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(Re)Creating Paradise: The Post-Tsunami Visual Economy of Thailand's Phi Phi Islands
A smaller island in the Phi Phi archipelago from the stern of a dive boat, June 2006. Photo by D. Bollwinkel.
I found paradise once, sitting on the bow of a dive boat as it meandered across the channel toward the lights of Ton Sai Village in June 2006. The two largest islands of the Ko Phi Phi Archipelago were silhouettes, monolithic black shapes between the kaleidoscopic sea and the sky, which was inflamed by a 360-degree sunset.\(^1\) As the sun disappeared behind the distant thunderclouds over mainland Thailand, the neon scene exploded like a firework. No one spoke. Gazing skyward, we just let the warm breeze dry our scant clothing as the boat sputtered through the phosphorescent swells.

We passed cold beers and cigarettes, exhausted from hours of snorkeling and climbing and playing soccer on the beach of Maya Bay. Between moments of silent reverence, laughter caught like the incendiary color all around us, spreading throughout the boat. We all spoke different languages, yet we didn't need a translator to explain this moment; it was universal in our satisfaction, universal in our awe for where we were and what we were witnessing. In Thai and Portuguese, Hebrew, Japanese, Afrikaans, and English we all thought the same thing: *there is nowhere else on earth I would rather be.*

During the day we relaxed on the beach and watched the storms over the sea billow and swirl while the heat held us down like a blanket, clutched in the hands of an umbrella's shadow. The sky over the island was always blue. The storms were just ethereal performances staged at a distance. One lay there and watched paradise define itself. The palms all leaning in for the whisper, the great secret the sea told with every advance and retreat over the pearl sand. Time was no longer relevant as a word, a concept, or otherwise. Personal space was what one made of it. If one desired company it was there; if one desired solitude it was a short walk around the next bend of beach or up a jungle path.

Backlit by torches and bonfires, night on the island staged the hedonistic release of the traveler id. Booze was cheaper than water and served in buckets. Hulking sound systems pulsed surging rhythm over the sweat-soaked bodies of those who chose to dance. Others held more subdued court on the beaches with guitars and harmonicas. Fire dancers, making the rounds, carved perfect circles in the darkness. And everyone was flawless and interesting, even if we couldn't understand each other.

This paradise was Thailand’s Phi Phi Islands in the summer of 2006, less than a year and a half after the Indian Ocean tsunami that wrought destruction and death on this same idyllic landscape. How this space was imagined, created, and so swiftly recreated indicates the power and pervasiveness of a visual economy of tourism. This visual economy produces such paradises, while simultaneously transforming people, landscapes, and even the natural disaster of the tsunami into viable commodities.

In the interest of this study, the visual economy of tourism and its transformative machinations on the Phi Phi Islands began in 1999 when actor Leonardo DiCaprio “discovered” this paradise. Set to the rising crescendo of a *Moby* anthem, DiCaprio’s character, Richard, pulled back layers of jungle to reveal *The Beach*. Based on British novel-
Alex Garland's similarly titled best-selling travel novel, director Danny Boyle's blockbuster version would fix the gaze of DiCaprio's character—and subsequently the world—on one particular scene: palm trees and white sand receding into perfect turquoise waters, framed by towering cliffs beneath a cloudless tropical blue sky.

Here in this paradise, Richard and his cohorts find a utopian dream come true: a mythical island off the coast of Thailand only reachable with the help of a crude treasure map. The Beach and its welcoming commune of adventure-seeking travelers represent the fantasies and desires of a new breed of tourist. No politics, no religion, and no native peoples to worry about displacing: simply self-determined, carefree existence and complete isolation from the so-called real world, set within the landscape equivalent of a tropical heaven on earth.

However, as the allegorical tale of The Beach so violently illustrates, the term utopia implies a nonplace—an unattainable ideology, not a tangible location. As The Beach unfolds, paradise is ruined after too many people discover it. Richard and his new friends can't sustain their secret Garden of Eden, and when word spreads beyond the community and unwelcome travelers arrive, the harmony is shattered and all are expelled. To put it another way, you can take the traveler out of a habitual pattern of consumer capitalism, but you can't take the insidiousness of a consumer capitalist system out of the traveler.

While The Beach was an international box office success, one of the film's breakout stars was omitted from the credits. Featured alongside the bronzed chest of DiCaprio and the bikini-clad French phenom, Virginie Ledoyen, was the performance of the Phi Phi Islands landscape itself.

In addition to the actors, the landscape too was in need of a bit of cinematic makeup, applied through the large-scale planting of palm trees and other temporary vegetation, including the digital enhancement of its seemingly primordial geography that further emphasized the filmmaker's desired depiction of the quintessential paradise.

Prior to The Beach's release, so-called backpacker tourism was alive and well on the actual Phi Phi Islands, which are located along Thailand's popular Andaman coast region. The coast possesses the climate and geography associated with the definition of paradise put forth in the lexicon of the present day global tourist industry, which according to scholars Martin Mowforth and Ian Munt, may be the single-largest global industry today, recently surpassing even agricultural production.

No matter the form it takes, tourism relies on a “visual economy” in order to initiate and sustain itself. Such a visual economy consists of the production and distribution of images through various local and global media in order to produce marketable spaces and experiences. It also depends on the alteration and adaptation of the actual landscapes represented in those images in order to maintain the perceived authenticity of experience, either cultural or natural, for those who come to visit. It can be so pervasive that it makes commodities out of landscapes, people, and in the case of this study, the efforts of well-meaning volunteer relief workers and the memory of a natural disaster.
A small archipelago, the Phi Phi Islands are located in the Andaman sea just a short boat ride from Phuket. The two main islands are Phi Phi Le, on which *The Beach* was filmed, and Phi Phi Don, the inhabited and larger of the two islands. While the Thai government’s Royal Forestry Department considers each a protected national park, overnight accommodation on Phi Phi Le is prohibited while tourist development on the larger Phi Phi Don is permitted. In the wake of *The Beach*’s success, visitation to the islands and subsequently tourist development on Phi Phi Don increased exponentially over a remarkably brief period of time. Millions of tourists from around the globe were visiting the islands annually. The film’s depiction of the Phi Phi Islands landscape generated unprecedented interest in this area, and both Thai and international tourist agencies adopted the film to market the location as an isolated and spectacular natural destination. In a bit of staggering irony, the tourist industry’s appropriation of imagery from an allegorical tale regarding the ruination of paradise at the hands of a small group of well-meaning travelers, resulted in overcrowding, pollution, and frequent infrastructural failure on the film’s actual landscapes.

Uninhabited until the post–World War II arrival of nomadic Thai and Malaysian fisherman, called *chao leh* (or sea gypsies), Phi Phi Don’s modern history has been almost entirely written by tourism. The *chao leh* established a small Muslim community on Phi Phi Don during the later half of the twentieth century, but for the most part sold their land to developers during Thailand’s tourism boom in the 1980s as the result of an aggressive international marketing and image campaign. Those Thai and Malay residents who remained made small fortunes converting their long-tail fishing boats to ferries and water taxis or opening up small businesses to service the increasing—and increasingly varied—tourist needs on Phi Phi Don. People gravitated to the area from the northern provinces of Thailand in search of the unrivaled income the tourist industry provided. International interests, including European scuba diving businesses and private resorts soon entered the picture. According to British travel writer John Chesshyre, to speak out against the over-population and uncontrolled development on Phi Phi Don meant the threat of being physically harmed at the hands of powerful land owners—an ominous story echoed more recently in editions of *The Lonely Planet Guide to Thailand.*

On the morning of December 26, 2004, Phi Phi Don was at full tourist capacity at the peak of its high tourist season. Unbeknownst to these throngs of tourists and their hosts, a massive undersea earthquake off the coast of Sumatra, Indonesia, had generated a tsunami unprecedented in modern human history. Based on its unique underwater geography and exposed isolation in the middle of the Andaman sea, Phi Phi Don was ravaged by the waves. Loss of life was catastrophic, and the loss of property almost total along the narrow strip of sand on which the island’s dense Ton Sai Village had been constructed. In many cases, bungalows, shops and various other hastily constructed businesses were piled atop one another.

The tsunami was one of the most costly natural disasters on record, in terms of casualties and economic losses across a broad scope of affected nations. In Thailand alone, more than 8,000 peo-
ple who represented thirty-seven nationalities perished, with still countless thousands missing today. It’s on record that Thailand’s tourist industry suffered the equivalent of $1 billion in damages and lost over 100,000 domestic jobs. A 2005 International Labor Office relief and development report even declared the tourist industry “the worst casualty of the Tsunami in Thailand.”

However, during the summer of 2006, during the monsoon or so-called low-tourist season, the tourists had returned to Phi Phi Don in record numbers for this time of year. Less than a year and a half since the tsunami hit, the ferries from Phuket were overflowing with worldwide travelers. New businesses were open and thriving. Crowded guesthouses were charging almost five times the going rate for a stay on the mainland. And all traces of that horrific day in December 2004 had either been erased from the island’s rebuilt landscape or reintegrated in economically strategic fashion. By night, bars and clubs were packed with people watching World Cup soccer matches in any number of languages. By day, cafés once again packed with tourists played The Beach on twenty-four-hour DVD loops.

Yet this was not the Phi Phi Don that I had first encountered less than three months after the tsunami. I stepped off of a largely empty ferry onto the island’s concrete pier in March of 2005 not knowing what to expect. I had been in Thailand visiting friends following a wedding in Australia when I went to Phi Phi Don. I did so partly out of curiosity and partly at the behest of a friend back in the United States who told me the island was once her favorite place on earth. What greeted me there was a scene of aftermath: broken palm trees, wide stretches of empty beach punctuated by occasional piles of smoldering debris, and the remnants of destroyed structures.

I also encountered ghostly characters who wore masks and carried tools, coated in the fine gray dust that hung over the entire island. Such international travelers as me, who had stumbled upon the scene quite accidentally, made up this transient volunteer workforce. It also was composed of people who had come by word of mouth through the tight-knit backpacker communities of southeast Asia, or still others who came seeking information about missing friends or relatives, yet chose to stay and help the survivors and in the hope of finding some closure through their efforts. Faced with this abject destruction and the intervention of these anonymous “voluntourists,” I did what a few thousand other island visitors chose to do over the coming months. Within minutes of arriving on the shattered paradise of Phi Phi Don in March 2005, I was standing in the shadow of a partially destroyed building wearing a hard hat and holding a sledgehammer in my hands.

The voluntourist is becoming an increasingly popular and profitable variation of the traveler who was portrayed in Garland’s and Boyle’s respective versions of The Beach. The traveler, or so called post-tourist, according to current academic parlance, sets out into the world with ideologies of responsible travel firmly in mind. British travel writer Paul Fussell notes:

Tsunami devastation in Ton Sai Village, Phi Phi Don Island, March 2005. Photo by D. Bollwinkel.
Tsunami evacuation route placard, Ton Sai Village, Phi Phi Don Island, July 2006. Photo by D. Bollwinkel.
by the mind working in history, the tourist that which has been discovered by entrepreneurship and prepared for him by the arts of mass publicity... If the explorer moves toward the risks of the formless and the unknown, the tourist moves toward the security of pure cliché. It is between these two poles that the traveler mediates.7

The traveler is well educated, politically conscious, ecologically concerned, and genuinely interested in the acquisition of cross-cultural experience. The voluntourist, and in particular those voluntourists who labored on the Phi Phi Islands and throughout tsunami-devastated regions of the world in the wake of the disaster, operated with these compassionate ideals firmly in mind.8 However, what the case of the Phi Phi Islands demonstrates is that these new forms of ethical global tourism have the potential to impact spaces, landscapes, and particularly cultures in manners contrary to their noble ideologies.

The impact described above happens neither through the fault of any particular individual or group, nor from the perspective of the visitor or the visited; it happens as a result of capitalism functioning through the practice of tourism in the age of global information technology and image saturation. Powerful and pervasive, this is the visual economy of tourism. Despite the noble intentions of the voluntourist labor force that intervened on Phi Phi Don in order to help those residents who wished to reclaim their homes and livelihoods, their inspired actions ultimately laid the groundwork for the rapid restoration of the same conditions of over-crowding and pollution that proceeded the tsunami, as well as the conditions in which the memory of the disaster itself was swiftly appropriated and made a commodity in the interest of selling the new space within the global tourist industry.

In the case of the Phi Phi Islands, my return in the summer of 2006 revealed the visual economy of tourism very much at work in the reclamation of the space, as well as my own complicity within these processes acting as tourist, volunteer, and eventually researcher. The tsunami and its after-effects had revealed just how dependent the business interests involved were on the image of paradise that the Phi Phi Islands had so lucratively come to signify. It was this image of paradise, along with the strategic integration of the tsunami itself into the greater visual economy of the islands, that made possible the swift reclamation of the space once again as a crowded tourist haven.

The disaster had warranted the placement of necessary precautionary measures, such as official blue-and-white tsunami warning and evacuation route signs throughout the island’s inhabited space. Often diminutive, these signs were displayed within the cluttered visual field of the island, filled with clues and advertisements encouraging conspicuous consumption.

One exception, a sign placed along an open stretch of beach, revealed just who is behind the funding of such public safety precautions besides the United Nations and other international aid agencies: The Coca-Cola Company. Through such a display of visual warning materials, the island’s
vulnerability is strategically drowned out by its prosperous offerings of leisure and consumption.

Yet the most startling reintegration of the tsunami into the landscape of the new Phi Phi Islands manifested itself in the production of tsunami memorial spaces. Tucked away on a remote corner of Phi Phi Don’s Ton Sai isthmus, far from the dense tourist development, resides the Phi Phi Memorial Park, a modest, landscaped garden of grass and native shrubs that contains a concrete-and-marble structure that lists on small black tiles in a multitude of languages the names of tsunami victims.

Partially funded by the same private European relief organization that helped coordinate the volunteer labor on the island, and designed and built in cooperation with remaining residents of the island, the hidden memorial park was neither listed in guide books nor on websites that market to tourists. Its simple construction reflected Buddhist and Islamic religious considerations through—amongst other elements—signs that request solemn behavior within the space, such as wearing appropriate attire and abstaining from alcohol. Seemingly existing outside the new tourist economy of the island, its modest composition reflects a hybrid of interests: international families who have lost loved ones in the tsunami and the residents and workers on the island who have also lost loved ones that day in December.

Along with the large memorial stone, smaller, more organic and personal mementos have been placed throughout the garden in tribute to tsunami victims. As if they themselves were growing out of the park’s landscape, these trinkets, plaques, and laminated photos further indicate the intended purpose and audience of the park. However, each of these memorial efforts remains unseen by the tourists who once again pour from boats to shop and swim while visiting the new Phi Phi Don. The park, like the tsunami warning and evacuation signs and the new tourist development, is situated in a greater context of the visual occlusion of the tsunami. Despite this relative invisibility, the park simultaneously exists as a fitting and gracious memorial to the human cost of the event. The garden’s location is strategic in numerous ways: It affords a space for the families and friends of tsunami victims and interested others to pay their respects, while at the same time existing outside the immediate gaze of the tourist. Such removal from view of the corporeal reality of the island’s recent past is an economically strategic component of the construction of the new visual landscape of Phi Phi Don. Visual clues as to the tragic past and precarious future of the island must be either removed from view or carefully integrated so as to avoid scaring away the once again increasing number of tourists.

In November 2006, in a public ceremony, a quite different memorial space was dedicated at the Phi Phi Islands. This new memorial also was constructed from the direct view of tourists, twenty meters under the surface of Phi Phi Don’s Ton Sai Bay.

The spectacular underwater monument consists of a central eighty-centimeter-high granite marker with a commemorative plaque, and three granite pyramids, each 150-centimeters tall, arranged in a perfect triangle surrounding the plaque. The plaque contains script written in seven
Tsunami warning sign, Lo Dalam Bay, Phi Phi Don Island, July 2006. Photo by D. Bollwinkel.
different languages (including Thai), which represents a cross-section of the nationalities affected by the disaster. The distance between each of the markers is approximately 5,395 centimeters, representing one centimeter for each victim of the tsunami on Thai soil whose name and nationality was positively identified. In news story broadcast and subsequently published online, the Thai news organization ThaisNews reported:

Each face of the pyramid granites in the triangle are engraved with memorial statements from the embassies in Thailand of 11 countries whose citizens lost their lives in the tsunami. (namely China, Korea, Switzerland, Sweden, France, Germany, Finland, Italy, Spain, Netherlands and Denmark) The foundations of the pyramids are engraved with words of wisdom from various philosophers to remind us of the right way of living.9

Precisely 2,874 centimeters in a northerly direction from the central memorial triangle, a traditional Thai Sala (pavilion) was constructed on the sea floor using wood salvaged from tsunami debris. This specific distance from the triangle to the wooden structure represents in centimeters exactly the number of confirmed tsunami victims in Thailand who could not be identified or whose remains were never claimed.10

In a public statement during the dedication, a representative of the Thai Ministry of Transport declared that the memorial was constructed in the hopes of attracting tourists in the form of scuba divers to the Phi Phi Islands. Scuba diving is both a popular and profitable experience associated with the Phi Phi Islands as a destination marketed under the auspices of adventure, leisure, and ecotourism. The construction of this new memorial starkly reveals the pervasiveness of the visual economy of tourism, integrating a supposedly solemn memorial to the international victims of the tsunami within Thailand into the greater economy of the Phi Phi Islands. The memory of the disaster has become, less than two years removed, a tourist attraction. The national status of the memorial maintains the necessary strategic occlusion of the Phi Phi Islands as a site once devastated by the tsunami, yet simultaneously draws the gaze of the tourist in the interest of return profits using the tsunami as part of the marketable experience of the islands. One need look no further for evidence of this strategic commodification of grief than the sources of funding for the underwater memorial: the Thai Ministry of Transport, the Tourism Authority of Thailand, and of course, Thai Airways.

Directly between the somewhat hidden space of the memorial garden on the edge of the Ton Sai isthmus’s northern beach and the underwater direct-marketing spectacle of the National Tsunami Memorial beneath the island’s southern bay is the greater central density of the newly rebuilt Phi Phi Don Island: the shops, restaurants, guest houses, resorts, and of course, numerous dive shops of the island’s once again thriving tourist economy. It is this nucleus of consumption, as well as the internationally marketed image of the ecological wonderment of Phi Phi Le and Leonardo DiCaprio’s
Maya Beach that makes both memorials, in their seemingly contradictory forms, possible.

The paradigm of paradise remains intact; the truth of the island’s recent past is conveniently tucked away, while the spectacular embodiment of the world’s loss at the hands of the tsunami on Thai shores lies beneath the sea, awaiting the tourists who will make sure to purchase one of the Kodak underwater cameras that now arrive on the island by the case, stacked high on the shelves of Phi Phi Don’s dive shops. Less than two years since the first shovel full of debris was hoisted by a handful of well-meaning volunteers, tourism is alive and well on Phi Phi, thanks in part to the selling off of morbid curiosity and the manufacture of grief under the thinly veiled guise of eco-tourism.

The construction of tourist spaces and economies is a complex process that can be beneficial and detrimental alike. Tourism, too, often is not necessarily some neo-colonial practice instigated within developing countries at the insistence of more economically powerful nations. In fact, as observed by anthropologist Dennison Nash, tourism is a practice often initiated and invited from within host nations. The successful undertaking of tourism often brings unprecedented profits, and subsequently a much higher quality of life to communities that choose to participate. The Thai people on the Phi Phi Islands that I interviewed and befriended while researching are not only extraordinarily happy that tourism has experienced such a swift and total post-tsunami recovery, but also extremely proud of their industry and the roles they play. At the same time, the mention of pollution and overcrowding was, in every case, a conversation stopper. Every attempt to interview a European dive shop proprietor was vehemently turned down. Phone hang-ups or doors shut in my face at the mere mention of the word tsunami were commonplace. Not surprisingly, the islands’ continued vulnerability within the seismically active region of the Indian Ocean is not being considered in the relocation and construction of new tourist businesses on Phi Phi Don.

The ways in which the practice of tourism can rapidly alter the landscapes and cultures of host communities—ultimately in its own interest beyond the intentions of the visitors or the visited—reveals gross inequalities and the ubiquitous power global capitalism represents.

When spaces, places, people, and even natural disasters can be rapidly transformed into commodities—through the production of images and the maintenance of visual economies of tourism, amongst other things—ecologies, cultures, and communities are often put in precarious positions of dependence and, ultimately, degradation. One needs to look no further than the practice of “sex tourism,” for which Thailand is internationally notorious. While I did not witness any indicators that this insidious practice was in place on Phi Phi Don in the summer of 2006, the manner in which the island’s landscape and the memory of the tsunami have been commodified is inseparable from the economic structure that also makes prostitution and human slavery possible.

As the allegory of The Beach and the recent transition of the Phi Phi Islands reveal, the making of such paradises as described in the introduc-
tion can be a costly endeavor. While the promise of paradise is manufactured by the visual economy of tourism, it is left up to those who live, work, and visit such places to actually deliver the product of paradise, no matter the consequences.
NOTES

1. Phi Phi is pronounced “pee-pee.”
6. The “post” or “new” tourist is a term used by such scholars as John Urry (*The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies* (London: Sage, 1990) and Gareth Shaw and Allan Williams (*Tourism and Tourist Spaces* (London: Sage, 2004), as well as Mowforth and Munt.
8. Today “voluntourists” are actively engaged in the recovery and rebuilding of post-Katrina New Orleans and the Gulf Coast of the southern United States.