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Preface II: The Last Virgin Space: Aesthetic Resistance in the Age of AI- Mediated Travel

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Leonardo Caffo argues that AI and algorithmic image saturation have made pure aesthetic experience, the genuine "wow" of discovery, effectively impossible for the modern traveler. Yet rather than mourning that loss, he proposes a radical reorientation: the last virgin space of authentic experience is not the destination itself, but the friction between what AI leads us to expect and what reality actually delivers.

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*Philosophy alienates itself from itself;
it arrives at its beginning, at immediate consciousness,
which is precisely the scission.*

— Hegel

It is widely recognized how challenging it is to reach a consensus on the definition of a “pure” aesthetic experience. By “pure,” we mean, in more technical philosophical language, an encounter between subject and world that is not mediated by any pre-perceptual expectation that might influence the experience of the landscape we are about to observe.

For instance, today it is impossible to see the Eiffel Tower without having already been exposed to an almost infinite array of images of the monument from films and social media prior to visiting Paris. The subject already knows what to expect, perceptual purity seems to be lost, and the idea of the traveler as a discoverer of universes is significantly diminished.

It is equally well known, therefore, that pure aesthetic experience appears to belong only to children and animals. The “wow” of astonishment, something that truly conveys the sensation of the first time, the unimaginable, the unexpected, seems entirely inaccessible to adult humans, especially in the wake of the dictatorship of images and AI in our digital contemporaneity.

Two trajectories present themselves: a defeatist and frankly naive one, which posits that AI deprives us of authenticity, a claim true for every technology throughout history, without, however, adopting a truly radical position (cf. the Unabomber). The alternative is a more nuanced, pragmatic path capable of coexisting with the new, seeking to integrate the concept of aesthetic experience with the defining features of our contemporary form of life.

Let us begin by defining, technically, what constitutes an aesthetic experience:

A is an aesthetic property of x if, and only if, A is an intrinsic property of x deemed worthy of attention (perception and/or reflection) within a specific culture C.

An observation or gesture is aesthetically relevant if, and only if, it directs attention toward an aesthetic property of an object or event.

A person has an aesthetic experience of x if, and only if, that person responds to an aesthetic property of an object while being aware that a specific culture C designates it as an aesthetic property.

Heidegger posits that to perceive something in a purely aesthetic, and thus entirely disinterested, manner, one must view it simply “as” that something.

It goes without saying that for the modern adult, experiencing something with pure wonder, unburdened by an avalanche of preconceptions, is a chimera. At most, this occurs when someone plays a trick on us, startling us by suddenly leaping out from behind a door. In that gasping “ah” of sudden shock, there lies something akin to the “wow” of the child or the animal.

The contemporary traveler, therefore, is precisely this tension, a taut string stretched between the child animal and the aesthetic void adult.

Yet, thankfully, AI, much like the broader world of images, remains fundamentally imprecise and devoid of absolute certainty. What we are witnessing, and what we might conceive, is a profound challenge.

Imagining setting off without knowing what we are going to see beforehand... impossible.

But the aesthetic experience we will arrive at, let's call it a compromise, is that of demonstrating the value of the subjective (my experience) in relation to the presumed universal experience of AI (The Experience), and, furthermore, attempting to realize an idea of an anti-Diary in the style of Bruce Chatwin:

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I had been told the Eiffel Tower was like this, but instead it was like this.

This trajectory of thought is extremely fruitful for the ethics of travel. If we accept that the phenomenological “purity” of aesthetic experience is unrecoverable, a victim of iconographic saturation and algorithmic pre-mediation, then we must shift the center of gravity of the aesthetic experience itself.

We no longer seek the object “in itself,” the landscape (which, in any case, is always a form of compromise between the eye and the world), but rather the nature of the gap.

If AI provides the “Universal Experience,” a statistical mean distilled from the infinite, the optimized prompt, the canonical vantage point, then contemporary aesthetic experience no longer resides in the naive discovery of the world. Instead, it is situated in the meticulous, often painful, calibration of the discrepancy between simulation (the AI-generated expectation, the curated social media feed) and reality (the raw, messy contingency of sensory experience).

If AI functions as the grand apparatus for the homogenization of the imaginary, the only space where the human can experience a “purity” that is not pre-packaged is no longer the encounter with the monument, which is already tainted by its hypermediation, but the precise instant where the real fails to coincide with its representational ghost.

The contemporary traveler is no longer an explorer of terra incognita. They are, more modestly yet more radically, a cartographer of the gap.

Aesthetic experience shifts from the object to the friction. When I observe, "I was told it would be like this, yet it was like that," I am performing an aesthetic act of reclamation. I am asserting that my subjectivity holds weight precisely because it has detected an error in the AI's universal calculation.

The child's "wow" is transfigured into the Epicurean clinamen, the unpredictable swerve of the falling atom, the anomalous rupture that disrupts the predicted trajectory.

The traveler is no longer one who "goes to see," but one who "measures the discrepancy."

In this sense, aesthetic experience becomes an act of active resistance.

Simulation (AI/social media) seeks the maximum convergence between desire and vision. It is a shortcut designed to erase the "noise" of the world.

Contemporary travel, conversely, deliberately seeks that noise. It feeds on what the algorithm cannot predict, for algorithms cannot calculate misfortune, meteorological caprice, hunger, or fatigue.

While the traditional diary was a log of events ("I was here, I saw this"), the Anti Diary is a phenomenology of failure.

It is no longer about recording that "the Eiffel Tower is beautiful." It is about mapping the disappointment, or the jarring surprise, relative to the canon.

This operation shifts the center of gravity from the world back to the subject. If the world is saturated with images, the only space still virgin, still uncolonized by algorithmic capital, is the subjective reaction to incongruence.

To state, "It is exactly as I expected," is the death of the aesthetic. It is the confirmation of the AI's victory.

To declare, "It is terrifying, it bears no relation to the photograph I saw," is the awakening, the moment consciousness severs itself from the representation.

We are facing a new form of asceticism.

The "error checker" traveler does not seek the exotic in the geographic sense, for every coordinate on the map has already been saturated by pre-mediation. They seek the exotic in temporal tension.

Aesthetic experience, therefore, no longer resides in what we see, but in the diachrony between the image model (which we carry with us as a phantom) and the reality event (which confronts us).

It is an exercise in critical consciousness that demands courage: one must be willing to relinquish the reassuring beauty of the "canonical view" to gain the brutal truth of the "contingent vision."

In a world where AI constantly offers the "corrected version" of reality, the task of the human paradoxically becomes to be the "glitch in the system."

To know the world and to travel, now means to be lost without the intention of being found.

To recover that spark we believed was lost, we must cease traveling to "add" experiences to our personal archive, an act dictated by the capitalism of platforms that demands the accumulation of data, photos, and check-ins.

We must begin to travel to subtract.

Every time we resist the desire to frame the landscape as AI would, every time we pause to observe the "wrong" detail, the grime, the unexpected, the mundane imperfection, we are asserting our freedom.

Aesthetics is no longer an act of passive admiration, but one of radical opposition.

The "wow" is no longer wonder at the magnitude of an object, but the astonishment of realizing that, despite everything, the world remains more real than its representation.

This is the final margin in which the human is salvaged, and travel returns to being an aesthetic experience in the only sense still possible for an adult life imprisoned by language.

