Review Article

Non-Places: Space in the Age of Supermodernity*

IAN BUCHANAN

'I seemed to need a new place,' she said. 'Not necessarily an interesting place. Just a strange place. Without associations. A place where I would be very much alone. Like an hotel.' (Raymond Chandler, The Lady in the Lake.)

Here, at once, we are faced with a familiar paradox: a known place that is still a strange place. The paradox is familiar, even if it is only infrequently phrased as such, because it describes one of the most striking features of contemporary life, namely the preponderance of generic spaces like hotels, airports, malls, freeways, fast food outlets, i.e. spaces we feel we know even though we have never been there before, and whether they are cross-town or overseas. Even if one does not travel very often, or own a car, or like deep-fried chicken and hamburgers very much, such places are still unavoidable in the course of daily life because cities today are structured around them. If you do travel, then such spaces seem to be the only kind you see: you travel to the airport along the freeway, or by train, you embark and disembark the plane at the airport, while you are away from home you stay in a hotel, you do your duty free shopping in the hotel mall, and (relieved not to have to experiment with local cuisine) you might even get a quick bite to eat at the local KFC. The question I wish to interrogate here is whether or not this aspect of contemporary life is different enough to signal the advent of a new epoch, and prevalent enough to actually characterise it. Marc Augé (1995), for one, says it is, and he calls it supermodernity.

Supermodernity is characterised by excess, a charged surplus in the three domains philosophical and, more particularly, anthropological thought has come to rely on as its cornerstones: time, space, the individual. On Augé’s reading, time is conceptually synonymous with progress and, as such, is seen by him to have suffered the same fate as progress; it too, he says, is regarded with the deep scepticism that is today levelled at progress, which, thanks to Adorno, is seen as nothing other than the harbinger of all the twentieth century ills—nazism, communism, capitalism. Practically, however, Augé sees this problem as secondary to the fact that instant telecommunications today make it exceedingly difficult to distinguish between what are called ‘events’ and the properly historical, or to put it another way, between meaningless occurrences and meaningful moments, because it gives us events in rich abundance, overabundance. So much so that time itself appears to have been mastered, spatialised by digital technology. Because, in the West at least, we are
philosophically programmed to try to understand the whole of the present, this abundance dooms us to misery and failure. Hence, the so-called crisis of meaning. But as Augé (1995) points out, what is truly new today is not the fact that the ‘world lacks meaning, or has little meaning, or less than it used to have; it is that we feel an explicit and intense daily need to give it meaning’. It is this practice, this felt need to imbue the world with meaning, that Augé is actually trying to address, not the real or imagined erosion of meaning lamented and celebrated by postmodernism.

So, rather than ask, as we move to the next category, space, what practices an excess of space has given rise to, we should instead inquire what historically new practices may be explained by a seismic shift in that category? For Augé, it is the apparently anomalous rise of what he calls particularisms that needs to be explained. Why is it that when we are on the brink of that long cherished utopian dream of unrestricted communication between all people and all peoples, there is such a clamour for peace and quiet, the mother country, home, roots, all of which in the popular imaginary at least stand to be superseded by cybertechnology? His answer is that certain spaces, which he will call non-places for reasons I will explain in a moment, induce a sense of disassociation (the feeling that one no longer knows where one’s coordinates are) only marginally compensated for by nostalgia (the ‘home’ page on the web-site, for instance). Space, as it was once understood, circumscribes an area of intelligibility, it defines a world in which certain things make a certain kind of sense, which is doubtless why the island figures so large in meditations on space: it literally is what space (as signifying universe) is conceived to be, a discrete totality. Again, as Augé sees it, the problem is not so much that old categories of space have been undermined, which is the story postmodernism tells, but rather that there is now such an overwhelming number of signifying universes that we no longer know which way to turn. (Is the local the living room and the global what’s on TV? Or is the TV local because it is in the living room and the living room global because via the TV it is connected to the whole world?) So we retreat.

But what are these non-places causing so much discontent? Well, in spite of the fact that Augé intended to give positive definitions for the conditions of supermodernity, in the first instance, we are forced to resort to the negative because the new spaces Augé has in mind belong to an order for which no terminology yet exists. Evidence of this, I might add, is never very far from view—witness the patent anachronism of ‘boarding’ or ‘disembarking’ an aeroplane—but often quite difficult to spot because of our facility for analogy—insofar as planes take us elsewhere, they are like boats, and so on. Non-place is defined in contrast to place, itself a standard anthropological concept meaning a ‘concrete and symbolic construction of space’. As is obvious from this vague definition, and as Augé usefully reminds us, place is an anthropologist’s tool, the property of its inventor, not the social group said to inhabit it. What it does is name a relational system that integrates a people with a region or territory, their past with a present still to be fashioned, their sense of self with a future they are determined to live (this is what de Certeau means when he identifies place with a calculus). So, however tempting it may be to identify a people with a place, the space they have shaped in other words, it is a misstep to do so
because it aligns a population with a system of distribution—or, to use an even more manifestly Foucauldian term, governmentality—not a core, chthonic category. Place functions like the proper name (as Lacan has taught us to understand it): it names and subordinates. But not all places are of this type.

Following de Certeau (1994), who, in opposing space to place, sets out to articulate what might be called an auto-governmental zone, i.e. an area conditioned by what he calls local authority, Augé suggests that there are certain places that while not yet being spaces in de Certeau's terms, are nevertheless not places either, properly speaking. His hypothesis is this: ‘If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place.’ Such generic spaces as airports, hotels, train stations and so on, are, in Augé’s view, non-relational, unhistorical and unconcerned with identity. Passengers on an aeroplane, for instance, share no necessary relation with each other beyond the simple and basically accidental fact that circumstances have brought them together for a few hours; those circumstances are at best micro-historical, and are probably not even susceptible to generalisation under so open a rubric as the need to travel; and, unless you pay extra, the only identity you have is as customer, and even then you are only what you pay for, which itself reflects a comparatively recent effort on the part of the airlines to try to make its bread-and-butter human cargo feel a little less like integers. For Augé, it is precisely the preponderance of hotels, airports and malls that signals things have changed, that spatially things are different, but these are not the only signs he attends to. Importantly, his perspective is not strictly historical, his evidence of change not simply the empirical fact that there are more airports today than there were, say, 10 years ago.

Although it is undoubtedly true and very far from incidental that empirically things have changed, that there are indeed more airports today than there were a decade ago, it does not in itself indicate the emergence of a new kind of space because, as Augé argues, space is an apparatus, or concept, not a given. It serves either as a principle of intelligibility for an observer, or a principle of meaning for an inhabitant. Subject to deep cultural investment—libidinal, social, sacral—space nevertheless does not produce community: on the contrary, the inauguration of spaces comprises one of the more crucial acts of collective existence. For this reason, according to Augé, one needs to adduce new experiences of space before the birth of a new epoch can be announced. Crucially, this demands we find behavioural evidence to support the intuition our eyes insist must be true, a mode of behaviour attributable to a type of space, in other words. A changed landscape does not always indicate a changed life, and even when it does, it does not always reveal the nature of the change. For instance, as I have already noted, the irony of contemporary life is that just when we are in reach of a truly global society, everyone seems to be in retreat from collective life. The new communications technology available today would seem to herald communal life of an unprecedented intensity and scale, but instead seems to have inaugurated a kind of solitary existence not known in even the darkest of times.

Now we must ask who this retreating ‘we’ refers to? This brings us to the third
category: the individual. 'The third figure of excess in relation to which the situation of supermodernity might be defined is well known to us. It is the figure of the ego, the individual, who is making a comeback (as they say) in anthropological thought itself'. The view now held is that any text about another tells us more about the conditions of its production, the author's background and personal prejudices, and so on, than it ever does about its purported topic—the Nuer, the Trobrianders, New Yorkers. A heightened concern in ethnological circles for the integrity of the other, today codified as a protocol to neither speak for the other nor in the place of the other, has had the paradoxical effect among ethnologists of a Hamlet-like soliloquising about the self at the expense of the other. By never presuming to speak for or on behalf of another, anthropology now chants the lonely song of the self. The individual is making a comeback, then, not because of a revival of humanist or even personalist thought, but, on the contrary, because of an almost hysterical suppression of it. From a theoretical point of view, what this means, as Augé rightly points out, is that anthropology is now placed in the invidious position of promulgating the individual as source and guarantor of all meaning production, even as it disputes the sovereignty of such an idea as the individual. What this urgently demands is a reconceptualisation of the individual in such a way as to be able to articulate the encounter with the other in an equitable way.

However, this is to speak only of the anthropologist's theoretical concerns. What of the anthropologist's subject, the retreating 'we'? In what sense is it in excess? In Augé's view, anthropology's renewed concern for the individual reflects, which is not the same thing as saying it registers, the success and absorption of capitalism's individualising apparatus: through advertising, we have been taught to single ourselves out for all kinds of extraordinary attentions and privileges ('you deserve it' 'you've earned it', 'the only thing that matters is you' and so on). As a matter of course, then, we put ourselves and consideration of our own interests first, safely believing that in doing so, we are acting in the way society expects us to. The temptation to narcissism, as Augé calls it, is almost irresistible nowadays because 'it seems to express a common law: do as others do to be yourself'. What, in effect, Augé is saying is that anthropology is the victim of a dupe; that it has somehow bought into the cult of the self central to commodity culture without realising it. His anthropological claim is that non-places help to create, and daily reinforce, this individualism by offering a kind of anonymous space that cannot be owned, that cannot be invested in emotionally, but which is nevertheless able to make one feel modern, important, at home even. 'Frequentation of non-places today provides an experience—without real historical precedent—of solitary individuality combined with non-human mediation (all it takes is a notice or a screen) between the individual and the public authority.' Supermodernity equals solitude.

This solitude is neither feared, nor regretted, because it is never fully felt. The success of the mechanism called the non-place is its ability to stand in for, and to improve upon, human interaction—the automatic turnstile is faster than the conductor, the ATM more convenient than the bank, and the credit card simpler than cash. We have been taught to welcome the inhuman, to feel at home in its known strangeness. And as every overseas traveller knows, the familiarity of even so soulless
a generic space as an airport can be very comforting. Even though you may be in
China and cannot speak or read Chinese, you can still negotiate your way around an
apparently intricate and dense space like Shanghai’s extremely busy international
airport because its primary features are the same as every other airport you’ve been
to. Like the well-trained citizen that you are, you know that no matter how
unfamiliar a place may be, if you simply follow an already all too familiar itinerary
you will get through: first, you present your ticket at the check-in desk, where you
are given a boarding pass; then, you put your luggage through (not stopping to think
how it knows where you are going, and where you are changing planes); next, you
proceed to the customs checkpoint, and from there to the immigration control point,
making sure you have paid your airport tax first of course; then, at last, you come
to that marvellous limbo-land, the departure lounge, where time seems to run on a
clock not of human imagining.

But does all this amount to epochal change? Augé’s argument is that the preva-
ience of non-places is an index of supermodernity, and the experience of them its
defining characteristic. But non-places are not its cause. The cause, although it is
never really named as such by Augé, is late capitalism. This is implicit in the claim
that supermodernity is the positive, which is not to say uplifting, side of postmod-
ernism. In other words, non-places result from transformations in the mode of
production, and if we are to specify them properly, that is where we must look to
find their true conditions of existence. But as Marxism has long argued, the
economic is only one of many determinations, and not the ultimate determining
factor. Even the economic itself is now broken down into a number of different
categories, each with their own specific effects. Moreover, as Jameson (1988, 1991)
has shown, there is very often a time-lag between changes in economic conditions
and changes in the social, a fact which expands further the gap in our thinking
between the purely economic and what we might call the cultural impetuses to
change. The question Augé’s approach raises is whether or not the mode of
production as cause needs to be taken into consideration at all when analysing
non-places. He seems to suggest the experience of them enough.

This raises what, to my mind, the central and still unresolved, problematic for
all analyses of space. This problematic can be staged as two questions. To what
extent is the experience of a space tied directly to the objective conditions of that
space? And, by the same token, to what extent can the objective conditions of a
space be separated from the subjective experience of that space? Is there something
specific to non-places that makes it impossible to experience them in the same way
that so-called places are experienced? And if so, does this mean subjects have
remained the same through history and only spaces have changed? If subjects do
change, however, then we must question whether it is purely spatial factors, i.e.
purely objective differences, like the lack of directional signposts in a mall, or the
purposely inconvenient location of a check-in desk in a hotel, for instance, that
separate places from non-places. Of course, the more influencing factors besides
spatial ones we isolate, the less determining the objective conditions of non-places
will appear to be in the evolution of supermodernity, with the effect that space itself
as an organising category diminishes in importance. Yet, if we do not take some
measure of the influence of the objective, space in other words, we wind up with a purely phenomenal account of the social, lacking even the constraint of the noumenal, that unseen and unrepresentable something that all the time pushes to be felt but never is.

Theoretically speaking, Augé’s approach is most certainly dialectical, but practically this is less certain. Ethnology, he says, must always deal with two spaces at once: ‘that of the place it is studying (village, factory) and the bigger one in which this place is located, the source of the influences and constraints which are not without effects on the internal play of local relations (tribe, kingdom, state).’ Yet that second place is never treated as truly defining, or determining, by him, never said to condition the other space in a significant and necessary way, so his method is not actually dialectical at all. While Augé does not celebrate the advent of supermodernity—he is not an enthusiast of the changes it has wrought, nor is he a romantic longing for something lost, and he is appropriately sceptical of all types of nostalgia—he is not able to critique it either. What his analysis lacks, which a properly dialectic analysis might provide, is an account of the necessity of the changes in our experience of cultural space he observes. Perhaps the task of adducing the cause of supermodernism is to be left to the anthropology of solitude that he imagines will one day descend on us.

University of Tasmania

Note
*A review article of Augé (1995).

References
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