4.6.3 Conclusion

This case study attempted to shed some light on the construction of virtual identities in teenagers, focussing on the hybrid self-staging practices of teenagers as well as the interstitial space of online profiles.

For the profile page, it was possible to show with front and back self-staging techniques that the test subjects are aware of the presence of a public audience and accordingly protect private topics with a facade. We were also able to observe different weightings within the profile categories, with the implicit rubrics being answered most truthfully. A conspicuous profile feature probably typical for teenagers is the inclusion of friends. This was evident both in the profile photos as well as in the labelling of friends as 'family'. This reference to prominent contacts in the network can also be found in the walls of the virtual identity projections. Teenagers seem to attach much more importance to the virtual relationship maintenance with their best friends than self-staging via their online profile.

With the help of an egocentric network analysis it was possible to shed light on this hybrid status of a space in a basically public arena but perceived as private among friends. Despite large personal networks, the number of communication partners is relatively small, which produces a familiar and perhaps also less reflected self-representation in the form of partly very private conversations among the teenagers. This is also evident in the reversal of front and back staging methods, since authentic information is displayed on the wall without a protective facade. In conclusion, the active relationship maintenance of offline contacts turns out to be an important function of virtual identitities which every day demands and stimulates a great number of conversations.

4.7 Petrol Stations as In-Between Spaces I: Practices and Narratives

Sonja Kmec

In *Blumme vun der Tankstell* (2011) ("Flowers from the Petrol Station"), the Luxembourgish singer-songwriter Serge Tonnar gives voice to the ambivalent feelings many people have about petrol stations, which have "often become a code, a mundane place and at the same time a modern myth" (Polster 1996: 11).[85] In the song, Sunday marital quarrels are repeatedly appeased by flowers bought at a petrol station, until one day the speaker's wife does not forgive him and stabs him in the chest. The lyrics encode a diffuse, but pervasive feeling that buying

85 | The present study has been developed together with Agnès Prüm, whose contribution in this volume centers on the encoding of (petrol-station) experiences into films and other media.

flowers at a petrol station may be considered a *faux pas*. As shall be argued below, this reflects a more general approach towards petrol stations, which fulfil concrete material needs, while generating a sense of unease, possibly linked to the "impersonal" atmosphere and mechanical customer clearance. "[Gasoline stations] tell us that we live in a world of increased place-product-packaging [...], of enhanced corporate dominance [...], of accelerated change" (Jakle/Sculle 1994: 233). At the same time, the standard layout generates a feeling of familiarity: "It is a place of strong behavior expectation" (ibid.: 229).

In their interstitial functioning between impersonality and familiarity, petrol stations fit Marc Augé's description of "real non-places of supermodernity" (Augé 1995: 96). Augé does not specifically categorize filling stations among the non-places of (super)modernity – except as part of the motorway system (ibid.: 97), but they share the characteristics of other sites of anonymous mass transit, such as train stations, airports and supermarkets, which create "neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude, and similitude" (ibid.: 103). "Non-places" are not defined ontologically, as things in themselves, but in contrast to the "relational" character of "places" (Augé 2012: 0:16-1:58). Augé himself acknowledges that "non-places" may well open up new spaces for (inter-)action, thereby destabilising the seemingly clear-cut distinction between "place" and "non-place".

Although, at first sight, "non-places" preclude any kind of identification, there are many ways this space is being appropriated – both in everyday practices and in creative appropriations. The latter may appear in the qualitative interviews[86], which do not simply relate past experiences and recurring routines, but cast them in a language that is steeped in (popular) culture. They refer to images such as exploding petrol stations, a relatively common occurrence in films across all genres.[87] This intersection of locally embedded practices and global frames of reference are a first aspect of the interstitial character of petrol stations. Moreover, they may be seen as interstitial spaces, defined as zones of contact and transformation of different forms of spatiality, on the following accounts:

Firstly, in their hybrid state – increasingly mechanized, though relying on organic matter (fossil fuel) – petrol stations constitute a type of contact zone, whose transformative power insidiously reconfigures the 'human' and blurs the distinction between man and machine, as illustrated in the Luxembourgish documentary *Plein d'essence* (Mersch 2007, see Kmec/Prüm 2014).

Secondly, driving a car and stopping for petrol is emblematic for the shift from adolescence to adulthood. This symbolic significance is underlined by Hayley G.

86 | University of Luxembourg, IDENT2 2012/2013 – qualitative survey.

87 | The synopsis of 818 films listed on the *Internet Movie Database* (http://www.imdb.com – accessed 22.10.2012) mention a "gas station" scene, 103 thereof may be classified as violent scenes. This includes 59 explosions of the site, mostly in the genres of drama, thrillers, action, crime and horror films, but also in science fiction films and even in romantic comedies (see section 5.8).

Hoover, whose user-generated video entitled *Gas Stations* (2009) starts with a 'declaration of (consumer) independence': "I am a big kid now and that means two very exciting things. One: I can order things off the TV. And two: I get to pay my own gas."

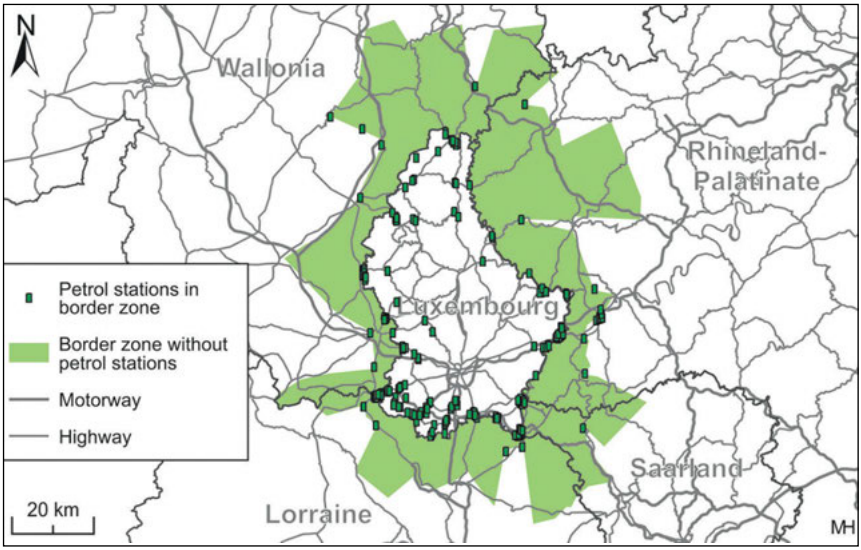

Figure 1: Petrol stations as border markers (source: Ullrich 2009, realization: Malte Helfer)

Thirdly, on a political level, petrol stations have become markers of state borders and tax regimes. Within the Schengen area, border posts have been abolished or turned into art centres to encourage cross-border exchanges.[88] However, these internal borders have not disappeared altogether. Within the EU, nation states use different instruments such as fiscal regimes, nationality laws, language policies or immigration restrictions, to establish and demarcate their zones of influence. The implementation of these mechanisms generates regional practices, which may disrupt official discourses and demarcations. It is in particular at the borders that state hegemony is renegotiated through the everyday practices and the choices of

88 | In 2007, when Luxembourg and the Greater Region were "European Capital of Culture", the project *hArt an der Grenze* was initiated in 2007 by the *Saarländisches Künstlerhaus* (http://www.kuenstlerhaus-saar.de/index.php/hart-an-der-grenze.html – accessed 06.01.2014). In a similar vein, the project *Borderline*, managed by Claudia Passeri and Michèle Walerich, transformed former borders at Esch/Grenz, Mondorf-Mondorff and Differdange-Hussigny into art exhibition and meeting places. The work of Guillaume Paris is still to be seen at the French custom office of Hussigny, whereas the former customs office at Mondorf continues to be used by the local tourist office.

individuals. In our case study, petrol stations have emerged as the specifically local physical markers of the overlapping of fiscal regimes in and around Luxembourg. Interestingly, their concentration at the outer limits of Luxembourg's zone of fiscal influence redraws the lines the Schengen treaties aimed to 'erase'. In the digital atlas of the Greater Region SaarLorLux, a map by Daniel Ullrich (2009) shows that the last petrol stations in Luxembourg (often located on or near the country's national borders) and the first petrol station in the neighbouring country define a new border zone spanning 10 to 25 km.

The reason for this phenomenon may be traced back to low excise duty and value-added tax rates in Luxembourg.[89] As a result, "petrol tourism" has a strong impact not only on Luxembourg's fiscal revenues but also on its image. The fiscal regime may be rigid, but people play the system by buying petrol, stocking up on cigarettes and alcohol, to be distributed or sold 'back home'. This transgression is not merely tolerated by the authorities; it is the very cause of existence of border petrol stations.

Finally, the perception of petrol stations wavers between that of a functional, impersonal "non-place" and that of a relational "place". Filling up the car may be an entirely mechanical gesture, pertaining to what Georges Perec (1989) calls the "infra-ordinary". It appears completely unreflected, while at the same time the petrol station triggers a sense of disturbance, as the unknown appears familiar (for instance through recognizable brands) and the familiar becomes strange and threatening.

The present study focuses on this last aspect of interstitiality or co-spatiality. It eschews all ambition of representativity, but explores the intersubjective and intertextual construction of meaning using the hermeneutical approaches of literary and cultural studies (Thompson *et al.* 1994). First, an analysis of everyday petrol station routines[90] will examine whether the empirical, statistical material reveals similar fissures and inconsistencies as the narratives do. In a second step, these narratives are explored further, showing three different ways the 'threshold' of the petrol station is experienced, narrated and transfigured – simultaneously "decoded" and "encoded [...] into and out of discursive form" (Richardson 2005) – in interviews and in various media.

89 | European Commission, Taxation and Customs Union, Excise duties on alcohol, tobacco and energy, http://ec.europa.eu/taxation_customs/taxation/excise_duties/index_en.htm (accessed 24.12.2014); VAT live, 2013 European Union EU VAT rates, http://www.vatlive.com/vat-rates/european-vat-rates/2013-eu-vat-rates-2/ (accessed 24.12.2013). A similar phenomenon may be observed at other state borders in Europe and worldwide.

90 | University of Luxembourg, IDENT2 2012/2013 – quantitative survey.

4.7.1 Stopping at the Petrol Station: A Mere Routine?

According to our survey, the vast majority of people living in the borderlands use a car in their daily life (94 %) and to reach their holiday destination (86 %). One objective of the survey was to find out about people's practices and preferences when filling up their car: which petrol station do they choose and why? Do they frequent petrol stations for other reasons than … buying petrol?

Pecuniary Incentives

Pecuniary advantages are frequently mentioned in the qualitative interviews as determining the choice of petrol station, as are the factors of proximity and convenience: 42 % explain their choice with reference to proximity, 24 % link it to the station's loyalty programme (*carte de fidélité*), 15 % to the friendliness of staff and 8 % to the shop attached to the petrol station, often a franchise of a local supermarket. The remaining 40 % declare that they do not make a conscious choice. One could argue that the former merely assume that they are acting of their own free will, when their choice may in fact be dictated by routine (proximity), public policy (excise duties and VAT) and marketing devices (*cartes de fidélité*). Despite their name, which suggests a form of personal connection, the latter do not generate a sense of community, but rather of loyalty to a corporation: clients are cast as "vassals" who remain unknown to one another as they pledge "fealty" (*fidélité*) to their "lord". The card may establish a bond, but it does not involve any personal interactions – as opposed to relating to the friendliness of the staff.

Locations

In their everyday life, most people prefer to use petrol stations located in villages or towns (62 %), whereas only 6 % choose to stop along the motorway. By far the highest percentage of any group using motorways to fill up on petrol are cross-border commuters (14 %). By contrast, Luxembourg residents are least likely to use motorways in their daily routine: only 3 % claim to do so. This relative reluctance to use motorway petrol stations contrasts markedly with people's behaviour when on vacation. In that case, one third (33 %) stops at service stations along the motorway, while only 27 % (in contrast to the 62 % mentioned above) opt for petrol stations in a village or town. The contrast is even more significant if one looks at Luxembourg residents, almost half of whom (45 %) actually prefer motorway stations when on vacation.

Age and Gender

There is no general gender bias, but age does seem to play a significant role in the choice of petrol station: 59 % of all young people (16-24 years old) prefer the motorway on their holidays, 9 % in their everyday life. Generally, the older one is, the more one is disposed to stop in a town or village for petrol. Young people are

also more likely to use petrol stations as a meeting place. This is also the only age group in which there is a marked gender difference: 21 % of men aged 16 to 34 state that they sometimes meet people at a petrol station, compared to an average of only 11 %. However, a significantly larger proportion of our sample, in particular young men again, state that they will eat or drink at a petrol station (logically often on their own).

According to one 23 year-old interview partner, petrol stations are a popular meeting point after nightclubbing:

"There is a petrol station in Leudelange, which I often go to … after clubbing in order to eat … a pizza or something of the kind, to be among friends. […] I think it is awesome, it's …, they put a pizza in the oven for us – you can buy a pizza for 2.50 or 3 € – and we eat together at about 4 or 5 am, at a time where we are still in harmony. After that, everybody goes home" [91] (male, 23, Luxembourgish, Luxembourg).

Whether situated in a small town like Leudelange or alongside the motorway (the same interviewee mentions the Aire de Berchem and the Aire de Capellen as meeting points), what attracts this young man and his friends are the all-night-long opening hours and the cheap food that is being served. However, not everyone finds "harmony" at petrol stations. A cross tabulation shows that people who visit nightclubs and cinemas frequently are more likely to meet at petrol stations, than those who spend their free time in sport halls and outdoors. For a majority of people the petrol station is not a *lieu de rencontre* but a *lieu de passage*. The main aim is to buy petrol, which 62 % do regularly, that is, more than once a month. Three other products people buy there regularly are bread/food (19 %), cigarettes (18 %) and newspapers/magazines (12 %), whereas only 8 % claim that they buy alcohol at petrol stations. Age matters again: cigarettes and alcohol are purchased mostly by the youngest age groups (with a bias towards cigarettes by young women, and alcohol by young men), newspapers/magazines most frequently by men aged 24 to 35 and food is bought most frequently by the 35 to 44 age group.

The Petrol Station: Beloved Enemy

Contrary to our expectations, people who shop in organic grocery stores are more – not less – likely to buy their bread or other food in petrol stations too. The choice appears to be less ideologically motivated than linked to the amount of money one

91 | Personal translation of: "Il y a une station de service à Leudelange, je la fréquente souvent après … de sortir de discothèque pour aller manger … une pizza ou quelque chose comme ça, être entre amis. […] je trouve ça génial, c'est … , ils nous mettent la pizza ou four – on peut acheter une pizza à 2.50 € ou 3 € – et on mange tous ensemble vers quatre, cinq heures du matin, donc, où on est encore en harmonie. Après, tout le monde part à la maison."

is disposed to spend on food.[92] Similarly, a statistical cross tabulation has shown that people who buy food in delicatessen have fewer qualms about buying it at petrol stations than people who frequent discount stores. Luxembourgers are most likely to buy food and least likely to buy cigarettes at the petrol station. This may be linked to the minimarket one finds attached to Luxembourgish petrol stations and its function as emergency solution (*dépannage*) to buy food after closing hours, whereas cigarettes can also be bought in bars till 1 am. According to a market research commissioned by Shell, shops with late opening hours attract a young urban clientele, mostly singles, who are either working long hours, are generally disorganized in their shopping or just need a quick fix (Paragon Communications 1992, cited by Polster 1996: 145). The consumer behaviour of this 'top-up society' is not limited to the singles and yuppies of big cities, but seems to apply more generally to young or middle-aged people living close to such convenience stores. As (1) strict regulations regarding shop opening hours do not apply to petrol stations in Luxembourg, (2) Luxembourg borders are replete with petrol stations and (3) no one in Luxembourg and the border areas we surveyed lives more than 30 km from the border, it is not surprising that about half of our interview partners consider petrol stations useful stopgap solutions ("*Abhilfe*", "*Noutstopp*") or even emergency exits ("*sortie de secours*"). The minimarkets are considered – mostly free of value judgment – to replace the traditional little shop ("*Tante Emma Laden*" or "épicerie"). Very few interviewees refuse categorically to buy anything there except petrol, considering those shops taboo ("*tabu*" or "*Unleben*"). Some are sceptical about meat, fresh fruits and vegetables or flowers, but express themselves very ambivalently. Asked whether he would buy food at the petrol station, one interviewee replies:

"Not at all! It's a real no-go for me! Most of the time, I go to my shop, where I [usually] go, there I know where I will find things. At petrol stations, I am never really sure, whether the goods meet the quality standards I really expect. [...] I would never buy a sandwich or something like that there. Well, I will buy a ... sausage as a snack, but nothing else!"[93] (male, 62, German, Rheinland-Pfalz).

The strict opposition between "my shop" (which is well known and can be trusted) and petrol stations (in the plural), where the food quality is uncertain, is overcome by the search for instant gratification. This spur-of-the-moment decision obliterates the dichotomy between 'place' and 'non-place' and creates an

92 | See section 5.2.

93 | Personal translation of: "Gar nicht! Das kommt gar nicht in Frage für mich! Meistens gehe ich zu meinem Laden, wo ich hingehe, da weiß ich, wo ich was finde. Bei den Tankstellen bin ich mir nicht sicher, ob das wirklich die Qualität hat, die ich auch wirklich bevorzuge. [...] Ich würde auch nie irgendwie mal ein Brötchen oder so was kaufen. Gut, für den kleinen Hunger mal zwischendurch so eine ... Wurst, aber alles andere nicht".

interstitial situation, where the adamant 'never' becomes 'maybe'. According to a 2006 market research commissioned by Aral, this behaviour is linked to the interstitial character of petrol stations:

"Each fuelling procedure is a mixture of pure routine and immersion into a very specific microcosm. [...] The subject perceives themselves as in an *in-between world*: for a brief moment, the visit to the petrol station has torn them out of their normal everyday routine. In this 'no man's land', the obligations and the rules of everyday life are less palpable, the subjects are more open towards the unknown and new products, and they will follow impulsive feelings and wishes more spontaneously. [...]. This alien/unfamiliar *in-between world* also generates fears and perhaps even a diffuse sense of threat and insecurity"[94] (Rheingold Institut 2006, author's italics).

While the market researchers recommend installing good lightning and using well-known brand logos to convey a feeling of orientation, order and safety, this study looks more closely at how customers behave on the threshold between the mechanical, mindless routine practiced at an anonymous 'non-place', on the one hand, and the creative appropriation of that same space, be it through (inter)action or imagination, on the other.

4.7.2 The Petrol Station as Threshold Between "Non-Place" and "Place"

The idea of transformation is key to the notion of "threshold" as conceptualized by the ethnographer Arnold Van Gennep (1909, cited by Turner 1982: 24). His highly influential study of rites de passage in traditional European societies distinguished between three phases: separation, transition and incorporation. Victor Turner further developed this model and examined whether it could be applied to (post)industrial societies. He found that "liminal" phenomena still exist "in the activities of churches, sects, and movements, in the initiation rites of clubs, fraternities, masonic orders", but that "liminoid" phenomena linked to leisure activities are more common. These are generally individualized, although they may have a "mass" effect (Turner 1982: 54-55). Contrary to rites of passage in traditional societies or structures, which invert but rarely subvert the *status quo*,

94 | Personal translation of: „Jeder Tankvorgang ist eine Mischung aus reiner Routine und dem Abtauchen in einen ganz eigenen Mikrokosmos. [...] Die Probanden fühlen sich wie in einer *Zwischenwelt*: Der Tankstellenbesuch hat sie für kurze Zeit aus ihrem normalen Alltagsgeschehen gerissen. In diesem Niemandsland sind Zwänge und Regeln des Alltags weniger spürbar, die Probanden sind offener gegenüber Neuem, neuen Produkten und eher bereit, spontanen Gefühlen und Wünschen nachzugehen. Und auch mal Dinge auszuprobieren, die sie sich im Alltag nicht trauen würden. Diese fremde *Zwischenwelt* löst allerdings auch Ängste und teilweise sogar ein diffuses Bedrohungsgefühl aus."

liminoid experiences "are often subversive, satirizing, lampooning, burlesquing, or subtly putting down the central values" (ibid.: 41). As the spatial metaphor of the interstitial space suggests, one may a) enter the "liminoid" and undergo a transformation; (b) recognize a potential threshold, but refuse to release control; or, (c) remain undecided or suspended in the interstice.

Entering the "Liminoid"

A rather straightforward way to cross the border between 'non-place' and 'place' is to initiate social interactions:

"My wife got to know the cashiers, it's for the atmosphere, it's more like a family atmosphere, less like a factory. Because the large stations, it's really … […] if you calculate the ratio [of petrol pumps per inhabitant] in Schengen[95], there must be something like 800 inhabitants […]. Taking into consideration the number of stations in Schengen, this is impressive!"[96] (male, 58, French, Lorraine).

In this interview extract a clear dichotomy is established between the anonymity of mass consumption ("factory") and face-to-face interactions ("family"): one way to disrupt the 'industrial' routine is becoming acquainted with the staff.

A more radical transformation of the unreflected "infra-ordinary" (Perec 1989) setting of the petrol station may be observed in the following extract, recounting how a group of young women used it to stage a hen night.

"They came there with a supermarket trolley and they were already a little drunk [laughter]. […] I think they wanted to wash the cars, but it wasn't very clever, because [loud laughter], just next to them, there was the petrol sta… – er – the automatic carwash station […] they must have stayed two, three hours before they left for – I don't know – Clausen [pubs and clubs district of Luxembourg city], well, and confront the bride with further dares. They made – er – a lot of noise. Me, I passed by twice with my dog and you could hear them in the entire village [laughter] laughing like crazy. That was really funny"[97] (female, 30, Portuguese-Luxembourgish, Luxembourg).

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95 | Schengen is a village in Luxembourg, bordering Germany and France, where the Schengen agreements were signed in 1985 and 1990.

96 | Personal translation of: "Mon épouse a fait connaissance avec les vendeuses, c'est pour l'ambiance, c'est plus familial, moins usine. Parce que les grosses stations, c'est quand même… […] Et si on fait un peu un ratio sur Schengen où vous devez avoir, si je me souviens bien, quelque chose comme 800 habitants […], et voir le nombre de stations qu'il y a, c'est impressionnant, il faut le dire!"

97 | Personal translation of: "Elles étaient venues avec un caddie et elles étaient déjà un petit peu ivres [laughter]. […] Je crois qu'elles voulaient laver les voitures, mais c'était pas malin, parce que [loud laughter] juste à côté, elles avaient la station essence, euh, de lavage automatique […]. Elles ont dû rester deux, trois heures avant de partir, je sais

A hen night or bachelorette party is part of most western weddings and constitutes the 'separation' or 'first phase' of this classic rite of passage. It involves the future bride being challenged by her girlfriends to 'misbehave' one last time before entering the safe harbour of marriage. The custom is far less formalized in Luxembourg than in Britain or the US (Kalmijn 2004; Montemurro 2006) and does not always involve disguises and dares. In this case, it includes a taunt apparently modelled on another US custom, the so-called bikini carwash, a fund-raising event where sparsely clad young women offer to wash cars against a fee. No matter what the actual intention and behaviour of the women at the Luxembourg petrol station were, the amused account provided by our interview partner refers to their state of inebriation, "crazy" laughter and loud noise, that is, to transgressions and transformations of expected social behaviour. It may thus point at the "anti-structure" said to characterise the "liminoid" (Turner 1982: 32-33). Although the stereotypical bikini carwash does not question, but rather reinforce, gender roles and the sexualized objectification of women, this chauvinist message tends to be subverted when it is used in an oblique or 'queer' way – as in the petrol station scene of the film *Zoolander* analysed by Agnès Prüm in her contribution to this volume.

Indeed, a parodic-travestying intervention (Bakhtin 1981b: Kindle Locations 1028-1029) may be seen as social critique: at a large motorway petrol station on the Luxembourgish-German border, a young man – observed and filmed by one of the authors (Aire de Wasserbillig 2012) – seizes a traffic cone and uses it as a speaker cone. He announces to the laughter of his friends and other clients: "Attention ladies and gentlemen! Three packs of cigarettes for the price of five!"[98] His ironical message derides the Luxembourg fiscal regime and the symbolic border posts petrol stations have become. The common laughter creates an (ephemeral) bond between strangers and disturbs the routine, just as the removal of the traffic cone disrupts the imposed order.

Implicit criticism of a certain consumer behaviour frequently emerges from the interstice between jest and seriousness, even when no concrete action is being related, only a hypothetical "what if" story. In that case, the threshold is crossed but in mind, producing even more radical associations with the petrol station.

"What If...?"

Asked what they would never do in a petrol station, two interview partners answer jokingly: "to smoke while filling up the car" (male, 42, Belgian, Wallonia) and "to play with the lighter" (female, 19, Portuguese, Luxembourg). The imagined threat

pas, à Clausen, voilà, et faire d'autres défis pour la future mariée. Elles avaient fait un euh, beaucoup de bruit. Moi, j'étais passé avec le chien deux fois et on les entendait dans tout le village [laughter] rigoler comme des folles. Ça, c'était drôle."

98 | Personal translation of: "Aufgepasst meine Damen und Herren! Drei Pack Zigaretten zum Preis von fünf!"

is such a cliché[99] that it leads to smile. Other interviewees, however, underline how dangerous the practice of filling up jerrycans with petrol is. As one of our interview partners phrased it: "Except for people who transform their cars into bombs, I cannot think of anything serious [laughter]"[100] (male, 57, German, Saarland).

Thus, in some interviews, there are hints at the potential danger of the place, but most people appeared perplexed when asked for their spontaneous associations with petrol stations. One man summed it up succinctly: "Not much happens at the petrol station. You drive up, fill up your car, pay, and drive off, eh"[101] (male, 52, Luxembourgish, Wallonia). This kind of reaction confirms our working hypothesis of a strong discrepancy between the absence of reflection about petrol stations as a place of everyday life and their significance in films and popular culture, where they are portrayed as uncanny, disquieting places, where bad things are expected to happen.

This underlying threat is linked less to the anonymous customer clearance than to actual interactions with station attendants. In her video blog, *Gas Stations* (2009), Hayley recounts how she had to step into the station shop due to a failure of the credit card reader and came across a man who "happen[ed] to resemble the creepy uncles from a second grade sexual harassment videos." Displaying the on-screen message "Stay Safe", she animates sock puppets and mimes a voice talking to children: "Although I recognize your face, you cannot touch my private space." The petrol station thus appears to generate (sexual) anxieties, linked to its perception as 'place' of human interactions (even if they are but imagined) rather than anonymous 'non-place'.

In a similar vein, one of our interview partners reports a "rather negative" anecdote, "even though nothing happened to anyone." He took exception to a station attendant in Austria who insisted on filling up his car:

"This is dreadful, because I really don't like it. […] I don't want anybody else to fill up my car, I want to do this myself. Most people fill it to the brim, but I want to fill up my car the way I always do, and I don't want another person to do this. […] I would let anybody drive my car – that is different. I'm not the type of person that cherishes their car, but somehow I don't like this service generally, or if a service is forced on me. I'm that type of person, I also prefer buffets. That's my disposition. And that [attendant] would not be stopped and immediately started to faff about. I really wanted to say …, and I got very angry at myself because I didn't intervene. I really wanted to tell him: 'Here, take 5 or even 10 € as a tip, but just leave me alone' [laughs]. I did tell him: 'Please, leave it be', but he just did it and

99 | As in the petrol station scene in *Zoolander*, analysed by Agnès Prüm.

100 | Personal translation of: "Abgesehen von den Leuten die ihre Autos in eine Bombe verwandeln, fällt mir da nichts Ernstes auf [laughter]."

101 | Personal translation of: "Op der Tankstell erlieft een net vill. Et fiert ee bäi, et tankt een, et geet ee bezuelen, an et fiert ee rëm, he."

afterwards I was so very angry at myself, I should have struck his fingers and told him: 'Just go, I'll do this myself'" [102] (male, 29, German, Saarland).

Both the blogger and the interviewee reject human interactions on the grounds that they fear a violation of their private space and want to remain in control of the situation. They see the threshold, but perceive an abyss that would destabilize their personality, and thus cling to the anonymity and the safety of interactions with machines.

A third type of reaction when faced with the interstitial space of petrol stations is to perceive both the 'non-place' and the 'place', but to remain unable to move on.

Undecidability

The state of suspension implied in the notion of undecidability may be detected in the ambivalent attitude of a female interviewee, who affirms that she dislikes petrol stations due to the smell of diesel, but

"Once I'm there, it no longer bothers me, and actually, I rather like [petrol stations], it's tidy, sometimes you can get rather nice chocolates, beautiful flower arrangements, and in general, the girls are nice … In fact, I do not like going there, I keep telling myself: 'Oh shit, I have to go and get fuel', but once I'm there, it does not bother me. It's fast, and rather comfortable, well thought-through, well laid out" [103] (female, 33, French, Lorraine).

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102 | Personal translation of: "Ich finde das ganz schlimm weil ich so was gar nicht mag. […] Ich will nicht, dass einer für mich tankt, ich will selber tanken. Die meisten lassen dann bis zum Rand vollaufen und ich will aber so tanken wie ich das immer mache und nicht dass ein anderer das macht. […] Ich würde jeden fahren lassen, das ist was anderes. Ich habe zum Auto jetzt nicht die Bezüge dass man das hegen und pflegen muss, sondern irgendwie ich mag generell nicht diesen Service. Wenn mir Service aufgedrängt wird. Ich bin selbst der Typ, ich mag auch am liebsten Buffet. Das ist so meine Einstellung dazu. Und der ließ sich gar nicht aufhalten und hat direkt angefangen da rumzumachen. Ich hätte am liebsten gesagt …, und da habe ich mich dann über mich selber geärgert, dass ich nicht reagiert habe. Ich hätte am liebsten gesagt: 'Hier bekommen Sie 5 € Trinkgeld oder sogar 10, wenn Sie mich einfach in Ruhe lassen' [lacht]. Ich hab auch gesagt: 'Bitte lassen Sie das', aber er hat das dann gemacht und nachher hab ich mich echt über mich selber geärgert, ich hätte dem auf die Finger hauen sollen und sagen sollen: 'Los weg da, ich mach das selber'.

103 | Personal translation of: "Une fois que j'y suis, ça ne me dérange pas, j'aime assez bien finalement, c'est bien rangé, des fois on trouve des chocolats qui sont pas mal, des bouquets de fleurs qui sont jolis, en général les filles sont sympas… En fait, je n'aime pas y aller, je me dis: 'Oh merde, il faut que j'aille maintenant faire le plein', mais une fois que j'y suis, ça ne me dérange pas. Ça va vite, et je trouve que c'est quand-même assez agréable, je trouve que c'est bien pensé, bien aménagé."

In fact, despite some reluctance, and once she is set on following her routine, she seems to approve of some aspects of its 'non-place' character (the organisation, the service, the speed, etc.). Outside of that routine, on the way to her holidays, she positively appreciates stops at petrol stations:

"Moreover, if we are not talking about petrol stations in Luxembourg, when you drive down to the south, the only ray of hope [sunbeam] of the journey [small ironic laughter] is to stop at petrol stations. During a long journey, I love it! But the stations are different from the ones you find here. There, you can see people, lorry drivers from different countries, you see people who take a sort of shower in the toilets, well, I think it's very lively. On the motorway, [petrol stations] are very lively, in fact, whereas here, it's not the same, it's fast [and impersonal]. You fill up and you leave, whereas a big station on the motor way is rather nice [...]. I've always liked that, ever since I was little. [...] And then, you see people, and there are people who make you laugh, some of them are fighting, and it's a very, very lively environment! And then, you get a coffee, a chocolate or something, and I like that" [104] (ibid.).

The difference between an orderly, well equipped, time-efficient 'non-place' and an enjoyable 'place' – described three times as "very lively" – lies not so much in the dissimilarity of petrol stations in Luxembourg and abroad, but may be ascribed to alterations of her state of mind. Daily routines only allow for 'non-places', whereas her holiday mood allows for 'places' to emerge and other people to be noticed.

The state of suspension and undecidability that might be experienced at the threshold between overlapping social spaces, or between 'place' and 'non-place' may be illustrated by the following extract from an interview with the Beatles-drummer Ringo Starr:

"We stopped at – errr – a motorway café – t'eat some grease [chuckles]. Now Paul had the keys, and George was sitting behind the wheel [mimics steering motion] as we came out. And there – an argument went on for at least an hour and a half. 'I've got the keys!' -'Well, I'm sitting behind the wheel!' [mimics steering motion]. And it was like we had to sit

104 | Personal translation of: "Et je dirais, si on ne parle pas des stations-service à Luxembourg, quand on descend dans le sud en voiture, le seul rayon de soleil du trajet [small ironical laughter], c'est de m'arrêter aux stations-service. Pendant un long voyage, j'adore! Mais ce ne sont pas les mêmes stations qu'ici. Là, on voit des gens, des routiers qui viennent de tous pays, on voit des gens qui prennent une sorte de douche dans les WC, enfin je trouve que c'est très vivant. Sur l'autoroute, elles sont très vivantes, en fait. Alors que celles-ci, c'est pas la même chose, c'est vite fait. On fait son plein et on part. Alors qu'une grosse station sur l'autoroute, c'est quand même sympa [...]. J'ai toujours aimé ça, depuis toute petite [...] Et puis, on voit des gens, il y a des gens qui font rigoler, il y en a qui s'engueulent, c'est très, très vivant comme environnement! Et puis on prend un café, un chocolat ou quoi, moi je trouve ça sympa."

there and go through this 'cause one of them – none of them was gonna give up! You know, 'I've got the keys' -'I've got the wheel!' [mimics steering motion]" (George Harrison 2011: 26:45-27:23).

For the viewer of this interview, diverse social and cultural spaces collide and intermingle in his account: childhood games and rivalries; the freedom, self-determination and rites of passage associated with driving cars, and by extension, petrol stations; youth culture; constructions and perceptions of the sixties culture and counter-culture; the band's global marketability, and the transformation of four young men into money-generating businesses that endure beyond their own natural life span (George and John are already dead); their profound (transforming) effect on popular culture, the music industry and entire generations etc.; all these situate *The Beatles* – the b®and – at the intersection between the relational and the non-relational, the human and the mechanical, the local and the global, the 'place' and the 'non-place'.

4.7.3 Conclusion

The petrol station, at first sight a symbol for supermodernity, routine and anonymity, serves to highlight the co-existence, intersection and mutual transformation of many different types of spaces. Firstly, an analysis of social practices linked to petrol stations showed that certain consumer patterns and leisure habits rely on the late opening hours of the stations' shop or eatery. The petrol station becomes – for some people, under some circumstances – a congenial meeting place or was part of a diffuse feeling of adventure when on vacation. In the end, the perception of petrol stations wavers between that of a functional, impersonal 'non-place' and that of an individualized 'place', depending on whether the mechanisms of (capitalist) supermodernity are activated fully, partially or not at all. It is important to note that this 'activation' depends on the subject's choice, which is itself contingent, momentary and dependent on the situation: they may choose to merely be led by the injunctions of consumer logics, or they may break the routine and initiate, rekindle or live out human relationships. The system itself is neither abolished nor affected by this choice: it is merely allowed to operate or to remain dormant.

The shift from 'non-place' to 'place' was then investigated in more detail, drawing on the reactions and anecdotes our interview partners imparted. Petrol stations act as threshold between 'non-place' and 'place', between absent-minded gestures and stimulus to the imagination ("what if …"), between boredom and exuberance. A chore may become a creative, even subversive, act. Sometimes the narrative also lingers in the interstitial space or passage between the different frames of mind. This undecidability shows how meaning is reconfigured through mimesis, parody or travesty. This links in with Ricoeur's hermeneutics, according

to which "the manner of existing [...] is from start to finish a being-interpreted" (Watkin 2009: 77).

This intermingling of diverse social and cultural spaces (co-spatiality), the unpredictable quality of thresholds, their openness and ever-latent potential for reconfiguration are markers of interstitiality, which may be experienced in non-places such as petrol stations. In and through (popular) culture, however, the petrol station itself undergoes one further transformation, or *transfiguration*: the *site* becomes a *sign*, complex and multi-layered, as blatant as its 'original' was discrete; evasive, ambiguous, and yet eminently recognisable. This aspect will be developed in "Petrol Stations as In-Between Spaces II: Transfiguration."

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4.8 Petrol Stations as In-Between Spaces II: Transfiguration

Agnès Prüm

"Nothing special"[105] (male, 62, Luxembourger, Luxembourg). This expression, used by one of our interview partners about the things he would do or buy at a petrol station, aptly voices the quasi-consensus among our interviewees about the role and significance of petrol stations in everyday life. Petrol stations may sometimes, as Sonja Kmec has shown, become the scene of extraordinary events and experiences, and thus momentarily acquire the qualities of a 'place'. These transformations are inadvertent and contingent, however, and petrol stations remain, in most situations, relegated to the realm of the "infra-ordinary" (Perec

105 | Personal translation of: "Näischt spezielles."