

IN LIMBO: NOTES ON THE CULTURE OF AIRPORTS

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Co-conceived and co-written with Runar Døving, this paper was presented (by me) at the EASA meeting in Prague in 1992, at a workshop titled 'The consequences of globalization for anthropology'. Great conference in a great city which had just started on the journey from drab state socialism to cheerful neoliberalism.

Field anthropologists move into and out of airports in the liminal phases linking their fieldwork with their normal life, but few have so far regarded the airport as such as a social arena worthy of investigation. The interaction and symbolisation taking place in airports nevertheless present us with peculiar problems and highlight current concerns with local--global linkages and the comparative study of modernities.

The purpose of this sketch is to outline some issues for further investigation and analysis regarding the international airport seen as a socio-cultural field. An anthropological focus on the airport inevitably brings out, in a pointed manner, several of the epistemological and methodological problems which have been at the forefront of anthropological self-reflection in recent years - notably problems concerning the time--space coordinates in social life, the unbounded character of social process and the epistemological status of the concept of culture. Drawing on our own admittedly limited fieldwork in international airports worldwide, we shall present some of our preliminary findings. Talking of airports in general, our main goal at this stage is to establish some basic coordinates, as it were, for a comparative anthropology of airports. Particularities and variations will thus not be taken account of.

What follows is intended as neither more nor less than a basis for discussion and further analysis. The presentation is systematic, but incomplete.

Architecture and location

If you've seen one, you've seen'em all. Of course, airports are not identical, but in important ways, they relate to the same set of rules; as arenas, they relate to a single language-game which is unbounded in space. For this reason, rules and conventions learned at one airport may tentatively be transferred and applied to another one.

Apart from the obvious technological requirements, every international airport must contain immigration and customs counters dividing the field into two mutually exclusive zones. The side facing the city or the country in many ways resembles a bus station or a railway station; in many countries, access to its space, its shops and cafes is free and unrestricted. The side facing the runway - beyond the pale, as it were - is much less rooted; in a sense, it is anywhere. After having had one's passport stamped and having passed through the metal detector, one is technically speaking nowhere: one is neither in the country of departure nor in the country of destination.

Airports must also contain transit lounges, which are perhaps even to a greater extent not places in a cultural sense. By definition, transit lounges are *non-lieux* (Augé, 1992), non-places.

Although this division of the airport into two signifies an interesting distinction, the side facing the city is also in important regards non-located in a cultural sense. Unlike railway stations, airports are always located away from the city centre, and therefore already their spatial location signifies that they are severed from the society they represent: they are intermediate nodes which in this sense seem to connect discrete societies by virtue of not belonging to the societies themselves. In this respect, airports may be seen to function in a similar way to the international business hotels described by Hannerz (1990) as "global switchboards". However, we would like to argue that airports do not merely connect discrete societies, but perhaps more

significantly, they represent a peculiar form of culture themselves. We now turn to a consideration of this system of signification.

Space

The organisation of space within the airport has briefly been touched upon. But evidently, the most intriguing spatial characteristics of the airport are (i) its location "outside of social space" and (ii) the relativisation of the spatial correlates of social life implied by air travel.

In his cultural account of air travel, Augé (1992) emphasises the smooth efficiency, the modernist comfort and the impersonality of this mode of transportation. In addition to these aspects, it would certainly be worthwhile to look into the effects of air travel on spatial categories. Writers on nationalism and modernisation have often stressed the importance of literacy, mass education and maps in the creation of identifications with abstract entities such as nations; an interesting question in this connection is what kinds of identification (if any), and what sense of space frequent air travel may encourage. It is evident, and it is often remarked upon in casual conversations, that the psychological sense of distance is altered or distorted seriously with frequent air travel and with the conversion of distance into flight hours. In brief, nowhere is really far away in the age of the jet plane, or rather: whether or not places are near or distant in cultural and psychological terms does not depend on their spatial distance. It can thus be argued that to an urban Trinidadian, Brooklyn is closer than Mayaro (Trinidadian periphery). In social and cultural terms, it will frequently turn out that urban Trinidadian neighbourhoods maintain more links, and have more in common with, certain neighbourhoods in Brooklyn than with neighbourhoods in rural Trinidad. The same can be said of immigrant communities in many other countries. With the shrinking of distance entailed by jetplanes, emigration no longer has a ring of finality and irreversibility, and many migrant groups in European countries are linked not only with their relatives and co-villagers in their countries of origin, but are also socially and culturally connected with immigrants from their country in other European countries.

In recent studies of the globalisation of culture, much attention has been paid to this feature of the modern world. Hannerz (1992) recently spoke of transnational families as a challenge for conventional anthropological notions of social communities and the spatial rootedness of identity; others, notably Giddens (1990), have written in more general terms about the relativisation of social space following technological changes. At the airport itself, which we have proposed as a physical locus for the investigation of these questions, this relativisation is indicated in very direct and literal ways: after all, it could be said that along with TV satellites, airports are the main vehicles for the ongoing disembedding of cultural signification from place. The "local" flavour at international airports is less striking than the uniformity. In this perspective, it makes little sense to carry out cross-cultural studies of airports, since they all relate to the same "culture", which neither exists at a particular place nor originates at a place. This point will be elaborated somewhat below.

Time

Time is an extremely scarce commodity at airports. Travelling by air is much faster and more expensive than its alternatives; it may thus be assumed that frequent air travellers are important individuals. With a number of important exceptions, they tend to be among the wealthiest members of their societies; sometimes they function as mediators between societies or see themselves as cosmopolitans in Hannerz' (1990) sense - they may be diplomats, businessmen, authors, anthropologists etc.

The scarcity of time stressed in the airport environment is being exploited commercially. In its ads, producers of laptop computers and "electronic notebooks" thus tend to depict business executives working on such a computer in their first-class airplane seats.

The difference between time zones adds to the breakdown of familiar time--space continua entailed by air travel. As Baudrillard (1982) has remarked, a passenger on the Concorde may actually arrive in New York before he left Paris. The phenomenon of the jet lag, whereby the biological time of the body is being upset by time differences between the place of departure and the

place of destination, adds to the impression of the air journey as unreal and somewhat magical: it transcends nature - it brackets and relativises time and space.

As a social system in time and space, the airport is, of course, qualitatively different from any local community. It is not constructed as a permanent, self-reproducing social system. It is marked by transience. Unlike say, a large ship or a prison, the airport cannot be seen as a "microcosm". Its main users, the passengers, pass through. Although the personnel taking part in and reproducing the airport as a social system is being completely replaced every few hours (disregarding, for the sake of the argument, the airport employees), the kinds of interaction taking place are identical from hour to hour, from day to day. It is predictable.

Iconography

The symbolism and iconography characteristic of departure lounges confirm the hypothesis that it the airport is severed from the social contexts of everyday life and takes on a quasi-autonomous existence as a system of signification. Icons signifying toilets, banks, duty-free shops, departure gates, customs and so on are almost uniform in airports all over the world. Their language is largely non-verbal and easy to learn; it is accessible in a manner reminiscent of traffic signs. On the other hand, these symbols are clearly interpreted into pre-existing frames of reference, which are culturally variable.

What are the connotations of airport icons? At the airport itself, they connote high-cost and high-speed travel, efficiency, a hygienic and bureaucratised social environment which offers little resistance, and haute-gamme consumption. Some of these meanings would clearly be attached to the icons if they were viewed isolated from the wider context as well.

Shared meaning - a third culture?

The cultural contexts of airports and departure lounges can be seen as minimal cultures analogous to the meaning-contexts reproduced in

rudimentary pidgin languages. First, the transit and departure lounges must satisfy a few very basic needs for their users: Food and drink must be available, and there must be toilets and adequate seating. Secondly, practical requirements related to the flight itself must be met: this includes flight information, airline agencies, check-in counters etc.. Thirdly, some amount of cultural brokerage must be offered. Most airports in non-English-speaking countries offer information in (at least) two languages plus icons and numbers (which codify crucial information such as prices and timings): English and the vernacular language(s). Although non-verbal communication will do in many respects, some conversation is often inevitable. Since many different airlines from different countries have agencies at the airports, this kind of competence is readily available in most cases. The airport is a material structure and a cultural universe that the vast majority of travellers merely pass through: Anthony Burgess's character Mr. Paxton, who has thrown away his passport after entering the nowhere of departure lounges and planes, filled his pockets with air tickets and is determined to spend the rest of his life in the nowhere and comfortable emptiness of planes and airports is, of course, a rather unusual personage (Burgess, 1989).

The transitory or even liminal character of the social interaction at airports entails that the airport is a meeting-place and no "society", and yet its rules and conventions endure and are by and large uniform at different airports. The kind of cultural competence required to participate is limited, and yet it is crucial for travellers. Even the hundreds of illiterate Malayalees whom Eriksen observed at Bombay airport in March, 1992, who were wearing dhotis and sandals and whose only luggage was small shoulderbags, knew the procedures from the check-in counter through immigration and customs to the departure lounge, and they would also know exactly how to behave once arrived at Abu Dhabi. Few are as culturally inept as that Naipaul character (from *In a Free Country*) who panics at take-off and later spits betel juice and vomits on the plane seats.

A question which is sometimes asked in relation to issues like these, is whether this kind of decontextualised meaning-context entails an extension of

a particular, pre-existing cultural universe or whether it rather constitutes a "third culture" at a remove from the cultural contexts normally engaged in by its participants/reproducers. The answer to this kind of question is normally either that airport culture represents an extension of "Western culture" (whatever that term means), that it is based on the common denominators of capitalism and commodity exchange, or that airport culture can indeed be regarded as a "third culture" because modes of participation vary and because it requires a certain cultural code switch from all who propose to take part, including European businessmen. Although all of these positions can plausibly be argued, we find the latter the most interesting one for anthropological investigation. According to this view, the airport can be seen as an "international symbol" of the modern individual. Airport interaction can be seen as modernity in its purest social form. There is the relativisation of time and space discussed above; there is also the cultural uprootedness and lack of history entailed in the global symbols which refer to no external social context; and perhaps most significantly, there is lavish consumption without the slightest trace of labour.

Airport experiences

The airport is devoid of cultural symbols. Apparently, it lacks codes which can be interpreted as "national" or "ethnic" ones. It objectivates freedom and equality - virtues of individualism. At the same time, the airport may function, for the traveller, as a kind of catharsis: The moment one passes through immigration into the departure lounge, one is removed from the impediments of society: Once there, neither the tax collector nor the family can reach you. You are a free individual.

(Døving, field notes)

The departure lounges of airports can fruitfully be analysed in their capacity as consumption reservations. The scarcity of time which is so crucial to the airport experience and serves to highlight the importance of air travellers (as one of our colleagues once remarked, scarcity of time is a scarce resource) logically implies that waiting is a main airport activity. Waiting passengers have brought few, but important personal belongings. Tickets, passport and

cards are common denominators; some nervous travellers ritually check their pockets at regular intervals.

In all international airports, but to a particular extent at the larger ones, a wide range of opportunities for consumption is offered to mitigate the experience of waiting. The airport being a special place, a liminal place and an exclusive one, special modes of consumption can be observed there. The emphasis is on luxury goods which heighten feelings of freedom, individuality and exclusiveness. With the relatively recent spread of plastic cards, the smoothness and placelessness of airport culture and airport consumption is further strengthened.

The free magazines distributed by airlines and sometimes by airports themselves communicate to a craving for luxury consumption among their readers. This is evident both in the advertising sections and in the articles of such magazines. The advertisements depict expensive consumer goods: perfume, cigars, liquors, laptop computers, cameras, Swiss watches, silk ties etc., as well as car rental firms and hotels in destination countries. The feature articles typically describe aspects of the societies the airline flies to, and very often emphasise the pleasures of the body or the possible acquisition of status symbols in these societies. Articles on food, beaches and local handicrafts are particularly common. Here, the interface between the global and the local is highly visible, and it is obvious that it is mediated by the market and shared notions of prestige and symbols of power (cf. e.g. Friedman, 1991, on globalisation and commodification). For even if it makes sense to regard the airport as a "third culture", the consumption goods acquired there are valid in the outside world as well. To this effect, the culture of airports is linked with the outside world. On the other hand, it may also be said to take on a semi-autonomous existence. Telephone booths in departure lounges seem out of place because they enable one to make city calls for a few coins: their presence interferes with the basic irrelevance of geographic location - particularly to passengers in transit.

Technology and progress

Freedom and individuality are perhaps the values most strongly expressed in the culture of airports. To acquiescing participants, the airport is experienced in terms of freedom, anticipation and security. To others, it can be a frightening place, for fundamental faith in technology and anonymous bureaucratic organisation is an absolute requirement for successful participation in the culture of the airport. We give our luggage away to strangers who label it and send it into the dark interior of the airport, assured that it will re-emerge at our destination, where we will be awaiting its arrival. This destination can be anywhere in the world, but it has to be at a particular "baggage retrieval" sign at an international airport. When invisible loudspeakers announce, at regular intervals, that unattended luggage will be destroyed, we know that an intricate and infallible system of security and surveillance attends to our needs.

Perhaps even more surprisingly, most of us trust that the plane will bring us safely to our destination at a speed we are simply unable to understand. As is the case with many of our technological aids, such as CD players, telephones and radios, few of us believe that we actually understand how aviation is technologically possible, yet we are bound to trust it (cf. Giddens, 1990, 1991, on risk and trust). This trust can be connected to a theme previously touched upon; the supernatural or magical quality of the airport. The baggage retrieval system, the surveillance monitors, the suppliers of food, drink and consumer goods, the voices that make announcements and the agents who have devised the x-ray machines (which miraculously do not affect films, tapes or diskettes), the metal detectors and that complex semiotic field that ensures that the announced departure gates correspond to planes and announced times and that flight information is internally consistent: all of this is invisible, and very few of us understand its functioning. Yet we trust that it works. A general feature of modernity often remarked upon in the literature, trust in anonymous and technologically complex systems is extreme in the case of air travel, since the consequences of failure are so high.

Styles of participation

The concept of "jet-set" (nowadays a rather dated word) is drawn from the terminology of air travel. Presumably, members of the "jet-set" use airports frequently. This implies that they are rich, need to economise with their time and are regular consumers of luxury goods. Far from all users of airports can be said to belong to this group. However, since the participants in airport culture can have any citizenship, the interaction at the airport can plausibly be seen as a "third culture" existing between or above particular "cultures". The differences between modes of participation are nevertheless significant. At the one extreme, the Malayalee migrant workers on their way to and from the Gulf participate in a bare minimum of airport contexts; apart from the compulsory check-in and immigration routines, they do not enter the communicational universe of the airport. At the other extreme, frequent business travellers in expensive suits buy gifts and prestigious items for their personal consumption, have meals, take showers, read international (placeless) magazines like Newsweek and demonstrate by their casual, relaxed manner that they are finely attuned to the smooth, tranquil efficiency of the airport. There are many other modes of participation as well; the excited mode of holidaymakers who associate airports with leisure, the bored manner of anthropologists and others who are intent on disliking air travel, the scared mode of grandmothers who have not internalised the blind faith in anonymous techno-bureaucratic systems, and so on. Perhaps our notions of "deep" and "shallow" play (Geertz, 1973) may shed light on these variations: the "deep players" would be those who are immersed in the symbolisation and practices in question, whose habitus is saturated with airport conventions; whereas the "shallow players" would be those who hover at the edges of the arenas: the penniless and disinterested ones. It has been argued that the "shallow players" may nevertheless be in the best position to reflect on the ritual or drama taking place, since they can move back and forth between spectatorship and participation (Kapferer, 1986). This nevertheless presupposes that they truly understand and master the semiotic field that makes up the arena. Perhaps infrequent travellers who nonetheless enjoy travelling are in the best position to elicit the symbolic meanings of the airport and relate them to the wider contexts of modernity.

The "deepest player" of all must in any case be the aforementioned Mr. Paxton, who - and that was clearly Burgess' intention - gives a demonstration of the cultural emptiness entailed in this peculiar expression of modernity. An uprooted man who had lost everything that connected him to the thick, rich meaning-contexts of ordinary life (he was retired, a widower, and his children had left home), he was intent on ending his days in the nowhere of air travel.

"God almighty," I said. What he showed me was a large yellow plastic folder crammed with air tickets. He said, riffling through them:

"Going everywhere. Rio de Janeiro, Valparaiso, wherever that is, Mozambique, Sydney, Christchurch, Honolulu, Moscow."

"If there's one place where you'll need a visa, it's certainly Moscow," I said. "But, damn it, how do you propose to go anywhere without a passport?"

"There's going and going," he said. "When I get to one place then I start off right away for another. Well, in some cases not right away. There's a fair amount of waiting in some of the places. But they have what they call transit lounges. Get a wash and a brush-up. Perhaps a bath. Throw a dirty shirt away and buy a new one. Ditto for socks and underpants. No trouble, really."

"In effect," I said, astonished, "you'll be travelling without arriving."

"You could put it that way."

(Burgess, 1989: 141)

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The whole airport may be regarded as a transit lounge, as a waiting-room between two places. The airport itself is not considered a place. All of us have witnessed discussions about whether one has actually visited a city or country when one has only seen the airport, and in the majority of cases, people agree that one has not. Upon entering the airport, one enters a cultural void - a

third, global culture. Sterile is a word often used to describe the significance of such non-places as compared to the thick contexts of ordinary life.

In this sketch, we have not succeeded in depicting the airport as a self-contained system of signification. The symbols reproduced there are intrinsically related to, and take their meaning from, contexts of the encompassing world. Social lives are not reproduced in airports: even the most avid travellers spend only a fraction of their life in airports. On the other hand, seen as one element in the worldwide articulation of global-local links and an emphatically global one at that, an anthropological understanding of airports along the lines suggested here may provide interesting contributions to a comparative understanding of modernities. Airports can, like international business hotels, be analysed as relatively uniform "bridgeheads" for cross-cultural understanding: their meaning will inevitably vary enormously in different cities and local communities (in Manhattan, the airport scarcely has the same meaning as in Jakarta). They can additionally be analysed as decontextualised, distilled and relatively pure forms of modernity. That will be our aim when we pursue the present analysis further.

Perhaps, therefore, Eriksen's Mauritian informant was not as untypical as his peers believed: he was a middle-aged man who spent much of his spare time in the rooftop cafe at Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam International Airport to watch the planes come and go. At one stage in his life, he managed to persuade his employer to fund his ticket to England because, he said, he wanted to emigrate. Three days after his departure (he had been wearing a new suit and a solemn face), he was back in town, and eventually he admitted that he had never really intended to migrate. He was simply fascinated with aviation and the culture of airports. He was a modern man.

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