

Paris Slide Show

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By Alfie Kohn

Somebody want to get the lights, please?

OK. This first one was taken on the Air France 747 that conveyed me and my two carry-on bags across the Atlantic. That elderly woman on my left (your right) spent most of the journey rapidly clicking her knitting needles and chattering away. The large, goofy grin you see on my face signifies that we were able to converse even though she spoke almost no English. Over hundreds of miles of ocean, she complained about the difficulty of getting luggage from place to place, the heat in the U.S., the poor service on American airplanes, and so on. I enjoyed every minute of it. We did not discuss the fine points of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, it is true, but we had ourselves an intelligible, two-way conversation. My last-minute cramming with the phrasebook and bilingual friends paid unexpectedly high dividends even before I set foot on French soil. In this next shot, the woman is burying a smile and the steward is looking confused because I have just indignantly informed him that he is not juice. Small setbacks are to be expected.

We're in Paris now, at a small Algerian restaurant that serves wonderful cous-cous. You wouldn't know that, of course, because what we're actually looking at here is a hole in a slab of wood which is called the bathroom. I figure the Louvre has appeared on enough slides already. Besides, an American notices right away that toilets are different in Europe. They're off by themselves in people's homes, for one thing; the room where people bathe would no sooner contain a john than a refrigerator. The phones look and sound different, too, and so do the light switches: tiny toggles with gentle slopes that are eased from one setting to the other rather than those vulgar protuberances we Americans flip up and down. It's taken me too long to explore life outside the States.

Here's the train just pulling into the station in Gentilly, the suburb south of Paris where I stayed. Over on the right, on the far wall, you can see a digital clock. It indicates that this train is late by exactly 20 seconds. I begin to understand why there are no clocks (or posted schedules, for that matter) in the subway stations at home. The train connects with the Paris subway system, *le metro*, which I came to know intimately. Here you see a typical metro station. Those boxes spaced a few meters apart are television sets, labeled "TUBE," which feature diverting images – the sort a child would find amusing – set to spacey, almost hypnotic music. The billboards in the stations are interesting as well. Besides the fact that women's bodies are used even more widely than in the U.S., one notices that the testimonial approach is favored to sell products: the slogans are mostly in first-person. Even the warnings inside the subway take this line. "I don't have a ticket – fine of 100 francs." A few metro stations feature small concession stands that sell only cosmetics and hair products for black people. One station has a machine that dispenses jeans. You strap yourself into a device that measures you, you answer some questions, you insert your 319 francs, and out come your American-style denims.

The obligatory city scene. Look at the faces in this crowd: their expressions are impassive or impatient. Unhappy people hurrying home with their long, crisp loaves of bread. They rush past each other, striding fearlessly between the small, darting cars, not pausing to look around, never smiling. I don't know why. However, they are not rude to a tourist who makes an effort to speak their language. (Let us be frank, though. It is a crude effort. By now my flush of self-congratulation is gone; some hydraulic contraption has lifted my standards and I want to be able to speak well. I can conduct conversations without fumbling with the guidebook or humiliating myself, but my syntax and vocabulary are barely passable. There is a scant millimeter of difference between, say, "deux heures" [2:00] and "douze heures" [12:00], and I am a long way from negotiating the pronunciations with the required delicacy. I suspect a lot of Americans end up missing engagements by ten hours.) I have been led to expect world-class rudeness from Parisians, and I find instead standard-grade urban briskness. There is a certain elegance here that occasionally borders on *hauteur* but people are surely willing to give directions. Shopkeepers are particularly cheerful, singing out a welcome, eager to please. The workers exude a muscular sort of mischievousness. Almost no one is fat, incidentally.

Another city scene: the area called Montparnesse. Lots of sex stores, but they are interspersed with respectable clothing shops and cafes, so the seaminess is diluted. A postcard stand. Notice how pussycat cards outnumber Eiffel Tower cards.

The Eiffel Tower. The legs are too far apart, suggesting a woman trying to urinate standing up. There is a restaurant or giftshop in each of the four feet, which are actually more than 100 meters apart. The area in the middle is useless, filled with gravel. The golden bust over there on the left is M. Eiffel, who appears, rather curiously, without irises. (The buses are continuously disgorging tourists, but no one is paying any attention to the sculpture.) I think I took a close-up of one of the legs.

Yah. Here it is. Does the color surprise you? I didn't expect this metallic brown, like brackish water. Of course it's the intricacy of the construction that's truly remarkable. Thousands of tiny bars: crisscrossing diagonals, parallel lines with small perpendicular connections that are then connected by even smaller segments. It looks like the doodling of someone on speed.

This is an outdoor marketplace that stretches out for blocks. You're looking at chickens with their feet still attached. Just behind them are calf brains. Maybe this explains why the people don't smile.

Marketplace again. This is not Kodachrome hyperbole. The tomatoes really are that red and luscious. Cherries fit for a still-life. And cucumbers of such dimensions as to make a Freudian's jaw drop. All the produce in all the stores is like this. Curious, though: with such wonderful produce, it's almost impossible to get real juice that's not from concentrate.

This cafe, I think, is near the Sorbonne, which explains all the young folk. They're all talking excitedly about a newly admitted student who is rumored to be a non-smoker. Here's a good candid shot of two folks doing that cheek-kissing ritual. The norm is now four kisses – left, right, left, right – a powerful example of inflation in the EEC. Handshakes are interesting, too. Brisk and efficient, even among good friends: smartly up and down, then release. But watch the French speak with their hands. I didn't get this on film, but one day I sat next to a middle-aged woman on a train; her husband sat opposite her. She and I struck up a conversation and I asked where she lived. Just as she named the town, her husband lifted his hand ever so slightly. She understood and stopped talking to me. On another occasion I was chatting with my host, Jean, about a certain woman whom I said I would see again. He waved a couple of fingers: "Ah, well! We shall see, then. Who knows what could happen!" his fingers said. In some cultures hands are never used; in others, they are always in motion. Here they are used sparingly but with breathtaking eloquence.

McDonald's. In Paris, for God's sake. I walked in here for the same reason one slows down on the highway to stare at an automobile accident. I don't know whether I was more sickened to hear people speaking French (indicating that residents would choose this over the indigenous cuisine) or English (indicating that American tourists are so desperately nostalgic for the worst of home that they would spend their dollars here). This particular McDonald's is in the Latin Quarter. There's a Burger King nearby. Worse: local variations on the same fast-food theme have sprung up everywhere. The only thing worse than the insulting gaudiness of American pop culture is the fact that it's in demand all over the world. Flip through the radio dial in Paris: more than half the songs at any given time are American.

Or go to a French party like this one, where the guests are in their early 20's. Very chic. The women dress daringly, with class. And the men – see that guy with the pinched face sitting near the window? He wears an ascot. He holds his cigarette just so, hand pointed up. He sucks it, blinks rapidly. So what are these trend-setters listening to? Disco! Complete with colored strobe lights supplied by the disc jockey.

I forget which building this is. The ornamentation is simply staggering, though. To walk around Paris is to understand the French influence on particular buildings in Washington and the elaborate grillwork in the French Quarter of New Orleans.

Well, you can't blame a fellow for wanting to see a movie in France, can you? They show commercials first instead of coming attractions – visually clever, sprightly commercials but still commercials. The film I saw in this theatre was Paul Newman's new *Glass Menagerie* and it has jolted me into realizing how much of foreign films I've been missing all these years by depending on the subtitles. Here, of course, the titles are in French, and they are appalling, washed-out versions of the English dialogue. "It has to be thrown together properly," says the erstwhile Southern belle Amanda Wingfield about a dinner party, and this is rendered in French as "Il faut l'arranger" (It has to be arranged). "Have some Farina" becomes "Manges un peu" (Eat a little). There oughta be a law.

I half expected to see "Huis Clos" engraved on Sartre's tombstone, but as you can see it's just his name and Beauvoir's. This unpretentious white cement block stands at the edge of the cemetery, close to the street. Those five pots of flowers could have come from anyone. S and B are located between Dr. Ira Gorovit and Mme. Bradamarte de March – lost in the crowd, among the people.

Tourists at the Arc de Triomphe. Lots of them from the Netherlands, Germany, England, Spain, and Japan. The Americans, of course, are a special treat. They seem perplexed, if not irritated, that the locals don't understand English. Their solution: speak louder. Among the comparisons between Americans and French that I hear about (but don't have time to witness): The French are more pretentious, challenging each other at parties on *haute culture* and, in the case of men, using their alleged acquaintance with famous intellectuals as a seduction device. (Try to imagine some American stud on the loose at happy hour crowing about how tight he is with Harold Bloom.) The French are obsessed with image; at social occasions "they look who look at them," as one informant put it – that is, they are delightfully conscious of themselves being watched. They are indirect and reserved, even while dancing with each other. They are also less efficient, perhaps because they are bound by protocol. They view Americans as friendly, absurdly mobile, and appallingly preoccupied with the subject of money, a subject utterly unfit for casual discourse here.

This, of course, is a bus, and it's carrying me out to the country. After a few days, Paris comes to seem less distinctive and more like any other large city. I'm tired of the bored commuters, the rushing pedestrians, the pollution and ubiquitous two-note sirens (ee-oo-ee-oo) and overpriced stores. I'm on my way to a fishing town on the English Channel called Honfleurs.

I know, I know. It looks like a postcard. The row of boats in this little harbor in Honfleurs, with the charming houses in the background, was almost too picturesque to photograph. Almost. I sat out by the water, chewing my cheese and bread and sa'lami, relishing the quiet dignity of the town. The ride from Paris was a treat, watching the countryside, the schoolchildren and the tiny shops, the cows mooing in French and the old folks who may remain on the farm because they have never seen Paris. Some of the most satisfying time during the whole of my week in France was spent walking up these narrow, sharply graded streets in Honfleurs, away from the Kodak signs in the windows by the waterfront. No two of these ancient stone-and-shutter houses are the same.

Here's another one.

And another. Any one of these structures is worth admiring at length. Together the effect is profoundly gorgeous. They don't clash with each other, though; their collective beauty is not intrusive or excessive. The houses stand patiently, leaning against each other, as the families inside have their midday meal. There is something both stirring and calming about the scene, something authentic and enduring. I wish this was more than a day trip.

Back in Paris now. Le Dernier Metro. I took this shot slightly out-of-focus to help you get the sense of a Parisian subway station at one a.m. Everyone is bleary and slightly sullen as if being kept awake against his will. Those fellows getting on the train over there are boisterously drunk. They sing loudly and tunelessly, clap their hands, and blow a whistle periodically. We end up trapped in the car with them. A few wary eyes keep watch; otherwise no one cares. Certainly no one finds them amusing. Two young lovers lean into each other, oblivious to the world. A couple of toughs light up cigarettes, which is strictly forbidden on the train. Everyone else is lost in silence, wishing to be in bed.

And...that's it. Somebody want to get the lights, please?

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