

Innovations in Non-Destructive Testing for Aerospace: A Focus on Penetrant and Radiographic Methods

Jose de Jesús Núñez Ramírez.

Affiliate institute: Instituto Tecnológico de Ciudad Guzmán.

Jose.nunez.ramirez@gmail.com

Abstract:

Innovations in non-destructive testing (NDT) techniques are pivotal for ensuring safety, reliability, and performance in the aerospace industry, where components must meet stringent quality standards. Among these, penetrant and radiographic testing methods have undergone significant advancements, driven by the need for higher precision, efficiency, and compliance with evolving industry regulations. Modern penetrant testing leverages advanced fluorescent dyes, automated application systems, and AI-driven defect detection to enhance sensitivity and reduce human error. Similarly, radiographic testing has evolved with the integration of digital radiography (DR) and computed tomography (CT), providing high-resolution imaging and 3D visualization of internal structures. These innovations not only improve the accuracy of defect identification but also streamline inspection processes, reduce downtime, and support the adoption of lightweight, complex materials like composites and additive-manufactured components. This paper explores recent advancements in these methods, their applications in aerospace, and the challenges and opportunities they present for future NDT solutions.

Keywords: Non-Destructive Testing (NDT), Aerospace Industry, Penetrant Testing, Radiographic Testing, Digital Radiography (DR)

Introduction:

The aerospace industry is a cornerstone of modern engineering, where precision, reliability, and safety are paramount. Non-destructive testing (NDT) plays an essential role in ensuring the integrity of aerospace components, as it enables the detection of flaws and anomalies without damaging the material or structure[1]. This capability is particularly critical in aerospace, where even minor defects can lead to catastrophic outcomes. Among the various NDT methods, penetrant testing and radiographic testing have long been fundamental to quality assurance processes. However, the increasing complexity of aerospace materials and the push

for efficiency have driven significant innovations in these techniques. Penetrant testing, known for its simplicity and effectiveness in surface defect detection, has evolved considerably to meet modern aerospace demands[2]. The development of advanced fluorescent dyes has enhanced defect visibility, even in challenging lighting conditions. Automated systems now apply penetrant solutions with remarkable precision, reducing variability and increasing throughput. Additionally, artificial intelligence (AI) has begun transforming penetrant testing by automating defect detection and minimizing the subjectivity of human interpretation. These advancements have made the technique more reliable, efficient, and environmentally friendly. Radiographic testing, which traditionally relied on film-based imaging, has undergone a digital revolution. The transition to digital radiography (DR) and the introduction of computed tomography (CT) have redefined how internal defects and structural inconsistencies are identified. These methods now offer unparalleled imaging resolution and 3D visualization, allowing for a deeper understanding of component integrity. In addition, AI-driven image processing enhances defect detection accuracy and reduces analysis time. These innovations are especially crucial for inspecting modern aerospace materials, such as composites and additive-manufactured parts, which often feature complex geometries. The importance of these advancements extends beyond quality assurance; they also support the broader goals of the aerospace industry. With the rise of lightweight materials and intricate designs, such as those enabled by additive manufacturing, traditional testing methods often fall short. Innovative NDT techniques ensure that these new materials meet rigorous safety and performance standards. Moreover, they contribute to operational efficiency by reducing inspection times and lowering costs, ultimately enabling faster production cycles and more competitive offerings in the aerospace market[3].

Non-destructive testing (NDT) is a critical component of ensuring the safety, reliability, and performance of aerospace materials and components. The aerospace industry operates under stringent safety standards due to the potential risks associated with even minor defects. Unlike destructive testing methods that require materials to be sacrificed for analysis, NDT allows for the evaluation of a material's integrity without causing any harm or altering its properties. This is particularly important in aerospace, where components such as engines, fuselages, and wings must operate under extreme conditions, including high stress, temperature fluctuations, and fatigue while maintaining structural integrity over long periods. NDT helps identify early signs of wear, corrosion, cracks, or other potential failures, ensuring that these issues are addressed before they lead to catastrophic consequences[4]. The role of NDT in maintaining safety and reliability within the aerospace industry cannot be overstated. It ensures that every component

is thoroughly inspected, preventing defects from going unnoticed and compromising the safety of passengers, crew, and the overall mission. For example, a crack in a critical structural component, if undetected, could lead to catastrophic failure during flight. Through continuous, effective use of NDT methods, aerospace engineers can ensure that aircraft, spacecraft, and other aerospace systems perform optimally, enhancing both safety and operational efficiency. In addition to ensuring immediate safety, NDT contributes to the longevity of aerospace components, thus reducing the need for expensive replacements or repairs. Moreover, regulatory and quality assurance requirements in the aerospace industry mandate the use of NDT to guarantee that components and systems meet safety standards. Regulatory bodies such as the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and the European Union Aviation Safety Agency (EASA) establish guidelines and certification processes that require rigorous inspections throughout an aircraft's lifecycle, from manufacturing to regular maintenance checks. These regulations ensure compliance with established safety protocols, making NDT an indispensable part of the certification process for aerospace products. Quality assurance teams in aerospace companies rely on NDT to verify that parts adhere to strict specifications, preventing the possibility of defects that could undermine performance or safety.

Penetrant testing (PT) is a widely used non-destructive testing method for detecting surface-breaking defects, such as cracks, leaks, or porosity. The fundamental principle of penetrant testing involves applying a liquid penetrant to the surface of a material. The penetrant, which is either fluorescent or visible, seeps into surface cracks or defects. Additionally, AI-driven software can analyze the resulting images to detect flaws more accurately than traditional manual methods, minimizing false positives and negatives. For radiographic testing, the transition to digital imaging systems has eliminated the need for film and darkroom processing, significantly reducing time and costs while enhancing image quality. Moreover, the integration of computed tomography (CT) in radiographic testing allows for 3D imaging of components, providing a more comprehensive understanding of internal defects. These advancements not only increase the precision of inspections but also enable more rapid assessments, reducing downtime and improving the overall efficiency of the manufacturing and maintenance processes in aerospace[5].

Penetrant Testing: Innovations and Applications

Penetrant testing (PT), also known as liquid penetrant inspection (LPI), is one of the most widely used non-destructive testing (NDT) methods in aerospace. The fundamental principle

behind penetrant testing is simple: it involves applying a liquid penetrant to the surface of a material, where the liquid seeps into any surface-breaking defects such as cracks, porosity, or leaks. After a period of penetration, the excess penetrant is removed, and a developer is applied to the surface. The developer helps to draw out the trapped penetrant from the defects, making the flaws visible as contrasting markings. The technique relies on the capillary action of the penetrant to move into the defects, and this method is highly effective for identifying surface defects in non-porous materials. Penetrant testing has been a key inspection tool in the aerospace industry for many years due to its simplicity, cost-effectiveness, and ability to detect very fine surface cracks that could pose a risk to structural integrity. The traditional process involves several stages: pre-cleaning the surface, applying the penetrant, allowing time for the penetrant to penetrate the defects, removing excess penetrant, applying the developer, and finally inspecting the surface under appropriate lighting conditions. For fluorescent penetrants, ultraviolet (UV) light is used to make the defects glow, enhancing visibility. Visible dyes, on the other hand, are inspected under normal white light. Penetrant testing is commonly used in aerospace for inspecting various components that are subject to high stress and potential fatigue, such as engine parts, turbine blades, wing structures, fasteners, and welded joints. Components that are subjected to extreme mechanical stresses, thermal gradients, and cyclic loading, such as aircraft landing gear and structural elements, require frequent inspection to ensure their integrity and reliability[6]. Penetrant testing is particularly useful in these cases because it can detect surface-breaking defects that may develop over time due to the stresses experienced during operation. The method is versatile and can be applied to a wide range of materials, including metals, plastics, ceramics, and composite materials. In aerospace, penetrant testing is often used to inspect critical parts like aluminum and titanium alloys, which are widely used in aircraft construction due to their strength-to-weight ratios. It can also be used to inspect welded joints in titanium or stainless steel parts, where the risk of microcracks is high. Due to the ability to detect very fine surface-breaking defects, penetrant testing is particularly valuable for ensuring the structural integrity of safety-critical aerospace components[7].

This method can be applied to any material and any type of joint. The object to be tested is covered with a dye-containing solution that seeps into the surface cracks. Excess solution is then removed from the surface but stays in the cracks. A developer – most commonly, a white powder- is then applied, usually by spraying[8]. The dye from the cracks will seep out to stain the developer powder, and the presence of the flaw is revealed by the stain, as can be seen in the diagram in Fig.1.

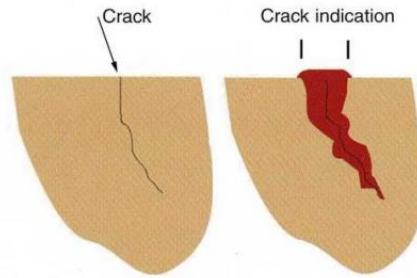


Figure 1: Dye penetrant indication of cracks.

The figure illustrates the process and result of dye penetrant inspection, a widely used non-destructive testing (NDT) method for detecting surface-breaking defects such as cracks in metallic and non-metallic materials. The image highlights a surface treated with a dye penetrant, showing the visible red or fluorescent lines that indicate the location of cracks. These indications are formed as the penetrant seeps into the surface-breaking flaws, revealing their exact shape and size upon the application of a developer. The process typically involves cleaning the surface, applying the penetrant, removing excess dye, and applying a developer to draw out the penetrant from the defects for visual inspection.

One of the key innovations in penetrant testing over recent years has been the development of advanced fluorescent dyes, which offer significant benefits over traditional visible dyes. Fluorescent penetrants have the advantage of being highly visible under ultraviolet (UV) light, which provides greater contrast between defects and the surrounding material, even in the most challenging lighting conditions. This enhanced visibility allows for the detection of even the smallest surface defects, which might be difficult to spot using visible dyes alone. Additionally, the formulation of modern fluorescent dyes has improved their performance in terms of sensitivity and detection accuracy[9]. These new dyes have better wetting properties, allowing them to penetrate defects more effectively. Some advanced dyes are also formulated to be environmentally friendly, reducing the toxic and hazardous chemicals traditionally used in older formulations. This ensures better compliance with environmental regulations while maintaining the high performance of the inspection process. Another significant advancement in penetrant testing is the automation of both the application process and defect detection. However, with the advent of automated systems, the application of penetrant and developer can now be done more precisely and uniformly. Automated spraying systems ensure that the right amount of penetrant is applied to the surface, reducing the potential for human error and inconsistencies[10].

The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into penetrant testing is transforming the way defects are detected and analyzed. AI can be trained to recognize specific types of defects and

classify them according to their severity, providing more accurate results and faster decision-making. By reducing the reliance on human interpretation, AI helps to minimize the potential for false positives and false negatives, which are common challenges in traditional penetrant testing. AI-enhanced systems can also provide predictive insights, allowing operators to detect emerging issues before they become critical, further improving the reliability and safety of aerospace components. The use of AI in defect detection not only enhances the precision of inspections but also increases the speed of processing, helping to streamline the overall testing procedure. While penetrant testing is highly effective for detecting surface defects in metals and alloys, it faces challenges when applied to newer materials like composites. Composites are becoming increasingly common in aerospace applications due to their lightweight and high strength, especially in the construction of aircraft fuselages and wings. However, composites often have complex surface textures, including porous or rough surfaces, which can make it difficult for penetrant dyes to adequately penetrate and reveal defects. Additionally, some composite materials may absorb penetrants in unpredictable ways, further complicating the inspection process. To address these challenges, there is a need for further research and development of specialized penetrants and techniques tailored to the unique properties of composite materials.

Radiographic Testing: Advancements and Integration

Radiographic testing (RT) is a critical non-destructive testing (NDT) method widely used in aerospace for the detection of internal defects and structural analysis[11]. It employs X-rays or gamma rays to inspect the internal structure of materials and components without causing any damage. The fundamental principle behind radiography involves passing high-energy radiation through an object and capturing the resulting image on a detector or film. The radiation interacts differently with materials based on their density and thickness, which results in varying degrees of absorption, producing an image that reveals internal features. In aerospace, two primary methods of radiographic testing are employed: X-ray and gamma-ray radiography. X-ray radiography uses X-rays produced by an X-ray tube, while gamma-ray radiography relies on radioactive isotopes, such as iridium-192 or cobalt-60, as the radiation source. Both methods provide valuable insights into material integrity by detecting hidden flaws such as cracks, voids, porosity, and weld defects that may compromise the strength or safety of critical aerospace components. X-ray radiography is most commonly used for thin or medium-thickness materials, such as aircraft skin or structural components. It provides high-resolution

images and is ideal for applications where precise detection of surface and near-surface defects is essential. Gamma-ray radiography, on the other hand, is typically used for thicker materials where the higher penetration ability of gamma radiation is required to inspect larger components, such as heavy structural parts or engine components.

Radiographic inspection involves placing a film behind the object being examined while directing a source of radiation, such as Gamma or X-rays, towards it, as shown in Fig. 2. Radioactive isotopes like Iridium-192, Caesium-137, and Cobalt-60 emit gamma radiation. In contrast, X-rays require an electrical power supply to generate. Gamma-ray inspection is particularly advantageous when X-rays are impractical due to access limitations or the material's thickness. The radiation's wavelength must be short enough to penetrate the metal and reach the film. If the metal contains porosity or hollow regions, more radiation passes through these areas, resulting in darker regions on the film, which indicate the presence of flaws in the component.

Radiography is highly effective for detecting volumetric flaws such as porosity. However, it is less effective at identifying planar flaws that are inclined at an angle to the radiation beam, as it primarily detects those aligned with the beam. This technique is widely used to identify internal defects, including cracks, corrosion, inclusions, and variations in thickness[12]. One significant advantage of radiography is the creation of a permanent inspection record, allowing the film to be analyzed later under optimal conditions for evaluation. Despite its benefits, this method has limitations. It cannot determine the precise size of flaws or their location along the material's thickness. Additionally, radiography poses potential radiation hazards and requires specialized equipment for operation.

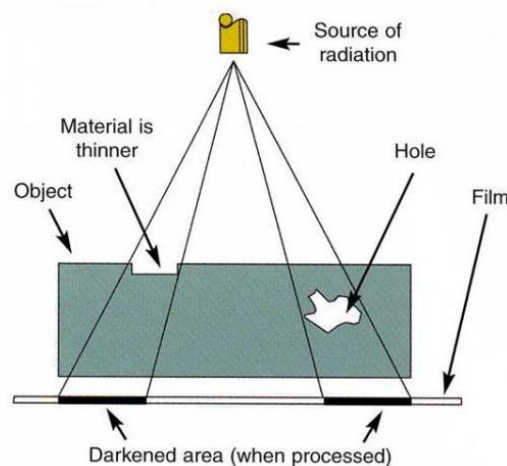


Figure 2: Radiography testing.

Radiographic testing is highly effective in identifying internal defects within aerospace materials, which are often not visible to the naked eye. These defects, which could develop during manufacturing, assembly, or service, include cracks, porosity, inclusions, voids, and bonding issues. Internal flaws in aircraft parts can be extremely hazardous, as they might grow over time under stress and potentially cause catastrophic failure. For this reason, the aerospace industry uses radiography extensively to ensure the safety and reliability of key components, such as turbine blades, aircraft fuselages, wing spars, and engine parts. In addition to defect detection, radiographic testing is also crucial for structural analysis. It is used to assess the integrity of welds and joints, particularly in critical areas like the engine mounts or wing-to-fuselage connections. Since welds can sometimes hide internal defects, such as incomplete fusion, porosity, or cracking, radiographic inspection provides a reliable means of ensuring that these critical connections meet the necessary strength and quality standards. The ability of radiographic testing to reveal hidden features makes it an indispensable tool for evaluating complex geometries and assemblies in aerospace[13]. For example, the internal structure of composite materials, which is increasingly used in modern aircraft, can be assessed for potential flaws using radiography. This allows engineers to identify problems early in the manufacturing process, which helps prevent failures in operational conditions.

One of the most significant innovations in radiographic testing has been the transition from traditional film-based radiography (FBR) to digital radiography (DR). In DR, the traditional film is replaced by a digital detector, such as a flat-panel detector or a charge-coupled device (CCD). These detectors convert the radiation passing through the object into digital signals, which are then processed to generate high-quality images. This transition has improved the speed of inspections, as digital images are available almost immediately for analysis. Additionally, digital radiography eliminates the need for chemical processing, making it more environmentally friendly and reducing turnaround times, which is particularly important in fast-paced aerospace manufacturing environments. Digital radiography also allows for better image manipulation and post-processing, enabling inspectors to enhance contrast, zoom into areas of interest, and optimize the image for easier defect detection. The digital format allows for better storage, retrieval, and sharing of images, which facilitates quality control and compliance with industry regulations.

Impact of Innovations on the Aerospace Industry

One of the most significant advantages of advanced non-destructive testing (NDT) methods, such as penetrant and radiographic testing, is their ability to detect defects early in the manufacturing and operational life cycle of aerospace components[14]. By identifying internal or surface flaws, such as cracks, voids, inclusions, or delaminations, these methods provide engineers with critical information regarding the structural integrity of parts. In aerospace, even the smallest defect can have catastrophic consequences. Therefore, detecting flaws before they propagate into larger, potentially life-threatening failures is paramount. Penetrant and radiographic testing both play a key role in preventing failures by identifying weaknesses that might otherwise go unnoticed. For example, in radiographic testing, X-rays or gamma rays can reveal cracks or voids deep within a part, while penetrant testing highlights surface-breaking defects that are not easily visible to the naked eye. These early defect detections allow for timely repairs or part replacements, significantly reducing the risk of failure during critical flight operations. By ensuring that components meet the highest quality standards, NDT contributes to overall safety and reliability within the aerospace industry. The ability to conduct these tests at various stages of production—ranging from initial material inspections to final post-manufacture testing—ensures continuous monitoring and verification of structural integrity throughout the lifecycle of aerospace components. This proactive approach to defect detection helps maintain the highest level of reliability, preventing costly and potentially dangerous failures after components are put into service.

Figure 3, provides a comprehensive overview of the value chain stages in the aerospace industry, showcasing the interconnected processes that transform raw materials into fully operational aerospace products and services. It begins with the raw material suppliers, responsible for providing essential inputs such as aluminum alloys, composites, and titanium used in manufacturing aircraft components. The assembly and integration stage involves combining these components into a complete aircraft, emphasizing precision and adherence to strict regulatory standards. The figure highlights the collaborative nature of the value chain, where each stage relies on advanced technologies and expertise to ensure quality and performance.

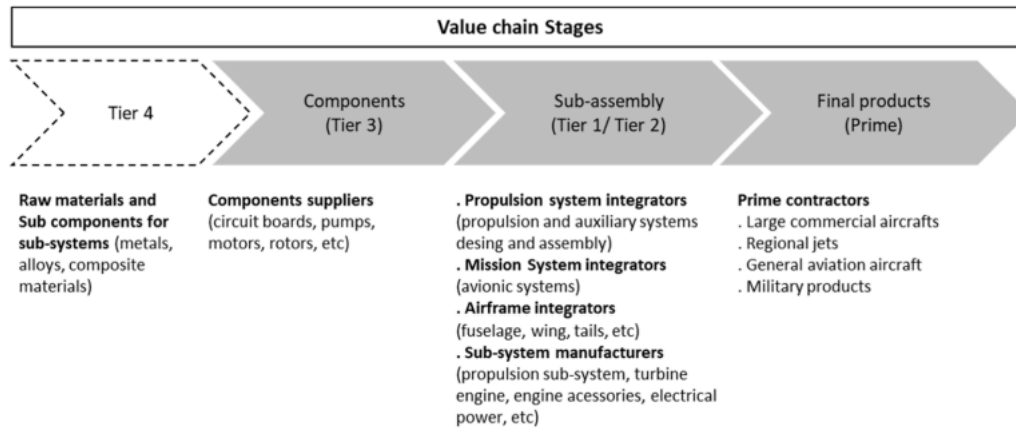


Figure 3: Value chain stages of the aerospace industry.

The later stages of the value chain include sales and distribution, which handle the marketing and delivery of finished aircraft to customers, such as airlines, military organizations, or private entities. Finally, the maintenance, repair, and overhaul (MRO) phase ensures the long-term operability and safety of aircraft, showcasing the industry's commitment to lifecycle management. Supporting these stages are regulatory bodies and R&D organizations, which provide oversight and drive innovation. The figure effectively illustrates how each stage contributes to the aerospace industry's overall value proposition, from material sourcing to end-of-life management, ensuring that the entire chain operates efficiently and sustainably. Aerospace is one of the most highly regulated industries in terms of safety and quality standards. Every component, from the smallest fastener to the largest structural wing section, must meet rigorous testing requirements set by organizations like the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), the European Union Aviation Safety Agency (EASA), and international standards bodies. Non-destructive testing (NDT) methods such as penetrant and radiographic testing play an essential role in meeting these stringent standards. Penetrant and radiographic testing are widely accepted and certified methods used to verify that components meet the required safety and quality standards. They are integral to ensuring compliance with regulations that mandate detailed inspections of critical parts, such as turbine blades, fuselage joints, and landing gear. For instance, in the inspection of turbine engines, radiographic testing ensures that critical internal components, such as turbine blades and disks, are free from material flaws that could lead to engine failure. The ability to perform comprehensive inspections without damaging the components ensures that they meet the high safety standards required for aircraft operation.

Table 1, illustrates the various Non-Destructive Testing (NDT) methods used in the aerospace industry, highlighting their specific purposes, advantages, limitations, and typical applications.

Each method is tailored to meet the unique requirements of aerospace components, ensuring structural integrity, safety, and reliability without causing damage[15]. For instance, Ultrasonic Testing (UT) is emphasized for its ability to detect internal flaws and measure material thickness in composite panels and landing gear, making it essential for maintaining critical aerospace structures. Radiographic Testing (RT), known for providing detailed imaging of internal defects, is widely used in inspecting engine components and welds, though it requires specialized equipment and precautions against radiation hazards.

Table 1: NDT of aerospace components

NDT Method	Purpose	Advantages	Limitations	Typical Applications
Ultrasonic Testing (UT)	Detect internal flaws, thickness measurements	High sensitivity, suitable for thick materials	Requires coupling medium, limited by geometry	Composite panels, fuselage, and landing gear
Radiographic Testing (RT)	Identify internal defects like porosity and cracks	Provides permanent record, detects hidden flaws	Radiation hazards, expensive equipment	Engine components, castings, welded joints
Eddy Current Testing (ECT)	Detect surface and near-surface defects	Fast, portable, no contact medium needed	Limited to conductive materials	Aircraft skin, fastener holes, corrosion detection
Liquid Penetrant Testing (PT)	Highlight surface-breaking flaws	Cost-effective, easy to use	Limited to surface defects, requires cleaning	Turbine blades, welded joints

The table also describes methods like Eddy Current Testing (ECT) which are effective for detecting surface and near-surface defects in conductive and ferromagnetic materials, respectively. These techniques are particularly suitable for applications such as aircraft skin and fastener holes, as well as landing gear inspection. Phased Array Ultrasonic Testing (PAUT) demonstrates the industry’s focus on leveraging cutting-edge technology for complex inspections, including bonded structures and intricate welds. Overall, the table serves as a

concise guide to understanding how each NDT method addresses the challenges of inspecting aerospace components under stringent operational and safety standards. As the aerospace industry continues to adopt advanced materials such as composites and additive-manufactured (3D-printed) parts, NDT methods must evolve to accommodate these innovations. Composites, such as carbon fiber reinforced polymers (CFRP), are increasingly used in aerospace due to their lightweight properties and high strength-to-weight ratios. However, these materials present unique challenges in terms of inspection, as they are often prone to delaminations, voids, and fiber misalignments that are not immediately visible to the naked eye. Penetrant and radiographic testing are critical tools in the inspection of composite materials, offering ways to detect surface and subsurface flaws that can compromise the performance of the part. Radiographic testing, especially digital radiography and computed tomography (CT), can offer high-resolution imaging capable of detecting voids and defects within the layers of composite materials. Penetrant testing can be used to identify surface cracks and other discontinuities that may arise during manufacturing, as well as those that develop during service. Similarly, additive manufacturing (AM) is changing the way aerospace components are designed and produced. Additive manufacturing enables the creation of complex, lightweight structures with optimized geometries that are difficult to achieve with traditional manufacturing methods. However, it also introduces new challenges in terms of part quality and consistency. The layer-by-layer deposition process can result in defects such as porosity, surface roughness, and lack of bonding between layers. To address these challenges, NDT methods such as radiography and penetrant testing are crucial for inspecting 3D-printed components. For example, CT scans allow for non-destructive internal inspection of 3D-printed parts, identifying defects that may be hidden within the printed layers. As additive manufacturing continues to advance, the integration of these NDT techniques will be essential for ensuring the quality and reliability of the new aerospace components produced using this technology.

Conclusion:

Advancements in non-destructive testing (NDT) methods, particularly penetrant and radiographic testing, are transforming the aerospace industry by enhancing the precision, efficiency, and reliability of component inspections. These innovations address the growing complexity of aerospace materials and designs, such as composites and additive-manufactured parts, ensuring their structural integrity and performance under demanding conditions. The

integration of automation, artificial intelligence, and digital imaging technologies has not only improved defect detection capabilities but also reduced inspection times and operational costs. While challenges remain, such as adapting these techniques to novel materials and balancing cost-effectiveness with advanced capabilities, the continued evolution of NDT methods is critical for meeting the aerospace sector's stringent safety and quality requirements. Future research and development will likely focus on further enhancing these technologies, ensuring they remain robust, adaptable, and aligned with the industry's rapid advancements.

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