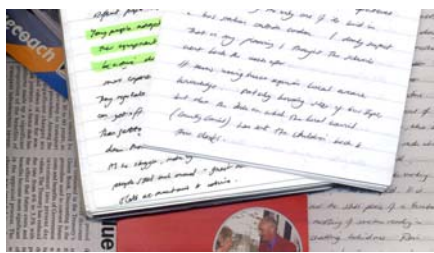


### Copyright

Copyright retained by the author. 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 This script may not be published elsewhere (e.g. mailing lists or bulletin boards) without the author's explicit permission.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.



## Travel Time Use in the Information Age Key Findings: Travel Times (or Journeys with Ada)

written and performed by  
Laura Watts

Stakeholder Meeting with UK Government  
Department of Transport  
January 2006

THROUGHOUT THE NARRATIVE, A SERIES OF SHORT VIDEO SEGMENTS PLAYS - STILLS AND MOVING IMAGES OF TRAVEL ON BUSES, TRAINS, CARS AND TRAMS. THE RELENTLESS FLICKERING IMAGES BOTH REFLECT UPON THE SPOKEN WORDS, BUT ALSO DISTRACT AND DRAW THE AUDIENCE.

SPEAKER: This paper is a synthesis of field notes<sup>1</sup> and video footage recorded during an ethnography of bus, train and other travel, as well as interviews with representatives from industry, focus groups and a national survey of rail passengers conducted as part of the project. This represents, only partially, over seven hundred items in all, as well as the hundreds of pages of detailed ethnographic notes, which the project has gathered.

I would like to take you on a journey, a collage of the many journeys recorded as part of the research. A journey both on trains, buses and foot, but also through this thing we call 'travel time'. To reconsider what travel time is, and most crucially, how it is made and experienced.

<sup>1</sup> Quotation marks indicate extracts from my own ethnographic field notes, unless otherwise indicated.



As with all journeys it begins with a thought, with an act of imagination: I would like to be Elsewhere...

... And this is what Ada is thinking. She has just woken and is considering her journey today. She is imagining sitting having breakfast beside a turquoise sea, beneath a warm summer sun.

"Depending on how prepared I am," she says to herself, "I might leave at, sort of, quarter to... and take more scenic route. Or..., if I'm in a bit more of a rush, I'll kind of take a more direct route, just walk down to the station."<sup>2</sup>

A journey does not begin with a bus stop, train station or mountain footprint, it begins with **Imagineering<sup>3</sup> a destination**: that is, the work of imagining the moment of arrival, the work of imagining being somewhere else - the *al fresco* breakfast. With this imaginary destination created, all the practices and movements that make the journey begin. Travel time begins with an idea.

For transport infrastructure to become journey-centric, to account for the whole journey and its travel time, it would begin its work at this moment. An **holistic approach to transport infrastructure** accounts for the whole journey, from imagined desire to destination.

Ada is already on her journey, even though she has not crossed the threshold of her own

---

<sup>2</sup> Extract from interview with ethnographic informant (J).

<sup>3</sup> By 'imagineering' I am implying that imaginative work is done, that the imagination has important social and material effects.



front door. She packs her rucksack with a book and bottle of water, and checks the online timetable.

"Those things are pretty useless," she says, "in terms of, if something different is happening they just give you complete nonsense, rather than give you a valid description of what has changed. But you know that if they do give you a load of rubbish you know that something's afoot. And you've got more of a chance of reacting to it."<sup>4</sup>

The timetable exists in another world, outside of Ada and her rucksack, or leaves on the line, or rush-hour traffic. Inside the electronic world of the timetable only binary bits can move. In the timetable, every train leaves on time, has always left on time. Its travel time is fixed into a perpetual utopia. Ada's journey does not often fit into this perfect world. Ada and the timetable do not mix well. There is tension, frustration. The timetable is self-centred rather than traveller-centred.

Ada takes the scenic route to the station, and then dodges the ticket queue by inserting exact change into a ticket machine. She keeps a pocketful of the necessary coins for just this purpose.

"There's a, I have to say, not a very good coffee place [here]..." and if that's closed I have to go to the one on the other platform,"<sup>5</sup> she says.

It does not matter if Ada is travelling to a working brunch or travelling to see her Aunt,

<sup>4</sup> Extract from interview with ethnographic informant (J).

<sup>5</sup> Interview extract and additional notes from ethnography of informant (J) journey.



if she is travelling on business or for pleasure. What matters is that she has repeated this journey so many times, that it has hardened into a particular set of practices. She does the same thing each time she travels this way. This hardening of the journey is possible through the creation of inherent flexibility. When the ticket office is busy, Ada buys her ticket with exact change. When the coffee shop is closed, she gets her coffee on the other platform. The more pressure is applied to the journey, the more it hardens. Repeated journeys, including not only commuting, are therefore **thixotropic**<sup>6</sup>: they are liquid journeys that behave under pressure as if they are hard and unchangeable.

As she waits, she gets a text message from a friend on a trip to London. It reads: "Left home by car. Leaving 65 mins to travel 8.5 miles to get to station, buy ticket and get on train... Manage... with 2 mins to spare."<sup>7</sup>

The travel time of a journey is not the timetabled departure and arrival time, it includes the traffic time, the time to find a car parking place, the ticket queue time, the waiting on a platform, times that are not accounted for, that do not exist, in the timetable. Yet, according to focus groups, it these times beyond a traveller's control, which are regarded as the most frustrating and most wasted.

A cold wind blows through the station, and the sound of building work buzzes behind Ada as she waits, coffee in hand. And then the

<sup>6</sup> Thixotropic is a viscous property of liquids that behave as a solid when under pressure. The classic example is corn flour.

<sup>7</sup> Extract from a travel diary, kept by a member of travel time use team.



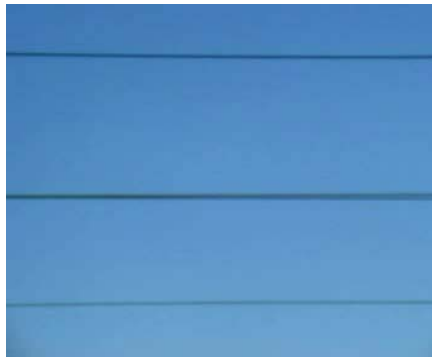
train pulls in. She chooses her usual seat<sup>8</sup>, and puts her coffee down next to her, gets out her book from her rucksack at her feet.

A woman sits opposite her, "...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, rucksacks, travellers do not fit into a single bus or train seat because they are much more than just a body. They are a body plus their travelling pack. This pack, necessary for travel - a mobile phone, a newspaper, a bottle of water - is unpacked to various extents when a person travels. So when speaking of a traveller, when accounting for travel time, it is only the traveller in their **unpacked state** which has meaning. Unpacking takes time. The longer the journey, the more unpacked a traveller becomes - they have time to take out their laptop, plug it in, turn it on, wait for it to boot, and long enough to focus on using it. An unpacked traveller is more flexible, more liquid, easily able to translate an unexpected half hour wait into a chapter of a book, or a phone call. Unpacked travellers are another aspect of the fluidity and flexibility of liquid travel.

So, an unpacked traveller occupies several seats, and a table, and a luggage rack. They spread, pouring into other spaces and other times, through mobile phone calls, coffee cups, emails and newspapers.

<sup>8</sup> This comment alludes to 'Compartment 92', an informal passenger social group established by regular travellers on a commuter train to London who chose to always sit in the same place.



Ada checks her watch - twenty past two. "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 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 its SuDoku squares". Despite her own book in hand, Ada stares out the window, watching cloud shadows slide over the fields, the sudden dark burst of a river, a stream of pylons, a blur of cars flowing backwards.

She checks her watch again, seemingly a moment later, it's ten past three "... Neither [the man or woman] has looked up from their puzzles..., despite the sun beginning to flicker through tree and cloud".

These two travellers that Ada watches 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 a 'puzzle time' - fifty minutes of suspended animation. On their ray of SuDoku light their clocks tick slow relative to Ada, their movements seemingly steeped in oil. Their time is not Ada's time. She stares mesmerised out of the window, barely able to see the world as it whips passed.

All their **travel times are not shared but situated**<sup>9</sup>, made by each different activity: puzzle time and window time. Travel time is not experienced as clock-time, as the timetable measures it, otherwise we would not

<sup>9</sup> 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.



need watches. Rather, the experience of travel time is situated in the ongoing activities of a traveller. Different travellers have a totally different experience of the length of a journey and how fast time flows, depending on what they do. Activity, movement, and interaction appears to compress time, making it run fast. For those who are busy working on a train, for example, there is almost not enough time to do the work. Whereas stillness, reverie, and thinking appears to stretch time, so that the journey seems ponderous, too long, even.

In short, **travel time is made by travel time use**. Even if a traveller does nothing but stare, they make their travel time stretched or compressed through this practice. Their unpacked travelling state, spread out over the train or bus with their mobile phone and newspaper, turns them into a human technology for making travel time.

However, which particular activities lead to what travel time experience is not a fixed relationship. Travel time is always situated in the individual traveller. As the rail survey suggests, there is no overall pattern of activity during the day, travel time use is profoundly personal. So, although the survey data does indicate that the majority of people read or look out of the window on a train, it can say nothing of how animated these people are - a more subtle research tool is required. One person may be rapidly thinking through a problem as they stare out of a window, whilst another might be lost in the slow gathering of a storm.

Ada turns as "a woman starts filing her nails. A man opposite looks up from his book





at the nail file. *Eek, eek*. He winces, looks slightly ill as the flakes fall... The woman stops filing, and looks out of the window... [A few minutes later], a woman's phone goes off loudly, and wakes up [someone] who looks around, re-arranges his body, and goes back to sleep... A girl lies back with her headphones on, listening to urban hip-hop" It distracts Ada from the window, she cannot help but half-listen to the beat.

Window time, puzzle time, the incessant beat of hip-hop time, time lost in sleeping dreams: so many activities making so many different times. Yet travellers, as they unpack into their travelling state, extend not just out of their seat and the seat of their bag next to them, but out of their headphones, out of their mobile phones, and out of the end of their fingernails.

Other travellers' activities, and hence the travel times those activities produce, affect each other. **Travel time is infectious**. The *eek... eek* of a nail file abruptly breaks Ada's stare out of the window, altering her experience of travel time, instantly compressing it. Her window time has been infected by her companions nail-file time, and is infected again by the urban drum beat.

Ada whispers, "there is a baby in the carriage - it has woken up and is wailing - it is soon stilled. Then starts babbling and blowing bubbles."

Children are particularly infectious, their high levels of activity, and rapid sense of time, permeate through a carriage. As another ethnographer remarked, "waiting rooms and trains are difficult places to 'manage'





toddlers, as they want to charge around and climb".

Ada's train suddenly bursts on to an estuary and then the sea, turning heads as they skim over the water, the waves lapping almost against the axels. She smiles, and remembers her last watery journey, high up on the top deck of a Lake District bus. "You could look forward, time moved faster, the world changing [all around you]... [as though you were] in an IMAX cinema," she recalls.

Windows, and the experience of passing landscape, are crucial to the making of travel time. Not just geographically, or as an indicator of motion, but as an entrancing, ever-changing vista in which the traveller can become immersed<sup>10</sup>. In the focus groups, people commented that they made time to drive along more scenic routes, that the pleasure of the landscape was important; many felt air travel was wasted time because of this lack of scenery. Supporting this the rail survey suggested that for 1 in 10 people, gazing out of the train window was a central part of worthwhile journey.

The sea became mud-flats and the heads turned back again, and for a long while... "Nothing seems to happen. A man reads a book, reads a newspaper. A woman fidgets and sniffs. A man sleeps. A woman stares".

It is... "[Half past four]... [Ada] is growing tired. Feels rooted now to [her] seat and table, has sat here too long - seems hard to move".

<sup>10</sup> For an extreme fictional version of a train with an immersive experience see the character of Blaine the Mono(rail) in Stephen King's The Dark Tower series of novels.



Eight minutes later. "... Time is fixed. A man sleeps. A woman looks out of the window. A woman fidgets".

As the journey wears on time is stretching for Ada. There is a withering of activity in the carriage, as less and less seems to happen. People adopt an **automaton position**, hands clasped in their laps, eyes resting ahead. Their typical activities, of reading, gazing and working (as determined by the rail survey), remain unchanged, fixed. As the train rolls on, without stopping, time becomes ever more sluggish, thickening around tired limbs like treacle. **Travel time has an inertia**. Time tends to stretch, activities tend to diminish. It takes effort to overcome this inertia. The view tends simply goes on, the coffee tends cool, bones tend to stiffen. To pack up and leave the train involves speeding up, overcoming this inertia, packing up the travelling self, putting away the book and water bottle, ready to adapt and unpack into a new space - a street, car, office or home.

Feeling slightly bored, Ada rises from her seat, and wanders through the train. "It had completely changed atmosphere and people..." she remarks. "Phones ring, people are laughing. In the Quiet Coach it is cold and still, pleasant after the screams and laughter of Coach D. I look up as the sun streams out over the water, creating bright ripples of shadow".

Always in opposition to travel time inertia, is the inherent instability of public transport. Trains and buses, unlike cars and aircraft, are **asynchronous forms of travel**. People get on and off a train or bus at



different places. So the experience of the carriage alters as the vehicle moves along. One moment a carriage may be still, then after the next station stop it might be packed with commuters. And each carriage may be different. So Ada walks through not a fixed, unchanging vehicle, but a series of unique carriages, each one in a constant state of flux. There is, in a sense, not a single train, but a series of linked environments that transform as the vehicle moves from station to station. The train is not a fixed object moving down the track but a mutating set of objects. Each carriage has its own temporality<sup>11</sup>.

"I notice a Lucozade bottle, empty," comments Ada, "and some biscuits packaging on the table... A man in a black bomber jacket [uniform] arrives, walking down the train, collecting rubbish... [Then] the train manager appears, checking tickets".

Later the train stops at a major station and there is a change of train crew.

Another facet contributing to the mutating of carriages, is the train crew. They are part of what makes the train possible, without a crew the train would merely be a lump of metal on wheels. The crew translates that metal into moving transportation. As the crew changes, the train mutates. And the interaction of the crew with their train or bus also affects travel time. Rubbish collection infects the travel time of each carriage as it passes through. The

---

<sup>11</sup> This leads to the idea that travellers should be seated according to their length of journey, or similar travel time use. So those on longer journeys, who require more space to unpack, should have a very different environment to those who are only travelling short distances. Even large numbers of standing on short journeys is acceptable, if suitable provision is made, as discussed with a train design consultancy.



announcement at each station infects all those who hear it. As is obvious, journeys with constant travel time invasions, such as bus or local trains with frequent stops, compress time, but also make it more difficult to become immersed in your own time and world - the rail survey data emphasised this, shorter journeys were more likely to be regarded as wasted time, longer journeys were more productive. In comparison, on an aircraft, the activity of the cabin crew is carefully managed, stretching and compressing travel time, as they turn lights on and off, provide food and entertainment.

There is an interesting conversation happening behind her, and Ada leans back into her seat to hear more clearly.

"[Bus] Drivers vary enormously, some put their brakes on hard and keep throwing you forwards", a woman is saying. "Other drivers are, you know... I mean, the thing about a bus is that you've one man at the front who drives, and if he's a good driver its fine but if he's a bad driver, your journey's completely ruined." Her companion, sitting next to her, runs on in agreement, "[Yeah]. Whereas if you've been on the trams... You're in a totally different sort of environment... you're not reliant on some bod whose driving... it's a more uniform experience."<sup>12</sup>

On a bus, in a car and taxi, the affect of the driver on the experience of travel time is extensive. They are a central part of the mechanism by which travel time is made during a journey, a central part of how the journey

<sup>12</sup> Quote from discussion between two informants during car ethnography. The sentiment was also echoed during a discussion at a Bus Design Group meeting.



is experienced and what travel time uses are even possible.

Ada gives up on the conversation as a cloud catches [her] and [she] drifts off, dreaming of her destination... "The train almost has me," she murmurs, "I am drifting into reverie again. The tiredness, the white light of [summer], the endless munching, the reading... I feel as though the carriage is air on which I am carried, blown along".

It is the next day, and Ada writes in her diary. "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".

So, when did Ada arrive? Her journey began with her desire to be Elsewhere, her idea of a destination - the *al fresco* breakfast. It was then that she began her journey, and began to weave her travel time from her activities (her preparation), long before she actually left her home.

So, when did this crafting of travel time from travel time use end? Was it the moment she packed up her travelling-self, her book, bag and water bottle, distributed over several seats? Was it when she stepped from the train carriage? Or the moment she stumbled, bones still shivering with accustomed motion, into her bed that night? I would argue that it was at none of these



moments. Rather, her journey ended when the work of imagineering her destination was done. When the experience she had anticipated, had been translated into a social and material place. A journey-centric account of travelling and travel time use is one that does not begin or end at the station, but one that continues until the moment of anticipated arrival. Until Ada has, finally, made her whole journey, Elsewhere.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Many thanks to my colleagues on this project: John Urry, Juliet Jain, Glenn Lyons and David Holley. 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/>