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# Dépaysement

**Scott Kushner**

*University of Rhode Island and Universidad de  
Puerto Rico, Mayagüez*

*For Jeffrey Herlihy-Mera, Héctor José Huyke, and Carlo Rodríguez Sabariz*

French has a word, *dépaysement*, which lacks a good translation into Spanish or English. The dictionaries suggest *cambio de aire*, *cambio de ambiente*, *cambio de costumbres*, or *desorientación* in Spanish, and *change of scene*, *disorientation*, and *culture shock* in English. None of these translations quite captures the meaning, in part because none of them quite captures the lexical and geographic anchorings of *dépaysement* and its adjectival sibling, *dépaysé*. It's not only a question of losing one's bearings or trying something new, because *dépaysement* is not a generic sort of experience; it is a subjective and specific feeling. *Disorientation/desorientación* comes closer, with its directional gaze, but this pair of words internalizes an attitude to the East that begs the question: why not *désoccidentation/desoccidentación/disoccidentation*?


The conceptual root of *dépaysement* is its etymological root: it's the feeling of being at a remove from one's *country* (*pays/país*), regardless of where on the compass it lies. *Dépaysement* isn't about confusion, but rather something closer to nostalgia, inasmuch as it denotes a sense of distance. Like nostalgia, *dépaysement* can be conceptual. Neither must necessarily be about a place; an idea will do. Unlike nostalgia, *dépaysement* needn't be tinged with sadness. In French, *se dépayser* conveys the excitement of encountering otherness; it's something worth seeking out.

This spring semester, I've held an *ad honorem* appointment as *investigador invitado* at the Universidad de Puerto Rico, Mayagüez, thanks to a sabbatical leave granted by my home institution, the University of Rhode Island. A sabbatical is, to state the obvious, a privilege; it is not lost on me that it is a privilege not typically accorded to my colleagues at UPRM. Among the many reasons a sabbatical is worth seeking out (and why it is worth defending at institutions where it still exists as a condition of academic employment) is the fact that it is a practice of *dépaysement*. Etymologically linked to the English word *sabbath* and the Spanish *sábado*, a sabbatical is a practice of distancing and setting apart, a time when an academic worker can encounter otherness. The recuperative effect

of a rest from teaching and service creates the conditions of possibility for sustained research and writing—two kinds of otherness that are generally unfamiliar to those whose working hours are largely devoted to classrooms and committee meetings. But it also creates the possibility to live elsewhere, enjoy colloquy with different people, think different thoughts, and engage with different problematics. I came to Mayagüez seeking respite; I found intellectual *dépaysement*.

Most concretely: I am a media studies scholar who found in Mayagüez a new understanding of what the term media can mean—and what its consequences can be. In its common acceptance, *the media*, equipped with a definite article (in Spanish, *los medios*; in French, *les médias*), refers to the institutions of mass communication: television, radio, newspapers (when we remember a world before the year 2000), and internet (when we don't). I came to Mayagüez, in part, to work out a broader sense of what the term media can mean. I wanted a notion of media that was inclusive of the many forms of conveyance that appear in the social and natural worlds: symbolic and non-symbolic communication, but also transport, institutions, concepts, and built and natural environments. This is by no means new. Many scholars—including (but not limited to) Ziad Fahmy, Markus Krajewski, Shannon Mattern, David Morley, John Durham Peters, Jefferson Pooley, Peter Simonson, Jonathan Sterne, Nicole Starosielski, Armond R. Towns, and Bernadette Wegenstein—have operated, implicitly or explicitly, under this assumption for many years. My hope was to take the term media from its adopted homeland (communication technologies, usually of the electronic variety) and resituate it in a territory that was at once grander and better anchored in media theory's own humanistic theoretical tradition. I believe I have managed to accomplish this, but I've learned something else, and largely by doing this work here in Puerto Rico. The term media, when constrained in meaning to the electronic communication media, performs the same kinds of colonizing work as terms like technology, and civilization. By restricting the word's meanings to a specific list of technologies—technologies that just happen to be the fruit of Western and Northern colonial capitalism—the term media authorizes the idea that some people and groups have media,






while others do not, and underwrites the assumption that there are forms of communication that are somehow unmediated. This is preposterous. Conveyance, flows, movements, transmission—all the many terms that stand in for mediation—are not the privileged province of colonizers. Mediation is a condition of being (human and otherwise), and a broader notion of what the term media means turns out not only to be a neat theoretical trick, but also an opportunity to see how different cultural formations engage with, internalize, and experience mediation. It is a chance to *dépayser* the media concept.

This is to say that *dépaysement*, even in its conceptual variants, has everything to do with territory. Like nostalgia, *dépaysement* is about the interplay between distancing and affect. In its original meanings, the territory in question was entirely tangible. As the νόστος in *nostalgia* originally pointed toward an actual home for which the nostalgic subject longed, the pays in *dépaysement* means country—land that anchors, roots, traps, and takes. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, human beings are both made of and destined to return to soil. *Dépaysement* is a reckoning with the fact that soil is not as universal as all that. The specificity of soil is a deep current in many religious traditions and the histories they have inspired: holy lands from Jerusalem to Mecca; crusades fought over such territory; and colonial enterprises that claimed lands, resources, and peoples, imposed conceptual categories like technology, civilization, media, and sovereignty, and then promptly declared the colonized were bereft of them all. The effect, in places like Puerto Rico, is a perpetual *dépaysement*: an anchoring in a land that mediates identity, culture, and life, while remaining subject to a claim of physical, political, economic, and cultural control by an outside power.

Humanities study and scholarship present opportunities to respond to the *dépaysement* of colonialism and its consequences through the intellectual *dépaysement* of interdisciplinary thought. Disciplines can have a controlling dimension, mandating, as they so often do, subjects, time periods, languages, methodologies, and means of dissemination. A discipline is the classic site of boundary work, a policing of perimeters, a demarcating of insides and outsides. At its best, interdisciplinarity,



the kind of work that a program in Estudios Culturales y Humanísticos can incubate, is a refiguring of discipline and the restrictions and limitations it imposes. If the problems, questions, and crises that scholarship addresses take shape across multiple domains, languages, political structures, and forms of cultural production, then we must respond in kind. Interdisciplinarity is thus a sort of *grito* (a cry in English, *un cri* in French), to be sure, but it is not an indiscriminate one. It is an openness to the range of tools, schools, and rules that are appropriate to—and can be effectively appropriated for—a task. Rather than “staying disciplinary,” interdisciplinary scholars deploy whatever resources they can to attack a problem. Interdisciplinarity mobilizes Michel de Certeau’s *faire avec*, the everyday tendency to make do, the impulse to appropriate the tools provided by the market or the boss, the instinct to cook with the ingredients furnished by the world. If a project demands both close readings of literary texts and ethnographic study of those who read, catalog, sell, ban, assign, or ignore them, then lean into different disciplinary practices and traditions until a response is ready. If your Spanish is rudimentary, perhaps French offers clarifying concepts. The interdisciplinary cry beckons us all to seek the intellectual *dépaysements* that help make sense of the political *dépaysements* of the 21st century.

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