The Airport Screening Complex

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Confessions of a Cross-Utilized Agent

In April 2001, I took a part-time job at the Bozeman, Montana airport. I worked for SkyWest Airlines, a regional carrier that flew planes under the livery of United Airlines. My official job title was “cross-utilized agent.” This meant that because it was a small airport, all airline employees were expected to perform every part of the daily operations: from checking in passengers and loading baggage, to cleaning planes at night and de-icing the aircraft on chilly winter mornings.

After September 11, 2001, my job at the airport took on unforeseen aspects. As an airline employee making $7.25 an hour, I was suddenly expected to serve double duty as a sort of ad hoc security guard. The routine act of checking passengers’ identifications at the time of check-in (and later, at the boarding gate) took on a more heavy, politicized significance. Screening passengers’ IDs had always been a small part of the job, but after 9/11 it became a highly charged—and for some, even an entertaining—part of the

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job. Several of my co-workers seemed to take perverse satisfaction in the act of consulting the cumbersome three-ring binder called the “No Fly List” whenever they thought a passenger appeared suspicious. This was a totally subjective exercise, based entirely on the passenger’s appearance or the level of pronunciation difficulty that a passenger’s name posed. During this time, when national security surveillance seemed to merge unflappably with conscious stereotyping and crude prejudices, I began to tune into the vexed practices and problems of what I call the airport screening complex.

The airport screening complex has a long history, and is not limited to US culture. However, for the sake of this essay, I will focus on a few brief moments in the recent history of this nexus. Rather than provide a definitive portrayal of the airport screening complex, my goal here is to sketch out a range of appearances and strange continuities around this emergent cultural form.

The “No Fly List” had arrived at our airport soon after the hijackings, and it was an awkward document to say the least. It was a hodgepodge of names, often redundant or with numerous spelling variations on a theme, and completely physically unwieldy due to its size. The list lived in the office behind our check-in counter, where we airline employees could pore over it in secret to see if we had a match, as the waiting and unsuspecting passengers drummed their fingers on the counter in the terminal. No matter that this was a tiny airport in the middle of the Northern Rocky Mountains—we were constantly reminded that several of the 9/11 hijackers had originally boarded flights in Portland, Maine, whose airport was about the size of ours.

Another new duty was to test the actual security personnel at the checkpoint. We were supplied with rubber knives, toy guns, and simulacral hand grenades, with the directions to try to sneak them through the checkpoint at random intervals as we were making our way to the departure gate to board our flights. The aim of this workaday subterfuge was to keep the security teams on their toes—for we were to report them whenever they missed these concealed replicas. I remember that some of my colleagues took great pleasure in devising elaborate ways to sneak the fake weapons past the
checkpoint—for instance, dunking the small fake gun in a large Styrofoam cup of soda and attempting to pass it around the metal detector as they walked through.

Media scholar Lisa Parks has commented on this odd practice in her incisive article “Points of Departure: The Culture of US Airport Screening.” Beyond the instigation of informal security checks performed by ordinary airline employees like myself, there were also official undercover agents responsible for checking the performance of the security screeners. As Parks rightly points out, “there must be profound ontological confusion at the checkpoint. TSA agents are regularly subject to a variety of secret tests by undercover officers and to experiments by citizen vigilantes.” In other words, the screeners are always potentially being screened themselves, and sometimes passengers are also screening their own material from view, as a form of covert recreation. Indeed, I recall one time that I was on a flight from Bozeman to Denver and the passenger sitting next to me pulled a very large knife from his jacket pocket, grinning and telling me exactly how he slipped it past security. He was not out to injure or kill anybody; he just liked the idea of sneaking his knife past security and into the sky.

Who can be accurately identified as nefarious when airport workers and undercover officers are paid to act like terrorists, and some passengers with no violent intent simply like to test whether they can outsmart the security personnel? How many layers of screening can occur at the checkpoint? In this space of intense scrutiny, what are the operative (if never completely fixed) distinctions between reality and representation? The post-9/11 airport became a slippery zone where subject positions could slide suddenly between those being screened and those screening, between innocent trickster tactics and real/imagined terror threats.

**Anatomy of a Phrase**

The phrase “airport screening” has become synonymous with security. However, the word screening carries a varied set of connotations that intertwine concealment, exposure, entertainment, distraction, and physical
The airport screening complex emerges out of this nexus of meanings.

The Oxford English Dictionary entry for the verb form of “screening” reflects the range of meanings that converge around airports. According to the OED, screening is defined as:

1. The action of sheltering or concealing with or as with a screen.
2. As a sorting or sifting carried on by means of a screen.
3. The posting of an offender’s name upon a screen or public notice-board.
4. A particular showing of a film. 5. The process of exposing a photosensitive surface or forming an image through a screen.

Over the course of this definition, screening comes to encompass two oppositional acts: concealment and exposure. Screening signifies an act of keeping out (sheltering), sorting out, or sifting through material. Screening can also suggest a penal system at work. Or screening can stand for an instance of cinematic entertainment. Additionally, screening denotes the technical reproducibility of an image. The OED definition shows screening to be a wonderfully flexible term. And around airports, these many meanings often overlap and intertwine in curious ways.

The most concentrated example of airport screening, as I have indicated above, takes place at the security checkpoint. Here, airport screening effectively conceals the sterile or safe zone from non-passengers (or airport employees whose jobs do not extend to gate-side). Yet this site also reveals the very transition zone between the sterile and non-sterile parts of an airport: the security checkpoint has become a recognizable image, a cultural trope for anxieties about fixed identity, and for relative expectations of personal safety and global danger. Furthermore, the security checkpoint works to capture images of belongings, to expose the identities of passengers, and potentially to act as a place of public notice for mischievous would-be passengers. Finally, for the sake of this preliminary survey, the
security checkpoint sorts out passengers and sends them onto their flights—or not, depending on the contents of one’s carry-on bag and the items carried in one’s pockets.

Screening becomes something that a body does: a security agent screens passengers and things as they pass through the checkpoint. But screening also becomes something done to a body: passengers are screened by metal detectors, overseen by surveilling gazes, and detected by full-body scanners that process their bodies into analytic images. Screening is also performed by a more abstract “body”—the TSA or even the larger post-9/11 security regime: this is a collective gaze at once more ubiquitous and less visible than any individual agent brandishing a magnetic sensing wand or wearing blue latex gloves. An anatomy of the phrase shows bodies to be in a complex relation to airport screening: humans both administer and are subjected to many acts of screening.

Screening (in) *The Terminal*

The dimension of screening involving “a particular showing of a film” need not have anything to do with airports, per se. And yet films about airports can bring the screening complex into sharp focus, with all its intricate layers of mediation, (in)visibility, and embodiment.

The most sustained example of this reflexive treatment of airport screening occurs in Steven Spielberg’s 2004 film *The Terminal*. This movie stars Tom Hanks as the stateless, airport-incarcerated character Viktor Navorski. While in flight to the United States on a personal pilgrimage of sorts, Viktor’s homeland government is overthrown. Now without citizenship, he is unable to leave JFK’s International Terminal because of his liminal status. Two scenes in particular linger on the airport screening complex.

Near the beginning of the film, Viktor stares intently at the exit doors of the International Terminal. Viktor is not sure whether he should leave the airport; he has been warned by the director of security not to leave. He hesitates. Suddenly Viktor hears the electronic hum of a surveillance camera
above him and sees, out of the corner of his eye, that it is tracking his every move. Further in the background, screens displaying departures and arrivals information are visible, blinking in the mezzanine. The scene then cuts to a point-of-view shot from directly above and behind the security camera; then to the same view as seen from the security control room. The security director is startled when Viktor turns abruptly and looks back at him on the closed-circuit television screen.

Figure 1. Four screenshots from *The Terminal*: 27.14, 27.17, 27.29, 27.43 (dir. Steven Spielberg, 2004)

Over the course of this scene, the meanings of screening overlap and enfold one another, turning the airport into what media theorist Gillian Fuller, in her essay on motion aesthetics at the airport, calls “a perceptual machine.” Viktor’s movements inside the airport are screened in the sense of being carefully examined by watchful guards. Viktor is also physically blocked or screened by the airport’s exit doors; he cannot access the outside of the terminal, where America lies. These same doors filter or screen a controlled flow of arriving and departing passengers. In the background media screens produce a steady stream of departures and arrivals information, images in
place-names and time-stamps. And further in the background, out of view, TV monitors display the covert video feeds of the surveillance cameras, and the security personnel are seen to be hard at work. Finally, the film itself is a big screen production—above all, this is a Hollywood spectacle. This last level of mediation and entertainment reflexively highlights the mediations and entertainment within the plot of the film: as the story unfolds, Viktor becomes an object of enjoyment for the security personnel, who watch his various moves and even go as far as to bet on his fate in the airport. (This recalls the very real situation of airport laborers for whom security matters become an object of distraction: playing tricks on the screeners and profiling passengers becomes ways to pass time during one’s work.)

The above scene reveals the airport screening complex in all its aspects, impossibly grasped as a bundle of perceptual technologies, layers of visibility (including the subject of surveillance and the object of the camera), and bodily movements all working simultaneously in dramatic concert. In “Points of Departure,” Parks demonstrates how airport security screening is at once the visual exposure of traveling bodies, the manual labor involved therein, and somatic “close sensing”—a mix of hands-on touching and looking at passengers’ bodies and belongings. Parks notes how the airport checkpoint is cited as a highly technologized and security-sensitive space; yet the site also requires physical labor that is exhausting, haphazard, low paid, and even injurious. Parks explains how “…the most common injuries are muscle and back strains due to heavy lifting, tendonitis, hernias, and cuts and lacerations sustained while reaching into bags for sharp objects.” In a space allegedly dedicated to sophisticated methods of mediation and visual perception, screening detours into brute physicality.

In a later scene of The Terminal, Viktor is invited to play a midnight game of poker with the apparently tireless airport employees—but only after he submits to being hoisted into and run through the X-ray machine. One of the airport workers is convinced that Viktor is really a C.I.A. agent in disguise, and that Viktor could in fact be trying to root out illegal immigrant airport workers—screening the airport’s own, as it were. Thus the airport laborers become suspicious not that Navorski is a terrorist threat, but that he might in fact expose their own questionable backgrounds.
This scene of *The Terminal* reflects the haptic overload of the airport screening complex, where the bodies must submit to an over-determined onslaught of being seen, seeing, seeing into, and touching. As we see in *The Terminal*, the airport is an abyss of screens, an architectural matrix of reflexive and (re)productive visualization practices for working, scanning, and filtering bodies in anticipation of flight. And the paradoxical demands of the airport screening complex are not matters of mere fiction; these paradoxical demands are carried out in everyday life, as well.

**Video Resistance**

The airport screening complex became a contested public matter in November 2010, as the Transportation Security Administration rolled out “advanced imaging technology” (or AIT) devices at airport checkpoints nationwide. These full-body scanners produce images of passengers’ bodies,
resembling (depending on the specific device) either “an image that resembles a fuzzy photo negative” or “a chalk etching”—the body is to be fully exposed and yet also made obscure, and thus rendered momentarily anonymous. These new screening devices produced a range of strong reactions from passengers, from one website that called AIT “porno-scanners,” to another site that decried the new security protocols for impinging on passengers’ privacy, encouraging passengers to “opt out” on November 24, one of the busiest travel days of the year in the US.
Figure 3. TSA website, “millimeter wave technology” and “backscatter technology”

The valence of screening that connotes “a particular showing of a film” was activated in a slightly different way around this event. The website “We Won’t Fly” encourages “members of the resistance” to video record their experiences with the TSA agents on their mobile devices; indeed, the site even recommends downloading Qik, “a neat little app that instantly uploads your video to their servers”—this, to deter TSA agents who might want to “lie and destroy evidence.”

In anticipation of National Opt Out Day, one New York Times article reported the following:

“I hope to see deserted airports,” James Babb, a co-founder of We Won’t Fly, a protest group that opposes use of the scanners, wrote on his Web site. “But if you want to do it, I say, have some fun with it. Be creative. Wear the kilt. Leave your phone on record. You could be the next YouTube star.”

The flippant possibility of becoming “the next YouTube star” in fact hits closest to the mark in terms of what is finally at stake for the airport screening complex. This is about being seen, seeing in secret, resisting being seen, and secretly recording what one sees. And also, having fun with it: video resistance is linked with the thrills of exposure through the mass circulation of video, and the allegedly political project is aestheticized—and potentially depleted, having been converted into a media form that Walter Benjamin might have pointed out “requires no attention.” On the other hand, the call to video resistance is a familiar move toward useful distraction: like the airport employee security games, weary and patted-down passengers repurposing the airport security checkpoint into a movie-making pleasure dome effectively turns work into entertainment. It takes work to submit oneself to the gaze of the TSA, but a little video espionage turns the experience into play.
This is a still frame from John Tyner’s covertly recorded (and later posted to YouTube) encounter with the new TSA screening protocols on November 17, 2010. On his way to a routine flight at the San Diego airport, Tyner was selected for extra screening at the security checkpoint. Tyner opted out of the full-body scan, but then also refused to submit to an enhanced pat down. Thereafter, he was awkwardly detained while various security personnel determined his fate. Tyner recorded the entire episode on his mobile phone: the video clips mostly capture the recognizable geometry and ambient sounds of the airport, with occasional tense exchanges overheard in the background, including the popular moment when Tyner warns a TSA agent not to touch his “junk.” By posting his video to YouTube, Tyner had screened the TSA screeners, and the debates around security were whipped into fresh turmoil.\textsuperscript{10}

As for actual security screeners, the work that day in the San Diego airport went on—and this work continues, laborious and largely uneventful. Meanwhile, as if responding to a demand for quantifiable results (and publicly visible ones), the TSA website posts a “TSA Week At A Glance” summary with statistics, such as these for the week of 12/06/2010 through 12/12/2010:
By creating a visible space online to account for the tantalizing objects of discovery, the TSA participates in the entertaining aspect of the airport screening complex. The objects of discovery are tantalizing precisely by being so vague: what did the “artfully concealed” items look like? And what exactly were the “prohibited items” in question, after all? What entails “suspicious behavior” in the pantomime of an airport, and what were these five individuals actually arrested for? Security itself, as a reified mode of power and as a practice of discovery, becomes in turn an object of visibility on the TSA website, available for everyday Internet browsers.

Conclusion: The Pleasures of Airport Screening

As my work experiences at the post-9/11 airport indicated, seemingly tight matters of security reveal layers upon layers of deception and trickery—often with no malicious intent, and sometimes even with pleasure. Airport screening functions as an infinite regress of possible official and unofficial screeners, within which various points of interest, intrigue, and entertainment are irreducible.

Then there is Tom Hanks’s Viktor Navorski of The Terminal, who gradually learns to see through the regime of security, only to be further immersed in the broader scopic economy of the airport. Viktor functions as an object of labor and as an object of entertainment for the characters in the film—as well as for the film audience.

The latest debates around full-body scanners likewise conjure the pleasures of airport screening. The call to travelers to video record their enhanced pat downs exposes a double screening imperative: full-body scans are opted out in favor of physical contact; at the same time, video resistance is employed to
document the intimate touching. Video imaging is deployed to secure mobility and to aid the labor of screening; but video feeds to other screens also work to document the secret recordings of what happens between the bodies and screening practices in question—and so to serve as a corollary outlet for visual excitement, and the distinct feelings of empowerment and agency that come with posting one’s own video to the World Wide Web.

As an all too brief concluding remark, I would like to suggest that the airport screening complex hinges on pleasure. On the one hand, we seem to be amid an old metaphysical conundrum: the question of whether one can apprehend reality by seeing it, or whether one needs to see through appearances to get to reality. The presupposition of airport screening in all of its guises seems to be that visual evidence is a firm access point to reality, one way or another. On the other hand, like Plato's prisoner who is dragged from the cave only to realize the numerous layers of light sources, shadowy forms, and murky reflections—realizations that do no good when back down in the dark cave—one must admit that in airports too, reality is always more than meets the eye. But in airports, metaphysics is hardly at stake. Rather, what seems to occur is a kind of generalized scopic excitement that overwhelms the banalities of security and the seriousness of flight. As in Plato's cave, one never knows where exactly one is in the airport screening complex: at any moment, the screener can be exposed as having been screened. It is an elaborate funhouse of seeing and being seen—and deriving pleasure whenever possible.

Screening is consistently about the pleasures available to screeners, travelers, and spectators alike. This lingering preoccupation was reflected on a recent New Yorker magazine cover illustration by Barry Blitt, entitled “Feeling the Love.”
The illustration shows what appears to be a female TSA agent making out with a male passenger who is being subjected to an enhanced pat down. In the background, another TSA agent leans into the frame and looks on, his hand suggestively positioned just off the page. Meanwhile, readers of The New Yorker can enjoy the clever portrayal of an exaggerated image of pleasures at the security checkpoint. The airport screening complex is in full effect, a sprawling yet concentrated menagerie of (mostly heteronormative) power dynamics and pleasure principles in play. A similarly themed Saturday Night Live skit likewise made ironic fun of the pleasures of airport screening, suggesting that that TSA agents could be compared to phone sex workers, offering the service of enhanced pat downs as an added bonus to the mundane routines of holiday travel.
Airport security relies on numerous modes and methods for seeing and being seen, and this arrangement results in myriad successful flights each day. The physical movement of bodies across vast geographic reaches, connoted by the presence of contrails in the sky, is perhaps the sign par excellence of modern progress. But eerily like Plato’s allegorical cave, airports also stand as zero-level sites where bodies are brusquely sorted out, media forms flicker away illusively, and, seen from the right (if unsettling) perspective, all the labors of mobility can appear a vast charade, with no stable referent or reality principle in view. And yet amid all this “ontological confusion,” pleasures emerge in reflexive acts of concealment, strategic visibility, video entertainment, and public exposure. These layers work together to comprise the airport screening complex.

Notes

2 Oxford English Dictionary, “screening.”
3 Gillian Fuller, “Welcome to Windows 2.0: Motion Aesthetics at the Airport,” Politics at the Airport, ed. Mark B. Salter (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2008), 161-162.
4 Lisa Parks, “Points of Departure,” 188.
6 “We Won’t Fly. Act Now. Travel With Dignity.” We Won’t Fly homepage, http://wewontfly.com/ (accessed 6 January 2011). A recent update of the site ambiguously claims, “This is a TSA security theater.” It is unclear whether the website is being presented as a parodic theater of TSA, or whether TSA screening at actual airports is being claimed to be a theater. Either way, the entertainment imperative is in full effect.
7 “Install Qik on your Phone so TSA Can’t Delete your Video,” We Won’t Fly website, http://wewontfly.com/install-qik-on-your-phone-so-tsa-cant-delete-your-video (accessed 22 December 2010).


10 See John Tyner’s blog post for a detailed account of the event, as well as responses: http://johnnyedge.blogspot.com/2010/11/these-events-took-place-roughly-between.html


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