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**Picturing Nature:  
Guided Picture Tours and the View-Master as Ideological Apparatus**

Last March, toy company Mattel announced that it had discontinued the manufacture of scenic picture discs for use with its popular children's product the View-Master.<sup>1</sup> An iconic plaything since its development by William Gruber and Harold Graves in the late 1930s,<sup>2</sup> the red plastic View-Master has long been seen as a portal through which children might look and transport themselves to remote locations, the settings of popular stories, and countless other realms, both real and imaginary. The toy's use of stereoscopic photography to produce a three-dimensional effect has been seen as a way to make users feel as though they are "right there" in the scenes depicted on the paper picture reels, each containing fourteen images—seven stereo pairs. For many years, these scenic picture reels were a popular means for children to be introduced to and experience these spaces. The reels' discontinuation may thus mark a distinct change in the way that children engage with and understand remote natural environments.

This paper examines a series of View-Master reel sets of American national parks produced by the General Aniline and Film Corporation during the 1960s and 1970s. The sets consisted of three reels (containing a total of twenty-one stereo images) and illustrated booklets that described and elaborated upon each image. Reel sets took the narrative format of "Guided Picture Tours" that led their viewers through a visual shorthand version of the physical spaces depicted on the discs, offering young users some of their formative and most memorable encounters with these spaces. The Guided Picture Tours articulate and reinforce a set of

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<sup>1</sup> Doug Whiteman. "View-Master, an icon of souvenirs since 1939, enters nonscenic era." *The International Herald Tribune*. 4 March, 2009. Available at: <http://www.iht.com/articles/2009/03/04/business/view.php>

<sup>2</sup> Ed Sobey and Woody Sobey. *The Way Toys Work: The Science Behind the Magic 8 Ball, Etch A Sketch, Boomerang, and More*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2008. p. 135.

acceptable park behaviors, effectively privileging a series of vantage points throughout the parks. By aligning the narrative course of the reel set with key park infrastructural elements, the discs encourage a particular navigational method, suggesting the right way to move through each park. As a toy—especially one that so integrally relies upon the exercise of human perceptual capabilities (binocular vision)—the View-Master is a mechanism through which particular ways of looking, seeing, or apprehending the natural environment are encouraged, while other perspectives remain obscured.

Such an examination of the View-Master's Guided Picture Tours positions the spectator within the legal discourses, classificatory structures, and infrastructural elements of American national parks. Thus situated, the View-Master supports an ideology of an unspoiled nature over which humans maintain dominance and hold a stewardship. Further, the discontinuation of these scenic picture discs also raises the question of the View-Master's continuing efficacy as a visual medium, and prompts consideration of what media may have supplanted it as popular entertainments and modes of imparting ideological content, such as the proliferation of webcams throughout parks, the semi-illicit practice of geocaching on federal lands, and geotagging images of park spaces.

While the present investigation concentrates on the use of View-Master as an apparatus in the service of a dominant argument about national park spaces, as a distinct medium or technology, the toy also holds both oppositional or subversive possibilities, as suggested by artist projects such as the Vladmaster handmade sets made by a Portland-based artist, which reimagine stories such as Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and often include components of public performance. The national park tour, however, was among the most ubiquitous and recognizable uses of the View-Master. To understand the View-Master in a longer historical context, this line of inquiry

builds upon scholarship on one of its nineteenth-century precursors—the Stereoscope, which is theorized by media historians and scholars of science and technology studies as part of a constellation of optical instruments that have been discussed variously as manifestations, carriers of, and challenges to various ideological formations at different moments in history. Among many characteristics that distinguish the View-Master from the stereoscope is the grouping of image pairs in sets of seven per wheel, which lends itself for an immediate kind of narrative logic, as well as its ease of operation, making it ideal as a children’s plaything.

Marketed as a children’s entertainment device, the View-Master enables youngsters to view distant vantage points from the comforts of their homes. In this sense, it is liberating. It emancipates the viewer from the necessity of physical travel much like its Victorian equivalent the stereoscope, which found pedagogical applications in travel, geography, and history lessons.<sup>3</sup> However, it maintains the capability not only to merely reproduce the natural world, but also holds the potential to refract, distort, or otherwise shape its representations. Whereas one could theorize that the work performed on “natural” spaces to transform them into national park exemplifies a certain kind of violence, the View-Master’s condensation and reworking of these spaces is for its young users represents a subtler but potentially as ideologically motivated and transformative undertaking.

Understanding the View-Master as a medium that can both embody and perpetuate certain ideological modes requires an elaboration of how it “works” as an apparatus or device. In examining the meaning of words in written and verbal communication, Barbara Hernstein Smith offers an explanation of what might *motivate* an individual to participate in dominant systems of

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<sup>3</sup> Some examples of this work include: Albert E. Osborne. *The Stereograph and The Stereoscope: With Special Maps and Books forming A Travel System*. New York: Underwood and Underwood, 1909, and *The World Visualized For the Class Room: 1000 Travel Studies through the stereoscope and in lantern slides, classified and cross referenced for 25 different school Subjects*. New York, Underwood and Underwood, 1915.

meaning and communication. She proposes that communication occurs through a process of “reciprocal effectivity,” whereby speakers (and listeners) succeed in recognition because they *want* to comprehend what they experience.<sup>4</sup> Although the meanings of language are dynamic, they enjoy transient periods of what she considers “relative stability”<sup>5</sup> before continuing to shift and change, enabling effective communication using a given set of terms for a period of time. The operation of the View-Master is an equivalent example in visual comprehension.

For centuries since the scientific revolution and the enlightenment, optical apparatus such as telescopes, and later microscopes, have fostered particular kinds of interactions between the human eye and the instrument’s lens. Scholarship on Victorian optical devices like the stereoscope has proposed a reconfiguration of visual perception during this time. Historians of science Thomas Hankins and Robert Silverman, for example, suggest that the stereoscope is a visual medium “that sustained an unprecedented correspondence to the physiology of sight,”<sup>6</sup> while Jonathan Crary describes the stereoscopic image as “two dissimilar images whose position simulates the anatomical structure of the observer’s body.”<sup>7</sup> These examples provide a context for understanding how and why it may feel “natural” or intuitive for a child to align their eyes to the View-Master’s lenses when presented with the toy. It is designed for users to interact with it based on historically constructed physiological cues. That its use seems natural is an example of what Althusser would call “hailing” its user as a social subject.<sup>8</sup> Further, when presented with the images on a View-Master reel, grouped in sets of seven and often accompanied by a narrative

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<sup>4</sup> Barbara Herrnstein Smith. *Belief and Resistance*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997, p. 55.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas L. Hankins and Robert J. Silverman. *Instruments and the Imagination*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006. p. 176.

<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Crary. *Techniques of the Observer*, Boston: MIT, 1992, p. 128.

<sup>8</sup> Louis Althusser. “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses. Notes Toward an Investigation.” In *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster. Londong: NLB, 1971, pp. 162-163.

booklet, it is also the user's expectation of relatedness between the objects that fosters their ability to connect words with images in a coherent narrative chain.

The View-Master's status as a "scientific" or "educational" toy, and the national park as a "documentary" subject additionally contributes to the device's ability to elude scrutiny as an ideological agent, because of its scientific and thus purportedly objective qualities. National parks and their attributes (geysers, geological formations, vegetation patterns, etc.) are natural phenomena understood through science, and thus, may appear unmediated. However, federally sanctioned spaces are rendered as such by a series of exclusionary rules, which historically (and therefore "artificially") demarcate them from their surroundings. These prohibitions (and their accompanying ideological significance) are reproduced in View-Master Guided Picture Tours, helping to reinforce the idea of the national park as an entirely natural space requiring admiration and preservation.

The particular ideological implications of the View-Master's Guided Picture Tours of American national parks are inextricably tied to the parks' status as emblems of "unspoiled" and "protected" regions within the United States. View-Master representations of national parks reinforce their position as spaces that, while available to visitors, also require protection, and must be formally distinguished from their immediate surroundings. These mediated versions of the Parks effectively reduce them to a handheld scale, while "preserving" their perceptual complexity and realism, because the stereoscopic image is three-dimensional, thus, more real, present, or apprehendable, as Jonathan Crary suggests in his discussion of the stereoscope, noting that the three dimensional effect offer's "not simply likeness, but immediate, apparent *tangibility*."<sup>9</sup> He continues, suggesting that for the stereoscope, this tangibility "quickly turned

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<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Crary. *Techniques of the Observer*, p. 122-124.

into a mass form of ocular possession,”<sup>10</sup> further reinforcing the notion of ownership and stewardship, both terms that require governance by some sort of rules. The discrete series of “tangible” View-Master images is accompanied by a booklet, which serves as a guide through each park. In the booklets, references to park regulations further imply a mastery and dominance over the natural world, all while staking out a set of acceptable practices that constitute appropriate park behavior.

Rules and regulations abound in the Scenic Picture Tour Booklets. One slide in the Yellowstone set depicts “a bridge jammed with fisherman,” and notes the Park’s policy to permit angling without a license,<sup>11</sup> an interesting inversion from other wilderness areas, which do require licenses. What is taken for granted here, however, is the existence of a licensing system that always already mediates public access to the water, rather than the assumption of free, un-negotiated access. Another slide, this one featuring grizzly bears, notes rules prohibiting feeding or “teasing” the bears, due to their unpredictable behavior. The same textual explanation contrasts grizzlies with popular Hanna-Barbara cartoon character Yogi Bear,<sup>12</sup> who inhabits a fictional Yellowstone (Jellystone). Such a move positions the actual grizzlies within contradictory terrain, at once familiarizing the viewer with them through comparison, and simultaneously casting them as un-tamable and unpredictable creatures. It is implied that because of their existence within the social order, park visitors (but not the bears) are subject to park rules, also validating a division between humans as cultural subjects and raw, unbridled nature.

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<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, p. 127.

<sup>11</sup> GAF Corporation. “Yellowstone National Park: Guided Picture Tour.” Ed. Lowell Thomas. Catalog Number A306. New York: GAF Corporation, n.d. Available at: <http://kipbrockman.com/viewmaster/booklets/A306.HTM> Reel 1, Slide 2.

<sup>12</sup> GAF Corporation. “Yellowstone National Park: Guided Picture Tour.” Ed. Lowell Thomas, Reel 1, Slide 6.

A slide in the tour of Yosemite National Park discusses park entrance prices in an historical context, noting that a \$5.00 permit was good for a seven days in 1913,<sup>13</sup> thereby both naturalizing and historicizing<sup>14</sup> the idea that park access is governed by policies and fees. Here, the system of restrictions becomes as natural as the park itself, appearing self-evident. The Guided Picture Tours are designed to function both as stand-alone View-Master-only experiences as well as supplements to physical park visits.<sup>15</sup> Yet, they notably foreground park rules (licenses, permits, conduct with wildlife), none of which are immediately relevant while operating a View-Master. Nevertheless, by working regulatory language into the optical or “imaginary” experience, View-Master reels reproduce these assumptions about the use and care of national park space, all of which naturalize park rules and expectations.

In addition to exclusionary rules, *what* is actually seen in a national park, and even more fundamentally, *the perspective from which* it is seen are ideologically structured concepts. The “realism” and high quality of View-Master Picture Tour images not only helps privilege certain perspectives from which park features should be viewed, but also highlight the enhanced access that social and technological interventions afford—there is the implication that the View-Master’s tour offers the best point of view. Implicitly acknowledging handicap-accessibility guidelines, a slide of the observation tower facing Clingmans Dome in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park boastfully asks “How else can a visitor see the area’s natural beauty

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<sup>13</sup> GAF Corporation. “Yosemite Guided Picture Tour, Packet no. 1.” Catalog Number A171. New York: GAF Corporation, 1975. Available at: <http://kipbrockman.com/viewmaster/booklets/A171.HTM> Reel 1, Slide 1.

<sup>14</sup> In many theoretical formulations, nature and history seem pitted against one another (for example, Althusser’s notion that ideology has no history), as historicizing something reveals its changes over time, rather than its permanent or “natural” stability. However here, “facts of history” are used to help legitimize (and thus naturalize) the system of entrance permits.

<sup>15</sup> Many of the Guided Picture Tours feature slides of aerial views, and expressly highlight that ordinary park visitors could not observe park features from such perspectives. GAF Corporation. “Yellowstone National Park: Guided Picture Tour.”

from a wheelchair?,”<sup>16</sup> which first emphasizes the infrastructural work that both enables and singles out, thereby privileging, a particular perspective, and secondly emphasizes a feature that is irrelevant to a View-Master spectator, who purportedly *already* has the optimum vantage point. The privileging of certain points of view and access to them in View-Master Guided Picture Tours begins to define criteria of value for viewing park features, thereby using a particular medium to reinforce an ideological program that governs not merely what is seen and from what perspective, but also how it should be viewed.

The parameters defining the physical and symbolic boundaries of a National Park are part of a larger classificatory system that positions the features and components of the park as elements of a natural and social totality. Foucault suggests how these parameters are discursively constructed, positing that the will to knowledge has “sketched out a schema of possible, observable, measurable and classifiable objects...in some ways taking precedence over all experience – a certain position, a certain viewpoint, and a certain function (look rather than read, verify rather than comment).”<sup>17</sup> Methods of seeing and interacting with the features of America’s national parks are constructed by the View-Master’s Guided Picture Tours in a similar fashion, whereby natural phenomena are made comprehensible by their placement in classificatory schema and condensation to easily-delineated terms.

The booklet accompanying the Yellowstone reel set, for example, explains calculations for determining the frequency and intensity of Old Faithful’s eruptions, thereby reducing a natural phenomenon to a set of measurable variables. Interestingly, the booklet also provides tips for how to capture the best photograph of an eruption, simultaneously “empowering” the viewer

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<sup>16</sup> GAF Corporation. “Great Smoky Mountains Guided Picture Tour.” Catalog Number A889. New York: GAF Corporation, n.d. Available at: <http://kipbrockman.com/viewmaster/booklets/A889.HTM>

<sup>17</sup> Michel Foucault. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1993, p. 218.

to apprehend nature and defining the specifications of a “successful” image,<sup>18</sup> further delimiting the criteria of value defining acceptable viewpoints and ways of looking. The book also features a paradigmatic chart of the eruption heights of several famous geysers around the world,<sup>19</sup> collapsing spatial boundaries to demonstrate geyser classification as a comprehensive system capable of describing a naturally occurring feature in its totality. Such rhetorical efforts, coupled with the aforementioned tangible quality of the stereoscopic image, all afford the viewer a sense of ownership or mastery over the natural environments depicted and described.

Additionally, View-Master booklets draw linguistic analogies and comparisons between park features, making natural phenomena understandable within the categories familiar to the viewer. Stuart Hall remarks that “ideologies do not operate through single ideas; they operate, in discursive chains, in clusters, in semantic fields, in discursive formations...Ideological representations connote—summon—one another,”<sup>20</sup> and such relational chains are what enable ideological information to be meaningful. The View-Master’s Guided Picture Tours effectively link national parks and monuments together in a larger system, using comparisons to render their natural subjects comprehensible. For example, a slide depicting “Half Dome from Glacier Point” in Yosemite is accompanied by a homology: “Half Dome is to Yosemite what “Old Faithful” is to Yellowstone—a park trademark.”<sup>21</sup> Similarly, a slide depicting Yavapai Point at the Grand Canyon illustrates the canyon’s depth with a helpful analogy: “If the Empire State Building stood in the river bed, only its TV antenna would show here.”<sup>22</sup> The View-Master user’s methods of understanding the parks, then, are structured by existing categories and relational thinking. In

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<sup>18</sup> GAF Corporation. “Yellowstone National Park: Guided Picture Tour,” Reel 1, Slide 7.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, Reel 2, Slide 4.

<sup>20</sup> Stuart Hall. “Signification, Representation, Ideology: Althusser and the Post-Structuralist Debates,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*. Vol. 2, No. 2, June 1985. p. 104.

<sup>21</sup> GAF Corporation. “Yosemite Guided Picture Tour, Packet no. 1,” Reel B, Slide 1.

<sup>22</sup> GAF Corporation. “Grand Canyon National Park.” Catalog Number A361. New York: GAF Corporation, n.d. Available at: <http://kipbrockman.com/viewmaster/booklets/A361.HTM> Reel 1, Slide 2.

this respect, the comparisons and classificatory contexts foregrounded in the View-Master tours reduce national parks to sets of comprehensible terms, which has the potential to obscure alternative ways of understanding park spaces as *cultural* as well as natural formations.

View-Master Guided Picture Tour books blur the distinction between “natural” features and “unnatural” infrastructural elements of the parks, thereby also privileging a certain way of moving through and navigating their spaces.<sup>23</sup> A slide of a lake in the Yellowstone tour, for example, features a “40-passenger excursion boat” with a hotel in the background,<sup>24</sup> emphasizing the importance of transportation technology in traversing Park spaces. The tour of Yosemite extends these premises, opening with information on early railroad and stagecoach lines running through Park territory, and plugging a travel museum on the physical site.<sup>25</sup> The tour of Zion National Park, comprised of twenty-one stereo images, devotes two of them to views of the Visitors’ Center, and yet another to Zion Lodge.<sup>26</sup> A slide in the Great Smoky Mountains tour proudly declares that the Park’s 1,500 campsites are able to accommodate up to 50,000 visitors in one day.<sup>27</sup> In addition to functioning as an advertising tool, the inclusion of details about lodging and other visitor facilities collapses distinctions between the “natural” and “cultural” features of the parks, highlighting marvels of engineering and design alongside natural phenomena. This strategy also positions the parks’ infrastructural elements as media through which visitors can achieve the greatest connection with the nature: boats enable access that might

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<sup>23</sup> These categories fall into the problematic that Latour establishes, however, using science and culture as polarities is one way of making this distinction understandable. Other divisions, such as features there before the territory became a National Park vs. those established after, might aid in distinction, but such categories would still blur the lines, as some infrastructural elements such as roads existed before spaces became official parks.

<sup>24</sup> GAF Corporation. “Yellowstone National Park: Guided Picture Tour,” Reel 1, Slide 3.

<sup>25</sup> GAF Corporation. “Yosemite Guided Picture Tour, Packet no. 1,” Reel A, Slide 1.

<sup>26</sup> GAF Corporation. “Zion National Park Guided Picture Tour.” Catalog Number A347. New York: GAF Corporation, n.d. Available at: <http://kipbrockman.com/viewmaster/booklets/A347.HTM> Reel 1, Slide 3, Reel 3, slide 16.

<sup>27</sup> GAF Corporation. “Great Smoky Mountains Guided Picture Tour,” 2, Slide 11.

otherwise be restricted: graded roads and overlooks provide optimum vistas, and the View-Master itself affords the best overview. Further, the focus on infrastructural elements also prescribes a particular way of moving through park spaces. The tour of Grand Teton National Park, for example, dedicates two slides to the Jackson Hole aerial tramway—one going uphill, and one going down.<sup>28</sup> Although Guided Picture Tours have the capability of charting courses that are entirely liberated from the roadways and conventional paths through the parks, they instead reinforces these paths of travel, presenting them as the “best” and “right” ways to move through.

Considering the parks themselves as hybrid entities, both natural and cultural formations, the View-Master images of their features then function as representations of an already shaped and cultivated natural environment. Jonathan Crary’s work on the stereoscope highlights the constructed nature of stereoscopic imagery. He notes that “no other form of representation in the nineteenth century had so conflated the real with the optical. We will never really know what the stereoscope looked like to a nineteenth-century viewer or recover a stance from which it could seem an equivalent for a “natural vision.”<sup>29</sup> Although the device seems to emulate human vision, Crary points out that ultimately, “in the stereoscopic image there is a derangement of the conventional functioning of optical cues,” and that “stereoscopic relief or depth has no unifying logic or order.”<sup>30</sup> Its extension of human visual perception thus mediates, or changes the way we perceive its images.

Perhaps among the most fascinating examples of the ideological nature of the View-Master’s Guided Picture Tours is from the Yosemite reel set, when the description

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<sup>28</sup> GAF Corporation. “Grand Teton National Park Guided Picture Tour.” Ed. Lowell Thomas. Catalog Number A307. New York: GAF Corporation, n.d. Available at: <http://kipbrockman.com/viewmaster/booklets/A307.HTM> Reel 2, Slides 8 and 9.

<sup>29</sup> Jonathan Crary. *Techniques of the Observer*, p. 124.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*, p. 125.

accompanying a slide of Mirror Lake discusses Mount Watkins in the background. It reads: “the peak, fittingly, was named for an early frontier photographer. His stereoscopic views of the valley helped Yosemite's scenic grandeurs to a nation of enthusiastic stereo-viewers in 1861.”<sup>31</sup> Such commentary strikingly frames the act of looking at stereo images in an historical context, discussing how people have essentially viewed this same (or a similar) image of the scene in the same way for a century. A provocative point to consider here, though here is not the space to explore it in depth, is the question of whether, given the ubiquity of stereoscopy in the nineteenth century, and its role in reconfiguring visual perception, the park’s actual design and construction might have been reflective of a larger stereographic logic.

The Guided Picture Tours’ discontinuation prompts contemplation of what other media formats may have challenged, replaced, or overlapped with the View-Master and questions the changing status of such optical devices. Due to the fact that they operate and circulate on the internet, many of these newer experiences are not bound by the same kind of spatial or infrastructural logic as the View-Master. The Old Faithful webcam, for example, is refreshed every thirty seconds, emphasizing a sense of liveness, though it has only recently been able to operate year round due to climate and temperature. In this case, the geyser “performs” for the viewer, and here, the timing and immediacy of the show are perhaps more important than the perspective, which is determined by park staff in charge of aiming the camera.

The practice of geotagging photos of park sites on photo sharing websites like flickr may also stand in for the views the View-Master offered. Here, the collaboratively-produced and dynamic dataset of the pictures might be understood narratively (by following a single user’s trip through a park), or as a spatially-defined temporal chain (the order in which images of a

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<sup>31</sup> GAF Corporation. “Yosemite Guided Picture Tour, Packet no. 1,” Reel 1, Slide 6.

particular place were uploaded by multiple users). Subsequent investigations might observe the extent to which these experiences represent entirely different paradigms of how parks are understood by remote viewers, or whether, despite their unique attributes, they have the tendency to reproduce the same kinds of assumptions about the proper use and importance of parks.

For many American youth growing up in the 1960s and the 1970s, the View-Master was a popular way to engage with distant spaces and come to understand the scope and the majesty of national parks. Despite the fact that they did not necessarily physically visit the parks, through the use of View-Master Guided Picture Tours, many children came to understand their rules and prohibitions, the scientific research involved in naming and classifying natural phenomena, and the most appropriate ways to navigate natural spaces. As a toy closely modeled after human anatomy and the principles of binocular vision that were explored in the nineteenth century, the View-Master appeared as an innocuous medium, one that could present tangible images of unspoiled nature to its user. However, considering the the View-Master's distinct characteristics provides a framework to understand how it operates as an agent of ideology, espousing popular conceptions about national parks as naturally occurring entities beyond any social, cultural, or political agendas.