In a society obsessed with speed and efficiency, there are not so many situations where a body accepts waiting. Most of the times, when waiting is necessary, waiting spaces try to provide the minimum comfort for a body to cope with the context: seats, magazines and smart phones provide the mind the mental escape the body needs to stay uncomplainingly inactive while maintaining a distance from the other waiting bodies.

In fact, if the space allocated for waiting doesn’t show the specific characteristics of a waiting area — queuing lines poles, peripheral chairs and benches, red digital numbers and their stressful call — the act of waiting becomes less acceptable: the minds seem to be programmed to react to signals they can clearly identify in order to accept a given situation. Logically, the occupied time feels shorter than the unoccupied time or in other terms, time is running faster when it’s not dedicated to waiting. And the number of distractions needed to occupy the minds keeps diversifying: we are seeing nowadays the multiplication of visual displays in waiting places being occupied by moving advertisements aiming to replace boredom with consumerist desires.

With the beloved expression die Sehnsucht (literally, the research of something desired), the German language offers an alternative to the notion of boredom: adding a nostalgic and therefore poetic understanding to the act of waiting, the Sehnsucht transforms the time of the passive wait into an active process, a longing necessary in order to enhance the object of the desire.

The Waiting Dichotomy ///

Furthermore, the act of waiting implies by definition a clear separation and relation of power between the one waiting and the one able to make that waiting end: the waiting body has expectations that the body able to end the wait — becoming the body practicing authority — is supposed to fulfill. Sometimes marked by the presence of a physical border (encounter, glass wall), the dichotomy is strengthened: the separation border — often reinforced by a difference of
ground level between one side and the other — acts as a spatial disposal to generate a respectful relationship between the one who wants and the one who can. We often ignore the fact that the result of such a wait could be frustration: what happens when on the other side of the border, one can’t deliver the object of the awaited desire?

Anger towards the empowered body naturally follows the feelings of boredom and frustration. And in some circumstances — imagine you’re a refugee waiting at the border, being the next in the line when the decision to close the border is taken — the frustrated body searches allies to defy the authority by opposing the group as a strength argument, taking advantage of the collective character of the frustration. But in most of the cases, the act of waiting is motivated by a personal survival reaction, where the other waiting bodies can’t take the risk of being collectively associated because every single body is in wait of a decision concerning their own waiting/living situation, transforming then the empowered body into the all-mighty. For example, the asylum seeker waiting for its authorization to find a refuge is isolated into a waiting zone — where wait seems to never end — but generally, no other asylum seeker would compromise its own awaited future to defend somebody else’s.

**Accepted Waiting Spaces ///**

In some situations, the act of waiting is accepted as a necessary condition. When the act of waiting is related to the maintenance of discipline and order to guarantee one’s security and when that waiting time is generalized to the collective — one is being a part of collective waiting — the condition of waiting is well accepted. The act of waiting is sometimes divided into several waiting times and spaces in order to be more acceptable: one reminds for example the succession of waiting lines in order to reach the top of the empire state building: every single waiting line is thought through in order for the body waiting to be in visual contact with the end of the line. There is first the line to the encounter, separated by a hidden door from the line to the elevator, spatially separated from the 86th floor line to the next elevator, passing by some entertaining disposals all made to make you forget you are currently waiting and to make you constantly think that your waiting time is almost over. The scenography around the goal to reach is made up to make you think it’s worth the wait.

But there are some more common examples of this phenomenon of the succession of waiting line: the airport (even though, despite their massive democratization they must still be considered as uncommon spaces due to their access being mainly restricted to middle and high class people).
Successive Waiting Times in Unidirectional Movement

In the airports, the waiting periods are clearly identified and known to any traveler. One has to wait first to check-in, then to pass the security checks, then to board until finally getting in the plane, leaving, and finally waiting for that travel to end, somewhere else. The unidirectional aspect of the movement in airports — the differentiation of the ways in and out — helps the traveler through the different filters to accept his situation as it is by definition constantly progressing. Also, the different qualities of waiting spaces — standing in line, standing in movement, shopping while waiting, waiting sitting, etc. — transforms the usually passive act of waiting onto an active process where the bodies unnecessarily in movement follow their path forward.

Moreover, the act of waiting is nowadays in airports produces a valuable asset as airlines use this fact to sell “non-waiting” privileges for a ridiculously high price. In airports, time is money.

Whereas in the 1960s and 1970s, airport design was based on the efficiency of a system and therefore on speed — their forms were adapted at the same time to the plane typologies and logistics and to reduce the displacements of the travelers, who were trying to reach the shortest way possible between the plane and the doors of the airport, whereas their designs nowadays focus on providing the best set-up for mass consumption, using consumption as a tool to transform the passive wait into an active one. The traveler is guided today through a mandatory non-linear (the longest, the better) walk amongst supposedly cheaper duty-free products from perfumes to leather outfits, technology to jewelry, etc. At the same time, the repetition of shopping utilities in the airports is used as the contemporary solution for economical balance: the infrastructure of the airport itself and the numerous and necessary surfaces of the waiting areas are paid partially by the outrageous price of the rent of commercial premises and therefore, their offers are primarily limited to luxurious products.

Waiting in Transit

But one part of the airport that is specific enough to look at is the international transit area. Meaning, the somewhere, between where one comes from and your final goal. The only place where it doesn’t really matter where in the world you actually are. The place where people from different cultures and different backgrounds are arbitrarily gathered, not sharing the same departure point nor the same arrival one. The place where nobody has apparently anything in common with any other body except the place they are all together at that instant: T.
Legally, even though those spaces are located on a national ground under national authority, those transit areas act in fact as a buffer zone in between many national borders: when the border acquires thickness, the interaction within appeals as a fascinating space for exchange and negotiation. It’s an in-between space and creates a time suspended in a nowhere / nowhen.

International terminals are not connected with any outside context: there is no weather feeling, no smell, no sound, no clue from the outside. The only hints of local cultural identity appear here and there on certain billboards amongst the ones selling the international dream.

Also, the use of wireless internet is restrained and quantified: airports facilities proposes pricey internet connections for a certain amount of time, giving the opportunity of spending free time on a non-free web. And the time one spends in the transit areas is often relative to the price of your flight ticket: the less you pay, the more you wait.

But what is fascinating in the transit area — and the truly valuable asset of those transit areas — is the variety of people inhabiting it for a short period of time. Whether amenities and facilities orientate travelers towards avoiding social contact, the value of those possible and hazardous encounters is the true richness.

**When Time and Space Stop ///**

But what if something goes wrong? What happens when for one reason or another you are not able to board and leave? What happens when your wait is longer than it is supposed to be?

Imagine you’ve come to the airport today in order to fly away. A volcano explosion somewhere in the world, a snow storm in a rather warm country, a sand blizzard, a “situation” comes up, and doesn’t allow you to travel as easily as the initial plan written on your boarding pass.

You will start by waiting. More than you planned to. You will first wait among other waiting bodies. And everybody has the same questions and tries actively to find positive answers: “if I can’t get on that plane what does it mean?” “When is the next flight?” “Will I get my connection flight?” “When will I arrive?” “What will happen to my luggage/properties?”

At first, the personnel on the ground will try to make you patiently wait by evoking circumstances out of their control or possibility of any control. Then, they will start dividing the waiting time onto shorter periods — as in some other context, they divide the waiting space into a succession of waiting spaces — and they will try to keep you,
geographically, in a controlled space: “the flight to where-you-want-to-go will board in 15 minutes. Please stay in the boarding area for a coming boarding. The airline company thank you for your patience.” Then, they will renew that message, again and again, until finally getting you on board or having to cancel your flight. In fact, if the flight is cancelled, it’s not such a drama: you’re at the departure point: you lost a day. But you may go back home, enjoy your rest and come back the day after once you finally get in touch with somebody at a crowded encounter who is able to redirect you to another flight possibility.

But if the flight is just delayed: you’ve been waiting standing in queuing lines for hours, not able to leave your cabin bag to just even go to the toilet if you don’t want to lose your waiting position. And if it’s winter, you’re dressed too warmly. If it’s summer, you’re not dressed warmly enough for the air-conditioned spaces. The level of discomfort you’re feeling reminds you that once, “standing cells” were used as a powerful tool of punishment and torture. You may finally board and arrive in another city, with the mission of finding out where and when your flight connection to your final destination will be. Another series of queuing lines is ahead. It’s more likely night time, as you already spent the whole day waiting somewhere else. You don’t really know what you have to ask for: a flight? a bed? a dinner? a phone call? help?

You end up understanding that whatever you ask for, you won’t have it: not because somebody doesn’t want to give it but because they’re not able to do so — there is no flight at night. The hotels are all full. There is no possible transportation from the airport as the roads are blocked. The subway stopped working. The shops are closed. The restaurants as well. You are surprised to be able testify to how easy it is to experiment with chaos in a supposedly working system.

And once you are finally feeling hopeless, you have one option: there is a space, somewhere in the airport where fortune beds are settled. You can have earplugs and a bottle of water. But you should hurry: the beds are limited and the crowd has decided to get its own bed even if it means that the crowd will have to run faster, to step on somebody else’s feet, to shout louder, or more simply, to ignore the other bodies. At that moment: you are nowhere, and you have nothing to do. Time doesn’t matter anymore. And neither does space.

**Moment of Grace ///**

But despite the accumulation of unfortunate circumstances, it is precisely when time and space stop, when the connections — physical or/and immaterial — are cut that we can observe another phenomenon. When time and space don’t matter anymore, some rare
unexpected connections start sparkling among the crowd. It’s the precise moment that people choose to start talking and actively take some time. And the solidarity coming from the action of taking time for each other bypasses the imagination of what one imagined as the “perfect” non-moment.

I have seen a pilot-to-be anxious about his final examination, a couple of old people flying for the first time to visit their newborn grandchild, a Spanish speaking woman with her child desperate to be misunderstood taken care by a German woman jumping between French, Spanish and English to get things solved, a Romanian gay couple with four women in their early fifties sharing the limoncello they brought back from Italy from their “holidays between girls” while explaining the aftermath of the fall of Communism and the economic consequences of capitalism applied to the industries in their country, a Spanish plumber and a south American Berliner looking for food to sustain the most hungry ones and taking care of a mother-to-be. In that unique context, one can think of a Sartrian “huis-clos” on a giant scale: nevertheless, to reverse Sartre’s conclusion of “Hell is other people” to “Heaven is each other,” stopping time and space is not enough: it also has to not last too long.

And the day after, the older blind woman looking for her rolling chair — surprisingly not there anymore — finds her way walking alone among the bed skeletons and the rests of the improvised camp. The beds will be cleaned up just after, the space will be cleared, as if none of it never happened.

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