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Flying Objects, Sitting Still, Killing Time

By *Christopher Schaberg*

The Elimination of Speed

Sitting in a cramped coach seat in a commercial airliner: it's a commonplace experience shared by many humans at the turn of the twenty-first century. This experience threatened to reach a level of absurdity in late 2010, when the *New York Times* travel journalist Joe Sharkey reported on a concept model stand-up aircraft seat called the SkyRider, which would radically reduce a passenger's personal space, and increase aircraft capacity and profit margins for airlines. The headline for Sharkey's column read "Legroom Tight Now? New Seat Is Less Spacious." Sharkey described the feeling of the seat as such: "like being strapped tightly into an amusement park thrill ride" (Sharkey, *The New York Times*).

This hyperbolic description of the SkyRider reveals an implicit understanding about commercial air travel: it is *not* supposed to feel like a wild ride. Ideally, air travel should be comfortable, uneventful, and entirely bland.

Sharkey's presupposition is a contemporary, low-grade variation on a theme articulated by Roland Barthes some 50 years before the emergence of the SkyRider. In his 1957 essay "The Jet-man," Barthes saw in the figure of the jet pilot "a motionless crisis of bodily consciousness" (71) that results from being totally disconnected from the terrain: jets go so fast, and are so hermetically sealed, that pilots lose bodily awareness of the space over (and through) which they travel. Barthes explains this as a kind of diminishment of the older airplane pilot, who was perceived as a hero who hurtled through *felt* space.

The crux for Barthes lies in a critical inconsistency that has to do with speed and bodily position:

... what strikes one first in the mythology of the *jet-man* is the elimination of speed: nothing in the legend alludes to this experience. We must here accept a paradox, which is in fact admitted by everyone with the greatest of ease, and even consumed as proof of modernity. This paradox is that an excess of speed turns into repose. (71)

The codes and protocols of the new era of jet-propelled flying machines caused "a sudden mutation" that forfeits the thrill of mobility in exchange for a feeling of motionlessness, and trades daring adventure for a kind of pseudo-religious devotion. According to Barthes, the old pilot-hero was defined by "speed as an experience, of space devoured" (72). The jet-man, on the other hand, goes faster than speed, all the way to stillness – or as Barthes puts it, the jet-pilot is assimilated into "pure passivity" (73). For Barthes this shift is apparent in a certain angle of repose adopted by the jet pilot: experiencing the time of air travel comes to mean sitting absolutely still, in a rather relaxed position.

Over the latter half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century, Barthes's paradox

seems to have made its way out of the cockpit and into traveling populations at large. The elimination of speed ironically increased with the spread of commercial aviation, and resulted in more collective time for airborne passengers sitting in rows of cramped seats, waiting to land. Commercial flight basically disseminates the peculiar feeling by which excessive speed turns into collective acts of passive repose.

Where Barthes was concerned with how jet thrust pushes humans bodies back in their seats and thus strips pilots of their humanity and heroic potential, Joe Sharkey basically accepts the object-ness of passengers as the default mode: people traveling in jets *should* be sitting back; neither should they feel the speed with which they are hurtling through space (again, it shouldn't feel like an amusement park ride). What's at stake here appears to be a subtle downgrade in the assessment of human flight. Where Barthes's earlier observation noted a shift from human to inhuman, contemporary critiques of commercial flight take for granted the de-humanised standard of air travel.

But what if we accepted from the outset that human beings in flight are *objects* as much as they are *subjects*? In other words, what if we asked a different kind of question, askance from Barthes's concern with how jet propulsion changes the human subjects of flight; what if we asked *how do these flying objects stay the same?* What kind of objects are people when they fly?

Interestingly, cultural representations of air travel have already provided speculative answers to this question, and they are organised around the figure of interest for both Joe Sharkey and Roland Barthes: how people in flight are *seated*. The present essay finds these speculations to be strewn about the history of air travel. Over the following pages I will show how various angles of seating throughout the hyperaesthetic culture of flight imagine humans as objects of air travel.

From Space to Time

Barthes identified the elimination of speed as a consequence of spatial surfeit: since the jet moves so fast across so much space, the bodily experience of that very same space is diminished, and the excessive speed turns into repose – being reclined in the aircraft seat. However, there is also a temporal factor at play. It is readily accepted that air travel *saves time*. Yet it is also widely admitted that the time of flight can feel excruciatingly drawn out, and experienced as profoundly *wasted* time: hours and minutes to be merely gotten *through*. In other words, air travel promises a way to skip over a longer temporal experience of a ground excursion or sea voyage; but flight then presents the passenger with highly concentrated forms of time to be mitigated, as when one waits in an airport departure lounge or while on a plane en route. Air travel reveals or unwraps the experience of *time* for flying objects – an experience to be expedited as much as possible, lest time feel to be at a standstill.

It would seem that contemporary air travel reverses a popular slogan, insisting that it is not the journey but only the destination that matters. This is why Joe Sharkey doesn't want airplane seats to feel like a roller coaster ride: we're not in it for the adventure, but only to get from point A to point B as quickly and as painlessly as possible. Yet it's precisely this *painlessness* that bothered Barthes: perhaps such an endeavor – that is, flight – *should* be rather painful.

The treatment of space in either formulation – that certain geographies can (and should) be flown over and avoided – has obvious ecological implications: it is hard to conceive of the planet as interconnected and interdependent when certain specific places are privileged above vast tracts of other spaces. But the matter of temporality is no less ecologically vexed by air travel. When time is treated as savable, expendable, or disposable, the very present can begin to take on a strange quality: cushioned by the elimination of speed, travelers may feel disconnected from the time of travel, yet also all too intimate with the seconds and minutes elapsing therein.

Lingering – and Not Quite on Purpose

There is a prehistory to trace here, akin to Barthes's elimination of speed but before the rise of jet propulsion. F. Scott Fitzgerald's unfinished novel *The Last Tycoon* (published posthumously in 1941) takes place in the late 1930s, and begins with the narrator Cecelia on a coast-to-coast flight. At one point, Cecelia reflects on the experience of air travel with a telling observation: "We were all lingering – and not quite on purpose" (5). This scene unfolds with Cecelia acting blasé about the "fasten seatbelts" sign when the plane hits turbulence, and basically experiencing commercial flight as an utterly mundane event, and one that takes time in an annoying way. It would thus seem that the elimination of speed and its temporal discontents were already well established within a few decades of the birth of flight, even while still propeller-driven.

When Cecelia's flight is suddenly grounded due to violent thunderstorms, in the Nashville airport Cecelia meditates further on the ennui of flight – this time, on waiting to fly again: "... we were taking off in less than an hour. Sleepy-eyed travellers appeared from the hotel, and I dozed for a few minutes on one of those Iron Maidens they use for couches" (14). This passage is of note because Barthes's elimination of speed seems to translate to an experience of being *on the ground*, as well.

Whether waiting to fly *or* soaring along at cruising altitude, Fitzgerald's characters express feelings of malaise: always "lingering – and not quite on purpose." These literary fragments suggest a subtle if also devastating critique of human flight: the feeling of flight is equated with the feeling of being on the ground. Air travel exposes *timesaving* and *wasted time* to be bound in a tight knot, and the figure of this dilemma is materialised in humans as objects *sitting still*.

Cecelia refers to the furniture in the Nashville airport as "Iron Maidens" – or nineteenth century torture devices, where humans are rendered as objects (in a bad sense) *par excellence*. And as noted just above, for Cecelia sitting in the airport is rhetorically equated with the feeling of being on the airplane. By equating flying with sitting around at the airport, and sitting around the airport with an older form of torture, Cecelia has twice undermined the promises of air travel to save time and to propel one into the future. Rather, flight is seen as something that exposes people as objects of other devices.

It turns out that this equation of flying through the air and sitting on the ground has an interesting precursor, as well. In the 1920s airports often placed wicker rocking chairs in the waiting rooms; these rockers materially echoed the lightweight wicker seats used in early passenger planes. [1] By this interior design strategy, the furniture in the airport got passengers ready for the thrill of flight by a metonymic segue: the airport could be phenomenologically linked to an airplane, just by sitting down.

If the wicker seats in the waiting room anticipated the aircraft, they also suggested to travelers that there was *no* airport or point of transition from ground to air. In the airport, passengers could feel as though they were already in an airplane sitting in wicker seats – already flying objects. One reading of this arrangement might suggest that flight was celebrated, while waiting on the ground was simply deemphasised.

Yet as we saw with Fitzgerald's Cecelia, the contiguity runs in the other direction, too: flying in an airplane and traversing vast topographical expanses can all too easily feel similar to waiting in an airport – at rest in a geographical location, perhaps even painfully so. The time of waiting is collapsed into the time of flying; but the time of flying is equally collapsed into the time of waiting. Which is to say, airport seating exposes flying as simply another form of waiting, even though it may seem odd to describe it that way. To justify the dedication of resources, infrastructure, and ever increasing pollution, flying must be understood as *purposeful* for free and active subjects. But in Fitzgerald's air travel in the 1930s and in the dual-purpose wicker seats of the 1920s, we discover that flight has been haunted by the sensation of flying objects sitting uncomfortably still: objects lingering – and not quite on purpose.

Lie Flat in Your Massage Seat

Temporal cessation around flight has hardly diminished; if anything, it is more apparent than ever – even with faster planes and an array of luxurious seating options for flying objects. Consider the website for Emirates airlines, which displays a new media montage detailing what is supposed to be the apex of contemporary air travel. Elaborate slideshows and dramatically scored videos convey opulence and signify a continuous stream of consumer choices available to the high-end passenger qua flying object.

In the Dubai airport, before departure, Business Class passengers are invited to linger in the upper level Emirates Terminal 3 Business Lounge, with its alluring row of cream-colored reclined seats. The Emirates website offers this poetic, elemental description of the Business Lounge:

The interior design and seating areas – themed around the concepts of Fire, Water, Air and Earth – provide a soothing and enjoyable ambience. Relax and treat yourself to the range of premium services available for your pleasure. How you spend your journey in Business Class is up to you: lie flat in your massage seat, enjoy the wireless seat and entertainment control, use your own mini-bar and visit your exclusive onboard lounge. (Emirates)

Beyond the enveloping imperatives to “relax,” “treat yourself,” and “enjoy,” I want to linger on another continuity – a continuity that appears once again between the passenger’s specific compartment both on the ground and in the air. The flying object is encouraged to “lie flat.” A short movie with a sensuous soundtrack demonstrates how one such passenger navigates his way through the reception area and to the reclined seats, where he rests before his flight ... the video fading out as the passenger presumably slumbers into a tranquil pre-flight nap.



Figure 1. Dubai Airport - Emirates Business Lounge.

Of course at this point in the airport, the journey has not even really begun. Yet once aboard the Airbus A380 in the Business Class section of the plane, the passenger is interpellated into a strikingly similar position of rest. On the website, an interactive video sequence animates the reclining function of the Business Class “Flat Bed.”



Figure 2. Emirates Business Class Flat Bed.

The angle of repose available to the Business Class passenger translates – or travels – from ground to air. Emirates advertises a standard of comfort – or an imperative to space-out – that is similarly achieved whether one is still at the airport, or hurtling through the air at 560 miles per hour. The flying object, lying still, can then proceed to kill time.

As in the earlier examples, Emirates's Business Class Flat Bed and the airport lounge chair compare the experiences of waiting on the ground and flying through the air. Emphasis is placed on repose, and present geographies are elided: the space of the airport can be tuned out as easily as the confines of the aircraft, or miles and miles of land or sea 43,000 feet below. The elimination of speed is dispersed, and sitting (or lying) still becomes the measure of flight.

These simple advertising injunctions to sit or lie back and relax in fact distort and even somewhat undermine the premise of *being there* on which flight is based: in such a uniformly reclined position, the human subject is quite literally rendered senseless and unconscious. Barthes's "motionless crisis of bodily consciousness" has reached its apotheosis – not in an especially cramped seat, but in a more luxurious class of travel, where the passenger is invited to "lie flat in your massage seat." And again, in these examples the elimination of speed is discovered to be operating both in the air *and* on the ground, in the airport when there is further time to sit still.

Hard Architecture

In his book *Naked Airport: A Cultural History of the World's Most Revolutionary Structure*, Alastair Gordon claims that "airportness" emerged as a structure of feeling in the 1950s (170-71). According to Gordon, as flight became increasingly familiar to people, airports generated a new phenomenology of perception – at once geared toward jet flight and oriented around thematically recognisable architectural and interior styles. Airports not only became increasingly inhabited places, but they also became places that people could experience as distinct *types* of space, geared toward flying objects. Arguably one of the most iconic symbols of airportness exists in the form of the Eames Tandem sling seat by Herman Miller, which arrived on the scene in 1962.



Figure 3. The Eames Tandem Sling Seat by Herman Miller (1962).

The Eames Tandem was created to be a fashionable and spatially ingenious concept that would conjure the ambience of jet flight while accommodating masses of passengers waiting on the ground. Designed specifically for Chicago O'Hare International Airport, this modular form of group seating was layout-manipulable and scalable. As the Herman Miller website explains it, "the sleek look complements public spaces without overwhelming them." Human passengers are a constitutive object for the Eames Tandem: as flying objects they justify, shape, and fill the spaces made by these seats.

The Eames Tandem is of a class of furniture that comprises what the environmental psychologist Robert Sommer terms "hard architecture." These seats are structures that configure humans in such a way as to discourage comfort, contemplation, and sociality. As Sommer describes such chairs,

they seem deliberately designed to eliminate conversation among passengers. The seats are fastened together with armrests, clearly marking off each person's space; the rows are placed back-to-back or arranged classroom style facing the counter where the ticket agent plays the role of teacher. Another assumption is that all people are the same size and shape and therefore all chairs in an area should be identical. (75)

For Sommer such seating is indicative of social regress, non-communication, and spatial tuning-out – the effects of which are reflected in and felt across culture at large. Countless imitations of the Eames Tandem have been installed throughout airports all over the world, and in popular culture the shape of such seats serves as a trope for annoying travel delays and the accompanying phenomenology of indefinite waiting.

Exemplifying this perspective is a memorable scene from Steven Spielberg's 2004 film *The Terminal*, in which Tom Hanks's airport-stranded character tries to sleep on generic Eames Tandem seats, alternately falling through the cracks or getting jabbed by the unmovable armrests. This movie is about a drawn out period of time in which a stateless character-object is quarantined to the terminal: his flight lands safely, but he cannot leave the airport – suggesting in

another way an odd continuity between being in-flight and going nowhere on the ground. The generic airport seats echo the confined interior of an aircraft, and Hanks's contorted body recalls Cecelia's "Iron Maidens" in *The Last Tycoon*. In this scene we recognise the time of the abject (or object) air traveler caught in the grip of hard architecture.



Figure 4. *The Terminal* Dir. Stephen Spielberg © Dream Works 2004.

This scene in *The Terminal* draws from the same set of cultural associations as a passage from Don DeLillo's 1986 novel *White Noise*: "He was sprawled in the attitude of an air traveler, someone long since defeated by the stale waiting, the airport babble" (307). While Herman Miller originally designed the Eames Tandem to merge seamlessly with the aesthetics and functional needs of air travel, it would seem that the culture of flight overdetermines the verisimilitude, and such seats are now ubiquitous reminders of the elimination of speed and the drawing out of time – whether on the ground or in the air, flying objects have to recline.

The continuity of seating between air travel and airport waiting was earlier hypostatised and satirised in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). In this film, the humdrum experiences of commercial aviation were projected into space – in turn making space travel seem ordinary and banal. One scene takes place in an orbiting spaceport replete with a Hilton hotel, a face-time payphone of sorts, and a Howard Johnson's restaurant.



Figure 5. *2001: A Space Odyssey* Dir. Stanley Kubrick © 1968.

Standing out in this scene are the curvy red lounge chairs that conjure a futuristic landscape of flight while simultaneously insisting upon the old need for repose, for sitting still while soaring above ground. Hard architecture is softened here, but nonetheless results in a familiar schema where the leading edge of progress looks all too familiar, and flying objects recline in the old position of the air traveler turned jet-man. Kubrick's speculative future evokes the elimination of speed – the slow time of flight – as a present remainder, an enmeshed inconsistency that will not go away. It is no wonder that in *2001* flying objects are haunted by an inexplicable monolith: for what is progress when there is time to be killed?

Dead Time

In his 1982 novel *The Names*, Don DeLillo formulates an elegant description of the phenomenology of air travel, which he sums up as the feeling of *dead time*:

This is time totally lost to us. We don't remember it. We take no sense impressions with us, no voices, none of the windy blast of aircraft on the tarmac, or the white noise of flight, or the hours waiting. Nothing sticks to us but smoke in our hair and clothes. It is dead time. It never happened until it happens again. Then it never happened. (7)

DeLillo's focus on the time of air travel reveals "hours of waiting" that get repeated day in and day out in the culture of flight. This time is a synaesthetic eddy out of which nothing but "smoke" escapes. This is the time of Fitzgerald's Cecelia, and the time of Barthes's jet-man. It is the time of the Emirates Business Class traveler as well as the economy class airport-bound passenger trying to find a comfortable position on an Eames Tandem or one of its many doppelgangers. This is the time of flying objects, sitting still.

Airlines commonly redirect passengers' attention from the dead time of air travel to spatial consolations, as in the United Airlines advertising campaigns for Economy Plus, a seating option wherein passengers can pay nominal fees for "up to five extra inches of legroom" in the coach section of their aircraft. One early advertisement for Economy Plus that appeared on the back of boarding pass envelope jackets suggested that the space would be "leg roomier":



Figure 6. Economy Plus advertisement © 2006 United Airlines.

In this image United promises a spotlighted zone of pleasure reading while in-flight. The actual environment of air travel has vanished, and is exchanged instead for a wish image of solitary enjoyment – as if this is time that a flying object would *choose*. Nevertheless, the exaggerated attitude of recline combined with the focal point of this advertisement – the book – belie the "hours of waiting" that comprise *dead time*. This is a time that confuses movement and stasis, ground and air, collective inhabitation of space and solipsistic spacing out.

The fantasy of isolation in the United Economy Plus advertisement piques an individualist meme that can represent bliss, as in the case of the happily relaxed airplane reader; but it is a meme that can equally result in existentialist dread – particularly when ensconced in the maddening confines of the airport. Flying objects are not always happy objects.

Time Can Stop Completely

In the United States, federal regulations recently were passed to punish airlines for keeping passengers on aircraft for over three hours on the taxiway; but curiously it is the passenger stranded in the airport who enduringly represents a particularly tortured soul. Consider this *New Yorker* cartoon that appeared in the magazine in 2009:



Figure 7. © Kim Warp, *The New Yorker* 4/20/2009.

This cartoon imagines Albert Einstein sitting in a prototypical airport departure lounge, his flaccid body in a familiar scrunched position, tired eyes staring blankly at nothing. The caption quips, “Einstein discovers that time can stop completely.” In this image we can see crystallised the anxieties of flying objects and the imperative to sit at an awkward angle long before one’s plane leaves the ground – if only in anticipation of more of the same, in flight.

Here the elimination of speed is taken to its limit, with the airliner on the ground and no hints of a departure anytime soon: it is significant that the tarmac is vacant, with no workers, fuel trucks, or catering vans in sight. Jet travel, with its overt promise of an “excess of speed,” has resulted in a state of repose prior to the plane. And as if to make sure we get the joke about hard architecture, Einstein even sits in a row of actual Eames Tandem sling seats. This is “dead time” to such an extent that the great theorist of time is stymied by the mind-shattering temporal drag of everyday air travel, converted into an ironic flying object, sitting still, killing time. According to the cartoon, Einstein “discovers” this truth: it is as if a natural law is suddenly understood. [2]

The anachronism of Einstein in the modern airport serves as an implicit layer of humor in the cartoon – yet it really raises another point of temporal confusion. Einstein died in 1955, while the cartoon is most likely intended to acquire its humor from the surge of staggering airport delays that have become new media events in recent years, and which are linked to terrorist threats, extreme weather patterns, and other global effects. Upon closer inspection, the anachronism

grows less obvious.

First off, the airport architecture itself does not necessarily indicate an obvious anachronism, as the full viewing architectural tactics of floor-to-ceiling windows were well in effect by the mid-twentieth-century. In his book *Airspaces* David Pascoe notes how in 1961 Paris's Orly airport was built to be "a window on the world, and a display case" (54). And as the media theorist Gillian Fuller has observed, historically "airports exult in a spectacle of outside" (164). These standards are hardly new features of airport design, then, and therefore Einstein's place in the departure lounge is not de facto jarring.

In the visible outside within the cartoon, the plane in the background appears to be a Boeing 737, which first went into service in 1967 and is one of the most widely used planes in service today. But the fuselage and wing design is general enough to call to mind the early 1950s, when jet airliners first entered the market. The Eames Tandem chair, as we noted above, dates to 1962. On all these counts, then, placing Einstein in this airport delay is not that radical of a temporal discontiguity. But it is this ambiguous admixture of historical markers that reflects a reality principle accurate to flying objects: as if the project of time-saving, in fact, *dulls* temporal acuity. Furthermore, as we noted in *The Last Tycoon*, the boredom of airport waiting is hardly restricted to the contemporary traveler. On multiple points, then, the cartoon has almost a *timeless* quality.

For flying objects time can stop completely – or seem recyclable across different and disparate historical moments. Indeed, it is Cecelia in *The Last Tycoon* who muses: "I suppose there has been nothing like airports since the days of the stage-stops – nothing quite as lonely, as somber-silent. ... airports lead you way back into history like oases, like the stops on the great trade routes" (14). Cecelia skips over more recent technological innovations in mobility (e.g. trains, cars) and relates air travel to another time entirely: the era of "stage-stops." The second figure is an odd simile – airport as oasis – which creates a double image, both an environmental mark (the fecund exception within an arid ecosystem) and a retrospective temporal gesture: the oasis calls to mind earlier times of travel and past modes of empire building.

Appropriately enough, a sort of oasis is part of the environmental ambience of Warp's cartoon: the minimal presence of a rolling tree line in the distant background of the image, at the edge of the airfield. Opposed to the stark and alienating grid of the airport, organic life goes on. One could speculate that it is precisely this subtle opposition that creates the comic tension in the cartoon: it is a perceived phenomenological abyss that separates the stale interior of the airport from vibrant life happening somewhere else, beyond the bounds of flying objects.

The Flight Took Fifty Minutes and Seemed Much Longer

I wish to end this essay by discussing a scene in David Foster Wallace's posthumously published, unfinished novel *The Pale King*. [3] An early section of *The Pale King* concerns a character named Claude Sylvanshine who is en route to Peoria, Illinois, to take an accountancy exam. The following two sentences are the opening of the second chapter of *The Pale King*:

From Midway Claude Sylvanshine then flew on something called Consolidated Thrust Regional Lines down to Peoria, a terrifying thirty-seater whose pilot had pimples at the back of his neck and reached back to pull a dingy fabric curtain over the cockpit and the beverage service consisted of a staggering girl underhanding you nuts while you chugged a Pepsi. Sylvanshine's window seat was in 8-something, an emergency row, beside an older lady with a sacklike chin who could not seem despite strenuous effort to open her nuts. (5)

In these lines we get an incredibly condensed picture of the haggard state of modern air travel and the flying objects contained therein. Quarters are close in the "terrifying thirty-seater" – a space that doubles as a frenzied cell of consumption, where Pepsi is "chugged." The apparent

youngster who pulls the “dingy fabric curtain over the cockpit” reminds us of the late-stage development of the airplane pilot: far beyond Barthes’s disillusioned jet-man, we’re not even in a jet plane any more, and the pilot is exposed to be a barely concealed wage worker with acne. Flying objects, indeed.

The mention of Sylvanshine’s specific seat on the aircraft marks a motif developed throughout the chapter. It is from Sylvanshine’s cramped vantage point of semi-repose that *time* becomes a distinct part of this scenario, as the passage goes on to describe:

The flight took fifty minutes and seemed much longer. There was nothing to do and nothing would hold still in his head in all the confined noise and after the nuts were gone there was nothing else for Sylvanshine to do to occupy his mind but try to look at the ground which appeared close enough that he could make out house colors and the types of different vehicles on the pale interstate the plane seemed to rock back and forth across. (6)

The elimination of speed thus becomes a matter of time, and specifically time to *kill* – for it is time that threatens to absorb human agency completely. The view from the window seat becomes the merest modicum of entertainment for the strapped-in passenger Sylvanshine, sitting still, safely in flight – yet just on the edge of losing it. Sylvanshine feels the object-ness of his subjectivity acutely in the space/time of flight.

Wallace then makes recourse to familiar imagery at the end of this chapter, as Sylvanshine deplanes and pauses outside the aircraft:

on the wet tarmac surrounded by restive breathers, turning 360° several times and trying to merge his own awareness with the panoramic vista, which except for airport-related items was uniformly featureless and old-coin gray and so remarkably flat that it was as if the earth here had been stamped on with some cosmic boot, visibility in all directions limited only by the horizon, which was the same general color of the sky and created the specular impression of being in the center of some huge and stagnant body of water, an oceanic impression so literally obliterating that Sylvanshine was cast or propelled back in on himself and felt again the edge of the shadow of the wing of Total Terror ...(24)

Finally standing up, Sylvanshine turns around “several times” to view “the panoramic vista” which echoes the vague tree line in the Einstein cartoon, and Cecelia’s “lonely,” “somber-silent” airport-as-oasis. And like Stanley Kubrick’s outer space imaginary in *2001*, feelings of cosmic alienation and of time at its end haunt Sylvanshine’s airport impressions. [4] Here once again, the passenger’s position on the plane is placed on a continuum with a feeling of dread on the ground. Wallace shows how the extreme ends of this spectrum bend back onto one another: the bored and confined air traveler is eerily equated with the deplaned and grounded human subject. They are all flying objects, inescapably so. The problem of sitting in the culture of flight becomes a generalised problem about living in modern time.

In his book *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Fredric Jameson rightly notes how late capitalism tends toward “abstract and nonsituated” feelings, such as those evinced by “the anonymous space of airport terminals that all run together in your mind” (116). Indeed, the big spaces of air travel have received much critical attention, from Marc Augé’s seminal study *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* to the recent book *Aerotropolis: The Way We’ll Live Next*, by John D. Kasarda and Greg Lindsay. In the present essay, I have attempted to focus on smaller spaces of flight – where and how travelers sit – in order to shift attention to matters of *time* and to the *objects* flyers become. The hyperaesthetics of air travel are imbricated with the seating fixtures that line the chambers of flight, and these small spaces reveal profound

temporal confusions – so easily passed over, so excruciatingly endured by flying objects, sitting still, killing time.

Christopher Schaberg is assistant professor of contemporary literature, culture, and theory at Loyola University New Orleans, and author of *The Textual Life of Airports: Reading the Culture of Flight* (Continuum, 2011).

Endnotes

1. See Martin Greif, *The Airport Book: From Landing Field to Modern Terminal*.
2. Interestingly, Warp's depiction of Einstein syncs with another of Barthes's essays in *Mythologies*, "The Brain of Einstein," in which Barthes underscores the importance of "discovery" as a "magical essence" and a "basic element" (69). We thus see again a naturalisation of the airborne subject, here via a 'discovery' made by the paradigmatic scientist.
3. One is tempted to explore the role of air travel in unfinished and posthumously published novels, but it is beyond the scope of this essay to do so.
4. For more on such impressions of airports as blasted spaces, see Christopher Schaberg, *The Textual Life of Airports: Reading the Culture of Flight*, esp. chapter 7, "Ecology in Waiting."

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