



Escapism

By Yi-Fu Tuan

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In prehistoric times, our ancestors began building shelters and planting crops in order to escape from nature's harsh realities. Today, we flee urban dangers for the safer, reconfigured world of suburban lawns and parks. According to geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, people have always sought to escape in one way or another, sometimes foolishly, often creatively and ingeniously. Glass-tower cities, suburbs, shopping malls, Disneyland?all are among the most recent monuments in our efforts to escape the constraints and uncertainties of life?ultimately, those imposed by nature. "What cultural product," Tuan asks, "is not escape?" In his new book, the capstone of a celebrated career, Tuan shows that escapism is an inescapable component of human thought and culture.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

"Who," writes the distinguished geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, "hasn't--sometime--wanted to escape? But from what?" In his fascinating look at the idea of escape, Tuan suggests that all human culture is really a kind of flight, an evasive mechanism, a means of not facing facts: our shelters give us refuge from the weather, our cities give us protection against nature red in tooth and claw, our religion and institutions give us solace against the certainty of death. "A human being," he says wryly, "is an animal who is congenitally indisposed to accept reality as it is." Tuan examines the artifacts of our present civilization to buttress his argument. The cornucopia of the modern supermarket, for instance, with its "dazzling pyramids of fruits and vegetables, its esplanades of meat," which promises ceaseless abundance, and the growth of escape-to-nature ideas, which, he insists, depend on an antithetical escape from nature (*nature* being, in his definition, "what remains or what can recuperate over time when all humans and their works are removed"). That escape to nature, he suggests, relies on an unfortunate abstraction, one of simplicity. Images of nature, he continues, are often formed from wishful thinking and not from direct experience, and they tend therefore to lack the complexity of reality. Tuan's vigorous essay is provocative, challenging, and a pleasure to read. --Gregory McNamee

Review

Escapism... is not so much an argument as a tour?sometimes a tour de force?of cultural escapes with exotic stops and unexpected twists and turns. And such a convivial tour guide! Tuan is chatty, engaging, unpretentious and charming.

(Francis I. Kane *New York Times Book Review*)

A reader could hardly ask for a more congenial guide, as Tuan's discussion ranges from Christ's last supper to chimpanzees copulating, from African bushmen barbecuing a turtle to diplomat-author Harold Nicolson bathing in a lake... Through this unusual perspective, Tuan is able to realign things usually considered opposites?'fantasy' and 'reality,' 'travel' and 'home,' 'work' and 'private life'?until they converge in fruitful new combinations... His playful treatment of life's glum realities feels at times as tonic as a leisurely Sunday morning... An original work to be read for both intellectual profit and pleasure.

(Jeffery Paine *Washington Post Book World*)

Writing in a deeply thoughtful style, Tuan, a leading cultural geographer, examines the wonders and atrocities that stem from the human impulse to deny the brutal realities of earthly existence.

(*Utne Reader*)

About the Author

From 1983 until retiring in 1998, **Yi-Fu Tuan** was the John K. Wright and Vilas Professor of Geography at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. One of the most important and influential cultural geographers of our time, Tuan has been the recipient of many awards, including a Guggenheim Fellowship, the Cullum Medal of the American Geographical Society, and the Lauréat d'Honneur of the International Geographical Union. His previous books include *Cosmos and Hearth: A Cosmopolite's Viewpoint*; *Topophilia: A Study of*

Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values; Dominance and Affection: The Making of Pets; and Who Am I? An Autobiography of Emotion, Mind, and Spirit.

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