

Air Travel and Omnipresent Disaster

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Civil aviation is an integral part of our contemporary urban fabric. As Deyan Sudjic asserts in *The 100 Mile City*: ‘Along with a handful of other international airports, Heathrow has reached the critical mass that makes it much more than simply an interchange between passengers, aircraft and cargo. If not actually a city in its own right, it has become a vital constituent of the city as a whole’.¹ In addition, airports and airlines speak to the status of the city and country that hosts them. They represent the economic and political situation which allows for travel, and they celebrate the inspiration of flight both romantically and technologically. They function as a symbol of nation-state and civic pride. However, airports and aeroplanes generate anxiety, stress and insecurity in society. Indeed, Gillian Fuller, in the book *Aviopolis*, posits the airport as an advance warning system for the effects of globalisation on society.² This can be seen in the 1968 hijacking of a flight made by El Al, Israel’s national carrier, by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). This hijacking demonstrated that attacking a national airline is effectively attacking the nation-state and foreshadowed how, in the future, civic and national issues would be fought via international platforms.

The security systems of civil aviation should be seen in the light of an ongoing effort to control and manage mass movement in regards to national and international law, immigration, safety and security. These systems are reacting to real and perceived threats against national and individual security. Indeed, successful attacks on these systems are used to justify the continuing escalation of surveillance and security against crime, illegal migration, hijacking and terror-violence.

Paul Virilio argues that the airport is a testing ground for new control technologies that are later found in prisons and cities.³ In this light, analysing the security systems of civil aviation casts light on the evolution of (in)security rhetoric in contemporary society. As Virilio asserts, ‘In the face

of omnipresent risk, and often of major risk for humanity, the question of the management of fear becomes once again a prime necessity’.⁴ Indeed, the ‘omnipresent risk’ in civil aviation creates an anxious and insecure subject who obeys behavioural instructions and subsumes themselves to inspection and interrogation in order to eliminate varying dangers. The generation and manipulation of fear around civil aviation provides an example of the management of fear in contemporary urban culture.

This paper looks at the airport, aeroplane and airline as visible stages on which conflict between the interests of international and national governance, and the interests of individuals and independent groups, are acted out within an urban context. It focuses specifically on acts of hijacking and terror-violence occurring within the context of civil aviation, arguing that these generate a culture of fear that is used to shape social behaviour and expectations at nation-state borders within the airport. It discusses issues of security and violent conflict in civil aviation through three multimedia artworks: *dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*, *Super Vision* and *Tracking Transience*.⁵ These works document symptoms of the ever-present disaster inherent within air travel, and the concurrently present security systems. They reveal the media presentation of terror-violence and potential implications of the escalating security systems in the airport and air.

Although the hijacking of aeroplanes first became common in the 1950s and 1960s, security against hijacking and terror-violence didn’t really evolve until the early 1970s. This is primarily due to the period 1968–72, which saw a shift from hijackings for the purposes of travel to hijacking for political leverage and visibility, firing on aircraft and armed attacks on airports. The rising incidence of terror-violence hijacking, beginning in 1968, coupled with an increase in the frequency of hijackings for transport, led to the introduction of basic physical screening procedures premised

on the creation of a 'clean', secure space within the airport and air. Since then, levels of security have increased as attacks have escalated in violence and purpose. For example, the 1980s were marked by bombs placed on aircraft and in ground facilities, and saw the introduction of hold baggage screening and the matching of passenger to baggage. In 2001, the successful use of civilian aircraft as a weapon rocked the world, and in the aftermath, biometric identification systems and data profiling gained credence.

In 1996, an American panel on aviation security held by the National Academy of Sciences explicitly linked the perception of danger to the acceptance of security screening, asserting that: 'Air carriers and the travelling public relate the extent of passenger screening they consider acceptable and adequate to the severity of the threat they believe is being averted by the screening process'.⁶ High-profile acts of terror-violence are followed by increases in airport security, driven in part by the media attention the attacks have received.

Indeed, as Johan Grimonprez's *dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* demonstrates, the aeroplane disaster garners media attention. His video on the history of televised hijacking and aviation terror-violence compiles and cuts together media archives from the 1950s to the 1990s to create a fascinating montage of changing attitudes and responses to attacks on aviation. Grimonprez's video begins with a forward shot from the nose of a plane coming in to land through clouds, the shot expressing the beauty and wonder of flight. At the end of the sequence it cuts to a spectacular shot of an exploding plane, ploughing into the ground, the screen filling with flames, demonstrating the visual spectacle of aviation disasters.

Images of disasters, hijackings and acts of terror-violence, playing on television at the time of each event, contribute to anxiety about civil aviation by fuelling its visibility and impact. According to M Cherif Bassiouni: 'Perhaps the most pervasive problem associated with media reporting of terror-violence is the climate of intimidation it engenders, a general fear of victimization that both despoils the quality of life and destabilizes social institutions'.⁷ Violence against civil aviation as a means of obtaining a media presence and political impact has had a disproportionate effect on the social imagination. As Bassiouni argues: 'Ideologically motivated terror-violence produces a psychological impact exceeding the actual harm caused'.⁸

Furthermore, Yonah Alexander, in the book *Aerial Piracy and Aviation Security*, specifically identifies aviation terror-violence as having an unusually high impact on the public imagination:

In 1989 alone a record of 4,422 domestic and international terrorist incidents, ranging from hostage-taking to facility attacks, with 8,237 persons dead, were reported world wide. Yet the impact of aerial piracy and sabotage, which consisted in 1989 of only 10 incidents, have in terms of the political, economic, and psychological costs been far greater than any other types of attacks on civilian population anywhere in times of peace. The aviation environment is indeed the highest profile vulnerable soft target which is the most attractive to terrorists.⁹

Grimonprez's video is an overwhelming and surreal montage of how our fear of aviation terror-violence has been fed by media coverage. It also vividly exposes the arbitrary nature of terror-violence and who is a victim of it. An example of this that Grimonprez uses is the massacre at Lod Airport (now known as Ben Gurion Airport) on 30 May 1972 by Kozo Okamoto, Yasuyuki Yasuda and Tsuyoshi Okudaira. The attack, in which the three members of the Japanese Red Army Faction used machine guns and hand grenades on a crowd at Lod Airport, killing twenty-six people and injuring nearly eighty more, was undertaken on behalf of the PFLP.

Okamoto's court case, where a gentle-seeming young Japanese man sits in the dock, is intercut with a scene of blood being mopped from a floor. Patricia Steinhoff, who interviewed Okamoto for her article 'Portrait of a Terrorist', published in 1976, reported that 'Okamoto believes its [the attack's] purpose was to shock the world by demonstrating the power of the revolutionary forces and the vulnerability of the bourgeoisie'.¹⁰ However, his beliefs regarding death and ideology were 'so comprehensive and so neutral that it permitted the matching up of terrorists and victims almost at random'.¹¹

Grimonprez reinforces the surreal nature of terror-violence by incorporating images of ducklings floating without gravity, lightning strikes and children's cartoons into the video. For me, the potentiality of immanent disaster is beautifully expressed by a clip of an ice skater spinning in the air, followed by a shack crashing to the ground. The juxtaposition of tangential footage into the video disrupts any clear narrative of good and bad that normally accompanies terror-violence. It also contextualises the images within a broader media culture of fear and distraction.

The hijacking of four aircraft in the United States on 11 September 2001 refocused world attention on the vulnerability of civil aviation and made intensive screening internationally acceptable. The intensification was influenced by the

security processes of Israel's airline El Al, which has the most intensive security screening in the world. It operates under the paradigm that every individual is a guilty subject who must demonstrate their innocence. In 2002, BBC News reported that: 'Passengers—in particular non-Israelis—are interrogated at length by highly trained screeners while plain-clothes security officials watch for suspicious behaviour'.¹²

With governments embracing this approach, airports internationally have become sites where the public submits to invasive personal questioning, data mining and the capture of biometric identifiers to confirm our identities and intentions. We accept such intrusive surveillance as the price of travelling by air.

This assumption of guilt is explored in the 2005 cross-media theatre production *Super Vision*, which pushes the interrogation of the individual at the airport, verbally and through data mining, to its limit. *Super Vision* was created during the time that the United States was intending to implement the Computer Assisted Passenger Prescreening System II (CAPPS II), utilising a form of computerised information analysis called Non-Obvious Relationship Awareness, which, according to the *Seattle Times*, 'can sort through oceans of data in real time, seeking links among people'.¹³ While only a watered-down version of the CAPPS II system was implemented in the United States due to privacy concerns, the Builders Association, when creating *Super Vision*, imagined how the system might be used.

In *Super Vision*, three stories intersect to explore how digital data is changing our lives. Of interest to this paper is the narrative line focusing on a Ugandan citizen of Indian descent. The Builders Association website says that he 'gradually is forced to reveal all of his personal information, until his identity becomes transparent, with no part of his life left outside the bounds of dataveillance'.¹⁴ At the airport border, the protagonist in *Super Vision* provides fingerprints and iris scans, and faces the camera in an ongoing collation of biometric data, which is visualised on the screen behind him. Throughout the work, the character is closely questioned about his identity, why he holds two passports, what nationality he truly holds. Any deviation from a fixed identity is considered suspicious.

The border officials pull up information about his previous travel patterns, people he has had contact with who are on the terrorist watch list, medical checks, parking and speeding tickets, properties that his family members own in the United States and credit card purchases. Each

time he is questioned, the information becomes more and more intrusive and the visual representation of the data mining on the screen behind him becomes increasingly complex. Through the course of *Super Vision*, the potential for an individual to absolutely lose his or her privacy slowly becomes clear.

The interactions that the character has with border security create a picture of insatiable data-delving by government departments, coupled with a negative interpretation of the data. Under the glare of suspicion, the character sweats and tries to please, eventually losing his temper at their refusal to take his 'word' that certain data is wrong. Finally, at the end of the play, he is rewarded for his total disclosure by achieving 'trusted traveller' status. His data is interpreted positively and without suspicion, a status many of us can achieve by registering for our own country's trusted passenger scheme, and undergoing a verification check.

Aviation security creates a situation in which the traveller is induced to confess everything so that they can be free to go. As Mark Slater argues in his article 'Governmentalities of the Airport: Heterotopia and Confession': 'The power of the state to expel or exclude any traveller, even citizens with no cause or appeal, is internalized into an anxiety of the confession ... we think: "have I told the whole truth? Is my story believable?" With "Please step over here" we panic'.¹⁵ In 2002, Hasan M Elahi, an American citizen of Bangladeshi descent, experienced this. He was stopped and questioned at the border while re-entering the United States due to a report by his storage unit owners that 'an Arab man' had been storing explosives and had fled on 12 September.¹⁶ In the culture of fear generated after 11 September 2001, this was enough to have Elahi's name placed on the terrorism watch list, which is automatically consulted at the United States border.

After a series of interviews and polygraph tests, Elahi was finally informed that he was cleared of the suspicion of being a terrorist. However, he was also advised to keep the FBI informed of his movements. Elahi's response was to make his life his art in a work called *Tracking Transience*. He posts his GPS position and photographic evidence of his movements throughout the day online at www.trackingtransience.net. In addition, he has specific databases tracking the airports he has flown through or slept in, his airline meals, the toilets he has used, his bank transactions, and other meals he has eaten while away from home. For Elahi, the immanent disaster has become personal as, at any time, nation-state security systems could refocus their suspicions on him.

By providing excessive information, he is attempting to overwhelm the system and is repeatedly proving his innocence.

Civil aviation will always be vulnerable due to its close connections with the nation-state and the interest the mass media displays in reporting its violations and failures. As is so vividly demonstrated in *dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*, terror-violence's visual and emotional impact captures disproportionate media attention and generates fear. This fear clouds our judgement and legitimates discourses based on security. As nation-states seek to reduce their vulnerability to this form of attack, they enact policies which reverse the traditional assumption of innocence into an assumption of guilt. Aviation and security professionals operate on the assumption that eventually another attack will be successful and use this to justify their continuing erosion of the presumption of innocence and the right to personal privacy.

The hypothetical but all too plausible *Super Vision* demonstrates how intrusive dataveillance can be, and Elahi's experience and artistic response posits a future where freedom from suspicion exists only in discarding individual privacy. These works expose how the omnipresent disaster which, every so often, ruptures the surface of society by becoming, briefly, the all-consuming disaster, is used to reshape society. They remind us to think and not just accept the culture of fear surrounding us.

NOTES

- 1 Deyan Sudjic, *The 100 Mile City*, Andre Deutsch Ltd, London, 1992, pp. 147–8.
- 2 Gillian Fuller & Ross Harley, *Aviopolis: A Book about Airports*, Black Dog Publishing, London, 2004, p. 106.

- 3 Paul Virilio, *The Lost Dimension*, Semiotext(e), New York, 1991, p. 10.
- 4 *ibid.*, p. 42.
- 5 Johan Grimontprez, *dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*, video, 68 minutes, Other Cinema, 1997; The Builders Association and dbox, *Super Vision*, a cross-media performance, 2005; Hasan Elahi, *Tracking Transience*, Web-based artwork, ongoing since 2002, www.trackingtransience.net, viewed September 2008.
- 6 'Airline Passenger Security Screening: New Technologies and Implementation Issues', National Academy of Sciences, 1996, www.nap.edu/openbook/0309054397/html/1.html, viewed 21 December 2007.
- 7 M Cherif Bassiouni, 'Terrorism, Law Enforcement, and the Mass Media: Perspectives, Problems, Proposals', *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, vol. 72, no. 1, spring 1981, p. 21.
- 8 *ibid.*, pp. 16–17.
- 9 Yonah Alexander, 'Introduction', in Yonah Alexander & Eugene Sochor (eds), *Aerial Piracy and Aviation Security*, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, Dordrecht, 1990, p. viii.
- 10 Patricia G Steinhoff, 'Portrait of a Terrorist: An Interview with Kozo Okamoto', *Asian Survey*, vol. 16, no. 9, September 1976, p. 843.
- 11 *ibid.*, p. 845.
- 12 'El Al Sets Security Standards', BBC News, 5 July 2002, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/2097352.stm>, viewed 11 July 2007.
- 13 Robert O'Harrow Jr, 'Preflight Checks: New Software Profiles Travelers in Advance', *Seattle Times*, 7 September 2002, <http://archives.seattletimes.nwsource.com/cgi-bin/texis.cgi/web/vortex/display?slug=profile07&date=20020907&query=preflight+checks>, viewed 20 July 2007.
- 14 The Builders Association, www.thebuildersassociation.org, viewed 20 July 2007.
- 15 Mark B Salter, 'Governmentalities of an Airport: Heterotopia and Confession', *International Political Sociology*, vol. 1, 2007, p. 59.
- 16 Anna Weinberg & Timothy Greenfield-Sanders, 'Enemy of the State', *Good Magazine*, no. 3, 2007.