

# Thinking about measuring Augé's non-places with Big Data

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## Abstract

Augé describes non-places as quantifiable and measureable physical space, but does not give an appropriate measure to do so. This contribution thinks about using crowd-harvested photo data, a specific kind of Big Data, to measure non-places in the context of tourism by giving a theory based discussion on Augé's non-places, photography as key element of "doing" tourism, and the selection processes of photography and uploading photos. Solely using theoretical thoughts and propositional logic, this contribution indicates that it could be possible to do so. Yet, there are plenty of empirical studies needed in order to verify the built hypothesis.

## Keywords

Non-place, Augé, photography, crowd-harvesting, volunteer-employed photography

## Introduction and Augé's non-places

'If a place can be defined as relational, historical, and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place' (Augé, 2008: 63). Augé sees place as anthropological place, characterised by identity, relation and history (contrary to Certeau, 1990). If such places become space by the act of doing, these characterisations are transferred to the space. However, if these characterisations are missing, the space created is distinguished by neither identity nor relation nor history. This space is denominated as non-place by Augé. Augé describes these non-places as quantifiable, measureable physical spaces (Augé, 2008: 64), but in all of his writings he cannot 'adequately resolve this tension' by providing or describing an appropriate measure, as Merriman (2011: 30) as well as O'Beirne (2006) conclude. Augé exemplifies non-places as transit spaces like airports and stations, as standardised locations of franchise companies (supermarkets, hotels, etc.), and many other spaces characterised by a solely functional use. Usage of these spaces is allowed but they must not be characterised by identity and relation; it persists an (only) contractual relation between user and non-place, becoming manifest in purchasing of tickets, booking of a room or purchases in supermarkets or gas stations.

It is noteworthy that a non-place never exists in its pure form. 'Place and non-place are rather like opposed polarities: the first is never completely erased, the second never totally completed; they are like palimpsests on which the scrambled game of identity and relations is ceaselessly rewritten' (Augé, 2008: 64). This leads to what Augé calls the paradox of non-places: One and the same place can be at the same time space out of anthropological places and non-place for two different persons. Transferring this thought to tourism we might say that non-places exist in no respect absolute, but that non-places can be ascribed to a group or sub-group of persons (e.g. tourists) because the ascription of identity – which is constructed as individual as well as collective identity always in relation to and in negotiation with the environment – causes a high variability in the existence of non-places. Augé (2008: 69) already hints at such tourist non-places: 'Travel [...]

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constructs a fictional relationship between gaze and landscape. And while we use the word “space” to describe the frequentation of places that specifically defines the journey, we should still remember that there are spaces in which the individual feels himself to be a spectator without paying much attention to the spectacle. [...]. The traveller’s space may thus be the archetype of non-place’. Augé assumes that there is at least sometimes a distance between the traveller (who surely can be considered a tourist, leastwise since the inhabitant/tourist distinction is more and more declined with emerge of the ‘New Urban Tourism’ theory (cf. Hannam, 2009)) and the place (the landscape), which hinders him to ‘recognise’ the place in the anthropological understanding. The traveller can perceive parts of the landscape and try to fill these elements with content (e.g. with a guidebook), but he can neither create relation nor identity with it at all the time. So there are places and non-places for tourists within a destination and we might ask ourselves in the following if there is a possibility to measure these and the shift between the opposing polarities.

The following paragraphs discuss to what extent, in what sense and in what ways this can be achieved. This paper argues that using online photo data from online photo sharing platforms like Flickr, Panoramio, Picasa and others might provide the opportunity to identify tourist non-places. The paper will first take a look into the question of what tourists photograph during their journey. Then the question of what content is uploaded will be addressed before subsuming these thoughts into a discussion about the possibility to identify non-places via crowd-harvested photo data.

### Photography as a marker of ‘doing’ tourism

‘Why do [...] [tourists] frame certain things [...] whereas others seem to remain “anaesthetic”?’ The question Lanfant (2009: 241) poses in his work can be placed as central question regarding the tourist gaze. Robinson and Picard (2009a: 1) emphasise the act of photography as one of the major characteristic of tourists (‘photography is [...] one of the markers of being a tourist [and] intimately linked to the doing and performing of tourism’), more than 90% of travellers take photos during their journey (Lo et al., 2011: 727). Every photograph involves one or more (conscious! (Larsen, 2008)) decisions about what to photograph, what to picture and what not to include in the photo. ‘The taking of photographs involves a framing of the world; a procedure of focus, both literally and metaphorically. [...]. The subject, be it a person or a landscape, is selected and necessarily, other people and parts of the landscape are excluded’

(Robinson and Picard, 2009b: 13). Photography is synonymic to an accentuation of certain features (Garrod, 2008), which are dependent on the photographer.

If a picture was taken consciously or a motive was chosen, respectively, then there has to be some kind of relation to this photograph. Otherwise, the decision in favour of one and against another motive is solely owed to coincidence. The work of Edensor (2001: 73) confirms this thought: tourists use photography as a ‘ceremonial’ in order to keep hold of their relation to places and other cultures. Photography is a mode of expression of an existing relation between tourists and photographed space (Edensor, 2000). For what reason should a person select this or that motive, and maybe even queue to get a specific angle or view, if not to create a certain message or statement, capture the ‘spirit’ or just to produce evidence that they have been on-site (Lo et al., 2011)?

In addition, Urry and Larsen (2011: 179) point out in their work about the ‘Tourist Gaze’ that mainly so-called ‘significant places’ are photographed and that places are ascribed with an anew relation already with the shooting of the photo. Photos are in most cases proof for having been actually on-site; photos play an important role in capturing memories and converting them into narrations and stories (Lo et al., 2011). This is also confirmed by Hunter (2008: 359) in an empirical analysis of photographed places: He concludes that mainly those ‘heritage or material culture space’ and ‘natural landscape space’ are photographed, which are also communicated as major sights in tourist information material (guidebooks, webpages, etc.). Other motives such as persons – detached from sights – follow at great distance. Robinson and Picard (2009b: 11) support this argumentation and reinforce the statement with the fact that people rather like to take own pictures, even if they are worse and there is bad weather, than buying postcards from a professional photographer instead. In many cases tourists even try to recreate postcard-motives as identical as possible (Garrod, 2008). Whether tourists are influenced by diverse media or influence the media themselves in doing so, in terms of a ‘circle of representation’ according to the ‘reproducing or producing’ discussion (Stylianou-Lambert, 2012: 1817), is irrelevant in this regard. It only matters that tourist photographs coincide in most cases with the post card motives of the major sights in terms of content, position and setting (Garrod, 2008).

With the line of argument above, space is attributed a bearing in terms of identity or at least relation, even if this maybe doesn’t get beyond the statement: ‘I’ve been at this place’ (Stylianou-Lambert, 2012: 1830). Photography is according to Stylianou-Lambert (2012) a tool for constructing the identity of

photograph and photographed. Therefore, the motive has to be a 'desirable' motive fitting one's own identity and being further identity-creating. And photographs of the tourists can be seen as part of a 'circle of representation' (Garrod, 2008: 385) or 'hermeneutic circle' (Hunter, 2008: 357) which means that space – regardless of how it is perceived and with which meanings it is assigned – is depicted in the same motives, objects and categories, in which the space was experienced (Robinson and Picard, 2009b: 7). This applies to the experiences in the phase of information prior to the journey or the previous knowledge about a destination, as well as the experiences made on-site. So photography of a space reflects just those relations, identities or histories which have been ascribed to the space previously – and even it is (again) just the statement: 'I've been at this place'. So the photographed space cannot be a non-place: 'sites turn into sights', as Urry and Larsen (2011: 178) argue. Places and spaces turn into sights and manifest relevance. Following this thinking, the differentiation between the two extremes place and non-place in the context of tourist photography is assured, even with the almost vanishing of limits of the amount of photos which can be taken in the course of the advance of digital photography with advanced storage capabilities: 'Although the field of the photographable may broaden, photographic practice does not become any more free, since one may only photograph what one must photograph, and since there are photographs which one must "take" just as there are sites and monuments which one must "do"' (Stylianou-Lambert, 2012: 1819).

So for the first hypothesis, we can assume that there are tourist non-places and also places with identity, relation and history for the tourists of which the latter are photographed more often. This does not mean that there are no photos without identity, relation and history, but rather that they form a minority. And even if photography can be seen as a highly individual act, there are extensive conventions and practices enabling the quantitative approach in the next chapter (Stylianou-Lambert, 2012: 1835).

### **The reproduction of tourist photography on online photo platforms**

Photography is one of the markers of being a tourist and is inherently linked with their activities and behaviour. Every photograph requires a conscious decision: What do I want to photograph, what do I not want to photograph (Larsen, 2008). So an exclusion or inclusion of elements of a space and a causation-led selection of the motive are mandatory (Garrod, 2008: 385). At this point the considerations for analysing tourist pictures from online platforms such as Flickr, Panoramio,

or Picasa begin, tying up with the studies of volunteer-employed photography (VEP; studies of photography of laymen) by Markwell (1997). In general, using these platforms on which registered users can upload their located photography or assign a shooting location to non-located photos, is free of charge and without limitation to certain groups. However, using these data scientifically – which has not received much attention yet – it has to be considered that there might be disparities in internet access and usage (digital divide, see Baginski et al., 2013; Warf, 2013). But with the increasing pervasion of society with information technology (e.g. smartphones) this problem will be put into perspective again within the next years. Lo et al. (2011) specify that in 2011 more than 90% of all travellers take (digital) photos while they are on vacation and after all 41.1% depict their photos in some form online. Online photo albums like Flickr, Panoramio and Picasa are used by about 20% of all travellers to depict their pictures. The users show a significant correlation in terms of age, education and income: Flickr user tend to be younger, higher educated and earn more money.

Using these platforms takes place as a process of controlled selection. After the first selection in terms of taking a picture (see above), the process of selection repeats with reference to the upload on such platforms (Girardin et al., 2008). In this regard, Lo et al. (2011) argue that travellers want to depict specific photographs (and therefore specific places) which are proof for or document the journey with the visited places, and sharpen their own profile. Photography is according to Stylianou-Lambert (2012: 1833) a tool for constructing the identity of photograph and photographed. Hence, the motive has to be a 'desirable motive' fitting one's own identity and being further identity-generating. This line of arguments forms the second part of the hypothesis: pictures of places with identity or identity-generating picture are uploaded to photo platforms more often. Similar to the first part of the hypothesis, this does not mean that uploaded photos without identity, relation and history won't subsist – for example pictures made just because of the aesthetics of a place – but that they form a minority.

Combining this second hypothesis with the first hypothesis it is possible to conclude for the initial hypothesis: Significant, for tourists meaningful places (places with identity and relation, places in opposition of non-places) are photographed and uploaded to online platforms more often. It has to be kept in mind that the hypothesis remains (empirically) unproven, even if the theoretical-conceptual thoughts have a lot to commend it. Hence, the following line of arguments in the next paragraph has to be placed in the mathematical category of a supposition: The statements within the following line of arguments follow

without internal contradictions and build upon each other; but the initial hypothesis remains (for now) unproven (Hilbert and Ackermann, 2011).

### Identifying places and non-places via crowd-harvested photo data

So far the hypothesis, built solely on theory, says that photos of places (in opposition to non-places) are uploaded more often. As this paper aims to think about measuring non-places (and not places), the question remains if we can invert this initial hypothesis: Is a not or only little photographed place doubtlessly a non-place? And does the analysis of photo data really reflect the deferral between the opposed polarities?

If our initial hypothesis – bore by the thoughts of Edensor (2001), Lo et al. (2011), Robinson and Picard (2009b) and Urry and Larsen (2011) – is valid, then the opposite must result out of the considerations of propositional logic. The propositional logic teaches us that B follows out of A if and only if not-A (in sense of the negation of the statement) follows out of not-B.

$$A \Rightarrow B \Leftrightarrow \neg B \Rightarrow \neg A$$

So each statement (*'B follows out of A'* or *'not-A follows out of not-B'*) is true, when the other statement is true. Popular examples are the elements A: It rains and B: The cat (in an open field, see remarks below) gets wet. If the first statement is valid (It rains, therefore the cat gets wet) then the second statement must be valid as well (The cat does not get wet, therefore it is not raining). In case of the crowd-harvested photo data, the elements are given as follow: A: Place was photographed a lot, B: Place is ascribed with identity, relation or history, not-A: place is hardly photographed, not-B: Place is not ascribed with identity, relation or history. Following the propositional logic, this means that out of the initial hypothesis (an often photographed place is attributed with relation, identity, or history) follows that the not-photography of a place must determine its status as a (tourist) non-place. So if all elements in the line of argument resulting in the initial hypothesis are valid, then the analysis of crowd-harvested photo data must be a suitable measure for fixing the (tourist) meaning of a place between the opposed polarities of place and non-place.

Summing up, non-places are ejected in the process of selection out of the tourist photography. Only places with relation, identity or history are depicted in online platforms. And those are represented according to the number of photos at a place equal to the deferral between the opposed polarities of place and non-place. It is important to consider that this is a strictly quantitative argumentation. There absolutely can be

single photos at places determined as non-places. But these can be assigned to a certain type of photography according to Robinson and Picard (2009b). Thus, tourist photography can be divided in three categories. In two categories the place of photography cannot be regarded as a non-place: '[t]hose which do not feature friends and family and consist of "neutral" views of landscapes and buildings, and those that do foreground friends and family. [...]'. However, the landscape or streetscape provides the tourist with obvious background for any performance' (Robinson and Picard, 2009b: 16). Only photography without any reference to space and time, without 'the where, the when and the why of their existence' (Robinson and Picard, 2009b: 22), so-called 'anywhere'-shots, can occur at non-places. But these photos then only represent individual cases. So not all non-places of every single tourist can be measured and analysed. But non-places can be assigned with the majority of travellers.

The validity of the initial hypothesis as a mathematical supposition is no matter of course. The two major critical points of the argumentation, which can prove or disprove the supposition, are: (1) is the initial hypothesis valid and empirically provable? And (2) are there external influences, which bring down the argument of the propositional logic (like an umbrella would in the example of the cat and the rain)? This questions include among other thoughts about the following headwords:

- Is a photographed place actually meaningful (in all contexts)?
- Is a not-photographed place a tourist non-place or a non-tourist place? This translates to the question of differentiating the uploaded photos into those by tourist and those by non-tourists. Girardin et al. (2008) for example do this by a mixture of the time span all photos within one region encompass, and the repetition of time spans in one region. Another way is to compare the identified places and non-places with GPS recorded movements of tourists (cf. Bauder, 2016).
- Is the 'Tourist Gaze' concept of Urry and Larsen valid in all continents? Ryan (2013: 234) doubts that: 'much of The Tourist Gaze still appeared to be very much UK-centred if not Euro-centric'.
- Do online photo archives offer a representativeness in regard of different tourist groups?
- Have smartphones extinct the process of selection by their possibilities to upload directly?
- Which time periods have to be considered when analysing the photo data, which spatial (aggregation) scales apply?
- What kind of relation is actually reflected in the process of taking a photo?



Those points have to be examined and answered carefully in future research. The manifold authors cited in this paper, who follow the initial hypothesis and hence accept the conclusion ‘meaningful place → much photographed place’, all use different approaches. But none of them took a look into the content of the photos in regard of the overall relationship of this line of arguments in detail. Hence, an empirical examination is strongly required.

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