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non-places: introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity

By Marc Augé

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An ever-increasing proportion of our lives is spent in supermarkets, airports and hotels, on motorways or in front of TVs, computer and cash machines. This invasion of the world by what Marc Augé calls 'non-space' results in a profound alteration of awareness: something we perceive, but only in a partial and incoherent manner. Augé uses the concept of 'supermodernity' to describe the logic of these late-capitalist phenomena—a logic of excessive information and excessive space. In this fascinating and lucid essay he seeks to establish an intellectual armature for an anthropology of supermodernity. Starting with an attempt to disentangle anthropology from history, Augé goes on to map the distinction between place, encrusted with historical monuments and creative social life, and non-place, to which individuals are connected in a uniform manner and where no organic social life is possible.

Unlike Baudelairean modernity, where old and new are interwoven, supermodernity is self-contained: from the motorway or aircraft, local or exotic particularities are presented two-dimensionally as a sort of theme-park spectacle. Augé does not suggest that supermodernity is all-encompassing: place still exist outside non-place and tend to reconstitute themselves inside it. But he argues powerfully that we are in transit through non-place for more and more of our time, as if between immense parentheses, and concludes that this new form of solitude should become the subject of an anthropology of its own.

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