
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. The hypothesis advanced here is that supermodernity produces non-places, meaning spaces which are not themselves anthropological places and which, unlike Baudelairean modernity, do not integrate the earlier places: instead these are listed, classified, promoted to the status of 'places of memory', and assigned to a circumscribed and specific position. A world where people are born in the clinic and die in hospital, where transit points and temporary abodes are proliferating under luxurious or inhuman conditions (hotels, chains and squats, holiday clubs and refugee camps, shantytowns threatened with demolition or doomed to festering longevity); where a dense network of means of transport which are also inhabited spaces is developing; where the habitué of supermarkets, slot machines and credit cards communicates wordlessly, through gestures, with an abstract, unmediated commerce; a world thus surrendered to solitary individuality, to the fleeting, the temporary and ephemeral, offers the anthropologist (and others) a new object, whose unprecedented dimensions might usefully be measured before we start wondering to what sort of gaze it may be amenable. We should add that the same things apply to the non-place as to the place. It never exists in pure form; places reconstitute themselves in it; relations are restored and resumed in it; the 'millennial ruses' of 'the invention of the everyday' and 'the arts of doing', so subtly analysed by Michel de Certeau, can clear a path there and deploy their strategies. Place and non-place are rather like opposed polarities: the first is never completely erased, the second never totally completed; they are like palimpsests on which the scrambled game of identity and relations is ceaselessly rewritten. But non-places are the real measure of our time; one that could be quantified – with the aid of a few conversions between area, volume and distance – by totalling all the air, rail and motorway routes, the mobile cabins called 'means of transport' (aircraft, trains and road vehicles), the airports and railway stations, hotel chains, leisure parks, large retail outlets, and finally the complex skein of cable and wireless networks that mobilize extraterrestrial space for the purposes of a communication so peculiar that it often puts the individual in contact only with another image of himself.

The distinction between places and non-places derives from the opposition between place and space. An essential preliminary here is the analysis of the notions of place and space suggested by Michel de Certeau. He himself does not oppose 'place' and 'space' in the way that 'place' is opposed to 'non- place'. Space, for him, is a 'frequented place', 'an intersection of moving bodies': it is the pedestrians who transform a street (geometrically defined as a place by town planners) into a space. This parallel between the place as an assembly of elements coexisting in a certain order and the space as animation of these places by the motion of a moving body is backed by several references that define its terms.

... Space, as frequentation of places rather than a place, stems in effect from a double movement: the traveller's movement, of course, but also a parallel movement of the landscapes which he catches only in partial glimpses, a series of 'snapshots' piled hurriedly into his memory and, literally, recomposed in the account he gives of them, the sequencing of slides in the commentary he imposes on his entourage when he returns. Travel (something the ethnologist mistrusts to the point of 'hatred') constructs a fictional relationship between gaze and landscape. And while we use the word 'space' to describe the frequentation of places which specifically defines the journey, we should still remember that there are spaces in which the individual feels himself to be a spectator without paying much attention to the spectacle. As if the position of spectator were the essence of the spectacle, as if basically the spectator in the position of a spectator were his own spectacle. A lot of tourism leaflets suggest this deflection, this reversal of the gaze, by offering the would-be traveller advance images of curious or contemplative faces, or in groups, gazing across infinite oceans, scanning ranges of snow-capped mountains or wondrous urban skylines: his own image in a word, his anticipated image, which speaks only about him but carries another name (Tahiti, Alpe d'Huez, New York). The traveller's space may thus be the archetype of non-place.

In my opinion these shifts of gaze and plays of imagery, this emptying of the consciousness, can be caused – this time in systematic, generalized and prosaic fashion – by the characteristic features of what I have proposed
to call 'supermodernity'. These subject the individual consciousness to entirely new experiences and ordeals of solitude, directly linked with the appearance and proliferation of non-places. But before going on to examine the non-places of supermodernity in detail, it may be useful to mention, albeit allusively, the attitudes displayed by the most recognized representatives of artistic 'modernity' in relation to the notions of place and space. We know that Benjamin's interest in Parisian 'passages' and, more generally, in iron and glass architecture, stems partly from the fact that he sees these things as embodying a wish to prefigure the architecture of the next century, as a dream or anticipation. By the same token, we may wonder whether yesterday's representatives of modernity, who found material for reflection in the world's concrete space, might not have illuminated in advance certain aspects of today's supermodernity; not through the accident of a few lucky intuitions, but because they already embodied in an exceptional way (because they were artists) situations (postures, attitudes) which, in more prosaic form, have now become the common lot.

Clearly the word 'non-place' designates two complementary but distinct realities: spaces formed in relation to certain ends (transport, transit, commerce, leisure), and the relations that individuals have with these spaces. Although the two sets of relations overlap to a large extent, and in any case officially (individuals travel, make purchases, relax), they are still not confused with one another; for non-places mediate a whole mass of relations, with the self and with others, which are only indirectly connected with their purposes. As anthropological places create the organically social, so non-places create solitary contractuality.

... The link between individuals and their surroundings in the space of non-place is established through the mediation of words, or even texts.

... But the real non-places of supermodernity – the ones we inhabit when we are driving down the motorway, wandering through the supermarket or sitting in an airport lounge waiting for the next flight to London or Marseille – have the peculiarity that they are defined partly by the words and texts they offer us: their 'instructions for use', which may be prescriptive ('Take right-hand lane'), prohibitive ('No smoking') or informative ('You are now entering the Beaujolais region'). Sometimes these are couched in more or less explicit and codified ideograms (on road signs, maps and tourist guides), sometimes in ordinary language. This establishes the traffic conditions of spaces in which individuals are supposed to interact only with texts, whose proponents are not individuals but 'moral entities' or institutions (airports, airlines, Ministry of Transport, commercial companies, traffic police, municipal councils); sometimes their presence is explicitly stated ('this road section financed by the General Council', 'the state is working to improve your living conditions'), sometimes it is only vaguely discernible behind the injunctions, advice, commentaries and 'messages' transmitted by the innumerable 'supports' (signboards, screens, posters) that form an integral part of the contemporary landscape.