



Richard Maxwell, Ph.D. and Toby Miller, Ph.D.
Greening the Media

Air Travel and the Speed of Global Warming

Why we need to rethink how we travel using an ecological sense of time

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More than 3.5 billion people will travel by air this year. Except for two brief downturns—following 9/11 and the global financial crisis—that number has grown at a rate of about 200 million travelers a year since 2000. The environmental impact of such travel is significant, and both airlines and their regulators admit as much: the International Civil Aviation Organization offers a carbon calculator so people can work out the impact of their travels.

The global industry uses five million barrels of jet fuel a day, which release 2.4 million metric tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. The carbon footprint of flying in coach from New York to London equates to a year of commuting 25km a day by car.

One of the reasons that we take planes is, of course, time. And airports as well as airplanes are magnificent time shifters: their stretches of space create time flows that are analogous to driving in and out of traffic jams, and lounges pool everyone into slow-motion zones where we know there's nothing we can do to make time move faster.

Years ago, finding ourselves in this situation might have led to a conversation with fellow travelers. Today, that random possibility has been replaced by the diversions of shops, bars, and restaurants and ubiquitous technologies of virtual escape, which break from slow-motion lounge time through the internet, music, and other streaming content. These options are technical fixes to the constraints of airport time. But airport time can still test the tolerance of people who panic when trapped in velocities not of their choosing, eliciting behavior at departure gates similar to hot-headed drivers who react to delays by tail-gating, honking, or careening cavalierly onto the prohibited shoulder of the road.

While it's clear that aviation time is different from our everyday lives, there are links, such as when missed flights and temporal detours alter work and family timeframes, or the guarded in-flight experience of leisurely reading, napping, or conversation mimics the ordinary. Such entanglements of travel time and quotidian rhythms are familiar parts of our modern, high-tech lives.

Air travel intersects with another temporal dimension which, at first sight, doesn't seem to be linked to the human experience of airports and flight: the speed of atmospheric change, carbon emissions, conventional pollution, and toxic waste connected to the operations of airports, planes, and transit vehicles. Environmental and transportation times might not appear to exist in the same vector or scale of time, but their interaction is profound. They mutually constitute one another's existence along with, paradoxically, the disappearance of environmental time in the experience of human travel.

The velocity at which the Earth is warming is fueled by human activity; but humans have no control over its eventual pace, except in human-centered fantasies. A common misunderstanding about global warming is that it can be turned off or dimmed as easily as a light bulb. But if we stopped harmful emissions this instant, the

climate would remain locked into an ongoing warming pattern as it dealt with carbon already in the atmosphere. In human time, this basically means the carbon we emit will be in the atmosphere forever. Ecosystems may heal themselves, but in a planetary timeframe that will probably outlast human existence, given our current rate of destructive industriousness.

So global warming continues at its own inexorable speed. 2015 surpassed 2014 as the hottest year on record. Also accelerating are the ancillary problems of a hotter planet—notably, melting permafrost that is releasing harmful gases and long dormant bacteria, and the receding ice sheets and glacier melting that raise sea-levels and threaten to release harmful toxins produced by Cold War military installations. All this is acting to “turbocharge” climate change, as *Newsweek* put it.

Airport time is part of a transport system that affects the velocity of climate change, though that relationship is rarely noticed by travelers. We recharge our electronics, relax in air conditioning, and marvel at the luxury goods and tourist tchotchkes at a speed that diverges from everyday events, work, and consumption. To link airport time to planetary processes requires a major effort of thought, compassion, and disinterestedness in the human-centered vagaries of tourist and business travel.

By contrast, atmospheric changes can suddenly irrupt, mobilizing and accelerating decidedly non-touristic human movement, when drought refugees and other climate migrants are thrust into travel times deeply enmeshed in the speed of global warming, causing anxiety in a range of human institutions whose temporal orientations are not yet synchronized with atmospheric time.

These dual experiences of travel time place an obligation on us to develop a “politics of temporality” within a framework of green citizenship. Such a politics will champion the well-being of the planet and its inhabitants by thinking backwards and forwards, in both human and atmospheric times, to reassess the ways we have travelled and rethink the ways we want to travel in the future.



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About the Author

Richard Maxwell, Ph.D., is a professor and chair of media studies at Queens College, City University of New York. **Toby Miller, Ph.D.**, is an interdisciplinary social scientist.

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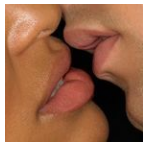
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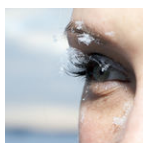
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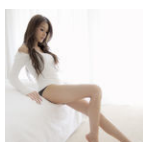
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