

## Non-Places of non-Augé

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When visiting Delhi in 2010, I remember a slight cultural shock from one of the city's recently completed subway lines. Not that I found something bleakly intrinsic to India, but on the contrary - I was intrigued by the lack of it, or by strange intersections between this 'lacking' and various existing or imaginary layers of culture. The new transportation system seemed to be far from what I had remembered from my earlier visit to India. In this heavily conditioned and rather silently sliding subway you could perhaps imagine to be in Singapore or Seattle. There was a Hindu dressed in a bright purple sari scanning over the London-styled subway signs, until from the announcements articulated in high-end English she recognised her own. The doors opened automatically, she drove along the escalator down to the lower floor and stepped from the white floor onto the dirty streets. Among dozens of noisy taxi drivers she waved down a rickshaw-taxi, in which she probably had to sweat for the next half hour in a traffic jam.

According to the French anthropologist Marc Augé these and other similar visible manifestations of globalization can be called "non-places" – a concept he first coined in 1992 in his "*Non-Lieux, Introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité*" (published in English in 1995).

Augé writes in his book about supermodernity as the opposite side of the coin of which post-modernity shows us only the backside: this is the affirmation of negation. He tells about major changes in our society, which are the excess of events in time and acceleration of history, overabundance of space and the individualisation of references. The direction expressed in these changes, that Augé calls supermodernity, has peaked in remarkable physical alterations, including the reproduction of such places which he calls "non-places". He opposes this to the concept of a sociological "place", which traditionally has been associated with space and time limited in a specific culture. If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then it is a "place" - the rest would be "non-places", such as for example highways, airports and supermarkets.

In association with the publishing of the Estonian translation of the book (Tallinn University Press, 2012, translated by Anti Saar) Marc Augé visited Estonia on 12th-13th October for an intensive seminar organised by the university's Institute of Humanities and the Graduate School of Culture

Studies and Arts. In his opening statements Augé emphasised that purely distinctive places or non-places do not exist – what might be a non-place to someone can be a place to someone else. During the course of the discussion, it was brought up that a non-place should rather be seen as a trend associated with globalization and modernization, not a defined category that is applicable to an object/space.

At his public lecture "Architecture and non-places" in one of the university's supermarket styled buildings, Augé associated certain aesthetics and architecture with the global world, which is characterised by failure and taboos, and where the system dominates over history. The World-City and the cityworld are in the oppositional relationship just as history and system. Here Augé referred to the Fukuyama's concept of the end of history – this happens when the system, which is mainly about the combination of the free market economy and representative democracy, predominates the historical. Even if architecture takes into account historical and geographical conditions, they are rapidly taken over by the patterns of global consumption.

In his view a number of great examples of the world architecture seem to be addressed to global society, which, however, does not yet exist. "Architecture relies on the illusion of the ideology of a prison. It has a share of the esthetics of transparency and the reflection of high and distant," said Augé. The relationship to the time expressed in contemporary urban architecture is in contrast with the one expressed in ruins, which have accumulated large amounts of histories. Thus ruins express 'pure time', which according to Augé is the perception of here and now, but also of something missing, which is the lack of the past.

In his second presentation "Non-places and Globalization" Augé touched on the intersections between tourism, time and image-based perception of the world, which consequently has led to a number of tourist attractions that can also be regarded as non-places. In this case, the historical environment has turned into a tourist environment, where the form is present, but not the spirit. Speaking of images, Augé also raised a question about whether the West is not colonising itself through images. Tourism, advertising, television and new means of communication all contribute to the satisfaction we get from the images, even to such an extent that it eliminates the desire for knowing more about the anthropological 'other'. Often the image is the only thing we know about the 'prophet', whether it's Obama or Putin. We are so much paralysed by the images that the fictional character Mr. Amegawa, who was introduced by professor Rein Raud in his presentation on the trajectories in Japanese culture, did not know what to shoot with his camera when travelling, because he had forgotten his guide book home (Japanese tourists often like to take photos which mimic or even mirror the images in guide books). Augé, in turn, pointed out that tourists travel through two series of images: the ones they look before going, and those they share with their friends after returning.

In his presentation, Patrick Laviolette brought forth another term in addition to Augé's non-place – that of unplace (or placelessness, nowhere). He introduced a small group of people who are mobilising under the name of urban explorers. In post-socialist countries often referred after

Strugatskys' novel and Tarkovsky's film *Stalkers*, they are interested in abandoned, closed, marginal and unusual places in urban space - the so-called places of nowhere. However in contrast to Augé's non-places these stalker-zones are not empty of meaning, but their meanings are layered and often contradictory.

When in Augé's book that first appeared 20 years ago it was still quite clearly, even structurally brought out, how some places could be defined as non-places. In the course of the seminar, however, he rather expressed another angle of the whole concept. Places and non-places are all the time on the move, one is never fully erased and the other reached. This again may raise questions about the use of non-place as an analytical category. As Laviolette also noted, when a category becomes too relativistic, it may not be useful for the analysis of social reality. Rather it seems that the contemporary Augé (or non-Augé), who has undoubtedly moved much further from the concept of a non-place developed many years ago, today uses non-place as a metaphor, which is more useful as a category of thinking rather than a category for direct analyses.

Even in the Delhi metro there are children playfully hanging down from the ends of the handles. They laugh as their Sikh father in elegant turban eagerly takes photos of them, so that the single sign of 'underground' definitely fits the frame. Although they are in the transit zone, they are still present. Even within this 'lack' or non-India, so to say, social relations and various cultural or even historical meanings are formed. In addition to shops, cinemas, offices, beauty salons in some Asian metropolitan supermarket, we can sometimes also find clinics, which means that in Augé's non-place women can now give birth.

Some have therefore regarded Augé as nostalgic when his scholarship can be read as a mere criticism towards phenomena characteristic to modern times. Augé rejects these remarks, emphasising that the very same accelerating world also needs anthropological attention, not that anthropologists are bored studying distant societies and have therefore turned towards more domestic areas. He also stressed that anthropology is mainly engaged with contemporaneity, with what is here and now, the present other. And that power is the object of anthropology, if not even its main object.

In addition to Marc Augé, Rein Raud, Patrick Laviolette, presentations were also given by Stefano Montes from the University of Palermo, who spoke about text and intertextuality in Augé's work, and by the seminar program director Marek Tamm, who spoke about the perspectives of cooperation between history and anthropology recurred by the works of Augé.