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Writing the Railway:
Biosemiotic Strategies for Enforming Meaning
and Dispersing Authorship in Site-Specific
Text-Based Artworks

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Birkbeck,
University of London

PhD

2019

The work presented in this thesis is my own
(except where citation, consultation and collaboration have been indicated).

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Although, as a matter of legal requirement, I have just claimed this work as my own, this is, of course, never the case. Like many foxes, I travel on the shoulders of hedgehogs and other foxes. Thank you to all who have ever taken the time to write or speak thoughtfully.

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ABSTRACT

This practice-led PhD is concerned with the subject matter of contemporary art. It proposes methods by which a writer-maker's authorship can be dispersed throughout reticulated networks of interpretation, and tests the limits of detail articulable in an artwork. To counter the literary and discursive turns that have dominated art theory and practice since the 1970s, the thesis demands a reassessment of the privileging of the viewer and of the adoption of indeterminacy as a generic style. It proposes instead a turn to biosemiotics as a means to situate the artwork materially, bodily, historically. That ambiguity and pluralism can consequently be deployed strategically, affectively and to critical effect is tested and evaluated in the accompanying practice.

The thesis gives an account of the theorising and devising of text-based artworks which take the UK railway as site, and considers site-specificity a particular sort of engagement with subject matter. The railway is approached as a complex technical object consisting in multiple entangled intentions and interpretations – social, emotional and political valences, diffracted by a spectrum of practices, knowledges and semiotic ontologies – all of which are available to the writer-maker as immanent materials of the artwork.

Part One of the thesis presents a transdisciplinary argument that draws on biosemiotics, linguistic anthropology, philosophy of time and socio-psychology as well as art history and critical theory. Part Two performs an analysis of paradigmatic descriptions of the railway, speculates on the social dynamics of a train carriage interior and empirically tests the bureaucratic structures of London Underground. Part Three is an exegesis of three pieces submitted as documentation in the practice portfolio: an audio work, a guided tour and a live performance on a train carriage tabletop.

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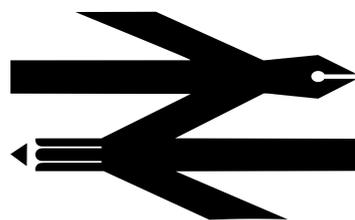
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Part One

INTRODUCTION:

POINTS OF DEPARTURE, TRACKS OF THOUGHT

Subject Matter as Subject Matter

The subject of this research project is subject matter itself. Through thesis and practice it develops a framework through which to consider how, and to what extent, ideas and materials can be enmeshed and articulated in contemporary artworks. And it charts a methodology of authorship, where the very act of describing a boundary about an object of interest becomes meaningful.

I am for art that is worldly, in critical relation to socio-political forms, that is perhaps polemic or witty, but nonetheless detailed and accurate. And yet a tendency of contemporary art to favour abstract thematics, ambiguous meaning and inscrutable intent can curtail descriptive and analytic detail. These ambiguities are intended to delay the moment of meaning making until the instance of viewing, but my contention is that this is a) impossible, for meaning flows from every decision made from the very outset of imagining an artwork to come, b) less critically engaging, since humans are inclined towards habitual inferences and projections, and ambiguity is therefore less likely to disrupt familiar patterns of interpretation and trains of thought, and c) a wasted opportunity for the artist to tool interesting convolutions. Where contemporary art privileges semantic ambiguity and viewer interpretation, the paradigmatic differences ascribable to a subject matter – its this or this or thisness – can all too often be lost. I am not proposing the rejection of ambiguity, however. This research project, rather, tests the possibilities made available when ambiguity is handled strategically. In the thesis and practice I will be asking and suggesting answers to such questions as: In which registers can I deploy ambiguity to critical and aesthetic effect? How does one make an artwork that is ontologically ambiguous or ambivalent, or that renders familiar subject matter as complex and problematic? How can the material conditions of viewing be employed to

elucidate or problematise subject matter? How far can one go in explicating subject matter before an artwork is rejected as ‘too polemic’ or ‘too illustrative’?¹

Subject matter is ‘the substance or principal content with which a mental artefact is concerned’.² It is that which is dealt with by the thought or artwork or discussion or contract or composition or dispute or law through which it is represented. The subject matter of contemporary art, then, is a function of relations: between the principle content and thoughts about that content, between those thoughts and the eventual artwork. In phenomenological aesthetic discourses, the matter of an artwork is that which has been ‘enformed’: its physical materials as well as non-material content, such as ‘Emotions, ideas, stories, polemic, moral exhortations, ideologies’.³ By extension, the ‘matter’ of subject matter is the physical and non-material content of the external phenomena to which an artwork relates. It is also the non-physical material through which that artwork partly manifests and which contributes to its effects. Within this complex structure, emphasis might be placed on the relationship between a thought and the effects of an artwork, for example, whereby the initiating subject matter is not so explicitly apparent; or, for the contemporary artist who chooses to engage critically with non-art forms and structures, on the relation between an artwork’s content and its external subject matter.⁴ An artist

¹ These are both commonly levelled accusations in art schools crits, although the former is usually couched in such terms as ‘telling the viewer too much’. One often hears artists say that they prefer the viewer ‘to make their own minds up’ about what an artwork is about. In my fifteen years of teaching and interviewing artists I have heard this more often than any other expression.

² ‘subject matter, n.’, *Oxford English Dictionary Online*
<<http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.lib.bbk.ac.uk/view/Entry/192713?redirectedFrom=subject-matter+#eid>>
[accessed 5 January 2018].

³ This model takes Aristotle’s hylomorphism as its starting point, whereby content is dialectically determined by the imposition of form on to material. I will be departing from this below, but it is a useful place to start, since it informs the majority understanding of subject matter in contemporary art. See Robert L. Zimmerman, ‘Form, Content, and Categories in Art’, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 25.2 (December 1964), p. 172.

⁴ I am writing modally here – outlining what an artist ‘might’ do or think – based on fifteen years’ experience as an art critic, during which time I have lost track of the number of conversations, interviews and tutorials conducted with practicing artists and art students. This is an example of the sort of non-citable knowledge that I consider legitimate in the context of this thesis. The outlines of intentions and methods mentioned here represent some of the predominant and recurring approaches artists have described to me, and which one can discern throughout gallery literature and art criticism, but which cannot be found in academic textbooks or as disciplinary discourse. For context, see Appendix I, a list of exhibition catalogue essays and features I have

might engage directly with a particular subject matter because she believes it should be celebrated, critiqued, revealed, made strange, thematically explored, recontextualised, outed, reappraised, enjoyed. She is at liberty to introduce as material any discourse she wishes (unless she is led by fashions or feels the constraints of ethical imperative handed down by example). And her handling of subject matter might be evaluated as an indicator of cognitive or material rigour or poetic power or socio-political intent.

For some artists, though, 'subject matter' is an out-dated concern that connotes pictorial representation. And for others, it is a burdensome voguish turn that has led to a widespread negligence of formal innovation. While I would argue against these two standpoints – since content and subject matter are themselves in relation, and it is impossible to consider how form and content can be disentangled, so that a non-representational or formal approach is just as likely to relate to subject matter – I do recognise that a work's relation to subject matter need not be its most important aspect. It is not unusual for an artist to start making a piece not knowing what its subject matter is. Or she might have just a vague inkling: it might be about tension or something to do with consumerism. An artwork's subject matter might be the ideas or affects mingling among or hinted at by its materials. It need not be discernable even. Or it might change over time or depend on context, or on the mood of the artist or the viewer. Subject matter might be a way for an artist to start making or thinking – not for the viewer at all. Or only in hindsight might the themes or ideas or objects or people or events that the work depicts, connotes, evokes, describes or represents become apparent.

Artists are frequently asked what their work is 'about', but if we refer to two other senses of 'about' – arranged around; approximate – the relationship between artwork and subject matter can be understood as not necessarily based in similarity and separation (i.e., representation). Where art is instead concerned

written, since to provide singular examples for many of the positions described here would be arbitrary.

with presence or process or participation or affect or form, it could be argued that these presences or processes or participations or affects or forms become the work's subject matter, or that such an artwork is about itself or about becoming or being or making or remembering or... Subject matter need not be external phenomena or concrete nouns or even gerunds. For some it might be ineffable. But I do not know that it can ever be nothing.

If, however, representation is still operative in an artwork – if it refers to a delineated subject or object outside itself – there has been much thought, written and spoken, on the ethics of this, on the question of how subject matter is represented, by whom and to what ends.⁵ The selection of subject matter and the effects of its handling are all taken as constitutive of the work's meaning. Even with straightforwardly representational works one can ask not so much what a work is about, but what it *does*. Does it contort its subject to particular effect? And if so, how does this relate to a viewer's understanding of that subject matter? In current art theoretical discourse, the artist's intent would be considered subsidiary to these interpretative effects. But while the relation between artist and subject matter seldom overrides all others, a dramatic example of just this is Dana Schutz's painting *The Open Casket* (2016), its inclusion in the 2017 Whitney Biennial generating a storm of dissent on social media and analysis in the art press. The painting was made from a photograph of the open coffin of Emmett Till, an African American fourteen-year-old who, in 1955, was murdered for allegedly flirting with a white woman. Till's body was displayed in a glass-topped coffin because his mother 'wanted the world to see what those men had done to my son', and the photograph consequently became an iconic image of the civil rights movement.⁶ While the subject matter of Schutz's painting is explicit, interpretations of what the painting *does* vary wildly. Because it was

⁵ See, for example, Jill Bennett, who grapples with the ethics of representation of that which 'does not readily conform to the logic of representation'. Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 3.

⁶ Interview with Simeon Wright, cousin of Emmett Till, in Abby Callard, 'Emmett Till's Casket Goes to the Smithsonian', *Smithsonian* (November 2009) <<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/emmett-tills-casket-goes-to-the-smithsonian-144696940/>> [accessed 31 January 2018].

made by a white artist, the painting, it is claimed, talks on behalf of black people,⁷ transmutes 'Black suffering into profit and fun' and demonstrates that 'blackness is hot right now';⁸ it abstracts from the photograph 'without much intensity',⁹ and 'is a sign of the success of the Black Lives Matter movement in forging awareness of patterns of state violence by politicizing the deaths of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, Tamir Rice, and others'.¹⁰ What makes this dispute so heated is that the painting's potential effects have been eclipsed by the apparent relationship between artist and subject matter. Put simply: the artist is representing issues of that which she does not have personal experience. But as JJ Charlesworth suggests, this narrowing of attention from the context of the subject matter to the context of the artist curtails what the painting might be able to say 'about the historical moment people find themselves in'.¹¹ For Schutz herself, the painting was made in response to a 'state of emergency', to an apparent spike in racially motivated violence; but it was also an exploration of a

⁷ Parker Bright, an artist who protested against Schutz's painting at the Whitney Biennale. Parker Bright, Facebook (17 March 2017) <https://www.facebook.com/parker.bright.9/videos/10209898925964379/?autoplay_reason=gatekeeper&video_container_type=4&video_creator_product_type=0&app_id=6628568379&live_video_guests=0> [accessed 25 January 2018].

⁸ Artist Hannah Black campaigned for the painting's removal from the exhibition and for its destruction, claiming that 'it is not acceptable for a white person to transmute Black suffering into profit and fun, though the practice has been normalized for a long time. | Although Schutz's intention may be to present white shame, this shame is not correctly represented as a painting of a dead Black boy by a white artist—those non-Black artists who sincerely wish to highlight the shameful nature of white violence should first of all stop treating Black pain as raw material. The subject matter is not Schutz's; white free speech and white creative freedom have been founded on the constraint of others, and are not natural rights.' For the full reproduction of Black's open letter to the biennale organisers, first published via Facebook, see Lorena Muñoz-Alonso, 'Dana Schutz's Painting of Emmett Till at Whitney Biennial Sparks Protest', *Artnet* (21 March 2017) <<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/dana-schutz-painting-emmett-till-whitney-biennial-protest-897929>> [accessed 25 January 2018].

⁹ Zadie Smith, 'Getting in and Out: Who Owns Black Pain?', *Harper's Bazaar* (July 2017) <<https://harpers.org/archive/2017/07/getting-in-and-out/>> [accessed 25 January 2018].

¹⁰ Coco Fusco, 'Censorship, Not the Painting, Must Go: On Dana Schutz's Image of Emmett Till', *Hyperallergic* (27 March 2017) <<https://hyperallergic.com/368290/censorship-not-the-painting-must-go-on-dana-schutzs-image-of-emmett-till/>> [accessed 31 January 2018].

¹¹ JJ Charlesworth, 'Violence and representation', *Art Review* (April 2017) <https://artreview.com/opinion/opinion_24_march_2017_violence_and_representation/> [accessed 28 January 2018].

Although Coco Fusco suggests that 'ignorance about history' and a 'Eurocentric art education' 'based in formalism' equips very few artists, of any ethnicity, with a capacity to represent race issues. See Fusco, 'Censorship, Not the Painting'.

mother's pain, at a personal rather than a racial level.¹² And yet the provocative image cannot articulate the particularities of this intersection of the global and the private; it cannot forestall interpretations of cultural appropriation when, among the painting's milieu, the theme of race has so overwhelmed the theme of motherhood.

Accusations of cultural appropriation are not confined to identity politics based in race, gender and ethnicity. Noses are frequently put out of joint by what are perceived as disciplinary breaches: a scientist, say, might consider an artist to have simplified, misinterpreted or inappropriately recontextualised a difficult idea from their field of practice or discourse. And artists, too, lament misunderstandings of contemporary art by those non-participant in their field, particularly when such outmoded qualities as beauty are invoked, or when asked what the 'use' of art is. And artists who live in a place where incoming artists have been invited to make work about that place may well ask 'Why them? Why not me?' The question arises throughout disciplines, scenes, sectors of the population and institutions, 'Who has authority to speak about this subject matter?' Authority and validity of authorship tend to pertain to proximity or to being 'inside' a discipline, practice, discourse, experience or community (even though being critical within some disciplines conventionally requires subjective removal from the object of study).¹³ Those who are within 'know' and 'know how', whereas those without can, at best, only 'know about'. The question is begged as to how discussion should proceed between those who understand and those who

¹² Brian Boucher, 'Dana Schutz Responds to the Uproar Over Her Emmett Till Painting at the Whitney Biennial', *Artnet* (23 March 2017) <<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/dana-schutz-responds-to-the-uproar-over-her-emmett-till-painting-900674>> [accessed 25 January 2018].

¹³ See, for example, Roland Barthes, 'From Science to Literature', in *The Rustle of Language* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 3–10.

See also James Elkins' more recent disavowal of academic authority in the discipline of art history and his programme of redress in his two upcoming books – *What is Interesting in Art History* and *Writing with Images* – which will in turn critique and propose an alternative to 'disciplinary expectations or constraints'. James Elkins, 'Writing Schedule' (2017) <<http://www.jameselkins.com/index.php/component/content/article/16-vita/258-writing-schedule>> [accessed 9 July 2018].

don't, between those who experience and those who perpetrate, observe or are in ignorance.¹⁴

My answer to this, and which this project explores the implications of, is to admit that knowledge is patchy, fragile, labile and mongrel. There are many types of knowledge: embodied and abstract ways of knowing; know-how, knowing about and knowing that; rigorous inferences, tested theories and mediated information; familiarity, habit, understanding, common sense and the educated guess; emotional intelligence and intuition, received truths and unfounded beliefs. All of these are drawn on in everyday situations, in moments of crisis, in aesthetic experience. My aim to recognise the influence of them all overlaps with Steven Connor's epistemopathy, which he intends 'to be able to register the compacts, confusions and conspiracies between the different ways in which we might feel we know, and ways we might feel about how and what we know'.¹⁵ Connor's object of study is the work of literature, which, he suggests 'may seem to partake of both the action of thinking and the condition of the database'.¹⁶ He is making a distinction here between knowing how and knowing that, between method and fact, knowledge and information. To know how is a matter of experience and understanding of process; to know that is a matter of externalisation and objectification, of outcome. These types of knowledge translate into *technē* and *epistēmē*, into practical application and theory; and although they have long been separated by academic, professional and governmental structuring, we will see that comprehension of surroundings and pursuit of activities employs a weave of the two. Indeed, where these two types of knowledge have been systematically separated by processes of modernity, many across several disciplines are calling for reintegration.

What follows in Part One of this thesis is an argument for the re-weaving of

¹⁴ For a rounded discussion of the role of experience in historiography see Joan Scott, 'The Evidence of Experience', *Critical Inquiry*, 17.4 (Summer, 1991), 773–97.

¹⁵ Steven Connor, 'Modern Epistemopathies', Twentieth-Century Research Seminar paper, (University of East Anglia, 11 October 2017), 1–17 (p. 11) <<http://stevenconnor.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/modern-epistemopathies.pdf>> [accessed 25 March 2018].

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

knowledge types, contexts and applications in political discourse and contemporary art. My intention is to handle an apparently mundane subject – the railway – with the possibility of extending the techniques developed and understanding gained to other fields of interest and to matters of grave importance. This is not to suggest that the railway is a whimsical choice. When environmental studies are revealing the severity of the impact of carbon-dependency, when it is becoming apparent that travel by road and air must be dramatically reduced, it seems imperative to reconsider our attitude to rapid transport systems. The railway must be rethought as a future-tending technology rather than a cranky relic of the Victorians. A writing-led art practice is just one means by which to redress our apprehension of such a complex object as the railway. But it is a means, as we will see in Chapter One, that is conventionally constituted to make analytic representations improbable. And so I have found myself asking such fundamental questions as: How can an artist handle ideas or objects or subject matters she knows of but does not know about accurately or in detail? Is it possible to avoid making assumptions or misrepresentations? And if not, are they always compromising, or even destructive? How can general assumptions and specialist knowledge be mobilised together, critically and affectively?

Articulating Relations and Differentials

When looking through my archived documents from the fifteen years or so I was writing art criticism, I realised that, in having addressed each artists' own subject matter, I have written about so much more than contemporary art. In the longer form texts I have written (by which I mean catalogue essays and magazine features, but not reviews), the list of proxy subject matter runs thus: weaponised hats, sellotape, background radiation, noses, artist-run spaces, wine and milk, aesthetics and politics, virtual reality, interpretation, erect penises, hubris, scenery, materiality, NHS mental health service users, stripes, bodies in contemporary art, ethics in contemporary art, perverse comedy, work and play,

Tyrian purple, punning, post-war British architecture, appropriation of Modernist forms, eventhood, theatrical magic, birdwatching, technologies of journeying, fourteenth-century Sieneese painting, osmosis, farce, car engines, art strikes, participation, oil-rig living, light, decision-making, associational thought, euphemisms, mussels, grottoes, parades, chance, futility, waiting, utopian architecture, science fiction, nineteenth-century spiritualism, difference, documentary filmmaking, rules, excess, the unknowable, ambiguity, epistemology, description, strategy, perversity, folk, narration, doodling, data collection, lying, hierarchies of knowledge, urbanism, collaboration, interdisciplinary collaboration, triangles, interdisciplinarity, bins, fandom, alchemy, economy, socialist magic, cabinets of curiosity, tenses, essentialism, place, dark places, fictional maps, specimens, public debate, reveals, mimetic representation, Sylvia Pankhurst, uncreative writing, avatars, concentricity, venetian blinds, darkness, IKEA, the uncanny, false utopias, specialisation, hands, sculpture, fragmentation, contemplation, knowledge, the prisoner's dilemma, artists' residencies, goats, referentiality, headlessness, reconstruction, torsos, slapstick, liveness, self-reflexivity, art criticism, Palestine, comedy, themes...¹⁷

At first I took this list to be a sign of my own vulnerability as a critic, demonstrating how I was perpetually off my turf, seldom dealing with subject matter I have any profound or prolonged relationship with. It seemed to corroborate the imposter syndrome I had felt in academic contexts.¹⁸ In a second conciliatory stage of reckoning, however, I took a cue from Buckminster Fuller's comprehensivism and Isaiah Berlin's figure of the fox, and renovated this weakness as a political imperative. For Fuller, comprehensivism is a mode of resistance against specialisation, which is, he warns, characteristic of modernity,

¹⁷ These documents were written during my time as a practicing art critic, c.2000–15. This list does not include the subjects of artworks written about in reviews, profiles, previews or interviews. They are from art magazine features and catalogue essays written for galleries, museums and biennales only.

¹⁸ Imposter syndrome is not a clinical condition, but a widely observed psychological phenomenon described as 'the internal experience of intellectual phoniness'. See Pauline Rose Clance and Suzanne Imes, 'The Imposter Phenomenon in High Achieving Women: Dynamics and Therapeutic Intervention', *Psychotherapy Theory, Research and Practice*, 15.3 (Fall 1978), 241–7.

which has perpetuated the ancient practice of power maintenance.¹⁹ Though specialisation of the workforce is a practical necessity in advanced technological society, it is also an engine of distancing and alienation – a means to divide and conquer – since it leads to a situation in which no one knows how everything works. In an academic context, as Hannah Arendt warns, over-specialisation leads to more and more being known about less and less, and to scholarship that ‘actually destroys its object’.²⁰ Running counter to this, Berlin’s fox is a class of intellectual or artistic personality, among whom he counts Shakespeare, Herodotus, Aristotle, Montaigne, Erasmus, Molière, Goethe, Pushkin, Balzac and Joyce.²¹ The figure derives from Archilochus’s fragment: ‘The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog one big thing’, and is characterised as ‘those who pursue many ends, often unrelated and even contradictory, connected, if at all, only in some *de facto* way, for some psychological or physiological case, related by no moral or aesthetic principle’; and as those who:

‘lead lives, perform acts, and entertain ideas that are centrifugal rather than centripetal, their thought is scattered or diffused, moving on many levels, seizing upon the essence of a vast variety of experiences and objects for they are in themselves, without, consciously or unconsciously, seeking to fit them into, or exclude them from, any one unchanging, all-embracing, sometimes self-contradictory and incomplete, at times fanatical, unitary inner vision.’²²

The New York and Berlin-based arts and culture magazine *Cabinet* has adopted the fox and hedgehog as a mascot duo, where the cunning, curious fox rides on the shoulders of rigorous, focussed hedgehogs.²³ And it is not uncommon for artists, in recognition of their centripetal tendencies, to use similar scavenging

¹⁹ See video, *Buckminster Fuller Meets the Hippies*, dir. unknown (Buckminster Fuller Institute, 1966 or 1968).

For an allied and more developed treatment of the idea, see Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality* (London: Calder & Boyars, 1973).

²⁰ Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (London: Allen Lane, 1970), p. 29.

²¹ Isaiah Berlin, *The Fox and the Hedgehog* (New York: Mentor Books, 1957).

²² Note the swerving sentence structure here, articulated by many commas, giving the impression that Berlin himself is a fox, darting diagonally from one detail and sub-clause to the next. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

²³ Perhaps tellingly, the author is, at time of writing, an editor at large of *Cabinet*.

animal similes and metaphors, likening themselves most often to magpies or that mysterious beast the cherry picker.

In my current frame of mind and state of understanding, my list of artists' subject matter stands as evidence of the messy multiplicity of a world tidied up into the particular neatness required of certain activities and knowledges. And it signals contemporary art's enmeshment in all of this knowledge, this human and non-human endeavour, and the materiality and processes they consist in. If one interrogates the artworks and art practices to which each essay's subject matter corresponds, it becomes apparent that how an artist engages is as important as what they engage with.²⁴ This thesis is an attempt to think methodically about how to approach technological subject matter in particular, how to relocate specialist knowledge within everyday activities, to integrate undisciplinedness, expertise and comprehensivity. I should be clear, however, that this methodicalness is not an attempt to establish a tool or template, or to eradicate improvisation, guesswork or intuition. It is intended as an extra implement to complement these artists' familiars. This research project makes an incursion into formal logic to augment and make more complex the illogical and anti-logical ploys of contemporary art. My aim is to make available the economic or political particularities of a given subject matter that would otherwise be lost to abstracted thematics. I wish to overcome a noted squeamishness regarding logic, explicit subject matter and detailed particularities, to challenge the widespread retreat from polemic and description and to prick the valorisation of ambiguity and the infinitude of interpretation.

Vital to my search for a way of rethinking subject matter is the phenomenologist's and the semiotician's struggle against what John Deely calls the 'coils of idealism'.²⁵ Idealism proposes that the world consists in perception and mental representation of objects 'out there'. Subject matter in this framework comprises an object perceived and represented by a consciousness and installed

²⁴ For an annotated list of subjects, with details of exhibitions and events for which the essays were written, and the artists and venues involved, see Appendix I.

²⁵ John Deely, *Basics of Semiotics* (Tartu: University of Tartu, 2009), p. 7.

within an artwork, which is then perceived and interpreted by a viewer, who reconstructs the subject matter as a representation in their own consciousness.²⁶ Phenomenology, and Heidegger's account of reference in particular, negates this communicatory model, and instead deposits making and viewing subjects within a pullulating network of relations, in which artworks are encountered and entered into relationship with.²⁷ In such a move, which supplants the hylomorphic model – that is, Aristotle's formulation of a thing as constituted by form imposed onto matter – identification of subject matter or an object of contemplation (which can be an idea, a cognitive object) translates into the act of imposing a perimeter around a cluster of interrelations. It is a process of objectification, whereby an object is delineated through the description of its significant interactions and relations. This act of delimiting underlies all processes of identification and representation, in which, it should be noted, the one who does the identifying and representing is herself implicated, since it is she who selects what is included and what is not. And so to inscribe the outline of an object, to notionally dislocate it from the infinite network of relations within which it participates is, as we will see, a critical act. The micro-decisions involved draw on manifold types of knowledges, on ideological impetuses, assumptions, prejudices, expectations and blind spots. And similarly, what an artist selects as her subject matter, the explicit relations that she actualises through an artwork, and the manner in which those relations are arranged in relation to other relations, becomes a critical gesture, or even a provocative act, as responses to Schutz's choice of subject matter demonstrate. The debate around *The Open Casket* prompts reflections on how the description of the image's pertinent relations differs depending on points of view, on ways of looking or thinking, or on belief. Schutz believed that she was relating to experiences of motherhood; others believed her to be failing to relate to blackness. Relations and networks of

²⁶ This thesis does not pretend to take on the vast history of idealism – classical, subjective, transcendental, objective, absolute, actual, pluralistic or otherwise – or the full range of contemporary theories of objects and realism. An understanding of the various traditions and contemporary fields has been pieced together by the many passing references and discussions scattered throughout the accompanying bibliography.

²⁷ See Paul Kockelman, 'Four Theories of Things: Aristotle, Marx, Heidegger, and Peirce', *Signs and Society*, 3.1 (2015), 153–92.

relations, lines of connectivity and points of disconnectivity, as we can start to infer, and as we will explore further, have distinct, ethical consequences.

The debate around Schutz's painting is exacerbated by the relative inarticulacy of imagery, and of contemporary artists' tendency to withhold intentions. It recalls Rosalind Krauss's observation of art of the 1970s and 1980s, where 'The photograph heralds a disruption in the autonomy of the sign. A meaninglessness surrounds it which can only be filled in by the addition of a text.'²⁸ Krauss is referring to the use of photography and accompanying captions in performance art, earthworks and conceptualism, which she perceives as echoing the necessity of captioning of photographs in newspapers. 'Meaninglessness' here is a result of the isolation of the image from the continuum of reality, from the network of relations. And Krauss likens these marooned images to the shifters of language – 'I' or 'you' or 'this', which obtain meaning from relation to objects and context of utterance.²⁹ The photograph shows us an emptied-out 'this', which must be reconstituted by language to regain meaning. Its subject matter must be rearticulated, its context described.

Since articulation is a key concept for this thesis, it should itself be fully and precisely articulated. The word derives from the Latin *articulus*, a small connecting part, *articulare*, to divide into joints, and *articulatus*, distinct, intelligible. In its contemporary sense, to articulate is to utter distinctly or to put into words, to express, to convey the meaning of. And articulation is the construction or composition of meaning by way of segments (syllables and words) synthesised by grammar and syntax – or of engine and trucks or carriages, connected by drawbars. Articulation has connotations of fluidity – or perhaps just the illusion of fluidity of the multiply jointed, like a film made up of frames. In which case it is the scale of perception that produces the effect of flow or of particulates, of a whole or of an assemblage of parts. I am proposing that

²⁸ Krauss, Rosalind, 'Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America', *October*, 3.1 (Spring 1977), 68–81 (p. 77).

²⁹ For more on the context-specificity of these 'shifters', see Emile Benveniste, 'The Nature of Pronouns', in *Problems in General Linguistics* (Oxford, OH: University of Miami Press, 1971), pp. 217–22.

authorship can more decisively guide scale of perception by articulating the relations through which a subject matter is constituted and contextualised. And in the accompanying practice I am testing the limits of such articulacy, to discern whether over-articulation necessarily supplants ambiguity with didacticism, interpretation with authorship; or if it is possible to author detailed articulations of subject matter that generate ambiguities of a different scale and in another register. As Susan Stewart writes, 'to describe more than is socially adequate [...] is to increase [...] the unreal effect of the real'.³⁰ To rearticulate an object assumed to be stable and singular draws attention to the means by which its friability or striatedness, its porous, fringed or otherwise indistinct boundaries are overlooked, banished or compensated for. To attend to normative articulations, one can see how, as Stewart puts it, 'detail lends hierarchy and direction to our everyday life'.³¹ Objectification, then, can be understood as the habitual suppression (inarticulation) or promotion (articulation) of certain details.

Throughout this PhD, linguistic articulation has been employed, constructed or precipitated in several registers of thesis and practice. In in-situ writing exercises I articulate in detail my own diverse ecology of perceptual sensibilities and interpretations; in Chapter Five I force the representations of a site – the London Underground – to articulate its requirements of a proposed artwork; in Chapter Six the black box of the railway is re-presented as a jointed and disjointed complex technical object; in the audio piece *HERMES* I articulate the concerns of axel counters by way of anthropomorphism; and in the final performance *Train Tabletop Text Opera*, I venture into prosopopoeia, with lucid characters personifying such 'types' as the franchisee, the encumbered employee and the idealist. And throughout, my subject matter, the railway, is endlessly rearticulated to reflect its changing connotations and effects, as experienced from several perspectives within its reticulated extensivity.

³⁰ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 27.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

Articulation of the perceived viewpoint of another is especially pertinent at the time of writing this thesis, when Brexit and the Trump presidency are widely criticised as discourses of oversimplification, when a discussion on EU membership has been abstracted into a yes / no referendum and discussion of detailed policy is sacrificed to easily communicated generalisations.³² But this should not be conflated with another current line of debate, which suggests that knowledge is routinely supplanted by emotions.³³ This thesis argues that knowledge or its lack is itself an emotionally charged issue, and that emotions contribute to understanding and meaning. Indeed, the differential between levels of formal education, between amounts of access to particular types of knowledge, has been identified as one of the predominant contributing factors to the current emotionally charged standoff between ‘remainers’ and ‘Brexiters’.³⁴ Differentials have long been the target of social critique: for traditional Marxists it is differentials in capital and access to the means of production; Foucauldians focus on disparities of proximity to power; for Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, in a networked economy it is differentials of mobility that count,³⁵ and for Rosi Braidotti, capitalism circulates and naturalises difference in race and gender to disrupt the dialectic formation of subjectivity in relation to multiple others.³⁶ For my part, I am looking at differentials in articulation, disparities in detail and patterns of generalization, in order to think about different types of knowledge, and to consider who has authority to interpret, infer, assume or guess. I share with Connor an interest in the fantasy of knowledge and ‘a care for that wanting to know, or the wanting that relates to knowing, along with the passions incident

³² See, for example, Mark Thompson, ‘Trump, Brexit and the Broken Language of Politics’, John Donne Lecture (Hertford College, Oxford University, 2017) <<https://www.hertford.ox.ac.uk/mark-thompson-trump-brexit-and-the-broken-language-of-politics>> [accessed 3 February 2018].

³³ See, for example, Bill Blum, ‘Trump’s Core Support Is Driven By Emotion, Not Fact, According to Sigmund Freud’, *Huffington Post* (8 May 2017) <https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/from-bill-maher-to-sigmund-freud-a-very-unfunny-look_us_5910dd11e4b0f71180724773> [accessed 3 February 2018].

³⁴ Aihua Zhang, ‘New Findings on Key Factors Influencing the UK’s Referendum on Leaving the EU’, *World Development*, 102 (February 2018), 304–13.

³⁵ Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, London (New York: Verso, 2005).

³⁶ Rosi Braidotti, *Affirming the Affirmative: On Nomadic Affectivity*, *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge*, 11/12 (Fall 2005/Spring 2006) <<http://www.rhizomes.net/issue11/braidotti.html>> [accessed 5 February 2018].

to it and its absence – because ignorance too, is no mere omission, or remission of knowledge, but itself a kind of mission, or even [...] a passion.³⁷ What follows is a reflection of the fears and joys of engagement with complex subject matter, and the difficulties of deciding what to investigate with rigour, what to accept as tacit subtext, what to allow to remain a received idea. It presents an exploration of the experience of, as well as the means of, understanding my chosen subject matter – the railway.

Why the Railway?

In Chapter One I focus on site-specificity as a way of delimiting the field of ‘artworks with subject matter’, and of focussing on a field of practice in which context is irrefutably part of the artwork, explicitly displacing ontologies of modernism based in autonomy and transcendence. Site-specificity foregrounds the viewing conditions of an artwork, but, as we will see in Chapter One, this does not necessarily translate to the extended situation in which an artwork participates. Site-specific art might orient itself towards the themes, materiality and processes of the site, and towards forms and activities that are not associated with art. And if, as Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson posit, we think of context not as a static ground against which an artwork stands, nor as history prior to artefact, but of artwork and context as co-constitutive of one another, then it follows that the art and the non-art forms and activities of a site can be considered not independent of one another but mutually implicated and co-constitutive.³⁸ Site-specificity is by definition a case of mongrel knowledges by dint of the composite practices that converge on sites.

Site-specific work has been subject to several criticisms, and justification is often demanded of the artists that make this sort of work: justification of artists from

³⁷ The ellipses here mask a mention of Jacques Lacan, removed for the sake of an introduction that does not leave too many loose ends dangling. Connor, ‘Modern Epistemopathies’, p. 3.

³⁸ Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, ‘Semiotics and Art History’, *The Art Bulletin*, 73.2 (June 1991), 174–208 (p. 178).

elsewhere making work about a place they have never lived in; of artists interpreting a history they have not experienced. In Chapter One I will be looking more closely at these problems, but here it will suffice to say that they are often an issue of abstraction. The artist must make assumptions, guesses, generalisations and other sorts of abstractions in order to articulate that which they cannot claim to know through experience – a must in everyday communication, in academic research and in literary endeavours too. I will be considering, throughout thesis and practice, the pitfalls and affectivities of such abstractions, and surveying the assumptions and generalisations made about my selected site – the railway – by artists and non-artists, customers and workers, socialists and libertarians, pessimists and optimists, enthusiasts and technocrats.

Importantly, by selecting the railway as a site, I am already dealing with a generic object, or what Bruno Latour calls a ‘black box’, its complex constitution subsumed by shorthand.³⁹ Indeed, the word ‘railway’ sounds comically dumb once one thinks of the complexity of the technological, managerial and economic structures through which it comes into being. Like much of the technology that surrounds us, its immediate materiality – track, rolling stock, stations – is readily apparent, but its non-material, economic, political, technological, bureaucratic and social infrastructures are less so. Although one not only sees and hears, but also bodily hurtles along inside trains, this amounts to exposure to a very limited portion of the railway assemblage, with the majority of its systems, processes and structures remaining opaque or distal.⁴⁰ ‘Train’, too, is a generic designation that covers a variable range of specifics. The 09:42 train from Gravesend to London St Pancras is not this in itself – it is a generic configuration of train carriages and an engine – but becomes the 09:42 train from Gravesend to London St Pancras by virtue of its position within a network of stations and rail sectors, its inclusion in an official timetable, its anticipation and use by travellers, its staffing, its capacity to be technically operative. But I am not making work specific to one train

³⁹ Latour refers to ‘blackboxing’ in conjunction with such processes and states as summarising, backgrounding, opacity, taken for granted, ignorance. Bruno Latour, *Pandora’s Box* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 70, 130, 183–5.

⁴⁰ See Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990).

station or a section of track or a particular control room. By writing about the railway generically, I am forced to identify universalising properties and make explicit my assumptions, and to articulate my assumptions about the assumptions of others, of the audience, of other passengers and of network operatives. If assumptions cannot be eradicated, it seems critical that they are analysed and tracked. In Chapters Three and Four I survey economic, psychological, physiological and socio-political interpretations that shape extant understandings of the railway, and it is through the reintegration of these perspectives, which tend to be considered within disciplinary and practice pockets that seldom overlap, that I re-present the railway as a complex, multiplicitous, contradictory subject matter with far-reaching thematic connotations and associative references.

The ambivalence and contradictions inherent to the railway – its characterisation as the epitome of progressive modernity and its position within everyday routine, for example – were key contributors to my choice of subject matter. Since it is an exemplary black box, the ad-hoc development of the British railway is all too often overlooked. It is easily forgotten how the railway was instrumental in initiating and supporting connectivity and mobility, while also dissipating the local, so that what constitutes our material and technological locale originates in places way beyond our immediate context.⁴¹ The train is a daily setting for the more mundane moments of life, where one reads a book or stares out the window; and it is an unknowable thing that can break down or be withdrawn without warning or that can collide with other trains, buildings, animals and humans to devastating effect.⁴² At a national level, the British network has passed

⁴¹ See Humphrey Jennings *Pandaemonium 1660-1886: The Coming of the Machine as Seen by Contemporary Observers* (London: André Deutsch, 1985).

⁴² Indeed, on 15th September 1830, during the inaugural train journey on the Liverpool and Manchester Railway – the first fully operating railway line in Britain – an ominously symbolic event occurred: the politician William Huskisson was knocked down by Stephenson's *Rocket* and died that evening from his injuries, while a lavish banquet was held in Liverpool to celebrate the opening of the railway. This ironic scene – which would have been tossed out of any film treatment for implausibility – presages the entanglement of body and machine, politics and commerce that has made governance of the railway so complex, and marks the ontological bifurcation, or ambivalence, it provokes.

through several states of private and public ownership.⁴³ Individuals, businesses and communities rely on it economically, and it is comprised of small and large businesses, corporations, institutions and governmental bodies; but it is also considered a public service, like the provision of roads, serving a perceived basic right of citizens to travel within the borders of their nation. And yet social and economic aspects of the railway are seldom considered in the same text. These disciplinary or practice-based knowledges and beliefs rarely interleave. A government inquiry is almost entirely couched in economic terms, while passenger complaints or literary evocations rarely take into account the logistics of running a railway or the technological challenges involved. Success as business and as public service and as sustainable technology is fraught with paradoxes, and the erosion of the railway's social value through economic streamlining or the overlooking of its environmental impact in favour of its economic potential are but two recurring examples of priorities skewed.⁴⁴

The railway is a prolific generator of textual and non-textual language. It is argued over in newspaper columns, vouched for in government white papers, criticised and speculated on in trade union consultancy reports. It is a place of danger that requires safety measures and areas of restricted access, with bureaucratically policed spatial and behavioural boundaries enforced by reams of directive literature and signage. And as we will see in Chapter Five, behaviour is regulated throughout the network, and within carriages, by both Benthamite panoptical control and the 'synopticon', a dispersed, self-regulating means of

⁴³ For accounts of 'Railways under Labour, 1974–9', 'The Thatcher Revolution? British Rail in the 1980s', 'On the Threshold of Privatisation: Running the Railways, 1990–4' and 'Responding to Privatisation, 1981–97', see Terry Gourvish, *British Rail 1974-1997: From Integration to Privatisation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁴⁴ See, for example, claims for the imperative of rail expansion and development to the economy in the Eddington Transport Study and, more recently, a government policy report on the high-speed rail network proposal (HS2) linking London, Birmingham, the East Midlands, Leeds and Manchester:

'Eddington Transport Study, Main Report, Vol. 2: Defining the challenge: identifying strategic economic priorities for the UK transport system', The National Archives (30 December 2008) <<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20090104005813/http://www.dft.gov.uk/about/strategy/transportstrategy/eddingtonstudy/>> [accessed 8 January 2017];

'Policy: High Speed Rail', Gov.uk <<https://www.gov.uk/government/policies/hs2-high-speed-rail>> [accessed 18 January 2017].

maintaining normativity.⁴⁵ Interestingly, a recent trend in train station announcements and on-board signage employs a more ‘affable’ tone. Voice actors, script- and copywriters have been tasked with presenting train companies as chummy hosts rather than forbidding patricians meting out unyielding imperatives.⁴⁶ The railway is being ventriloquized by corporate bodies, in an attempt to humanise or socialise technocratic agendas.

The railway also yields emotions. My own relationship with it is chequered, my feelings mixed. I have boiled with frustration at a dysfunctional train, line or network, worried about stations vulnerable to crime and terrorism, marvelled or tutted at the ability of an overloaded system to just about cope, speculated on how it is all structured, programmed and monitored, and I continue to fantasise about being rewarded with free train travel for life for some magnificent on-board deed. I have bubbled with anxiety as the anonymous hand operating an underground train seemed determined to make me miss my mainline connection, or as those drawing up timetables force me onto the expensive trains. From early teenagehood, the railway carried me towards liveliness, away from my dull, familial background to the port city some ten miles away. And when I was left waiting for hours at an icy rural station, I would seethe at how society oppressed me, how it did not want me to be ‘free’. The train transported me to my undergraduate degree interview, which precipitated a major break with inherited identity, since no other member of my known family had ever gone to university. During my thirties, as hitching became more difficult, due to shifts in attitude to risk, the train was my predominant mode of exploration, the means through which I discovered the history and current social realities of the UK. And for the last ten years, having given up flying, the train has also been my conduit to other countries. I have travelled through 16 countries by train,

⁴⁵ Zygmunt Bauman interprets ‘synopticon’ (coined by Thomas Mathiesen) as referring to the supplanting of traditional top-down managerial models with that of self-management ‘on the threat of eviction’. Zygmunt Bauman and David Lyon, *Liquid Surveillance* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), p. 72.

⁴⁶ This is particularly marked on board Virgin trains, where the spoken message about not flushing away anything other than toilet paper adopts a ‘chummy’ tone to ‘get the message across’. David Millward, ‘Virgin introduces talking train lavatories’, *Telegraph* (3 November 2013) <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/road-and-rail-transport/10423584/Virgin-introduces-talking-train-lavatories.html>> [accessed 28 January 2018].

traversing most of the US and half of Siberia, passing through Belarus, with its terrifying border guards, and crossing the horizon-chasing 8km-long bridge between Denmark and Sweden. I have slept for weeks on end on trains, have written sections of novels and whole essay drafts to their steady gait. I have ogled the showy ostentation of Moscow train stations, where fairy-tale castle frontages conceal stingy shacks behind, in which the real business of administering tickets occurs. And I have appreciated, with caveats, the robust simplicity of continental networks, where routes are negotiated not through archaic tangles of tracks, but along solid straight lines, the stock shuttling back and forth like industrious mules. And now, as I am coming to the completion of this thesis, working on the final edits of this text, I am doing much of this work on the train between my London home and that of my recently deceased parents. The train now carries connotations of anxiety and grief, of hopeless prognoses, wrenching farewells, lapsed pasts.

Disciplines, Methods, Theoretical Frameworks

At over 150 years old, the railway and its literatures will have been the subject of a rainbow of philosophical and cultural inquiries and theories. Its existence spans a period that takes in nineteenth-century romanticism, Marxism, pragmatism, structuralism, existentialism, post-structuralism and post-humanist discourse. My own theoretical and methodological requirements are manifold and contradictory: I need at once to understand the dynamic forces of my site, the material, physiological, social, political and economic factors that constitute the railway and influence the behaviours of those who frequent it, run it and narrate it. But I also need to allow for the illogical or intuitive decisions required of writing and making, and what I will be referring to as 'strategic ambiguity'. In short, since I am working in detail within a compound context – that of an artwork in public space within a technological and socio-economic network – there is no single axiomatic discipline that can admit my research entirely. And so I have instead sought out theories, methods and frameworks that reflect the

ongoing struggle to square the embodied, untidy practice of making with the accuracy and communicability required of the academy.

The heteroglossic, multi-modal nature of my project and the multiplicity of practices that converge on the railway make it necessary to survey understandings and representations of the railway from several perspectives. As a result, there is much theoretical engagement in what follows that could be described as brisk. I move not only between the situated autoethnographic viewpoint of practice and the overview of disciplinary theory, but also between different disciplinary paradigms, whereby my knowledge is only as extensive as befits the problem in hand. Since I am working in a compound context – that of the artwork in public space – there is no single axiomatic discipline available that can admit my research object entirely.⁴⁷ My approach is therefore necessarily transdisciplinary, which Peter Osborne defines as associated with ‘a form of knowledge production that has its basis in broader social processes to which it is ultimately responsible, and from which it cannot ultimately be disengaged’.⁴⁸ ‘Writing the Railway’ is a generative situation to which I have brought many borrowed tools and techniques. In such fields as linguistic anthropology, science studies and social psychology I cannot claim profound knowledge of their histories or theories, and yet it has proved impossible to analyse my subject matter or pursue my practice without limited reference to or adoption of some of their concepts. It has proved particularly fruitful to employ literary theories of narratology, for instance, since the motif of the journey is such a common metaphor – in literature and everyday speech – for a life, a relationship or an endeavour. And philosophies of time and historiography, which theorise the aporia between phenomenological experience and historical narrative, have also

⁴⁷ As we will see in Chapter One, there is much of interest to me that is omitted from extant discourses of contemporary art in the public realm.

⁴⁸ Peter Osborne, ‘Problematizing Disciplinarity, Transdisciplinary Problematics’, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 32.5–6 (2015), 3–35 (p. 10).

been central to my understanding of train travel as passage from known present to unknown future.⁴⁹

To date, my practice has not adhered to a particular form, medium or genre, and the venues and audiences I have reached through my operas, novels, videos, performances and texts in journals and exhibition catalogues are unusually varied. Having said this, and despite my work more often being shown in situations other than gallery exhibition, I consider my field of production and dissemination to be contemporary art. While my text-based works lean towards description and narrative, I deem them to be objects in performative and formal relation with their site and audience.⁵⁰ I understand a text to be associationally architectural, a dynamic spatio-temporal situation, an agential component intersecting with infrastructures and other practices. Writing is not so much a means of expression as that through which an intent is potentially actualised – although this may or may not find its mark due to interference with other motivated forces. As such, performativity (in the sense of a social action) is integral to my practice, and is implicit in all aspects of this practice-led PhD.⁵¹

Another constant across thesis and practice, and related to performativity, is the condition of intertextuality. In Chapter One I discuss how, in the latter decades

⁴⁹ See Mark Currie, *The Unexpected: Narrative Temporality and the Philosophy of Surprise*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), and Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time* (London: Verso, 1995).

⁵⁰ Indeed, the opera *The Virtues of Things*, for which I wrote the libretto and made collaboratively with composer Matt Rogers and director Bijan Shebani, was considered a ‘sculpture’ by Lisa Le Feuvre, the then director of the Henry Moore Institute, who dedicated one of the Henry Moore Foundation’s Essays on Sculpture journals to the piece. See *The Virtues of Things*, Essays on Sculpture No.75 (Leeds: Henry Moore Foundation, 2016).

⁵¹ I am using the term ‘practice-led’ since practice is not only a research methodology, a means of testing and generating ideas, it is also my subject matter. Academic definitions of these terms are not entirely constant between institutions however. Birkbeck offers the following distinction in its downloadable guidelines: ‘In practice-based research the creative work acts as a form of research. Whereas practice-led research is about practice leading to research insights.’ Hazel Smith and Roger T. Dean, *Practice-led Research, Research-led Practice in the Creative Arts* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p. 5 <<http://www.bbk.ac.uk/english/our-research/downloads/practice-based-PhD-english-and-humanities>> [accessed 26 July 2018]. Perhaps neither term is quite applicable in this instance. I have found that insights into practice are gained through the thesis, and insights into the thesis are gained through practice. Since, as a writer-maker, my ‘practice’ and my ‘research’ are both rooted in writing, it is very difficult to discern the seam, and there is no single direction of influence.

of the twentieth century, intertextuality contributed to understandings of the performativity of writing, and to a consequent dematerialisation and ahistoricisation of discourse. I then go on to redress textual performativity, anchoring it in socially, materially, somatically and historically particular contexts. It would be possible to theorise this proposition from first principles, using, say, systems theory or reception theory as the basis of an argument. I am keen, however, to work with and through theories of writing, such as Jane Rendell's site-writing and Nancy K. Miller's arachnology, that have emerged through practice, and which fight against disciplinary conventions to demonstrate their political motivations.

All the practice submitted – the audio piece *HERMES*, the guided tour *I Hear Horses* and the site-specific performance *Train Tabletop Text Opera* – is explicitly intertextual, its networks of textual references, echoes and influences intended to emphatically situate author, artwork, subject matter and audience in complex relation. But intertextuality is also pivotal to the undetectable processes of making. I write exegetical notes and passages before and after the making of a piece: the preparatory texts projecting intentions for the work, the retrospective texts describing its unforeseen relations and effects. These proleptic and analeptic treatments make apparent the difference between an anticipated, imagined artwork and its actualisation; they demonstrate how authorial intent is mediated by the processes of making. I have not made these notes and passages available in this submission, because this would necessitate a subsequent set of exegetical texts that make clear the relations between the before and after texts – that is, that describe the relations between relations, since the before and after texts are already descriptive of relations between an expectation or memory and a future or past event. And these meta-exegetical texts would then also require further commentary, for they too are an expression of a relation between relations (that is, the relation between a split temporality and a synthesised temporality, the prospective/retrospective view in relation and the fully retrospective view). And while this reticulation of nested commentaries is precisely what I am exploring, I have decided to apply it to the railway itself, rather than to the submitted

artworks and their exegesis. I am, after all, embarking on an investigation into the subject matter of art, not the meta-language of art commentary or criticism.

And as a multidisciplinary form of intertextuality, in order to get to know my site, and to get to know extant knowledges of my site, I have collected many descriptions, narratives, directives and declarations that take the railway as their subject matter. Recognising that it is impossible to analyse these texts without interpreting them in some way, I am careful to note how my own viewpoint is in part productive of the viewpoints I discern in them. The section on guided tours in Chapter Two in particular makes an argument for situated knowledge, or the practice of recognising one's entanglement in one's subject matter, as well as in its narration by others.⁵²

I have also, as an equivalent of en plein-air painting, written real-time descriptions in situ on trains. This is an activity through which to observe my own entanglements in and micro-responses to objects and events, to note the processes through which I understand everyday occurrences like navigating the automatically locking train door or gauging the threat of rowdy passengers. Some of the results of this writing find their way into artworks as observational detail and narrative or structural micro-events. And the switching of ontologies throughout this process – between the social register and the physical, turning attention from actions and responses to materials and forces – is key to the considerations of Chapter Four, which examines the manifold connotations of a single phrase uttered in situ on the train, and how a change of ontological ground makes apparent different configurations of significance and interrelation. Here, observation yields recognition of the minutiae of semiotic processes and of generic assumptions. And as we will see in Chapter Two, the movement between idiosyncratic detail and universal representations, between specialist knowledge

⁵² 'Entanglement' is a resonant term employed by physicists and philosophers to describe non-Newtonian behaviours of quanta. I am using it here to indicate the complexity of non-linear relations involved. See Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

and common sense, is an important feature of the working relationship with subject matter that I am proposing.

To be able to track all this movement, I have deployed the framework of triadic semiotics, since it is, as we will see in the following section, capable of theorising navigation between differently constituted understandings, or what I will be referring to as ontologies. Contemporary exegeses of triadic semiotics have underpinned my critical thinking about site and activity, and provided a means of analysing the perceptual and authorial processes of train travel, of writing and making and of viewer, listener or reader response. As discussed in Departures Hall below, semiotics is not bound to a single discipline. It too is a transdisciplinary method founded in philosophy and logic by Charles Sanders Peirce.⁵³ Given its foundations in physical phenomena and its implications for inference and meaning making, it has since been developed for practical and theoretical application by, among others, zoologists, historians, archaeologists, anthropologists and art historians. Throughout this thesis, what might within disciplinary confines be considered problematic vacillation – between art history, philosophy, critical theory, literary theory, art criticism, sociology, science studies, anthropology, linguistic analysis – becomes a necessarily prismatic semiotic analysis of the context of site-specific text-based artworks. I have found it useful to think, as Deely does, of methods as ‘the systematic implementation of something suggested by a point of view’, and to note that a fecund point of view will suggest many methods.⁵⁴ The railway, after all, is a complex object constituted by a multitude of ontologies.

⁵³ Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), on whose work the contemporary variants of semiotics (biosemiotics, geosemiotics, phylosemiotics and so on) is based, was a founder of American pragmatism, which requires that any hypothesis be clarified through the tracing of its practical consequences. See *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy Online*: <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pragmatism/>> [accessed 29 January 2019].

⁵⁴ Deely, *Basics of Semiotics*, p. 12.

Works Submitted

I have submitted three final works – an audio piece, a guided tour and a performance. The audio work can be listened to on any mainline train journey of 22 minutes or longer; the guided tour took place on the Swanscombe peninsular, Kent, in June 2018, and the performance is made specifically for the highspeed branch of the southeastern service that runs between London St Pancras (Birkbeck’s nearest train station) and Gravesend (where I lived for four years while I undertook this research project).⁵⁵ Documentation of these works is submitted in three accompanying Writing the Railway booklets, which take 1980s British Rail timetables as their design reference.

Thesis Structure

The thesis comprises three parts. Part One sifts through theoretical frameworks and methodologies of contemporary art and literature, identifying aspects and manoeuvres that are fruitful for a semiotic approach to site-specific text-based artworks. Part Two explores my site – the railway – from several perspectives: through analysis of its various literatures; by way of an on-board utterance, and through the proposal of an artwork, intended to provoke the system’s infrastructure. Part Three comprises commentary on and analysis of artworks, the documentation of which is submitted alongside the thesis.

⁵⁵ There are many reasons for this choice of site for the performance. Convenience admittedly counts for something, as taking the train every other day certainly makes for good exposure to one’s object of research. But more important are the geological, technological, social and personal histories of the site. This stretch of the Southeastern network runs from the centre to the eastern margins of London, through the industrial landscape of Rainham and Purfleet, alongside salt-water marshes and bird protection zones and under the Thames itself to Ebbsfleet, a place that was invented around its railway station, which serves the route of the Eurostar, from St Pancras, London, to Paris and Brussels. The journey between London and Gravesend, through urban, industrial and natural landscapes, compacts into 23 minutes abundant evidence of the railway’s reconfiguration of human and non-human communities and of physical geographies. The terrains through which the train passes are at once specific and generic, not necessarily known and yet understandable, comprising a readymade illustrated tour of the universal impacts of technology.

Part One: Groundworks

The first chapter is prefaced by a Departures Hall, where I explain triadic semiotics. I also orientate my project in relation to discourses that I do not invoke elsewhere for the sake of clarity and manageability of scale of the thesis, but which have been influential on my thinking nonetheless. I also sharpen the image of my methods by defining certain terms used throughout.

Chapter One presents a critique of Mark Wallinger's installation *State Britain* and identifies an act of Parliament as contributing to the artwork's materials. Contemporary art's intertextuality, its entanglement with other discourses and practices, is examined in relation to site specificity (as a particular mode of engagement with subject matter), and the reasons for its ahistorical and dematerialised tendencies are examined. This tendency is also noted in Jane Rendell's site-writing, where the relationship between viewer and subject matter is metaphorised as architectural.⁵⁶ It is proposed instead that an artwork be considered an agential practice that is the 'roots and fruits' of the materially, historically and socio-politically inflected site, author and audience.⁵⁷ Karen Barad's and Donna Haraway's interest in the operation of diffraction is invoked to make apparent the agential connotations of self-consciously networked actions and interpretations, and the potential for the willed generation of effects throughout reticulated semiotic networks. Finally, the prevalence of ambiguity in contemporary art is discussed – with recourse to Tirdad Zolghadr, Amanda Beech, Suhail Malik, Nato Thompson and others. A case is made for a nuanced and detailed approach, with biosemiotics as a means by which to construct ambiguities in registers previously under- or unexplored, and to generate diffractive patterns that disrupt normative signifying and interpretative modes.

⁵⁶ Jane Rendell, *Site-Writing* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010)

⁵⁷ 'Roots and fruits' is a term used by Kockelman to convey how any phenomenon or noumenon can be the foundational or terminal element of a sign, the precipitant of a semiotic processes or its outcome. Paul Kockelman, *Agent, Person, Subject, Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 3–4.

Chapter Two establishes the role of abstraction in everyday communication, and its various connotations in modern and contemporary art. Stereotyping and objectification are recognised as vital processes, and the abstraction of space and time are examined for their impact on knowledge and perception. The railway's pivotal contribution to the establishment of spatio-temporal abstraction and standardisation is discussed, and its critical, affective and political effects are examined, with recourse to Doreen Massey, Robert Musil and Bruno Latour. Musil's essayism, or the interleaving of the concrete and the abstract, is proposed as a means to augment Fredric Jameson's handling of Louis Althusser's 'expressive causality', or the remodelling of ideas and events by a political unconscious.⁵⁸ It is suggested that textual descriptions and narratives that reintegrate material, bodily, socio-political, scientific and emotional factors can trace more accurately channels of agency and effect. Even the syntactically humble list can do this, since its relative evidence the scope of what is considered relevant or important: echoes of the bizarre lists of the early Enlightenment are found in the decategorising lists of speculative realists like Jane Bennett. The itinerary is introduced as a particular sort of list that interacts with site, and its enactment as guided tour is related to Bernard Stiegler's proposition of technology as a tool for memory. The guided tour is reconsidered as an intervening practice that does not synthesise a narrative so much as negotiate multiple and conflicting values of a site to produce critical patterns of diffraction.

Part Two: Surveying the Site as Understood by Others

Chapter Three asks 'What is a railway?', and surveys pragmatic and literary texts for mediated perceptions, rote interpretations and implicit attitudes and beliefs. Michel de Certeau's and Marc Augé's descriptions of train travel are criticised for objectifying the train to a very localised degree, ignoring its involvement with broader networks of technology, management, political structuring and

⁵⁸ Fredric Jameson, 'On Interpretation', in *The Political Unconscious* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 1-88.

psychosocial behaviour. The imperatives of Latour and Wolfgang Streeck to desegregate the social and the economic are introduced, and the texts garnered from railway history books, technical accounts, statistical reports, government papers and train operators' passenger charters are examined in this light. Accounts of the railway in literature are explored for their ambivalent attitudes to modernity – polar examples of which can be found in Charles Dickens' serialised novel *Mugby Junction* and Virginia Woolf's 1924 lecture-essay 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown'.⁵⁹ Examples of modern and contemporary art's engagement with the railway are found to be less rigorously delineated than their literary counterparts, but ambivalence itself is presented as a core consideration for theorists such as Claire Bishop and Chantal Mouffe, who argue for art that negotiates non-harmonious relationships, which is rearticulated here in semiotic terms as participation in multiple, incongruent and overlapping ontologies.

Chapter Four implements this idea of clashing ontologies, analysing several of the connotations and interpretations of a single phrase – 'I'm on the train' – when uttered inside a train carriage. Departing from Michael Halliday's socio-linguistic framework, in which an utterance operates as behaviour, system and knowledge (and, potentially, as art), the chapter explores the various topographies implied by the phrase, such as the interpenetration of a site with other distant, telephonically connected sites, and the overlaying of private and public spaces. Train operators' and passengers' intentions and desires are considered as mutually diffracting factors within the train carriage: proxemics, or the study of limits of tolerance, is explored in physical and aural registers; sightlines where airline style seating has been used to minimise face-to-face encounter, and visibility and transparency in general, are considered in relation to broader managerial and bureaucratic practices, and to Althusser's critique of state apparatus as a means of replicating behaviour.⁶⁰ The phrase 'I am on the train' is then broken down into constituent elements in order to discuss the

⁵⁹ Charles Dickens, *Mugby Junction* (London: Hesperus, 2005); Virginia Woolf, *Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown* (London: Hogarth Press, 1924).

⁶⁰ Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus*, (London: Verso, 2014).

following thematics: self, autobiography, intertextuality, hybridity; philosophies of time, ontology of performance, novelty; movement, scale, anxiety; the generic and the particular, abstraction, repetitiveness; objectification.

In Chapter Five the devising of an artwork evidences the infrastructure of a rail network – in this case the London Underground. By asking a curator and a producer at Art on the Underground to respond to a proposal for a site-specific performance, insight into the everyday processes and systems through which the network is run become apparent, as well as the institutional pressures placed on art in a context of public service and economic growth. The proposal is explored more broadly as a critical art form, since it remodels an existing state of affairs; and the unproduceable proposal is presented as a challenge to established practices of a site, where existing overlapping codes, rules, norms and laws cannot yield to the new conditions required. The prevailing perception of bureaucracy as a repressive form is redressed and argued as being potentially facilitating, protective or equalising – an idea that is particularly pertinent at a time when the UK is negotiating a break with the EU, and when deregulation and deracination as a radical propensity of the avant-garde can be critiqued in light of contemporary global capitalism. The dynamic textual environment of the London Underground system is then explored as an ambivalent site of protective and aggressing surveillance, and of signage and advertising, to be disrupted or parasitically inhabited.

Part Three: Interspersal of Site and Works

Chapter Six is dedicated to an analysis of a single artwork included in the accompanying practice portfolio. An account of the intentions and theoretical materials of the audio piece *HERMES* demonstrates the intertextuality of the piece and its participation in several ontologies ascribable to its site (it is to be listened to while on a train journey). The piece explores interferences between the physical and psychological conditions common to train travel, and between

the various temporal frameworks involved in the act of journeying. The railway is explored as a reticulated and dynamic semiotic and material network, and the train carriage proposed as a generic-specific site: that is, a place that is particular in its qualities, but replicated across multiple instantiations. Texts that similarly interact with generic-specific places include the prayer, which draws on generalities to produce a singular connectivity (in the case of prayer, a psychological connection between she who prays, God and a community; in the case of *HERMES* a textual connection between the spoken words, novels, railway infrastructural texts, critical theory and the voiced and unvoiced experiences of rail travel). The piece draws on theories of temporal frameworks, ventriloquism and anthropomorphism, suspension of disbelief, tool theory, boredom, the systems model of human error (where mistakes are perceived not as an individual's fault, but as a result of their situation) and dispersed causality.

Chapter Seven comprises commentaries on two artworks: a guided tour recently performed as part of the Whitstable Biennale, and a performance for a train table top, with an audience of three. The chapter draws on the theoretical frameworks outlined in the Introduction and Chapters One and Two, and presents the artworks as practical responses to the identified challenges and potentials of the socio-political and textual propensities of train travellers and railworkers, as explored in Chapters Three, Four and Five. The textual and theatrical qualities of the guided tour *I Hear Horses* are considered as translations between the narrating practices of contemporary art, educative leisure and corporate self-presentation. Irony, assumptions, lying and fudging are explored as pragmatic, affecting means of negotiating perceptual or cognitive aporia; and differentials in knowledge are proposed as prime material for the writer-maker. *Train Tabletop Text Opera* is commentated on as an instance of authorship dispersed throughout the complex assemblage of the site-specific performance. My negotiation of its characters' incommensurate value structures is articulated through such processes of textual representation as modelling, switching and glossing.

The thesis concludes with Arrivals Hall, where I identify the ongoing resonance of this PhD. I describe how, as a way of thinking about writing and making, it informs not only my own writing-making practice, but also my teaching practice. The ellipsis at which Chapter Seven arrives becomes a point of departure for onward journeys.

**DEPARTURES HALL:
A MOMENT OF ORIENTATION**

Semiotics is What?

Peircean semiotics describes a universe in a state of immanent dynamism, where any apparently singular object or state of affairs can be understood as participant in and constituted by a web of significances and (human and non-human) interpretative responses.⁶¹ Unlike Saussurian semiology – which, as we will see in Chapter One, can be charged with leading contemporary art to an impasse of dematerialisation – Peircean semiotics admits multiple systems of signification, including but not confined to the linguistic. Semiotic analysis can articulate a single action or event as coincident multiple semiotic processes, each conducted in reference to an interpretative agent. Stepping down from a train, for example, can be described as a chain of intentions, signs, perceptions, interpretations and responses based in social status, personal need, cautionary signage, spatial orientation, memory of past accidents, physiology of musculature, electrical signalling of neurones and so on. Semiotics can also reframe a practice as the propensity of a semiotic community to signify, objectify and interpret – that is, to behave – in certain ways due to a prior cause or to belief (which is itself a response to signifying experiences).⁶² Let us take as an example the practice of selfishly barging on to a train. The semiotician might trace the conditions that produce the act of barging to a behavioural tendency not effectively discouraged in childhood, or to a sense of privilege due to class or race or gender, or to a message of urgency being transmitted by the bladder. Where theories of performativity are useful for identifying general flows of activity, and for introducing the potential for political agency, semiotics can increase the level of detail and scope of analysis. Through a Peircean lens, performativity is responsiveness to and the renegotiation of myriad normative significances. Semiotics acknowledges the influence of different ontologies, or grounds of

⁶¹ See Kockelman, *Agent, Person, Subject, Self*, p. 21.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 66.

interpretation – and it is this that is of immense importance to the writer-maker working site-specifically, where textual semantics and rhetoric are just two methods through which to generate meaning and affect.

In its baldest terms, contemporary semiotics can be characterised as the study of action in response to signs, where a sign comprises the triadic relation between sign-vehicle, object and interpretant.⁶³ Peirce proposed that the universe is ‘perfused with signs if it is not composed entirely of signs’,⁶⁴ and undertook to taxonomise and describe them. His system is broad and complex and studded with neologisms; his textual and diagrammatic output, largely unpublished in his lifetime, is massive. As Jonathan Culler points out, Peirce’s ten trichotomies of classification would yield a possible 59,049 classes of signs (although Peirce identified just 66 classes in his lifetime).⁶⁵ In practice, such proliferation, while intended to generalise the inundation of signification that is the universe, would approach the absurdity of the fabled one-to-one scale map which matches the territory in size and complexity.⁶⁶

In this thesis I will not be engaging with the technical nomenclature of signs so much as theorising semiosis as complex emergent responsivity. I will be considering semiosis as a historically, socially and materially circumscribed process, and interpretative acts as dependant on combinations of codes, conventions, knowledges, beliefs and physiological, cognitive, conventional and material affordances and propensities. The multi-dimensional, self-reflexive and dynamic nature of semiosis, as Paul Kockelman describes, consists in:

an enormous web of possible ways of relating practices and processes, entities and events, causes and effects, factors and references, signs and

⁶³ The sign-vehicle is that which stands for something else; the object is that which is stood for, and the interpretant is the response – that which happens as a result of the particular mode of interpretation in which the sign-vehicle is encountered. For an overview of Peircean triadic semiotics, its history, development and applications see *The Routledge Companion to Semiotics*, ed. by Paul Cobley (London: Routledge, 2010).

⁶⁴ 448, f.n.1, in *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), v, p. 302.

⁶⁵ Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 25.

⁶⁶ See C. S. Lewis, *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded* (London: MacMillan, 1893) p. 169

interpretants, qualities and quantities, modalities of time and distributions in space, 'subjects' and 'objects,' and much else besides, such that, to an agent aware of such interrelations, any two relata within such a web can be framed in terms of a sign-object relation.⁶⁷

This infinite, recursive reticulation eviscerates enclosed forms and makes legible the many-codedness of any object. Prefiguring Heidegger, and subsequent object-oriented ontologists such as Graham Harman, Peirce qualifies an object as a thing that is present to a subject's perception, but which is not necessarily physical. Objectification is the process of separating a thing from its extraneous relations, that is, from the semiotic processes and physical interactions with which it is involved, but which do not appear to constitute it. Like the process of identification of subject matter described above, objectification is the making-object of a particular segment of the infinite reflexive, reticulated network. It is this operation, and the truncations, compactions and fudges that it necessitates, that is a particular focus of this thesis and accompanying practice. I will be analysing and testing through practice how significances, connotations and particular interpretations of a sign are dependent on its physical context (Umwelt), on public, shared understandings (Lebenswelt), and on personal, psychological modellings of experience (Innenwelt).⁶⁸ To give a simple example for now: a drawing of a train can perform as a sign-vehicle, with a real train as its object and the thought of a train its interpretant. This thought of a train might then become a sign-vehicle in itself, which might relate to several other idea-objects, depending on the ground of interpretation or ontological context, on common values and personal experience. For instance, in the context of colonial history, the object might be the idea of Western industrial imperialism, and the interpretant a feeling of anger; in the context of contemporary economics, the object might be the thought of the cost of travel, and the interpretant a sense of disenfranchisement. In this manner, the image of the train can be understood to

⁶⁷ Kockelman, 'Four Theories of Things', p. 189.

⁶⁸ I do not place 'Umwelt', 'Lebenswelt' or 'Innenwelt' in italics, since they are technical terms within the field of semiotics, following their introduction by Thomas Sebeok in his reading of Jakob Von Uexküll. See Thomas A. Sebeok, 'Neglected figures in the history of semiotic inquiry: Jakob von Uexküll' [1979], in *The Sign & Its Masters* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979) pp. 187–207.

stand variously for a mode of transport, a means of income, expense, escape, pollution, globalisation and so on. Through this admittance of multiple interpretability, material affordances, too, can be repurposed: a train carriage might be construed as a unit of transport hardware, or as a holiday dwelling on a Welsh cliff top. A train's smart blue exterior might relate to a personal memory of childhood trains and provoke nostalgia; or it might imply cool, hard materiality and instil a sense of the operator's authority, or spark recognition of the attempt to instil authority through psychology and branding.

Such embedded and embodied processes of signification and interpretation are sensitive to the introduction of new media, instruments and modes of representation, which can change what is perceivable or cognisable and therefore interpretable. This in turn has implications for accountability for the introduction of new perceptions and interpretations, since, as Kockelman puts it, 'interpretations are interventions as much as interventions are interpretations'.⁶⁹ All interactions between person and infrastructure, agent and ontology are the 'roots and fruits' of culture, of a recursive system of reassertion or transformation of assumptions that change the world about which those assumptions are made.

Semiotics and Contemporary Art

The majority of art historical semiotic studies focus on the study of paintings and photographs, and on three classes of sign-vehicles: the icon, the index and the symbol.⁷⁰ Multiplicity of interpretation offers the art historian an opportunity to narrate relations between the conditions of viewing at different points in history, across varying material and socio-political situations. Bal and Bryson give the example of a still-life painting of a bowl of fruit, which a viewer might interpret

⁶⁹ Kockelman, 'Four Theories of Things', p. 190.

⁷⁰ The iconic sign relates to its object through similarity, the indexical sign is actually affected by its object and the symbolic sign signifies through convention. Although, when defining 'index', Peirce uses the unhelpful phrase 'really affected', which has been variously interpreted and, according to Elkins, misinterpreted to mean physical causation. See James Elkins, 'What Does Peirce's Sign Theory Have to Say to Art History?', *Culture, Theory & Critique*, 44.1 (2003), 5–22 (pp. 6–7).

as referring to a real bowl of fruit or to other still lifes or a huge amount of money or seventeenth-century Holland.⁷¹ This object of thought, of which the painting is a sign-vehicle, can itself be taken as a sign-vehicle and interpreted as relating to another object, and so on in an infinite recursive chain of meaning making. Semiotics is customarily employed in art history to investigate the processes by which artworks are made sense of by viewers.⁷² As Bal and Bryson describe, ‘standing somewhat to one side of the work of interpretation, semiotics has as its object to describe the conventions and conceptual operations that shape what viewers do – whether those viewers are art historians, art critics, or the crowd of spectators attending an exhibition’.⁷³ A semiotics of subjectivity arises from the importance placed on the potential multiple interpretation of signs, displacing art histories of pictorial unity and prescribed narrative meaning, lending itself to reception-oriented theories of art.

The index – that is, an actual causal relation between an object and its sign-vehicle, rather than a representational relation – has particularly contributed to discourses on the affectivity of pictures. Bal and Bryson note several registers in which it operates: a pointing figure directing the viewer’s eyes; the rückenfigure or voyeur transposing the viewer into the landscape or into proximity with the nude; the open mouth of a screaming pope invoking the indexical relation between pain and scream; a gestural mark, as a direct result of movement and paint, implying expressivity.⁷⁴ In ‘Notes on the Index’, Krauss responds to non-representational works, where artists employ the index to ‘exacerbate an aspect of the building’s physical presence, and thereby [...] embed within it a perishable trace of their own’.⁷⁵ She is referring here to the physical influence of architecture or materials on installation works, where the site of the artwork is vital among its material, from the extremes of Gordon Matta-Clark’s building cutaways to the

⁷¹ Bal and Bryson, ‘Semiotics and Art History’, p. 188.

⁷² Similarly, in literary theory semiotics has lent itself to reception theory and theories of reading. See, for example, Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982); Jonathan Culler, ‘Semiotics as a Theory of Reading’, in *The Pursuit of Signs*, pp. 47–79.

⁷³ Bal and Bryson ‘Semiotics and Art History’, p. 185.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

⁷⁵ Krauss, ‘Notes on the Index, Part 1’, p. 81.

smaller gesture of hanging a painting in alignment with a detail of the underlying paintwork. Kristen Kreider develops the site-specificity of the index in her 'material poetics', whereby the artwork operates as a multiply constituted 'indexical' sign.⁷⁶ Differentiated from a pure index, Kreider describes the indexical symbol as that which relates a meaning that pertains in all situations *and* a spatio-temporally specific meaning. From this she develops a mode of analysis in which the poetics of artworks are attributed as much to their material specificity as to universal signifiers, to context as much as code.

Sharon Morris mobilizes the Peircean concepts of firstness, secondness and thirdness, with particular recourse to psychoanalysis, in her evaluation of artworks.⁷⁷ In brief: firstness is unconceptualised encounter, relating to 'sense and possibility'; secondness is correspondence with another object, relating to 'force and actuality', and thirdness is signification, relating to 'understanding and generality'.⁷⁸ As Morris points out, aesthetic theory of the twentieth century has been intent on artworks exceeding representation. As a complex signifying structure, the work of art is

a Thirdness, created in relation to other works of art, and as an existent object in our material world it signifies through its Secondness. Crucially, however, as an encounter with a viewer, the work of art is experienced as *presentations* signifying qualities of experience that are non-conceptualised : Firsts.⁷⁹

A firstness as a radical other to be encountered is, for Morris, augmented by the index, which can evince a strange or loaded influence of one material or entity upon another; and 'a radical work of art' is 'precisely that which evokes no immediate logical interpretant'.⁸⁰ These obstacles to easy meaning based in art

⁷⁶ See Kristen Kreider, *Poetics and Place: The Architecture of Sign, Subjects and Site*, (London: I.B. Taurus, 2014).

⁷⁷ Sharon Morris, 'Peirce: Re-Staging the Sign in the Work of Art', *Recherches sémiotiques / Semiotic Inquiry*, 33.1–2–3 (2013) 103–30.

⁷⁸ Firstness, secondness and thirdness seem to be particularly slippery ideas, which Kockelman describe as 'genus categories', and which include types of signs, objects and interpretants as species. Here I have conflated Morris's apparent interpretation of these terms and definitions supplied by Kockelman. See Kockelman, *Agent, Person, Subject, Self*, p. 67.

⁷⁹ Morris, 'Peirce: Re-Staging the Sign in the Work of Art', p. 105.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

historical traditions redirect attention towards individual, phenomenological experience, and such engagement, for Morris, ‘can reveal the fragility of the symbolic self and ego’.⁸¹ In paying attention to emotional, physiological and physical responses to artworks, ‘we may also need to pay attention to our selves as a process of semiosis that refuses to stabilize around a logical interpretant’.⁸²

It is this point of semiotic instability which an artwork can evince that I am taking further in this thesis, and in the accompanying practice. I will not be conducting semiotic analysis along dominant art-historical lines, which tend to be limited to identification of icon, index and symbol and analysis of their operations within a given artwork. A taxonomic mobilization of just three classes of signs seems restrictive when, as James Elkins points out, Peircean semiotics is ‘a combination of sharp-edged mathematical exactitude and a very tangled or tumbled braid of recurring themes’.⁸³ Elkins draws on the following as an example of the unexpected turns in Peirce’s thinking:

Take, for instance, ‘it rains’. Here the icon is the mental composite photograph of all the rainy days the thinker has experienced. The index is all whereby he distinguishes *that day*, as it is placed in his experience. The symbol is the mental act whereby [he] stamps that day as rainy.⁸⁴

Here understanding is far from confined to visual evidence, with semiotic processes necessitating leaps of association between mental cognition and physical experience, making use of several temporal perspectives to draw on memory, immediate perception and anticipation. And it is this cocktail of understandings that I am equating to the ecology of knowledges described in the Introduction.

Rather than privileging artworks as special instances of signification, I am considering them as sign-vehicles, objects and interpretants, as active,

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 113.

⁸² Ibid., p. 113.

⁸³ Elkins, ‘What Does Peirce’s Sign Theory Have to Say to Art History?’, p. 20.

⁸⁴ *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. by Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1932), II, 438 (p. 266); cited in Elkins, ‘What Does Peirce’s Sign Theory Have to Say to Art History?’, p. 6.

participatory agents in environments and processes. Like Bal and Bryson, I deploy semiotics to '[help] us think about aspects of the process of art in society, in history', as 'dynamic and positioned in time'.⁸⁵ And I am introducing to this thought process the biosemiotic figure of 'channels'. Semiotics is a matter of shifting correspondences (between the relationship between a sign-vehicle and an object and the relationship between an interpretant and an object), and we can think of significance unfolding through the infinite web of relations as being conducted along 'channels' of correspondence.⁸⁶ In place of structuralist models, where paradigmatic alternatives are sequentially selected from an abstract structural code, against which they stands as object against ground, Kockelman suggests that all potential channels of semiotic operation are available and either are activated by a participant agent or remain latent. In this environmental model, if interpretants are based in social or psychological habits, then artworks that problematise or satirise or otherwise détourn the 'normal' functioning and outcome of signs activate different channels of sign-vehicle / interpretant correspondence. The artwork 'extends, diminishes, buffers or masks the sensory and instigator capabilities of semiotic agents'.⁸⁷ That is, an artwork can influence that which is experienced, perceived, known or understood; it can bring conceptual objects to mind and precipitate particular or generic correspondences or relations between relations. Art becomes a 'model for interpretation, for arranging perception'.⁸⁸ An artwork mediates. As such, it is possible for an artwork to foreground the switch between a normative and a new channel of semiotic operation, making apparent critical differentials: between expectations and actualities, habits and possibilities. The technical specificity of the writer-maker, then, could approach that of the engineer or orchestral composer, where gauging the effect of differentials produces not electrical power or aural resonance, but critical engagement with subject matter. It is the acceptable limit of such authorship, of articulation of intent and concrete meaning, given the conventions of contemporary art, that this project tests.

⁸⁵ Bal and Bryson, 'Semiotics and Art History', p. 191.

⁸⁶ Kockelman, *Agent, Person, Subject, Self*, p. 50.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁸⁸ Susan Stewart, *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), p. 24.

A Note on Technical Objects, Speculative Realism and Actor Network Theory

I consider my subject matter, the railway, to be, as well as a web of semiotic processes, a technical object. And under this description, there is a particular theoretical ground that I am employing throughout this thesis. This ground comprises several discourses that cluster around certain propensities and which operate intertextually with one another: the technicity of Gilbert Simondon; Bernard Stiegler's epiphylogenetic memory; Latour's pre-modernism, and Barad's agential realism. Simondon provides a reflection on body/technology relations that are based in complementarity, that is, a recognition that the human is not prior to technology, that the human/technology relationship is based not in patronage or ingestion but incorporation and interdependence. Humans do not govern machines but, by constructing the signification of exchanges of information between machines, render them compatible.⁸⁹ Stiegler suggests that tools and technical systems are the embodiment of human memory and knowledge and thereby drivers of temporality.⁹⁰ Barad insists that the body – human and non-human – is central to a performative account of technoscientific practices.⁹¹ This is an outrageous compaction of enormous overlapping discourses, which have informed my understanding of what follows, but a full account of which cannot be crammed into a single thesis word count. Thankfully, they are amply presented, critiqued and developed elsewhere.⁹² But I wish to point out that a commonality of these theories and paradigms is particular attention to the body and to time, which, it should become apparent, has had a profound influence on the thesis that follows and the artworks submitted.

⁸⁹ Gilbert Simondon, *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects* (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2017).

⁹⁰ See Bernard Stiegler, 'The Disengagement of the What', in *Technics and Time* (Stanford, CA.: Stanford University Press, 1998), I, pp. 239–76.

⁹¹ See Karen Barad, 'Posthumanist Performativity', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 28.3 (2003), 801–30.

⁹² Besides the bibliographic entries of Simondon, Stiegler, Latour and Haraway, see also: Adrian Mackenzie, *Transductions: bodies and machines at speed* (London: Continuum, 2002); Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015); Isabelle Stengers, 'Including Nonhumans in Political Theory: Opening Pandora's Box?', in *Political Matter: Technoscience, Democracy, and Public Life*, ed. by Bruce Braun (University of Minnesota Press, 2010) pp. 3–33.

Thomas Sebeok described semiotics as the difference between illusion and reality,⁹³ by which I take him to mean that, since there are signs for us and things beyond signs, these things beyond signs are that which has not been subjected to representational mediation: that is, they are physical non-objectified reality. Similarities can be found with Heidegger's withdrawn object, which informs such models and theories as Roy Bhaskar's critical realism and Graham Harman's object-oriented ontology, both of which attend to the existence of objects beyond their representation to human consciousness.⁹⁴ And indeed, it would seem an oversight to write on objects and networks without some recourse to speculative realism – the umbrella term for several theories that reject the anthropocentricity of post-Kantian philosophy and the assumption that an object's properties are not possessed by that object but are a function of human perception.

And yet, after considerable engagement with object-oriented ontology (OOO) in particular, I have rejected it as a useful framing for this thesis on several grounds. One is the many obfuscating moves that Harman makes with regard to Heidegger's tool analysis (discussed in Chapter Six). In his use of the term 'eidos', for instance, he relates this to the essential qualities of an individual object and not the genus or species of object, as is the case with Husserl's formulation on which Harman's is based.⁹⁵ This lack of generality does not allow for any act of comparison, and renders all objects in a state of radical individualism. This presents issues for my project, which is based in the perceived fluidity of fleetingly established *Lebenswelten*, co-inhabited by other entities who share, for a brief period, certain beliefs and values based in generalities as much as specifics. There are many other reasons I have been wary of Harman – not least of all the seemingly fantastical lengths to which he goes to avoid any admittance of relation (for instance, he proposes that two planes crashing momentarily become a single

⁹³ According to Paul Cobley, this was the description used by Sebeok when talking to the media or layperson. Paul Cobley, 'Introduction', in *The Routledge Companion to Semiotics*, ed. by Paul Cobley (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), pp. 3–12 (p. 3).

⁹⁴ See Roy Bhaskar, *Reclaiming Reality: A Critical Introduction to Contemporary Philosophy* (London: Verso, 1989); Graham Harman, *Tool Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Chicago: Open Court, 2002).

⁹⁵ See Graham Harman, *The Quadruple Object* (Winchester: Zero, 2011), pp. 27–30; Edmund Husserl, 'Matter of Fact and Essence', *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1983), pp. 5–32

crash-object) – but these would warrant a full philosophical thesis that I am not qualified to make.⁹⁶

There are a couple of ideas, however, that I do wish to salvage from my readings of OOO. One is its insistence on the equivalence of human and non-human, real and fictional, material and immaterial objects. I intend to draw on this to emphasise how Peircean semiotics too assumes an idea or a fiction to be as objectively real as a lamppost, in that both precipitate actualisable responses. Contemporary discourses of biosemiotics recognise the necessity of thinking beyond the human purview. Semiosis is not confined to language or even to human culture, but has engendered the burgeoning fields of zoösemiosis (animals), phytosemiosis (plants), endosemiosis (microbial), cosmosemiosis (the universe at large) and physiosemiosis (dyadic interactions of material, or ‘brute’ force).⁹⁷ AI researchers have also been asking whether or not a robot has an Umwelt.⁹⁸

A second crucial OOO characteristic that I wish to retain is the influence of Latour, whose Actor-Network Theory (ANT) has served as a point of departure for many a speculative realist. I am particularly keen to keep in view Latour’s programme of pre-modernism, through which he aims to end the combative segregation of nature and culture, science and the social. This supports the proposition that the material and immaterial are agential, that things and objects participate in social activities. For Latour it is science’s programmatic ‘purification’, its conducting of analysis without synthesis, and a concentration on abstract forms, that has rendered it ignorant of the hybrid forms produced through the commingling of humans, objects, animals, plants and technologies. If we instead understand purification as a particular case of mediation, as just one

⁹⁶ For a really thorough academic takedown of Harman’s oeuvre, see Peter Wolfendale, *Object-Oriented Philosophy: The Noumenon’s New Clothes* (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2014).

⁹⁷ Many of these practices have developed from Jakob von Uexküll’s biosemiotics, which suggests that semiotic webs are particular to a species, and that multiple Umwelten overlap in the physical world, but are differently perceived by biologically differentiated organisms.

⁹⁸ Clause Emmesche, ‘Does a Robot Have an Umwelt: Reflections on the biosemiotics of Jakob von Uexküll’, *Semiotica*, 134.1/4 (2001), pp. 653–93.

narrativising process among the many available, science itself becomes not an autonomous field of endeavour, but interpenetrated by social forces.

The method of choice for Latour's programme of reintegration is investigative description, the exhaustive tracing of connections that constitute networks and assemblages of the human, non-human, reified, imaginary, virtual, technological and biological,⁹⁹ in order 'to pass with continuity from the local to the global', between 'interpersonal contacts and depersonalized rationalities', via 'the thread of networks of practices and instruments, of documents and translations'.¹⁰⁰

Investigative description is also key to the current thesis, with particular emphasis on the narrative qualities of description, on what Jameson identifies as the political unconscious and Althusser as interpellation – that is, that which is inevitably expressed in every attempt to describe, narrative and objectify.¹⁰¹ (In Chapter Four in particular I will be surveying the underlying assumptions and expectations that selected narratives substantiate.)

These two retained aspects of speculative realism are related. They both require a return to mediaeval scholastic thought and a short-circuiting of modernity: in short, the reuniting of *technē* and *epistēmē*. Several of the theorists cited – Rosi Braidotti and Jane Bennett for instance – draw on Benedict Spinoza's *Ethics*, in which he insists that mind and body are not dualistically constituted.¹⁰² On the semioticians' part, it is often Thomas Aquinas or Louis Poinsoot who are called on. Deely in particular refers to Aquinas's realism, in which he eradicates idealism by insisting that human awareness is prior to any distinction between the material or the conceptual, that is, that human experience is animal experience first of all.¹⁰³ For my part, I will be leaving such matters to the philosophers and practicing what Sara Ahmed refers to as 'not philosophy',

⁹⁹ See Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

¹⁰⁰ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 121.

¹⁰¹ See Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*; Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*.

¹⁰² See Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), p. x; Rosi Braidotti, 'Spinoza Revisited', in *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), pp. 146–51.

¹⁰³ Deely, *Basics of Semiotics*, pp. 198–9.

which ‘aims to create room within philosophy for others who are not philosophers’, so that ‘the incapacity to return texts to their proper histories allows us to read sideways or across, thus creating a different angle on what is being reproduced’.¹⁰⁴ The philosophies, points of view and methods mentioned here are not the subject matter of this thesis *per se*, but are implicated as related grounds of interpretation.

A Note on Terminology, Practices and Positionings

In the thesis that follows, I describe myself as a ‘writer-maker’. This double-barrel identifier is intended to signify my understanding of what I do as writing-in-the-mix-with-something-else, and to mark a difference from ‘artist’. I am foregrounding myself as ‘writer’ because I think of writing as medium, discipline, form, material and methodology all at once, and wish to acknowledge the different sorts of texts I produce and their various functions in context. In the context of this PhD, for instance, the writing of the thesis and of its practice elements are in non-hierarchical relation; and there has been call for many other types of writing along the way too – notes, reports, emails, outlines, plans, lists – all of which have been equally important and tended to comprise writing that draws on and contributes to its context for meaning and effect. The ‘maker’ element of my term brings me into proximity with artists, but also with craftspeople, tradespeople, fabricators and engineers. The connotation here is that something is produced with attention to facture and materials, and in continuity with non-art practices.

I have avoided the term ‘artist’ to head off any suggestion that I have swapped sides, from critic to artist, for the move is more complex than this. Criticality is implicit in the practice documented in this submission, and while some of what I have submitted can be identified as art, often it has been made for different reasons. One text piece, for instance, has been devised solely to test the

¹⁰⁴ Sara Ahmed, *Willful Subjects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), p. 15.

managerial and technological structures of London Underground, and the performance *Train Tabletop Text Opera* was originally conceived as a way of enticing friends to come and visit me in the small, dull town I was living in. As will become clear, I do not wish to separate the ontology of art from that of other practices, and so ‘maker’ is also a way of indicating that the production and manipulation of meaning through materials is far from confined to art. This thesis and the practice that accompanies it is an amalgam of makerly modes, most of which involve language, but it should be remembered that myriad other ‘creative’ practices – the making of props and costumes, and of meals, atmospheres, conversations, messes, relationships – have been vital to its completion.

By extension of this, I have not provided the customary descriptors for individuals referenced and cited in the text. I have not referred to ‘the philosopher, literary theorist, psychoanalyst and novelist Julia Kristeva’ or ‘the biologist Jakob von Uexküll’ because, in some instances, disciplinary involvement requires a list of imbricated fields that, with each additional term, becomes even more implausibly vast; and in other instances the technically accurate term does not admit the trans- or interdisciplinary interest or importance of the person or text in question. In some instances it is not possible to know how someone might wish to identify themselves, or they might identify differently depending on context, or on how a given interpreter wishes to construe that subject’s indeterminacy. For instance, does Amanda Beech prefer to present herself as an artist who theorises, or do her institutional employers represent her as a theorist who makes art? And so finally, I have decided to omit all descriptors because, frankly, one comes across as naïve if one writes ‘the artist Marcel Duchamp’; and if one can write simply ‘Duchamp’, and it is for the reader to know or to find out what this person is famous for, then with contemporary knowledge-gathering technologies at fingertips and on tap, it is only fair that all of those who have contributed to the ideas in this thesis are accorded equivalent levels of respectful complexity. Commentary on lives and works are accessible elsewhere, should the

reader wish to know something other than how these people's ideas have been enfolded into the discourse in hand.

And finally, it will be noticed that, particularly in Part Two of the thesis, the discussion is not geared toward identification of types of signs, sign-vehicles, objects or interpretants, nor is it heavy with semiotic terminology. I have elected to work in a less technical register to allow the context of the railway, and the languages inherent to it, to be heard. As already mentioned, I am not presenting this thesis in continuity with art historical semiotic analyses of pictures. Rather, I am using an awareness of semiotic processes to increase perceptual sensitivity to divergent agential responsiveness, to multiple and concurrent significations and interpretations as imminent, mediating processes. I have therefore written in such a way as to (hopefully) preserve the fluid effect of responsiveness in a text that does not trip the reader up on potentially unfamiliar technicalese.

CHAPTER ONE:

SITUATIONAL TEXT

Social Form as Material

In the lecture ‘Crisis as Form’, when pressed for an example of an artwork where an aspect of form is immanent to location or context, Peter Osborne showed four images of Mark Wallinger’s installation *State Britain* (2007): one installed at its original site, the Duveen Gallery, Tate Britain, London, and three reiterations at MAC/VAL, Vitry-sur-Seine, De Pont Gallery, Tilburg, Kunstmuseum Aarau and Kunstverein Braunschweig.¹⁰⁵ The installation is a facsimile of Brian Haw’s protest encampment in Parliament Square, London, which, after ten years of protest, had grown into a caustic encrustation of text, imagery, bloodstained clothing and forlorn, weather-beaten soft toys. The material accoutrements of Haw’s encampments were eventually confiscated by the metropolitan police under the Serious Organised Crime and Police Act of 2005 (SOCPA), which prohibits unauthorised protests in a specified zone around Parliament, 1km in radius. The Duveen Gallery is bisected by the boundary of this zone.

Only the original installation, Osborne asserts, is a complete work, since it is here that its site is fully activated. The conceptual and political power of *State Britain* is generated by this apparent transgression of the law, and determined by a complex argument around protest, representation and reconstruction. Since slogans and images used in protest are, by nature, to be reproduced by participants, the installation could be considered another protest; and yet the status of the artwork problematises this, as its representational *and* presentational ontologies are equally arguable. It could, on the one hand, be an iconic sign, standing, through similarity, for Haw’s protest; or it could be an indexical sign, a

¹⁰⁵ Peter Osborne, ‘Crisis as Form’, lecture, Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy, Chelsea College of Art (12 October 2017) <<http://backdoorbroadcasting.net/2017/01/peter-osborne-crisis-as-form/>> [accessed 4 August 2018].

result of Wallinger's own position on foreign policy, or his stance on the government's response to Haw, or both. But only in the Duveen Gallery, where the social form of the legislative act and the discourses of contemporary art coincide, can the installation be both a transgressive protest and a representation of a protest. Elsewhere it is merely a still life.

Osborne gives *State Britain* as an example of how forms (by which he means conceptual, not material, forms) can be destroyed by context. In any incarnation other than the Tate installation, it is fair to say that the piece lacks something. His criticism is levelled at the travesties of art circulation which does not recognise the social form of the legal act among the work's artistic materials. By circulating only its material aspects, the piece is incomplete, defanged. In contemporary art more generally, Osborne criticises 'the emblematically opaque objective materials in which we can invest the illusion of alienated subjectivity'.¹⁰⁶ I take this to refer to how an artwork appears to frame or reframe, present or represent aspects or parts of the material world, while withholding evidence of the physical, cognitive and emotional processes through which this has occurred, and which the viewer might then imagine. Although Osborne's comment is possibly coined in relation to Marx's commodity fetishism, it can also be figured through Peircean semiotics. Where the artwork is at once immediate and mediating, physically and affectingly encountered and culturally encoded, it has both firstness and thirdness, where this signifying thirdness is multiple, depending on the grounds of interpretation. In the instance of *State Britain*, although Wallinger's reputation for political commentary based in socialism is a considerable framing device, his art-historical point of reference, his understanding of the ontology of the artwork, remains unclear. The firstness of the work soon gives way to its secondness – its likeness to Haw's camp – but we cannot entirely fix its thirdness: we cannot know whether this was intended as equivalent to or representative of Haw's camp. In the Tate installation, then, the transgression of the SOCPA zone is a matter of interpretation. *State Britain* can be willed into an overt act of dissent through the cognitive and ideological act of viewing.

¹⁰⁶ Osborne, 'Crisis as Form'.

It is telling that Osborne considers a form to have been destroyed by the artwork's change in context. It suggests that it is not the SOCPA zone that is part of the work, but whatever new object comes into being when the zone interacts with *State Britain*: a legal transgression, or the representation of a transgression. When moved to the kunsthalle, this transgression is indeed eradicated. We can take from this that one of the epochal indicators of contemporary art – the incorporation of ‘non-art’ objects and substances among an artwork’s materials – extends to its integration of contiguous, immanent or coincidental non-art practices – in this case, the practice of law. As Osborne points out, we can think of Rosalind Krauss’s expanded field,¹⁰⁷ where modern art’s bounded condition is replaced by an ontological process of determination where sculpture is not identified by its materials, but by open forms, unexpected materials, incompleteness and experience – and by what it is in opposition to. (For Krauss, this is primarily landscape or architecture). For Osborne the artwork is in oppositional relation to empirical reality; it is distinct from non-art.¹⁰⁸ It is this presumed contrast that I wish to contest.

Elsewhere, Osborne states that it is not objects that are installed, but ideas: ‘Works are the product of the installation. Installation has been transformed from a technical to an ontological category.’¹⁰⁹ *State Britain*, under this description, is the installation of the idea of transgressing the legal act. And yet, it turns out that the artist got lucky: it wasn’t until the piece was already commissioned and its production underway that a curator noticed that the SOCPA zone bisected the gallery.¹¹⁰ Wallinger’s original intention was not the redeployment of the legislative form as an artistic material, rendering the installation as an indexical signifier of his political position. Rather, his intention was correspondent with the iconic functioning of memorial art: sustained visibility of the object (Haw’s protest) and the commanding of an attentiveness

¹⁰⁷ See Rosalind Krauss, ‘Sculpture in the Expanded Field’, *October*, 8 (Spring 1979), pp. 30–44.

¹⁰⁸ Osborne, ‘Crisis as Form’. See also Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, p. 20.

¹⁰⁹ Osborne, ‘Non-places and the spaces of art’, p. 192.

¹¹⁰ This information was told to the author by the artist in conversation while conducting research for an artist monograph. See Sally O’Reilly, *Mark Wallinger* (London: Tate Publishing, 2015).

different to, and more sustained than that conferred on objects in everyday life. Wallinger was not exercising practices of legislation and dissensus so much as those of museological display and viewership. His aim was to arrest viewers' attention through an 'extreme verisimilitude that is a bit boggling to the eye and mind, and that slows down people's reactions a bit as to how those things are'.¹¹¹ The camp, before the police raid and its impoundment, is remade as 'a frozen moment in time', 'elegiac of some kind of loss of freedom'.¹¹² *State Britain* is, in the artist's understanding, a representation of an absence, a trompe-l'oeil. His interest for Osborne, then, was a matter of serendipity, rather than intent. The 'idea' that Wallinger installed was not the one that Osborne understood. The credibility of the piece as both protest and representation of a protest is a result of interpretive fluidity not intentional authorship.

This revelation punctures the primacy and singularity of Osborne's proposed ontology of art, which can 'transform all kinds of place into "art space" [...] by bringing it into relation with gallery conventions'.¹¹³ It was from within the ontology of art that Osborne was minded to afford Wallinger full control of his intentions (for there is a tradition of artistic intent as a marker of an object not being non-art). And yet the status of the art object as transgressive is precipitated within the ontology of national law. In the Duveen gallery it might seem that the ontology of art is foregrounded almost to the point of obliterating all else, but there is in fact an imbricated mesh of significances and activities in play.

To further explore this idea of enmeshed ontologies, I will turn briefly to another instance, albeit under the rubric of a different theoretical framework, where art is considered to overwrite place. According to Nick Kaye, in spoken-word performance, language erases, removes or dismantles the site to which it refers. This occurs, he suggests, when a plurality of descriptions renders a place non-singular and therefore unstable, or when its constructed nature is made apparent, or when its histories are eclipsed by an utterance in an ambiguous here and

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 90.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Osborne, *Anywhere or Not At All* (London: Verso, 2013), p. 140.

now.¹¹⁴ Kaye refers to Michel de Certeau's transposition of Saussure's *langue* and *parole* on to place and space, where *langue* and place are propositional orders of rule-bound systems, of semantics and grammar, and *parole* and space the expression of these rules in practice, in speech and everyday activity. Put simply, *Langue* is town planning, *parole* the streets and squares as they are inhabited. For Kaye, 'space, like the spoken word, is realised in a practice which can never rest in the order it implies, so the representation offered by 'the word' *moves one on* from 'site'.¹¹⁵ Spatial practices, he claims, are unable to realise or maintain a place properly, and therefore can only function in their absence, or, at most, as apparent as that which has been overwritten in a palimpsest. While I would agree with the provisionality of any act of naming or describing – that it cannot match up to or exhaust its referent – I would not equate this to the disappearance of place. The idea of a place is still available to those who contemplate the inadequate description, since a generic idea and a specific description can be concurrently and equally agential. In semiotic terms, a description of a place is a representational sign-vehicle to be interpreted by a listener; and it is an interpretant, a speaker's response to the site as a sign-vehicle for certain ideas or memories. In either case, the site-as-object (whether actual or idea) is not destroyed or absented. It has been mediated, from a type of place to a particular site, or from a particular memory to a tropic figure, by the simultaneously interpreting and signifying person who speaks.¹¹⁶ The 'instability' of place is not its disappearance as a material referent or a concept, under the power of language, but the waxing and waning in prominence of the many relations and mediations through which it is continually reinterpreted.

Kaye's exemplar of the place of a city absorbed into the space-time of performance is Forced Entertainment's *Nights of This City* (1995), where a fragmentary, illogical, autobiographic narration, conducted on a coach tour of

¹¹⁴ Kaye, 'Introduction: Site-Specifics', in *Site-Specific Art: Performance, Place and Documentation* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 1–12.

¹¹⁵ Kaye, *Site-Specific Art*, p. 6.

¹¹⁶ In Peirce's nomenclature this would constitute a shift from legi-sign to sin-sign or vice versa. See definitions of several types of signs in 'Nomenclature and Divisions of Triadic Relations, as Far as They Are Determined', in C.S. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, ed. by Nathan Houser and others (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), II, pp. 289–99.

Sheffield, reclaims the city from customary historical narratives. While it is important to admit the undeniable re-modelling power of description and re-description (as will become clear in Chapter Three), it seems to me undesirable to suggest that contemporary art can overwrite a site, reducing it to mere mise-en-scène for a performance set within an ahistorical non-space-time.

Furthermore, this erasure is difficult in practice, since one's understanding of such a performance would be inflected by an understanding of what a city is and how it is 'normally' experienced and interpreted, just as much as the conventions and assumptions of art inform how it is understood. Artwork and site are always entangled. Even when an artwork is imposed on public space with little regard for thematic relevance, one cannot deny the impact of peripheral vision on the experience of viewing. The observing, thinking subject does not instantaneously forget the experience of travelling to an artwork, trekking through a forest, say, or weaving through a crowded shopping centre: the art historical subtext of landscape or the commercial aura of neon will inevitably play a role in interpretation. And even within the dedicated art institution, art practices necessarily incorporate practices of health and safety, of rhetoric, of mathematics and so on, which contribute to aesthetic experience and to meaning.

I would suggest that it is more the case that the space-time of art is flexible or transferable, that it can establish a workable situation parasitic upon many contexts. In place of the model of an oppositional *langue* and *parole*, designed places, grammatical constructions, anthropological places and contingent utterances are all agential factors available to the writer-maker when working site-specifically. Rather than considering code as restrictive and discourse as free play – for, as any writer knows, constraints can be freeing from the shackles of arbitrariness, and discourse comes with its own conventions – the text spoken in relation to a site can be thought of as 'fruits and roots': as a representation of and an act of being in residence in the world.¹¹⁷

And yet the idea of art's separateness remains important to many who pursue its

¹¹⁷ Kockelman, *Agent, Person, Subject, Self*, pp. 3–4.

critical potential. For Matthew Poole, for example, an artwork is a ‘positioning before or beyond (and passing through at a tangent) a given subject’s location’; it is ‘laterally dislocated from that which it is in (lateral) proximity to’.¹¹⁸ It is easy to see why it would be desirable for contemporary art to be “‘autonomous’”, distinct from other social practices’,¹¹⁹ or, as Nicholas Bourriaud describes it, ‘partly protected from the uniformity of behavioural patterns’.¹²⁰ It suggests the possibility of independence from the ideological hegemony, or ‘freedom and the right to think differently’.¹²¹ Indeed, Poole draws an equivalence between lack of autonomy and the degrading instrumentalisation of art by government policies that amounts to mere gestures of social regeneration.¹²² But autonomy is a relative, transitive and historical term. The answer to the question ‘Autonomous of what?’ is not singular. Dave Beech and John Roberts’s account of the autonomy of Romantic and modern art, for instance, describes the former as a refusal of institutional closure, and the latter as the defence of cognitive and aesthetic closure.¹²³ And they note that, for contemporary art, autonomy is vastly different to isolation, since although art should not be put into the service of extrinsic political or social ends, it is permeated by the social, and persists through interdependencies with extrinsic forces. As the Autonomy Project warns, might an insistence on autonomy lead to art’s isolation, it being merely ‘tolerated and dismissed as irrelevant to wider social and political concerns’?¹²⁴

As Osborne himself suggests, art is participant in recursive webs and rhizomes construed through operations and qualities of material, or through forces,

¹¹⁸ Poole, ‘Specificities of Sitedness’, in *When Site Lost the Plot*, ed. by Mackay, Robin (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2015), p. 87.

¹¹⁹ Peter Osborne, ‘Non-places and the spaces of art’, *Journal of Architecture*, 6 (Summer 2001), 183–94 (p. 183).

¹²⁰ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: les presses du réel, 2002), p. 9.

¹²¹ See ‘Autonomy Symposium’, seminars, The Autonomy Project (Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, 7–9 October 2011) <http://theautonomyproject.org/autonomy_symposium> [accessed 12 January 2018].

¹²² See the Anti-Humanist Curating strand of The Political Currency of Art research forum, of which Matthew Poole is a steering committee member <<http://www.thepoliticalcurrencyofart.org.uk/research-strands/anti-humanist-curating>> [accessed 12 January 2018].

¹²³ Dave Beech and John Roberts, *The Philistine Controversy* (London: Verso, 2002), p. 40.

¹²⁴ The Autonomy Project, ‘Autonomy Symposium’.

densities and intensities, making it impossible to imagine such dislocation.¹²⁵ Indeed, its participation would be vital to its critical potency. In this thesis I will be exploring art's contiguity with, rather than separation from, social and infrastructural forms – be that narratives, laws or physical materials. Happily, there are others pursuing this course, albeit with different focuses and methods. David Burrows and Simon O'Sullivan, for instance, propose 'fictioning' as a mode of operation that resists dominant forms and disrupts order by augmenting and intervening in existing realities.¹²⁶ As such, art can avoid two potential pitfalls of distancing from the real: that of parody (which proposes no solutions), and escapist or improbable utopian imaging (which recommends a future that never arrives). Fictioning proposes instead 'a different mode of being (and thus, again, a different world) from within already existing ones'.¹²⁷ It is a similar approach that I will be ascribing to here, in sited artworks that have 'one foot in the field of the real', and which instrumentalise the social forms and technical apparatuses of that site to better gain a purchase on its representations and interpretations.¹²⁸ The ontology of contemporary art, I am suggesting, does not have the status of an episteme, ideology or culture laterally disjunctive from any other. It is neither pure nor stable, nor even especially assertive in its surroundings. It is heteroglot, responsive and reflexive. An artwork can be contiguous and synchronic with, as well as absorbent of, constituted by and perturbing of, the myriad ontologies, practices, significances and forms that constitute a site. And the artist can exploit the affordances or functions, the values, roles, norms or statuses of that site. As Kockelman notes, this is the mode of 'Hackers [...], ninjas, pirates, assassins, skateboarders, arch-capitalists, flimflam artists, and anthropologists'. But this is not only the mode of negatively construed deception or artful specialism; it is also the mode of humans more

¹²⁵ Osborne mentions Simondon and Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari as particularly influential in this modelling, which replaces a hylomorphic model of objects. See 'The notion of the phase applied to coming-into-being: technicity as phase', in Gilbert Simondon, *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*, pp. 221–2; and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *One Thousand Plateaus* (London: Continuum, 2004), *passim*.

¹²⁶ See David Burrows and Simon O'Sullivan, 'Introduction', *Fictioning: The Myth Functions of Contemporary Art and Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), pp. 15–27.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹²⁸ Carrie Lambert-Beatty, 'Make-Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility', *October* 129 (Summer, 2009), 51–84 (p. 54); cited in Burrows and Sullivan, *Fictioning*, p. 4.

generally in the pursuit of practical agency, where ‘strategy and artistry’ is a matter of ‘dramatizing this or that role’, of parasitically incorporating forms, identities and practices of a site.¹²⁹ A site always already comprises practices, forms and forces, which can be handled as artistic materials and as subject matter. Like Mikhail Bakhtin’s heteroglot novel – a ‘vertically’ absorbent text which incorporates the myriad primary genres and voices that pervade all aspects of communication and interaction – these constituent practices of site can interact with practices of art making and viewing.¹³⁰ But these forms, identities or practices need not be found readymades; that is, they need not be native to the site. Artists invite and import other practices into their artworks – practices of reading, image skimming, political debate, architectural encounter or lounging, for example. And they absorb, reference and re-deploy a multitude of other practice-elements unconsciously: habits of taxonomy or over-identification, for example; or assumptions about what is beautiful or dramatic. All these practices and semiotic processes each intervene in further histories, rules, assumptions, vocabularies, atmospheres, habits, motivations and modes of interpretation, which the artist or viewer may or may not be familiar with, or even able to identify. But before, in Part Two, I examine my site from the perspective of practices and ontologies that emerge from the functioning of the railway, I will track the idea of the multiplicitous site through theories of art and literature.

Site-specificity: Material, Social, Discursive

Art historically, the account of site-specificity most often begins with minimalism, with the art object that is not representational of an elsewhere or otherwise claiming transcendence of the here and now.¹³¹ Rather, the minimalist artwork directs the viewer’s attention towards the space that both artwork and viewer occupy. This stock art historical trajectory, however, ignores earlier site-

¹²⁹ Kockelman, *Agent, Person, Subject, Self*, p. 107.

¹³⁰ See Mikhail Bakhtin, ‘The Problem of Speech Genres’, *Speech Genres and Other Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), pp. 60–102.

¹³¹ See, for example, Nick Kaye, *Site-Specific Art: Performance, Place and Documentation* (London: Routledge, 2000), and Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002).

specific performance works. The Dadaists, for example, adopted the musical hall as a site of radical performance. The Happeners (as Allan Kaprow refers to those who make Happenings) produced not objects, installations nor even spectatable events, but actions and events to be apprehended only by way of photographically annotated anecdotes, myths or ‘calculated rumor’.¹³² And the Futurists’ performed actions in locations that contributed to the thematic or political content.¹³³ For example, Marinetti’s delivery, in 1910, of the speech ‘Beauty and the Necessity of Violence’ in the Chamber of Labour, outlining the theory of violence in revolution, asserts not only the artist’s opinion of the equivalence between justice, art and war, but also of how ‘it is absolutely necessary for artists to intervene in public matters’.¹³⁴ Workers of all union affiliations gathered in the Chambers for recreation, education programmes and employment services, and so the location of the speech comprises a social form through which its propositional content might feasibly become an actuality, through uptake of its ideas by workers. This can be thought of as a honing of the Futurist’s practice of sited actions, following the publication the previous year of the Manifesto of Futurism in the Italian and French newspapers, *Gazzetta dell’Emilia* and *La Figaro*, and its ‘distribution’ from St Mark’s clock tower during the Venice Biennale.

These dis-locations from the gallery are implicit institutional critiques intended to challenge normative conditions of the category of ‘art’. By overlooking Futurism, Dada and Happenings, and instead claiming minimalism’s foregrounding of an object’s empirical context as the origin of site-specificity, there emerges a dilation of definition of site from physical to social to discursive – an apparent progression that I believe needs redressing, although not by the simple restitution of an earlier origin. The issue here is not so much that the direction of ‘progress’, from empirical to theoretical, is historiographically

¹³² Allan Kaprow, ‘The Happenings Are Dead: Long Live the Happenings!’ [1966], in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 1993), p. 62.

¹³³ See Günter Berghaus, ‘Political Action as Performative Genre’, in *Italian Futurist Theatre* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), pp.59–84.

¹³⁴ Quoted in a telegram from the Ministry of the Interior to the Prefect of Milan, 5 January 1910, following an ‘attempted demonstration’ by the Futurists. Cited in Berghaus, *Italian Futurist Theatre*, p. 62.

reductive, but that the current ontology of the discursive site is singular, that it does not admit 'anterior' social and material frameworks. As outlined in the Introduction, my aim here is to make apparent and to articulate the manifold significances and affordances of an artwork or event, and as such to collapse categorical distinctions, considering all sites to be at once material, social and discursive.

Minimalism also marks the emergence of the prominence of the viewer. Douglas Crimp pronounced minimalism 'an attack on the prestige of both artist and artwork', encouraging instead the spectator's 'self-conscious perception'.¹³⁵ It was not so much that the artist-subject was displaced by the viewer-subject, but that the entire viewing environment was implicated in the form of the artwork. The gallery could no longer be considered a neutral backdrop, but an active formal component; and it was this imperative of an encounter with an object in the situation of the gallery space, which includes the beholder, that Michael Fried notoriously denounced as theatrical (with theatre being 'the negation of art').¹³⁶ Art's autonomy would soon be further unravelled by conceptualist and performative practices, which recognised any location as socially, culturally and economically determined; and so, in the latter decades of the twentieth century, site becomes a political consideration with which an artwork associates itself critically or with complicity. The white cube gallery is exposed as a space 'composed of mental projections based on unexposed assumptions', a place that distinguishes between art and society, and where content or referentiality has been abandoned for the sake of art's autonomy.¹³⁷

To dismantle the distinction between art and society, we can turn to Henri Lefebvre, for whom any social space comprises a convergence of logico-epistemological, social and sensory phenomena. It is where physical, abstract, symbolic and imaginary objects underpin and presuppose one another in an

¹³⁵ Douglas Crimp, *On the Museum's Ruins* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), pp. 16–17.

¹³⁶ See Michael Fried, 'Art and Objecthood' [1967], in *Art and Objecthood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 148–72 (p. 153)

¹³⁷ Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Oakland, CA: University of California, 1976), p. 80.

ongoing process of production.¹³⁸ As just such a social space, the gallery can be understood as continually codified and decodified by the material and cognitive conditions in which it persists and by the practices through which it is produced, which include, but are not confined to practices of displaying and viewing art. The gallery thus becomes politically charged in a broader context – as an employer, for instance, or a place of pedagogical activity. Miwon Kwon identifies the emergence of a cluster of art practices that respond to this expanded understanding of the site of art, including: relational interactions with social fields, communities and other cultural practice groups; institutional critique, or the investigation of practices and economies that sustain the system of art production and exhibition, and the trans-national biennale, through which identities are performed.¹³⁹ Kwon then notes how the designation of socio-political site is broadened even further to include any discourse or artefact – actual, virtual or theoretical – to which an individual relates and through which communities form, the range of which she illustrates with a list: ‘cultural debates, a theoretical concept, a social issue, a political problem, an institutional framework (not necessarily an art institution), a neighbourhood or seasonal event, a historical condition, even a particular formation of desire’.¹⁴⁰ And so, as she points out, we arrive at three ontologies of site-specificity characterisable as the phenomenological/experiential, the social/institutional and the discursive, where the first refers to the materiality of site, the second to the practices that it gives rise to and which constitute it, and the third to the dematerialised, dispersed and paradigmatic realms of discourse.¹⁴¹ But while Kwon is clear that the competing categories of the material, social and discursive are overlapping and synchronous across various cultural practices and do not follow a linear historical progression, she does not consider the multivalency of a given artwork, project or practice. Her prioritisation of an artwork’s discursive site in particular leaves no place for addressing its material conditions. T.J. Demos points out that in ‘rendering her examples discursively nomadic, referentially organized, and

¹³⁸ See Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991).

¹³⁹ See Kwon, ‘Introduction’, in *One Place After Another*, pp. 1–9.

¹⁴⁰ Kwon, *One Place After Another*, pp. 28–9.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

largely dematerialized’, Kwon’s own analysis ‘occasionally moves too far toward the very “unsiting” her eventual argument warns against.’¹⁴² Demos is referring here to Kwon’s criticism of a particular type of installation art – made apparently for one place but relocated to another in a paradoxical move of site-specific interchangeability – and to how the dematerialised discursive site can become just as abstracted, universalised, thematic or tractionless. He suggests that ‘referential reductiveness’, or the uprooting of a discursive site from materials and history, may be overcome by further theorising the term ‘discursivity’ itself, pointing us towards Foucault’s definition of discursive practice.¹⁴³ Here Foucault identifies discourse as a ‘group of statements’ not with ‘rhetorical or formal unity, endlessly repeatable’, but ‘a fragment of history, a unity and discontinuity in history itself’, consisting in ‘a body of anonymous, historical rules, always determined in the time and space that have defined a given period, and for a given social, economic, geographic, or linguistic area’.¹⁴⁴ But ‘discourse’ as it often gets used, risks losing specificity to mere insinuations of families of ideas or schema of relations couched in vague terms. Further articulation is necessary. If we take, for example, feminism as our discursive site, then it would be markedly differently inflected, depending on whether we were discussing it in the UK, Kerala or Russia, in a television studio, a garment factory or a domestic bedroom, with a group of partially sighted feminists, a violent patriarch or the emissary of a race of aliens with differently configured bodies. Material, historical and geographic specificity *is* important to a discursive site.

One must be careful, as Kwon herself warns, not to reiterate the negligence of the artist who moves from geographic place to place, providing services for institutions that require vivification of their locale, reducing methodological principle or critical process to mere stylistic preference, flattening site into content and reverting the artwork to inert, representational object.¹⁴⁵

Furthermore, as Claire Bishop notes, if an artwork is primarily concerned with

¹⁴² T.J. Demos, ‘Rethinking Site-Specificity’, *Art Journal*, 62.2 (Summer 2003), 98–100 (p. 99).

¹⁴³ T.J. Demos, ‘Rethinking Site-Specificity’, p. 98.

¹⁴⁴ Michel Foucault, *Archaeologies of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 131.

¹⁴⁵ Kwon, *One Place After Another*, p. 38.

social engagement, the material conditions of its situation and the aesthetics of the results are often neglected.¹⁴⁶ While this can be intentional, as a mode of resistance to acritical, commercial contemporary art, it has encouraged the assumption that all aesthetic concerns should be equated with ‘the triple enemy of formalism, decontextualisation and depoliticisation’, and considered ‘synonymous with the market and conservative cultural hierarchy’.¹⁴⁷ This perception, Bishop notes, has contributed to an orthodoxy in socially engaged practice that prioritises the social impacts of an artwork over its material and aesthetic qualities, and that dislocates discursive sites from their historically embedded and embodied instantiations.

Historically, many well-meaning individual artists and collaborative groups have pursued an ideal in which the public come together against a common threat. The alternative community-constructing ideals of the pageant movement in the UK at the beginning of the twentieth century, for example, pursued popular communitarianism as a critical response to industrial modernisation; and theatre of the mid-twentieth century was conducted in disused factories, car parks or apartments as an anti-bourgeois stance.¹⁴⁸ Frequently such sites are figured not as an amalgam of social forms, practices and agents, but as a singular community, an undifferentiated entity. Bourriaud writes about the effects of relational work as ‘being-together’, ‘the collective elaboration of meaning’, ‘empathy and sharing’ and the generation of ‘bond’.¹⁴⁹ And Nato Thompson describes ‘social aesthetics’ as ‘speaking a language that everyday people can understand’.¹⁵⁰ Such claims to reunite the social, private and civil *tout court* are problematic. According to Bishop, often this ‘community’ is only superficially enjoying an ‘immanent

¹⁴⁶ Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells* (London: Verso, 2012), pp. 17–18.

¹⁴⁷ Bishop’s aim in *Artificial Hells* is to emphasise the aesthetic through a rehabilitation of *aisthesis*, or ‘an autonomous regime of experience that is not reducible to logic, reason or morality’. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

My aim, on the other hand, is to consider and activate the discursive, social *and* material qualities of the site, and the subsequent imbrication of aesthetic and cognitive effects.

¹⁴⁸ See Erica Fischer-Lichte, ‘Policies of Spatial Appropriation’, in *Performance and the Politics of Space*, ed. by Erica Fischer-Lichte (New York: Routledge, 2013) pp. 219–38 (pp. 224–7)

¹⁴⁹ Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, p. 15.

¹⁵⁰ Nato Thompson, *Seeing Power* (New York: Melville House, 2015), p. 17.

togetherness' because its members already have something in common.¹⁵¹ And Kwon notes that communities are frequently produced by an artwork – with people brought temporarily together, only to dissociate once the project is over – instead of an artwork empowering existing communities. At its worst, an artwork might precipitate a temporary community that exists only as long as the funding (or the artist's interest) lasts, and which has little to do with the ongoing communities that inhabit that site; or it might collapse a site's community relations into mere content, rendering it 'mythic', overgeneralized and abstract.¹⁵² The result can be an artificial situation that remains contiguous with, but distinct from, the social forms and practices of a site. As Bishop points out, these artworks might establish concrete goals that are 'more substantial and "real" than artistic experiences', and yet 'these perceived social achievements are never compared with actual (and innovative) social practices taking place *outside* the realm of art; they remain on the level of emblematic ideal, and derive their critical value in opposition to the more traditional expressive and object-based modes of practice'.¹⁵³ The recurrent issue here is that artworks are perceived as immiscible with the social or material fabric of their sites; they apparently stand beside, and are considered qualitatively different to, other forms, practices and value systems.

One way to deal with this, I suggest, is to consider the artwork as an explicit act of authorship, and to perform that authorship emphatically, to make clear the relationship between author, artwork, subject matter and site – that is, to articulate the relationships that constitute it. I am taking a cue here from writing practices where such relations are made evident through autobiography or autoethnography, where the writing subject does not distance herself in the interests of academic objectivity, but incorporates the affectivity and personal reflections generated by proximity to and interaction with subject matter. This approach tests several orthodoxies and disciplinary expectations. Science, for instance, has conventionally denied subjectivity any credence in its objective

¹⁵¹ Claire Bishop, 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', *October*, 110 (Fall 2004), 51–79 (p. 67).

¹⁵² 'Mythic' is Kwon's term. For her typology of communities, see Kwon, 'From Site to Community in New Genre Public Art', in *One Place After Another*, pp. 100–37. For a critique of community construction, see also Bishop, 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', pp. 51–80.

¹⁵³ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, p. 19.

programme;¹⁵⁴ the empiricist historian ignores the anecdotal;¹⁵⁵ the communitarian considers the individual viewpoint to compromise that of the ‘people’.¹⁵⁶ Kwon, too, warns against the over-assertion of the artist’s authorship, which would render a site as content for the narrator-protagonist, and lead to ‘a hermetic implosion of (auto)biographical and subjective indulgences’. But rather than perceiving subjective projection on to a site as an egotistic or colonising gesture, one can think instead through what Donna Haraway calls ‘situated objectivity’: a partial perspective in which the limited viewpoint of the subject is vital to epistemologies that provide an alternative to those based in transcendent dissociation.¹⁵⁷ Here, the contingent aspect of sited practices is incorporated into epistemological methods and outcomes, in contrast to classical objectivity, which does not account for the exceptional, the untidy, the accidental or even the context-specific. Situated objectivity defies the negative identification of subjectivity as ‘indulgence’, since it is precisely the particularities of an autobiographical account that produces specific inclusions and occlusions, locating the political subject and making apparent how she perceives interrelatedness. As Haraway puts it: ‘It allows us to become answerable for what we learn how to see.’¹⁵⁸ In the context of site-specificity, the articulation of partial knowledge, and lack of knowledge, could facilitate self-reflexive, critical conceptions of that site. It could anchor the free-floating acriticality warned against by Kwon – and, as we will see below, several other critics and commentators – not through exhaustive knowledge, but through a

¹⁵⁴ Conventional scientific method, as developed between the seventeenth century and the early twentieth century, did not admit of the role of observer effect or the role of language in empirical data collection or analysis. For an account of scientific objectivity see Thomas Nagel, *The View From Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

For an account of the admittance of observer effect in physics, see Werner Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy* (London: Penguin, 2000), p.15.

For a critique of the rhetorical impartiality of science see Roland Barthes, ‘From Science to Literature’.

¹⁵⁵ R.J. Collingwood outlines the problems of this, and argues for a structural and relational philosophy of history in R.J. Collingwood, *Essays in the Philosophy of History* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1985).

¹⁵⁶ According to Paulo Virno, it is not until the notion of the multitude replaces the unity of ‘the people’ that the private can be truly public, that the singular, subjective standpoint has integral meaning for the whole. Paulo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004).

¹⁵⁷ Donna Haraway, ‘Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Knowledge’, *Feminist Studies* 14.3 (Fall 1988), 575–99.

¹⁵⁸ Haraway, ‘Situated Knowledges’, p. 583.

demonstration of the limits of what is perceivable or knowable, which in turn prompts questions of why certain information, materials, causal relations or signifying processes remain hidden. Emphatically situated text presents commentaries, descriptions, fictions or fantasies authored through decisions made not only in relation to universal ideas, but also to a profusion of partial views of particular objects. Broad thematisation of a site is avoided, since no attempt is made to totalise or essentialise it. It is, rather, made apparent as comprising generic forms, materials, signs and practices as well as specific, local ones, in which the text is implicated. The author is a marshalling force, partly determining how these interrelations are perceived and interpreted by another, even though, embedded in the situation, she is unable to extract herself, to transcend, to oversee the whole.¹⁵⁹

Text itself can also be considered a site of reticulated relations, if one rethinks Julia Kristeva's notion of intertextuality through more recent theories of writing's performativity. Kristeva advances intertextuality, and the siting of text within history and society, in order to dislodge established evolutionary models of literature based in influence and inspiration.¹⁶⁰ In place of the static solidity of the canon, she proposes a text to be a mosaic of quotation, a dynamic interplay of meanings constructed collaboratively by the writing subject and the addressee, through text and context. Extrapolated from Bakhtin's idea of heteroglossia – where a word in literature is not a point of fixed meaning, but an intersection between diachronic uses, between various social verbal forms, which the writer then *rewrites* – the internal tensions of a text are directed out towards a referential web. Roland Barthes contributes to this idea, and to the abolishment of origin and singular meaning, by asserting that a text is not the work of a

¹⁵⁹ This marshalling of perception and interpretation is a whole other area of theoretical discussion. See, for example, Valerie Robillard's exposition of the processes of referentiality, representation and association in Valerie Robillard, 'Beyond Definition: A Pragmatic Approach to Intermediality', in *Media Borders, Multimodality and Intermediality*, ed. by Lars Elleström (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 150–62.

¹⁶⁰ Julie Kristeva, 'Word, Dialogue and Novel', in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), pp. 64–91.

unified author but a tissue of blending, clashing quotations.¹⁶¹ But the line between influence and intertextuality is, I would suggest, very difficult to draw, especially if we permit a full spectrum of registers which, as Ulla Musarra-Schroeder argues, could include philosophical, psychological, sociological or scientific ideas from individual thinkers or their works, as well as formal, stylistic, structural and compositional principles.¹⁶² Nancy K. Miller's arachnology is a theory of writing that deploys Barthes's figure of the text as a web of associations, while maintaining the importance of the author in a political intertextuality through which subversive relations to dominant texts remain perceptible. As Bal points out, 'The demise of canonical authority might not be experienced as the same process by those who had never stood much chance of being included in the canon in the first place'.¹⁶³ Fictocriticism, similarly, by speaking across the assumed authoritative voices of foundational (male) theorists, rather than submissively and passively repeating learned positions, is 'haunted' by academic predecessors, while reasserting its author's role.¹⁶⁴ By ignoring the conventions that relate a particular significant textual corpus with a given social status, what once seemed to be thirdness – an imperative correlation – becomes secondness – an arbitrary coupling. The writer and reader are free to accord significance and necessity where they see fit. And so intertextual relations perform not only at the level of linguistic code and discourse, but also socio-politically, enabling the inclusion of writers and readers beyond a previously narrowly defined corridor of status, milieu, body, voice and emotional charge.

Effectively, these developments do not progress a dematerialised web of associated texts divorced from authors, but establish a performativity of association and divergence anchored as much in the writing and reading experience as in the discursive content of the texts. Jane Rendell makes textual

¹⁶¹ Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author' [1968], *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana, 1977), pp. 142–8.

¹⁶² Ulla Musarra-Schroeder, 'Influence vs. Intertextuality', in *The Search for a New Alphabet: Literary Studies in a Changing World*, ed. by Harald Hendrix, Joost Kloek, Sophie Levie and Will van Peer (Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1996), pp. 167–71.

¹⁶³ Bal and Bryson, 'Semiotics and Art History', p.184.

¹⁶⁴ Anna Gibbs, 'Fictocriticism, Affect, Mimesis: Engendering Differences', *TEXT*, 9.1 (April 2005) <<http://www.textjournal.com.au/april05/gibbs.htm>> [accessed 26 October 2014].

interrelation and locatedness palpable by characterising writing – in her case, art criticism – as architectural. For Rendell, writing is the site of designing, building and thinking. It is a spatial construction, and the writing subject's choice of subject matter, processes of inquiry and creation are locational factors. Object and subject are reflexively implicated, and changes in position – physical, psychological and ideological – alter the overall scheme and effects of the text:

‘From the close-up to the glance, from the caress to the accidental brush, *Site-Writing* draws on spaces as they are remembered, dreamed and imagined, as well as observed, in order to take into account the critic's position in relation to a work and challenge criticism as a form of knowledge with a singular and static point of view located in the here and now.’¹⁶⁵

Rendell too refers to Haraway's situated knowledge; and she also cites Braidotti's nomadic subject as exemplary of ‘a kind of knowingness, (or unknowingness) that refuses fixity’.¹⁶⁶ For Braidotti, the positive proliferation of differences between technologically mediated others triggers recognition of the multiplicity within the self, developing alternative systems of symbolic value and meaning that deny the possibility of the singular, dominant subject.¹⁶⁷ In such a scheme, the writer's, and readers', many modes of signification renders any given text open to complexly multiple and dynamic interpretations. This is different to the sort of singular openness I will be investigating below. We are, rather, in the realm of Kockelman's network of channels, where many potential chains of semiotic operation are available and are either activated by a participant agent or remain latent.¹⁶⁸ Authoring here comprises the instigation of particular sequences of semiotic processes, the forging and interpreting of which the writer-maker has varying degrees of control over.

Rendell categorises the art critic as a particular type of viewer who, through autoethnographic means, compromises the autonomy of the artwork being

¹⁶⁵ Rendell, *Site-Writing*, p. 18.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁶⁷ See Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

¹⁶⁸ Kockelman, *Agent, Person, Subject, Self*, p. 40.

written about. And as a writing subject, too, she considers herself unstable, since she must always relate to unknowable others: that is, the artwork and the reader. Rendell deploys a psychoanalytic hermeneutic which frames causes, mediations and interpretations as being based in drives, repressions and unconscious associations. But by figuring an encounter with an artwork as a spatialised site of psychological relations, site-writing risks neglecting broader material, social and historical contexts. Further-reaching relational complexities are collapsed into writing that aims to generate affects for the reader that are analogous to the affects of the artwork for the writer. Rendell considers the linguistically encoded parallelism of the analogy to be a manoeuvre through which critical writing becomes creative. But other types of infrastructural agents can effectively disappear into the analogy she develops between the writer / subject matter relationship and the reader / text relationship. By authoring channels through a semiotic terrain in which subject matter, writer, reader and text are all implicated, criticality and creativity lies in the selection from all manner of social, material or technical forms.

Before moving on, in the next chapter, to a more grounded inquiry into the potential agential relations between author, reader/listener, text and site, it is useful to introduce another theoretical perspective to clarify how material conditions impact on my thinking and making processes. Barad's agential realism centralises the body within discursive practices that are as performative as they are referential, and 'challenges the representationalist belief in the power of words to represent preexisting things' or 'to determine what is real'.¹⁶⁹ Like Kristeva's carnivalesque, agential realism's 'performativity is actually a contestation of the unexamined habits of mind', but following rather than preceding the linguistic turn, this is intended to right the habits of mind that have 'grant[ed] language and other forms of representation more power in determining our ontologies than they deserve'.¹⁷⁰ As such, a performative understanding of discursive practices 'shifts the focus from questions of

¹⁶⁹ Karen Barad, 'Posthumanist Performativity', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 28.3 (2003), 801–30 (p. 802).

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

correspondence between descriptions and reality (e.g., the mirroring of nature or culture) to matters of practices/doings/actions'.¹⁷¹ And if, as Kockelman observes, to interpret is to intervene, then to name or describe is not to represent, but to evaluate, to place in relation and to remodel.¹⁷² Where epistemological modes of social constructivism draw on 'the geometrical optics of reflection' and operate like 'the infinite play of images between two facing mirrors', forms are reiterated ad infinitum, and yet 'nothing more is seen'.¹⁷³ For Barad, and for Haraway, reflection is a process of mirroring and sameness that hinges on such erroneous notions as the original, real and authentic.¹⁷⁴ And so they turn instead to physical optics. Here, processes of reflection are replaced by processes of diffraction, whereby replication of the same is no longer available, since 'diffraction does not produce "the same" displaced', but comprises the mapping of interference'.¹⁷⁵ Diffraction is a core trope borrowed from quantum physics that makes apparent the relational nature of difference; and it comprises not the mapping of difference, but the mapping of the effects of difference.¹⁷⁶ Where reflection cannot admit the recursivity of action within a system, diffraction evidences the highly specific effects of action within any given set of relations, and is itself one of the actions that participates in that specific semiotic or physical entanglement. In the context of site-specific art, diffraction can be deployed as a process by which to redress the neglect of embodied dispositions. Thinking through diffraction reinstates the influence of materiality and the body on knowledge, and the importance of physiological and genealogical grounds of interpretation to the discursive site.

Throughout this thesis I will be turning to geosemiotics, which understands social space, as does Lefebvre, to be produced through interaction of participants in situations that are at once socially, culturally, materially and psychologically interpretable by humans and non-humans. As Sue Nichols explains, geosemiotics

¹⁷¹ Ibid., p. 802–3.

¹⁷² Kockelman, 'Four Theories of Things', p. 190.

¹⁷³ Barad, 'Posthumanist Performativity', p. 802–3.

¹⁷⁴ Haraway quoted in Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), p. 71.

¹⁷⁵ Barad, 'Posthumanist Performativity', p. 803, fn. 3.

¹⁷⁶ See Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, p. 72.

involves ‘the totality of activities, signs, environments and their interaction [...in] a holistic method that is less about deconstruction than it is about layering of meanings’.¹⁷⁷ This will be explored in Chapter Four, where it is made evident how, when several different codes at once are interacted with, reproduced and transformed through processes of competency, uptake, modification and rejection, it becomes important not only to analyse what a text or gesture means, but also to register its diffractive effects within the multiply coded field in which it participates. Bourdieu’s *habitus* already gives us an account of historical and social forms that are neither fixed nor purified, but mutating in response to and reflexively with multiple practices and types of knowledge. It is ‘a system of cognitive and motivating structures’ that is ‘embodied history, internalized as a second nature and so forgotten as history [...] the active presence of the whole past of which it is the product’.¹⁷⁸ As Kristeva puts it, ‘practice is taken as meaning the acceptance of a symbolic law together with the transgression of that law for the purpose of renovating it’.¹⁷⁹ And particular groups of practitioners – those who engage in the practice of driving trains or writing-making artworks – can be thought of as constituting a semiotic community that collectively negotiates the implicit and explicit rules of that practice. Semiotics reinstates the influence of common sense, practical knowledge, disciplinary habits and socially conditioned assumptions, which had been chased from the system of structuralist theories. This results in interactions and transformations that are far more complex than stereotypical diffraction, since interpreting a gesture, describing a complex object or explaining a social convention are context-dependent and polyvalent; that is, meaning changes with implicated agents, circumstances and scale of consideration. A return to material and humanist concerns of history acknowledges objective causality, intentional authorship and their effects; and this in turn has implications for the ontology of contemporary art, which, as we

¹⁷⁷ Sue Nichols, ‘Geosemiotics’, in *New Methods in Literacy Research*, ed. by Peggy Albers, Teri Holbrook and Amy Flint (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 177–92 (p. 179).

¹⁷⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1980), pp. 53, 32, 56.

¹⁷⁹ Julia Kristeva, ‘The System and the Speaking Subject’ [1973], in *Kristeva Reader*, ed. by Toril Moi (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), pp. 24–33 (p. 29).

will see, having been influenced by the linguistic turn for several decades now, can tend towards ahistoricity and indeterminacy of meaning.

Ambiguity and Contemporary Art

If we no longer consider contemporary art a privileged indeterminate practice discontinuous with everyday life, but as objectifiable and meaningful as any other, it becomes a compositional force within the habitus in which it participates. A text can be understood as producing patterns of diffraction or paradigmatic mediations, as distorting and developing a site (which necessarily includes any audience) through the interpretations of its effects. But this would be undesirable for art that wishes to activate the ‘non-place’ of art or to tickle the infinite subjectivities of an audience.

The positing of Minimalism as the origin of site-specific practice compounds a propensity for site-specific work to place emphasis on reception and interpretation. Contemporaneous theoretical discourse, epitomised by Roland Barthes’s *Death of the Author* and Umberto Eco’s *The Open Work*, argues that a text eclipses its author, that reading and viewing become at least as important a meaning-making activity as writing and making.¹⁸⁰ This is, as Foucault describes, the point at which ‘writing has freed itself from the theme of expression’; it becomes ‘an interplay of signs less according to its signified content than according to the very nature of the signifier’.¹⁸¹ Text itself is established as the primary site of engagement, and the world to which it refers is no longer conceptualised as being referent of the text, but as a complex structure of significances through which the text is tooled. Culture becomes discourse, and language, texts and narrative structures are deemed constructive of historical

¹⁸⁰ See, for example, Suhail Malik, ‘The Problem with Contemporary Art is not the Contemporary’, part of lecture series, ‘On the Necessity of Art’s Exit from Contemporary Art’ (New York: Artists Space, 3 May 2013) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fimEhntbRZ4>> [accessed 3 February 2018]; Martin Herbert, *The Uncertainty Principle* (London: Sternberg, 2014), and Tirdad Zolghadr, *Traction* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016).

¹⁸¹ Michel Foucault, ‘What is an Author’, *Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology* (New York: The New Press, 1998), p. 206.

reality, no longer explicable as the expression of a social reality. Value and meaning are differential rather than referential, relative not absolute. As Gabrielle M. Spiegel describes, where culture had formerly been considered the unmediated subjective expression of the objective structure of society, the linguistic turn ‘carves out autonomy for culture as a non-referential mechanism of social construction’.¹⁸² The subject re-enters history as a conscious agent, not parsing life in terms of norms, traditions and values, but interpreting behaviours and signs.¹⁸³ Under this rubric, the artwork means what the viewer takes it to mean in its particular situation within a semiotic system that is ambiguous, heterodox and non-totalizable, and interpreting, or sign reading, becomes a historically particular way of seeing.

There have, since the linguistic turn, been exceptions to this approach to meaning making. Practitioners of forensic research and the ‘educational turn’, for example, overtly articulate their subject matter and author their output as knowledge-generating events.¹⁸⁴ And yet the openness of interpretation, or what Andrea Phillips and Suhail Malik identify as the ‘indeterminacy’ of contemporary art, remains dominant.¹⁸⁵ Writing in response to Jacques Rancière’s proposition that the political agency of contemporary art lies in the very paradox of ‘the non-identity of art to itself and the identification of this non-identity’, Phillips and Malik ‘expose the limits of the politics occasioned in and by art’ that relies on audience recognition of art’s separation from the dominant powers of production and circulation.¹⁸⁶ The particularities of subject matter engaged through such free play between *poiesis* and *aesthesis*, between making and reception, are to all

¹⁸² Gabrielle M. Spiegel, ‘Introduction’, *Practicing History: New Directions in Historical Writing after the Linguistic Turn* (Abingdon, NY: Routledge, 2005), pp. 1–31 (p. 8).

¹⁸³ See, for example, Clifford Geertz, ‘Thick Description: Towards an Interpretative Theory of Culture’, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 3–30 (p. 14).

¹⁸⁴ See, for example, the work of Forensic Architecture <<https://forensic-architecture.org>> [accessed 10 November 2019];

and Irit Rogoff’s theories of curating: Irit Rogoff, ‘Education Actualized – Editorial’, <<https://www.e-flux.com/journal/14/61300/education-actualized-editorial/>> [accessed 10 November 2019].

¹⁸⁵ Andrea Phillips and Suhail Malik, ‘The Wrong of Contemporary Art: Aesthetics and Political Indeterminacy’, in *Reading Rancière: Critical Dissensus*, ed. by Paul Bowman and Richard Stamp (London: Continuum, 2011), pp. 111–28.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

intents lost to the non-narrative illogics of free play itself. And yet for some artists, this constitutes in itself a way of working politically, beyond normative logics.¹⁸⁷ As we will see, though, a particular aesthetic-political decision often collapses into an unquestioned cooption of the apparent contrariness of ambiguity. Falling short of pointed political indeterminacy, such art tends towards interpretative obscurity, obtuseness, evasiveness or vagueness which, while not etymologically related, each negate clarity and articulacy: the obscure retreats into darkness; the obtuse is too blunt to be precise; the evasive is an escapee, on the loose; the vague simply wanders off, a vagrant from sense.

Attempting to identify the causes and ongoing symptoms of indeterminacy, Tirdad Zolghadr points to post-structuralism's linguistic turn, highlighting the art world's 'highly selective take on *différance*, paratextual jouissance, and obtuse third meanings' as especially symptomatic.¹⁸⁸ Zolghadr is referring specifically here to Derrida's theory of deconstruction and deferred meaning, to a widespread tendency to produce texts that interpret the artwork thematically, and to Roland Barthes's signified meaning or emotion-value, which cannot be communicated linguistically. Together, he claims, these contribute to the dominance of indeterminacy, of unfixable, vague or broadly thematic meaning. While this fluidity of significance encourages subjective projection on to an artwork, it also has limiting repercussions for the structures and processes that support and perpetuate contemporary art. Zolghadr describes how, through the maintenance of art's indeterminacy, 'expertise is flaunted and denied, authority is wielded even as it is apparently neutralized, and powerful decisions are admitted only on the condition that they be attributed to someone else'.¹⁸⁹ Add to this the formulation of Rancière's 'ignorant schoolmaster', who is not an authority so much as an enabler of open-ended discussion – a position adopted by many who teach contemporary art in art schools and universities – and we begin to see how, when all is indeterminate, no one is accountable for how an artwork is narrated

¹⁸⁷ Phillips and Malik cite Thomas Hirschorn as having remarked on the difference between 'making political work' and 'working politically'. Ibid., p.122.

¹⁸⁸ Zolghadr, *Traction*, p. 70.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., pp. 77–8.

or how an institution describes its influence on artists and, indeed, on the ontology of art itself.¹⁹⁰

There is, however, critical resistance to indeterminacy, particularly where it undermines art's potential to be interrogative of historical doxa, and consequently its efficacy as commentary, polemic or activism. Osborne, as we have seen, identifies an art object's opaque objectivity – its definitive, but unknowably arrived at constitution – as the means by which it illusorily presents itself as an alienated subjectivity, which he finds analogous to the processes of capitalism. Hal Foster notes how much contemporary art 'seems to float free of historical determination, conceptual definition and critical judgement', in a 'paradigm of no paradigm [which] has abetted a flat indifference, a stagnant incommensurability, a consumerist-touristic culture of art.'¹⁹¹ Terry Smith deems a widespread 'tone' made up of 'doubtful gestures, equivocal objects, bemused paradoxes, tentative projection, diffident proposal, or wishful adaptations' to have resulted in a 'witless presentism'.¹⁹² For Malik, contemporary art's semantic indeterminacy and material 'anythingness' make it difficult to locate in any register other than its membership of the 'genre without identity' – that is, contemporary art – and consequently as a free, asystemic actor.¹⁹³ For Burrows and O'Sullivan, since new forms of state and corporate control include confusion and retreat from meaning in their methods, art as a 'vacuole of noncommunication' becomes questionable as a mode of resistance.¹⁹⁴ And indeed, for Zolghadr it is opacity and removal that renders art 'tractionless' as a tool of socio-political critique.¹⁹⁵

For Amanda Beech, indeterminacy consigns the artwork to the role of mirror, in which the tragic human contrasts its finitude with the infinity of art. She

¹⁹⁰ See Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991).

¹⁹¹ Hal Foster for the editors, in 'Questionnaire on the Contemporary', *October*, 130 (Fall 2009), 3–124 (p. 3).

¹⁹² 'Terry Smith', in 'Questionnaire on the Contemporary', 46–54 (p.46).

¹⁹³ Suhail Malik, 'The Problem with Contemporary Art is not the Contemporary'.

¹⁹⁴ Burrows and O'Sullivan, *Fictioning*, p. 47.

¹⁹⁵ See Zolghadr, *Traction*, passim.

considers the image to be at once general, chaotic and specific: 'it is always something, but this something does not matter!'¹⁹⁶ And it is precisely this commitment to infinitude, where ambiguity is an ontic requirement, that scuppers any potential for material power. Beech aims instead for imagery that does not work in referential relation to a reality that is in excess of the individual, but which is itself an inherent material force that participates in a political reality. She expounds an art that abandons the 'category of the uncategorisable', and that which overcomes 'the fear of representation'.¹⁹⁷ The model to which she turns to counter the conservatism of contemporary art's indeterminacy is the scientific image, which produces 'concept without difference'.¹⁹⁸ But she gives no examples to aid understanding of what she means by 'scientific image' – either within the paradigm of science or of contemporary art. To reconstruct her intention, I must turn instead to Keith Tilford, who gives the example of Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970) as presented in a gallery or publication by way of photographs, sketches and texts which 'form an artificial and institutional vector disseminating it in a matrix of abstract plots that enable it to be a protractive entity designed according to its capacity to cognitively rather than phenomenologically produce for its viewer an art-fiction'.¹⁹⁹ In place of an indeterminate openness of an encounter designed to produce hallucinations of subjective interpretation based in difference, 'epistemic mediators' such as the pen and the camera prompt a perception of the visual information as generic modelling, where generic modelling is taken to be a technology of investigation, a fictional proposal of a potential real.²⁰⁰ For Beech, then, contemporary art's political agency lies in this

¹⁹⁶ Amada Beech, 'Traversing the Paradigm: Concept without Difference, Image without Art', conference paper, 'The Art of the Concept' (Zagreb: MaMa, 15–17 June 2012), 1–17 (p. 4) <<http://amandabeech.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Traversing-the-Paradigm-Beech-2012.pdf>> [accessed 12 February 2017].

¹⁹⁷ Beech 'Traversing the Paradigm', p. 17.

¹⁹⁸ The term 'scientific image' is borrowed from Francois Laruelle. See Beech, 'Traversing the Paradigm', p. 13.

¹⁹⁹ Keith Tilford, 'Laruelle, Art, and the Scientific Model', paper for seminar, 'Aesthetics of the Generic and Non-Event', (New York: Parsons, Center for Transformative Media, 18 March 2015), 1–15 (p.11) <http://keithtilford.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Tilford_Keith.pdf#page=1&zoom=auto,-145,792> [accessed 17 February 2019].

²⁰⁰ Tilford borrows the term 'epistemic mediators' from Lorenzo Magnani. See Lorenzo Magnani, 'The Epistemology of Evidentially Inert Knowledge-Enhancing: Abducting Scientific Models

region of generic cognitive modelling. Where theorizing involves the imposition of ideals on to reality, and experimental method extrudes universals from empirical observation, to model is to invent a potential idealisation through which its connotations can be thought. I too will be turning towards the generic in the following chapter, although via a rather different route, and as partly constitutive of, not in lieu of, material encounter. Observation and projection, experience and invention, the particular and the generic will be deemed equally potentially active within complex semiotic processes, which are themselves processes of environment modelling.

Beech frequently cites the neo-pragmatic ‘private irony’ of Richard Rorty as especially problematic for critical discourse.²⁰¹ She is referring here to Rorty’s proposition that an individual’s or a group’s ‘final vocabulary’ – their beliefs and their justifications of thoughts, actions and interpretations – is optional, mutable and vulnerable to negation by others.²⁰² For Beech, this leads to a situation in which indeterminate culture, or ‘known unknowns’, becomes a primary, idealised mode of expressing knowledge or effecting change, with no consequence for actual systems of capitalist distribution.²⁰³ And it is precisely the liberal openness of doubtful irony, the questioning of the validity of any given final vocabulary, that contributes to the defence for indeterminacy in contemporary art. Okwui Enwezor, for instance, considers openness to allow for a re-centring of the previously marginal, empowering challenges to monoculturalism and fixed canonical histories.²⁰⁴ And Martin Herbert still has time for the constructed ‘twilit epistemological space’ in which complex issues can be broached uncategorically – although he also acknowledges a cline of incertitude that tilts quickly away from productive ‘purposeful enigmas’ to ‘a

Versus Abducting Fictions’, in *The Abductive Structure of Scientific Creativity* (Cham: Springer, 2017), Chap. 3, Sect. 3.2.

²⁰¹ See Beech, ‘Traversing the Paradigm’, p.13; also Amanda Beech, ‘Culture Without Mirrors – Restructuring Creative-Cognitive Power’, *Glass Bead* (2016) <<http://www.glass-bead.org/article/culture-without-mirrors-restructuring-creative-cognitive-power/?lang=enview>> [accessed 16 February 2018].

²⁰² See Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 73.

²⁰³ Beech, ‘Culture Without Mirrors’.

²⁰⁴ ‘Okwui Enwezor’, in ‘Questionnaire on the Contemporary’, pp. 33–40.

pronounced not knowing’, ‘uncertainty-related emphasis on open-ended reception’, ‘teasingly withheld payoffs’, ‘murky atmospherics’, ‘relativism as special effect’ and the arbitrary ‘privileging of incertitude’.²⁰⁵ In its least appealing guise, the effecting of ambiguity through withholding or muddling information becomes the ultimate telos, and ‘the notion of resisting closure becomes a point of closure’. Herbert’s is an empirical response to practices that employ inarticulacy or obfuscation to differing effects. Perhaps it is possible to organise these observations in a taxonomy that echoes that of William Empson’s seven types of ambiguity, which relate an increasing disorder in the writer’s mind.²⁰⁶ (Although, where Empson’s is a typology of symbolic signs, a comparative study of contemporary art would necessarily extend its enquiry to all the classes of Peircean signs.)²⁰⁷

In his curatorial practice, Nato Thompson, too, appreciates the qualities and effects of both ambiguity and didacticism. He perceives indeterminacy and clarity not as binary but as two ends of a cline, and suggests that most gestures oscillate somewhere between them, with socially engaged artists, for instance, tending to deploy techniques of didacticism for legibility, and of ambiguity to engage a viewer and prompt her ‘to explore the work for herself’.²⁰⁸ For Thompson, ambiguity relies on an aesthetic language that is removed from that of the everyday and is thus a means of seduction that promotes engagement. But this seems a misapprehension, given the conscious (and theorised) use of strategic ambiguity in advertising,²⁰⁹ marketing and journalism,²¹⁰ in managerial and legislative rhetoric,²¹¹ by the alt-right as a tactic for wrong-footing their

²⁰⁵ Herbert, *The Uncertainty Principle*, pp. 7–13.

²⁰⁶ William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1949).

²⁰⁷ James Elkins has conducted a semiotic analysis of ambiguity in painting, in which he identifies and analyses icons, symbols and indexes. See James Elkins, ‘On Monstrously Ambiguous Paintings’, *History and Theory*, 32.3 (Oct 1993), pp. 227–47.

²⁰⁸ Thompson, *Seeing Power*, p. 35.

²⁰⁹ See Luuk Lagerwerf, ‘Deliberate ambiguity in slogans’, *Document Design*, 3.3 (2002), pp. 245–60.

²¹⁰ See Marcel Broersma and Frank Harbers, ‘Between engagement and ironic ambiguity: Mediating subjectivity in narrative journalism’, *Journalism*, 15.5 (2014), 639–54.

²¹¹ See Jeffrey Pfeffer, ‘Management as symbolic action: The creation and maintenance of organizational paradigms’, *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 3 (1981), 1–52.

critics,²¹² and by politicians and policy makers.²¹³ The unexplained gesture is not particular to art and does not automatically evade the tyranny of capitalist logics or scientific rationalism. Quantum theory, gravity and banking systems, for instance, are based on abstractions and occlude the ‘rational’, while a popular understanding of science is itself based in many an ambiguating metaphor.²¹⁴ What is more, the implication that ambiguity is counter to a pervasive unambiguity elsewhere implies the possibility of stable semantics and a corresponding tidy, orderly society, which is, from everyday experience, decidedly not the case. And yet the admittance of ambiguity is crucial to queer theory, radical perspectivism and resistance to orthodox knowledges. A case can be made for and against ambiguity with equal force. Where some consider it ‘a veil that preserves the essential mystery of our existence, that insures life will not wither under the harsh light of the program or rule’,²¹⁵ or ‘the infinite step of creation before things are named or taxonomized’,²¹⁶ for others it has become ‘something approaching a period style’.²¹⁷ Where in some instances semantic ambiguity might signal a rejection of rationalism (as in the case of Dadaist phonic poetry, say), elsewhere its effects have been adopted without recourse to its cause (such as the visceral horror of World War One and the rationale of nationalism that it represented for Hugo Bal). Here ambiguity operates as a convention – and it is against this that Malik, Beech, Smith et al protest.

²¹² Whitney Phillips and Ryan N. Milner, *The Ambivalent Internet: Mischief, Oddity and Antagonism Online* (Cambridge: Polity, 2017).

²¹³ ‘Strategic ambiguity’ is also a phrase attributed to Henry Kissinger, when, according to Adam Curtis, he played a ‘double game’ in the Middle East in order to manipulate the structural global balance of power. See *Hypernormalisation*, dir. by Adam Curtis (BBC iplayer, 2016) <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/p04b183c/adam-curtis-hypernormalisation#>> [accessed 31 August 2017].

Kissinger’s phrase was also recently echoed by Brexit minister David Davis’s phrase ‘constructive ambiguity’. ‘David Davis: Brexit is going “incredibly well”’, *Today Programme* (BBC News, 15 August 2017)

<<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-politics-40934771/david-davis-brexit-is-going-incredibly-well>> [accessed 4 February 2018].

²¹⁴ See Elizabeth Leane, ‘Knowing Quanta: The Ambiguous Metaphors of Popular Physics’, *Review of English Studies*, 52.207 (August 2001), 411–31.

²¹⁵ See John D. Caputo, ‘In Praise of Ambiguity’, in *Ambiguity in the Western Mind*, ed. by Craig J.N. de Paulo, Patrick Messina and Marc Stier (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), pp. 15–34 (pp. 33–4).

²¹⁶ Invitation to a symposium from MFA students, Slade School of Fine Art, Facebook (12 January 2015) <<https://www.facebook.com/events/766593816768623/?fref=t>> [accessed 12 January 2015]

²¹⁷ Herbert, *The Uncertainty Principle*, p. 10.

In Peircean terms, such uncritical ambiguity has become a sign-vehicle, a generic marker of contemporary art for the viewer who knows how to read it: as a signal not to interpret but to associate, project or enjoy sensual and cognitive cues without seeking precise meaning. Ambiguity is also an interpretant, a response that an artist can enact when deciding how to articulate subject matter differently to how a journalist or a Hollywood director would. It is a go-to means of tendering co-authorship to an audience, who might be tasked with asking such questions as: 'Is this a found or a made object?'; 'What is this a representation of?', or 'What is this about?' But even Eco considered the reception of *The Open Work* to have 'overstressed' the 'rights of the interpreter' over the 'rights of the text'.²¹⁸ As he puts it: 'the notion of unlimited semiosis does not lead to the conclusion that interpretation has no criteria [...] that interpretation has no object and that it "riverruns" for the mere sake of itself.'²¹⁹ And extra-textually, too, as Foucault asserts, since it is impossible to dislocate practices from discursive forms, the disappearance of the author has never been achieved. While the author's intended semantic meaning might be masked, other traces of authorship remain. Among the practice-functions of the author's name, for example, is the 'marking off the edges of the text, revealing, or at least characterizing, its mode of being'; it 'manifests the appearance of a certain discursive set and indicates the status of this discourse within a society and a culture'.²²⁰ The work is still attributed to an author or artist, after all; and the audience may well find themselves also asking such questions as: 'Is this an optimistic or a pessimistic message?', or 'Does the artist really believe in this as a proposition?' This artist-subject is not a bottomless source of expressive content, but one who performs ideologically, aesthetically and with self-interest through coextensive, and possibly contradictory, social practices and semiotic processes. While the writing subject may relinquish the status of sole originator of a text, one cannot overlook the agency of the author in relation to the discourses and practices of writing. As William H. Gass puts it, even if art is characterised as

²¹⁸ Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 6.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Foucault, 'What is an Author', p. 211.

being without singular author, ‘this “anonymity” ... may mean many things, but one thing which it cannot mean is that *no one did it*.’²²¹ Less accommodatingly, Bryan D. Palmer accuses the linguistic turn of aggressively displacing historical materialism by its ‘hedonistic descent into a plurality of discourses that decentre the world in a chaotic denial of any acknowledgement of tangible structures of power of comprehensions of meaning.’²²²

The line that this thesis takes stops well short of Palmer’s disparagement of the primacy of interpretation. Since the agential historicised writing subject’s intentions can be apparent in, suffused through, camouflaged among or withheld from the many elements of a text, my aim is for ambiguity to be authored in particular accordance with those intentions. And as such, ambiguation will be considered not as the displacement of meaning, but as an intervening semiotic process in itself. Walter Benjamin writes that ‘the object of knowledge, determined as it is by the intention inherent in the concept, is not the truth’, since ‘truth is the death of intention’.²²³ Truth is an essence that demands ‘total immersion and absorption’.²²⁴ Does knowing, then, equate to intentional movement through concepts? And ambiguity to either blockage of that movement or the diversion or splitting of its progress? On the one hand we can think of ambiguity as arresting recursive, reticulated semiotic processes – that is, as a dead-end. On the other, we can consider ambiguation as an interpretant: an individual’s unconscious response to competing roles or values, say, or to a lack of access to necessary information (a bad memory perhaps); or it could be consciously intended to hoodwink, impress or passively aggress another. The practice accompanying this thesis is authored through recognition of these revelatory potentials of ambiguity, some instances of which are analysed in Chapter Seven.

²²¹ William H. Gass, ‘Death of the Author’, *Salmagundi*, 65 (Fall 1984), 3–26 (p. 11).

²²² Bryan D. Palmer, *Descent into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1990), p. 188.

²²³ Walter Benjamin, ‘Epistemo-Critical Prologue’, in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (London: NLB, 1977), pp. 27–56 (pp. 36).

²²⁴ *Ibid.*

In the next chapter I will be turning to artworks that consciously count a site's forms and materials among their own – in particular, the overtly site-articulating genre of the itinerary and the guided tour. I will be analysing these established textual practices of site narration and audience direction to better understand how and when ambiguity and articulation of detail might be deployed. To this end, I will be attending to such choices available to the writer-maker as that between generic or specific invocation ('a train' or 'the 9:42 from Gravesend to London') and to the pacing and pitch of knowledges: to what is dwelt on, what is parcelled up or glossed over, what is explained or a given and what remains tacit, subtextual or entirely inconsequential.

CHAPTER TWO:
AN ITINERARY FOR WRITING

Abstraction, Universals, Specifics, Lists

The previous chapter identified several recurrent problems associated with working through site. These include: the extraction of discourse from material site; stereotyping, or the failure to adequately represent the complexity of and difference within a community; the dislocation of a touring artwork from its intended site; the flattening of place into broad thematics, and the assumptions necessarily made and particular to the pursuit of any (art and non-art) practice. These are all modes of abstraction, where some aspect of subject matter or site is in some way simplified, idealised, curtailed or generalised. While this might sound wholly undesirable, art historically abstraction has had progressive connotations: it has been linked to emotional expression and spirituality, and found to have resonance with significant forms in nature or to symbolise metaphysical potential; it has been identified with the creative process itself, with gesture and the subconscious, and considered a means to transcend imposed limitations of a figurative tradition.²²⁵ As an alternative to realism, abstraction is the authorised mode of some religions and considered imperative in the rejection of populism. On the other hand, it has been identified with the colonial arrogance of Western modernism, deemed expressive of an ‘anxious relationship’ to the world,²²⁶ and allegedly championed by the CIA to valorise individualism.²²⁷ In the controversy surrounding Dana Schutz’s painting *Open Casket*, arguments for the removal of the work were founded in an association of abstraction with

²²⁵ See *Meanings of Abstract Art: Between Nature and Theory*, ed. by Paul Crowther and Isabel Wünsche (London: Routledge, 2012).

²²⁶ Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style*, (Chicago: Elephant Paperbacks, 1997), pp. 47–8.

²²⁷ See, for example, Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper?: The CIA and Cultural Cold War* (London: Granta, 1999).

erasure and irresponsibility.²²⁸ But as Coco Fusco points out, ‘Abstraction, like mimeticism, is an aesthetic language that can be interpreted and used politically in a range of ways. It doesn’t necessarily mean erasure, but it does complicate the connection between perception and intellection — something that deeply thoughtful painters like Gerhard Richter have taken advantage of in order to make us reflect on how photographic images represent history and structure memory’.²²⁹ The effect of abstraction in this instance is redolent of Wallinger’s aims for *State Britain*: the slowing down of interpretation; a demand for time, attention and inventiveness of the viewer.

Abstraction is both a pragmatic necessity and a potentially divisive operation. As Jorge Luis Borges’s fictional character Ireneo Funes demonstrates, a world of perpetual differentiation, without generalities, would be intolerable and incommunicable.²³⁰ In practice, the writer decides at which level of abstraction to represent a phenomenon or idea, or she switches between different levels to achieve comprehensivity or persuasive impact. In progressive journalism, for instance, the disruption of rail services due to workers’ strikes would be discussed with regard to particularities of pay and safety, but the debate could be sharpened through a consideration of the public/private status of public transport and infrastructure in the UK in general, or, even more generally, the conditions of capitalist post-industrial societies. Abstraction in this context is a matter of granularity and scale of objectification – that is, where the perimeter of the object is delineated, whether an object is recognised as constituting a partonomy and, if so, the degree of detail to which constituent parts are articulated. In Latourian terms, it is a question of black boxes: of whether we consider the details or

²²⁸ Coco Fusco, ‘Censorship, Not the Painting, Must Go: On Dana Schutz’s Image of Emmett Till’, *Hyperallergic* (27 March 2017) <<https://hyperallergic.com/368290/censorship-not-the-painting-must-go-on-dana-schutzs-image-of-emmett-till/>> [accessed 31 January 18].

²²⁹ *Ibid.*

Fusco goes on to suggest that Theodor Adorno’s famous dictum ‘to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric’ is an appeal for abstraction, but this interpretation is disputed by Mark Godfrey, who considers it rather to be a rebuke of what Adorno perceived to be the easy continuation of German culture post-war. Mark Godfrey, *Abstraction and the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 9–12.

²³⁰ Jorge Luis Borges, ‘Funes the Memorious’, in *Labyrinths* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), pp. 87–95.

generality of this particular strike and whether we acknowledge its embeddedness in issues of classical liberalism more widely.²³¹ In systems theory, the whole is not static, singular and absolute, but constituted by emergent properties distributed throughout its imbricated structures. Such recursive structures dictate that local struggles cannot be resolved without addressing systematic problems. The Xenofeminists transpose this into overtly political terms, lamenting what they perceive to be a loss of attendance to the whole:

Systematic thinking and structural analysis have largely fallen by the wayside in favour of admirable, but insufficient struggles, bound to fixed localities and fragmented insurrections. Whilst capitalism is understood as a complex and ever-expanding totality, many would-be emancipatory anti-capitalist projects remain profoundly fearful of transitioning to the universal, resisting big-picture speculative politics by condemning them as necessarily oppressive vectors. Such a false guarantee treats universals as absolute, generating a debilitating disjuncture between the thing we seek to depose and the strategies we advance to depose it.²³²

Whether we pitch our perception among lower and higher order abstractions has practical and ideological consequence.

Abstraction involves separation, withdrawal or isolation from a whole or from accidental properties, but it also means ‘a state of mental preoccupation’ and ‘something which exists only as an idea or in theory’.²³³ Whether an abstract element is separated from a prior external visual reality or is always already theoretical marks the difference between the art historical categories of reductive abstraction and non-objective abstraction. Where reductive abstraction sheds specific properties of a tree or a train to tend perhaps not towards its *eidos*, but

²³¹ For an analogous discussion in linguistics and cultural anthropology, see Yuri Lotman on the necessary cognitive translation between ‘discrete’ and ‘continuous’ texts, where segmentation between units in one system become a semantic blur in another. Yuri Lotman, ‘Rhetoric as a mechanism for meaning-generation’, in *The Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1990), pp.36–53.

²³² Laboria Cuboniks, ‘Xenofeminism: A Politics for Alienation’
<<http://www.laboriacuboniks.net/#interrupt/1>> [accessed 28 July 2018].

²³³ ‘abstraction, n.’, *OED*
<<http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.lib.bbk.ac.uk/view/Entry/766?redirectedFrom=abstraction#eid>>
[accessed 7 March 18].

some idiosyncratic interpretation of its perceived effect or essence, non-objective abstraction is intended to visualise the non-physical: geometry, beauty, the spiritual. The former type of abstraction proceeds from experience of the physical world, from things-become-objects. It is a process based in perception. The latter is the translation of ideas into images, where ideas are objects that, not being derived from things, are a matter of conception.²³⁴ These two modes of imagistic abstraction, then, are differentiated by their engagement with that which cannot be quantifiably known and that which can only be known. In a research project such as this, which engages with the diverse ecology of knowledges, both these modes are to be considered and deployed.

In pragmatic communication, language proceeds through several modes and scales of abstraction, through references to objects and to ideas, assumptions and specifics. S.I. Hayakawa's 'ladder of abstraction' charts the categorical modes of abstraction and maps an organisation of thought that runs from the specific to the universal, or from low- to high-order abstractions.²³⁵ To give an example: there is a train strike. The commuter on the platform hears an announcement that the 10:42 from Gravesend to St Pancras is cancelled due to industrial action. This can be described differently, depending on the 'rung' of the ladder: by way of IUC identification markings of particular engine and carriage units held in the depot; the non-appearance of the 10:42 service from Gravesend to St Pancras; a cancelled train; industrial action on the railway; frustration with public transport; the alienating effects of governance or technology.

Where Hayakawa's model is a synchronic array of abstractions of varying degrees of removal from the actual physical phenomenon, Alfred Korzybski's structural differential model describes an abstracting processes occurring in time.²³⁶ The former attends to abstraction as a noun; the latter as a verb, to the process itself. For Korzybski, abstraction follows a somatic-cognitive-linguistic-semiotic

²³⁴ See John Deely on ideas as sign-vehicles: Deely, *Basics of Semiotics*, p. 44.

²³⁵ S.I. Hayakawa, *Language in Thought and Action* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1974).

²³⁶ Alfred Korzybski, *Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics* (Lancaster, PA: International Non-Aristotelian Library, 1933).

itinerary, whereby an external material event is translated into sensory perceptions; these are then understood and described verbally, and from this account meaning is inferred. The eventual inferred significances have recursive implications: they may well colour the description, and even the sensory perception, of future events. In the case of our train strike, when the commuter on the platform hears the announcement, she sees fellow thwarted passengers pull faces and mutter to one another. She infers that this is her train that has been cancelled, and predicts that she will now be late. She too groans, although this could be solely in response to her own predicament – she might have no strong opinion on the striking rail workers. Months, maybe years later, a similar event occurs. This time, when the commuter hears the announcement, she goes through the same process, adding to the interpretative stage the remembering of the previous incident, the recall of having been anxious and compromised, and the gist of newspaper coverage of the strike. She swears under her breath at the striking rail workers. There is a shift in the target object, and in inferred meaning, from ‘my train is late’ to ‘the rail service and its workers are impacting on my life again’. The response to the second event, altered by the outcome of the previous event, is no longer contingent solely on present conditions, but extends in scope, and consists in reductive abstraction and non-objective abstraction.

It is the translation from material particularity or token to general rule or type that interests me here.²³⁷ It involves the projection of propensities on to a subject, object or event, perhaps through logical or causal means, or through such potentially unsubstantiated means as stereotyping, assuming, believing and objectifying (in the semiotic sense of the word, where a cluster of relations are considered fused and enclosed). These are ethical, political and existential processes that underpin ideologies, epistemes, paradigms and cultures, since they are all partly constituted by assumptions, perceptions and expectations. But as such, these less reputable forms of inference are neither possible nor desirable to root out entirely, since they are the source of commonality that enables us to understand one another. The *Lebenswelt* is that which we experience together,

²³⁷ In Peircean terminology, these equate to *sin-signs* and *legi-signs*.

and objects of thought – concepts, fantasies and suppositions – are as integral to this as the physical world. For successful communication in the Lebenswelt we rely on consensual points of objectification and abstraction. An exemplary example from the history of modernity of such standardising abstraction is railway time.

In 1840 all British town railway stations reverted to Railway Time (Greenwich Mean Time), and for several years both local and railway time were observed, until the latter achieved legal status with the Statutes (Definition of Time) Act in 1880. In 1884 Greenwich Mean Time was adopted as the universal standard following the International Meridian Conference in Washington DC, USA.²³⁸ Stripping away local inflections, the consequent global synching of clocks, assumption of a universal calendar and worldwide expansion of patterns of social organisation has been frequently identified with the supplanting of organic, qualitative, heterogeneous experience with homogeneous, quantitative, mechanised, regulated modernity.²³⁹ Charts, timetables, accounts ledgers, maps, calendars and clocks dictate the timings of activities – sleeping, harvesting, selling – that would previously have been decided in reference to local conditions. Ambiguity and heteroglossia are chased from the system by the mechanisation of time and its isolation from space. Space becomes constant over time and autonomous of its inhabitants, while time is metaphorised as flowing linearly, independent of place and of whomever may be experiencing its passing. An abstracted, disembodied view of either, or both, is possible: the ‘god trick of seeing everything from nowhere’, as Haraway calls it.²⁴⁰ The entire network is managed from this perspective, by way of objective, abstracting devices that translate contingent experience on the ground into rational and visible arrangements and representations. The train is a latter-day equivalent of early

²³⁸ For more on attitudes to time during the early developments of the railway, see *Victorian Time: Technologies, Standardizations, Catastrophes*, ed. by Trish Ferguson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialisation and Perception of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987).

²³⁹ See, for example, Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilisation* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2010), pp. 10–12; Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990); Jonathan Crary, *24/7*, (London: Verso, 2014).

²⁴⁰ Donna Haraway, ‘Situated Knowledges’, p. 581.

Mediaeval monasteries, which Sandford Kwinter describes as prototype clocks, subjecting the unruly body to regulation and rule, to spatial organisation and temporal routines, to ‘the mathematicization of the day’.²⁴¹ In the monastery it is the cells, common rooms and meditation yards through which ‘the action of the bell and the intervals it scoops out of the continuum of duration are made to penetrate into, and reorganize, the bodies they seize.’²⁴² The railway timetable too notionally differentiates the train and its passengers within the borderless flow of immersive experience, offering the possibility of an external viewpoint – and of the rationalisation, regularisation and instrumentalisation that comes with this – by bracketing off time from space in timetables, or vice versa in maps.

By the late twentieth century, however, several theories, practices and disciplines were intent on reintegrating all four dimensions.²⁴³ Where in quantum physics this is a matter of expediency, in the humanities it has often borne ethical connotations. Doreen Massey, for example, describes how the separation of time and space has resulted in problematic attitudes: space considered as surface renders histories imperceptible and territories a simple matter for colonisation, while belief in a singular historical trajectory generates a global situation in which some societies are considered to be lagging behind rather than different.²⁴⁴ Space, Massey insists, is constituted by interrelations that happen over time; it is the sphere of multiplicity and difference, ‘always in process’ and ‘never a closed system’.²⁴⁵ A site is a spatio-temporal agglomeration of narratives, of physical and

²⁴¹ Sandford Kwinter, *Architectures of Time: Toward a Theory of the Event in Modernist Culture*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), p. 17.

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ The progenitor of these paradigms is Einstein’s theories of space-time, which displaced Newtonian causal determinism and Cartesian rationalism physics. The railway carriage and the train recur throughout his exposition of the theories, but is perhaps best known in the thought experiment that illustrates the Relativity of Simultaneity: Albert Einstein, *Relativity: The Special and General Theory*, (New York: Pi Press, 2005), pp. 34–7.

²⁴⁴ Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: Sage, 2005), pp. 4–5. Although this notion of progress was first posited by Bernard Le Bovier de Fontanelle in 1688, constituting what is now considered the founding moment of European Enlightenment supremacy, it is suggested that de Fontanelle himself considered this to be relative rather than absolute. See Robert Nisbet, *Metaphor and History: The Western Idea of Social Development* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2009), p. 104; Edward Cornish and others, ‘The Discovery of the Future’, in *The Study of the Future: An Introduction to the Art and Science of Understanding and Shaping Tomorrow’s World* (Washington: World Future Society, 1977), pp. 51–67.

²⁴⁵ Massey, *For Space*, pp. 10–11.

cognitive events that happen in space and time, and these narratives will be related, in speech, writing or thought, as strategic combinations (or jumbles) of abstractions, generalisations and specifics. The train that a passenger has in mind is the soonest one that happens to be going where they want it to; for the driver it is the six-coach unit headed by the locomotive engine serial number 396 002. What is more, for the passenger, a general desire for an anticipatable future (i.e., the train arriving on time) is entirely commensurate with a desire for a particular flavour of crisps from the at-seat trolley service. The choice between high- or low-order abstraction employed in any given communication could be down to desired rhetorical effect, or it might be a matter of the limits of knowledge, or of how little specificity one can manage on. The communicating subject adjudges on the fly which of an object's properties will need to be identified, alluded to or assumed to make a decision, convey the point or produce the required effect. The train guard will relay to passengers only some aspects of her communications with the driver, leaving out unnecessary technical detail, but giving just enough so as not to appear to be withholding information. The politician will deal with rigorous specifics when rubber stamping policy,²⁴⁶ but is likely to defer to universals in rousing ideological rhetoric on the campaign trail: 'We will deliver the infrastructure – the road, rail, airports and broadband – that businesses need'.²⁴⁷

The art critic is warned off using meaningless universals,²⁴⁸ while the artist tends distinctly towards higher-order abstractions, as my list of artists' subject matter

²⁴⁶ See, for example, the most recent policy paper, at time of writing, which outlines the criteria by which the Secretary of State permits a rail service provider to continue using carriages that do not comply with accessibility regulations: 'Rail Vehicle Accessibility Regulations Exemption Orders: 1 January 2016 – 31 December 2016', Department of Transport, Presented to Parliament pursuant to section 185 of the Equality Act 2010 (December 2017) <https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/669303/rvar-annual-report-2016-web.pdf> [accessed 14 January 2018].

²⁴⁷ Conservative Manifesto 2017 <<https://www.conservatives.com/manifesto>> [accessed 14 January 2018].

²⁴⁸ Gilda Williams, for example, counsels: 'don't dance around art by writing in broad strokes and generic art-patois'. Gilda Williams, *How to Write About Contemporary Art* (London: Thames & Hudson 2014), p. 69.

in the Introduction evidences.²⁴⁹ Given the conventions of ambiguity and indeterminacy described in the previous chapter, it is not surprising that contemporary art is rich in reductive and non-objective abstract thematics. High-order abstractions can be interpreted in relation to many different ontologies and practices. ‘Power’ can be identified as operative within many more situations than ‘private sector monopoly’. This tendency to surrender particularities for general effect contributes to the mutable anythingness and ahistoricity of contemporary art, as critiqued in the previous chapter. Kwon too recognises this in the context of artist residencies, where the nomadic artist works thematically in response to institutionally predetermined sites. She wonders whether ‘polymorphous critical plays on fixed generalities and stereotypes’ within a ‘paradigm of nomadic selves and sites’ might be ‘a glamorization of the trickster ethos that is in fact a reprise of the ideology of “freedom of choice” – the choice here being ‘the choice to forget, the choice to reinvent, the choice to fictionalize, the choice to “belong” anywhere, everywhere, and nowhere’.²⁵⁰ And I would add that, in relation to subject matter, thematic abstractions contribute to the appearance that art and artists are involved in the world, while also neglecting to articulate any specific point or effect an identifiable change.

In place of this tendency, I am arguing for, and testing out, the admittance of specifics among the ambiguities and thematics. In the context of literary criticism this is not a new proposition. It is already the mode of the essay, which, for Brian Dillon, is the ‘dauntless search for the most productive or provocative metaphors in the material to hand’, drawing from the world its figural potential.²⁵¹ Figural thought moves from material encounter to metaphoric or generic extension, from the particular to the theoretical, and potentially back again. Dillon’s writing ‘I’ is contained, provisional and dispelled, an essaying subject that ‘turns out to be sleepy and dispersed, liable to fall into a swoon, forget itself and wake again

²⁴⁹ Although it should be noted that among the thematic subject matter – place, self-reflexivity, waiting, decision-making, darkness, comedy – a few are more specific – for instance, the prisoner’s dilemma, osmosis, NHS mental health service users and Tyrian purple – and that these pertain to technological and scientific discourses: to game theory, cell biology, psychiatry and organic chemistry.

²⁵⁰ Kwon, *One Place After Another*, p. 165.

²⁵¹ Brian Dillon, *Essayism* (London: Fitzcarraldo, 2017), p. 106.

hardly knowing what or who it is. The “I” travels out from the seat of consciousness and dissipates itself at the extremities’.²⁵² Totalisation and singularity are improbable, given the nature of thought relieved of rigid application and an inability to entirely govern attention. In place of unity, Dillon demands a diffuse form of attention: ‘the solid thing made fully present on the page and then dissolving into all else it implies’.²⁵³ The word ‘implication’ itself gives us a cue to think of webs and networks, deriving as it does from the Latin *implicātiōn-em*, meaning ‘entwining’ or ‘entangling’, and the sixteenth-century French *implication*, meaning ‘complicity’, ‘contradiction’.²⁵⁴ That which is implicated is in relation, continuous with others, but also antagonistic, intervening and effective. An essayistic mode of associational thought, then, is a writerly technology of concentration and distraction, clarity, haze and diffraction. It oscillates between descriptive detail and metaphoric stretches, leaps and unfoldings; it exploits ambiguity and abstraction as a means to discover new particularities, which the text then absorbs as further pivots around which to disperse itself, to colour and intervene in that which it relates.

Dillon borrows his book title, *Essayism*, from Robert Musil, for whom the term encapsulates a method of mediating between morality and life, science and art. Musil considers the essay an attempt to establish order through the connection of thoughts, and as ‘the strictest form attainable in an area where one *cannot* work precisely’.²⁵⁵ But while these thoughts proceed from facts, unlike facts in the natural sciences they are not directly observable and their connections are often singular rather than universal; they are idiosyncratic perspectives, not theories. The essayist is located, eschewing the deistic overview for a position that cannot be disentangled from lived life. And the essay offers not insights into truths, but incorporates ‘feelings, ideas, complexes of will’, directed not at knowledge but

²⁵² Ibid., p. 19.

²⁵³ Ibid., p. 83.

²⁵⁴ ‘implication, n.’, *OED*

<<http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.lib.bbk.ac.uk/view/Entry/92477?redirectedFrom=implication#eid>> [accessed 7 March 18].

²⁵⁵ Robert Musil, ‘On the Essay’ [c.1914], in *Precision and Soul* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 48–51 (p. 48).

‘the transformation of man’.²⁵⁶ Dillon also makes reference to Montaigne, who gives equal weight to the singular casual anecdote and the serious universalising philosophy, to style and content. And Dillon’s own easy segues between autobiographic recollection and historical reference, his dilations from the particular to the universal, and vice versa, echo Musil’s integration of the personal and the historical in an ecology of metaphorisation and exemplification, and of low- and high-order abstractions. Musil, while acknowledging that human experience cannot be encapsulated by scientific rationalism, recognises that reductivism and universal abstractions are factors of human experience. Meaning and experience are combined in an ontology not of truth, but possibility, or ‘the ability to conceive of everything there might be just as well, and to attach no more importance to what is than what is not’.²⁵⁷ Universals, specifics, the imagined and the experienced are placed on a common plane, where the essay involves the practice of both rationalism and associative thought, with recourse to scientific *and* social constructivist attitudes, to nature and culture, ‘precision and soul’.²⁵⁸ For Musil, essayism is an interdisciplinary approach to writing, but it is also an ontological imperative intended to correct what he saw as a state in which ‘We do not have too much intellect and too little soul, but too little precision in matters of the soul.’²⁵⁹ And even now, it is still all too easy to provide examples of this in contemporary public and political discourse. The generalisations of politicians and partisan media’s slogans come immediately to mind, especially such inarticulate emotive abstractions as ‘Project Fear’ and Trump’s rallying cry ‘Make America Great Again’.²⁶⁰

Mark M. Freed describes Musil’s essayism from a contemporary perspective as the ‘discursive mediation of science and art, the ordered and the chaotic, the

²⁵⁶ Ibid. pp. 50–1.

²⁵⁷ Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities* (London: Picador, 1995), I, p. 11.

²⁵⁸ Musil, *Precision and Soul*, title page.

²⁵⁹ Musil, ‘Helpless Europe’, in *Precision and Soul*, pp. 116–33 (p. 131)

²⁶⁰ A reference to the team campaigning against Scottish referendum and the Remain campaign during the UK’s 2016 EU referendum. See Ian Jack, ‘“Project Fear” started as a silly private joke during another referendum, but now it won’t go away’ *Guardian* (11 March 2016) <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/mar/11/project-fear-started-as-a-silly-private-joke-now-it-wont-go-away>> [accessed 3 February 2019].

nonhuman and the human'.²⁶¹ One can add to this the reified and the fictional, the specific and the abstracted. This re-enfoldment of that which has, through processes of modernity, been considered immiscible has much in common with Latour's 'premodernism', which similarly aims to dismantle the distinction between nature and culture, realism and constructivism. Latour decries, as the apotheosis of modernity, post-structuralism and the linguistic turn's 'bracketing off, on the one hand, the question of reference to the natural world and, on the other, the identity of speaking and thinking subjects'. He rejects the idea of an autonomous text or discourse generalised as a result of its dissociation from the particularities of that which it refers directly to and of the person who wrote or spoke it. While Latour concedes that this affords mediators (in this case, the text itself) 'dignity' and recognition of their role in the generation of meaning, it also means 'turning nature over to the epistemologists and giving up society to the sociologists, [making] it impossible to stitch these three resources back together.'²⁶² We are left with three separate realms:

a nature and a technology that are absolutely sleek; a society made up solely of false consciousness, simulacra and illusions; a discourse consisting only in meaning effects detached from everything; and this whole world of appearances keeps afloat other disconnected elements of networks that can be combined haphazardly by collage from all places and all times. Enough, indeed, to make one contemplate jumping off a cliff.²⁶³

It is Latour's idea of text that is afforded dignity through recognition of its role as mediator that especially interests me here. That narration produces meaning has long been recognised: in early twentieth-century narratological analyses, judgement is considered to be manufactured by viewpoint, and narrative is a persuasive tool by which a point of view can be made sympathetic to the

²⁶¹ Mark M. Freed, 'Latour, Musil, and the Discourse of NonModernity', *symplekē*, 11.1–2 (2003), 183–96 (p. 184).

²⁶² Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* pp. 63, 64.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

reader.²⁶⁴ Towards the end of the century, Jameson identifies narrative meaning as the sedimentation of consensual reading and interpretative habits and traditions.²⁶⁵ No narrative can be ahistorical. Indeed, for Jameson, to distinguish between texts that are historical or social and those that are not is ‘something worse than an error’, since this would reify a structural, experiential and conceptual gap between the social/political and the poetic/psychological, reinforcing the privatisation of contemporary life and ‘[maiming] our existence as individual subjects and [paralyzing] our thinking about time and change just as surely as it alienates us from our speech itself’.²⁶⁶ The reading or writing subject caught in structuralism’s disembodied, representational bind has no recourse to textual acts that diffract the social or material world. Jameson is drawing on Althusser’s ‘interpellation’, the obverse of Kristeva’s performativity, whereby ideologies embodied by a text, utterance or ritual draw the human subject into relation, requiring them to perform social roles;²⁶⁷ and on Althusser’s ‘expressive causality’, which Jameson describes as the historiographic process by which a sequence of events or texts or artefacts is narrated as an allegorical vehicle for a more fundamental narrative.²⁶⁸ The history of things, objects and events remains always inaccessible, since it is remodelled and mediated by processes of narrativisation governed by ‘our collective thinking and our collective fantasies about history and reality’.²⁶⁹ For Althusser and Jameson, ideological mediations occur mainly through typification pertaining to social class. And yet, as we have seen, processes of typification, or abstraction, assumption or objectification, can be performed on all types of objects and subjects, in all registers of meaning, for many reasons. For Susan Stewart ideology is simply ‘the conception of order’, ‘a partial reality’, which can be the result of many an illusory tidying process.²⁷⁰ Science’s purification of forms, for example, which for Latour is achieved by the segregation of science and the

²⁶⁴ For an account of this see, for example, Mark Currie, *Postmodern Narrative Theory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 25–31.

²⁶⁵ Jameson, ‘On Interpretation’, in *The Political Unconscious*, pp. 1–88.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 4.

²⁶⁷ Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, pp. 189–97.

²⁶⁸ Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, p. 13.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

²⁷⁰ Stewart, *Nonsense*, pp. 49, 50.

social, becomes a performative and mediating practice of abstraction premised on a perceived equivalence between clarity, separation and control. Science represents the material world in such a way that excludes the impure hybrid forms arising from the commingling of humans, objects, animals, plants and technologies, so that, paradoxically, the ideological and cultural impetus behind its own mediating processes falls beyond its purview.

In my own practice, I am exploring how real, parodied and imagined ‘expressive causality’ can be made overt. Just as Kockelman suggests that one can learn much by rendering an object’s features, ‘insofar as the form, material, properties, and position of any object are themselves signs of the transformative processes that brought that object into being’, I am proposing that the ideologies and frames of interpretation through which a text has been constructed can also be made apparent.²⁷¹ Such a narration-object would be knowingly absorbent of consensual forms of rhetoric, cognisant of its situated objectivity and expressive of its intention to diffract and mediate meaning. It would make apparent the relations and processes of mediation through which it takes form and to which it gives rise. This narration-object would be the ‘root and the fruit’, or the conditions and consequences, of its context.²⁷² Narration here is not to be considered an iconic signifier, a representation of meaning, prior reality or thought, but a producer of meaning that causes patterns of interference with concomitant narrations in the psychosocial commons. Narrating and reading/listening subjects must be physically implicated within the site of narration, whether that be a social space or the private place of the page. For Barad, the re-centring of the body in social processes is key to rebalancing a skewed faith in culture and language as agential, and to redressing a misconception of matter as passive referent or backdrop. The body should be described and understood not simply as biological processes or the result of socio-historical forces, but rather as constituted through ‘a host of material-discursive forces – including ones that get labeled “social,” “cultural,” “psychic,” “economic,” “natural,” “physical,” “biological,” “geopolitical,” and

²⁷¹ Paul Kockelman, ‘Meeting the Universe Two-Thirds of the Way (Witchful Thinking)’, *Signs and Society*, 4.2 (Fall 2016), 215–43 (p. 238).

²⁷² Kockelman, *Agent, Person, Subject, Self*, p. 20.

“geological”.²⁷³ Only then can we begin to understand how discursive practices, materialisation, agency and causality serve structures of power, which in turn direct channels of causality and agency, legislate practices and direct the movement of material. Latour’s task, similarly, is to resume the tracing of connections, interrupted by modernity’s tendency to segregate and categorise. This is best achieved, he counsels, through investigative descriptions of networks and assemblages that incorporate the human, non-human, reified, imaginary, virtual, technological and biological.²⁷⁴ His itinerary is ‘to pass with continuity from the local to the global’, between ‘interpersonal contacts and depersonalized rationalities’, via ‘the thread of networks of practices and instruments, of documents and translations’.²⁷⁵ And among the potential channels of relation through the infinite web of semiotic processes, among the participant material, social and mental elements, the tangible objects, diffuse ideas and immaterial fictions, we can also include the categories ‘errors’, ‘lies’ and ‘guesses’. As Deely describes, the erroneous identification of celestial spheres has been as influential to human thought as the stars they were thought to embody:

We the better see thus that the world of experience as experienced is through and through objective, the leprechaun no less than the cancer cell or silver bullet (used to kill werewolves) or mountain stream. We see, too, that the physical universe on its material side exists within and as part of the objective universe of experience, indeed, as its lining and skeleton, so to speak. But we see also that the objective and physical worlds are by no means coterminous, as each extends in its own way well beyond the confines of the other.²⁷⁶

It is these attitudes of profusion and inclusion that result in the joyous (or for some, irritating) lists that suffuse Latour’s books, and those of the flat ontologists, speculative realists, vital materialists, object-oriented philosophers and others who have worked exegetically from Actor-Network Theory and Peircean

²⁷³ Karen Barad, ‘Posthumanist Performativity’, p. 810.

²⁷⁴ See Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

²⁷⁵ Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, p. 121.

²⁷⁶ Deely, *Basics of Semiotics*, p. 81.

semiotics. Here is Latour's inventory of social-scientific hybrid 'monsters' published in the daily newspapers of the early 1990s: 'frozen embryos, expert systems, digital machines, sensor-equipped robots, hybrid corn, data banks, psychotropic drugs, whales outfitted with radar sounding devices, gene synthesizers, audience analyzers, and so on';²⁷⁷ and Graham Harman's potential actors, among which speculative philosophies play out: 'Neutrons ... black holes ... buildings, cities, humans, dogs, rocks, fictional characters, secret potions, and voodoo dolls' ... 'microbes, tape recorders, windmills, apples, and any real or unreal actors that one might imagine'.²⁷⁸ And to draw closer to my own site, here is Jane Bennett's vitalist materialist sketch of the national grid: 'a volatile mix of coal, sweat, electromagnetic fields, computer programs, electrons streams, profit motives, heat, lifestyles, nuclear fuel, plastic, fantasies of mastery, static, legislation, water, economic theory, wire and wood'.²⁷⁹ And Kockelman's inventory of 'ontology-exhibiting agents', or subjects that interpret: 'children and adults, animals and humans, artifacts and organs, individuals and institutions, interactions and infrastructure, dollar bills and genes, linguistic structures and immune systems, *inter alia*'.²⁸⁰

Such lists comprise *relata* – that is, antecedents of potential relations. The list as a whole can imply relational interdependence: you will need all these things to make a national grid; if one item is missing you do not have a national grid, but a different object again. As such it is a marker for distributed agency across a network. But while Bennett's list inventories the elements of a pre-existing technical object, it does not describe the nature of the relations between the material components of a national grid – the listed items are symbolic representations of the types of things that are needed, from which the engineer can infer causal and processual relations. Harman's list, by drawing into association fictional characters and quotidian materials, presents disjunctive enumerations that challenge received taxonomies. Like the unsettling lists of the

²⁷⁷ Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, p. 50.

²⁷⁸ Graham Harman, *Prince of Networks* (Melbourne: re.press, 2009), pp. 100, 102.

²⁷⁹ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. 25.

²⁸⁰ By 'ontology-exhibiting agents', Kockelman means that within which significance is embodied. Kockelman, *Agent, Person, Subject, Self*, p. 6.

Surrealists (an umbrella, a sewing machine, an operating table) or the voracious attention of the Baroque artist, where excess is celebrated, the speculative realist's inventory of actants disrupts or deforms the logic that might be expected of a practical list. By inviting the imagined and the material into proximity, Harman, Latour, Bennett and Kockelman demonstrate the interrelatedness or equivalence of what would ordinarily be perceived as differentiated, distanced or distinct. Such lists confound taxonomies refined through scientific efforts to organise relata into genera and species that privilege certain properties or essences. They recall much earlier signifying systems of objects and ideas collated through knowledges that look absurd or naïve from our differently technologized perception of the material universe: the wunderkammers displaying unicorn horns and faked religious relics; alchemists' charts; occult philosophy's litanies of bizarre influences powered by virtues and attractions.²⁸¹ By supplanting modernity's tendency to categorise and objectify with processes based in descriptive, associational tracing, the infinite web of potential branchings and diffractive interactions becomes available once more.

Although Harman and Bennett are more current in their theorising of the post-human, I turn, rather, to Eco for a cue as to how lists themselves make evident diverse intentions and ideologies. In his semiotic analysis, Eco taxonomises lists into the poetic and the pragmatic, where the latter is finite, purely referential in function and records that which already exists and therefore cannot be altered.²⁸² I would argue, though, that Eco is conflating all pragmatic lists with the function of the inventory or catalogue. There are pragmatic lists that are less distinctly objectifying, that relate actions or abstract nouns: the to-do list, for instance, might include such abstractions as 'improve customer relations' or 'be more kind'. Eco does recognise, however, that the pragmatic list can be appreciated for its poetic qualities, and that an attempt at coherence and completion may result

²⁸¹ See, for example, Cornelius Agrippa's *Three Books of Occult Philosophy* [1581], in Twilit Grotto: Archives of Western Esoterica

<<http://www.esotericarchives.com/agrippa/agrippa1.htm>> [accessed 7 March 2018].

²⁸² Umberto Eco, *An Infinity of Lists* (New York: Rizzoli, 2009), p. 113.

in a ‘topos of ineffability’,²⁸³ where the inability of an author to articulate the scope or itemise the plethora of items implied produces an aesthetic effect, and demands work on the part of the reader/listener’s imagination. A war memorial, with its horrifyingly long lists of names of the dead, is an example of this.

The affordances and actions particular to lists – such as parataxis and hierarchisation – can have several potential purchases or purposes. The list can be a bar to movement, halting the narrative while items are brought to the attention in close sequence, overriding other temporal or spatial geometries that might otherwise separate them. Or a list might be a demonstration of the arbitrariness of ‘sensible’ categories and the contingency of meaning.²⁸⁴ A list might be delimited by and dependent upon its context, or it might be unbound, potentially infinite, always trailing off with an ‘etcetera’... It might invoke and pile up with ‘and’ upon ‘and’,²⁸⁵ or differentiate with ‘or’ after ‘or’, or produce a range. It can shatter a thought and make navigation impossible; it might be the marker of a greed for words, a desire for accuracy, a state of ambivalence, a recognition of heterogeneity; it can evidence a bureaucratic tendency, a desire to control, or it can demonstrate a relinquishment of control, or an inability to control or even to identify; it can give form to a particular point of view by making all that is visible from there apparent while passing over that which pertains to a different position; it can reassert a point through reiteration or move through stages of incremental change; it can relate disorder as expressiveness, decadence, monstrosity, the encroachment of the sublime; it can perform submission to the endless spread of associative thinking; it can be luxurious, a profusion of sound and image relieved of the rigours of syntax and grammar. Dillon reminds us that lists do not ‘admit of qualification or reserve,

²⁸³ Ibid., p. 327.

²⁸⁴ I am thinking here of Jorge Luis Borges’s oft-quoted taxonomy of animals in his fictional *Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge’s Taxonomy*, where ‘animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies.’ Jorge Luis Borges, ‘The Analytical Language of John Wilkins’, in *Other Inquisitions* (Austin: University of Texas, 1964), pp. 101–5.

²⁸⁵ For a rigorous exposition on the effect of ‘and’ within the list form, see William Gass, ‘And’, in *Habitations of the Word* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), pp. 160–84

narrative switchback or second thoughts, dependent clauses or sinuous trains of thought'.²⁸⁶ Lists are a no-nonsense highspeed service, moving with swift, deliberate intent. Or they are meandering, with no idea where they are headed or why. As such, they can reflect the anxiety of the listing subject, who attempts to timetable and organise the disobedient memory, the unruly material world or the slipperiness of categorisation.

Eco proposes that lists tend to enumerate properties rather than essences, that a tiger will be described through its accidents (in the Aristotelian sense), as that which marks it out as unique among other animals, rather than by its membership of a genus.²⁸⁷ And as such, lists tend towards the specific over the general, to the encyclopaedic definition, and an accumulation of properties, in contrast to the essentialising dictionary. Eco introduces Emanuele Tesauro's *The Aristotelian Telescope* (1665), which, like Dillon's approach to the essay, proposes the metaphor as 'a way to discover hitherto unknown relationships between known things'.²⁸⁸ By organising items by way of their properties, Tesauro brings the previously incongruous into association:

members of the category of Substance include Divine Persons, Ideas, Gods of Fable, Angels, Demons, and Sprites, members of the Heavens include Wandering Stars, the Zodiac, Vapours, Exhalations, Meteors, Comets, Lightning and the Winds; the category of Earth lists Fields, Wildernesses, Mountains, Hills and Promonteries; that of Bodies includes Stones, Gems, Metals and Grasses; while Mathematics includes Globes, Compasses, Squares and so on.

Likewise in the category of Quantities, for Quantity of Volume we find listed the Small, the Great, the Long and the Short; for Quantity of Weight the Light and the Heavy; for Quality, under Seeing we find the Visible and the Invisible, the Apparent, the Beautiful and the Deformed,

²⁸⁶ Dillon, *Essayism*, p. 23.

²⁸⁷ Or as 'that which may be attributed to a substance without being essential to that substance.' A train may or may not be on time, but it must run on tracks. If it didn't run on tracks it could be a bus; if it were on time or late it would still be a train. 'accident 2. (in Aristotelian logic)', *A Dictionary of Philosophy* (London: Pan Books, 1984), p. 4.

²⁸⁸ Eco, *An Infinity of Lists*, p. 233.

the Clear and the Obscure, Black and White; under Smell, Aroma and Stink...²⁸⁹

The book was envisioned as an aid to ingenuity, which, Tesauro claims, is the capacity to ‘penetrate objects that are hidden under different categories and to make comparisons between them’.²⁹⁰ In the chapters that follow, the railway is my telescopic means of discerning relations across dissociated fields of thought and endeavour. It is a heterogeneous assemblage, routinely abstracted and particularised through mediating inventories, commentaries and projections that can tell us much about the motivations of their authors.

Spatio-Temporal Modalities of Itineraries and Guided Tours

The list forms that most commonly pertain to the railway are maps, timetables, inventories and checklists. Their expressive causality, or fundamental allegorical narrative, could be characterised as a belief that filleting space and time into a series of intelligible snapshots affords control and prediction over the chaotic material universe. Among these list forms the itinerary is of especial interest, since it connotes future movement, formalising a relation between space and time, and between subject or object and Umwelt.

The itinerary is ‘A line or course of travel; a route’ or ‘a record or journal of travel; an account of a journey’; ‘pertaining to a journey, travelling, or a route [...] or the description of roads.’²⁹¹ As a narrative genre, the itinerary is meagre: a selection of times, places, objects, subjects and events delineated in the broadest of terms. But its temporality and modality are labile: it may refer to a journey actually undertaken in the past, or one merely imagined; and it can refer to an undertaking at one or several unspecified future moments. An itinerary can be followed, diverted from or ignored. For those for whom space and time cannot

²⁸⁹ Eco, *An Infinity of Lists*, pp. 233–4.

²⁹⁰ Cited in Eco, *An Infinity of Lists*, p. 233.

²⁹¹ ‘itinerary, n.’, *OED*

<<http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.lib.bbk.ac.uk/view/Entry/100339?rskey=0Gu9Lf&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>> [accessed 5 November 2017].

be separated, the course of travel comprises not movement through space, but between manifold interrelations. An itinerary, then, becomes an account of past and future events. It mediates the experiences of a writer/speaker into an experience for a reader/listener. Massey presents Aztec culture as an example of space-time thinking, where a site is characterised as a 'place-moment', and the *Aztec Codex Xolotl* (see below) a narrative related via signs on a map connected by footprints, to be read 'by locating the origin of the footprints and deciphering the place signs as they occur on these itineraries'.²⁹² It is a visual method by which the whole of a narrative outline can be known at once. In contemporary applications too, the at-a-glance itinerary lets the reader know the gist of what will happen. A spatio-temporal skeleton of events, on which the particularity of experience depends, it is a totalising document with a stated origin, prescribed plot and a horizon of arrival – an ending. According to Henri Bergson, all future is unforeseeable; even the most expected things are abstract and stilted, vague in comparison to the sense events that actually occur.²⁹³ But the itinerary implies a future that, all being well, is knowable, at least in general terms of topographic movement, temporal span and thematic encounter or activity.

²⁹² J. B. Harley, *Maps and the Columbian Encounter* (Milwaukee, WI: University of Wisconsin, 1990), p.101; cited in Massey, *For Space*, p. 7.

²⁹³ More on this in Chapter Six. See Henri Bergson, 'The Possible and the Real', in *Key Writings*, ed. by Keith Ansell-Pearson and John Mullarky (New York: Continuum, 2002), pp. 223–32.

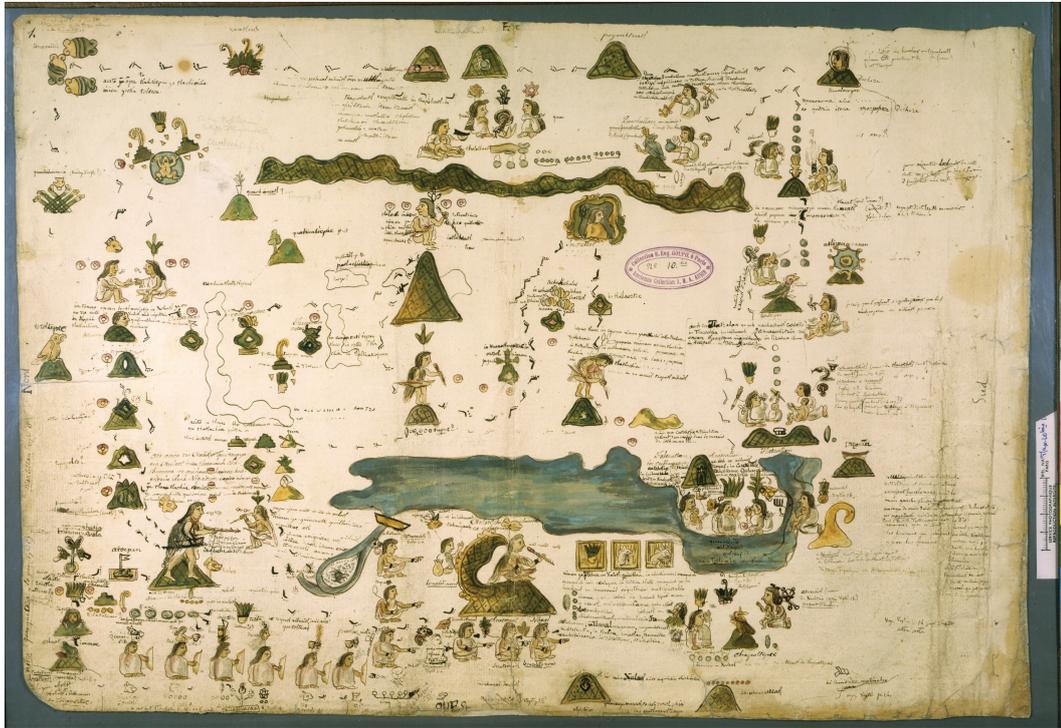


Fig. 1a: The arrival of the Chichimeca and their chiefs (Xolotl and his son Nopaltzin) in the region of the Anahuac lakes.²⁹⁴

²⁹⁴ The arrival of the Chichimeca and their chiefs (Xolotl and his son Nopaltzin) in the region of the Anahuac lakes. Xolotl Codex, page 1, copied by Antonio León y Gama, c. eighteenth century. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, MS fonds Gama, Joseph-Marius-Alexis Aubin, Eugène Goupil, RC-C-08566.



Fig. 1b: The arrival of the Chichimeca and their chiefs (detail)

The itinerary depends on several other temporal frameworks besides this future orientation. Firstly, there is the time of research and the devising and writing of the itinerary in relation to the site on which it is based, by the subject who researches that site and whose intentions for the itinerary are implemented through its devising and distribution. Secondly, there is potentially a historical event or events which the itinerary traces or patches together: a literary pub tour of London, for example, includes pubs frequented by literary figures that may not have been alive at the same time; in Patrick Keiller's *Robinson in Space* (1997), the filmmaker's itinerary reconstructs the documented travels of Daniel Defoe around Britain in 1724–6. Or, if the itinerary is not historically oriented, a route might be otherwise constructed mentally and then itemised: the hen weekend, for example, reconstructs the desires of the bride-to-be as imagined by the maid of honour, or the holiday itinerary reconstructs an assumed idea or prior experience of fun or relaxation or quality time. Thirdly, there is the anticipation of the enactment of the itinerary, the imagining of its completion-in-process by the reader of the itinerary, on receipt of it, before the journey is embarked on. Fourthly, there is the time of enactment, the durational unfolding of the itinerary as experience. The actions of holidaymakers, pubcrawlers, hen partiers and so on convert the abstracted plan into material and psychosocial practices, which have been anticipated by the maker of the itinerary, at higher or lower levels of abstraction, as such activities as 'partying', 'eating a fish supper', 'enjoying a reconstruction of the moment when Dylan Thomas met his future wife Caitlin'. And fifthly, there is the packaging of experience retrospectively, into an anecdote after the event. As Mark Currie points out, this in itself is temporally complex. The very act of beginning to tell an anecdote signals that something is worth hearing, and that, by the time the anecdote has been told, something will be perceived to have happened.²⁹⁵ By submitting to listening to an anecdote, one recognises that the unforeseeable is to be expected.

It is the crossings conducted between these timeframes and modalities of knowledge, and the difference between the broad strokes of the itinerary and the

²⁹⁵ Currie, *The Unexpected*, p. 17.

specific unfolding of experience that interests me. The itinerary presumes to influence, and therefore to know in advance, the direction and target of the reader/listener's attention. In literary terms, it is at once analepsis and prolepsis: it brings together the temporal frameworks of the past that is being narrated, the moment of narration, which has also lapsed, and the future of the reading/listening subject, which at the time of enacting the itinerary is that subject's present. As Currie explains, this temporal crossing is typical even of conventional fictions, which are most often written in the past tense and, through the practice of reading, parsed into a form of present tense in which the future of the narrative is at once unforeseen and already written.²⁹⁶ The temporality of narrative is, he explains, a product of three conflicting attitudes we harbour in relation to the future: as something that is open and unknowable; as something we are busy shaping through our daily actions; as something to be waited for, as fate, or anticipated in prediction. (And, we might add to this, as something that is shaped for us by others, by individuals, groups, institutions, with our consent, against our will and without our knowledge.) In the novel these incompatible models are fused, since the protagonists are witnessed in their struggle to shape their future, while to the reader it seems if not entirely open (for there are generic forms that imply certain types of expected outcomes), then at least unforeseeable to some extent; and yet that future is, we know, entirely accessible, already given. All we need to do is skip ahead to 'later' pages. Currie deals with this apparent paradoxical situation by considering writing and reading as practices that inflect one another, and by drawing on Paul Ricoeur's circularity of narrative, where narration is not straightforwardly mimetic of the world, but necessarily already incorporates reflection on the event narrated. For Ricoeur, the mimetic function is distributed between makers and audiences, between events and their descriptions, and unfolds in three stages: 1) prefiguration, when it is understood what an action is and it is inferred from it what might happen as a result, where such an understanding has already been learned from the world; 2) emplotment, where the narrative elements are crafted into an intelligible whole, with a beginning and an end, and 3) refiguration, when the narrative is applied to the

²⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 12.

world, which it modifies in the mind of the reader/listener.²⁹⁷ This circular reflexivity echoes that of Korzybski's differential model, exchanging differing orders of abstraction for differing temporally inflected representations of an event. As Currie interprets it, one of the effects of this circle of mimesis is that we do not read the present solely as a present, but also 'as a kind of past, already complete in relation to some future point at which its untold story will be told'.²⁹⁸ In other words, a moment is split into an immersive, phenomenological, durational now and a teleological, retrospective view of an event. Its significance is at once ontological and epistemological, as present experience and future discursive knowledge. As we will see in Chapter Four, and as the listener may note in the audio piece *HERMES* (discussed in Chapter Six), this temporal splitting of the present is central to the experience of train travel, as well as to the functioning of the itinerary more generally.

The itinerary, then, is the objectification of similarly performative future-, present- and past-oriented practices of reading, writing, remembering and imagining, and of paradigmatic interpretations of site. It prefigures the retelling of stories of the past, the narrating of the present and as-yet-untold stories. The sites circumscribed by an itinerary are already inscribed by multiple narrative interpretations, including the narrative imagination of the itinerary maker; and they will become the objects to which future narrative representations, as told by holidaymakers, pubcrawlers, hen weekenders, will relate. The itinerary mediates between perception and memory, plan and intentional action. It relates to sites at which *Umwelt* and *Innenwelten* meet, where communalising assumptions and differentiating particularities intervene, and where different discourses and paradigms exercise interpretative processes to varying effects. The train timetable is the itinerary for a multiplicity of trains, which intersect with and function as tools for the actualisation (or disruption) of a multitude of passenger itineraries. It is generative of a plenitude of narratives to be variously understood.

²⁹⁷ See Paul Ricoeur 'Time and Narrative: Threefold Mimesis', in *Time and Narrative*, I (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1984), pp. 52–87.

²⁹⁸ Currie, *The Unexpected*, p. 48.

To develop this idea of the itinerary as a textual tool, it is helpful to introduce Bernard Stiegler's *epiphylogenesis*. This is the proposition that human tools and technology are a mode of memory; that skills, gestures and practice know-how is embodied by the instruments we surround ourselves with; that the expanse of knowledge we have access to is far greater than the scope of any individual.²⁹⁹ In this formulation, language is a powerful technology, with the capacity to distribute and mediate memory and knowledge through writing and speech. The tools incorporated within the technology of language include grammar and rhetoric, but I would also suggest that cliché and rhyme are primary tools for memory storage, as are genres and graphic forms with distinct, reiterable features. The cascading contents page of a textbook, for example, is understood as a hierarchy of chapters and subheadings, directing attention to make sense of the book's contents; the grid of the timetable conveys the very idea of accuracy and singularity. The itinerary, too, is a recognised tool for directing bodies, attention and meaning. Its combination of empirical facts and rhetorical glosses is symptomatic of its constituent practices of interpreting, knowing, believing, authoring, entertaining, teaching, organising, narrating, objectifying. But where conventionally such features as clarity and coherence are foregrounded, I refer the reader back to the list of potential purchases and purposes of lists above, and suggest that, in practice, the effective scope of the itinerary can be vastly more varied.

A related but more articulated tool is the guided tour, which can be described as a narratively fleshed-out itinerary. The guided tour is a direct means by which to introduce text to site. It can be pre-recorded, printed or spoken live, and is practiced widely, in commercial, industrial and cultural situations, usually adhering to generic characteristics, and potentially with overt and covert functions. The tour guide is conventionally a symbol of authoritative knowledge. She points out a significant empirical object – a castle or a steam train – and interprets it within a particular framework: that of the history of kings and queens of England, for instance, or the industrial 'might' of Britain. She will often

²⁹⁹ Stiegler, *Technics and Time*, I, pp. 239–76.

recount a particular event as evidence of the applicability of the general idea. The listening or reading subject conceives of the site or object differently as a result of the tour guide's narration. A tourist learns a particular history of a place; an arts audience member's opinion might be swayed by an aesthetic commentary or factual revelations about an artwork or an artist; a new employee receives vital information about the working practices of a company; a rambler is directed to views that conform to orthodoxies of 'natural' beauty. The authorial voice is assumed to be dominant in the guided tour, and the narrator merely an interlocutor or conduit for impersonal information to be replicated and handed on, uninflected by the identity of the speaker. But while rhetorical concerns are usually forfeited for this informational remit, the selective nature of content nonetheless mediates understanding and transforms listening or reading subjects: the tourist comes to know the canonical account; a worker becomes inducted and ready to work; the rambler will have seen the 'best' views. The tour guide, too, is as interpellated as the listener, as implicated in the text's expressive causality. Norms are enforced, Lebenswelten entrenched.

In conventional touristic guided tours, the majority of other practices performed at a site tend to be absorbed into, overwritten or ignored by those assumed to be of most interest to the sightseer. Material forms dominate and social forms recede, since professional tour guides select a TVP, or 'top visual priority' – often a distinctively coloured object, in which to anchor their text, because, when travelling through a busy city, colour is the most readily apparent and economically described quality to verbally direct attention towards.³⁰⁰ Under such empirical conditions, certain objects become symbols of prescribed content while others recede as background noise, their relations to and functions within the site unarticulated. The tourism and heritage industries that define the Tower of London's contemporary role, for example, are ignored and displaced by narratives of historical penal, military and ceremonial practices. Jack the Ripper tours quietly boost the practices of the publican, and potentially the picket pocket

³⁰⁰ This information was gleaned from a private conversation with professional tour guide Tim Goddard, 31 November 2017.

and bag thief too, as tourists ingest their cocktail of oral history, mystery fiction and documentary in the pubs and streets of Whitechapel.

Contemporary art that parodies the guided tour genre often aims to counter or obscure or disprove orthodox narratives, or reveal hidden narratives of a site. Iconic and symbolic signs are wilfully misread. Andrea Fraser, for instance, leads tours of museums that foreground behind-the-scenes practices and power structures. Forced Entertainment's *Nights in This City* splinters the urban landscape through recountings of a fragmented, constructed autobiographic subject. One artist (whose name I have never known) conducted a river tour of Paris, speaking only of the weight of buildings, thereby making light of architectural hubris. These artists accentuate the mediating effect of narration, authoring texts that smother or disrupt a site's conventional narratives. Others aim to restore to visibility a narrative they consider neglected or wilfully sidelined, or to overturn an assumption that masks a 'truth' or hidden intent. Rosie Oliver's Dotmaker Tours of London, for example, direct attention to the incidental sounds of the city, forgotten animal effigies in architecture or the operations and structures that deal with human waste.³⁰¹ In Oliver's *Chimneys and Tunnels* tour (2013-ongoing), the differential between a contemporary perception of urban landscape and its forgotten histories is felt as a moment of material revaluation: what has been assumed to be a generic post in a side street reveals itself, through the tour guide's verbal captioning, to be a nineteenth-century stink pipe. And in *The Walbrook Pilgrimage* (2013) Tom Chivers delineates the infringement of the built environment on the hidden waterways of London. His methods are less directly informative than Oliver's, more based in poetic speculation and associational leaps. Evocations of the waterways of London are thematically interwoven with vignettes and motifs of Greek mythology and contemporary subcultures, and punctuated by archival audio and interviews with city workers. The present is revealed not only as constituted by its pasts, but also by contemporaneous elsewheres, and by perspectival construction.

³⁰¹ Dotmaker Tours <<http://dotmakertours.co.uk>> [accessed 11 November 2017].

The primary difference between Oliver's 'factual' and Chivers' 'psychogeographic' tour is the primacy of authorship of the latter – that is, the listener's sense that content is provisional, dependent on the author/narrator's interests. Oliver is revealing forgotten or overlooked causal relations and tangible significances; Chivers is generating lyrical inferences by essaying between material objects, images, concepts and themes. Where the conventional guided tour maintains the site as clear referent, using material features as evidence of past agencies, this other 'literary' technology departs from or retools the site through its perspectival and modal features. By perspectival I mean the material positioning and ideological dispositions of the author/narrator, and by modal I mean the degree of certainty, potentiality or conditionality with which propositions are offered. A modal statement describes what a site might be or might become or should have been or certainly will become or could possibly be, have been or be becoming...³⁰² Such modal statements indicate alterity arising from divergent interpretations or assumptions, from different paradigms and practices. A guided tour can model a proposal; it can 'describe' how something could or should be, in contrast to how it is; it can generate patterns of interference between the actual and the possible. The tour guide is an authorial agent who can, as we will see in Chapter Seven, activate all manner of channels through the semiotic web to diffract understanding, to supplant a generality with a specificity, to reveal a particular past within an ambiguous present.

In Chapter Seven I will be discussing how *I Hear Horses*, the guided tour devised in collaboration with poet and tour guide James M'Kay, is based in the particular physical geography of its site and in dissociated abstractions. The tour corresponds to a physical place, but also to a terrain of thought, comprising social phenomena, mental constructions and behavioural response. Its textual itinerary passes from token to type, and type to token; it even attempts to switch between ontologies that are foreign to one another. It is a complexly imbricated mesh of temporal frameworks, modal conditions and epistemological categories: of

³⁰² It will become clear in Chapter Four how modality in particular pertains to perceptions and understandings of train journeys and of the railway.

knowns, proposals, logical inferences, best guesses, fantastical possibilities, obligations, assumptions. It engages with affordances, instruments, actions, roles and identities, 'caught up in (mediated by, entangled with, or regimented through) feeling behaviours, and utterances, [...] moods, habits and beliefs'.³⁰³ The terrain of my guided tour is equivalent to Kockelman's metaphor for personhood – a terrain in which multiple and conflicting values are negotiated. His metaphor turns on the relationship between a map, a terrain and a traveller, where the terrain is not physical space but that of meaning, and which involves infinite potential combinations of relations between social statuses, mental states and material substances. The map 'figures such a terrain in terms of differently weighted origins, paths, and destinations' according to a particular understanding or set of assumptions about the terrain.³⁰⁴ The traveller charts a journey by interpreting the map through multiple framings or ontologies, which inform and support reflexive decisions as to which values cohere with or uphold her own complex identities, roles, beliefs, intentions, propensities and capacities, and therefore which course of action to take – in the private psychological realm and the public discursive one, in reference to systems of language, to states of mind and to material and social states of affairs. At any point within the terrain, signs may be differently interpreted depending on their semiotic embeddedness or enchainment, their different conceptual contents and different paradigmatic, cognitive or physical framings. Kockelman calls this navigation of the map 'comporting within interpretation', whereby experience and behaviour are mutually implicated roots and fruits in a multidimensional semiotic universe. Here irrationality and ambiguity can be explained as the result of one's actions being at once signifying, objectifiable and interpretative, and potentially incoherent in non-correlative theoretical or practical terms. Indeed, given the complexity of such a terrain and its map, the potential for incoherence is rife. A sign might be misinterpreted or an interpretation erroneously acted upon. And

³⁰³ Semiotically, affordances, instruments, actions, roles and identities are signs, the objects of which are purchase, function, purpose, status, value; and the sign-vehicle of which are natural feature, artificed entity, controlled behaviour, expression of status (often by undertaking an action), expression of value (often by performing a role). Kockelman, *Agent, Person, Subject, Self*, p. 97.

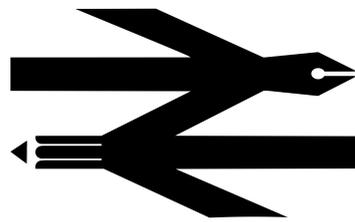
³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

such errors might occur by accident, or they might be purposely encouraged to produce advantageous confusion (as in the case of the strategic ambiguities in corporate legal documents), or to dramatize existing contradictions or activate latent ones (which is more like the intention of critically ambiguous artworks). As Norbert Wiley points out, Peirce refigures Cartesian dualism as ‘I err therefore I am’, since when a child first experiences how their knowledge of the world does not match another’s testimony of it, they realise that there must be ‘a *self* in which this ignorance can inhere’.³⁰⁵ And it is this capacity for the positive identification of ignorance that, for the writer-maker, as we will see in Part Three, translates to such rhetorical moves as dramatic irony, bathos, satire and critical remodelling.

In *I Hear Horses*, my terrain is the patchwork of values and beliefs by which a writer-maker orients herself, and the resultant itinerary directs the audience through her subject matter. The route taken evidences the ontologies – the knowledges, values, beliefs and interpretative and actional propensities – of the itinerary’s author, and it demonstrates her willed mediation of landmarks, waypoints and paths. Just as a conventional itinerary has a purpose that might be based in the episteme (literary tour) or the symbolic regime (hen do) or sensual experience (pub crawl), or a combination of such purposes, so does the reflexively authored, located text-as-itinerary-as-artwork. It is by bringing conceptual objects to mind, precipitating particular or generic correspondences, by amplifying or diminishing certain features, masking or encouraging thematic ideas or habits of thought, by scotching expectation, introducing unanticipated possibilities or instigating certain perceptions, by playing up to existing knowledges or massaging or dismantling common beliefs, that an itinerary can produce critical patterns of diffraction. And these mediating moves can be as explicit as the writer-maker likes, since there is still plenty for the audience to do in inferring the intentions behind them.

³⁰⁵ Norbert Wiley, *The Semiotic Self* (Cambridge: Polity 1994), p. 30.

But before I commentate on my own artworks, devised and executed as instances of situated knowledge or comporting within interpretation, and on all the ambiguities, incoherences and piratical subversions this invites, there is much work to be done on coming to comprehend the logical, linguistic, mental, somatic, social and physical aspects my site and subject matter. In the following chapter I will be asking the question ‘what is a railway?’, and collating a plethora of answers from differing disciplinary, industrial and practice-based positions, each with their particular technological, economic, social or aesthetic concerns – but, tellingly, never considering all of these registers at once.



Part Two

CHAPTER THREE:

WHAT IS A RAILWAY?

The Job of Description

The railway is a mode of transport; it is a place of work and a technical assemblage to be maintained; it is a source of income and of expense, a national asset and a potential squandered; it is a necessity and a delight, a place to relax, a lifeline; it is an object of nostalgia, a strain on the environment, a relief of road traffic, a threat to tranquillity, a boon to the economy, the safest way to travel, the epitome of modernity, old fashioned and badly managed, sleek, swift, noisy, dirty, smelly... The railway depends on, merges with and gives rise to other assemblages – government, businesses, trade unions, the family, the leisure industry, the postal service – which each generate and embody their own structures of belief and value regarding the railway, as expressed through their motivated actions. Over a century and a half, the dispersed, machinic, bureaucratised spaces of the railway have agglutinated, through the activities of these controlling, demanding, participatory and subjected agents, into a vast network of conflicting significances, repeatedly reinscribed and reinterpreted, contingently and programmatically.

There are, however, singular accounts tooled with the aim of revealing the railway's essential qualities. Michel de Certeau, for instance, calls it 'travelling incarceration', with the passenger immobile inside the train and the world a detached and absolute instant that is sped through.³⁰⁶ The linear order of the train and technocratic grid of the railway, he explains, are like the grammar of text, moving its passengers from one place to another. These passengers are regulated, held in organised stasis, by the rationalism required of a railway – a

³⁰⁶ Michel de Certeau, 'Railway Navigation and Incarceration', in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 111–14 (p. 111).

panoptic and autonomous state of reason, which only the toilets are free of – so that they might rest and dream. The passenger, he explains, is the interior narrator, and the landscape ‘an object without discourse, the strength of an exterior silence’; and it is this silence that ‘makes our memories speak or draws out of the shadows of dreams our secrets’.³⁰⁷ For de Certeau, the rail is the imperative to move on and the window the creator of distance. It abstracts, allowing sight and barring possession. The locomotive is the single source of division and connection, the prime mover, ‘the solitary god from which all the action proceeds’, and the railway a ‘mute rationalization of laissez-faire individualism’. The machine orchestrates history through its smooth running, and through its jolts and failure; and the real vicissitudes of history engulf the passengers again only once they have quitted the machine and re-entered the movements and events of the terminus.³⁰⁸ Only on the station platform does the train become immobile and the world mobile again, and the noble travelling soul that was intact is relinquished to the combative conditions of the workplace. ‘The incarceration-vacation is over.’³⁰⁹

There is much to dispute in this account – particularly de Certeau’s recourse to the linear, the singular and the binary. Where the commuter’s movement is likened to grammar, it is only the syntagmatic code, or the production of linear progression, that is attributed to the brute machinery. Paradigmatic variables are relegated to the realm of passenger psychology. In other words, the hardware of the railway is seen as governed by material causality alone, with such interpretative modes as inference, guesswork and projection relegated to the traveller’s interiority. This binary is just one among several assumed to characterise the railway journey – division and connectivity, incarceration and navigation, dreams and technology, laziness and thoughtfulness – and such binaries are emblematic of ahistorical Saussurian semiology based in the

³⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 112.

³⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 113.

³⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 114.

complementarity of opposite terms.³¹⁰ Furthermore, that commuterism is a singular state, and going to work the predominant reason to travel, is a blatant over-simplification. But the least helpful assumption here is that the train is a singular object, a prime mover and an autonomous environment, sealed off from 'reality'. In actuality the train cannot achieve autonomy from the commuter, since without commuters, there would be no train. Within the carriage it is the social flows and stoppages constituted by and participated in by other passengers that imparts a particular private/public condition, as we will see in the following chapter. And casting our attention further afield from the physical locus of the passenger seat, as we will see below, the train itself is but one element of a railway consisting in machine parts, human activity and fuel, which is in turn but one physical composite among many overlapping material objects, immaterial ideas, practices, institutions and assemblages that make up the railway, which in turn participates in the infrastructure of a nation, a continent, a world, a universe.

For a different conception of travelling on the railway, we can turn to Marc Augé, who describes spaces of transit as the 'frequentation of *places*', as a parallel movement between traveller and landscape caught as partial glimpses, 'a series of "snapshots" piled hurriedly into his memory and, literally, recomposed in the account he gives of them'.³¹¹ Rather than experiencing a physical removal that throws the traveller back on her own interiority, Augé's traveller constructs an ongoing fictional relationship between gaze and landscape. She notionally frequents places that, while abstracted from physical encounter, are engaged with through projection and memory, generating a text that overwrites them. Like de Certeau, Augé does not consider the entire railway as a site, but concentrates his attention on a seat in a carriage. Both writers seem to take the single viewpoint aboard a train as metonymic of an individual's experience of the distancing effect of modernity, where reality is 'out there' and the individual a panoptical

³¹⁰ In some editorial circles, such use of opposites is eyed with suspicion – perhaps not because of its adherence to semiological theories, but more because it can be a writerly special effect appearing to make a profound point, but actually saying everything and nothing. See Jennifer Higginson *et al.*, 'Binary Fluffing', *Frieze*, 100 (June–August 2006), 220–5.

³¹¹ Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to the Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London: Verso, 1995) p. 86.

observer, affected but physically detached. But although sightedness and occlusion seem central to the experience of train travel, in the following chapter I will discuss how this is less the result of a traveller's retreat from exterior conditions, than of particular responses to psychosocial forms through which the ambience of the train carriage is sustained.

Augé's non-place is of the category of places for which a particular end – transit, whether for leisure or commerce – is prescribed. In contrast to an anthropological space, which is constituted through the social practices that take place there, a non-place produces only abstract, fleeting, non-specific relationships with those who pass through it. The non-place is dislocating. It bristles with signs: texts, images and ideograms that direct, prohibit, inform, itemise, warn; not singularly addressed, from an individual to an individual, but from institutions or corporations to an imagined everyperson assumed to be capable of basic interpretations. But this characterisation of the non-place is parochial. It fails to recognise that travel is a means to an end, as well as an end in itself. The railway was a participatory aggregate of nineteenth-century colonialism, capitalist venture, social progressiveness and the personal vanity of prospectors. Today is constituted by the activities of those who govern and maintain it: by capital accrual and shareholder appeasement; mechanical, electrical and digital maintenance; rhetorics of marketing and advertising; bureaucratic and trade union control, and passenger strong-arming and incentivising. The ubiquitous signage is the distillation of empirical studies in and heuristic developments of communication techniques and of the methods and tools of systems planning and analysis. And so it becomes apparent that if one widens the parameters of objectification when delineating the railway, the conditions of a train carriage, a station control room or a network points system are not typifiable, prescriptive 'non-places', but a profusion of explicit, diffused and sublimated social, technological and economic forms and practices.³¹²

³¹² Peter Osborne reaches the same conclusion, by different, but relatable, philosophical routes. For him Augé's error resides in the failure of the anthropological imagination 'to conceive of the possibility of an identity-forming generation of meaning outside the confines of place'. See Peter

Below, I will be surveying textual representations of the railway, and analysing them for the assumptions or sensibilities they evince. I will be seeking out interpretations that are technically accurate, politically charged or emotionally affective. The aim is to gather an understanding of understandings. In the main, the materials of these texts will be conventional – printed ink and paper or electricity, source code, pixels and computer – but it will be clear that they are the fruits (and roots) of social, political and economic structures and practices. While there are huge numbers of technical and historical commentaries of the railway, and myriad metaphorical and allegorical renderings of its presence and effects in the arts, the categories of fact and fiction, technological detail and affectivity are notably annexed from one another. Although non-fictional accounts cannot escape accusations of imaginative inflection due to the inevitable flaws of interpretation, speculation and memory, and although fiction must include some technical specificities when invoking such schematic abstractions as the body’s vulnerability to the speeding machine, neither take into account the full spectrum of manifestations and connotations of the railway. Any given text fails to admit the railway’s coexistence as a concept, an everyday tool of transit, a physical site of activity, a cluster of systems, a machinic assemblage, a web of social, political and economic forms, a site of emotional and psychological activity, an icon of industrialisation, an allegory of threat or emancipation and a bearer of many other symbolic projections. Such a failure corroborates Latour’s assertion that materialism and society have been tacitly separated,³¹³ and Streeck’s observation of the incommensurability of the economic and the social in Europe since the 1950s, to the detriment of the social.³¹⁴ My aim is to draw on textual practices across the board, to make apparent the mediatory channels that have been navigated through the semiotic web of the railway, and to demonstrate the dispersed caughtness of any writer, passenger and reader in this web. To objectify the site as ‘the railway’, when it is so much more than the word implies, is a

Osborne, ‘Non-places and the spaces of art’, *Journal of Architecture*, 6 (Summer 2001), 183–94 (p. 189).

³¹³ See Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, passim.

³¹⁴ Wolfgang Streeck, *How will Capitalism End?: Essays on a Failing System* (London: Verso, 2016), p. 242.

pragmatic necessity; but, as already established, the descriptive articulation of this object will tell us something about the politics of the sited writer or utterer, of what they can and can't (or do and don't take the responsibility to) perceive or know. Below I will work through existing descriptions of increasing complexity, from the materially biased to the sociologically and philosophically inflected. No one description, of whichever angle of approach, however deep or detailed, will ever quite do; but from this profusion of partial views I hope to piece together a prismatic understanding of the railway.

George Ottley's *Bibliography of British Railway History*, last updated in 1996, is just shy of 13,000 entries.³¹⁵ The British Library Catalogue lists 16,700 books on the subject 'railway' written by academics, enthusiasts, managers, engineers, civil servants, fiction writers, journalists and essayists.³¹⁶ The scope for engagement is vast, the level of technical accuracy and depth of knowledge wildly divergent, as is the focus and aim of each book, which might be educative, nostalgic, instrumental, entertaining, critical, elucidating, literary, technical...³¹⁷ Recalling Bernard Stiegler's tool, which holds within it the practical memory of its usage, Wolfgang Ernst refers to the 'time-invariant event', whereby cultural history has a bearing on an experimental setting, but the artifact under experimentation (he gives the examples of the monochord or the electromagnetic oscillation) is indifferent to the historical.³¹⁸ The railway, analogously, might express changes in peripheral properties – speed, size, levels of comfort, livery – but its *eidōs*, being factors of physics and of human desires, persists through different historical and geographical contexts. And yet verbal representations of a perceived *eidōs* can shift radically, depending on historical, geographic, vocational and ideological

³¹⁵ The Railway & Canal Historical Society maintains the series 'Not in Ottley' on their website. <<http://www.steamindex.com/library/ottley.htm>> [accessed 29 January 2017].

³¹⁶ This figure is based on a catalogue search that includes general and British railways only, barring titles listed under subject headings associated with the Canadian railway. British Library Catalogue <http://explore.bl.uk/primo_library/libweb/action/search.do?mode=Basic&vid=BLVU1&tab=local_tab&> [accessed 21 January 2017].

³¹⁷ For a concise summary of historical and technical volumes considered preeminent in their field, see 'literature of railways', in *The Oxford Companion to British Railway History*, ed. by Jack Simmons and Gordon Biddle (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 268–70.

³¹⁸ Wolfgang Ernst, *Digital Memory and the Archive* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), p. 185.

perspective. Franz Stanzel suggests that it is the schematic and highly selective nature of the verbal construction, in contrast to life's 'innumerable false trails, cul-de-sacs, its often ceaselessly extravagant fullness, and its simultaneous meagerness and absurd narrowness', which offers the possibility of artistic formation.³¹⁹ I would add to this that any objectifying description is an aesthetic, narrative form. Camus considers the narrative impulse to be a rectification of the world's lack of style and destiny. The novel, for Camus, is a metaphysical act of rebellion against death. Where in life it is only at 'the fugitive moment which is death ... in which everything is consummated', the text makes 'destiny to measure', prescribing the unity and boundaries of the universe.³²⁰ This is a condition of stopping short, where a stable and functionally directed description eliminates those sectors of a complex heterogeneous assemblage that do not serve it. There will always be huge sectors of reality omitted by any description, and it is often this remainder, this topology of exclusion, that produces frictions and political factions. The indeterminacy that any referential verbal construction invariably generates is as crucial to a site as its unity and boundaries. And it is these objectifying limits, when enclosed forms are carved out of the reticulated network, that I will be considering in the descriptions below, in order to gauge the skews in perception that locate the authors ideologically, epistemically, historically and aesthetically. I will begin my survey with empirical data and that which is conventionally identified as historically factual, and then move on to politically motivated deployments of nomenclature, categorisation and description, and then to more overtly subjective and aestheticized texts. Since there are many commentaries that expose authoritative history and objective fact as subjective, biased and context-dependent, I do not need to reiterate the pitfalls of paradigmatic thinking. I will, instead, concentrate on the textual effect of these accounts, despite, or because of, their theoretical insufficiencies. As such, I am not proposing this chapter as a means of generating a stable, coherent description of the railway, of making universal claims or uncovering hitherto unknown realities about its power structures. It is not offered as an example of Latourian

³¹⁹ Franz Stanzel, *Narrative Situations in the Novel* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971), p. 9.

³²⁰ Albert Camus, *The Rebel* (London: Penguin, 2000), pp. 226, 229.

science studies, since I am not rigorously, exhaustively tracing relations through a network via primary methods of investigation. This is, rather, a litany of textual contingencies, bold and covert intentions, habitual and novel mediations; it is a historiographic sweep that dwells on lines of fracture and difference across several contexts. The situated knowledge of the describing subject, their expectations and assumptions within particular socio-economic, political and artistic paradigms becomes conspicuous not necessarily as a function of historicising the railway itself, but of historicising its descriptive accounts.

'Working' Descriptions of the British Railway

Since its inception, the network has been subject to distinct phases of reconstitution, from the initial private entrepreneurial ownership of lines to statutory amalgamation in 1923, which combined 120 companies into four; then nationalisation in 1948 and re-privatisation in stages between 1994 and 1997. This broad account bears the inscription of other narratives – of the loss of empire, the wax and wane of the state and the march of market liberalism – which have influenced the functional structures of the network, and perceptions of its status within national and international socio-economic infrastructures. Today's network is a complex assemblage of inter-related machinic and social forms, with many blending with other socio-economic, political and infrastructural forms, so that the components, and scope, of the railway can be difficult to identify. It has developed through contingency and planning, through technological, operational, ideological and aesthetic decisions, reified as a patchwork of hard- and software, of iron and concrete, clapboard and paper, optic fibre and LEDs. This mongrelism underpins many aspects of the network, and marks it out from its European counterparts, which were significantly more planned than cobbled. The British network's chequered history of design and maintenance tendencies is most readily discerned through its array of stations: the impressive, brushed-steel and boutique-flanked Eurostar terminal and quaint Victorian small-town station cottages; the 'facile splendours' of St Pancras's

gothic red-brick frontage,³²¹ and barren rural halts comprising little more than a platform. An inductive inquiry extrapolating from these artefacts alone would produce a rainbow of railways.

For the empiricist and, arguably, the technocratic economist, a description of the railway would begin with the hardware involved and the activity that it supports. Due to the haphazard nature of its inception – seeded by entrepreneurial endeavour, vanity projects and public ‘mania’ – the Victorian railway was an unruly conglomeration of variously gauged track, services that did not join up and many kilometres of underused, or even unused, routes. The Railways Act of 1921, which resulted in the grouping of the ‘Big Four’ in 1923, heavily regulated the industry and forced mergers of all operating companies into just four companies, reducing the inefficiencies of duplicate facilities and inter-company rivalry, although the network was still conducted through the erratically formed track routes and services.³²² This ‘bastard nationalization’ was followed by full nationalization of the commercial entities that comprised British Railways in 1948.³²³ The portfolio of tangible assets that the people of Britain then became owners of amounted to:

about 19,000 route miles [30,578km] of track, 1,230,000 wagons, 45,000 passenger coaches, 20,000 locomotives, 50,000 houses, 25,000 horse vehicles, 7,000 horses, 1,640 miles of canals and waterways, 100 steamships, 70 hotels, plus 34,000 commercial lorries, acquired as a result of the partial takeover of the road haulage industry. It also acquired almost 700,000 new employees.³²⁴

The infamous Beeching Report of 1963 advised the closure of some 2,363 stations, and the withdrawal of 266 train services, on strictly economic

³²¹ E.M. Forster, *Howard's End* (New York: Garden City, 1929), p. 16.

³²² See entry for ‘Grouping of 1923’, in *The Oxford Companion to British Railway History*, p. 197.

³²³ Sir Frederick Banbury, Tory MP and former chairman on the Great Northern rail company, quoted in Matthew Engel, *Eleven Minutes Late: A Train Journey to the Soul of Britain* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2010), p. 175.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

Engel does not provide a bibliography, but quotes his sources for these figures as: *Manchester Guardian*, 6 May 1947; David Henshaw, *The Great Railway Conspiracy* (1991) p. 41.

grounds.³²⁵ Although this was only partly instituted, the network was nonetheless severely pollarded. Despite this reduction in stations and miles of track – which currently stands at 2557 mainline stations and 15,799km of route open for traffic – usage has increased steadily.³²⁶ The Eddington Transport Study conveys the awesome load that the current privatised network supported in 2005:

the population of Great Britain made a staggering 61 billion trips, spending a total of 2.5 million years travelling. An average resident of Great Britain makes over 1,000 trips a year, travelling over 7,000 miles. On top of that, the network supports 250 billion tonne-kilometres of freight per year.³²⁷

And figures published by the Office of Rail and Road state that in 2015–16, 1.72 billion passenger journeys were made in Great Britain, 64.7 billion passenger kilometres were recorded on the rail network and £9.3 billion was raised through fares.³²⁸

These statistics give a sense of the thousands of measures and mechanisms in place through which this vast amount of activity is conducted and administrated and its material components managed and maintained. Such statistics could be classed as a visualising technology, which, like sonar, electron microscopes and large-aperture space telescopes, makes ‘visible’ that which would be unknowable to the unaugmented individual body. In the case of statistics, though, visibility is metaphoric, or at best transliterated into graphics, since these figures can only be understood abstractly, reconstituted in the imagination. For the operations manager or government departments, such statistics offer a snapshot that transfigures fluxing activity, incremental change and heuristic process into

³²⁵ Dr Richard Beeching, ‘The Restructuring of British Railways, Part 1: Report’, Railways Archive <<http://www.railwaysarchive.co.uk/docsummary.php?docID=13>> [accessed 23 January 17].

³²⁶ ‘Rail infrastructure and environmental 2015–16 Annual Statistical Release’, Office of Rail and Road <http://orr.gov.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0014/23045/rail-infrastructure-assets-environmental-2015-16.pdf> [accessed 28 January 2017].

³²⁷ ‘Eddington Transport Study, Main Report, vol. 2: Defining the challenge: identifying strategic economic priorities for the UK transport system’, National Archives (30 December 2008), p. 49 <<https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20081230093524/http://www.dft.gov.uk/about/strategy/transportstrategy/eddingtontstudy/>> [accessed 8 January 2017].

³²⁸ ‘Passenger Rail Usage 2016-17, Q2 Statistical Release’, Office of Rail and Road (8 December 2016) <http://orr.gov.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/23376/passenger-rail-usage-2016-17-q2.pdf> [accessed 7 February 2017].

purposive, tangible facts on the basis of which decisions can be made. In this context, as an epistemological strategy, such statistics could qualify for inclusion among the methods of objectivity that Haraway describes as ‘a leap out of the marked body and into a conquering gaze from nowhere’, or ‘the god trick of seeing everything from nowhere’.³²⁹ For the lay person such statistics are more likely to invoke a scale that dwarfs experience, and provoke a state of mind that could be best described as the contemporary technological sublime.

Where in German Romanticism the sublime is attributable solely to natural forms, in contemporary contexts the divide between naturally occurring and human-made phenomena no longer inheres. The economy is as awesome as weather; technical objects colloquially possess an intrinsic teleology and power that works against the human subject, whether this be down to the ‘fat controller’ – another euphemism for ‘the Man’ who oppresses us – or a technological monster that has turned against its maker. The origin of this shift in perceptions of the sublime is attributed by David Nye to early North American settlers, who battled to transform the wilderness into a ‘civilised’ landscape, where ‘both natural and man-made objects became part of the discourse of Manifest Destiny. Those who praised Niagara Falls and a new railroad did not see any inconsistency in embracing both.’³³⁰ But events of the intervening century or so have altered perceptions of technological progress and Manifest Destiny, to the extent that technology now is more likely to provoke overwhelming incomprehensibility than generate a state of technological perfection.

As we will see below, a sinister sublime was already invoked in realist literature of the era of steam; and this can become hyperbolic now, when rail travel and speed are normalized in technological landscapes, made baroque with machinery and infrastructure, as Jameson describes:

that enormous properly human and anti-natural power of dead
human labour stored up in our machinery – an alienated power ...

³²⁹ Haraway, ‘Situated Knowledges’, p. 581.

³³⁰ David Nye, *American Technological Sublime* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), p. 39.

which turns back on and against us in unrecognisable forms and seems to constitute the massive dystopian horizon of our collective as well as our individual praxis.³³¹

In an era of big data, railway statistics start to seem quaint, pertaining to a mechanical age, before the deployment of pixels and electrical impulses. It is the metadata of activity that generates intense anxiety now.³³² According to Nick Srnicek the data sublime is a form of oppressive control, and the individual a tragic individual in a universe of information. It is the artist's role, he suggests, to transform these gross abstractions into image forms that are comprehensible to the unaugmented human, so that they may then be manipulated to their own ends.³³³ But, as we have seen, this would be antithetical to contemporary art's generic indeterminacy. It would be illustrative; and, since without interpretation, data is simply visible, it would also need to be annotative and therefore interpretative. This conundrum recalls Amanda Beech's critique of the dematerialised artwork that aims to avoid the problems of mediation and representation. Beech interprets valorisation of process over representational imagery as a bid to 'become political', since this supposedly involves direct lines of communication that do not employ 'the problematic mess of interpretation'. But in doing so we are led to 'a certain form of horror' that is 'either the hellish univocity of the masses singing as one chorus, or the Babel-esque anarchy of language subjects where each speaks only singular truths'.³³⁴ The indeterminate, process-based artwork, like raw data, at once means anything and nothing. We can add to this the Peircean semiotician's view that no perception can be unmediated, since every perception is grounded in an ontology. Furthermore, the act of identifying sources and applications of raw data is itself another moment of

³³¹ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 38.

³³² At the time of writing, criticism of the harvesting and purposing of data by such companies as Facebook and Google is emerging in the mainstream UK press. See, for example: Paul Lewis, "Utterly horrifying": ex-Facebook insider says covert data harvesting was routine', *Guardian* (20 March 2018) <<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/mar/20/facebook-data-cambridge-analytica-sandy-parakilas>> [accessed 12 February 2017].

³³³ Nick Srnicek, 'Accelerationism—Epistemic, Economic, Political', in *Speculative Aesthetics*, ed. by Robin Mackay, Luke Pendrell and James Trafford (Falmouth: Urbanomic 2014), pp. 48–53.

³³⁴ Beech, 'Traversing the Paradigm', pp. 5–6.

mediation that can make apparent all-too human ends among the electronic and bureaucratic means.

To move on from the discomforts of statistics, I will direct this survey of descriptions towards the brute physicality of the railway, to definitions based in hardware and operations, before moving on to concomitant social and economic forms. Michael Robbins, Managing Director of British Railways 1971–8, lists the following attributes as essential to the identity of the railway: specialised track; accommodation of public traffic; conveyance of passengers; mechanical traction, and some measure of public control.³³⁵ The absence of any item from this list would describe not a railway, but a tramway, a light railway, a private means of transport, or something else altogether. ‘Specialised track’ refers not only to the technical development of the rails themselves, but also to the requirement that these rails have sole occupation of the land through which they pass. ‘Accommodation of public traffic’ requires accountability to that public, and the meeting of safety and compliance standards, as well as associated charges and rates. ‘Conveyance of passengers’ forces railway management to adopt codes of practices other than those specific to freight.³³⁶ ‘Mechanical traction’ is the means by which the railways gathered hitherto unknown speeds, and ‘public control’ is the order of regularisation by the state of this important asset to communities and the national purse, and which is not without its physical and fiscal dangers. Robbins’s quintuplet of descriptors provides us with a useful breakdown of that which is essential to the railway as a concept – a scheme that is the obverse of statistical breakdowns. It is a series of idealised propositions that bears no evidence of the railway as a cluster of practices or events. ‘Mechanical traction’ or ‘conveyance of passengers’ are not material qualities in Aristotle’s sense of the word: they do not change over time. They are essential generic features without

³³⁵ This clutch of qualities was first identified by Charles E. Lee in *The Evolution of Railways*, cited in Michael Robbins, *The Railway Age* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), p. 12.

³³⁶ Initially, the nineteenth-century owners and managers promoted the railways primarily as a means of haulage and freight transport, but these expectations were quickly reversed when passenger take-up outstripped that of freight for the first two decades of the railway’s operation. Although the ratios of passenger and freight usage have altered over the decades (for reasons including war, the advent of the motorcar and the introduction of motorways), the primacy of the railways as a passenger-bearing network holds now.

which the railway would cease to be a railway – that is, they constitute its whatness, its *eidos*.³³⁷ Withdraw one of these attributes and you have a different form of transport. Any particular realisation of these generic attributes, however, is contingent on historical conditions. As the engineering student in Latour's *Aramis*, a social-science novel-cum-technological case study, eventually accepts, social forces are at play in the research, development and implementation of any technical object.³³⁸ The precise nature of 'specialised track' is not simply a matter of the best design, but is also down to the haphazard and drawn-out period of development of the railway, to the discriminations and leanings of the people, companies and institutions that back and develop it.

To learn of contributory social, material and historical factors, writers and researchers turn to *The Oxford Companion to British Railway History*.³³⁹ In the encyclopaedia's introduction, its editors categorise the majority of accounts and studies consulted into those written by 'insiders', who already have a strong interest in the railway, and 'outsiders', who study it mainly as a means of economic and social change that is equivalent to other industries such as textiles, coal and power generation.³⁴⁰ The editors' aim is to bring these two viewpoints together, 'examining what the railways have done, or not done, for the country, and the technologies they used in providing their services [...] to set the railways in their context, displaying them and their multifarious activities as elements in the life, work, and thought of Britain in the past and in the modern world.'³⁴¹ The editors stress the importance of an account that stretches well beyond the physicality of the railway to provide 'an account of the growth, consolidation, and eventual contraction of the system'.³⁴² Entries include descriptions and

³³⁷ See Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology*, p. 8.

³³⁸ Bruno Latour, *Aramis: or the Love of Technology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

³³⁹ It is cited, for example, as a core text for the university course 'Scotland's Railways: A History and Geography', History department, Edinburgh University <<https://www.course-bookings.lifelong.ed.ac.uk/courses/HS/history/HS232/scotlands-railways-a-history-and-geography/>> [accessed 17 February 2017]

³⁴⁰ *The Oxford Companion to British Railway History*, p. ix.

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. ix–x.

³⁴² *Ibid.*, p. ix. The publication covers the period up to the initializing of privatization in 1994, and therefore not the subsequent expansion of services.

accounts of: the means by which the railway network was built, operated, promoted and financed; some of the people who planned, constructed and ran it;³⁴³ the part the railway has played in national history and development; methods and structures of civil engineering; services provided and vehicles used; equipment, safety devices, accidents; effects on communities in 43 towns (including the capital and other large cities, ports, seaside resorts and new railway towns); workers' roles, constituent companies and Parliament and legislation. The sheer heft of the volume goes some way to impressing upon the reader the thickness of description that would be required to stitch this profusion of individual entries into a narrative history.

Each encyclopaedic entry centralises a singular attribute of the railway – the practice of continuous braking, say, or the impact of World War II – but beyond cross-referencing the subject matter of other entries, it does not describe complex connectivity. The encyclopaedia fragments the rail network into embedded objectified elements, organising the whole into a partonomy, which, like a taxonomy, can be expressive of ideology and politically divisive.³⁴⁴ While detailed descriptions of relations between elements is part of the job in hand here, since it is through such specificity that I am aiming to compensate for the critical failings of thematic treatments of subject matter, the organisation and labelling of a partonomy can also disclose useful information about the perceptual tendencies and values structures of its executors. The partonomy of Government departmental nomenclature, for example, relates how the business of running a country is conceptually partitioned, and how the railway is considered among other national assets and liabilities. The department whose duties have included legislating on the railways is currently, and has been predominantly, since 1919, the Ministry for, or Department of, Transport. Variations in nomenclature have

³⁴³ All of whom are men. Queen Victoria receives a mention in an entry on 'royal travelling', which outlines how trains re-established the practice of monarchs going 'on progress', journeying through the realm to show themselves to their people.

³⁴⁴ The entry for 'commuting', for example, is focused entirely on the matter of season tickets and their uptake by British rail company operators, whereas another more politically minded editor might also discuss it in relation to patterns of working hours under capitalism, obligations to travel on one's own time and so on. While there is an entry for 'capital', which describes the financing of the establishment of a railway, there is no entry for 'capitalism', which is its ongoing engine.

included the Ministry of Transport and Civil Aviation (1953–9), the Department for the Environment (1970–6), the Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1997–2001) and the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions (2001–2). This provides a very rudimentary means of analysis, but hints at changes in assumed overlaps and priorities of concern from a party political perspective. In the New Labour government, for example, the elision of transport with environment in a single department reflects a concern with vehicle congestion and carbon emissions, and flags a programme of investment and demand management that was intended to shift emphasis from road travel to more sustainable forms such as rail.³⁴⁵ Moving on to the next level of aggregation of operational boundaries and ligatures between the industry and government, the Department for Transport, at time of writing, comprises 19 agencies and public bodies, including the non-ministerial department the Office of Rail and Road, the executive non-departmental public bodies Directly Operated Railways Limited and High Speed Two (HS2) Limited, the public corporation London and Continental Railways Ltd and the independent body the Rail Accident Investigation Branch. Train services are operated by 28 private companies, and the infrastructure is owned and managed by Network Rail, a government-controlled public body.³⁴⁶ What this partonomy mainly tells us is that the British railway is in a muddled state of public/private striation.

Traditionally, privatisation is deemed a policy of the political right, nationalisation of the left. In the current parliamentary make-up at the time of writing, for instance, the Transport Secretary, Chris Grayling, announced in December 2016 that the Conservative government plans to bring infrastructure into the control of operating companies through the privatisation of Network

³⁴⁵ Iain Docherty and Jon Shaw, ‘The transformation of transport policy in Great Britain? “New Realism” and New Labour’s decade of displacement activity’, *Environment and Planning A*, 43 (2011), 224–51. The authors note that New Labour policy was influenced by the report ‘Transport: A New Realism’, also known as Working Paper N° 1062: Phil Goodwin and others, ‘Transport: A New Realism’, Transport Studies Unit, University of Oxford (October 2012) <<http://www.tsu.ox.ac.uk/pubs/1062-goodwin-hallett-kenny-stokes.pdf>> [accessed 5 February 2017].

³⁴⁶ See Rail.co.uk <<http://www.rail.co.uk/our-partners/rail-operators/>> [accessed 29 January 2017].

Rail,³⁴⁷ while the leaked Labour manifesto for the June 2017 general election lists nationalisation of the railway as a core policy.³⁴⁸ Such stable dualistic identifications and equivalences have not always inhered though. While privatisation was notoriously implemented by the Thatcher government, New Labour also introduced Private Finance Initiatives to the structures of the London Underground, the NHS and schools.³⁴⁹ And indeed, the current orthodoxy across party lines is a neo-liberal system in which the reciprocal relationship of provider and customer pervade, where all institutions are expected to behave like businesses and where the state is no longer considered to be providing public services, but facilitating business solutions.³⁵⁰ At the time of writing, however, there is a distinct seachange in non-governmental and non-executive bodies regarding the efficiency and quality of public-private partnerships.³⁵¹ It is being accepted that the practice of contracting a private company to set up and maintain a school, hospital or road, the costs of which the government pays back with interest over the course of 25-30 years, provides neither value for money nor good, responsive municipal practices. The UK is now at a position where:

There are currently over 700 operational PFI and PF2 deals, with a capital value of around £60 billion. Annual charges for these deals amounted to £10.3 billion in 2016-17. Even if no new deals are entered into, future charges which continue until the 2040s amount to £199 billion.³⁵²

³⁴⁷ Robert Wright, 'Network Rail faces loss of power to train operators', *Financial Times* (6 December 2016) <<http://www.ft.com/content/94c304ce-bb09-11e6-8b45-b8b81dd5d080>> [accessed 29 January 2017].

³⁴⁸ Anushka Asthana and Heather Stewart, 'Labour party's plan to nationalise mail, rail and energy firms', *Guardian* (11 May 2017) <<http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/may/10/labour-party-manifesto-pledges-to-end-tuition-fees-and-nationalise-railways>> [accessed 11 May 2017].

³⁴⁹ See Mark Drakeford, *Privatisation and Social Policy* (Harlow: Longman, 2000).

³⁵⁰ See *Organising Neoliberalism: Markets, Privatisation and Justice*, ed. by Philip Whitehead and Paul Crawshaw (London: Anthem Press, 2012).

³⁵¹ See David Walker and John Tizard, 'Out of Contract: Time to move on from the 'love in' with outsourcing and PFI', Smith Institute (January 2018) <<http://www.smith-institute.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Out-of-contract-Time-to-move-on-from-the-'love-in'-with-outsourcing-and-PFI.pdf>> [accessed 22 January 2018]; and the report by the Comptroller and Auditor General, 'PFI and PF2', National Audit Office (January 2018) <<https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/PFI-and-PF2.pdf>> [accessed 22 January 2018].

³⁵² 'PFI and PF2', p. 4.

The apparently simple descriptors 'private' and 'public' carry enormous emotional charge regarding the perceived social status in the railway. They mark its role as a public service, invoking the ideas of collective consumption and public goods, and as an individual consumer product and profitable business. No matter which rubric the railway operates under at any given time, there will always be disagreement between different factions of the public, politicians and rail workers, due to its mongrel constitution, its chequered public/private status to date and the conflicting emotional and pragmatic responses (sometimes within an individual person) to the very idea of the railway. As Robbins observed in 1962:

The railway's obligation to carry every load that is offered to it is something that has become very firmly fixed in the thinking of railwaymen and of the public. It arose naturally in the conditions of near-monopoly that the railways once enjoyed; tradition and a decent anxiety to meet all kinds of social needs make many railwaymen unhappy about giving up any of the services they have been rendering for many years. For similar reasons, some sections of the public feel that they have a right to railway services that are demonstrably uneconomic, taken by themselves; it is even claimed that the railway should be there ready to provide service when the alternative on the road or in the air is overloaded or temporarily not available. Unless there is a massive support from public funds, after a deliberate political decision that the railway is to be supported as a matter of social policy, the railways cannot play this role and live.³⁵³

But still the railway is considered metonymic of ideological positions on state intervention and private ownership. (It is interesting that public ownership is often characterised as 'state intervention', as if it were always divisive meddling. There is no 'private intervention', just the firm, authoritative 'in private hands'.) While defenders of privatisation claim the private sector to be more efficient,

³⁵³ Robbins, *The Railway Age*, p. 160.

others link rising fares and lowering standards to company profiteering.³⁵⁴ But whichever side you identify with, there is a problem with treating all institutions or industries as interchangeable on this issue. Even David Willetts, Conservative ex-Transport Minister, admits there is not, in practice, a direct equivalence between all industries:

Rail privatisation was a classic example of taking a model that had worked for one industry and wrongly applying it to different circumstances. We had a model for gas and electricity, where you had a neutral grid, then you had competing providers putting electricity or gas into the grid. The Treasury applied that model to the railways and it was the wrong model.³⁵⁵

While I do take a position on the question of public/private ownership of the railways, it is based on an intellectual and emotional nexus that is not adequately informed by the economic details of railway operation. And while the desirability of nationalisation is a concern of the current thesis, since the eradication of private shareholders would better support a reintegration of the social and the economic concerns of the railway, what is interesting here is how the paradox of the private and public status of the railway transposes on to the experience of travelling. Below, the private/public dichotomy will be seen to play out in a similar state of antagonism inside fictional train carriages and, in Chapter Four, as a fulcrum about which social micro-behaviours turn.

In the twenty-first century, when, arguably, political parties no longer represent clearly defined traditional positions on the public/private debate, the conflict can be understood instead as that between economic imperative and passenger experience. Investment in a rail network supposedly conveys a government's consideration for the quality of life of its citizens, not only because it will provide a more dependable infrastructure with swifter, safer, more comfortable journeys, but because it will also attract foreign businesses and boost the economy in

³⁵⁴ See artist Ellie Harrison's campaign *Bring Back British Rail* <<https://www.bringbackbritishrail.org/>> [accessed 1 March 2017].

³⁵⁵ *Daily Telegraph*, 13 December 2003, cited by Christian Wolmar, 'Foreword', in Tim Strangleman, *Work Identity at the End of the Line: Privatization and Culture Change in the UK Rail Industry* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. xv.

general. The wellbeing of citizens is pegged to the wellbeing of the economy, as if the latter contains or produces the former. As the current government's Rail Policy home page declares:

We need a modern rail network to support economic growth and productivity, and to help people get around quickly and safely. We're carrying out the biggest rail modernisation since Victorian times. This will provide much-needed extra capacity, more services and better journeys.³⁵⁶

The first sentence here gives priority to economic factors, but it turns on a comma towards the personal safety and comfort of the individual. The second sentence seems to serve as a caveat, a reason for the difficulty of the task in hand, and to humanise the government and its contractors. The third appeals to the subjective experience and abstract appreciation of the train user, coming to land on the ambiguous 'better journeys', perhaps intended to be interpreted by readers to best suit their personal expectations.

Each train operator publishes its own 'Passengers' Charter', in which it lays out its public-facing priorities. The economic priorities of the company are entirely absent from these documents. Virgin Trains, for example, proposes that any passenger purchasing a ticket should 'enjoy':

A reliable and punctual journey
Clean and safe trains and stations
A Customer Service team member onboard each train to be available to provide help if required
A refreshment service on most trains
A seat if reserved in advance³⁵⁷

Southeastern Trains admit that 'Customer satisfaction is one of our top priorities'.³⁵⁸ The charter goes on to elucidate what contributes to satisfaction –

³⁵⁶ 'Rail Network', Gov.uk <<https://www.gov.uk/government/policies/rail-network>> [accessed 8 January 2017].

³⁵⁷ 'Passenger's Charter', Virgin Trains <https://www.virgintrains.co.uk/about/~/_/media/be389721d159493e9c54529f3f5a7f04.ashx> [accessed 2 January 2017].

safety, reliability and so on – but neglects to outline such other top priorities as stakeholder profits.

Although the government does appear to consider social and economic returns of transport investment, the priority of consultations and reports such as the Eddington Transport Study, is undeniably skewed towards the latter. A section dedicated to investment in existing infrastructure offers a rare mention of the social implications of transport policy:

Given the potential agglomeration and labour market impacts [...] higher returns would be expected in these areas [of urban network investment]. The findings from this evidence are due to the higher proportion of public transport schemes that typically offer low business benefits or that have been developed for social objectives, so GDP returns are lower.³⁵⁹

While this section of the report observes that ‘the schemes considered are not designed explicitly to target growth’, all figures pertain to quantifiable elements such as GDP, total lost hours, percentage of overcrowding and even a graph of environmental and social impacts, bearing the footnote ‘Social effects, such as journey ambience, are also illustratively included where possible’, but with no mention of how these have been quantified.³⁶⁰ Unruly phenomena are tidied away by the abstracting processes of tallying, measuring and calculating.

Since the government’s response to the economic crisis of 2008 – which prioritised the economy, precipitating the institutionalisation of austerity policies, cuts in public spending and lower standards of living – the economy has become an urgent social issue.³⁶¹ And yet social factors remain eclipsed by

³⁵⁸ ‘Passenger Charter’, Southeastern Railway <<https://www.southeasternrailway.co.uk/about-us/our-policies>> [accessed 21 January 2017].

³⁵⁹ ‘Eddington Transport Study, Main Report, vol. 3: Meeting the challenge: prioritising the most effective policies’, National Archives (30 December 2008), p. 181. <<https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20081230093524/http://www.dft.gov.uk/about/strategy/transportstrategy/eddingtonstudy/>> [accessed 8 January 2017].

³⁶⁰ ‘Eddington Transport Study’, III, p. 184.

³⁶¹ See Peter Taylor-Gooby, ‘UK heading for bottom place on public spending’, Poverty and Social Exclusion <<http://www.poverty.ac.uk/articles-government-cuts-international-comparisons-public-spending-whats-new/uk-heading-bottom-place>> [accessed 8 January 2017]. This article is

technocratic economics in government and company governance literature. To rectify this, Streeck urges sociologists to reincorporate economics into their discipline, which has, since the 1950s, eschewed models of historical economics for ‘a society cleansed of its economy’ on the one hand and, on the other, efficiency-theoretical economics, or ‘a neutral mechanism of wealth creation ruled by esoteric laws and governable by scientifically informed technicians’.³⁶² This divide must be abolished, he claims, since markets left to expand dynamically into other spheres of social life have repeatedly caused frictions and destabilising contradictions. He describes inflation of the 1970s, rising public debt of the 1980s, deregulation of private credit of the 1990s and recent crises of high finance as ‘expressions of a clash between a popular *moral economy* of social rights of citizenship and a capitalist *economic economy* insisting on allocation according to market justice and in line with the requirements of ‘business confidence’.³⁶³ Hauling the economy back into society will, he hopes, check movement towards a situation in which ‘governments begin to resemble corporate managements pressed to extract “creditor value” from citizens turned into workforces disciplined by capital markets’.³⁶⁴

According to some journalists in Britain, such technocratic methods have already produced an atmosphere of mistrust: citizens assume that when politicians work closely with external specialist advisors, the primacy of political and democratic considerations diminish.³⁶⁵ And perhaps this is not without foundation, as Julie Metz suggests. Starting with the case study of the European Commission’s mismanagement of the BSE crisis in Europe, which was closely associated with

based on data collated by the IMF: ‘Report for Selected Countries and Subjects’, World Economic Outlook Database, International Monetary Fund (October 2012) <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2012/02/weodata/weorept.aspx?sy=2000&ey=2017&scsm=1&ssd=1&sort=country&ds=.&br=1&c=156%2C132%2C134%2C144%2C112%2C136%2C111%2C158&s=NGDP_RPCH%2CGGX_NGDP&grp=0&a=&pr1.x=65&pr1.y=16> [accessed 8 January 2017].

³⁶² Streeck, *How will Capitalism End?*, p. 242.

³⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 246.

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 250.

³⁶⁵ See, for example, Henry Mance, ‘Britain has had enough of experts, says Gove’, *Financial Times* (3 June 2016) <<https://www.ft.com/content/3be49734-29cb-11e6-83e4-abc22d5d108c>> [accessed 1 February 2017].

the Commission's expert advisory groups,³⁶⁶ Metz goes on to demonstrate how most studies contradict any assumption that efficiency-oriented experts shielded from political imperatives are better able to achieve efficient policy solutions than elected politicians. She concludes that EU committees are 'remote, opaque, and unfair',³⁶⁷ and proposes that complexity has generated a situation in which effective governance, or the delivery of policy outputs that successfully solve the problems of citizens, is potentially compromised by expert groups that are 'far more than technocratic deliberation arenas or impartial providers of factual data'.³⁶⁸ Rather than a populist rejection of experts, though, she instead condones 'resource dependence theory' – the systematic analysis of relationships between the Commission and its consultant groups – and a reconceptualising of these relationships as exchanges of resources with political implications that hinge on actors seeking influence and power. Her proposal is based not on changing the composition of committees but the procedures of their regulation.³⁶⁹ This is a Latourian call for exhaustive and constant re-description of relationships and components, a process in contrast to those academic discourses that Latour identifies as abstracting a particular infrastructural situation into such meaningless terms as 'power' and 'inequality':

By putting aside the practical means, that is the mediators, through which inertia, durability, asymmetry, extension, domination is produced and by conflating all those different means with the powerless power of social inertia, sociologists, when they are not careful in their use of social explanations, are the ones who hide the real causes of social inequalities.³⁷⁰

He is referring here to a tendency, after Foucault, for academics to write about the power relation evinced by apparently innocuous activities. For Latour, this

³⁶⁶ Julia Metz, *The European Commission, Expert Groups, and the Policy Process: Demystifying Technocratic Governance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 1–3.

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

³⁶⁹ While Metz does not necessarily support the reduction of corporate dominance to enhance democratic legitimacy and accountability, since corporations create market ties to the segment they serve, she suggests a diversity of practice that also includes 'commissioned studies, existing independent reports, public consultations, workshops, seconded national experts, and committee committees'. *Ibid.*, pp. 206–8.

³⁷⁰ Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, p. 85.

work is seldom conducted in enough detail; it merely delineates ‘an invisible, unmovable, and homogeneous world of power’, stymying any possibility of studying and modifying the means by which institutions and societies are configured and controlled.³⁷¹

Identifying chains of command, lines of power and conflicts of interest is important to this thesis not only because of the historic and contemporary conflation of private companies and civil governance of the railway, but also, more specifically, because it is being written in a context of the popular demand for self-governance in the UK. The pervasive political and economic architecture of the railway – private companies guided by public bodies, government departments and expert groups – is at odds with the populist understanding of ‘control’, since even before the EU is factored in, governance is already diffuse through a complex network coursing with clashing interests and intents. Echoing modernity’s division of culture from nature, of science from the social, experiences of the railway are coloured by contradictory expectations of it as a business and a service, an opportunity and a right. Furthermore, it can be difficult to identify motivations behind large-scale adjustments to the railway network, since policy makers can be disingenuous in their deployment of socially oriented rhetoric. Current plans for new high-speed routes in Britain, for example, are explained by the Department for Transport primarily in terms that suggest a moral right of citizens and businesses:

Parts of our transport network are full to capacity. This makes it hard for people and business to move freely and isolates parts of the country. Good transport networks open up paths and create opportunity. We’re investing in HS2 to help free up our transport networks and bring our country together.³⁷²

But journalist Simon Jenkins, citing the Eddington Report, insists that claims of overcapacity are mislocated, and should be tackled instead on overcrowded commuter lines around the country’s major cities. Far from a practical or moral

³⁷¹ Ibid., p. 86.

³⁷² ‘Policy: High Speed Rail’, Gov.uk <<https://www.gov.uk/government/policies/hs2-high-speed-rail>> [accessed 18 January 2017].

imperative, he frames HS2 as a project born of political vanity, considered by parliamentarians on the one hand to be ‘a talisman of a virile, manufacturing-oriented Toryism’ and on the other ‘an expensive mistake’.³⁷³ By introducing the minister’s personal character – his ‘vanity’ – Jenkins implies that the social is, in this case, contaminating the political and economic. And in the context of factual reporting, this can come across as speculation or gossip. The disciplinary ethos of journalism does not allow for the ‘undecidability at the heart of knowledge’, which gossip thrives on, but rather adheres to certain historiographic constraints on what can and cannot be written about.³⁷⁴ Those ‘dark areas’ of history that cannot be claimed for knowledge comprise the unofficial and the undocumented – the life below stairs in the great house of a ‘great man’, or that same great man’s interiority.³⁷⁵ Journalism can only speculate on the conflict experienced by a minister’s duty to serve society and his desire to serve the self; but this is precisely the sort of ontological patchworking in which our semiotic terrain, as described in the previous chapter, consists. For those of us released from the impossible task of narrating facts, such ambivalence is material to work with.

Embodied Descriptions: The Enthusiast and the Ambivalent

The enthusiast is neither an economically dependent railway professional nor a self-interested passenger, oblivious to the network’s workings. He (and it is usually a ‘he’) will have a more extensive understanding than the layperson of certain technological, historical and perhaps economic factors too. He is a recognisable ‘type’, a cultural cliché: white, male, middle-aged, stood on the footplate because now, in adulthood, he has the power, money or cultural capital to achieve what he could only dream of as a child. This stereotype suffuses British film and television, not only in drama and sitcoms, but in factual programming,

³⁷³ Simon Jenkins, ‘HS2: the zombie train that refuses to die’, *Guardian* (2 June 2016) <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/jun/07/hs2-the-zombie-train-that-refuses-to-die>> [accessed 28 December 2016].

³⁷⁴ Clare Birchall, ‘Becky with the Good Hair’, *Tank*, 70 (2017) <tankmagazine.com/issue-70/features/clare-birchall/> [accessed 27 February 2017].

³⁷⁵ See Brian McHale, ‘Real, Compared to What?’, in *Postmodernist Fiction*, (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 84–96 (p. 87).

with the BBC commissioning and broadcasting within the last ten years two long-running series featuring train journeys narrated by Michael Palin and Michael Portillo.³⁷⁶ Publishing, too, has long been a repository for enthusiasts' research and memoirs. Portillo's television series revisits some of the destinations featured in mapmaker George Bradshaw's railway guide of 1850, while Ian Allan Publishing, which specialises in transport titles, was founded by a public relations worker at Southern Railway in 1942. Allan's *ABC of Southern Locomotives*, originally intended as a response to questions the company received about its rolling stock, was the first source of centralised data against which ferroequinologists, or trainspotters, could check their observations.

The railway enthusiast's commentary encompasses technical data, historical accounts, autobiography, emotional confessional and polemic, and may or may not be coloured by critical awareness of his own ideology, taste, experience or knowledge. Journalist Matthew Engel, for example, describes his 'journey to the soul of Britain' as 'a lovelorn passenger's personal view of the railways', but one in which he doesn't want his 'passion and anger and love and loathing about this weird industry over-diluted by listening to too many politicians or professionals defending entrenched positions'.³⁷⁷ He is as concerned with the aesthetic experience of railway travel – the design of stations and comfort of carriages, the landscape, the quality of the catering, the melodious or evocative names of stations, engines and lines – as he is with the economic and political forces that have modelled and modified it. For Engel, judgement is based on personal preferences not entirely formed during, but illustrated through an account of journeys taken for a variety of reasons – business, leisure, curiosity. The effect is that of engagement beyond simple self-interest, conducted from an ideologically compelled position that admits the technocratic necessities of management, but which cannot quite square this with an emotional attachment to lapsed pasts or

³⁷⁶ See Michael Portillo presenting *Great Continental Railways Journeys* (BBC: 2016) <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01ntzsb>> [accessed 12 February 2017]; and Michael Palin presenting *Great Railway Journeys* (BBC: 2008) <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00f60q8>> [accessed 12 February 2017].

³⁷⁷ Engel, *Eleven Minutes Late*, p. 318.

alternative possibilities. A 'fair and accurate' account is tempered by personal outrage and lyrical appreciation; progressiveness is punctured by nostalgia.³⁷⁸

Engel's consideration of the railway stays, in the main, in the vicinity of the rail tracks, spatio-temporally and phenomenologically. It is journalistic, bracketed historically and philosophically, and does not follow lines of thought into contiguous fields of practice or theory. It is also, like its televisual counterparts, monological. Interviews have been conducted and their findings absorbed into an account that does its best to synthesize the many voices and positions encountered into a unifying history. Certain polyphonies are noted – for instance, in his conclusion Engel places most of the blame for the 'ongoing fiasco' of the British railways with politicians, past and present, making short-sighted decisions – and yet, in the final analysis it is 'us' who are responsible for the mess, 'because we let them do it.'³⁷⁹ The multitude are invoked as a lack of voice, made audible through the author's account of it.

Engels tethers his subject to its hardware – the track and trains and buildings – and to its governing economic and political structures. Psychological and social factors are presented only in the most pragmatic of instances, as responsive safety measures or expected service standards, for instance, while the wider metaphorical, symbolic or allegorical potencies are neglected. The enthusiast tends to emphasise the technical, bureaucratic or economic over the mystery, excitement or frustration of personal experience, but a located engagement rebalances technical account and political history with the anecdotal and polemical to an extent. More emphatically personal accounts of the railway can often amount to political polemic through inference, as when train users are overheard relating anecdotes of 'nightmare' journeys, implying that the common right to a functioning infrastructure has been compromised. The everyperson is a technical element in the functioning of the railway, since citizen expectation in part informs policy and management, and their numbers make up the

³⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 321.

³⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 308.

operational statistics. But if the speaker is, say, the leader of the Labour party sitting on the floor, allegedly unable to find a seat, or a trade union member invited to the television studio to relate his anxieties over safety in light of changes in working conditions, then the personal account becomes de facto political.

In such situations the individual is metonymic, an iconic representation of 'people', and the train of techno-economic forms. A continuity is perceived between part and whole. This figure is used as a literary device in Virginia Woolf's 1924 lecture-essay 'Mr Bennet and Mrs Brown', where the train compartment is the means by which the character of Mrs Brown transcends the conventions of Edwardian literature: 'Old women have houses. They have fathers. They have incomes. They have servants. They have hot water bottles. That is how we know that they are old women.'³⁸⁰ But in the train carriage, rather than being tied to, even obliterated by, the fabric of things, Mrs Brown is represented by the fragmentation, contradiction and obscurities that characterize the era:

an old lady of unlimited capacity and infinite variety; capable of appearing in any place; wearing any dress; saying anything and doing heaven knows what. But the things she says and the things she does and her eyes and her nose and her speech and her silence have an overwhelming fascination, for she is, of course, the spirit we live by, life itself.³⁸¹

Here the train is emblematic of the technological landscape, and Mrs Brown of subsequent alterations in social deportment in a new ontology of movement at speed, connectivity and change.

Since its first appearances in literary works – such as T.L. Peacock's *Headlong Hall* (1816), where it figures among such other 'remarkable improvements' as canals and tunnels – the railway has been figured as an object of speculation and

³⁸⁰ Woolf, *Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown*, p. 16.

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 20–1.

change.³⁸² William Makepeace Thackeray was a some-time speculator in railway business,³⁸³ and George Eliot notes how the impact of the railway on ‘images that are habitually associated with abstract or collective terms’, or ‘the picture-writing of the mind’, is dependent on the nature of engagement with the material object.³⁸⁴ That is, a train is an engine of difference. More often, the railway was an object of fear and loathing for Victorian writers. Peacock attacked the railway in later novels, particularly the accidents they gave rise to. Charles Dickens was also a loud dissenting voice on similar grounds, while John Ruskin disapproved of the aesthetic impact on landscape.³⁸⁵ But by the early twentieth century, the railway had become an accepted part of infrastructure, featuring heavily in plot turns of detective fiction, for instance. And by the mid or late century it is as likely to feature as an object of nostalgia.

Where early investors and political supporters presented rail travel as democratising, as wealth (and empire) building, and as energising social relations, Victorian novelists were as disposed to represent their destabilising effects as their positive, distance-eating ones. The railway, as concept and material reality, was frequently deployed as a cipher for modernity and industrialisation, and as the epitome of their proximate, machinic, dangerous and perception-bending qualities. The displacement of the stagecoach and private carriages with the train’s speed and convenience precipitated new social anxieties of class and gender. After the security and privacy of the stagecoach, the train exposed upper classes to the hoi polloi, women to predatory men or strangers in general, the respectable to the criminal. And the perception of this class barrier breakdown increased exponentially after William Gladstone’s Railways Regulation Act of 1844, which stipulated compulsory low fares be made

³⁸² This is cited as the first appearance ‘in any literary work of importance’ in *The Oxford Companion to British Railway History*, p. 266.

³⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 277.

³⁸⁴ George Eliot, ‘The Natural History of German Life’, *Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings* (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 253.

³⁸⁵ See, for example, Ruskin’s vitriol aimed at the rail link that ran along the valley between Buxton and Bakewell. John Ruskin, ‘Letter V: White-Thorn Blossom’, in *Fors Clavigera*, ed. by Dinah Birch (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), pp. 23–7.

available to workers.³⁸⁶ As Lord de Mowbray, in Benjamin Disraeli's novel *Sybil* (1845) declared: 'A great revolution! [...] I fear it has a dangerous tendency to equality.'³⁸⁷

Consequently, in fictions of social manners and emotional drama, the train is, at the most simple narrative level, a means of introducing new characters: strangers from distant counties, or those returning after a long absence. It is the device by which a life-changing decision can be made by or for a character: to take a journey or not, to catch or to miss a particular train.³⁸⁸ And the train carriage is a place in which characters meet, for the first time or after many years, on purpose, by accident or by extraordinary coincidence. It is a space in which strangers come together and may be forced to interact, with romantic, awkward or horrific outcomes. In films and novels the train carriage has been the contained but hurtling site of a murder, a pact, an assignation, the glimpse of a love object, the witnessing of an incriminating act, the initiation of an important relationship or long stretches of exposure to an unlikely companion.

The railway extended the scope of how the interpersonal was imagined. The efficiencies of speed made viable travel to far-flung or previously inaccessible places, with shorter journey times appearing to collapse distance. While the benefits of this are clear, the downsides have also been amply noted. In *Dombey and Son* (1846–8) Dickens describes a situation in which even the sun has 'given in', being absorbed, as 'railway time', into a network where specificity of a place is subsumed by the identity of the railway.³⁸⁹ Literature has widely related the negative impacts of the railway: the travelling body subject to accidents, illness

³⁸⁶ 'Gladstone's Act', in *The Oxford Companion to British Railway History*, p. 177.

³⁸⁷ Benjamin Disraeli, *Sybil; or The Two Nations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p.101, cited in Michael Freeman, 'The Railway Age: An Introduction', in *Art in the Age of Steam*, ed. by Ian Kennedy and Julian Treuherz, exh. cat., Walker Art Gallery, National Museums Liverpool; Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MI (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) pp. 21–33 (p. 31).

³⁸⁸ The film *Sliding Doors*, dir. by Peter Howitt (1998), hinges this device. The film presents two potential narratives: one that unfolds from the catching of a tube train; the second from missing it.

³⁸⁹ Railway time was introduced incrementally by railway lines, and was not legally instituted throughout Britain until 1880. See Trish Ferguson, *Victorian Time: Technologies, Standardizations, Catastrophies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

and weariness; the overworking of railway staff, often in dangerous conditions; the urban impinging on the rural; identities of place dislocated by the indifference of the railway itself; the mechanisation of travel better serving wars; personal liberation tempered by mechanical determinism and human character overwhelmed by the machine; local specificities threatened by exposure to incomers and to the very notion of connectivity itself.³⁹⁰ Many critics and academics have noted the monsterisation of the train in several of Dickens's novels in particular, and attributed this to a deep anxiety stemming from the author's own experience,³⁹¹ as well as to the regularity of reported accidents – as high as five a month in the 1840s to '60s.³⁹² Jen Cadwallader tracks attitudes to these accidents, and the perception of their inevitability, in the descriptive language used to invoke the locomotive in contemporaneous novels. At first, the novelty of 'larger than life' steam trains, which could travel at 'unheard of speeds' produced a hybrid of natural and mechanical references: a 'steam nightbird' or an 'iron horse' with 'ribs of steel and bowels of brass' would be 'roaring and snorting, screaming, shrieking and hissing'.³⁹³ This would become even more hyperbolic, with the train recast as phantoms of modern civilization in a rage, giant flying demons or malignant god-like creatures, which, Cadwallader infers, is indicative of the pervasive popular idea that accidents 'were not caused by human error, but by the inevitable, unstoppable work of the iron monster'.³⁹⁴ The train, as a symbol of human desires, signifies that which is beyond control.

It also stands for processes of insidious co-option and absorption of the subject into the industrial complex. Charlotte Mathieson describes how, in mid-nineteenth-century fiction, travelling bodies become an element in the

³⁹⁰ See Adrienne E. Gavin and Andrew F. Humphries, 'The Transports of Fiction 1840-1940: An Introduction', in *Transport in British Fiction: Technologies of Movement, 1840-1940*, ed. by Adrienne E. Gavin, Andrew F. Humphries (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 1–25.

³⁹¹ See, for example, Jonathan H. Grossman, *Charles Dickens's Networks: Public Transport and the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Jen Cadwallader, 'Death by Train: Spectral Technologies and Dickens's *Mugby Junction*', in *Transport in British Fiction*, pp. 57–68.

³⁹² This figure is in reference to contemporaneous *Times* articles, cited by Cadwallader, 'Death by Train', p. 59.

³⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

circulation of capital.³⁹⁵ Wrapped in rugs and ensconced in upholstered, parlour-like first-class carriages, the human subject is dislocated from the industrial, machine ensemble of the railway, and from the phantom-like landscape through which they travel. Besides a symbolic attempt at protection (both physical and social), Mathieson finds in the image of the wrapped-up traveller the suggestion that the body, like the site on which a train station is built, has ‘become appropriated by and reproduced in the image of the railway’.³⁹⁶ It has become an object of freight. The train, as the vehicle of capitalism, drags along the body of the commuter, or ‘strap-hanger’,³⁹⁷ who is coerced by economic imperatives into travelling some distance or in unpleasant conditions, often in the margins of daylight. One of literature’s best-known commuters, Mr Pooter, is the epitome of the dedicated employee, whose life revolves almost entirely around his job.³⁹⁸ For Pooter, the journey to work is as fastidiously undertaken as any other aspect of his job, drawing attention to how, in fact, commuting *is* part of one’s job, and yet no one is paid for the time taken (and seldom for expenses incurred).³⁹⁹ In film and television, scenes of commuters sardined in a carriage or released in their droves across London Bridge have, by now, become a hackneyed depiction of alienation, of the horrors of mechanical determinism and capitalist imperative by which the individual is oppressed – the epitome of victims of abstracted, oppressive power.⁴⁰⁰ And in recent fiction, the train continues to exemplify the ambivalence of modernity. In China Miéville’s *Iron Council* the train, in the

³⁹⁵ Charlotte Matthieson, ‘A Perambulating Mass of Woollen Goods: Travelling Bodies in the Mid-Nineteenth-Century Railway Journey’, in *Transport in British Fiction*, pp. 44–56.

³⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

³⁹⁷ Simon Webb, *Commuters: The History of a British Way of Life* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword History, 2016), p. 130.

³⁹⁸ George and Weedon Grossmith, *The Diary of a Nobody*, (Bristol: Arrowsmith, 1910).

³⁹⁹ Alex Woloch discusses George Orwell’s socialist critique of commuting as that which ‘cannot be contained within the (wage) definition’ of work. Alex Woloch, *Or Orwell: Writing and Democratic Socialism* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press 2016), p. 131.

⁴⁰⁰ The London Bridge trope is particularly enduring. The bridge is the thoroughfare for commuters from the south of London and the south of England to the City. See *About a Boy*, dir. by Chris Weitz and Paul Weitz (2002);

‘Wide shot commuters crossing London Bridge / London’, Getty Images <<http://www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/video/wide-shot-commuters-crossing-london-bridge-london-stock-video-footage/834-15>> [accessed 13 March 2017];

‘London Market / London Bridge 1930–9’, British Pathé <<http://www.britishpathe.com/video/london-market-london-bridge/query/london>> [accessed 13 March 2017].

hands of seditionists, represents hope of political change.⁴⁰¹ In Geoff Ryman's *253* – the first hypertext novel, launched as a website in 1996 – the reader clicks through pages dedicated to all 253 tube train passengers, gleaning insight into their moods, preoccupations and activities one by one, until the driver is reached, when it is discovered that the fate of all the other characters are in the hands of this one suicidal stranger.⁴⁰² The reader is left to imagine the moment at which 253 phenomenological experiences converge into the historiographic singularity of a news story.

Besides featuring prominently in nineteenth-century painting, at the cusp of modernism, visual art has been less successful at representing or connoting the complex symbolism of the railway. The locomotive in JMW Turner's *Rain, Steam, and Speed* (1844), for example, does not impress itself on the viewer as a real, moving train; it is a static motif drawn from memory, looking rather like a wine bottle weathering its impressionistic surroundings. Claude Monet's *The Gare St Lazare* (1877), on the other hand, was painted from direct observation. Here, the train station is depicted as a busy social space, a continuation of everyday life, just as de Certeau would go on to figure it, and the steam is treated as a variant on the natural clouds beyond. The impressionists tended to depict industrial life as either grim or heroic. For Gustave Courbet, for example, railways stations, engine houses, mines and factories were 'the saints and miracles of the nineteenth century', their representation imperative to the project of realism.⁴⁰³ Elsewhere, bridges, chimneys, viaducts and clouds of smoke presented compositional possibilities, with the railway playing more or less interruptive or modifying roles in the landscapes, ripping through pastoral scenes, dominating place or simply introducing dynamic lines into pictorial composition. In the early twentieth century, the Futurists emphasise the impact of the railway, not only through their embrace of 'great locomotives' and

⁴⁰¹ China Miéville, *Iron Council* (London: Pan, 2011).

⁴⁰² Geoff Ryman, *253, or tube theatre*

<<https://web.archive.org/web/20140530180412/http://www.ryman-novel.com/>> [accessed 17 March 2019].

⁴⁰³ Ian Kennedy, 'Impressionism and Post-Impressionism', in *Art in the Age of Steam*, pp. 155–85 (p. 157).

‘twisting tunnels’,⁴⁰⁴ or their declaration that trains, dining cars and railroad stations were divine,⁴⁰⁵ but also in their recognition of how velocity was to overturn conventions of the flesh:

Speed detaches corpuscular man from corpuscular woman. Speed destroys love, vice of the sedentary heart, saddening coagulation, arteriosclerosis of humanity’s blood. Speed hastens, precipitates the railroad-automobile-airplane blood circulation of the world.

Only speed will be able to murder the nostalgic, sentimental, pacifist, and neutralist moonlight. Italians! Be fast and you will be strong, optimistic, invincible, immortal!⁴⁰⁶

Where impressionist painters treat the subject within the constraints of realism and the pictorial – the blur and melting landscapes implying movement and velocity, reflecting the experience of passengers new to travelling at such speeds – the Futurists eschew outward appearances for ‘pure sensation’ and a technique of ‘vibrant nervousness of brushwork’ that stands for restlessness and alienation.⁴⁰⁷ For Boccioni solid bodies give rise to vibrations, which in turn provoke ‘abstract lines’ or ‘states of mind’, which he formulates into a system of Plastic Dynamism.⁴⁰⁸ Objects are not static and definitive, but extensive; and sculpture must embody this, ‘rendering apprehensible [an object’s] plastic and systematic [...] prolongations into space, since no one can any longer believe that an object finishes where another begins’; and the viewing subject is cut and sectioned ‘with an arabesque of curved and straight lines’ within this extensivity.⁴⁰⁹ In Boccioni’s Plastic Dynamism the object overflows its material outline and performs through encounters with a spectator considered to be at the centre of meaning making, ‘embedded in the “simultaneousness of the ambient [amid] the dislocation and

⁴⁰⁴ F.T. Marinetti, ‘Electrical War’, from *Le Futurisme* [1911], in *Futurism: An Anthology*, ed. by Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi and Laura Wittman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 99.

⁴⁰⁵ Marinetti, ‘The New Religion-Morality of Speed’ [1916], in *Futurism*, p. 226.

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 229.

⁴⁰⁷ Julian Treuherz, ‘States of Mind’, in *Art in the Age of Steam*, p. 196.

⁴⁰⁸ Cited in Ester Coen, *Umberto Boccioni*, exh. cat. (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1988), p. 121.

⁴⁰⁹ Umberto Boccioni, ‘Technical Manifesto of Futurist Sculpture’, *Founding and Manifesto of Futurism, Archivi del futurismo*, I, ed. by Maria Drudi Gambillo and Teresa Fiori (Rome: DeLuca, 1958/1962), p. 143; cited in Kwinter, *Architectures of Time*, p. 62.

dismemberment of objects, the scattering and fusion of details, freed from accepted logic and independent from one another”⁴¹⁰ The technological object amplifies the fragmenting nature of phenomenology, and the artwork similarly shatters under the play of the innumerable subjectivities of its viewer. In a recent, mirroring move, the collaborative Low Profile invert this with *Commuter Karaoke* (2005): holding out of a kitchen window cardboard signs bearing song lyrics, a line at a time, for the pleasure of passing train passengers, the known object, the song, springs to mind, more or less intact, once triggered.⁴¹¹ The effect of the train here is not entirely distancing and fragmenting. It brings into temporary being a dispersed spectatorship that, while not quite amounting to Beech’s nightmare of ‘hellish univocity’, converges on a particular point in the popular music commons for a few seconds.

From this brief survey of railway descriptions and characterisations in literature and art, what seems central is a state of ambivalence. In his founding studies of schizophrenia, Eugen Bleuler notes that most people are able to tolerate ambivalence.⁴¹² They can, for instance, compare the beauty of a rose with the risk of handling it, and form an integrated understanding. Indeed, to a mind that is able to synthesise two apparently oppositional qualities into a new sensibility based in poetics, its beauty may even be heightened by the potential of pain. Freud adopted Bleuler’s formulations of ambivalence to describe the mutual power over the individual of the opposing instincts of eros and thanatos, placing a fundamental ambivalence at the root of all human behaviour. Georg Simmel, meanwhile, was already formulating the sociological relevance of conflict and the

⁴¹⁰ *Founding and Manifesto of Futurism*, p. 105; cited in Kwinter, *Architectures of Time*, p. 65. Kwinter points out the resemblance between Boccioni’s and Bergson’s thought, and discusses this in the context of Einstein’s Special Theory of Relativity. *Ibid.*, pp. 54–100.

⁴¹¹ Performed as part of the Five Second Theatre programme in Hull. Low Profile <<https://we-are-low-profile.com/~wearelow/commuter-karaoke/>> [accessed 23 January 2018].

⁴¹² The term ‘ambivalenz’ was coined by Eugen Bleuler during his study of schizophrenia, referring to a state in which a subject cannot resolve contradictory qualities of an object. Bleuler identifies three types of ambivalence: affective ambivalence; ambivalence of the will, and intellectual ambivalence. The former is the conflict of emotions regarding an object, as with the example of the rose; that of the will is an equivalent desire to do and to not do something, or to perform two contradicting actions, and intellectual ambivalence is the tendency for an idea to appear simultaneously with its counter-idea. See Eugen Bleuler, *Dementia Praecox or the Group of Schizophrenias* (New York: International Universities Press, 1969), pp. 53–5.

positive effect of dualisms, whereby an individual ‘does not attain the unity of his personality exclusively by an exhaustive harmonization, according to logical, objective, religious or ethical norms, of the contents of his personality’, but rather that conflict and contradiction are operating at all times.⁴¹³ Similarly, a society also ‘needs some quantitative ratio of harmony and disharmony, of association and competition, of favourable and unfavourable tendencies’.⁴¹⁴ This conflictive model of self and society has been developed by William Connolly into a theory of multiplicitous ambiguity that refutes the primacy of the dualisms of ambivalence, but which maintains the essential dynamics of antagonism.⁴¹⁵ For Deleuze and Guattari, too, the schizophrenic state shatters neurotic individualism, disconnecting from, or deterritorialising, institutions of power and facilitating collective (i.e., non-private) expressions of desire.⁴¹⁶ And Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe claim antagonism as a condition of democracy that is emergent between incomplete entities, with consensus being an imposed authoritarian order – an idea that Bishop extrapolates towards a mode of contemporary art that does not seek collectivity as the harmonious resolution of differences, but which sets up ‘relationships that emphasize the role of dialogue and negotiation’, without ‘collapsing these relationships into the work’s content’.⁴¹⁷ For the triadic semiotician, relations based in uneasy, sustaining tensions correspond to the multiple, incongruent and overlapping ontologies that contribute to the *Lebenswelt*, and to the multiplicity of ontologies that constitute an *Innenwelt*. In the following chapter I will continue my exploration of the railway by way of the texts that it has generated. But where in this chapter I have been surveying self-consciously produced descriptions, explanations and metaphors, in the next I will be analysing a single phrase that is often uttered

⁴¹³ Georg Simmel, ‘Conflict’ [1908], in *On Individuality and Social Forms* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 70.

⁴¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

⁴¹⁵ William E. Connolly, *Identity\Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox* (London: Bloomsbury, 2002).

⁴¹⁶ Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1983).

⁴¹⁷ Bishop refers to Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (1985), which she sites as one of the first books to ‘reconsider Leftist political theory through the lens of post-structuralism’. Claire Bishop, ‘Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics’, p. 70.

absent-mindedly or laden with subtext. We will now board a train and analyse the imbricated, contrary psychosocial factors that inflect all that occurs within its carriages.

CHAPTER FOUR:

‘I’M ON THE TRAIN’

The Train Carriage as a Sociolinguistic Context

A mobile phone rings a couple of seat rows in front and I feel my neighbour bracing herself for the half a conversation that is about to flood the carriage. On board the train most people speak relatively softly with fellow travellers, but when it comes to mobile phone calls such cordialities can lapse: people project, as if speaking to someone far off in the tiny replica world they hold to their ear. The recipient of the call tells the caller, and the rest of us, what Phil wrote in an email, and what Christine said about what Phil wrote, and so on, until, outside the windows, a concrete wall obliterates the view of marshland encroached on by light industry. It is the opening to the tunnel under the Thames. ‘Hey, listen, I’m on the train, so...’ I feel my neighbour sigh – a relative of the eye roll – and I give out a blast of air through my nostrils in agreement. The phone conversation ends after a disengagement ritual of repeating action points – ‘so, I’ll forward the email when I get back. Yup, yup. I’ll call you later...’ – and the carriage returns to its peaceful state of waiting for London.

‘I’m on the train’ can be heard on most types of overground train journeys: short hops between urban stops, intercity dashes of a few hours and epic international adventures. It is uttered, if not right at the beginning of making or taking a call, then when it is known or suspected that the material conditions of the rail journey – tunnels, patchy reception, electrical interference – are about to disrupt the signal or cause disconnection. To those who share a carriage with the speaker, ‘I’m on the train’ is a statement of the bloody obvious; but it can be useful, startling or frustrating information for the person on the other end of the line. It might be big news indeed. The speaker might be on their way to visit the listener at short notice. Or they might be offering the phrase as an excuse for some

oversight, neglect or inopportunity: I'm in transit so I have not been able to feed the cat, sack the employee, build the barricade, etc. Or it might warn of an inability to talk freely in public or of a lack of information to hand. In the train carriage a pullulation of relationships floods in from and spills over into the world at large, and the phrase – 'I'm on the train' – is our Aristotelian Telescope, after Tesauro: a point of convergence of idiosyncratic and typical causes and intentions, an array of particular and general responses, subtle connotations and explicit states of affairs. As will be demonstrated, language, as it is messily conducted in routine life, draws on many types of knowledges and operates through rational, habitual, intuitive, subconscious and accidental modes. It is both ideational and interpersonal, representational and agential. As Michael Halliday describes sociolinguistic activity: 'the conceptual framework is likely to be drawn from rhetoric rather than from logic, and the grammar is likely to be a grammar of choices rather than of rules'.⁴¹⁸ The casual utterance of 'I'm on the train' at once conveys cognitive content and generates meaning through its reiterative nature. And text and context are interdependent and mutually diffractive, where context is both the train carriage and the sociolinguistic field.

The train carriage is already suffused with the linguistic activity of the train operators: in signage, manuals, verbal instruction, announcements; as information, instruction, knowledge, opinion, persuasion, and as the meta-language of regulation, policy and reform. And passengers, too, produce spoken and written text in the pursuit of entertainment, work, the expression of emotion. While some of these modes are explicit, there is also much scope for subtext, for tacit understanding, conventions and unspoken rules, and for their misreading or flagrant disregard. To navigate this complex scene, we can turn to Kockelman's semiotic modelling of the environment in which an organism is immersed:

A sensation is caused by a state of affairs and indexically (or 'causally') gives rise to a perception. A perception represents a state of affairs and inferentially (or 'logically') gives rise to a belief. A belief represents a state of affairs and inferentially gives rise to an intention.

⁴¹⁸ M.A.K. Halliday, *Language as Social Semiotic* (London: Edward Arnold, 1978), p. 4.

And an intention represents a state of affairs and indexically gives rise to an instigation, which may itself either immediately constitute or eventually cause the state of affairs so represented.⁴¹⁹

This recursive semiotic web is populated by agents – human, animal, vegetable, mineral; sensate, digital, mechanical – many with *Innenwelten* which interpenetrate the *Umwelt*. Between these agents, intentions collude or clash, knowledges and beliefs overlay or contradict one another and instigated interactions modify these relations. To navigate this unfolding, complex situation, the human performs a division of kinds, or a projection of tendencies, which results in identification and categorisation of social, material and mental phenomena, of roles, statuses and attitudes, where ‘a status (qua “identity”) is propensity personified; a role or index (qua “performance”) is personhood actualized; and an attitude (qua “recognition”) is another’s person internalized.’⁴²⁰ In other words, just as a particular material (object) is understood as having certain properties (sign-vehicle) and therefore uses (interpretant), so is a social status or mental state (object) understood as giving rise to particular roles or behaviours (sign-vehicle) and commanding certain attitudes (interpretant). In this semiotic modelling, intersubjective interactions become the conditions for and the consequences of social activity which unfolds throughout and beyond the train carriage, involving all manner of commitments, internalisations, predictions and assumptions about self and other, and by the other about oneself. This ‘other’ can extend to the person sitting in the next seat or to a distal institution, which may have already decided something about one’s own desires and capacities.

The following investigation into the conditions and consequences of an utterance of a single phrase necessarily roves across disciplinary boundaries. As Halliday charts in Fig.1, below, when an utterance functions within a linguistic system (potentially simultaneously) as behaviour, knowledge and art, other disciplinary methods and frameworks become relevant. What follows is not a formal

⁴¹⁹ Kockelman, *Agent, Person, Subject, Self*, pp. 20–1.

⁴²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

grammatical or semantic analysis, but a picaresque, associational, semiotic approach based in personal experience of the social space of the train. The spoils of this investigation will be put into practice in the audio work *HERMES*, discussed in Chapter Six; and the understandings gleaned also inform the writing and making of *Train Tabletop Text Opera*, a performance in an operative highspeed train carriage, discussed in Chapter Seven.

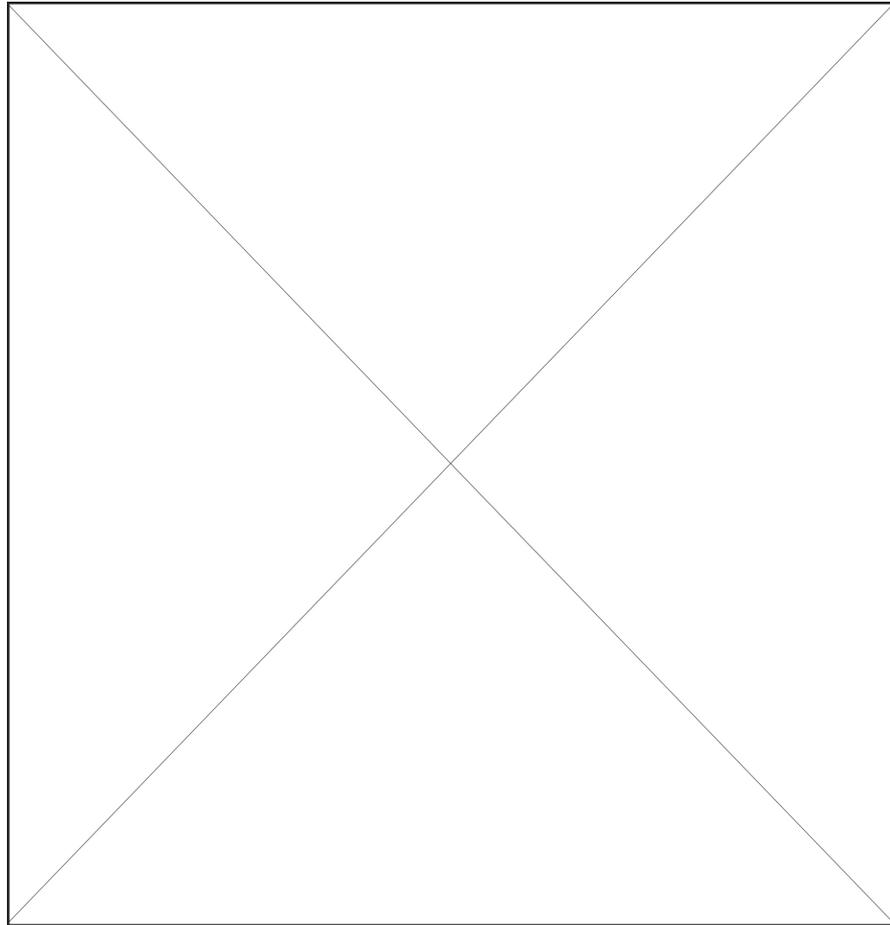


Fig. 2: 'A diagrammatic representation of the nature of linguistic studies and their relation to other fields of scholarship'.⁴²¹

Topographies of Speech

I have not found any prior research dedicated to the train/phone intersection, but while the connotations of 'I'm on the train' might be various, I would be very

⁴²¹ Halliday, *Language as Social Semiotic*, pp. 10–11.

surprised if its wording has changed since the widespread uptake of mobile telephones in the 1990s. It is a straightforward and unembellished phrase, which bears neither ritualised rhetorical flourish nor dead metaphor. In J.L. Austin's terms, it would be a constative utterance, since it has a reference (the physical fact of a subject being on a train) and describes or reports a situation.⁴²² It would not be considered a performative utterance, which refers only to itself and would enact the activity the speech signifies. Similarly, according to Derrida, the performative utterance 'does not have its referent [...] outside of itself or, in any event, before and in front of itself. It does not describe something that exists outside of language and prior to it'.⁴²³ It transforms its own situation. While our phrase is descriptive of the current situation – the speaker is indeed on the train – its utterance does not make this the case, or change this as a state. It is of now, but does not produce now. In the future, technology like Alexa, Apple's 'intelligent personal assistant', may well be developed in conjunction with teleportation to reify such spoken commands, but at present the repercussions of 'I'm on the train' are various and displaced in time and space.

And yet I would argue that 'I'm on the train' is performative subtextually, in that it reasserts or distorts certain assumptions, codes and practices – particularly if one considers the technological and psychosocial aspects of the extended context in which it participates. For one thing, it makes palpable the doubling of space that telephones produce, asserting the separation between speaker and addressee, while also emphasising the co-presence of those who overhear. This doubling or making multiple of space has been noted as a recurrent property of media, which changes what Joshua Myrowitz calls the 'situational geography' of social life.⁴²⁴ The distortion of co-present interactions in physical settings to situations that exceed the reach of the unmediated human body does not, as Shaun Moores notes, result in a weakened sense of place, but rather an experience of settings that are at once distanced and close, and that are permeated by multiple

⁴²² J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 3.

⁴²³ Jacques Derrida, 'Signature, Event, Context', in *Limited Inc* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), pp. 1–23 (p. 13).

⁴²⁴ Joshua Myrowitz, *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behaviour* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

connections with other places.⁴²⁵ A train carriage, then, is potentially co-present with as many other places as there are mobile phones on tables, in pockets or bags. That it is a multiply ghosted space becomes apparent when this phrase is spoken. And yet, despite this telephonic co-presence, all those sat or stood in the carriage have some investment in embodied presence too, as Moores points out, since they are still compelled to travel bodily; they are acting on a compulsion to proximity, whether towards business, personal, spiritual or leisure ends.

'I'm on the train' performs the hinge between these two phenomenological experiences of locatedness and displacement. It is the phrase that signals the speaker's understanding of being in two places at once: on the train in a physical capacity, and on a noetic train in the imagination of the person at the other end of the telephone connection. And it is a marker of mixed needs and sufficiencies: the need to be located and relocated, and the adequacy of electronic dislocation. The person on the train who overhears is likely to be sensorily biased towards the physical space of co-presence, but they can also draw on memories of past experiences to imagine other telephonically linked places in general terms. They can perceive this seam between spaces. And they can infer, too, from tone of voice the possible unspoken meanings: a whisper implying that sensitive information must be withheld; a broken or faltering exchange possibly mirroring a bad phone signal (or someone faking a bad signal to avoid having to speak); a trailing 'so...' suggesting an excuse, a reason for not delivering the required action or the end of the sentence. Such euphemistic use of our supposedly simple statement enables the speaker to imply meaning without having to commit to directly descriptive words. Euphemisms dodge harsh social judgement by way of a linguistic faint. They are defeasible. And they can circumvent embarrassment, as Norman Fairclough describes when medical staff supplant the naming of genitals with 'between the legs'.⁴²⁶ Here, a performance of linguistic disengagement, a return to artless basics, becomes a mode of sensitivity.

⁴²⁵ Shaun Moores, 'The Doubling of Place: Electronic Media, time-space arrangements and social relationships', in *MediaSpace: Place, Scale and Culture in a Media Age*, ed. by Nick Couldry and Anna McCarthy (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 21–36.

⁴²⁶ Norman Fairclough, *Language and Power* (Harlow: Addison Wesley Longman, 1989), p. 60.

The necessity of dealing with private matters in public is a side effect of the doubling of phenomenological space. Train carriages are places in which we are at rest, waiting, as well as (hopefully) speeding along. We each (again, hopefully) have our comfortable seat, and possibly a table, and may well be engaged in activities associated with the home or workplace: reading, writing emails or reports, knitting, doing puzzles or accounts, playing cards or chatting with a friend or colleague. I have also watched someone making models for a well-known 3D animation company, and listened to parents teaching their children the alphabet or to count. And I have known people who have trysted in toilet cubicles.

Early carriages, according to Wolfgang Schivelbusch, were modelled on the stagecoach, with passengers sitting facing one another in small, lavishly upholstered and curtained compartments.⁴²⁷ The padded chintz was primarily to protect the body from the jolts of mechanised travel, but also to assert an atmosphere of privacy and luxury for those who could afford the first- and second-class carriages.⁴²⁸ Today, only the disposable paper or spunbond polypropylene antimacassars have survived the modernisation of rolling stock. Most recent UK mainline train layouts favour closely packed pairs of seats facing on to the back of the next pair of seats, although groups of four or six people facing one another might be accommodated in some carriages.⁴²⁹ These design decisions are made partly on the basis of economics and space optimisation, but rail companies have also engaged psychologists to conduct research into how train travel can be made more attractive to paying customers. Experiments and surveys of various approaches have found that enforced eye contact and proximity with strangers ranks highly among the negative aspects of train travel

⁴²⁷ See Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: Trains and Travel in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979), pp. 123–5.

⁴²⁸ In the early days of the railway there were first, second and third class passenger tickets available, and, following the introduction of cheap fares on ‘parliamentary train’ in 1844, fourth and fifth classes were introduced on some lines, with a sixth class emerging in the 1860s on some southern lines, and a workers’ class on early morning trains into town centres. See ‘class distinctions’ in *The Oxford Companion to British Railway History*, pp. 84–7.

⁴²⁹ Rapid transport systems, such as the DLR and underground trains in London, Newcastle and Glasgow, have greater proportions of facing seats and more standing room between them.

that drive people into their cars.⁴³⁰ Staring, instead, at a plane of tufted nylon in rail company livery colours has been deemed preferable.

While this solves the issue of eye contact, adjacent seats are proportioned such that it is not possible to preserve the standard 0-18cm radius of intimacy, thereby potentially aggravating interpersonal distant (IPD) discomfort.⁴³¹ This uneasy proximity among non-intimates is maintained through the avoidance of speech – often even of polite comment or cursory greeting – by signalling through posture, withdrawal into a book, a screen or headphones and the maintenance of muscular tension so that bodies do not actually touch.⁴³² While politeness plays a role in enforced interactions, the primary modes of self-preservation in these anxious social compositions are, in the main, stillness and quietness. Personal space is sacrificed for an acceptance of material adjacency, as subjects become objects to one another for the duration of the journey. Small compensations such as window or table seats carry a premium, since they afford escape for the gaze or extra legroom. But even so, this is not an easy equilibrium to sustain. The scene is frequently disrupted by what Erving Goffman terms territory violations, intrusions and obtrusions, perpetrated by other bodies, objects or sounds, and which Kockelman describes as ‘atypical tokens’, where an action is framed as inappropriate, ineffective or incoherent in context.⁴³³

⁴³⁰ Research commissioned by railway companies has included several psychological research approaches – physiological and perceptual, personality and social, learning theory and behavioural change and developmental – in areas of policy and planning, vehicle and facility design and management. Psychology research is also employed by transport departments to assess reasons for a widespread preference for car travel over public transport, and to increase ‘reinforcements’, or positive aspects, of public transport. See *Handbook of Environmental Psychology*, ed. by Daniel Stokols and Irwin Altman (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1987), II, pp. 998–1003.

⁴³¹ The categories of proxemics are intimate (0-18inches), personal (18inches–4ft), social (4–12ft) and public (12–25ft). See Edward R. Hall, ‘Distances in Man’, in *The Hidden Dimension: Man’s Use of Space in Public and Private* (London: Bodley Head, 1966), p. 107–22.

⁴³² There is huge number of publications that relate the findings of sociological and psychological experiments in public space. For analyses of such concepts as privacy, crowding, territory and personal space, see Irwin Altman, *The Environment and Social Behavior* (Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1975); Stokols and Altman, *Handbook of Environmental Psychology*, I, pp. 389–504; Leslie A. Hayduk, ‘Personal Space: Where We Now Stand’, *Psychological Bulletin*, 94. 2 (September 1983), 293–335.

⁴³³ Kockelman, *Agent, Person, Subject, Self*, p. 152.

In analysing the social challenges of early train travel, where strangers sat facing one another in silence, Schivelbusch invokes Simmel: ‘Generally speaking, what we *see* of a person is interpreted by what we *hear* of him, the reverse being a much rarer case. Therefore one who sees without hearing is far more confused, undecided, upset than one who hears without seeing.’⁴³⁴ In today’s train carriage we are much more likely to hear without seeing, and in Simmel’s terms, therefore feel more able to interpret – or judge – that person. But while smaller seating units cut down the potential for group noise, they also undermine the possibility of co-travellers self-policing noise offenses. Topography of the space does not often facilitate a hard stare. It holds in rigid proximity subjects who would ordinarily be able to flow tactically around one another. It thwarts what in Edward Hall’s mechanistic model plays out as ‘a series of delicately controlled, culturally conditioned micromechanisms that keeps life on an even keel, much like the automatic pilot on the airplane’.⁴³⁵ And it obstructs Goffman’s ‘eye discipline’, which requires constant and delicate adjustment, with the glance, the averted gaze and the sustained stare used in different contexts to act variously as request, ratification, reprimand, signal of modesty, sincerity and so forth.⁴³⁶ In the public space of the contemporary train carriage the violation of offensive loudness often cannot be met with a counter-violation-turned-reprimand of the dirty look. Sometimes the only recourse is, as per Milgram’s observation of the individual overloaded by a crowded environment, withdrawal from interaction, with other people becoming equivalent to the scenery.⁴³⁷ The rowdy passenger becomes another noise produced by the train.

Historically, the ethics of visibility has shifted, from an enthusiasm for the panopticon of early surveillance, the visual bias of enlightenment rationalism, the transparency of modernist glass structures, supposedly non-hierarchical and

⁴³⁴ Georg Simmel, *Sociology: Inquiries into the Construction of Social Forms* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), I, p. 573. This passage is also cited in Walter Benjamin, ‘On Some Motifs on Baudelaire’, *Illuminations* (London: Pimlico, 1999), p.187; and in Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey*, p. 80.

⁴³⁵ Hall, *The Hidden Dimension*, p. 4.

⁴³⁶ See Erving Goffman, *Relations in Public: Microstudies of the Public Order* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2010), pp. 40–61.

⁴³⁷ Stanley Milgram, *The Individual in a Social World: Essays and Experiments* (Reading, MS: Addison-Wesley, 1977), pp. 29, 51.

synonymous with the eradication of deception, and Walter Benjamin's 'moral exhibitionism, that we badly need',⁴³⁸ to Eisenstein's less positive interpretation of glass walls that are at once isolating and exposing, where transparency makes new exploitations possible.⁴³⁹ For Eisenstein, the gift of vision is dangerous. And today we experience a paradoxical compaction of these positions. We are at once enabled and overloaded by access to information, and regard with ambivalence the compromising trade-off between security and human rights. The train carriage relieves us of some of these anxieties. Structural, procedural and material design control our flow through and behaviour on the railway and in its architectures, so that we are delivered to our destination without having to see, and therefore negotiate, much of what is involved in getting us there. Althusser would identify this as another instance of Ideological State Apparatuses at their work of regulation and (re)production of obedience. For Althusser, institutions such as the school and the family not only reinforce behaviour that encourages the reproduction of the skills of labour, but also teach the contrasting virtues of 'modesty, resignation, submissiveness on the one hand, cynicism, contempt, arrogance, confidence, self-importance, even smooth talk and cunning on the other'.⁴⁴⁰ Ritualistic enactment is the means of reproduction of the means of production – that is, the micro-processes through which a compliant and appropriately skilled labour force is generated – since the interpellated individual is steeped in behavioural correctness that equates to '*subjection to the ruling ideology* or the mastery of its "practice"'.⁴⁴¹ In the space of the train carriage these 'virtues' come to bear on attitudes, behaviour and inter-subjective negotiations, and the outcomes consequently feed back into ideological models of consensual and individual responsibility. In many instances, on the train it is a plebiscite of silence and inaction that prevails as a nullified *vox populi*.

⁴³⁸ Walter Benjamin, 'Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia', in *Selected Writings*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), II, pp. 207–221 (p. 209).

⁴³⁹ In the planning stages of the unrealised film *The Glass House*, Eisenstein considered the glass palace to represent America. For an account of the failed process of the film's production, see Oksana Bulgakowa, 'Eisenstein, the Glass House and the Spherical Book', *Rouge* (2005) <<http://www.rouge.com.au/7/eisenstein.html>> [accessed 22 July 2017].

⁴⁴⁰ Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)' [1970], in *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, App. II, p. 252.

⁴⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 236.

Sound space, as well as physical space, is topologically mapped and, according to setting, allotted a distance from which it is acceptable to be heard.⁴⁴² In the football stadium the perimeter of permissible sound is clearly greater than that of the library. But while there may have been consensus on this in train carriages of the past, the invention of the mobile telephone has shattered standards of quietude. It is impossible to gauge whether it is a function of technology or a change in social behavioural norms, but fundamental attribution error – a social bias whereby the behaviour of others is considered to be determined by their character, while the same behaviour in oneself is attributed to circumstances – is palpable. The acceptable level of noise in a train carriage now depends on whose phone call it is: mine or someone else's. Tolerance might also be dependent on the length of journey and crowdedness. If an overbearing voice is just one factor of discomfort among many, it may well be the only thing possible to blame on a singular source and therefore to change. Or one might just give up on comfort altogether and agree to suffer until the whole ordeal is over.

One curious effect of passenger orientation and lack of sightlines in carriages, which has repercussions for the ethics of individual culpability, is how one who speaks on the telephone can commit an act of obtrusion (as opposed to intrusion) onto others' aural territories. E.A. Schegloff recounts an incident in which a young woman, arguing with a partner on a telephone in a train carriage, takes offence at a fellow passenger's making eye contact, saying to him, 'Do you mind?! This is a private conversation!'⁴⁴³ Other passengers do not simply hear, but overhear. The speaker makes more (aural) territorial demands than would usually be considered appropriate, transforming what in other circumstances would be the aggrieved into intruders, into eavesdroppers who violate the speaker's territory. The term 'eavesdropper' originates in wilful proximity to a private home. (One who stood where the water dripped from the eaves, to better

⁴⁴² See 'Chart showing interplay of the distant and immediate receptors in proxemics reception' in Hall, *The Hidden Dimension*, pp. 118–19.

⁴⁴³ E.A. Schegloff, 'Beginnings in the Telephone', in *Perpetual Contact: Mobile Communication, Private Talk, Public Performance*, ed. by J.E. Katz and M. Aakhus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 285–6; cited in Moores, 'The Doubling of Place', p. 31.

hear what was going on inside a house, could be fined.) And yet in the train carriage, with its thoroughfare and its personal armchair, a confusion between the perimeters of public and private territories can transpose the roles of victim and perpetrator.⁴⁴⁴

From the point of view of the person speaking on the phone, and the person to whom they are speaking, the related issue of exposure can arise. Besides Hall's proxemics theory, in which physical closeness to a body is the preserve of intimates, other symbolic boundaries are relinquished as markers of special relationships, such as emotional and informational distance.⁴⁴⁵ Apart from the few pleasantries or enforced necessities exchanged during train travel, it is rare that personal information or emotions (beyond annoyance at delays) are divulged to strangers in the contingent, temporary and reticent community of the train carriage. 'Too much information' becomes an expression of outrage in societies where norms of non-involvement have been established.⁴⁴⁶ To withhold this sort of content from an intimate, on the other hand, would also constitute a violation. And so, when the person speaking on the phone to a loved one in need of reassurance is in a double bind, 'I'm on the train' signals circumstantial reasons for not providing the required response. But where this explanation may be emollient in the context of the relationship between telephone callers, it becomes exposing within the context of the train carriage: the speaker must be overheard evading a point and sharing a banality. Within intimate relationships exchanges of banal information can be a ritual delicacy, an act of normative maintenance or a procedural necessity. Among strangers it is a literalism upon which judgement may be pronounced.

In the enclosed space of the train carriage, entitlements to act on whim or desire are asserted, and obligations to observe the desires and needs of others are met or

⁴⁴⁴ Although eavesdropping was not a violation of the common law of England, Parliamentary Statutes or ecclesiastical laws, it was 'embedded within a long tradition of moral analysis and social condemnation'. Eavesdroppers would be accused rather vaguely of conduct against peaceful relations between neighbours. See Marjorie McIntosh, *Controlling Misbehavior in England, 1370-1600*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 57, 65-6.

⁴⁴⁵ Goffman, *Relations in Public*, p. 58.

⁴⁴⁶ See Milgram, *The Individual in a Social World*, p. 29.

rejected. It can feel as if a sense of one's own self-determination is at stake, and that fellow travellers' behaviour has become allegorical of broad socio-political battles of will. For Goffman, the peculiarities of any given situation is the active, variable element, and human participants' vanities, aims and desires a given.⁴⁴⁷ This seems not only an unhelpful separation of material and psychological parameters; it also blocks the possibility of willed deviation from behavioural norms. The train carriage is not simply a materially defined space: it is also economically constituted, emotionally charged and politically inscribed. It is microcosmic of societal pressures to conform, and therefore, as Ahmed describes, occasions 'the possibility of not being compelled by an external force ... the capacity to say or enact a "no" to what has been given as instruction'.⁴⁴⁸ The loud passenger who disregards others can be thought of as 'too full of will, a fullness that is also narrated as an emptying or theft of will from others'.⁴⁴⁹ It is this negative willfulness that is emblematic of the tragedy of the commons, where an individual's actions result in the degradation of conditions for the group. Some sociological theories would consider this in terms of an aggregate result of conflicting individual desires, or as the deviation from consensually maintained norms. Triadic semiotics, on the other hand, enables us to think of the situation as a recursive process in which responses, actions and their reticulated consequences feedback into the environment as further causes or inferences of further responses, which in turn modify the environment and affect all inhabitant, responsive agents. The obvious, monumental extrapolation of the tragedy of the commons is climate change, and to rethink it through semiotics would call for a deeper understanding of the further reticulated effects of energy generation and consumption. Tussles for soundspace in the train carriage may seem a trite example in comparison, but if one was to deal with its difficulties by fleeing the site, by travelling in the privacy of one's own car, for example, this would be to evade one small tragedy by participating in one of a far greater magnitude. On the other hand, as Ahmed argues, the 'willful subject' swerves or deviates from given straight-line trajectories, breaking with compelling external

⁴⁴⁷ Goffman, *Relations in Public*, p. 59.

⁴⁴⁸ Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*, p. 12.

⁴⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

forces, and with that which has long been secured as a collective will and is no longer visibly apprehended as that which has been willed – that is, she breaks with the habitual. And it is precisely this wilfulness – this resolve to *not* reproduce a regular pattern or routine route through the semiotic web – that is required to achieve deviation from the habits and assumptions that have led us to the potentially linear narrative of rising sea levels.

Below I will be exploring further what it is about the train carriage that encourages our found phrase to flourish – not to reproduce itself precisely, but to be drawn into variations of contextually particular roles and function in relation to speaking and listening subjects, to material, social and mental conditions, based in the assumptions and expectations that constitute and represent the train, the railway and beyond. I have broken the phrase down into its constituent words as a way of overriding formal grammatical analysis, to instead essay associationally through the terrain that the phrase maps.

'I': Self, Autobiography, Intertextuality, Hybridity⁴⁵⁰

The co-presence of rail travellers is, in the main, coincidental. And for each traveller, the journey itself is usually part of a plan of some order – one seldom catches a train by accident (although accidentally catching the wrong train is less improbable). The intersection between passengers, then, marks the overlay of different compositional approaches: the improvisatory or responsive, the intentional or coordinated. A single train journey is a disorganised collation of narratives, in various states of structuredness and clarity, and each in process. Each traveller's 'I' will tend to resonate more strongly with him or her than another's 'I', since from the perspective of each traveller, the meaning of 'I' is singular, while that of 'you' changes with context. The 'I' narrates and describes many 'you's; and yet each 'I' becomes the others' 'you'. The train carriage is a

⁴⁵⁰ Although in context 'I'm' is usually uttered as an apostrophied compaction, for the purposes of rigour, here it will be broken down into its constituent 'I' and 'am'.

dynamic network of protagonists each playing a walk-on role or becoming scenery in the autobiographic narratives of others. 'I'm on the train' is coincidentally true for all who overhear, but also undercuts the singularity of a material location. It hints at other locations, other characters elsewhere. It is an intersectional phrase, a hinge between several *Umwelten* and *Innenwelten*. And it has become increasingly apparent, as this phrase is raked over for its contextual implications, that it is not a statement of self-assured fact, but a marker of a relational, unstable, performative, prismatic scene in which the personal and collective are recursively interdependent. Similarly, in contemporary literary theory, the autobiography has developed from a representational mode towards 'self-enacting, self-reflexive verbal structures' through which identity is performed.⁴⁵¹ In practice, autobiography is a site of contention between the singular, autonomous self and decentred, constructed cultural and social identities. In Benveniste's terms, it is a combination of discourse and history, of phenomenology and of narration.⁴⁵² It is the intersection between 'I' and 'we'. In semiotics it is a shifter and an indexical sign: that is, a *sin-sign* that is directly related to a particular utterer, and a *legi-sign* that is directly relatable to anyone who utters it. It is the intersection between the self as individual and the self as a species type. It is also a means for the past self and the current self who speaks to attain an illusion of correspondence or even unity.⁴⁵³ The 'I' becomes a subject through the inscription of an interior *and* an anterior. It is the intersection between 'I am' and 'I was'.

The inappropriateness of autobiography, discussed in Chapter One, has been attributed to its proximity to the confession as a legal or religious act.⁴⁵⁴

Confession as truth-telling introduces social structures of verification, judgement and punishment, and establishes a site of power contestation, of valuing and

⁴⁵¹ William C. Spengeman, *Forms of Autobiography* (New Haven: Yale, 1980), p. xvi.

⁴⁵² Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, p. 206.

⁴⁵³ See Domna C. Stanton, 'Autogynography: Is the Subject Different?', in *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, ed. by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), pp. 131–44 (p. 136).

⁴⁵⁴ See Leigh Gilmore, 'Policing Truth: Confession, Gender, and Autobiographical Authority', in *Autobiography & Postmodernism*, ed. by Kathleen Ashley, Leigh Gilmore and Gerald Peters (Amherst, MS: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), pp. 54–78.

devaluing discourses of identity. For Leigh Gilmore this site is not private, but bound up in cultural practices of policing and resistance that relate to the church/state's control of what can be said, but which also include the codified practices of psychoanalysis. The confessor and the listener/reader perform in relation to discourses of truth, and the confessor's identity emerges 'not as a thing in itself patiently awaiting the moment of revelation but as the space from which confessions issue'.⁴⁵⁵ Philippe Lejeune seems to support the policing role of the reader/listener, who verifies a text or denounces it as fraud, through the 'pact' of autobiography.⁴⁵⁶ The name on the flyleaf of the book (or in our case, the individuality of the speaking person) constitutes the social contract of autobiography, 'a pledge of responsibility of a *real person*'.⁴⁵⁷ And so the expectation of 'speaking for the state of one's soul' persists.⁴⁵⁸ Foucault, too, asserts that the confession is a ritual of discourse, a mutual performance of speaker/writer and listener/reader that produces intrinsic modifications – exoneration, redemption, purification – in the person who articulates it.⁴⁵⁹ In our situation, the statement of fact is not likely to be construed as a confession; but its opposite – a lie – would certainly be remarked: 'I'm nearly there', when the train has just pulled out of the station, for instance. The utterance here introduces a sully effect, making all who hear and do not protest complicit in the deceit.

An autobiographical text might present an empirical picking over of particular conditions and events, presenting them as referents and even generators of the text, but in doing so it simplifies the complexity from which these salient moments have been selected. 'I am on the train' is a simple statement of material fact that cannot be refuted in most circumstances, but it does not account for all that is occurring. The autobiographer re-presents and re-structures events, motives and effects to generate an account, a story, which, through the convenience of its neat packaging, signals that it cannot be a reality in full. All

⁴⁵⁵ Gilmore, 'Policing Truth', p. 54.

⁴⁵⁶ See Philippe Lejeune, 'The Autobiographic Pact', in *On Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), pp. 30–30.

⁴⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.11.

⁴⁵⁸ Gilmore, 'Policing Truth', p. 58.

⁴⁵⁹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Pantheon, 1978), pp. 61–2.

autobiography, then, is an aesthetic construction and abstraction.⁴⁶⁰ Even our plain old phrase has been crafted not to draw too much attention to itself – its charmless rhetoric is not unintentional or without effect. Paul de Man proposes that all assumptions that the life produces the autobiography must be displaced by the recognition that the autobiographic process produces the life, ‘that whatever the writer *does* is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and is thus determined, in all its aspects, by the resources of the medium’.⁴⁶¹ His deconstructionist approach breaks down the distinction between referential and fictional texts, and rolls the autobiographic over into creative literature, since autobiography, or the figuring of the self, does not rely solely on the referent, but a ‘whirligig’ of undecidability between construction and description.⁴⁶² The autobiographic is, he proposes, not a genre, but a figure of reading that occurs to some degree in all texts. In the openly autobiographic text the author ‘declares himself the subject of his own understanding’,⁴⁶³ and produces in the reader a ‘specular moment that is part of all understanding’, which ‘reveals the tropological structure that underlies all cognitions, including knowledge of the self’ (where ‘tropological’ is a metaphor or figurative interpretation).⁴⁶⁴ The ‘I’ is the function of the rhetorical practices of figuring, and of the anticipation of being read (or in our case, heard) in the context of another ‘I’. And so, since the parameters are dispersed between text and context, writer/speaker and listener, neither the self nor the text can be fully resolved.

This intermeshing of ‘I’s comprises a field of acute intertextuality. ‘I’, as a sign with multiple objects to which it relates, operates like Kristeva’s ‘poetic word’, which is ‘polyvalent and multi-determined, adhering to a logic exceeding that of codified discourse and fully comes into being only in the margins of recognized

⁴⁶⁰ Indeed, Paul de Man swept away the distinction between history and aesthetics when he denied the generic specificity of autobiography. That an autobiography may be conducted in verse, or that it might diverge from its referent through phantasms and dreams, inductively demonstrates its generic instability. See Paul de Man, ‘Autobiography as De-Facement’, in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), pp. 67–81.

⁴⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

⁴⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁴⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁴⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

culture.⁴⁶⁵ In contrast to Saussurian semiology, which sacrifices the speaker or writer to a sign system, Kristeva insists that the speaking subject, and speech as a practice, be rehabilitated. Each speaking subject delineates a particular meaning, an authored route through the infinite terrain of semiotic possibilities. 'I am on my way'. 'I'm late.' 'I'm early.' 'I'm leaving you.' In this light we can think of the train carriage as carnivalesque, in Bakhtin's formulation, as developed by Kristeva, where to acknowledge the multitude of 'I's is to admit the influence of play, pleasure, desire, fantasy, intuition, psychological drives and all the other consciously and unconsciously motivated responses of a plethora of subjects. Our train carriage is brimming with interlocking autobiographic subjects who all hear a statement of simplified fact that can equally apply to themselves, and these listening subjects, these commensurate 'I's, subsist not only in a self-narrativising ego, but also a phenomenological pre-reflective spontaneous selfness, or *ipseity* – 'the very being of consciousness'.⁴⁶⁶ Intertextuality can be extended further too, beyond the social and sensory selves that are seated or stood within the train carriage, to those who infiltrate it via other medational means: by the telephone, of course, but also via adverts, newspapers, novels, emails, documents on laptops and so on. The train carriage is bustling with live, dead and imaginary egos and *ipseities* whose senses, cognition and biographies (narrated by self or other) overlap with and diverge from those of the traveller. 'I am on the train, while my friend texts me from the pub to say she is early, while I see from a newspaper that a 16-year-old German girl tries to return home from Iraq, where she fought with Isis, while in the book in the bag beneath my seat an imagined nineteenth century woman and man meet on a train station platform.'

Such intertextual extensivity undermines the conventional coding of women's autobiographic as being concerned with the private and domestic. Where modern redistributions of labour, legal rights and everyday attitudes have conventionally recognised the public domain of politics and work, and the qualities of control and rationality, to be the province of men, introspection

⁴⁶⁵ Kristeva, 'Word, Dialogue, and Novel', p. 65.

⁴⁶⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, (London: Methuen, 1943), p. 76.

becomes endemic to the decoding of women's writing.⁴⁶⁷ As a quotidian polarity, this no longer holds, but literary critics have historically drawn gendered distinctions between the totalised and the prismatic subject. Mary Mason, for example, takes Augustine and Rousseau as exemplary of male strategies of self-representation, and Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe of the female. Mason characterises Augustine's *Confessions* as the presentation of the self as a 'stage for a battle of opposing forces' in a drama complete by a 'climactic victory ... [of] spirit defeating flesh', while Rousseau presents an 'unfolding self-discovery where characters and events are little more than aspects of the author's evolving consciousness'.⁴⁶⁸ Early female mystical writers, on the other hand, ground their identity in relation to a chosen other – in these cases a divine figure, but in subsequent secular writers' autobiographies this role might be fulfilled by husband, children or some other alterity. Where the woman writing in the Middle Ages performs an act of deviance, the contemporary writing woman constitutes herself as multiply voiced, motivated and coercible in a heterogeneous, multivalent symbolic order. And this relationalism is considered political, since it produces an 'I' that is a fabric of various ontologies, practices and relations, which is in itself a denial of the 'phallogocentric order of totalized self-contained subject present to itself'.⁴⁶⁹

But this relationism can be problematic. It can be difficult to differentiate between a critical manifestation of female relatedness and acquiescence to cultural norms whereby a woman defers to others. A preoccupation with human relations in autobiography by women can simply reproduce oppressive hegemonic structures. Recent discourses of discontinuity, digression and fragmentation can help us out of this dilemma, however. 'Anthematic subjectivity', as Elizabeth Deeds Erath calls the fragmented and ever-fluid subject, derives from the 'anthemion', a complex floral pattern which develops not through precise repetition, but rhythmic reiteration. One can imagine our phrase

⁴⁶⁷ See Elizabeth W. Bruss, *Autobiographical Arts: The Changing Situation of a Literary Genre* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1976).

⁴⁶⁸ Mary G. Mason, 'The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers', in *Women, Autobiography, Theory*, p. 321.

⁴⁶⁹ Stanton, 'Autogynography', p. 140.

set to the rhythm of the train's rattles and rockings, each utterance bearing its different connotations as neither reinterpretation nor reapplication, but a remaking of the phrase in situ and in full relation to all who hear it. This is a universal condition beyond gender identity, where the transference of attention is from structure on to codes, from the display of difference on to processes of production.⁴⁷⁰ This emphasis on process gives us access to the minutiae of relations that make up an utterance, gesture or response, whereby we can observe the consequences of mediating evaluations and instigations as a situation unfolds.

In the context of the autobiographical text, this has immense bearing on established ideas of subject generation. Where it has been widely accepted that the individual is a discursive and contradictory bundles of impulses and drives, striving towards an impossible self-possession, this 'anthematic' refiguring requires an in situ description of myriad relations unfurling across materials, entities and scales. Related subjects and objects, each set at varying angles, produce not neat mirrorings or diametric contrasts, but disorienting skewed reflections, glimpsed through parallelograms of negative space between seats, around bulkheads and through vestibule door windows. This scene in the carriage could be conceptualised by way of Peter Sloterdijk's 'foams' – the spatial plurality through which the phenomenologies of intimacy and symbioses within the multitude are animated, so that the co-isolated co-exist as a temporary community.⁴⁷¹ But the train's carriages are not necessarily places of social aggregation, in Sloterdijk's terms. An individual's presence is predicated on the material function of the train; and the train's political function is not constituted by the activities conducted within it, but across the broader network in which the train participates. The material outcome of the train journey is not up for negotiation for the average passenger, and the train is not so much a machine for the production of consensus, as a vessel in which an uneasy stasis is habitually weathered until relocation is achieved. Unlike the assembly hall, the circus big

⁴⁷⁰ Elizabeth Deeds Erath, 'Agency in the Discursive Condition', in *Practicing History*, pp. 99–110.

⁴⁷¹ Peter Sloterdijk, 'Foam City', *Log*, 9 (Winter/Spring 2007), 63–76.

top or the stadium, where the apparent unity of publics, communities and nations is staged through the mass vocalising of ‘aye’ or ‘hooray’, in the train carriage expressive excess is not the norm. It is rare that voices accrue into consensus; and dissensus is commonly internalised or translated into evasive or policing micro-actions. Although our phrase applies to all who hear it (excepting the person on the other end of the telephone), it is not cried out in unison. Beyond the ‘we’ of small groups of coordinated co-travellers, use of the collective pronoun would be correct only in temporary and strictly material terms.⁴⁷² The ‘we’ of passengers is a series of ‘I’s held in weak association. The surface tension of the ‘foam’ that constitutes the train carriage is low.

‘Am’: Philosophies of Time, Ontology of Performance

The present tense of the verb ‘to be’ participates in the construction of a statement of ontology that is particular to a moment in time. It is, loosely speaking, historicising. More specifically, ‘am’ operates in reference to three distinct temporal frameworks and consciousnesses, which Peter Osborne terms ‘phenomenological’, ‘historical’ and ‘cosmological’: the first being the time of personal experience, or duration; the second being of social and cultural narratives, and the third the time of the planets and consequently the calendar and the clock – that is, chronological time.⁴⁷³ The experience of train travel is exemplary of the overlap, interrelatedness and contradictions of these three temporal frameworks. Firstly, I am experiencing the journey as being longer than one hour and ten minutes because I have forgotten to bring a book with me. Secondly, the train is running on the same day that floods in Gujarat killed over 200 people. Thirdly, the train runs to a fixed timetable pegged to ‘railway time’, which, as we have seen, precipitated the establishment of global time standardisation; and it is this, along with the homogenisation of labour time and

⁴⁷² Although one can imagine a carriage full of people becoming a ‘we’ in adverse conditions – when communicating with a rescue party following a chronic breakdown, for example, in dangerous weather.

⁴⁷³ See Osborne, ‘One Time, One History?’, in *The Politics of Time* (London: Verso, 1995), pp. 30–68.

the universal equivalence of money, that has produced the conditions for standardisation and synchronization of events on a global scale. According to Osborne, capitalism has ‘universalised’ history, establishing ‘systematic relations of social interdependence on a planetary scale (encompassing non-capitalist societies), thereby providing a single global space of temporal co-existence of coevalness’.⁴⁷⁴ All events and actions are now quantifiable by and relatable to world standard time. But, as he also points out, this has not unified history, since chronology remains abstract, indifferent to ‘the concrete multiplicity of the rhythms of different social practices’.⁴⁷⁵ The train is not a totalising historical form that subordinates particular experience, but an extrinsic social and technical form that facilitates personal narratives and world histories.

As Latour writes in quotation of Michel Serres, who repeats Charles Péguy’s *Clio*: ‘we are exchangers and brewers of time’.⁴⁷⁶ Any given site is an accrual of material, mental and social consequences of prior interpretations and instigations, the effective scope of which can be minutes, days, centuries, aeons. Just as the DIYer uses the latest cordless drill as well as a hammer, the principle of which has not changed for hundreds of thousands of years, the railway is an amalgam of adaptations of the late-neolithic wheel and up-to-the-minute low-fire-hazard, diesel-resistant heat shrink cable identification systems. A somatically focussed essay on train travel might mention the atavistic thrill of a landscape blurred through relative motion, the modern psychosocial discomforts of proximity to others and the effects of recent developments in heating and filtration systems. Or one could write on the various temporally inflected states of mind invoked through travelling. One might, for instance, describe the journey in Hegelian transcendental historical terms, where redemption is dependent on the realisation of an ideal future: that is, arrival at the destination. The journey in progress is teleological, but rather than the perfection of humanity or the construction of a utopian society, the goal is simply controlled relocation. This is at best ‘endism’, or ‘the predetermination of the future as both ground and result

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 34.

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 34.

⁴⁷⁶ Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, p. 75.

of a totalizing hermeneutic of the past'; at its worst, it is the passive state of waiting for history to happen.⁴⁷⁷ Other passengers-become-scenery could be thought of as entering the state of timelessness associated with non-historical, non-human entities, or with Roger Caillois's 'psychasthenia' where, having momentarily rescinded socialised life, they deploy the mimetic magic of certain insects to apparently return to inanimate matter.⁴⁷⁸ From the perspective of most travellers, though, whose consciousness is only temporarily turned inwards, the train journey is neither an end in itself, nor a means to an end. It is a durational stage in a continuum of states and actions. Immanent within the journey is a tendency towards a new historical form that surpasses the horizon of arrival. For some the train journey might be thought in the non-linear terms of Derrida's 'weak' messianism, where the present does not progress steadily towards arrival, but holds within it the emancipatory promise of a future-to-come that is out of joint with the present.⁴⁷⁹ 'I'm on the train' is pregnant with recognition that there is a 'you' which constitutes a future outside the train. Benjamin's messianism, too, negates the linearity of progress, but constructs causality retrospectively, with the past in constellation with the present, or 'now-time'.⁴⁸⁰ 'I am on the train, and if I hadn't caught it just in time, as I did, with seconds to spare, I wouldn't be on my way to you now. Our future together was contained in the moment I decided to skip buying a sandwich for the trip.'

Within phenomenological traditions of the philosophy of time, subjective experience is faced with the problem of the objectivity of cosmological time. Here, durational experience (the 'time of the soul') and the indifference of the clock ('the time of the world') are understood to be incommensurable, of different orders altogether.⁴⁸¹ Paul Ricoeur, in *Time and Narrative*, ascribes this

⁴⁷⁷ Here Osborne is referring to the 'endism' expounded by Francis Fukuyama in the essay 'The End of History?', *The National Interest*, 16 (Summer 1989), 3–18, and subsequent book *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Penguin, 1992). Osborne, *The Politics of Time*, p. 36.

⁴⁷⁸ See Roger Caillois, 'Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia', in *The Edge of Surrealism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 91–103.

⁴⁷⁹ See Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (London: Routledge, 1994).

⁴⁸⁰ See Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', *Illuminations* (London: Pimlico, 1999), pp. 245–55.

⁴⁸¹ Osborne, *The Politics of Time*, p. 47.

incommensurability to an aporia between eternity, history and an individual's experience.⁴⁸² For Ricoeur, narratives are attempts to resolve this aporia through structure and schema, which Osborne encapsulates as 'mediation [...] in the form of the "reinscription of lived time on cosmic time", or an "imperfect mediation" of the human and the cosmic'.⁴⁸³ It seems astonishing that we can switch attention with such fluidity between temporal, historical and narrative frames within a single sentence, when the complexities and implications of their interrelation is so difficult to think philosophically. But indeed, in our on-board situation, we participate in multidimensional, recursive, mediating relations: between the individual passenger and the train, with an independent 'outside' analogous to nature in a classical model, and between these multiple moments of external referencing and the totalizing singular train. 'I am on the train', as spoken and overheard, exemplifies multiple overlapping portrayals of the train-as-type and as durational experience, which stands in mediated relation to the precise context of a singular, materially objectifiable and timetabled train. That is, reutterances of our phrase converge on the singular, material here and now, while also expressing their geographically and thematically dispersed significances. Any consequent historical convergence between utterers and/or hearers of the phrase is speculative: 'I am on the train, which despite being eleven minutes late (due to unknown events in the work routine of an unknown other or others) is bearing me towards future encounters and events in my own ongoing narrative, and which hopefully will not derail or be targeted by terrorists, thus becoming a world historical event in itself that is also the moment of totalisation of my life's narrative and those of my fellow passengers'.

For some practitioners of and commentators on contemporary performance, chronological time is 'inherently foreign to performance', representing the oppressive regimes of logic and capital to be unlearned and emancipated from.⁴⁸⁴ One might say it is chronic-logical. Benjamin's messianic moment, on the other

⁴⁸² See 'The Experience of Time', Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, I, pp. 5–30.

⁴⁸³ Osborne, *The Politics of Time*, p. 46.

⁴⁸⁴ Branislav Jakovljević, 'Now Then – Performance and Temporality: Not once, not twice...', *Performance Research: On Time*, 9.3 (2014), 1–8 (p. 7).

hand, is considered desirable since, unlike the ‘homogenous, empty time’ of the clock,⁴⁸⁵ it refers to ‘the possibility that each moment within the everyday may be lit by the spark of wonder’.⁴⁸⁶ Such non-linearity suggests that a ‘structure of the possible’ is achieved through the abandonment of representational and temporal normativity.⁴⁸⁷ But the rejection of abstract time has often been to the detriment of historical time. The insularity of the performative present, or the coevalness of the ‘different time’ of all performances, is misread as a universal timelessness.⁴⁸⁸ This attitude among certain communities of performance practitioners, commentators and curators has been inherited from Peggy Phelan’s insistence that: ‘Performance honors the idea that a limited number of people in a specific time/space frame can have an experience of value which leaves no trace afterward ... Performance’s independence from mass reproduction is its greatest strength.’⁴⁸⁹ Under these circumstances, the moment of performance is obliterated by image-based documentation, which ‘attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology’.⁴⁹⁰ In this ontology of performance, repercussions and reverberations become secondary; narrative is disabled, since the viewing and performing subject is a singular generator of an idiosyncratic significance unhinged from history. Webs of memory and association (the past and co-presents) go unacknowledged, and intertextuality is neglected in favour of a sole source of immediate experience. Representation of subjective experience (i.e., a narrative inscription of the self on history or vice versa) is considered illegitimate; the phenomenological eclipses the historical; the instant is stillborn, without future.

⁴⁸⁵ Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, p. 252.

⁴⁸⁶ Jeff Stewart, ‘A Shared Meal’, in *Performance and Temporalisation: Time Happens*, ed. by Simon Grant, Jodie McNeilly and Maeva Veerapen (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 77–87 (p. 78).

⁴⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁴⁸⁸ For an anthropologically focused discussion on the splintering and historicising of perceptions of performance time by ‘the whole performance sequence’ and ‘layering of seeings’, see Richard Schechner, *Between Theatre and Anthropology*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), pp. 16–21, 297.

⁴⁸⁹ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 149. In the UK this community centres on the Live Art Development Agency, and its tenets are especially prevalent in the current pedagogical structuring of the Royal College of Art’s Performance Programme, where I occasionally teach.

⁴⁹⁰ Phelan, *Unmarked*, p. 145.

But this is a harsh rereading of an ontology of performance that is just one among many. More broadly, there is a mixed ecology of performance temporalities, where the politics of participation in ‘empty time’ and in the stratified time of social and cultural histories are acknowledged. A performance is as likely to constitute heterogeneous temporalities, which feel in turn concrete and abstract, or temporal maladjustments, such as ‘syncopation, untimeliness, belatedness, hyperactivity, slowness’, which can be interpreted as mediations between phenomenological and historical temporalities.⁴⁹¹ Tradition, duration, repetition, seriality, unfolding, expansion, crescendo, declination, coincidence are all temporally structured, and can be figured in relation to the historically specific technological, economic and social apparatuses of which they are consequences and to which they contribute context. In terms of our performative in-train phrase, ‘am’ is a marker of multidimensional temporal ontology, and all the historical conditions that the present tense implies: ‘I’m on the train ... again. And it’s eleven minutes late ... again. When will a government impose a cap on the private rent sector to save me from this deadening reiteration of the daily commute, or nationalise the railway and administrate it through a non-ministerial, apolitical department?’

‘On’: Movement, Scale, Anxiety

Why are we ‘on’ a train, and not ‘in’ it? It contains us, in the topological sense of containment: there are walls/sides, a floor/base and a ceiling/lid. The doors and windows close so that when the train is moving it is difficult – or in many cases impossible – to fall out of the train. Note that we would fall ‘out’ of a train, even if we tend not to be ‘in’ one. Are we ‘on’ one – as opposed to ‘under’ it? Perhaps ‘I’m on the train’ conveys the simple *jouissance* that we have successfully negotiated the gap between the platform and the train.

⁴⁹¹ Jakovljević, ‘Now Then’, p. 6.

Or perhaps that ‘on’ relates to the movement implied in phrases like ‘on the move’ or ‘on my way’. When we are in something – in a room, in a fix – the implication is that we are static. The sensation of movement might be slight, but the sighted train passenger can see that they are moving, possibly at great speed. But though the view rushes past, parallel with the direction of travel, there is no corroborating sight of a vanishing point behind or ahead. Movement in the most pertinent direction – towards the destination or from the origin – is abstracted. The ‘on’ of ‘on my way’ is more a positional metaphor that figures the journey, the ‘way’, as a linear trajectory through imagined continuous space, as a line that links A and B, and on which the train is currently located at some point. To an extent this is literally the case – the train is indeed between point A and point B, and there are (hopefully) continuous tracks that join these two points – but this is no simple, idealised trajectory made of the single substance ‘line’. The railway line is, in fact, composed of a massive number of affordances, actions and instruments. It is a precise choreography of friction, combustion, conduction, insulation, oscillation, switching, surging, conversion, regulation and so on, which we choose to bundle into a much less intimidating, more folksy sounding ‘way’. And importantly, it is ‘*my way*’: the autobiographical drives the narrative, with all others in the carriage temporary extras.

We can claim to be ‘in’ a car, and so perhaps it is a matter of scale that we are expressing with this ‘on’. A car can be sat in and its bounding sides reached by the average leaning limb-extended body. The physical edge of a train, on the other hand, is beyond an individual’s reach. We cannot even see how many carriages the train is composed of once we are sat in our seats. But when we are sat in (or on?) our seat we are, more accurately, seated in a train carriage, not a train. The train is a composite object made up of carriages and a locomotive engine. To claim to be ‘on’ a train, then, is in part recognition that we cannot be ‘in’ it, since it is not a single container. It is an assemblage of metal and plastic and humans and paper and electricity and silicon and friction and combustion and conduction and insulation and oscillation and switching and surging and conversion and regulation and... While we might be able to guess at, or in rare

cases truly understand, the workings of this and other technological assemblages that underpin our daily existence, we simplify their overwhelming complexities in order to use them. We prefer to be ‘on the train’ than in a rigid container borne along at great speeds by a finely controlled series of potentially violently incompatible processes. ‘On the train’ provides the illusory safety of vagueness.

In starker light we can see we entrust our lives to technologies that are beyond the expertise of most. We have little or no control over the means of regulation, production or maintenance of such ‘indispensable’ utilities. Even the most modest expectation – that the train door will open at the press of a button – takes for granted numerable potential errors and faults in technological and administrative systems which are global in scope and utterly opaque in structure, and it places trust in those who manage and maintain these systems through interlocking chains of command and skills. Immediate mastery by the user is impossible; trust is extended to an improbable range of disinterested parties. Trust can be thought of as inversely related to clarity. If a series of events, actions or thought processes were in continual view, then trust would not be necessary. But dislocations and occlusions abound: the workings are trapped behind metal or plastic façades, half a mile or a continent or a hemisphere distant, and possibly displaced in time too. Trust in these systems is a necessary result of their ambiguities, and yet where there is ignorance there is usually grounds for cynicism. We find ourselves in a state of ambivalence, caught between distrust of the hidden and distrust of that which has been made apparent. Indeed, modernity has been described *in toto* as intrinsically double-edged, cultivating deference and suspicion, comfort and anxiety.⁴⁹² And as we have seen in the previous chapter, the train is an exemplar of this.

Where passengers deal with onboard community life through gestures and micro-actions, the rail companies conduct the business of producing and

⁴⁹² See, for example, an account of the imaginative history of the industrial revolution in Jennings, *Pandaemonium*; or an institutional analysis of modernity in Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*; or an exposition of anomie in Émile Durkheim, *Suicide: a study in sociology* (London: Routledge, 1952).

managing trust in equivalent, but scaled-up performative means. At points of individual access the ticket office operative, the onboard guard or conductor, the helpline operator and customer service representative are trained in rhetoric that implies personability and empathy: 'I am sorry to announce that...'. Beyond the scale of interpersonal encounter, too, societies establish regulatory bodies that monitor processes and distribute licences, commissions or contracts, while consumer watchdogs publicise transgressions and recommend procedural or policy change. This all amounts to a performance of the fiction that the train user and the telephone caller can be protected from malpractice, accidents and incompatibility. It is a pretence of communication, or 'deliverance for those looking for salvation in connectivity'.⁴⁹³ It is a theatrics of trust in immense interlocking structures of technical assemblages that no one can realistically hope to predict or control. And it is symptomatic of what Stiegler refers to as the 'control society', which oversees these ever more complex and interrelated systems and suppresses individual and collective 'spirit', to the point that outbreaks of aggressive, drive-based acts – antisocial behaviour, crime, riots – constitute a symbolic misery.⁴⁹⁴

As we have seen, Latour complains of sociologists' tendency to use words like 'society', 'power', 'structure' and 'context' to 'connect vast arrays of life and history, to mobilize gigantic forces, to detect dramatic patterns emerging out of confusing inter-actions, to see everywhere in the cases at hand yet more examples of well-known types, to reveal behind the scenes some dark powers pulling the strings'.⁴⁹⁵ These vast mysterious edifices – the train company, the government, the Man – are experienced only partially in the immediate environment through which one conducts everyday life. But as Latour says: 'the time has come to have a much closer look at the type of aggregates thus assembled and at the ways they are connected to one another.'⁴⁹⁶ And yet flat ontologists and vital materialists such as Bennett assert that individuals are 'incapable of bearing *full* responsibility

⁴⁹³ Sloterdijk, 'Foam City', p. 63.

⁴⁹⁴ Bernard Stiegler, *Uncontrollable Societies of Disaffected Individuals* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), p. 17.

⁴⁹⁵ Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, p. 22.

⁴⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

for the effects' of these assemblages.⁴⁹⁷ As mentioned in Chapter Two, Bennett describes the electrical grid not as a human construction that fulfils a given function, but a 'volatile mix' of actants. The conglomeration of forces, tendencies and capacities can never be resolved into a single organism with overruling control of its constituent parts; a black-out occurs through agency distributed across its continuum, extruding from many sites. Bennett does not say how much, if any, responsibility one can take for the material conditions of the grid. But we can, I would suggest, take responsibility for how much we are willing to know, how much, in Haraway's terms, we are willing to learn to see. As Arendt warns: 'The rule by Nobody is not no-rule, and where all are equally powerless we have a tyranny without a tyrant'.⁴⁹⁸ And as Boltanski and Chiapello rigorously demonstrate in their description of network capitalism, where chains of mediators, detours and actors operating at a distance, possibly without knowledge of one another and potentially with divergent intentions, make it extremely difficult to level accusations of exploitation at any one body – individual, institutional or incorporated.⁴⁹⁹ We are on the train, abstractedly much of the time, but if we desire more political traction, an awareness of the interrelated processes that draw us to and keep us on the train would go some way to understanding a site not only socially and in the present tense, but materially, less tenuously, less vaguely 'elsewhere'. 'I'm on a Japanese manufactured train, on a network where the operator's contract is about to expire, and the shortlist selected for the next stage of the procurement process includes bidders owned or part-owned by companies based in the Netherlands, Britain, Italy and Japan.'

'The' / 'A': Generic/Particular, Abstraction, Cliché

Note that it is sometimes 'the train', sometimes 'a train'. One tends to use the definite article if the addressee has prior knowledge of the journey currently

⁴⁹⁷ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. 37.

⁴⁹⁸ Arendt, *On Violence*, p. 81.

⁴⁹⁹ Boltanski and Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, p. 373.

underway, or if it is known that the train journey is a regular and common occurrence. 'The' connotes a more particular understanding of the train in question. 'A train' is generic – it carries no specific information to do with timing or destination – suggesting that the addressee is not primed for the possibility that the speaker is on a train.

In newspaper headlines neither 'a' nor 'the' is used: 'German axe attack on train'; 'Paralympian forced to wet herself on train without accessible toilet'; 'Man who viciously abused dog on train jailed for 8 months'.⁵⁰⁰ The inverted pyramid of news reporting, with the most significant information at the top, makes available only the bald facts. More reading work must be done to reach specific details. While this journalistic writing practice originated, according to some accounts, in the material and cost constraints of the analogue printing press or in the unreliability of the telegraph,⁵⁰¹ it also constitutes a break with the more literary rhetoric of nineteenth-century news writing, supposedly establishing journalism as a scientifically aligned practice based in efficient objectivity. The dropping of the definitive and indefinite article avows the universalism of 'train' as an abstract ideal of theoretical deliberation. The particular *mise-en-scène* is not so important as the generally understood capacities and characteristics of the train, which in the sample headlines above is primarily the contained yet public nature of their carriages. The choice of 'a', 'the' or simply 'train', then, seems to rest on a calculation of how much and what type of knowledge the listener is assumed to require in interpreting the intended communication. Since, as mere passengers, we have little chance of appreciating the precise implications of each individual train, save perhaps the brute difference between 'high-speed' and 'normal' locomotives, or first- and second-class carriages, a functional and a broken-down train, we relinquish particularity and differentiation for a universal category of common properties, an *eidos* based not technical objectivity (specialised track; accommodation of public traffic; conveyance of passengers, and so on), but in

⁵⁰⁰ Random headlines on *Telegraph* and *Guardian* websites accessed through search function 24 July 2017.

⁵⁰¹ See, for example, Joseph R. Dominick, *The Dynamics of Mass Communication* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1990), p. 92.

experience and common sense: 'I'm on a train, so it's noisy and public here and the phone signal might go'.

This in-carriage reductive abstraction is accompanied by another modernist art trope: collage. The train traveller experiences a montage of partial views, decontextualized and fragmented overhearings, surrealist tableaux of body parts brought into improbable encounter. Collage's connotations of violent dislocation are cinematically played out in sightlines and occlusions, screenwipes and sharp edits, which literalise the sorts of ambivalent attitudes we encountered in literary examples in the previous chapter, where technological transport is at once empowering and freighted with risks and frustrations. When 'a' is used, our phrase becomes a conversational shortcut for this generic condition. Semantic loss is offset by the gain of an abstract concept, where the particularities of a train carriage are supplanted by such notions as speed or publicness or connectivity. Derrida suggests that concepts are worn-down metaphors, like coins whose faces have been ground down so that their monetary value, particular to a time and place, is replaced by an infinitely extended but vague value.⁵⁰² Here, meaning passes from the physical to the metaphysical. But in our terrain of the reticulated semiotic web, transcendence is not a relevant term, since the concept of a train is as significant and interpretable an object as an actual train.

While we are thinking of worn-down metaphors, we might ask the question: has our phrase been repeated frequently enough to have become a cliché? Its utterance can certainly produce the sighs and eye rolling that signal such a degraded linguistic form. Elizabeth Barry identifies the cliché as occupying the gap between the dead metaphors that litter language (one-upmanship, the housing ladder and so on) and the idealised philosophical concept.⁵⁰³ Like dead metaphors, the cliché is mechanically repeated. It is pre-authored, but the identity of its author has been lost to history. Like idealised philosophical

⁵⁰² See Derrida, 'White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy', *New Literary History*, 6.1 (Autumn 1974), 5–74 (p. 8).

⁵⁰³ Elizabeth Barry, *Beckett and Authority: The Uses of Cliché* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillian, 2006).

concepts, it conveys a universal idea and retains the ‘faintly beating heart of the metaphor’, although it is an instance of individual eloquence devolved to common ownership.⁵⁰⁴ Our phrase, on the other hand, is not so much a metaphor as a signifier of a seam between ontologies. It does not necessarily operate at the level of language. It is a situational cliché, in which the social context and physical paraphernalia of train travel amount to a rhetorical figure, even if the phrase itself does not. Perhaps it is the situation as a whole that produces an eye-rolling response in those who overhear, in those who are implicated, who recognise its dual state as obvious and transportative. In the mouth of another, the cliché signals vulgar thought, devalued of the specialness of lived experience. And yet, as Barry explores, it can be wielded constructively. In everyday discourse it is a display of social credentials, a signal of membership to a tribe. It can be handled satirically or ironically, or we as listeners can feel a sense of achievement in recognising that it is a cliché. It is argued that cliché recognition, like the intertextual dynamics of autobiography described above, is contingent on the reader/listener, that cliché is a property of the audience as much as the writer/speaker.⁵⁰⁵ Momentarily, then, a new stratification emerges among the anonymous characters who, by chance, inhabit the train carriage. Co-present minds acknowledge, or not, the familiarity of the phrase uttered and the apparent universality of the condition that it applies to. They might reject this universalism and perform value judgements on its utterer. Or they might think nothing of it whatsoever.

‘Train’: Beyond Objectification

As we have seen, the train is not a singular vehicle into which we step. Even in the simplest of understandings, it is a series of couplings of coaches and engines, possibly with integrated buffet cars, and hopefully with toilets. In more rigorous definitions that incorporate the structures directly and indirectly facilitating and

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 9.

⁵⁰⁵ Ibid., pp. 10–11.

maintaining the running of a set of stock, a service, a branch line or a network, the edge of 'train' is not easily identifiable. The platform, the signalling systems, the national and international timetables all contribute to our understanding and experience of train travel. If one is aware of the scope of the technical assemblage, the site is phenomenologically local and cognitively vast. It is, in the literal sense, a network; to point to its singular essence is not possible. To say 'train' is to objectivise, fetishise. Dewey asks us to consider a criminal act where a person in one state sends poisoned candy to someone in another, who eats it and dies. Where, he asks, was the crime committed? For Dewey, the transaction is located 'wherever it has consequences'.⁵⁰⁶ In the case of the railway, consequences spread directly and indirectly throughout, by changes in practices, processes, forms and intentions, by swivels in modes of interpretation and by processes of objectification and abstraction. A train derails and the tracks are inspected, a timetable is redrafted and passengers' moods modulated. As we have seen in the preceding chapter, and in this one, modifications can be precipitated not only by physical events, but also by rhetoric, by linguistic events, by psycho-socially and socio-politically performative texts. Where this chapter has outlined certain sectors of the socio-linguistic constitution of the train carriage, the following chapter will explore some of the techno-economic infrastructures that maintain the systems and processes of the railway.

⁵⁰⁶ 'Part 1: Habit, Conduct and Language: Nature, Communication, and Meaning' [1925], in *The Essential Dewey, Vol. 2: Ethics, Logic, Psychology*, ed. by Larry A. Hickman and Thomas M. Alexander (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), p. 62.

**CHAPTER FIVE:
A PROPOSAL FOR THE UNDERGROUND**

Anticipating Practicalities when Devising for Public Space

When making an artwork for the railway, besides aesthetic, conceptual and ethical considerations, there will be many pragmatic concerns – some for which the artist-producer can prepare, and others that can only be improvised around as they occur. Devising and rehearsing in situ in a train carriage, for example, must be budgeted for, as all involved will need mainline train tickets for every session. If the site is the train between London St Pancras and Gravesend, then return journey, lasting between 21 and 28 minutes each way, currently costs £18.30 per person after 10am. (A Network Railcard will slice off £5.30.) The current timetable would facilitate, within the confines of the traditional eight-hour working day, four return journeys, amounting to £72.20 per person per day (or £52 if they have a railcard).⁵⁰⁷ A budget for a production on the London Underground would be cheaper. If all performers have pay-as-you go Oyster or bank cards, then the daily cap for travelling around zones 1-6 is £12, rising to £28 should the piece need to take in zone nine at the end of the London Overground or Metropolitan lines, or Watford Junction or Shenfield.

A less easily calculable and potentially impeding factor on the Underground, and one that is more prone to unpredictable fluctuations and surges, is carriage and platform overpopulation. Crowding is common at rush hour, which can start as early as 3:30pm; and the network is prone to sudden surges in volume at any point in the day: when a train breaks down or a passenger incident takes a train out of service, or when a large group of tourists or schoolchildren descend. It could be possible, though, to conceive of a piece where something as

⁵⁰⁷ Some of this cost could be circumvented by making a video of the train journey and playing it back in a rehearsal space when initially blocking out the performance, but it wouldn't be advisable to leave rehearsal in situ until too late in the process, since the unpredictability of train travel is one of its most challenging aspects.

fundamental as the number of non-audience individuals present can be unfixed; and it should even be possible to devise something that can accommodate or even make use of uncomfortable swells in body count. Awkward passage through a crowded carriage can be, in everyday life, a fairly tense event to observe. In a performance this can be good material.

In the main, though, performances in sites that are not theatres will aim to be controlled and predictable. Health and safety measures of commissioning or hosting bodies responsible for audience and performers are likely to have a fixing and narrowing effect, where the range of possible outcomes is kept to a predictable minimum. Anticipation becomes a key component of devising and writing in this scenario, which, as Chris Goode suggests, can have taming effects and reduce the specifics of a place to its generic underlying structures. Most theatre, especially that made for ‘unusual sites’, he writes, is ‘made for a generic, vaguely imagined (or completely unimagined) audience, in advance of their arrival, on the basis of a complex of more-or-less sustained assumptions and anticipated conditions’.⁵⁰⁸ To reveal the resultant inflexibility he has devised the ‘cat test’: ‘Let loose a cat in the performance space: if the piece can accommodate and include and refer to the cat, in all its feline unpredictability and unwillingness to comply with the structures of performance, then you’ve got a specific piece.’⁵⁰⁹ By ‘specific’ Goode means a piece that is articulated in such a way that it can change shape to accommodate any given ‘cat’, where a lesser piece would be inflexible, like a code that demands a predictable mode of usage and does not tolerate reflexive creep in its structures.

The aim, then, is to devise a performance that can absorb and respond to unexpected events onsite, and which operates not as inflexible code, but as a series of propositions or interrogatives that elicits response – the unpredictability of which will not compromise the conditions of its continuation. Theatre made

⁵⁰⁸ Chris Goode, ‘All you get is sensory titillation’, *Thompson’s Bank of Communicable Desire*, 8 November 2007 <<http://beescope.blogspot.co.uk/2007/11/all-you-get-is-sensory-titillation.html>> [accessed 18 September 2017].

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid.

for theatres and art made for art galleries have the luxury of (apparently) optimum conditions that will not interfere with the aims of the piece, which, as we have seen in Chapter One, is not the case at all: these forceful conditions have in fact become naturalized, invisible, immanent within practices of making and viewing art and theatre. If these conditions of viewing are transgressed – if the audience does not sit quietly or does not not touch, or if they do not engage – the piece is threatened. The railway, on the other hand, is a vast system, built over decades, premised on the very idea of dealing with a less than ruly public with divergent needs and whims. The railway is always coping and adapting. To continue to deliver a systematic service, despite the unsystematic expectations of and behaviours carried out through it, a sophisticated series of processes are in ongoing development to contain and direct the multitude safely, and to give them what they want: transportation from any point to any other point. As a semiotically saturated environment, it is navigated contingently to a degree, but also expressly constructed, directed and managed. Action, affordance and instrument must align with the desirable purpose, purchase and function at every scale and in every register. Electrical impulsivity, mechanical maintenance, public signage and managerial strategy must all serve the primary motivation of the network. The most efficient channels of operation must be activated; the dangerous or incidental ones must be inert. It is through this strictest of infrastructural organisation that the functional coherence of the railway is achieved and maintained.

Being a passenger on trains affords the merest sliver of insight into how the system as a whole operates. To make a performance that will not be closed down by unknown mechanisms, one must either test them through the processes of devising in situ, or find out about them in advance. The former strategy risks tripping a particular sector of the transport system's apparatus: that which constrains or prohibits the unruly and ejects and potentially punishes the non-compliant. Such ejection is not likely to be generative of knowledge of the corrective structures at work. For insight into the hidden aspects of operation it is advisable to pursue knowledge in advance. Limited knowledge can be obtained

by calling the standard information lines, but when the sort of information sought is other than times and prices, it is necessary to present oneself as something other than a regular passenger to someone other than a customer service assistant. And so to gain an understanding of how to devise and produce a performance on the London Underground, I arranged to speak to Eleanor Pinfield, Head of Art on the Underground, who is embedded within, employed by and has first-hand experience of the possibilities and difficulties of producing artworks within and for the network. What follows is the brief outline of a hypothetical project, with the working title *Platform Homography*:

On a station platform, among the people waiting for trains, the performers are indistinguishable in ordinary clothing. All looks normal from the perspective of the person monitoring the control room video screens. Then, without warning, one performer holds towards one of the platform cameras a sign that bears a few words of text. It is held steady for a few moments before it disappears from view. Then another performer holds up another sign, also bearing words, to a different camera; then another, and another, until all the cameras have been communicated to. The person monitoring the control room video screens will have received, a few words at a time, a message that is only for them.

On sending this proposal I made it clear that I was not pitching an artwork or asking for a commission, but soliciting practical feedback on a piece that would only ever exist in the imagination. I was emphatic that it was a thought experiment, not to be produced; it was a problematic proposal, 'intended to exercise the systems of the underground on paper only'.⁵¹⁰ In fact, I considered it to be entirely unproduceable. I was asking Pinfield to troubleshoot what I perceived to be an insurmountable health and safety issue: the paradigmatic clash between the spectating of art and overseeing the safety of passengers. If workers in the control room were looking at the artwork, they would be neglecting their responsibilities. By proposing a *détournement* of the technological system that

⁵¹⁰ Email from author to Eleanor Pinfield, 23 August 2017.

enables Tfl to cope, I aimed to trigger the sort of bureaucratic measures I imagined to be in place. As it turned out, the primary issues Pinfield and I discussed were not bureaucracy or health and safety: as we will see below, technological, social and aesthetic issues dominated our discussion. Production and curatorial issues were clearly delineated from one another, in part because one of the curator's roles is to shield the artist from institutional processes, but also because the means and ends of curating and production can differ wildly. Where discussion of concepts and aesthetics is nebulous, governed by disparities and convergences in taste, expectations, experience and knowledges, the practicalities are covered, as we will see, by permissions and assessment templates passed along prescribed lines of communication. For further information on these, I conducted a separate interview, outlined below, with Jess Davies-Malloy, a producer for Art on the Underground.

Proposals, Rules, Bureaucracy, Surveillance

The proposal is related to the scientific image, or model, discussed in Chapter One. It is a modelling, or a remodelling, of structures, materials and forces into new significances, in the pursuit of different intentions and through which new theories can be trialled. And it is related to Burrows and O'Sullivan's 'fictioning', which inheres in that 'writing, imaging, performing or other material instantiation of worlds or social bodies that mark out trajectories different to those engendered by the dominant organisations of life currently in existence'.⁵¹¹ More usually, a proposal is intended to generate enthusiasm in those who have the means to bring about its realisation. It is commonly a form of persuasion, of showing a potential future that can be actualised if those being proposed to accept it as desirable. But there is also a history of proposal as provocation, where its unproduceability is not the result of an unfortunate oversight, but a critical ploy to foreground a rule or tendency deemed to be unjust, or to air a radical alternative to an ingrained procedure, an assumption or a neglected area of

⁵¹¹ Burrows and O'Sullivan, *Fictioning*, p. 1.

practice. The Artist Placement Group was established to generate just such frictional and productive exchanges between artists and industry or government departments. Artists placed with companies and institutions were to work to an open brief, not necessarily to produce tangible results, but to precipitate engagement and discussion. The group did not intend to operate at a critical distance, but through practices they considered to be perhaps not continuous with, but contiguous to, practices of business, industry and governance – evidence of which can be found in an internal APG memo of 1970, which suggests that the term ‘artist’ be replaced by ‘environment engineer’ or ‘concept engineer’.⁵¹² It is important to note, however, that APG did not consider the artist to have ‘superior’ knowledge, to operate as a seer or sage, to ‘correct’ the single-minded businessperson or bureaucrat. As John Latham suggests, ‘the influence of [the APG operative] is likely to be ambivalent, ambiguous – it may be incidentally positive or it may be a waste of time’.⁵¹³ The engineering not of actual difference, but of diffractive viewpoints, seems to have been the primary objective.

The critical proposal asks the reader/viewer to use their imagination to transcend the ‘normal’ state of affairs, to anticipate the previously unthought but possible. The proposal’s unproduceability could be testament to the unjust constraints that have rendered it so to date, and which, by extension, constrain creativity more generally. Or unproduceability might be a marker of a proposal that does not need to be produced, for its materials already exist in the imagination of the reader/viewer/listener. Janice Kerbel’s *15 Lombard St* (2000), for example, draws on collective imagination and presents the reader with the tools required to actualise a common transgressive thought.⁵¹⁴ The artwork comprises a slim booklet that lays out a rigorously researched plan to rob Coutts bank in the City of London. It signposts and provides the cognitive means to execute the logical subsequent stage of the piece: an actual bank job. And yet this future state will

⁵¹² Anthony Hudek, ‘Artist Placement Group Chronology’; exh. publicity, ‘The Individual and the Organisation: Artist Placement Group 1966–79’ (London: Raven Row, 27 September–16 December 2012) <<http://www.ravenrow.org/texts/43/>> [accessed 16 October 2017].

⁵¹³ Ibid.

⁵¹⁴ Janice Kerbel, *15 Lombard Street* (London: Bookworks, 2000).

inevitably be curbed by security forces and the artist's and reader's sense of propriety or fear of the law. For Kerbel, projects have often been 'borne out of the need to give form to things that can not otherwise be seen', and to imply a future practical application.⁵¹⁵ The invisibilities that *15 Lombard St* draws on are the interiority of the bank vault, the firm's security and surveillance apparatus and 'the law', the visibility of the first of these being the hypothetical goal, the second the means by which it is achieved, and the third that which curbs any such attempts. As the publisher's publicity copy states:

Kerbel's meticulous plans include every possible detail required to commit the perfect crime. The ubiquitous fantasy of a bank robbery functions as a backdrop for Kerbel's 'play of subversion'. By surveying surveillance Kerbel shows how different systems are interrelated, forming a web of control. Kerbel's aim is not simply to subvert but to emphasise the fact that the idea of absolute control and the fantasy of robbing a bank are interconnected and mutually sustaining.⁵¹⁶

The Coutts vaults and the City police force stand symbolically for the desire for wealth and fear of incarceration, while the actuality of the book thwarts the fulfilment of the former, since it would, on realisation of the proposal, become incriminating evidence. But, as with Wallinger's *State Britain*, the predisposition for contemporary art to identify itself as different from other practices ultimately renders this piece representational – it is not likely to be taken seriously as proof of criminal intent. And yet the ontology of art dominates only as long as *15 Lombard St* remains in proposal form. If anyone were to take the project to its implicit next stage the governing rules and practices of the law would be activated, eclipsing all others, transforming proposal to documentation, artwork to evidence and possibly artist to accessory.

The proposal can be a form of dreaming, of deferring action. It allows that to exist which would be closed down by material, economic or legal obstacles. Or it

⁵¹⁵ Lani Yamamoto, 'Janice Kerbel', *Art Slant* (February 2012). <<https://www.artslant.com/ew/events/show/201993-janice-kerbel>> [accessed 19 September 2017].

⁵¹⁶ '15 Lombard St', Bookworks <<https://www.bookworks.org.uk/node/74>> [accessed 19 September 2017].

can be a thought experiment, where the viability and effect of interleaving practices and ontologies is considered. The critically inclined proposal can challenge ethical codes or legal practices; it can delineate or emulate networks of control. Or it can foreground the ambivalent nature of bureaucratic systems made up of rules and routines intended to protect humans, objects, creatures, sites and ideologies, but which also might be thought of as inhibiting creative 'freedom'. For artist-activists, select rules and prohibitions are to be broken, bent or stretched; or they are to be reinforced to absurd ends, or followed to the letter – a work to rule – to highlight their inherent absurdity. For site-specific writer-makers, a less combative approach would also take into account rules to be adhered to, emphasised or overlooked.

Any given site comprises several bodies and continua of rules and codes. It is governed by overarching laws of the state, overt and enforceable rules pertaining specifically to the site, unenforceable guidelines for movement and behaviour, tacit codes of practice and coercive apparatus such as signage, architectural design and town planning. For Kockelman, rules and regimentation are a disposition of the human species to achieve coherence at varying scales: temporally, at genetic, historical and interactional scales, and between individuals, groups, societies, species. They are 'simultaneously the source and shackle of human creativity'.⁵¹⁷ As Fiona Wilkie points out, a site has a 'repertoire' of appropriate behaviours, which are replicated, altered or ignored by inhabitants and those passing through.⁵¹⁸ These repertoires account for how, as discussed in Chapter Four, appropriate noise levels differ from site to site. Wilkie's example is sitting on the floor: acceptable in a bookshop, but not in a supermarket, and a sign of dissent in particular public spaces. On the train, sitting on the floor can be simply a necessity, but one that becomes of political significance when the person involved is a politician campaigning for the nationalisation of the railways.

⁵¹⁷ See Kockelman, *Agent, Person, Subject, Self*, p. 153.

⁵¹⁸ Fiona Wilkie, 'Kinds of Place at Bore Place: Site-Specific Performance and the Rules of Spatial Behaviour', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 18.3 (August 2002), 243–60 (p. 249).

Wilkie categorises the rules of a space as: 1) physical barriers, constraints and channels of movement; 2) explicit rules stated by the controller of a site; 3) borrowed codes (such as the country code or listed building regulations), and 4) implicit conventions that organise behaviour. In a traditional theatre these rules are enacted by: 1) the fourth wall, seats, auditorium, doors and passageways and so on; 2) such stipulations as the inadmittance of latecomers or the prohibition of drinks in the auditorium; 3) fire safety regulations, and 4) no talking during the performance, and applause at the end.⁵¹⁹ But, Wilkie asks, when a performance is sited elsewhere, which of these rules persist and which fall away? How are new rules instituted and communicated to the audience? There is no automatic rewriting of conventions simply because the theatre is not architecturally present. The theatre is likely to remain active by way of the behavioural repertoire of witting audience members, but absent for those inhabiting the site for other reasons. Similarly with contemporary art, there will be conventions of looking, on the part of the audience, and of making, devising and writing on the part of the artist that are difficult to shrug off, while those who are simply passing through adhere to the rules that are 'native' to the site in its everyday working mode. Pinfield makes mention of these issues when we discuss whether or not an artwork is announced or framed as such:

'something happening very organically without anyone knowing is very hard to achieve. You're briefing a lot of people, and in this place it's very hierarchical, so you tend to brief people above. I think in terms of public, you could not give any information out, and a lot of the time it almost de facto happens that way.'

Station staff would need to know that an unusual activity is art, and that it should not trigger the same responses as other unusual and debarred activities. A regular passenger may well consider our performance an unusual activity, possibly even as art. But someone unused to the environment could feasibly overlook it as just another behaviour they do not recognise.

⁵¹⁹ Wilkie, 'Kinds of Place at Bore Place', p. 248.

The body of rules that I imagined to be most blocking of my proposal was bureaucracy. If one identifies bureaucracy as that which maintains a system's infrastructure, and infrastructure as that which regiments behaviour, its effect can be experienced by the most casual tube passenger, as well as the ensconced employee.⁵²⁰ The imperative of buying tickets and passes, the use of zoning and gradations in price are ways of achieving what Zigmunt Bauman describes as the 'sorting' of individuals into categories of profitability.⁵²¹ And the 'human system' that Pinfield describes – comprising customer service staff on the platforms and in ticket offices, and, unseen by the general public, supervisors and managers, shift rotas, office workers, mess room operatives and unions – is a complex weave of rotas, timetables, controls, imperatives, contracts, regulations and so on, intended to collectively sustain the smooth running of the network. The monolithic black box 'bureaucracy' can be opened up to reveal an articulated system made up of many embedded systems.

The earliest use of the word 'bureaucracy' cited in the *OED* is in the *Times* newspaper on 11 November 1815: 'From that multiplicity of employments ... has sprung that complication of intrigues of wheels within wheels, which is called bureaucracy.'⁵²² Note the industrial connotations of those nested wheels, presaging common perceptions of the cold machinery of procedure. In subsequent citations it is frequently described negatively: 'an inveterate evil of Ireland'; 'a bureaucracy-ridden reign of horror'; 'That vast net-work of administrative tyranny ... which leaves no free agent in all France, except the man at Paris who pulls the wires'.⁵²³ The bureau of bureaucracy is metonymic: the desk stands in for a room or a building or a sector of a city filled with desks, with a multitude of people sitting behind, beside and in front of them. But if one compares the resonance of the word 'bureaucrat' to that of its synonym 'public

⁵²⁰ Behaviour being, in semiotic terms, the relationship between a sign-vehicle and its interpretant, and infrastructure being the channels by which this behaviour is mediated. See Kockelman, *Agent, Person, Subject, Self*, pp. 58–60.

⁵²¹ See Bauman and Lyon, *Liquid Surveillance*, pp. 52–75.

⁵²² 'bureaucracy, n.', *OED*

<<http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.lib.bbk.ac.uk/view/Entry/24905?redirectedFrom=bureaucracy#eid>> [accessed 22 September 2017].

⁵²³ *Ibid.*

servant', the former carries a distinct whiff of overbearing, impersonal rigidity, where the latter suggests selflessness, which could be twisted to imply either gallantry or unctuousness, both of which connote the accommodation of others. As Raymond Williams observes, in Britain the French term was used in recognition of what Thomas Carlyle deemed 'the Continental nuisance' of the governmental offices that were establishing and expanding to control and intervene in the burgeoning trade and industry of the nineteenth century;⁵²⁴ and such rationalism was considered by Friedrich Schlegel to be counter to wit, self-awareness and instinct.⁵²⁵ German Romanticism more broadly was, according to Berlin, an expression of the desire 'to soar into infinity, a feverish longing to break through the narrow bonds of individuality'.⁵²⁶ He proposes that its essence lies neither in the valorisation of the individual nor of collectivity, but in the transformation of consciousness from that which adheres to the principles of logic to that which can comprehend uncertainty, multiplicity, ambiguity and ambivalence. And yet to achieve this, rather than a mode of unfettered, uncensored 'free' creativity, Schlegel counsels structured communication that involves a period of self-restraint, since 'What appears to be unlimited free will, and consequently seems and should seem to be irrational or supra-rational, nonetheless must still at bottom be simply necessary and rational; otherwise the whim becomes willful, becomes intolerant, and self-restriction turns into self-destruction'. In short, one should not 'blurt out everything', but consider the various forces within which one is caught up.⁵²⁷ Today, however, Romantic anti-rationalism tends to valorise the spontaneous and wilfully transgressive or perversely illogical, and cast the bureaucrat as a cowardly sycophant, emotionally stunted technocrat or lobotomised automaton. In 'The Critic as Artist Manifesto', curator Andy Hunt asserts that:

aesthetics is a higher sphere than ethics; and that perversion and criminality are a perfected form of art.

[...] sin is an essential element of progress – it helps assert individuality

⁵²⁴ Raymond Williams, *Key Words* (London: Fontana, 1983), p. 49.

⁵²⁵ See Peter Firchow, 'Introduction', in Friedrich Schlegel, *Lucinde* and *The Fragments* (Minneapolis, MS: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), pp. 3–39.

⁵²⁶ Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1999), p. 15.

⁵²⁷ Schlegel, Fragment 37, in 'Critical Fragments', *Lucinde* and *The Fragments*, p. 147.

and avoids the monotony of conformity. Rules of morality are non-creative and, thus, evil.⁵²⁸

Here ethics and morality are considered a bureaucratic imposition to be resisted by an alternative ethic of indolence, disinterestedness, criminality and the rejection of all that is useful. And yet throughout the manifesto Hunt unironically itemizes, rationalizes and legislates over that which should not be itemized, rationalized or legislated, while constructing a reasoned defence for the resuscitation of such historical categories as Wildean new Hellenism, individualism and art for art's sake.

That which Hunt wishes to disregard, but which I am more interested in engaging with, has been cemented by Max Weber's characterisation of ideal bureaucracy. Since bureaucratic rule is constituted by and sustained through the reiteration of forms, it seems appropriate to reproduce a table generated by David Jaffee, which lays out Weber's schematic appraisal of bureaucracy and its implications for organizational processes and structures.

<i>According to Weber</i>	<i>Implications for Organizational Structure and Process</i>
The regular activities required for the purposes of the organization are distributed in a fixed way as official duties.	Formal job descriptions and job titles; specialization, horizontal division of labor
The organization of offices follows the principle of hierarchy; that is, each lower office is under the control and supervision of a higher one.	Hierarchical structure; authority resides in positions within the hierarchy; vertical division of labor

⁵²⁸ Andy Hunt, 'The Critic as Artist Manifesto', Reading International publicity email, 25 September 2017. Also published as a 'zine: Andy, Hunt, *The Critic as Artist*, (Reading: Reading International, 2017).

Operations are governed by a system of abstract rules [and] consist of the application of these rules to particular cases.	Universalism; rules and regulations that apply to all members of the organizational standardization and uniformity
The ideal official conducts his office [in] a spirit of formalistic impersonality without hatred or passion, and hence without affection or enthusiasm.	Impersonality; no favouritism; no nepotism; impartial decision making
It constitutes a career. There is a system of “promotions: according to seniority or to achievement, or both.	Recruitment, employment, and promotion based on qualifications and achievement; meritocracy; internal labor markets; professionalization
Experience tends universally to show that the purely bureaucratic type of administrative organization is, from a purely technical point of view, capable of attaining the highest degree of efficiency.	Means-end structure of positions and tasks enhances efficiency; organizations interested in efficiency will model structure along ideal-type bureaucratic lines.

Fig. 3: Weber’s Bureaucracy and the Organizational Implications ⁵²⁹

Thus itemised, it becomes clear how bureaucracy is perceived as brittle and dispassionate, and even ruthless. In common parlance, it has become synonymous with ‘red tape’, so called because of the convention of tying important official documents in a red binding tape. But this is to simplify bureaucracy and to weight an interpretation of its forms towards the negatively impersonal and machinic aspects of Weber’s formulation. For one thing, this focus on control excludes agendas of care. Regulation can be facilitating,

⁵²⁹ David Jaffee, *Organization Theory: Tension and Change* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001), p. 90.

protective or equalising. The flip side of unemotional decision-making, for instance, is lack of bias, since a rational organisational instrument might be considered as that which does not favour one class or category over any other. (Although whether this is possible, given that bureaucracies are enacted by humans endowed with weaknesses and beliefs, is a moot point). What is more, bureaucracy is the means by which an organisation's objectives are realised – it is authority in action, and the phenomenological interface of rule. It is, as Charles T. Goodsell describes, the 'moment that the social meaning of governance is created'.⁵³⁰ It is a means of making the law apparent, of responding to the content of the law and of making accountable those in power. Goodsell points out that in constitutional democracies, authority is only temporarily in the hands of the rulers, and their activities are heavily circumscribed by law.⁵³¹ Processes of response, on the part of the ruled, are written into that law in the form of elections, lobbying and protest rights, town council meetings, focus groups and so on, making the collective order adjustable, in theory (although it is contestable that these processes are, in some instances, merely symbolic). Systems of accountability ensure that the electorate can vote in or reject an executive, that monitoring bodies can assess processes for fairness or safety, and that individuals can lodge complaints about their treatment by a system or an individual. Bureaucracy is constituted by all these processes of rule, response and accountability, and renders them perceptible as material events. And the offices of regulation – of employment, say, or immigration or municipal governance – manifest a tangible interface – comprising architecture and personnel – between the law and the governed. The bureaucratic moment is when legislation becomes visible, when discourse becomes action.

And yet red tape is persistently imagined as a barrier, like Duchamp's *Mile of String*, perhaps, obstructing free passage. As Pil and Galia Kollektive point out, bureaucracy is consistently thought 'Synonymous with mediocrity, a petty clinging to power, anti-heroism, tedium and impotency [...] a disease of

⁵³⁰ Charles T. Goodsell, 'The Bureau as Unit of Governance', in Paul du Gay (ed.), *The Values of Bureaucracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2005), pp. 17–40 (p. 29).

⁵³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 18–19.

modernity, which reduces the unique character of every single life to statistical probability and efficiency.⁵³² Weber's impersonal condition of ideal bureaucracy is represented as suffocating, as incompatible with such irrational values such as love, and 'the opposite force to the directness of a lived experience and the truthfulness and decisiveness of real political action'.⁵³³ And it is on this idea – of bureaucracy as oppression – that artists and free-marketeers, left liberals and right anti-federalists often converge. Just as Hunt and others talk of eschewing rules of law, so the Business Taskforce have identified legislation they consider to be barriers to overall competitiveness, to starting a company and employing people, to expanding a business, to trading across borders and to innovation.⁵³⁴ Among the EU legislations that the taskforce has been lobbying to be withdrawn or amended are directives on data protection, health and safety risk assessments, shale gas, pregnant workers, working time (including sickness rights), environmental impact assessments, emissions from fuels, food labelling, soil protection, origin marking on consumer goods, clinical trials and new medicines.⁵³⁵

⁵³² Pil and Galia Kollektiv, 'Some Notes on Art and Bureaucracy: Points for Discussion of Key Areas in Parallel Sessions at the Fourteenth Artists' Regional Meeting', (n.d.) <<http://www.kollektiv.co.uk/Bureaucracy.html>> [accessed 19 September 2017].

⁵³³ Here Kollektiv give the example of *A Matter of Life and Death*, dir. by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger (1946), where love is presented as evidence of extenuating circumstances in a divine court scene. We might also look to the recent Windrush scandal in Britain, where vulnerable individuals suffered as a result of the Home Office's 'hostile environment', or the forceful and unconditional imposition of hardline immigration law. See 'Handling of the Windrush Situation', National Audit Office (5 December 2018) <<https://www.nao.org.uk/report/handling-of-the-windrush-situation/>> [accessed 16 March 2019].

⁵³⁴ 'Cut EU red tape: Report from the Business Taskforce'. The report is signed by Marc Bolland, Marks & Spencer; Glenn Cooper, ATG Access; Ian Cheshire Kingfisher; Louise Makin, BTG; Dale Murray, CBE, Entrepreneur and Angel Investor; Paul Walsh, Diageo, Gov.uk (October 2013) <https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/249969/TaskForce-report-15-October.pdf> [accessed 19 September 2017].

⁵³⁵ 'About', Red Tape Initiative <<https://redtapeinitiative.org.uk/about/>> [accessed 19 September 2017].

Also, at the time of writing, a cross-party Red Tape Initiative project has been established to deal with 'regulatory changes that could benefit both businesses and their employees in a post-Brexit Britain'. There is very little on the project website at this stage to indicate the direction of its findings or rulings, although it has been reported that on the very morning of the Grenfell Fire disaster the panel rejected the dismantling of the Construction Products Regulation (EU 305/2011), which covers 'construction materials, including external cladding, across the EU, to make sure they are safe and fit for use'. Sandra Laville, 'Government-backed "red tape" group looked at EU fire safety rules on morning of Grenfell fire', *Guardian* (22 June 2017)

This attitude to 'red tape' is, I suggest, a mis-identification of the site of agency. The 'system' is often granted a totalised rationalising agency, against which the individual must battle for self-realisation. But, as we might extrapolate from Weber's scheme (which in the twentieth century has been as applicable to private businesses as it has been to public bodies), the ideology of bureaucracy is not reducible to static forms. Legislative and procedural changes are brought about point by point, and are activated by relations that can be traced, described and challenged. And in the twenty-first century, bureaucracy comprises not a monolithic tower of control, but a global network of negotiation between interconnected bureaus that convey and monitor fluctuating flows of information and command between them. No single body has an overview, let alone control, of the whole. As Bauman and David Lyon put it, the modern panopticon has given way to the synopticon.⁵³⁶ By this they mean that the strict hierarchies of command and report have been supplanted by a 'liquid surveillance' system through which individuals' desires are actively encouraged and their fears played upon to keep them in a position of 'voluntary servitude', where self-watching and out-sourcing take the place of obedience and career advancement. Here bosses vanish and the 'watchtowers ... are privatised'.⁵³⁷ Under Arendt's 'rule by Nobody', we surrender all agency and all responsibility to this anonymous sprawl. I would rather back the Kollektive's demand that the critical artist, instead of acting on the perceived dichotomy between bureaucracy and personal freedom, acts instead for 'a just and equal form of management of the social'.⁵³⁸

Kollektive refer their argument to Boltanski and Chiapello's recognition of two distinct forms of critique – social critique, which denounces poverty and exploitation, and artistic critique, which demands liberation and authenticity –

<<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/jun/22/government-backed-red-tape-group-eu-fire-safety-rules-grenfell-fire>> [accessed 19 September 2017].

⁵³⁶ See Bauman and Lyon, *Liquid Surveillance*.

⁵³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁵³⁸ Kollektive, 'Some Notes on Art and Bureaucracy'.

and two associated and often muddled meanings of liberation.⁵³⁹ Boltanski and Chiapello characterise the gains in liberation post-1968 as a rejection of disciplinary, regulatory measures that artistic critique would have identified as cramping conditions for personal autonomy and creative liberation. But this generic form of liberation – ‘emancipation from forms of determination liable to restrict the self-definition and fulfilment of the individual’ – would produce precisely the conditions of oppression and alienation particular to networked capitalism. Here it is uncertainty and precarity of relations based in temporary contracts, rather than stable relations and codified structures, that oppress individuals and create disparity. Boltanski and Chiapello therefore reformulate a social critique that supplants a nineteenth-century emphasis on the unequal division of property or power, with mobility and flexibility as prime indicators. The mobile, flexible individual, they suggest, is more likely to come into contact with other high-status individuals and bodies, and so can form stronger, more extensive networks of influence and opportunity, and better author their own situation. Those who are not mobile are excluded from this extensivity; and, since profit is generated by differentials – in this case differentials in mobility – it is in the interest of the exploiter of networks that the immobile remain so. In this liquid situation, then, bureaucratic systems, as the means of rule, response and accountability, must adapt to the role of monitoring the disparity of mobility and, if not correcting it, then at least redistributing its negative effects.⁵⁴⁰

The modus operandi of the artist who practices artistic critique, on the other hand, is predicated on ‘deracination’ and multiplicity:

Parisian artists in the nineteenth century made *uncertainty* a lifestyle and

⁵³⁹ Boltanski and Chiapello point out that these critiques are nineteenth-century constructions, and the work they undertake is to reconfigure equivalent critiques more applicable to network capitalism based in contracts and auditing rather than career paths and discipline. See ‘Part III: The New Spirit of Capitalism and the New Forms of Critique’, in Boltanski and Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, pp. 345–482.

⁵⁴⁰ It is beyond the scope of this thesis to investigate the technicalities of the ‘synopticon’, but it is discussed in depth in Boltanski and Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*; David Lyon, *Theorizing Surveillance: The Panopticon and Beyond* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), and Michael Reed, ‘Beyond the Iron Cage?: Bureaucracy and Democracy in the Knowledge Economy and Society’, in *The Values of Bureaucracy*, ed. by Paul du Gay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 89–114.

a value: being able to possess *several lives* and, correlatively, a *multiplicity of identities*, which also presupposes the possibility of freeing oneself from any *endowment* and rejecting any *original debt*, whatever its character.⁵⁴¹

This sets free ‘the oppressed desire to be someone else; not to be someone whose life-plan has been conceived by others (parents, teachers, etc.); to be who one wants to be, when one wants it’.⁵⁴² The liberated artist escapes identitarian affiliations to nation, religion, ethnicity and even family. But this rejection of inheritance and of the social given as a condition of the unmatrixed performer, of the flâneur and so many avant-garde figures is increasingly redolent of the negative impact of globalisation or network capitalism as cited in arguments that sustain both new forms of social critique and reactionary forms of nationalism.

The case against bureaucracy, then, is not cut and dry. And anyway, it is impossible for the artist herself to shrug off all bureaucratic forms: the performance artist who rails against the ‘tyranny of the clock’ performs before an audience who have turned up (more or less) on time; boss/worker relations persists between director and performers or artist and subcontractors; the international artist with a practice that claims antagonism towards power is caught up in a differential of mobility that keeps other artists at home. Artworks can be thought of as ‘eerie’ remnants, as documents of an unknowable symbolic order that has passed into an irretrievable history;⁵⁴³ and even the apparent unruliness of sadism can be theorised as another application of hierarchical rulership, an extreme case of dispassionate intimacy and ruthless bureaucracy.⁵⁴⁴ What seems more pertinent is not to circumvent a bureaucracy deemed to be removed from or antithetical to the everyday precincts of experience, but instead to recognise the interpenetration of bureaucratic, social and economic practices, to make visible the moment of organisation and control, and to admit to and take responsibility for compliance with bureaucratic systems.

⁵⁴¹ Boltanski and Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, pp. 434

⁵⁴² Ibid.

⁵⁴³ See Mark Fisher, ‘Approaching the Eerie’, in *The Weird and the Eerie* (London: Repeater, 2016), epub, pp. 102–8

⁵⁴⁴ See Lucy Ives, ‘Sodom, LLC: The Marquis de Sade and the office novel’, *Lapham’s Quarterly*, IX.4 (Fall 2016) <<https://www.laphamsquarterly.org/flesh/sodom-llc>> [accessed 4 October 2017].

But where I had anticipated bureaucracies of health and safety to be the major stumbling block, it was in fact the technical functioning of station surveillance that required me to reformulate my proposal. Surveillance comprises bureaucracies of vision and visibility – hierarchies of the observed and the observing. Passengers are made visible to staff through several systems; the visible and audible presence of customer service advisors induces passenger trust in the network, while control room staff are only semi-visible to passengers through tinted windows. I had imagined the cameras one sees on the station platforms and in the tunnels, entrances and on escalators to be connected to a bank of screens in a control room, where they are continually monitored by London Underground personnel. But Pinfield informed me that this is not the case. While there are multiple CCTV cameras (on average, 90 per cent of a platform is covered by them), there is not the corresponding number of monitors, and so operators must scroll through the images from several cameras on a single screen. Furthermore, the recorded footage is primarily intended for review after an event. The live feed seldom plays out to an observer specifically tasked with looking for events as they happen. There would, after all, be nothing they could do, given their dislocation from the site of observation. The CCTV system is intended, rather, to provide evidence, explication and, potentially, blame posteriori. Direct surveillance, with the express objective of immediate passenger safety, is performed by ‘customer service assistants’ – the people in uniform who watch over the platforms and make PA announcements as trains pull in and out of stations, or when delays occur. Any live data feeds that are active on the network originate at the ticket gate, where the use of registered Oyster cards and bankcards is collected, and the results used by Underground managers for passenger flow analysis, or to monitor advertising exposure.

The underground’s PA system and platform cameras produce technically aided illusions of proximity between passengers and network operators. The control that this exerts over passengers comes in large part from their understanding that they are being watched (as well as their desire to contribute positively to the

commons, to not break the system). The ticket gates are oriented towards network responsivity and value extraction, the customer service advisors towards passenger care. But conversation with Pinfield disclosed a technology participant in the infrastructure of passenger safety that I had not been aware of: the One Person Operation (OPO) system, which enables drivers to monitor passengers on the platform and thereby gauge the moment at which train doors should be closed. In earlier monitoring systems drivers used platform-mounted mirrors to view gestural messaging by platform staff with batons.⁵⁴⁵ Mirrors have now largely been replaced by platform cameras and a bank of monitors by the driver's cab; and in its most recent form, up to eight camera images can be combined into a composite picture that is transmitted via microwave radio link onto a screen in the driver's cab, so that drivers can 'see every door on their train, regardless of whether the platform is straight or curved'.⁵⁴⁶ And it is this increased clarity of platform image that makes the train drivers the most viable audience for *Platform Homography*. Where other potential observers of monitors are scattered through time and space, the drivers' presence, while not entirely predictable – for trains can be delayed or break down – is guaranteed at some point in time, in a particular point in space. And what is more: a clear and full view of the platform has become one of the tools of their job.

To accommodate this fresh understanding of the site, I sent the following adjusted proposal to Jess Davies-Molloy, Art on the Underground producer, for her response:

On a station platform, among the people waiting for trains, performers are indistinguishable in ordinary clothing. All looks normal from the perspective of the driver monitoring the platform via in-cab OPO screens. Then, without warning, just as the doors have closed, three or four performers hold up, towards the platform cameras, signs that bear a few

⁵⁴⁵ This system still persists in some stations. It consists in a customer service assistant (csa) holding up a baton when it is safe for the train to leave the station, and keeping that baton raised until the driver's cab has lost sight of the platform. If the driver sees the csa lower the baton, they are to stop the train immediately.

⁵⁴⁶ 'Helping London Underground to prepare OPO systems to handle the upgraded rolling stock', Telent.com (2 July 2017) <<https://telent.com/news-media/case-studies/london-undergrounds-microwave-opo>> [accessed 13 October 2017].

words of text. Together these signs add up to a single message, which the compositing function of the OPO system makes apparent to the driver. The message is delivered and the train leaves the station as normal.

A series of these messages is to be delivered along the length of the Victoria Line (since this line has an in-cab OPO system installed throughout). In sequence the messages accumulate into a narrative or a series of call-and-response episodes: like a quiz, for example, or a series of jokes.⁵⁴⁷

On considering how she would go about making my proposal happen, Davies-Molloy recognised that, since the piece does not introduce new materials or objects to be left at the site, the main task would be to let everyone in the relevant stations know what was happening and when. An operational assurance notice, in pdf form, would need to be signed off by each station manager and circulated on a network-wide system. This form would include a description of what was happening, where and when, as well as a route map for getting in and out of the station, between the point of the performance and the exit. The Art on the Underground team would also talk to people working at each station, including area managers, customer service managers and customer service advisors (the people at the ticket barriers and on platforms) to let them know that something ‘out of the ordinary’ was going to occur. Representatives of the train drivers would need to be consulted too: service controllers, train operator managers and health and safety reps for stations and drivers (who would in turn consult directly with drivers).⁵⁴⁸ A second form would need to be completed and approved: an S1088, which specifies who is doing what where, with particular attention paid to risk of fire, impact of activities on fire escape routes and evidence of efforts to mitigate these risks. Since each station’s topography is unique, a separate S1088

⁵⁴⁷ For the full proposal, with suggestions of message content, see Appendix II.

⁵⁴⁸ The London Underground term for ‘driver’ is ‘train operator’, but elsewhere in this chapter I have used ‘driver’, so as not to cause confusion with the term ‘train operator’ as it pertains to the national network, that is, to the companies that run the regional concessions.

would be required for every station involved.⁵⁴⁹ These would need to be signed off by a London Underground fire engineer; or, if the proposed piece does have a potential impact, then it would need to be sent on to the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority, which combines fire and emergency rescue services and is external to TfL. If the signs to be used in the performance were to be left in situ, then their materials would need to be tested for fireproofing. Since mine is an ephemeral piece, this would not be necessary; although it would be imperative that everything was cleared away and taken from the station once the piece was finished.

All artists and performers would need to be accompanied by an Art on the Underground staff chaperone to facilitate access, and to make sure that performers obstruct passengers as little as possible. Davies-Molloy anticipated that one chaperone would be enough per three performers, which makes two chaperones per station, although more could be needed on curved stations due to diminished sight-lines. Since the piece potentially takes place at all sixteen stations along the tube line, extra staff would need to be secured from other London Underground departments. Each performer would also need a SABRE access number, which serves as worker id and authorisation of station access. Performers are signed in and out with the station supervisor as visitors, covered by a generic Art on the Underground SABRE access number for ‘non-intrusive, non-disruptive works’. All SABRE information is sent to the area manager and the station’s access team and posted on the network-wide Operational Assurance Notification system, so that no one is surprised, everything is verifiable. TfL’s public and product insurance would cover everyone involved for the duration of the piece; although consultation with the crime prevention team could be a possibility, if it is thought that the situation would provide opportunities for pickpockets, for example. This would involve an Art on the Underground

⁵⁴⁹ There is a current discussion at TfL about the possible public availability of station layouts. For people with access issues – the blind and partially sighted, for example – prior knowledge of station access routes makes journeying a little easier; and yet this also poses security risks, since such knowledge could be used to destructive ends. The ambivalence of transparency is apparent here too.

representative giving a presentation to and requesting email authorisation from the crime prevention team.

The production procedure, then, is a matter of letting everyone know, from the top down, what to expect, where and when. And it is this distribution of knowledge of what is to occur, and when, that produces flexibility in an infrastructure that would otherwise close down the performance. For Kockelman, flexibility is a key feature of agency, which is not possessed by the individual, but resides in their ongoing relations, and the institutions that enable them. Flexibility might involve 'having lots of options open or having a strong say in which particular option will be acted on' when it comes to the precise nature of these semiotic relations.⁵⁵⁰ Agency can be further aggregated into types. Residential agency is to have a say about what is meaningful, which in our context equates to the power of the curator to say which artworks are important enough to be scheduled for production, or for the fire officer to decree that an artwork is not important enough to take the attendant risks. Representational agency is based in knowledge – here, of the particular infrastructure that must be activated correctly to ensure compliance on the part of all London Underground staff and technical systems. The powerful and knowledgeable, then, are flexible enough to respond to new information in ways that are not incoherent to the established intentions of the system – or, if they are incoherent, to modify that system. An empowered station manager is one who knows not to throw a station into a state of emergency at the sight non-normative behaviour, but to absorb into the remit of the platform its function as a forum for art. And an empowered artist is one who has gained the confidence of just such network managers.

There is one issue, however, which presents a logistical problem to *Platform Homography* – a point at which the functioning of the network cannot be made more flexible – which is that it would be impossible to know, without trying it in situ, what the composite image of the platform looks like on the screen in the

⁵⁵⁰ Paul Kockelman, 'Agency: The Relation between Meaning, Power, and Knowledge', *Current Anthropology*, 48.3 (June 2007) 375–401 (p. 375).

driver's cab. A test would need to be carried out to ascertain how big to make the signs, how close to the camera the performer holds them, how bold a font would be required. For the artist to ride in the cab is not a problem, since this often happens when artists are first shown around the network. (It was also how Zineb Sedira's *South to North – North to South* (2017) was made, which shows the subterranean journey of a train on the Victoria line from the driver's perspective.) The problem posed by my proposal is that, with a normally running service, it would be impermissibly disruptive to hold the train at a station in order to communicate to the performers on the platform from the driver's cab ('take two steps forward'; 'hold it lower', 'left a bit', etc.). One possible way round this would be to test different positions of performers and signs in each station along the line; although the many parameters involved would require several laps to exhaust all possibilities and find the very best combination. Another possibility is to photograph the view of the platform on the cab screen, with a person in situ on the platform as a positional guideline, and to then work it out mathematically. For such a visually led piece, though, a reliance on speculation with no responsive adjustments is likely to produce less than perfect results. Another possibility is the use of a testing platform at Charing Cross, not in current use but in full working order. But although this platform is complete with cameras, lighting, escalators and so on, it is not likely to be able to support the full in-cab OPO system. If none of these options are viable, then there is always trial and error, coupled with the artist's fall-back position of writing this into the piece, so that over a longer period the drivers will witness the message becoming clearer with subsequent iterations, as the logistics are learned on the job.

Text on the Underground: Signage and Advertising

Now that the apparatus of the proposal-artwork has been clarified, another point of consideration, before moving on to content, is its immediate material context. One of the overriding qualities of the underground network, and the platforms particularly, is the sheer volume of text. As discussed in Chapter Three, the non-

place dedicated to impersonal passage bristles with signage and information, to aid flow and to direct those unfamiliar with the topography. Also, since this is a location for mass passage, advertising is attracted to the endless potential market it presents. My immediate task, then, given this textual milieu, is to analyse its modes of operation, and to ask how my text will respond to this: will it be antagonistic, critically reassertive, poetically interruptive...?

Signage is generally not singularly addressed, from individual to individual, but from institutions or corporations to the abstracted everyperson – not unlike the generic, unimagined audience Goode warns against. Signage, and its observance, is the apparatus by which authority and trust is maintained in an impersonal system. More specifically targeted messages will pass between workers on the Underground, from a manager to a control room worker, for example, or from controllers to drivers. Pinfield speaks of notices at the end of platforms, where the drivers' carriages stop, reminding them to make public announcements about what to do if a passenger is taken ill on a train.⁵⁵¹ In these cases, where the messages are intended for those performing a particular role, the vocabulary used can be specialist, full of acronyms. A walk through an Underground station will make this separation of general and particular signage apparent: there are some messages one can interpret, others that remain opaque, clearly addressed to those who speak a different argot.

Like signage for the general public, advertising is to be as universally readable as possible, although it might be spun to appeal to particular demographics. It apparently deals not in authority, obedience and impersonality, but in individuation, desire and consciousness. However, new modes of self-surveillance and self-governance develop in situations where eternally modifying aspirations, differently limited means and ever-changing ideals and standards conspire. For contemporary advertising, aggrandisement of the product is too simplistic a mode to employ in a field of textual and extra-textual practices

⁵⁵¹ The advice being not to pull the emergency cord, but to wait until the train reaches the next station and then get the passenger on to the platform, so that help can reach them more easily, and so that the trains service is not unnecessarily disrupted.

crowded with competing and conflicting imperatives. Advertising copy is as likely to deploy irony or mystery as it is overt forms of persuasion. Perhaps one of the earliest descriptions of the performativity of advertisement text, and one which still resonates, is Walter Benjamin's. For Benjamin, beyond the refuge of the book, script's apparently autonomous existence is 'pitilessly dragged out into the street' and 'subjected to the brutal heteronomies of economic chaos'.⁵⁵² And yet it is the fiery reflection of the advertising neon in the puddled street that gives it a vital, materially and historically sited edge over the page-bound text. As with newspaper and film, advertising is rudely disturbed from the horizontal repose of the page and forced on to 'the dictatorial perpendicular'.⁵⁵³ In early twentieth-century organisational technologies, as Benjamin describes, the card index represented the 'conquest of three-dimensional writing ... and an astonishing counterpoint to its original form as rune or knot notation'.⁵⁵⁴ In a contemporary Underground station, the movement and spatial arrangement of text is vastly more complex and rapid, with moving-image adverts, a turn-over of static posters, strata of signage and systems of digital data collection, relay and response. Text, both readable, audible and beyond perception, translated into zeros and ones or electrical frequencies, is four-dimensional, responsive, productive and reflexively related to the system that produces it, and as such it is performative and agential.

It is useful to think of advertising in this extended performative textual environment, to acknowledge that while its intention might appear monoglot – sell, sell, sell – its rhetorics and cultural frames of reference are, and have historically been, manifold. As Jennifer Wickes reminds us, the *avertissement* originated within literature, first as an end note signifying that a copy had been made on a holy day, and was therefore not to be sold – functioning as anti-advert, placing a text outside of commerce – and then as a frontispiece announcing the work that followed, describing its content and stating the

⁵⁵² Walter Benjamin, 'One Way Street' [1928], in *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), I, (pp. 444–488) p. 456.

⁵⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 456.

⁵⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 456.

printer's identity and address.⁵⁵⁵ A surge in production of books and pamphlets, and the consequent competitiveness of the printing industry, required these *avertissement* to become exhortative. According to Wicke, 'Far from being a pathetic degraded stepchild of print [they] bolstered a solidarity among printers', heralding 'a new type of self-sufficient and nonfeudal worker', producing a 'network of connection between a new merchant class and a new world of literature', and participating in 'the secularizing trends and classical revivals by announcing and arguing for the importance of these texts'.⁵⁵⁶ Subsequently, advertising would branch off and support the new cultural form of the newspaper, before becoming the apparently autonomous textual practice we recognise today; but it is useful to note the multiple ontologies of its provenance. Referring to Bakhtin's heteroglossia, Wicke identifies advertising as an archaeological subject to be analysed for its stylistic and orchestrated languages, its emulative procedures and the technicalities of its intentions. She mentions practices of social reading, whereby 'advertising does not serve as a simple messenger-boy of ideology, if only because ideology does not exist in some place apart before it is channelled through advertisement'.⁵⁵⁷ Advertising as a practice is not the sole organ through which products are sold, nor is it the only apparatus through which a consumer class is produced. Although on reading an advert, the one clear message that we receive is that the business represented wants us to buy its product, there are several other forces at work. The advert reflects individual marketing strategies and collective values, historically specific forms, genres and subjects. What is more, Wicke suggests, in arising 'out of the economic imperatives of capitalism', it narrativises 'all the relations of and contradictions in the surplus value of capitalism production'; it is a 'vast textual system' that prompts a social reading 'of all the multiple possibilities with this excess that lies beyond product or consumer'. Social discourses of law, medicine, education, literature and politics, she proposes, are staged in the narratives of advertisements. She does not address the nature of these narratives, however, nor

⁵⁵⁵ Jennifer Wicke, *Advertising Fictions: Literature, Advertisement, & Social Reading*, (New York: Columbia University press, 1988), p. 3.

⁵⁵⁶ Wicke, *Advertising Fictions*, p. 4.

⁵⁵⁷ Wicke, *Advertising Fictions*, p. 16.

the problematics of an industry that pushes a small spectrum of possible ones. Where commercial imperative foregrounds certain types of stories and scenarios that best suit proliferation of the product or brand, there is work to be done on breaking habits of representation and ideologically infused assumptions. Perhaps this is a potential critical role for artists. But, as Michael L. Ross points out, this role cannot be performed from a position outside promotional rhetoric and commodity culture.⁵⁵⁸ It should be noted that artists, as social readers and cultural producers, contribute to the expanded field that advertising narrates; they speak the languages and reiterate the behavioural codes that it absorbs and reflects back.

According to Pinfield, there are two broad strategies that commissioned artworks tend to adopt when engaging with these issues. One is to disrupt the dynamics and rhetorics of the advertising field; the other is to inhabit it. Among the projects that could be identified as inhabiting the given aesthetic field, Giles Round's tile designs and Liam Gillick's poster and film work *McNamara 68* (2016) point up a further decision to be made by anyone working within the fabric of the Underground: is this inhabitation in earnest or in some way ironic? Round's tiles have been designed for the job in hand: they are decorative and hardwearing. His design company, Design Work Leisure, operates within the ideological trajectories of the Arts and Craft movement and the user-friendly clarity of twentieth-century design classics such as the tube map, while 'Drawing on the belief that good design leads to a better society'.⁵⁵⁹ Liam Gillick's *McNamara 68*, on the other hand, while appearing to enter into the everyday functionality of the Underground – in this case, its advertising function – publicises a 1960s-style spy movie that does not exist. Gillick's intention for the work is to draw attention to the continuity and exchange between art, graphic design and marketing. But, unlike the aftershave or breakfast cereal or underwear

⁵⁵⁸ Michael L. Ross, *Designing Fictions: Literature Confronts Advertising* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015).

⁵⁵⁹ 'Underline: Design Work Leisure', Art on the Underground project page <https://art.tfl.gov.uk/projects/design-work-leisure/?numPosts=16&main_select_value=&autocompleteText=&action=projects_loop_handler> [accessed 30 September 2017].

that other adverts refer to – adverts that precipitate processes of subject-formation, manufacture desire or raise brand awareness, depending on which discourse you favour – Gillick’s film exists only in potentia.⁵⁶⁰ His posters and trailers set among the architecture of the Victoria Line consist in fragments of a non-existent whole. *McNamara 68* remains forever a taster or a proposal, to which there are at least three possible responses: that the film is extrapolated by the imagination; that the posters and trailers are walked past without remark, or that they spark outrage at their failure to deliver a product – i.e., that this is false marketing. The latter possibility is slim, however, since the posters are clearly branded as Art on the Underground commissions. Pinfield explains that artworks are seldom dropped in situ without framing, signalling or forewarning, mostly because of the corporate demands of the Transport for London office, where it is necessary to explain exactly what is being done, why and at what financial cost. It is important for Art on the Underground to make clear their use of expensive assets or services such as advertising sites, which are not owned by TfL itself, but by Exterior Media, which manages advertising assets across the underground network, the DLR, 47 mainline train stations, Croydon trams, 99% of London buses and the two London Westfield shopping centres. The costs of hiring a screen or billboard site are substantial, and so Art on the Underground only use resources that are offered for free: filler slots that are unsold to corporate clients, and which TfL are offered access to. It is interesting to note, then, that though Gillick wishes to imply continuity between art, graphic design and marketing, it is only by dint of art’s (apparent) distinction from commercial practices that the posters were able to be installed at all.

Nonetheless, the economic entanglements of artwork, design and advertising are foregrounded on the underground network, since so many artists are excited by the prospect of adopting commercial apparatus for mass communication,

⁵⁶⁰ For discussions of advertising and subject representation and manipulation see, for instance, Ben Fine, *The World of Consumption* (London: Routledge, 2002); for advertising and desire, see Stewart Ewan and Elizabeth Ewan, *Channels of Desire: Mass Images and the Shaping of American Consciousness* (London: McGraw-Hill, 1982); for an account of advertising, brand consciousness and corporate transcendence of product to lifestyle, see Naomi Klein, *No Logo* (London: Flamingo, 2001).

particularly to disrupt the normative modes of signage and marketing. According to Pinfield, Benedict Drew's *de re touch* (2015) – an eight-second-long digital animation featuring an ear and some sinewy, fatty looking text ('body image' and 'de re touch') – provoked anger from passers-by. Pinfield wonders if this anger was somehow indexically transmitted by the 'throbbing' imagery in the video itself, but suggests that it is primarily down to Drew's aesthetic being 'utterly counter to anything, because it doesn't have the polish of anything you see around it'. Polish and slickness seem imperative for an advertising campaign – one seldom sees technically bad photography, although bad grammar is not unheard of. And yet it is interesting to note that there are several overlaps between Drew's imagery and that of mainstream advertising, particularly abjection as a dramatic device and ambiguity as a strategy for prolonging attention.⁵⁶¹ Ambiguity tolerance is a subject of study for media theorists;⁵⁶² and studies into the rhetoric of persuasion have analysed the lexical ambiguity of advertising slogans. Often it is mobilised as humorous wordplay, intended to produce positive feelings towards a brand; but, as Luuk Lagerwerf points out, the ambiguous advertising slogan must be resolvable on re-reading, and 'the analysis of ambiguity should contain a twist in the interpretation'.⁵⁶³ The ambiguity should not remain forever beyond comprehension, but be interpretable as the fortuitous elision of amusingly or poetically incongruous frames of reference. For Lagerwerf an abstract interpretation collides with the interpretation of a slogan's context, and it is this collision that creates the eventual, gratifying interpretation. He gives as an example a poster from Ken Livingstone's successful London mayoral election campaign of 2000:

⁵⁶¹ In the case of abjection, I am thinking specifically of adverts for horror films or novels, where the image portends thrillingly violent, visceral or tense scenes and narratives.

⁵⁶² See, for example, Qian Lia, Zhuowei (Joy) Huang and Kiel Christian, 'Ambiguity tolerance and advertising effectiveness', *Annals of Tourism Research*, 63 (March 2017), 216–22.

⁵⁶³ Lagerwerf, 'Deliberate ambiguity in slogans', p. 248.

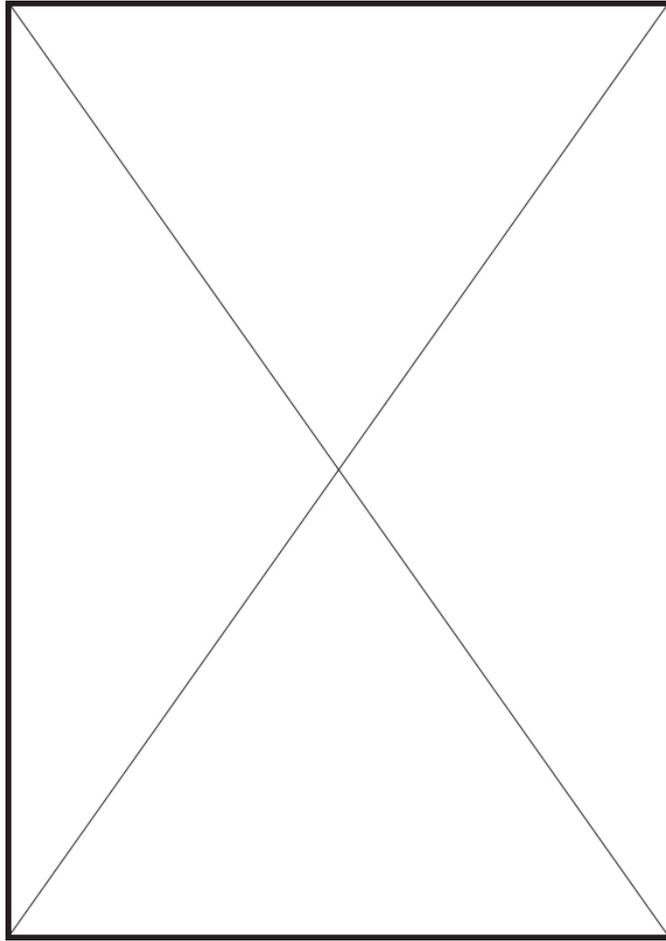


Fig. 4: Advertisement from the mayoral election campaign of Ken Livingstone.⁵⁶⁴

The interpretation of [Where Ken stands on the Tube] might be called literal. The abstract 'stand', meaning 'having an opinion,' however, reflects the interpretation without context. The abstract meaning is thus prior to the literal meaning. Rather than literal meaning, some notion of default meaning determines priority in linguistic interpretation [...]

The abstract interpretation of [the slogan] collides with the interpretation of its context, and this collision creates the other interpretation. The humorous or pleasant effects of deliberate ambiguity are partly explained by the collision. A distinction between prior and contextual interpretation is necessary to explain the effects of deliberate ambiguity. This distinction

⁵⁶⁴ Reproduced in Lagerwerf, 'Deliberate ambiguity in slogans', p. 246, courtesy of Euro RSCG Wnek Gosper.

can be made by introducing the concept of saliency of meaning. ‘The salient meaning of a word or expression is its lexicalized meaning, i.e., the meaning retrievable from the mental lexicon rather than from the context’.⁵⁶⁵ It consists, among other things, of idioms and collocations. Expressions are almost always understood in their salient meaning, whether or not they fit the context.

The advertiser is operating along pragmatist lines, contrasting meanings of a phrase in different contexts: as a politically sited comment, as a literal statement and as a received idiomatic form. The aesthetic effect is generated by this ‘hinge’, or what Arthur Koestler would identify as ‘bisociation’, where a situation, idea, image, word or phrase is perceived as consisting in two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference.⁵⁶⁶ Poetry has also been analysed along these lines, as a series of linguistic operations that turn about different modes of ambiguity. William Empson’s *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, for instance, lays out a seven-fold typology of textual ambiguities, running from puns and metaphor to outright contradiction, and which can be characterised as an advancing ‘degree of logical or grammatical disorder, the degree to which the apprehension of the ambiguity must be conscious, and the degree of psychological complexity concerned’.⁵⁶⁷ Ambiguity, here, can be taken as evidence of non-compliance with norms of clarity and order, as a transgressive ploy in and of itself. Advertising, then, signifies a point at which transgression of rational order is co-opted by the very apparatus of that rational order.

For artworks the aim might be not to obliterate normative ends, but to disrupt normative means. Pinfield says of Poems on the Underground:

I think there is that simple relief, I find, when something is not trying to tell you something, and I think that’s a kind of negative space, I suppose, away from advertising. Because even all the [TfL] corporate messages are still trying to tell you something. And in the main, even our posters are

⁵⁶⁵ Rachel Giora, ‘On the priority of salient meanings: studies of literal and figurative language’, *Journal of Pragmatics*, 31 (1999), 919–29; cited in Lagerwerf, ‘Deliberate ambiguity in slogans’, p. 248.

⁵⁶⁶ See Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation* (London: Penguin Arkana, 1990).

⁵⁶⁷ William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1949), p. 48.

trying to tell you something, even if they're quite nice, or very nice in fact, but there is an information exchange. In a way, poems are a form of negative space, that it's not trying to tell you something or sell you something.⁵⁶⁸

A poem will, however, convey an image, idea or atmosphere to varying degrees of clarity, with differing amounts of interpretative work required on the part of the reader. *De re touch*, on the other hand, comes closer to Empson's 'doctrinaire sluttishness, where one is tempted to set down a muddle in the hope that it will convey the meaning more immediately'.⁵⁶⁹ It is impossible to glean any concrete meaning from Drew's video – although his intent to confuse is clear, which itself constitutes a meaning. In many contexts, and especially that of contemporary art, as we have seen in Chapter One, such an unidentifiable thirdness is far from taboo. And so perhaps the anger Pinfield reports is the result of an ontology polluted, norms transgressed, assumptions not met. In a space of transit where the most common messages are 'this way' or 'desire me', the open work offers no directive whatsoever.

And yet Mark Wallinger's *Labyrinth* – a series of enamelled square signs throughout the tube station, each printed with a different labyrinth – doesn't seem to provoke equivalent frustration. The red, white and black signage borrows from the vernacular of the official Underground livery, without quoting it directly. Indeed, it is likely that the lack of text (save a small edition number in the bottom right-hand corner) rescues the work from misidentification. One sees people looking at it perplexedly, but not with serious intent to orientate the self. (Although I hear that it is often used by the Art on the Underground curating and production team as a meeting point, since there is one, but only one, in every tube station.) While Drew's appropriation of materials is also direct – the advertising screen – and his content divergent from the norm, Wallinger's diagrammatic proposition is somehow accepted not as interference but more like adornment, an addition rather than an interruption. Perhaps this is because

⁵⁶⁸ Eleanor Pinfield, interview with the author, Art on the Underground offices, London, 8 September 2017.

⁵⁶⁹ Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, p. 236.

where Drew's work is stubbornly unreadable, Wallinger's can be perceived as a poetic shift in gear from informative communication to apposite thematics of the mythic, the lost and found. A little work is required to make the thematic link between site and artwork, but many who have experienced the complexity of the tunnels have done so.⁵⁷⁰

Audience: The Train Drivers

In thinking through the dynamics of such a text-saturated site, and through the infrastructures and ideologies that this text evidences, it becomes apparent to me that, like the strategies of the artist opposed to bureaucracy, blunt opposition to the textual mode of advertising is not necessarily the most productive approach. Rather than flat negation, it seems more effective to draw out the mechanisms by which people are consensually or unwittingly caught within a web of sightlines, semiotic flow, persuasive campaigns and coercive structures. The question is not how to transcend or contradict the textual milieu of the Underground platform, but how to negotiate their content and relations productively to generate a meaningful experience for someone who inhabits this place every day.

My final consideration, then, is of the particular audience for *Platform Homography* and the structure of its dissemination. Since the audience is to be drivers in train cabs, not control room staff, I must reconsider the spatial and temporal distribution of texts. Originally, I imagined episodes of the performance to take place on a single station platform and to be planned according to the shift patterns of control room staff. The performance would have comprised an itinerary developed in relation to rotas, with the primary differential occurring through time. In the case of drivers, though, it would make more sense to distribute the performances along the line, with consecutive episodes performed as the train is about to close its doors at each station. As an itinerary, the piece

⁵⁷⁰ See, for instance, Will Self's introduction to the accompanying book, Mark Wallinger, *Labyrinth: A Journey Through London's Underground* (London: Art on the Underground / Art Books, 2014), pp. 11–13.

coincides with the timetable of the trains and the map of the line in question. The messages would be delivered, on average, a couple of minutes apart, and incorporated into a repetitive rhythm of movement, halt, passenger interchange and departure. Having necessarily selected one of the Underground lines on which the OPO system is installed – the Victoria Line – I have sixteen stations to work across. These are traversed in thirty minutes, with trains running at intervals of ten minutes in the early mornings, one to two minutes at peak times, two to three minutes for most of the rest of the day, and five to ten minutes towards the end of the evening.⁵⁷¹ More information would be required on the number of cameras per station, and tests would have to be performed to ascertain the number of words that can be presented to each camera for optimum legibility. However, working with the estimate of six cameras to a platform, on average, and that each performer could hold up three to four words on a single sign, that would make eighteen to twenty-four words per station. This sentence you are reading now comprises eighteen words, each carefully selected to contribute to a cogent message. For eyes reading it for the first time, and in the busy environment of a station platform, this could take several seconds to take in. Further tests would be required to gauge how the piece might be physically configured so that meaning of the text can be established when the conditions of reading are potentially distracting.⁵⁷² For the sake of continuing the discussion, however, I will work on the assumption that a message of up to eighteen words can be broadcast to drivers at each station, making a combined message of 288 words in total for the Victoria Line. Further exploratory tests would be required to ascertain whether drivers could retain the content delivered at the previous station accurately enough (given that the next episode of the message would be ‘broadcast’ approximately two minutes later) for a progression of ideas to be possible, or whether each station message would need to be self-contained.

⁵⁷¹ The Victoria Line night tube runs approximately every ten minutes on Friday and Saturday nights, although, being mindful of the comfort of the performers, I wouldn’t choose to run the piece at this time of night.

⁵⁷² These tests would involve my riding in the driver’s cab to check the appearance of the transmitted images on screen, possibly several times, to try out different variables such as type size and font (handwritten or typed), distance and orientation of signs in relation to cameras, the timing of the presentation of signs in relation to the moment of the doors closing.

There is another convolution made possible by this line/station structuration. It could be that the eighteen-word message episodes are all delivered at a single station only, to multiple drivers as they pass through, so that no one driver receives the full 288-word message. This model of distribution raises an interesting point about coherence and totality. Pinfield and I discussed works that can never be fully known by an audience, which can become what she termed ‘endeavour for its own sake’.⁵⁷³ She gave the example of a piece by Ruth Ewan in which all the buskers on the Underground network, in tunnels and entrance halls, simultaneously played the same song. The buskers did not announce the song as part of an artwork, and no audience member was in a position to experience the song being performed by two or more buskers simultaneously, since pitches are located without earshot of one another. Pinfield seemed ambivalent about the piece because of its lack of impact on uninformed passers-by. Her curatorial sensibility is more geared towards palpable effects that are ‘outside of an everyday experience’ of passengers, although this does not necessarily require that the tube user recognise this experience as art. Her exemplar of this is Jeremy Deller’s *What is the City but its People* (2009), where the artist published and circulated among workers responsible for making PA announcements – drivers, station announcement teams, supervisors – a book of collected quotes and proverbs to deliver alongside their usual warnings, requests and imperatives. As Deller explains:

This piece came out of frustration with travelling in Britain and just being hounded all the time by continual messages about remembering to get on and off trains and take your things with you and so on. I produced a book of quotations for people who work on London Underground’s Piccadilly Line to read out, if they wanted to, among all these standard announcements, as a way of giving them licence to say other things and inject an element of unpredictability into a journey.⁵⁷⁴

⁵⁷³ Pinfield interview, 2017.

⁵⁷⁴ Project description on artist’s website: Jeremy Deller, ‘What Is The City, But The People? 2009’ <<http://www.jeremydeller.org/WhatIsTheCity/WhatIsTheCity.php>> [accessed 15 October 2017].

The pertinent thing to notice here is that Deller has reproduced pre-existing texts, mainly comprising anonymous proverbs or quotations by historical (male) figures: ‘Life is to blame for everything’ (Robert Musil); ‘As one gets older one discovers that everything is going to be the same with different hats on’, (Mark Twain); ‘A throne is only a bench covered in velvet’, (Napoleon Bonaparte); ‘Everything has been said before, but since nobody listens we have to keep going back and beginning all over again’, (André Gide). Deller’s authorial function resides in the selection, framing and distribution of texts already in the public domain. My intention, on the other hand, is to add new text to the site. The next question, then, and one that Pinfield also brought up with delicate tact, is if I were to author the text myself for an audience that I do not know, what assumptions can I make about them? We must grapple, once more, with Goode’s complaint about generic, vaguely imagined (or completely unconsidered) audiences.

Where Deller’s text appeals to universal themes, my own aim is to move between the universal and the specific, to engage the site in its particularity and its broader thematics, and to draw on the social and material forms of the systems that operate through it. My task is to critically engage bureaucracies of sight and rhetorics of persuasion, but this must be pursued with a view to the fact that, unlike in the gallery or theatre, there is no tacit pact here between audience and performers. It cannot be taken for granted that this is time voluntarily spent in pursuit of aesthetic, conceptual or critical experiences. A driver would have to expressly sign up to ‘receive’ *Platform Homography*, but how much information should be made available beforehand as to the nature of the content of the piece? Is this becoming a play-on-demand broadcast service that can be taken or left according to the audience’s pre-existing tastes and expectations? And what would a train driver want anyway? Is it my business to find out? Would drivers be appreciative of technically accurate comedic observations? Or of poetry made up of technical terms a layperson could not know? Or would they prefer a complete change of subject, a diversion from the everyday concerns of their job?

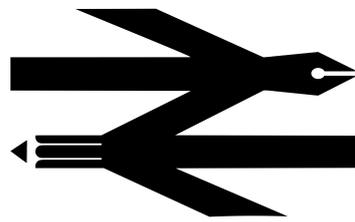
The answer to these questions is, of course, likely to be different from driver to driver. Since I have deliberately truncated the extent of this piece by designating it a proposal only, I will never find out how its contents might sit with its intended audience. But, if I were to push on with the piece to completion and performance, I would take into account Teresa de Laurentis's assertion that for viewers, 'semantic value is produced through culturally shared codes'.⁵⁷⁵ In other words, I would recognise that while I share certain Lebenswelten with the drivers – we are all humans, all English speaking, all living in or around London – they and I inhabit different sectors of the Underground. Our knowledges and experiences of the environment will be different. Neither George Herbert Mead's 'generalised other' nor Eco's 'model reader' can help me here because, in the context of the Underground drivers' Lebenswelt, I lack the paradigmatic perceptual apparatus, experience, knowledges and entrained tendencies.⁵⁷⁶ And so, if I cannot pretend to generate useful, relevant or desirable content for the train drivers, it should be left to them to use *Platform Homography* as they will. If I were to pursue the piece beyond proposal stage, I perhaps should frame it as a driver-to-driver messaging board: as a socialising tool, perhaps, or a joke-telling machine.

While it has been incredibly instructive to consider the 'back end' of production, the proposal can only take us so far. All understanding remains hypothetical, untested, and the relationships between content and site entirely unexplored. And so in the next two chapters I will address the 'front end', and explore the potential functions and effects of three actualised text-based artworks sited on the railway.

⁵⁷⁵ Therese de Laurentis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 167.

⁵⁷⁶ Mead's 'generalised other' is the nexus of common expectation projected on to another member of a given community. George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self & Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1934), pp. 155–6.

A 'model reader' is foreseen by the writer, their social and cultural habits and capabilities anticipated, and the text is fully actualised by the model reader's active interpretation of its significances. Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), pp. 7–8.



Part Three

CHAPTER SIX:

GENERIC-SITE-SPECIFICITY AND EXTENSIVITY

The following chapter is to be read after listening to the piece in situ on a mainline train (not an Underground train). The audio file is available at www.sallyoreilly.org.uk/hermes.html

Introduction to the Audio Work *HERMES*

The objective of the *Platform Homography* proposal in the previous chapter was to test the ‘back end’ of production: the infrastructural systems and practices with which an artwork must interact appropriately to come into being. The reception of the piece, its interpretation and effects could only ever be speculative; and by confining an idea to the virtual, forever in potentia, it is possible for the fringes of the possible – often the first things to be eradicated when something must be brought into material actuality – to stay in play. In this chapter, I will be reversing this emphasis. The work in question, *HERMES* (2017), has been straightforward to make from a practical perspective, requiring few resources other than my own writing, recording and editing capacities and the input of a musician and composer, who improvised to the recorded voice, with minimal planning and production. The ‘installation’ of the work requires the distribution of a sound file to willing recipients’ devices – a process that, in comparison to the *Platform Homography* proposal, involves relatively few stages of acquisition for those who deem audio playback devices an everyday technology, and is hopefully minimally effortful for those who don’t.

By shrinking the back end in this way, attention can be shifted to interrelations of content, site and audience. Where in the previous chapter the audience could only be glossed as a vague demographic, here it becomes potentially identifiable

as comprising the sort of individuals who would request access to the piece (either through the obligations of their academic position or of our friendship or through voluntary interest, or a combination of these factors). But rather than anticipating the proclivities of the individuals I am likely to be making the piece for, or conducting focus groups to gauge reception of the piece, I am constructing an idea of audience based in the generic material conditions and social conventions of the site in which the listening is to take place. I will be drawing on such broad thematics as ‘travel’, ‘time’, ‘destination’: high-order abstractions that could be said to render the artwork not site-specific, but generic-site-specific. That is, the work operates in relation to any train journey.

The comedy of *HERMES* lies in its claim to agency over all actual trains, over ‘train’ as a generic type of object and as a concept. *HERMES* pretends to be able to make the listener’s train run on time, presenting itself as a textual technology that is not ‘phonographic’ – that is, it does not correlate to the concept of writing as the fixing of speech – but is what Sybille Krämer calls ‘operative writing’.⁵⁷⁷ Javascript and calculus, as examples of operative writing, do not require the reader to pass through an interpretative stage – the signifier does not have a correlative object, but simply stands for an action. Use is emphasised over understanding, interpretant over object. *HERMES* is a fantastical prototype of a new application for operative writing, a new text-technology, where the script, set in motion by a particular subject, apparently automatically produces the generic result of punctuality. Although, of course, *HERMES*’s non-representational operative mode is an illusion. In reality it is a tool that attends not to the specific mechanics, electrics or computer systems of a train, but to the listener’s generalised understanding of the word ‘train’. It is a theatrical technology that cannot really work; and it cannot be guaranteed that the conditions of listening will even produce the illusion that it has worked. The train may well still be delayed or even cancelled. But therein lies the potential for a moment of dramatic

⁵⁷⁷ For Krämer, calculus is the exemplar of operative writing, because ‘On the one hand, it is a medium for representing a realm of cognitive phenomena. On the other hand, calculus provides a tool for operating hands-on with these phenomena in order to solve problems or to prove theories pertaining to this cognitive realm’. Sybille Krämer, ‘Writing, Notational Iconicity, Calculus: On Writing as a Cultural Technique’, *MLN*, 118.3 (April 2003), 518–37 (p. 522).

irony for the listener perhaps not to enjoy, for there could be other things on their mind, but maybe to wryly note.

To contextualise this proposition of a text as technology, we must return to Stiegler and his concept of ‘grammatisation’. Stiegler observes how industrialisation has broken down the continuity of flows – of bodies, of language – and detached certain gestures or forms to produce new ‘grammē’, or externalised and discreet traces of those gestures, from which new technics are developed.⁵⁷⁸ The worker’s gesture of hammering a nail, for instance, is isolated, grammatised and replicated by a machine; the tool or technique comprises the memory of this gesture and is deployed in anticipation of its outcome. The gestures that are grammatised in *HERMES* are assumptions about and affordances of the relations between customer, service provider and technical service, and between imagined, desired, expected and actual formulations of that service. By engineering a text that makes use of differentials within this milieu, I hope to make apparent the digressions, shortfalls, contradictions and paradoxes that represent, or even constitute, the political forces that converge on the railway as service and site. By political forces, I mean the policies, opinions, debates, threats, pleas, expectations, desires and regrets generated by these non-correspondences between what a railway has been, is, could be, should be and will likely become.

Modality and temporal frameworks, as we will see, are key to narrating these differentials, and to our experience and perception of train travel.⁵⁷⁹ The anticipatory and memorialising function of technics coincide with the prospective and retrospective moves involved in train travel, as noted in Chapter Four, and overlap with the modal ‘should have’ and ‘should do’ associated with its failures. *HERMES* navigates this nexus of attitudes to pasts, presents and futures as they are variously figured by the rail company manager, worker,

⁵⁷⁸ See Stiegler, ‘Technoscience and Reproduction’, in *Technics and Time*, III, pp. 187–224; and Bernard Stiegler, ‘Retentional Economy’ and ‘The Work of Grammatization’, in *For a New Critique of Political Economy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010) pp. 8–13.

⁵⁷⁹ I am referring here to literary modality, where certainty, willingness, obligation and possibility are expressed through such words as ‘will’ ‘should’, ‘could’, ‘must’, ‘ought’.

politician and traveller: as recursive responses between work in process and finished product, contingency and planning, intent and response, error and correction. *HERMES* mediates across fault lines of the railway's various ontologies, encouraging crossings between its present state and its idealisation, its past perceptions, desires for its future and the anticipation of a future anterior – that is, the anticipation of its recollection. I will be discussing all this below, but first I will describe the piece as fully as possible, from the perspective of my intentions for it and via the theoretical models and practical examples that were brought to bear during its devising, writing and production.

Intentions and Theoretical Materials

The relation between text and travel, grammar and movement, has been frequently noted: the passage of the hand across paper or the cursor across a screen being a spatial or visual exemplar. The figure of the journey is also reflected in the most basic stories that move from a beginning to an end, from a position of not knowing to a position of knowing. I should clarify that, to make such a claim, I am considering the 'beginning' as that which has been humanly produced, and which contains within it the author's intention for and method of narrative framing, rather than the divine or mythical 'origin'.⁵⁸⁰ This is not a straightforward matter, however. Where does the story of a train journey begin? With the train pulling out of the station? On leaving home for the train station? With the online purchase of tickets? Or with the decision to travel? The identification of a moment as a beginning is a divisive act of objectification, of carving out a delineated sector of the potentially infinite network of semiotic relations. If, as Edward Said writes, 'the beginning is the first point (in space, time, or action) of an accomplishment of action that has duration and meaning', and it is '*the first step in the intentional production of meaning*' [original italics], then the question of when the journey begins corresponds to the question: which

⁵⁸⁰ See Edward W. Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (London: Granta Books, 1997).

scale of meaning is intended?⁵⁸¹ Is the ‘meaning’ of the journey simply its completion – the movement from one geographic place to another? Is it the objective of the trip: arrival at a library, say, or the reading of a particular book? In the case of the latter, it could be further argued that the journey began when the traveller first became hooked on the subject of that book, or with the first faltering words of their reading career. For a train operating company, the question translates into one of site: where does the experience of travel start: on the company website, in the ticket hall, on the train? The ending of a train journey, on the other hand, is more clear-cut: the journey ends when the passenger quits the arrival station.⁵⁸² For the train company, a successful ending is on-time arrival, with alternative, less happy endings involving lateness or redirection to a different destination or abandonment of the journey altogether, which could occur at any point along the way, including at the beginning. A successfully completed journey mirrors the structure of the simplest of stories: a quest with resolution. And there are narrative structures, involving interruption, peripeteia and ellipsis, that reflect the forms of less successful journeys, where a lack of ending-cum-arrival – made a featured of by its absence – suggests that even these journey-cum-narratives are end-oriented.

The temporal framework of reading or listening differs from that of travel. A reader may well be similarly end-oriented, in that she wishes to reach the end of the story, to find out what happens; but where a commuter might experience the boredom of the present, an adventurer anticipate arrival and a departing lover reflect on memories, the act of reading requires both retention and protention simultaneously throughout.⁵⁸³ The present point in a text is that at which recent

⁵⁸¹ Said, *Beginnings*, p.5.

⁵⁸² I am considering a return ticket to comprise two journeys, so that each episode of travel is identifiable by a single point of departure and point of arrival, including changes. Although this becomes an unstable postulate if a passenger has used a split ticketing website, where a single journey might be covered by several tickets that are cheaper in total than a single through-ticket would have been. Does the journey pertain to the experiential whole or the ticketed fragment? My feeling is that it would be the former for the passenger and the latter for the train operating companies in question.

⁵⁸³ Although it should be admitted that one is seldom only a commuter or an adventurer or a lover. One’s other roles and identities can interrupt or interpenetrate the state of remembering, enduring or anticipating.

words and sentences are retained, less recent content has receded into simplified, remembered forms, and words and sentences, and even entire episodes, acts or epochal events to come are anticipated. As Currie notes, any point in a text, regardless of the tense in which it is written, represents a transformation from a future that is unknown into a past that is known.⁵⁸⁴ And yet, though this future is unknown to the reader (unless they have read the book before, or perhaps heard a précis or seen a film adaptation), it already exists in the pages between the bookmark or open page and the book's back cover. The act of reading or listening to an already written narrative fuses two incompatible ideas of the future: the future in life, which is open, virtual and arrives in surprising forms, and the future that is already there. The present point in a narrative is the moveable 'now' at which teleology and eschatology – a discerning of design and purpose and an anticipation of an ending – collide. And it is this ironising, concurrent sense of indeterminism and fatalism that I recognise as relevant to the psychology of train travel. One can have a sense of having made a firm decision to travel – and indeed, as we have seen in Chapter Three, the train can be symbolic of will and purposiveness of the modern individual – and yet, when a train is delayed or cancelled, fatalism steps in, as destiny or the ghost in the machine or gremlins or God or the incompetent network or the whole damn socio-political and economic system intercedes.

There is another aspect of philosophies of time that has informed *HERMES*, which I had long been vaguely aware of, but which Bergson articulates clearly:

No matter how I try to imagine what is going to happen to me, still how inadequate, how abstract and stilted is the thing I have imagined in comparison to what actually happens! The realization brings with it an unforeseeable nothing which changes everything. For example, I am to be present at a gathering; I know what people I shall find there, around what table, in what order to discuss what problem. But let them come, be seated and chat as I expected, let them say what I was

⁵⁸⁴ See Mark Currie, 'Part One: Surprise and the Theory of Narrative', in *The Unexpected*, pp. 11–51.

sure they would say: the whole gives me an impression at once novel and unique, as if it were but now designed at one original stroke by the hand of an artist. Gone is the image I conceived of it, a mere prearrangeable juxtaposition of things already known!⁵⁸⁵

It might be posited that this unforeseeable nature of all events is due to the additional factors that other people bring to the situation: their gestures, attitudes, temperaments. But, Bergson insists, it is the same for novelty as it unrolls in one's inner life and for actions in which no one else is involved. To explain this, Bergson goes on to argue for the reversal of common misconceptions of the relationship between the real and the possible, against the possible that precedes the real. He proposes instead that it is reality that makes itself possible. A possibility that appears to lodge itself in the past, prior to its realisation, suggests that novelty or creation are impossible, since in this model, all reality is simply a matter of choice between pre-existing possibilities. But the possible is, argues Bergson, 'a mirage of the present in the past' – that it always seems to have been possible is an illusion.⁵⁸⁶ And, similarly, since we understand the present to be a future past, we are also subject to the illusion that future possibilities are somehow contained in the present. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to plunge too deeply into subsequent philosophies of being and time, of which there are many extant accounts and exegeses.⁵⁸⁷ To encapsulate though, after Bergson and Peirce, Deleuze presents theories of multiplicity, duration, immanence and virtualisation that displace conventional understandings of the real and the possible as functioning through rules of resemblance and limitation – where all that is real must resemble the possible, but not all that is possible will become real. Rather than thinking that what is possible pre-exists what is real, then reversing this to consider what is real as what is possible plus existence, the 'virtual' always already possesses a reality, and is made 'actual' through

⁵⁸⁵ Bergson, 'The Possible and the Real', p. 223; also cited in Currie, *The Unexpected*, p. 32.

⁵⁸⁶ Henri Bergson, 'The Possible and the Real', p. 229.

⁵⁸⁷ See for example Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will* (London: MacMillan, 1910); Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism* (New York: Zone Books, 1988); Keith Ansell-Pearson, *Philosophy and the Adventure of the Virtual: Bergson and the Time of Life* (London: Routledge, 2002); Valentine Moulard-Leonard, *Bergson-Deleuze Encounters: Transcendental Experience and the Thought of the Virtual* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2008); Sanford Kwinter, *Architectures of Time: Toward a Theory of the Event in Modernist Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).

experience. For Deleuze the actual comes into being through creative processes of difference and divergence: ‘The indiscernability of the real and the imaginary, or of the present and the past, of the actual and the virtual, is definitely not produced in the head or the mind, it is the objective characteristic of certain existing images which are by nature double.’⁵⁸⁸ In semiotic terms, it is a matter of ontologically constituted perception whether one sees an object or image in one state or another. In his late work on cinema, Deleuze draws significantly on Peirce, who defines the virtual as that which is ‘not an X, which has the efficiency (*virtus*) of X’ (where ‘X’ is a ‘common noun’), and identifies potential not in the past, but as a lack that ghosts a present form.⁵⁸⁹ To give form, to utter or identify, is to override other potential utterances or identities; and it is at the point of perception (whether or not it is consequently represented in speech or thought) that the event or object comes into being. This equates to the appearance of a singular channel through our semiotic terrain, actualised through a subject’s participation in processes of interpretation and representation, with recourse to a variety of ontologies, knowledges and intentions.

HERMES bases its ‘technology’ on this notion that no situation is anticipatable, and proceeds via a comic misapplication of the actualising properties of speech. Where Bergson critiques the illusion that the present contains all future possibilities, I have taken the idea literally and coupled it with a literal rendering of Peircean objectification: If I want something to happen a particular way, I must imagine, and speak, all the ways that I do not want it to turn out. Since the primary aim of train travel is arrival at a destination on time (the joys of journeying and other motivations for travel notwithstanding), then the (fictional) function of *HERMES* is to eradicate all possible obstacles to achieving this – that is, to identify all virtual ‘possibilities’ that might prevent punctuality becoming actual.

⁵⁸⁸ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image* (London: Athlone Press, 1989), p. 69.

⁵⁸⁹ C. S. Peirce, ‘Virtual’, in *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology*, ed. by James Mark Baldwin (New York: Macmillan, 1902) II, pp. 763–4.

Writing for Specific Generic Sites

From a user's perspective, a tool or technique should function in all situations in which its grammē is required. There is a universal expectation that a hammer can hit all nails, that a door can connect any two rooms. This assumption is based in the perception that the qualities of an individual nail or room are subordinate to its categorical essence, and that a hammer is a sign of its constituent material affordances. The design and function of a room might inflect upon the design of its door, but the essence of roominess will remain stable, requiring an equally stable dooriness, assuming that the room has been made out of appropriate materials. All nails should be hammerable. All journeys between any two stations on the rail network should be commutable by a train or a series of connecting trains. If *HERMES* is a text-based technology, technique or tool to be used on any train, it begs the question of what the 'traininess' of a train is: what are its generic characteristics? Here the train becomes the nail of the situation, which must itself adhere to essential generic qualities and display signs of predictable material affordances in order to be hit by the hammer that is *HERMES*. In semiotic terms, where the decision to travel by train is an interpretant of an intention to travel, *HERMES* is a complex assemblage intended to mediate between a desire to arrive at a particular place at a stated time and the generic affordances of 'train', which include the potential for delays. *HERMES* is the objectification of a bundle of purchases that amounts to this function, and as such can be used by anyone whose purpose correlates with its function.

In Heideggerian phenomenology, for the average commuter a train is a ready-to-hand tool, participant in a reticulated network of relata.⁵⁹⁰ It is not so much that a semiotic chain is interpreted step by step, but that the train is instantly understood as a previously encountered entity of the world. This understanding is inarticulated, since it necessarily involves the idiosyncratic and unbounded set

⁵⁹⁰ See Martin Heidegger, 'The Being of Beings Encountered in the Surrounding World', in *Being and Time* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2010), pp. 66–71; also, Graham Harman, 'Reference', in *Tool-Being*, (Chicago: Open Court, 2002), pp. 24–35. This should be followed up with Peter Wolfendale, *Object-Oriented Philosophy: The Noumenon's New Clothes* (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2014), for an analysis of Harman's 'misreading' of Heidegger.

of relations it is engaged in. But if a passenger is unfamiliar with a network – if, say, they are travelling abroad and are unsure of protocols that distinguish between carriage classes – the train must be interpreted to an extent, rather than being entirely and instantaneously understandable. It must fit into a foreknown concept of a train and taken *as* a train. This ‘as-structure’ contains propositional content or assertions: the traininess of trains, and the second classness of second class. There is a certain amount of variation that is tolerable, but there are some essential features without which the train would no longer be a train, which constitute its whatness, or *eidōs*.⁵⁹¹ The determinacy of the ‘as-structure’ or *eidōs* is brought to bear on the indeterminate circumstance: something vague must be judged. To remodel this in semiotic terms, an unfamiliar train might be a sign of the object ‘the train that I want’, and the interpretant the decision to board it, but given that the agent cannot be sure that the ground against which she is interpreting this train is the ground that holds in this part of the world, the interpretation of the sign might be mistaken. A ground will include an understanding of the *eidōs*, of ‘train’, but not the properties of ‘the train that I want’. And so, when the ground of an individual’s interpretation does not match the Lebenswelt in which they find themselves, the relation between sign and object is not solid, and interpretation involves an aspect of risk. Such misinterpretations can also make apparent certain value judgements. If one brings an understanding of British train décor to the Trans Siberian Express, for example, all carriages, with their individual compartments, curtains and at-seat service, appear to be first class. Scrutiny of this ground reveals an assumed correlation between fabric detailing and higher fares, which in turn raises fascinating questions, like: is there a generally applicable correlation between privacy, fussiness of design and wealth? And does the notion of privacy have different connotations in a post-Communist country?

To return to the question of what constitutes the train’s *eidōs*, or generic features: this is dependent on the individual. As we discovered in Chapter Three, for the engineer it is specialised track, accommodation of public traffic, conveyance of

⁵⁹¹ See Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology*, p. 8.

passengers, mechanical traction and some measure of public control. In art and literature, it coincides with the ambivalent bundle of thematic properties of modernity: progressiveness, distanciation, danger. The commuter's primary concerns are cost and reliability of service; for her the train is an unremarked ready-to-hand tool that only becomes an issue when it is late or cancelled. For the writer-maker working with the generic train as site, the question is whether to intermingle these properties or to identify a property that recurs throughout. The problem with the former strategy – an over-articulation of the object – lies in the potential to alienate those unfamiliar with a technical or literary understanding of the site. The potential problem of the latter – an under-articulation – is that the universally recognised is all too often a cliché. Two potential resolutions to these conundrums are to accept that: 1) unfamiliarity can be an enjoyable state for an audience, and an interesting material for a writer-maker to work with, and 2) the cliché is not categorically without value.

To illustrate this latter point, I will turn briefly to Force Entertainment's *Dirty Work (The Late Shift)* (1997/2017).⁵⁹² Two performers on a conventional stage verbally describe a performance in the present tense, while a third performer provides atmosphere by way of a record player. The described performance comprises a catalogue of recognisable events and disasters, many of which would be impossible to stage: a child drops an ice cream; an atomic bomb detonates; a huge shantytown is razed; a body decomposes... The dual site is the here and now of performance and the dislocated pre-existence of universal imagery, of clichés. As director Tim Etchells describes of another piece, but which holds for this one too, there is no first-order utterance, the performers do not embody the text so much as quote it.⁵⁹³ As clichés, these images have been wrought by a long-forgotten author. What interests me here is the limit of the generic, the point at which abstraction from phenomenological, particular experience remains understandable. The ideas that the performance strings together verbally are both

⁵⁹² I have cited Forced Entertainment performances a few times in this thesis not because they are an especial focus of the research, but because, since I am seeking illustrative examples, they are well known enough for many readers to be familiar with their practice, if not the particular pieces mentioned.

⁵⁹³ See Nick Kaye, *Art Into Theatre* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic, 1996), p. 244.

common (dropping an ice cream) and uncommon (dropping an atomic bomb), and yet they are both instantly recognisable due to their respective reiteration in lived life or repetition in video, photography and written account (both reportage and fiction). Repetition is one of the more robust mnemonic tools: the act of memorising is associated with such common phrases such as ‘hammering in’ or ‘drilling’; it is a textual technology of memory that forges neural pathways by frequently retreading them. Genre and the generic are maintained through the repetition of specific markers and tropes, of clichés, which are themselves repetitions. Forced Entertainment depends, then, on an intertextuality based in reiteration, with subject matter articulated not through plot but through a theatre audience’s innate processes of memorialisation, recall, replication and the sort of performative reiteration that we have seen, in Chapter Four, associated with socialising norms.

Curiously, in my search for other textual practices that have been written for specific generic sites, the only example I have found is the prayer, and most notably prayers for travellers.⁵⁹⁴ The travellers’ prayer is an appeal to God to deliver the traveller safely to their destination. It is wholly universalising, permitting few particularities other than the mode of transport (usually a car or an aeroplane). It belongs to the ‘intercessory’ category of prayer and has an ‘upward’ directionality, since it appeals to God to intercede in human affairs. When the prayer is made on behalf of another, it also has an ‘outward’ directionality. The third directionality of prayer is ‘inward’. This directional and connective function of prayer is theorised as being in the service of cognitive structuring:

‘to clarify the state of one’s internal affairs, reveal the fundamental issues associated with paradoxical situations, and define the character of desire.

The structure sought via prayer here refers to an understanding of the

⁵⁹⁴ Texts written for performance in theatres can arguably all be thought of as generic-site-specific texts, since they have been made with the generic conditions of the theatre in mind, but I have found no instances of this in any other kind of space.

pattern of events. Its central component is the observation of order or disorder.⁵⁹⁵

This remit of the upwards, intercessory prayer to influence disorder – to produce an orderly, desirable outcome – is shared by *HERMES*, the fundamental difference being that the directionality here is outwards rather than upwards. In place of a single entity – God – to which to appeal, agency is diffused throughout the railway network. The absurd comedy of *HERMES* lies in its systematic attempt to appeal to every possible cause of disorder in lieu of a prime mover. And another difference is its inflection of the thematic with the technologically particular, and the machinic with the affective. The text draws in part on familiar, repeatable motifs and abstractions, but also includes specific narratives and specialist vocabularies; it is grounded in literature, technology, social science and philosophies of time. And it is these tensions between the generic and the particular, and between commonly dissociated fields of endeavour and experience, that are a source of energy for *HERMES*.

*HERMES, Track by Track*⁵⁹⁶

A tool makes a practice possible and materials useful; it is transitive, in that it refers to the objects it can be applied to. A tool is an object, where the materials enformed are a sign of the affordances that contribute to its hammeriness or traininess; it is also an interpretant of the need to hammer or travel by train; and it is a sign-vehicle, where the function of hammering or travelling is the object. A previously unknown tool, however, might need to be analysed and its affordances described for its relation to its function or object to be understood. We talk of ‘breaking down’ a complex object or process to understand it; and indeed a tool, for Heidegger, when broken down, becomes objectively present, an obdurate

⁵⁹⁵ Kevin L. Ladd and Bernard Spilka, ‘Inward, Outward, Upward Prayer: Scale Reliability and Validation’, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 45.2 (June 2006), 233–51 (p. 234).

⁵⁹⁶ The audio is downloaded as a single file, but as the script makes apparent in the accompanying practice documentation, it has been constructed in fifteen sections, or tracks, which run seamlessly into one another when listening.

arrangement of materials, contrary to its condition when in full working order.⁵⁹⁷ When broken, the fluid relations within which the ready-to-hand tool participates become problematised and all too apparent. The following breakdown of *HERMES* necessarily extends the usual mechanical diagnostics to include relations between material and immaterial, concrete and abstract components of the system in which it claims to participate.

Track 1

The title of the piece and the source text for track one was found on an air and rail traffic management company website. Graffica specialises in software systems and consultancy for the transport sector; they ‘research, prototype and validate future systems and concepts, as well as implement operational systems’.⁵⁹⁸ Recent projects include: the Digital Railway, a UK government initiative, headed by Network Rail ‘to tackle the UK’s capacity crunch by accelerating the digital modernisation of the railway’,⁵⁹⁹ and the Thameslink Traffic Management System, ‘intended to smooth the flow of information between signalling centres and to feed customer information systems, ensuring that up to 24 trains/h can be handled at peak times through the route’s central core between St Pancras International and Blackfriars stations’.⁶⁰⁰ Graffica’s strapline is ‘Vision Accomplished’. They model themselves as a future-facing company, angling not for maintenance contracts but development projects in which modernisation and improvement are primary motivations. The function of Graffica’s *HERMES* system is as a simulator, which generates ‘a high-fidelity model of the real world railway’, and enables the introduction of additional or alternative functional elements and components, in order to gauge how change will affect rail service

⁵⁹⁷ See Heidegger, ‘The Worldly Character of the Surrounding World Announcing Itself in Innerworldly Beings’, in *Time and Being*, pp.72–5.

⁵⁹⁸ ‘About’, Graffica website <<http://www.graffica.co.uk/about/>> [accessed 10 December 2017].

⁵⁹⁹ Digital Railway <<http://digitalrailway.co.uk/>> [accessed 10 December 2017].

⁶⁰⁰ ‘Thameslink Traffic Management contract signed’, *Railway Gazette* (27 July 2015) <<http://www.railwaygazette.com/news/infrastructure/single-view/view/thameslink-traffic-management-contract-signed.html>> [accessed 10 December 2017].

performance.⁶⁰¹ I needed to make very few changes to the website text, other than a bit of compression and cutting so as to rein in length. The function of the product described is surprisingly close to the fantastical linguistic tool I was developing; and its marketing rhetoric, too, being targeted at a specialist consumer group, has a usefully higher level of detail than one finds in the pseudo-technological claims made for, say, cosmetics.

And so Track One represents an unexpected point of convergence between my fantastical technology and a perfectly viable one. It also sets up listener expectation. The rhetoric and mode of address – ‘Welcome. And thank you for choosing...’ – position the listener as consumer of the audio as product. Although the listener/audio relationship has, as already mentioned, been established through obligation or curiosity, it is now being processed, through one-sided assertion, into one of choice and consumption. Thank *you* for choosing *me*.

Track 2

Track 2 further establishes the fiction of consumer choice and product effectiveness. It adopts the bland spiel of the salesperson or website that appeals to the everyperson, rather than to the specialist buyer. It is the sort of text that, as Gass describes, is ‘customarily constructed on assembly lines by gangs and other committees, by itinerant troupes of clerical assistants’.⁶⁰² In a ‘real’ situation, this text would not have been spoken by the person that authored it or that commissioned the authoring of it. The voice would be a mediating conduit between listener and business; the direct address, ‘You have turned to me...’, being a ploy to obfuscate this impersonal relation. Like that of the customer service advisor and the helpline operator, the use of direct address is a theatrical device that shrinks the distance over which customer and provider conduct their

⁶⁰¹ HERMES System Overview <<http://www.graffica.co.uk/rail/hermes/>> [accessed 10 December 2017].

⁶⁰² Gass, ‘Death of the Author’, p. 19.

business, and apparently resurrects the face-to-face interactions of the mediaeval marketplace – the aim being to emulate the trust conventionally associated with interpersonal dealings.⁶⁰³

But since the person who speaks here claims to ‘have the combined mental capacity of all who have ever journeyed’, it might not be such a cosy exchange after all. In a technological environment where reliance on human memory has waned and the elaborative encoding of information is most likely left to digital devices, this claim smacks of the theatrical magician or of AI. In the context of train travel, it is most likely to be the latter. But given that *HERMES* is being presented as an artwork, it requires a certain act of credulity on the listener’s part to accept this insinuation. Indeed, comic absurdity proceeds from the circularity of such spurious claims made through spoken assertions for the effectiveness of speech as an operative technology.

If the fiction is to be entertained, however, then this voice would be representative not of an individual employee or spokesperson for the company, but of the AI technology that powers the product in question. We are in the realm of ventriloquism or prosopopoeia,⁶⁰⁴ wherein an actual object or an abstraction or imagined character is personified; and this has been variously deployed to afford a critical or ironic perspective on human behaviour or desires. The eponymous pencil in Leonard Read’s ‘I, Pencil’, for instance, maintains that no one human knows how to make it, that it comes into being through a combination of innovation, demand and the ‘invisible hand’ of the free market.⁶⁰⁵ Erasmus’s *The Praise of Folly* personifies folly as a woman (attended to by

⁶⁰³ And to engender trust beyond these interpersonal encounters, there are regulatory bodies to monitor processes and distribute licences, consumer watchdogs to publicise transgressions and professional societies to foster peer critique. These institutions supposedly protect those who place their trust in them from that which will always be opaque: from contingent events and the intentions of others. Of course, these regulatory bodies themselves are in need of regulating, for they too are comprised of individuals within hierarchies and bureaucratic systems...

⁶⁰⁴ Depending on one’s understanding of AI as existing in the hardware or as the abstract functioning of data in its ‘mind’. See Claus Emmesche, ‘Does a Robot Have an Umwelt: Reflections on the biosemiotics of Jakob von Uexküll’, *Semiotica*, 134.1/4 (2001), pp. 653–93.

⁶⁰⁵ Leonard Read, ‘I, Pencil’, first published in *The Freeman* (December 1958); see Library of Economics and Liberty <<http://www.econlib.org/library/Essays/rdPncl1.html>> [accessed 10 December 2017].

Flattery, Self-Love, Forgetfulness, Sound Sleep and Imbecility, among others) who asserts her pervasive influence on all who seek pleasure, on the pretentiousness of theologians, on warring pontiffs and pedantic scholars. Travis Jeppesen ventriloquises artworks in an expressive, speculative form of art criticism in which the influence of somatic and material factors are flagrant.⁶⁰⁶ Such a perspective of humans, articulated from an apparently non-human view, is of course paradoxical, since it is narrated or composed by a person, and therefore cannot escape the human ontology. The disembodied voice of *HERMES* is close in tone to marketing strategies, promising freedom from the overwhelming effort that being human ordinarily entails. If it is the ventriloquism of anything, it is that of technological autonomy. And the voice is, self-reflexively, the apparatus through which the language-technology will be implemented, since utterance itself supposedly creates the marketable effect.

Track 3

The first and only task (besides continuing to listen) is asked of the train traveller: to silently articulate the name of the station they are travelling to and the time they are scheduled to arrive. Through invocation, a target is locked in, the piece becomes specific. In practices of magic, such a user-side spell can be thought of in the tradition of ‘natural magic of the imagination’, a psychologised, internalised form of mental manipulation. In reference to an episode in Percy Shelley’s *Hellas* (1822) where a phantom is invoked by a Wandering Jew from the imagination of Mahmud, ruler of Turkey, Simon During describes the process as neoplatonic, where ‘unlike the stuff of history, the objects of true thought and inspired imagination are eternal’; and consequently, should the king (and the reader) willingly suspend disbelief, the ghost arises ‘within passions and sensations drawn from the cultural energies that the poem engages’.⁶⁰⁷ Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s phrase ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ involves converting

⁶⁰⁶ See Travis Jeppesen, *16 Sculptures* (Portland: Publication Studio, 2014).

⁶⁰⁷ Simon During, *Modern Enchantments: The Cultural Power of Secular Magic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 44.

belief in real magic or supernatural agency into ‘poetic faith’, which checks all scepticism based in logic for the duration of, and to better appreciate, the work.⁶⁰⁸ In the case of literature and contemporary art, ‘belief’, as a psychological category, pertains more readily than ‘faith’, which is, in religious rhetoric, a gift from God. The practice of reading, listening or viewing is predicated on the suspension of everyday logics of utility and efficacy in order to enjoy the aesthetic, surreal or ambiguous aspects of an artwork or literary fiction. The listener of *HERMES*, on uttering the required destination, assents to this suspension, and in the process commits the first step of the neoplatonic procedure to come, identifying the eternal true thought that they wish the actual journey to make a reality. In this, *HERMES* is a paradoxical engine, fuelled by the very model of the possible and the real that the virtual/actual model, from which it departs, seeks to displace.

If one were to prefer to interpret the piece in terms of AI rather than magic, then this silent voicing procedure is a developmental step ahead of currently available voice-activated domestic technology. *HERMES* can read the user’s thoughts. While this is already operational in fMRO scanners and decoders – currently in development for use by patients with ‘locked-in syndrome’, on the market as performance and wellbeing tracking devices or used in criminal court cases as an alternative to polygraph machines – brain reading and thought crime are persistent tropes in dystopian and sci-fi literature and film.⁶⁰⁹ As genre fiction, *HERMES* would be attributable to the categories of fantasy or sci-fi.

Track 4

Once it has been established where the traveller wishes to end up and at what time, the logic of the piece requires all other potentialities to be imagined, spoken

⁶⁰⁸ See Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographica Literaria* II. xiv. 2; cited in ‘suspension, n., 3b: (willing) suspension of disbelief, *OED* <<http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.lib.bbk.ac.uk/view/Entry/195164#eid19461023>> [accessed 16 March 2019].

⁶⁰⁹ For marketed devices see Emotiv <<https://www.emotiv.com>> [accessed 12 December 2017].

and therefore struck from the list of actualities-in-the-making.⁶¹⁰ A systematic working through of all possible destinations and times would be longwinded and tedious. 2,560 working UK train stations were listed by the Office of Rail and Road in 2016-17, which, given that a station might offer services between 6am and 1am, and working at an aggregate of minutes, that would make for 1,140 arrival time permutations per station, which makes 2,918,400 combinations in all.⁶¹¹ Such a grinding, mechanical approach would also be a wasted aesthetic opportunity.

Rejecting network timetables as a source of potential journeys, I have turned instead to novels in which an event on the railway is symbolic or pivotal, where the train is an engine of peripeteia, carrying towards the locus of the plot lovers, nemeses, prodigals, murderers or accident, or simply bringing things, people, materials or ideas into association. In Track 4, *The Litany of Arrivals*, the novels' passages and episodes are remade, through excerption and encapsulation, into freestanding vignettes that may or may not be familiar to the listener. My hope is that intertextuality is apparent in this itinerary of literary intensities, even if the source texts are not identifiable. Intertextuality extrudes a text, drawing it into relation with anterior texts that have been absorbed or replied to, and resulting in Barthes's 'multidimensional space'.⁶¹² The intended effect of Track 4 is that of an old-fashioned first-class carriage, where a long corridor gives on to several separate small compartments, in which miniature intersubjective dramas are playing out, to be glimpsed as one passes by.

A parallel might be drawn between the fatalism of literature – that is, the fact that a literary character's future is always already fixed – and the dehumanizing qualities of a bureaucratized, economically driven system that delimits and

⁶¹⁰ This is to muddle the labelling of the possible/real and virtual/actual models somewhat, but with the advent of virtual reality, this latter term has accrued new connotations of sensory immersion that are not intended here, and so I have elected to retain 'possibility', with the stipulation that it is not future-tending but innate within the present.

⁶¹¹ 'Estimates of Station Usage', Office of Rail and Road
<http://orr.gov.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0020/26129/estimates-of-station-usage-2016-17-key-facts.pdf> [accessed 11 December 2017].

⁶¹² Barthes, 'Death of the Author', p. 146.

abstracts the messiness of the social. But *HERMES* fights such logic with warped logic, its mechanisms with fantastical mechanisms, and with supernatural agency. The rhetorical form of The Litany of Arrivals – Let so and so arrive at somewhere or other, where such an such... – is borrowed and adapted from Christopher Smart's *Jubilate Agno*, written between 1758 and 1773, for most of which period Smart was committed to Bethnal Green asylum. According to contemporaneous accounts, the most prevalent symptom of his mental 'illness' was 'a compulsion to pray in public, at any time or place', and the text too is a canticle.⁶¹³ The fragmentary reiterative form is over-articulate, emphasising Smart's rich and diverse subject matter and knowledges, drawn from theological texts, books on natural history and botany, medical handbooks, travelogues, a Latin dictionary, Newton's *Principia*, Chambers's *Cyclopaedia*, Royal Society periodicals, Rosicrucian, Masonic and other occult texts. The resulting effect is of a bizarre world with a bustling history, in which God is hectically busy overseeing and underwriting the professions, pastimes and callings of a vast society of real and imagined creatures.

If, as Kevin L. Ladd and Bernard Spilka speculate, prayer is 'the downstream result of mental processes that originate to serve other purposes', then connectivity of prayer and supernatural or preternatural interaction 'is based on imagination that is grounded in physical experience with humans'.⁶¹⁴ And indeed, in *HERMES*, the litany of arrivals begins to take on the qualities of information passed on in the less pious mode of gossip. Gossip is a quantum of symbolic capital often offered up in the interests of exchange, but here it acts as a fuel of sorts, propelling the listener away from an unwanted fate; or as a barrier to repetition, as an example, as in 'making an example of...'. There is something uncomfortable in these vignettes, since hearing the travails and hard-won triumphs of others makes one glad to be sitting quietly in a train seat. *HERMES* runs partly on schadenfreude.

⁶¹³ Karina Williamson, 'Introduction', in *The Poetical Works of Christopher Smart*, ed. by Karina Williamson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), I, p. xix.

⁶¹⁴ Ladd and Spilka, 'Inward, Outward, Upward Prayer', p. 246.

Ultimately, though, this part of the process lays bare the fundamental failing of *HERMES*. Where the software's (fictional) creators have apparently understood a description to be evocative enough to approach reality (perhaps especially on account of its poetic affectivity), any listener will know this to be hopelessly wide of the mark. Abstraction and objectification – processes through which detail is curtailed in narration, and more markedly so in précis – lies at the heart of the impossibility of *HERMES*'s claims.

Track 5

At this point the space-time of the audio splits and becomes complex. It is claimed that the work of the previous section is continuing out of earshot of the listener, that the litany of arrivals will remain operative in some register or at a speed imperceptible to the human. The voice itself, meanwhile, will remain within the listener's perception, in their ear even, while moving on, at the pace of intelligible speech, to the next part of the process. Here the fantastical is (rather conveniently) manifest as ineffable.

Track 5 asks the listener to look around them. This is the moment at which direct contact is made between the voice and the specifics of the individual's listening environment, when the generic properties of a train are first considered. Age is the lens through which these properties are deliberated: at first by way of the comparative design particularities of different eras, then by a projection of human, fleshly aging on to the anatomy of a train carriage. Firmness and swiftness are taken to be the measures of youth or newness. Absurdity arises from discordant *and* comparable paradigms of value ascribed to biological and technological entities: the young human is inexperienced and irresponsible; the new train is more reliable and better equipped. The old human is slower and set in her ways; the old train is slower and aligned with out-of-date systems.

For *homo faber*, who controls environments with tools, the train is progressive. For the human body that participates in the railway assemblage, technology has ambivalent implications for the body and for time. The journey speeds up and stretches out time, since such vast distances are covered in mere hours, during which so much boredom can be experienced. A lifetime of events can happen within one week, and yet one can feel one's age creeping up on one as one waits to arrive. Time is at once chased out of and floods into the system, altering objects and bodies. It is as if the supplementarity of technology – that is, its constitutive connotations for the body – is literalised, as trains adopt human signs of age: wrinkling and wheezing, in marked contradistinction to expectations of the mechanical reiterability of technics. It is in this section, too, that assumed categories of speed – machines, fast; humans, slow – are confirmed by the (veiled, but retrievable) information that human sperm travels at up to 5mm per second, which would be rivalled by any train travelling upwards of 0.02km per hour.

Track 6

Track 6 moves beyond the immediate, visible properties of the train and performs the upwards and outwards directionalities of the prayer. Taking the passenger's own body as a starting point, the connectivity and scope of technical elements and interlocking systems of the railway are sketched in. The aim here is not to invoke the technological sublime through exhaustive detail, but to articulate enough detail and invoke a particular vocabulary (ballast, pantograph, drawbars) to impress a reality on the listener. Also in this section, the word 'riddle' is used in two of its senses: as a conundrum, and to pervade or permeate. The railway is riddled with technological components, which are the source of its riddle-like nature, implying that the text being spoken is at once the means of making mysterious and of coming to know the network.

Tracks 7 & 8

The information that has been condensed into Track 7 was gleaned from a ‘table of cancellations and significant lateness’ published by the Office of Rail and Road.⁶¹⁵ ‘The last recorded year’ is 2014. No data on delay times is publically available after this year. All the data used in the script is accurate, the fantastical element residing in the idea that any degree of lateness can be added to the time of the clock – as if a stalled train actually stretches duration (which sometimes can seem to be the case) – and in the image of a network of tracks healing like a skeleton, its broken sections thickening organically in compensation. It is purportedly the effects of speaker’s voice that performs these reparations. We are in the realm here of speaking into being: of prayer, but also of deistic pronouncement or fiat magic.⁶¹⁶

Track 9

The main focus of Track 9 is the boredom of axel counters. As the voice explains, axel counters are track-based sensors that detect the direction and speed of a train carriage. Axle counter readings at two ends of a length of track are compared to determine whether everyone has made it through and the track is clear. They are likened to invigilators – the people who sit or stand in galleries to keep an eye on artworks and to give information to visitors if asked. This is a notoriously dull job, and the voice of *HERMES* claims that technical failures due to axel counters are down to their being bored. Boredom, as we will see below, is one of the recognised contributory factors of human error; but here this is pure anthropomorphism. (And might humanising and animating technical objects be just the sort of thing one does while daydreaming, bored, on a long train journey?) Speculations and studies suggest that boredom is a foil for creative

⁶¹⁵ ‘Significant lateness’ means that a train has arrived at its final destination more than 30 minutes late. See ‘Cancellations and Significant Lateness by TOC (periodic) – Table 3.55’, f.n. 1, Office of Rail and Road <<https://dataportal.orr.gov.uk/displayreport/report/html/d0fe38ad-2f5e-4e59-a9d0-39488b2d47ea>> [accessed 12 December 2017].

⁶¹⁶ More on fiat magic in Chapter Seven.

thought and action.⁶¹⁷ A basic definition of boredom is not the result of having nothing to do per se, but ‘of have nothing to do *that one likes*’.⁶¹⁸ An extended implication here is that any technology that does not fail must *like* what it does, since it does not get bored performing the precise same function over and over. And this anthropomorphism marks a foundational difference between human and machine: a person seeks meaning across a variety actions and circumstances, and will tire of a repeated act, taste, sensation, experience. A machine will not. The vacuity of boredom, of eternal repetition, presents no qualitative difference to the machine.

In fact, the whole text of *HERMES* flirts with the limit of the boringness of permutation, which lies somewhere on the cline between outright repetition and open-ended novelty. Claims for systematic processes are made but not fulfilled, and so (hopefully) the listening experience is one of being set up for boredom but then diverted from its grid – unlike in Samuel Beckett’s *Molloy*, where the reader is party to all the permutations of positions of sucking stones in greatcoat pockets and the mouth, and in Beckett’s *Watt*, where one must work through (or skip over) exhaustive combinations of voices that ‘sang’, ‘murmured’, ‘stated’ and/or ‘cried’ and through a dozen permutations of Mr Knott’s knowledge of, responsibility for and contentment with his mealtime arrangements.⁶¹⁹ Here Beckett is enumerating all the specific instantiations of a situation that would likely be represented by another writer in its generalised form. *HERMES* is a public-facing programme which does not wish to overly challenge its listener, and so hopes to strike a balance between the lower-order abstractions of specific permutation and the higher-order abstractions of generalised schematic depiction. It has taken heed of Bergson’s assertion that laughter is a means of

⁶¹⁷ See for example: Teresa Belton and Esther Priyadarshini, ‘Boredom and schooling: a cross disciplinary exploration’, *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 37.4 (2007), 579–95.

⁶¹⁸ See Sandi Mann and Andrew Robinson, ‘Boredom in the Lecture Theatre: An Investigation into the Contributors, Moderators and Outcomes of Boredom Amongst University Students’, *British Educational Research Journal*, 35.2 (2009), 243–58 (p. 243).

⁶¹⁹ Samuel Beckett, *Molloy* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1966) pp. 73–9; Samuel Beckett, *Watt* (London: Calder, 1963), pp. 27, 86–7.

restoring fluidity to the subject that has become rigid, reiterative, mechanical.⁶²⁰
HERMES seeks to entertain through diversion and variation, despite its ultimately machinic, systematic intent.

Track 10

Track 10 extends anthropomorphism throughout the railway network: bridges go on strike; infrastructure is unruly; signalling apparatus (some forms of which are viable in the railway context, some not) is vulnerable to disease, self-neglect and being misunderstood. A fanstactical world emerges that is more easily imagined than the complex technical reality: a claxon that shouts until it is hoarse or a bridge disgruntled at what is expected of it is more accessible an image to the layperson than unmetaphorised electricity or the effects of the forces of compression and tension or the operational details of points lubrication systems.

Track 11

At this point the text performs a figure that I do not know the name for. Analepsis is a flashback and prolepsis a flashforward to another point in time. Here the flash is sideways to the parallel fictive space in which the Litany of Arrivals has purportedly been continuing while the listener has been attending to other elements of the *HERMES* programme. The textual content maintains the established template, 'Let so and so arrive at somewhere or other, where such and such...', running on like a monastic continual prayer.

⁶²⁰ See Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (London: MacMillan, 1935), pp. 8–22.

Tracks 12 & 13

The third and final programme of the HERMES system is set running in Tracks 12 and 13. The listener is introduced to the ludicrously named THERP and SLIM-IAN, which stand for Technique for Human Error Rate Prediction and Success Likelihood Index Method, and Immaterial Analytic Nodaliser. The job of this segment is to eradicate all human error from the system, which is a factor in at least 80% of railway accidents worldwide, although no metrics are available for its role in everyday delays and cancellations.⁶²¹

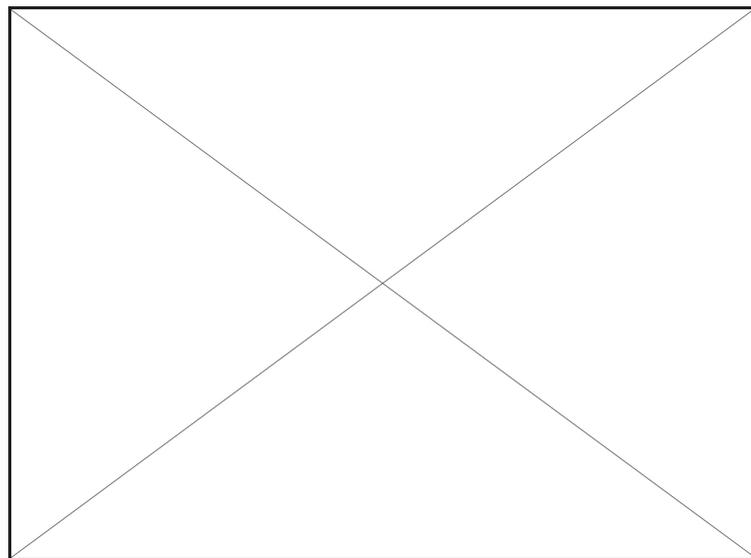


Fig. 5: James Reason's Swiss Cheese Model

The European Railway Agency's guide 'Integrating Human Factors in SMS' (where 'SMS' stands for Safety Management System) is 'addressed to railway undertakings and infrastructure managers in order to implement an SMS compliant with Article 9 and Annex III of Directive 2004/49/EC' and advances the integration of the systems study of human factors into the design of management systems.⁶²² The authors of the paper mention James Reason's Swiss Cheese Model, whereby:

⁶²¹ Miltos Kyriakidis, Arnab Majumdar and Washington Y. Ochieng, 'The human performance railway operational index – a novel approach to access human performance for railway operations', *Reliability Engineering and Safety System*, 180 (February 2018), 226–43.

⁶²² Eleni Douvi, Anna Patacchini and Task Force on SMS Guidelines, 'Integrating Human Factors in SMS' (Paris: European Railway Agency, 2013), p. 3.

an organisation's defences against failure are modelled as a series of barriers, represented as slices of the cheese. The holes in the cheese slices represent individual weaknesses in individual parts of the system, and are continually varying in size and position in all slices. The system as a whole produces failures when holes in all of the slices momentarily align, permitting 'a trajectory of accident opportunity', so that a hazard passes through holes in all of the defences, leading to an accident.⁶²³

This adheres to the systems model of human error, in which it is not that an individual should be blamed for forgetfulness or recklessness when something goes wrong, but that the circumstances in which he or she has been required to act should be scrutinised. As Reason describes it: 'humans are fallible and errors are to be expected, even in the best organizations. Errors are seen as consequences rather than causes, having their origins not so much in the perversity of human nature as in "upstream" systemic factors.'⁶²⁴ Latent conditions are described as 'resident pathogens' in a system, which arise from 'decisions made by designers, builders, procedure writers, and top-level management'.⁶²⁵ Like Bergsonian and Deleuzian models of the actual and the virtual, the error is virtually ever-present and its actualisation brought about by particular human, material, chemical or electrical responses to an event. Trajectories of accident opportunity can be triggered by situations in which errors of response are likely to happen, such as a sudden overload of work or a deficiency of time, or by the alignment of weaknesses such as faulty equipment or unworkable procedures. Human error is accounted for in the systems model of human factors; staff are trained to recognize and rectify or compensate for it. A brittle intolerance is replaced by an elastic responsiveness (as per Kockelman's definition of environmental agency); the system benefits from increased flexibility.

⁶²³ 'James Reason HF Model', SKYbrary Aviation Safety <https://www.skybrary.aero/index.php/James_Reason_HF_Model> [accessed 16 December 2017].

⁶²⁴ James Reason, 'Human Errors Model and Management', *British Medical Journal* (18 March 2000) <<http://www.bmj.com/content/320/7237/768>> [accessed 16 December 2017].

⁶²⁵ Reason, 'Human Errors Model and Management'.

HERMES might at first appear to be less enlightened than Professor Reason and other human factor researchers, invoking ‘badly made’ or ‘badly managed’ equipment and systems. But the voice goes on to recognize the human experience of operating within these systems. It notes how boredom is not necessarily generated from within an individual, but is a reaction to a situation; recklessness is not part of a person’s temperament, but a response to the imposition of conflicting requirements – of punctuality and safety, for example. The voice of *HERMES* acknowledges that a cause is constructed through the process of investigation, and that its articulation depends ‘on where you look, what you look for, who you talk to, what evidence you consult and probably who you work for’. Whether one chooses a person-centric mode of accident investigation, where an individual is sought to carry the blame, or a systems model, whereby the circumstance in which that person acted is investigated, becomes a matter of historiographic method. In the current thesis, it is the latter that pertains, but there are plenty of managers, media commentators and juridical bodies that cleave to the ‘great men of history’ model, who hold individuals to account for events that unfold through complex networks. And then, on the other hand, there are those, like Bennett, who consider extended hyperobjects as conglomerations of forces, tendencies and capacities, human and non-human actants which can never be resolved into single entities with overriding control. For Bennett, individuals are ‘incapable of bearing *full* responsibility for the effects’.⁶²⁶ In a paradigm where causality is non-linear and agency and effect composite, she suggests that it is a matter of political judgement whether we should ‘acknowledge the distributive quality of agency to address the power of the human-nonhuman assemblages and to resist a politics of blame’, or to ‘persist with a strategic understatement of material agency in the hopes of enhancing the accountability of specific humans’.⁶²⁷ For Kockelman, the imposition of responsibility is a typical response within human ontology to a person’s perceived agency, since equivalence is drawn between the rewards and culpabilities of power. This is not, in complex situations, so straightforward, of

⁶²⁶ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. 37.

⁶²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

course, since power is not often predicated on full knowledge, and any knowledge is unstable when it is of a dispersed network comprising many ontologies. *HERMES*'s solution to such dispersal and divergence is to consider what, among the assemblage of social, metaphysical, material and economic factors and forces, can be appealed to, which relations can be attended to in the hope of better outcomes. Although dressed up here as passenger self-interest, it is in principle an appeal, pace Haraway, that we 'become answerable for what we learn how to see.'⁶²⁸

Track 14

While I agree with Bennett to an extent that, in light of anthropocene projections, singular blame is neither useful nor, within the systems models of human factors, possible, I do require accountability and responsivity of the system. I desire the means to generate change in response to adverse trajectories such as climate change or enrichment of one community at the expense of another. The problem is, as Track 13 implies, and as Reason puts it:

The causal web quickly multiplies and fans out, like cracks in a window. What you call 'root cause' is simply the place where you stop looking any further. As far as the causal web is concerned, there are no such things as root or primary causes—there is in fact no end anywhere.⁶²⁹

Track 14 works 'backwards' from events – including real accidents such as the fatal derailment at Hatfield in 2000 – tracing trajectories of accident opportunity, or 'holes' or weaknesses in the system that have lined up and enabled the virtual to become actual. But what *HERMES* includes, and which investigation boards tend not to in their final reports, are social, political and personal emotional factors, as well as technological and economic ones. As the chain of explanations supposedly gets closer to a root cause, the audio fades out, implying that the end

⁶²⁸ Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges', p. 583.

⁶²⁹ Reason, 'Human Errors Model and Management'.

of this chain of 'because's' could be perpetually extended. Each 'trajectory' fades out as we approach the more difficult next steps in identification: the causes for capitalism, selfishness, emotions...

Track 15

The final track reassures the listener that the HERMES programme will be running for whatever remains of their journey. There is a return to the orotundity of marketing and technical specification, blinding the client with hyperbole and a blizzard of software names. The final sentence, however, is intended to produce a rhetorically pared-back moment of disquiet:

And so all that is left for you to do is to sit back, enjoy the journey and arrive on time – calm and ready for whatever might be in store for you at your destination.

'Whatever might be in store' being precisely what the previous half an hour or so has been attempting to objectify and control. The implication here is that although the train journey itself has purportedly been brought into alignment with the traveller's intentions, there is the whole of the rest of their life to come, a universe of objects, technologies, people, materials, forces to reckon with. Where the future was previously closed by the horizon of arrival at a prescribed destination, a new openness is hinted at, a further gulf in which new horizons must be established.

Summing Up, Referring Back, Moving On

HERMES mediates between differing granularities of abstraction and objectification, performing the required technical work of articulation to produce a correspondence between the unnuanced 'arriving on time' and the multiple precise systematic procedures required of a smooth-running railway. It is metonymic of what we have come to demand as consumers: a desirable and

predictable outcome via near-intangible means. *HERMES* is powered by multiplicities of relations, and relations between relations: between generic place and actual site; between expectation and outcome; between recollection, experience and anticipation; between discordant knowledges; between intention and interpretation; between causes and effects; between significances and responses. Its drama turns about these intervals, producing a sense of the opportunities or risks that an individual is exposed to in a complex system of which they are an immanent element.

Another relational 'fuel' of the piece is intertextuality. Text, as we have seen, permeates and objectifies the railway: through laws, unwritten rules, advertising, signage and Parliamentary acts, and in descriptions by technicians, managers, journalists, politicians, novelists, artists. Quotation, as a form of intertextuality is, according to Said, a neurotic response to problems of authenticity and originality: 'The greater the anxiety, the more writing appears to be a quotation, the more writing thinks itself as, in some cases even proclaims itself, rewriting'.⁶³⁰ For Susan Stewart, quotation 'involves an infinite regress and an infinite resource'.⁶³¹ It detaches discourse from any original context, thereby implying an objective significance that lies beyond the domain of a speaker's experience. The steadying, ballast-giving effects of intertextuality, then, can be considered a symptom of weakness or a quality of delusional strength. *HERMES* is apparently a self-possessed, pragmatic (if fantastical) solution to a perceived lack of control over one's circumstance. It presents intertextuality not as unsettling displacement, but as a form of empowerment, and a displacement of responsibility from the individual onto his or her milieu. The main thrust of *HERMES*'s duties is to locate agency throughout systems of the railway, of social habits, of writing and of listening. Here, authority is not only a matter of identifying who is responsible, but also of identifying collective authorship, whose words are absorbed into the text as reference, encapsulation or direct quotation. *HERMES* is a Bakhtinian carnivalesque, or what Adrian Mackenzie

⁶³⁰ Said, *Beginnings*, p. 21.

⁶³¹ Stewart, *Nonsense*, p. 122.

calls ‘a polyphonic voicing of technology’, supplanting what Leo Marx has described as ‘a bloodless abstraction that represents no particular person or thing, no specific skill, vocation or other institution’.⁶³² It is a medley of utterances and types of knowledge.

HERMES describes a network by tracing its contours outwards, via its mechanised construction, along predetermined alignments of components, to a scale that implies the national, if not the global; or, in moments of failure, along trajectories of accident opportunity. Importantly, when cataloguing potential futures to be avoided, *HERMES* identifies both fictional and actual events: no distinction is drawn between the fatal derailments at Hatfield in 2000 or in Ellen Wood’s *East Lynne* (1861). A fictional character, Eco suggests, is an expression that conveys a set of properties as its content, and is therefore a semiotic object.⁶³³ In the case of a real person, the object or referent exists in the real world; in the case of a fictional person this object is supplanted to a virtual fictional world. The character as signifier holds on two counts: when the reader becomes absorbed into the world of the text, or when the character enters our world as a culturally fixed signifier, as a type – tragic, fallen, pathetic, hubristic, etc. – or as a prototype, as with Frankenstein, a figure of malevolent progress to which many imaginings and realities since have referred to. But where Eco understands a character as fixed, I suggest this is not the case. Fan fiction, for instance, overturns even the basic givenness of a character’s circumstances and the outcome of their actions. Even the connotations of the original text can change with reading habits. Anna Karenina, while she persists as an imagined suicide, will have been differently described since the widespread uptake of psychoanalysis and second wave feminism, for instance. Evaluative practices and paradigms of judgment with which reading is intermingled must, I suggest, be considered

⁶³² Adrian Mackenzie, *Transductions: Bodies and Machines at Speed* (London: Continuum, 2002), p. 1. Marx quoted in Mackenzie, *Transductions*, p. xi.

⁶³³ Umberto Eco, ‘On the ontology of fictional characters: A semiotic approach’, *Sign Systems Studies* 37.1/2 (2009), 82–97. In non-semiotic theories of objects, such as those of Bruno Latour and Graham Harman, the parity of influence between ‘real’ and ‘fictional’ entities, between ‘fact’ and ‘belief’ is imperative. See Graham Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* (London: Penguin, 2017), pp. 33–5, and Latour, *Pandora’s Box*, pp. 287–91.

when writing. My own habits of reading and evaluating have been informed by the choice of texts through which they have been exercised, and by the process of encapsulation to which *Anna Karenina*, *The Diary of a Nobody*, *The Hounds of the Baskervilles* and so on have been subjected. By drawing on literary narratives as well as real world events, *HERMES* acknowledges all manner of mediations that contribute to understandings of the railway. Distal causes or meanings within other narratives diffract a network most often interpreted through the comparatively local and practical ontology of travel.

HERMES also attempts to dilate circumscribed assumptions with regards to failure and fault. When a technical failure is investigated, its cause is often couched in terms that are singular, retrospective, proximal, counterfactual and judgemental: a person or company is held accountable because they were at the locus of the event in question and did not act as the situation required. And yet when a situation is unfolding, becoming apparent or understood, it is impossible to know what action *will have been* appropriate. The modality enabled by hindsight is not possible in the midst of an event. Some things, granted, are more predictable than others – the likelihood that a wet floor will be slipped on, for instance – but more often, among the throng of reality, it can be difficult to discern the beginnings of an event, which is a slightly different but related conundrum to that outlined above, of tracing the root cause of an event.

HERMES deals with this by literalising and upcycling Bergson's observation – that the future is unforeseeable – into a tool that makes 'visible' all that is not desired. The text of *HERMES* is a prophesy inverted and inside-out. It does not predict what will pass, but intones all that should not pass; and so, by speaking in the present of alternative futures (which are in fact actual pasts, real and imagined), a negative space is cleared in which the actual future can come into being. The actual future, meanwhile, remains unvoiced, unsensed, so as not to hex it. The impossible claim is that that which is desired can be reified within a telic universe by the listing of all that it is differentiated from. *HERMES* is a pantomime of *différance*.

**CHAPTER SEVEN:
COMPORTING WITHIN INTERPRETATION**

At the end of Chapter Two, I anticipated making artworks that function as essaying itineraries, directing the reader or listener to particular landmarks and waypoints in a metaphoric terrain. This terrain would consist in the writer-maker's selected subject matter, the path charted through it evidencing the ontologies of she who, in Kockelman's terms, comports within interpretation. That is: such an itinerary would be symptomatic of the knowledges, values, beliefs, interpretative propensities and actional purposes of its writer-maker. And the particular composition of such a text would direct the reader or listener's perception of the terrain and thereby mediate their understanding.

The focus of the previous chapter – the audio work *HERMES* – cannot be identified as anything so organised or organising as an itinerary. It is a hectic piece that scatters the listener's attention. It does not essay or guide the listener through ideas so much as inflict a deluge of images and a tangle of literary effects and readerly affects. It is less a relating, more a demonstration of ideas – of the contradictory temporalities involved in train travel, for instance, and of the arbitrary nature of objectification, particularly when identifying a singular cause within the reticulated network of an event such as a machinic or systemic fault. *HERMES* fulfils my aim to draw on the material, social, political and psychological aspects of its site, but does not elucidate functional particularities of that site so much as make it shimmer. Its excitement for me lies in its multitude of implied ontologies.

Ultimately, though, the ontologies of contemporary art and travel are not as interwoven as I would have liked. I am not convinced that the travel concerns of the listener remain foregrounded when listening to the piece. Until something disruptive occurs, seated passengers tend to allow themselves to be distracted

from the state of travel. And so, even though the audio is being listened to on a train, the railway becomes a dislocated referent of the piece. Furthermore, I doubt that the audio would be persisted with if the journey were actually disrupted. On learning about a broken-down train or signal failure, the listener would most likely stop playback and switch focus to their immediate predicament. A fundamental flaw of *HERMES* is that the ontologies of the train carriage and the artwork remain segregated – attributable to the fact that the actual site of *HERMES* is not the train carriage, but the digital file as it plays back on the listener’s mobile device.

In this chapter I will be discussing two performance works that have not suffered from equivalent dislocation. In both instances, the site is emphatically where audience and performers meet. In *I Hear Horses*, the site is the Swanscombe peninsular, a triangle of land approximately 1 sq km, around which the Thames meanders in north Kent and where the Eurostar and Southeastern high-speed trains enter the tunnel under the Thames, 1.5 km northwest of Ebbsfleet, a new town built around a new international train station. In *Train Tabletop Text Opera*, the site is a four-seated table space in the carriage of a Southeastern train travelling from London St Pancras to Gravesend.

I Hear Horses: A Guided Tour in the Railway Landscape

I Hear Horses adopts the form of a guided tour – or, rather, two interleaved guided tours led by two guides apparently with different agendas – starting where a recent housing development and ancient salt marshlands meet, and ending just 200 metres from where trains enter the Thames tunnel. Much of the Swanscombe peninsular is brownfield, and implicated in the evolving development plans for the Ebbsfleet area, marketed as a new ‘garden city’, ‘where London meets the garden of England’.⁶³⁴ The proposed development echoes the Metropolitan

⁶³⁴ See the Ebbsfleet Development Corporation website: <<https://ebbsfleetdc.org.uk>> [accessed 15 August 2018].

Railway's promotion of 'Metroland', the London suburbs, in the 1920s and '30s, with promises of a commuter lifestyle in a place equidistant from countryside and town, nature and culture.⁶³⁵ Ebbsfleet affords a 17-minute commute to Stratford, London, and two-hour travelling time to Paris, making international commuting possible too. It is a place where city and country, and potentially country and country, meet.

The development of Ebbsfleet and Swanscombe is emblematic of the effects of its geology: of chalk deposits and waterways, which have attracted human settlement and industry from the Iron Age onwards.⁶³⁶ The Thames contributes to ancient histories of trade, transport and invasion – augmented by the advent of the railway in the nineteenth-century and the more recent expansions and upgrades of the high-speed lines serving Kent and Europe. The most immediately apparent influence on the peninsula – on its terrain, housing development, employment patterns, political orientation, soil and water toxicity – has been the Swanscombe Cement Works, established as a family concern in 1825 and owned, at the point of closure in 1990, by Blue Circle Industries.⁶³⁷

One half of *I Hear Horses* is a guided tour, devised and lead by James M'Kay, a poet and qualified tour guide. His content engages with the many histories of the area: the geology of the ice age; geo-political histories of road and river transport infrastructure; cement manufacturing; paleobotanical research. M'Kay's tour appears to provide the piece with conventional solidity. He leads with professional authority. His narration is, at the outset, factual, and he pegs each segment to a notable landmark, or 'top visual priority' (TVP), as it is known in tour-guiding circles. As the piece progresses, however, M'Kay departs from the 'proper' mode of the tour guide, straying into blatant fantastical reimaginings,

⁶³⁵ See Irene Hawkes, Part Two: The Development of 'Metro-Land', in *A History of the Metropolitan Railway and Metro-land* (Manchester: Crécy, 2018), pp. 78–143.

⁶³⁶ See Edward Biddulph, Rachael Seager Smith and Jörn Schuster, *Settling the Ebbsfleet Valley: CTRL Excavations at Springhead and Northfleet, Kent: the late Iron Age, Roman, Saxon, and medieval landscape* (Salisbury: Oxford Wessex Archaeology, 2011).

⁶³⁷ See Christoph Bull, *Swanscombe in Old Picture Postcards*, (Zaltbommel: European Library, 2004); Christoph Bull and Mason Durling, *Suinescamp to Swanscombe*, (Peterborough: Upfront Publishing, 2014).

and at one point he recites a poem that has nothing to do with any tangible aspect of the site: it is an existential outpouring written by a suicidal friend, inserted into the tour as a memorial act.

The other half of the piece was devised in reference to an extant proposal for a theme park by the London Resort Company Holdings (LRCH),⁶³⁸ which until 2017 was proceeding on the Swanscombe peninsula with a branding license from Paramount Pictures.⁶³⁹ Such films as *Shrek*, *Titanic*, *Spongebob Squarepants* and *The Italian Job* were to have informed the thematisation of rides and attractions at the park; without Paramount's involvement, though, the developers have thematic carte blanche. And so, one half of *I Hear Horses* is a comic imagining of a thematic tourist attraction developed with an agenda wildly divergent from that of a film production and distribution company. What if, I wondered, the park was not a space for escapist entertainment, but for ethical self-critique? What if its principle aims, functions and aesthetics were not pegged to economic imperative and human behaviour filtered through the lens of cinema? What if its themes were developed to ape the perspective of non-humans, whose interpretations of human behaviour render them absurd or horrific? This half of the performance turns on the central conceit that the theme park is to be developed in partnership with animals and plants – coelenterates, horses, algae, birds – and that the audience are potential funders to be briefed on proposals for rides and attractions. These proposals are written in such a way as to invoke the qualities of non-humans as imagined by a human: the horses' rhetoric proceeds

⁶³⁸ The LRCH website is not currently accessible. The documentation at Companies House identifies two directors as contactable through Armila Capital, but holds no record of other companies involved. 'London Resort Companies Holdings Ltd', Companies House <<https://beta.companieshouse.gov.uk/company/07625574/officers>> [accessed 17 August 2018]. For the involvements of all directors see Company Check <<https://companycheck.co.uk/company/07625574/LONDON-RESORT-COMPANY-HOLDINGS-LIMITED/companies-house-data>> [accessed 17 August 2018]. The *Independent* identifies LRCH as comprising 'A handful of parties, including the French cement manufacturer Lafarge, which owns the 872-acre site'. Tom Peck, 'Forget Disneyland Paris. Now It's Paramount World ... Swanscombe', *Independent* (9 October 2012) <<https://www.independent.co.uk/travel/news-and-advice/forget-disneyland-paris-now-its-paramount-world-swanscombe-8202969.html>> [accessed 17 August 2018].

⁶³⁹ According to Andy Martin of LRCH, in conversation with ITV news reporter Tom Savvides, the withdrawal of Paramount does not mean the end of the theme park. Tom Savvides, 'Paramount Pulls Out of New Theme Park in Kent', ITV news (n.d.) <<http://www.itv.com/news/meridian/topic/swanscombe/>> [accessed 17 August 2018].

at a gallop and comes across as rather vain; the birds are expressionistic with sound; the algae are callously relentless and fastidious; the grammar, syntax and vocabulary of the coelenterates are wobbly, but their meaning inferable.

Both halves of *I Hear Horses*, then, comprise different types of commentary and narration – historical, mythical, scientific, absurd and speculative (in both senses of the word: the fantastical and the financially projective). The piece also mobilises several practices and rhetorics and refers to a number of ontologies. It adopts practices of the tour guide as well as those of the art viewer, the artist and the psychogeographer, and it draws on the verbal and gestural rhetorics and intonations of urban development marketing, the entertainment industries, local historians, ethical positions and political theories, the literary reading, spoken-word performance and the cookery programme. As such, the piece switches between what, in hylomorphic terms, would be described as content- and form-led practices (between local history research and performance poetry, for example), at times foregrounding the information imparted, at others linguistic play or the sound qualities of a text. Or we can think of this aspect of *I Hear Horses* as a demonstration of the instability and multiplicity of ontologies and the interleavedness of practices a given situation involves. The guided tour, particularly one framed by a contemporary art programme, mediates extensive networks of semiotic processes to express the situated knowledge and participatory agency of its writer-makers.⁶⁴⁰ The terrain has been self-consciously landscaped or engineered to privilege a particular route through all available significances and interpretations: that is, the site has been objectified and certain meanings brought to consciousness. And, reflecting the aims of this thesis as laid out in Part One, the piece reintegrates social, economic, psychological, material and emotional aspects of site, resulting in a multivocal, non-linear, intertextual and fragmentary narration. And this multiplicity is further exacerbated, as described in the following section, by the wilful introduction of certain (orchestrated) ambiguities.

⁶⁴⁰ The piece was commissioned by the 2018 Whitstable Biennale <<https://www.whitstablebiennale.com/>> [accessed 20 August 2018].

Ironising, Assuming, Lying, Fudging

As discussed in Chapter Two, the tour guide's narration is a function of historical and phenomenological filtering. In the case of the Swanscombe peninsula, activity there spans epochs and ontologies: the geological formation of rivers and land masses and features; pre-historical movements of humans along and across the river Thames; shifts in flora and fauna population; the actions of a cement company in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; excavations for the high-speed rail link in the 2000s, and the leisure and housing development currently in planning and partly underway. In the case of geological formation, its effects make up the very landscape itself: the river responds to the densities and friability of soil, stone, chalk and clay. In semiotic terms, the course of the river is a sign-vehicle, or a symptom, constituted by the dynamic interpretant of water when responding to a geological object or specific terrain. But in the case of Blue Circle Industries, the symptoms of the cement industry are harder to identify or infer. It was a local resident who told us about the soil of the peninsula being made toxic by the regular burial of industrial flue dust. Once we knew to look for it, this could be seen colouring the water that runs off the land in channels into the river, and in the puddles that form after rain.

The TVP also operates as an indexical sign-vehicle, whereby the tour guide directs attention, verbally or by pointing, to a bridge, a building, a tree, a plaque or a standing stone and then goes on to describe how this is the result of some temporally, spatially or conceptually distal object or event. The TVP is a single point from which the tour guide delineates a narrative object or a causal chain of events, ideas and entities. It is a phenomenological hook on which a narrative hangs, and might be presented as a symptomatic object in contiguous or metonymic relation to its backstory, as the result of a general tendency or a specific endeavour. For example, St Pancras train station might be represented as emblematic of the excesses of Victorian civil engineering, or as a particular accomplishment in William Henry Barlow's career. In *I Hear Horses*, the tendency is for M'Kay's half of the performance to relate historical and material

particularities, while my half revolves around abstracted themes such as dispossession and energy.

Conventionally, a good tour guide facilitates an unfurling or arrival or emergence or receipt of knowledge that appears to originate in the site itself, rather than from the tour guide. A bad tour guide would fail to forge a link between what is perceived – a castle, a terrain – and a history previously unknown to the audience. Such a failure would arise from either dissociation between site and narrative or elision between narrative and what the audience already knows. Ideally, the experience of being guided is that of perception and/or understanding augmented or altered by narration. The intention is to transfer new knowledge or to re-align existing knowledge, or to produce the recognition that existing knowledge *is* knowledge, or that something known about something else can also be applied here. Within a semiotic framework, this manipulation of what is known and what is articulated can be figured in terms of an infinite reticulated web of semiotic processes rooted and fruited in the narrated and the narrative, in relations between new interpretations and interpretations already understood by the audience. Two distinct categories of objects in play, then, are those about which accounts are given – the Dartford Crossing, an electricity pylon – and pre-existing accounts that potentially incorporate them, such as the history of Thatcherism in Britain or current proposals for renewable energy. On a guided tour, newly acquired knowledge tends to be founded in particularities – dates, technicalities, named persons, actual events – while pre-existing frameworks are generalised – an understanding of party politics, a general knowledge of monarchic and democratic rule in the UK. Through narration, a black box is opened to afford a view of some of its parts. Or, from a semiotic perspective, a TVP is presented as a symptom of a larger narrative: the fact that the Dartford Crossing is one of the very few instances of civil engineering commissioned by the Thatcher government can be presented as symptomatic of the widely accepted correspondence of Thatcherism, private enterprise and the curtailment of state intervention. But when M'Kay recites the poem, the significance of a TVP is fudged. The accepted function of the guided tour –

information delivery – is replaced by the tour guide hijacking of one of its purchases – that is, its property of directing attention. The graffitied concrete wall he stands beside is not discussed in particular historical terms, but re-imagined as a prompt for an elegy to disaffection (the poem’s primary motif is the word ‘empty’). Through a semiotic swivel in the guided tour’s capacities – the deployment of a purchase (attention direction) over a function (information delivery) – and a move from lower- to higher-order abstractions, the tour guide abuses his authoritative position to do as he wishes, not what is expected. (Although the context of contemporary art makes this to some extent impossible, since the unexpected is entirely expected. Still, within the fictional register, this point stands.)

I Hear Horses also plays with differentials of articulacy and scale. It collages temporal and spatial references to evolution, biography, national and international systems, local geology and global weather systems. Through tone and rhetoric it invokes the operational scopes of marketing, documentary, literature and satire. The intention is to place the listening individual in multiple relations with assemblages and complex objects of varying proximity and accessibility, and for affecting inferences to be drawn from the particularly authored delineation of these relations. That the geological timeframe overwhelms that of the human is intended to become an analogue of individual will dwarfed by the apparatus of advertising and flows of social forces. A satirical tone, it is anticipated, produces the illusion of control, since for a listener to grasp a wry point she must perform an instance of objectification, an abstract idea must be made tangible. (I will return to the processes of satire and scale below.)

And so, from the perspective of the writer-maker, the knowledge on which the guided tour depends is not only that which is related by the tour guide, but also what it can be reasonably expected that the audience already know of or about or can sense, and which styles, genres, discourses or registers of sensitivity they are

competent in.⁶⁴¹ A TVP is a peg on which to hang a fragment of narrative, and that narrative fragment is a means of triggering in the audience a complex understanding, a field of discourse or a history of thought, knowledge or practice. In this context, a trigger is a phenomenon called into indexical relation to a memory or idea or narrative. More generally, a trigger is a cause; or, rather, it is a fetishised cause, to use Hobbes' definition of fetish as the ignorance of remote causes.⁶⁴² It is entangled in spatially and temporally proximate and distal effects and causes. The trigger of a gun, for instance, is the apparently immediate cause of an immediate effect (the wounding or killing of a person) and of a more distal effect (the termination of a dynasty), a deeper cause of which can be traced to a prior event or state of affairs: mental illness, a personal vendetta, a society that valorises wealth. Similarly, linguistic triggers bring to consciousness coherent objects – memories, knowledges, values, beliefs – which precipitate associated objects and responses, which in turn elicit further associations and reactions. For the writer-maker, this capacity of triggers to instantaneously 'author' is an important aspect of text. Like Freud's case study of Alfred Maury, where an apparently long and detailed dream about the French Revolution seemed to depend entirely on the stimulus that woke him (his bed's canopy falling and hitting him on the neck like a guillotine blade), a trigger word can summon entire narratives. The ongoing consideration for the writer-maker is how standardised or detailed these collective 'dreams' might be, and whether they are narratives, knowledges or ideologies worthy of perpetuation. The writer-maker asks what assumptions she can make about the assumptions of the audience: what do they believe they already know, and do I want to encourage this? She can ask, in a given epistemological context, what associations a narrative, sentence, phrase or word are likely to elicit, and whether she wants her text to reassert or build on these existing understandings, or to detour them, make them unstable or overturn them entirely. When devised as the interpenetration of one

⁶⁴¹ For a discussion on competency in everyday discourse genres see Aniss Bawarshi and Mary Jo Reiff, *Genre: An Introduction to History, Theory, Research, and Pedagogy* (West Lafayette: Parlor Press, 2010), pp. 50–2.

⁶⁴² 'Ignorance of remote causes disposeth men to attribute all events to the causes immediate and instrumental; for these are all the causes they perceive'. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (London: John Bohne, 1839), p. 91; cited in Kockelman, 'Four Theories of Things', p. 163.

epistemology by another, the guided tour potentially instigates a dynamic process of audience agreement, assent or rejection – of reflection, diffraction or deflection – and so becomes a means by which the writer-maker can reframe, critique or refute established perceptions and interpretations.

When writing my half of *I Hear Horses* it was difficult to generate the illusion of a narrative ‘naturally’ extracted from the visible objects and structures of the site. My process of relating text to site was the inverse of that of regular guided tours: I felt I was forging links rather than uncovering them. And yet, as I discovered during M’Kay’s own research, devising and writing process, the tour guide is just as liable to subjectively decide what is to be narrated and then massage indexical links back through the semiotic chain to the relevant TVP. What marked my own process as different was that these links were entirely and obviously fabricated, their key component extruded from abstract thematic inferences of a given TVP, rather than its historical or material particularity. For instance, where M’Kay attached particular historic narratives of mobility and connectivity to the Dartford Crossing, I extruded from it the higher-order abstractions of dispossession and isolation.⁶⁴³ To deal with this potential problem of incredulity – that a truth claim so obviously over-dilates an accepted significance – I consult Christine Brooke-Rose on the genre of the marvellous, whereby what is being related seems immediately impossible to the author and reader, and yet is unremarkable to the in-world characters (in this case, the two tour guides).⁶⁴⁴ The status of each segment of text is not ambiguous: the facts and fantasies are easily discernible. The satirical point of *I Hear Horses* is, rather, to demonstrate how meaning can be drummed up to serve ideological ends. By making palpable the stretching of thematic links between the landmarks available and what my tour guide character wishes to say, my half of the piece becomes semically over-determined; in other words, its processes of meaning making are ‘too clear’ to the

⁶⁴³ M’Kay talks about the circulation of chalk and clay, pilgrimage and bare-knuckle fighting; I describe a ride designed by horses for fair-goers who want to explore the sights of ‘peacetime brutalities’. For a full transcription of *I Hear Horses* see the accompanying documentation.

⁶⁴⁴ See ‘Science Fiction and Realism’, in Christine Brooke-Rose, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 72–102.

audience.⁶⁴⁵ The signifying points of departure within the real (the TVPs) are rendered overtly thematic, while the monological narrative (the tour-guide framework) delimits the material to a singular expressive causality, the object of which, within the theme park pitch narrative, is to sell ideas. Over-determination and delimitation are markedly non-ambiguous moves. They are ostentatious signposts, determining a route through the metaphoric terrain with sharp cornering and distinct divergences from other, more common paths. This cornering and forking becomes a cognitive analogue of the sudden dips and whirls of the theme park ride. The audience groans or laughs as they experience their knowledge tugged, stretched or mis-replicated toward absurd ends. The aesthetic effect is akin to the enjoyment of dramatic irony, of knowing what is going to happen at the beginning of a narrative and then anticipating the means by which it occurs. In this case, the dramatic irony lies in perception of how a lie has been achieved. This recalls Susan Stewart's understanding of nonsense as a paradoxical is/is not status, where the absurd extension of a legitimate theme results in 'wall-to-wall metaphor' and 'wall-to-wall literalness'.⁶⁴⁶ In the devising and performing of *I Hear Horses*, it was less a case of engineering a lack of audience certainty as to whether something was real or invented, and more of daring them to take it literally to better enjoy the writers-makers' audacious departures from reality, their wilful misinterpretations and obscure means of association.⁶⁴⁷ A further critical step would be for the audience to find similarities between these absurd mediations and those encountered in serious, all too 'real' circumstances.

I seldom mention the comic aspect of my practice, and have played it down in this PhD commentary so far, since it is not theoretically motivated, but an impulse I cannot constrain. In this instance, however, it is worth noting that if we take comedy or humour to be based in 'a perception of the incongruous', or the

⁶⁴⁵ Brooke-Rose, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal*, p. 106.

⁶⁴⁶ Stewart, *Nonsense*, p. 35.

⁶⁴⁷ The starkest instance of this is the final element of my part of the performance: a reverse strip tease, in which I put on 37 layered t-shirts, each bearing the image of an animal, which I claim to be ingredients in a tur-duck-en style dish of multiple concentrically stuffed meats. See accompanying documentation.

‘tear[ing of] holes in our usual predictions about the empirical world’, then an unruly litter of signifiers diffracted about a landscape in the name of knowledge dissemination is situationally comic.⁶⁴⁸ The humour of *I Hear Horses* is elicited by playing on epistemological confusion; but at the register of cultural artefact, there was little ontological confusion at all. For those among the audience who do not routinely look at or think about contemporary art, its generically marked textual and performative content facilitated its identification as a parody of the guided tour.⁶⁴⁹ And for those who understand contemporary art to be generically marked as divergent from other pragmatic contexts, credibility of content was never expected.⁶⁵⁰ This twin ease of readability undermined my ambitions with regards to ontological ambiguity, since there was little doubt as to the status or aims of any element of the piece. My ambition to mobilise ambiguity strategically, in several registers and to critical ends, is better realised in the final piece of my practice submission.

Train Tabletop Text Opera: A Performance in the Train Carriage

Train Tabletop Text Opera comprises a conversation between characters – a ferroequinologist (or railway enthusiast), a train company worker, a rail franchise CEO – each ventriloquized by the writer-maker to express divergent views on how a railway should be constituted. For an element of the marvellous, I also added a witch. My hope is that it provokes something other than laughter in the audience: dissent, perhaps, or the critical reappraisal of another’s perspective or of assumptions made about another’s perspective. Susan Suleiman suggests that ‘Ideological dissent from works of fiction is a reading experience involving the “perception” of certain formal devices as masks for the novelist in his role as

⁶⁴⁸ Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 1, 3.

⁶⁴⁹ There were several employees of the Ebbsfleet Development Corporation on the tour, as well as local residents, who have had little, if any, engagement with contemporary art.

⁶⁵⁰ And the piece can also be perceived as a satire on the sort of site-specific art that Miwon Kwon derides as paying lip service to the idea of community: in this case, the audience and artists come together for two hours and display an intense interest in the place before being bussed back out to a convenient train station, likely never to return. As mentioned in Chapter One, for a typology of communities, see Kwon, *One Place After Another*, pp. 100–37. For a critique of community construction, see also Claire Bishop, ‘Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics’.

manipulator of values.⁶⁵¹ Dissent in this case might be in relation to the views represented, or how such views have been represented. In the opera, ‘sung’ text is delivered parasitically via publications and other documents and objects that conventionally bear text. Here authored dialogue is a mask imposed on pages of a trade magazine, Ladybird reading books, train timetable leaflets, text books, note books, tape measures, till receipts, silent film intertitles. But, unlike simple verbal irony – an ‘incongruously double-layered phenomenon’ in which ‘the intended meaning is the opposite of that expressed by the words used’ – the interloping text interrupts at odd angles.⁶⁵² The witch, in particular, performs a travesty of the rhetorics and generic markers of the host publications, producing patterns of interference based not in opposites, but peculiar skews.⁶⁵³ She begs such questions as, ‘What distinguishes the content of this Ladybird book from others? Why is it inappropriate? (An answer: its semantic content is too specific for a children’s reading book. The history of railway gauge is niche and therefore adult.)

Train Tabletop Text Opera works with the socio-political ruliness of the train carriage, as explored in Chapter Four. It takes place during a train journey which begins, to the onlooker’s eye, as normal, coming to a crescendo of unruliness twenty-three minutes later, at which point the audience disembarks.⁶⁵⁴ The basis of drama is conflict between characters’ ideologies, while material mayhem provides a source of comedy. The excess of textual supports acts as an ontological bridge between these two aspects, being the means of ‘singing’ in the opera and of communication between characters within the fiction, while also impacting on the state of affairs in the actual train carriage. Where the status quo of the

⁶⁵¹ Susan Suleiman, ‘Ideological dissent from works of fiction: towards a rhetoric of the *roman à these*’, *Neophilologus*, 60: 2 (April 1976), pp. 162–77; cited in Brooke-Rose, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal*, p. 125.

⁶⁵² Douglas Muecke, *The Compass of Irony* (London: Methuen, 1969), p. 42.

⁶⁵³ ‘Travesty’ is another of Muecke’s modes of irony, which he deems ‘merely amusing, wantonly destructive or both’. *Ibid.*, p. 79.

⁶⁵⁴ The theatrical rules through which the piece is to be viewed are explained to the audience at the beginning of the performance, to assuage the discomfort of anyone in doubt as to what is expected of them. I am working with the rules of contemporary art, which, unlike those observed by Fiona Wilkie in theatre, as mentioned in Chapter Five, adds to ‘no talking’ ‘no interaction’, which can sometimes even manifest as ‘no clapping’.

carriage is customarily maintained by the self-containment of individuals' behaviour, noise and belongings, here the apparatus of the performance, while silent, contravenes spatial norms, obtruding, becoming messier as pages and scrolls unfold and unfurl, and props emerge from a valise or lunchbox.⁶⁵⁵ Absurdity mounts as text proliferates so that the serious business of railway structuration might be roundly debated.

Despite this slapstick tang, *Train Tabletop Text Opera* is a more 'serious' piece than *I Hear Horses*. The Swanscombe tour courted nonsense in its capacity, as Stewart describes it, as 'language that does not count in the eyes of commonsense discourse [...] an impediment, an infirmity [that] confuses the proper schedule for "time's marching on."' ⁶⁵⁶ The content of at least half of the tour was an impediment to understanding of the site, its subject matter parodically handled, its genre a pastiche of the guided tour, its ideologies a spoof. And at such an ironic remove, it could not wholly fulfil my hopes for a located text that blends with the materials of its site. The tabletop opera, on the other hand, while still performing and referencing ironies, as we shall see, comprises a more delicate interleaving of sensibilities, assumptions and motivations. And yet it can still be thought of in nonsensical terms, as a confusion of the proper – not least for train guards, who struggle to identify it as a nameable passenger activity.⁶⁵⁷

Dispersed Authorship

I identify the performance as an opera because of its constitution as a heteroglossic assemblage. Opera, as Michael Halliwell asserts, is 'fundamentally closer to fictional narrative than to drama'; that is, 'it is essentially diegetic rather

⁶⁵⁵ See Chapter Four for a discussion of the passenger 'becoming object' and the transgression of common consensus through such practices as obtrusion.

⁶⁵⁶ Stewart, *Nonsense*, p. 5.

⁶⁵⁷ In all performances, bar the first 'dress' rehearsal, the cast and audience are accompanied by a production assistant, whose job it is to take care of everyone's train tickets so that the train guard does not interrupt proceedings. When necessary, the assistant also explains what is going on to any curious onlookers. Once enlightened, train guards tend to be much friendlier and make comments like, 'I see all sorts of things in my job', which I read subtextually as a gesture of acceptance of our comparatively minor on-board transgression.

than mimetic', since its multiple elements – staging, libretto, dramatic direction, character performance and musical dramaturgy – contribute to the polyphonic narration of a story.⁶⁵⁸ But Halliwell claims that, where the heteroglossic novel is 'a freewheeling mode that encourages its readers into active participation in its carnivalesque exuberance', in opera heteroglossia is 'a performative mode that seeks to overwhelm its audience with a show of power'.⁶⁵⁹ This show of power is that of the writer and/or composer, who corrals character voices within an authorial framework constructed through musical, textual and dramatic quotation or reference. Given that everyone is singing, opera is a mannered representation of dialogical exchange; and the authorial framework is made even more distinct through visual, material, musical and textual devices intended to heighten dramatic power. In the case of *Train Tabletop Text Opera*, the mise-en-scène (a tabletop), character design (a lunchbox, a model portacabin) and the textual supports (tape measures, train timetables, children's books) are decidedly quotidian. The music comprises the soundscape of the train and textual intonation as 'heard' internally by an audience member when reading the characters' textual exchanges (as opposed to the trained and dramatically directed delivery of lines). And so, since the forces of the opera are parasitic, as a show of power it can never transcend the found materials through which it comes into being.⁶⁶⁰

This approach to dispersed authorship also applies to the list of dramatic personae. To the ferroequinologist, the worker, the CEO and the witch, I would add the performer/ventriloquist/puppeteer (who in this instance corresponds with the writer-maker), the three audience members, the train carriage, the train guard, the geographic terrain through which the train passes and any fellow passengers. The writer-maker's materials include the distributed sensibilities, tendencies and agencies of these normatively directed and potentially otherwise

⁶⁵⁸ Michael Halliwell, *Opera and the Novel: The Case of Henry James* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), p. 45.

⁶⁵⁹ Here Halliwell is quoting Herbert Lindenberger, *Opera: The Extravagant Art* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), p. 95; cited in Halliwell, *Opera and the Novel*, p. 51.

⁶⁶⁰ In opera production the 'forces' are the number and types of singers and players that perform the piece. The forces of *Train Tabletop Text Opera*, within the matrix of the fiction, are four performers and a railwayful of instrumentalists. In reality, the forces are me.

motivated persons and objects, which each comport within interpretation, negotiating between their own Innenwelten and a temporarily communal Umwelt (of the actual train carriage and of the illusory train carriage of the fiction, which also incorporate one another). Drama is broadly generated by divergent or clashing tendencies of CEOs and railworkers, actual train carriages and art audiences, the conceptual terrain of the conversation and the geography of the journey. And to figure the dramatic tensions more particularly, one could analyse the emergence – resulting from divergent viewpoints, incommensurate value structures and intersubjective tensions (between any combination of dramatic personae) – of blind spots, mistakes, misinterpretations, guesses, assumptions, contradictions and corrections. My intention in encouraging such destabilising states and processes is to collapse Halliwell's and Lindenberger's distinction between the novel and the opera: to dislevel authorial power over character and situation by manifesting the messy mesh of relations between relations in a tabletop carnivalesque thoroughly entangled in the railway. And I am allowing here for the most extensive constitution of the 'railway' – one that includes the knowledges (and lack of knowledge) of the audience-passenger, and the plethora of simplified, skewed, fudged and muddled representations of the railway through which they have come to understand it. What follows is a scheme by which to reconfigure authorial power as writing-making that is self-aware, and directing of, its agencies and fallibilities within this dispersed network of physical, psycho-social and cognitive materials.

The lines 'delivered' by the Ladybird book, the till receipt roll and so on are analogous to actors on stage or what Goffman calls 'laminators' in reported speech, whether spoken or written, 'factual' or fictional. These object-supports perform the function of 'she said' or a change in voice quality; that is, they denote a performative utterance within a performance, and a performance about performative utterances.⁶⁶¹ Dramatic dialogue on the stage, like reported speech

⁶⁶¹ This is a modification of Valentin Volosinov's understanding of reported speech. See Valentin Volosinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (New York: Seminar, 1973); cited in Suzanne Romaine and Deborah Lange, 'The Use of Like as a Marker of Reported Speech and

in conversation, involves a cascade of incorporations and references between spatio-temporally differentiable linguistic agents. Goffman identifies this 'production format' as comprising 'author', 'animator' and 'principle', where the author is 'someone who has selected the sentiments that are being expressed and the words in which they are encoded', the animator is the 'body engaged in acoustic activity' and the principle is 'someone whose position is established by the words that are spoken, someone whose beliefs have been told, someone who is committed to what the words say'.⁶⁶² More loosely speaking, we could call these agents the author, the performer and the character. But, as Kockelman points out, the character is not so much an agent as a production of the author and/or performer.⁶⁶³ And so he replaces Goffman's production format with a triadic formation of residential agency, which comprises control, composition and commitment, where to control is to determine where and when a sign is expressed, to compose is to determine what object is stood for by a sign, or which sign stands for a given object (that is, what meaning is expressed and how), and to commit is to determine what effect an expression of a sign will have and the degree to which this interpretant can be anticipated (that is, why and/or to what effect a sign is expressed). Kockelman augments this scheme with that of 'representational agency', comprising thematisation, characterization and reasoning, where to thematise is to determine the theme or reference of a sign, to characterize is to determine what properties are attributed, and to reason is to determine the epistemological status of the sign. In short, residential agency describes the locations and dislocations of accountability for the outcome of any semiotic process (be it involving indexical, iconic, symbolic, representational, energetic, affective or any other category of sign); representational agency describes the locations and dislocations of accountability for how a state of affairs is represented or changed through its representation (by way of representational

Thought: A Case of Grammaticalization in Progress', *American Speech*, 66.3 (Autumn, 1991), 227-79 (p. 228).

⁶⁶² Erving Goffman, 'Footing', *Forms of Talk* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), pp. 144-5.

⁶⁶³ Kockelman points out that, being rooted in two-term (signifier and signified) Saussurian semiosis, Goffman's formulation is limited to linguistic communication, and that the principle is not a distinct category but a matter of degree of the author's or animator's responsibility for the utterance. Kockelman, *Agency*, fn.5, pp. 380-1.

signs). Together, these schema describe distributed agency, through which rights and responsibilities can be identified, and through which complex diagrams of objectification, differentiation, abstraction, incorporation and diffraction emerge.

Train Tabletop Text Opera exercises this authorial agency, particularly through its control and characterisation of signs: that is, I have elected to work through an historical art form that does not usually accommodate this type of subject matter non-metaphorically and in such detail. Conventional opera overlays particular events and universal themes; its storytelling mode is often taken to be allegorical, a specific iteration of underlying, timeless, humanist dimensions.⁶⁶⁴ It organises events into encounters and exchanges between characters, their particular relations strained by, and the drama arising from, archetypal frictions considered inherent to such states of mind as love, jealousy or greed. In my opera, these states of mind may still apply as dramatic drivers, but I am also consciously and self-reflexively exercising the theme of representation itself, actuating a multi-modal mesh of such representational practices as writing fiction, animating text, ventriloquizing stereotypes, captioning objects, anticipating an audience's knowledge, remodelling actual space-time as fictional space-time, demonstrating theory through practice... This mesh provides us with many a 'relation between relations' – that engine of semiotic process, and a source of critical, evidential diffractions. In the tabletop opera we might perceive, among countless other relations, that between the operational reality of the railway and the enthusiast's idealisation of it; between the allusions of handwriting in a cheap notebook and that of text produced on a domestic printer on specialist paper; between an art audience's reading of a trade magazine and a rail professional's reading of it; between an art audience's evaluation of a mess of text on a tabletop and a train

⁶⁶⁴ This understanding is readily apparent in marketing material and reviewers' responses to enduring emotional intensities. See, for example, the 'universal and timeless themes' claimed for *Carmen*. 'Carmen', Royal Opera House <<https://www.roh.org.uk/productions/carmen-by-carlos-acosta?story=1>> [accessed 26 January 2019].

See also the 'universal, emotionally powerful, visceral' subject of any Janáček opera. Richard Mantle interviewed by Imogen Tilden in "Opera can make us see, feel and hear the world differently: the UK's opera chiefs tell us why their art form matters", *Guardian* (9 May 2014) <<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2014/may/09/inside-opera-live-why-opera-matters-uk-opera-chiefs>> [accessed 26 January 2019].

guard's; between the immediate, concrete meaning of a character's utterance and its underlying connotation.

This last point – that signs can have an immediate, concrete significance and a distal, abstracted one, to be interpreted 'by reference to a communicative intention or repressed wish' – is, as Kockelman points out, vital to ethnographic interpretations of customs and of Freudian dream analysis.⁶⁶⁵ It is symptomatic of subtext, unconscious drives or ultimate interpretants. It is also, I would add in reference to the discussion in Chapter Two, a description of Jameson's 'expressive causality', or the condition of any narration as allegorical, as symptomatic of an underlying fundamental theme or narrative, and of how one thinks about history and society.⁶⁶⁶ My thematisation of content, my selection and characterization of characters are evidence of my own perception, reasoning and judgement, and my anticipation of the perception, reasoning and judgement of my audience members. 'Representation' here is applicable in at least two senses of the word: as iconographic portrayal, and as the right to speak on behalf of another individual or group. My representation of people around a train tabletop is a complex geometry of projected perspectives as plotted from a position of patchy, patchworked knowledges. In ethical terms, my right to ventriloquise these 'types' is supported by the generic forms of art history, where representation is foremost a mode of portraiture, and only relatively recently interpreted as an act of political representation, as a speaking on behalf of.⁶⁶⁷ And while my characters' clash of fictional opinions may stand for a state of incommensurability in actuality, here there is a metalanguage by which to critique their positions. Traction is made possible through the totalisation of their relations into a *drama* of incommensurability. The stalemate of debate on the privatisation of the railway is here a point of audience interest, rather than the source of frustration and inaction. And as such, I am committing to particular ultimate interpretants of artworks. I am assuming, for instance, that

⁶⁶⁵ See Paul Kockelman, 'Meeting the Universe Two-Thirds of the Way', p. 216.

⁶⁶⁶ Jameson, 'On Interpretation', *The Political Unconscious*, pp. 1–88.

⁶⁶⁷ And it is the artist's inability to predict this shift that caused so much trouble for Dana Schutz, as discussed in the Introduction and Chapter Two.

the audience will make an effort to understand what it all ‘means’, and that they will take a position on the politics of railway governance. But I am also assuming that they will not take it to be an actual debate with actionable outcomes. I am banking on the audience’s willingness to both engage with concrete meaning and enjoy formal play, to countenance articulation *and* ambiguity.

Enclosure, Scale

To the audience, the endpoint of *Train Tabletop Text Opera* is a massing of textual objects with rhetorical, aesthetic, semic, narrative resonance. To the train guard and other passengers it is likely a mess, albeit a more intriguing or gratuitous mess than most. Within the developed practices of contemporary art or performance, the rhapsodic tabletop does not comprise a valuable readymade, as recognised by art history, nor is it solely a theatrical *mise-en-scène*. The messy tabletop has been loaded up with significance through its participation in a motivated event. It is a persuasive object that approaches the status of evidence: material proof of an attempt to change a state of affairs: an opinion, perhaps, or a mood or a body of knowledge. It is an enclosed object that implicates all that has informed it.

There is precedence for disclosure through enclosure, whereby a complex ensemble of meaningful relations is revealed through its convergence on an apparently simple object. Thematic publications about mushrooms, cod or the notion of longitude disclose the complexities of human and non-human forces, structures and endeavours that have shaped their cultural or industrial distribution – a critical theory methodology employed, as Kockelman points out, in the work of economists and ethnographers such as Karl Marx and Edward Evans-Pritchard:

‘Around such “objects”—understood as ensembles of social relations, semiotic practices, and material processes—these scholars elucidated modes of perceiving and acting, thinking and feeling, categorizing and

evaluating. Indeed, so extensive was the reach of such objects that the ensembles they disclosed constituted the grounds of collective existence insofar as they mediated space and time, substance and form, quality and quantity, ontology and cosmology.’⁶⁶⁸

The reticulated network is enclosed by the boundary of a perceived object; and by disclosing the processes through which it has been delineated, this object is at once a thing and a method of research and interpretation.

As Latour reminds us, in Scandinavian countries ‘Thing’ is a public assembly or a court of law.⁶⁶⁹ In English, this sense is exercised in such conversational turns as ‘the thing is...’, where ‘thing’ is ‘A matter with which one is concerned (in action, speech, or thought); an affair, a business, a concern, a subject’.⁶⁷⁰ The thing is that which is attended to, the issue that calls together relevant parties and triggers ‘new occasions to passionately differ and dispute’.⁶⁷¹ In my opera, the object is the table, but the thing that people have assembled to debate is the railway. The train tabletop around which they sit is at once forum and subject, and each (save, perhaps, the witch) has a palpable stake in the thing. For this assembly, the railway is an assemblage that shimmers with multiple meanings: as a going concern, a symbol of progressive economic modelling, a place of work, a commercial acquisition and a liability, a fascination, a space in which one chooses to pass time.

But of course, these are not actual people. Their utterances are not verbatim transcriptions. They are fictional characters invented by me, rendered at a resolution that approaches that of cipher. As the place in which such types have been imagined to assemble, the train tabletop becomes a scalar metonymic object, a partial representation of the assemblage in which it materially lodges,

⁶⁶⁸ Kockelman himself encloses as such objects two different avian types. See Paul Kockelman, *The Chicken and the Quetzal* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 4.

⁶⁶⁹ See Bruno Latour, ‘From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik, or How to Make Things Public’, in *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, exh. cat. (Karlsruhe: ZKN), ed. by Bruno Latour, Peter Weibel (Cambridge, Mass: MIT, 2005), pp. 14 – 41.

⁶⁷⁰ ‘thing, n.¹’, *OED*

<<http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.lib.bbk.ac.uk/view/Entry/200786?rskey=ZRj3Lj&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>> [accessed 25 January 2019].

⁶⁷¹ Latour, ‘From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik’, p. 15.

tooled from my own perspective. My character types occupy familiar ideological stances – of the idealistic dreamer, the resigned pragmatist, the scheming capitalist and the mischievous trickster – and their typification occurs in much the same way as a material object comes to be understood. They appear to exhibit stable properties and behave in predictable ways in given circumstances, producing foreseeable effects in response to particular causes; and it is these propensities that are perceived as objective purchases (in the case of materials) or purposes (in the case of human character or personality). Where material substance is grounded in causes, character type is grounded in roles, in the propensities and normative orientations of those roles, and their status within a given structure or context. Kockleman again:

a kind is a (projected) propensity for patterned being that admits of interpretive reasoning, where such reasoning is grounded in semiotic processes that turn on indexicality and inference (however large or small the world in which such a patterning persists or is ontologically projected to persist, and however large or small the world that finds or projects such more or less persistent patterns).⁶⁷²

The perception of kinds, or patterned behaviour, is mired in misconceptions: in subtle or brutal assumptions and simplifications that are necessary to narrate at all, as we have seen in Chapter Three. And if that which is being narrated is ambiguous because it is participant in a semiotic community other than our own, with other perceptual apparatus, interpretative tendencies, knowledge bases, values, conventions and beliefs, then the identification of kindness must be arrived at through less reputable modes of inference, such as guesswork and projection. Intrasubjectively, too, the multiplicity of context-dependent roles and statuses of a person, an object or a thing generates ambiguities, fudges and contradictions, which can result in certain roles being eclipsed, forgotten, denied or conflated. It is expected of the railworker, for instance, that they relinquish their domestic roles when they enter the work place, that they act according to rail company hierarchies, not to those of their home.

⁶⁷² Kockelman, *Agent, Person, Subject, Self*, p. 72.

Monolithic, singular roles, while an implausible mode of realistic self-description, are suited to opera, where complex polyphony has historically supported plots and characters tending towards the stereotyped. The stereotype is a gross inflation, a simple giant with knowable motivations. *Train Tabletop Text Opera's* enclosed world peopled by stereotypes, then, is a salad of metonymic miniature and actual gigantic, described by Stewart respectively as representing 'closure, interiority, the domestic, and the overly cultural', and 'infinity, exteriority, the public, and the overly natural'.⁶⁷³ She suggests that:

In approaching the miniature, our bodies erupt into a confusion of before-unrealized surfaces. We are able to hold the miniature object in our hand, but our hand is no longer in proportion with its world; instead our hand becomes a form of undifferentiated landscape, the body a kind of background. Once the miniature world is self-enclosed [...] we can only stand outside, looking in, experiencing a type of tragic distance.⁶⁷⁴

The gigantic, conversely, transforms the body into the miniature; it surrounds us, like landscape, and we can know it only partially. The tabletop hosts textual modellings and remodellings of ideas of the railway, while the actual network escapes cognition. Temporal scale, too, is multiple, with the text directing attention to private, phenomenological duration, individual biographical lifetime, social, shared, cognised histories and abstract cosmic and geological temporalities. The opera has been devised to emphasise the incommensurability of these timescales. The witch traces the gauge of railway tracks back to Roman chariots; the CEO can only see as far as the next financial report. Tragedy proceeds from this discordancy of scopes.

Stewart suggests that literary miniatures such as the tableau – by which she means lengthy descriptions of a single moment or scene – are at once particularising and generalising, in that they represent a singular instance, but one that stands for several other instances.⁶⁷⁵ Stereotypification channels unstable features into enduring propensities, sacrificing individual idiosyncracies for a

⁶⁷³ Stewart, *On Longing*, p. 70.

⁶⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 70–1.

⁶⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

public type. (Indeed, the etymological root of the combinatory form ‘idio-’ is the ancient Greek *ιδιο-*, meaning ‘own, personal, private, peculiar, separate, distinct’.)⁶⁷⁶ Stewart describes stability, coherence and common sense as ‘an ongoing accomplishment’, since ‘the biographical situation of individuals and the stock of knowledge at hand are always “in process”’.⁶⁷⁷ The articulation of an object, or indeed of oneself, in relation to all that one knows about the universe to date, is a phenomenological manifestation of the hermeneutic circle, where a text in its entirety is understood in reference to its various parts and its parts understood in reference to the whole.⁶⁷⁸ Complex gymnastic feats of narration are required to perform such totalising illusions. Below I will be considering a small handful of just such moves: I will be exploring the linguistic practices of glossing, modelling, switching and spelling, through which I have elected my characters to wittingly or unwittingly fortify, skew or fudge their representations (to self and to others) of the railway.

Modelling: The Ferroequinologist

My ferroequinologist, or railway enthusiast, is not necessarily a model-maker in the hobbyist sense, but she does remodel the railway through linguistic imaging and ideological projection. She thinks of the railway as ‘an extension of the civic body, | which none have the right to prostitute’; and she entertains standard nostalgic revisions: ‘I shall resurrect | restaurant cars with curtains, | obliging platform porters, | diesel engines | and signal boxes...’ She is also aware of the modelling capacities of those who visualise and discuss the railway in other terms. She accuses the rail franchise CEO of figuring the railway ‘flattened into spreadsheets | of risk attribution, | revenue growth, | passenger satisfaction

⁶⁷⁶ ‘idio-, comb. form’, Oxford English Dictionary online
 <<http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.lib.bbk.ac.uk/view/Entry/91025#eid908092>> [accessed 6 February 2019].

⁶⁷⁷ Stewart, *Nonsense*, p. 12.

⁶⁷⁸ See Hans-Georg Gadamer, ‘Hermeneutics and Social Science’, *Philosophy Social Criticism / Cultural Hermeneutics*, 2.4 (1975), 307–16; Paul de Man, ‘Form and Intent in the American New Criticism’, in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 1971), pp. 20–35.

ratings...’ Her representations, and those of others to which she alludes, are iconic signs that, in remodelling their objects, might persuade the listener or reader of the desirability of these modifications. Textual modelling contorts that which it signifies, although it does not carry such disingenuous connotations as glossing (discussed below).

The contortions of hobbyist modelling involve shrinking, simplifying, generalising, neatening, rounding up and squaring off its physical referent – the real railway track, trains, landscape, station buildings and so on. It is considered an instance of reductive abstraction. Scientific modelling, on the other hand, is the working of a concept (an immaterial object) towards a potential material context or vice versa. For Georges Canguilhem,

‘[t]o work a concept is to vary its extension and comprehension, to generalize it through the incorporation of exceptional traits, to export it beyond its region of origin, to take it as a model or on the contrary to seek a model for it – to work a concept, in short, is progressively to confer upon it, through regulated transformations, the function of a form.’⁶⁷⁹

Enformed, the concept is at once made specific and generalised. Modelling particularises, articulates, visualises or concretises theory, and yet it remains an idealised representation: it is just one potential instant of its reification. A model is the presentation of a proposition, a political positing of potential. It is the schematisation of ideological propensities. If, within the framework of semiotics, meaning occurs with correspondence between the relationships between a sign-vehicle and its object and a sign-vehicle and its interpretant – that is, if meaning resides in the mutual recognition of what should happen next in response to a given sign – to model is to propose a response, to venture a future state of meaningfulness, or to simulate or hallucinate a present one.

⁶⁷⁹ Georges Canguilhem, ‘Dialectique et philosophie du non chez Gaston Bachelard’, *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, 66 (1963), 441–52 (p. 452), cited in Keith Tilford, ‘Laruelle, Art, and the Scientific Model’, seminar paper, ‘Aesthetics of the Generic and Non-Event’ (New York: Center for Transformative Media at Parsons, 18 March 2015) <<http://keithtilford.com/texts#.XEgiTC7gqG8>> [accessed 11 February 2018].

The modeller's agency lies in her capacity to characterise her theme and to provide the means of evaluating her reasoning. But the model is artifice; it is revisable; it is a method of research, an instrument for learning about that which it represents, and about the method of modelling itself. The model is a manifestation of the processes of generalisation and particularisation. Unlike a contemporary sculpture, it is not necessarily intended to precipitate the infinite particularities of those who view it. It is not an engine of performative differentiation, but a guiding towards a possible difference.⁶⁸⁰ As such, the model is a speculative fiction fashioned through the future perfect tense: what will have been (if a given state of affairs were to have prevailed). In modelling, the hobbyist and the scientist perform an act of fiction-making and of engineering, of bringing to comprehension a possible world through logics that must be adhered to: gravity and material cohesion and adhesion in the case of the hobbyist; programming languages in the case of the computer 3D modeller; mathematical or quantum laws for the theoretical physicist.⁶⁸¹ And like most speculative fictions, the future invoked has a qualitative unity. The powers of representation of the model do not stretch to multiplicity. The model is at base a singular fiction, it does not approach the repetitiveness and permutational rigour of laboratory experimentation. It also, for readability, honours existing conventions, thereby falling short of the disruptive qualities of avant-garde artistic experimentation. The modeller's fiction tends to extend from and remain in contact with the already knowable.

The scientist's, technologist's, fiction writer's and hobbyist's models are all objects participant in semiotic processes, intervening in relations between ideas

⁶⁸⁰ We should recall here Keith Tilford's explication, in Chapter One, of Robert Smithson's 'non-site' *Spiral Jetty* as 'fictive transport', whereby its exhibition form of 'published photo documents, writings, and sketches form an artificial and institutional vector disseminating it in a matrix of abstract plots that enable it to be a protractive entity designed according to its capacity to cognitively rather than phenomenologically produce for its viewer an art-fiction'. Tilford, 'Laruelle, Art, and the Scientific Model', p. 11.

⁶⁸¹ For a discussion on models, theories, simulation, representation and fiction in science see Margaret Morrison and Mary S. Morgan, 'Models as mediating instruments', in *Models as Mediators*, ed. by Mary S. Morgan and Margaret Morrison (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 10–37; and Margaret Morrison, 'What is the Role of Fictions in Science', lecture (Edinburgh University, 13 November 2014) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VrQcrS_dpro> [accessed 23 January 2019].

and things, attitudes and actions They can all make problems apparent, since they are topographies on which to project experience. The reference for the audio piece *HERMES*, discussed in the previous chapter, for example, is a modelling software platform that simulates and tests the efficacy of rail network designs. And Anna Karenina's suicide by train could be taken as a warning against replicating the pressures of nineteenth-century Russian social norms. The ferroequinologist's models are a spur to agreement or disagreement with her vision of the railway, depending on whether one takes her position to be informed by political naivety or unwavering principles. And this particular illusion, where some perceive over-simplicity and others clarity, is also operative when the ferroequinologist herself responds to the modelling of social structuration, noting that "up" to the mine | "down" to the port' is now replicated by the up and down lines of every rail route, where 'it's "up" to the big city, | the gold, the gems, the power; | "down" to the depot, to home, to squeezed councils.' The mine – the source of product and wealth – is analogous to the city; the port – a seamy, dissipated and dissipating place – to where paid work and externally directed organisation ceases. Hierarchies, she notices, might have shifted focus, but they have essentially persisted. This could be a questionable claim, since the broad formal equivalence is vague, and the complexity of economic and social transformations remains opaque. But as a strategic ambiguity within rhetoric, it is a simplification with resonance.

Switching: The Worker

The worker is a switch, a user interface; she straddles at least two realms. And throughout the performance, she switches identity too: between the sort of worker who wears fluorescent garb and works technically on tracks, overhead lines, electricity substations and so forth, and the worker in liveried shirt or blouse and jacket, who tends to the socio-economic operation of train carriages, ticket barriers and ticket offices. The former is insulated from the public and speaks, in the opera, via handwritten lowercase text on metal retractable tape

measures; the latter is customer facing and speaks in handwritten block capitals (for clarity) on till receipt rolls. Both are housed in a portacabin – that signifier of infrastructural contingency or a secondary priority.

In both incarnations, the worker is an agent for another. She works to further the interests of the employer, while (partly) serving her own interests by earning a wage, participating in society, contributing to an industry, keeping busy. (She bucks her own interests too, since her time and energy are depleted to ends that do not necessarily match her own desires or needs). In addition, the liveried worker also performs serving the needs of the rail user. Because of this trifurcation, she is easily compromised. Her roles and responsibilities are not so much dispersed as placed in contradiction. Trackside, she works under the laws of physics and observes rulings of best practice and health and safety, while also attempting to hit productivity targets and correct faults within imposed timeframes. When in customer relation, she is loaded up with the responsibilities of the author or director of the situation, when in fact she has had little if any say in its processes. She must, for example, make the railway appear to serve the traveller's needs, when an ultimate goal of private companies is profit. To figure this semiotically: she must pass off one ultimate energetic and representational interpretant – the motivations and public image of the railway – in the guise of another.

The talents and travails of the worker lie in this switching capacity. To switch is to make or break a circuit, to complete or isolate elements within a sequence. The switch is related to the push-button, but while both are translations of energy (electrical and/or muscular) into information, their connotations are somewhat different. The button suggests absolute power: 'go'.⁶⁸² The toggling switch presents a choice: 'on' or 'off'. The switch can also be an act of deception. One object is apparently presented, to be supplanted by another at the moment of acceptance. The origin of the switch lies in the whipping stick used to generate a

⁶⁸² For more on the connotations of button pressing, see Rachel Plotnick, *Power Button: A History of Pleasure, Panic and the Politics of Pushing*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018).

change of direction in livestock. It is a stimulus, a compulsion that cannot be ignored, for it makes use of the infrastructure of a system to produce its effects. In livestock herding, that infrastructure is neurological and physiological; in railway technology it is electrical and mechanical; in the case of the railway worker it is psychosocial and socio-economic. She must pull on her emotional and cognitive resources to sympathise or help, or at least appear to sympathise or help.

In the opera, the worker feels torn and buffeted at every turn. She is aggrieved by passengers' apparently contradictory attitude to arrivals and endings, noting that:

they expect to arrive at their destination on time

and demand to hear every excuse for not.

And on the other hand,

they expect not to arrive at their ultimate destination at all,

denying the definitive cause entirely.

Here she conflates personal everyday temporality with the arc of a lifetime. Of course people do not (often) want to arrive at death. And of course they (usually) want their travel plans to be accurately enabled. But by failing to recognise different underlying motivations and propensities of passengers – the survival instinct on the one hand, and the desire to minimise effort on the other – the worker experiences this as contradiction, a switch between propensities: between not wanting to arrive and wanting to arrive.

The worker herself, though, is subject to 'the subtle geometries of annoyance', the 'ambivalence of attachment', the 'conflicting obligations of involvement'. She is ambivalent, caught between roles: it is her job to serve up the executives' slice of the pie 'with a smile and a thank you', her manners providing a mask for spontaneous emotional responses. Passenger-side, she is the messenger who is to be shot. She also experiences a complex form of nostalgia: 'the future was better in the old days'. Indeed, what are her prospects when she is entangled in brittle corporate structure, as she moves closer towards the point at which the narrative of her life will become clear to her? Is there time and opportunity to switch

tracks? An especially fraught hope, when the necessary switching mechanisms would need to deploy the infrastructural materials of a train operating company embedded within global capitalist structures. How is it possible to harness this vast, unknowable, self-reflexive apparatus in the production of effects that would be best characterised as self-determination, luck or a facility for strategy?

Glossing: The Train Operating Company CEO

Gloss is smooth. Gloss is flattering of the surface to which it is applied. It appeals. It aids acceptance. It shines and seduces. Etymologically related to *Γλώσσα*, Greek for ‘tongue’, gloss is language, especially foreign language – foreign in the sense of ‘far from home’ or ‘proceeding from other persons or things’, in all its metaphoric and literal applications.⁶⁸³ A gloss is an explanatory insertion into an existing text; it is interpretative, mediating. In multiple, glosses form a glossary. To gloss is to comment on a text, or on a person’s words or actions. But the verb can also mean the excessive enactment of its primary definition: ‘To veil with glosses; to explain away; to read a different sense into’.⁶⁸⁴ It carries within it the potential disingenuousness of the glosser. The lesser used noun ‘gloze’ departs quickly from the marginal note towards such effects as ‘flattery’, ‘deceit’, ‘pretence’, ‘a disguise’. To make gloze or gloze is ‘to talk smoothly or flatteringly’,⁶⁸⁵ or to ‘clothe with specious adornment’.⁶⁸⁶ To gloss is to thematise the object, idea or action in hand and amplify the characteristics that most suit the interpretation that the glosser intends. Since those to whom the gloss is directed are likely to require it, because of the foreignness or remoteness of the source object, idea or action, the justifiability of the gloss is the province of the

⁶⁸³ ‘foreign, adj. and n.’, *OED*

<<http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.lib.bbk.ac.uk/view/Entry/73063?isAdvanced=false&result=1&rskey=19xqLc&>> [accessed 22 January 2019].

⁶⁸⁴ ‘gloss, v.¹’, *OED*

<<http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.lib.bbk.ac.uk/view/Entry/79132?rskey=39rsiQ&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>> [accessed 22 January 2019].

⁶⁸⁵ ‘gloze, n’, *OED* <<http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.lib.bbk.ac.uk/view/Entry/79233#eid3039976>> [accessed 22 January 2019].

⁶⁸⁶ ‘gloze, v.¹’, *OED*

<<http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.lib.bbk.ac.uk/view/Entry/79234?isAdvanced=false&result=2&rskey=jAXUso&>> [accessed 22 January 2019].

glosser – the teacher, interpreter, translator, correspondent, editor, prospector, overseer, manager. For such figures, their authority lies in their recognised license to author gloss.

The rail franchise CEO speaks through the pages of *Rail Professional*, a glossy industry magazine.⁶⁸⁷ The magazine contains articles on the progress of rail projects, interviews with industry figures, profiles of technological developments, product reviews, notices of company and governmental personnel changes. It carries adverts for technical components, management systems, energy network services, job opportunities. But despite this serious business, it is eager to attract readership through the populist practice of front-cover punning: ‘freight expectations’; ‘tickety boo?’. My CEO inhabits the magazine pages, her spoken lines manifest as cyan Helvetica bold of uniform size, printed on strips of textual columns cut from another issue of the magazine and collaged on to photographs of trains and ties and landscapes and maps which overflow the pages when animated by the performer. The animator here is an analogue of Goffman’s acoustic body, or laminator, but with a human/paper amalgam – the fluttering of paper strips and the rustling of turning pages – standing in for air passing over vocal cords, and tongue and mouth shaping sounds.

The CEO glosses throughout the opera. She asserts her own ideological interpretation as fact, and makes it appealing through word play and affable imagery: ‘To remodel is to vandalise. | Preserve the franchise system. | Jam them in! | Payback’s sweet!’ And she glosses her motivations and intentions as an attendance to the needs and desires of customers: ‘We want everyone to feel individual, | so that wherever they are, | there is a different individual wherever they are not. | We want places to be familiar enough not to be alarming, | but different enough to make people want to go there.’ But she also lets slip the act of glossing: ‘Upgrade! [...] Offer the illusion of choice!’ And introduces lexical turbulence to be wilfully obscuring: ‘I am a railway franchisee | with a near-lapsed government contract. | I’m sitting on my dividends, | awaiting the

⁶⁸⁷ The issue used is *Rail Professional*, 186 (October 2012).

amortisation of intangible assets | and my final emoluments.’ Unlike any of the other characters, her motivation is singular, her ontology unambiguous. The character inhabits the printed accoutrements of her industry; she is characterised solely by her role within the railway. She speaks of nothing that falls outside the purview of her job. I have objectified the CEO. In short: the CEO as an inveterate, self-serving glosser is a gloss of my own.

Spelling: The Witch

My witch might seem an anomaly in such company. Although feasible, the boardroom, ticket office, train carriage or portacabin are not obvious locales for the stereotypical undertakings of a witch. And yet if we consider the other characters not as CEOs, workers and railway enthusiasts, but as entities comporting within interpretation, maintaining or changing states of affairs by their instigations and responses, then the witch’s processes are different not in kind, but in their non-normative routing through mysterious channels.

The opera opens with the witch relating the ingredients, methods and effects of a spell: ‘a tape recorder | some canned salmon, | an exposure meter, | a drop of lemon juice’ must be stirred widdershins to gain control over the competitive marketplace of railway operation. The audience can enjoy noticing that although these ingredients happen to be the subjects of features in an old issue of *Which* magazine, the witch claims their combination to be powerfully meaningful. She is passing off the arbitrary as the motivated, as agency over causality. Unexpectedly to us, but a matter of fact to the witch, particular materials acting under special conditions will cause certain effects. But it is not clear which affordance of the lemon juice or tape recorder are agential in the spell. In cuisine, lemon is used for its acidic property and for its particular action on the region of the tongue that interprets sourness. In household cleaning, it is its acidity and its oiliness. The tape recorder functions as documentary or distributive media in its usual contexts, but here is it the heft of the machine that is being called on, or its

symbolic reverberations? Is the witch invoking the tape recorder's abstract connotations of repetition, surveillance, consumer technologies, or its actual materiality of metal and plastic? Magical spelling forces a convergence of disparate objects into potent significance, but only the witch knows how they interact to produce the desired effect. To paraphrase Kockelman paraphrasing Francis Bacon: 'If the task of knowledge is to find for a given nature the source of its coming-to-be, the task of power is to superinduce on a given body a new nature'.⁶⁸⁸ Magical power is the ability to generate effect or a new nature through unrecognisable means. And the spell is an appeal to the universe to deliver a specific coincidence of phenomena.

The illusions of stage magic are achieved through theatrics and physics: attendance to sightlines and misdirection, and through such material affordances as elasticity, opacity and psychological suggestibility. 'Real' magic is achieved through supernatural relations beyond the perception of human ontology. It is a transaction entered into, a bargain with an occult assemblage. Perception and belief are pivotal in both types of magic, but in witches' magic, sensing is not entirely human-normative. Knowledge acquisition might run from innate intuition or clairvoyancy to material divinations (cartomancy, oomancy and splanchnomancy – divination using cards, eggs and the entrails of human sacrifice – being just a few among many possible methods). But the outcomes of both types of magic can be taxonomised as types of transformations at variance with physical laws that govern unmediated experience: transportation, production, vanishing, restoration, prediction, penetration, transposition, escape, levitation. And yet these transformations are quotidian moves for language, which is always already a technology based in tricks and effects, used for producing and vanishing objects of attention, directing understanding, transforming status, bringing a future into being, penetrating objects, rendering them visible or invisible, performing time travel or implausible spatial contortions, and generally

⁶⁸⁸ Francis Bacon [1620], *The New Organon*, ed. by Lisa Jardine and Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); cited in Kockelman, *Agency*, p. 376.

overcoming laws of physics that ground material probabilities.⁶⁸⁹ In processes of conceptualisation and understanding, all language engages in fiatic or orphic magic – that is, the creation of an object (such as an idea) by a word, or the enchantment of the already existing by means of vocal material (as when a place or person is redescribed to draw out the previously unnoticed). The potency of the spell is that language will actualise these transformations in material registers too. In *Train Tabletop Text Opera*, the most potent instance of this is when another of the Witch’s spells concludes with the lines ‘Dissociation is complete | by the time we reach Ebbsfleet’, just as the train pulls into Ebbsfleet station. The (literal) sign for Ebbsfleet appears through the train window just as the idea of the place is invoked by the utterance of the word. Within the matrix of the fiction, it is as if the spell has worked (when of course it is an illusion of convergence, wrought through planning). In a conceptual register, the fiction is suddenly dilated to incorporate reality, and the audience is reminded that they are currently and actually participant in the subject matter of the piece.

Real magics are understood to be in contradiction to enlightenment values of knowledge, or the study of material causes, where the immaterial is without agency.⁶⁹⁰ But my witch is to be understood in a semiotic framework that attributes agency to the material and the immaterial, where brute objects collaborate with inchoate ideas, effects go on to be causes, and vulnerable interpretations can turn into hardened dogma. My witch does not simply contravene common-sensical causality; she engages ordinary semiotic processes and diffracting multiple perspectives as her familiars. Her *cries de coeur* are ‘All change!’, ‘Behold mutability’, ‘Hail differentials, source of all power’. She offers control of such signifying qualities as ‘mood, tastes and image’ so that one might have command over the processes of persuasion required by the practice of railway business. She is aware of the transformations performed by those who turn ‘corner cutting into rationalisation’ and ‘encroaching automation into

⁶⁸⁹ For commentary on the effects and tricks of literary texts see Simon During, ‘Magic and Literature’, in *Modern Enchantments*, pp. 178–214.

⁶⁹⁰ During cites Hobbes, in *Leviathan*, as insisting that invisible agents such as ghosts and spirits ‘cannot be both “incorporeal” and possess agency’. During, *Modern Enchantments*, p. 14.

innovation' through the mediating capacities of their ideologically motivated and rhetorically tooled interpretations, representations, modellings and refurbishments. And she notes the symptoms of the railway's dissociating tendency: cooled carriages designed to carry people in near-segregation; the destruction of intersubjective relations when villages are flattened to make way for economically motivated intercity connectivity.

My witch revels in multimodal complexity and supra-human scale and scope. She distorts the technological sublime of railway statistics into an absurd, macabre joke: 'For every 166,490 journeys: a rail worker injured. | A suicide for every £3.5 million of revenue. | An average 38km journey: a 2 millionth of a passenger harmed | (an eyelash perhaps, or a single heartstring).' She pulls on the non-canonical threads of human history, identifying the influence of the material fact of the width of a Roman warhorse's arse on the contemporary railway gauge. Ultimately though, given that she is a human invention rendered in conventional materials, the witch must perform one final ambiguating, objectifying gesture. She draws a perimeter around the opera by alluding to the circumstantial necessity of doing so. First, she relates a disagreement on matters of scale: "If a gazelle were the height of a viaduct," | says the franchisee, | "its legs would crumple under its own weight." | "Perhaps," says nationalisation, "but with my sturdy build, | I can run to the size of a country." The outsize gazelle is an intertextual reference to J.B.S. Haldane's essay 'On Being the Right Size', in which he proposes that any entity – animal or institutional – has an optimum scale based in the properties of its constituent parts and the functions required of them.⁶⁹¹ The scale of the opera, too, is constrained by materials, social conventions of train carriages and contemporary art, the imaginative scope of its writer-maker. 'An opera, however, will always overflow a tabletop', exclaims the Witch. The narrative act of objectification, of closure, is denied. The audience must disembark at Gravesend: 'Please remember to take all your personal effects with you | as you leave the opera.' The unnarrated universe is called on to diffract

⁶⁹¹ J.B.S. Haldane [1927], 'On Being the Right Size', in *The Oxford Book of Essays*, ed. by John Gross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 452–7.

and multiply, to fray the ending. This is not with the aim of modelling infinite potential second acts via the subjectivities of the audience. Rather, the opera remains undone to implicate the act of will that would be required to enclose it.

ARRIVALS HALL

The previous chapter ends with contemplation of the illusory nature of endings. Given that any semiotic process gives rise to interpretants that become sign-vehicles or objects in subsequent semiotic processes, which in turn give rise to sign-vehicles or objects, and so on ad infinitum, I felt that the only possible way to exit would be to acknowledge the constructed artifice of any exit. (Even after death one continues to participate in the materiality of the universe, as humus or as smoke.) To end is to enclose, to curtail further movement, to enform. It therefore seemed fitting to ultimately enform my subject matter (which is, after all, subject matter itself) through a self-conscious process that makes apparent its un-enformability, the impossibility of fully narrating it. As such, I have deemed it inappropriate to present a conclusion to this thesis in the conventional doctoral mould. The foregoing chapters and accompanying practice should be taken not as an argument for a coherent theory or practice, but as the exposition of a personal ambition for the agency of writing and the presentation of some means of achieving this. While it sits in contiguous relation to several extant theoretical and practice frameworks, it is undeniably idiosyncratic, ludic and picaresque. It is intended as an account of responsivity, not the disclosure of a plan.

As mentioned at several points throughout, this thesis has been written in the context of Brexit, where the abstract concept of ‘sovereignty’ has been proffered as a singular tangible political grail.⁶⁹² In the preceding, I hope to have demonstrated the impossibility of such transmutations. The indivisibility of institutions, networks, hyperobjects and repercussive actions that constitute and participate in the contemporary nation state should be glaring. My intention is for the analytical methods I have been devising and testing to be applicable in any situation where representations – in both senses of the word: as similarity with an

⁶⁹² The *Economist* identifies three modellings of sovereignty at variance. See ‘Dreaming of Sovereignty’, *Economist* (19 March 2016) <<https://www.economist.com/britain/2016/03/19/dreaming-of-sovereignty>> [accessed: 14 January 2019].

object and as standing for subjects – are wilfully mediating of their objects. ‘Writing the Railway’ should proffer some new means by which readers or listeners might be sensitised to particular rhetorical moves on the part of the writer-maker (be that of artworks, political speeches or newspaper headlines) and their responses to them.

For my own part, this research has engendered a vastly intensified perception of the role of responsivity in all modes of life. My tendency throughout this thesis to list alternative potentialities has become a habitual cognitive practice for me. It has made writing singular, declarative texts almost impossible. And it has made dramatic structuring a particular conundrum, since to isolate the heroine one must objectify and abstract more than I am now willing to. (See Appendix III for an account of my current struggle to write an opera libretto). When teaching contemporary art and writing, however, I have found this ‘multiple vision’ useful for identifying students’ assumptions and for helping them understand their processes of interpretation and meaning-making. I have included in Appendix IV an example of a workshop devised for students on the Writing programme at the Royal College of Art, London. The reader will recognise how the foregoing research has made this granularity of attention to site and activity possible, and how I have translated this into tasks that exercise perception and mediation through writing.

Contribution to Knowledges and Practices

While my project is transdisciplinary, as outlined in the Introduction, there are aspects within it that can be seen as contributive to discipline-oriented knowledge too. While Krauss’s two-part essay on the index and Kreider’s work on material poetics, as discussed in the Introduction, approach issues of site-specificity from the perspective of a viewer, I have found nothing written from the perspective of an artist or writer about the semiotic processes of devising or

making site-specific work, or the biosemiotic analysis of a given site.⁶⁹³ Semiotic analyses are predominantly conducted by a particular type of viewer: the art historian or critic. This PhD has been undertaken by a writer-maker – a particular type of intermittent viewer, caught in cycles of making, viewing, reviewing and remaking, of intending and interpreting. Where the viewer infers and constructs relations between subject matter and artwork, the writer-maker infers and constructs relations between subject matter and artwork, *and* anticipates viewers' inferences and constructions. She gambles on the nature of the Lebenswelt, or the socio-historical commons, making decisions based in observation, research, intuition and abduction. I suggest that this processual biosemiotic figure of comporting within interpretation contributes to art-historical semiotic practices more usually occupied with the particular effects of types of signs.

In the field of contemporary art and literature, I have found very few examples of text-based works written for specific generic sites. As we have seen in Chapter One, site-specificity is not confined to geographic location – it can relate to a discourse or a community. But while site-specific artworks might develop generic themes, the site is usually particular (a building, a geographic formation, a town, an institution). It could be said that the generic-specific condition I am interested in is applicable to artworks made for the particular conditions of the generic gallery. But beyond the gallery, and apart from such textual objects as prayers for journeying by car or aeroplane, I have found few examples of text-based works made for any other generic type of place. One project that is relevant to this discussion is French & Mottershead's *Afterlife*, a series of four audio works to be listened to on a boat on a river, in a forest, in a museum and at home. The subject matter of *Afterlife* – that which is extensively described – is the human body as it decomposes into each of these specific-generic surroundings. While the particular conditions of the forest or river are contributory, one could argue that

⁶⁹³ Neither have I found anything from this perspective among allied studies of film, performance or theatre, such as Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983); Robert Stam, Robert Burgoyne, Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, *New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics* (London: Routledge, 1992); Marco de Marinis, *The Semiotics of Performance* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993).

the primary site of this series is the human body and its biological processes. And as a site, this is ultimately universal.⁶⁹⁴ There is a 'biting point' between particularity and generality, between detail and type, that I am looking for here, and so the audio work *HERMES* (discussed in Chapter Six) represents a mode of generic-site-specificity that I need to research further.

The discussion in Chapters One and Two contributes to ongoing debates on the instrumentalisation and critical potential of contemporary art, on autonomy and indeterminacy, which are core to theories of its ontology. I have responded to discussions conducted by academic research groups, such as the Anti-Humanist Curating strand of The Political Currency of Art research forum, and The Autonomy Project, to propositions presented through public lectures in galleries and art schools by theorists Suhail Malik and Peter Osborne, and artist and theorist Amanda Beech; and I have drawn on arguments published in the art press and philosophy journals, by critics and art historians such as Martin Herbert and Hal Foster. While the discourses intersected with are variously complex, attending to agendas that veer off from the interests of this thesis, and which articulate ideas presented here in different terms, they all have in common a desire, convergent with my own, to hold contemporary art to account for its critical intervention with social forms and institutions, and, as such, for its relationships to subject matter.

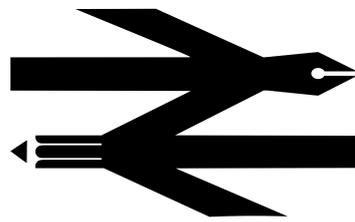
Overall, perhaps the most significant contribution this thesis can claim is to theories of practice within institutional and infrastructural contexts. As I have hopefully demonstrated, biosemiotics elicits understanding that does not demand singular disciplinary knowledge, but instead facilitates an analytical approach that participates in multiple imbricated signifying registers. Such a role for the artist has precedence (as developed by the Artist Placement Group, mentioned in Chapter Five, for example), but here it is explained more fully as a process. It can be appreciated as a means by which a site can be responded to in

⁶⁹⁴ I have also looked at Sites and Wrights' 'misguides', but they too do not quite fulfill the conditions I lay out, since they figure an encounter with a city in very broad terms. See <<http://mis-guide.com/anywhere.html>> [accessed 11 November 2019].

ways that an expert of that site might not consider, and as a generator of patterns of interference that can make its host structures more apparent. And it is this, which I have been calling 'dispersed authorship', that I intend to develop further as a means of working and thinking critically, as a non-specialist, through the material and social forms of complex sites.

Onward Journeys

As my climactic ellipsis suggests, there is much more to be thought and done. This PhD submission is a temporary, illusorily coherent object, which I intend to take as a point of departure for onward journeys. As I am tidying up the peripheral matter – footnotes, appendices, documentation – I am also preparing the ground for new works. An opera libretto is shortly to be handed on to a composer, and a performance in a bathing machine in north Wales needs devising. I am already finding it impossible to approach these commissions as anything other than site-specific works, where the expanded context of the opera house and the seaside performance festival provide me with material and social forms through which to enform new objects and splinter existing ones, to engineer symphonies of responsivity and to disperse authorship.



End Matter

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APPENDIX I:

SUBJECT MATTER (ANNOTATED)

What follows is the distillation of features and catalogue essays into their core subject matter. In the case of catalogue essays, this is usually the primary subject matter that the artist was dealing with in the work I was writing about. In features, it is subject matter that I have alighted on, and brought artworks, texts and exhibitions to bear on it.

Identification of subject matter can be straightforward: artists can have an object or event that they return to over and over; or I might have been asked to write about a particular project or to explore a singular thread through their practice. This is not always the case, however. An artist might have several strands of interest, or an exhibition or project might have multiple focuses; in which case I have attempted to generalise, to 'round up' to the commonest denominator, often resulting in such broad abstractions as 'aesthetics and politics'.

The list is presented in an order dictated by the arrangement of publications on my shelves. Besides a separation of smaller and larger publications, they are not organised (chronologically, say, or alphabetically by artists' names). There are several texts I have written that I never received in publication form, or which I have lost or loaned out and never retrieved. Although I have electronic copies of these texts, I have omitted them due to this lack of bibliographic reference. There will also be a small number of texts (and corresponding subject matters) that I have no record of at all, due to the failure of one external hard drive.

Weaponised hats,¹ sellotape,² background radiation,³ noses,⁴ artist-run spaces,⁵ wine and milk,⁶ aesthetics and politics,⁷ virtual reality,⁸ interpretation,⁹ erect penises,¹⁰ self-love,¹¹ scenery,¹² materiality,¹³ NHS mental health service users,¹⁴ stripes,¹⁵ bodies in contemporary art,¹⁶ ethics in contemporary art,¹⁷ perverse comedy,¹⁸ work and play,¹⁹ Tyrian purple,²⁰ punning,²¹ post-war British architecture,²² appropriation of Modernist forms,²³ eventhood,²⁴ theatrical magic,²⁵ birdwatching,²⁶ technologies of journeying,²⁷ fourteenth-century Siense

¹ 'Quoit Turban', in Avani Tanya, *A Selective Guide to the V&A's South Asian Collection* (London: Delfina, 2018), pp.42–7.

² 'Sellotape', in *She Sees the Shadows*, exh. cat. (London: David Roberts Art Foundation and Llandudno: Mostyn, 2018), pp.24–31.

³ 'What the Eye Can't See The Heart Can't Grieve For', in Matthew Tickle, *What the Eye Can't See The Heart Can't Grieve For*, exh. cat. (London: Matt's Gallery, 2004), unpag.

⁴ 'On the Nose', in Rick Buckley, *The Hard and the Fast* (Cologne: Salon, 2012), pp.38–42.

⁵ 'Definition of and Artist-Run Space', in Luke Gottelier and Francis Upritchard, *Bart Wells Institute* (London: Dente-de-Leone, 2009), pp. ix–xi.

⁶ 'Wine and Milk', in *Monologues 1*, cassette tape (London: CT Editions and Entr'acte, 2011).

⁷ Untitled, in *As If Something Once mentioned Now Plain to See*, (Birmingham: Colony Gallery, 2007), pp.60–3.

⁸ 'Tobias Berstrup', in Matteo Bittani and Domenico Quaranta (eds.), *Gamescenes: Art in the Age of Video Games* (Milan: Johan & Levi, 2006), pp. 76–7.

⁹ 'An Onion in Apple's Clothing', in Linda Quinlan, *Like Horses and Fog*, exh. cat. (Dublin: Crawford Gallery, 2007), pp. 82–4.

¹⁰ Untitled, in Rachael House, *Cocksure*, exh. cat. (Northampton: Intercession Gallery, 2018), unpag.

¹¹ 'In the End You Will Always Love Me', in *Self/Love*, (London: Eros, 2016), pp. 5–8.

¹² 'Scenery', in *Scenery*, exh. cat. (Venice: Nuova Icona and London: Richard Salmon Gallery, 2003), pp. 19–21.

¹³ 'A Discussion of Substance', in Katie Holten, *Gran Bazaar*, exh. cat. (Mexico City: Uruguay # 40), unpag.

¹⁴ 'The Importance of Being Earnest', in Bob & Roberta Smith and Jessica Voorsanger (eds.), *Hearing Voices Seeing Things*, exh. cat. (London: Serpentine Gallery, 2006), pp. 17–25.

¹⁵ 'Signes D'Abstraction', in *Jacob Dahlgren*, (Stockholm: Blå Himmel, 2008), pp. 54–7.

¹⁶ 'Re: B-B-B-B-Odies', in Josephina Posche, *Re: B-B-B-B-Odies* (Göteborg: Snowball Cultural Productions, 2013), unpag.

¹⁷ 'Jochem Hendricks', in *Jochem Hendricks*, exh. cat. (London: Haunch of Venison, 2007), pp. 5–7.

¹⁸ Untitled, in *Elizabeth Price*, exh. cat. (London: Jerwood Space, 2004), unpag.

¹⁹ Untitled, in *Richard Forster*, exh. cat. (London: Jerwood Space, 2006), unpag.

²⁰ 'Violet and the War', in Jane Bustin, *Violet and the War*, exh. cat. (London: Eagle Gallery, 2004), unpag.

²¹ 'Unhinged', in Livia Paldi and Olav Westphalen (eds.), *Dysfunctional Comedy* (Berlin: Sternberg, 2016), pp. 103–11.

²² 'Festival', in *Lucy Williams: Festival*, exh. cat. (New York: McKee Gallery, 2014), unpag.

²³ 'This Fauvist Walks Into a Bar', in *David Austen*, exh. cat. (Milton Keynes Gallery, 2007), pp. 8–11.

²⁴ 'What Is an Event?', in Claudia Milioti (ed.), *Yesvember*, (London: Chunky Arts, 2004), unpag.

²⁵ 'Bewildering Logic', in Jonathan Allen and Sally O'Reilly (eds.), *Magic Show*, exh. cat. (Hayward Touring, 2010), pp. 11–15.

²⁶ Untitled, in *Emma Hart: To Do*, exh. cat. (London: Matt's Gallery, 2011), unpag.

²⁷ 'Curious Voyager', in *To Be Continued...*, exh. cat. (Helsinki Photography Festival, 2005), p. 18.

painting,²⁸ osmosis,²⁹ farce,³⁰ car engines,³¹ art strikes,³² participation,³³ oil-rig living,³⁴ light,³⁵ decision-making,³⁶ associational thought,³⁷ euphemisms,³⁸ mussels,³⁹ grottoes,⁴⁰ parades,⁴¹ chance,⁴² futility,⁴³ waiting,⁴⁴ utopian architecture,⁴⁵ science fiction,⁴⁶ nineteenth-century spiritualism,⁴⁷ difference,⁴⁸ documentary filmmaking,⁴⁹ rules,⁵⁰ excess,⁵¹ the unknowable,⁵² ambiguity,⁵³

²⁸ ‘Circling the Square’, in *Paul Doran*, (Kinsale, Co Cork: Gandon, 2006), pp. 11–15.

²⁹ ‘Is Miguel Palma a Generalist and, If So, Is This Necessarily an Insult?’, in *Miguel Palma: Osmosis*, exh. cat. (London: Bloomberg Space and Lisbon: BES Arte, 2009), pp. 61–65.

³⁰ ‘A Geometric Farce in Two Acts’, in *John Wood and Paul Harrison*, exh. cat. (Tokyo: Mori Art museum, 2007), pp. 62–7.

³¹ ‘Crude’, in Nicole Mollett, *The Kent Cultural Baton: Atlas of Kent* (Kent County Council, 2012), pp. 7–10.

³² ‘Strike-a-Light’, in Gavin Wade and Liam Gillick (eds.), *Strike*, exh. cat. (Wolverhampton Art Gallery, 2002), p. 64.

³³ ‘The Anatomy of a Participatory Project’, in Jeni Walwin (ed.), *Searching for Art’s New Publics* (Bristol: Intellect, 2010), pp. 36–45.

³⁴ ‘Litter’, in *Sophie Jung: Producing My Credentials*, exh. cat. (London: Kunstraum, 2017), pp. 11–14.

³⁵ ‘Synthetic Reality’, in *Synthetic Reality*, exh. cat. (Bury St Edmunds Art Gallery, 2005), pp. 13–15.

³⁶ ‘Decisions’, in *Melanie Manchot: Twelve*, exh. cat. (London: Peckham Platform, 2015), pp. 46–51.

³⁷ with Jennet Thomas, ‘How One Thing Leads to Another’, in *8 Artists Try Not to Talk About Art*, (London: Space Studios, 2006), pp. 96–107.

³⁸ ‘Are You Thinking What I’m Thinking?’, in *Ripe*, 8 (2016), pp. 16–17.

³⁹ ‘Retrieved Realities’, in *The Vanished Reality*, exh. leaflet (Modern Art Oxford, 2016), pp.1–3.

⁴⁰ ‘The Fly Remains’, in *Bridget Ashton and Nicole Mollett: Only the World Remains*, exh. cat. (London: Spacestation 55, 2017), unpag.

⁴¹ ‘Love Cannon’, in *Zoë Walker: Love Cannon*, exh. cat. (Les Arques: Les Ateliers des Arques, 2005), unpag.

⁴² ‘From Chaos to Order and Back Again’, in Jeni Walwin and Henry Krokatsis, *You’ll Never Know: Drawing and Random Interference*, exh. cat. (Hayward Touring, 2006), pp. 33–36.

⁴³ ‘Systematic Collapse’, in *Jo Coupe: Give and Take*, exh. leaflet (Colchester: Firstsite Gallery, 2006), unpag.

⁴⁴ ‘Ruminations on a Platform’, in *Brian Griffiths: Life is a Laugh*, exh. leaflet (London Underground: Platform for Art, 2008), unpag.

⁴⁵ ‘All in the Best Bad Taste’, *Ian Monroe*, exh. cat. (London: Haunch of Venison, 2005), pp. 34–7.

⁴⁶ ‘Strange Attractors’, in *Tommy Stöckel*, exh. cat. (Copenhagen: ICA; Copenhagen: Pork Salad Press, 2003), unpag.

⁴⁷ ‘Hilma af Klint’, in *Hilma af Klint: An Atom in the Universe*, exh. leaflet (London: Camden Arts Centre, 2006), unpag.

⁴⁸ ‘Marion Coutts’, in *Marion Coutts*, exh. cat. (Colchester: Firstsite; London: Film & Video Umbrella), pp. 9–24.

⁴⁹ ‘Conversations in the Dark’, in *Artsway’s New Forest Pavilion*, exh. cat. (Venice: Palazzo Zenobio; Sway: Artsway, 2009), unpag.

⁵⁰ ‘Machines, Morality and Misnomers’, in *Katie Pratt: Pell Mell*, exh. cat. (London: Houldsworth, 2002), unpag.

⁵¹ Untitled, in *Caroline McCarthy*, exh. cat. (London: Gasworks, 2002), unpag.

⁵² ‘Back to Black’, in *Jennet Thomas: Return of the Black Tower*, exh. cat. (London: Peer Gallery, 2007), unpag.

⁵³ ‘A Quest for the Moment’, in *Phyllida Barlow: Peninsula*, exh. cat. (Newcastle: Baltic, 2005), pp. 12–19.

epistemology,⁵⁴ description,⁵⁵ strategy,⁵⁶ perversity,⁵⁷ folk,⁵⁸ narration,⁵⁹ doodling,⁶⁰ data collection,⁶¹ lying,⁶² hierarchies of knowledge,⁶³ urbanism,⁶⁴ collaboration,⁶⁵ interdisciplinary collaboration,⁶⁶ triangles,⁶⁷ interdisciplinarity,⁶⁸ bins,⁶⁹ fandom,⁷⁰ alchemy,⁷¹ economy,⁷² socialist magic,⁷³ cabinets of curiosity,⁷⁴ tenses,⁷⁵ essentialism,⁷⁶ place,⁷⁷ dark places,⁷⁸ fictional maps,⁷⁹ specimens,⁸⁰ public debate,⁸¹ reveals,⁸² mimetic representation,⁸³ Sylvia Pankhurst,⁸⁴ uncreative

⁵⁴ ‘Andrea Medjesi-Jones’, in *New British Painting*, exh. cat. (Southampton: John Hansard Gallery, 2003), p. 27.

⁵⁵ Untitled, in *Leo: Labyrinths*, exh. cat. (Leeds City Art Gallery, 2007), unpag.

⁵⁶ Untitled, in *Elsewhere*, event documentation, (London: Seprentine Gallery, 2002), unpag.

⁵⁷ ‘A Modestly Perverse Non-Sequitur’, in *Katie Cuddon*, (Newcastle: Art Editions North, 2008), pp. 18–20.

⁵⁸ ‘The Work as Movement Archive’, in Serena Korda, *The Work as Movement Archive*, (London: Serena Korda, 2012), unpag.

⁵⁹ ‘Muster (Script)’, in *Laura Eldret: Power Plays*, exh. cat. (Bournemouth: The Gallery, Arts University College, 2012), pp. 9–13.

⁶⁰ ‘Décor and Decorum’, in *Mikey Cuddihy: James in Limbo*, exh. cat. (London: Peer Gallery, 2003), unpag.

⁶¹ ‘Hysterical-Historical Praxis Therapy’, in *Ellie Harrison: Confessions of a Recovering Data Collector*, exh. cat. (Plymouth College of Art, 2009), pp. 3–14.

⁶² Untitled, in *Alan Currall*, exh. leaflet (London: Jerwood Space, 2002), unpag.

⁶³ ‘Hot Cheeks’, in *Goldsmith 2005*, degree show cat. (London: Goldsmiths College, 2005), pp. 4–5.

⁶⁴ ‘Lars Arhenius. The Street’, in *Lars Arhenius*, exh. cat. (Santiago de Compostela: Centro Galego de Artw Contemporánea, 2004), pp.18–21.

⁶⁵ ‘Pleasant and Nasty’, in *Emma Biggs and Matthew Collings: Click Clack*, exh. cat. (London: Fine Art Society, 2006), unpag.

⁶⁶ Untitled, in *Siobhan Davies Commissions*, exh. cat. (London: Bargehouse, 2011), pp. 4–7.

⁶⁷ ‘The Triangulation of the Scatterlings’ Union’, in *O’Reilly, Semeiko, Zinik*, exh. cat. (London: Peer Gallery, 2013), pp. 39–40.

⁶⁸ ‘On Interdisciplinarity’, in *O’Reilly, Semeiko, Zinik*, pp. 42–3.

⁶⁹ ‘Siberian Trialogue’, in *O’Reilly, Semeiko, Zinik*, pp. 48–60.

⁷⁰ ‘Drawing in the Margins’, in *Julie Henry*, exh. cat. (Manchester: Cornerhouse; London: Film & Video Umbrella, 2003), unpag.

⁷¹ *The Alchemical Times*, 2 issues (Manchester Museum, 2007–8), pp. 1–12 (entire).

⁷² ‘W. Wordsworth-Allott’s Economic Poetry’, in *Irresistible*, exh. cat. (London: Tate Modern, 2007), pp. 26–8.

⁷³ with Ian Saville, ‘I Can See Your Ideology Moving’, in *The Live Art Almanac* (London: Live Art Development Agency, 2008), pp. 111–16.

⁷⁴ ‘Spontaneous Combustions and Other Friktions’, in *The Frik Collection*, exh. cat. (Den Haag: Gemeentemuseum, 2005), pp. 13–200.

⁷⁵ ‘A Study in Tenses’, in *The Indivisible Present*, exh. leaflet (Modern Art Oxford, 2016), pp. 1–3.

⁷⁶ ‘As Barbara Cartland Would Put It’, in *The Internationaler*, 1 (2006), pp. 3–4.

⁷⁷ ‘Insensible Places’, in *Sense of Place: Place of Sense* (Sleaford, Lincs: Beacon Art Project, 2005), pp. 28–31.

⁷⁸ ‘Dark Places’, in *Dark Places*, exh. cat. (Southampton: John Hansard Gallery, 2010), pp. 4–7.

⁷⁹ with Cathy Haynes, ‘Implicosphere: Fictional Maps; in *Maurice*, 1 (2006), pp. 26–31.

⁸⁰ Untitled, in *Mark Fairnington*, exh. cat. (Mannheim: Galerie Peter Zimmermann, 2005), pp. 13–14.

⁸¹ ‘Public Debate Roundly Discussed’, in *Goshka Macuga: The Nature of the Beast*, exh. cat. (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2009), pp. 38–9.

writing,⁸⁵ avatars,⁸⁶ concentricity,⁸⁷ venetian blinds,⁸⁸ darkness,⁸⁹ IKEA,⁹⁰ the uncanny,⁹¹ false utopias,⁹² specialisation,⁹³ hands,⁹⁴ sculpture,⁹⁵ fragmentation,⁹⁶ contemplation,⁹⁷ knowledge,⁹⁸ the prisoner's dilemma,⁹⁹ artists' residencies,¹⁰⁰ goats,¹⁰¹ referentiality,¹⁰² headlessness,¹⁰³ reconstruction,¹⁰⁴ torsos,¹⁰⁵ slapstick,¹⁰⁶

⁸² 'Undercover', in *Danica Maier & Miranda Whall: Adam and Eve It*, exh. leaflet (London: Printworks Trust, 2005), unpag.

⁸³ Untitled, in *Vineta Kaulača* (Riga: Vineta Kaulača, 2006), pp. 6–7.

⁸⁴ 'The Deputation', in Jonathan Allen (ed.), *Lost Envoy: The Taor Deck of Austin Osman Spare* (London: Strange Attractor, 2016), pp. 103–8.

⁸⁵ 'Now More Concentrated', in *Artenol*, 1 (Winter 2015), pp. 16–20.

⁸⁶ 'Audience and Avatar: some interlocking perspectives and meandering associations', in *Audience and Avatar: Brody Condon: Modofocations*, exh. cat. (Tampa: Contemporary Art Museum, 2008), pp. 5–18.

⁸⁷ 'The Buzz', in *Inside* (Nottingham: YH485 Press, 2010), p. 4.

⁸⁸ 'Grilling the Venetian', in *Miscellany of Noir*, exh. cat. (Derby: Quad, 2012), pp. 25–6.

⁸⁹ 'In the Dark', in *Prologue: Cahiers*, 3/3 (Gentilly: Arcueil et Gentilly, 2010), pp. 12–15.

⁹⁰ 'An essay on the IKEA Style of Curating', in *IDEA: You are De-Curators*, exh. cat. (London: University of the Arts, 2005), pp. 6–7.

⁹¹ Untitled, in *Richard Wathen*, exh. cat. (London: Max Wigram Gallery, 2006), unpag.

⁹² 'Untitled', in *Heather & Ivan Morison: The Land of Cockaigne*, exh. leaflet (London: Bloomberg Space, 2007), unpag.

⁹³ 'One Hundred Ways to Cook an Egg', in *What People Do for Money: Manifesta 11*, exh. cat. (Zurich: Manifesta 11, 2016), pp. 168–70.

⁹⁴ 'Manicular Therapy', in Lucy Byatt and Charlotte Troy (eds.), *100 Years of the Contemporary Art Society: What's Next: Inside Public Collections* (London: Contemporary Art Society, 2011), pp. 243–9.

⁹⁵ 'Interview with a Phenomenaut', in Chris Driessen & Heidi van Mierlo, *Wanderlust: Excursions in Contemporary Sculpture*, (Tilburg: Fundament Foundation, 2008), pp. 139–44.

⁹⁶ 'The English Haul', in *Simon English: My Big Self Decoy Justin Bieber* (London: Black Dog, 2017), pp. 152–5.

⁹⁷ 'Mark Wallinger', in *Qu'est-ce que l'art video aujourd'hui?*, (Boulogne: Beaux Arts, 2008), p. 184.

⁹⁸ 'Introduction', in *Goshka Macuga: The Sleep of Ulro*, exh. cat. (Liverpool: A Foundation, 2006), pp. 9–13.

⁹⁹ 'Working-togetherism', in *Zoé Walker & Neil Bromwich*, exh. cat. (Southampton: John Hansard Gallery, 2008), pp. 120–5.

¹⁰⁰ 'Down on Blackrock Farm', in *2016 Blackrock*, exh. cat. (London: Matts Gallery / Lydney: Blackrock, 2016), pp. 6–7.

¹⁰¹ 'Ruminations on a Ledge', in *Bedwyr Williams: The Gulch*, exh. cat. (London: Barbican, 2016), pp. 17–20.

¹⁰² 'Theatre of Memory', in *Layla Curtis* (Newcastle: Locus + / Walsall: New Art Gallery, 2006), pp. 13–17.

¹⁰³ 'Offshore Worlds', in *Ruth Claxton: Lands End*, exh. cat. (Birmingham: Ikon Gallery, 2008), unpag.

¹⁰⁴ 'Scattered Typologies', in *Anne Bean: Autobiuary*, exh. cat. (London: Matt's Gallery, 2006), pp. 28–36.

¹⁰⁵ 'Sally O'Reilly on John Coplans's *Self-Portrait (Torso, Front)*, 1984', *Tate Etc.*, 17 (Autumn 2009), p. 117.

¹⁰⁶ 'Things Fall Apart', *Frieze*, 110 (October 2007), pp. 256–61.

liveness,¹⁰⁷ self-reflexivity,¹⁰⁸ art criticism,¹⁰⁹ Palestine,¹¹⁰ comedy,¹¹¹ themes.¹¹²

¹⁰⁷ 'Live and Kicking', *Art Monthly*, 266 (May 2003), pp. 1–6.

¹⁰⁸ 'Self-Reflexivity', *Art Monthly*, 289 (September 2005), pp. 7–13.

¹⁰⁹ 'On Criticism', *Art Monthly*, 296 (May 2006), pp. 8–12.

¹¹⁰ 'Letter from Palestine', *Art Monthly*, 301 (November 2006), pp. 35–6.

¹¹¹ 'Dead Funny', *Art Monthly*, 302 (December–January 2006–7), pp. 7–10.

¹¹² 'Another Fine Mess', *Art Monthly*, 326 (May 2009), pp. 11–15.

**APPENDIX II:
PROPOSAL FOR PLATFORM HOMOGRAPH (UPDATED)**

The following is not to be produced. It is a problematic proposal, intended to exercise the systems of the underground on paper only. The main reason it cannot be produced is glaring; but if magically it didn't matter that the people employed to oversee safety on the platform-train interface were being distracted, I would really like to hear what permissions and procedures would be required to produce such a piece.

Overview

On a station platform, among the people waiting for trains, performers are indistinguishable in ordinary clothing. All looks normal from the perspective of the driver monitoring the platform via in-cab OPO screens. Then, without warning, just as the doors have closed, three or four performers hold up, towards the platform cameras, signs that bear a few words of text. Together these signs add up to a single message, which the compositing function of the OPO system makes apparent to the driver. The message is delivered and the train leaves the station as normal.

A series of these messages is to be delivered along the length of the Victoria Line (since this line has an in-cab OPO system installed throughout). In sequence the messages accumulate into a narrative or a series of call-and-response episodes: like a quiz, for example, or a series of jokes.

What follows is the beginning of a list of possible approaches to generating content for the Platform Homograph.

Possibility No.1

The frustrations felt by train operators are researched through interview. The text describes comedic, absurd workarounds or retorts to these problems.

[For example, it is reported that the Piccadilly Line requires a longer training period than any other Underground line because it is the only manually driven one and its 1973 stock has an electro-pneumatic braking system that newer stock does not.¹¹³]

Possibility No.2

The OPO system makes possible seeing round corners (from cab to platform), and around oblique curves (the length of curved platforms). Associations can be drawn with clairvoyance, the implication being that the train operator is not constrained by humdrum limitations. The text extends this idea, and describes other special powers of train operators, casting them as mythical figures. It describes their ability to travel at great speed; their having the life of hundreds of people in their hands; their repeated journeying from the underworld to the lighted regions.

Possibility No.3

The aim of the text is ornamentation. It introduces forms that are widely accepted as beautiful into the platform environment. The text verbally plants the platforms with trees, shrubs and flowers. The language is technical – Latin names, technical processes – thereby communicating on specialist terms not with drivers qua drivers, but as gardeners, naturalists, ramblers, scientists.

Possibility No.4

The journey along the tube line maps on to the plot line of a soap opera. Characters are established in the first few stations; dramatic events unfold across the whole line, with several cliffhangers en route. The question remains whether

¹¹³ Although some train operators report that it is the 1992 stock that is more difficult to operate, and yet is not given as much training time. See ‘Night Tube Operator Recruitment’ on District Dave’s Forum <<http://districtdavesforum.co.uk/thread/28047/night-tube-train-operator-recruitment>> [accessed 15 November 2017].

the final stop delivers a plot resolution, or leaves the possibility open for a future series.

Possibility No.5

To enable drivers to 'learn while they earn', the texts relay a series of everyday phrases in another language of the driver's choice. As the line is traversed several times in each shift, the reiteration of the phrases (and their translation) aid the learning processes.

Possibility No.6

The text delivers a digested version of a whole novel.

Possibility No.7

The text delivers a digested version of an entire film.

Possibility No.8

The project is a television on-demand service, through which drivers can be kept abreast of programme broadcasts: the comings and goings of contestants on reality programmes, for instance, or sport fixture outcomes or news updates on particular stories. An order is placed before a shift, and the necessary text is written for delivery on the fly, as events happen.

Possibility No.9

It's a quiz! At the first station a quiz question is delivered; at the second its answer – and so on up the line.

Possibility No.10

At random, somewhere along the line, the driver is treated to a lolly-stick-style joke – the question at one station, the answer at the next station. There might be one joke per traversal of the line, or there could be several.

APPENDIX III:

A VIEW OF THE THESIS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF PRACTICE

(in reverse chronological order)

What follows is a brief account of artworks made during the course of researching and writing this thesis. The accompanying documentation includes artworks thematically adherent to 'Writing the Railway', which is itself an enformed object and therefore necessarily leaves out a lot of thought and other activity that does not reinforce its eventual shape.

I have made several performances, videos and publications that don't entirely map on to the themes and arguments of the thesis. And yet there is much about them that has informed the project. And so I have included them here, albeit in a roughly sketched form, to give a stronger sense of the complexity of relations between theorising, reading, making and the many types of writing that have gone in to 'Writing the Railway'.

Furthermore, there are several other objects and events I could have included – talks and presentations that are arguably performances, teaching workshops that engaged with site-specificity or responsivity or narration.¹¹⁴ But, as ever, a boundary must be made around an object, and a divide between PhD and not PhD must be constructed.

In some of the following accounts I have also outlined the socio-economic conditions and interpersonal relations through which the work was made. This appendix enacts the thesis's call to re-incorporate the particular with the thematic, the experiential with the theoretical.

¹¹⁴ I have included the brief of one writing workshop in Appendix IV as an example of how the PhD has informed my teaching practice.

She Described It to Death

May 2020

Opera: 6 singers, 11 instrumentalists

90 mins (approx.)

Commissioned by Royal Opera House, London

The opera is about a woman lost in John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids*. She was sent to scout out a place for potential resettlement of citizens of a city overpopulated due to a vast increase in longevity. The piece explores the effects of death (and its scarcity) on rhetoric and narration. It also tests the limits of plot complexity and character ambivalence in a traditionally dramatic form.

The narrative has been developed around composer Matt Rogers' formal and structural desires for the piece (for example, that there is a character describing somewhere that the other characters cannot see), and in response to the recent death of my parents. I am also in discussion with a dramaturg, who places more operatically conventional expectations on the text. It is a piquant instance of multiplicitous and frequently conflicting value structures bearing on the making of a piece. Where I am exploring dispersion of character activity and responsibility, the dramaturg is pressing for clear, singular character motivations and a melodramatic denouement. My current efforts are aimed at figuring out how to dilate the field of dramatic action, while also generating the sorts of tensions and releases considered by the Opera House and the dramaturg to be essential.

Train Tabletop Text Opera

March 2019

Performance

1 performer

23 mins

Performed at a table seat aboard a high-speed service between St Pancras and Gravesend



Fig. 6

Photograph: Rosie Lonsdale

I sit at a table and puppeteer text-bearing objects – a writing case, a magazine, a model portacabin and a lunchbox – which stand for four characters engaged in conversation at a train table. As the characters speak, these objects reveal other text-bearing surfaces: a notebook, Ladybird reading books, a geometry textbook, timetables, unfurling rolls of paper, unfolding flaps, sheets and strips, extending tape measures, oversized crisps... Through this textual exchange, the characters debate the economic structuring and governance of the railway, describing and demonstrating its metaphoric and literal significances.

Train Tabletop Text Opera was made for two primary reasons: as a means of trialling some ideas generated through researching and writing this thesis, and to lure friends to Gravesend, where I had been living for four years. I moved from London for the sake of lower rent, so that I could pursue this PhD without having to take on extra teaching or writing work to fund it.

The performance demonstrates dispersed authorship, and trials grounded approaches to speaking on behalf of another, where I am conscious of my processes of representation of the other. Its heteroglossic composition also exercises the diffracting effects of multiple interacting perspectives; and it tests the limits of in-carriage behaviour. For a fuller account, see Chapter Seven and the accompanying documentation.

I Hear Horses

6 June 2018

Performance

2 performers

Swanscombe Peninsula, Kent

Commissioned by Whitstable Biennale

Made in collaboration and performed with James M'Kay



Fig. 7

Photograph: Neil Luck

Two tour guides with very different remits lead a group around the peninsula, taking it in turns to inform them about the past or future of various sectors and aspects of the site. One tour guide relates the many histories of the area: the geology of the ice age; geo-political histories of road and river transport infrastructure; cement manufacturing; paleobotanical research. The other tour guide describes a future theme park, currently in development in partnership

with animals and plants – coelenterates, horses, algae, birds. The audience are potential funders being briefed on proposals for rides and attractions.

Although *I Hear Horses* was a commission, it couldn't have been more fortuitously sited. The peninsula is the point at which the high-speed train services between London and Kent go under the Thames – a particularly fascinating sector of landscape through which the train passes, and emblematic of the impacts of industry and transport. Working with a collaborator (who did much of the heavy lifting in terms of historical research, since he is a qualified tour guide), it was necessary to split the narrative content in half in order to achieve the aims of my research, since I could not impose all my concerns on him. Rather helpfully, though, the double vision that this produced was also in keeping with the multiplicity of knowledges that I had been aiming for.

The piece also required writerly experimentation in prosopopoeia and personification; and the idea of the theme park (which is an actual extant proposal for the site, albeit not designed by non-humans) was a gift for my thinking about subject matter through higher- and lower-order abstractions. For a fuller account of this work see Chapter Seven and the accompanying documentation.

Night Sea Shore (after John Barth)

25 May 2018

Performance

1 harmonium player, 1 reader

Performed at Royal College of Art, London,
with musician Kit Downes

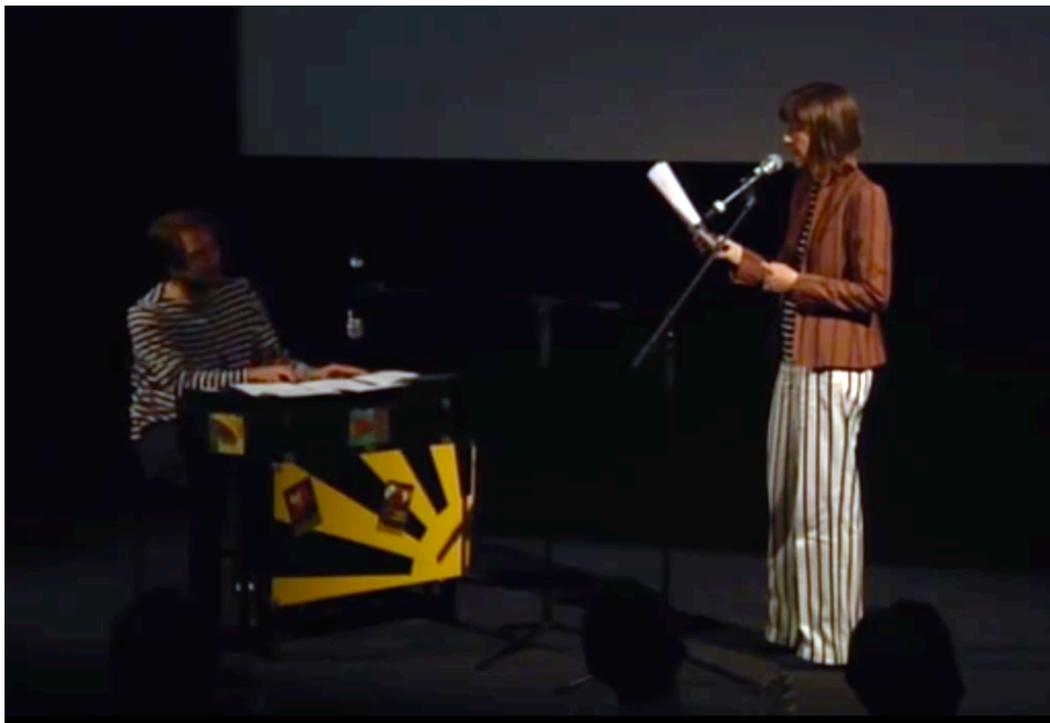


Fig. 8

Video still; video courtesy of This Is Tomorrow

I read a text about a perimenopausal uterus, written in response to a short story narrated from the point of view of a sperm. Musician Kit Downes accompanied me on a harmonium, underscoring the reading with music that did not dramatise it so much as provide a place for it to inhabit – a place that reflected the ostensibly mysterious nature of the events related.

The text involved personification of a protean, non-lingual (but still human) entity, while insinuating the concerns of an encultured, conscious woman. In this sense, it is a curious amalgam of metonym and allegory, and a means of

expressing a personal experience of the perimenopause through abstractions and at an apparently epic scale.

The musical element is something that I had been working with for a while at this point. I had been finding the sensory, real-time, mutual responsivity between reader and instrumentalist not only interesting in theoretical terms, but also incredibly useful practically. When speaking into silence, all decisions are yet to be made; a musical underscore, on the other hand, instantly narrows the range of apparent possibilities, which can even, when generic musical forms emerge, tip into compulsion.

HERMES

December 2017

Audio

22 mins

www.sallyoreilly.org.uk/hermes.html

To be listened to while travelling on a train – any train, so long as the journey duration is 22 mins or longer

Music by Matt Rogers

HERMES comprises spoken word and electronically generated music. Within the matrix of its fiction it is a technological tool that pretends to be able to make the listener's train run on time. It bases its efficacy on the notion that no situation is anticipatable, and proceeds via a comic misapplication of the power of language. The voice apparently embarks on the task of itemising every destination and time that the traveller does not want to arrive at, and in naming every possible fault – human or technical – that could divert the train from its proper schedule.

The piece is a farce of connectivity and multiplicity. It is an instant of willed conflation of the literary and the technological, and it exercises some of my thinking about incommensurate temporal frameworks. For a full account, see Chapter Six and the accompanying documentation.

Platform Homography

2017

unproduceable proposal

If *Platform Homography* were to be actualised, it would involve the performative publication of text to a readership of London Underground train drivers. At stations along the Victoria line, performers on the platform would hold up signs as the train left the station. These signs would be readable by the train driver via the live-feed video from on-platform cameras. For possible approaches to writing these texts, see Appendix III.

Platform Homography was devised especially to activate the curatorial, production and health and safety processes of London Underground. The outcomes and implications of this are discussed in Chapter Five. I decided to dedicate an entire chapter to this, because it is important that the non-linear nature of conceiving, devising and making an artwork are made perceptible in a thesis that considers art practice, as well as encounters with complete artworks. And while it will always remain virtual (in the sense that it will never be actualised) the piece provoked my most tangible interaction with the railway as a technical object. Thanks to the responses of a curator and a producer at Art on the Underground, I was afforded an insight into the actual processes of operation, instead of the usual customer-facing translations of the train guards.

The Ambivalents

July 2017

Publication

52 pages

Published by Cabinet Books, New York

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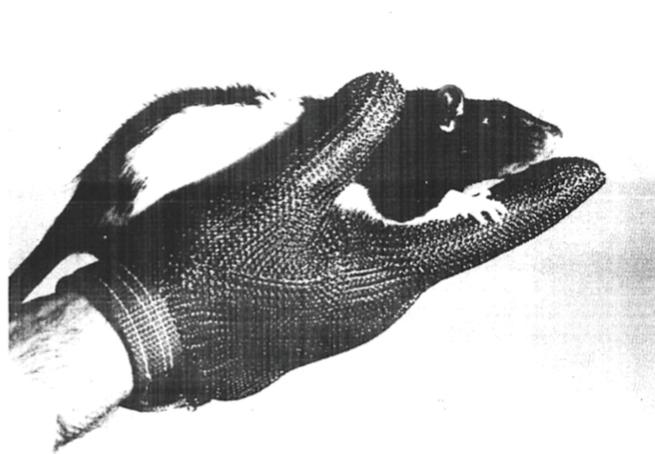
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Glove with Forearm Gauntlet.

D-588	\$145.00
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Stainless Steel Sleeve Armguard and Harness (wrist to shoulder). Sizes S, M, L. Specify left or right hand.



Fig. 9: Excerpt from Braintree Scientific laboratory equipment catalogue 1986

The book *The Ambivalents* was created and designed in one twenty-four-hour period. In an exercise in authorial constraint and responsivity, instigated by the editors of *Cabinet* magazine, I was asked to consider a found document revealed to me a day in advance: the 1986 catalogue for Braintree Scientific, an American company that manufactures lab products used in experiments on rats and mice. The result was dozens of letters sent to an imagined beleaguered woman working in the press and marketing department of the company, written by a range of characters, including an artist, a literary critic, a dissatisfied customer, a beagle, a rat, several schoolchildren and a man who, like the animals depicted in the catalogue, is perhaps close to death.

The Ambivalents was an opportunity for me to interleave scientific subject matter with psychosocial content, as per the Latourian project of pre-modernism or Musil's call for precision *and* soul. In the contracted timeframe, though, negligible research was possible, and so the technical is underrepresented (especially as the catalogue itself does not figure in the publication). Here the science laboratory, unlike the train in later works, remains a representational backdrop.

Public Address System on the 12:30 from Common Ground

July 2017

performance

1 reader

10 mins (approx.)

Performed as part of the symposium 'Creative Resistance: Architecture, Art, Writing, a Life...', 4 July 2017, Institute of Advanced Studies, UCL, London

The script was written following telephone interviews with symposium conveners Jane Rendell and Emma Cheadle. The 'Common Ground' of the title is the name of the room in which the symposium took place. '12:30' was the time scheduled for the delivery of the piece, and the amount of drift from this, in minutes, was inserted into the paragraph. The script is written in the voice of a train manager making announcements over the tannoy. The main section of the script comprises statements about the train – 'This train is...' – with 'train' being a euphemism for 'symposium'. The characteristics and particularities described pass through sections of focus, from the role of the 'train' in the institution to its relationship to various temporal frameworks to its material composition to its bodily and social composition to its valencies in the psychologies of its participants.

This performance foreshadowed *HERMES* (discussed in Chapter Six) in its flexing of a method of hyper-particularisation, and by demonstrating the inexhaustibility of an apparently knowable object and situation such as the academic symposium.

Live Illuminated Manuscript 3: Four Legs Good

24 November 2016

Performance

1 reader, 1 musician

Commissioned by Modern Art Oxford

Performed with musician Chris Vatalaro

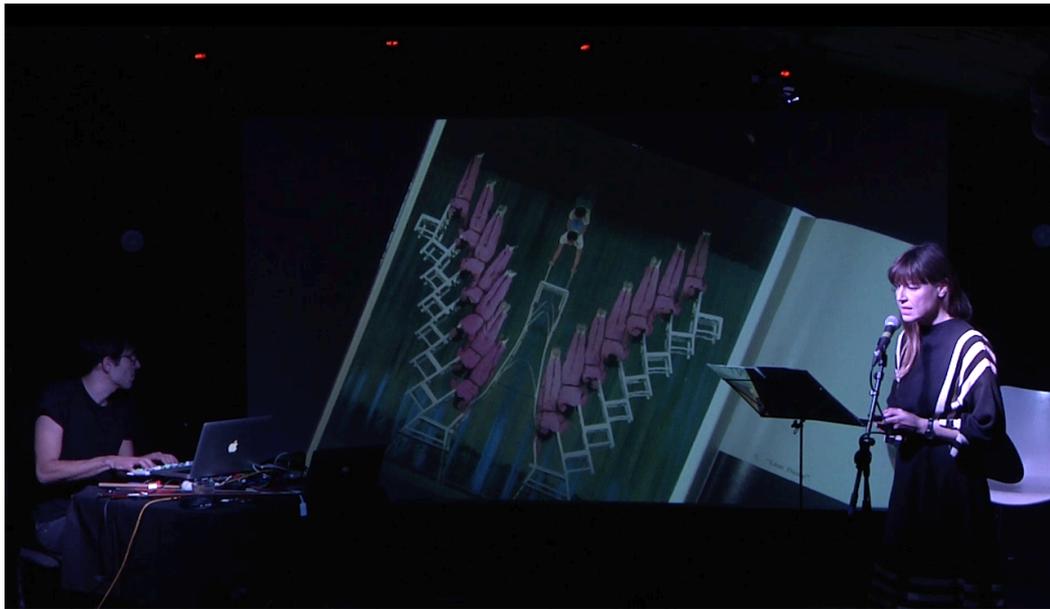


Fig. 10

Video still; video courtesy This Is Tomorrow

Four Legs Good is a speculative fiction musical that relates the experience of an archivist who, while researching an exhibition about furniture, discovers that chairs were once sentient creatures that roamed the landscape, eventually oppressed by humans. It comprises videos, spoken word, MIDI-triggered sounds and images.

This piece developed from a necessity to engage with the archive at Modern Art Oxford, which was a stipulation of the year-long residency that I was only aware of once the first piece (see LIM1 below) was almost finished. Since I was not interested in working from artworks in any art historical or art theoretical sense, I elected to find the broadest theme possible so that I could move through history

and disciplines and still be able to point to items in the archive that could be said to be what the piece was 'about'. I alighted on the motif of the chair after discovering a set of slides of an exhibition in which artists had made furniture represented in paintings.

Four Legs Good addressed issues of archival translation and historiography, and pushed the creativity of the historian to the limit with its fantastical absurdity. It was also my first foray into MIDI-triggered sound, which is something that I intended to investigate further in *Train Tabletop Text Opera*, until it became apparent how problematic sound in the train carriage would be.

The Ends

13 October 2016

Performance

1 reader, 1 musician

30 mins

Pompidou Centre, Paris

Commissioned by *Cabinet* magazine for The School of Death

Performed with musician Corentin Chassard

Arrangements by composer Matt Rogers

Films remembered and sourced by John-Paul Gandy



Fig. 11: Still of final scene from Robert Hossein, *Point de chute*, 1970
(and the final scene of *The Ends*)

I am onstage, dressed as if in mourning. Behind me plays a montage of clips of films that all end on the beach. A cellist plays arrangements of orchestral pieces that represent the sea. I become increasingly dishevelled as I retrieve and read out texts from about my person – written on a handkerchief, on red ribbons that

appear to be drawn from my wrists, on my legs (accessible by ripping my fishnet tights) and within my entrails, which I pull out through a hidden opening in my dress. The content of the texts are the final sentences from sea-themed novels.

The piece is an archly thematic study in endings, and in trans-media equivalence. It draws into parity classical orchestral concert music, world cinema and the popular novels available in an underfunded regional library (in Gravesend). As such, it was also an exercise in working with the constraints of available means. The films were those that a single person could remember as having ended on a beach, and the orchestral music was arranged to approximate the effect of the whole when played by a single cellist.

Annual Retrieval

10 & 11 September 2016

Performance

2 performers

30 mins (approx.)

Bathurst Pool, Lydney, Gloucestershire

Commissioned by Matt's Gallery + Blackrock



Fig. 12

Photograph: Rupert Bathurst

An actor recites an epic prayer in which she appeals on the behalf of the community (i.e., the audience) to Mars Nodens, the Roman god of health to whom there is the ruins of a dedicated temple nearby. The prayer is part of a

ritual that also involves me swimming up the length of the pool to deliver a series of votive objects. These have been made from items bought from the local charity shops: all the hair in Age Concern; all the sounds in the Dean Forest Hospice shop; all the 'chest messages' (T-shirts bearing text) in Age UK; all the leopard print in the Cats Protection League shop; all the white collars in the Dial-a-Ride local transport charity shop. At the end of the performance the audience voted on which votive was to be offered to Mars Nodens. The rest were dismantled and their constituent parts returned to the charity shops for resale.

This performance was the outcome of the Matt's Gallery + Blackrock residency, in Lydney, Gloucestershire. It was the point at which I came to realise the importance of an expanded approach to site. As with the video installation described below, this piece disrupted the ordinary functioning of its site, requiring its closure to normal operations. I had been researching practice theory at this time, and considered the practices of the wider community to be represented in the piece by way of the circulation of secondhand consumer goods. I was thinking of the material surfeit and economic poverty embodied by Lydney high street (which, although tiny, has five charity shops) as among the issues made apparent through debate around the Brexit referendum, which had happened during the span of this residency.

All the Knowledge

September 2016

Video

10 mins 30 secs

Lydney, Gloucestershire

Commissioned by Matt's Gallery + Blackrock



Fig. 13

Photograph: courtesy Matt's Gallery

The structure was made from all the floral curtains bought from the Dean Forest Hospice shop throughout the two-month-long Blackrock residency, and the video features all the non-fiction books bought on a single trip to Age Concern.

The video takes the non-fiction made available to the general public – books filled with knowledge that is technical, educational or entertaining – and wilfully misinterprets it. It exaggerates how information that finds its way out of corporate laboratories, university research programmes and other specialist environments into the public realm is, by necessity, simplified and generalised.

And yet the video's narrator – a neologism who wishes to enter the language it is studying – learns from these books not utilitarian wisdom, but the contradictions and blind alleys that constitute modernity, that make it so difficult to 'know' anything at all.

The piece is a study in misinterpretation: of the cultural cues represented by the contents of the books, and of the nature of the floral content of an industrial greenhouse. The neologism that is trying to enter the language is 'ambivalence' (although this remains unknown to the audience). The piece is an expression of my ambivalent relationship to conventional processes of knowledge production, and to the possibility of community. It was made during the run-up to and immediate fall-out of the Brexit referendum, and itself relates what would later come to be called the 'hostile environment' experienced by incomers (in this instance, the incomer being a new word, which stands for a hitherto experienced, but lexically unidentified state of mind).

All the Chest Messages

24 & 25 September 2016

Performance

1 performer

Bathurst Pool, Lydney, Gloucestershire

Commissioned by Matt's Gallery + Blackrock



Fig. 14

Photograph: courtesy Matt's Gallery

I wore all the slogan T-shirts found in a charity shop (37 in all): the small children's ones closest to the skin, the largest men's ones on top. I then stripped off the T-shirts one by one; then, on reaching the smallest, I put them back on; then took them all off again, then put them all back on again... I did this for two hours in a caravan on a dairy farm. Only my torso was visible through the window.

The piece was intended to make apparent social subtexts. As the strip passed through the sizes associated with young girls, young boys, women and men,

slogans revealed the values and behaviours that the clothing industry ascribes to these 'types'. Operating in the caravan set-up as captions to a headless (anonymous) person, the thematic clustering of the text narrates this figure as a princess, a monster, a sex object and an alcoholic. I was thinking of this, in relation to the thesis, as a rather glib instance of expressive causality.

Live Illuminated Manuscript 2:

In The End You Will Always Love Me and The Dinner

August 2016

Performance

1 performer, 1 musician

Duration: 45 mins

Commissioned by Modern Art Oxford

Performed with musician Kit Downs on the harmonium

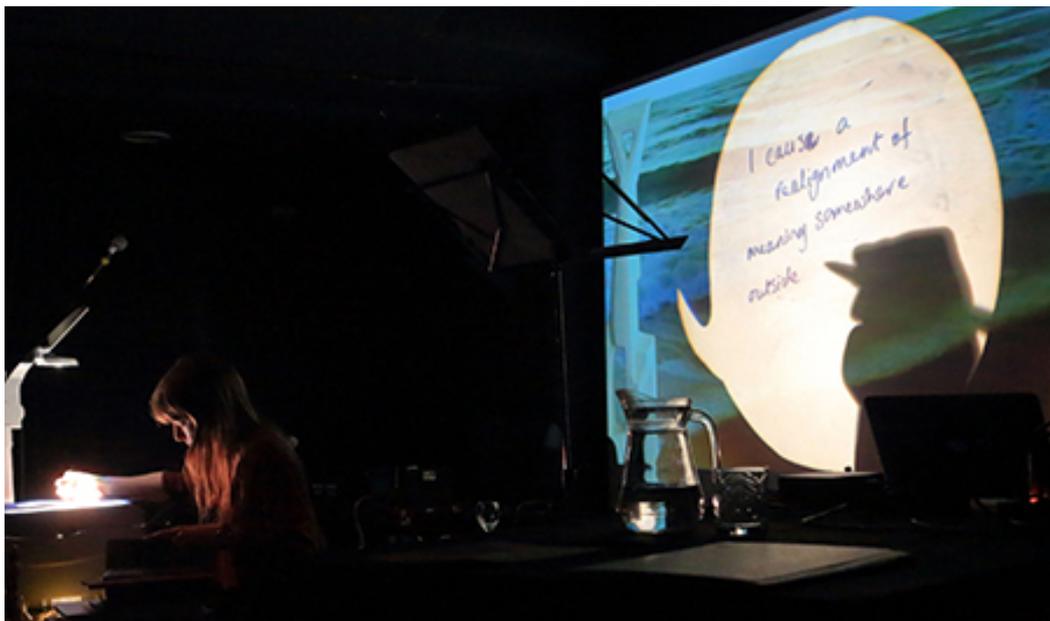


Fig. 15

Photograph: Stu Allsop

In The End You Will Always Love Me is a montage of many final sentences from catalogue essays published in Modern Art Oxford exhibition catalogues over the last twenty years. Where the text mentions the artist or artwork, I changed this to 'I'; where the viewer was invoked, I changed this to 'you'. The result was a hyperbolic text that makes the most incredible inflated claims for art. I presented this text as a conversation between two sculptures by a shoreline.

The piece emphasised the often near-messianic capacities writers afford art and artists in these unconditionally supportive texts. It is another example of a collation of a single type of text revealing something about values and behaviours (see *All the Chest Messages* above), this time of the community of art critics, curators and artists who tend to write exhibition catalogue essays. This piece was later reconfigured as a spoken word piece with emotive musical underscore (duration 10 mins).

The Dinner was a dramatised reading of a text written in response to a dinner invitee list found in the archive box for a 1996 exhibition 'The Director's Eye' at Modern Art Oxford, marking the centenary of European Cinema. Several well-known film directors had been present at this event, and the performance was an imagined reconstruction of the toasts given at the dinner, with directors expressing their interests, asserting their ideologies and flexing their egos.

The performance was a study in transmediation, since I was thinking about how a filmmaker's visual or structural style might be transliterated into their speech. Of course, I did not imagine this to actually be the case – the piece was the fantastical extension of a maker's conscious aesthetic processes into their (potentially) unconscious ones. Or rather, it was a provocation for an audience to identify how an approach to filmmaking was being repurposed and applied to speechmaking.

Harris Garulatrix

2016

Audio installation

14 mins

Commissioned by Harris Museum and Gallery, Preston

Voice performed by Rosie Thomson



Fig. 16

Photograph: courtesy Harris Museum, Preston

This is a talking head. A recording of a female actor performing a monologue plays through a hidden speaker, as if the shoe itself were speaking. The garulatrix

is a scold and a gossip, imparting vicious observations about the other artworks in the show, and insulting the viewer while she's at it.

The *Harris Garulatrix* makes the site-specificity of the gallery apparent, rendering it as a particular iteration of itself, inhabited by a particular community of artworks. The content of the garulatrix's monologue draws out, and is critical of, contemporary art's tendencies towards ambiguity and the infinity of viewer interpretation, as discussed in Chapter One.

Live Illuminated Manuscript I: Police Control

February 2016

Performance

1 Foley artist, 1 musician

30 mins

Commissioned by Modern Art Oxford

Performed with musician Emma Smith



Fig. 17

Photograph: St Allsop

On-screen text and image represent the proceedings of a quiz show host and contestants. It is a show that demonstrates the methods of policing in the 1970s (which in this fiction involve coercive methods of cybernetics). A live Foley artist, a live musician (playing violin and clarinet) and pre-recorded sound dramatise the action described by the text.

The performance plays with illusory and real relationships between several of its aspects. At times the Foley is being actually performed, at others it is mimed to a

recording. The content segues between documentary accuracy and absurdity. (The material on cybernetics straddling both these categories – as the believable-fantastical.) The on-screen text, along with live and pre-recorded sound, describe an actual open day competition between police constabularies in 1971, as outlined in a photocopied booklet that has survived the event. The audience are addressed as if they are at once a contemporary art audience and a 1970s police open day audience. In another register again, the piece appears to fulfil the gallery's brief of engagement with an item from its archive (in this instance, a 1968 installation by Steven Willats called *Visuals Automatics, Shift Boxes and Visual Transmitters*, which explored processes and effects of cybernetics), when in fact the cybernetics material was inserted once the piece was almost complete. This had been necessary because archival engagement was a late edition to the conditions of the residency, since it was a stipulation of some last-minute funding.

The Forgotten Waterbearer

2015

Video

15 mins

Commissioned by Sequences VII, Reykjavic, 2015



Fig. 18
Video still

The video relates a fairy tale, with a strong gender-politics undertow, using found footage, written and filmed intertitles, and audio montaged from several sources. It merges ideas of plumbing – as industrial and domestic conduits for water and oil – with the human body and the channels of deep time.

I made this piece at the very beginning of the current research, when my technical object was the oil industry. I had recently been to Siberia to try and reach the oil pipelines there, as an experiment in the accessibility of the industry

that supplies such a pervasive, supposedly 'everyday' substance. The closest I had got was visiting a factory in Novosibirsk where sewage pipes were made. This video, too, exemplifies my inability to deal head on and in detail with something as politically fraught as the oil industry. Its imagery is far from current and apposite, its narrative entirely divorced from my subject matter and its allegorical potency totally opaque. I did not alight on the subject matter of the railway for more than a year after this, but it signals the beginning of my struggle to identify a technological hyperobject that is difficult to understand, but not so obfuscated as to be impossible.

The Virtues of Things

2015

Opera

5 singers, 10 instrumentalists

1hr 20mins

Performed at and Commissioned by Royal Opera House, London; Aldburgh Music; Opera North, Leeds



Fig. 19

Photograph: Stephen Cumminskey

Members of a family of prop makers start becoming ill and call in a freelancer to help them fulfil a large order. It becomes apparent that it is exposure to objects of significance (a variation of Stendhal syndrome) that is the cause of illness. As they introduce new props into the workshop, family members become absorbed into the opera plots that these objects represent. Eventually, all except the freelancer are killed by the potency of language or of a character in the final opera-within-the-opera.

The opera handles themes of craft and technology, the significance of objects, and apparently incommensurate systems of knowledge and representation (with one substantial discussion on the merits and problems of two different types of abstraction). The libretto was written with particular attention to technical and colloquial vocabulary, and features many everyday discourse genres, such as the mnemonic, the bawdy folk song and (one side of a) fragmented telephone conversation. It was written at the beginning of my research process, when I was engaging with speculative realism and the ontology of objects, and so it is an opera in which the main plot turns are precipitated by objects, albeit with human responses generating the drama.

APPENDIX IV

EXAMPLE OF TEACHING PRACTICE

This workshop brief was devised for Royal College of Art students on the Writing programme. It took place on 21 February 2019. Most of the students chose to find a situation in London – in a hospital, a fun fair, the Natural History Museum, a library, a nail salon, Canary Wharf, an airport – although some were travelling or visiting elsewhere, and conducted the workshop from wherever they found themselves that day. Even I was out of town, travelling by train and coach between Vilnius and London. There was no centre, no home base for the exercise: everyone was working remotely.

The exercises were devised to sensitise the students to the multiplicity of activities through which a place is constituted, to make apparent the potential connective potency of high- and low-order abstractions, and to consider the particularities of intention, effect, function and error.

What follows the writing exercises is my response to the students' texts, which I wrote and emailed to the students two days later, while travelling by train from Warsaw to Köln. It is an ecstatic inventory of types of motion, an exercise in rewriting categories of kindedness.

Writing Situation

Daylong Writing Exercise Brief

Choose a location you are interested in, and in which you will be able to spend some time perceiving, thinking and writing. This amount of time should be fairly substantial – long enough to at least take notes for the writing exercises that follow, if not to perform them in their entirety in situ.

Try to think of this location that you are in not simply as a space, but as a dynamic situation. Consider it a shifting convergence of many different types and scales of materials, conversations, things, entities, actions, forces, power flows, intentions, practices, events. What is this situation comprised of?

Once you have tuned in to your situation, select from the writing exercises and prompts over the page. You may do as many or as few as you like, so long as it is generative. You are welcome to make up your own exercises too.

When you have been perceiving and thinking and writing all morning, find somewhere you can refine and upload your texts. You might need to relocate to type them up, or find some wi-fi. Build this time into your schedule. Upload all texts by 3pm. Label all texts with your name.

Then have a read of other people's texts. Send people emails or messages about their texts, about your texts in relation to their texts, about their situations in relation to your situations.

Exercises

1. What is there a predominance of in your situation? Chatter, baggage, pigeons, piped music, shrubbery, foodstuffs, books...? Devise a new taxonomy of types of this item. Are there multiple ways of taxonimising it? Make a piece of writing about or through one or some of these taxonomies.

2. Wilfully misunderstand something in your situation and run with that misunderstanding. What can you usefully understand differently through this misunderstanding?

3. Describe the sound of your situation without the use of metaphors, similes or adjectives. Now describe the sound of your situation using an ornamented metaphor extended almost to breaking point.

4. What human practices are being conducted in your situation? This might include professional and skilled practices, such a pastry cheffing or legal consultancy, as well as less rarified practices, such as cutlery wielding or gossiping. Select two of these practices and write a short essay about what they have in common, what they could contribute to one another, their differences, where else such a convergence occurs and your relationship to both these practices.

5. Develop a visual repertoire through which to write your situation. This might involve typographic design, diagrams, calligrams, illuminated letters, adapted letterforms...

6. If you have a camera (and if it is not inappropriate), take a photograph of your situation. Then select at least two from the following options:

Write a short paragraph of non-fiction that place this image in the following relations with the text:

- a) as an interruption to the text;
- b) embodying the proposition of the text;

c) adding to the theory or argument of the text.

Write a short paragraph of fiction that place this image in the following roles:

- a) as something that the narrator sees;
- b) as something that the writer imagines;
- c) as something that the narrator is unaware of.

7. Write a script (for film, theatre or some other performance or distribution format) made entirely out of overheard snippets of spoken language.

8. Impose a recognisable (literary or non-literary) genre on to your situation and write an opening paragraph that describes the site in the mode of that genre. (For example, a sci-fi rendering that speculates on an imagined wider world of which it is a vignette, or a police statement that establishes a fact.)

9. Imagine that you are an omnipotent being with infinite technological abilities: you have carte blanche to recreate your situation from scratch. How would you redesign the situation? Which functions would you preserve? Which would you reconfigure or omit entirely, and why?

10. Identify an object or entity in your situation that particularly interests you. In a single paragraph, relate this to universal abstract ideas, to historical events and to personal memories.

11. Write a slavishly logical and hyper-detailed description of an action that occurs in your situation, using as many words as you need. Now rework this using just 18 words. Now rework it again using just 6 words.

12. Identify an abstract theme that seems pertinent to your situation. Riff on that theme, folding in particularities of the site as you go.

13. Think of an episode from your past that bears some relation, however tenuous, to your situation here and now. Write about now as if from the perspective of then.

14. Recalling the Dolven test, channel a writer whose work you admire and write about your situation in their style/voice/mode. (Whether this is a description of place, the account of an event, an essaying through abstract ideas or a political treatise will depend on who you are channelling.)

My Response: A taxonomic inventory

(with occasional inflections of other exercises too)

There is a predominance of movement here. There is physical movement, of course: the train and coach being exemplars of objects hurtling through space. (Although some would rather not figure them as objects moving across a fixed ground, with time separated from space. For these seers, vehicular movement is immanent, a coordinated material response to combustion, electrical pulses, neuronal firing, traction, infrastructural management, economic formations, socio-political forces... But this is a different taxonomy, for another space-time). Thanks to the train's aptitude for containment, humans and dogs on leads and cats in baskets and attendant fleas and lice and yeasts and viruses also move en masse like shit off a shovel through a landscape brittle with cold. And besides the train's forward momentum, there are the incidental sways and jolts, which transmit to us as, after the initial big push up from the platform to the vestibule, we heave luggage and hang coats and jostle for window or table seats; as we cross legs, swivel apart or lean in. We rummage in bags and smooth hair and remove layers. We settle. We wriggle and shuffle, sigh and nod, all the while swaying and jolting. We batter the air with our tongues and filter it through our lights, into the blood and on through other gizzards. Our pumps and valves and filters thrum and knock; our chitterlings squeeze, dilate and creak; our various reservoirs fill and drain. Eyeballs scan, nostrils flare, crevices sweat. You get the idea: bodies self-tend in seats.

People pass along aisles and through doors, shuttling food and drink, scanning tickets, exercising toddlers, marshalling rejectamenta towards the appropriate vessel. Outside the window three deer are a picture. Once we have passed, their heads will bob back down and they will graze on. Fungi and trees conduct their occult communications – a secret well kept, since not even the tips of the slenderest branches waver in the chill out there. Cars are few, and slower than us, beetling across our determined path at angles. Another train roars past, shuttering half our view. The iced ponds and puddles melt a little as the sun climbs the sky. Some smoke slyly insinuates itself into the cloud cover. And there must be birds

out there somewhere, shattering the air from within a dense tree that hides all but their song. You get this idea too: phenomena are in full effect.

And then there is another sort of movement. Call it cognitive and emotional: the shuffling of thoughts and temperament in response to internal and external, logical and sensational occurrences. There is the rush of recognition of a woman travelled beside on a different train three days previously, which releases some sort of happy hormone (later intermixed with some sort of annoyance hormone, as she chews abstractly and ferociously on her thumbnail while she reads). By now my internal weather has changed from anxiety, which catching a train in a strange station always generates, to an ease in which the commencement of work is possible. Obligation and curiosity combined spur me to extract, plug in and turn on my laptop.

I move between virtual locations, ‘opening’ and ‘closing’ your documents, in which you have miraculously inscribed your endeavours. (These inscriptions only partly comprise the directionality of your intentions, their course knocked off by assumptions, oversights, serendipity and mistakes – just as this document is not what I intended to write either). My eyes follow what you want me to believe was the movement of your thoughts, from left to right, top to bottom; although I know this to be an illusion, which some of you already give the lie to with your layouts of columns and fragments and all-over pictorials. And as I read, something (neural, soulful?) sparks and blooms in manifold directions. Your ideas pilot their way through my oceans of understandings, tugging certain thoughts and images to the fore or twisting them out of their usual berth or colliding with them fatally or gently cruising past, creating a vague impression that fades. I feel the vigour of your piloting, and I think I can tell when you have lost grip of the tiller. I hear you change direction, plotting a new course; and I see you triangulating with known shores, and shores you think you know, but which look different from where I’m sat. There is the clonk and click of recognition: of things I knew I already recognised, and of things I didn’t – this latter being an effect of great writing, the former a sign of your appealing to the life-world we have in common. There is also: the rearrangement of shards, dollops and filaments of understanding, as your writing draws them into fresh relation; the

rupture of laughter, when some tissue of logic is torn or some standardisation upset; a sharp wince at a bad cliché, and a slump of disappointment at an undeveloped thought. Then add to all this the seep of covetousness when a perfect image is clinched or a fine point made.

And to be uncomfortably honest, once all has been read, there is a swelling of pride (among the upper offal) at having asked you to do something, and you having done nothing I anticipated, instead shimmying, loping, shambling, sashaying, creeping, trundling, glissandoing, plodding, sliding and hop-skipping off in all directions – fuelled by your own ambitions, intentions, proclivities and capacities, admittedly, but jumpstarted by one or some of my fourteen shoves. I am moved, in the conventional metaphoric sense, by your earnest explorations aboard the intergalactic space-timeship that is writing. And so, as a final move, I set off this brief, luminous flare (in celebration, not distress).