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LITERATURE, AND CULTURE



Air Travel

Fiction and Film:

Cloud People

Erica Durante

*Foreword by*  
Rodrigo Fresán

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society is safe, planes become faster and faster and also burn cleaner and cleaner, our floors are bacteria-free, the sandwiches are fresh, only beautiful people fly, all destinations are beautiful, everybody is getting wealthier and taller, we are conquering our weaknesses [...]. The blue is numinous, full of depth, somehow both spiritual and electromagnetic. (Baxter 2015, 47)

Baxter's semiotic study of blue highlights the prophylactic connotations of this color. Blue is idyllic, hygienic, and hypnotic, instilling transparency and confidence. With the stroke of a brush, the entire landscape of the air trip becomes more beautiful, temporarily allaying passenger fears. This color reconciles disconnection and "retreat in the sky," inviting the sort of "mini-Sabbath in the skies" (Iyer 2014, 25 and 57) that the traveler seeks when rising above the clouds, wrapped up in his "flying Cocoon" (Popcorn 1992, 31). With these virtues in mind, blue is an integral part of both the ritualization of luxury and the need for protection and rejuvenation that plagues the passenger in flight. Luxury, comfort, and cocooning are thus three constants of the air travel imaginary that can be read under the common denominator of blue, the dominant and holistic hue of the Airworld.

The other color that defines the luxurious environment of airports is white. It homogenizes the terminal landscape and subliminally guarantees a certain standard of cleanliness, transparency, and clarity. A particular location in the airport epitomizes the profusion of luxury, and white, in line with the reiteration of opulence and ostentation that characterizes the imaginary of the air transport infrastructure. This location is the duty-free shopping area, which, by definition, offers the ephemeral temptations associated with the acquisition of products such as perfumes and cosmetics, drinks, tobacco, and jewelry. This commercial wing of the airport, full of signs and bright lights, intensifies the relationship of air travel with luxury and consumption. Duty-free shops are inevitable settings in many novels and films that, at some point, play out within a terminal of the world. They are often described as an excess of items, sections, and illuminated signage that dazzle passengers on their obligatory route toward the departing gate. Jérôme Game's description of the duty-free shop in his novel *Salle d'embarquement* (2017) demonstrates the excess and amorphous abundance that are commonly perceived as the defining features of this showcase of luxury: "Different signs, most often for luxury or last-minute shopping, announce one after the other silk

scarves, precious bottles, chocolates, watches, it sparkles” (Game 2017, 67).<sup>23</sup>

In both reality and fiction, the airport terminal is in itself a trademark that guarantees, in terms of appearance, a flamboyant décor conducive to the impulses and joys of temptation and consumption of superfluous goods. In this regard, a striking parallel between a lavish setting and the splendor of plentiful and well-kept sections of luxury stores is paradigmatically drawn from the very beginning of French-Hungarian author Nina Yargekov’s *Double nationalité* (2016). The novel’s protagonist is impressed by the lighting and glamorous atmosphere of the terminal where she has just landed, which she immediately compares to a Parisian shopping mecca. The effect produced by this initial description in the novel is all the more destabilizing because only one comparative aspect is initially made explicit to the reader:

There is something that is amiss at the Galeries Lafayette. You examine the lighting, scrutinize the vendors, sniff the temperature. Among the customers, so many tourists, it must be spring or summer [...]. You see perfumes, mascaras, body lotions, and sausages. Taken separately, each element seems irreproachably normal, and yet the whole is somehow strangely deformed and quite coarse, the ceiling is too low, the labels askew, the music dissonant, and then the sausage, you can’t demonstrate it in a strictly scientific way, but you have the intuition that it does not really belong in the perfume section. (Yargekov 2016, 11)<sup>24</sup>

The landscape and sensory experiences created by the wide range of cosmetic products, the regulated temperature, the lighting imitating

<sup>23</sup> My translation. In the original: “Différentes enseignes, le plus souvent de luxe ou relevant d’emplettes de dernière minute se succèdent à base d’écharpes en soie, flacons précieux, chocolat, horlogerie, ça brille” (Game 2017, 67).

<sup>24</sup> My translation. In the original: “Il y a quelque chose qui cloche aux Galeries Lafayette. Vous examinez l’éclairage, détaillez les vendeuses, humez la température. Parmi les clients, quantité de touristes, on doit être au printemps ou en été pour qu’ils soient si nombreux [...]. Vous voyez des parfums, des mascaras, des laits pour le corps et des saucissons. Pris isolément, chaque élément vous semble d’une normalité irréprochable, pourtant l’ensemble est comme atteint d’une déformation étrange et très disgracieuse, le plafond est trop bas, les étiquettes posées de travers, la musique de fond dissonante, et puis le saucisson, vous ne sauriez le démontrer d’une manière résolument scientifique, cependant vous avez l’intuition qu’il n’est pas réellement à sa place au rayon parfumerie” (Yargekov 2016, 11).

daylight, and the flawless appearance of the salespeople suggest that the “something that is amiss” the narrator observes may reflect her biased impression, as the décor appears to perfectly correspond to the interior of the Galeries Lafayette. Yet, as time passes, the perception of the place conforms less and less to the upscale Parisian department store. Then the great discrepancy appears, putting an end to the analogy hitherto unequivocally maintained:

You look upwards, seeking the stained glass dome, and realize that you are not at the Galeries Lafayette but in the tax-free shop of an airport, darn, you were confused, although in your defense there was a touch of resemblance in terms of atmosphere. So that is why you have a suitcase, you were wondering what you were doing pulling that rectangular parallelepiped along behind you. (Yargekov 2016, 12)<sup>25</sup>

The comparison of the two places, ultimately betrayed by the absence of the majestic cupola of the Galeries Lafayette, is justified by the narrator’s unhesitating observation of the strong resemblance in “terms of atmosphere” between the department store and the unnamed airport terminal. It is only through the suitcase, an accessory not intrinsic to the place, that the setting as a whole is placed in the proper perspective and is finally explicitly identified as the “tax-free shop” of the airport. Such a mental and visual superimposition of these two places, which produces a *trompe l’œil* if not *déjà vu*, is not, however, unique to the character of Yargekov’s novel. Benjamin C., the frequently traveling protagonist of Game’s *Salle d’embarquement*, makes some strangely identical observations, albeit from a male point of view. Benjamin C. is awed by the entry to the duty-free shop, especially after the excruciating experience of security checks, and suddenly seized by the glaring lights that welcome him into this sector of the Hong Kong terminal, giving rise to a feeling of intimidation due to his casual clothes, which he has readjusted after going through the body scanner. Here “everything is pink and white and

<sup>25</sup> My translation. In the original: “Vous levez les yeux à la recherche de la coupole aux vitraux et vous comprenez, vous n’êtes pas aux Galeries Lafayette mais dans la boutique détaxée d’un aéroport, zut vous aviez confondu, on admettra à votre décharge qu’en termes d’ambiance cela se ressemble un brin. C’est donc pour cela que vous avez une valise, vous vous demandiez aussi ce que vous fabriquiez à tirer ce parallélépipède rectangle derrière vous” (Yargekov 2016, 12).

shines. It smells of musk, sweetness” (Game 2017, 106–107).<sup>26</sup> Passengers immersed in the beauty salon-like atmosphere of rose-beige colors reminiscent of “finely powdered skin” (Game 2017, 106) are focused on their purchases, their contemplative silence broken only by “the noise of credit card receipts being printed out” (Game 2017, 107).<sup>27</sup>

From one country to another, major brands of travel, beauty, and luxury products populate airports around the world. The Airworld, designed according to the commercial logic of the lures of luxury, encourages consumption of high-end products and rewards the loyalty of wealthy customers. Credit cards, which provide access to exclusive airport lounges around the world, as well as frequent flyer programs, are levers intended to foster the consumption of fictitious values such as miles and superfluous duty-free shopping. These methods of intensifying the acquisition of luxury goods spread without resistance to the duty-free shops of the airport and to the airplane itself. The shopping experience within the confined space of the cabin is, however, no longer described under an aura of refinement, but, on the contrary, reveals an enslavement to hyper-consumption. In the absence of a gleaming infrastructure that showcases merchandise and luxury icons, the descriptions of the tax-free products sold in the cabin are more akin to long lists that characters unfurl over the course of the narrative and that take inventory, in detached and dull tones, of the uselessness of the articles.

A particularly significant example of such passages that resemble sales catalogues more than narrative segments appears in Charles Dantzig’s *Un avion pour Caracas*. The narrator is surprised by the types of products sold on board, and wonders both about their inanity and about the company’s absurd decision to offer them in the duty-free shop at such exorbitant prices:

The chief flight attendant announces that the tax-free shop is open. Who might like a braided steel diving watch or a bottle opener “in material tested by NASA?” Who still has this 1978 alpha male style? In *Noms à vendre*, Xabi says that the Institute of Meteorology in Berlin, who decides the names of the storms in Western Europe, also sells them. They are priced

<sup>26</sup> My translation. In the original: “tout est rose et blanc et brille. Ça sent le musc, le sucré” (Game 2017, 106–107).

<sup>27</sup> My translation. In the original: “grain de peau finement poudré” (Game 2017, 106); “le bruit des imprimantes de factures de cartes de crédit” (107).

199 euros a low-pressure system, 299 euros a cyclone. “I wonder who are the people that can give money to an organization to buy something that does not belong to them and, what’s more, is immaterial.” (Dantzig 2011, 135)<sup>28</sup>

This haphazard list format is also inspired, in a sort of parody, by traveler characters’ reading of airline magazines, which feed the perverse machine of air luxury by encouraging compulsive consumption during flights and layovers.<sup>29</sup> In international fiction, references to in-flight magazines are systematically accompanied by immediate allusions to the composite selection of goods that fill their advertising pages. The space that literary narratives give to this type of media is a reflection of the role that such publications play in terms of marketing and promotion of a certain standard of life of the jet-setter and globe-trotter (Thurlow and Jaworski 2003, 601). Numerous characters are depicted flipping through one or another of these magazines. Sometimes they are described at the moment the characters succumb to the temptation to buy, and other times when, bored by the magazines’ uninteresting content, they look away from the page to contemplate the blue of the sky. Yet in both cases, without variation, the emphasis is on the pro-luxury and consumerist discourse that this medium fosters.<sup>30</sup> The phrasing of magazine descriptions immediately takes the form of an inventory and the tone of a manifesto of elite global culture. For example, while carelessly leafing through the British Airways magazine, Sandra, a character in the second novel of Agustín Fernández Mallo’s trilogy *Nocilla Dream*, contemplates the aerial panorama she sees from the plane window:

<sup>28</sup> My translation. In the original: “La chef de cabine annonce que la boutique en détaxe est ouverte. Qui peut vouloir de montres de plongée à bracelet en acier tressé ou d’ouvre-bouteilles ‘en matière expérimentée par la NASA?’ Qui a encore ce style de macho à cravate de 1978? Dans *Noms à vendre*, Xabi raconte que l’Institut de météorologie de Berlin, qui décide des noms des tempêtes en Europe occidentale, les vend aussi. C’est tarifé. 199 euros la dépression, 299 euros le cyclone. ‘Je me demande quelles sont les personnes qui peuvent donner de l’argent à un organisme pour lui acheter quelque chose qui ne lui appartient pas et qui, de plus, est immatériel!’” (Dantzig 2011, 135).

<sup>29</sup> See, for example, Kirn (2002, 43), Escobar (2012, 33 and 61), Uribe (2009, 168), Game (2017, 52–53).

<sup>30</sup> Interestingly, through a sequence of actions of his character Pierre Dupont, Marc Augé (1995, 3) highlights in the prologue of his book *Non-places* the collusion between the consecration of luxury on board and the encouragement of hyper-consumption through in-flight magazines and cabin duty-free shopping.



She flicks through the in-flight magazine, *British Airways News*. Reports on wine production in Ribeiro and Rioja, the latest high-tech architecture in Berlin, mail-order Majorca pearls. A tear falls onto a photo of a Caribbean beach [...]. She looks out the window, looks ahead, sees neither clouds nor earth. [...] on airplanes, there is no horizon. (Fernández Mallo 2019, 5)

The accumulation of goods and idyllic destinations extolled by airline company magazines is a recurring element in contemporary air travel storytelling. This medium distributed to passengers, even those in economy class, encourages unrestrained consumption driven by the inertia and downtime of the trip. Although they are often unwilling to purchase these sorts of products, the characters are usually unable to resist the temptation of glancing at these magazines. From the *British Airways News* columns of the character in *Nocilla Dream* to the Lufthansa magazine that draws the protagonist's gaze to a Danish brand Skagen watch (168)<sup>31</sup> in Basque Kirmen Uribe's novel *Bilbao-New York-Bilbao* (2008), these commercial publications undoubtedly produce an overload effect. This is reflected in the endless stream of titles that Benjamin C. peruses in Game's *Salle d'embarquement*:

He flips through *En Route*, *Hemispheres*, *Escala*, *High Life*, *Air France Magazine*. He browses *American Way*, *Skylights*, *Wings of China*, *Gateway*. He skims *Bon voyage!*, *Gulf Life*, *Going Places*, *Royal Wings*. [...] Right there, a mahogany cognac shines against a blue background, in close-up, before an electrical adaptor in the form of a Swiss army knife with integrated SIM card reader, one-year international warranty. Then come the leatherwork for smartphones, tablets, and credit cards, fountain pens, model aircrafts in the colors of the company, and an 18 Megapixels Canon Electro-Optical System, Full HD Video-Recording, with LCD screen, *the*

<sup>31</sup> Remarkably, perhaps, compared to other references to in-flight magazines, Uribe's novel makes narrative use of the watch spotted in the advertising pages of the Lufthansa publication. It is, in fact, the brand name Skagen, more than the men's watch itself, that attracts the protagonist's attention. The trademark evokes memories of the northernmost port of Denmark and its connections to the family saga that the character mentally reconstructs throughout the entire novel, which corresponds to the duration of his Bilbao-New York flight.

*best of pocket size EOS photography!* if you believe the advertisement. (Game 2017, 52–53)<sup>32</sup>

This catalog of the catalogs paraphrases the ephemeral joys of shopping on board and, through the eccentric enumeration of superfluous gadgets, mimetically connotes the consumption logic that inspires these magazines, regardless of the company that produces them. Generally, these stand-alone inventories have little value other than that of unpacking in the form of rambling and endless lists of the surplus of goods that the passengers can accumulate with the wave of a credit card, without even having to leave their seats. This compulsive logic of hyper-consumption and the immediate satisfaction of varied material needs can sometimes produce an unhealthy relationship with objects and trigger a climate of “generalized hysteria” on board (Baudrillard 1998, 77). A scene from Martin Scorsese’s film *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013) and the entirety of Pedro Almodóvar’s *I’m So Excited* (2013) both clearly show the excesses that can arise from the uncontrolled, or uncontrollable, consumption of alcoholic beverages served to passengers in business class.

In *The Wolf of Wall Street*, Jordan Belford, played by Leonardo DiCaprio, marvelously embodies the debaucheries that can result from immoderate access to luxury and comfort during a transoceanic flight. Given access to unlimited amounts of alcohol, Belford turns the first-class lounge upside down, hassling and publicly groping the flight attendants. In Scorsese’s film, this is an isolated incident; however, a similarly raucous performance takes up a large portion of Almodóvar’s film, which reaches a pinnacle in terms of bacchanal and orgy. Aware that the airplane on which they are traveling will attempt an emergency landing due to a mechanical problem, the airplane staff and business class passengers participate in frenzied consumption of alcohol and sex to allay their skepticism about a

<sup>32</sup> My translation. In the original: “Il feuillette *En Route*, *Hemispheres*, *Escala*, *High Life*, *Air France Magazine*. Il survole *American Way*, *Skylights*, *Wings of China*, *Gateway*. Il parcourt *Bon voyage!*, *Gulf Life*, *Going Places*, *Royal Wings*. [...] Juste à côté, du cognac acajou brille sur fond bleu, en gros plan, avant un adaptateur électrique au format couteau suisse avec lecteur de cartes SIM intégré, garantie internationale d’un an. Puis viennent de la maroquinerie pour smartphones, tablettes et cartes de crédit, des stylos-plume, des modèles réduits d’avions aux couleurs de la compagnie, et un Canon Electro-Optical System à 18 Mégapixels, Full HD Video-Recording, avec écran LCD, *le meilleur de la photographie EOS au format poche!* à en croire la publicité” (Game 2017, 52–53).

of fluidity and the regulations and safety systems that govern circulation in the air context.

This suspension of daily identity should be read in conjunction with the observation of Michel Serres, who characterizes airports and airplanes as “interchanger[s]” (1995, 170) since they allow the passage from one space to another, from one system to another, shifting individuals from their unique and sedentary identities to multiple and mobile ones. The role assumption of the passenger reiterates the anthropological function of the airport and its annexes, which applies both to the place and the subject. Yet the adhesion to the identity of the passenger entails the integration of a series of movements, behaviors, and practices that are different from the ordinary. In fact, the transitional function of air transport requires the subject to respect the procedures in terms of identity and security checks and to act quickly and efficiently to comply with multiple protocols. This adaptation to the role of fluid traveler plays a central part in Walter Kirn’s novel *Up in the Air*. For Kirn’s protagonist, Ryan Bingham, check-in procedures, security checks, boarding and disembarking, and the actions the latter require on the part of the passenger become such banal and mechanic gestures that he enjoys doing them each time more rapidly and fluidly, though not without sarcasm:

Rushing, racing, delayed at the hotel by a wake-up call that never came, I hop from the parking lot shuttle to the curb without nothing to check, just a briefcase and a carry-on, cross the terminal, smile at the agent, flash my Compass Class card and driver’s license, say Yes, my bags have remained in my possession, say No, I haven’t let strangers handle them, then take my upgraded boarding pass and ticket, recross the terminal to security, empty my pockets—change, keys, mobile phone, foil blister-pack of sleeping tablets, mechanical pencils; [...] flop my bags on the X-ray, straighten up, and step through the metal detector. (Kirn 2002, 12)

Bingham’s cascading narration mimics the dexterity and swiftness of movements that differentiate him from the mass of travelers as a *homo aeroportis globalis* (Salter 2008, 11): his impeccable mastery of the slightest gesture, his experienced knowledge of each potential question, his ultra-light luggage and, above all, his record time in completing this rite of passage from landside to airside. He is fully inducted into the fluidity of aerial transit and its annexes. The quick pace of this competitive slalom, from one counter to another, one reply to another, and

one line to another, is a similarly distinctive trait of the hyperactive and hyper-performing traveler in French writer Jérôme Game's novel *Salle d'embarquement*. The repetitive movements of the hyperflier form part of an invariable and alienating schedule that extends from the terminal to the plane and vice versa without allowing for respite or escape from anonymity:

Wake-up. *A nice day* smiles the hostess, window raised. Fresh coffee, natural light, freshly squeezed juice. [...]

[ *Where exactly?*

He travels with Aeroflot, Air Canada, Air India, Alitalia, American Airlines, British Airways. He flies on Cathay, China Air, China Eastern, China Southern, Delta Airlines, Egyptair. He takes Emirates, Iberia, Japan Airlines, Lufthansa, United. [...]

[ *But where does he go like this?* (Game 2017, 51–52)<sup>1</sup>

The questions in italics, inserted into the text, reflect the passenger's progressive loss of individuality as he is hurried and trapped in the hell of flights, companies, and nights spent on planes. Reduced to an enumeration of the names of airline companies, the subject dissolves into the planetary journeys he consumes. The vital dimensions of space and time are no longer measured in terms of duration, but by flight connections and airport schedules (61). In jumping from one airplane to the next, the character becomes a prisoner of a web of acronyms, codes, and operations that pile up on the page (Fig. 1) without any logic beyond the bustle and perpetual movement of frequent travelers. The subject is little more than pure movement, powerfully engulfed in the fluidity of the Airworld.

Perfect control of airport motions singles out the fluid passenger not only in the terminal, but also in the airplane cabin. The limited space of the latter emphasizes certain automatisms of expected conduct and demeanor. As in fiction, contemporary poetry also highlights this neurosis of well-established gestures that occupy the passengers from the moment they enter the airplane, and that obsess fluid air travelers who are

<sup>1</sup>My translation. In the original: “Réveil. *Une bonne journée* sourit l’hôtesse, fenêtre levée. Café frais, lumière naturelle, agrume pressé. [...] [*Où ça exactement?* Il voyage avec Aeroflot, Air Canada, Air India, Alitalia, American Airlines, British Airways. Il vole sur Cathay, China Air, China Eastern, China Southern, Delta Airlines, Egyptair. Il prend Emirates, Iberia, Japan Airlines, Lufthansa, United. [...] [*Mais où il va comme ça?*” (Game 2017, 51–52).

• AA	• AC	• AF	• AH	• AI
• AM	• AO	• AT	• BA	• BI
• CA	• CI	• CO	• CP	• CX
• CZ	• DG	• DL	• EG	• EI
• EK	• EL	• EV	• FI	• FM
• GF	• IB	• IC	• JL	• KE
• KL	• KU	• LH	• LD	• LX
• MF	• MH	• MQ	• MU	• NH
• NQ	• NW	• OK	• OS	• OZ
• QF	• QR	• RG	• RJ	• SA
• SC	• SK	• SN	• SQ	• SV
• SZ	• TG	• TK	• TP	• TV
• TX	• UA	• US	• VJ	• VN
• VS	• VW	• WN	• XO	• XW

**Fig. 1** Jérôme Game: Selection of Iata Airline Codes in *Salle d'embarquement* [page 55] [2017] (Courtesy of the author)