

**The Train, the Window, and the Mobile Phone Designer:
a story of travel-time use in the high-speed cellular age¹**

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SCENE 1: INTRODUCTION



This is a story concerning a mobile phone designer named Ada, and her journey from central London to Thurso, Scotland. Critical accounts are stories, with a different literary form. The method and style of writing and storytelling alter the conditions of possibility for the sensory worlds which are made by a listener or reader; the writing method makes a difference to what words I choose, and how you imagine and translate them as an audience. Storytelling is inherent to academic practice and performance. Through the figure of Ada, ethnographic evidence is woven together into a story, drawing on fieldnotes, images, videos, artefacts, and memories from two different research projects completed last year. This account is not of any single journey, rather it acknowledges the partial nature of evidence and experience

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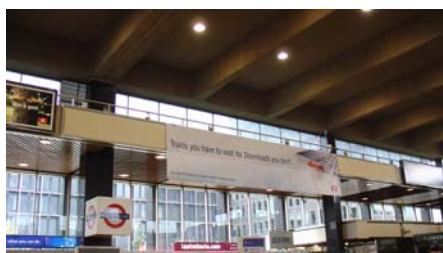
(Strathern, 1991). It is a collage of moments from a mobile ethnography conducted on UK public transport; and of a multi-site ethnography of the mobile telecoms industry in and around London. Ada and her journey are therefore comprised of fragments of evidence - for how is any accounting of knowledge done except by tracing fragments? This is not some methodological sleight of hand, but an explicit attempt to read and write a generative rather than deconstructive critique; an acknowledgement of the always creative work involved in knowledge-making. The method is one answer to Donna Haraway's question: 'what if the study and crafting of fiction and fact happened explicitly, instead of covertly, in the same room, and in all the rooms?' (Haraway, 1997: 110).

Ada's train journey from London to Caithness in north east Scotland is not an arbitrary but a journey with a single purpose: to generate an intervention of the train, as a dynamic sensory place, into how knowledge is made. How do mobile places, with their particular re-arrangements of materials and sensory experience, affect world-making?

Ada is a mobile phone designer, and therefore the knowledge she is preoccupied with making is that of mobile phones and their imagined futures.

SCENE 2: ADA IS PACKED
AND WAITING

The paolozzi sculpture, a monument of silver panelled earth, squatted in Ada's path. Piscator, fisherman, it diverted the stream of commuters for whom it was



merely an in-grown barb; no longer experienced as anything more than a brief irritation in the direction of their footsteps.

Walking up the river of early morning city-souls, against the current, she saw the behemoth for the first time. Its uppermost layer of built stratigraphy were blocks rising over the roots of a city. She imagined all cities had metal roots, technological roots, thrumming with electricity and digital codes.

She strode on, checked her watch: seven am; shifted the weight of her over-stuffed laptop case, rugged and secure against her back.

The concrete bunker euphemistically named Euston station was filled with bodies and travel inventory: magazines, books, pens, paracetamol, sandwiches, coffee. Advertising executives knew their market well: overall the most popular activities on the train were reading for leisure (34%), window-gazing or people-watching (18%), and working or studying (13%). More than a third of passengers were equipped with a book, over three-quarters carried a newspaper, over two thirds carried a mobile phone (Watts and Urry, in prep.).

That was her business: the mobile phone, cosseted purveyor of private moments in public spaces, hellspawn of her industry's imaginary which proclaimed:

'a world where six billion people are online all of the time...' (3GSM 2004 Fashion Show).

An advert for a Vodafone 3G card caught Ada's eye, another calling into being of that imaginary: Trains you have to wait for. Downloads you don't.

She slid her own handset out of her pocket, checked she hadn't missed any messages.

3G was old news, already everywhere. Always on: that was another of the industry's mottos. Beneath her feet, in the soil between the catacombs of the tube, were the trunk lines, bundles of optical fibre ceaselessly bright. And above her, through her, were the living, breathing cells of wireless signal; if she could see such high-frequency colours, the air would be alight with radio transmission.

London to Edinburgh, via Crewe. No platform announced.

She kept moving, turned left in to the steel chamber of AMT and ordered an espresso, mentally reviewed her packed case:

[She had] packed [her] bags so that they [were] easy to store on a train, and easy to run with. A paperback novel... in the top, for those unexpected long moments of waiting... notebook and... camera... similarly accessible. [ethnographic notes]

She and her belongings were in a packed and waiting state (Gasparini), consequently there was little to do but sit and sip her coffee and watch the bodies and attached bags dragging along on their leash behind. Suitcases were

what Donna Haraway might call, companion species.

Passengers were not simply bodies, they were bodies plus their belongings. Following ideas of distributed personhood (Gell, 1998), a passenger can be understood as both person and property; a person does not end at the skin but includes clothes, money, jewellery, and all the materials necessary for meaningful social interaction. When travelling by train, mobile phones, watches, and flight-cases are such prosthetics, they are part of the passenger and are meaningfully attached to them, although distributed in space. Both person and property travel together as a single meaningful entity. Nothing of that distributed, socio-material passenger should be lost en route, or travel at a different speed, or take a different route.

Moreover, Ada, as a distributed passenger, was spatially configured: her laptop case packed so that a notebook was ready to hand for long moments of waiting, laptop packed securely. She and her companion luggage were highly mobile, and equipped for waiting (Bissell, 2007; Gasparini, 1995).

She finished the final bitter-almond paste of coffee and found a departures screen and platform number. Her body and belongings, their routes through Euston long worn into instinctive memory, glided without thought to the welcoming doors of her train.

SCENE 3: ADA UNPACKS

After a protracted pause, her eyes



adjusting their gamma balance to take in the dimly lit seat reservation, she finally dumped her case down on her seat, and began to carefully unpack her laptop and notebook and papers. And then, carefully, she unwrapped a smooth polished quartzite stone, a pale grey pebble, and placed it by her computer.



[Another woman boarded, sat down, and] put her handbag on the seat by the window - rummaged in it for water, bottle, book... and keys - [which went] on to the table - and finally a phone, which she used to text someone. She pulled out a wad of paper, print-out of a website, and started to make short tick marks on it as she read...



Unpacked passengers are a reconfiguration of person and property into a shape well-equipped for travelling, but not moving. Laptops, pebbles, books, are placed to hand on seats and tables; unpacked passengers take considerably more space than simply a body in a seat. Their configuration includes fixed tables, fixed seats, to place their things in and on. Therefore they, too, become fixed in place, immobile; passengers become entangled with the train carriage as an object. In order to pick up a newspaper from the onboard shop, Ada was acutely aware that she would have to take the time to pack up her laptop, and detach bits of her technocultural self from the fixtures of the train.

SCENE 4: ADA LEAVES
LONDON EUSTON



The train began to rumble its way westwards, around the heavy mass of the new Wembley stadium. It was building up speed, ready to sling-shot itself north as it left the atmosphere of the capital.

Ada flicked on her laptop wireless, and watched the pattern of wireless networks rise and fall as the curve of track swung the carriage around and north. It was as if her laptop was taking in one last deep breath of home, holding in for as long as possible the rich heady scent of a flowering networks in the city air, unencrypted, ripe and ready to pick.

As the networks thinned, her eyes slipped from laptop to window. A criss-cross of points were flowing back and forth, binary lines, switched on or off. Lines that led in or out of the city. Her world was lived in lines, they were the topology of her everyday existence: telecommunication lines in the air, telecommunication lines in the earth. Lines of tarmac of her commute, of the hard-shoulder of the M25, a line that marked the optimum distance of the suburban asylum from the urban centre, according to Iain Sinclair's reading of Michel Foucault.

Ada was a flatlander. The mobile telecoms industry existed in a flat linear world: distances and directions to company meetings were always given in tube diagrams (Vertesi, 2005), in routes from a motorway junction, in miles from an air-corridor terminus. When she communicated it was by lines of

electricity, lines of electromagnetic waves, lines of digital characters.

The corporate campus, where she was based, included a landscaped garden, and she often sat on the decking, staring over the rim of an espresso at the thick wall of firs which hid the electrified spikes of fencing. The corporate architecture had no past, no earthworks or features from what had been before; her life there was lived within a landscape without the *long duree*. As Tim Ingold had remarked: 'for inhabitants of the metropolis, the world of their thoughts, their dreams and their relations with others floats like a mirage above the road they tread in their actual material life' (Ingold, 2004).

SCENE 5: ADA REFLECTS ON MOORE'S LAW



The future dreams of the industry wove this landscape of lines into form, and the lines of the landscape wove the future into form. Future, dream, landscape, were lines. The line of the future was what Ada (and most of her colleagues called) Moore's Law.

Moore's Law was the oft-misquoted prediction by Intel founder, Gordon Moore, of the exponential doubling of components per integrated circuit year on year (Moore, 1965). Since that publication over forty years ago, and in the rehearsal of the pervasiveness of silicon technology, Moore's Law had become synonymous with the exponential growth of almost any system in the high-tech industry. Moore's Law pulled the future of the mobile telecoms industry into a linearity of thought; no



rhizomes, no regions, no other topology. This relational shape, as a line, had a politics (Law, 2002). It was predictable and safe; just follow the curve on upwards, you can't miss. As time moved forward on the graph, technology quantifiably progressed. Bigger, better, faster, more, towards a future of anyone, anywhere, anytime, always on. 1G to 2G to 3G to 4G. *Ad infinitum*.

Moore's Law. Ada pursed her lips, grim. It was:

a runaway train, roaring down a path to disaster, picking up speed at every turn, and we are now going faster than human beings can endure.

She was bound to that future line, just as she was to the chair of the train. She moved in both worlds along the shortest possible line from a point of departure to a point of arrival, which was ideally no distance at all. Both were born of Cartesian, flat graphs, flat earths, their vectors marked out in increments of time and money. It was a line that Tim Ingold had recently explored as the line of transportation: a series of destination points; the kind of line that's in a hurry and 'wants to get from one location to another, then to another, but has little time to do so' (Ingold, 2007: 73). Such a line is indicative of moving over the world, racing from location to location, in an attempt to achieve pure transportation: the quickest, straightest path. The passenger, Ada and the mobile telecoms

industry, were assumed to be powerless, merely carried along, roaring on down the path. The line of transportation was technologically deterministic.

The line of urban transportation was the topology of the industry, its politics was of getting out and up as fast as possible, 3G downloads as fast as possible, reaching the high-speed cellular age as soon as possible. Lived landscape and lived imaginary were woven together.

SCENE 6: LANDSCAPE DOES
NOT RESIST



Ada starred motionless out of the window, bound to the gloom of her thoughts. Her mobile phone popped, another inescapable email.

The telephony and information network were unimpeded by the city blocks and bricks that filled Ada's window. They had long been perforated by infrastructural needles; the city was on telephony life-support, a permanent dialysis from one urban sprawl to another. As long as she remained within the flows of the city, its fleshy and digital mobilities, she and her bits would be transported at high-speed. The topography had been flattened into submission, made subservient, bulldozed, offering almost no resistance to either the embodied or electronic movement of those in the industry; rather it enabled the movement of high-speed automobile, aeroplane, and wired/wireless communications. The landscapes that were woven through the futures of the mobile telecoms industry (and the futures that were woven through these landscapes) had

a politics that were isotropic, flat and unresisting. Moore's Law, that ubiquity of information access, required no creative or visionary thought for Ada. For that was the shape of her world.

SCENE 7: ADA REFLECTS ON
PEOPLE'S PRACTICES
(MAKING OF TRAVEL TIME)



[Ada] looked out at the dotted mobile radio masts, the flood plains and town beyond, the dark watery sky and sun-brightened pylons... the power lines lit up, white arcs against the sky.

Someone switched their mobile onto handsfree, and a distorted voice echoed out into the carriage. Another phone rang... [creating] a low buzz of conversation in the carriage... [ethnographic notes]

Distracted by the staccato of noises, Ada booted her email. As she worked her way through the glowing coloured flags and shriek-marks within her inbox, she also scanned the seats around her, people watching.

A man and woman... were both doing sudoku [puzzles]... The businessman... had his elbows on the newspaper, deep into the [puzzle]... He was enthralled... doing the difficult one...

The man leant back, took his glasses off, folded his arms... picked up his mobile, dialled... Then leant over the puzzle and started again.

An hour later the business woman finally put her sudoku in her bag and opened up her magazine... The businessman... was still enthralled. He picked up his pen, ready to mark.

These two travellers flew along down the train line immersed in their world of sudoku puzzles. As Ada's fingertips communed with her keyboard and mail system, their bodies barely shifted during an hour of almost suspended animation; pens poised, eyes intent on the puzzle. Their time was not her time, their world was not her world. Ada and the puzzle-playing passengers were situated in their differently paced practices. Travel time was crafted and experienced with different artefacts, different materials: the flickering touch of trackerpads versus the forgotten pressure of a pen. As Doreen Massey and others have discussed, time and space are not subjective nor socially constructed but are made in dynamic socio-material interactions. Travel time is an effect of ongoing engagement with the mobile landscape. Travel time is made in travel time use.

Ada felt as though her travel time had been compressed, surprised at how fast time had passed compared to her watch. As Latour suggests, you do not encounter time, you only encounter interaction - you look at a station clock, sleep through an alarm, have no sense of minutes passing whilst reading a good book. Compared to clock time, travel time can be made stretched or compressed, dependent on the particular socio-material interactions, the particular world of the passenger.

SCENE 8: ADA
CONTEMPLATES CARRIAGE

The track winds on to Warrington. Banks of earth, the random jettison and flotsam of grey rubbish.



Many of those around her look out at the dotted mobile radio masts, the marsh-plains and town beyond; the dark watery sky and sun brightened pylons, almost white, the power lines lit up, white arcs against the sky.



Beautiful soft light, low through the trees and over the roofs and houses at Wigan. Mist in the air is creating a dreamy, peaceful air. The wide windows let in flashing means of sunlight, broken by catinery pillars, create a luminous strobe effect. On the other side of the train the sky is a dark grey and stormy, like the North Sea in winter. [Ada was] struck by the polarity that the train creates. Two weathers, two worlds.



The carriage was hermetically sealed against the world outside: temperature, air quality, atmosphere, ambience. Neither London nor Wigan. But its own distinct place, a place inbetween. As the train moved out of London it transformed, fluidly changing with new passengers and new landscapes. The window, the views, the puzzles, and handsfree mobile phone calls, were a particular sensoriality that was in flux. Moreover, this sensoriality was ontological, it was what made this world of the train for Ada. Travel time was made in travel time use. And it therefore was not, Ada realised, a fixed





world. Although the train on its line of acceleration out of London wove the shape of Moore's Law, as it moved through different places, the world was altering. As Tim Ingold said so succinctly: 'we know as we go, not before we go' (Ingold, 2000). But rather than moving through the world, the train was itself a moving dynamic landscape in which she lived. The world moved through her. And the topology of the line on which travelled might also change. She might be able to think differently about the future of the mobile telecoms industry.

The cloud was speckling the sky, coalescing into dark clouds, the yellow sun, a disk appearing and disappearing within its midst.

The countryside was flat... . Large farms... corrugated outbuildings, white painted cottages... and everywhere a trail of pylons, telephone cables and mobile antennae criss-crossing in the air. The networks interwoven amongst the occasional oak tree and chimney. Then suddenly [she was] in suburbia, and the network was television. Each building seemed to have four sturdy, bristling TV aerials, all pointing... back down the train line.

Edinburgh: her first change of trains. The summer haze beckoned her up out of the bowels of Waverley station to find lunch within the gothic warren of nearby streets. Then she was back, another train, another seat, another long journey ahead.

SCENE 9: ADA REFLECTS ON
THE PEBBLE



Hoping for some inspiration, some future other than Moore's Law, Ada returned to her invitation, the reason for this extraordinary journey:

Workshop on multisensory mobile communications: touch, taste, and test the future. Live a one day, island-wide demonstration and experience of a multisensory mobile future, the invitation read.

She knew almost nothing about the small design company on the archipelago of Orkney, off the far northern coast of Scotland. She had only a wavering instinct, a scent of possibility from her small pebble, an irritant in her mind.

She had taken the stone from another designer's desk, back at the design studio, part of their conversation on the aesthetics for the next five years. She could hear her colleagues lilting words, carefully chosen:

[We want a] lightness in materials, a playfulness in tension... Ecological in a material sense [means] is natural, she had begun.

[There is a] fierce function between mechanical and natural in a bike. Instead... we need to make a contrast. Softer, tactile, smooth... Choice of natural has integrity.

Stone is more natural than white... White is ageless...

Products [need to] look like they are in motion... Pebble shape has motion.

Beach glass is already worn, the more you touch it the better it gets.

Ada picked up her pebble, as always drawn to the translucency of the polished stone. She pressed it between thumb and forefinger, rubbed its surface; felt the coldness, the smoothness, but also a slight crease in the surface, a fracture, which drew her thumb. The imperfection nagged at her nerve endings. But no new thoughts came, only that jumble of voices.

The pebble slipped from Ada's fingers, fell into her lap. The colleague, from whom she had acquired it, had already mined its secrets for a new cameraphone, a luminous white curved shape in the hand. The pre-production models had arrived yesterday but, in the translation of engineering, economics and marketing, the design had lost its sheen, its allure. It had become another cameraphone, only faster, with more features and a higher megapixel camera. A victim of Moore's Law. Caught on the line.

She held soft quartzite pebble absently in her palm. Haptics, that's what interested her. Touch. She was seduced by the touch of the stone, its polished texture, translucent warmth. But what other futures might it and the world around her inspire?

SCENE 10: TRAVEL IS
LIMINAL (AND CREATIVE)

The world around her, now, was radically different to when she had left London. The vehicle, the people, the smells, the light, and the view had all been transfigured. There, was that snow



reflecting from the implacable Cairngorms? As she moved over the hours, had she been carried forward through the year into another season? Her journey had not simply performed a sling shot around London, and out of its atmosphere, it had taken her from one planet to another. Could she even say this was the same form of transportation, how was this train rattling past distilleries and an imagined scent of peaty-hops, related to the air-conditioned carriage on which she had left London? Was she even on the line of transportation anymore? Was this some other line, perhaps?

This train was not London, was not Wigan, not Edinburgh, nor the Cairngorms. It was none of those places, rather it was its own dynamic place, with its own temporality and ever-changing sensory experience; mobile in both geography and ontology.

As Ada stared out at the heather, thoughts colliding, she felt protective of her time. This was

time for me, and time to be me, she thought.

This travel time was transition time, she was neither at work nor at home, neither in London, nor in Thurso, neither working productively nor relaxing, but in-between.

Travel time was liminal, a place neither here nor there, a time and place of transition between different socio-material practices (Turner, 1986). This train, as a landscape, created a

uniquely changing place in-between arrival and destination. It had a socio-material specificity for Ada that created a sense of ambiguity and possibility. Its value was in its rich possibility for experience and practice, both imagined and enacted, which were markedly different to other places.

Moving on a train created a very different set of possibilities for practice, imaginaries, and dreams, compared to walking besides a train. Moreover, different train journeys, altered those possibilities and dreams still further.

The landscape Ada now dwelt within had an openness and fluidity, which wove a different world to that of her life in the design studio.

Travel landscapes were creative and productive as an effect of their ambiguous sense of place. But this potential for productivity was nothing to do with any resemblance to an office (or home), but in its partial differences.

SCENE 11: VISCOUS TIME



Ada's wandering senses and thoughts had not led her anywhere particular, but she felt buoyed by the excesses of daydreaming. As the train pulled in to Inverness, her rucksack felt lighter, and the long hour drinking hot-chocolate in the nearby plaza, slid warmly passed; the sun still high enough in the sky this far north to savour its warmth in the evening air. Although her body still juddered - travel always had a bone-marrow effect, a shivering viscosity which filled her limbs with a heavy,

SCENE 12: NO MOBILE
PHONE SIGNAL (OR
ERRATIC)



liquid lead.

Renewed, she boarded her final train for the three hours of transformation, which would leave her at Thurso, ready to take the boat across to the islands of Orkney the next morning.

The colour of the gorse on the hills, and then the clear water, a North Sea she had never imagined possible. Black rocks and shale beaches welcoming seals out of the depths.

She had to take a photograph and email it.

The thought collided with Ada's world. That was when her world, and her line of thinking, began to, finally, shift.

She discovered that her mobile phone was behaving erratically, the signal went from full to nothing in a second, a wild fluctuation that made the object seem like a plastic (and plastic-y) toy.

Next she flipped open her laptop and saw that her battery was almost dead. And, of course, the train did not provide power sockets (not even in first class, she looked).

There was no ubiquity of mobile telephony here, no always on. The six billion people online, all of the time, were not those who travelled on this train. That future, that imaginary, was suddenly meaningless to Ada. Was anyone going to install cellsites all the way along this remote line? Her knowledge of the mobile telecoms industry, suggested the economics would almost never work. Remote, disparate populations somehow were forgotten by Moore's Law - they

resisted the line - the capitalist economics of distribution responded by making them invisible, irrelevant. But here she was, in that world. And she did not feel irrelevant.

Her pebble, out as usual on the flip-down table in front of her, glistened suddenly, and she picked it up, began to run her thumb back and forth over that nagging imperfection. She imagined that her movements were like rubbing a magic lamp, would activate the stone in some way, bring it to life, so that her friends, family, would be conjured from its depths - perhaps their faces appearing in the translucency of the stone itself. A haptic mobile device... with no need for ugly keys and buttons, just pressure, movement, perhaps it was kinetically powered..

Ada was on another line, a trail, following her nose from place to place as the train moved on. She was making her journey more as a wayfarer, interacting with the landscape inside and outside the train. Tim Ingold contrasts this form of line with the line of transportation, which moves rapidly from location to location over the world. Ingold characterises the trail as the open-ended line of the wayfarer, always on the move, but always moving in and through the world. The route is the transport ideal, defined by its destinations. The trail is ongoing and defined by the movement itself (Ingold, 2007: Chapter 3).

By travelling as a wayfarer, at least in part, Ada moved along the train

line differently, her world was different, and her dreams for the future of the mobile telecoms industry were transformed.

SCENE 13: ADA ARRIVES AT THURSO



Thurso and Ada's technocultural self was a seething mass, she had been writing notes on bits of paper, now stuffed into her pockets. Her bones jangled beneath her flesh, although whether with disorientation, tiredness, or excitement, she could not say. Map in hand, she walked out into the deep-blue of a northern twilight, Venus setting, faint constellations beginning to form. The road down the hill pointed to the beach, to the north coast, and to Orkney.

She walked through the high street, passed the grey pebble-dashed housing and onto the stony beach. Her ferry sat in the nearby harbour, lit, waiting for her. But there was a thick white sea-mist covering the horizon, hiding Orkney.

Her dreams of a haptic mobile device seemed irrelevant now, on solid ground. Daydreams. Such possibilities could only exist in the liminal world of the train, it seemed. Now, in this urbanised town, the thought seemed incongruous - the cool wind of economic and marketing necessities made it practically impossible.

Disillusioned she unwrapped her pebble again, sighed in frustration, then bent down and tossed it, finger to thumb, trying to skim it over the waves. It spun once, then sunk.

The ripples spread, her gaze lifted

following them out to sea. And the mist on the horizon began to thin.

There.

Orkney.

The far off cliffs, and Old Man of Hoy, floating on the water. What futures might be made there. In a place where no train line stamped its linear mark of topology or politics of transportation, where the hills and sea between the islands forever resisted radio signals. Orkney was a place where her industry's future of always on information access would never be, and might never be imagined. It was always partial, patchy, local, adapting to those who lived there. On Orkney other futures might be imagined.

She smiled to herself, turned back to the town and her berth on the ferry that awaited.

Ada was ready, now, for tomorrow's journey and tomorrow's futures.

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