

The art of train travel

or how to tell a story of people, places and technical paraphernalia

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[SLIDE]:

The painter, Edward Hopper, had a fascination with travel and with trains. The woman sitting here in Compartment C is so much like myself and the many others I photographed during my research last year: reading, dreaming, transported elsewhere, no longer quite the same as we are when standing still. The project I am involved in is, broadly speaking, a sociological investigation into what we do when we travel in the UK, and in particular, what we do when we travel by public rather than private transport¹. This paper is focused, however, on the minutiae of train travel.

There are many actors involved in the performance of a train journey. Myself, as the ethnographer and traveller, is also subject to, and a participant in, the world of the timetable system, in the limited world of a return ticket to London, in the worlds of my fellow passengers, and in the prescribed universe of the rail network itself. These worlds are made by the many different social and material actors involved in train travel; heterogeneous actors², human and nonhuman, who each possess their own worlds, their own possibilities, and yet must interact together in order for a train journey to be made. Let me tell you a story, then, of a train journey, and of how many worlds collided and coalesced to produce a version of me, travelling by train during four months of research last year. Each world is constructed from fragments of evidence collected by the project, including ethnographic writing, interviews, focus groups, surveys, photography and video stills, all concerned with what people and technologies do when they travel. This story is a collage of a train journey, each fragment, each world, in tension with another...

¹ This is an EPSRC funded project 'Travel time use in the information age'. For more information see the project website <http://www.transport.uwe.ac.uk/research/projects/travel-time-use/>

² By heterogenous actors, I am invoking the approaches of Actor-Network Theory. Law, J. 1992. 'Notes on the theory of the actor-network: ordering, strategy and heterogeneity'. *Systems practice* 5: 179-393.

World of... ethnographer



Lancaster station

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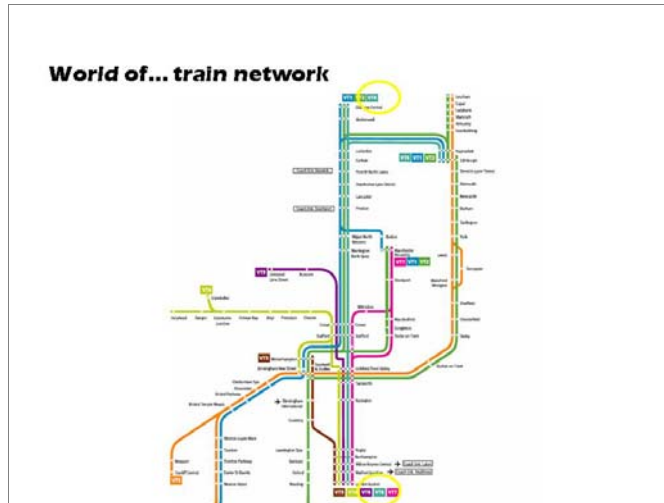
I have booked my tickets in advance for the whole journey. Particularly to get a seat on the 18:30 on Friday. I used the Fast-Ticket machine and my tickets are printed, however, I have no reservation, it just says Suggested Service. Not helpful. I go to the ticket booth. The man sarcastically remarks that the ticket machines are a “waste of time... we have twenty or thirty a day come back” he says.

World of... ticket



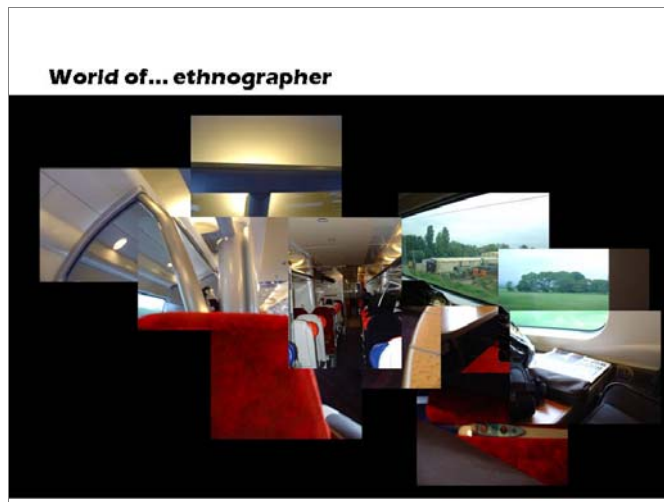
[SLIDE]:

Class Standard. Ticket type Saver Return. Adult One. Child Nil. From Lancaster to London Terminals. Valid See restrictions. Price £60.40. Number 1621.



[SLIDE]:

Follow route VT6, which originates at Glasgow Central and terminates at London Euston.



[SLIDE]:

I depart on the 13:57 from Lancaster to London Euston... It is so difficult to read in the low light... A man a few seats away has a walkman on, I can hear the tinny sounds, like a small world echoing. Most noticeable to me, sitting at a table by a window, however, is how low the windows are. They are wide, but not high, it feels as if the sky is pressing down upon me. It is like I might imagine being on a boat or the Space Shuttle. There is a distinct feeling of separation, enforced and necessary, from the outside elements; like travelling underwater or where the outside is hostile.

World of... ethnographer



[SLIDE]:

A man further down the carriage has adopted a familiar position: hands clasped and resting in his lap, eyes resting straight ahead. Reminds me of an automaton, waiting to be switched on.

World of... member of a focus group

"It would be exciting if there was a carriage running with a lap dancing show, a bar with poker in it, a rock and roll band playing..."

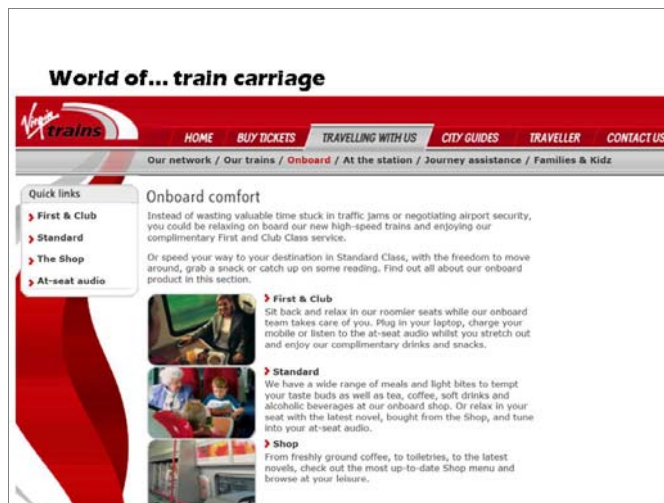
[SLIDE]:

It was a vast, dark and scaled viper, curled around the platform. A black snake of a train, with impenetrable tinted windows, and no branding, just a poison yellow nose at the front, through which the driver would stare down the track. Heavy set security guards in leathers and sunglasses barred each door, and more stood in a line in front of the temporary panelling, which shielded the front end of the train, currently being loaded with equipment. The doors, as one, hissed as they rolled back, dry-ice billowing down the steps. I dashed forward with the surge, waving my ticket ahead of me. The security man checked the UV mark, and I leaped into the dark mist. The light onboard was nightclub dim, the beating sound system turned low. I took a left into the first carriage, slipped around the casino tables, the dealers standing to attention, packs of cards glistening in their sealed wrappers.



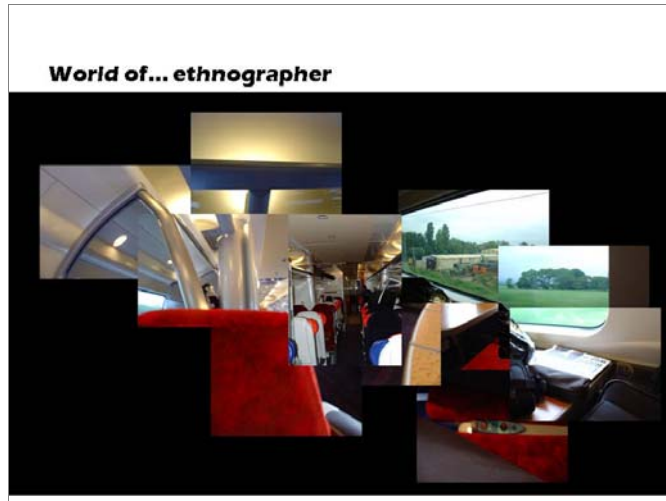
[SLIDE]:

The train manager... reminds passengers in the Quiet Coach to switch off their phones and “not to use any item which might otherwise cause a nuisance to fellow passengers” There is the rustle of a crisp packet, the smell of artificial cheese and onion wafts over.



[SLIDE]:

Instead of wasting valuable time stuck in traffic jams or negotiating airport security, you could be relaxing on board our new high-speed trains, enjoying our complimentary First and Club Class service. Or speed your way to your destination in Standard Class, with the freedom to move around, grab a snack or catch up on some reading. Sit back and relax in our roomier seats whilst our onboard team takes care of you. Plug in your laptop, charge your mobile or listen to the at-seat audio whilst you stretch out and enjoy complimentary drinks and snacks. We have a wide range of meals and light bites to tempt your taste buds as well as tea, coffee, soft drinks and alcoholic beverages at the onboard shop.



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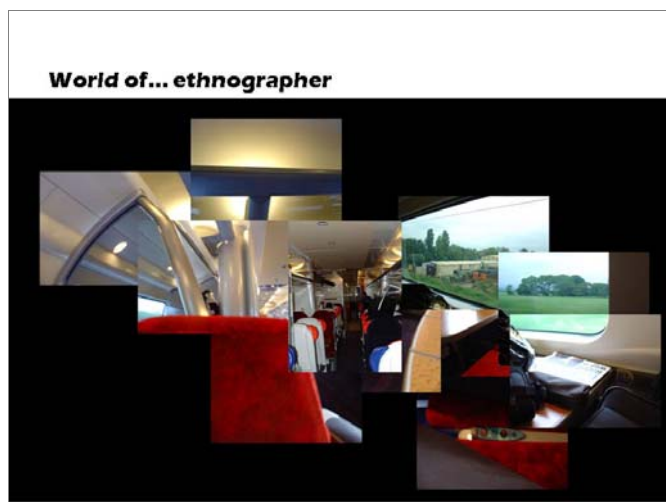
The train is running ten minutes late, I'm likely to miss my connection at Macclesfield. The train manager consults the timetable and suggests I change at Preston (which I do).

World of... timetable

Lancaster	13:57
Preston	14:17
Preston	14:38
Manchester	15:17
Stockport	15:27
Macclesfield	15:41
Macclesfield	15:52
Stoke-on-Trent	16:12
Milton Keynes	17:25
London Euston	18:10

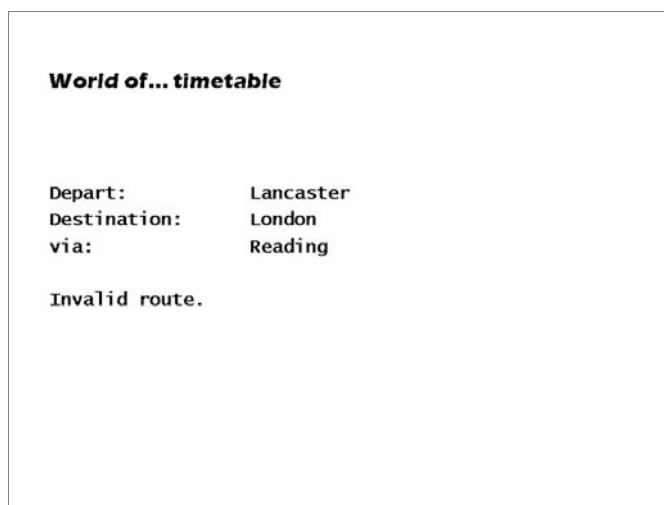
[SLIDE]:

Lancaster 13:57; Preston 14:17.
 Preston 14:38; Manchester 15:17; Stockport 15:27; Macclesfield 15:41.
 Macclesfield 15:52; Stoke-on-Trent 16:12; Milton Keynes 17:25;
 London Euston 18:10.



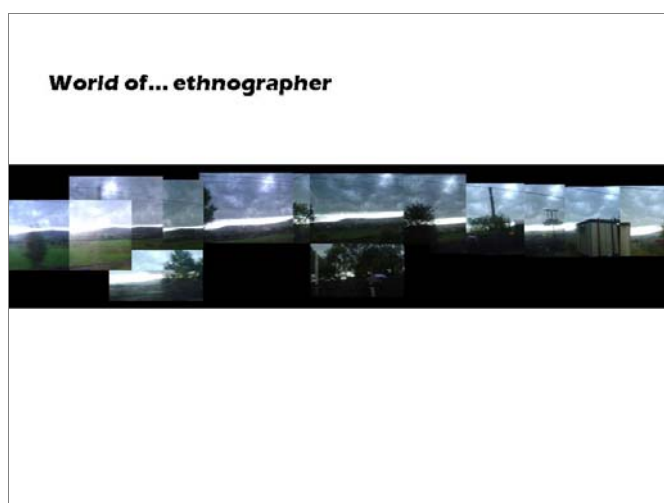
[SLIDE]:

Realise after I've been sitting on the London Euston train at Preston (waiting for thirty-five minutes) that I should have stayed on the Bournemouth train, changed at Reading, and travelled into London via Paddington.



[SLIDE]:

Invalid route.



[SLIDE]:

Feeling strung out.

Inside it feels extraordinary claustrophobic... Low lighting... The whole carriage is dark, almost atmospheric and theatrical... Pulling into Wigan North Western: the station, through the portal windows seems drab and unworldly, like the Space Shuttle landing at the tiny Kirkwall airport on the Isles of Orkney. There is beautiful soft light, low through the trees and over the roofs and houses past Wigan. Mist outside is creating a dreamy, peaceful air... On the other side of the train the sky is a dark grey and stormy, like the North Sea in winter... The track winds on to Warrington: banks of earth and the random jetsam and flotsam of white rubbish. Many of those around me look out at the dots of mobile radio masts, the dark watery sky and sun-brightened pylons, almost white; the power lines lit up in the sunlight, glowing arcs against the sky.

The background rumble of air conditioning gives me a headache. I long to open the window and feel fresh air on my face. My eyes hurt from reading in the low lighting.

World of... survey questionnaire

Q44 How did you spend the time on this train?

	TICK ALL THAT APPLY	TICK ONE SPENT MOST TIME ON
Sleeping/snoozing.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> 2%
Reading for leisure.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 28%
Working/ studying (reading/ writing/ typing/ thinking).....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> 15%
Talking to other passengers.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> 5%
Window gazing/people watching.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 21%
Listening to music/radio.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> 3%
Text messages/phone calls – work.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> 1%
Text messages/phone calls – personal.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> 1%
Eating/drinking.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> 1%
Entertaining children.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> 2%
Playing games (electronic or otherwise).....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> 0%
Being bored.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> 2%
Being anxious about journey (e.g. delays or where to get off).....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> 1%
Planning onward or return journey.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> 1%
Other : Please write in <input type="text"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> 7%

[SLIDE]:

Strategic Rail Authority survey. Question 44: How did you spend the time on this train? 28% said mostly Reading for Leisure, and 21% said Window gazing or People watching.

World of... member of focus group

“It’s your own time isn’t it - if you’re alone. I always travel alone, very seldom with friends, let’s put it that way. I enjoy it. It’s time for me.”

[SLIDE]:

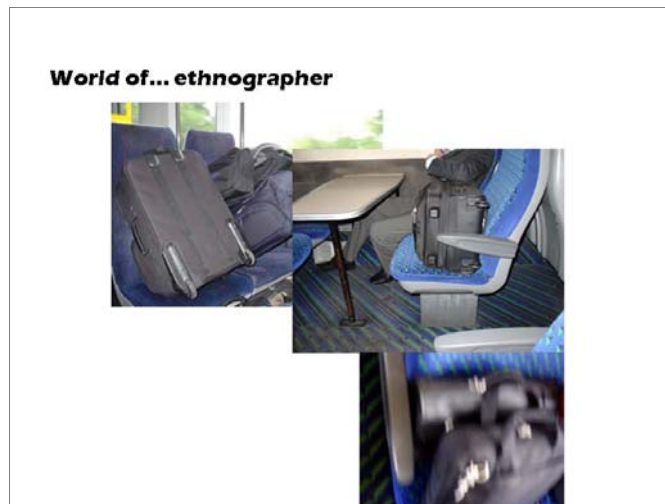
It’s your own time isn’t it. If you’re alone. I always travel alone, very seldom with friends, let’s put it that way. I enjoy it. It’s time for me.

World of... rolling stock operator

“Why do you want passenger entertainment on trains, and the simple answer is because train journeys are boring. They are dead boring.”

[SLIDE]:

At the door a waiter offered me a glass of champagne, I took it with a grin, and headed on, through the vestibule. There was a roar of air conditioning, a blast of cold air, and then I was in to the black leather seats of the entertainment carriage. With an expert roll, I launched into the nearest seat, and flipped up the foot support, slipped the plastic flute into the drinks holder. The console fell easily into my lap, and I pulled the screen up close to my face, pushed my head back to get the maximum effect from the directional speakers in the seat. The credits for Grand Theft Auto rolled, my thumb flexed, and then I was off. Driving the streets of San Andreas. Others take up seats around me, but when we left the station, or if we left, was an irrelevant mystery. After an hour thrashing someone called Sysop, who was hooked up into the system nearby, I peeled back the screen and wondered off for other pleasures. Now the sound system in the vestibule areas was beating out some indie rock from a live band further down the train.



[SLIDE]:

Someone walks past, an overnight case held awkwardly aloft, the wheels crash into the seats as she passes, narrowly missing a man's head. Those sitting by themselves all have their luggage next to them on a seat. As I do. There is no storage room beneath the seat in front, to place my rucksack.



[SLIDE]:

Please don't store your luggage: in the aisles, in the vestibules, in the wheelchair area, outside or inside the toilet area, in the onboard shop, or on the next seat.

World of... member of focus group

"I was reading a book, but when you look up as you go out at those awful houses... then you start to get gardens, and then the flat conversions. It's quite fascinating just to look up and speculate on who lives there and where they're going to..."

[SLIDE]:

I was reading a book, but when you look up as you go out at those awful houses... and then you start to get gardens, and then the flat conversions. It's quite fascinating just to look up and speculate on who lives there and where they're going to...

World of... ethnographer



[SLIDE]:

London. Suddenly I feel it.... The press of buildings... Dusk. Blue light and orange fluorescence. It feels hot and stuffy like an oppressive summer heat; contributing to a sense of low frustration and waiting impatience. Large stations are full of doe-eyed gazing upwards passengers. The gentleman across from me peers intently at a long bus ticket. The minutes tick by. The train seems caught in a stasis. Platform after empty platform now blurs past. I desperately want to read my book - to sink into another world. My body does not want to be here. The claustrophobia of other people, the knowing of the trauma to get home by bus at the other end, the noise, the constant juddering. I feel tired, a cross London tube journey awaits and another train, then a thirty minute walk and a hotel. I wonder what journeys await my fellow passengers.

We arrive ten minutes early.

That was a collage of a train journey, an overlapping of the many worlds involved in making train travel possible. More crucially, however, it was also a collage of me as a train traveller. It talked about how I could not remain unaffected by the worlds around me. The timetable made a difference to me, I had to change at Preston, but was not allowed to change at Reading. The low lighting in the train carriage made my eyes ache when I was reading. I was

invaded by the overpowering smell of cheese and onion crisps. In the words of the sociologist of science, Karen Barad, things kick-back³, they perform their materiality through our experience, through our interaction with them. Donna Haraway calls it material-semiotics, the discursive practices through which we make the world in a particular way, and not in another⁴. So, by interacting with the timetable system, both I and the timetable got made in a particular way. But in order to interact we had to translate each other's resistances, translate each other's local social and material qualities. By translation I mean that we had to establish something commensurate between us, for a while. We developed an understanding: I had to change at Preston, and the timetable system remained intractable concerning the possibility of anything changing at Reading en route to London. The world of the timetable could not translate going to London via Paddington, but in order to travel I had to accept that limitation. In order to continue to travel, my world had to include the incommensurability of the timetable.

So, from Preston onwards it became no longer possible to talk of me as a traveller in isolation from the timetable. Rather, I now included it; for my journey, my movement, was made possible through that world. A better example of this inseparability would be my luggage. Once onboard the train, it and I travelled together and would arrive together, it even took the seat next to me. We were inseparable, we went to the shop together, even the toilet together⁵. I was no longer the same as I might be sitting at home, I was sitting on a train, meaning that I was a person and their luggage moving as one. As a train traveller I was, what Lucy Suchman, an anthropologist of technology, calls 'irreducible' to me and my luggage as separate entities⁶. And I was also irreducible to me, my luggage and the train timetable. I was no longer then, entirely just human, in travelling I had become mixed up with lots of nonhumans, such as timetable systems, train tickets, and my luggage⁷; and it would be impossible for me to complete my journey without being mixed up in their worlds. I could not travel by train without a train ticket, without translating the timetable, without my luggage, without the train carriage. We were all in it together, woven together.

This ongoing world-making, this iterative interaction, is a practice that has effects, not least, arriving late or worse, never arriving.

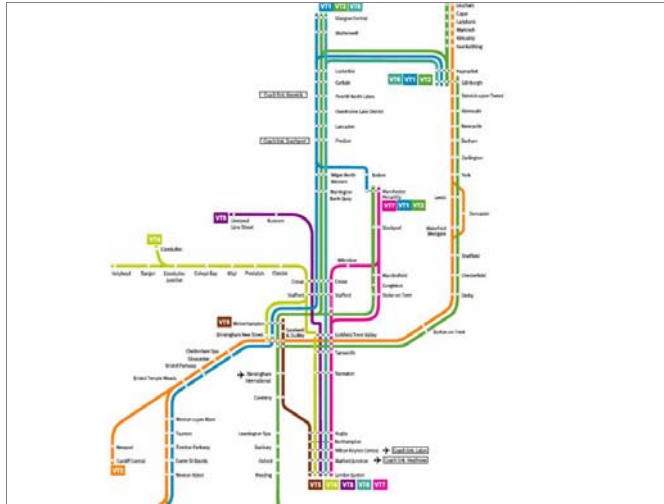
³ Barad, K. 1999. 'Agential realism: feminist interventions in understanding scientific practices' in Biagioli, M. (ed.) *The science studies reader*. London: Routledge.

⁴ Haraway, D. 1991. 'Situated knowledges: the science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective' *Simians, cyborgs and women: the re-invention of nature*. London: Free Association Books.

⁵ This idea of mutual inter-dependency is also discussed by Donna Haraway in her work on companion species. Haraway, D. 2003. *The companion species manifesto: dogs, people, and significant otherness*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press.

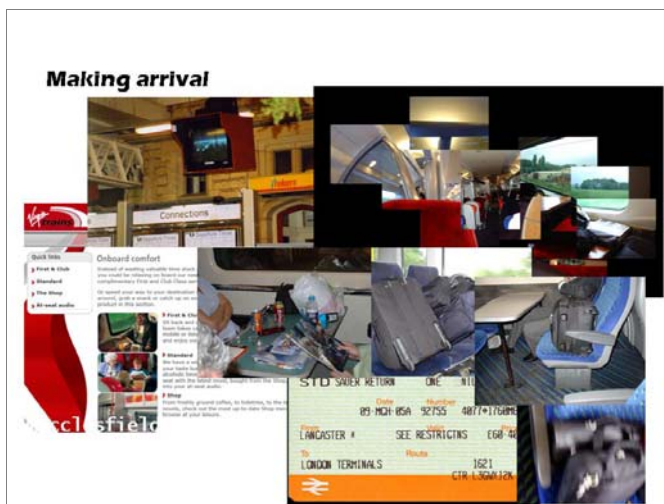
⁶ Suchman, L. in prep. 'Replicants and irreductions: affective encounters at the interface (draft)' in *Plans and situated actions: the problem of human machine communication (2nd Edition)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁷ In this mixing of human and nonhuman, nature and culture, I am drawing upon the trope of the cyborg in Science Studies. Haraway, D. 1991. 'A cyborg manifesto: science, technology, and socialist-feminism in the late twentieth-century' *Simians, cyborgs, and women: the reinvention of nature*. London: Free Association Books.



[SLIDE]:

The line of VT6 is a map of the journey from Lancaster to London Euston, the planned stops, the interchanges, yet it does not include any of the work of making a train journey. It provides no help, does not anticipate in any way, the ongoing interactions and irreductions necessary to make a train journey. Lucy Suchman, in her contrasting of European and Micronesian navigation, suggests that rather than following rational plans such as a preconceived course or map, navigation may also be a series of situated actions, that is “actions taken in the context of particular, concrete circumstances”⁸. A Micronesian mariner, unlike a European mariner, does not follow a planned course or map but, rather, responds continually to the flow of local winds, waves, star relationships and so on. Train travel, similarly, requires not a map but a constant iterative negotiation and translation between travellers, luggage, trains and tickets, in order to reach a destination. Unlike a car driver, a train traveller does not set off with a spatial course but with a destination in mind; with the desire to become a traveller and through that transformation of the self and the world of tickets and trains around them, to reach that destination. In words of Tim Ingold “we know *as we go*, not *before we go*”⁹. Like navigating with the wind and stars in Micronesia, train travel is also an art, it is a craft, it is a making of the world, a knitting together moment by moment, that takes a little practice. We can only arrive by departing and stepping onboard; we can only know a destination by leaving home.



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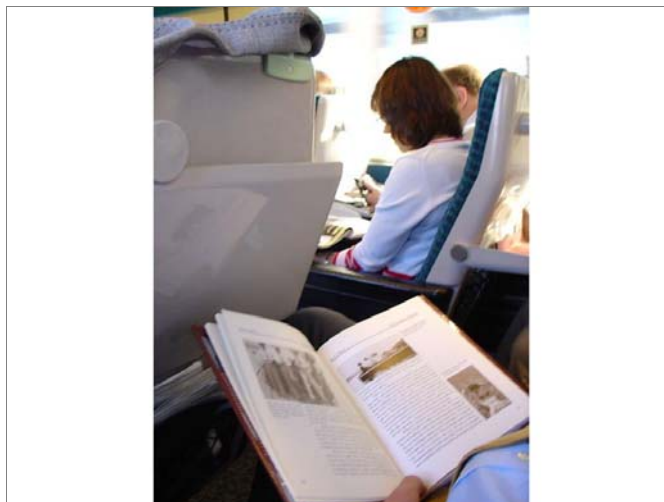
⁸ Suchman, L. 1987. Plans and situated actions: the problem of human machine communication. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. See page viii.

⁹ Ingold, T. 2000. 'To journey along a way of life: maps, wayfinding and navigation' *The perception of the environment: essays in livelihood, dwelling and skill*. London: Routledge. See page 239.

So the moment of arrival is made from the journey, it is made from the ongoing situated actions between all of the many actors involved. It is this ongoing fluid world-making which provides the sense of liminality of travel, of separation from the everyday: the worlds of travel are not commonplace (and when they are travel becomes something else). But there is something particular about the liminality of train travel. In order to travel by train, I had to interact with the train systems and become the collage which I showed earlier; I could only travel by becoming myself plus (at least partly) the train and all the rest. In the moment of mixing with that technology something rather strange was made, a hybrid of me plus a train. So, I am, whilst travelling, partly unfamiliar to myself. I am no longer entirely in control of my movement, no longer entirely sure how or when I might arrive (these things are now entangled with the train network). But, although there is a loss of control there is, in that making of a partial stranger, also the possibility for something else - something magical, something imaginative, something other than the everyday me. Trains make different kinds of travellers to cars, or to aeroplanes. They make different possibilities. Perhaps that is why Alain de Botton wrote the following:



[SLIDE]:



[SLIDE]:

“[Hopper] was drawn to the half-empty carriages making their way across a landscape: the silence that reigns inside whilst the wheels beat in rhythm against the rails outside, the dreaminess fostered by the noise and the view from the windows, a dreaminess in which we seem to stand outside our normal selves and have access to thoughts and memories that might not arise in more settled circumstances. The woman in Compartment C, Car 293, seems in such a frame of mind...”¹⁰

¹⁰ de Botton, A. 2002. The art of travel. London: Penguin. See pages 56-57.

The art of train travel is, perhaps, not just an art of mixing people, places and technical paraphernalia, but also an art of dreaming¹¹.

¹¹ By dreaming, I am hinting, too, at the common practices (as demonstrated in the SRA questionnaire) of reading and window-gazing on trains.