Faced With Non-Places: Engaging the Solitude of Supermodernity

ABSTRACT: In a convergence of critical distance and creative alchemy—waters that flow into the same ocean—this essay responds to the proliferation of non-places in the world in which we live. Slippery imaginary characters make a rather unruly appearance in the context of reflections concerning, among other things, the birth of supermodernity, the horizons of cyborgenics, our customary passage through airports and Wal-Marts, the loneliness of hotel rooms and the synoikismos of retreating plazas, the islands of our threatened planet and the clamor of “the varied strains of civilization[.]beating at the present” (Fuentes 101). The image of a changing moon serves as witness and spectator of such critico-poetic congeries.

In Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity, Marc Augé defines history as “a series of events recognized as events by large numbers of people,” and he gives a few examples: “the Beatles, ’68, Algeria, Vietnam, Mitterrand’s victory in ’81, Berlin Wall, democratization of Eastern Europe, Gulf War, disintegration of the USSR” (27). The cronopios are not the Beatles (although they would like to be), nor are they the Boston Tea Party, or the War in Iraq, but they are certainly recognized by large numbers of people today. “That’s a cronopio!” is an exclamation one could hear in the streets of almost any Latin American city today—and one that could be heard as well in various languages in cities all around the world. I know, for instance, that the cronopios were in Warsaw—I saw them in the bookstores, in the streets—when I visited Poland some years ago. Their Historias (the Spanish word means both stories, as in tales, and histories, as in recorded trajectories) have been widely translated, and that makes the cronopios very happy, because cronopios love to travel and are impressed by their own adventures.

The cronopios? As usual they have showed up unannounced, and consequently we must brace for the unexpected. In a text written mostly in

IJLSA 12,2 (FALL 2007: 223-232)
Warsaw and later published in Tartu, I tried to define them as “those half-real, half-imaginary creatures, at once ideal and goofy, joyful and hapless, and probably the most internationally popular characters among the many conceived by the great Argentine writer Julio Cortázar. Moreover, they are arguably the single most significant cultural contribution of the many he made and one by which Cortázar would have liked to be remembered.”¹ They are imaginary at one level, yes, but at another they are as real as you and I. That’s why we can spot a cronopio in our midst. Real or imaginary, whatever the case may be, if we observe and register their actions, aware that imagination nurtures life and life imagination, maybe they can help us define the terms with which we are working and give us keys to fight the solitude of supermodernity.

If you Google the cronopios you will get about 300,000 entries. Wikipedia informs us that “in his stories Cortázar describes few physical features of cronopios. He does refer to them as ‘those greenish, frizzly, wet objects,’ but this description is surely mostly metaphoric. His stories demonstrate aspects of cronopios’ personalities, habits, and inclinations. In general, cronopios are depicted as naive and idealistic, disorganized, unconventional, and sensitive creatures, who stand in contrast or opposition to famas (who are rigid, organized and judgmental, if well intentioned) and esperanzas (who are plain, indolent, unimaginative, and dull).”² Like my definition, this would be a fine description had Cortázar’s surreal sensibility not inscribed ludic—playful, imaginative—contradictions within these categories. But who are we, anyway, to argue with Wikipedia? Aren’t cybernetic search engines only getting better and better? Just ask Ray Kurzweil. He predicts that nano search engines will be implanted in the brains of a few lucky earthlings by the early 2020’s. Many a partial cyborg already swears that Bluetooth is absolutely fantastic (and good for your neck if you need to multitask), but how will technologically advanced earthlings feel when non-places move deeper inside them?

Non-places? Augé quotes Baudelaire, to make a commentary on modern progress and introduce the notion of supermodernity as well as the origin of non-places. In “Paysage”, the poet, melancholically looking at Paris at the turn of the last century, metonymically condenses in two words the coexistence of two contrasting worlds: “Les tuyaux, les clochers, ces mâts de la cité”, chimneys, steeples, (industrial bloom, Judeo-Christian religion), those
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city masts.³ It is in this clash of worlds as well as in the poet’s gesture, as he looks at the spectacle holding his chin in his hands, that Augé notices a “very particular and modern form of solitude” (93):

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 called ‘supermodernity’. These subject the individual consciousness to entirely new experiences and ordeals of solitude, directly linked with the appearance and proliferation of non-places. (93)

Non-places have traveled far since the industrial revolution: talk about clashes of meaning. Semiotically speaking we live in a highly complex montage society. And these polymorphic “plays of imagery” have a mailing address. Malls and Wal-Marts, hotels and motels, airports and highways, the grey eyes of computers and TVs, the convenience and discord of palm pilots and BlackBerrys, the newest New Phone, Twitter-mania, machines that dispassionately interact and almost imperceptibly change us, that quietly inhabit our public and private spaces, these, to advance Augé, are among the non-spaces we face. They are defined in opposition to the anthropological notion of place, that is to say, “places whose analysis has meaning because they have been invested with meaning […] they want to be—people want them to be—places of identity, of relations and of history” (52).

A plaza comes to mind, sensual and sharing, and the description of that communal space by Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset. He thought of that empty space, heart of the polis, of synoikismos, the pact of living together, to be a more novel invention than Einstein’s space (Rebelión 174). But are not plazas everywhere struggling today to avoid becoming a spectacle of by-gone times? How dear the sentiment of the public market and the crowded bazaar. “The non-place is the opposite of utopia”, writes Augé, “it exists, and it does not contain any organic society” (112-13). Non-places are a sort of no-man’s land, the archetypal loneliness of journeys that don’t mingle, even when they cross paths.

“So there will soon be a need—perhaps there already is a need—”, concludes Augé, “for something that may seem a contradiction in terms: an ethnology of solitude” (120). If so, perhaps there already is—and has been
for a time—a corresponding need for a sort of inside out creative praxis, a playful *disculturation* of non-places. We cannot advocate a single solution, because in order to respond creatively to the challenge of non-places we must see them out of place, perform something akin to what the French call *détournement* and the Russians *ostranenie*. We can always abstract ourselves as we transit through non-places, we are free to recognize and renew the expected response. Reflection has a hand in this, and so does imagination. To reflect upon a system and change it, as semiotics shows following a question that goes back to Kant, you must have at least another system: you must know at least two languages: the language of what you want to understand and the system to understand it, the language of description, of distance, but also that of imagination. And who knows just what imagination is. Surely it must be linked to transformation, to renewal, creativity.

It’s not enough to see non-places from outside. To be able to move on, we must also see them out of place and transform them in the fires of imagination, true master of rhetoric. The more we can skirt their hook and displac-e, substitute, abstract and transform them as we move through them, instead of blindly, unintelligently and unimaginatively, following their *signage*—those generalized messages that take us *en masse* from non-place to non-place: eat this, use this, wear this, see this, do this⁴—the more we can connect with the horizons of play and the sparks of imagination that can link, in time, distant, unexpected things (“ces mâts de la cité”). Metaphor and dialectics bridging the divide. Because every extreme engenders a logical solution. Place and non-place, writes Augé following de Certeau, “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” (79). We can’t arrive at a fixed solution in such a board of endless palimpsests, but we may use the example of the slippery cronopios.

Faced with non-spaces the cronopios proceed to playfully reinvent them. Take the traveler’s space, which Augé considers “the archetype of non-place” (86). Cronopios like to travel freely. An unforgettable cronopio once walked out of a travel agency and noticed in the display window that his journey had been traveled for him beforehand in brochures, travel guides and even colorful postcards—with attractive “images of curious or contem-
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plative faces, solitary or in groups" (Non-Places 86), gazing at the very sights the cronopio would see, the white beaches of an island, washed by green seas, seen at sunset, from the porthole of a plane. So as soon as this cronopio boards the plane he wastes no time and orders a colorful drink so that he can have the enormous joy of drinking with one hand and, with the other, write to his friends beautiful postcards with pictures of lovely, solitary islands washed by green seas, seen at sunset. This is how our cronopio found, without searching, a way to reverse and recreate that reversal of the gaze that, for Augé, makes of the position of the spectator “the essence of the spectacle, as if basically the spectator in the position of a spectator were his own spectacle” (86). Because a cronopio knows he is.

I’ve offered a concrete example so that we may move from the general to the abstract, from what is bound to happen to what is happening now, the circumstances with which we can all relate without great surprises. Take Wal-Mart, for example. Non-places are the domain of a single language, the mono-linguistic space par excellence, because there—despite the diverse countries it takes to make the products—we are invariably told what to do with a repertoire of things and offerings, not to reflect upon the instructions. Some people, in their loneliness, go to Wal-Mart with the unconscious intention to see and perhaps even talk with other shoppers, to feel the community of the plaza, remotely nostalgic, and some times actively conscious of a distant empty space that fostered human interaction. Shoppers, in these non-places, are people whose desires profit has foreseen. Wal-Mart does not prohibit talking to each other; that old habit is respected but not encouraged. Perchance communication happens, but rarely with any depth or creativity—there is a hook all around you. The predominant language must be one in which there is no noise in the semiotic sense, that is, no technical imperfections in the system of communication. The goal is to generate a space and communicative system that promotes consumption. The mantra is “Buy! Buy!” when you come in and, “bye, bye”, when you go out. Come back.

Communication without communitas, without sociability: a Wally World in which the message at large is the massage and what is advertised is a repertoire with which to construct your personality. The codes of the products to be consumed and those of the consumer are intended to coincide perfectly, without noise. But semiotics teaches us that humans are interested in communication not because codes may perfectly coincide but precisely be-
cause codes, at times, do not completely coincide—we want to learn the variant language of an interlocutor because we don’t fully understand it, because we are left free not to follow the rules of the grammar we have learned. In our loneliness, however, and hoping to fill God knows what lack, to fulfill what catch of our mind, we follow the signage of huge consumer worlds located in convenient places with the hope of solving practical temporary problems. What we get is a normative view of the world that does not want us to think of our human faculties and facilities but rather of a space located in any major city near you or me where we are not expected to converse or reach out to someone else, a vast, enclosed space where a child can pick and choose among a gallery of toys. Maybe she will choose an attractive cash register, or one of many other cultural clichés.

Since it is more than ever evident today that progress has no limits, and Wal-Mart is there to sell it at low prices, our favorite provider of quality goods is promoting an extensive line of glass products with the exclusive virtue of being solid and transparent—a solid one can see through—that old miracle found awesome by children, yes, but now with the added quality of also allowing gasses to pass through! And the word is out that Permeaglass® will also allow some liquids to sieve by, and in some years, a few, mushy, solids.

Learning about this, the famas looked at their watches and wasted no time in buying all the available stock of this promising product, convinced, as they are, that it will certainly lead to further innovations that may not alleviate our human problems (famas like to let things ride) but will probably make them better-off so that they can open new philanthropic organizations.

Esperanzas, who like to shop at Wal-Mart like everybody else, are not much impressed by the new product because they have joined a club that has assured them that progress is like a flight of birds or a school of fishes, and they have embraced it, shyly, but with hope.

Cronopios are happy. Permeable glass will let flies and other insects crawl or fly out of senseless bubbles, like cars and bedrooms, and who knows how they got there in the first place. Cats, trapped outside of time by an invisible window beyond physics and metaphysics, could jump free from their shady prison and bask in the sun, as any good cat should. Captive fishes could rejoin vast seas, full of waves and storms. The afternoon’s warm
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breeze could blow in your face without your having to open a window or lift a hatch. And maybe one day, just maybe, the cronopio thinks dreamily, all the many faces of a friendly store that brought us such innovation at affordable prices will, too, be able to slip free and see the evening sky darkened by a flight of birds.

Can the keys of reflection or imagination free us from non-places? Maybe, maybe not. Here is the paradox. To run from places that shun reflection, we must be able to abstract ourselves, but in order to lucidly see things from a critical distance we must first be familiar with them. You need both hands to understand the dialectics of places and non-places. Critical distance, on the one hand, that secondary language that understands the particular in the context of the whole; imagination, that brass key too long to fit in any pocket, on the other. A double rainbow, formed by chance with the distance of creativity and the abstraction of silence. We need at least a double rainbow to unravel an artwork of progress for profit stretching over a sea of alarms and certainties. Borges called it algebra and fire. Einstein, mischievously placing emphasis on the poetic logical extreme, affirmed that imagination is more important than knowledge. He could think so because he cusped a long tradition of scientific rigor. To argue one aspect over the other would be like birds fighting over a cage.

If we could view our planet with the eyes of someone outside our world, something ethnologists routinely attempt on a small scale, ponders Augé at the end of his book, perhaps then we could see the world as one, perhaps then, being from Earth would mean something. “In the meantime, though”, he writes, “it is far from certain that threats to the environment are sufficient to produce the same effect” (120). The way things are going, I wouldn’t be so sure. We don’t need to be extraterrestrials to witness the amalgamation of our global community. Moreover, anthropogenic climate changes may yield friendships among strangers in strange lands. In the meantime, it’s still good to enjoy the mall’s expected surprises, the convenience of the super-mart and the anticipated promises of magical airport leaps. Nice to be able to work at home or from your lap-top as you travel, to have a sort of synthetic home away from home. Surely, however, we have experienced screen-solitude, electromagnetically charged, away from direct human warmth, caring friends, family, fruits, sunsets, and another full moon not seen; or the solitude of hotel rooms, that ancient paradigmatic non-place more common now
in a world more traveled. The solitude of non-places often falls upon us like a sudden death that gives us no time to face, to examine, to object. A cold solitude hidden by thoughts of comfort as we move in larger and larger spaces full of products linked to codes instead of merchants who can share them with us. Wal-Mart may be monolingual in its promotion of products but not in its appeal to diverse consumers.

Blessed are the immigrants to supermodernity because they are not yet emigrants. They have not yet been adopted by codes intended to foresee and mold them. In them the solitude of non-places is still marked, and with a little luck, can be recognized as a thought, an awareness to be followed to its ultimate conclusions. Otherness is a mirror that places us elsewhere, where we can see ourselves and shatter the horizons of normative predictability.

"If there is to be a culture at all in the coming times", concludes Carlos Fuentes in *The Writer in an Alien Culture*, "it will be a culture capable of including all the varied strains of civilization, all the hidden, all the underground civilizations coming from the past, beating at the present, Western and Eastern, Northern and Southern, of the First, Second and Third Worlds" (101). In the meantime we can only be patient, alert, widely informed, abstracted, consciously and dreamily aware, moving in the product worlds of the mind, worlds that are real and worlds that are not, new places among disseminating non-places that unsuspectingly hide and reveal the human in us.

Solitude. The word signals the slippage of time and the plenitude of timelessness; the awareness of being in time and the ideal eternal. "Time, as Hegel showed", wrote situationist Guy Debord, "is a necessary alienation, the environment where the subject realizes himself by losing himself, where he becomes other in order to become truly himself" (Debord 1983:161).

Cronopios can live with that. After all, they like to travel from place to place, like a metaphor—and, students remind me—like metonymy, linked but different, like walking and thinking. In one of the first lectures Lacan gave in the United States (1968 at MIT), Chomsky asked him a question concerning thought. Attuned to metonymy the psychoanalyst replied, "We think we think with our brain; personally, I think with my feet. That's the only way I come into contact with anything solid. I do occasionally think with my forehead, when I bang into something." Chomsky wasn't happy
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with the answer. Hearing this our cronopio steps outside and, as he walks, he thinks: “Why does it always have to be one or the other”, and then, looking up and seeing a silver disk he breathes in deeply, “How many more times shall I see the lonely moon.”

NOTES

1. See “The Book at the Outskirts of Culture”, where the cronopios, as well as the famas and esperanzas, are defined at greater length. Sanjines 1993:274.
4. Boswell notes that in supermodernity “one confronts only generalized texts (‘Take your seat’, ‘Please stay on the right’, ‘Milford next three exits’, ‘Checks accepted with guaranteed card’). These faceless texts address no one in particular because in non-place there is no individual identity of which to speak.”

REFERENCES

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