Departure Lounge: Touring Airport Spaces

Sarah Sonner, work-in-progress paper for ASA conference, April 2007

(Could readers please note that this is a draft in progress – an updated version will be presented as part of the conference panel.)

What is it about airport space that offers a culture in which to participate or observe? I believe it is possible to enter airport spaces from any passenger perspective – whether rushing through to catch a connecting flight or spending the night in a terminal on purpose – and to be transformed by the experience. Airports produce and perpetuate fantasies about air travel, while making use of the same tools to exert control over the transient citizens of airport space.

This investigation has grown out of my conviction that airports possess a culture that transcends their inevitable individual differences. For example, the use of airport shorthand found in the three-letter designations for cities is now readily available to, and used by, passengers as well as employees. Booking tickets online is faster when you know the three-letter airport codes – it has become advantageous for those outside airport space to become conversant with this aspect of airport culture. Indeed some three-letter codes reveal evidence of a pre-airport past, as in Chicago O'Hare's ORD code, so-called because of the orchard that was once on the airport's site. This is one example of an aspect of airport culture that has become participatory, but what about the actual spaces of the airport, which may act as sites for the generation and perpetuation of airport culture? I believe that being in an airport is qualitatively unlike being in any other contemporary space, and it is curiosity about the fantasies and control produced by airport space that has led to this work.

This paper focuses on the departure lounge space of the airport as a kind of tourist pre-site; broadly, the airport offers a liminal space in between one (home) site and another (tourist) destination, yet within any airport lie a series of thresholds and in-between spaces. This paper will explore the intersection of tourism and airport space by examining the uneasy relationship of the contemporary tourist with the liminal space of the airport departure lounge, re-casting airports as tourist destinations in themselves. I am interested in questioning how airports both exploit and mask their airportness for the transient tourist (governed by the idea of a destination at the end of the flight) and the tourist of airport space (wherein the airport itself becomes a kind of tourist objective).

How does airport space mediate our experience of tourism? What do airports offer the tourist, accidental or otherwise? Architecture, a vision of the locale, and souvenirs all contribute to the airport's function as a gateway or portal to and from a particular place. To what extent can we approach a greater understanding of airports through examining these forms of airport tourism?

Of course not all airline passengers are tourists in the strictest sense – business travellers, or "deadheading" airline employees[1] for example might travel through airports regularly without tourism as part of their conscious agenda. However, keeping this in mind, for the scope of this investigation (and to nod to the variety of circumstances under which people now take flights) it is most useful to refer to all passengers as potential tourists of airport space, since to some degree the airport addresses each of its temporary citizens with the same tourist-based approach. Airport space must somehow buffer its captive passengers from their own situation by using some elements of a tourist experience as means to mediate control within the confines of the departure lounge. Local cultural sights and souvenirs attempt to reinforce the airport's association with a distinct place, rather than its potential function as a culture in and of itself.

In possession of a ticket, the passenger has arrived at the airport, checked in, and proceeded through security screening. All that awaits him or her now is to board the plane. It is this space, a sub-section of the larger liminal space that is the airport, which I will focus on here. People inhabiting the space of an airport departure lounge, who are there for the purpose of travel and not employment as airport staff, I will therefore refer to as passengers.

If we were to build a narrative around this space of departure lounges, what would it be like? A narrative of waiting, punctuated by consuming, bookended before and after by the activity of queuing at the thresholds of the security scan (the magnetometer) and the jetway onto the plane itself.

In writing of airports as a "non-place" in the opening passages of *Non-places: an Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*,[2] Marc Augé uses a narrative device to introduce the reader to a (seemingly generic) passenger's experience of contemporary airspace and air travel. While his Pierre Dupont (our protagonist) is in the airport, waiting for the "sequence of events" after his check-in and before his flight, he meditates upon the time and

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[1] "Deadheading" is the airline industry term for those staff who are not on shift but nonetheless travelling by airplane for work-related reasons.

[2] Marc Augé, *Non-places: an Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, London: Verso, 1995.

space of the departure lounge, thinking of himself situated inside the airport as, "just the two of us!

> …these days, surely, it was in these crowded places where thousands of individual itineraries converged for a moment, unaware of one another, that there survived something of the uncertain charm of the waste lands, the yards and building sites, the station platforms and waiting rooms where travellers break step, of all the chance meeting places where fugitive feelings occur of the possibility of continuing adventure, the feeling that all there is to do is to 'see what happens'.[3]

This description occupies a relatively small space in Augé's narrative prologue, however it is the space that typifies a "non-place." It is this "non-place," the departure lounge and its environs, which I argue has a transformative effect upon travellers. What Augé calls a non-place is actually weighted with a culture of the liminal – a transitory, transitional space writ large for passengers, surrounding them and yet usually invisible and unavoidable in contemporary air travel.

In recent work on the culture of US airport screening, Lisa Parks concludes, through her observation of the particulars of close examination involved in post-September 11th TSA screening, that the airport is no longer a "non-place," but rather has become "*the* place:" a discursive space that orchestrates and reproduces a set of protocols on "freedom of movement."[4] The supermodernity encountered by Augé's Pierre Dupont is in actuality a cultural function of airport space as "*the* place" where security, technology, and globalization now collide.[5]

Having passed through the space occupied by the culture of airport screening, passengers must then await boarding – seemingly a necessarily empty time to be filled with what the airport lounge itself might offer in the way of culture, that is to say commodities: CNN on ceiling-mounted screens, fast food consumed on modular seating, perhaps with a view of the runway or apron where ground staff move between parked planes and airport vehicles. As Parks describes, the airport users, the jetset, wield the tickets and the economic power inside this space.

It is here worth making explicit that my thinking about airports in the context of this paper is from a first-person Western bias, though within this, I hope to address airports on all scales: from international hubs with populations as large as cities, to regional airports with a single

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[3] Augé, 3.
[4] Lisa Parks, "Points of Departure: The Culture of US Airport Screening," 28 February 2007 presentation of article forthcoming in *Journal of Visual Culture*, 2007.
[5] Ibid.

terminal, runway, and airline serving its passengers. There can be found a kind of sameness, as well as notable differences between all airports: architecture, quality/breadth of shops, airline associations/identities imposed upon airport spaces (e.g. the United tunnel in O'Hare), which amount to individual airport personalities. I have chosen to think here about the departure lounge – a space meant for waiting and a given aspect of modern airport design.

Returning to the question of what culture might be found in a departure lounge, the most apparent activity upon clearing security is most likely shopping, particularly (as with recent regulations) if you have had to abandon any liquids or gels outside the secure area. "World Duty Free" shopping also offers a chance to purchase non-necessities, things that I will buy at an airport but won't buy elsewhere: perfume, designer brands of makeup, large containers of candy. The branding of a duty free shop creates a safe, neutral space in which to consume luxury items that may be inaccessible outside the airport, due to price or perceived exclusivity. The fact that they are tax-free acts as an incentive: you're getting a bargain, but not really a bargain –money is still being handed over for luxury commodities.

These commodities are on display but are often not the only things set up specifically as displays. Airports also make use of exhibitions in order to influence passengers in the departure lounge. These may take several forms, and I will address them here under the umbrella of airport exhibits.

In the first instance, the airplanes and outside activity of the apron may act as de facto exhibits. Through picture windows, passengers can watch their own plane being prepared for flight, baggage being loaded or offloaded, flights taking off and landing, and glimpse the complex and inaccessible working life of the airport "behind the scenes."

More conventional types of exhibition displays are also encountered in these spaces, including artistic or didactic objects relating to the airport's locale, or most interestingly, to passenger security and safety. For example, wall art and showcased displays may act as means of diverting attention and slowing passenger progress down a hallway, while they invite consideration of their contents: local art or artefacts, perhaps seized contraband objects. It is this latter example that I wish to explore further, and by its means re-introduce Bruno Latour's use of the term "black box" to airport spaces.

In his article "Mixing Humans and Nonhumans Together: The Sociology of the Door-Closer," Latour focuses on the self-closing door hinge in particular, as an example of what he

terms a "black box," in order to point out and then unpack the complexity of human and nonhuman interaction involved in the entrance or exit from any structure:

> So, to size up the work done by hinges, you simply have to imagine that every time you want to get in or out of the building you have to do the same work as a prisoner trying to escape or a gangster trying to rob a bank, plus the work of those who rebuild either the prison's or the bank's walls.[6]

The black box is a mechanism or system whose workings go unnoticed until it breaks down, at which point we recognize it as existing, important, yet necessarily obscure. Latour's central observation about the "door-closer" is that there is only one human to discipline should a door-closer be employed, rather than disciplining each user of the door, and that making the door-closer into a mechanical function then "blackboxes" the theoretically arduous process of passing through a door (or "hole-wall") that he details in the quote above. As the mechanism of the door-closer has blackboxed that process, so airports have in turn blackboxed the contemporary passenger's transformation into the tourist.

All forms of the airport displays mentioned here are a means of interaction between the human (traveller/passenger/tourist) and the non-human mechanisms of airport space, a means for the airport space to discipline passengers. Museum-like displays of seized contraband invite passengers to view one of the airport's black boxes, but for a specific, deterrent, purpose – such that the airport mechanism in this way uses one of its own black box tools as a means of control over humans by non-humans, while leaving other black boxes in airport space intact and for the most part, invisible.

Latour refers to this kind of "behavior imposed back onto the human by nonhuman delegates" with the term *prescription*:

> How can these prescriptions be brought out? By replacing them by strings of sentences (usually in the imperative) that are uttered (silently and continuously) by the mechanisms for the benefit of those who are mechanized: do this, do that, behave this way, don't go that way. Such sentences look very much like a programming language.[7]

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[6] Latour, 299.
[7] Latour, 301.

What is therefore prescribed by the space of the departure lounge?

Wait

Consume

Comply

Know we are watching you

This is a space where pictograms replace words, numbers of gates may appear gigantic, distances may be measured in projected travel-time: it may take 15-20 minutes to walk down a hallway from the shopping area to where your plane awaits.

I want to turn now to the black box as a concept, and to Latour's use of it as a verb, with respect to the complex mechanisms of airport space. In his elaboration of the terms "black box" and "blackboxing" as they relate to his research, Latour acknowledges the aerospace context from which they were lifted. However, Latour uses the black box as a metaphor, largely discarding its original aviation association. This does not continue to affect a discussion of the properties of the black box as it relates to unpacking of the ordinarily hidden mechanical meanings involved in so many everyday human and human/nonhuman interactions.

Black boxes are actually bright orange. This facilitates their recovery from a crash site, and is often made as an early statement of general aviation fact in a news report on the investigation of a downed flight. Shortly following the explanation that black boxes are not actually black will be a statement telling us that most planes have two black boxes, one (the "flight data recorder") responsible for recording the functioning of the plane's mechanical systems, and the other (the "cockpit voice recorder") recording a continuous loop of the ambient sound from the flight deck. When recovered, these black boxes are often displayed, damaged but usually resilient, as part of the report of an ongoing investigation. This is the case even though most black boxes would look like what they are: a reinforced metal container with handles—resembling most of all a bank's safe deposit box—and in their physical appearance would likely offer no clue as to the cause of a crash.

Latour's application of the term as metaphor does not strictly address the boxes' mechanical function as recording devices. Until its function is arrested in a plane crash, the black box continues to record over itself, in anticipation of failure, when its contents could be called upon to provide a record of the last moments before catastrophe, to illuminate the human factors which may or may not be involved.

In this way, for a plane crash and for Latour's metaphor, the black box embodies a discomfiting intersection between the individual life and the impersonal mechanism, and is all the more powerful for its documentary properties: the non-human which gathers and stores limited evidence of the human. The black box in any airplane is a potential vital clue, a potential last document, and a means of communicating with the dead in the investigatory process.

The airport itself is composed of a series of these black box-like architectural mechanisms. We enter it, are converted into passengers, processed and tracked, and expected to fulfil a set range of tasks (if waiting can be called a task) according to the airport's needs. We only become fully aware of the black boxes of airport spaces when something happens to interrupt the system, to call attention to how each space functions.

Held in the waiting game of the departure lounge, passengers find themselves complying with the parameters of this particular black box, in Latour's metaphorical sense. The mechanistic metaphor of the black box, as we see here (re)made physical in airport spaces, may act as an architectural example of the human need to mediate the potential of a group space, in this case the departure lounge, whose rules for individual inhabitation are strict yet opaque. When might the departure lounge break down, and call its own black box status into question? Is sleeping in an airport perhaps a way to deconstruct and inhabit the black box?

Reading through the anecdotes and recommendations on such sites as sleepinginairports.net provides insight into aspects of the departure lounge that tend to recede into the background of a passenger's awareness during the "busier" waiting times, and which become glaringly apparent when sleeping in an airport (recasting the waiting area), such that it becomes urgent to find a way to deal with them. These include the standard security announcements over the PA, and the disturbance caused by the sweeps made by cleaning crew or other airport staff. These also occur during normal daylight waiting times, as portions of the airport routine that integrate almost seamlessly with the sensory stimulation accompanying the departure lounge as consumer environment. But when the stores are all shut and the ranks of seats are largely empty, these repetitions in the pattern of airport space emerge – we notice them because they prevent sleep. Similarly, interactions with the airport's employees are thrown into greater relief.

Sleepinginairports.net includes testimonials from travellers who miss a flight connection, plan a long layover overnight and elect to remain in the airport to avoid paying for a short stay in

a hotel, or perhaps have an early-morning flight and decide to arrive late the previous evening in order to comply with the suggested 3-hour-early check-ins. Finding themselves there either by choice or accident, reviewers on the site are generally frank and practical about the benefits and drawbacks of sleeping in particular airports. Toilets, lounge-seating configurations, climate control, even floor surfaces are reviewed and taken to task for their utility in these overnight situations.

In addition, many of the anecdotes reflect a concern for the availability of consumer goods at unsociable hours. Reviewers on the site express distress at their inability to consume – for example in describing how no food stalls were open between the hours of midnight and 5:30 am so they were not able to buy anything to eat, and no shops were open overnight either, so they were not able to purchase anything to distract them from the passing hours. Equally, reviewers are pleased when noting those shops or food services that are accessible overnight, for example the all-night book kiosk, however minimal, that remains open to display magazines, bestsellers, and other staples of the airport literary market. This is one example of the non-human airport space's prescription upon the human which comes starkly to light once the prescription cannot be fulfilled due to time of day.

In terms of the overnight population of airport space, the preference seems to be for cleaning staff to be present, but not too present – thus acting as a security feature alongside any guards employed for that purpose: "The cleaning staff was unobtrusive, and I felt better that there was someone around."[8] Probably the most useful tip I have gotten from this site is to search out the chapel when looking for a place to sleep in an airport. It will normally be shielded from the PA system and be located in an enclosed space not lit by overhead fluorescent lights.

As individual descriptions, these reviews do not have a place in the usual spectrum of tourist literature. Taken together however, the site offers a new perspective on the unique twentieth-century liminal space that is the contemporary airport: it offers a tourist guide to global airport space, and implicitly treats airports as destinations. It provides insight, advice, and a sense that there is a fellow human out there who has gone before you, and lived to tell the tale of its coded restrictive spaces and even perhaps gotten something useful (if only a few hours' nap) out of an unusual spatial and cultural experience. It describes one of Latour's metaphorical black

[8] Contributor review of Chicago O'Hare, www.sleepinginairports.net, accessed April 2007.

boxes in physical terms of human utility and comfort, and in this way allows the stranded passenger to actively inhabit a mechanism in which we are only expected to passively participate.

What do these examples reveal, through their spectacle or concealment, about the cultural politics of airport spaces and airports' relation with tourism? These are the spaces of waiting – in the airport we wait to attain the status of tourists, we are already on our holiday and yet not at our destination. We have paid to become passengers, and so we are paying to wait and to follow the prescriptions of the departure lounge, and become frustrated when this arrangement breaks down. The airport is both an integral part of tourism and not a part of the pre-conceived tourist experience. The departure lounge is a liminal time and space, where we as tourists are maintained as part of a larger machine, moving and waiting, spending and complying as needed.

The "strategic play of hide and reveal achieved by airport displays is acting upon human passengers in order to entertain and distract them during their time spent waiting in the departure lounge, while also serving, through displaying contraband items, to reinforce an imposed restriction of objects not allowed onboard. The strategic reveal here is the display contents, while what remains hidden is the black box function: the control thus implied upon passengers under the guide of providing them insight into the black box that is the airport.

Departure lounges reproduce a fantasy of air travel and tourism – while in them we are not quite at our destination, but close enough to imagine it. They reproduce a stratified, consumer-driven economy, yet one where the consumer is controlled and passively participatory inside a largely invisible, distinctively cultured, mechanism. The departure lounge holds its passengers precisely within the very particular space of the airport, while simultaneously promoting fantasies of imminent flight. It presents us with mediated spectacles of itself in the forms of displayed commodities, exhibits, or airplane activities, yet remains essentially inaccessible.

Sources

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