

Renting reality

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Published: 2025-07-28

Dear friends,

As I walked through the city today I noticed some interesting terraforming occurring. What I saw was groups of people crowding to access an *experience* something that performed real life while they engaged deeply in their glowing rectangles. They took endless selfies, reenacted organic reactions ‘for the reel’ , and facial expressions dropped the moment the camera did. Like a dystopian sci-fi scene, buildings have transformed into containers for paid experiences, people have subscribed to a life where social media drives reality and Zucc’ s monetisation fuels ‘interaction’ . Monetisation of leisure and life. Not wanting to jump to assign blame, I’ ve decided to refer to this as the Instagramification of everyday life.

I grew up on sci-fi. And my family has a particular pull towards dystopia. So I’ ll acknowledge my bias here, seeing people interact with each other as a performance for Instagram is a strong assignment of value(s) from my own positionality. But, the novelty, here, is the use of physical spaces for capturing ‘experience’ the same way that Instagram, Facebook and others provide lifeless boxes around human expression for consumption – interspersed with an unhealthy number of ads. But let’ s get back to urban planning, because what else is this blog about?

We are fortunate to be guided, in Adelaide, by a small elite group of groups, amongst them is the creatively named Committee for Adelaide, who are “think tanks” (they wish) committed to “big” business and who frequently make decrees about the pain and suffering of business in our state. Creative naming isn’ t their memberships’ only strength. Indeed, another of these groups’ great fortitudes is casting misanthropic assertions about the lack of us plebians’ spending in the CBD. But belittling has not sufficed in stirring the denizens of the suburban sprawl, and our city’ s capitalist overlords have moved towards honing exploitative experiences which might attract “influencers” (its Adelaide, for goodness sake), instead of resorting to whips and chains to drive up nascent foot traffic.

Since COVID this cityscape transformation has intensified rapidly. While echoed across other Australian cities, it is particularly the case in Tarndanya (Adelaide), where our small population, remaining relative diversity of employment opportunities beyond office work, and (somewhat) low socioeconomic lead to “ingenuity” by the capitalists. Extraction, of course, remains the name of the game but in smaller cities like ours where CBD foot traffic is akin to suburbia interstate, there are specific manifestations of that extraction which may only be beginning elsewhere. So as I walked, I saw on one street more than five locations which offer boxed ‘experiences’ . Cramped buildings which were former home to artisanal craft spaces, coffee shops, and florists. Don’ t get me wrong, these were the old capitalism, rife with its own performativity and exploitation. Now transformed –and bustling with wannabe influencers –donning bridal gowns for fake wedding shoots, setting up tripods for heavily staged TikToks, and manga kids reenacting fight moves from their favourite zine.

Once upon a time I wondered how long it would take for the rectangles that governed our access to information – and increasingly more services and interactions – to begin to influence our physical world. I caught myself thinking how long it might be until the epistemology offered in consumptive technology and modern capitalism began to shape the way we sought interaction in the physical world –reconfiguring the ontologies of place once more. God I’ m a nerd. Yet, we’ ve arrived. After a few quick searches, I learned that these spaces are available for anything from 30 minutes, to multiple days, and that a bespoke team configures furnishings, lighting, you name it. One space even offers paid actors to

complement your performance. Literally rent-a-crowd to in-fill your modelling of a paid product placement.

I'm quite sure these spaces exist elsewhere. And I'm sure this isn't an entirely novel idea. The transformation of living, breathing, speaking place into sterile rooms for meaningless experiences is fundamental to capitalism time immemorial, but it remains one which concerns me deeply. Particularly because this transformation is intensified by digital 'cultures' and epistemologies of individualism and preposterously alleged meritocracy. Moreover, I grow increasingly concerned for our shared future, what does this reconfiguration of experience mean for what we are becoming as we look to the future?

I fear we may already be reaching those dystopian futures forecast in sci-fi. Right now we're battling fascism on many sides. Elites so wealthy on the blood of the worker that they have made space a plaything. Despotism triumphant in Israel. European capitulation to Trumpian politics, even while the Scots put up an admirable fight. Albanese affirming Australia's ongoing support of the US, in holding to developing submarines, which will likely result in more war crimes. We're surrounded by a climate catastrophe which is killing the oceans, with dolphins washing ashore, while mega trawlers continue to decimate the ocean floor for the few remaining fish not poisoned by human activity on the surface. There have been multiple regressive regimes installed in nations across the globe, with our neighbour Aotearoa New Zealand speed running back to the Stone Age with a conservative government akin to Trump on social policy, and so many travesties of human rights recorded globally. The writers of science *fiction* are in a race for extremism against our reality.

If I cast my mind forward, trained on dystopia, I can envisage a planet covered in artificial constructions, surrounded by wild seas, dead oceans, where massive galvanised structures harbour the dregs of human life. Within their boxes of extreme wealth inequality, the very worst jobs are reserved for the human worker - with world-killing AI and psychopathic trillionaires at the helm of the creative. Everything has become monetised, surveilled, and examined. The middle class attend performative experiences of recordings of nature -from when it still existed -for half an hour a week, afforded by hours of hard labour building spaceships for the mega-wealthy. As the planet slowly runs out of oxygen, cartels run by billionaire sycophants deal out the last canisters of 'real air' stored in an age where the planet's lungs were functionally breathing life into our world.

So, a bleak vibe, eh. But if we're not careful, the erosion of our planet, the disruption and destruction of social cohesion, and the axes of inequality (particularly of wealth) will bring an end to us all. And in a more gruesome destruction, may even bring an end to life on this planet as we know it. Yet to relate, to collaborate, and to be a decent person are fundamentally human nature. Capitalism may still claim to be the only way -but its contemporary form has barely existed for 150 years. There are ways of life which value humanity, that teach us about the virtues of connecting to and working in relation with place. These are not something we need to wait to be taught, or which are distant relics. Within every person is the capability for care, compassion, and meaningful reciprocity. These are not things we need to be told -because unlike colonial capitalism, these values are human.

Finding each other, finding Country, and finding care remains possible, and a hopeful world is on the horizon. I just hope we realise and act on it, before our collective torture ontology is made irreversible.

With love,

Aidan