

# **Screens in Places of Transit**

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## Introduction

In 2002 the aircraft manufacturer Airbus delivered several type 340-500 airplanes to the airline United Arab Emirates. This type of Airbus has what is referred to as an "eye in the sky" application. It entails that the plane is mounted with two cameras; one to the nose, and one on the tail. The footage from these cameras is fed to the personal inflight entertainment (IFE) system. Hereby passengers can enjoy panorama views of important landmarks and see take-offs and landings "live" from their seat onboard. A service as such grounds the traveler with an experience.

The "spectacle" of the eye in the sky begs one to consider if we can speak of a relation between place, screen and experience and if so how this may be conceptualized. The fact that contemporary places of transit demonstrate a continuing trend of the employment of scenic devices makes an examination of the way in which these elements relate to each other more fascinating. In this essay I aim to provide a general framework for understanding the ubiquity of (TV) screens in places of transit by approaching them as non-places. I assert that the presence of screens is related to what I term "non-experience."

First off I will examine places of transit as non-places. The non-place is a concept that the French anthropologist Marc Augé discusses in *Non-Places: An Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (Augé 1995).<sup>1</sup> His fundamental deposition is that society has reached a state of supermodernity that "stems simultaneously from the three figures of excess: overabundance of events, spatial overabundance and the individualization of references"(109). Non-places are consequent of the spatial overabundance. They materialize as places in society that have no historical background (such as airports, shopping malls, supermarkets and highways) and are as a result void of identity.

An inherent property of places of transit as non-places, I propose, is the non-experience. A consideration of the characteristics of the non-place will allow me to provide an understanding of the non-experience. Having done so, I move on to evaluate the idea of non-place as a mediated space. That the non-place is a space of mediation has been readily implied by Augé, and indicated by Bolter and Grusin, but solely by drawing a relation between mediation and consumer capitalism, not the non-experience.

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<sup>1</sup> Despite the chosen terminology it should be noted that Augé himself is wary of creating a dichotomy between 'place' and 'non-place.' Augé finds that a dichotomous treatment would lead to negative inferences in the appreciation of the non-place (81). The label 'non-place' does great injustice to the concept itself.

Having determined what places of transit are, in the second chapter, I go on to examine screens of transit. I group the screens of non-places as theoretical objects and refer to these screens as screens of transit. To address the function of screen mediation in places of transit I analyze two billboard advertisements that are part of the campaign by Delta titled "change is." The analyses of these billboards serve as a springboard into theoretical considerations. They lead to drafting the genealogy of the computer screen in relation to remediation. Fundamental in the idea of remediation is that "new" media are consequent of the refashioning and improvement of "old" media (Bolter and Grusin 15). From my perspective the success of screen development can be measured by establishing the extent to which the screenic device can offer experience as a substitute for the non-experience. The increasing sophistication of screenic devices offers plentiful means by which to engage travelers.

Furthermore, having at this stage established that the screen goes perfectly hand-in-hand with the non-place based on the non-experience, I explore the screens of transit "at work." This is the relation between the screens of transit and the non-experience. I zoom in specifically on inflight entertainment as a screen of transit. The aircraft, as a place of transit, proves a fascinating case study because passengers remain immobile in the transportation vehicle for an extensive period in time. Within the context of this primary case study I analyze several screens of transit as secondary case studies; the screen found at Utrecht Central Station (CS), The Netherlands titled "W8," the screens at Utrecht central bus station platform and the public transport bus in Milwaukee (Wisconsin). In the interrogations of screens of transit I stress the temporal organization of the non-place and the role of the screen to counter the non-experience. Specifically, I examine the commercial rhetoric of screens, the tribulation between broad and narrowcasting that presents itself and the significant role set aside for real-time as one of the most able features to counter the non-experience.

Lastly, the conclusion serves to summarize the findings of this exploration into several relations. It will have given the means by which to define the relation between places of transit and the non-experience, as well as the relation between the screen and the non-experience. Finally, this will make evident how places of transit and the screen based are brought together by the non-experience.

## Defining Places of Transit

According to Anna McCarthy in *Ambient Television* (2003) the screen is "site-specific." TV screens reflect, "in their material and sensorial form the social and physical arrangements of the environments in which they sit" (McCarthy 2004:184). The idea of site-specificity functions as a conceptual tool by which to appreciate the diversity in which we encounter screens. In the case of places of transit I examine site-specificity within the larger context of its identity as a non-place.

According to Augé, in supermodernity the non-place is spatial excess consequent of the increased mobility of goods and passengers. The non-place materializes as the *installations* and *the means of transport* that organize mobility (Augé 34). Installations refer to structures such as roads, shopping malls and airports. The means of transport are the vehicles that mobilize goods and passengers. Places of transit are those non-places that concern themselves with the flows of passenger mobility.

### Death of the Traveler

Supermodernity is the trajectory of changing mobilities that has become increasingly visible and prominent in the twenty-first century. Essentially, technology has changed mobility as well as the conceptualizations of temporal and spatial organizations. As a result of these changes we find the "death of the traveler." Specifically, the death of the traveler is the result of a fourfold transformation in travel. Looking at modern modes of transport these can be pointed-out. Wolfgang Schivelbusch has readily established two of these in *The Railway Journey* (1987).

First off, there is the replicability of non-places. Bolter and Grusin call this "interchangeability"(177). Airports, train stations and bus stops are all similar in appearance. A commercial aircraft is, in how we encounter and experience it, interchangeable for any other commercial aircraft. It is the result of the consumer demands of sameness and this, write Bolter and Grusin, leaves the non-place to express a "quality of detachment" (177).

Non-places are fairly recent phenomenon and for this reason have no historical trajectory that embed the place with "meaning" and "identity." They are thereby less able to themselves offer satisfying "experiences." They conform to a neutral, or non-historical, aesthetics that establishes its void identity. The homogeneity in transportation vehicles enhances boredom.

Secondly, according to Schivelbusch, train travelers became disengaged from the landscape they move through as a result of the velocity of the vehicle in which they reside. Schivelbusch explores the nineteenth century metaphor of the projectile that was used to capture the “loss of continuity” that resulted from the railroad transforming landscape to systematic geographical space, the latter being a concept introduced by Erwin Straus (Schivelbusch 53). The specific selection to use the projectile metaphor, Schivelbusch notes, was to highlight the velocity of the train (53-54). In light of the spatial transformation by the railway it was perceived that the “The traveler who sat inside that projectile ceased to be a traveler and became, as noted by a popular metaphor of the century, a mere parcel” (Schivelbusch 54).

Additionally, the train carriage was divided into compartments that fragmenting the traditional social space (Schivelbusch 64-67). It encouraged the traveler to seek other activities whilst in the train. The loss of continuity and the rise of compartments in the carriage contributed to the establishment of a train reading culture. Schivelbusch exquisitely captures the redirection from the outside landscape to the book as follows:

The dissolution of reality and its resurrection as panorama became agents for the total emancipation from the traversed landscape: the traveler’s gaze could then move into an imaginary surrogate landscape, that of his book (Schivelbusch 64).

Michel de Certeau brings forward the two same essential transitions when he describes the railway car as “A bubble of panoptic and classifying power, a module of imprisonment that makes possible the production of an order, a closed and autonomous insularity – that is what can traverse space and make itself independent of local roots” (111).

The emancipation from the landscape is caused by the fact the window offers a “multiplication of visual impressions” decentralizing the viewers gaze (Schivelbusch 56-57). This is what the Canadian scholar Marshall McLuhan addresses in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964). He notes that the annihilation of space has led to the annihilation of the experience of travel (McLuhan 103). The screen, however, acts as window to a centralized gaze initiated by viewer immobility and the norms/conventions of film and television.

Lastly, preceding the mass integration of technology into our social arena, traveling was a corporeal activity. The physical engagement the act of travel necessitated from the traveler established experience. As the involvement in the

mobility itself has drastically diminished, the traveler has a very small role in the act of travel. Or, as quoted earlier, they have been reduced to a mere parcel. Without this "interaction" with the machine and the landscape, traveling proves tedious. It contributes to an experience of boredom.

As a result of supermodernity travel ceases to be an experience in which the traveler actively takes part. Rather, the traveler finds him/herself suspended in time and space within the dull environment of the non-place. In light of this it is hardly surprising that tools are sought that present us with imaginary surrogate landscape(s).

### **The Organized Nature of Bracketed Space**

The installations and the means of transport are both, as a space, bracketed off from all other spaces. Passing through the non-place you assume the role of a passenger, customer or driver and lose your identity as an individual (Augé 103). Prior to taking on this role, in order to make use of the non-place, you are required to identify yourself. Augé states, "The passenger of 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" (Augé 103). These codes, messages and entries are what isolate the non-place from its surrounding space.

What is furthermore characteristic of non-places are the "instructions for use." They are part of the codes, messages and entries of the non-place that help define it. These instructions are "prescriptive ('Take right-hand lane'), prohibitive ('No smoking') or informative ('You are now entering the Beaujolais region')" (Augé 97). They have the practical function of organizing the flow, or as Augé puts it the "traffic conditions," of the non-place. The timetables and itineraries that the non-place conforms to results in them being highly organized spaces. Thereby one can measure the non-place in units of time (Augé 104). The lack of spontaneity in favor of effective, as well as efficient, mobility contributes to the mundane existence of these places.

### **The Flow of the Places of Transit**

Moving through a place of transport a person is repeatedly confronted with a rhythmic "stop" and "go" mechanism implemented by the parenthetical deconstruction of the journey. The deconstruction is meticulously organized by the itineraries of the networked institutions. The flows are arrested with (designated) pauses. The pauses bestow an anticipation of mobility upon the traveler. It is the mechanism of mobility as implied above that I explore. The pause in passenger flow leads to the accumulation of perceptual, cognitive and

physical monotony. Aside from the lack of distraction and diversity that makes the traveler bored, their physical containment within the structure of the non-place equally necessitates distraction. It is these pauses in flow, passenger immobility, that make the traveler go in search of diversion from their mundane state.

What I find is that the fractures in the travel narrative create "gaps" that can benefit from screen integration. The pauses in mobility are formed by the itineraries of the institutions. We wait in designated areas, but we never opt to wait. Waiting is a nuisance that usually leads to boredom. In public transport the "fractures" in the travel narrative are bestowed upon us. The screens may entertain, but function only as "intermission." We have the intention of reaching a particular destination. I have never been to the train station or purchased an airplane ticket simply in order to watch TV. In other words, in places of transit passengers conform to the timetables of the institute and not to those of television screens. The screens implemented in non-places are, in adhering to a commercial rhetoric, concerned with "smoothing out" the travel. Its function is to mend the "cracks" encountered in the journey by replacing (non-)experience.

### **Mediation in the Non-Place**

Augé is certainly not the first to address the topic of spatial excess. In a lecture Michel Foucault gave in 1967, published as "Des Espace Autres"<sup>2</sup> in 1987, he suggested society to be situated in an "epoch of space." Relevant for my purposes are the two types of spaces he identifies that are related to all other sites: utopias and heterotopias (Foucault np). Foucault uses the utopia as a means by which to provide an understanding of the heterotopia. Our common definition of the utopia is that it is the idealized version of Society. It, however, differs from Society because it is without a place in reality (Foucault np). The heterotopia is "a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (Foucault np).

The theoretical premises of the non-place, I find, bears great similarity to the heterotopia. Both the heterotopia and the non-place have a place in reality, yet are void of an own identity. When Foucault breaks down the heterotopia, he does so according to six defining principles. These tenets state that all cultures have heterotopias, that they can be given different functions in relation to changing society over time, can juxtapose several real places in one, have a temporal dimension, are isolated through a system of opening and closing and

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<sup>2</sup> Translated by Jay Miskowiec in the online article "Michel Foucault Of Other Spaces (1967), Heterotopias."

lastly are related to all other spaces (Foucault np). A complete interrogation into the overlap between the heterotopia and the non-place, though highly interesting, would contribute little to the subject matter at hand. In generalizing terms Augé is predominantly thorough in defining his concept from the bottom up, whilst Foucault, on the other hand, is hesitant to elaborate and remains particularly concise never reaching a level of general abstraction.

Though I find that many of the tenets find resonance with the non-place, there is one that catches my particular interest. I want to take a brief moment to consider the tenet of juxtaposition because the principle explicitly addresses the relation of (screen) mediation in the space of the heterotopia. It states that the heterotopia has the ability to juxtapose several places simultaneously. Foucault actually uses cinema to illustrate this. In such an instance the screen functions as a "window" to other place. Mediation allows for the heterotopia to "borrow" identity from a virtual elsewhere.

Interpreting Augé's concept, Bolter and Grusin (1999) define non-places as high-technology spaces; "free floating, hypermediated experiences" and claim that the media within the non-place define its identity (177-179). The screens in non-places are granted identity with the substitution of the non-experience for an experience. Augé, unlike Foucault and even Bolter and Grusin, does not draw the relation between mediation and space as explicitly.

"Experience" as term is often used as an attribute, "experience of," or as noun, "the this-and-that" experience. Central for my case, in fact non-experience, is the (lack of) experience of spatial and temporal mobility. Within the context of this paper experience can be defined as being a process in which the identity or role of the traveler is constructed within the screen-based "imported" identity of the non-place. It is the result of dynamic interrelation between the viewer and the screen. The choice for the term is therefore not implied as act of polarization, for the non-experience is the experience of boredom, but rather to establish it as a component of non-places.

## Grounding Experience: The Screen and Its Viewer

Presently I analyze the two billboards from the Delta Airlines 2007 "change is" advertising campaign that I came across in Manhattan, New York. The billboards, centered on the inflight entertainment onboard Delta, function as a means by which to interrogate the screens of transit. They specifically allow for considering how the evolution of screenic devices is focused on improving their ability to entertain. Reformulated, it will be made evident that the screen goes hand-in-hand with the non-place because it is constantly "tweaked" to optimally counter the non-experience. In order to establish I address, in a concise fashion, remediation and relate it to the three types of screens Lev Manovich (2001) delineates in the genealogy of the (computer) screen. The genealogy I interpret of as sketching development towards more able means of viewer engagement. Furthermore, the billboards provoke thought on the relation of the screen as metaphoric window in contrast to it constituting a material barrier.

### Remediating the Screen

The mere presence of the billboards demonstrates that IFE is a means for airlines to differentiate their service. The billboards show a concern with the experience of time, expressed through the reference to time in their "change is" catchphrase that contrasts the past to the present. Furthermore they denote a red mouse cursor aimed in the direction of the airlines slogan. The presence of the cursor alludes to the interaction and (spatial) exploration offered by the system.

The billboard in Figure 1 depicts a hand with a finger stretched out to "touch" the screen of the inflight system. The ability to interact with the screen in addition to the text "change is" establishes expectations as to the systems sophistication. Additionally, the text accompanying the image "mocks" the non-experience suggesting that the Delta Airlines inflight entertainment system will make you want to prolong your flight. The IFE is explicitly presented as a useful means to distract oneself from the monotony of the journey.



1. *Billboard Advertisement Manhattan I. (photo by author).*

Marshall McLuhan (1964) found the content of a medium to always be another medium. Leaning on this insight Bolter and Grusin sought a term to describe this as a historical practice: how each new medium retrospectively quotes older media. They named this remediation and defined it as “the representation of one medium in another” (Bolter and Grusin 45). It elucidates the relation between the old and the new. Bolter and Grusin conclude:

What is new about new media comes from the particular ways in which they refashion older media and the ways in which older media refashion themselves to answer to the challenges of new media (Bolter and Grusin 15).

New media can co-exist with the old and do not necessarily replace them. Moreover, Bolter and Grusin claim that convergence can be equated to remediation (224). It is a process in which multiple applications “merge” into a single medium. Such an understanding allows us to think of the genealogy of the screen sketched by Manovich as identifying the significant stages of remediation. At each step the screen type not only “absorbs” the properties of the earlier, but expands on these as well. The screenic developments have found resonance in single apparatuses; the inflight entertainment system is one of these.

For the classical screen Manovich provides the following definition; “It is a flat, rectangular surface. It is intended for frontal viewing – as opposed to panorama for instance. It exists in our normal space, the space of our body, and acts as a window into another space” (95). The dynamic screen is the second screen mentioned by Manovich. It is best understood as the classic screen, but then with the ability to display moving images. The last stage in the genealogy

identifies the screen of real time where “The image can be continually be updated *in real time*” (Manovich 99). The classic screen is remediated in the dynamic screen. The screen of real-time, in turn, is the remediation of the dynamic screen. Reformulated, the screen of real-time encapsulates the properties of the dynamic screen that holds the properties of the classic screen.

From my perspective the screen evolution has led to screenic apparatuses that are better able in battling the boredom modern man incurs in his/her travels than its predecessor. Hereby I find that there is a positive correlation between the development of screens and the extent to which they are successful in distracting the viewer. They distract the viewer by offering, what Schivelbusch would call, an “imaginary surrogate landscape,” or, what I would call, experience.

### **The Virtual and the Material**

Convergence and interaction are related in the IFE system because the apparatus “contains” multiple applications. In order to benefit from all the services interaction is mandated. The screen, by means of touch, functions as a navigational tool between the various applications. The technological innovation of touch screen marks the end of the need for a remote control. Contemporary screenic devices have absorbed this task and now execute it themselves. The interaction between the user and the screen is possible on the same “flat material surface” as where the visual stimuli are reflected. Not all airlines have, yet, switched over to touch screen technologies in their inflight entertainment systems.

Previously, the screen had been appreciated merely as a theoretical object and the fact that it was equally a material object was often neglected (McCarthy 2003). This led to the metaphoric identity of the screen as window. On the one hand the screen provides a window into another virtual space, yet at the same time equally functions as a barrier between the material and the immaterial made apparent in its opaque state when one “touches” and “manipulates” the content of the screen. It is therefore important to recognize that the screen is always a barrier, a distance, between the space of the viewer and the immaterial content of the screen. In her essay “It’s All About the Fit”, building on Bill Brown’s distinction between transparency and opacity Heidi Cooley provides the useful terms window-ed seeing and screenic seeing for the purpose of defining the object/thingness of the screen. The difference between the two types of seeing is that the first is the act of looking *through*, as one would a window, whilst the

latter term refers to looking *at* the screen as an opaque thing (Cooley 153).<sup>3</sup> When the screen is transformed into a surface a tactile engagement with the interface is made possible.

The screen as an object, fixed in a certain position, necessitates that in order to engage with the content of the screen the viewer be positioned immobile directly in front of the screen. The moving-images on the screen, however, mobilize the gaze of the viewer. This is what Anne Friedberg, in *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Windows* (2006), identifies as the paradox of mobility/immobility. Furthermore, Friedberg identifies the paradox of materiality/immateriality. It is within this paradox that we find an appreciation for the screen as material object. It functions as a means to explore the "virtual mobile gaze." The paradox of materiality/immateriality concerns the separation of the material, where the body resides, from the immaterial of the screens images, the virtual. It is "the screens of cinema, television, and computers open "virtual windows" that ventilate the static materialities and temporalities of their viewers" (Friedberg 2006:4). Here the role of the screen is addressed explicitly as a mediator between the material world and the immaterial virtual space that constitutes the "content" of the screen.

Together the paradoxes form what Friedberg calls the "twin paradox." The dialectic in the twin paradox clarifies the working of virtual mobility. It can be considered a distraction from the monotony because although not a physical experience grounded in the body, the "effect," I find, compensates for the lack of physical exertion.

The (re)materialization of the screen, after a period in which its conceptualization has stood central, opens different means by which to approach to the screen. The understanding of the screen changes when we consider its material presence within a particular spatial context (defined by economical, social and political factors), but also in the way the materiality of the screen changes the relation between the screen and the viewer. To "communicate" with the apparatus by touch, I propose, expands the offer and type of entertainment. The viewer is presented with a selection of imaginary surrogate landscapes within a single device.

### **Different Ways of Experience**

Entertainment is the process of experiencing. The term "to entertain" suggests the traveler is engaged in a positive experience. As a surrogate to the non-

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<sup>3</sup> This is equally reminiscent of the notions immediacy and hypermediacy which are the visual strategies employed by remediation according to Bolter and Grusin. Hypermediacy emphasizes the presence of the medium (or media) whilst immediacy aims to conceal the mediation process through a transparency.

experience the success of the screen is based on the assumption that a greater degree of satisfaction can be granted to the passenger by the mediated experience over the non-experience.

The book has since the nineteenth century been a “mobile medium” that accompanies us on train journeys. Reading is often perceived as a leisure activity able of providing entertainment when confronted with “blank” time. By offering multiple imaginary surrogate landscapes the screenic apparatuses onboard aircrafts provide means by which the traveler can be distracted from the non-experience.



2. *Billboard Advertisement Manhattan II. (photo by author).*

The billboard in Figure 2 explicitly indicates that the inflight entertainment has assumed a role previously attributed to the book. In fact, IFE is suggested to have “perfected” the art of distraction and entertaining. This is done by placing the image of a personal IFE screen and strategically above it the text “Change is: Being Glad You Forgot Your Book.” It provides a link back to the research by Schivelbusch on the ascent of a reading culture in train travel. The billboard proliferates the inflight entertainment system as a direct replacement of the book.

The movies screened and computer games these IFE systems offer are examples of entertainment. It stipulates either immersive viewing, through modes of alignment and identification, or an interactive gaming experience. Both are ways by which to “engage” and in doing so they “distract” the individual from their current state of the bored passenger. In other words, the device functions to counter the non-experience of the aircraft by offering an imaginary surrogate landscape(s). The term surrogate nicely identifies how the screen enables an act of replacing the non-experience for an experience.

A remarkable entertainment feature of the IFE onboard the Airbus 340-500, as indicated in the introduction, is that of the eye in the sky. Mounted with a camera at the nose and tail of the aircraft it provides a spectacular form of entertainment by feeding the footage live to the personal screens in the cabin. These cameras offer the passengers the ability to view the take-off and landing of the aircraft from outside the confines of the capsule.

In this inflight system application the twin paradox of mobility/immobility and materiality/immateriality presents itself beautifully. The real-time visual experience is synchronic to the movement of the aircraft. By this facilitation of a different visual perspective in this manner, the aircraft itself becomes an attraction. The passengers are invited to take part in a spectacle. The way in which this is accomplished bears resemblance to the *Hale's Tours* as described by Lauren Rabinovitz in "From *Hale's Tours* to *Star Tours*: Virtual Voyages and the Delirium of the Hyper-Real," one of the first ride-films with point of view shots designed to create the illusion of movement in synchrony to the moving car occupied by viewers (133). The *Hale's Tours* ride-films "attempted to dematerialize the subject's body through its *extension* into the cinematic field while they repeatedly emphasized *the corporeality of the body* in all its *fixity* and in the physical delirium of the senses" (Rabinovitz 133, my emphasis). This is precisely what happens with the eye in the sky application.

The first paradox is evident in the description in the corporeality of the body and its fixity. To view the screen you must be seated before it remaining still. The second paradox is apparent in how the experience is described as an extension into the cinematic field, or rather into spatial immateriality. Whilst the aircraft itself provides mobility, the screen facilitates a virtual mobility by engaging perception and cognition. Reformulated, it offers an imaginary surrogate landscape. It is an alternative to the spatial and seemingly temporal suspension "experienced" in the place of transit.

Airbus has turned the aircraft into an entertainment center. The aircraft no longer solely exercises the practical function of transporting passengers. It is mind-boggling to see how a seemingly simple application has attributed the aircraft with the same status as an amusement-park ride. The cameras overcome the material barrier of the aircraft in itself restricts possible spectatorship of the environment surrounding the aircraft. From our seat gazing at the personal inflight screen we are provided with "a visually induced sense of travel to another place" (McCarthy 2003:137). In reality we are also experiencing this movement. The "real" and the "virtual" serve to reinforce one another resulting in an experience based on particulars of the non-experience. Tom Gunning stated that

"Cinema in early travel film become itself a mode of transportation" (30). Presently we see that, with the eye in the sky, the mode of transport becomes itself cinema. The contemporary equivalent of *Hale's Tours'* cinema turned travel is United Arab Emirates' travel turned cinema.

In 2006 CBS Outdoor "W8",<sup>4</sup> a 25m<sup>2</sup> electronic billboard became operational at train station Utrecht Central, The Netherlands (Figure 3).<sup>5</sup> The "W8" screen is, by the own account of CBS Outdoor on their website, characterized as live, interactive and progressive. Its subsequent success<sup>6</sup> is the reason that CBS outdoor intends to install relatively smaller screens on each of the station's platforms during the course of 2007.



3. The "W8" Screen at Utrecht Central Station. (photo by author).

CBS Outdoor is seeking ways to offer advertisers innovative ways to direct the attention of the passengers in transit to their commercial message. In January 2007 Universal Music used the "W8" installation to promote the new Gwen Stefani CD. CBS Outdoor has chosen for an interactive approach to accomplish this. The passenger has to take part in the occurrence. They played part of Stefani's video-clip "Wind-up" on the 25m<sup>2</sup> screen. While this was playing, passenger's passing-by could download music fragments onto their cellular phones by activating Bluetooth.

<sup>4</sup> "W8" is pronounced as "wacht" in Dutch, and translates to "wait."

<sup>5</sup> At Roma Termini, within the realm of the station, screens were ubiquitous. Instead of a single screen the hall was filled with countless screens. Each platform was mounted with its own screen at the end of the rail track. The screens were of the make LG Electronics. The logo was visible on each screen, as that of CBS Outdoor in Utrecht. The commercial nature of screens of transit becomes very visible.

<sup>6</sup> Based on statistics Intomart GfK gathered, discussed on the CBS Outdoor website

## The Screen in Places of Transit

In this chapter I focus on a specific type of screen of transit: the inflight entertainment system. Despite the fact that there are accounts of films screened in aircrafts that date back as far as 1921 it is stated that in the beginning “the goal of these screenings was not to distract passengers from the monotony of a long flight. Quite the opposite – flying was considered an exciting new form of travel. Instead it was all about creating publicity for the films” (Gubisch 23). An observation underscored in the historical overview provided by John Norman White in “A History of Inflight Entertainment.” What we find is that this reality is now different and has demonstrated a radical shift in emphasis. In the beginning aviation served as a platform to provide newly released films with publicity, now IFE is used as a means for airlines to differentiate their brand.<sup>7</sup>

The IFE as a screenic device is particularly fascinating when attempting to understand boredom alleviation. The diversity in applications, bound in a single apparatus, is precisely what makes it a thought-provocative case study. It is the classic, dynamic and real-time screen fused into one. In addition, air travel mandates an extended time commitment within the mode of transport. The “act of travel” itself, the penetration of the aircraft through the cloudscape, necessitates the imprisonment of the traveler for several consecutive hours. After boarding the aircraft passengers are asked to keep their seatbelt fastened during take-off and landing and to remain seated during the flight. The immobility of the passenger is most drastic in this particular non-place. Consequently it leads not only to unease, but effectively also monotony.

Within the context of the inflight entertainment system I will first discuss the extent to which programming is commercial. After, the significance of screen positioning is examined. Moreover the screens as tools that “accelerate” and “decelerate” the experience of time will be addressed. The analyses draw attention to the dangers of repetitive programming in creating a “temporal bubble.”

The aforementioned dimensions of the screen are explored in relation to other screens of transit found in places of transit; the train station, the bus (station) and personal mobile devices. These later case studies will underscore the observations made in relation to the inflight entertainment system. The analyses hark back to the theoretical framework provided in the preceding

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<sup>7</sup> Apparent when Govil points out that “annual airline expenditure on IFE increased from \$400 million in 1992 to \$1.75 billion in 1998” (240).

chapters and extended on these ideas through observations from the screen in practice.

### The “Brush Past” Screen

Inflight entertainment is exemplary of a device to counter an extended suspension in mobility. At installations, as apposed to those in modes of transport, two types of screens of transit can be identified. Aside from screens of transit in waiting areas such as the main hall of Utrecht CS and the IFE system, the station also features screens we merely “brush” past. The bus station at Utrecht CS has several TV screens installed. There are two entry points leading down from the train station each equipped with an escalator, staircase and hung in the center of the place of passage are “double-sided” classic screens. The left image in Figure 4 demonstrates one of the installations from this point of entry. The right image in Figure 4 is the screen installed walking onto the platform from ground level. On the exact opposite end of this platform there are two screens, single-sided and mounted against the wall of a building block.



4. Textual screens, Utrecht CS. Left: escalator. Right: platform entry. (photos by author).

The screens on the staircase towards the bus station have not been hung in places of “perfect” passenger immobility. What I mean by this is that the “brush-past” screen has not been positioned at a place that captures the peak of the mobility suspension, but rather in the “act” of the flow, the content needs to be relatively quick to absorb. The peak of the non-experience would be the instance where the suspension in time, anticipating commencement, is at its greatest

Brush-past screens are found in the staircase towards the platform and, on street level, the slight mount onto the platform. At these points the passenger is confronted with a brief deceleration, but they are not brought to a complete halt. It is, however, sufficient to capture and process the “factoids” presented on the screen. What we find is that these screens are more tainted by commercial

rhetoric less concerned with offering an escape from boredom through entertainment or information. The advertisements are rotary with news bulletins.

In the aircraft passengers are immobilized in their corporeal movement or several consecutive hours. The plane in which they reside does, however, mobilize through the cloudscape at high velocity. The screens lure in the seatbacks acting as magnets to the gazes of the passengers. As the journey in the air commences the flight tracking system of the IFE pinpoints our location and provides information about the cruising speed, altitude, local time and so forth. The environment outside the aircraft, from which we are "detached," is experienced only on a conceptual level expressed in numerical figures.

According to Govil the aircraft presents a paradox of movement/stillness. The animated map of the flight tracking system functions as a reminder of the aircrafts movement (Govil 248). In is shown in all serenity without giving the traveler the possibility to interact with the display. Thereby, on the one hand we find it necessary to be alert of the movement of the aircraft. On the other hand, however, as Govil states, "There are, of course, few things more frightening than movement during flight" (248). Essentially modern transport mandates comfort that in turn necessitates stillness. It is this, in part, what makes non-places interchangeable and mundane. According to McCarthy the role of screens in the aircraft is that they "help to transform a space potentially fraught with anxiety into nothing more scary than a waiting room" (2003:219). This citation underscores that, on a conceptual level, the screen is "fused" with the act of waiting. The truth of the matter, however, is that the aircraft is a "miles high" waiting room. The mere presence of the screen is not what reduces anxiety; it is the distraction it offers that achieves this. The non-experience is tainted by anxiety. Replacing the non-experience with a mediated experience replaces the conjoined anxiety.

### **Commercial Programming**

The amount of commercials incorporated in the inflight entertainment programming is limited. The IFE propagates the airlines own services and by no means entails such a large commercial content percentage as the other screens of transit. Advertisements are predominantly found in the inflight magazine. The IFE is a commercial differentiation strategy and this can be said to presently still safeguard it from commercial content.

On the one hand the non-place, with its non-experience, offers the circumstances for demanding the travelers attention. On the other hand, the content has to direct our attention towards the commercial message (McCarthy

214). They are equally seduced to as well as rewarded for watching the advertisements and commercials on the screen. It is for this reason that the screen "W8" screen at Utrecht CS offers a 30/70 balance in favor of entertainment and information.

With mobile devices, often encountered in non-places, the user selects the content of the device. This indicates, as do the earlier mentioned examples, that paying for the device, or simply its operation grants the viewer/listener certain autonomy. Specifically, it liberates them from being confronted with commercial messages. This observation can be verified when reconsidering the programming we encounter in inflight entertainment. However, for the mobile (personal) device deviating to live programming (re)subjects the traveler to listening and watching and to commercial messages.

### **The Position of the Screen**

The "success" of the eye in the sky application, as entertainment, is only made possible by the fact that the spectator is optimally situated for the viewing experience; directly in front of a personal screen. Recent changes to the KLM Royal Dutch Airlines<sup>8</sup> inflight entertainment system demonstrate that the broadcast (public) screens are being reinforced or rather extended with narrowcast (private) systems. The newly acquired Boeing 777 and Airbus A330 aircrafts are now equipped with personal video screens integrated into the seatbacks of both travel classes.

The overhead position of the "W8" screen in Utrecht CS main hall makes it an object visually accessible to all. The "W8" installation has no audio. The omission of audio from the installation makes it, as a whole, less intrusive.<sup>9</sup> In order to appreciate the screens percepts of the screen the body needs to remain "fixed" in place. Viewing "W8" would require the passenger to stand relative motionless, coming to a momentary halt, in front of the screen. According to McCarthy such placement would address the viewing subject as an anonymous individual (2003:122). Augé stresses that whilst in the non-place a person experiences "solitude." The solitude is consequent of the "silent dialogue" with the "landscape text" (Augé 103). The overhead placement underscores the isolation endured by the passenger. Ironically, their homogeneity is established by their presence in the non-place. Being on the move you "act" and become part

<sup>8</sup> A subsidiary of Air France-KLM as of March 2004.

<sup>9</sup> McCarthy (2003) addresses the screen's "intrusion" in relation to CNN Airport Network. For this she concludes, "it places commercial speech precisely at the threshold of consciousness" (111). The screen's I have encountered either have no audio, or audio is optional by personal choice through a headset. Textual communication replaces the aural communication. The "size" of an audience and the amount of time they have to "spare" are factors that determine whether or not sound is offered. With public screens with audio, viewers are often granted control over its level.

of a homogeneous mass by having to respond to the same entries that organize the flow in the non-place.

In aircrafts public screens are still operational. For the most part it seems that they have taken over the role of the instructions for use. For one the safety onboard film is featured here. Additionally, flying to countries that require a Visa, a videotape is played instructing how to fill out the form. Also, prior to landing at Schiphol Airport, The Netherlands they show a film about the airport gates, transfer desks, the departure halls and location of the conveyor belts. These public screens primarily seek to communicate and inform the passenger as to the organization of their embarked on journey. It instructs the passenger as to their part. They are told as what to expect and how to act. As a traveler in mass transportation we take part in a mobility executed according to a carefully scripted scenario.

The personal systems onboard aircraft are single-viewer, placed directly in front of the passenger. Such a positioning allows the traveler to seek a tactile engagement with the material surface of the screen. They can substantiate a change in channel by touching the display or using the designated remote. Aside from control over what to watch there are other features such as audio levels, subtitles and contrast that can be individually selected to tune into the demands of the viewer in defining the experience. The screens previously discussed were placed in an overhead position. By placing multiple monitors within a space, McCarthy notes, viewing is turned into a private experience. It compartments the people within the space and makes viewing a "private" experience by it separating people from each other and the things surrounding them (McCarthy 2003: 137). With Schivelbusch we were made aware of the implications that the physical/material compartmenting of the trains carriage had on the social sphere. In addition to the physical compartments in the aircraft by the organization of the seats, the screens in the aircraft establish what McCarthy calls a "sensory isolation."

It has just been stated that personal systems allow for sensory isolation. However, returning to places of transit in general, here we find mobile screens to stipulate sensory isolation. The mobile devices in the place of transport leading to a "detachment by mobility." The personal mobile screen is "imported" into the area and with the advantage of tactile interaction with the apparatus in addition to sound through earphones. The modern citizen increasingly "mobile" proves to lay grounds for an interesting paradox. This paradox is that the ascent of public screens is met parallel to the rising popularity of the (personal) mobile screen.

Michael Bull has written a stimulating article on how users of mobile aural devices transform the representational space of communication. Here he notes an interesting and highly relevant paradox. Users of mobile devices, in their desire for company, alienate themselves in public spaces to retreat in their own "privatized sphere of communication" (Bull 276-280). Upholding McCarthy's terminology this is an act that establishes sensory isolation. He takes this observation even a step further. He determines that the sensory enticements of the mobile screen are prioritized over those from the "real" environment of the non-place. As a result of screen mobility the "user" creates an environment in which all places can be transformed into non-places.<sup>10</sup> The mobile device can, in line with the argument I uphold for the screen, "smoothen" the act of travel. Not only this, but the mobile device can actually establish a single, perpetual experience. It can be activated at the will of the traveler.

### **Accelerations and Decelerations**

In the previous chapter the Delta Airlines billboards indicated that IFE has the ability to make time fly. Nitin Govil has a rather skeptical take on the extent to which inflight entertainment systems are capable of realizing this. He chooses to stress IFE's role in media consumption. He finds that air travel encourages "desultory spectatorship structured around banality and boredom" (Govil 238-239). Whilst banality and boredom probably do initiate viewing onboard, it would by no account stimulate desultory spectatorship. In case that the imaginary surrogate landscapes offered by the screens do not surpass the non-experience, the systems have an "off" switch. Additionally, some people, like McCarthy herself has experienced, find themselves sitting in a waiting room hoping that they're not next in line. This is simply because they have devoted their attention to the TV screen and find themselves captivated by it. As with inflight entertainment, being confined for such an extended period, we might as well take advantage of the situation and "indulge," as McCarthy would put it, in watching a little television.

Returning to the idea of inflight entertainment making time fly both McCarthy (2003) and Novil "accuse" television of marking time. They are wary because programming may act as a catalyst to the boredom already incurred. I find that any activity within the place of transit "marks" time. As mentioned the non-place can be measured in units of time. The duration of the different screenic

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<sup>10</sup> Michael Bull draws the same conclusion in relation to aural media. He writes, "It would appear that as we become more and more immersed in our mobile media bubbles of communication, so then those spaces we habitually pass through in our daily lives lose significance and progressively turn into the 'non-spaces' of daily lives which we try, through those selfsame technologies, to transcend" (Bull 290).

activities are offered within the larger context of the duration of the journey. It is like kayaking down a river. The flow of the water determines your speed. The river has smaller currents, within the main stream, that cause accelerations and decelerations.

The accelerations and decelerations are metaphoric for the experience of time. The applications of the IFE work in a similar fashion to these smaller currents. I have divided them into communication and entertainment. These applications do not make the trip go any faster in reality, but they can make it feel as if it does. The applications become the constituents of the temporal narrative of the journey. However, they do compartment time by not providing a single surrogate landscape that endures the entire extent of the travel. The beginning of an engagement may cause the experience of time to accelerate. The ending is marked by deceleration. Watching a movie onboard, for instance, time may seem to accelerate as a result of engagement. When the movie ends, when the surrogate landscape is not longer offered, a "reality check" takes place. You awaken in awareness of your position within the deadness of the cabin.

The structured nature of the non-place has been suggested to regulate the passenger flow. The itinerary of passengers and of the installations and transport vehicles are very crucial in this. The "content" of screens of transit, which includes both applications and programming, tries to avoid establishing a temporal bubble for the non-place as a result of looping.

### **Avoiding the Temporal Bubble**

The inclination to escape repetitive programming has been demonstrated with the "W8" installation. Here the rate of passenger flow was calculated and the programming of "W8" was made to equate the seven-minute average wait of passengers.<sup>11</sup> Research conducted by Intomart GfK indicated that the average person spends three and a half minutes watching the "W8" screen. By offering programming that cycles every seven minutes the danger of heightening boredom through a repetitive program is bypassed.

Riding the public transport system in Milwaukee I encountered a screen installation in the bus. Here the screen was positioned slanted in an upper corner, within the vision field of all passengers in the back of the bus, providing trivia questions and advertisements. The installation caught my immediate attention. If I recall correctly the quiz was on American culture and history. The intrusion of advertisements during the "game" you accept because it is a package deal. I wasn't in the bus long and arrived seemingly "quicker" at my destination. Later

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.cbsoutdoor.nl/web/CBS-Outdoor/Nieuws/Q4-2006/Onderzoek-W8.htm>. Accessed 30 March 2007.

on that same day taking the bus back same story. The next day, however, on the bus yet again I realized the quiz was played in a looped-sequence. It became repetitive and lost most of its attraction. McCarthy rightfully points in such situations the screen acts as "A bubble of machine-like, unvarying time, it foregrounds the structure of assess, duration and delay in the waiting environment, *heightening*, rather than diminishing, awareness of the duration of the wait for those who sit in its presence" (2003:209).

The elaboration of inflight systems indicate that here too manners are sought to protect a backfiring of the boredom alleviation service. Nowadays, personal IFE systems allow the traveler to construct his or her own entertainment program. Often this is still based on a "broadcast schedule" that designate the beginning and end of programs on different channels. The passenger has the freedom to select what to watch. Also, the latest developments in inflight entertainment has led to on-demand systems. The KLM celebrates that their on-demand video system enables you to watch "what" you want and "when" you want. This is another example of how the temporal loop in programming can be evaded.

Communication in IFE is making use of the interactive interface, or extensions of the apparatus. KLM boasts: "Use your handset and screen to send text messages to any mobile phone number or e-mail address *anywhere* in the world and receive replies right at *your seat*"<sup>12</sup> (my emphasis). A prime example of communication offered to the airline customer. Replies are received right in "your" seat. The seat is a fixed place where you sit immobile for many hours. As immobile passenger you can, nonetheless, send messages to and receive messages from "anywhere." Sending and receiving text messages is a real-time activity. Using this service you can "puncture" the temporal bubble and access an elsewhere.

With its launch, Virgin America, a new low fair U.S. airline, the revolutionary Red inflight entertainment system was introduced to the market. A system the company refers to as an "interactive airborne entertainment environment." In the elaborate system the emphasis is placed on being interactive. As a verb interaction implies real-time. Effectively the integration of telephones and Internet, as immediate real-time media, are means pursued to prevent a confrontation with looping. Watching live satellite onboard an aircraft delivers a perpetual supply of programming.

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<sup>12</sup> [KLM Entertainment] [http://www.klm.com/travel/gb\\_en/travel\\_information/on\\_board/entertainment/index.htm](http://www.klm.com/travel/gb_en/travel_information/on_board/entertainment/index.htm). Accessed 7 March 2007.

Despite the users ability to determine content, mobile devices are equally subject to the dangers of looping. The user, prior to departure, transfers a self-selected play-list to the hard disk of the device. With the Ipod, for instance, the storage space is limited. This places restraints on the multimedia quantity one can carry. The content is determined prior to departure. For the mobile devices this also means that, depending on the duration of the journey, the traveler may find him/herself in a temporal loop resulting from the restricted choice the selection of multimedia files/applications to transfer onto the device mandated. The reality is that many MP3 players and cellular telephones are now equipped with FM transmitters indicating that real-time is a good way to defy the "stuck in time" sensation attached to the non-place.

## Conclusion

This essay has served as a project concerned with the integration of screens within places of transit. The places of transit have been identified as non-places where passengers are rapidly moving along installations and modes of transport. My focus resided with screens in places of transit drawing on examples from these places. The observation of the screens of transit has established the non-experience as a basis by which to delineate how places of transit relate to the screen. Additionally, the operation of screens of transit within places of transit has been considered.

Places of transit, I have asserted, are places prone to screen integration because of its identity as non-place. The non-place has been characterized as interchangeable, highly structured and effectively dull. These inherent traits of the non-place designate it as a space for screen integration. It has been found that the link between spatial transgression and temporal unfolding, the passenger flow of the non-place, creates the perfect brewing place for positioning screens. In the non-place this flow is managed by the itineraries of the installation and/or means of transport.

Below the surface site-specificity has helped to generalize places of transit by examining the flow of their passenger mobility. All places of transit have this mobility breached by moments of banality and monotony consequence of itineraries, but also material structures such as escalators. These moments of boredom have been labeled as the temporal and spatial suspensions in travel. The extent of the temporal disruption and the resulting expansion of its experience mandate different relations to the screen and its content. The screen here sutures the travel into a continuing activity of perceptual, cognitive and (virtual) mobile enticement by means of an imaginary surrogate landscape.

It has been stated that current-day places of transit creates spatial homogeneity. In turn this homogeneity is fuelled by the fact that the technology has reduced physical investment in the act of travel resulting in suspensions in mobility. In specific respect to modes of transport the passenger in the vehicle is detached from the surrounding environment as a result of velocity. Modern transport vehicles no longer necessitate physical exertion in the act of travel. The lack of investment gives the passenger opportunity and motive to seek other engagements.

The Delta Airlines billboards identified the screen as an instrument that replaces the non-experience. Moreover the process of remediation indicated a

growing concern with the extent to which screenic devices are able to counter boredom and provide entertainment. IFE systems are means to differentiate in the competitive airline market. Within commercial passenger aviation there is the inclination to find solutions through screens of transits to counter a non-experience. The assessment of screens of transit indicated that the commercial load of programming is dependant on who pays for the operation of the device.

Examining inflight entertainment furthermore demonstrated how screenic devices function as instruments in accelerating and decelerating the experience of time. The pace of passenger traffic, I have argued, results in differences to be observed between screens at transit non-places. There are screens of transit that are brushed past and those situated in a prolonged period of immobility, such as within a vehicle.

The case studies furthermore indicated the dangers of looped programming. The programming of "W8" equates the average wait of train passengers. The danger of heightening monotony through repetition is hereby reduced because the flow ensures that the passenger will not be at the same place for over seven minutes. The hypothesis stood ground against the other cases that underscored this assertion. Additionally it seemed that real-time is seen as an effective possible means by which to avoid the "pitfall" of repetitive programming. Although not a bulletproof methodology, the screen escapes the danger of heightening the non-experience. A person is able to stand immobile before the screen to be informed and/or entertained by the mediums content. It has been found that in this process real-time is one of the most satisfying solutions in succumbing the temporal bubble of places of transit. This is because it relieves programming from the dangers of repetitiveness.

Earlier research (Augé, 1995; Bull, 2004; McCarthy, 2003; Schivelbusch, 1987) shows a thematic captivation with solitude incurred by the traveler consequent of media engagement. A distinctive feature observed in the oscillation between narrow- and broadcasting was program control. The traveler was reconfirmed, by the positioning of the screen, as an isolated individual. In broadcast public screens the viewer engages in a personal dialogue with the medium, instated by the non-place itself. In narrowcast (personal media) it is accomplished through sensory isolation. The status of the non-place as space makes seeking other activities attractive. At the same time, however, an engagement with the device breaks down the last of the attachment the traveler has to other travelers and also leads to the dissolution of their tie(s) to the surrounding environment.

Furthermore, screen finds in places of transit a worthy accomplice for the crime of immobility. Viewing the screen requires immobility and the structure of places of transit creates that the traveler is confronted with suspensions in their mobility. The screen is the means by which to replace the non-experience inherent to its flow with a mediated experience.

Given how supermodernity has changed the way in which passengers move and experience space and time, the ascent of screens in places of transit is far from surprising. Places of transit stipulate a non-experience symptomatic of its lack in an autonomic identity as well as its organization of the flow of mobility. The ubiquity of the screens indicates the need of the modern man to remain "experiencing." In light of the presented knowledge, on places of transit as non-places and the screens evolution aimed at optimizing the level of entertainment, we can conclude that the non-experience brings places of transit and the screen together in a relation that can only be described as perfectly symbiotic.

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