

THE ART AND CRAFT OF TRAIN TRAVEL¹

written and performed by

Laura Watts

Cosmobilities Network Meeting - Berlin
October 2005 - Fluidities and Stabilities:
New Perspectives in Mobility Research

BEHIND THE SPEAKER A CONSTANT STREAM OF VIDEO PLAYS THROUGHOUT THE PERFORMANCE. IT IS CLEARLY TAKEN THROUGH A TRAIN WINDOW: A BLUR OF TREES, FIELDS, INDUSTRIAL SITES, SUBURBAN HOUSING, THE SEA, TRAIN TRACKS, BRIDGES. THE IMAGES ARE RELENTLESS, BLURRING TOGETHER IN MANY PLACES. THE NEVER-ENDING MOTION IS DISTRACTING.

SPEAKER: The following performance is a synthesis of quotations from my field notes² and video footage recorded during an ethnography of an eight hour train journey down the West Coast of the UK, repeated over several weeks. This travel ethnography forms part of a wider project on: 'Travel Time Use in the Information Age'³ at the Centre for Mobilities Research at Lancaster University, and the Centre for Transport and Society at University of the West of England.

¹ COPYRIGHT: This online draft script may be cited or briefly quoted in line with the usual academic conventions. You may also download it for your own personal use. This script may not be published elsewhere (e.g. mailing lists or bulletin boards) without the author's explicit permission. If you copy this script you must include this copyright note. This script must not be used for commercial purposes or gain in any way. You should observe the conventions of academic citation in a version of the following form: Laura Watts. 'The Art and Craft of Train Travel'. Published by Department of Sociology, Lancaster University UK at http://www.lancs.ac.uk/wattslj/postgrad/downloads/lwatts_artandcraft_october2005.htm

² Extracts from my ethnographic field notes are shown in quotation marks.

³ This is an EPSRC funded project at Centre for Mobilities Research, Lancaster University, and at Centre for Transport and Society, University of the West England. For more information see the project website <http://www.transport.uwe.ac.uk/research/projects/travel-time-use/>

Together the video, fieldnotes and commentary create a performance of particular experiences of my travel ethnography and some of their effects.

THERE IS A PAUSE AS THE VIDEO COUNTS DOWN AND THEN BEGINS.

FIELDNOTE: "I have packed my bags so that they are easy to store on a train, and easy to run with. A paperback novel is in the top, for those unexpected long moments of waiting⁴... This notebook and my camera are similarly accessible, as are my tickets".

When does the journey begin? Perhaps it began last night when I packed my bag, in the moment of socio-technical interaction with the rucksack. It was in that moment, in that movement, when the journey was made as a possibility; it was then that a destination shimmered, materialising. Through that interaction - packing a bag - an ephemeral course was plotted; a faint, yet tangible, connection to a destination.

FIELDNOTE: "It is 11:09 am. I'm on the Bournemouth train, from Lancaster to Preston. I was going to catch the 11:24, but this arrived whilst I was waiting, so I adopted my usual policy of [ignoring the timetable and] catching the next available service. You never know if the one behind will be delayed".

FIELDNOTE: "Preston 12:48. The [train] manager tells me that it's all change at Birmingham New Street, since the train only has one engine [working]. 'It won't get over

⁴ For a discussion of technology and waiting see: Gasparini, G. (1995) On Waiting, in *Time and Society*, 4 (1): 29-45.

the hills in Devon,' he says. So the train we need will arrive on the adjacent platform... This is the second time this month that I will have had to change trains unexpectedly due to a problem with the train. Last time it was due to a smashed window... The manager [makes an announcement] '[This] train is being taken out of service... [the] service replacement [is] at platform 2B."

The timetable plans no-one's journey for there are no passengers moving inside the world of the timetable. Nothing travels in its electronic domain; it can only imagine travel. Its work is a form of *imaginary engineering*: the production of alphanumeric relations. The timetable imagines the course of journeys without the mess of bodies and axel grease. In the world of the timetable, every train leaves on time, has always left on time; its future and its past are in a perpetual utopia. But this Elysium of train travel is a place with very material and social effects. It is a place I, as a passenger, may never visit for I am not an alphanumeric, but instead must circumnavigate. In the manner of a Trukese mariner, as Lucy Suchman suggests, I respond to the timetable as I respond to the weather, altering my movements, making my journey moment by moment through ongoing situated actions⁵.

FIELDNOTE: "[Have had an] espresso. We stop opposite a Pendolino [train]... On another platform [a freight train] trundles through. We sit on the platform. The minutes tick by...

⁵ This borrows from the anthropologist of technology Lucy Suchman's work on plans as resources for situated actions. The timetable is the plan to which a traveller must respond to ad hoc changes in circumstance. See Suchman, L. (1987) Plans and situated actions: the problem of human machine communication, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Is this a delay? Is this scheduled? Will I miss my connection? The minutes tick on. The train remains idling. We wait".

FIELDNOTE: "We are running 18 minutes late.. there has been a fire which has led to points failure. We will be here for [another] 10 to 15 minutes, sitting on the train. People sigh in frustration. 'Bloody hell,' cries the woman behind me.

The utopia of the timetable is incommensurate with the ever-shifting world of the traveller. For utopia is merely an addled dream; is without the flesh of the caffeine-saturated traveller. Yet, it is only through the jangled mixing of dream and vice that a train journey is made; in the *heterogeneous engineering* of imaginary timetable and embodied traveller, to borrow from John Law⁶. The train journey is made by infecting traveller with timetable⁷, an inflammation of the joints that alters movement and restricts my actions, so that sitting becomes coiling, ready to spring to a connecting service.

FIELDNOTE: "12:38... I'm sat in a carriage watching, taking notes, surreptitiously taking photographs. I am a partial-passenger, a lone ethnographer travelling to Penzance; my alien movements, scuttling from carriage to carriage, reveal my otherness to those that [just] sit and sit".

FIELDNOTE: "Birmingham New Street... [In the onboard shop] the train manager, as I walk

⁶ See discussion of Actor-Network Theory in Law, J. (1992) 'Notes on the theory of the actor-network: ordering, strategy and heterogeneity' in *Systems practice* 5: 179-393.

⁷ This notion of infectious agents draws on Donna Haraway's work on hybridity in *Science and Technology Studies*, and in particular on blood infection as a metaphor for category-mixing. See Haraway, D. (1992) 'Race: Universal donors in a vampire culture' in *Modest_witness@second_millennium.FemaleMan[®]_meets_OncoMouse[™]*. London: Routledge.

passed, is concerned... (playfully, but only just) that I am not a spy reporting back to the company. 'I am just having a tea,' he tells me".

FIELDNOTE: "[I realise] my [name] badge marks me as an outsider, which is both ethically correct but also invasive. Without a badge I might not be recognised as an outsider. I am liminal, both wanting to pass unnoticed as a passenger, and [not wanting to] display false-colours as an ethnographer."

FIELDNOTE: "Crewe... As I walk back and forth through the train people are beginning to recognise me, regard me with curiosity".

Travel ethnography has a partial perspective⁸. Watch, but not just the passengers and train, watch also your own ticket, your own journey, your own bags, your own seat. See other carriages, and see what other passengers do not see. But see differently and you are seen differently.

FIELDNOTE: "[On the table in front of me] a man has a bag of sandwiches, tickets, cigarettes and lighter, a plastic cup of half-drunk coke, [and] a mobile phone... a middle aged couple have a picnic, newspapers and a book laid out in front of them..."

FIELDNOTE: "Bristol Temple Meads. Opposite a table is... full of children's games, a flask, coffee cups, a litre bottle of water. The half eaten apple... stares back at me... The

⁸ The notion of partial perspective, as a situated form of objectivity in scientific practice is discussed in 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.

floor around the... table is littered with crisps and a banana skin."

FIELDNOTE: "15:58... A woman boards, puts down her handbag on the seat next to her, and rummages in it for a water bottle, a novel, a set of keys - all of which go on the table - and finally a mobile phone, with which she begins to text someone".

Bottle, novel, keys, phone: train travellers do not fit into train seats, for they are more than the sum of their packed-parts. To become a traveller is to unpack into a billowing shape: a shape that more easily flows, and may navigate half an hour in Coach D as exploits within a novel; a shape rather different to one that walks or drives. A train traveller extends, not just from here to the other end of a mobile phone call there, but also into bottles of water and stories in books. Travellers billow out with their chosen technologies of travel, drinking the water that quivers with them on the seat, reading their novel on the table, so that their shape flows into that adjacent seat, into that table, into the wireless text-filled air. Train travellers swell with their interactions, expand into seats, sandwiches and song. Until they stop travelling by train, and must repack, folding themselves into something compact that may step from the train.

Rewind to...

FIELDNOTE: Preston 11:09. The carriage is packed, every seat is taken and people are wading through. I ask a woman in a window seat to move her bag [from the adjacent seat]

so that I can sit down. She puts it on her lap - cannot be comfortable."

FIELDNOTE: "Birmingham New Street... Men sit with their legs astride their luggage, knees out into the aisles so that I have to step over them".

FIELDNOTE: "The train manager announces "Would the passengers who have left their luggage at the vestibule end of coach C please remove them as they are providing a hazard at present."

FIELDNOTE: "16:31 Taunton... The train manager appears, checking tickets. She asks who the two [huge] rucksacks, sitting on a pair of seats [behind me], belong to. You'll have to move them, she says. A woman gets up and sits besides them, pushing them over so that both fit together on the seat by the window".

A train traveller is not merely infected with timetable, nor are they merely swollen with novels and mobile phones, they are also an inseparable part of their luggage. To make a train journey all that you are, and all that you carry, must travel as one. The travelling-self includes both body and belongings; luggage is a prosthetic, as Chia Ling Lai has said⁹. A train traveller is irreducible to a person and their property¹⁰, for these may only separate when finally stilled, having either arrived or been lost. Bags, novels, water bottles and a body in motion, although scattered in space, must

⁹ Lin Lai, C. (2005) Luggage: the unbearable weight - 'heavy travel' in the age of mobility, in 'Materialising tourism geography; dematerialising tourist places' session, Royal Geographical Society (RGS-IBG) Annual Conference, London.

¹⁰ The notion of a human and nonhuman being irreducible during a particular interaction is drawn from Lucy Suchman's work on the interaction between robots and their programmers. See 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.

move together, must be understood together,
and make a travelling-person together¹¹.

Rewind to...

FIELDNOTE: "Preston 12:48. I introduce myself to the train manager who is... friendly (very Virgin Trains). He mutters 'they do some very strange things' to me, [meaning] the passengers. [A comment] seconded by the First Class Stewardess."

FIELDNOTE: "I walk through the train at Birmingham New Street to introduce myself to the [new] train manager. They are always at the first class end of the train".

FIELDNOTE: "18:20 Plymouth... The service is thirty-nine minutes late... [and] now I have to say hello to [another] new train manager".

FIELDNOTE: "Liskeard. Realise I have not introduced myself to the new train manager. He is coming through checking tickets. He comes past and I say hello. I am exhausted."

A train is crafted into a solid form by axels, trackside signalling, reservation systems, overhead lighting and the rest. But trains are more than technical, they are *technosocial* beasts. A train cannot move without driver and crew; mobility requires technical and social. It may be solid to the touch, but my train from Preston to Penzance is not so much solid, as flowing flesh. It may appear to hold its shape as it rattles over points, but that shape is also a mutating flow of one train crew at Preston

¹¹ This follows the notion of the distributed person and distributed personhood in Anthropology. For a discussion see Gell, A. (1998) 'The Distributed Person' in *Art and agency: an anthropological theory*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

into the next crew at Birmingham and into the next at Plymouth. Without that flow of crew it would halt, collapse into immobility, and become, no longer a train, but merely a husk on rusting wheels.

Rewind to...

FIELDNOTE: "Birmingham New Street. I wander back through the train. It has completely changed atmosphere and people. Lots more technology suddenly, laptops, mobile phones, more personal stereos... phones ring, people are laughing, a man is trying to conduct a phone conversation using a headset... In the quiet coach it is cold and quiet... pleasant after the screams and laughs of coach D. Many people are reading... I look up as the sun streams out over the hills, creating bright squares of shadow".

FIELDNOTE: "At Bristol Parkway a huge number of people board. I get up and... stand in the packed vestibule... I learn that a train has been stopped here and the extra people are [trying to get to] Bristol Temple Meads... In the vestibule it is baking hot, humid and air-less... I feel like passing out... It is almost unbearable, like the [London Underground] in summer. How do people stand it?"

FIELDNOTE: "15:58... Finally we haul in and out of Bristol Temple Meads. [There is] a mass exchange of people."

There are other flows of flesh that comprise a train - its passengers. They are asynchronous flows; incoherent, starting here stopping there, a twisted flux of many journeys. Before Birmingham some are quiet,

after Birmingham others are laughing. In one carriage they are still, in another they are restless. So, I walk through, not one train, but a series of carriages each in flux. Flows differ from one carriage to the next, from one station to the next, as passengers move and mingle. Down the track the carriages flow, on and on, from one form of flesh into another, both translating and transforming. The crew and carriages flow, and the train mutates, and on it goes until the final stop. So, a train is not a fixed object moving along a line, but is a mutable as well as mobile one¹². This follows the idea of immutable mobiles in Science and Technology Studies, that is, in order for things to travel their sets of relations have to be stabilised. A train is, however, an example of a mutable mobile, it retains its shape not through fixity but through a flow of relations.

Rewind to...

FIELDNOTE: "14:19... Birmingham New Street. A man is sorting out a newspaper, laying out his work, hanging up his jacket on a hook. A woman sits behind him, she has a sheet of SuDoku [puzzles] resting on a magazine, besides it a bookmarked Harry Potter novel... In front of her the man now has his elbows propped on the newspaper, deep into the SuDoku in the... tabloid [newspaper]".

¹² The immutable and mutable mobile is a trope from Science and Technology Studies literatures. John Law discusses the ship as an example of an immutable mobile (one that holds its relational shape but also moves) in Law, J. (2002) 'Objects and spaces' in *Theory, Culture and Society* 19(5/6). The idea of a mutable mobile, one whose relationality flows but also moves, is proposed by Marianne de Laet and Annemarie Mol in de Laet, M. and Mol, A. (2000) 'The Zimbabwe bush pump: mechanics of a fluid technology' in *Social Studies of Science* 30: 225-263.

FIELDNOTE: "Watch the business man. [He is] doing the difficult one, [is] half way through. [He] leans back for a while, then leans in, head in his hand... He does not once look up out of the window. The lady also does not look up, her shoulder to the glass, facing inwards with her body".

FIELDNOTE: "15:11... Neither has looked up from their puzzles since Birmingham, despite the sun beginning to flicker through tree and cloud".

FIELDNOTE: "The man leans back takes his glasses off, folds his arms. He picks up his mobile, dials... puts it down on the table, picks up his glasses... leans over the puzzle and... starts again."

FIELDNOTE: 15:21. The business lady stops, puts her SuDoku in her bag and opens up her magazine. The business man is looking down at the SuDoku... still enthralled. He picks up his pen ready to mark.

These two travellers fly along down the line on a ray of light from their SuDoku puzzles. Inside their numeric world of one to nine, time slows. Their bodies move in puzzle-time, fifty-two minutes of suspended animation. On their ray of SuDoku light their clocks tick slow. Their time is not my time. Their time is stretched, their movements steeped in oil. Are they in stasis? Will they move again? The minutes are interminable. I am an ethnographer: writing, watching, glancing, fleeting. My time is compressed not stretched, the journey too fast to capture with ink. They, however, are caught in the sticky web of the SuDoku puzzle. Our travel

times are not shared but situated¹³, made by our own activities: SuDoku time and ethnography time. Time is personal, as Barbara Adams says¹⁴. Time is technosocial, I would add. For time is made - made differently through each travellers' specific activities - their particular interactions with puzzle, elbow, field notebook and cloud. Time is made slower, faster; stretched and compressed. Travel time is an art, a craft. It may be made slowly or quickly, but it must be made.

FIELDNOTE: "Exeter St Davids. We are rolling past the waters [of the sea]. Many [passengers] are ensconced with books and do not look up. [They] are in another world."

FIELDNOTE: "16:22... Nothing seems to happen. I want to write that something happens, but nothing happens. A man reads a book, reads a newspaper. A woman fidgets and sniffs. A man sleeps. A woman stares".

FIELDNOTE: "16:45... Time is fixed. A man sleeps. A woman looks out of the window. A woman fidgets [and sniffs]".

Time is stretching, stretching. As the journey slides into its nth hour, there is a withering of activity, less happens... and less happens. Automatons stare, their clockwork activities - read, look, work as our survey said¹⁵ - these activities wind down, until

¹³ For a deeper discussion of the implications of situated-ness, and situated knowledge in particular see: Haraway, D. (1991) *Situated knowledges: the science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective*, in Simians, cyborgs and women: the re-invention of nature. London, Free Association Books.

¹⁴ See discussions of personal time and clocktime in Adams, B. (1990) *Time and Social Theory*. Polity Press: Cambridge.

¹⁵ From a project mail-back questionnaire, integrated into the national SRA survey of train passengers, the three main activities were claimed to be Reading for Leisure (28%), Window-gazing/People watching (21%), and Working/Studying (15%). Based on 26,221 responses in Autumn 2004. See Lyons, G.; Jain, J.; Holley, D. (in prep) *The use of travel time by rail passengers in Great Britain*, published by Centre for Travel and

they stop on: look, look, look. As the train roars through the Mendips and Moors time becomes ever more sluggish, thickening around tired limbs like treacle. Travel time has inertia, activities tend to an unchanging monotone. Without change, without activity, time stalls, stretches into stillness, unmeasured. The view simply goes on, the coffee cools, bones stiffen. When travelling by train, time tends to stretch, multiplying the minutes. This travel time inertia, therefore, makes time run slow not fast. Train travel tends to make more time, not less; and, it tends to stillness not speed.

Rewind to...

FIELDNOTE: "16:17... A woman starts filing her nails with a huge purple nail file. A man opposite looks up from his book at the nail file. Eek... eek. He winces, looks slightly ill as the flakes fall".

FIELDNOTE: "16:22... She stops filing, and looks out of the window".

FIELDNOTE: "16:35... A woman's phone goes off loudly, wakes up [the man opposite] who looks around, re-arranges his body, and goes back to sleep".

FIELDNOTE: "16:54... Exeter St. Davids... A girl lies back with her headphones on, listening to urban hip-hop. The rapping rhythm runs out of her ears into mine".

FIELDNOTE: "17:03 The man opposite looks up briefly as children chat and eat crisps... he

has covered his eyes with his hand, shielding them from the rest of the carriage."

FIELDNOTE: "Opposite me [another man] has his legs [crossed] so that his foot is stuck out into the aisle. [His] eyes are closed... someone tries to get past... [and] his foot is knocked... he is asked to move it. He wakes and obliges".

Ethnography time, time inside a novel, the incessant beat of hip-hop time, time lost in sleep: so many practices making so many times. Yet travellers are more than active flesh. As I have suggested, they are billowing shapes comprising novels and phones that spill out of their seats. Their activities - and so also their times - spill out of their headphones, out of their hands, out of the end of their fingernails. And into me. On a train other travellers' activities and times burrow into my own shape, slip inside, to infect me. Travel time is contagious. Inside the novel I might be seemingly lost to the rhythm of the plot, my time beating with the life of the characters. Yet the eek, eek of a nail file pierces that world, injects the cells of a stranger's nail into me. My time is abruptly compressed, shocked into rapidity. I am folded, protesting, my imaginary world crushed into a falling nail cell in a hot carriage outside Exeter.

FIELDNOTE: "17:48. Plymouth... A cloud catches me and I drift off, dreaming of my destination... The train almost has me, I am drifting into reverie, the tiredness, the white light of Cornwall, the endless munching, the reading, the reading... I feel

as though the carriage is air on which I am carried, blown along".

FIELDNOTE: "It's growing darker. A storm. It's raining hard outside and I am sucked into the rain. Feel rooted now to my seat and table, sat here so long, seems hard to move."

FIELDNOTE: "The window is sucking me outside the train, into the world beyond; the buildings, the river... Hard to look inside the carriage, sucked out to daydream amongst the passing pylons".

FIELDNOTE: "18:48. St Austell... The clouds are drifting with intent, up the coast, flowing away from the train... as am I".

Stretched, monotone time conflicts with the dynamic faster-than-ink time of the travel ethnographer. As those around me slow and stare, or read without motion, lost in dreams, their stillness infects me, turns me, too, into stone. The storm clouds, sea and lights of the world outside the window become a sirens call to elsewhere. Am I, then, a passenger falling into reverie, or an ethnographer failing to resist the thrall of her fieldsite? A travel ethnographer is always both. Always partial, always susceptible to the infectious agents of her sleeping fellows, the rolling rivers and march of passing pylons. An ethnographer of train travel is always part of the train, part of its mutating flows - never impartial to its changing fluids of flesh and infection.

FIELDNOTE: "It is 9:30 am. I'm sitting outside a café, warm beneath a white disk of sun covered by hazy cloud; watching the water

slowly slide down the harbour, beaching boats one by one. Around me people wait for their breakfast. A baker turns up, leaps out of his van with a massive tray of warm loaves, and swings past with apologies. The [malted scent] of freshly-baked bread spills into the air as I write”.

When did I arrive? When did the crafting of travel time and train journey end? Was it the moment I gathered in my ethnographic tools, packed up my travelling-self distributed over several seats, and transformed myself into a separate body, paper and pen? Was it the moment the train began to slow? The moment I stepped from the carriage? Or the moment I stumbled, bones still shivering with motion, into my accommodation? Or was it that following morning when I sat, finally still, finally immobile, watching the tide fall, imagining my next journey... home?

Perhaps the moment of arrival was made as I packed my rucksack, in that interaction, when my destination shimmered, materialising. As I travelled, I crafted that moment more and more, from the slow times I made, from the fast times, from the mobile phone calls and notebook scribbles. Arrival is a hybrid place, made as much from the practices onboard the train, as from bricks and mortar. Arrival is crafted. Arriving is a craft. Had I scribbled less, slept more, changed trains more frequently, I would have arrived in a different place. Destinations are not singular places where many travellers arrive, but multiple places which each traveller must craft for themselves - must anticipate, must dream, must work to create as art and artefact.

In this presentation I have attempted to create something of the partiality of travel ethnography. The video images, the landscapes and places, have become entangled in my words. They may have been distracting, they may have slowed or quickened your experience of this performance. There was no simple spoken paper, but a hybrid sense of meaning produced through the agency of my words and the agency of the travelling images. Each reading of this paper, each journey, is a unique one, partly unfamiliar as the words and images flow differently, resisting fixity. Travel ethnography similarly flows differently to static ethnography, its partiality and ongoing reconfiguration resists a fixed, singular account.

In this flow of words and images I have spun versions of time. Universal clock-time beats in the utopian world of the timetable, but in the messy, embodied world of travelling-people that read novels, and play on laptops, other times are needed: situated time, stretched time, infectious time, and the interminable inertia of travel time. Times that must be crafted, worked into the experience of travel. Times that, ultimately craft an always particular, always difficult to attain, destination¹⁶.

¹⁶ Many thanks to my colleagues on this project: John Urry, Juliet Jain, Glenn Lyons and David Holley.