

Non-Places

Introduction to an Anthropology
of Supermodernity



MARC AUGÉ

Translated by
John Howe



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From Places to Non-Places

The presence of the past in a present that supersedes it but still lays claim to it: it is in this reconciliation that Jean Starobinski sees the essence of modernity. In a recent article he points out in this connection that certain authors, indubitably representative of modernity in art, outlined

the possibility of a polyphony in which the virtually infinite interlacing of destinies, actions, thoughts and reminiscences would rest on a bass line that chimed the hours of the terrestrial day, and marked the position that used to be (and could still be) occupied there by ancient ritual.

He quotes the first pages of Joyce's *Ulysses*, containing the words of the liturgy: '*Introibo ad altare Dei*'; the

beginning of *Remembrance of Things Past*, where the cycle of the hours around the Combray bell tower punctuates the rhythm 'of a vast and solitary bourgeois day'; and Claude Simon's *Histoire*, in which

memories of religious school, the Latin prayer in the morning, grace at midday, the evening Angelus, provide landmarks amid the views, the disassembled schemes, the quotations of all sorts that stem from every period of existence, from the imagination and the historical past, proliferating in apparent disorder around a central secret

These 'premodern figures of continuous temporality, which the modern writer tries to show he has not forgotten even as he is becoming free of them' are also specific spatial figures from a world which since the Middle Ages, as Jacques Le Goff has shown, had built itself around its church and bell tower by reconciling a recentred space with a reordered time. Starobinski's article begins significantly with a quotation from the first poem in Baudelaire's *Tableaux parisiens*, where the spectacle of modernity brings together in a single poetic flight:

. . . *the workshop with its song and chatter;
Chimneys and spires, those masts of the city,
And the great skies making us dream of eternity.*

'Bass line': the expression Starobinski employs to evoke ancient places and rhythms is significant: modernity does not obliterate them but pushes them into the background. They are like gauges indicating the passage and continuation of time. They survive like the words that express them and will express them in future. Modernity in art preserves all the temporalities of place, the ones that are located in space and in words.

Behind the cycle of the hours and the outstanding features of the landscape, what we find are words and languages: the specialized words of the liturgy, of 'ancient ritual', in contrast to the 'song and chatter' of the workshop; and the words, too, of all who speak the same language, and thus recognize that they belong to the same world. Place is completed through the word, through the allusive exchange of a few passwords between speakers who are conniving in private complicity. Vincent Descombes writes of Proust's Françoise that she defines a 'rhetorical' territory shared with everyone who is capable of following her reasoning, those whose aphorisms, vocabulary and modes of thought form a 'cosmology': what the narrator of *Things Past* calls the 'Combray philosophy'.

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 (hotel 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. The first of these references (p. 173) is to Merleau-Ponty who, in his *Phénoménologie de la perception*, draws a distinction between 'geometric' space and 'anthropological space' in the sense of 'existential' space, the scene of an experience of relations with the world on the part of a being essentially situated 'in relation to a milieu'. The second reference is to words and the act of locution:

The space could be to the place what the word becomes when it is spoken: grasped in the ambiguity of being accomplished, changed into a term stemming from multiple conventions, uttered as the act of one present (or one time), and modified by the transformations resulting from successive influences (p. 173)

The third reference, which stems from the second, highlights the narrative as an effort that ceaselessly 'transforms places into spaces and spaces into places' (p. 174). There follows, naturally, a distinction between 'doing' and 'seeing', observable in everyday language which by turns suggests a picture ('there is . . .') and organizes movements ('you go in, you

cross, you turn . . .'), or in map signs: from medieval maps, essentially comprising the outlines of routes and itineraries, to more recent maps from which 'route describers' have disappeared and which display, on the basis of 'elements of disparate origins', an 'inventory' of geographical knowledge. Lastly, the narrative, and especially the journey narrative, is compatible with the double necessity of 'doing' and 'seeing' ('histories of journeys and actions are punctuated by the mention of the places resulting from them or authorizing them', p. 177) but is ultimately associated with what Certeau calls 'delinquency' because it 'crosses', 'transgresses' and endorses 'the privileging of the route over the inventory' (p. 190).

A few terminological definitions are needed at this point. Place, as defined here, is not quite the place Certeau opposes to space (in the same way that the geometrical figure is opposed to movement, the unspoken to the spoken word or the inventory to the route): it is place in the established and symbolized sense, anthropological place. Naturally, this sense has to be put to work, the place has to come to life and journeys have to be made, and there is nothing to forbid the use of the word space to describe this movement. But that is not what we are saying here: we include in the notion of anthropological place the possibility of the journeys made in it, the discourses uttered in it, and the language characterizing it. And

the notion of space, in the way it is used at present (to talk about the conquest of outer space, in terms which, for the time being, are more functional than lyrical, or to designate unnamed or hard-to-name places as well as possible, or with the minimum of inaccuracy, in the recent but already stereotyped language of travel, hotel and leisure institutions: 'leisure spaces', 'sports spaces', rather like 'rendezvous point'), seems to apply usefully, through the very fact of its lack of characterization, to the non-symbolized surfaces of the planet.

As a result, we might be tempted to contrast the symbolized space of place with the non-symbolized space of non-place. But this would hold us to the existing negative definition of non-places, which Michel de Certeau's analysis of the notion of space may help us to improve upon.

The term 'space' is more abstract in itself than the term 'place', whose usage at least refers to an event (which has taken place), a myth (said to have taken place) or a history (high places). It is applied in much the same way to an area, a distance between two things or points (a two-metre 'space' is left between the posts of a fence) or to a temporal expanse ('in the space of a week'). It is thus eminently abstract, and it is significant that it should be in systematic if still somewhat differentiated use today, in current speech and in the specific language of various institutions

representative of our time. The *Grand Larousse illustré* makes a separate case of 'airspace', which designates that part of the atmosphere in which a state controls the air traffic (less concrete, however, than its maritime equivalent, 'territorial waters'), but also cites other uses which testify to the term's plasticity. In the expression 'European judicial space' it is clear that the notion of frontier is implied but that, setting aside this notion of frontier, what is expressed is a whole institutional and normative mass which cannot be localized. The expression 'advertising space' applies either to an area or to a length of time 'set aside for advertising in the various media'; 'buying space' refers to all the 'operations carried out by an advertising agency in connection with advertising space'. The craze for the word 'space', applied indiscriminately to auditoriums or meeting-rooms ('Espace Cardin' in Paris, 'Espace Yves Rocher' at La Gacilly), parks or gardens ('green space'), aircraft seats ('Espace 2000') and cars (Renault 'Espace'), expresses not only the themes that haunt the contemporary era (advertising, image, leisure, freedom, travel) but also the abstraction that corrodes and threatens them, as if the consumers of contemporary space were invited first and foremost to treat themselves to words.

To frequent space, Michel de Certeau writes, is 'to repeat the gleeful and silent experience of infancy: to be other, and go over to the other, in a place' (p. 164).

The gleeful and silent experience of infancy is that of the first journey, of birth as the primal experience of differentiation, of recognition of the self as self and as other, repeated later in the experiences of walking as the first use of space, and of the mirror as the first identification with the image of the self. All narrative goes back to infancy. When he uses the expression 'space narratives', de Certeau means both the narratives that 'traverse' and 'organize' places ('Every narrative is a journey narrative . . .', p. 171) and the place that is constituted by the writing of the narrative ('. . . reading is the space produced by frequentation of the place constituted by a system of signs – a narrative', p. 173). But the book is written before being read; it passes through different places before becoming one itself: like the journey, the narrative that describes it traverses a number of places. This plurality of places, the demands it makes on the powers of observation and description (the impossibility of seeing everything or saying everything), and the resulting feeling of 'disorientation' (but only a temporary one: 'This is me in front of the Parthenon,' you will say later, forgetting that when the photo was taken you were wondering what on earth you were doing there), causes a break or discontinuity between the spectator–traveller and the space of the landscape he is contemplating or rushing through. This prevents him from perceiving it as a place, from being fully

present in it, even though he may try to fill the gap with comprehensive and detailed information out of guidebooks . . . or journey narratives.

When Michel de Certeau mentions 'non-place', it is to allude to a sort of negative quality of place, an absence of the place from itself, caused by the name it has been given. Proper names, he tells us, impose on the place 'an injunction coming from the other (a history . . .)'. It is certainly true that someone who, in describing a route, states the names appearing along it, does not necessarily know much about the places. But can a name alone be sufficient to produce 'this erosion or non-place, gouged' out of a place 'by the law of the other' (p. 159)? Every itinerary, Michel de Certeau says, is in a sense 'diverted' by names which give it 'meanings (or directions) that could not have been predicted in advance'. And he adds: 'These names create non-place in the places; they turn them into passages' (p. 156). We could say, conversely, that the act of passing gives a particular status to place names, that the faultline resulting from the law of the other, and causing a loss of focus, is the horizon of every journey (accumulation of places, negation of place), and that the movement that 'shifts lines' and traverses places is, by definition, creative of itineraries: that is, words and non-places.

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'⁵) 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, solitary 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*.

5. 'Je hais les voyages et les explorations . . .' (Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*). [Tr.]

To the coexistence of worlds, and the combined experience of anthropological place and something which is no longer anthropological place (in substance Starobinski's definition of modernity), movement adds the particular experience of a form of solitude and, in the literal sense, of 'taking up a position': the experience of someone who, confronted with a landscape he ought to contemplate, cannot avoid contemplating, 'strikes the pose' and derives from his awareness of this attitude a rare and sometimes melancholy pleasure. ¶ Thus it is not surprising that it is among solitary 'travellers' of the last century – not professional travellers or scientists, but travellers on impulse or for unexpected reasons – that we are most likely to find prophetic evocations of spaces in which neither identity, nor relations, nor history really make any sense; spaces in which solitude is experienced as an overburdening or emptying of individuality, in which only the movement of the fleeting images enables the observer to hypothesize the existence of a past and glimpse the possibility of a future. ¶

Even more than Baudelaire (who derived satisfaction from the mere urge to travel) one thinks at this point of Chateaubriand, who travelled incessantly, who knew how to see, but who saw mainly the death of civilizations, the destruction or degradation of once-glittering landscapes, the disappointing shards of crumbled monuments. Vanished Sparta, ruined

Greece occupied by an invader wholly ignorant of its ancient splendours, conjured up before the 'passing' traveller a simultaneous image of lost history and life passing by, but it was the journey's movement itself that seduced him and drew him on. A movement whose only end was itself, unless it was the writing that fixed and reiterated its image.

Everything is clearly stated from the beginning of the first preface to *Itinéraire de Paris à Jérusalem*. In it Chateaubriand denies having made the journey 'to write about it', but admits that he used it to look for 'images' for *Les Martyrs*. He has no scientific pretensions: 'I make no attempt to follow the footsteps of people like Chardin, Tavernier, Chandler, Mungo Park, Humboldt . . .' (p. 19). So that finally this work, for which no purpose is admitted, answers a contradictory desire to speak of nothing but its author without saying a single thing about him to anyone:

For the rest, it is the man, much more than the author, who will be seen throughout; I speak eternally about myself, and did so in all confidence, since I had no intention of publishing my Memoirs. (p. 20)

The vantage points favoured by the visitor and described by the writer are evidently the ones from which a series of remarkable features can be seen ('. . . Mount Hymettus to the east, Mount Pantelicus

to the north, the Parnes to the north-west . . .'), but the contemplation ends, significantly, the moment it turns back on itself, becomes its own object, and seems to dissolve under the vague multitude of similar views from the past and still to come:

This picture of Attica, the spectacle I was contemplating, had been contemplated by eyes that closed for the last time two thousand years ago. I too will pass on when my turn comes: other men as fleeting as myself will one day have the same thoughts on the same ruins . . .
(p. 153)

The ideal vantage point – because it combines the effect of movement with distance – is the deck of a ship putting out to sea. A description of the vanishing land is sufficient to evoke the passenger still straining to see it: soon it is only a shadow, a rumour, a noise. This abolition of place is also the consummation of the journey, the traveller's last pose:

As we drew away, the columns of Sunium showed more beautifully above the waves: they could be seen perfectly against the azure of the sky because of their extreme whiteness and the balminess of the night. Already we were quite far from the cape, although our ears were still struck by the seething of the waves at the foot of the rock, the murmur of the wind in the

junipers, and the song of the crickets which today alone inhabit the temple ruins: these were the last sounds that I heard in the land of Greece. (p. 190)

Whatever he may claim ('I shall perhaps be the last Frenchman to leave my country for travels in the Holy Land with the ideas, the purpose and the feelings of an ancient pilgrim', p. 133), Chateaubriand was not on a pilgrimage. The high point at the end of the pilgrimage is, by definition, overloaded with meaning. The meaning people seek there is worth the same to the individual pilgrim today that it always was. The itinerary leading to it, dotted with stages and high spots, comprises with it a 'one-way' place, a 'space' in the sense employed by Michel de Certeau. Alphonse Dupront points out that the sea crossing itself has an initiatory value here:

Thus, on pilgrimage routes, when a crossing is necessary, there is a discontinuity and, as it were, a banalization of heroism. Land and water are very unequal in showing people at their best, and above all sea crossings cause a break imposed by the mysteriousness of water. Behind these apparent facts was hidden another, deeper reality, which seems to have been perceived intuitively by certain early-twelfth-century churchmen: that of the completion, through a sea journey, of a rite of passage. (p. 31)

Chateaubriand's case is another thing entirely; his ultimate destination was not Jerusalem but Spain, where he planned to join his mistress (the *Itinéraire* is not a confession, though: Chateaubriand shows discretion and 'maintains the pose'). And he finds the holy places less than inspiring. Too much has already been written about them:

. . . Here I experience a difficulty. Should I produce an exact portrait of the holy places? But then I could only repeat what has already been said: never perhaps has there been a subject so little known to modern readers, yet never was any subject more completely exhausted. Should I omit the picture of these holy places? But would not that be to remove the most essential part of my voyage, to deprive it of what is its end and purpose? (p. 308)

Doubtless, too, the Christian he would like to be cannot celebrate the relentless decline of all things quite so glibly in these places as he does when he gazes across Attica and Sparta. Instead he resorts to assiduous description, makes a show of erudition, quotes whole pages of travellers or poets like Milton or Tasso. What he is doing here is *being evasive*, and the abundance of verbiage and documentation really does make it possible to identify Chateaubriand's holy places as a non-place, very similar to the ones outlined in pictures

and slogans by our guidebooks and brochures. If we turn for a moment to the definition of modernity as the willed coexistence of two different worlds (Baudelairean modernity), we can see that the experience of non-place as a turning back on the self, a simultaneous distancing from the spectator and the spectacle, is not always absent from it. Starobinski, commenting on the first poem of the *Tableaux parisiens*, insists that it is the coexistence of two worlds, chimneys alongside spires, that makes the modern town; but that it also locates the particular position of the poet who, broadly speaking, wants to see things from high up and far away, and belongs neither to the universe of religion nor to that of labour. For Starobinski, this position corresponds to the double aspect of modernity: 'Loss of the subject among the crowd – or, inversely, absolute power, claimed by the individual consciousness.'

But it can also be said that the position of the poet in the act of looking is a spectacle in itself. In this Parisian tableau, it is Baudelaire who occupies the central position, the one from which he sees the town but which another self, at a distance, makes the object of a 'second sight':

*Chin on my two hands, from my mansarded eyrie,
I shall see the workshop with its song and chatter,
Chimneys, spires . . .*

Here Baudelaire is not just referring to the necessary < coexistence of ancient religion and new industry, or the absolute power of individual consciousness, but describing a very particular and modern form of solitude. The spelling out of a position, a 'posture', an attitude in the most physical and commonplace sense of the term, comes at the end of a movement that empties the landscape, and the gaze of which it is the object, of all content and all meaning, precisely because the gaze dissolves into the landscape and becomes the object of a secondary, unattributable gaze – the same one, or another.

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. Try to imagine a Durkheimian analysis of a transit lounge at Roissy!

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

start, that there are words that make image – or rather, images: the imagination of a person who has never been to Tahiti or Marrakesh takes flight the moment these names are read or heard. Hence the TV game shows that derive so much of their popularity from giving rich prizes of travel and accommodation ('a week for two at a three-star hotel in Morocco', 'a fortnight's full board in Florida'): the mere mention of the prizes is sufficient to give pleasure to viewers who have never won them and never will. The 'weight of words' (a source of pride to one French weekly, which backs it up with 'the impact of photos') is not restricted to proper names; a number of common nouns (holiday, voyage, sea, sun, cruise . . .) sometimes, in certain contexts, possess the same evocative force. It is easy to imagine the attraction that might have been and may still be exercised, elsewhere and in the opposite direction, by words we find less exotic, or even devoid of the slightest effect of distance: America, Europe, West, consumption, traffic. Certain places exist only through the words that evoke them, and in this sense they are non-places, or rather, imaginary places: banal utopias, clichés. They are the opposite of Michel de Certeau's non-place. Here the word does not create a gap between everyday functionality and lost myth: it creates the image, produces the myth and at the same stroke makes it work (TV viewers watch the programme every week, Albanians

camp in Italy dreaming of America, tourism expands).

┌ 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. ┘

France’s well-designed autoroutes reveal landscapes somewhat reminiscent of aerial views, very different

from the ones seen by travellers on the old national and departmental main roads. They represent, as it were, a change from intimist cinema to the big sky of Westerns. But it is the texts planted along the wayside that tell us about the landscape and make its secret beauties explicit. Main roads no longer pass through towns, but lists of their notable features – and, indeed, a whole commentary – appear on big signboards nearby. In a sense the traveller is absolved of the need to stop or even look. Thus, drivers battling down the *autoroute du sud* are urged to pay attention to a thirteenth-century fortified village, a renowned vineyard, the ‘eternal hill’ of Vézelay, the landscapes of the Avallonnais and even those of Cézanne (the return of culture into a nature which is concealed, but still talked about). The landscape keeps its distance, but its natural or architectural details give rise to a text, sometimes supplemented by a schematic plan when it appears that the passing traveller is not really in a position to see the remarkable feature drawn to his attention, and thus has to derive what pleasure he can from the mere knowledge of its proximity.

Motorway travel is thus doubly remarkable: it avoids, for functional reasons, all the principal places to which it takes us; and it makes comments on them. Service stations add to this information, adopting an increasingly aggressive role as centres of regional culture, selling a range of local goods with a few maps

and guidebooks that might be useful to anyone who is thinking of stopping. Of course the fact is that most of those who pass by do not stop; but they may pass by again, every summer or several times a year, so that an abstract space, one they have regular occasion to read rather than see, can become strangely familiar to them over time; much as other, richer people get used to the orchid-seller at Bangkok airport, or the duty-free shop at Roissy I.

In the France of thirty years ago, the *routes nationales*, departmental main roads and railways used to penetrate the intimacy of everyday life. The difference between road and rail routes, from this point of view, was like the difference between the front and back of something; the same difference is still partially perceptible today to anyone who keeps to departmental main roads and the railways (TGV excepted), especially regional lines (where they still exist, for significantly it is the *local* services, the roads of *local* interest, that are vanishing fastest). Departmental roads, which today are often rerouted to bypass towns and villages, used to pass through their main streets, lined with houses on both sides. Before eight o'clock in the morning or after seven at night, the traveller would drive through a desert of blank façades (shutters closed, chinks of light filtering through the slats, but only sometimes, since bedrooms and living-rooms usually faced the back of the house): he was witness to

the worthy, contained image the French like to give of themselves, that every Frenchman likes to project to his neighbours. The passing motorist used to see something of towns which today have become names on a route (La Ferté-Bernard, Nogent-le-Rotrou); the texts he might happen to decipher (shop signs, municipal edicts) during a traffic hold-up, or while waiting at a red light, were not addressed primarily to him. Trains, on the other hand, were – and remain – more indiscreet. The railway, which often passes behind the houses making up the town, catches provincials off guard in the privacy of their daily lives, behind the façade, on the garden side, the kitchen or bedroom side and, in the evening, the light side (while the street, if it were not for public street lighting, would be the domain of darkness and night). Trains used to go slowly enough for the curious traveller to be able to read the names on passing stations, but this is made impossible by the excessive speed of today's trains. It is as if certain texts had become obsolete for the contemporary passenger. He is offered others: on the aircraft-like train the TGV has become, he can leaf through a magazine rather like the ones provided by airlines for their passengers: it reminds him, in articles, photos and advertisements, of the need to live on the scale (or in the image) of today's world.

Another example of the invasion of space by text is the big supermarket. The customer wanders round in

silence, reads labels, weighs fruit and vegetables on a machine that gives the price along with the weight; then hands his credit card to a young woman as silent as himself – anyway, not very chatty – who runs each article past the sensor of a decoding machine before checking the validity of the customer's credit card. There is a more direct but even more silent dialogue between the cardholder and the cash dispenser: he inserts the card, then reads the instructions on its screen, generally encouraging in tone but sometimes including phrases ('Card faulty', 'Please withdraw your card', 'Read instructions carefully') that call him rather sternly to order. All the remarks that emanate from our roads and commercial centres, from the street-corner sites of the vanguard of the banking system ('Thank you for your custom', 'Bon voyage', 'We apologize for any inconvenience') are addressed simultaneously and indiscriminately to each and any of us: they fabricate the 'average man', defined as the user of the road, retail or banking system. They fabricate him, and may sometimes individualize him: on some roads and motorways a driver who presses on too hard is recalled to order by the sudden flashing (110! 110!) of a warning sign; at some Paris junctions, cars that jump red lights are photographed automatically. Every credit card carries an identification code enabling the dispenser to provide its holder with information at the same time as a reminder of the rules of the game:

'You may withdraw 600 francs.' [Anthropological place' is formed by individual identities, through complicities of language, local references, the unformulated rules of living know-how; non-place creates the shared identity of passengers, customers or Sunday drivers.] No doubt the relative anonymity that goes with this temporary identity can even be felt as a liberation, by people who, for a time, have only to keep in line, go where they are told, check their appearance. As soon as his passport or identity card has been checked, the passenger for the next flight, freed from the weight of his luggage and everyday responsibilities, rushes into the 'duty-free' space; not so much, perhaps, in order to buy at the best prices as to experience the reality of his momentary availability, his unchallengeable position as a passenger in the process of departing.

Alone, but one of many, the user of a non-place is in contractual relations with it (or with the powers that govern it). He is reminded, when necessary, that the contract exists. One element in this is the way the non-place is to be used: the ticket he has bought, the card he will have to show at the tollbooth, even the trolley he trundles round the supermarket, are all more, or less clear signs of it. The contract always relates to the individual identity of the contracting party. To get into the departure lounge of an airport, a ticket – always inscribed with the passenger's name – must first

be presented at the check-in desk; proof that the contract has been respected comes at the immigration desk, with simultaneous presentation of the boarding pass and an identity document: different countries have different requirements in this area (identity card, passport, passport and visa), and checks are made at departure time to ensure that these will be properly fulfilled. So the passenger accedes to his anonymity only when he has given proof of his identity; when he has countersigned (so to speak) the contract. The supermarket customer gives his identity when he pays by cheque or credit card; so does the autoroute driver who pays the toll with a card. In a way, the user of the non-place is always required to prove his innocence. Checks on the contract and the user's identity, *a priori* or *a posteriori*, stamp the space of contemporary consumption with the sign of non-place:⁶ it can be entered only by the innocent. Here words hardly count any longer. There will be no individualization (no right to anonymity) without identity checks.

Of course, the criteria of innocence are the established, official criteria of individual identity (entered on cards, stored in mysterious databanks). But the

6. The expression *non-lieu*, which in the present text usually means 'non-place', is more commonly used in French in the technical/judicial sense of 'no case to answer' or 'no grounds for prosecution': a recognition that the accused is innocent. [Tr.]

innocence itself is something else again: a person entering the space of non-place is relieved of his usual determinants. He becomes no more than what he does or experiences in the role of passenger, customer or driver. Perhaps he is still weighed down by the previous day's worries, the next day's concerns; but he is distanced from them temporarily by the environment of the moment. Subjected to a gentle form of possession, to which he surrenders himself with more or less talent or conviction, he tastes for a while – like anyone who is possessed – the passive joys of identity-loss, and the more active pleasure of role-playing.

What he is confronted with, finally, is an image of himself, but in truth it is a pretty strange image. The only face to be seen, the only voice to be heard, in the silent dialogue he holds with the landscape-text addressed to him along with others, are his own: the face and voice of a solitude made all the more baffling by the fact that it echoes millions of others. The passenger through non-places retrieves his identity only at Customs, at the tollbooth, at the check-out counter. Meanwhile, he obeys the same code as others, receives the same messages, responds to the same entreaties. The space of non-place creates neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude, and similitude.

There is no room there for history unless it has been transformed into an element of spectacle, usually

in allusive texts. What reigns there is actuality, the urgency of the present moment. Since non-places are there to be passed through, they are measured in units of time. Itineraries do not work without timetables, lists of departure and arrival times in which a corner is always found for a mention of possible delays. They are lived through in the present. The present of the journey, materialized today on long-distance flights by a screen giving minute-to-minute updates on the aircraft's progress. From time to time the flight captain makes this explicit in a somewhat redundant fashion: 'The city of Lisbon should be visible to the right of the aircraft.' Actually there is nothing to be seen: once again, the spectacle is only an idea, only a word. On the motorway, occasional luminous signs give the ambient temperature and information helpful to those frequenting the space: 'Two-kilometre tailback on A3'. This present is one of actuality in the broad sense: in aircraft, newspapers are read and reread; some airlines even retransmit TV current affairs programmes. Most cars are fitted with radios; the radio plays continuously in service stations and supermarkets: buzzwords of the day, advertisements, a few snippets of news are offered to – inflicted on – passing customers. Everything proceeds as if space had been trapped by time, as if there were no history other than the last forty-eight hours of news, as if each individual history were drawing its motives, its words and images, from

the inexhaustible stock of an unending history in the present.]

Assailed by the images flooding from commercial, transport or retail institutions, the passenger in non-places has the simultaneous experiences of a perpetual present and an encounter with the self. Encounter, identification, image: *he* is this well-dressed forty-year-old, apparently tasting ineffable delights under the attentive gaze of a blonde hostess; *he* is this steady-eyed rally driver hurling his turbo-diesel down some god-forsaken African back-road; and that virile-looking fellow at whom a woman is gazing amorously because he uses toilet water with a wild scent: that is him too. If these invitations to identification are essentially masculine, it is because the ego-ideal they project is masculine; at present, a credible businesswoman or woman driver is perceived as possessing 'masculine' qualities. The tone changes, naturally, in supermarkets, those less prestigious non-places where women are in a majority. Here the theme of equality (even, eventually, disappearance of the distinction) between the sexes is broached in symmetrical and inverse fashion: new fathers, we sometimes read in 'women's' magazines, take an interest in housework and enjoy looking after babies. But even in supermarkets the distant rumble of contemporary prestige is audible: media, stars, the news. For the most remarkable thing in all this remains what one might call the 'intersecting

participation' of publicity and advertising apparatuses.

Commercial radio stations advertise big stores; big stores advertise commercial radio. When trips to America are on special offer at the travel agencies, the radio tells us about it. Airline company magazines advertise hotels that advertise the airline companies; the interesting thing being that all space consumers thus find themselves caught among the echoes and images of a sort of cosmology which, unlike the ones traditionally studied by ethnologists, is objectively universal, and at the same time familiar and prestigious. This has at least two results. On the one hand, these images tend to make a system; they outline a world of consumption that every individual can make his own because it buttonholes him incessantly. The temptation to narcissism is all the more seductive here in that it seems to express the common law: do as others do to be yourself. On the other hand, like all cosmologies, this new cosmology produces effects of recognition. A paradox of non-place: a foreigner lost in a country he does not know (a 'passing stranger') can feel at home there only in the anonymity of motorways, service stations, big stores or hotel chains. For him, an oil company logo is a reassuring landmark; among the supermarket shelves he falls with relief on sanitary, household or food products validated by multinational brand names. On the other hand, the countries of East Europe retain a measure of

exoticism, for the simple reason that they do not yet have all the necessary means to accede to the world-wide consumption space.

★

In the concrete reality of today's world, places and spaces, places and non-places intertwine and tangle together. The possibility of non-place is never absent from any place. Place becomes a refuge to the habitué of non-places (who may dream, for example, of owning a second home rooted in the depths of the countryside). Places and non-places are opposed (or attracted) like the words and notions that enable us to describe them. But the fashionable words – those that did not exist thirty years ago – are associated with non-places. Thus we can contrast the realities of *transit* (transit camps or passengers in transit) with those of residence or dwelling; the *interchange* (where nobody crosses anyone else's path) with the *crossroads* (where people meet); the *passenger* (defined by his *destination*) with the *traveller* (who strolls along his *route* – significantly, the SNCF still calls its customers travellers until they board the TGV; then they become passengers), the *housing estate*⁷ ('group of new dwellings', Larousse says), where people do not live together and which is

7. *L'ensemble*. [Tr.]

never situated in the centre of anything (big estates characterize the so-called peripheral zones or outskirts), with the *monument* where people share and commemorate; *communication* (with its codes, images and strategies) with *language* (which is spoken).

Vocabulary has a central role here because it is what weaves the tissue of habits, educates the gaze, informs the landscape. Let us return for a moment to Vincent Descombes's proposed definition of the notion of 'rhetorical country' based on an analysis of the Combray 'philosophy', or rather, 'cosmology':

↑ Where is the character at home? The question bears less on a geographical territory than a rhetorical territory (rhetorical in the classical sense, as defined by the rhetorical acts: plea, accusation, eulogy, censure, recommendation, warning, and so on). The character is at home when he is at ease in the rhetoric of the people with whom he shares life. The sign of being at home is the ability to make oneself understood without too much difficulty, and to follow the reasoning of others without any need for long explanations. The rhetorical country of a character ends where his interlocutors no longer understand the reasons he gives for his deeds and actions, the criticisms he makes or the enthusiasms he displays. A disturbance of rhetorical communication marks the crossing of a frontier, which should of course be envisaged as a border zone, a marchland, rather than a clearly drawn line. (p. 179)

If Descombes is right, we can conclude that in the world of supermodernity people are always, and never, at home: the frontier zones or 'marchlands' he mentions no longer open on to totally foreign worlds. Supermodernity (which stems simultaneously from the three figures of excess: overabundance of events, spatial overabundance and the individualization of references) naturally finds its full expression in non-places. Words and images in transit through non-places can take root in the – still diverse – places where people still try to construct part of their daily life. Conversely, it may happen that the non-place borrows its words from the soil, something seen on autoroutes where the 'rest areas' – the term 'area' being truly the most neutral possible, the antithesis of place – are sometimes named after some particular and mysterious attribute of the surrounding land: aire du Hibou, aire du Gîte-aux-Loups, aire de la Combe-Tourmente, aire des Croquettes . . . So we live in a world where the experience that ethnologists traditionally called 'cultural contact' has become a general phenomenon. The first problem with an ethnology of the 'here' is that it still deals with an 'elsewhere', but an 'elsewhere' that cannot be perceived as a singular and distinct (exotic) object. These multiple permeations have become apparent in language. The use of 'basic English' by communications and marketing technologies is revealing in this respect: it is less a

question of the triumph of one language over the others than of the invasion of all languages by a universal vocabulary. What is significant is the need for this generalized vocabulary, not the fact that it uses English words. Linguistic enfeeblement (if that is the name we give to the decline of semantic and syntactic competence in average spoken language) is attributable more to this generalization than to subversion of one language by another.

It now becomes clear what distinguishes supermodernity from modernity as defined by Starobinski through Baudelaire. Supermodernity is not all there is to the contemporary. In the modernity of the Baudelairean landscape, on the other hand, everything is combined, everything holds together: the spires and chimneys are the 'masts of the city'. What is seen by the spectator of modernity is the interweaving of old and new. Supermodernity, though, makes the old (history) into a specific spectacle, as it does with all exoticism and all local particularity. History and exoticism play the same role in it as the 'quotations' in a written text: a status superbly expressed in travel agency catalogues. In the non-places of supermodernity, there is always a specific position (in the window, on a poster, to the right of the aircraft, on the left of the motorway) for 'curiosities' presented as such: pineapples from the Ivory Coast; Venice – city of the Doges; the Tangier Kasbah; the site of Alésia. But

they play no part in any synthesis, they are not integrated with anything; they simply bear witness, during a journey, to the coexistence of distinct individualities, perceived as equivalent and unconnected. ¶ Since non-places are the space of supermodernity, supermodernity cannot aspire to the same ambitions as modernity. When individuals come together, they engender the social and organize places." But the space of supermodernity is inhabited by this contradiction: it deals only with individuals (customers, passengers, users, listeners), but they are identified (name, occupation, place of birth, address) only on entering or leaving. ¶ Since non-places are the space of supermodernity, this paradox has to be explained: it seems that the social game is being played elsewhere than in the forward posts of contemporaneity. It is in the manner of immense parentheses that non-places daily receive increasing numbers of individuals. And they are the particular target of all those whose passion for retaining or conquering territory drives them to terrorism. ¶ Airports and aircraft, big stores and railway stations have always been a favoured target for attacks (to say nothing of car bombs); doubtless for reasons of efficiency, if that is the right word. But another reason might be that, in a more or less confused way, those pursuing new socializations and localizations can see non-places only as a negation of their ideal. The non-place is the opposite of utopia: it exists, and

it does not contain any organic society.

At this point we again come across something touched upon earlier: the question of politics. In an article on the state of the town,⁸ Sylviane Agacinski recalls the ideal and aim of the National Convention member Anacharsis Cloots. Hostile to all 'embodied' power, he called for the death of the king. All localized power, all singular sovereignty, even the division of humanity into different peoples, seemed to him incompatible with the indivisible sovereignty of the human species. Seen from this point of view the capital, Paris, is a privileged place only to the extent that 'an uprooted, deterritorialized thought' is privileged. 'The paradox of the seat of this abstract, universal – and perhaps not simply *bourgeois* – humanity', Agacinski writes, 'is that it is also a non-place, a nowhere, something like what Michel Foucault – who did not envisage it as including the town – called a *heterotopia*' (pp. 204–5). Today it is certainly the case that the tension between thought concerned with the universal and thought concerned with territoriality is manifest on a world scale. We have looked at this here in only one of its aspects, starting with the observation that an increasing proportion of humanity lives, at least part of the time, outside territory, with the result that the very conditions defining the empirical and the

8. 'La ville inquiète', *Le Temps de la réflexion*, 1987.

abstract are shifting under the influence of the three-fold acceleration characteristic of supermodernity.

The 'out-of-place' or 'non-place' frequented by the individual under supermodernity is not the 'non-place' of government, with its tangle of contradictory double necessities: to think about and locate the universal, to erase and found the local, to affirm and challenge origins. This unthinkable aspect of power which has always lain at the base of the social order – when necessary by inverting, as if by an arbitrary act of nature, the terms used for thinking about it – undoubtedly finds a particular expression in the revolutionary wish to think simultaneously about authority and the universal, to challenge both despotism and anarchy; but it is a more general constituent of every localized order, which must by definition produce a spatialized expression of authority. The constraint that limits the thought of Anacharsis Cloots (and sometimes gives him an appearance of 'naivety') is that he sees the world as a place; a place belonging to the whole human species, admittedly, but involving the organization of a space and recognition of a centre. It is significant, incidentally, that when mention is made these days of 'Europe of the Twelve' or the 'New World Order', the question that immediately arises is still that of the real centre of these entities: Brussels (not to mention Strasbourg) or Bonn (not to jump the gun with Berlin)? New York and the UN,

or Washington and the Pentagon? Thought based on place haunts us still, and the 'resurgence' of nationalisms, which is giving it new relevance, could pass for a 'return' to the localization from which Empire, as the would-be forerunner of the human species still to come, might seem to have represented a withdrawal. But in fact the language of Empire was the same as that of the nations that reject it, perhaps because the former Empire and the new nations need to conquer modernity before moving on to supermodernity. Empire, considered as a 'totalitarian' universe, is never a non-place. On the contrary, the image associated with it is that of a universe where nobody is ever alone, where everyone is under close control, where the past as such is rejected (has been swept away). Empire, like the world of Orwell or Kafka, is not pre-modern but 'para-modern'; a botched modernity, in no case the successor to modernity, featuring none of the three figures of supermodernity that we have tried to define. One might even say that it is its exact negative. Blind to the acceleration of history, it rewrites it; it protects its subjects from the feeling that space is shrinking by limiting freedom of movement and information; similarly (as can clearly be seen from its bad-tempered reactions to initiatives in favour of human rights), it removes the individual reference from its ideology and takes the risk of projecting it outside its frontiers: a shimmering figure of absolute

evil or supreme seductiveness. Of course the first example that springs to mind is the former Soviet Union, but there are other empires, big and small; the tendency of some of our politicians to believe that the single party and sovereign executive are a necessary preliminary to democracy in Africa and Asia is strangely reminiscent of the modes of thought whose obsolescence and intrinsically perverse character they denounce when they talk about Eastern Europe. The stumbling block to the coexistence of places and non-places will always be political. Doubtless the East European countries, and others, will find their positions in the world networks of traffic and consumption. But the extension of the non-places corresponding to them – empirically measurable and analysable non-places whose definition is primarily economic – has already overtaken the thought of politicians, who spend more and more effort wondering where they are going only because they are less and less sure where they are.