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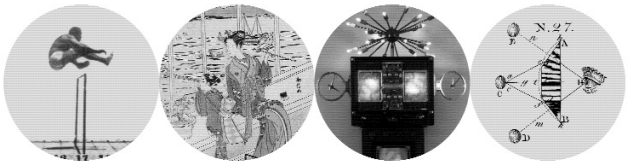

Points of Departure: The Culture of US Airport Screening

Lisa Parks

Abstract

Treating the airport checkpoint as part of the new security regime, this article concentrates on three issues. First, it considers the working conditions of Transportation Security Agency (TSA) employees whom the US government pays to screen passengers, and emphasizes the enduring physicality of their labor despite the technologization of the checkpoint. Second, it explores new techniques of inspection implemented at TSA checkpoints and delineates practices of 'close sensing' that establish continuities between looking and touching. Finally, the article describes the object-oriented visual economy that takes shape at the checkpoint, and suggests that the x-ray sequence ultimately exposes the state's inability to regulate the flow of objects and matter in the age of globalization. Thus the searches, exposures, and probes that define this threshold should be understood not just in terms of individual privacy invasions, but rather as an opportunity to focus on structural changes in federal labor, state surveillance and globalization that have emerged since 9/11.

Keywords

airport screening • imaging technologies • national security • 9/11 • objects • surveillance • travel

For many months I've been conducting an experiment at airport security gates, shooting photographs of Transportation Security Agency (TSA) facilities and screeners to determine how long I can go on before I'll be asked to stop. After shooting over 100 photos in 12 airports (for example, see Figures 1 to 3), I received only one warning at the US–Canada border while taking a picture of a 20-something woman of color being interrogated by TSA workers after she was physically searched in a nearby makeshift room. I only became visible to the TSA at the moment I witnessed her

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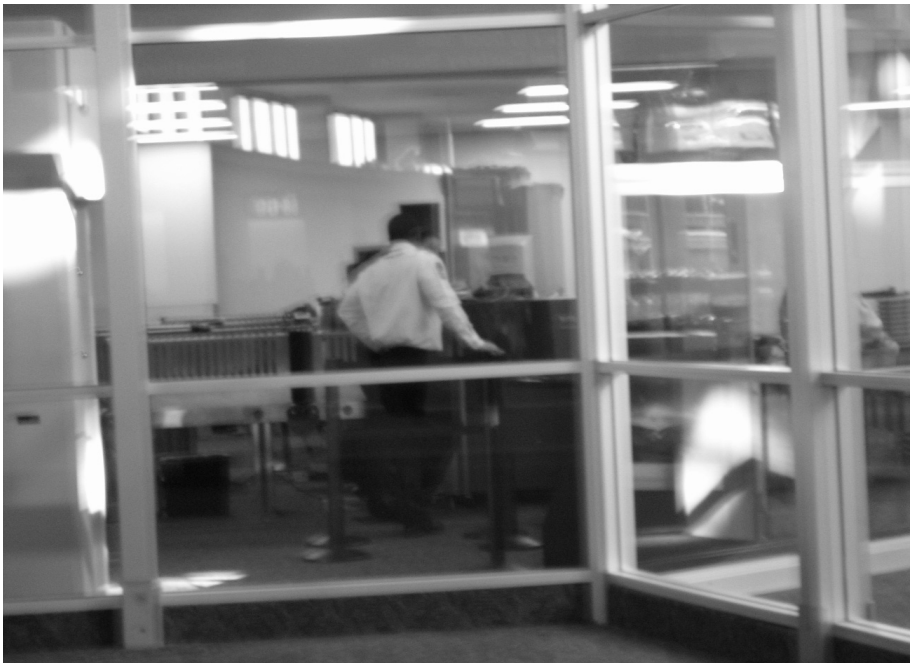

Figure 1 TSA worker wearing blue gloves waits for passengers to enter checkpoint. Photo by author.

Figure 2 TSA workers inspect passengers' belongings and shuffle grey bins at San Francisco checkpoint. Photo by author.

Figure 3 Security officers interview a young woman after she was inspected in a nearby room in Vancouver airport. Photo by author.

visibility, but in general as a white woman I go relatively unnoticed in a US security regime largely based on racial profiling. If I were a person of color it is possible that my photos would not exist, that my camera would have been taken, the images destroyed, or I might not have even taken the risk in the first place. In any case, it has become clear to me that the airport is no longer just a 'non-place' as Marc Augé (1995) famously described it over a decade ago, but in the context of the US-led war on global terror has possibly become 'the place', a charged and volatile domain punctuated by shifting regimes of biopower.

Two months after the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the US government passed the National Transportation Security Act, which authorized the formation of the TSA to secure the nation's airports, railways, bridges and highways. Since then the TSA has boldly declared its presence in airports, occupying and branding space as aggressively as McDonald's and Starbuck's. TSA checkpoints have been expanded with multiple lanes and cumbersome new screening equipment. TSA information boards cover airport walls and marquees. Flocks of uniformed TSA agents appear everywhere, some wearing special tags that read, 'I am TSA!' And every few minutes TSA public service announcements blare through loud speakers warning passengers to keep baggage in sight at all times. Indeed, the TSA relies on audiovisual practices that include such things as worker uniforms, behavioral models, placards and signs, loudspeaker announcements, digital simulations, scanning devices, and images of passengers and their belongings.

In this essay, I treat the airport checkpoint as a discursive space where the state, the airlines, workers, imaging and sensing technologies, and travelers converge to orchestrate and reproduce a set of protocols designed to ensure what the TSA describes as 'freedom of movement'. Rather than confine my analysis to individuals and their private property, however, I treat the checkpoint as a site of biopower that represents the shift from a paradigm of 'national defense' to one of 'national security' described by Hardt and Negri (2004). 'The notion of security', they explain, 'signals a lack of distinction between inside and outside, between the military and the police. Whereas "defense" involves a protective barrier against external threats, "security" justifies a constant martial activity equally in the homeland and abroad' (p. 21).

Treating the airport checkpoint as part of the new security regime, my analysis concentrates on three issues. First, I focus on the working conditions of TSA employees whom the federal government pays to screen passengers to accentuate the enduring physicality of their labor despite the technologization of the checkpoint. Second, I explore new techniques of inspection implemented at TSA checkpoints to delineate practices of 'close sensing' that establish seamless continuities between looking and touching/handling/manipulation. Finally, I explore the object-oriented visual economy that takes shape at the checkpoint, and I suggest that the x-ray sequence ultimately exposes the state's inability to regulate the flow of objects and matter in the age of globalization. In short, I suggest that the searches, exposures, and probes that define this threshold should be understood not just in terms of individual privacy invasions, but rather as an opportunity to focus on structural changes in federal labor, state surveillance and globalization that have emerged since 9/11.

The TSA's multi-media, multi-sensory and material practices illuminate the ways in which the histories of media technologies are interwoven with that of the state and its security. At different moments, radio, television and digital technologies have been developed and used within military and law enforcement institutions in efforts to protect national territory and citizens. Technologies such as signal intelligence, closed circuit monitoring, emergency broadcasting and digital profiling have all been used to advance officially defined state security interests. These issues arguably take on greater urgency after 9/11 with the passage of the Patriot Acts, which authorized new regimes of observation and inspection in the US and beyond. As Patrice Petro and Andrew Martin suggest in *Rethinking Global Security* (2006):

> In the twenty-first century, the politics of war, terrorism, and security can hardly be separated from the practices and processes of mediation, which continue to expand and intensify . . . Both fictional and fact based threats to the U.S. and global security helped to create and sustain a culture of fear, with far reaching effects. (p. 1)

Understood in this context, airport screening involves a set of mediation processes that have been expanded and intensified to fit the prerogatives of an anxious state.

The Labor of Searching for Something

Airport screeners were first implemented in US airports during the 1970s after a series of skyjackings around the world aroused concerns about airline security. In 1972, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) made it mandatory for airlines to search passengers and their carry-on bags and magnetometers were installed in US airports. After the 1988 bombing of Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, airport security intensified and the FAA began to screen computers and radios more carefully on flights coming from Europe and the Middle East. (You may recall that a bomb was placed in a radio given to a young woman and programmed to explode in mid-air.) Despite bolstered security measures, by the end of the 1990s, members of the US Congress began to express concern about airport screeners. At a Congressional hearing on 16 March 2000, political leaders identified the airport screener as the 'weak link' in airport security because of poor training, high job turnover, uncompetitive compensation and benefits, and a failure among private contractors to conduct rigorous background checks and random drug testing (U.S. House, 2000: 28). During this period, commercial airlines paid private contractors to operate and staff airport security checkpoints in the nation's airports. A comparative study with the UK, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany and Canada found that US airport screeners were outclassed by better trained, higher paid and professionalized screeners in other countries.

In 2000, airport screeners in the US were making an average of $5.25 to $6.75 per hour, often leaving their jobs just after being trained to take slightly higher paid positions flipping burgers at fast food outlets in the same airport. The job turnover rate at some airports including Chicago O'Hare was 400 per cent. Screeners worked long hours – often 12-hour days – scrutinizing 20-year-old black and white monitors that were very difficult to see (U.S. House, 2000: 37). The labor of the airport screener was described at a congressional hearing as a 'repetitive, monotonous and stressful task that requires constant vigilance' (U.S. House, 2000: 8). A year before 9/11, the consensus in the US Congress was that 'inadequate training and low morale among screeners threaten safety and security in the skies' (U.S. House, 2000: 3).

After 9/11 Bush signed the National Transportation Security Act, the number of screeners surged from 8000 private workers in the year 2000 to 53,000 federal employees in 2003. During this period there was a concerted effort to standardize training, increase salary and benefits, and produce a professionalized class of airport screeners. The regime of screening and scrutiny at the gate became more intrusive as passengers were asked not only to pass through magnetometers and place their baggage on an x-ray machine, but over time were also asked to remove belts, coats and shoes, empty their pockets and submit to wand sweeps or pat downs by TSA officials. Some passengers were also randomly selected for further searching and questioning.

The protocols and interpersonal dynamics at airport checkpoints changed dramatically after 9/11, and the gate has become a space of friction for many

reasons. Passengers are annoyed by the invasiveness of the new procedures. Long lines cause delays and sometimes travelers miss their flights. Personal items are regularly and increasingly confiscated and never returned. The TSA has earned nicknames like the Tourism Suppression Agency and Thousands Standing Around (Leff, 2005). TSA screeners have even entered the business of mood control, for as of 2004 they can fine passengers for 'non-physical interference'. If 'attitude' becomes an 'aggregating factor', the TSA is authorized to issue civil penalties ranging from $150 to $10,000 (Sharkey, 2004). A newlywed woman bringing a wedding cake knife in her carry-on as a memento was fined $150 (Joyner, 2004). Cecelia Beaman, a 57-year-old middle school principal and grandmother from Seattle taking care of 37 kids on a field trip to California put a bread knife that she made sandwiches with in her bag en route to the airport and forgot to take it out before the checkpoint. She was fined $500 and put on the terrorism watch list (Reece, 2005). Other passengers with names that resemble those on the 'no fly' list have been treated as suspect, detained and/or denied transit (such as Catherine Stevens, wife of US senator Ted Stevens, whose name is like Cat Stevens, who was alleged to have ties to Muslim fundamentalists).

While checkpoint tensions have escalated, public discussions of them tend to privilege the civil liberties of the consumers/travelers over those of this new class of federal employees, many of whom only have high-school educations and come from working class and non-white ethnic backgrounds. Alongside a flurry of congressional hearings, surveys have been conducted regarding TSA morale, working conditions and effectiveness, revealing widespread discontent among TSA screeners. A recent report included comments from 11,000 TSA workers that were so negative that the federal government, despite several requests, refused to make them public and only released the quantitative parts of the study (Arsenault, 2005; Project on Government Oversight [POGO], 2006). For instance, TSA workers sustain more injuries on the job than all other federal employees. In 2004, they were injured four times as often as construction workers and seven times as often as miners (Strohm, 2005). One study found that TSA workers handling checked luggage lifted one bag every seven seconds, and most of them weighed more than 50 pounds (Frank, 2005b). Not surprisingly, 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. Between 2002 and 2004, US taxpayers paid $67 million in expenses related to airport screeners injured on the job. In 2005 alone, their injuries and lost wages cost the federal government $52 million (Frank, 2005a). During that year, 29 percent of all airport screeners were injured on the job and 250,000 days of work were missed, which caused staff shortages and heightened concerns about security (Barr, 2006; Frank, 2005b).

The checkpoint may be increasingly technologized and US taxpayers have subsidized billions of dollars' worth of screening equipment in recent years, but the TSA screening process relies more heavily upon manual labor than ever, requiring that workers carry heavy bags, check tickets, shuffle grey bins, search carry-ons, confiscate items, frisk passengers and operate machinery.

Thus the airport checkpoint has become a state-led exercise in hand–eye coordination where workers apply manual and ocular labor to minimize risks. In addition to physical injury, there must be profound ontological confusion at the checkpoint. TSA workers are regularly subject to a variety of secret tests by undercover officers and to experiments by citizen vigilantes. The so-called Red Team is a band of secret agents that arrives at security gates to covertly evaluate operations and often attempts to pass through with illegal objects, whether guns, bombs or knives. In one exercise a woman secured a gun to her upper thigh under a thick bandage and after it was detected through wanding, she was asked about it and claimed she had staples from a recent surgery and was allowed to pass through (U.S. House, 2003). James McNeil of the security firm McNeil Technologies smuggled a gun past the gates in Rochester and then testified to Congress about his stunt to make the case that security experts don't even know what we need to train screeners for (U.S. House, 2003). A 20-year-old college student, Nate Heatwole, managed to get prohibited items including box-cutters, knives and liquid bleach past airport screeners and onto aircraft, claiming he was intending to test TSA procedures. After doing this successfully on several flights, he emailed the TSA to notify the agency of his experiment and was subsequently fined $500 and put on probation (U.S. House, 2003). While these checkpoint games are designed to keep the TSA on their toes, they reveal that imagining and staging security breaches has become a national preoccupation and an obsessive management ritual.

Besides being subject to covert operations, each day on the job that airport screeners are posted at the x-ray monitor, they must distinguish between 'real' and 'fake' threats. The Threat Image Projection (or TIPS) program, which is used at all airports, arbitrarily superimposes simulated images of contraband, bombs, and other dangerous materials on x-ray images of innocent passengers' carry-on bags as they pass through the machine. There is an archive of 4000 images that can be randomly and automatically inserted. As one systems manufacturer, Rapiscan Systems (2006a), explains, 'an "escape" is recorded if the checkpoint operator does not respond to the virtual threat projection within the allotted time period'. In some cases, TIPS has caused enormous confusion. A *Seattle Times* investigation found numerous incidents in which threat images were identified by screeners, but bags 'escaped' without being physically searched and thus entire terminals filled with passengers had to be evacuated and re-screened ('Airport Insecurity', 2004).

Not only is there a strong likelihood, according to statistics, that a TSA worker will be injured on the job, but such operations constitute a kind of stateside psy-ops – that is, psychological operations that are designed to generate profound confusion among federal employees and passengers about the status of 'the real' at the very moment when deciphering it could be a matter of life or death. The checkpoint is used to stage the state's struggle to define, test and regulate the shape-shifting form of the security threat. TSA workers are paid to partake in a state-sponsored guessing game orchestrated by security experts and the managerial class who concoct all

kinds of potential violations which TSA workers on the frontlines are charged day after day to detect. Even though each day dangerous objects pass through without incident and each day actual attacks are imagined that are not carried out, the state-led trickery, gaming and managed chaos at the checkpoint is likely to normalize a fundamental skepticism about the status of all people and things for travelers and workers alike.

Close Sensing

In addition to articulating a new regime of labor relations, the airport checkpoint exposes new technologies of sensing, scanning and detection. Collectively, these techniques might be referred to as close sensing – a set of practices that serve as the counterpoint to what I have explored elsewhere as satellite remote sensing (Parks, 2005: 74–107) in that they are oriented toward the minute and the personal rather than the geographic and panoramic perspectives of the earth's surface. Close sensing involves the use of magnetometers, x-ray machines and trace sensing devices to scrutinize personal belongings and their fragments, the body and its interior. In this sense, close sensing is like an extension of the kinds of practices Lisa Cartwright (1995) discusses in her history of medical imaging where film, x-ray and other technologies combine with scientific and popular imaginaries to make the body visible in new ways. What distinguishes close sensing from other forms of surveillance is the authority the state has granted to supplement machine vision with touch. According to TSA guidelines, all belongings or bodies that are handled must be scanned with a machine first. TSA workers rely on so-called 'screener assistant technologies', such as 'Target', that use software algorithms to search x-ray images for dangerous materials – 'the algorithm analyzes the mass, size, and atomic number of items in the image against preset thresholds; objects that match the defined criteria are identified for the operator' (Rapiscan, 2006b). TSA screeners also use image-processing programs with names like Crystal Clear, which can zoom in for a closer view and/or perform organic–inorganic stripping. The function of the checkpoint machine, then, is to direct the TSA agent to apply his or her manual labor to specific bodies and objects that pass through the gate. It is impossible, then, to separate the visual search from acts of handling, which are often conducted with conspicuous blue latex gloves, the iconic signature of the TSA. To foreground their manual interventions, TSA workers also leave 'notices of baggage inspection' in checked luggage that is physically searched.

This tactile supplement to what Paul Virilio (1989) would call 'eyeless vision' (p. 3) has transformed the checkpoint into a physically charged locale in which passengers hurriedly strip off layers of clothes, remove their shoes and empty out their pockets to avoid further inspection. These acts of disrobing, which used to occur in the bedroom, are now performed while in transit and in full view, in front of not only TSA agents, but other passengers as well, so that gender and sexuality are repeatedly invoked as sites for the assertion of

authority. The physical search has aroused much controversy as thousands of complaints have been filed with the TSA and discussions abound in the press. There have been letters to newspaper editors and articles re-telling stories about TSA screeners looking down the back of women's pants, cupping their breasts, or groping body parts during physical searches. More aggressive pat-down policies were implemented in September 2004 after two Chechen women carrying explosives allegedly caused two plane crashes in Russia (Goo, 2004). TSA officers were instructed to perform more intrusive pat downs and to look for 'irregularities in a person's natural shape or contour'. One woman reported having her breasts touched as the TSA agent loudly asked, 'Are those real!?' The agency received 250 formal complaints in the month after the policy went into effect (Associated Press, 2004).

A controversy has also blossomed around the use of so called 'x-rated x-rays' or backscatter machines that use high energy x-rays and allow screeners to see through passengers' clothes and detect some-one that might be carrying a gun or bomb (Sharkey, 2005). The machines cost from $100,000 to $200,000 a piece and are also the kind of devices used to screen South African diamond miners going home at the end of a workday. There are concerns not only about this high visibility of the body that renders breasts and genitalia in detail, but also about exposure to high levels of radiation. The Electronic Privacy Information Center and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) argue that backscatter inspection constitutes a major privacy invasion and should be banned since it 'compels passengers to submit themselves to a level of bodily exposure that almost everyone would consider is indecent and many find religiously or ethically offensive' (Electronic Privacy Information Center [EPIC], 2005). Nevertheless, backscatter machines have already been implemented in Baltimore/Washington, Dallas/Fort Worth, Jacksonville, Florida, Phoenix, San Francisco and London Heathrow). To encourage the public to accept the idea, in 2003 the director of the TSA security laboratory, Susan Hallowell, strolled through a backscatter machine to demonstrate its efficacy in detecting the gun and bomb she had hidden under her clothes. Trying to minimize the issue of privacy encroachment, she suggested the only problem is that 'it makes you look fat and naked' (Miller, 2003). The TSA has used the high volume of women's complaints regarding physical searches to legitimate the use of these backscatter machines, claiming they perform a 'virtual search' and will make pat downs unnecessary.

Media scholars Laura Marks (2002) and Margaret Morse (1998) have referred to the relation between looking and tactility as haptic visuality, where the eye functions as an organ of touch. They both develop the concept primarily in relation to experimental media art and minority media. As Marks (2002) explains, 'Haptic visuality, a term contrasted to optical visuality, draws from other forms of sense experience, primarily touch and kinesthetics' (p. 2). She invokes the haptic to critique post-Enlightenment rationality and its privileging of distant and detached modes of observation and sets out to 'restore a flow between the haptic and the optical that our culture is currently lacking . . . [and] to explore how a haptic approach might rematerialize our objects of perception' (p. xiii). While airport screening

practices structure continuities between looking and touching, they do so not to generate multi-sensory aesthetics and criticism, but rather to perform a security function for the state. In this way, the close sensing that occurs at the checkpoint shares more in common with medical imaging and diagnostics since it involves the machine's identification of potentially dangerous objects that are then inspected with workers' hands and either contained or eliminated.

The institutionalization of close sensing at checkpoints in the US and abroad means that there are now more people in the world whose bodies and belongings have been scanned by machines and touched by workers than ever before. It is important to note, however, that those who are most closely sensed are not necessarily screened by closed circuit monitors, but are taken behind closed doors. Makeshift rooms exist for more intensive inspections and these spaces are cordoned off beyond public view. In one sense, the checkpoint is a more protected place in terms of civil liberties because of the over-exposures that it affords, yet it also functions as a system for selecting or filtering those who are subject to even closer scrutiny, where seeing not only becomes touching but may become torture. Therefore we cannot separate the practice of stateside close sensing at the airport checkpoint from the more excessive and violent versions of scrutiny and interrogation that have emerged in the midst of the US-led war on global terror. In some cases individuals have been apprehended and rushed through airport security gates only to be put on CIA 'torture flights'. In December 2005, new stories broke about hundreds of CIA flights that have funneled Islamist terror suspects from Europe and the US to the Middle East (Goodman, 2004; Hirsch et al., 2005; Taylor, 2005). Close sensing, then, involves the hand–eye coordination of state power and may be articulated at checkpoints or in mid-air and may be applied to different bodies and to varying degrees. Its most extreme version may be in Abu Ghraib prison or Guantanamo Bay where detainees have been subject to the same kinds of scanning, imaging, profiling techniques and then brutally tortured and photographed. Airport screening practices might be understood as symptomatic, then, of a broader security regime in which looking authorizes touching and touching can become torture. Haptic visuality may therefore take on dangerous dimensions when it is articulated by a vengeful state.

Closed Circuits and Sharp Edges

Developing a textual or semiotic approach to study close sensing is a difficult proposition since civilians are not allowed to stand near or behind the x-ray machines at checkpoints. Using simulations, however, it is possible to imagine and delineate the visual form of the x-ray screening strip – the sequence of x-ray images that represents personal affects as they pass on a conveyor belt whose rhythms and densities are shaped by flight schedules, the work week, holidays, machine speeds, and TSA staffing. An MSNBC website gives us a sense of this visual form as it features a two-minute interactive

simulation, inviting the user to identify various threat images that appear including a gun, knife and explosives while passengers tell you to hurry up. Like an airport screener, the user can pause and zoom in/out on the image or turn it from black and white into a color version that differentiates organic and inorganic matter (see Figure 4). The closed circuit monitor delivers a slide show of personal belongings splayed open by x-rays for the eyes of the operator(s). When I tried the simulation myself I was overwhelmed by how difficult it was and was struck by the odd application of such a high-stakes gaze to a stream of ordinary objects. Purses, briefcases and backpacks rapidly pass by, containing objects such as pill bottles, coins, keys and cell phones, but there are also knives, guns and explosives that the screener is tasked to recognize. As the screener-in-training inspects the materials that pass, the voices of angry passengers can be heard on the soundtrack yelling, 'This is taking for ever!' 'My grandma could do a faster job than that!' or 'Come on, I don't have all day!' In two minutes, I screened 22 bags, 9 of which contained threats. I identified 77 percent of them correctly, earning a 'C', and was warned at the end of my session, 'Letting even one threat by would get a fully trained screener fired.' Given the sheer volume of objects to be scanned, it is not surprising that forbidden items sometimes pass through the gate unnoticed. No matter how diligent and well-trained the TSA staff, the labor of searching for something is hard work and the eyes tire when faced with a never-ending display of things to examine. When passing through checkpoints myself I've observed how these screens are monitored, and I have seen two or three workers clustered around them at times and one person falling asleep at others, a testament perhaps to the condition of high alert banality that characterizes this visual form.

Figure 4 Screen capture of MSNBC airport screening simulation interface shows a gun in a briefcase.

Whatever the case, the checkpoint x-ray machine generates the most dense object-oriented visual economy we have seen yet, resonating with what

Jonathan Beller (2002) has called the cinematic mode of production. 'Cinema', he suggests,

> refers not only to what one sees on the screen or even to the institutions and apparatuses which generate film but to the totality of relations which generates the myriad appearances of the world . . . Cinema means the production of instrumental images through the organization of animated materials. These materials include everything from actors, to landscapes, to populations, to widgets, to fighter planes, to electrons. Cinema is a material practice of global scope, the movement of capital in, through, as image. (p. 67)

While one could argue that the airport x-ray machine is not exactly cinematic, I am intrigued by Beller's provocatively totalizing account of the cinema (or audio-visuality) because it relates, I think, to the way airport x-ray sequences expose the steady pace of capital accumulation. What appear on the monitors are the faint traces of consumer goods at once being protected and scrutinized as potentially dangerous objects. The x-ray machine generates a spectral slideshow of 21st-century consumerism, so that it becomes a gothic cousin to the television commercial, manifesting the trace of already bought and used commodities moving through the world. As belongings pass across the conveyor belt, they pivot somewhere between possession and loss, safety and danger, significance and oblivion. Akira Lippit (2005) suggests that the x-ray provides a visual registration of invisibility, explaining,

> X-rays record only the shadows of a secret, its trace, the place where it hides. Not so much an exposure as a disclosure, the X-ray reveals secret visibility as a mode of secret visuality, showing what nonetheless remains invisible, without operation or accident. (p. 32)

In the case of airport screening, the x-ray may disclose that lurking within capital accumulation are disastrous threats to its future. Each x-rayed object becomes a reminder that the capacity to see, to consume and to move might not last.

While each object is x-rayed individually, the unending collection of objects x-rayed produces a broader inventory of the things we think we need to have with us – currency, identification cards, eyeglasses, umbrellas, snacks, pills, diapers, tampons, baby strollers, makeup, cigarettes, laptops, ipods, cell phones, shoes, water, documents, magazines, jewelry, and so on – the accoutrements of travel. When all of our personal things are reduced to transparencies, they are not just objects to be looked at, they become symptomatic of a more permeating gaze, in which the state not only reserves the right to touch what it sees, but also uses its visual capital to temporarily evacuate the vitality or materiality of objects as part of the process of trying to reduce or eliminate threats to its own future. Put another way, the closed circuit x-ray sequence is symptomatic of the state's increasing inability to control and regulate the flow of matter in general, whether weapons, drugs, currency, consumer goods and/or natural resources in the context of

globalization.[1] Upon the conveyor belts of airport screening checkpoints, then, there is a larger drama unfolding about the unstable position of the state not only in a war on global terror but also in a world of uncertain materialities, mutable things, and camouflaged objects, where a cell phone can be a gun, a lipstick can be a knife, a teddy bear can carry a weapon, a condom can be a vessel for drug-running, and a shoe can be a ticking time bomb.

Consider some of the objects that have been confiscated at TSA gates in the US. A knife disguised as a lipstick. A handgun inserted inside a radio. A teddy bear with its backside slashed open with no indication as to what was inside. Between 2002 and 2005, the TSA confiscated 18 million objects (Novotny, 2005). After these objects are taken away from passengers, they are sorted and auctioned in bulk to the public at government warehouses. Not surprisingly, some of these confiscated materials now re-circulate through the web-based economy. When I searched eBay in early 2006, I found 138 entries for TSA seized knives, scissors, nail clippers, corkscrews, wrenches and pliers (see Figure 5). One person describes an 'NTSA lot of 8 pounds of scissors' indicating 'most are made in China, Japan and Korea' reminding us of the broader global economy from which they emerge. Another describes a 'crappy bag of old scissors' as 'airport seizure property', suggesting its history of confiscation gives it added value. Indeed, it was just such a descriptor that prompted me to buy a TSA-confiscated pocketknife for $5.00 (see Figure 6). The knife was manufactured in Germany, sold to some one who ended up in a US airport after September 11, 2001, was intercepted by the TSA, sold again at a US government auction to second-hand dealers in Las Vegas, who then sold the knife to me on eBay. The transit history of this object alone is suggestive of the odd economies of re-distribution that have emerged as an effect of the war on terror.

Figure 5 Screen capture from eBay showing NTSA-confiscated scissors for sale.

Figure 6 A German-made pocketknife confiscated by the TSA, sold at a government auction to second-hand dealers in Las Vegas, and purchased on eBay by the author.

So what do we make of the TSA's interception and re-circulation of our sharp edges? The events of 9/11 enabled a scenario to emerge in which US political and security officials could believe in and promote the idea that sharp edges in mid-air were more threatening than anything else, more threatening than a reckless leader in the White House, more threatening that a US foreign policy determined by unilateralism, more threatening than a global economy contingent upon the ebbs and flows of oil. This idea persists. Just recently, a US congressional leader spiritedly introduced federal legislation called the 'Leave All Blades Behind Act'. Yet we all know that one person's fist can be just as deadly as another's knife. And anyone could turn a handful of coins and an empty sock into something that could wreak havoc. Simply put, if the soft spot in the US security system is the sharp knife wielded in mid-air, then the airport checkpoint exposes the US government's willful blindness to the current state of global affairs.

Unending Turbulence

In this article, I have treated the checkpoint as a discursive space where we can detect shifts in biopower in the context of a changing world political order. I have suggested that TSA procedures have produced problematic working conditions for federal employees who are breaking their backs while trying to keep knives out of the air, generated a new regime of inspection where looking becomes continuous with touching/handling/manipulation, and, finally, revealed changes in the representation of material objects where what may ultimately be seen is the state's struggle to control capital accumulation and circulation. At the airport checkpoint, security involves everything from screeners' back muscles to secret agents' breach scenarios, from trace detection devices to x-rayed pocketknives, from blue latex gloves to CIA

torture flights. Much more than a non-place, the airport has become a vital place where security, technology and capital collide, and spur the US social body to recognize its terrorizing interiority.

The turbulence caused by new airport screening practices continues (see Figure 7). As I was finishing this article, the TSA announced a new policy banning liquids and gels on all flights to and from the US. This policy was based on an alleged terrorist plot to embed bombs in ordinary objects that would be carried on planes to the US leaving from England. This meant that passengers now had to leave behind not only their blades, but their bottled water, toothpaste, lotion, eye drops, and cough syrup as well. During the months of August and September 2006, airport screeners' trash bins toppled over with containers full of liquid and gel as perturbed passengers reluctantly complied with the abruptly implemented rules. At Frankfurt airport in August 2006, I asked the head airport screener whether I could take a photo of the abandoned objects pouring out of the trashcan behind her and was told I

Figure 7 TSA flyer featuring tips about carrying liquids and gels onboard flights.

would have to get written permission from the Bavarian government to do so. No object is un-threatening in the war on global terror – whether it is me, my camera or the deodorant, hairspray or lipstick that lay in the trash. As of October 2006, the TSA carry-on regulations had changed yet again and sandwich-sized Ziploc bags filled with 3 oz. containers of liquids and gels were allowed. Bottled water could be taken onboard as long as it was purchased beyond the checkpoint. There is a price to pay for secure commodities – in my case, it was $4.50 for a safe sip of water in mid-air. At Los Angeles International airport in October 2006, TSA staff ordered me to throw my $1.00 bottle of water in the trash and told me not to worry because I could purchase one for $3.50 just beyond the checkpoint. Thus, whether water or oil, the cost of security is embedded in the exchange value of the commodities we consume. As much as airport screening may isolate dangerous objects, it also exposes the collisions of capital, media and security that increasingly punctuate our lives.

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Note

1. For an interesting take on this issue, see Naim (2005).

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