

## Art Criticism Is a Non-Place (A Little Theory Applied to the Writings of Marc Augé)

### Prologue

Before getting in his car, Pierre Dupont wanted to buy some magazines at the bookstore of the Musée d'Art Contemporain: *Art Press*, *Frieze*, *Trouble*, *Exit*, *Tate*, etc., and *Art Monthly*. Then he drove to the private foundation that had invited him to speak -- with three other critics, an American, a Pole, and a Greek, one German philosopher, and one Swiss artist -- at a round table titled "Art and Economy," in the context of the exhibition "Post-Capitalism." While waiting for the debate to begin, he glanced at the exhibition. Paying no particular attention to the exhibition's overall meaning, he noted with amusement some recurring expressions in the wall texts: "micro-politics," "cracks of the real," "return of form," "deterritorialization," "reinterrogation of the question of the image," "playing with feminine stereotypes," "fictionalization of the real," "distract our perceptions," "not without humor," "sidestepping aesthetic codes." During the round table that followed, Pierre Dupont heard the names Gilles Deleuze (27 times), Marcel Duchamp (12 times), Luc Boltanski (9 times), Jacques Lacan (9 times), Jean-Luc Godard (5 times), and the name of a Chinese intellectual that he didn't know (1 time). During the cocktail party held for him and the other speakers, he heard several times the names Lyotard, Agamben, Kraftwerk, Fernand Raynaud, Harald Szeeman, David Lynch, and the Lumière brothers. Above the bar, a monitor played a video of the previous round table titled "Cultural Studies in Asia" (Derrida: 31, Foucault: 28, Sontag: 25, Krauss: 14, Cusset: 6). Before he left the foundation, the director gave him the press release of the following month's round table titled "The Center and the Periphery," with artists, writers, art critics, and curators. The press release mentioned the names Derrida, Godard, Adorno, Baudelaire, Lacan, Benjamin, Don DeLillo, and Gertrude Stein. Pierre Dupont also learned that the Eskimo language has 200 different words for "snow." Later, in the bullet train that was taking him to a European biennial, he flipped through the deluxe, multilingual book that he had received that morning from a press agency on the best thousand artists chosen by one hundred curators chosen in turn by ten art critics who were themselves chosen by one editor. He felt good, because he knew or had heard about 912 out of the thousand artists. While drinking a beer in the restaurant-car, he glanced at a free newspaper distributed by the railroad that combined images of fashion, travel, and cultural reporting. He learned that the Eskimos have 70 words for "snow." In the culture section, he found the expressions "postmodernism," "sharing of the sensible," "return of form," and "reinterrogation of the statute of the image," as well as the names Derrida, Deleuze, Baudelaire, David Lynch, and Godard. Before beginning to write a text for a Mexican editor, he put a promotional DVD into his iBook and took a quick look at some European public art projects financed by a German collector. In the filmed interviews, he heard the names Augé, Derrida, Rancière, Jenny Holzer, Baudrillard, Georges Perec, Herbert Marcuse, Lucy Lippard, and for the second time the name of the Chinese intellectual that he had heard earlier in the day. He connected his computer to the Internet via the infrared port of his cell phone, typed the Chinese name into Google, came upon a quotation in English, copied it (command-c/command-v) directly into the Word text that he had to write. Then he looked out the window at the sun setting on the countryside. For a few hours, he would be alone.

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### In Non-Places, No One Can Hear You Scream

"The real non-places of supermodernity," according to Marc Augé, "are original in that they also define themselves by the words and texts that they propose to us." (1) Exactly. The fundamental concept of the *non-place* deserves then to be applied. This may even be the primary interest to be found in this notion-star of sociology: that, in the end, it does not concern just physical places, but potentially more abstract ones. For instance, a field of practical theory. So it is that when it comes to myself, I have to admit that more than train stations and airports, the primary "non-place" that I experience on a regular basis, in the accepted way of Augé, concerns the area of art criticism itself. It is an initially intimidating practice (for someone like myself who, moreover, isn't an academic), but one realizes quickly that its formal and conceptual repetition (a precise and recurring semantics, the shared use of a limited body of references,

the formatting of styles, the *international touch* [In English in the text] of certain publications), the transformation into a trompe-l'oeil space of investigation, a deterritorialized territory that is still extremely well mapped and comfortable for someone who is used to crossing it. It is an undetermined position with an overly-determined, impersonal, and oftentimes interchangeable semantics. Henceforth, art criticism circumscribes a potential space of adventures (of thought, of investigation) that are discreetly exciting but rarely real undertakings. Art criticism often remains a transit lounge (between work and viewer, artist and work, art and art, discipline and discipline) that sows few theoretical seeds, yet multiplies references whose aims are functional. Art criticism is the space of a voyage between two poles (journalism and art theory), the practice of the fleeting that is immediate and changing, that has no real past nor future, that operates with a precise finality in time and space (a report on an exhibition, a catalog, a press release). Finally, art criticism is a place that is foreign to everyone. It is a place that can be read but only reread a little. Art criticism expresses itself but is unprintable, because it can be inscribed only with difficulty into a territory of investigation. Consequently, it circumscribes an impersonal, suspended place in thought only the origin and goal of which entirely justify existence.

### Lost in Translation

What does art criticism mean then? Is it so bad that the critic can be seen as a non-place? No, in the sense that its anonymity and space that are prevented from being diffused do little harm to art or its viewers. No, in the sense that this improbable and functional space of thought offers in the end the same chance to everyone to have access to its basic codes, as long as we go beyond the initial semantic intimidation. But yes, in the sense that we can expect something else. Whereas the organization of the exhibition continues to be (even if it is less and less) a practice that is relatively risky (we no longer discuss, we show) and where art criticism itself is practiced beyond the reach of the critic. If an exhibition can still provoke a debate, even a scandal, the sterilized space of the critical text offers complete impunity. It benefits from a perpetual "case dismissed." (2) It is a *duty-free* space, where there is neither prescription nor prohibition, yet, in the end, no liberty either.

It is a shame that the language of advertising remains infinitely more speculative and innovative than that of art criticism, while at the same time their goals sometimes seem similar. It is a shame, because, at the same time, the art critic classes, limits, and excludes. Marc Augé: "The space of the non-space creates neither singular identity nor relationship, only solitude and similitude." If art criticism is fundamentally a gesture and a thought, it is often an automatic gesture. It is mimetic. I dream of a literary and critical practice that takes into account the subjectivity of the author. I dream of a critic that pushes art around with its own energy instead of serving it neutrally. I dream of a criticism that seeks to seize the unlimited polysemy of each work, by inventing new writing protocols to beat out the same (disjunctive) rhythm as its subject. I dream of a practice that affirms the speculative, by designing a meeting place that is not just fortuitous. I dream, finally, of an art criticism that rediscovers the creative virtues of identity and relationships.

Certain symposiums of art critics in which I have participated represent a possible concrete model for the practical and critical idea of the non-space. It is a space of intellectual transit peopled with non-specialists who comment on subjects that seem evident to everyone, but whose meaning itself has often escaped me. The references are indeed familiar, the citations known, the tone identifiable, but the impersonal and consensual logic leads to an automatic piloting of the word in which, like at an airport, we can only wait for the ensuing events. It is a language of prescriptions whose accessibility is limited. The virtual. In these specific, too frequent cases, art criticism really becomes the place of an extreme solitude and at the same time that of a suspicious fascination with vacuousness.

1. Marc Augé, *Non-Lieux, introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité*, éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1992

2. The French expression "Non-lieu" means, in judicial language, a decision not to pursue a judicial case because of a lack of evidence or a pardon.