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## **Consuming a Machinic Servicescape**

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# Consuming a Machinic Servicescape

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## ABSTRACT

Consumer encounters with servicescapes tend to emphasize the harmonic tendency of their value-creating potential. We contest this assumption from a critical non-representational perspective that foregrounds the machinic and repressive potentiality of such consumption contexts. We offer the airport servicescape as an illustrative example.

## INTRODUCTION

The site of the service encounter, the *servicescape* (Bitner 1992; Hooper, Coughlan, and Mullen 2013; Wakefield and Blodgett 1994), has become a mainstay in the literature on the threshold of managerial and consumer marketing. While the literature on servicescapes typically describes how service encounters are facilitated, provide value, or engage consumers in value creating activities (Ezeh and Harris 2007), little in terms of critical scholarship has been directed towards the idea of servicescapes, even though our society is increasingly colonized by commercially motivated spatial configurations that promise meaningful consumer experiences (Denzin 2001; Holt 2002; Kozinets and Handelman 2004; Sherry 2008).

Notable exceptions from cultural perspectives notwithstanding (Kozinets et al. 2004), servicescapes have largely been conceptualized from the marketing perspective as manageable, logic-bound spaces that, providing they are efficiently planned and operated, offer harmonious opportunities for value co-creation (Grönroos 2011; Vargo, Maglio, and Akaka 2008). Under this lens, service failure constitutes a preventable outcome of service fault: an anomaly of the system rather than the system in its 'natural' state (Ezeh and Harris 2007). For Hoffman and colleagues (2003), for instance, service failure occurs when a service is either missing, slow, defective, poorly articulated, or else contaminated. Nilsson and Ballantyne (2014) contend provider firms are "not always able to influence the value-creation process in ways they would like", unless they recognize the "underlying functional, technical, symbolic and social dimensions which frame the meaning of a particular servicescape" (p. 377). A unifying theme of managerially oriented contributions is that servicescapes can and ought to be managed.

This conceptual study marks the beginning of the exploration of instances in which servicescapes can be said to be exerting an influence on the service 'recipient' that cannot be fully accounted for by understanding the value provision of the service. We provide an alternative view where the servicescape provides a milieu that is never politically innocent. For instance, servicescapes are often constructed to attract a particular clientele, either implicitly or explicitly, on account of their age, gender or appearance (Rosenbaum 2005). Nor are servicescapes always directed towards individuals that would be consumers of the service by virtue of their own volition. Often when travelling, for instance, consumers have little option other than to traverse a commercialized servicescape to reach an exit (Pütz 2012).

We shift our gaze to service encounters that have run amok – servicescapes that continue to add service components that exceed control and organize not in accordance with mutually co-created benefits but in monstrous forms, where organizing is not assumed to tend towards harmony but rather its opposite (Thanem 2006). These

perspectives, which draw from non-representational literatures (Hill, Canniford, and Mol 2014), offer novel conceptual tools for theorizing consumption in servicescapes that question the individualism (Thompson, Arnould, and Giesler 2013) that manifests methodologically as the *emic* voice that assumes active cognitive meaning-makings by the consumer. This allows for theorizing on questions of collective domination, injustice, and inequality (Peñaloza and Venkatesh 2006) – all possible affective relations of the service encounter. We conceptualize the airport servicescape as an exemplar of a service encounter with a machinic logic where consumption is not sufficiently explained by the notion of meaningful experiences of value co-creation.

## THE AIRPORT SERVICESCAPE

As sites of travel departure and arrival, airports serve many functions that directly facilitate consumption. They offer spatial possibilities for consumers to engage with airline services and constitute consumption environments created and shaped to a large extent by retailers (Folkes, Koletsky, and Graham 1987; Rowley and Slack 1999). Beginning with duty-free tobacco and liquor sold to trans-Atlantic travellers in Shannon, Ireland in 1947, the airport context of consumerism thereafter emerged worldwide (Newman and Lloyd-Jones 1999). Latterly, airports have emerged into 'airports-as-firms', offering "an array of different value propositions: attractions for tourists and aviation enthusiasts, congressional and logistics facilities, shopping venues and consulting services" (Jarach 2001, 119).

Akin to other servicescapes, airports are sites of a wide array of consumption instances, posing either favorable or adverse outcomes that vary in their degree of controllability and predictability. Crawford and Melewar (2003) describe airports as sites of heightened consumer anxiety, fear, and excitement, accentuated by travel stress. While this is conducive to heightened impulse purchasing, such consumption can only be facilitated by stress-reducing design – thus airports should be both aesthetically pleasing and functional (Bowes 2002). Fodness and Murray (2007) describe the airport as "an elaborate servicescape ... similar to a hospital, with many corridors, queues, signs and complex interactions" (p. 493). Rowley and Slack (1999) note that airports, due to consumers' experiences of global travel, facilitate a sense of "timelessness and placelessness" (p. 363) for consumers in transit. Similarly to hospitals, supermarkets and motorways, airports thus reflect what Augé (1995) terms 'non-places' and Castells (2000) 'places of flow'. Both lack a history and sense of identity and are judged primarily on their capacity to transfer users from one point to another in as smooth and error free a fashion as possible. Airports are also often the first and last points of traveler contact from the perspective of tourism consumption, and thus airport experience has a strong bearing on travellers' future expectations and intentions (Martín-Cejas 2006).

Consumption in airports often consists in frustrating and problematic experiences (Crawford and Melewar 2003; Pütz 2012; Rowley and Slack 1999). In the extreme, it has been noted that airport 'security theatre' (as opposed to 'security reality'), elaborated in the wake of 2001, has played no role in thwarting recent attacks (The Economist, 2015). Highly visible security rituals have not been able

to guarantee passenger safety against ‘inside’ jobs (Metrojet Flight 9268), external attacks (Malaysian Airlines Flight 17), or technological malfunction (Malaysian Airlines Flight 17). However, airport service contexts continue to prosper (Crawford and Melewar 2003; Rowley and Slack 1999), indicating that any straightforward notion of benign value co-creation fails to capture the emergence of these consumption contexts and the performative ways they become reenacted through their mundane repetition.

While the airport consumption experience has many unique characteristics, a recurring theme in the literature is the idea of its manageability and its value generating potential. We will now offer an alternative logic of machinic becoming to provide a new way of describing and problematizing the airport consumer experience – a view that questions the manageable and foregrounds the ‘monstrous’.

### PHILOSOPHICAL REFOLDING – BECOMING-MACHINIC, BECOMING-MONSTROUS

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1977, 1987), in addition to their various single-authored works, collaboratively wrote some of the most influential non-representational accounts in the recent tradition of French philosophy. While it is impossible to construct any comprehensive account of their approaches here, their project firmly centered upon constructing a new image of thought that would be of ‘emergence’. Their work has had little impact upon consumer research (Hietanen, Rokka, and Schouten 2014), but their ideas, which foreground an ontology of incessant change rather than assuming that nature (or thought) aims for a harmonious systemic order or equilibrium, have received greater recognition in organization theory (Thanem 2006). We believe adapting their ontology can bring forth a new perspective to services research sharing a threshold with consumer culture theory (Arnould 2006; Peñaloza and Venkatesh 2006).

In contrast to most marketing and consumer research accounts that base their ontology on human rationality and individual agency, for Deleuze and Guattari all relations (both human and nonhuman) are in becoming; a production of intensities that attract or repulse. This is affect that is beyond the representational; a form of surplus of raw desire that is in constant excess of rationalistic accounts (Thanem 2004). Thus, while a conventional account of services would see problematic situations as merely faulty or as epiphenomenal hindrances to the intended service (Grönroos and Voima 2013; Morgan and Hunt 1994; Raval and Grönroos 1996), in this view the ‘problematic’ is purely productive (Genesko 2014). It produces an excess of relational affect. All relations are in mutual becoming, and thus also it is the tendency for humans to become-machinic when thrust into relational becoming with machinic emergence (Deleuze and Guattari 1977, 1987).

In its view of the machinic, the Deleuzoguattarian approach breaks from rationalistic aspirations of humanity by postulating that oppression and subjugation are not emotive states which desire avoids. Quite the opposite, we desire to be controlled by a structuralist logic we embody from a very early age (Deleuze and Guattari 1977, 1987). Moreover, a Deleuziguattarian perspective of becoming one with the environment is not a matter of Aristotelian distinctions of the external and the internal (Deleuze 1994). We do not walk into a space as external things. Rather, we construct the space itself through presence in space and social interactions. It is not mimesis (Marks 2000), but rather the idea that space cannot occur without embodied participation in it.

Next, we argue that the airport servicescape, through its tensions and performative events (security checks, pronounced distinctions between the have-nots and the privileged, unpredictability of service

encounters and the like), is best described as a machinic becoming where technologies, operators and consumers become engulfed in a systemic becoming that has long since escaped any conceivable form of rational service provision.

### MACHINIC ENCOUNTERS IN THE AIRPORT

We identify three machinic performances of the airport servicescape which we term (1) conspicuous stratification, (2) the contradiction of unpredictability and linearity, and (3) security theatre. These collectively manifesting performances invite all participants to submit and enter into a relationship of becoming with and within them.

Processes of stratification both implicitly and explicitly segregate passengers by way of wealth, physical ability, and sexuality within the airport context. In an implicit sense, luxury boutiques and high-end restaurants housed in airport terminals constitute restrictive zones whose services cater to affluent travelers but actively discourage those less privileged. In an explicit sense, business and first class passengers are granted privileged access to lounges and fast track queues from which economy passengers are formally excluded (Wu 2014). On the flight itself, it is often only a conspicuous curtain that separates economy from business and first class. The curtain, usually left open during take off and landing, is tantalizingly drawn closed during the flight itself, during which time higher-paying passengers enjoy superior meals and entertainment than lower-paying passengers (The Economist 2016). One could argue that nowhere else in contemporary western society is social class distinction as visible as in the airport servicescape.

Physical disabilities, accentuated within the context of the security check, constitute a second form of stratification. Upon entering the metal detectors, for instance, travelers are processed before speculating passengers and airport employees. Pütz (2012) notes the manner by which this temporary isolation poses a challenge for travellers walking unaided, but constitutes an “insurmountable barrier for others” (p. 15), such as infants and the disabled. By virtue of their wide thoroughfares, disability ramps, and support vehicles, airports are constructed to accommodate disabled passengers. However, these very same provisions also draw attention towards these disabilities. Another form of stratification is evident in the observable limit on equality that lies in the function of the physical security check (Mann 2011). Primarily as an organizational response to issues of privacy, travelers are instructed by security personnel to divide into males and females before being patted down (Pütz 2012). That this form of screening is embraced by the majority of passengers and practiced in airports universally is indicative of the human desire to, in some fashion, submit to its machinic order. In all, the airport is machinic insofar as stratification occurs and segregating insofar as that stratification is conspicuous.

A second machinic property of the airport servicescape lies in the contradiction of linearity and unpredictability. Put simply, though airports constitute a near universally defined set of practices, arranged in a specific order, which seasoned travellers can negotiate with ease, they also engender a high degree of unpredictability. Delays are all too common, hour-long stopovers can suddenly extend to full days, and random drug and explosives checks can be sprung upon unsuspecting travellers (Pütz 2012). Professional security continually monitors passengers; and passengers consciously and unconsciously surveil one another (Foucault 1977). As a result, inappropriate behaviors, like drunkenness, are treated with greater severity than in analogous service encounters. Airport servicescapes possess a linear quality consistent with Lovelock and Wright’s (1999) notion of being ‘in the factory’. Whereas consumers can voluntarily leave

most service encounters, airports reflect an extreme of the 'in the factory' metaphor with no obvious provision for passengers to turn back. Once on the plane, that plane will continue to its predefined destination and passengers only emerge at the end of the assembly line. Recognition of the gravity of entering the airport machinery is visible in passenger body language as they enter the security check. As Pütz (2012) notes, on stepping through the metal detector "travelers duck while passing it ... other travelers take a deep breath before stepping through the metal detector. Some pause right in front of it and take one large step, as if passing a point of no return" (p. 18).

A third machinic property of the airport servicescape is security theatre. This term, referenced in previous studies of airport and border security encounters (Amoore and Hall 2010; Walsh 2015), describes the irrational fashion in which security checks are conducted. High technology and staffing costs expend supplier resources and protracted queuing wastes the time of travellers. This takes place despite little evidence security checks increase overall passenger safety, for safety is an illusion conferred in the iterative practice of security checking rather than any measurable outcome (Walsh 2015). In addition to this, airport security machinery primes users to enact the persona of 'the passenger' as deemed desirable by airport staff, airlines and other passengers. In their study of borders, for instance, Amoore and Hall (2010) emphasize how assemblages of technologies and calculations that form the sequence of the securitized border serve to authorize its actions. By differentiating bodies that must wait, stop, pass or turn back, travellers are disciplined to understand they must adopt prescribed behaviors to ensure timely passage. Since most seek only hassle-free travel, passengers strive to avoid potential conflicts, as inconsequential as they may be. This further guides desire to comply with the machinic. Passengers, for instance, often remove watches, sunglasses, and other accessories in imitation of others further ahead in the queue, rather than wait to be instructed to do so themselves by security personnel (Pollner 1979).

The capacity consumers display to render themselves compatible with machinic assemblages has been explored within the servicescape literature. Studies have shown humans are highly sensitive to environmental cues: for instance talking softly and slower when lights are slow and the service environment is perceived as formal (Nilsson and Ballantyne (2014). By contrast brightly lit service encounters tend to be louder and communication exchange is more frequent and fast paced (Lewison 1991; Hoffman and Bateson 2002). In similar fashion, Pütz (2012) notes that the closer travelers come to the checkpoint itself and to the perceived sense of formal observation and security scrutiny, the quieter they become. Passengers avoid looking directly at travellers who are patted down, but nevertheless seek to take cues from the exchange as to how they should behave once their turn comes. When it does, travelers avoid direct eye contact with the security official but also avoid staring dreamily into space: "they are able to observe the situation out of the corner of their eye and stay cooperative" (Pütz 2012, 174).

### AN ONTOLOGY OF THE MACHINIC SERVICE ENCOUNTER

The purpose of this conceptual study has been to open novel ontological avenues for theorizing the consumer experience of a service encounter. Employing a Deleuzoguattarian perspective that emphasizes the relational emergence of affect, we have attempted to introduce an alternative conceptual space to how 1) servicescapes have been written as manageable wholes that assume an equilibrium-logic (Ezeh and Harris 2007; Grönroos 2011; Vargo, Maglio, and Akaka 2008), and 2) to the view that privileges consumers' individualism and cognitive meaning-making prevalent in consumer culture theory

(Thompson et al. 2013). While we posit that the service encounter in servicescapes such as the airport emerge as assemblages where the consumers enter into a collective mode that can be described as becoming-machinic, our approach is not devoid of humanism in the sense that we remain conceptually interested in how the airport is a primary exhibit of how consumption manifests under the (1) conspicuous stratification, (2) the contradiction of unpredictability and linearity, and (3) security theatre. The airport, as a service encounter is an example of monstrous organizing (Thanem 2006) *par excellence*, and in all its machinic tendencies is a site where discipline is performed both as a condition of its own systemic properties and collectively between consumers themselves.

The idea of machinic becoming is marked by a certain precognitive condition, the sense through which humans are affectively drawn to, or repulsed from, becoming constitutive of and embodying the contexts and socially and technologically unfolding performances. A Deleuzoguattarian logic of desiring has the tendency to actively seek its own repression and subjugation, which is embodied when one 'becomes' a machinic part of the spatial organization itself (Deleuze and Guattari 1977, 1987). We argue for a novel logic in culturally oriented consumer research that questions the capabilities of the individual to maintain a cognitive distinction with him/herself and the performative context s/he encounters. This is how the airport has a systemic tendency that evolves by centripetally feeding the system itself for itself. If conventional theorizing on services would hold, it should be straightforward to rectify the inconsistencies and contradictions of how the airport service encounter unfolds. Thus, we are faced with the idea that airports are, as they manifest now, either supposedly approaching something deemed the managerial optimum, or then there may well be a relational space of becoming not well addressed by the extant literature. Neither alternative seems to have received adequate attention.

We thus postulate that, with the particularities of the airport consumption experience notwithstanding, the monstrous (Thanem 2006) is inherent in all events of sociotechnological organizing. An airport as a service encounter seems to be a fitting example of this, but similar emergent relationality could potentially take place in all servicescapes where the consumer is required to pass through and adhere to a market logic. Additionally, the airport offers an illustrative example of an ultra disciplined urban space. This is not a simple idea of surveillance, but rather a collective policing that goes on among people going through the 'system' ("doesn't she know what she is doing in the security check? Why would you bring your family with you as a nuisance to all other travellers?"). Yet, we are not attempting to dissect the machinic encounter of the airport-scape. Rather, we see it *in toto*, as a totalizing system without limit, a holistic desiring-machine, inhabited by desiring-technologies and desiring-consumption.

This is one reason why passengers display a willingness to give themselves over to the machine: only through compliance with the airport apparatus can passengers secure a swifter passage. This compliance is reinforced by what Pütz (2012) defines as architectural design and procedural rules. The former is reflected in permanent fixtures (i.e. walls and gates) and impermanent fixtures (ropes and other movable elements that channel passengers into forming a queue) engineered to narrow the possible actions that could happen at any given checkpoint. The latter manifests in unambiguous written and unwritten rules that reduce the many imaginable behavioral patterns at a security point to those few deemed acceptable and desirable. To return to the machine metaphor, this process is akin to (1) priming subjects as they enter the machine and (2) sifting out inappropriate, contaminated, perhaps even dangerous, subjects before they enter the machine (Pütz 2012).

In addition, there is a future call to pay increasing attention to the breaks in the machinic code of the servicescape. While its logic remains totalizing, it is unlikely that it can “be total”. Every act of subversion by the servicescape consumers or operators (removing the temporary barriers so as to not have to zig-zag lengthily in the queuing apparatus, the officer cracking a joke during the security check ritual) pierces the machinic and renders it visible. Under different logics, such phenomena have been called ludic agency (Kozinets et al. 2004), microemancipation (Brownlie 2006), or the molecular tendency within every system that operates to produce molar or structural rigidities (Deleuze and Guattari 1977, 1987; Guattari 2007; Thanem 2006). Nevertheless, these subversive acts of resistance seem to hardly contest the overall functioning of the airport servicescape and its repetitious performative unfolding.

If non-representational theorizing continues to gain ground in consumer research (Canniford and Shankar 2013; Hill et al. 2014; Hietanen and Rokka 2015) there is also another pressing issue that the Deleuzoguattarian logic of machinic becoming of social relations can inform us about. This is the problem of subjectivity. Unlike practice-based theorizing and actor-network perspectives that generally stress the surface level of human and technological interactions (Latour 2005; Warde 2005), Deleuze and Guattari (1977, 1987) make human desire for subjectivity one of their central focuses, even if this subjectivity is inherently always fleeting, elusive and incomplete. Thus Deleuze and Guattari foreground the politics of the human who continues to incessantly desire subjectivity (Genosko 2009). In the airport servicescape, the potential for such desire may seem bleak. The question in consumer research thus becomes: what kinds of subjectivities are we able to imagine in the machinic orders of commercialized and stratifying servicescapes? In line with Denzin (2001), it calls for research that incites and informs action or what could, even if only conditionally, bring about possibilities for ‘revolutionary consciousness’ (Bogue 2003).

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