Strayed Homes
A Reading of Everyday Space

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Thesis submitted for the degree of PhD
London Consortium
Birkbeck, University of London

July 2014
I hereby declare the work contained within to be my own.

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July 2014
Acknowledgements

I would like to say thank you here to my mother and father for their patient love and generosity and for teaching me that arguments could be settled and unsettled by recourse to the dictionary. And to Annecy for letting me read to her.

To Adam Carter and Mark Dunford at James Allen’s Girls’ School for shifting my attention to what wasn’t there. To Denise Lewis for her faultless and thrilling introduction to Judaism. To Corrine Barton and Caroline Edwards for encouraging questions and ignoring handwriting.

To Richard Brown, Jay Prosser and John Whale at the University of Leeds. For helping me to read *Ulysses*, *Dumbstruck*, and offering glimpses of offices full of tables stacked with books. And who offered encouragement when I most needed it (and didn’t ask). To my supervisor Matthew Sweet who does a very good line in apposite, occasionally gruesome, anecdotes and who knows how to spell Colman’s mustard. The thesis would have a very different (far weaker) flavor without you. To Mark Cousins whose seminars on Antigone let my mind out of a window that has not been closed since. And whose Friday night lectures at the Architectural Association are the backdrop to the scene of this writing. To Steve Connor who I am loathe to call my supervisor because he never once made me feel as though thinking had to or could be supervised. Which was a very great gift.

To all my friends at the Consortium for time spent talking, eating, whispering and groaning, good lord! To Hannah Gregory for words and tips. To the Underfitz poets in all their incarnations, for keeping me sane. To the librarians at the Mass Observation Archive and Senate House Library. To my friends from the London Conference in Critical Thought. To the men and women of Store Street Espresso. To the London Consortium for existing.

And to everyone (all those mentioned and more) for telling me your stories or sending me your pictures or sending me out into the city armed with directions to your launderette, etc. It has been a great pleasure to hear, see and have them. I hope you will not be too alarmed to find them written down here.

Thank you, thank you, thank you John-Patrick, Fergus, Constance, Billie, Octavia, Neusha, Dan, Jess, Dylan, Jenny – for the everyday. And to Leo. For very nearly sending it all flying.
Abstract

This thesis puts forward the category of 'strayed home.' Might it be possible to locate public spaces which are temporarily transformed by the homely things that take place in them? Places which permit or invite intimate ways of behaving? Through an interrogation of a series of spaces in which people do things in public that might be thought of as private the thesis asks questions about habitual experience of space, about attachments to practices and places. Each chapter presents a close reading of a strayed home that takes into account its cultural representations (in film, literature and advertisements) alongside a reading of the space as the author finds it today. The collision of these imaginary and immediate spaces is explored as inseparable from the way space is experienced. As such the thesis follows the logic and the poetry of everyday speech and imagery and the way realities of expression shape reality.

Taking the Jewish tradition of eruv as its starting point the thesis moves from the launderette, to the sleeper-train, the fire escape, the greasy spoon and then to the postcard. Each space (or object) is explored separately but themes that emerge highlight the simultaneous pleasure and trauma involved in the experience of a strayed home. These spaces are at once too small and pleasurably confined, sites of exposure but also encounter, of contagion but also mixing, of solitude and of society. These are spaces which trouble our natural sensitivity to time and space but which permit a certain and rare figuring of the one through the other. The handling of time in these spaces or the way in which they disrupt the handling of time is suggestive for conceptions of home, domesticity and privacy. This investigation suggests that wasted time, as well as the other bodily wastes of dirt, sound and smell, might be integral to what it is that makes a space (temporarily) a home.
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Neither matter nor space nor time is what, up until twenty years ago, it always was.

Paul Valéry, 'La Conquête de l’ubiquité'

‘It was much pleasanter at home’, thought poor Alice, ‘when one wasn’t always growing larger and smaller.’

Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*
Introduction. *Strayed Homes, A Reading of Everyday Space*
1.1 Secular Eruvin

The Jewish tradition of eruv is the practice by which an area outside the home is temporarily redefined (by halachic law) as part of the home. This area can be as small as a courtyard or as large as a borough. There are eruvin in almost every city in the world. The temporarily transforming structure is made by the enclosure of space within a series of poles, wires and natural boundaries.¹ A ritual involving the sharing of food is used to merge the private spaces inside the structure with that of the newly enclosed space. For the duration of Sabbath, if the structure remains intact, the space is governed by the same laws of behaviour that apply to the home. The construction and maintenance of an eruv allows observant Jews to do things outside the home that are only permitted inside the home under the laws of Shabbat. The construction of an eruv is the construction of a legal loophole. The prohibition that the eruv finds a way to elude is that which forbids the carrying of objects to and from private and public places.² There are four eruvin in London, the first one (the North West London eruv), was completed in 2003. The proposed erection of this eruv in 1991 was the subject of opposition within and outside the Jewish community. The conflict surrounding the proposal (made to Barnet council) to construct the eruv forms the basis of Robert Charles Ash’s thesis, Mountains of Hair: Eruv, A Symbolic Act Through Which the Legal Fiction of Community is Established. In this thesis Ash investigates ways in which ‘it might be argued that this faintly absurd controversy represented in symbolic form the basic dilemma of Jewish life in liberal societies in the late twentieth century.’³ The aspects of the dispute that were the most absurd were, significantly, those which worked upon the same principle of concrete allegory as the tradition of eruv itself. They were those which took the practice at its word. It was curiosity about this literal experience of allegory and symbol (an experience shared by the proposers of and protestors against the eruv) that formed the starting point for this thesis.

¹ Natural boundaries can mean in this case a riverbank or busy road; the workings of the eruv depend upon the definitions of the four ‘domains’ of the sabbath articulated in the Mishnah. These and other intricacies of the procedure are made clear by Robert Charles Ash, Mountains of Hair: Eruv, A Symbolic Act Through Which the Legal Fiction of Community is Established. Thesis submitted to the Department of Sociology, University of Leicester, May 2000. p.29.
² ‘the prohibition on carrying is connected to going out of ‘one’s place’ … For most practical purposes, one can say that Jews who observe the laws of Sabbath may carry things within their homes but may not carry anything from inside their homes to the outside … the obvious solution to the problems generated by this restriction would be to redefine places a private domains which were previously semi-public … the most basic example of how this is achieved is the practice of eruv(ei) chatzeiroth (‘the merging of courtyards’).’ Ash pp.29-34. To my mind this is not an obvious solution but rather an intriguing and highly suggestive one.
What do I mean by concrete allegory? Ash defines eruv as ‘an anglicised form of a Hebrew word which literally means “mixing” or “amalgamation.”’ Before the word concrete came to denote a ubiquitous building material it described something that had been formed from a cohesion of parts, something that had solidified. It is also used to describe the real or the tangible as opposed to the abstract or immaterial. Allegory is a linguistic device that gives narrative form to a sustained metaphor. Both terms contain kernels of simultaneity (concrete being a solidified mix of ingredients and allegory being one subject described or represented in language under the guise of another) but they make an uneasy pair for modern ears because one so resolutely recalls the material poured to make buildings. A building that is also an allegory is difficult to think about. Ash explains the eruv as ‘a symbolic (though concrete) enclosure,’ by the means of which, ‘the carrying of objects between two private domains, or between public and private domains,’ is made possible. It is precisely this quality of being at once symbolic and concrete that makes eruv such a fascinating structure. This may seem counterintuitive, for aren’t all symbols at once concrete and symbolic? A symbol is an object, sign or gesture which stands for or represents something else. The eruv, whilst symbolically standing for something, also is a thing. It is at once a symbol and the newly made space. As such the analogy and recall inherent to the symbol collapses in on itself and the space is attended to in ways that blur its immediate and referential attributes. The eruv is concrete and allegorical.

In practice this means that the physical integrity of the structure is indissoluble from the way in which it functions. While the poles and wires are only representative of doors, walls and gateways, the symbolic effect of the eruv depends upon their continued physical presence. What the structure represents is one thing, what it becomes is another. This means that congregations using an eruv will organise a watch or patrol to check and repair the boundaries before and during Sabbath; if any of the connecting parts are broken the prohibition against carrying remains. The newest eruv in the United Kingdom, the Manchester eruv, lets people know if the structure is broken or operational by text, email and an announcement online. The eruv website reiterates the seriousness of checking these updates, stating that; ‘it is not adequate for one to assume that the eruv is functional if there have been no storms or major adverse weather conditions during the previous week.’ Whilst bad weather is probably the most common source of eruv damage, the structures are relatively fragile so many things can affect them. The eruv in Jerusalem suffered in 2001

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4 Ash, p.2.
5 Ash, pp.2-4.
6 It does stand for a thing (see Weizman for an articulation of the analogous relationship between eruv and the doorway to the Temple) but it also is a thing.
8 www.manchestereruv.org.uk (accessed March 2014)
because children kept flying their kites beneath it. The emphasis on the structure’s integrity explains the status held by the shadowy figure of the boundary marven in Michael Chabon’s *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union.* The difference between an operational and a broken *eruv* is the difference between obeying and disobeying god.

Somebody has to lay down those lines, survey the territory, maintain the strings and the poles, and guard the integrity of the make-believe walls and doors against weather, vandalism, bears and the telephone company. That’s where the boundary marven comes in. He has the whole strings and poles market covered.

I’ve said that the objections raised by the proposal of the North West London *eruv* in Barnet took the practice at its word. These objections, which still find voice as other councils are applied to for planning permission, look at the poles and wires used to create the *eruv* (identical to other street furniture in every way) as markedly different. The fact that one community group regards the poles as being imbued with symbolic significance makes them similarly (though contradictorily) imbued with meaning for another, it is as though meaning were contagious. The differentiation made between Jewish lampposts and non-Jewish lampposts, whilst anti-Semitic and absurd, worked on the same principle that the users of the *eruv* also subscribed to; that these physical objects and markers were more than what they appeared to be. The concrete and the allegorical were again collapsing into one another. The relationship between the various readings of the space, the structure, and the practices made possible by that structure, were found to be intricately in tension on both sides of the argument. Ash argues that the fastidious attention to the concrete details of the *eruv* on the part of the community who propose it, are in fact secondary in significance to what takes place in it once it has been established. These are the social practices which

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11 ‘Strong objections have been voiced and these include – it would impose religious practices on the non-Jewish community – the Eruv would promote one faith which is a minority in Bushey – the Eruv would promote social exclusion – the Eruv would impact property values – the Eruv would create a sense of ownership over land in the Eruv.’ Stuart Littlewood, ‘Jewish Communities Planning to Annex Parts of North London’ 24th September 2013 [www.deliberation.info/jewish-communities- planning-annex-parts-north-london/](http://www.deliberation.info/jewish-communities-planning-annex-parts-north-london/) (accessed March 2014)

12 By the same literal logic of analogy it is forbidden to put up an umbrella inside an *eruv* but carrying coats is permitted. For reflection on how this simple permission changes the experience of the space see Jennifer Cousineau, ‘Urban Boundaries, Religious Experience’ *Making Place: Space and Embodiment in the City* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014) pp.126-147.

13 ‘The two most striking features of the findings were that 1. Several of the different ‘types’ of support/opposition were found on both sides of the argument. 2. Little of the support or opposition was unequivocal; in many cases individuals were pulled in more than one direction, sometimes to the point where decision making was impossible.’ Ash p.245.

14 ‘There are immensely complex rules governing, for example, the size of a breach in a partition between domains; the degree of a “sag” of a wire or rope suspended between the poles of a symbolic
give their own concrete form to the legal fiction the *eruv* establishes. The emphasis for Ash is on what the new and temporarily (in the eyes of the law at least) private space does to the once public space it now occupies and crosses. Eyal Weizman and Manuel Herz, in *Between City and Desert: Constructing the North London Eruv*, also focus on the transformative effects of the structure which they argue ‘transforms and mutates’ definitions of space. In both cases the relationship brought to critical (and concrete) tension by the *eruv* was that between the symbolic and the practical. This relationship, unequivocally one of tension and blurred positions, is one that this investigation seeks to examine.

This is an investigation into secular *eruvin*. Might it be possible to locate public spaces which are temporarily transformed by the things that take place in them? Places which permit or invite different ways of behaving? If the threshold of a home can be elongated by a series of wires, poles and practices then might it be possible to spread this domesticity out in other ways? Are there spaces being used like an *eruv*? Are there spaces into which the home has temporarily strayed? The starting point for this questioning was a simple concrete coincidence. *Eruv* wire, strung between poles, measured out between wall and roof, looks very like washing lines. Once or twice a fortnight the shared stairwell of my building would fill with the outstretched jumpers, trousers and sheets of my neighbours. Climbing up to the top floor of the building would mean being confronted by an inventive and efficient repurposing of the space between the floors. The arrangement was expedient and make-shift and its arrival always surprising. It altered the space around it. The presence of the unattended clothes which shifted the dimensions of the stairwell also shifted the mood of the space. Comparisons that can be made between the appropriation of space by washing lines and *eruv* are not restricted to the ways in which they alter the space they cross; similar issues of territorial transgression, social contagion and aesthetic effrontery that were part of the dispute in North London are also issues that surround the practice of using washing lines. What I am interested to understand is the way in which the washing lines altered (to my mind positively) the shared stairwell and hallway. The space had not changed from being public to private but it was palpably more homely. This small shift in mood, this inking of a difference between the private, the intimate and the intimate-in-public, is what I would like to locate and understand.

gateway … this concern with the concrete detail, the ‘geometry’ of the *eruv* however, it a minor matter, it merely hints at the real significance … the transformation of urban landscape by a reconceptualization of its spaces: a human social practice.’ Ash p.240.

15 ‘The *eruv* symbolically changes the nature of urban space, so too do the laws bound to it. The *eruv* therefore demonstrates the direct relation between law and space: it is the point in space and time where the law is transgressed by an urban intervention and the city is re-valued by the law.’ Weizman and Herz, p.73.
Terms like ‘intimate’ and ‘homely’ are subjectively vague and may seem like rather inconsequential ideas to invest one’s time in writing or reading about. They signify highly subjective experiences which fit into an equally vague category, that of feelings. But thinking about how we experience the public spaces that make up the incidental backdrop to our daily lives and why we take pleasure in some and displeasure in others is important and has implications for a number of different disciplines. Architecture, the art form we consume in a state of distraction, is also the art form that we consume most.\textsuperscript{16} And it consumes us. From dawn to dawn we move through constructed space, pushing our bodies through gaps that have been measured and fitted to reflect or direct certain types of behaviours and attitudes. We are constantly consuming architecture and it is no wonder that we do so without giving it our full attention. If we were to pay attention to every window frame, every drain, every gutter that we pass, the effort would be overwhelming. An investigation into this distracted consumption must therefore involve attention to the irrational, the inadvertent, the inconsequential and the felt. Because even though we do not attend to every detail consciously, we are always sensing the space we are in. Even though we do not attend to it, we are shaped by it. Walter Benjamin writes, ‘the distracted mass … absorbs the work of art into itself’.\textsuperscript{17} Space, which is nothing more than that which architecture surrounds, is sensed rather than apprehended; an understanding of it is approached rather than arrived at. This sensing is more often than not wordless so the ways in which it is described tend towards the vague and the subjective. This thesis will articulate and extrapolate on the inadvertent distracted consumption and appropriation of spaces that in some way contain a home that has strayed. I do not take Benjamin’s term, ‘the distracted mass’, as one that patronises the people it describes. Nor do I take it to mean that a distracted consumption is somehow less felt by the person doing the consuming. The joy of this thesis has been that everyone spoken to has an experience of the spaces in question and talks fluently about it. If these spaces have not been written about before, they have certainly been thought about.

An investigation of this sort is of particular relevance now because the idea of a strayed home stands in direct opposition to the pervasive consensus that privacy is no longer guaranteed by the locked door or the sealed envelope. The phrase ‘invasion of privacy’ is often heard in modern parlance; your details and demographics have been sold by one company to another (by one government to another), your emails are read and the appropriate adverts appear beside them in your inbox, your neighbours have hung their washing out to dry in your stairwell, a man read your newspaper over your shoulder on the

\textsuperscript{16} Architecture has always provided the prototype of a work of art that is received in a state of distraction and by the collective. The laws governing its reception have most to tell us.’ Walter Benjamin ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ One-way Street and Other Writings, trans. J. A. Underwood (London: Penguin, 2009) p.255.

\textsuperscript{17} Benjamin, ibid.
tube, sat too close on the bus, touched you, breathed on you. It seems everywhere there are a series of privacies that are being invaded, little territories that are broken into, lines that are constantly being crossed. What of the inverse? An invasion by privacy? What if privacy were not a space like a safe, with a secret at its heart, but a series of gestures and practices, movements and memories? What if privacy was not an inert space or quantity but an active and lively quality? What if it were something that moved out instead of in? What would this movement look like and what would its effects be on the space around it? In an attempt to answer these questions I have identified and interrogated a series of spaces in which people do things in public which might be thought of as private. In each of these spaces the themes suggested by the eruv can be seen to be present. These are: concrete allegory (the collapsing of the literal and the figurative), the temporary presence of the domestic in the public, and the sensed pleasures (and pains) of space. A fourth theme that plays a large part in the analysis is the way in which representations of these spaces (in film, literature and advertisements) informs experiences of them.

I am calling this piece of writing *Strayed Homes, A Reading of Everyday Space* because the process of investigation has been above all one of reading space. The presence within the title of the term ‘everyday’ refers not so much to the spaces but the way in which they are experienced. Everyday is a useful term because it describes those objects, places and practices which are met or which happen with such regularity that they become part of the furniture. Broadly speaking I am defining reading everyday space by working with Roland Barthes' conception of reading, Michel de Certeau's conception of the everyday and Gaston Bachelard's conception of space. Each of these writers has something to say to each of the terms but I'll say why and how I am using them in the way I am by limiting myself to these three categories.
1.2 Reading

A garment, an automobile, a dish of cooked food, a gesture, a film, a piece of music, an advertising image, a piece of furniture, a newspaper headline – these appear to be heterogeneous objects. What might they have in common? This at least: all are signs. When I walk through the streets – or through life – and encounter these objects, I apply to all of them, if need be without realizing it, one and the same activity, which is that of a certain reading.¹⁸

Much of the opposition surrounding the proposed North West London eruv depended upon the ways in which citizens were reading the street furniture; it depended on different interpretations of the same inert object. It is a modern conceit to associate reading only with literacy, it would be wrong to imagine that only words are read. Spaces are read, bodies are read, gestures are read, and objects are read. Reading is the activity of discerning, distinguishing and interpreting and it is constantly taking place often, as Barthes says, without us realising it. It is not however a passive activity (though it is silent) because to read is to decide. Barthes gives an example, which I will quote in full, from the life of the Marquis de Sade which pinpoints the active and radical possibility – the decisiveness – inherent in any instance of reading.

The Marquise de Sade, having asked the imprisoned Marquis to have his dirty linen sent out to her, ‘[the Marquis] pretends to see in her request another, properly Sadian motive. ‘Charming creature, you want my dirty linen, my old linen? Do you know that is complete tact? … I have every wish in the world to satisfy you in this matter, because you know the respect I have for tastes, for fantasies, however baroque they may be, I find them all respectable, and because one is not the master of them, and because the most singular and bizarre of them, when well analyzed, always depends on a principle of tact.’¹⁹

The pretended reading that is made here by the Marquis of the request made by the Marquise, made all the more powerful because the prison walls that separate them give shape to the gulf that always separates the reader from the thing he reads, is playful; he is teasing his wife. But it is also an instance of agency, he is exerting the power he has to interpret actions in such a way as to subvert them; despite his imprisonment he is still free

in this respect.\textsuperscript{20} Using both the Marquis’s pretended reading and his very truthful account of reading tastes and fantasies Barthes shows that tact is one form of reading. He writes, ‘Sade’s very utterance exposes what the principle of tact is: a pleasure in analysis, a verbal operation that frustrates expectation, a perversion that plays with the useless detail.’\textsuperscript{21}

Reading here is what has taken place between the act and the response. The useless detail is of the utmost importance. Who decides what is useless? Reading for Barthes is a decisive interpretive gesture which can give form to the agency of the one who makes it. To read a lamppost in a certain way, to interpret it as holy, blasphemous or mundane, is to make a decision. Not every reader is Sade, not every decision will be so willfully playful and perverse, but it has the potential to be. Even within the same reader there is the possibility for a series of readings and rereadings.\textsuperscript{22} For Barthes reading is subversive, inventive, and decisive.

The project of semiology, explored by Barthes, can be understood as a reading of this reading. Proposed by Ferdinand de Saussure as ‘a science that studies the life of signs within society,’\textsuperscript{23} it uses the tools of his structural analysis of language to study systems of meaning.\textsuperscript{24} Barthes’ semiological project was ultimately a post-structuralist one but its central question was the relationship between a thing and its significance(s); a relationship exemplified by the activity of reading. The interrogation stemmed from Saussure’s hunch that ‘the characteristic that distinguishes semiological systems from all other institutions shows up clearly only in language where it manifests itself in the things which are studied least.’\textsuperscript{25} Barthes’ key semiological text \textit{Mythologies} was a disinterment of things that are taken as read, the natural, the least studied; that which \textit{goes-without-saying}.\textsuperscript{26} In this text he showed how culture is saturated with ideological propositions through a reading of myth as a type of speech. It is this treatment of culture as language and of language as a system of meaning that makes his writing central to an investigation into the commonplace experience of being in common places; he writes, ‘all social space is signifying space.’\textsuperscript{27} A lamppost, a garment, a train carriage, a dish of fried mushrooms, a cigarette butt, a clip from \textit{West Side Story}, a picture of a beach, a packet of soap, a Formica-topped table, a turn of phrase – these

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{20}This is a key point when thinking about reading and subversion. We are all subject to the world, in it and always already implicated by it, how we choose to read it is one of the ways in which we can assert agency upon it.
\item \textsuperscript{21}Barthes, \textit{The Neutral} p.29.
\item \textsuperscript{22}‘in the presence of an object there are almost always several meanings possible, and this is not only between one reader and the next, but also sometimes in one and the same reader’. Barthes, \textit{The Semiotic Challenge} p.188.
\item \textsuperscript{24}Saussure and Barthes saw language as just one of many systems of meaning.
\item \textsuperscript{25}Saussure, p.962.
\item \textsuperscript{27}Barthes, \textit{The Semiotic Challenge} p.191
\end{itemize}
appear to be heterogeneous objects. What might they have in common? This at least: all are signs.

The method of his analysis is absorbing, playful and constantly moving on, like the text it takes as its subject, it does not close but rather spreads.

In the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be disentangled, nothing deciphered; the structure can be followed, ‘run’ (like the thread of a stocking) at every point and at every level, but there is nothing beneath: the space of writing is to be ranged over, not pierced.28

Playfulness is crucial to Barthes’ understanding of reading. He makes his own play on words to unpack this; “playing” must be understood here in all its polysemy: the text itself plays (like a door, like a machine with “play”) and the reader plays twice over, playing the Text as one plays a game … also playing the Text in the musical sense of the term.29 His approach mirrors the instructions Walter Benjamin gives about applying opinions to the giant apparatus of social life; they should be applied as oil to a machine: ‘one squirts a little of it in hidden nipples and joints.’30 He follows threads that run, seeks out the hidden joints and applies his oil. His approach is sponge-like, permeable to anything that might be relevant; inter-multi-anti-disciplinary and is as immersed in high culture as it is in low. It is absorbing in the sense of being compelling because its author is absorbed by what he analyses, compelled by it to write. It is not an analysis that takes place at a safe distance from its object. He is immersed in the system that he reads (and immersed in reading). This immersion is a symptom of the naturalising processes he is investigating and as such it is important that it is part of his work; it reflects the naturalised relationship of a native speaker to his or her language: ‘We all understand our language so “naturally” that it never occurs to us that it is an extremely complicated system.’31 To take a step away from language, culture or environment, to skew this naturalised perspective, ‘requires an incessant shock of observation’.32

31 Barthes, The Semiotic Challenge p.158.
32 Barthes, The Semiotic Challenge p.158.
This effort of observation, to be able to shock passive sight into seeing, is described by Georges Perec who gives an exemplary call to arms for a project which has much in common with that of Barthes.

To question the habitual. But that’s just it, we’re habituated to it … To question what seems so much a matter of course that we’ve forgotten its origins … What we need to question is bricks, concrete, glass, our table manners, our utensils, our tools, the way we spend our time, our rhythms. To question that which seems to have ceased forever to astonish us. We live, true, we breath, true; we walk, we open doors, we go down staircases, we sit at a table in order to eat, we lie down on a bed in order to sleep. How? Where? When? Why?33

The question at the heart of semiology is a subversive one. The subversion is two-fold; firstly against the apparent neutrality of the status quo and secondly against the status of what can or should be studied. Interrogating structures of meaning means that emphasis is shifted from subject matter to the form of its delivery, this throws divisions between and hierarchies of subjects open; ‘semiology is a science of forms, since it studies significations apart from their content … it knows only one operation: reading’.34 Reading, which is one of the habitual processes Perec describes, becomes both instrument and patient, the means by which the shock of observation is applied and that which it is applied to, and nothing is too trivial for this attention.

Make an inventory of your pockets, of your bag. Ask yourself about the provenance, the use, what will become of each of the objects you take out. Question your tea spoons.35

This attention to reading is impossible to separate from the fact that, as Barthes states time and again, reading is a bodily act. Perec writes; ‘What we need to look at is not the message once grasped but the actual grasping of the message at the elementary level.’36 By shifting our attention to this grasping he wants to ‘bring reading back to what it primarily is: a precise activity of the body.’37 The pleasures of reading are sensual pleasures; Barthes discusses them in terms of touch and friction, he aligns them with erotic pleasure returning repeatedly to the deliberately untranslatable affirmation of bliss, jouissance. This

36 Perec, p.175.
37 Perec, p.175.
investigation is concerned with the grasping, the message that is grasped, and the pleasures that guide both. Both Perec and Barthes use the reading of text to explore the various times, postures and pleasures of reading in general. When talking about reading space the corporeal, sensed aspects of reading seem more self-evident. If much of the pleasure in reading text is derived from its nonsensical parts (from play with ‘the useless detail’) then how might the pleasures of reading space manifest themselves? This requires Barthes’ shock of observation.

The texts that this work takes as precedent for form as well as content are Barthes’ *Empire of Signs*, Perec’s *Species of Spaces* and Daniel Spoerri (et al)’s *Anecdoted Topography of Chance*. These are texts which let their subject matter (places and times) inform their form and content. They also take pleasure in the process. I have set each chapter in and on a different space. I have organised each chapter in response to the imperatives that issued from that space. In defending a study of pleasure Barthes writes, ‘there is something light, trivial, partial about it.’ As an experience, pleasure is and is also out of time; it happens, it shudders, it passes. It is rather like sound in this respect, of which Leopold Bloom remarks, ‘it’s in the silence that you feel you hear.’ Though perhaps this is exactly not right, for sound goes and pleasure comes. The pleasures of everyday space are not overwhelming or all-consuming, they are partial, but they are also intricately bound up with the coming and going of time; they are the pleasures of distraction.

It matters little to me that these questions should be fragmentary, barely indicative of a method, at most of a project. It matters a lot to me that they should seem trivial and futile: that’s exactly what makes them essential.

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40 Perec, p.211.
1.3 Everyday

What is the everyday? This is one of the most problematic questions for this investigation. The everyday, seemingly mundane, bland and neutral has shown itself to be anything but. It is at once a theoretical category and a word that is part of the thing it apparently describes. I see the everyday everyday. More than anything it has come to be a term that is used to sell things (lip salves, sofas, eggs and bread, magazines, rail tickets, broadband, gym membership, holidays). It is gathering credence as a term and theme for the rather sinisterly complementary professions of politician and curator both of which wield it to reflect something (an image, an ideal, a value) back at the people it is used to. This use is always presumptuous and always patronising. There is something of Louis Althusser’s interpolative calling-and-naming at work here and also Sigmund Freud’s invocation of the ‘ordinary man’. Freud, in Michel de Certeau’s words,

Signs a contract with ‘the ordinary’ man and weds his discourse to the masses whose common destiny is to be duped, frustrated and forced to labour … the ordinary man renders a service to Freud’s discourse, that of figuring in it as a principle of totalization and as a principle of plausibility … the ordinary man functions here in the same way as the God of former times.  

The idea behind the invocation of the ordinary in the everyday, by politicians, curators and advertisers today, seems to take a step away from a Freudian distance, reducing the appearance of a clinical or authoritative gaze and replacing it instead with something much friendlier. Not so much ‘I see you’ or even Althusser’s ‘I call you’, but rather ‘I am you’. This insidious dead end can be read in the fact that ordinariness has come to be a fixed, desirable and attainable quality for those who want to represent, or sell things to, ‘the people’. It is a guise that can be seemingly picked up and worn and then discarded. There seems to be no sense that ‘the ordinary’ could be a changing and subjective category.

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42 Louis Althusser’s concept of the subject that is hailed and interpellated by ideology is explained through a series of everyday examples where a disembodied voice recognizes and hails a subject; ‘We all have friends who, when they knock on our door and we ask, through the door, the question “Who’s there?”, answer (since it’s obvious) “It’s me”’. He writes that in this moment both individuals are practicing the rituals of ideological recognition that govern almost every aspect of our behaviour. For Althusser ideology is only made possible by the existence of the category of the subject, which is a category we all subject ourselves to. Louis Althusser, Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses, trans. Ben Brewster, The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001) pp.1482–1508.
Every invocation of the term ‘everyday’ reflects the indeterminacy at its heart; is it a thing you have or a thing you use? Is it a time or a place? Is it an adjective or a noun? Is it so general and nonspecific as to negate itself entirely? How, for example, is everyday life so different from life? It cannot be a neutral term because it only makes sense by implicit contrasts. It might be best described as a measurement. It performs a role (or is used) like the air bubble in a spirit level; something from which to balance or measure things from; a base level, a fixed quantity. Its deployment is invariably revealing. Its use in advertising can be divided into two camps; that which says the everyday is ordinary (Tesco Everyday Value) and that which says the everyday is extraordinary, (‘Everyday is Extraordinary’, advertisement for The Mirror’s magazine supplement Notebook, photographed in May 2013).

Both uses translate to the same simple message (buy this sofa / buy this carton of orange juice) but the way in which the message is phrased interpolates the consumer into a different relationship with that base or fixed level. The ‘everyday is ordinary’ camp is most recognisable in the entry-level value brands offered by supermarkets. Their ‘everyday’ translates as cheap (which is both good and bad) and invites the customer to scrimp now and splurge later because the everyday is held up (implicitly) in comparison to a future other and better day: (‘Been missing out on your dreams lately?’ advertisement for the National Lottery, photographed January 2013). So the box of Everyday Value orange juice calls attention to its lesser qualities; it isn’t special, extra or embellished, it is fine, it is certainly not as good as the more expensive cartons but for the time being, it will do. The extraordinary advert suggests that the everyday is always and asks, in that case don’t you deserve to make it a little better? If you use it everyday then why not ‘make the everyday more comfortable’? (Habitat window slogan on Tottenham Court Road, photographed May 2013). Some adverts work on the pivot between these two positions, for example Twinning’s’ Everyday Tea which is described as being ‘satisfying, uplifting and that extra bit special’.

An interrogation of the term would be the subject for an entire book and indeed John Storey has just written an account of the term’s use within academic contexts. I give these examples from the high street and supermarket to highlight a strain of unease that runs throughout this work and to draw attention to the fact that it is not a closed or fixed term. What is crucial to any deployment of it, and what must be included in any theoretical engagement with it, is that it is above all symptomatic of an unresolved and anxious

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43 ‘To use a facile spatial image, we still have to place everyday life at the centre of everything. Every project begins from it and every realization returns to it to acquire its real significance. Everyday life is the measure of all things: of the fulfillment or rather the nonfulfillment of human relations.’ Guy Debord, Perspectives for Conscious Alterations in Everyday Life 1961 in The Everyday Life Reader ed. Ben Highmore (London: Routledge, 2002) pp.237-244.

44 Tesco Everyday Value, Sainsbury’s Basics, Morrisons Everyday Savers, Asda Smart Price.

45 John Storey, From Popular Culture to Everyday Life (Oxon: Routledge, 2014)
relationship with the present. The term everyday always preempts and presumes certain understandings of time. Wherever it is deployed the everyday is saying something about time and its relative value.

This research project is concerned with and given hope by Michel de Certeau’s understanding of the everyday as outlined and investigated in *The Practice of Everyday Life* and *The Practice of Everyday Life Volume 2: Living & Cooking*. For Certeau ‘the everyday’ is not a space, a time, or an object. It is a surface that surfaces; it is the way we handle time. The practice of everyday life is the means by which one lives a life that is divided into days and days that are divided into hours. Certeau is most concerned with the meeting of internal and external structures of time and space; the way men and women exist in externally set limits and boundaries. These can be the limits of a life, a day, a shift at work, or boundaries that separate home from street, kitchen from hallway or neighbourhood from neighbourhood. An example of the kind of practice he is interested in is that of *la perruque* or ‘the wig’. This is the name given to the quietly subversive practice of working for yourself (for your own ends) during working hours; ‘the worker’s own work disguised as work for his employer.’

Another example offered is the means by which pedestrians carve their own routes and itineraries through the space of the city, which Pierre Mayol describes as poeticizing the city: ‘The city, in the strongest sense, is “poeticized” by the subject: the subject has refabricated it for his or her own use by undoing the constraints of the urban apparatus and, as a consumer of space, imposes his or her own law on the external order of the city.’ The subject who poeticizes the city is exemplified for Marc Augé by the veteran commuter on the metro; ‘This traveller knows whether to rest or hurry … subway riders basically handle nothing but time and space, and are skilled in using the one to measure the other.’ An investigation into the practice of everyday life is for Certeau an investigation into the way people manoeuvre through the time and space they share with other people. And he is always looking for the confrontation or encounter between an imposed and an invented condition, for the possibility of playing, subverting and resisting the one with the other. His name for these practices is ‘tactics’.

Both the wig and the walk have recognisably tactical qualities but the practice of everyday life is also to be read in activities which might not appear resistant, poetic or political. Using a hand held whisk to beat the flour, eggs, butter and sugar for a cake. Smiling at your neighbour in the stairwell (not smiling at your neighbour in the stairwell).

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These things too are part of the practice of everyday life. And this is where it is useful to come back to Perec’s incitement that we question our tea spoons and to an understanding of reading as decisive. The things that do not appear political, the things that do not appear, are still part of a series of readings and decisions. Their smallness and slightness does not necessarily speak to the thought with which they are performed or the impact with which they are felt.

What speaks to us, seemingly, is always the big event, the untoward, the extraordinary … In our haste to measure the historic, significant and revelatory, let’s not leave aside the essential: the truly intolerable, the truly inadmissible.49

The everyday is beneath our attention. It is what we overlook. On one view, that is as it should be; the everyday is a place of perdition. Why linger on what is merely daily? Our duty is to higher things: we are right to shun the ordinary. Yet, by a different token, we overlook the everyday at our peril. It is the source of our truth; the daily world is our homeland: we alienate ourselves in the extraordinary, not in the ordinary.50

Like the naturalised processes discussed by Barthes, the everyday is that which is taken for granted. It is also that which is seen to be unimportant. Like Barthes, Certeau’s intention was to change the way we think about the things that we do, through a small but meaningful subversion to tip the balance towards the ‘taking’ involved in taking something for granted; ‘this goal will be achieved if everyday practices, “ways of operating” or doing things, no longer appear as merely the obscure background of social activity.’51

The defining feature of the everyday for Certeau is its transience. Whether figured in the language of nomads or renters, the pathos and the potential of the tactics of the everyday is centered on an awareness (and celebration) of its infidelity, on the fact that it does not hold still. Everyday tactics do not capitalise. Because of this he finds an ‘inevitable’ starting point in the operation by which contemporary culture is consumed and the operation that is its focus, that of reading. Seeking above all to disturb any understanding of consumption and consumers as passive he aligns consumption with a reading that is anything but: ‘the activity of reading has … all the characteristics of a silent production.’52

We can see concurrence with Barthes who wrote, ‘the Text requires that one try to abolish

49 Perec, p.209.
51 Certeau, Practice Vol. 1. p.xi
52 Certeau, Practice Vol. 1. p.xxi.
(or at the very least to diminish) the distance between writing and reading. Both writers place the emphasis on and find the agency in a reading which is creative and productive but also limited to the duration of its happening. Luce Giard describes Certeau’s method as an analysis that ‘comes and goes, alternately captivated, playful, protesting, fugitive – made in the image of the mobile reality that it aims at grasping.’ What cannot be understated is that the object being studied is a mobile reality. The tactile language – ‘grasping’ (identical to the word used by Perec to differentiate between the meaning in words and the getting of meaning through words) conveys that the effort of this work is one of the body and that it is often to be frustrated. It involves effort. The admission of ineluctability on the part of those who study everyday life is its most radical (and consequently destabilising) aspect because it states that there can be no such thing as a static reality or for that matter a static theory.

If one of the ideas challenged by Certeau’s reading of the everyday is that of stillness or fixity then another is that of reality as defined by a verifiable truth. Certeau pays particular attention to way in which narrative shapes space, behaviour and belief. He sees ours as a recited society in which the endless citation and recitation of news stories has replaced ancient narratives of gods and states. This thesis follows fictions that inform experience, and the very real presence Certeau identifies in everyday life, of fictional characters, stories and spaces. Luce Giard reflects upon the presence of legend and narrative in Certeau’s work:

I regretted not being able to include in this index the gallery of legendary or fictional characters, heroes of Greek myths or from the ‘case studies’ of Freud, that modern creator of myths. This close-knit troop traverses volume 1. of L’invention du quotidien just like the departed philosophers and poets in the cantos of Dante, sometimes as potential actors, sometimes as metaphoric carriers of meaning.

Everyday life is thick with news, with messages, with images and projections. This work works at precisely the point of friction between them. It is a zone where the jarring of impressions and the mingling of senses shows, if we attend to it, just how frayed the boundary lines are between categories like fact and fiction, private and public, past and present.

54 Giard, Practice Vol. 2. p.xxiv.
55 ‘What we need to look at is not the message once grasped but the actual grasping of the message at the elementary level.’ Perec, p.175.
56 Giard, p.xxxi-ii.
I say I am given hope by Certeau’s approach because, as Giard writes, ‘he limited himself to proposing some ways of thinking about everyday practices of consumers, supposing from the start that they are of a tactical nature.’ This supposition is rare in the field of critical thought. His work therefore begins from a place of optimism as well as from a place which respects its subject. By using the word optimism I do not mean to disavow the very great realism with which he writes. Giard and Highmore have both drawn attention to the constant presence in his work of death and indeed the sounding note of his interventions is often one of sorrow. Acute sensitivity to structures which are enforced and experiences of subjugation under authority does not dull his belief in the practices he finds everywhere rubbing up against them.

In the present conjuncture which is marked by a contradiction between the collective mode of administration and an individual mode of reappropriation, this question is no less important . . . I would like to follow out a few of these multiform, resistant, tricky and stubborn procedures that elude discipline without being outside the field in which it is exercised, and which should lead us to a theory of everyday practice, of lived spaces, of the disquieting familiarity of the city.

Certeau draws his sense of the tactical together with a Kantian reading of tact; ‘this tact ties together (moral) freedom (esthetic) creation and a (practical) act.’ He is describing precisely the radical and subversive tactfulness that Barthes finds in the playful reading made by the Marquis de Sade. Even from prison, even in a state of imprisonment, both insist, this tactical reading can (and does) take place.

I have said that I am using the term ‘everyday’ less to describe the spaces in question (some of them are not everyday at all) and more to describe the way in which they are used. If for Certeau the defining feature of the everyday is its mobility then a defining feature of the strayed home is that it is not used possessively. I am just as interested in the use of the launderette by someone without a washing machine who uses it habitually to do her washing as I am by the person whose machine has broken down and who comes in just the once. Both come and go; both move with their belongings from one space and then leave that space, both take up temporary residence (a residence which can barely be called a

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57 Giard, p.xxiii.
58 ’A praise of night and shadow (ordinary intelligence, ephemeral creation, opportunity and circumstance), this philosophical journey through “common life” is blind neither to political realities … nor to the weight of temporality everywhere reaffirmed.’ Giard, p.xxxii.
59 There is a productive melancholy in his writing … the mood of an everyday saturated by ghosts of toil and tenacity’, Ben Highmore, ‘Feeling Our Way: Mood and Cultural Studies’, Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies 10 (September 2013), p.11.
60 Certeau, Practice Vol. 1. p.96.
residence) and then return to where they came from. Similarly the sleeper train, which is clearly an extraordinary space, is one that is occupied and then abandoned. The greasy spoon fills and empties; the fire escape is only ever moved through. The postcard is characterised by its brevity. If ‘the daily world is our homeland’ then this is a reading of its nomadic outposts.  

\footnote{Certeau, \textit{Practice Vol. 1.} pp.22-23.}
1.4 Space

To live is to pass from one space to another,
while doing your very best not to bump into yourself.\textsuperscript{62}

Space is defined in the \textit{Shorter Oxford English Dictionary} first with reference to time, as the lapse or extent of time between two points and secondly with reference to area, as an area sufficient for some purpose. Space is described as something there can be a quantity of in which or during which something might happen. It is thus something between two fixed coordinates, defined by what it surrounds and by what it is enclosed by, by what happens in it and, as a sufficiency, by what it allows to happen. Space is the very opposite of a surface but it is that which surfaces depend upon (space presses up against every surface). The sense that space is simultaneously a container and a quality which can be contained exemplifies our relationship with it. The way in which both the spatial and the temporal are spoken of points to their paradoxical immateriality; neither can be held but both are felt intensely.

Space is absence, void, gap and air. At some specific coordinate space becomes \textit{outer space} and conditions for existence in it begin to change. This investigation is concerned primarily with space as area, with the physical structures built and inhabited by bodies. This space has already been organised, divided up and divvied out by the time we get to it. The ‘external structures’ Certeau is interested to examine find their most ubiquitous form in the structures of space and time. We live our lives in a series of spaces in which we are told how to behave; we live in organised and organising space. This space is always being reorganised by new forms of architecture, by government, by technology, by belief and by practice. This investigation suggests a new category of space, that of the strayed home, and asks questions about the way that category has been represented and is experienced.

The ‘way in which things are spoken about’ is central to this investigation because it does not set experience of a space in oppositional counterpoint to description or depiction of it. Barthes writes, ‘never separate a behaviour for the account the subject gives of it, for the word penetrates the act throughout.’\textsuperscript{63} This plastic relationship between account and actuality is interrogated in depth by Gaston Bachelard in \textit{The Poetics of Space}. Bachelard uses images of intimate space in poetry to write a phenomenological account of the poetic imagination. His attention to the poetic image is not understood as attention to the unreal.

\textsuperscript{62} Perec, p.6.
\textsuperscript{63} Barthes, \textit{The Neutral} p.29.
The problem for me … is not to examine men but images … Such images as these must be taken at least in their existence as a reality of expression … It would be quite superfluous for such images to be true. They exist.\(^{64}\)

This sense of an image made by words being a reality of expression, existing without reference to a verifiable truth, reiterates the simultaneity of experience found in ideas of concrete allegory. Thus the lines he cites by Jean Wahl which, if read literally make for a grotesque and surreal play of space, scale and substance, make sense to us as poetry working out, ‘the two fold imaginary geometrical and physical problem of extroversion and introversion’:

The frothing of the hedges
I keep deep inside me.\(^{65}\)

Bachelard examines the expression of intimate space in poetry. He writes that space is inseparable from memory and that the memories that can be spatialised are the ones that will be remembered. He writes that the spatial memories of our childhood homes are inscribed within us, that, ‘we are the diagram of the functions of inhabiting that particular house.’\(^{66}\) His investigation is into the poetic images which reignite memories of childhood spaces; these are the cellar, the garret, the wardrobe, the nest and the shell. They are essentially spatial images of safety, solitude and secret. Carried inside us, in memories that do not seem to be formed of words but rather gestures and movements that recall the body in contact with latches and doors, switches and pulls; parts of buildings that are used without thought but that in their repetition, become engrained and cherished. These habitual movements and memories of interaction with space create a blueprint for future spaces. And if this is the case then why not say that we are the diagrams of the functions of inhabiting a particular city, with a particular skyline, or that in our movements through a city we impress our diagrams on the spaces we move through? Bachelard writes,

These investigations would deserve to be called topophilia. They seek to determine the human value of the sorts of space that may be grasped, that may be defended against adverse forces, the space we love.\(^{67}\)

Strayed homes can also be understood as the transplanting of intimate practices and gestures. Moving house is a dramatic version of this transplant, a movement that Bachelard

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\(^{65}\) Bachelard and Jean Wahl, The Poetics of Space p.12.

\(^{66}\) Bachelard, p.14.

\(^{67}\) Bachelard, p.xxxv
would understand as picking up all the spaces you had ever dreamt in and taking them with you; 'The places in which we have experienced daydreaming reconstitute themselves in a new daydream.'

This investigation is concerned with the reality of expression and the poetry of everyday images and phrases. An example of the spacing of time in commonplace speech is the expression that says an event has taken place. If something has happened it is said to have taken place on a certain date, if something is going to happen, it will take place. The taking of this place-taking is forceful and the sense is of a playgroundesque grabbing. If someone takes your place they have stolen space that belonged to you; they’ve inserted themselves between you and the thing you wanted. It is not a neutral phrase. It is probably heard in the news report or read in the history book where it is meant to be neutral because it is associated with fact. It is used when something that has happened is being articulated; it is part of the recitation of a certain story or narrative, one that you are meant to pay attention to. If things that happen ‘take place’ then what of the things that happen but are never spoken of? What about the activities that do not capitalise and that are not recited? Bachelard hints that these uneventful events reside in the memory of the body. The instances of recollection which give words to wordless states are found for him in the images made by poetic imagination. He suggests that these images give form to the very forming of perception.

In a perfectly positive way the psychologist determines the different thresholds at which the various sense organs go into action. These thresholds may differ with different persons but there is no contesting their reality … I should like to see if the imagination does not attract us to an area beyond these thresholds; if a poet who is hyper-alert to the innerworld, by making form and colour speak, doesn’t hear in a region beyond perception.

Ways of talking about space are always approximations. Certeau identifies two types of spatial narrative or depiction; that of the tour and that of the map. He bases these types on a research project that asked a group of New Yorkers to describe their apartments. The responses could be divided into two types, those who gave a tour-like description (‘you go into the hall and in front of you is a door, you walk forward into the kitchen’) and those who gave a map-like account of the space (‘there is a hall and a bathroom and a kitchen’). Certeau writes that the tour organises movements (you enter, you go across, you turn right) and thus presents a space defined by practices. The map by contrast organises sight and presents a tableau of information (‘there is’, ‘there are’). The overwhelming predominance in the

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68 Bachelard, p.6.
69 Bachelard, p.174.
study he discusses was towards the tour-like description but Certeau is interested: ‘in the relationship between the indicators of tours and maps where they exist in a single description … how are acting and seeing coordinated in this realm of ordinary language in which the former is so obviously dominant.’ The relationship he identifies is between an itinerary and a map, between a discursive series of operations and the projection on a plane of totalizing observation. He traces how itinerary has been eroded from modern maps; ‘the map has slowly disengaged itself from the itineraries that were the condition of its possibility.’ If the modern map is devoid of itinerary then how might this have affected our relationship with the space it plots?

These spatial speech patterns reflect the difference made between spatiofugal and spatiopetal apprehensions of space by Steven Connor in his essay ‘Building Breathing Space.’ Connor describes spatiofugal space as that which you know from the outside-in, this is the space of a totalizing view; Google maps, architectural plans, but also the spaces apprehended through an Atlas or a globe. Spatiopetal space is that which you know from the inside-out. He recalls the animal’s burrow, a space that is made by the repeated movement of a body in that space, carved, dug, wriggled and rubbed. We can also think of a home or a neighbourhood being made in this way, through the repeated movement of bodies in space. Pierre Mayol describes the neighbourhood in just these terms:

The neighbourhood is a dynamic notion requiring a progressive apprenticeship that grows with the repetition of the dweller’s body’s engagement in public space until it exercises a sort of appropriation of this space.

Of course, like the speakers who tell of their apartments, our experience of certain spaces can be at once spatiopetal and spatiofugal. Perec says that to live is to move from space to space whilst trying not to bump into yourself. Often the collision between spatiofugal and spatiopetal understandings of the same space can feel just like this. From time to time everyone has the experience of ‘bumping into’ a space that is akin to a collision with oneself; this might be a volitional visit to an old school or the house you grew up in or the chance encounter with a once-familiar or once-foreign space. City-dwellers will be familiar with the experience of space reconstituting itself through time and the strange confrontation that is

70 Certeau, Practice Vol.1. pp.119-121.
71 Of the medieval maps: ‘Each of these maps is a memorandum prescribing actions. The tour to be made is predominant in them.’ Certeau, Practice Vol.1. p.120. Barthes shows modern versions of these itinerary maps made for him by locals in Tokyo in Empire of Signs, trans. Richard Howard (London: Jonathan Cape, 1983), pp.34-37. If we draw maps we tend to make them like these ones.
effected by the realisation that somewhere once visited as odd and alien (a pub at night reached via a taxi and an errant bus route) is now part of your regular surroundings. These instances are collisions between spatiopetal and spatiofugal understandings of the same space.

The formatting of Google maps works a cack-handed attempt at collating spatiopetal and spatiofugal apprehensions of space with its ‘directions’ function. This is the function that provides an aerial and routed journey in small isolated sections which constitute a single ‘action’. The jarring discord between the objective view and the action reveal that the action has been formed with no ground-based information; this is still a projection. The tension between concrete and abstract knowledge of space has not been halted by the spread of new mapping technologies. Applying Barthes’ sense of the word penetrating the act when reading not narratives but new configurations of space like this is to see that experiences of space are above all compounds of these two types of perception. Bachelard finds the poetic image as compelling as he does precisely because, when it is successful, it makes a leap between, if not strictly spatiopetal and spatiofugal expressions of space then at least between given and remembered expression; so the elicitation by an externally expressed spatial image of an internal one. It is pleasing to imagine what form a mapping application that was informed by poetic imaginations of space might take.

The poetic spatial image is a map that leads to a tour. It draws a reader in two directions, out towards the image and in towards a memory; it is the telling of a tour or map that opens up a memory of space for the person who reads (or listens).

All we communicate to others is an orientation towards what is secret without ever being able to tell the secret objectively. What would be the use for instance, in giving the plan of the little room, that was really my room, in describing the little room at the end of the garret, in saying that from the window, across the indentation of the roofs, one could see the hill. I alone … can open the deep cupboard that still retains … the odor of raisins drying on a wicker tray. The odor of raisins!\textsuperscript{74}

The tangible leap between objectivity and subjectivity is what Certeau has identified as lost in the evolution of the modern map. The poetic image by contrast permits an oscillation between the perceived and the felt. Bachelard understands this as orientation towards a secret, towards something that can never be communicated objectively. It is the admission of the possibility of failure of communication that the totalizing map (and viewpoint) contradicts. The map deals in information, presented as truth it is often the source against

\textsuperscript{74} Bachelard, p.13.
which reality (as opposed to its representation) is checked. The sur-real poetic image is a reality; if it is successful, ‘the poetic act has no past.’ It exists and alters, it recalls and transforms, it is. Central to this success is finding something that has been felt internally expressed by something exterior. A successful poetic image therefore is one which dissolves space, working across surfaces and between interior and exterior perception. Bachelard writes, ‘At the level of the poetic image, the duality of subject and object is iridescent, shimmering, unceasingly active in its inversions.’

The oscillation between subjective and objective experience, or between external and internal perception, is one that Bachelard’s images open up and the totalizing map shuts down. Everyday life can be understood as a shuttling between or constant negotiation with these alternating projections and experiences of space (and time). Certeau has written about the relationship between spatial practices and the constructed order which he envisages as tactical, playful and disruptive. The ‘sieve order’ is worried, worked at and evaded by the delinquencies of its subjects. These delinquencies always ‘begin with the inscription of the body in the order’s text.’ The body will always fail to be anything other than subjective. Ways of mapping space often try to remove or trouble this subjectivity. As I look back through my notes towards this thesis I continually find a small triangle drawn next to a zigzag. These are to remind me of the trajectories (viewed from an imaginary bird’s eye) of gay men moving through postwar London and the girl whose mapped spatial existence was mocked so mercilessly by Guy Debord. Richard Hornsey traces the zigzag progress of queer men through late-night and lunch hour London of the 1940s and 50s. With all its connotations of deviation and bent perversion from the straight and narrow the zigzag is at once the shape made by men walking to and from side-street cafés and a means of reiterating the order they were supposed to be disturbing. It is an extremely self-conscious way of travelling, made necessary because the walker imagines he is (or actually is) being watched. It is the shape made by the subject who imagines himself from an external viewpoint. The triangle is the shape carved out in a spatiopetal sense and then represented and read spatiofugally as though it could account for the life of the person whose journeys it was formed by.

In his study Paris et l’agglomération parisienne (Bibliothèque de Sociologie Contemporaine, P.U.F, 1952) Chombart de Lauwe … in order to illustrate the

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75 Bachelard, p.xv.
76 Bachelard, p.xix.
78 Certeau, Practice Vol.1. p.130.
narrowness of the real Paris in which each individual lives … within a geographical area whose radius is extremely small … diagrams all the movements made in the space of one year by a student living in the 16th Arrondissement. Her itinerary forms a small triangle with no significant deviations, the three apexes of which are the School of Political Sciences, her residence and that of her piano teacher.  

Debord’s reading is one of ‘outrage that anyone’s life can be so pathetically limited.’ He pays no heed to the unseen parts of this image. Certeau writes,

The ordinary practitioners of the city live ‘down below’, below the thresholds at which visibility begins … these practitioners make use of space that cannot be seen … it is as though the practices organising a bustling city were characterised by their blindness.

Certeau mistrusts the view offered from the distant vantage point, locating use and practice of space within the body that cannot see without also feeling its way. Both the zigzag and the triangle can only be perceived as such from what was at the time an imaginary vantage point. Both point to the potential madness, reduction and cold voyeurism of objective renderings of spatial stories. But also to the impossibility of communicating these stories at all. How might the delinquent spatial practices of reading or daydreaming (characterised and protected for Bachelard by the space of the home) be mapped or told? Both are activities that do not take place, that seem instead to trouble the space they inhabit, relinquishing it, avoiding it; ‘reading frees itself from the soil that determines it … emancipated from places, the reading body is freer in its movements … if I read and I daydream, my reading is thus an impertinent absence.’ The triangle and zigzag do not take into account the decisive reading of space that must be part of any journey through it. This project is concerned with spaces that encourage or contain what might be characterised as impertinencies and invisibilities, the tangible, immediate sensation of being in them, and the images and narratives that have shaped them.

81 Debord, ibid.
82 Certeau, Practice Vol. 1 p.93.
Chapter Two. *Laundrette*
2.1 Introduction

This chapter begins with an account of laundering practices in Britain before the introduction of the laundrette in 1949. Working from Mass Observation directives it looks at the apparently irrational feelings attached to these practices. Thinking with Mary Douglas’s work on dirt and pollution it outlines that doing the laundry is part of a system of ordering. This is an ordering of time as well as space, of matter and the immaterial. Where the laundry takes place and the people who do it are sources of consequential anxiety. The three imperatives issued by the space of the laundrette today are Gossip, Play and Wait. All three express anxiety about the order the laundry is meant to realign. Section two of this chapter, Gossip, focuses on the ideas of laziness and contamination that have attached themselves to the laundrette and the people who use it. On the one hand the laundrette is a place to waste time, on the other it is a site of encounter. Both these possibilities give rise to anxieties and fantasies that are played out in representations of the spaces. Section three, Play, tries to dissect the pleasure of the space, looking intently at the effect of the strayed edges of the home and body. This section introduces the idea of the spatial gape which will be seen to be present in every strayed home examined. Section four, Wait, thinks about the space in terms of the type of time spent there. Are laundrettes anything other than waiting rooms? They are certainly spaces of commutation. Thinking about function excessive to function this section suggests the positive possibility of delinquency and dawdling contained in the laundrette.

An examination of laundry practices cannot get very far without coming up against the idiom, ‘washing your dirty linen in public.’¹ The accepted meaning behind this phrase is that someone who washes their dirty linen in public is discussing or doing, or allowing others to discuss or do, things in public that should be kept private. The idiom hints at the disruption that might be part of a strayed home and gives rise to the thought that rather than the home being the structure that keeps the outside world out, it is the structure that keeps private and secret parts in. The potency of these secret parts is such that they alter and alarm the space they are in. Whenever the phrase is uttered it is in the form of a chastisement or warning. Don’t wash your dirty linen in public is what it is telling us. The current domestic laundering climate in Britain is largely one of privately owned washing machines with laundry services and laundrettes only being used in special or unusual circumstances. This indoor and individual approach to clothes washing is a relatively modern development. Before Nikola Tesla’s coil arrived to reduce the size of electric motors, meaning machines small enough to fit in houses started to be built, washing was done at home manually or sent out to commercial laundries. Before the washing machine clothes

¹ A common equivalent is ‘airing your dirty linen in public’.

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were washed by being boiled in a vat, pushed through a mangle, and then hung out to dry. Launderettes arrived to showcase the new, house-sized machines in 1949. They were at their peak in the 1980s when there were over 12,500 in the country. In 2010 the number had fallen to just over 3000.

![Figure 1. Makeshift washing line.](image)

The laundering of clothes marks personal and social, physical and metaphysical, spatial and temporal boundaries. It is a practice with a complicated spatial history. Carine Muelders and Rudi Learmans write that, unlike most other domestic processes, laundering has moved from the outside, in. As evidence for this they cite the move into the space of the home from shared water sources in rural areas.\(^2\) In actual fact the practice has always enveloped and spread between domestic and communal spaces, overlapping, out-spilling and mingling the one with the other. Even during the age of the ‘great wash’ in which whole communities would come together regularly to wash clothes and linen as a festival event there were still small washes which took place at home and informally. The great wash itself was split into two stages and spaces: first came the private sorting, soaking and boiling of a household’s linen then, ‘with their piles of soaked and boiled laundry … the women of the village [would gather] around their communal washing place.’\(^3\) In the cities of Europe, after 1850, outdoor washing places (laundry barges and river beds) were gradually replaced with public washhouses. The space in which heavy-duty laundry took place remained public and shared though there were items that tended to be washed in private. The distinction made between what was washed at home and what was washed in public was a question of


\(^{3}\) Learmans and Meulders, p.122.
practicality as much as it was about anxiety about the revelation of domestic secrets.4 Smaller items could be washed and dried at home, larger ones simply could not.

The practice of laundering has historically taken place at physical boundaries and created metaphysical ones. The physical boundaries derive from the absolute necessity of a water supply; the metaphysical boundaries from ancient ideas about dirt and stains and the rituals and practices which have developed from them. In her research into primitive societies, Mary Douglas has found that ‘reflection on dirt involves reflection on the relation of order to disorder, being to non-being, form to formlessness, life to death.’5 The practice of washing (in which Douglas includes everything from laundry to purification rituals) marks a spiritual reordering as well as a physical one. Muelders and Learmans write that traditionally the great wash coincided with the other major spring and autumn events and thus ‘marked a transitional period, a passage in nature that deeply influence[d] the entire rural economy.’6 There was a ‘ritualised synchrony between the natural and religious calendar’ which ‘lent the great wash a supratemporal meaning.’7 Douglas puts it another way; ‘with the linen, the year gets its ritual washing at birth and death.’8 So the year, or time itself, was seen as being replenished and renewed at the same time as the clothes and linen. The ‘supratemporal meaning’ identified by Learmans and Meulders is that which goes beyond the removal of stains, it lies in the sense of creative reordering identified by Douglas in all acts of washing or cleaning. She writes, ‘dirt offender against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement but a positive effort to organise the environment.’9

Douglas urges her readers to look at bodily purification rituals as being symbolic of an underlying fear of social pollution, equivocating the margins of the body with the margins, boundaries and limits of the social group, territory or race.10 This is reiterated by Muelders and Learmans who align the rural washerwomen’s appreciation of the disappearance of sins ‘through active penance’ with the removal of stains through ‘heavy duty.’11 In both instances the concerted effort of the individual to clean or launder can be extended to symbolise more general ideas about the order and safety of the group that

4 Wear and tear, stains, unfashionable items.
6 Learmans and Meulders, ibid.
7 Learmans and Meulders, ibid.
9 Douglas, Purity and Danger, p.2.
10 ‘Just as it is true that everything symbolises the body, so it is equally true (and all the more so for that reason) that the body symbolises everything else. Out of this symbolism, which in fold upon fold of interior meaning leads back to the experience of self within its body, the sociologist is justified in trying to work in the other direction to draw out some layers of insight about the self’s experience in society.’ Douglas, p.123.
11 Learmans and Meulders, p.122.
individual belongs to (whether that order is threatened by social or spiritual pollution). The direct confluence between washing, personal penance and society's order can be seen in Edith Wharton’s *House of Mirth* which describes the annual ‘spring clean’ that took place in the wealthy homes of New York society in the late 1890s.

The first two weeks after her return represented to Mrs. Peniston the domestic equivalent of a religious retreat. She ‘went through’ the linen and blankets in the precise spirit of a penitent exploring the inner folds of conscience; she sought for moths as the stricken soul seeks for lurking infirmities. The topmost shelf of every closet was made to yield up its secret, cellar and coal-bin were probed to their darkest depths and, as a final stage in the lustral rites, the entire house was swathed in penitential white and deluged with expiatory soapsuds.\(^\text{12}\)

The analogous relationship between Mrs. Peniston and her house is Bachelardian, the folds of linen are her skin; their secrets are her own. The effects of the annual cleaning reach in two directions simultaneously. From the starting coordinate of surfaces (linen and blankets; cellar, closet and coal-bin) the implications are drawn inwards, towards the secrets of the subconscious, and outwards towards the waiting and watching world outside. The condition of the surfaces is simultaneously indicative of the intimate singular conscience and society at large. The ruthless purge of nooks and crannies is clearly about matters beyond hygiene, the implications of meticulous order having significance of a more spiritual manner. The words used to describe the process are religious rather than scientific; the house must be purged in order to be saved.

Whether the ‘supratemporal’ value of the great wash was articulated as magical or religious the ritual carried with it a potency that signaled regeneration. Part of this potency stems from the a-temporal properties of cleaning. Washing removes, erases and eradicates and in one sense it reverses. Ritual is always both repetitive and generative, looking forward even as it repeats the past. Washing your clothes is the ultimate regenerative ritual in the manner of the seasons. Douglas defines the generative repeat as ‘how human physiology matches nature’s pendulum, swinging between contiguity and discontiguity.’\(^\text{13}\) We can think of our laundry as the broken down pieces of our past, the evidence of our misdemeanours. Its assembly marks a pause between then and now. Its transformation (from dirty to clean, from worn to unworn\(^\text{14}\)) looks forward as it erases the past. It is a practice which turns then (past


\(^{13}\) Douglas, p.3.

\(^{14}\) Newly washed clothes are not, of course, actually unworn, but common parlance speaks them as being so. ‘Can I borrow this skirt?’ ‘Yes, but I’ve worn it’ (she doesn’t mean she has worn it before, she means she has worn it and not washed it; it is dirty.)
tense) into then (future tense). It is the broken step of everyday activity, a mundane but spectacular occurrence forming a boundary that divides past from present.15

This timely and liminal practice, taking place between what has been done and what will be done, is the content and context for the Washers at the Ford episode of James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*. Joyce described the episode as ‘a chattering dialogue across the river by two washerwomen who as night falls become a tree and a stone.’16 The chattering takes its cue from (among other things) the bits and pieces the women wash with their hands in the water of the Liffey. Reading on the surfaces and in the shapes of the garments a language that would be illegible to others they decipher and decode the past actions of their owners. It is a performance of specious speculation that might strike the reader as having more to do with fortune telling than fact but the women know what they are looking at.

Look at the shirt of him! Look at the dirt of it! … How many goes is it I washed it? I know by heart the places he likes to saale, dudirty devil!17

I can tell from here by their eau de Colo and the scent of her oder they’re Mrs. Magrath’s. And you ought to have aird them. They’ve moist come off her. Creases in silk they are, not crampton lawn. Baptiste me, father, for she has sinned!18

Kinsella’s Lilith! Now who has been tearing the leg of her drawers on her?19

Stains, smells and tears are interpreted as the material traces of deviance. They are discovered and ‘aired’ by the women who will eradicate them. The ford of the river becomes outdoor confessional and courtroom.

Joyce’s washerwomen are linked to a tradition of gossiping women who see and speak about what they see. Key to the mythic figures alluded to in the *Wake* is that they see the future as well as the past. They are speakers by proclivity and speakers of prophecy. George Cinclair Gibson writes that these figures were central to Druid rites of divination and were known for their riverside scrying.

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15 This sense of breaking step recalls Mark Augé’s description of the non-place: ‘It was in these crowded places where thousands of individual itineraries converged for a moment, unaware of one another, that there survived something of the uncertain charm of the water lands, the yards and building sites, the station platforms and waiting rooms where travellers break step.’ *Non Places: An Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London: Verso, 2006) p.3.
18 Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* p.204.
19 Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* p.205.
The *Wakean* banshees, as humourous and ridiculous as they are, nonetheless reenact the mythic and ritualistic patterns first performed by their pagan prototypes long ago … Priestesses, acting as the Washers of the Ford and trained in the arts of seership and divination, were called upon to give prophesy before impending and important events.20

Like Roman Catholic confession, the goal of the clothes-wash is to enable the person whose clothes are washed to move forward and start again (with a clean slate). It is a practice that practices the movement between the past and the future, which looks back in order to move forward; a sort of spiritual accounting. Gibson’s reference to scrying draws the actions of seeing and divining together. Through the process of putting out all the clothes they wash, the women are able to read them and divine something about what might be written on them next. The word scry also stands for sieve which gives a material analogue to this action of filtering out, separating and straining through.21 As they wring and scrape the garments in the water they are also sieving time, separating the present from the past and predicting the future.

The practice of laundry marks spatial, spiritual and temporal boundaries. As such it provokes anxieties that announce themselves in a variety of ways. Mary Douglas writes,

> It is my belief that people really do think of their own social environment as consisting of other people joined or separated by lines which must be respected. Some of the lines are protected by firm physical sanctions … But wherever the lines are precarious we find pollution ideas come to their support.22

Fear, prevention or eradication of pollution for Douglas is not fear, prevention or eradication of dirt or the dirty. She argues that dirt is not inherently ‘bad’ but rather that it is part of a system of classifications which allows social groups to impress order upon disorder through a set of practiced oppositions.

If we can abstract pathogenicity and hygiene from our notion of dirt we are left with the old definition of dirt as matter out of place … it implies two conditions: a set of

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20 Gibson, p.147.

21 This sieving recalls the Hindu festival of Karva Chauth where women, having fasted since sunrise, look at the moon through a sieve or at its reflection in water before ending their fast. Significant for the materialisation of a line or boundary between the present and the future.

22 Douglas, p.140.
ordered relations and a contravention of that order. Dirt then is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is a system.  

The regular washing of clothes is part of the regular upkeep of a system. It is also, significantly, a practice that takes place where, in Douglas’s words, the lines that connect people to their social environment are precarious. Representations of public or shared acts of laundering like those of Wharton and Joyce make clear anxieties about this precariousness.

From Nausicaa to Dot Cotton, laundering has always taken place outside as well as inside the house. Laundry that is outsourced (which it has been in some way or another since laundering began) is a practice that troubles the line that divides home from not-home, inside from outside, and secret from exposed. It therefore undermines the practiced oppositions which Douglas writes about. Comic extrapolations of this worrying flaw in the structure of domestic or institutional space take form in the figure of the washerwoman and proliferate in representations of spaces where the policing of edges is particularly important such as prisons, hospitals, schools and hotels. The laundress can cross the divide between inside and outside without attracting unwanted attention, she (or he) is a free agent, the bag of washing acting as password and disguise. In The Wind in the Willows it is the washerwoman who allows Toad to escape from prison, a plan hatched by the girl who brings him food every day.

One morning the girl was very thoughtful, and answered at random, and did not seem to Toad to be paying proper attention to his witty sayings and sparkling comments.

“‘Toad,’ she said presently, ‘just listen, please. I have an aunt who is a washerwoman.’

“‘There, there,’ said Toad, graciously and affably, ‘never mind; think no more about it. I have several aunts who OUGHT to be washerwomen.’”

This comic denigration, made all the more amusing because Toad himself will soon be a washerwoman (the similarity in their figures once he has put on the dress of said aunt allowing him to leave the prison in her place), is a common theme in cultural references to this earthy but liminal figure. The laundress seems to retain a certain witchiness in the eyes of those who use her services, an ambiguous magic which is punctured with the pleasurable barb of the comic.

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23 Douglas, p.36.
At Haileybury, there were a number of ladies in their own place at school who did all the washing for everybody. We used to put the clothes in bags and left them at the end of our beds to be collected, and it came back the same way. The ladies who did all this were called Hags and the bags Hag Bags.25

In the spoof film *Thoroughly Modern Millie* the squeak of the laundry basket is symbolic of an imminent abduction from the boarding house where the heroine lives. The basket and the laundry men who wheel it are being used to remove the limp, chloroformed bodies of girls ready to be shipped to China as white slaves. This incarnation of the fearful (and funny) figure of the washerwoman is revealing about the boundaries that were alarming at the time of the film’s production.26 Boundaries of a more intimate and domestic nature are at stake in the escape made by Falstaff in Shakespeare’s *Merry Wives of Windsor*.

MRS PAGE: For shame … your husband’s here at hand, bethink you of some conveyance, in the house you cannot hide him. – Look, here is a basket. If he be of any reasonable stature, he may creep in here; and throw foul linen upon him, as if it were going to bucking, or, it is whiting-time, send him by your two men to Datchmead.27

The trope reappears, among countless other instances, in the sitcom *Fawlty Towers* where the laundry basket is one of a string of unlikely places used to hide the body of a dead hotel guest.28 The most recent version at the time of writing was the laundry chute by which Monsieur Gustave and his adopted gang escape prison in *The Grand Budapest Hotel*. Whether disguised as the washerwoman (as Toad is) or in a laundry basket (like Basil Fawlty who escapes his own hotel hidden amongst its dirty linen), the potential for mischief surrounding laundry is exemplified by its liminality. As we have seen the laundering of clothes marks personal and social, physical and metaphysical, spatial and temporal boundaries. It is part of a system of ordering. Where and when this ordering takes place, and the people who practice it, are sources of anxiety. This is due in part to the relationship of equivocation, described by Douglas, between physical and social boundaries. I will examine this relationship further and think about its significance for the space of the laundrette today through an interrogation of the state of Britain’s laundry before the introduction of the laundrette in 1949.

25 Interview with Donald Attlee, June 2013. Speaking about his schooldays in the 1930s.
26 *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, dir. by George Roy Hill (Universal Pictures, 1967). The casual racism worked hand-in-hand to give voice to anxieties about immigration as well as the fate of modern young women.
2.2 What Was the State of Britain’s Laundry Before the Introduction of the Launderette in 1949?

No launderettes, no automatic washing machines, washday every Monday, clothes boiled in a tub, scrubbed on the draining board, rinsed in the sink, put through a mangle, hung out to dry.29

It's no more foolish to conceive of a room exclusively devoted to Mondays than to build villas that are only used for sixty days a year. The Monday room could ideally be a laundry room (our country forbears did their washing on Mondays.)30

In 1939 Mass Observation prepared an interim report on Clothes-Washing: Motives & Methods.31 The report was made from a series of interviews conducted with housewives in the city of Bolton. They concluded that ‘washing-day is so bound up with the traditions of British home-life that the laundries have had a hard task to displace it.’32 In comparison with the tradition of home-baked bread for example the trend was firmly against moving the process away from the individual household. The report’s conclusion defines the practice of clothes-washing as a ‘habit.’33 The report asserts that ‘there is a big force of sentiment and irrational feeling to back it [the tradition of home-washing] up.’34 It appears that the new developments in both methods and machinery for clothes-washing were treated with caution. What seems particularly relevant is the emotional attachment people felt to the actual process of washing and the ritual of ‘washing-day’. In this way, doing the laundry can be thought of as a form of the burrowing which creates spatiopetal space, an extension of the process of home-making through repeated bodily movements.35

The objections made against the new commercial laundries could be corralled into three general categories; a nebulous sense of the ‘feeling’ of the laundered clothes, their ‘[the laundries’] potential incompetence, and the infringement of privacy that the use of them would permit. The ‘feeling’ justification included the fact that home-washing allowed for (weather permitting) clothes drying to take place out of doors;

31 I am using Mass Observation reports and directives because the period 1945–54 was one of the most progressive for the laundry industry in England. Since the end of the war in fact, more rivals to the laundry industry have appeared than at any other time in its previous history. Mass Observation, Clothes-Washing, Motives and Methods an interim report by Mass Observation (June 1939) p.1.
32 Clothes-Washing, p.1.
33 Clothes-Washing, p.1.
34 Clothes-Washing, p.1.
Drying, being done in the garden, is sweeter and fresher than the stale warm air of the laundry hot room.\(^{36}\)

Sometimes it was just a feeling:

I like the ‘feel’ of home-washed clothes,

They never have that soft feeling which is so comfortable in home-washed garments.\(^{37}\)

The general acceptance of commercial laundries’ incompetence (a myth perpetuated by music hall jokes) was another key factor for the dismissal of their usefulness; rather than run the risk of having clothes ruined or lost, many preferred to continue with the heavy workload of the home wash.

The potential risk of loss or damage was extended to include pollution. Certain interviewees raised doubts about the ‘mixing’ that might occur at a laundry, the fraternisation of your clothes with someone else’s being potentially contaminating rather than cleansing.

Having seen the condition of the dirty clothes at a certain popular laundry, I would hesitate to allow my more personal garments to be mixed with them.

The idea of all those clothes being washed together is distasteful to me.\(^{38}\)

Sending your laundry out of the house meant firmer emphasis on the classification of washing; some things could be exposed to the outside world but some could not.

I think there is some prejudice about sending out articles of intimate wear for washing.

These objections were raised by conscientious male interviewees:

Sister’s stockings and more intimate garments, much better washed at home.

One knows one’s wife, the laundry girl one doesn’t normally know.\(^{39}\)

\(^{36}\) Clothes-Washing p.4.

\(^{37}\) Clothes-Washing p.7.

\(^{38}\) Clothes-Washing p.10.
Not all the participants favoured home-washing, some found the laundry a blessing, and many were voluble on the downsides of washing at home. A common bug-bear was the space taken up by drying clothes and the lack-lustre meals prepared on wash-day.

Washing days were miserable with hours of steam, etc. Followed by days of damp rooms ‘till the clothes were dried, ironed, then aired.

The laundry does away with the old time horror of washing day with its dark and dangling horrors, steamy atmosphere, sketchy meals.

Laundry saves making Monday a black day.

Laundry-washing prevents that horrible Monday feeling and smell, the cold dinner, and the steaming clothes in winter.⁴⁰

There was however the persistent sense that washing was part of home life and that to use a laundry was to go against tradition.

You will see that I have found many more advantages for sending clothes to a laundry than for washing them at home. When I was a child the laundry was done at home . . . of course, there were no well-organised laundries as now, and as mother was a born-laundress there was no question of not doing the work at home.⁴¹

The phrase 'born-laundress' used by this interviewee reinforces the idea that laundry as a practice meant more than just getting clothes clean. It involved a knack and was a traditional skill to be proud of even if it was also a thankless task.

By 1949 almost half of the clothes-washing public were using laundries; the general trend was towards a split wash for those who could afford it (not dissimilar to the split between private and public washing from the time of the traditional great wash). ⁴²

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⁴⁰ The equivocation in this statement is sublime. Clothes-Washing p.10.
⁴² Clothes-Washing p.14. The laundries and washing machines did reshape the space of the home so in many ways the anxieties about them were well-founded, the laundry and the washing machine reshaped the space of the home and the shape of the housewife’s week. This redistribution of women’s time and environments in particular is another thing the launderette has in common with the eruv. See in particular Jennifer Cousineau, ‘Rabbinic Urbanism in London: Rituals and the Material Culture of the Sabbath’, Jewish Social Studies 11 (2005) pp.36–41.
⁴² A national survey of housewives found that less than half used laundries, with most either doing their own washing or (for the better off) having a washerwoman come in to do it for them. To possess
meant sending items such as sheets, towels, blankets and other heavy articles to a laundry and continuing to wash other items (but particularly underwear) at home. A *Report on Home Washing* in October 1949 found that from a sample of 160 housewives only 4% said that they only used the laundries when winter weather made home-drying impossible. From the remaining sample 40% sent one wash a week and 26% sent fortnightly. The sampled group were made up of women from Glasgow, Swansea & Neath and London and represented a mix of middle class and artisan housewives. There were some differences in method and motive, across the north/south and middle class/artisan divide, but on the whole the results were convergent. The writers of the report were keen to point out the serious and genuine interest displayed by all those interviewed:

> On matters outside their home, housewives are usually uninterested and apathetic, but washing in all its aspects is something that affects them very closely. Nearly all the questions in the questionnaire were in most cases answered clearly and concisely.\(^4^3\)

Clothes-washing was an arduous and time-consuming part of housework, but it was an area in which women demonstrated expertise and experimentation.

The experimentation allowed for by clothes-washing was due to the wide variety of brands, types and methods involved in the process. While most women favoured soap powder (70% of those sampled) there was still popularity for soap flakes, powder detergent, bar soap, soda, bleaches and ammonia. As for brands there was no real brand loyalty and most women interviewed ‘mentioned very nearly 3 different brands of cleanser which she used for her clothes.’\(^4^4\) The women interviewed enjoyed exercising their rights as knowledgeable consumers, adapting and improvising with different combinations and styles.

There is a very considerable interchange that is fairly constant in progress between one brand and another, between one type and another, and women seem on the whole to approve and enjoy their experimenting.\(^4^5\)

\(^{43}\) Mass Observation, *Report on Home Washing* October 1949, p.2. This quote and the report it comes from should have qualified its authors’ use of terms like ‘uninterested and apathetic’, the housewives interviewed were much more likely to have been uneducated about (or simply cut off from) ‘matters outside their home’ and thus unable or unwilling to speak about them. This does not mean they were uninterested or apathetic.

\(^{44}\) *Home Washing*, p.8.

\(^{45}\) *Home Washing* p.8.
It is interesting to note that it is in the midst of this interchange, and vibrant system of trial and error, that the first real contradictions in answers come about; ‘it is on this point – and this point only – that answers tend to be vague and contradictory.’ Almost every type or brand was said to be the ‘best’ by some and the ‘worst’ by others, and for completely different reasons.

The same brand of detergent for instance, is liked by one housewife for its lather and distrusted by another for its absence of it. These inconsistencies recall the sense of ‘feeling’ described by the Bolton housewives who were asked to differentiate between home and laundry washing. They are personal and highly subjective preferences that are part of a broader sense of what feels right. The writers make clear that even these vague and contradictory opinions are opinions that have been considered and that matter to the respondent;

The ‘don’t knows’ in this case are certainly not the ‘don’t cares’. The reasons behind these opinions are so subjective and apparently irrational that the authors of the report look outside objectively measurable reasons to justify their respondents’ answers.

Washing attitudes contain a large irrational element, which is partly due to the way washing day is geared onto the wider compulsive rhythm of the week. In other words, the setting aside of Monday for this laborious task is a kind of unconscious insurance against the general slackening of effort which might follow if the habit were not observed.

Their conclusions fall in line with Mary Douglas’s writing about systems of order: ‘Our pollution behaviour is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications.’ We can include in these cherished classifications the structures of day and night, week, month and year which are also hemmed and given shape by rituals and routine. The implications of washing and wash-day methods are found to have much less to do with cleanliness and dirt than they have to do with fitting in to the structure of the rest of the week. It is hard to think of something less likely to elicit feelings of love

46 Home Washing, p.10.
47 Home Washing, p.10.
48 Home Washing, p.10.
49 Clothes-Washing, p.21.
50 Douglas, p.37.
and tenderness than the sterile verb ‘classify’ but the questioned housewives are displaying irrational and sentimental feelings towards certain methods and implements. These are the objects and practices which repeat and reiterate what they already know: ‘The more consistent experience is with the past, the more confidence we can have in our assumptions.’

The language used by writers of the Mass Observation report suggests that certain classifications are being clung onto rather than cherished. Doing the laundry does not just occupy a position of temporal tension through its ability to clean what was once dirty (to undo what has been done) but also in the way in which, through inherited gestures and methods, it performs the continuation of the past. As such it is a domestic task, the space of the home being that in which habits are begun, inscribed and reinscribed. These habitual practices might be more recognisable (because cooking is more readily aligned with pleasure and place) in the traditions surrounding food preparation. Writing about local traditions and regional dishes, Léo Moulin writes; ‘it is more indicative to believe that we eat our most reassuring memories, seasoned with tenderness and ritual, which marked our childhood.’

The pattern discerned from Mass Observation’s research into home-washing and clothewashing in general does seem to align the practice with both ritual and a gestural burrowing. We can think of this in the terms outlined by Bachelard; ‘we live fixations, fixations of happiness. We comfort ourselves by reliving memories of protection.’

### 2.2.1 The Public Washhouse

For those who could not afford to send clothes to a laundry and for those whom the burden of home-washing was simply too great there were alternatives. These were the communal laundry facilities set up by local authorities or housing associations ‘to enable housewives to do personal and domestic washing outside the home.’

In 1949 ‘approximately two thirds of the houses in England and almost three quarters in Scotland were built before 1914’, almost all of these houses had either poor or non-existent laundry facilities. This meant that most of the laundry was done in kitchens or bathrooms and that 37% of households used kettles and pans to heat the water needed for washing. This time-consuming and highly inefficient practice led Janet Wilson to advocate the building of further wash-houses and communal laundries; ‘it is likely that as soon as efficient laundry services can be deployed at a price

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51 Douglas, p.37.
55 Wilson, p.10.
which housewives in the lower income groups can afford to pay, the number using them will increase rapidly'.

The public washhouse is the best-known type of communal laundry service, and the most widespread; it was also the first to be started.

The first public washhouse in Britain was set up in 1842 by Liverpool City Corporation. It came into being after the success of one woman’s laundry-service during the cholera epidemic of 1832. Assuming that cleanliness was linked to the arrest of the epidemic, one housewife living in the slums allowed her neighbours (those without any washing facilities at all) to use her scullery for clothes-washing. With voluntary help she carried on this work for several years, doing the laundry for up to 85 families a week. The value of this work was eventually recognised by the city and they set up their own public washhouse and bathhouse as an experiment. The scheme was a success and soon washhouses were being built in all the poorer districts of the city. The ‘Public Baths and Washhouses Act’ of 1846 made the provision of public washhouses part of the work of Local Authorities. By the end of the century the scheme had spread to London, Manchester and Glasgow.

The washhouses were not ideal; women had to travel away from home which meant away from young children (if there was no crèche at the washhouse), and they had to travel on buses or trams with heavy loads of washing. There was also a common complaint of pilfering. In 1949 only 2% of the population were using public washhouses although facilities were not available for many more. The need for a faster and more efficient way of washing was made apparent by the popularity of a scheme set up by factories employing a high proportion of female employees. To target the widespread absenteeism on Mondays the factory manager arranged for his employees to be able to bring their washing to work where it would be collected by a laundry and returned clean a few days later.

**2.2.2 Commercial Laundries**

With almost half the population using commercial laundries for at least part of their washing before the introduction of electric washing machines and launderettes, the commercial laundries were a vital part of the national picture. These establishments exemplify some of the attractions and anxieties that would come to characterise the launderette as they saw people’s belongings being sent out into the world unaccompanied

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56 Wilson, p.11.
57 Wilson, p.14.
58 Wilson, p.14.
or accompanied only by the laundry man). There was a strong concern (and constant possibility) that clothes would go missing. The laundries themselves were aware that the clothes they picked up, washed and delivered were not simply possessions. The items they took into their care were pieces of people’s lives, imbued with memory and ‘sentimental value’ that far exceeded their actual monetary worth.59

The fact that each garment sent to the laundry has its own ‘history’ seems most important. Even the handkerchief that is lost may have been bought on a special occasion, given as a special present or be one of a set. And its loss may be felt out of all proportion to its monetary value.60

Aside from causing upset, lost clothes were also somehow thrilling. A lost item of clothing had slipped its leash and was, ‘on the run’. The fault line between public and private that the laundry exemplified was another sort of threshold; it was the possible beginning for adventure and narrative. The Mass Observation directive notes about lost items, ‘How it was lost becomes something of an event to be remembered long afterwards.’61 As a consequence of this anxiety a key part of the laundry industry’s practice was to encourage trust. This was mainly the responsibility of the man who picked up and delivered the weekly wash. As the caretaker of their clothes the ‘van man’ was the human face of the laundry and as such played a vital role in the generation and cementing of business. A Mass Observation report found that customers liked to imagine that their clothes were only going to ‘friends’, they continue, ‘The personal touch is always important in business. It seems likely to be particularly so in laundries.’62 An extension of the sentimental possessiveness of belongings was the affection people had for their laundry when interviewed. The phrase ‘my laundry’ was used again and again.63

60 *Coming Out in the Wash* p.11.
61 *Coming Out in the Wash* p.11.
62 *Coming Out in the Wash* p.11.
63 The phrase was elongated by Hanif Kureshi and Stephen Frears *My Beautiful Launderette* dir. Stephen Frears (Working Title, 1985)
2.3 Gossip

Britain’s first self-service, coin-operated launderette opened for a six-month trial at 184 Queensway in Bayswater on 1st May 1949. The local paper publicised the event, declaring ‘all that housewives have to do is bring the washing, put it in the machine and come back 30 minutes later (charge 2s 6d for 9lbs).’ Laundromats had been in existence in America since 1936 and were seen by washing-machine companies as a simple way to introduce people to their product and incite them to buy one for their homes (though for most this was still an outlandish suggestion). The Queensway branch was a success and a series of other Bendix launderettes were opened across London. By 1954 there were seven hundred in the country and they continued to open at a rate of ten or twenty a week. The ‘laundry problem’ was beginning, bit by bit, to be dispersed. Their early use was hindered by the perception that going out of the house with your washing involved exposure and indicated a form of exhibitionism. The objections raised echoed the tensions between the communality and exposure involved in the traditional great wash as well as the qualms cited about the use of commercial laundries. Mass Observation wrote that,

> Many people seem unwilling to parade their more personal garments in front of a shop full of people, and, possibly as a result, launderettes have become known as ‘gossip shops for lazy people.’

This stigma is in full working order today even if the launderette itself is in decline. In the 1980s there were over twelve thousand launderettes in the UK, today there are fewer than three thousand. Although most households have their own washing machine people will use a launderette for large washes (duvets, curtains) and if their machine breaks down. Those who do not have machines generally do not have either the space or the money for them; this includes students, the elderly and people who are new to the country or in temporary accommodation. There are therefore two categories of customers, the regular and the irregular. It is safe to say however that almost everyone has used a launderette at some point in his or her life. The stigma spotted by Mass Observation in the 1950s captures the uncomfortable position of the launderette as a space which inspires (at least in people’s imaginations) both gossip and laziness. It is simultaneously a space of transfer and mixing,

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64 Kynaston, p.325.
66 *Coming Out in the Wash* p.10.
67 *Coming Out in the Wash* p.14.
of languor and time wasting. Like the home, it is a place of and outside society but unlike the home you cannot police its edges.

The stigma has attached itself not so much to the gossip but to the people doing it, the ‘lazy people’. Laziness suggests inactivity, waste and deviance. We can think of the slacker, the scrounger, the truant; we can think of the outlaw. Michel de Certeau writes that the lazy man is one step away from the dying man and almost as much of a problem in the eyes of society. The lazy man is ‘a subject that doesn’t work,’ ‘intolerable in a society in which the disappearance of subjects is everywhere compensated for and camouflaged by the multiplication of tasks to be performed.’69 This intolerability stems from an imaginary reciprocity at the heart of society. This is the reciprocity that means one person’s inactivity implicates another’s activity as though there is a finite quantity of effort that is adjusted through an unconscious but constant homeostasis.70 Putting this another way Robert Louis Stevenson wrote in 1876 that ‘the presence of people who refuse to enter into the great handicap race for sixpenny pieces, is at once an insult and disenchantment for those who do.’71 In the 1950s laziness was perhaps reasonably attributable to those who used launderettes because washing at home was such comparatively hard work. These days laziness as an idea has attached itself (subtly but firmly) to those who use launderettes giving rise to the sense that they are in some way out of order. This is the order of affluence, aspiration and activity; it is an order which avoids waiting at all costs. As I was walking past a launderette the other evening with a friend, he paused perplexedly and looking at the Sunday evening collection of people waiting for their washing asked, ‘but what are they doing?’ Technically these people were waiting for something to be done but he couldn’t quite get his head around why or how someone might do that, how someone might happily do nothing. If we imagine sitting by the washing machine in our homes while a wash is taking place, the practice does seem somehow wasteful and perverse. Certeau writes that ours is ‘a society that officially recognises “rest” only in the forms of inertia or waste’.72

The absence of work is non-sense; it is necessary to eliminate it in order for the discourse that tirelessly articulates tasks and constructs the Occidental story of ‘There’s always something to do’ to continue.73

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70 Which is directly comparable to Douglas on systems of order; through differentiation (marked, highlighted, policed) some sort of balance is arrived at.
73 Certeau, Practice Vol.1 p.191.
This insight is borne out by a cursory glance at advertisements today which describe a climate where waiting is equivocated with wasting. These are all from a single underground platform on the same day.

Think of a book and start reading it in 60 seconds – Kindle

Fed up of waiting, waiting for a train, waiting for the barista to make your coffee . . .
– Emmi’s Latte’s to go.

Anything worth doing is worth doing faster – Blackberry play book.74

These echo early advertisements for washing machines in their emphasis on speed and relative values of time.

The new Hoover washing machine is here to set you free. MUCH MORE TIME FOR YOURSELF … MORE ENERGY FOR PLEASURE.

You set it and forget it! Bendix automatically gives you the time of your life.75

The gossip ascribed to the launderette has found a fonder place in the cultural imagination. Much of the basis for social media is the sense that anything worth doing is worth telling someone about or, more cynically, unless you can tell someone what you’ve done, it’s not worth doing. To this end, gossip has been diluted (morally) into the righteous act of ‘sharing’. In this way the online telling of news (which is defined as anything that strikes the teller as new) is imagined as an act of goodness; the childhood lesson that it’s good to share is given new license. Gossip is traditionally the telling or outing of secrets, things that ought not to be shared. But there has always been something miraculous about the way it could produce action and consequence. In the Walford Launderette manned by Dot Cotton in the popular BBC soap opera Eastenders the space functions both as healthy business and vital plot device. The gossip that takes place there is matter, currency that is passed from person to person. Like the news aired on the banks of the Liffey or the secrets scavenged from the sheets of the Upper West Side, the words are both vessels for the past and contents for the future. Unlike the disorderly laziness of the launderette its gossipy nature is thought of indulgently. People delight in eavesdropping and the launderette is an eavesdropping arena, a space made for the cosy exposure of stains, holes, news and views.

74 Advertisements for Kindle, Emmi’s and Blackberry, photographed September 2011.
Appearing to trouble the edges of conformity, gossip acts as both deterrent and transgression, reinforcing the line even while crossing it.

Like the home, the launderette is a place of and outside society but unlike the home you cannot police its edges. The ‘open door’ policy of these spaces gives rise to gossip and exchange but with this comes the potential for unwanted exchange (unwanted news or knowledge) and the unwanted encounter. When you go to a launderette you are at the mercy of the space and you don’t know what or who you will find in it. Stanley Bloom characterises the early launderettes of London as spaces of democratic mixing, containing regular assortments of ‘students, housewives, char ladies, actors and actresses.’ He writes that ‘class distinctions did not seem to exist in these situations.’ This was not the case for everyone concerned and he does remember, after opening a launderette on the Old Brompton road in 1952,

An elderly upper-middle class lady coming into the launderette in the first week and whispering to us that we might do better business if we covered the window with lace curtains.\(^76\)

The fear of exposure and encounter that characterises this interaction recalls the dread of mixing detected in the Mass Observation report. The fear of contamination is one of the central theme’s of Bruce Robinson’s hysterical modern horror story *Paranoia in the Launderette.*

It was the worst one and a half hours of my life. The place was overrun with brats and terrible peroxide mothers. The moment I got through the door I found myself surrounded by brazen punters in whom all grace and etiquette had been routed. They exposed the unwashable. Loaded openly. Dried and folded without pride. Stains didn’t interest them. In fact they all seemed determined to show each other just how filthy their families could be …\(^77\)

Exposing filthy items of clothing is almost as fraught with mortification for the narrator as exposing items of underwear. These articles are so taboo that even to mention them by name is a source of embarrassment for Robinson’s hero.

‘What have you got in there?’ she said.
‘Just socks, and a shirt?’

\(^76\) Bloom, pp.28-30.
'Is that all?'
'No.' I paused. 'There's a pair in there as well.'
'A pair?'
'Yes.'
'A pair of pants?' she repeated with a hint of indignation. 

The fantasy version of this nightmare is one of coincidence. As a static and everyday site of exchange the launderette often figures in film and advertising as a democratising venue for romance or random sexual encounter. The most well known example of this is the 1985 Levi's ad 'Launderette' in which a James Dean look-alike walks into a launderette to stonestone-wash his jeans, removing all his clothes in the process. 

Figure 2. Reading and not reading in the launderette.
From 'Launderette' dir. Roger Lyons (Bartle Bogle Hegarty, 1985)

The launderette in the advert is a space of anachronistic nostalgia and pleasurable incongruity. The advert name-checks 1950s Americana and the birth of the teenager while also paying homage to the grubby reality of the local launderette. Despite the Chevrolet and GI seen outside, and the classic 50s attire of the hero, there is something very English about the collection of people inside (which is perhaps attributable to the fact that it was filmed on the Harrow road.) Inside we find a harassed mother and her children, a chain-smoking

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78 Robinson, p.33.
79 Launderette dir. by Roger Lyons (Bartle Bogle Hegarty, 1985). Ben Campkin suggests the term 'distress aesthetics' for the choice of the Elephant & Castle shopping centre in south London as the location for another Levi’s advert (over thirty years later). The advertiser’s choice of the Elephant was determined by the association of the area’s worn-down material environment with a sense of authenticity – with the ‘real life’ of the working metropolis. Remaking London: Decline and Regeneration in Urban Culture (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013) p.73. The choice of the launderette for the original ad was as much about the authenticity of the space as it was about the apparently ordinary presence in that space of underwear.
laundress, a prim bespectacled girl, an overweight middle aged man and two fashion conscious young women (all of whom react differently to the torso in their midst). The sense of the space as one of exchange and encounter is made explicit by Marvin Gaye’s ‘I Heard it Through the Grapevine’, which plays over the sounds of steam being expressed and coin-operated machinery. The final frame of the film shows the characters in the space sitting in a bank of chairs along a wall, waiting for their washing. This is the launderette as a waiting room, the image is redolent of any city bus stop or train station platform, and reveals the pleasurable incongruity of the launderette as a space of mixed types. The pleasures and pains of the Levi’s advert and Robinson’s horror story stem from the same source; the possibility in the launderette for coincidence; for chance encounter with others.

Figure 3. Side by side.

From ‘Launderette’ dir. by Roger Lyons (Bartle Bogle Hegarty, 1985)

The advert plays to the latent anxieties about mixing but in exaggerating these to the point of fantasy it also creates its own cultural commonplace, which in turn informs the way people, use and think about these spaces today. The enduring power of the advert is that it depicted and subverted what was for many people an everyday experience. My survey of people talking about launderettes, made using the social media platform Twitter, which means it is essentially a survey made by eavesdropping, reveals that launderette users still delight in the liminal space where they wash their clothes and that the fantasy of the chance encounter is a present part of that practice.80

80 Survey made using the social media platform Twitter.
Roy has just been ambushed by two single ladies in the launderette!

The thrill of the chance encounter can of course be undermined by the space it takes place in;

Sat near very hot guy in launderette, but it's very hard to be attractive when he can see my dirty underwear.

The romance of the space is the same romance that was part of people's experiences using commercial laundries as observed by Mass Observation; the adventure of lost items of clothing is still part of the ritual.

I am convinced that the man at the launderette stole my pants which had the cookie monster on. I will not rest until I find them!!!

As is the possibility of looking at and judging others;

A guy came into the launderette, put clothes in the dryer. Went out, came back with 8 cans of Fosters and a microwave pizza ...

Can only assume man in launderette has run out of clean trousers and that's why he's wearing shorts.81

In the quoted comments and surveyed speech the 'unknown,' 'mixing,' and 'togetherness' which gave commercial laundry users in the 50s such frissons of anxiety are spoken about with pleasure and glee. The frisson simply of being in the presence of other people's underwear is clearly still central to experiences of these spaces. These twitterers might not be shy of saying (or writing) words like 'pants' and 'underwear' but the fact that they are consistent topics of launderette discussion reveals a fascination (and perhaps anxiety) about their strayed, intimate presence in public.

81 Twitter laundry log.
Figure 4. Almost a crowd in Solis launderette, Bethnal Green.

Figure 5. Waiting in Solis launderette.
Figure 6. Waiting in the first launderette in Queensway.
From The Launderette, A history (London: Duckworth, 1988)
A trip to the launderette is a reconfiguration of the outermost limits of the domestic. This unremarked and impermanent redrawing of lines creates a similar situation to that of infantile den-making. The practice of hanging out wet washing to dry, inside and out, cuts up space in a new and transformative way. A room hung with washing is a new room, a balcony over-spilling with wet sheets and blankets is transformed. The journey to and from the launderette enacts precisely the same playful movement of frontiers. Lurking beneath the surface of this re-bordering are aspects of the surreal and the uncanny, but the practice remains firmly in the realm of play. This structural play recalls Roland Barthes’ account of the flooding of Paris in 1955.
First of all it displaced certain objects, refreshed our perspective of the world by introducing into it certain unaccustomed and yet explicable points: we saw cars reduced to their rooftops, street lamps truncated till only their tops rose above the surface like water lilies, houses cut up like children’s blocks . . . All these everyday objects seemed separated from their roots . . . this break had the merit of remaining strange, without being magically threatening.  

The edges of the familiar world were redrawn by the deluge but the world remained recognisable. This familiarity is important when thinking about why the experience of the flood (and that of the laundrette) was and is pleasurable. Barthes writes that the atmosphere among the public during the flood was ‘of Festivity far more than of catastrophe.’ The playful aspect of the experience can be located in the coupling of the words, ‘displacement’ and ‘refreshment’: the one leading directly to the other. Barthes writes, ‘It overwhelmed the very coenesthesia of a landscape . . . no more paths, no more banks, no more directions, a flat substance which goes nowhere and which thereby suspends man’s process, detaches him from reason, from a utensility of sites.’ The familiar landscape had lost its ‘utensility’ but it was still recognisable.

Pipilotti Rist’s show ‘Eyeball Massage’ at the Hayward Gallery in September 2011, worked upon the same premise; removing the ‘utensility’ of familiar objects and places to redraw the edges of everyday life. Her installation ‘Hiplights or Enlightened Hips’ saw three hundred pairs of underpants strung out across the spaces between Royal Festival Hall and the Hayward. The confabulation of ‘unmentionables’ and concrete is not unusual in London, council estates and urban gardens abound with similar structures, but bringing the utilitarian intimate to the space of the art gallery and to be spied upon by the commuters on Waterloo Bridge, seemed to enact the very same distortion and surreal redrawing of frontiers that took place in the flooded city described by Barthes. It also highlighted the sense of play that is inherent in the presence of underwear and other drying garments strewn up around the city. The sight of washing drying on lines and the practice of taking your clothes to the laundrette might not be consciously experienced as surreal or indeed playful, but the pleasure taken in them reveals them to be so regardless. In Rist’s installation the garments were instantly familiar and yet strange; she knowingly courted taboo by confronting passersby on the road and pavement with lines of slightly soiled looking...

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84 Barthes, ‘Paris not Flooded’ p.32.
underwear with no explanation as to why. The seedy nature of the installation was transformed at night, when the pants were lit from within and glowed like jellyfish.

Figures 8 and 9. Hiplights or Enlightened Hips – Pipilotti Rist’s installation at the Hayward Gallery.
Figures 10 and 11. The Hayward Gallery at night. 

The coupling of displacement and refreshment that opened up a space of play for Parisians in the flood and for Londoners exposed to Rist’s washing lines can be thought of as a spatial gape. This sense of the gape alludes to Barthes’ assertion in The Pleasure of the Text.

Is not the most erotic portion of the body where the garment gapes? . . . It is intermittence, as psychoanalysis has so rightly stated, which is erotic: the
intermittence of skin flashing between two articles of clothing (trousers and sweater), between two edges.\textsuperscript{84}

He uses the clothing analogy to describe the pleasure to be taken from intermittence or ‘a change of codes’ within a text. The same intermittence occurs in the friction found in the redrawn edges of the flood. The intimate edges of Rist’s underwear, displaced and refreshing their new place, play the same game. We can therefore look at the strayed home of the launderette and the washing line as spatial translations of Barthes’ textual holes; the gape between material exposing flesh, the flash of something else, disorder in a system of order. The force of the spatial gape derives from the displacement between time and space or time and thing. We can think broadly about the spatial gape and then more precisely about how it applies to the strayed home of the launderette.

\textbf{Figure 12.} A trip to the butcher in a boat. Paris floods in 1955.
From www.parisianfields.wordpress.com (accessed February 2013)

If we look again at the workings of space for Barthes and Rist we can see that the spatial gape exemplifies a disordering. The sight of the boat sailing down the street (described by Barthes) and Rist’s playful exposure of underwear are ultimately things out of place. Because all things are said to have a place, things out of place disrupt the place they are found in. The presence of the boat seems to state that the street is a river, the underwear states that the public place is private. Part of the pleasure to be derived from these mis-speakings is that they reveal something of the arbitrary nature of the underlying system

they disrupt. Why not make the river your road? Why not hang your washing on a line which stretches from gallery to gallery? Understanding conventions, being part of the society to which these conventions have meaning, we know why not but it is still pleasurable to be provoked into thinking against or outside these meanings and conventions. The fact that both these experiences or provocations can be thought of as pleasurable is because they do not stray too far from conventional behaviour, they are glimpses of disorder, nothing more. Douglas writes that the appearance and maintenance of order is exemplified by a careful and constant avowal of the differences between things, of their limits and edges, of their place. 86 It is at these strictly policed boundaries between things that spatial gapes can occur and at which the possibility for the surreal and the playful abound. Or we could say, the spatial gape reveals the boundary and its policing.

Douglas echoes Barthes when writing about the experience of confronting such ambiguities; ‘there is a whole gradient on which laughter, revulsion and shock belong at different points and intensities.’ 87 She continues,

Shoes are not dirty in themselves, but it is dirty to place them on the dining table; food is not dirty in itself, but it is dirty to leave cooking utensils in the bedroom … similarly bathroom equipment in the drawing room; clothing lying on chairs. 88

Michel Leiris is affected in a different way by the experience of moving home which finds him with all of his belongings in a single room – he is yet to unpack. The experience approaches catastrophe rather than festivity, meeting in the disturbing chaos of the carnivalesque.

When all of our movable goods temporarily gather in heteroclite formations (like the preposterous associations of successive pictures in a rebus, joined despite their disparateness by the link of contiguity), when the complete upheaval of objects that are normally submissive to us, and the imbroglio of relations that results from it, present us with a vaudeville-like image (translated into a language between the bed-sheets) of what death may be now that relations between people are finished, between the world and us: the tu is tué ["the intimate you is killed"], the diplomatic vous ["formal you"] keeps losing its way. 89

86 Douglas, Purity and Danger p.4.
87 Douglas, p.38.
88 Douglas, p.37.
Leiris’s home and belongings are his reconstituted edges, it is through his relationships with them (geographical and emotional) that he is able to locate himself. His things are part of him in that their place makes his place make sense. When all his belongings are heaped together in a pile, stacked upon boxes, crammed into bags, they create an image like that of Paris flooded, they are the familiar displaced. This spatial gape leads to a refreshment of sorts, even if it is disturbing. It is a new image, a ‘rebus’ which spells itself out, unthinkingly, like a language of dreams. The spatial gape is the distortion of time by space (or things in space); the familiar has become strange.

For Leiris these material things and his physical location in their midst are tied inextricably to his use and experience of language. Moving house has eroded familiar words, translated them. The words too have been moved, carried across a threshold to where they begin to mean something new. The words which expressed the relationship between him and the world around him (between ‘you’ and ‘I’) were rooted to a place, to things; they had foundations. Now they lose their way seemingly standing upon sinking sand, ships that have slipped their anchors. This intimate reciprocal relationship between place and language (they simply cannot be separated), between things and identity furthers our understanding of why the space of the launderette is a site of such interest. Leiris’s belongings were felt to be his edges so minutely that to move them changed the way he thought and spoke. Clothes and linen exist as edges already; they are skins, layers, intimate and emblematic. We can think again of the experience of the laundry customers interviewed by Mass Observation (losing things, hoping that clothes were ‘going to friends’) and launderette users (not wanting to take their ‘intimates’, put off by the possibility of ‘mixing’) to see other ways in which our belongs are felt as edges. The launderette is actually double-edged in terms of displacement and refreshment; it is a place where your belongings are brought out of their place, out of the home (first displacement) and it is also a place where they are cleaned or purified (second displacement). A trip to the launderette is a disordering that enables a reordering.

For Barthes, in a textual sense, displacement or the creation of an edge is the route towards the possible bliss of a text. He explains this by thinking about a piece of literary laundering.

In *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, I read this sentence which gives me pleasure; ‘Cloths, sheets, napkins were hanging vertically, attached by clothes pins to taut lines.’ Here I enjoy an excess of precision, a kind of maniacal exactitude of language . . . the exactitude in question is not the result of taking greater pains, it is not a rhetorical
increment in value, as though things were increasingly well described – but of a change of code.90

The edge that has been created is that of a literary language rubbing up against a more essential (‘the grammarian’s’) language. The cut between two styles creates two edges and it is the gap between them, the gape, that allows for textual pleasure.

These two edges, the compromise they bring about, are necessary. Neither culture nor its destruction is erotic; it is the seam between them, the fault, the flaw which becomes so.91

In the practice of using launderettes and hanging up washing it is the seam between the private and the public and between then and now that is being opened up and in a sense harassed.

Pleasurable intermittence and jarring concordance is also at work in the objects that call the launderette home. Maureen Stanton delights in the surreal possibilities of launderette washing-powder.

I love the machines that dispense miniature boxes of soap . . . a sense of pleasure blooms in me if I’ve forgotten my economy sized laundry soap and I get to pay a dollar for a box of mini-Tide or mini-Cheer or mini-Bounce, identical to the huge supermarket-size boxes, an offspring.92

There are two things at play here, the visual spectacle of the miniature and the ‘love’ and ‘pleasure’ expressed towards or invoked by a machine. The visual spectacle enacts another spatial gape; displacement and refreshment, the uncanny play of doubles and sizes. The soap box in its shrunk state is personified for Stanton and a family narrative mingles unsettlingly with the spawn-like allusions of ‘offspring’. The pleasing nature of the miniature is like the pleasure taken in the compartmentalised packets and containers of airplane food; both indicate an individualised, self-contained world, one in which edges, lids and wrappers abound. There is no space for confusion or misuse, everything, as they say, is in its right place. Part of the pleasure invoked by this experience must be the illusion of control, a totalised viewpoint; the order for which we strive. It is a canny gimmick on the part of the

91 Barthes, Text p.7.
soap manufacturers, the little boxes are such a source of pleasure that Stanton describes buying them as an achievement; ‘I get to pay a dollar’.

A key part of the miniature is that it is ‘identical’ to the economy sized box; it is the same but different, a strange repeat. The fun it incites derives from the displacement, not the replacement, of what is already known. We can think again of the festivity of ‘Paris not flooded.’ Like the fantasies of children playing with dolls houses the pleasure of the experience is located in the re-enactment of and deviation from their own day-to-day lives. It is invention based upon repetition. We can think again of the way Douglas aligns ‘human physiology’ with ‘nature’s pendulum, swinging between contiguity and discontiguity,’ when thinking about the importance of repetition and the cyclical in the launderette. Like the boxes of washing powder the washing-machines themselves are identical and different. The walls of the launderette are lined with numbered machines; washers and driers. Most launderettes have two sizes of washers, the larger machines sitting uncannily beside or opposite their miniatures. It is only too easy not to ‘spot the difference’ and to find oneself paying for a large wash instead of a small one. The machines are repeats of one another in that they will all be the same make and require the same order of actions to bring them to life. They are identical to look at and once the money has been paid, each machine will run for the same amount of time. They perform the same function and will require the same maintenance. The differences begin with the arrival of customers. No two laundry loads will be the same and customers will come and go when they please, setting off the machines one after the other, beginning a series of randomly spaced cycles. Side by side echoes of the same routine will be ricocheting around the launderette all day; each cycle is like and unlike, alterations on a theme. Side by side these alterations give rise to spatial gape – temporal lag – the friction described by Barthes as ‘intermittence.’

The remembered love and pleasure described by Stanton seem to be bound up with the automatic pleasures of the slot machine; the libidinal rhythm of in and out and the pleasing order of function, but we can also align them with the gut feelings of the Bolton housewives interviewed by Mass Observation. These were the impulses and sensations which were the basis for their ritualised behaviour; the bodily burrowing that forms spatiopetal space. I too remember the soap machines fondly. My first experiences with a launderette were in Paris where I found, by chance, an apparently abandoned launderette with no name. I would always walk to it via a different route and once or twice lost my way even while waiting in the nearby streets for the washing. In that space were silver slot machines like those that dispense cigarettes in bars. You had to fit your coins into the holes

93 Mary Douglas, ‘Yvonne Verdier’s Façons de Dire, Façons de Parle, Woman, the measure of all things’ Anthropology Today 3. (Oct 1987) p.3.
and then with a forceful tug drag out one of the slotted drawers in which you would find a foil wrapped pair of soap cakes. As I write I can feel the pleasing weight of the package in my hands and recall the silvery green shine of the wrapping. The cake would almost always crumble in my hands before I could put it in the washing machine, it had probably sat in its silver canister for years. The diagrams on the lids of the washing machines never made clear which compartment was the right one for the soap, being marked only with vague algebraic hieroglyphs so I took a gamble each time. Soap deposited I could fix the next lot of coins into the washer and set the cycle off. Why was this routine so satisfying? Stanton writes that ‘a sense of pleasure blooms’ and that was precisely it, a warm, self satisfied bloom, from the inside out. Was it pleasure at the orderliness of it all? Or pleasure at the repetitive ritual, the same but different each time?

Marc Augé writes that the map of the Paris metro offers commuters ‘a moment of life suddenly perceived in its totality . . . as if the individual who consults a subway map were sometimes rediscovering the point of view that allows the measuring of private life, the vagaries of a profession, the sermons of the heart, the political conjuncture, the travels of time, and the pleasures of life to become palpable in all their transparency, strangely solitary at a distance.’ He seems to be articulating the achievement of a momentary but profound bird’s-eye-view of life. We can posit that a bag of clothes taken to the launderette offers a similar perspective as that of a glance at the metro map. The amassed clothes, like the stations laid out upon the map conjure up thoughts of the past and the future simultaneously; past and future wearings, past and future experience. That you travel outside your home to perform this task creates an isolated (and therefore focussed) image, the change of context giving clarity to the picture; the beholder ‘strangely solitary at a distance.’ The glimpsed ‘totality’ cannot be order, it must be a flash of disorder that throws the rest of life into relief, a pleasurable but potentially alienating reflection. This glimpsed disorder is at the heart of the playful aspect of the launderette and the spaces cut up by washing-lines.

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What links the two imperatives already discussed, issued by the space of the launderette, is their perceived uselessness. Gossip is thought of as *idle* talk, *careless* chatter. Its subject matter is trivial, it is not serious or important. Play is similarly side-lined as an activity which is for one’s *spare* time. Neither are occupations which are seen to produce anything. You don’t perform them in the hope of having something to show for it. Of course a trip to the launderette will, all being well, *produce* a bag of clean washing. The spaces have a designated use and function. What this reading is concerned with however is the excess to that designated function. The irrelevance. The imperatives that have been announced by the space are contradictory to its functionality. They disrupt the very definition of functionality.

This third reading of the space will interrogate the disobedient uselessness that the launderette seems to contain or invite. It takes as its starting point the imperative *wait*.

Inherent in the action of waiting is that thing or time which you are waiting for. In the launderette you wait for the washer or drier to finish. It is an action (a paradoxically inactive action) of expectancy, hopefulness and apprehension. Because the wait is always judged against that which you wait for, it is seen as muted and dulled experience; it is *not yet*, it is *almost*. It is characterised by a lack and a desire and the increase of the one only enhances the other. Waiting is desire and lack made routine, we do not wait for our clothes to wash (or the bus to come) in desperation, rather we have accepted that there are moments like this, of inert suffering, quiet solitude, time that you simply have to wait out, knowing that it will pass. In the launderette this solitude is permitted to spread itself out, to become proprietorial and expansive. *Because* of its emptiness, it is ripe for filling. Excessive to function, outside of the functional, waiting can be potent. This potency is drawn out in Thomas Beller’s short story ‘The Laundry Room’, where the space acts as an enterable madeleine; a room you can walk into to be touched by the memories of the building that contains it. Beller’s laundry room is a space where waiting, which is always an action that looks to the future, an apprehension of what is to come, is met and filled by the past.

In the laundry room in the basement of his Manhattan childhood home the narrator recalls the ways in which the building shaped as well as contained the relationships between the people in it. Aspects of the building which were excessive to function meant that when the pianist who lived there played;
Gusts of classical piano would rise up the air shaft. The delicate curtain over the kitchen window would tremble with a breeze, the afternoon sun hitting at an angle, and it was as if the notes themselves were undulating the curtain as they entered.\textsuperscript{55}

Beller describes this accident of architecture as ‘an amenity – not one you could include in a real estate brochure, but one that had been a part of the building’s life for so long you could forget how unusual it was.’\textsuperscript{96} The laundry room is an amenity included in real-estate brochures but, like that of the airshaft which inadvertently communicates music throughout a building, its function (beyond function) is probably not included. This function partly takes the form of a similarly haphazard form of communication as was provided by the airshaft. Beller finds a neighbour ‘pulling clothes out of the dryer’ and though she is distracted and does not recognise him at first they exchange news and stories, communicating through conversational commonplaces; ‘she asks after my mother, the wife, the kid.’\textsuperscript{97} It also functions as a space for memory. The narrator feels the “electric presence” of babysitters of the past, wondering at these once young girls, feeling the static imprint of their youth in the air; ‘they too, have become chimeras in the laundry room.’\textsuperscript{98} These days ‘there is a slight tension between the old guard and the new’, and the laundry room seems to be the only place where ghosts and the living can meet. It is the ‘common ground’ of the building, democratic, unbiased; the normal and the abnormal, the living and the dead, all are welcome there. Sitting in the room is like being enveloped by a daydream, it is alive with lost and wished for things, the dreams of an old building.

Two white welded chairs against the white wall. The floor painted grey. I take a seat as though in a waiting area. A bus station. It’s a place to collect my thoughts. I close my eyes to clear my head, but the building rocks like a ship and its world comes rushing in.\textsuperscript{99}

Perhaps ‘wait’ is the most persuasive imperative issued by the space, the one which gives rise to its most home-like peculiarities. It is a place where the ripeness of lack can be felt, where the full can be divined in the empty.

The launderette is a warm, soapy, humming space where you can be left alone for an hour or two with just the machines to keep you company. It is a technical space, a space of

\textsuperscript{55} Thomas Beller, ‘The Laundry Room’, \textit{The Paris Review} 12\textsuperscript{th} December 2011
www.theparisreview.org/blog.2011/12/12 (accessed April 2013)
\textsuperscript{96} Beller.
\textsuperscript{97} Beller.
\textsuperscript{98} Beller.
\textsuperscript{99} Beller.
necessity, and a space like that of Mayol’s neighbourhood, which is neither entirely public nor completely domestic. It is a place you wait in; a space of idling, daydreaming and thinking. Mayol writes that the home and the neighbourhood are ‘the only places where in different ways one can do what one wants.’ Because of its combined functionality and irrationality (because of its function beyond function) the site of the launderette can be a space for daydreaming and a dream space. Guy Rosolato writes, ‘If I read and I daydream, my reading is thus a sort of impertinent absence.’ In the everyday reading of the city the launderette allows for this kind of delinquency. Mary Douglas wrote about pollution behaviour as that which ‘condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications.’ This has particular significance for thinking about the way the launderette and its users are thought of today. Looking at the launderette shows us that time has come to be the quality that most disturbs society and that its limits, boundaries, uses and abuses are policed as rigorously as the edges and limits of bodies and spaces. This is why daydreaming can be categorised as delinquency.

Beller compares his laundry room to a waiting room and a bus station. A similar allusion is made in the closing shot of the Levi’s Launderette advert. Both these comparisons highlight the similarities between the experience of using a launderette and commuting; experiences which meet in the verb wait. Writing about the development of the London Underground, John Lanchester points out that early in the 19th century commuting was ‘a new kind of time: an interstitial mental space between home life and work.’ On the tube or the bus passengers wait to arrive at their destination, in the launderette pieces wait for their temporal destination to arrive. In these spaces (tube carriage, train gangway, bus seat, launderette chair) there is a tension between the inert and the kinetic, the still and the moving. To commute is to be moved rather than to move so it is not surprising that the experience can feel automatic and unreal. For the practiced commuter, the daily journey to and from work could be thought of as a form of possession, a gestural ventriloquism which demands submission and pliancy from its subjects. Time spent in the launderette comes closer to the original meaning of commute (to exchange or change) which contains tinges of

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100 ‘The neighbourhood grows with the repetition of the dweller’s body’s engagement in public space until it exercises a sort of appropriation of this space . . . as a result of its everyday use, the neighbourhood can be considered as the progressive privatization of public space.’ Pierre Mayol, ‘The Neighbourhood’ The Practice of Everyday Life, Vol.2. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998) pp.10-11.
101 Mayol, p.11.
103 Douglas, Purity & Danger, p.38.
105 Plural developed to describe the random group of assorted strangers found in a space due to contingency; for example the group found in a lift, at a bus stop, on a platform, in a launderette; pieces recalling the playing pieces of a board game because there is an emphasis on both position and temporariness, also that they can be moved by forces other than their own volition.
the magic and transformative. This recalls the supernatural side-effects of the great wash and the spring clean, rituals and moments during and at which the effects of invisible and ubiquitous time is, for want of a better word, perceived. In the launderette, rather than moving through space and time, pieces sit still and allow time to move towards them, watching the timer dial flash from sixty to thirty to zero. The imperative to wait can be felt as relief:

To my relief there was a rush of water and the thing started spinning. I became almost euphoric. It was all over. All I had to do now was stand in front of it till the things came out clean.

The relief of waiting is described by Marc Augé as pleasurable submission in the category of space he defines as non-place. Describing the experience of waiting in an airport departure lounge he writes: 'Subjected to a gentle form of submission to which he surrenders himself with more or less talent or conviction, he tastes for a while – like anyone who is possessed – the passive joys of identity-loss, and the more active pleasure of role-playing.'

Augé’s ‘non-place’, thanks to its neatly quotable syntax, has come to be used by many in a very simplified fashion. It is not a simple category and is one that Augé reminds us, ‘never exists in pure form’ anyway. He uses the term to describe motorways and supermarkets, but also imaginary places, tourist attractions and clichés. He makes a case for the emergence of a series of spaces and experiences of space that cannot be defined as relational, historical or concerned with identity. His reflections on the presence within these spaces of text (instructions for use) and the way people experience immediate and historical time in what he terms the conditions of supermodernity are relevant to an investigation of the launderette. Aligning, as we have, the category of the strayed home with that of the eruv should make clear the fact that these spaces (though full of texts, and giving space to a very particular relationship with time) are deeply relational, historical and concerned with identity. There is much more to be found in common with the strayed home and Augé’s reading of the Paris metro which he does not confine to the category of non-lieu.

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106 "Commute" in its original sense means to give something in exchange for something else, or to change one thing into another ... The word crossed over to use in a railway context in the USA, where regular travellers began to swap day tickets for better-value season tickets; they “commuted” their daily tickets into season tickets. The Oxford English Dictionary gives the first instance of the modern, dragging-your-weary-bones-to-work-sense as in the American magazine Atlantic Monthly, which defined a commuter as follows: 'one who purchases a commutation-ticket.' Lanchester, pp. 70-71.

107 Robinson, pp.29-30.


109 Augé, Non-places pp.77-8.
In the daily commute to and from work, an exchange of location takes place. In the launderette the exchange (made with change) is less tangible. The dirty clothes are changed but excessive to this is an inhabited spacing out of time. Lanchester calls commuting ‘a new kind of time;’ new because it was neither work time nor home time; because you were between home and work, places in which time is measured by what you do. New also, because of its intimacy with or the attention paid to time. When you wait you are in the company of time. Augé, writing about the experience of travelling through the Parisian metro, writes that ‘subway riders basically handle nothing more than time and space, and are skilled in using the one to measure the other.’ Handling is an important word here because during the commutation of the launderette the gestures are predominately hand-gestures. Grabbing, scrunching, putting, passing, opening, closing, weighing, feeling, slotting, finding, reaching, pulling, folding. Launderers are just as adept at handling time, commuting their efforts into results; we can recall Joyce’s washers on the banks of the Liffey, ‘My wrists are rusty rubbing the mouldaw stains.’

This reading has invoked the peculiar pleasures of the launderette but the imperative wait is one that can also be experienced as pain. There is a tension in the launderette (as in the tube carriage) between boredom and restlessness. Between a claustrophobic panic at the curtailment of space or ability for movement and the pleasurable submission to the control the space is effecting. Like the child who takes comfort in the space-within-a-space (under his mother’s capacious skirts, under the kitchen table, inside his den), the sectioning off of time-within-time can lead to a similar sense of comfort. This is the comfort taken in relinquishing control, of being cordoned off from the wider world. When a space comes with instruction for use, waiting can be a relief. When thinking about a text that causes (or allows) him to daydream Certeau asks, ‘is reading an exercise in ubiquity?’ The question of the space of the launderette can be aligned with the sense of placelessness and impermanence that he identifies (or almost identifies) in the correlation of reading and daydreaming.

The launderette is only ever a temporary home, and yet it is a familiar one, its blueprint is copied again and again and each launderette is reminiscent of the last. Like the book that allows you to daydream, you know how to use the launderette even if you have not been to it before. If you do not know what to do the launderette will tell you. The sparse

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110 Augé, *In the Metro* p.8.
111 Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* p.196.
and cogent texts upon the walls and machines are instructions for use; clearly written lists of rules, with the occasional plea for good behaviour.

Please check all pockets before putting washing into machines.\textsuperscript{115}

The self-service, coin-operated launderette is a space governed by a series of clearly written instructions. The success of an unmanned launderette depends entirely upon instructions that can be followed. Launderette washing machines are ruinously expensive to repair so it is in the launderette owner’s interest to make the machines easy to use and the instructions easy to follow. Instructions are defined as orders or commands but we could just as easily call them maps; they are routes through time, trajectories to be followed.\textsuperscript{116}

\begin{itemize}
  \item No dye,
  \item Check pockets,
  \item Do not slam the door.\textsuperscript{115}
\end{itemize}

They imply a certain spacing of time and predict the future while retracing the past. One launderette sign includes the cryptic instruction ‘Rember number,’ which we can translate as ‘remember number’.\textsuperscript{116} This kindly reminder can only have been instituted after a series of forgetful customers found their way from their machine to the pay point only to have forgotten their number; the sign stands as a memorial to all those wasted journeys from machine to pay point, lest we forget, lest we forget.
The launderette is not simply a place where you play follow the leader. While the signs do separate the space from that of the home (you would not find any instructions for use in your bedroom) they are incidental to the main activity of the space which is waiting. There are no signs which instruct you as to how to wait, far from it; the launderette is entirely un-policed for this period of time. You can eat, drink and (until recently) smoke. What will you do; stare into space? Eavesdrop on fellow customers? Talk to them? Watch them? Or will you read your newspaper, your book, your magazine? I like to do a mixture of all of these, and from time to time I will look up from the pages of my book engaged in a pleasant vacancy, a swimming, a suspension. Can we define this suspension? One way to do it would be to call it a constitutive break, an inhabited pause that makes way for something else, something other. The pleasure of the launderette can ultimately be found in the daydream and a playful delinquency. And these experiences are pleasurable only because they are a break from the norm, they are out of order, but they will return in. Leaving home is only to return, pausing is only to start again, the daydream must come to an end. Like the humming sounds of the machines, registered only in their shifts of tone or speed, the pleasure is in the intermittence between starting and stopping. We are thrilled or amused by glimpses of disorder, glimpses even of death; play at the transient occupation of space, repeat the ritual of moving through, crossing over, letting go.

Themes suggested by the eruv can be read in the strayed home of the launderette as follows; concrete allegory can be located in that which goes beyond the apparent function of the spaces, the washing and drying of dirty clothes. I have used Douglas’s sense of ‘creative reordering’ to think about this. It is significant that this creative reordering is characterised
in the launderette by a certain stillness, by the experience of solitary collectivity and –
crucially, by leaving the house. I have written that doing the laundry does not just occupy a
position of temporal tension through its ability to clean what was once dirty (to undo what
has been done) but also in the way in which, through inherited gestures and methods, it
performs the continuation of the past. In the launderette we find the temporary presence of
the domestic in a space that is public, this is characterised by the presence of dirty and
personal items but also by the practice of waiting. It is a space of peculiar pleasures and a
space where the interplay of the imaginary and immediate can be read. I have shown that
these pleasures can be aligned with the experience of a spatial gape and that the matter out
of place of the strayed home can be experienced as pleasurable. Regardless of what non-
launderette users think of the people who use them (lazy, odd, out of order) most launderette
customers enjoy the time it takes to wash and dry their clothes and relish the ‘mixing’ that
takes place there. This works against the logic of washing-machine adverts (and indeed
most technological marketing) that says simply, ‘faster is better.’ The launderette is a
‘gossip shop for lazy people’ in the sense that it is a space of transfer and mixing as well as
leisure and time wasting. Unpacking the experience of this leisurely time wasting is
important to understanding the peculiarity of the space. Unlike almost any other structure
in the city this is one which encourages waiting, pausing, and thinking, doing – some might
say – nothing. It is a fugitive place and a place for daydreaming. It is a space conditioned by
but also offering respite from solitude. Even though these rooms (for they are rarely more
than one room shops) are places for exchange (gossip) and escape, they are also strangely
familiar and offer, against the odds, comfort.

I love launderettes for the spaces they provide where people can be comfortable
together even as strangers, enjoying innocent camaraderie, and spending time
outside the home in a relaxed place of social possibility.117

The Laundromat is one of the few places in which I allow my mind to wander.118

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117 The gentle author ‘The Lost World of Launderettes’ Spitalfields Life (April 2010)
Chapter Three. *Couchette*
3.1 Introduction

This chapter is a reading of the space of the sleeper train that tries to unpick the romance that still surrounds it. The couchette is a train filled with beds, a place in which you sleep with strangers. It is also a recurring set for narratives that draw together crime, romance and the everyday. The chapter looks in particular at Agatha Christie’s *Murder on the Orient Express*, Graham Greene’s *Stamboul Train*, and Jerzy Kawalerowicz’s *Night Train*. It is the action of drawing (or throwing) people together that is key to the pleasures of the space. This leads to visual pleasures made possible by the framing and foreclosure of the space. These visual pleasures are examined here as collage and cut up. The couchette is not an everyday space but a space which exaggerates many of the surreal and childish pleasures of the strayed home. In section two, Double Negative, the negatives performed by the space, that of place and that of consciousness, are examined. Like the space of the bed and the space of the stage, the sleeper train can be read as a space that is here and not here – you are ‘on a train’ and nowhere else. Adding to this drama is the experience of sharing the intimate and surreal divide between day and night, between consciousness and unconsciousness, with a strange and changing cast of characters. In section three, Hide and Seek, the space is examined as one of childish exaggeration where bodies are felt to shrink and grow in reaction to the strange proportions of the train. It shrinks distances and swells time; its passengers shrink and grow in turn. The trains themselves engage in a play of compensation in their design and procedural practices. In section four, Missing and Crossing, the drawing together that the spaces allow for is thought about in terms of time. Using Derrida’s conception of *contretemps* I suggest that one of the greatest pleasures allowed for by the train is that of coincidence. The desire for or pleasure taken in coincidence is the temporal version of claustrophilia (pleasure taken in being enclosed in small spaces, the need to shut drawers and doors), which is also experienced as both pleasurable and painful on the sleeper train. The conclusion will draw together the space with that of the launderette to think about the category of strayed home.
The sleeper train is uncomfortable, it smells of other people and its sounds are disturbing. Still you must make it your home for the night, get into its bed and fall asleep. While you sleep you will be carried across borders, through forests and towns, past sleepy stations and places whose names you may never know. The experience of using the *wagons-lit* is one which troubles our natural sensitivity to time and space. Time seems to grow, stretching to fit the fact that all you can do is wait; while space seems to shrink and expand as though you were Alice under the influence of the caterpillar’s mushroom.\(^1\) They are spaces which have inspired countless writers and film makers in the way in which they are neither here nor there, (or here and here and here); they allow for leaps of imagination and suspension of disbelief. Agatha Christie, Alfred Hitchcock, Graham Greene. Why is the sleeper train a place where murder, coincidence and romance seem to find themselves again and again? And has this literary and filmic interpretation ever been borne out in real life?

Like an archaic manifestation of the internet, long-distance train networks are part of a great network of connectivity, communication and trade. The train shrinks experience

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\(^1\) *the Caterpillar took the hookah out of its mouth and yawned once or twice, and shook itself. Then it got down off the mushroom, and crawled away in the grass, merely remarking as it went, “One side will make you grow taller, and the other side will make you grow shorter.”* Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971) p.57.
of distances, speeds up interaction and generally forms part of the mechanism of modernity. The experience of being on one of these trains however is conversely static. You are exempt from the world, out of time and place, you are nowhere. Michel de Certeau conceives of railway navigation as a kind of ‘incarceration’ a being-held-immobile as you travel through immobility. Stepping out of this incarceration at the end of your journey is momentarily disorientating, it is as though you are stepping from one time zone to another. He writes, ‘there is another threshold, composed of momentary bewilderments in the airlock constituted by the train station. History begins again.’ History has been interrupted, paused by the train journey; because history is placed, located and has roots, the train is a place that resists history. There is the sense that nothing can really happen while you are on a train. The much-used and constantly overheard phrase ‘I’m on the train’ goes some way to perform this sense of delinquency. It is spoken, self-consciously, with the knowledge that it is clichéd, into a mobile phone but also, somehow, for the benefit of the surrounding passengers (we are all in it together); ‘I’m on the train’, it’s an excuse, a confession, a get out of jail free card. ‘I’m on a train,’ so I cannot be held responsible for what happens next, so I might not be able to do whatever it is you are about to ask me to do, ‘I’m on a train,’ so – no.

The double negative of transit and sleep makes the space of the sleeper train an irrational space. Michel Foucault describes the train as ‘an extraordinary bundle of relations since it’s something through through which one passes [and is also] something that passes by,’ and the bed as a place where ‘the emplacement of repose’ is located. He does not speculate on what happens when the two are combined. By double negative I mean firstly the negation of location and secondly that of consciousness that takes place on the trains. Like the grammatical double negative this is not a simple algebra that means two negatives equal a positive. The quality of the grammatical affirmative made by the presence within a sentence of two negative terms is queered somewhat; it expresses an aporetic affirmative, a statement that pivots on itself gesturing to what it does not say in what it does. The first negative of the sleeper train is that of place, you let go of your location, absent yourself from your place of departure, and submit to the power of external forces to get you there. The second negative, not restricted to the train that travels overnight, but only officially catered for there, is that of sleep. The Oxford English Dictionary defines sleep as,

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3 Certeau, ibid.
The naturally occurring (esp. nightly) condition of repose and inactivity assumed by people and most higher animals in which consciousness, response to external stimuli and voluntary muscular action are largely suspended.\(^5\)

Sleep is simultaneously a negation of and surrender to consciousness. It is the most solitary of occupations and the most absent of occupations, and yet, it is still an occupation. The sleeping subject is very obviously there, his body takes up space, he is heavier, more present and obvious than when awake, and yet he is not there in any active way; he cannot be called upon and will not make any demands of those around him. We know from our own experience the abandon and potency of sleep; the person who sleeps in public is sensational. He causes problems for those around him because both response and action are suspended. In this way the sleeping subject is neither to be acted upon nor to act. He is also unguarded which involves those around him in an odd performance of responsibility and care; even though we may not want anything to do with the sleeping figure we are anxious for him, involved.

In terms of space the couchette performs a double negative, it moves so resists placement, and you sleep, so elude placement even further. First the moving carriage, slipping through space, enacts motion which is itself the constantly reaffirming negative of letting go, moving through, leaving behind. Then, moving inside the train carriage, we find the space of the bed which is always a place that complicates presence. Georges Perec writes,

> Bed: where unformulated dangers threatened, the place of contraries, the space of the solitary body unencumbered by its ephemeral harems, the foreclosed space of desire, the improbable place where I lay my roots, the space of dreams and of an Oedipal nostalgia.\(^6\)

Perec conceives of the bed as ‘foreclosed space,’ a space that is edged, held in, specific. The word foreclose derives from the Latin foris (outside or foreign) and clere (to shut) lending it a contrary tension between keeping in and keeping out. Foreclosed space is that which you cannot escape, space shut up, the blocking of an opening. For Perec the bed is the foreclosed space of desire, which again seems to link two contrary forces; the shut off space of that impulse which cannot be contained (desire). This outward movement, this out-reaching, in bed, must be the solitary effort of day and night dreaming, a going out which can go nowhere other than inside. So is a bed (any bed) simultaneously inside and outside a room?

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It is a space of sleep, of absenting, of love-making and of waking (of appearance and disappearance). What makes a bed; is it pillows? sheets? desire?

### 3.2.1 Double Negative – Location

The way in which bed and train resist placement draws them together with the space of the stage. This is the placement of the double negative. Mark Cousins has said ‘one of the most extraordinary inventions of drama is this idea that the stage can be anywhere else but itself.’ Like the space of the stage, the couchette is out of time and place; time is suspended and place is anywhere but here. Barthes writes,

> The great tragic sites are arid lands squeezed between the sea and the desert, shade and sun raised to the absolute state . . . This geography sustains a special relation between the home and its exterior . . . the tragic stage is not strictly secret, it is rather a blind alley, the anxious passage from secrecy to effusion, from immediate fear to fear expressed.\(^8\)

As the ‘foreclosed space of desire’ the space of the bed is a site of innumerable desires, but ones which must play by the rules of this enclosure. These are the same rules that govern the scene or the stage; they are the rules of delimited space and time. Like the space of the stage, the couchette is self-contained; it is a world (and law) unto itself and is therefore a space of possibility and play.

Agatha Christie’s *Murder on the Orient Express* is her most spatially curtailed fiction. Aboard the train from Istanbul to Paris a man is killed during the night. During the same night the train drives into a snow bank and is brought to a standstill. No one can get onto or off the train. While the train lies dormant the next day (waiting for the tracks to be cleared) the detective Hercule Poirot begins investigations into the murder. Not only is the space of the crime limited but the space of detection too, for he can make no contact with the police to verify what any of the passengers are telling him. Poirot remarks:

> What to my mind is so interesting in this case is that we have none of the facilities afforded to the police. We cannot investigate the bonafides of any of these people. We have to rely solely on deduction.\(^9\)

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\(^7\) Mark Cousins, ‘Law and Antigone’, lecture at The ICA 2011.


The way in which he must depend on deduction; on what can be understood or interpreted from what can be seen (and what cannot be seen) links the genre of detective fiction (and this example in particular) to Greek tragedy. Ruth Padel has written that Athenian tragedy performed the impossible tension between inside and outside; ‘this is the theatre exulting in possibilities of relating inside to outside, unseen to seen, private inner experience to the external watching and guessing of others.’ It is this ‘watching and guessing of others’ which is heightened by the claustrophobic space of the train. Every detail becomes magnified, every statement a contretemps-trap.

“But what have you to go on?” . . .
“We have the evidence of the passengers and the evidence of our own eyes.” . . .
“From now on, it is all in here”, he tapped himself on the forehead.
“We have thrashed it all out. The facts are all in front of us – neatly arranged with order and method. The passengers have sat here one by one, giving their evidence. We know all that can be known – from outside.”

The impossibility of knowing something from the outside is what creates drama. Reading is a surface activity that hopes always to uncover what lies beneath the surface.

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11 ‘Dates, timetables, property registers, place-names, all the codes that we cast like nets over time and space in order to reduce or master differences, to arrest them, determine them –these are also contretemps-traps.’ Jacques Derrida, ‘Aphorism Countertime’, *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge, trans. Nicholas Royle, (New York: Routledge, 1992) p.419.

The spatial set up of *Murder on the Orient Express* echoes the space of classic tragedy. Froma Zeitlin writes that ‘by convention this space is constructed as an outside in front of a facade of a building. There is a door which leads to an inside which is hidden from view.’ The Orient Express is an inside trapped in a menacing and unfathomable outside moderated two-fold by the space of the corridor. The corridor stands between the outside (snow) and the hidden inside of the passengers’ compartments.

“At half an hour after midnight, as you all know, the train ran into a snow drift. After that time it was impossible for anyone to leave the train.” . . .

“The only thing that his evidence did show plainly was that no one in any other part of the train could possibly have murdered Ratchett. It drew a clear circle round the Stamboul-Calais carriage.”

This ‘clear circle’ is a version of the ‘magic circle’ inherent to all play. The space inside it is foreclosed, curtailed and thus actions are heightened, exaggerated and surreal.

Roland Barthes has written about spaces of the tragic stage in a way that elaborates on this paradoxical magnification of the minimal. The smaller the stage, the more static the scene, the greater the tension. He cuts the space into three, the stage proper (which he calls

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the Antechamber), off stage (the Chamber) and the audience or world. The Antechamber is held still between the world and the Chamber. He makes a crucial distinction between these spaces. The Chamber, during the scene, is a space of imminence and terror. It is made present throughout by the presence of a door which though never opened speaks only of the possibility that it will be.

Fixed between the world, a place of action, and the Chamber, a place of silence, the Antechamber is the site of language. It is here that tragic man, lost between the letter and the meaning of things, utters his reasons. The tragic stage is not strictly secret . . . it is rather a blind alley, the anxious passage from secrecy to effusion, from immediate fear to fear expressed.15

In *Murder on the Orient Express* the corridor functions as an Antechamber. It is a space of crossing, missing and collision, a space of heightened tension due to the curtailed sight and movement it allows for. The misleading evidence given to Poirot (and the reader) depends upon events or encounters reported as having been seen or heard taking in the corridor. The mysterious (and entirely fanciful) figure of the woman in the red kimono is one such piece of evidence. Several passengers report seeing her disappear in the same direction from the safety of their compartment vantage point; door ajar, looking only one way, they could see nothing but her back.

The dramatic potential of the corridor (half slapstick, half horror) is a feature of all train-based dramas. In Alfred Hitchcock’s 1959 thriller *North by Northwest*16 the one-way direction traffic of the corridor allows Roger Thornhill to spot his pursuers before they see him. The curtailed inevitability of the space is made explicit in Jerzy Kawalerowicz’s 1959 film *Pociąg* (Night Train)17 with a chase that runs the length of the train before the hounded man throws himself overboard. Both scenarios are farcical and frightening, the pursued can see his pursuers, knows they are behind him and can only keep on going. The ‘stage’ is cluttered with people who are both audience and obstacles whose presence only serves to heighten the tension and the sense of farce. Graham Greene recognised the theatrical nature of the sleeper-train setting, writing of his 1932 novel *Stamboul Train*; ‘I wanted to escape the

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16 *North by Northwest* dir. by Alfred Hitchcock (Metro Goldwyn Mayer, 1959) Hitchcock was particularly fond of the train as stage-setting, using it to ‘throw together’ a series unsuspecting strangers in *Suspicion* and *The 39 Steps*. This uneasy collusion of the coincidence and the plan is one of Agatha Christie’s favourite devices as well. Keith Lovegrove notes that the train was the setting or set up for many of Hitchcock’s cameos; – A man at London’s Victoria Station in *The Lady Vanishes* (1938); a card player abroad a train to Santa Rosa in *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943); a passenger alighting a train with a cello in *The Paradine Case* (1947); and a man boarding a train with a double bass in *Strangers on a Train* (1951).’ *Railway – Identity, design and culture* (London: Lawrence King, 2004) p.26. 17 *Pociąg*, (Night Train) dir. by Jerzy Kawalerowicz (Telepix, 1959)
vast liquidity of the novel and to play out the most important situation on a narrow stage
where I could direct every movement of my characters.'\(^{18}\) The contents page of the book
which lists parts one to five, each with its own location, reflects Greene’s desire for solidity
over liquidity. The progress of the novel, so the page says, will be as certain and as linear as
a train on its track. There is a surprisingly post-modern sensibility at work in the collusion
of space, text and technology as the form of the page reiterates the link between a passage of
text and a passage of travel. The thrill of a list of places with nothing but space between
them opens up a lottery of possibilities that echoes the heightened tension of the foreclosed
circle of play or the trapped space of the tragic stage, held between door and audience; what
will happen in between? Between the specific certainty of OSTEND, COLOGNE, VIENNA,
SUBOTICA and CONSTANTINOPLE, the contents page only gives the clue of the
increasing page number. The chapter names are taken from the sides of the train carriages
which make the journey which makes up the book, carriages that are uncoupled and left
behind as the journey unfolds. The austere and weighty destinations, the coupling of
numbers and unembellished printed place names also echoes the form of the ticket.

Ticket in hand, the passenger/traveller tries to read the spaces between ‘Departure/From’
and ‘Arrival/To’. In this case it is the space between PARIS NORD and LONDON ST-
PANCRAS. It is resolutely unreadable, refusing to give up any of the secrets of the passage,
resisting interpretation. The names of the cities themselves are blank too, black block
capitals spelling out capitals; like dictionary definitions with no definition, they do not
elaborate. The terse ticket pretends cogency and logic, it is in fact magic. The future is
predicted (arrival time: 08.09) and a complete translation of place and person will have been
effected by the time it arrives.

The most compelling thing about the ticket is what it does not say. It is the symbol of and through a gap. It is a silent password. On ancient Roman maps, lands yet to be explored were marked with the phrase ‘HIC SVNT LEONES’; here be lions. Do the blank spaces implicit in the ticket to travel fill us with a similar trepidation? Blank space is something we encounter repeatedly throughout our lives and conjures up memories of childhood, school and exams. Then it was something we wrote upon, marking, transforming, filling. For the passenger it is something we will travel into and through. Nancy P. Nenno writes, ‘the blank space functions as a site for the inscription of identity.’ She considers the maps of the Alps in the early 20th century, blank spaces marked only with the phrase ‘Terra incognita’ and asserts that they were ‘not merely a place holder, words to fill the empty space on a map but also the articulation of a challenge to fill that space with words, with narratives, with names.’

Does the ticket function in a similar way? It would be interesting to compare the way space and time is figured in tickets and contents pages with the way it is figured in the maps discussed by Barthes and Certeau as well as modern maps.

The instability of the space of the train, described here as a series of negatives, is not a fanciful construction, as anyone who has travelled by these conveyances knows. The borders that are crossed by the train are heavily policed, pointing to the unstable legality of the space inside it. Who has jurisdiction over the speeding carriage? Policed by the beauracracy of belonging and belongings, at each border two sets of border police can join the train and passengers will be asked for their passports and (if so ordered) subjected to having their luggage searched. The legality of the spaces is worryingly up for grabs. Like the eruv they are problematic in this way, not quite legal loopholes but suggestive of legal leapfrogs. The jurisdiction of the border has been playfully used a plot device by programmes like The Bridge and The Tunnel. In both these television series a dead body is discovered on the border between two countries (Denmark and Sweden, England and France). The play is between the insurmountable materiality of the dead body and the man-made magic of borders and jurisdiction. Agatha Christie’s Murder on the Blue Train gives voice to this fruitful legal loophole.

“You shouldn’t die on a train,” remarked Derek flippantly. “I believe it causes all sorts of legal and international complications, and it gives the train an excuse for being even later than usual.”

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Not seen as bad luck, but an omen of some kind, is the inverse, being born on a train. When it happens there are reports in the newspaper, announcements are made. The dancer Rudolph Nureyev, famous for the height of his vertical leaps, took his birth on the Trans-Siberian railway as a symbol of his ancestry and of his own place (or lack of it) in the world. ‘He had always been a wanderer, he said … he was to be buried under a rug woven by his people, Tartas of the Steppes, Muslim nomads and carpet makers.’

3.2.2 Double Negative – Consciousness

If the first negative of the sleeper train is a refusal of placement (made by movement) then the second is a refusal of consciousness (made by sleep). Built into the timetable of the journey in a couchette is prescribed and shared sleep. The experience of the trains is thus strange and strangely familiar. Nothing could be more familiar to you than sleep – but you are forced to share this experience with strangers in a strange place. The surreal nature of this forced intimacy is alluded to by Greene when he talks about the ‘narrow stage’ of the sleeper train; it has the effect of exaggerating and heightening its contents. Narrowsness inflicts itself on the people in the train; they come too close to one another, squeezing past each other in the corridor and witnessing the private rituals of sleep and sleep-preparation in the compartments. If condensation and displacement are the attributes of dreams, then they are also the attributes of a journey on a sleeper train. Walter Benjamin’s description of the phenomenon of Surrealism (for those who were part of it in 1924) could easily be a description of a journey made overnight (or over several nights) from West to East, on the Orient Express.

Where the threshold between waking and sleeping was worn away in everyone as if by the toing and froing of streams of images; language seemed itself only where sound and image, image and sound, meshed so successfully, with such automatic precision, as to leave no chink through which the least grain of ‘sense’ might escape.

The sleeper train is a place of constant transgression; no borders are respected, every line can be crossed. The train travels across legal and physical borders as it traverses day and night, inside lines between the private and public and the conscious and unconscious all

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22 Greene, p.xii.
become tangled. Greene plays with this opening of borders as he embeds the dreams of his characters into the story and into one another.

The figures began to swim before his eyes in a mist of sleep. Ones, sevens, nines, became Mr. Eckman’s small sharp teeth’ sixes, fives, threes, reformed themselves in a trick film into Mr. Eckman’s dark polished eyes.25

In 1839 the French government commissioned Constantin Pecqueur to make a study of the Belgian railway system. Proposing, as a result, a public national railway system for France, Pecqueur conceived of the future railway as a great leveler. He exclaimed; ‘it is the same convoy, the same power, that carries the great and the small, the rich and the poor; thus, the railroads must generally provide a continuous lesson in equality and fraternity.’26 He would have been disappointed to know that four hundred years later space on the railway is divided up with almost as much rigour as space elsewhere (by what you can afford to pay, into different zones and classes) but might have been cheered by the relentlessly strange assortment of people who do find themselves joined together (however briefly) by the necessity of travel. If we all experience something of this context collapse during our morning commute the sleeper train is a space in which the experience is extended and exaggerated.27

The corridors are dream spaces because they are a space of concentration, things and people appear in a rebus-like order of nonsense, all hemmed in and concertinaed by the space. An elderly lady, a pack of scouts, a furious Frenchman with a tremendous moustache, a man carrying a limp looking spaniel. And you in the midst of them, equally absurd in your pyjamas. It’s not so bad if you stay in one place, moving around is dangerous. If you need to brush your teeth, wash your face or use the toilet then you must disentangle yourself from the paltry, hairs-width sheet, clamber down from your bunk, and slide open the compartment door to the dark and noisy corridor outside. It is the corridors of these trains that are the real dream spaces. Out in the corridor, armed with only toothbrush or wash bag (armed and exposed) you stagger to the toilet which is always located at the end of the carriage, just before the join between two carriages. This space will contain the smokers, drug-takers and ticketless travellers. Once inside the lavatory you must grapple with

25 Greene, p.18.
27 Content collapse is a term being used in cyborgology studies to talk about newly affected forms of society and sociability brought about by emerging technological platforms. See Jenny Davis and Nathan Jurgenson, ‘Content Collapse: A Literature Review’, The Society Pages http://thesocietypages.org/cyborgology/2013/01/10/context-collapse-a-literature-review/ (accessed December 2013)
various things, the mirror made of metal that reveals a blurred reflection, and then of course the facilities themselves; dirty, utterly utilitarian, and occasionally revealing the racing track over which you travel.

The experience of being squeezed and of becoming too close to other people as you travel can be pleasurable. Every account of a journey on these trains carries with it a brief tableau of characters and again we can see a surrealist link. In each of these accounts the pleasure taken is the same pleasure found in the surprise and juxtaposition of the collage. Collage is the systematic exploitation of the coincidental or artificially induced encounter of two or more unrelated realities on an apparently inappropriate plane – and the spark of poetry that leaps across the gaps between them.  

In the case of the night-time scene of the sleeper it is not so much a spark of poetry as it is a spark of terror or horror that ‘leaps between the gaps.’ The scene is redolent of the aftermath of a bomb; dismembered bodies, jumbled figures, undone shapes and edges.

He was passing the non-sleeping compartments in the second class, men with their waistcoats off sprawled along seats, blue about the chin; women with their hair in dusty nets, like the string bags on the racks, tucked their skirts tightly round them and fell in odd shapes over the seats, large breasts and small thighs, small breasts and large thighs, hopelessly confused.

The same ‘hopeless confusion’ is brought to life in another guise in the sleeper-train scene from Some Like it Hot. This collage is farcical, the crowded bodies and disembodied limbs make it a space of innuendo, sexual fantasy and uncanny repetition. Thirteen girls in a berth, a hot water bottle cocktail shaker and the constant possibility that someone will discover Daphne is in fact Gerald . . .

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29 Greene, p.20.
30 Some Like it Hot dir. by Billy Wilder (United Artists, 1959)
Figure 19. Getting ready for bed between Chicago and Miami. *Some Like it Hot*, dir. by Billy Wilder (United Artists, 1959)

Figure 20. Bedtime crush in *Some Like it Hot*.

A similar relish for coincidence, comparison and juxtaposition is expressed in the Launderette narratives offered by Levi’s and Bruce Robinson. These are oddly assorted collections of people, brought together by coincidence and shared expediency rather than intention. On the sleeper train these collections are always remarkably vivid and diverse.
All around us are people of all classes, of all nationalities, of all ages. For three days these people, these strangers to one another, are brought together. They sleep and eat under one roof, they cannot get away from each other.31

There was a New Zealand archaeologist on his way to Tashkent and Alma . . . [an] English lady schoolteacher and keep fit enthusiast who skipped a rope at every station to the delight of the Siberians . . . a brisk septuagenarian San Francisco lawyer who proved he was an expert traveller by producing an all-purpose wash basin stopper.32

There’s the lady from Wellesley who writes for the Atlantic Monthly; an eggshaped Armenian from New York who was brought up at the monastery of San Lazarro in Venice, studied painting in Asolo . . . there’s another Armenian whose mother, father and three sisters were cut up into little pieces before his eyes by the Turks in Trebizond; there’s a tall, iron-grey Standard Oil man, very tall, with a little potbelly the shape of half a football.33

Figure 18. Curiosity in the corridor in The Darjeeling Limited dir. by Wes Anderson (Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2007)

The collage effect of the couchette is made possible by the framing that happens there. Both collage and framing are visual modes of manipulation and the pleasures of the

31 Christie, Orient Express p.38.
sleeper train are pleasures of spectacle above all. The train is linked with the form of film and dream because of this visual sensibility. Vision is obstructed, spliced, cut up and skewed on the train, and everything is framed, captured or curtailed. Jerzy Kawalerowicz’s Pociąg (Night Train), filmed in the same year as Some Like It Hot, pays particular attention to the scopophilic aspects of a journey by train. Almost every shot is hemmed or cut up by part of the train, bunk beds crop faces, doors splice up corridors, buckles, belts, coats and luggage racks exude into the picture. The effect of all of this is at once surreal and authentic. A jumble of bodies and body parts, an assortment of figures pressed together in a corridor or third class carriage, gives rise to the strange concentration and confrontation of the collage, but it is also prosaic and familiar; this is what many overnight train journeys are actually like.

I want to address the pleasure of the cut up screen, which Kawalerowicz makes such a feature of, because it is a pleasure that persists in the way people experience and think about these spaces, and because it can be seen to offer a form of the spatial gape. The first type of cut up is the obstructed view; this is when part of the screen is obliterated by train furniture like an open door or a berth. The screen shifts from its regular rectangular shape to being that of a trapezium or irregular rhomboid. The effect means figures and views are cut up, characters are left without eyes or hands or appear as only disembodied limbs before coming further into shot. This device allows for a playful oscillation between sense and nonsense. The staggering of comprehension, as though injecting a stutter into the sightline of the audience, holds the ‘gap’ that Benjamin alluded to, open. The shot that cuts a chin and mouth away from its owner’s eyes makes the mundane uncanny, the shot that shows a disembodied arm before revealing the person it is attached to makes the inanimate animate. Thoughts of death haunt more than one passenger on the train (the traumatised doctor who insists that a girl uncover her feet because the white sheet reminds him of a corpse under a winding sheet in a morgue, a group of men who discuss the recent murder written about in their newspaper while another man, further down the carriage, tries to forget all about it.) The unspoken allusions to death are made through a series of spatial gapes exemplified in this case by the cut up screen. There is displacement and refreshment and a slowed down elongation of the moment between nonsense and sense. Here the ‘spark of poetry’ that Max Ernst finds leaping between the gaps of collage is staggered, arrested; the cut up screen working at the ‘fault, the flaw, the seam’ which Barthes found so erotic. Wes Anderson pays attention to the possibilities of these framing devices with characteristic claustrophilic relish in The Darjeeling Limited.
Figures 21, 22, & 23. Cut ups on the couchette in *Pociąg*, dir. by Jerzy Kawalerowicz (Telepix, 1959)
To look at Kawalerowicz’s cut up screens alongside Sophie Calle’s image from a sleeper train is to be reminded that they also make a spectacle of voyeurism. The compromised view is taken from behind something, it directs the viewer’s attention to what is behind as well as what is in front of the screen. It is the point of view of one who watches. Calle’s image shows a view from the floor or the bottom berth of a cabin. Looking upwards it shows legs, two shoes and one bare foot. A ladder leads to a berth strung with iron netting, luggage spills over, a coat hangs on a peg. The scene is almost abstract, a series of geometric shapes fitted into one another, a series of textures and shades of light. Taken from her book *Suite Vénitienne* which documents the two weeks she spent following a stranger in Venice, the image is clearly intended to capture an experience of subterfuge and
surveillance. It was taken with a hidden camera as its awkward angle and intimate proximity to the body parts it captures might suggest. As with the cut up screens of Pociąg the image inserts the viewer into the shot, implicating them in this secret and untoward vantage point. A voyeur is one who derives sexual stimulation from the covert observations of others, or someone who observes without participating; a voyeur can be someone who takes pleasure in watching when it is not known that that is what he is doing, but also someone who watches without being able to intervene. The first sense is of a watcher who is passive intentionally the second unintentionally. The experience of travelling on a sleeper train forces the voyeur’s vantage point upon us, even if we do not necessarily take his pleasure in the situation. The sense of incarceration or immobility that can be located within the passive experience of voyeurism (seeing without being able to act on what it is you see) compounds the unwelcome proximity of the space.

The second type of cut up screen, which appears in all train films as well as in train advertising, is the carved screen. This type of image fits into a long lineage of images depicting vanishing points, here rendered as a curve that fits between ground and sky. The effect recalls the turning of a lathe to produce an edge, the impact of shape upon shape. The pleasures of these images must have something to do with the pleasures described by Ponge and Perec, they are the pleasures of end points, limits and edges. These views offer us vantage points of a different kind to those of the voyeur but perhaps they stroke the same anxieties. Dos Passos describes how ‘huge rounded shoulders of hills cut into the stars’, as he gazes out of the window of his Orient Express. Moments like this of watching the tracks spool out from the back of a train (or watching its great bulk move through the landscape from an open window) are speechless. They are about the feeling of sight. Marc Augé writes about standing on the deck of a ship as it puts out to see as ‘the ideal vantage point – because it combines the effect of movement with distance.’ The recycled image of train track cutting through countryside, hurtling towards (or away from) an ever receding sky and ground, hurtling into a horizon, capture this sense of movement and distance but can also be aligned with the images Bachelard calls ‘miniatures’. They are experiences of safe and pleasurable abstraction which shrink the subject at their centre.

He entered into a miniature world and right away images began to abound, then grow, then escape. Large issues from small, not through the logical law of a dialectics of contraries but thanks to liberation from all obligations of dimensions.

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35 Dos Passos, p.159.
36 Augé, Non-places p.89.
What Bachelard describes as liberation is in fact brought about through confinement. There is, as we will see, relief to be taken from the small, the close and the curtailed. Francis Ponge thinks about this spatial paradox in terms of the uniform and the thoughts of immortality.

The sea, up to the edge of its limits, is a simple thing that repeats itself wave after wave. But in nature not even the simplest things reveal themselves without all kinds of full and formality, nor the most complex without undergoing some simplification. This—and also for reasons of rancor against the immortality that overwhelms him—is why man rushes to the perimetres and intersections of things in order to define them. For at the heart of the uniform, reasoning is dangerously shaky and elusive: a mind in search of ideas should first stock up on appearances.  

Perec finds the same relief and attraction to end points, the sleek lines and smooth abstraction of the carved screen give a sense of what it might be like to be inside a Bachelardian miniature, when the world takes its measurements from you. Perec finds relief and pleasure in these end points of abstraction: ‘Like everyone else, I presume, I feel an attraction for zero points, for the axes and points of reference from which the positions and distances of any object in the universe can be determined.’

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39 Perec, p.82.

Pociąg and The Darjeeling Limited.
3.3 Hide and Seek

“It was much pleasanter at home”, thought poor Alice, “when one wasn’t always growing larger and smaller.”

The couchette is a playful space, inviting invention and creativity as it forms a series of spaces within spaces containing objects that have been creatively adapted to fit and work. A space which invites play akin to the activity of den-making. In their essay ‘Location Envy,’ Barry Curtis and Claire Pajaczkowska align the recognition of different zones containing different behaviour and emotions within a home as something that is comprehended (without being explicitly taught) during childhood. They write that, thanks to the mobility and transmutability of libidinal drives, this emotional state can be rediscovered in spaces other than the home. It can be found in ‘forms of envelopment that are as ephemeral as music, as momentary as the taste of the madeleine dipped in tisane, as sublime as the faith in celestial paradise or as solid as a bomb shelter.’ The emotional state – evoked by the manipulability but also strictly demarcated space of the sleeper train, is one that recalls the making of a space within a space, this is the childish play of den-making. Den-making involves a very particular kind of envelopment, one that draws a line between the child and the surrounding world when such a line already exists. So, sitting under the table in the kitchen or playing in a box in the hall, sitting under the clothes drying on the clotheshorse, or playing between the curtains and the window. This line can also be made through a series of pretended boundaries, making spaces through make-believe. Curtis and Pajaczkowska draw comparisons between this practice and the grand indoor-outdoor space of the Great Court at the British Museum. Part of the pleasure of that space is attributable to its den-like qualities, the playful, subversive, childish pleasure of drawing a line to create a space within a space. Of course, any lines drawn in the sleeper car are temporary, often invisible and generally permeable.

The experience of travelling in these spaces is one of compensation and constant negotiation. It leads us to ask what the effect of the den might be on the child if the den were having to be constantly remade. During a long-distance journey it might be the case that a number of different people and different assortments of people occupy and move through the same space. Similarly moving through corridor or dining car will be to be confronted by various spatial and social incursions. The inconstancy of the space is one of its most insistent features. Part of this is by design. Working within a very limited space designers of long-

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41 Barry Curtis and Claire Pajaczkowska, ‘Location Envy’, *Here, There, Elsewhere: Dialogues on Mobility* p.23 (London: Open Editions, 2002) p.23
42 Curtis and Pajaczkowska, p.29.
distance trains have to negotiate space and comfort, weighing up the one against the other, always with an eye on being able to provide space for the maximum number of ticket sales. The heightened sense of space on the train often begins with the disappearance or transformation of various parts and objects integral to the space of the train itself. The 1937 Pullman Roomette allowed a whole compartment to be turned into a bed. The Pullman Company advertised the model as follows:

The roomette is not actually a room. It is combination furniture inside which the passenger can move. The bed, lowering on balanced springs, absorbs almost the entire floor space. Walls and upholstery will reveal closets, wash basin, and toilet facilities."

This brief product summary is marvelously surreal as well as being darkly unnerving. The floor-absorbing bed recalls the shrinking prison cell of William Mudford’s *The Iron Shroud* in which an Italian nobleman is sentenced to a death. As he waits for his execution his cell minutely and imperceptibly shrinks around him, eventually crushing him in its ‘iron arms’. Written in 1830, giving form to the terrors mechanical horrors rather than supernatural ones, the story is a gothic classic: ‘Yes, yes. That is to be my fate. Yon roof will descend – these walls will hem me round – and slowly, slowly, crush me in their iron arms!’ Spatially it expresses the nightmare version of the envelopment described by Curtis and Pajaczkowska. There is a shade of the mechanical horror story in the Pullman text, the bed *absorbs* the floor, the upholstery *hides* then reveals closets. This latent thread of surreal terror was not without basis in reality. The train compartment was a scene of unobserved crime in the 19th century imagination. In an 1861 report for the French *Annales d’Hygiene Publique*, the murder of Chief Justice Poinsot was used as a model for the ‘dangers run by travellers on trains.’ These dangers had at their heart the isolated space of the compartment: “[Poinsot] shared his compartment with a single fellow passenger, his murderer.”

Developed in the late 1800s, the Pullman style was characterised by precisely this type of convertibility. The highly functional spaces and furniture were necessarily make-shift and thus (potentially) suspiciously double-natured. Giedion traces the development of the style from the boom in combination and patent furniture that took place in Europe and North America in 1869. As he describes it, these designs were uncanny in their ability.

45 *Annales d’Hygiene Publique*, quoted by Schivelbsuch, p.80.
46 *Annales d’Hygiene Publique*. 
They dissolve into one another. Multiformity and metamorphosis are part and parcel of their being. An armchair that changes into a couch, a couch that changes into a cradle … Everything is collapsible, folding, revolving, telescopic, recombinable.\(^{47}\)

The Pullman Roomette places the passenger inside this double-natured piece of furniture. They are able to move about. The illustration provided by the company shows a solitary female traveller posing rather awkwardly by day and pulling out a bed from a wall by night. Between day and night she has changed from flowery dress to silken dressing gown and the blind has been pulled over the window. Both images make a feature of the multiform nature of the space, operating what Giedion terms, ‘the law of the transmutability of plane surfaces’.\(^{48}\) The transmuted plane surface during day on the train is the triangular footrest that rises out of the floor, as though each segment of the compartment had the ability to respond to wherever the traveller wished to rest her feet. The version of the Roomette I travelled in (which is still making the twenty-six hour journey back and forth between Zagreb and Berlin) saw six strangers sliding around (when unconscious) or wedged awkwardly when conscious on the same (extremely comfortable it’s true) compartment-sized bed. This contraption metamorphosed from six facing seats to one large bed. The seats had allowed for relative privacy whereas the bed, as a single entity, did not. The procedure of transforming the compartment into a bed (a novel way of making the bed) was fun and involved the travelling strangers in cooperative work. Trying to fall asleep without accidentally placing your foot in the face of one of these strangers was more or less impossible. We embraced the mélange.

Alfred Hitchcock’s \textit{North by Northwest} uses the space of the sleeper-train to throw together its two protagonists, Roger Thornhill (Cary Grant) and Eve Kendall (Eve Marie Saint). On the run from the police and a criminal gang, Thornhill, who has been wrongly identified as the fictional C.I.A. agent George Kaplan, must skip town. His photograph has been splashed all over the newspapers so he decides to take the train rather than the plane. It is the idiosyncratic design of the train that provokes his decision; he explains to his mother; ‘the train is safer, because there’s no place to hide on a plane should anybody recognise me.’\(^{49}\) The capacity for the train to play with ‘the law of the transmutability of plane surfaces’\(^{50}\) is what makes it a good place to hide in. The overnight journey from New York to Chicago does turn into a prolonged game of hide-and-seek with Thornhill.

\(^{47}\) Siegfried Giedion, \textit{Mechanization Takes Command} p.423. \\
\(^{48}\) Giedion p.438. \\
\(^{49}\) \textit{North by Northwest}. \\
\(^{50}\) Giedion, p.438.
disappearing into all the secret compartments the train has to offer (corridor, toilet, compartment, bathroom, even at one stage the folded up bed in a cabin.) The game of hide and seek is alluded to when Kendall calls to let him know the coast is clear: ‘Come out, come out, wherever you are.’ The allusion adds another layer of the fantastic to the already surreal situation. The journey treads a fine line between farce and tragedy oscillating as it does between romantic comedy and man hunt. The sequence plays with the hyper-compartmentalised space as Thornhill and his pursuers move between spaces in a peek-a-boo game of appearance and disappearance.

Figures 27. & 28. *Hide & Seek in North by Northwest*  
dir. by Alfred Hitchcock (Metro Goldwyn Mayer, 1959)

On the train there are ingeniously designed combination-spaces. Historically the ingeniously designed combination spaces were not just there to make the most of the limited dimensions, but also to cover up or ameliorate the ways in which the new technology might
affect its passengers. Early travellers needed the security of iron (though perhaps upholstered) arms to counter the perceived dangers of their journey. Schivelbusch dismisses Freud’s assertion of a compulsive link between railway-travel and sexuality (based on the ‘pleasurable character of the sensation of movement’) and suggests that early passengers experienced ‘a feeling of impotence due to one’s being confined in a fast-moving piece of machinery without being able to influence it in the least.’ The train shrinks distances and swells time, its passengers shrink and grow in turn. The designers of early long-distance trains were attuned to the way in which the machines might trouble the natural sensitivity to time and space of their customers. After the introduction of the corridor in the 1860s, the new impetus for railroad companies seemed to be to reduce apprehensions passengers might have had about travelling on the trains. In a bid to erase anxiety and discomfort they became spaces of almost excessive luxury. Schivelbusch notes, ‘The conveyance was perfected, it worked ever more smoothly, and its disquieting idiosyncrasies were, if not abolished totally, at least ameliorated, or “upholstered.”’ This upholstering is much in evidence in figures 29. and 30. which show train interiors from an 1890 Pullman and the Pullmann ‘Roomette’ from 1919. To counter the confinement of the space, the 1890 Pullman was decorated with miniature furniture, built with the scale of the space in mind, so that a passenger might feel he had stepped into a shrunken world, or that he had grown. In the ‘Roomette,’ as we have seen, the walls and floor grow towards the passenger they contain, responding to her needs as the hour dictates.

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33 Schivelbusch, p.78.
35 Lovegrove, p.13.
The bid to create an illusion of groundedness and weight was a direct response to the speed and distance being travelled. It is traumatic to travel great distances at great speeds in confined spaces so a series of adjustments are made, both by those who travel and by those who facilitate travel. Modern trains tend to be more streamlined and ‘futuristic’ in appearance with the emphasis being placed on comfort and a canny utilisation of the limited space at hand. Patricia Highsmith’s Tom Ripley experiences the streamlined and smooth surfaces of the sleeper train as pleasurably ordered, there is no play of planes here, only cleanliness and efficiency which are divinely luxurious.

The white taut sheets of his berth on the train seemed the most wonderful luxury he had ever known. He caressed them with his hands before he turned the lights out …

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56 I am focusing here on the trains still used for getting from place to place rather than the luxury holiday trains which function as destinations in themselves – which retain or embellish the luxury of the old Pullman carriages.
and the clean blue-gray blankets, the spanking efficiency of the little black net over his head …

Tom is mentally disturbed and in the midst of an increasingly desperate escape from detection as the murderer of his friend so it is unsurprising that a space of excessive functionality and order should please him as it does. Passengers on board overnight trains today are perhaps more acclimatized to the experience of travelling great distances than they were in the last century but there is still a sense that attention should be focused on the inside of the train rather than where it passes or how it moves. The relative containment and control enjoyed in a cabin or berth is framed encouragingly as luxurious rather than claustrophobic. This sequence of images, taken from the Rail Europe sale website moves the prospective passenger through the series of spaces they will inhabit during their journey. We move from the compartment, where a bed casually strewn with newspapers invites the ideal traveller (clearly a business man or woman) to sleep and work in bed, to a shot which captures a couple at a table looking out of a window. The next shot, an aerial table view, shows an example of a meal which, the caption assures us, is fresh. The image is clearly intended to encourage the customer to buy the more expensive ticket, which includes food, but the movement the images make, from inside to looking outside to back inside is telling. While the view outside is idyllic and romantic, your gaze is directed back to the space of the table, which offers a series of activities all designed to locate you firmly in your seat.

The compensatory excess of the table is an analogue to the over-embellishment of the earlier trains’ interiors. Barthes find a similar compensation in the food and staging of food in his essay on the railroad dining car.

What Compagnie Cook’s *Prix-Fix* supplies is not so much food as a philosophy. Its principle is a wager: that the traveller should consume at the very heart of his journey, everything constitutively opposed by the journey.59

The very lack of a room engenders a great deal of napery, a cloud of tablecloths and napkins (they’re wrapped around everything, even the breadbasket), many *covers* – as if neither space nor time were in short supply for storing and washing them.60

This compensational spatial opposition occurs in other long-distance travel experiences. When faced with the surreal and dangerous experience of flying people tend to retreat inwards. On long distance flights you are met with various packages to *get into* to distract

60 Barthes, ibid.
you during the most traumatic part of your journey (just before take-off). You are presented in some cases with numerous packets containing socks, a blanket, a headset and toiletries, all hermetically sealed in cellophane. It is a marvel of containment, just when you think you have opened everything you find a small bag containing a box which reveals further boxes; inside these you find a tiny tube of toothpaste, a toothbrush that has to be constructed from two smaller parts, and a disconcerting pair of small skin-coloured plastic balls which turn out to be ear buds. The practice of reduction or miniaturisation can be seen at the start of all journeys; when people first find their seats and begin adjusting to the new territory that is theirs. They spread their belongings (smally) and make a little world out of what they can. They use the shelf above them, the net pouch by their knees and the stowaway space below their seat. They change their size, adjusting by increments to the new space. The method may have changed but this constitutive spatial opposition has often been deployed to suppress the anxiety of those who travel. The first menu aboard the ‘test’ train for the Orient Express company (no doubt planned as something of a celebration as well as an exercise in compensatory napery) was fittingly extravagant: oyster-soup with Italian pasta, turbot with green sauce, chicken ‘à la chasseur’, fillet of beef with ‘château’ potatoes, ‘chaud-froid’ of game animals, lettuce, chocolate pudding, buffet of desserts.\footnote{Istanbul Railway Museum.}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image33}
\caption{Savoury snacks on board the Darjeeling Limited.}
\end{figure}
Lines of demarcation on the sleeper train are often invisible and always permeable. This creates strange social tensions reflecting the difficulty of negotiating the space inside the train as well as reacting to the fact of its hurtling through space outside. Wolfgang Schivelbusch’s *The Railway Journey* charts the evolution of the train compartment and the concurrent evolution of an ‘industrialised consciousness’ which was shaped by the railroad itself.\(^\text{62}\) He writes that the early spaces within spaces of the train compartments and carriages were spaces to be feared, not only for the new form of social interaction they required of their passengers, but also because of the possibility in them for robbery and assault. Once the train had left the station, before the introduction of the corridor, you were trapped in your carriage with no chance of escape. The hide and seek game characteristic of modern couchettes had not yet evolved; the lack of a corridor meant that passengers were trapped in their compartments whenever the train was in motion. Instead of the playful alternation of spaces experienced on modern trains, passengers were forced to stay in their seats.

Until the 1860s, even the compartments of express trains could only be entered from outside: there was no communication between them. . . . This caused the travellers’ interrelationships to change from mere embarrassment at silence to fear of potential mutual threat. The train compartment became a scene of crime—a crime that could take place unheard and unseen by the travellers in adjoining compartments.\(^\text{63}\)

\(^{62}\) Schivelbusch, pp.159-177.

\(^{63}\) Schivelbusch, p.79.
There is nothing playful about incarceration, instead of intermittence there is stasis, instead of invention, ennui.

The trains do not just provide a difficult physical space to negotiate; they are also a problematic space for social interaction. The embarrassment identified by Schivelbusch as an embarrassment of shared silence was a factor that the introduction of the corridor did not remove. The constant adjustment that travellers make to account for spatial sensitivity is added to by an adjustment made in relation to who they are travelling with and how they should behave. One traveller on the early railroad complained about having to spend a long time in the public carriages where he was ‘subjected to all the noises’ and ‘vulnerable to all eyes and all ears’. This vulnerability to numerous disembodied eyes and ears is still one that is felt today. The presentation of an external surface to many watching and listening body parts is a continuing strain for the modern traveller on the couchettes. Anna Gaskell, interviewed about her travels on long-distance Chinese sleepers, weighed up the various merits of spatial or social freedom. Her pick was always for the top bunk.

The beds are all the same size, it is the space above them that differs (gets dramatically less) the higher the bunk. So the bottom bunk was always the 'social' one, because you didn't have to break your neck to sit straight while you were on it. But, as I said, the bottom bunk was also the most public, and the most shared. The journeys are long, so there is often day-time and night-time on the train. Good luck if you want your bottom bunk to yourself during the day-time!

Greene’s *Stamboul Train* plays upon the mingling social contraries of the sleeper train. These are the divergent experiences of being safe or exposed, of being alone or with others. The train is a site of physical intimacy (the trope of the chance romance is a constant feature of train-narratives) but this does not always lead to a feeling of company. For Greene’s travellers it is as though the enforced and elongated period of proximity to others fuels a certain kind of loneliness. Time on the train is simultaneously solitary and shared, oscillating between the two states in extreme ways. Passengers move from dining cars filled with strangers to corridors where they must squeeze past one another, to private compartments (if they are wealthy), to shared compartments (if they are not). The oscillation can prove exhausting as it requires a constant moderation of self; a continually adjusted performance. Greene captures this shift between tension and release as the

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64 Which is perhaps why there is far less romance attached to the experience of air travel.
65 Schivelbusch p.85.
66 Interview with Anna Gaskell, April 2012.
travellers first arrive on the train from their connecting boat. On the Stamboul Train (as on all trains,) privacy is dependent on financial means. Myatt bribes the guard:

He was the first through the customs, and before the other passengers arrived, he could arrange with the guard a sleeping compartment to himself. He had a hatred of undressing before another man.  

Coral is not as lucky and must travel with a husband and wife in a four-seater upright compartment.

She had been afraid for several minutes that he would speak, or else the tall thin woman his wife. Silence for the time being she desired more than anything else . . . Then the man spoke to her and she was compelled to emerge from her hidden world and wear a pose of cheerfulness and courage.

The experience of being in the confined space, and heightened stage, of sleeper train is one that requires effort. This proximity leads to embarrassment, awkwardness and a great play of propriety. Greene’s character Myatt, feels this acutely: ‘He did not want to run the danger of sharing a table, of being forced into polite openings, of being, not improbably, snubbed.’ The word ‘snubbed’, meaning both insulted and cut off, made smaller or diminished, makes clear the minute spatial sensitivity inherent in his reactions to other people. He is afraid of ‘polite openings,’ of being ‘forced into,’ conversation as though the boundaries of his body were bound up with those of his speech. We can see how forced proximity to strangers, to a public with whom you must share private practices such as eating, sleeping and un/dressing, brings to the surface a tension between inside and outside. In the way in which it subjects its passengers to the feeling of shrinking and growing, and the necessity of hiding and seeking, the sleeper-train can be seen as a space of potential embarrassment. Myatt’s exaggerated body-consciousness can be seen as a reaction to the attitudes, feelings and actions of people encountered on the train and off. The sleeper train is a space which can enlarge these perceived and felt divisions.

67 Greene, p.7.
68 Greene, pp.9-10.
69 Greene, p.12.
70 As in the case of Michael, a patient of Dr. Eduardo Weiss whose agoraphobia first manifested in the space of the sleeper train. ‘He was lying in his Pullman berth when he suddenly felt very uneasy.’ Agoraphobia in the light of Ego Psychology (New York & London: Grune & Stratton, 1964) p.38.
3.4 Missing and Crossing

Jacques Derrida identifies the tension between being on time and off time as one that has driven plot throughout the history of Western culture. He suggests that it is the missed rather than made connections which drive desire and (consequently) plot. If we think about the experience of everyday life as a counterpoint to plot we can see that ‘being on time’ is an absolute requirement for those who wish to function normally in society. Pierre Mayol writes,

> Everyday language here provides an extremely precise description: ‘jumping out of bed,’ ‘eating on the run,’ ‘catching one’s train,’ ‘diving into the subway,’ ‘arriving right on time’ . . . Through these stereotypes we see what ‘going to work’ really means: entering into an undifferentiated, indistinct city, sinking into the magma of inert signs as in a swamp, guided only by the imperative of being on time (or late).\(^7\)

Mayol does not add that you must be in the right place but it is implied. A simple balance of opposites can be surmised when thinking about time in this way: we are on and on time at work; we are off and out of time when at home. The spaces between on and off, between home and work, are spaces which do not demand a specific role (you are neither on nor off, neither at work or at home) but you are not expected to linger in them. I have written about the mistrust society has for the slow, the lazy and the unemployed; there are similar though diluted qualms invoked by those who opt to take sleeper-trains. They are quaint, romantic, or perhaps just oddly sensitive to the shadow of a carbon footprint; they are surely wasting time as anyone must be who lingers between home and work – who does nothing.

Derrida writes of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, ‘it is both a text which articulates certain problems that run through the entire history of Western culture and one of that culture’s most familiar and endlessly recirculated icons.’\(^7\)\(^2\) The problem he identifies as being one that runs through the entire history of Western culture is that of *contretemps* – mishap or syncopation, the experience of being *out of time* or in *counter time*. As the dual embodiment of tragic *counter time* Romeo and Juliet have come to be (perhaps surprisingly) ‘positive heroes;’ icons of miscommunication, saints of the out of sync, ‘They missed each other, how they missed each other! Did they miss each other?’\(^7\)\(^3\) Derrida’s playful trio of near misses can be imagined spelt out in gaudy colours emblazoning the pulp-novel version of the play, or up in lights, publicizing a Hollywood interpretation. The speculative word play seems to promise

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\(^7\) Derrida, p.417.
the brazen embellishment and scandal that we have come to expect from plot driven pulps. The ‘positive’ attributes of the hero and heroine are derived from their near-death-experience with life, theirs is a double-negative beyond compare. They came closer to not missing one another than most people. Somehow, as Derrida writes, ‘both survived one another, – an unfortunate crossing of chance.’

Figure 35. Bill Murray misses the train in the Darjeeling Limited.

The language Derrida uses to bring to life the temporal tension in the play is language which speaks of transport and communication and trains and old-fashioned telephones in particular. Crossing and missing are two actions brought to everyday experience by the technology of the railway which introduced tracks to landscape and standard time to cities. They are also actions or experiences which are felt to have become more frequent but less physical in contemporary urban day-to-day lives. A cross is the interlocking symbol where one horizontal line lies directly across a vertical. It can mean both a mark, a point or a plot (‘x’ marks the spot); the meeting of two things and, conversely, the point at which two things pass one another (they crossed like ships in the night). A miss is a loss or lack, something off-target; something that has erred. The words of course also speak of desire, of the erotic space between yes and no, between ‘to have’ and to ‘have not’, between meeting and failing to meet. Derrida draws comparisons between the aphoristic character of Romeo and Juliet (so familiar to audiences, so often repeated that it

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74 Derrida, ibid.
75 'In the 1840s the individual English railway companies proceeded to standardise time, but did not coordinate their efforts; each company instituted a new time on its own line. The process was so novel that it was repeated daily, in the most cumbersome manner... Each morning an Admiralty messenger carried a watch bearing the correct time to the guard on the down Irish Mail leaving Euston for Holyhead. On arrival at Holyhead the time was passed on to officials on the Kingston boat who carried it over to Dublin. On the return mail to Euston the watch was carried back to the Admiralty messenger at Euston once more. Which lends new weight to the phrase, “do you have the time?”’ Schivelbusch, p.43.
seems to quote itself even before you have seen it) and the aphoristic character of the desire it describes. He uses the provocative sentence, ‘there is no time for desire without aphorism,’ to explain this. No time indeed, for desire, like aphorism, seeks to name, to rename and to hold still (because the desire of desire is that time is shared). In seeking to align the times of two people, (to ‘have and to hold’, forever or ‘as long as we both shall live’) the desirous subject aphorises.

This aphoristic impulse is one which ‘marks dissociation, it terminates, delimits, arrests. It brings to an end by separating, it separates in order to end.’ For Derrida the aphoristic impulse increases rather than decreases the potential for contretemps. He identifies a contradictory force in the desirous act of naming. He sees it as an attempt to institute a ‘temporal and spatial homogeneity’ which is impossible.

Dates, timetables, property registers, place-names, all the codes that we cast like nets over time and space in order to reduce or master differences, to arrest them, determine them – these are also contretemps-traps. Intended to avoid contretemps, to be in harmony with our rhythms by bending them to objective measurement, they produce misunderstanding, they accumulate the opportunities for false steps or wrong moves, revealing and simultaneously increasing this anachrony of desires.

Romeo and Juliet’s experience is, ‘the exemplary anachrony, the essential impossibility of any absolute synchronisation.’ And yet it is this essential impossibility that makes desire; ‘I love because the other is other, because its time will never be mine.’ Even with the knowledge of this impossibility we cannot let go of a desire for timeliness, that which Derrida calls ‘the promise of a now in common.’

I have drawn a comparison between the site of the stage and the space of the sleeper train and one reason for this is that, like the stage, the space of the sleeper train is one of suspended time. Certeau envisages it as an airlock or prison. The image of the airlock is significant, not only because modern sleeper trains are airlocked, but because it captures the sense of one atmosphere moving through another. We can think of the motto of Captain

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76 Derrida, p.418.
77 Derrida, p.416.
78 Derrida, pp.418–422.
79 Derrida, p.419.
80 Derrida, p.418.
81 Derrida, p.420
82 Derrida, p.421.
Nemo of the *Nautilus, mobilis in mobili*, moving amidst mobility.\(^{83}\) The relationship between the inside and the outside appears to be one of imbalance; the scope for movement in the train is limited. As it hurtles forward the world outside carries on regardless which can lead to the sense of being in a different time zone, delayed or suspended; paused. If too much thought is given to this lag or difference the experience can be one of claustrophobia, if however passengers embrace the new time zone it can be one of escape. Graham Greene’s travelling businessman, Myatt, sees it as a strategic sidestepping of the crowded world of work and a place to get a clear head.

The world was beating now on Eckman and Stein, telegrams were arriving, men were interrupting the threads of their thought with speech, women were holding dinner parties. But in the rushing, reverberating express, noise was so regular that it was the equivalent of silence, movement was so continuous that after a while, the mind accepted it as stillness.\(^{84}\)

There are two things at work here, the first is the delinquency of the train; it provides an escape, an excuse (similar to the one divined in the phrase ‘I’m on the train’). The second is the way in which Myatt adjusts to the train’s environment. The outside world continues to plod on but the humming, hurtling train creates a new world, a temporary but complete space with its own ecosystem.

This ecosystem is one which hovers between the two impulses discussed, those of claustrophobia and escape, paradoxical feelings of entrapment and freedom. Claustrophobia, the irrational fear of confined spaces, is a natural response to the space of the train (we can think back to the iron shroud and the fear of the compartment). The spatial aspects of this contrary impulse have been discussed, what are its temporal tensions?\(^9\) The time of everyday life, cut up into slices of work and rest, punctuated by two frantic commutes through the city, is put on hold; time inside the train is of a different nature. Because it is an enclosed space, time too seems enclosed, and the *contretemps* identified by Derrida is heightened. This leads to an increase in the occurrence and significance of *missing* and *crossing*. The two apparently contrary impulses are exaggerated by the space of the sleeper train which can be thought of as an aphoristic space. An aphorism is defined as ‘a precise statement of scientific principle’, but Derrida uses it to describe something which stands alone and outside of the context in which it is used, a quotation of sorts, a precept, a motto. The word derives from the Greek *aphorismos*, from *aphorizein*, define + *horizein*, set bounds to. The sense of bounding or defining the constantly moving limit of the horizon works well when thinking


\(^{84}\) Greene, p.14.
about the train that crosses material and temporal borders on its journey. We can recall the carved screen of train-based cinematic narratives and pleasure of the edge. We have already seen that inside the space of the train the horizontal and vertical planes that make up the surface are also resistant to definition. The train travels with the horizon and for the duration of its journey is constantly missing and crossing the landscape it travels through. Inside the train passengers feel a heightened significance to their interactions, which is also to do with the airlock (or time lock) of the space. Misses; fleeting glances in the corridor and crosses; simple social interactions are both events and traumas. Everyone who has travelled on a sleeper has a story of this sort to tell. People are too close, too present, too personal.

As a space of forced intimacy and closeness the sleeper train is also a site of coincidence. In film and literature the space has been used to force coincidence in a way that creates surreal or farcical realities. A mix of romance, danger and the ridiculous is worked into the coincidental (or not as the case may be) meeting of Eve Kendall and Roger Thornhill in North by Northwest. The attraction of coincidence is that it seems to throw order into a world of chaos, significance into an otherwise insignificant experience. Things seem meant to be, predestined, fatal. Agatha Christie was highly attuned to the pleasurable thrill of the coincidence. The Mystery of the Blue Train is set up through a string of coincidences which the reader has to unravel picking their way through the actual coincidences and the fabricated ones, for if the flipside of the coincidental is the mundane, the on time, and the everyday, the double bluff is the plan.

It was with a little shock of surprise that she found herself set down to a small table with, opposite her, the same woman who had been her vis-a-vis in the Pullman. A faint smile came to the lips of both women.

“This is quite a coincidence”, said Mrs. Kettering.

“I know”, said Katherine, “it is odd the way things happen.”

Coincidence seems to throw ‘plot’ into everyday life. It provokes the sense of some kind of external order. Crossed paths, and a concordance of events seem to signal significance, and design.

“I see, Madame, that you have a roman policier. You are fond of such things?” . . .

“Someday, who knows, you might be in the thick of things”, he went on, “it is all chance.”

“I don’t think it will be likely”, said Katherine. “Nothing of that kind ever happens to me.”

85 Christie, Blue Train, p.75.
Christie’s self-reflective inclusion of the roman policier is a nod to the well-known format and its escapist pleasures. These are narratives in which coincidence abounds, expressed spatially here as a thickening of events. Coincidence is the coming together of things, a group or collection of events, a concentration. It is the very unlikeliness of such an abundance that makes it exciting. A desire for coincidence is a desire for timeliness; that which Derrida calls ‘the promise of a now in common.’

Actual co-incidence is impossible. Physically no two objects or bodies can occupy the same space at the same time – all they can do is co-incide, rub up against one another, or crash. The spectacular co-incidence of the train has been discussed in terms of collage and cut up, the exaggeration performed by the space means they are surreal and dream-like. One of the most common recurring dreams are dreams of journeys on trains, perhaps because as on the train, narrative in the dream does not arrange itself sensibly, rather a spark (or more) of nonsense is permitted to slip through. In his Interpretation of Dreams, analysing one dream in particular, Freud writes that ‘numerous trains of thought converged upon it.’ This convergence is significant, for in the dream coincidence takes material form. Marina Warner points out that in his interpretation he reaches for analogy in a quote from Goethe’s Faust, aligning the production of a dream with that of a rug. The turns of phrase that pepper his analysis reveal another (perhaps latent) association, between the form of thought and transportation systems. To a modern sensibility his imagery is more redolent of railroad transportation and electrical circuits than carpet weaving. He describes connections, links,
short-circuits, loop-lines, connecting paths, and at one point speculates on the dream thoughts in such a way as to make them appear as trains in a station.91

Are all the dream thoughts present alongside one another? Or do they occur in sequence? Or do a number of trains of thought start out simultaneously from different centres and afterwards unite?92

What he appears to struggle with is their very coincidence. Do they happen at once or in sequence? Questions of psychic and emotional simultaneity are always difficult to render in material terms, this is what is challenging about symbolic representation, about interpretation in general.93 It is enough here to suggest the similarities in form of the train journey and the dream to think about how experiences of both can be experiences of surprising concentration. Innate to the train (of carriages or thoughts) is this sense of the numerous being fused. The surreality of the train, its spectacle, its cut ups, its collages juxtaposing various simultaneous existences, links it with the unconscious dream work of condensation and distortion.

Freud writes that dreams of trains are dreams of death, or sex.94 The sleeper train narratives discussed in this chapter are strangely dream-like, surreal, heightened, alarming or farcical. Whilst there is the very real presence of death and sex in almost all of them they appear to be instead narratives about make-believe, about the magic but inconsequential potential of dreams themselves. They are narratives that circumscribe themselves, conscious of their own fictions, reveling in the delectable and delinquent pleasure of play. The death and sex that happens there happens there so it is not overly disturbing. The playing out or plotting of the future, the gathering up and sorting out of the past (permitted by the aphoristic time zone of the space) makes them foreclosed spaces of caught stories, paused lives. The pleasure that can be taken from them is the pleasure of the detour, suspension, the gape or gap. These are after all grown up fairytales, escapist fantasies. Marina Warner writes beautifully about the space of the magic carpet in the Arabian Nights, drawing it

91 'Some trains of thought arise for the first time during analysis. But one can convince oneself in all such cases that these new connections are only set up between thoughts which were already linked in some other way in the dream-thoughts. The new connections are, as it were, loop-lines or short-circuits, made possible by the existence of other and deeper-lying connecting paths.' Freud, Penguin 2006, p.385.
93 Barthes would remind us there is more than one reading even in the same reader: 'in the presence of an object there are almost always several meanings possible, and this is not only between one reader and the next, but also sometimes in one and the same reader.' The Semiotic Challenge, trans. Richard Howard (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988) p.188.
together with that other carpeted space of curtailed dreaming, Freud’s couch. King Solomon’s carpet is ‘a universe of itself’, the humble prayer mat is ‘a portable precinct where someone can be contained, separated from whatever is happening around.’ It is the foreclosure of these spaces that means they are sites of a particular kind of reverie, contemplation or journey. The edges of the space are being reinscribed in the case of the analytic couch by the edges of time, the fastidiously attended to time of the session.

He then imposed a time limit on the analysis in order to set up a temporary border around the desired play of free-floating thought until the next session where the narrative would be picked up again.

Drawing together the sleeper train and the couch covered in magic carpets, sites of delimited time and space where paradoxically free experiences of thought abound, is to be reminded of John Lanchester and Marc Augé writing about the London underground and Paris metro respectively. These are spaces which can capture the same divergent sense of claustrophobia and escape, both writers turning towards a certain claustrophilia as a result of the relief or escape offered by the small and static (though moving) space. Lanchester echoes descriptions of Bachelardian fairytale miniatures describing glimpses of the driver’s cab on the underground; ‘the cab looks so cosy, so self-contained, so snug and safe; a world unto itself.’ Augé writes of how the metro is experienced as a series of shifting spaces and shapes into which habitual travelers fit:

Different workers, recognizable by the kind of nonchalance created from boredom and habit into which they page through the newspaper or let their bodies slip onto the folding seats at the end of the car. Their bodies are best molded to the nonetheless uncomfortable shapes as if for a last break before stampeding to the ticket window or the workplace.

Recalling the compensatory excess of the early Pullman carriages and the self-preserving rituals of packages, spreading and organising that travellers indulge in, Lanchester suggests another compensatory reaction to the strangely felt experiences of travel and commutation. Waiting is often the most terrible thing travellers have to do, sometimes experienced as horror, or at the very least, as something that needs to be escaped.

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96 Warner, p.419.
97 John Lanchester, What We Talk About When We Talk About The Tube (London: Penguin, 2013) p.53. This description also preempts the way the curtailed space and recognisable routines of the greasy spoon are talked about in Chapter 4.
98 Marc Augé, In the Metro (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002) p.31.
Lanchester suggests that as a reaction to the paradoxical motion and stasis, solitude and collectivity of the space commuters retreat inwards; ‘We react to it by going somewhere else in our heads.’ He links this move inwards with the faltering underground moments evoked by T. S. Eliot in ‘East Coker’:

Or as, when an underground train, in the tube,
Stops too long between stations
And the conversation rises and slowly fades
Into silence
And you see behind every face the mental emptiness deepen
Leaving only the growing terror of nothing to think about.

This retreat into ‘inner space’ is the reaction to a stopped carriage in a tunnel, a reaction to a pause of motion that is somehow comforted by motion of another sort, internal, private, silent.

The metro and the underground are spaces of commutation, between the set roles of home and work, between stations. Time on the sleeper train can be read as an elongation of that liminal time. The effect of this can be aligned with Marina Warner’s conception of the daydreaming state Freud intended to invoke through a series of constraints on time and space: ‘The state of reverie that arises when someone is still awake or rather semi-awake, a receptive state of consciousness – reverie and daydream.’ This state recalls the still but potent space of Thomas Beller’s laundry room, a state elicited that seems to elongate the pause between then and now. A state elicited by a space. In its slowness, in its materiality and in its forced intimacy, the sleeper-train seems to offer different kind of space-time relationship. Resistant to speed, ponderous and tracked it is both in and out of time, on and off space. It is both a waste of time and a space of exaggerated time, a space of heightened coincidence and drama, plot and possibility.

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99 Lanchester, p.85.
Figure 36. In the knick of time.
3.5 Strayed Homes

This reading has tended to the spectacular, surreal and exaggerated experiences of the sleeper train, but it is a space that lends itself to these heightened forms. I have tried to let each space shape the chapter that describes it rather than impose a series of preconceived categories through which to read it. The launderette and sleeper train are both spaces of encounter that can be comforting as well as confrontational. The dangerous encounter is more particular to the train (and train narrative) as the space is far more strictly contained than that of the launderette (once you board you cannot easily disembark, once in your seat, compartment or berth, you are fixed). Both are sites of coincidence, places where simultaneities can be felt as surreal. The train can be seen as an exaggerated version of the launderette’s strayed home, where the anxieties of the launderette (mixing, contagion, exposure) are given more room to breath. Both spaces are ones in which other people can encroach upon your personal space. This can be felt to be revolting or thrilling. Both are spaces which are of and outside society, operating at a slightly different time scale, permitting or inviting certain solitary as well as sociable practices.

The spatial gape, the pleasurable coincidence of two codes, matter out of one place or time inserted subversively into another, is articulated visually in films set on the trains through the collage and the cut up. The narratives that so conspicuously place themselves in these spaces draw crime, farce, sex and death together with the everyday. The everydayness of the sleeper train is cemented by the gestures that make and break days up, those of waking and falling asleep. Perhaps it is not the negative of place or consciousness that makes a space a strayed home but rather the shared experience of falling into and out of consciousness. These are actions that are inscribed in the space of the home. They are intimate. While people do not tend to fall asleep in the launderette they do, as described in the discussion of waiting in Chapter Two, drift off, into shared but solitary reflection. Perhaps this shared idleness, this doing-nothing, can be read a version of falling asleep which is a strangely intimate act. These spaces draw together physical intimacy and a solitary distance. Both are important to the category of a strayed home. The strayed home is never just a space, it is a space filled (or that contains evidence of having been filled) with bodies. The spaces examined so far are spaces where daydreaming, dreaming and waiting happens in the presence of others. Travelling from York to London recently I caught the train that had set off from Aberdeen. I was the third person to take up temporary ownership of the seat I sat in. The train was palpably homely and you got the feeling it had been lived in. All around me signs of settled and unsettled territories spilled out from luggage racks, tables and seats. The negotiation of space was adeptly but entirely silently handled. This was not a sleeper train but the shared experience of time, idle time, time between places and
destinations, had clearly been shared. This communal commutation had altered the space.
Between Aberdeen and Edinburgh one body, between Edinburgh and York, another.
Between York and Kings Cross, mine.
Chapter Four. *Fire Escape*
4.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the space of the fire escape. It presents a reading of the various uses and misuses of the space. As a space that is designed in the hope that it won’t be used there is a lot of scope for misuse and appropriation. It also examines the effect the structures have when they are seen as well as used, the way their presence alters or adds to the cityscape for those who routinely pass them by or who come across them during a fire drill. In section two, titled Trapdoor, I examine the potential the structures have for altering space. The sudden unexpected presence of a door or route is likened to the experience of coming to the bottom of a set of stairs abruptly. These are instances of collision between the real and the unreal, between an imagined conception of a space and its actual immediacy. In section three, Moving Houses, I consider the proliferation of fire escapes as background scenery in narratives about growing up in the city. These are narratives of spatial and social awkwardness as well as coincidence and voyeurism. The sense of permissible transgression that the spaces seem to allow has filtered into the way the spaces are used and spoken of by city-dwellers today. In section four, Skin, I read the metonymic relationship between building and body, between surfaces and skins. Recalling the elongated threshold of the eruv, the temporarily altering surfaces of washing hung out to dry, and the bags of clothes taken to and from the home, the fire escape is an altering and pliable space and surface that inserts instability and in some cases intimacy into the space of the city. The conclusion of the chapter articulates the possibility that it is the absence of its immediate or designed function that makes the space so variable. Like the launderette it allows for function excessive to function.

We might expect the space of the fire escape to act as the opposite of the strayed homes discussed in previous chapters. That rather than being spaces where the intimate and the domestic encroaches on or takes up temporary residence in public, they work in the opposite direction, enforcing an element of publicity or exposure onto – or into – private places (on or in blocks of flats) and linking the isolated zones of institutions like hotels, office blocks, schools and cinemas. That rather than being part of a strayed domesticity they are sites where the public and the external encroach upon the private and internal. This assumption is justified but it does not take into account something that is peculiar to the fire escape and this is that they are spaces that are made to be used only in emergencies. A reading of them must take into account their use and their misuse; their function and their mal-function. Where fire escapes are not being used as intended by design they often fit the category of strayed home, and wherever they are they are structures that permit homes to stray.
This chapter takes into account both internal and external fire escapes. Internal escapes are bland and innocuous, negatives of the buildings they are in, following a pattern with institutional obedience. They offer, by law, alternative routes from a building in the event of a fire. In many buildings (particularly tall ones) the stairs are the only alternative to the lifts, and so double as internal fire escapes. Many of the practices and pleasures examined here apply to shared, semi-public stairwells, but ‘fire escape’ is the centralising theme of the chapter because the stairwells I am interested in are only those which have been discarded in some way, or which only come into use in roundabout, abnormal or unusual ways. Often decaying, they are almost always abandoned (empty of people) with a few choice leftovers signaling a certain kind of use or misuse; an empty brandy bottle, a syringe, a used condom. The cold brick walls are painted in thick (and occasionally peeling) layers of pastel shades; the milky cream of weak tea, sad teal, pigeon grey. If there is light it is making its way through frosted glass, or buzzing from a shuddering halogen strip, which makes the whole place the colour of bathwater. External escapes are beautiful structures akin to blackly inked lines of scaffolding; they are fragile, line drawings rather than paintings, marks rather than words. They are by nature antiquated, cold, dubious additions, rickety perches. Both internal and external escapes are like life boats stored on ocean liners, practical and functional, but at the same time, out of date or at the very least, best before now.

The earliest fire escapes in London were roaming structures which were moved on wheels from place to place as needed. Developed by philanthropists as a reaction to the high death-rate at fires in domestic properties, the escapes were a free-standing series of ladders and a chute that stood at crossroads throughout the city from 8pm to 7am each night. They were manned by an escape conductor in a makeshift sentry box which, like the escape, would be stored in a nearby churchyard during the day.¹ Funded by the Fire Escape Society and then the Royal Society for the Protection of Life from Fire (who took over in 1837) the conductors were issued with a uniform cap, a tarpaulin coat and trousers and a helmet, lamp and rattle. In 1837 a total of twelve escapes were positioned throughout the city and over the next forty years that number increased. At this time, the street escape stations were more numerous than fire stations. An Apprentice-joiner, writing about his childhood in Mile End in the 1890s recalls: ‘The escape ladder had to be pushed along in the upright position … it was a precarious operation, the long heavy ladder swaying from side to side, and almost beyond the capacity of any one fireman.’² In a joint report made by the chief of police and the chief of the fire brigade, fire ladders were found to be the most effective object in the fight against fire. Their maintenance and manning was adopted into the first London Fire

Engine Establishment in 1896. The moveable escape ladders were effective because they enabled access in this most haphazardly arranged of cities. In his report Braidwood describes how useful the machines were in ‘the narrow streets, courts and alleys which abound in the city of London.’

This sense of the escapes fitting and being fitted to the city is borne out in their move to being structures which were fixed to and which later appear as part of the buildings they serve. The earliest permanent structures look like and were architectural afterthoughts. They were formed by and in response to the city and the dangers that were part of living there. These escapes are a visible reminder of the fact that architecture, and especially urban architecture, is always the articulation of afterthought. It is always piecemeal and palimpsestic, always responding to the past and attempting to shape the future.

The Hyde Park Hotel, built in the 1850s as a gentlemen’s residential club, was at the time the tallest building in London. There was a great scandal as its central clock tower

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Figure 37. Abraham Wivell’s fire escape ladder, 1836.
www.bmagic.org.uk/people/Abraham+Wivell (accessed June 2014)

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3 Report made by Mr. Daniel Whittle Harvey and Mr. James Braidwood, London Standard Thursday 22nd October 1840, British Newspaper Archive (accessed November 2013)
broke the tree line in Hyde Park. This was felt by the residents and authorities of Knightsbridge as an affront, as an invasion of their space. The skyline was in some way their property and the hotel was invading it. We do not have to look far for analogous feelings about the way buildings incur upon and affect our experience of the city today. City-dwellers live with the changes to their shared skyline. The skyline is unstable due to an ever-encroaching city. In London city dwellers have a very particular, and very personal, relationship with the current highest point in the skyline, the Shard. These skyscrapers (from the Hyde Park Hotel to the Shard) remind us that the built environment affects our conception and experience of the spaces we live and work in. This chapter suggests that the presence of spaces like fire escapes in the urban landscape have an effect on us that is similarly experienced even if it is not articulated. Gaston Bachelard writes that space is inseparable from memory and that the memories that can be spatialised are the ones that will be remembered. Carried inside us, in memories that do not seem to be formed of words but rather gestures and movements, is the diagram of the functions of inhabiting a particular house. In the introduction to the thesis I asked, if this is the case then why not say that we are the diagrams of the functions of inhabiting a particular city, with a particular skyline? Less obviously visible, though no less felt, is the line that separates buildings from the space they divide. This is a skyline too, though one viewed on a slant.
4.2 Trapdoor

Fire escapes show the skin of a building to be permeable in a way that is not quite appropriate. They open up the possibility of trapdoors, tripwires, and trapeze movements in and around a building; stretching and squeezing space, pushing and pulling people through it. The definition of a trapdoor is as follows; a door or hatch, usually flush with the surface, in a floor, roof, ceiling or theatre stage. The joining of the words ‘trap’ and ‘door’ is itself extremely suggestive. The trap to catch game or vermin is a gin, a snare that works on the basis of allowing entry but not exit to a space. The trapdoor switches the coordinates of the surface it is part of, flush, until it is used and gives way. It is thanks to the trapdoor potential of the fire escape that it enables the home to stray, to realign itself, to swivel or slip. This potential slip is both pleasing and alarming and gives way to the playful appropriation of space discussed in Chapter Two (Launderette) and the surreal but highly functional manipulation of planes in Chapter Three (Couchette). This is the play that allows for displacement and refreshment through a certain malleability of borders; the spatial gape. Barthes links the pleasure inherent in this manipulability with ‘the kind of pleasure the child takes in wielding his toys, exploring and enjoying them.’ The pleasure of the malleable border is exploited again and again in children’s literature as well as in cartoons, film and theatre. It is also the pleasure of the trapdoor. We can think of the delight taken in the repeating motif of the ‘bookcase doorway’ or the predilection of James Bond villains for the hidden trapdoor in the floor, controlled (unbeknownst to the hapless henchman or imprudent hero) by a hidden switch on their desk. One of the most well known examples of this is the walnut wardrobe found in an empty room, filled with fur coats and smelling of moth-balls, which leads to Narnia.

She soon went further in and found there was a second row of coats hanging up behind the first one. It was almost quite dark in there and she kept her arms stretched out in front of her so as not to bump her face into the back of the wardrobe. She took a step further in – then two or three steps – always expecting to feel woodwork against the tips of her fingers. But she could not feel it.

“This must be a simply enormous wardrobe”, thought Lucy, going still further in and pushing the soft folds of the coats aside to make room for her. Then she noticed that there was something crunching under her feet.

“I wonder is that more mothballs?” she thought, stooping down to feel it with her hand. But instead of feeling the hard, smooth wood floor of the wardrobe, she felt something soft and powdery and extremely cold.

“This is very queer,” she said, and went on a step or two further... A moment later she found that she was standing in the middle of a wood at night time.\(^5\)

The sensation of feeling for an edge and not finding it, or finding something else in its place, is one which we are all familiar with. It is the inverted version of the jolt we get when, walking down stairs, the floor seems to arrive too quickly; expecting one step more we are brought up short with a bump. The trip wire is the inverted trap door; one stops you in your tracks with an abrupt start as you meet a boundary you had not seen, the other pushes you along, out, forming a hitherto unseen route further in or outwards. Interaction with either is a tactile experience that takes place in the dark or when we have our eyes closed – we may not literally have our eyes closed or be in the dark but we feel that we know the space so we are not paying attention to it; we are not looking or checking. These are instances when our imagined conception of the space around us is corrected by experience; instances of bodily-learning where the actual asserts itself upon the imaginary or where the imagined (and expected) does not become actual. They are instances of collision between the real and the unreal (even when no collision actually occurs). In the excerpt above Lucy feels with her hands, the outstretched fingertips which feel for edges embody a sort of handling (and manhandling) of a world which has not yet been defined.

Through this trapdoor the fire escape enables the home to stray; escapes have the potential to realign the borders of the house as they redistribute the ways in and out. In a fire a window can suddenly become a door; a room can become a trap. The escapes and exits which are revealed during a fire or crisis (or fire drill) open up the possibility of a previously unimagined backstage area to a building. The trapdoor of the fire door spills people out into the street or onto the roofs of adjacent buildings but it can also spill people further inside, into the bowels of hotels, hospitals or office blocks. This new internal route can reveal the backstage activities which seem to separate buildings and their servicing, we find cleaning cupboards, store rooms, post rooms and entirely alternative experiences of places you might have thought you knew. It is a disconcerting discovery that reveals a space you had thought of as finite as being a facade that is in some way fabricated (or maintained) by the space behind it (akin to discovering Narnia at the back of a wardrobe). It is tempting to think of these behind-the-scenes scenes as the subconscious of a building; they are certainly repressed.\(^6\) In Alan Hollinghurst’s *The Line of Beauty* movement between the main staircase and the servant’s staircase is remembered as a flitting between spaces of permission and transgression, as dreamlike alternation between the secret and the exposed.


\(^6\) Made clear by the Tres Cosas campaign currently underway at Senate House (University of London) which fights for the employment rights of outsourced workers.
The service stairs were next to the main stairs, separated only by a wall, but what a difference there was between them: the narrow back stairs, dangerously unrailed, under the bleak gleam of a skylight, each step worn down to a steep hollow, turned slightly into a steep grey shaft; whereas the great main sweep, a miracle of cantilevers, dividing and joining again, was hung with the portraits of prince-bishops and had ears of corn in its wrought-iron banisters that trembled to the tread. It was glory at least, an escalation of delight, from which small doors, flush with the paneling, moved by levers beneath the prince-bishops’ high-heeled and rosetted shoes, gave access, at every turn, to the back stairs and their treacherous gloom. How quickly, without noticing, one ran from one to the other.7

There is a corresponding disobedient ‘backstairs’ glee in the illustrated book *Eloise* by Kay Thompson. Here the eponymous heroine, a six year old girl who lives at the Plaza Hotel in New York, delights in her own particular brand of havoc, caused by using the stairwell and the elevators one after the other in quick succession.8 The two-page spread depicting this game, which demands that readers turn the book on its side so that it stands portrait, captures the separate zones of the hotel in a minimal cross-section. The combination of lifts and stairs allows Eloise to create a life size game of Snakes and Ladders. The two means of getting from floor to floor operate at different speeds so exist in different time zones, Eloise can insert a surreal time lag into the journey of those travelling by lift alone by running in between the two spaces. This out-of-sync play is one of the covert joys of the fire drill which enforces a synchronising of watches (or worlds) upon groups of people who live and work in isolated spaces and time zones. There is something intensely pleasurable about watching disparate groups of people idle about in awkward company while they wait to hear if the drill was a success (they are never a success).

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As a temporal exercise the fire drill is anomalous in our day to day experience for here is reasonable timetabled delay, sponsored or enforced delinquency. Steven Connor has written that ‘fire precaution requires an intensification of regulated movement – clearly marked exits, drills that reduce the random millings and effusiveness of social movements into controlled routines.’\(^9\) But in fact these drills never run smoothly, they are never

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experienced as regulated or controlled for they cannot lose their innate character which is chaotic. You are taken out of work and allowed (forced even) to stand idle, this is not something we find easy to do. The fire drill is meant to catch people unawares and as such the milling crowd assembled at the ‘assembly point’ are always in a state of not-quite-readiness. They are without coats (due to the insistence that they pick up none of their belongings), they are bleary eyed. Whether they interrupt the school or work day the drill always seems to take longer than it should, and those participating are left with an overall feeling of both inefficiency and anti-climax. Which is not to say that people wish there had been a fire, but rather that the drill would seem more point-full if there had been. The meeting of various time zones can be experienced as a form of jet lag; returning from a fire drill office workers and school children are both rejuvenated by the break and confused as to how to get back into the time zone they had imagined they were in before. Foucault wrote in 1967, ‘we are in the era of the simultaneous, of juxtaposition, of the near and the far, of the side-by-side, of the scattered.’ The modern ritual of the fire drill practices juxtaposition of simultaneities that reveals spatial and temporal seams as it (temporarily) removes them. When I talk of seams in this way I am thinking again of Barthes’ image (which he uses to describe the textual gape). As in the illustration from Eloise, there is the sense of various codes or orders working side by side but separately. Eloise’s game, like the fire drill, draws them together unexpectedly.

The fire escape is unusual as a space because it is, for the most part, unused (most days, there is no fire drill). This lack of use is what puts it in a different time zone to that of the buildings it is part of or attached to, like out of date objects it becomes a little wild, untethered. Writing about the urban planning that took place in Paris during the 1970s and 80s Michel de Certeau described the presence of old buildings in the newly renovated and regenerated areas of the city.

These seemingly sleepy, old-fashioned things, defaced houses, closed-down factories, the debris of shipwrecked histories still today raise up the ruins of an unknown, strange city. They burst forth within the modernist, massive, homogenous city like slips of the tongue from an unknown, perhaps unconscious language. They surprise.

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The fire escape, whether modern or antiquated, is always a slip from the dominant tongue; a step from the dominant time. The sense of them being like dead metaphors is borne out in the lexical erosion that has taken place in their name. Taken separately the words ‘fire’ and ‘escape’ are words of urgency, potency and disaster. But the coupling ‘fire escape’ is mundane, colourless and completely separate from the kind of active impetus that we might assume such a pairing would induce. ‘Fire escape’ has been subsumed into that other, dead coupling of words, ‘Health and Safety’. It is not quite right to say that fire escapes are useless, we should say rather that they are not used as fire escapes. Some, like the concrete stairwell at Sivill House on Columbia Road are not used at all and so become heavy with vacancy and space, others like the glass windowed corridors of Westthorpe House in Bethnal Green are used to smoke and stand still in; the erosion or evolution from their intended use or time allows them to take on new significances and to surprise.

The fire escapes of London’s buildings today operate in a disruptive and resistant order. Like the closed down factories and derelict houses of Certeau’s Paris, they work like dead metaphors in the text of the cityscape. They are familiar but divorced from their original meaning or design. The way we look at, pass by, use and misuse the fire escape is akin to when we skip or gloss over an unfamiliar or over-familiar word or phrase in a text. They are naturalized for us like language, gesture and practice in the eyes of Barthes, Perec and Certeau. Fire escapes lend themselves to this treatment partly because they are all edges, they are places of absence staged by presence, an emptiness made significant (or not as the case may be). Whether old-fashioned appendages to buildings or the more familiar modern spaces of hollowed out internal stairwells, they surround and people strive to make them remain, empty spaces. The trapdoor of the fire escape leads from one space to another and from one time to another; its presence within buildings and the city is one that is ignored until the door gives way and two separate zones collide.\[13\] The pleasurable surprise of the fire escape is rooted in its trapdoor-like qualities but these can also have negative consequences. The consequences of the presence within structures of porous or permeable boundaries will not simply be to draw attention to simultaneous times and spaces; those times and spaces can filter in to one another. The juxtaposition of two simulaneities can turn to amalgamation, infection, and distortion as the one is adulterated by the other.

Having gone from being structures that were wheeled to buildings around the city fire escapes became structures that were attached to existing buildings. It is only a relatively recent development that sees them being constructed as part of the integral arrangement of

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\[13\] For pleasurable surprise the buildings of the Architectural Association in Bedford Square. Similarly the RIBA building on Great Portland Street (best viewed from the service entrances and exits and the kitchen on the top floor).
a building, and even now they retain a certain externality. Their externality is partly by
design, they are routes out of buildings; exits from the inside to the outside. The fact that
they are now permanent fixtures as well as routes creates tension. Most of the anxiety they
inspire stems from the fact that any means of exiting a space doubles as a means of entrance;
if you can use them to get out, someone can use them to get in. Ingress is the unwelcome
partner of egress, as we can see from these Twitter instances which describe the unwanted
intimacy the structures can invite.

Woke up and had a heart attack, maintenance man just standing outside my
bedroom window on the fire escape. I live on the 6th floor.

No really. I like waking up to men literally next to my face on the fire escape
hammering nothing that needs to be hammered.

Man working on my fire escape just asked me if I was planning on taking another
shower today.\textsuperscript{14}

In each of these examples the sense is of an extreme invasion of personal space. The way
each person has reacted to the unwanted incursion facilitated by the fire escape is akin to the
reaction of the schizophrenics presented by Hall later in this chapter. Their personal space
has been violated and the imagery used is suitably corporeal. The first example twins the
appearance of a stranger at a window with that of a blood clot in a coronary artery. The
hyperbolic phrase ‘had a heart attack’ draws the shock of seeing a man outside a window
inside the speaker’s body where it was felt. The second example works with a similarly
bodily experience with the man described as being ‘next to my face’. This intimate
placement makes it seem as though the man were actually in bed with the speaker, suddenly
sharing her pillow and sheets. All three are redolent of horror film imagery; the figure at the
window lit by a sudden bolt of lightning, the face at the door with the axe, the sudden
dawning of the realisation that you are being watched.

\textsuperscript{14} Survey made of Twitter mentions of fire escapes.
4.3 Moving Houses

The schizophrenic nightmare of no filter between inside and outside, seen as city reality in these tweets, has its fantasy inversion in the romantic-comedic plot of serendipitous urban coincidence. Strayed homes, which are by nature makeshift, are often represented in such a way as to fetishize their temporary haphazard untidiness. If the city dweller feels fixed, trapped in an unending cycle of commute, work and prescribed hours and modes of rest, then the narrative of chance, escape and chaos that representations of subtly permeable domestic settings and scenarios provide is a pleasurable one. Fire escapes often hem or are the backdrop for narratives about the urban young. They can be seen as providing extended versions of Lucy feeling for the edge that does not arrive; a handling (and manhandling) of a world which has not yet been defined. The recent frustrated-coming-of-age narratives Tiny Furniture (2012) and Frances Ha (2013) can also be read as strayed home narratives. Both use space to reflect upon themes of fitting in, growing up and the negotiation of fantasies against realities. Both films’ opening scenes show their anti-heroines socialising on fire escapes. In Tiny Furniture Aura, played by Lena Dunham, is at a party where she is introduced to a tall, dark and handsome stranger. In Frances Ha, Frances, played by Greta Gershwig, is seen sitting on her building’s fire escape dangling her legs over its sides, smoking, laughing and talking to her friend Sophie who is on another section of the escape. These images reference a series of fire escape fantasies and recite the idea that they are spaces of bohemian lassitude, serendipitous encounter, and unruly (un-rulebound) fun; it’s worth mentioning that in the opening montage of Frances Ha (a montage which is meant to capture the happier days of Frances and Sophie’s platonic romance) another of the spaces they enjoy is a laundromat. Of course, neither film takes these fantasies very seriously, they are precisely what they seek to unpick, and the fantasy of serendipitous urban coincidence is shown to be just that. Tiny Furniture prefigures this in the handling of the fire escape scene, deflating the bohemian romance of the space by making a play of how awkward it is to climb out of a window in a dress with a room full of strangers watching. And the stranger Aura meets out on the city-balcony reveals pretty quickly that he doesn’t have anywhere to live.

The strain of doubt about the play of a grown up childhood, exemplified by a series of interactions with den-like spaces, grows as both films unfold. Tiny Furniture is the story

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13 The fantasy of the popular sitcom Friends was of just this. Permeable domesticity, two neighbouring apartments that bled into one another. Many scenes and set pieces were shot or included the fire escape that hemmed Monica’s flat. See also Barefoot in the Park dir. Gene Saks (Paramount Pictures, 1967)

of what happens when Aura moves back home to live with her mother and teenage sister after finishing college. Clearly having ‘outgrown’ the role of daughter-at-home but not able to move out Aura tries to fit herself back into the space of the familial home with little success. The way she places her body in the house is awkward. She strikes a series of childish poses, lies on floors, stands on tables, sits down in the shower and lets Jed (the man she met on the fire escape) sleep in her mother’s bed. Outside the house things aren’t much better, at one point she finds a cylinder of rolled floor-matting and uses it as a secluded spot in which to have sex. Pushing the theme of ungainly growth further we also see her playing with the tiny furniture of the film’s title (her mother is an artist who made a name for herself by taking pictures of miniature tables and chairs in various locations). Aura lies at her mother’s feet like an overgrown child while at her head stands a gathering of small yellow sofas and chairs. *Frances Ha* presents the den-making of young adulthood as a series of abrupt unplanned relocations. The film is divided into sections by a series of addresses which are delivered to the audience in the form of silent film captions. White writing on a black screen announces each new location (each a place where Frances sleeps). The viewer, like Frances, is given little warning about when these shifts will occur and very little explanation as to why. An inability to steady herself for a significant period of time seems to be Frances’s problem, and her interactions with the spaces she stays in reflect this. She repeatedly asserts that she is ‘not messy just busy’ as a way of explaining the conditions of her bed and living rooms. Her rapid drift from place to place is juxtaposed with her inability to shift herself when it is actually necessary; she sleeps through her weekend in Paris, is daunted by the distance between Sophie’s bed and her own (a room away) and struggles to leave the house at the weekend. She complains ruefully about her housemate Lev, ‘He’s so good at leaving.’ In both films the heroines’ experiences of home-space are shown to be disturbed. The fantasy of the childish manipulation of space allowed for by the city and exemplified by the fire escape fantasy is subverted. Both films owe a debt to Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* which depicts the shrinking and growing body of Alice as she moves around the fantastic nightmare of Wonderland.

The fire escape is cast in a slightly different role in Tennessee Williams play, *The Glass Menagerie* where it is the scene for Tom’s desperate dreams of escape as well as the only way in or out of the claustrophobic apartment he shares with his mother and sister. It is still however a site that shows the space of the home to be permeable and susceptible to incursion and a site which is used as an extension of the home.

*The apartment faces an alley and is entered by a fire escape, a structure whose name is an accidental poetic truth, for all of these huge buildings are always burning with the slow and*
implacable fires of human desperation. The fire escape is included in the set – that is, the landing of it and steps descending from it.\textsuperscript{17}

The fact that the fire escape is included in the set reiterates the sense of growing imprisonment felt by Tom’s sister Laura whose only chance of escape it seems is in the dream of the gentleman caller who will scale its ladder to save her. The implausibility of this fantasy means it comes to play the part of a spectre, reminding the audience only of its fatal absence; ‘It became an obsession … the image of the gentleman caller haunted our small apartment.’ Both Tom and Laura harbour no illusions of the rescue actually happening but their mother Amanda is convinced and manically tries to fit the fairy tale scenario to their small Chicagoan tenement; ‘A fire escape landing is a poor excuse for a porch’. Like \textit{Tiny Furniture} and \textit{Frances Ha} the narrative is essentially that of a girl and the space she is permitted to be in but unable to take control of. Amanda’s deploring speech about Laura; ‘It frightens me how she just drifts along,’ could easily be applied to both Aura and Frances, though neither of them are reduced to waiting for a gentleman caller to wrench them out of their overly static (or fluid) situations. Laura’s delinquent drift from space to space about the city, having given up on her typing course because she was too shy to continue, makes a stark contrast to her predicted future;

\textbf{LAURA}: It wasn’t as bad as it sounds. I went inside places to get warmed up … I went inside the art museum and the birdhouses at the zoo. I visited the penguins every day! Sometimes I did without lunch and went to the movies. Lately I’ve been spending most of my afternoons in the Jewel-box, that big glass house where they raise the tropical flowers.

Taking from this only that she has failed to complete the course that might have given her a job, Amanda is distraught. She doubles her efforts to find another means of getting Laura out of the house.

\textbf{AMANDA}: So what are we going to do for the rest of our lives? Stay home and watch the parades go by? I know so well what becomes of unmarried women who aren’t prepared to occupy a position\textsuperscript{18}

Within the timescale of the play Laura is only seen trying to leave the house once, via the fire escape, where she falls and twists her ankle.

\textsuperscript{17} Tennessee Williams, \textit{The Glass Menagerie} (New York: New Directions, 1999) p.3.
\textsuperscript{18} Williams, Act 1. Scene 1. ll.84–100, Act 1. Scene 2. ll.10–15.
A woman who champions both fire escapes and marriage (both as means of survival) is Truman Capote’s Holly Golightly. In Truman Capote’s 1958 novella *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, and in the 1961 film it inspired, Holly Golightly and her upstairs-neighbour (known as Fred) use the drop down ladders of the escapes that flank their Manhattan brownstone to flee to the street or to gain easy access to one another’s bedrooms. Living in the same building for weeks and being made aware of one another’s presence through the buzzing of intercom system locks and speaker boxes, ‘Fred’ does not actually meet Holly until she arrives one day at his window: “I’ve got the most terrifying man downstairs,” she said, stepping off the fire escape and into the room.”¹⁹ This one gesture, with which she moves without invitation from the fire escape to the bedroom of a man she’s never met, encapsulates Holly. The step from escape through window marks her complete disregard for the space of the home and the rules which govern it. Before Fred meets her he has to let her into the building (via its buzzer system) countless times because she cannot (or does not care to) remember her keys. Her inability to keep hold of her keys is only one symptom of her pathological aversion to anything traditionally regarded as homely. The label on her mailbox reads, ‘*Holly Golightly, Travelling*’ and she would dismiss the cosy confines of a beautifully decorated apartment in the same way she dismisses Fred’s antique palace of a birdcage; ‘But still, it’s a cage.’²¹ Her own apartment stands in a state of make-shift disarray, ready for her to bolt when necessary; ‘The room in which we stood (we were standing because there was nothing to sit on) seemed as though it were just being moved into; you expected to smell wet paint.’²² As befits someone whose willed status is ‘travelling’, Holly’s home is transient. It is on the fire escape that she feels most at home; this is where she relaxes and drops the facade of her everyday fiction. Capote deploys a series of hyphenated couplings of words which epitomise this willed transience, each of them step over a boundary as they mark it. Her bedroom is described as having a ‘camping-out atmosphere,’²³ the parties she holds are ‘open-windowed,’²⁴ and when Fred eventually has to pack up her apartment so that she can skip town he carries her ‘going-away belongings’²⁵ down the fire escape. *Tiffany’s* depicts a version of the serendipitous urban coincidence that both *Tiny Furniture* and *Frances Ha* position themselves against. The film version can be read as providing a fetishistic depiction of drift and intransience.

In Capote’s novella the site of the fire escape is both route in and out, and also a strayed home, it is where Holly sits when she is not performing the role she has assigned

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²⁰ Capote, p.16.
²¹ Capote, p.53.
²² Capote, p.31.
²³ Capote, p.51.
²⁴ Capote, p.61.
²⁵ Capote, p.95.
herself; it is an un-policing space. It functions as a similarly un-policing and secret space (for day dreams and assignations) in Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins’ MGM musical *West Side Story*. The still shown below is from a scene set in a back alley at evening time. The alley is lit by sunset colours, dusky pinks and blues that are more redolent of fairytale castles and negligée than city streets. The light is crepuscular, the structures are crepuscular too; cusp-places, brinks, hovering ladders looking ready to detach themselves from the brick walls they are insecurely anchored to and drift off into the sky. These images can be seen as informing the fantasy of the escape that is resisted or reworked by Dunham and Baumbach.

![Image](image_url)

**Figure 39.** *Under the fire escapes and washing lines.*

*West Side Story* dir. by Jerome Robbins (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1961)

Tony’s dream, told under the fire escapes and washing lines and expressed in spatial metaphors, is redolent of the growing pains expressed in *Tiny Furniture* and *Frances Ha* as well as by Tom in *The Glass Menagerie*.

TONY: Every single night for the last month, I wake up and I’m reaching out.
RIFF: For what?
TONY: I don’t know.
RIFF: A dame?
TONY: It’s right outside the door, just around the corner, but it’s coming.
RIFF: What is?
TONY: I don’t know.  

This isn’t a daydream of triumph so much as it is a daydream of event. Tony’s fate, his destiny, his time is finally going to catch up with him. Something is coming, for him. It is a

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26 *West Side Story* dir. by Jerome Robbins (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1961)
characteristically adolescent daydream for the teenager who says ‘I’m bored’ is only the slightly more mature version of the child on a journey who continually asks ‘Are we there yet?’ Tony’s dream is the inverted version of this complaint, not ‘Are we there yet?’ but ‘am I there yet?’ It is a daydream of ‘life’ as that thing which is external to you suddenly finding itself in sync with you; a dream of what Derrida calls ‘the promise of a now in common.’

For the daydreaming adolescent, the hope is not for a ‘now’ in common with someone else, but with himself. Tony is dreaming of a present that is present to him. The dream is expressed in specifically spatial metaphors, grounding it in the experience of a body in a city, the ‘thing’ he is waiting for is right outside the door, just around the corner, just evading the outstretched tips of his fingers. This linguistic spacing of time reveals a conception of ‘life’ as something external, something you could collide with. This sense of destiny and collision recalls the missing and crossing of plot and coincidence in the sleeper train. The collusion of unfixed destiny and the rickety, liminal structure of the fire escape is not accidental. Tony sings, ‘Will it be? Yes it will. Maybe just by holding still. It will be here.’

West Side Story’s reiteration of themes of destiny is a clear reference to the play it takes as its source material, Romeo and Juliet. Derrida’s playful tri-tensed summary of the plot is updated and the question of one’s destiny – rather than the destiny of a pair – is underlined. The ‘they’ in this case are the young and their ‘lives’; ‘they missed each other, how they missed each other, did they miss each other?’ is reinterpreted to allow themes of social inequality and the injustice of such forms of fate. The film (made in 1961) gives voice to anxieties about spaces shaping (or cramping) destinies. The fire escape is one part of a set of crowded slums and contested territory.

As it quotes the play’s preoccupation with the contretemps of life’s plot it also quotes its infamous staging with a newly imagined balcony, the fire escape. This escape (climbed by Tony, occupied by Maria) does not trapdoor its users into another time zone so much as it makes reference to another place and time for the audience, its readers. The structure quotes the cityscape of 50s Manhattan at the same time as it quotes the balcony scene so endlessly recirculated as symbol of Romeo and Juliet. The fire escape has itself come to stand as a symbol for the city of Manahattan as well as for the permissive playful use of space already discussed. This chain of reference is one that could be read in many structures and sites within a city but the fire escape is a particular case because of its uniformity. The relative limits to its design means that many escapes look very similar, so looking at one will quickly

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27 ‘Daydreaming spins a particular narrative which only has one hero (the dreamer) and is only ever about triumph’, Mark Cousins, ‘Losing a Life’, lecture given at the Architectural Association 19th October 2012.
29 West Side Story.
trigger a memory of another. The structures thus act like quotations in the everyday text of the city. For many people the fire escape quotes another place, the place of Manhattan, so insistently they are quick to deny the presence of such structures in London. This simply isn’t the case (there are fire escapes everywhere in the city) but it underlines the fact that fire escapes are a strange presence. This strangeness is retained because the structures do not lend themselves to single ownership or purpose.

In the city the trapdoor fantasy is marred by the abruptly unromantic reality of your neighbours. Any secret passage you find, any hidden door, will probably lead into the kitchen or lap of someone you do not want to spend time with (not all of us have Audrey Hepburn living downstairs). The fire escape narrative is more often than not shaped by the interlacing of the lives of various sets of neighbours. In the fictions cited here the fire escape is a space into which other people’s homes (and lives) stray. The narrative in Tiffany’s is driven by the straying of one home in particular. Before they meet ‘Fred’ glimpses Holly “over the banister’, leaning out into the hallway, ’just enough to see without being seen.’30 Their unbidden intimacy reflects Pierre Mayol’s description of the neighbourhood as that place of coexistence which links dwellers ‘by the concrete, but essential, fact of proximity and repetition.’31 Bit by bit Holly’s proximity allows her neighbour to learn about her, encroaching on her life as her life encroaches on his through the series of permeable borders which lie between them.

He learns about her from eavesdropping on the fire escape, glancing at the trash she throws out, and flipping through the tabloids she graces as much as by roaming New York with her.32

30 Capote, p.16.
Figures 41. & 42. Looking down, sneaking up.

*Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, dir. Blake Edwards (Paramount Pictures, 1961)

The pleasurable surprise of the fire escape is linked with the pleasure of the trapdoor (the play of malleable borders, the mixing of codes) but it also stems from the particularly urban pleasure of voyeurism. These stills from *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* echo the cut up shots from *Pogiag* as the rectangle of our cinema vision is divided up by the structure of the escape. In the city the thing that lurks beyond the facade, the unknown entity behind the hidden door, is other people and their simultaneously lived lives. The voyeuristic impulse is a definite feature of the fire escape narrative and its everyday companion eavesdropping. We can compare the images of the blocked stairs in *The Seven Year Itch* with the open escape structures in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* which gesture towards an anxiety inspired by the space – and the skin – of the home and particularly the home in the city. The permeability of this skin is the main theme of that other fire escape narrative, Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rear Window* which sees L.B Jeffries (James Stewart) using his camera as a ‘portable keyhole’ to delve further in to the lives of his neighbours.
Rear Window opens with the slow striptease of rising window-blinds. The three blinds peel back in tantalisingly unhurried counterpoint to the frenzied syncopated rhythm of the opening credits’ jazz overture. Through the three frames of the window we can see (bit by bit) other eye-avenues and peep-shows; fire escapes, alley ways, ladders, balconies, windows, all thrown wide open to counter the summer heat. Through these unwitting lenses we see a man putting on a tie, a couple asleep on a fire escape, a girl facing her mirror tying up her hair, and in the small slit that leads out onto the road, a milk van. We are looped into the radio frequency and hear mixed broadcasts of music and advertisements, alarm clocks and morning conversations. The scene is familiar, domestic, referencing a multitude of morning rituals and routines; the viewer looks at and listens to a discordant but recognisable urban dawn chorus. The camera pulls back on itself, back behind the original three panes and into the apartment that they belong to. Here we find Jeffries in his ‘plaster cocoon,’ ravaged by the heat, itching to be out of this ‘swamp of boredom.’⁵³ Jeffries is rooted

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⁵³ Rear Window dir. Alfred Hitchcock (Paramount Pictures, 1954)
to the spot, stuck in two plaster casts, having recently broken both his legs in a race car explosion. This enforced stasis allows Hitchcock to create a modern version of what Barthes calls ‘the tragic stage.’ In this modern tragic stage, the subject waits, but he also spies. In the modern city stages like this proliferate.

The film casts the fire escape as one in a series of structures which invite an unseemly voyeurism articulating the guilty tension that works between looking and being looked at. Stella, who visits the apartment to nurse Jeffries puts this into words inadvertently espousing what she means to discredit; ‘we’ve become a race of peeping toms, what people ought to do is get outside their own house and look in for a change’. The denouement of the film will make this a terrifying reality when the murderer, who Jeffries has been spying on without his knowledge, looks back into his (Jeffries’) apartment. The opening scene of Rear Window makes a visual spectacle of eavesdropping. The fire escape narrative will often be one of eavesdropping because the escapes are the modern day versions of eaves. The definition of ‘eavesdrop’ reads as follows:

Listen secretly to (a person, private conversation), orig. by standing beneath the eaves of a house. Formerly also, stand beneath the eaves of (a building) in order to overhear conversation within.

Moving from the fictional I spy of Rear Window to the actual I spy of Twitter we can trace the remains of a tradition of voyeurism and exhibitionism that is still taking place on and around fire escapes. On the day the survey was made there were two remarkable fires in the news (a house fire in Streatham and a factory fire in Karachi). The ‘mentions’ of fire escapes on the social networking site were still predominantly (over 80%) focussed on the other uses of the structures, i.e. those which had nothing to do with escaping from a conflagration. I have made a list of key words and phrases from the Tweets below.

Hang out
Accident
Workmen
Blocked off
Slip out
Fall off
Perch

35 SEOD p.791.
36 Twitter survey, 14th September 2012.
Overlooking
Contemplate
In bras
Drinking
Weed
Be myself
Get away
Singing to myself
Barefoot
Phoneless
Chilling
Balcony
Briefs, no shirt
Sneak down

The overwhelming sense is that these are spaces of leisure but of a leisure which is also somehow a form of disobedience. From one of the most repeated phrases, ‘hang out’, we can discern an expansive and insouciant release of tension. The phrase sets up a mirrored relationship between the structures themselves and the people who are using them. The structures ‘hang out’ from the buildings they are attached to and the users of the space feel the liminal pleasures of being simultaneously part of and separate from the building they live in and the streets it overlooks. There is a wavering in the phrase between the droop and declivity of ‘hang’ and the spreading and reaching of ‘out’. ‘Hanging out’ embodies this sense of luxuriating and abandon; the delinquency is an indulgence. The phrase also leads us back to the exposed intimacy of washing lines upon which we hang out our clothes to dry. People repeatedly report sightings of strangers in their underwear or revel in their own state of semi-undress. Like ‘Fred’ in Breakfast at Tiffany’s these urbanites tread a tightrope between exhibitionism and voyeurism, leaning out ‘just enough to see without being seen.’ 37 Like Jeffries they take pleasure in spying and do not imagine they can be spied on. In Chapter Three, I wrote that a voyeur is one who derives sexual stimulation from the covert observations of others, or someone who observes without participating. The space of the fire escape, like that of the train, forces the position of voyeur onto those who use them and those who watch others. If you are on an external escape you can look at the world at a remove, you can watch but not participate. If you see other people on an escape you are similarly removed. They are stage-like spaces in this regard, calling attention to what happens in them but without inviting participation.

37 Capote, p.16.
4.4 Skin

The structures of fire escapes trouble the limits of the buildings they are part of. Suggesting alternative routes and detours, fire doors are secret doors which are normally held shut with bars and alarm systems. Through the trapdoor-like presence of these spaces the skin of a building is shown to be permeable in ways that are not quite proper, acceptable or appropriate. Didier Anzieu writes that ‘the surface of the body allows us to distinguish excitations of external origin from those of internal origin.’ This premise which is startling due to the suggestion of an innate confusion between inside and outside establishes the skin as a sort of check point. Anzieu conceives of it as a checkpoint which forms a projection, at once overwhelmingly material and overwhelmingly mental.

One of the capital functions of the ego is to distinguish between what belongs to me myself and what does not belong, between what comes from me and the desires, thoughts and affects of others, and between a physical (the world) or biological (the body) reality outside the mind; the ego is the projection in the psyche of the surface of the body, namely the skin, which makes up this sheet or interface.

For Anzieu the untidy experience of external and internal stimulation is only given order through the interface of the skin, that border that separates the body from the world. This projected surface, the ‘sheet or interface’ as Anzieu puts it, does not stop at the surface of the human body. Rather, whenever we find ourselves inside a structure we mentally throw our skin outwards, like a net thrown into the sea to catch fish. Or, like the goldfish and reptiles which grow in direct correlation to the cage or tank that houses them; we grow and expand to fit the space we are in.

We can see evidence for this imagined expansion in the way in which someone driving a car will hunch into himself, ducking inside the car, as he drives under a low bridge or through a dark tunnel, as though his contraction will allow the vehicle easier passage, as though his shape will be mirrored by that of the car. Of course, this is not the case, and were the driver to be questioned about his behaviour, he would explain that he had acted without thinking. He would not consciously or rationally expect the car to get smaller as he made himself smaller inside it, and yet, he would probably not be able to stop himself from

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38 Trapdoor: A door or hatch, usually flush with the surface, in a floor, roof, ceiling or theatre stage. 2. A door directing the ventilating current in a mine. 2. Computing A feature or defect of a computer system which allows surreptitious unauthorised access. SOED p.3357
40 Anzieu, p.63.
ducking the next time he drives under a bridge. The action is an unconscious and irrational one, just as the projection of an edge – the imagined expansion of our bodies within spaces that contain them – is unconscious and irrational. We do not feel this projected edge in the same way we feel our bodies; we cannot feel the rain on the roof of our house or the branch that taps on the window pane in the way that we can feel the sun on our heads or the splinter in our finger, but we are conscious of it. We carry it with us in the sense that we are simultaneously aware of the inside and the outside of the place we inhabit. If you close your eyes now and think about the building you are in you will find that you can do so with relative ease, because the way in which you think of it is not based upon what you can see but rather on a series of repeated journeys in and around it. In a very different way to the way that you know your own body, you know the building you are in from the inside out and from the outside in. (You have never been outside your body but you have made the journey to and from this building several times, you have possibly entered it from different routes, through different doors, you might even have had to exit it after hours, or during a fire drill . . .). This closed-eye, internal projection of the external space is always with you, functioning as an unstudied awareness; the same kind of bodily know-how allows you to get from your bed to your door in the middle of the night without bumping into anything.\footnote{For the farcical version of this knack gone-wrong it is worth reading Mark Twain’s  \textit{A Tramp Abroad}  where, in a strange hotel room, his blind sight fails him. (New York: Literary Classics, 2012) pp.73–82.}

Gaston Bachelard articulates a sense of this blind sight in  \textit{The Poetics of Space}  when he writes, ’Sight says too many things at one time. Being does not see itself. Perhaps it listens to itself.’\footnote{On Henri Michaux’s poem: ‘And the nightmare is simple, because it is radical. It would be intellectualising the experience if we were to say that the nightmare is the result of a sudden doubt as to the certainty of inside and the distinctness of outside. What Michaux gives us is an \textit{a priori} of being which is the entire space-time of ambiguous being. In this ambiguous space, the mind has lost its geometrical homeland and the spirit is drifting.’ Bachelard, \textit{Poetics of Space} pp.215–8.}

Bachelard also writes that ’outside and inside’ are ‘always to be reversed – to exchange their hostility.’\footnote{Bachelard, pp.217–8.} In terms of the skin ego outside and inside can never be reversed. A reversal would be awful; it would mean either insanity or death. Edward T. Hall draws upon the experience of some schizophrenics for an example of when outside and inside are not properly differentiated.

Although man is a self-domesticated animal, the domestication process is only partial. We see this in certain types of schizophrenics who apparently experience something very similar to the flight reaction [\textit{seen in wild animals}]. When approached too closely, these schizophrenics panic in much the same was as an animal recently locked up in a zoo. In describing their feelings, such patients refer to
anything that happens within their ‘flight distance’ as taking place literally inside themselves. That is, the boundaries of the self extend beyond the body.44

As we have seen in the example of the subject who ducks inside his car, the confusion of limits experienced by schizophrenics is an exaggeration of something we all experience from time to time. It is not difficult to accept that the ‘boundaries of the self extend beyond the body’; everyone has attachments to things, people and places that they feel deeply. Problems arise when the difference between inside and outside (or between internal stimulation and external stimulation) cannot be told apart. For it is not ‘outside’ and ‘inside’ that are ‘always to be reversed’ but rather the position from which we look at the surface. Identity and sanity both rely on the freedom with which we can move between one and the other; upon the ability to step outside oneself as much as on the ability to know oneself.

Pierre Mayol’s understanding of the way the neighbourhood is sculpted and formed is also Bachelardian. The way in which environment and habitat become internalised is a result of external involvement. As the public is ‘encroached on by the private’ it is, bit by bit, ‘privatised.’ And movements through it become habitual and engrained. Our surroundings become second nature to us; we take them into ourselves though habitual use, through repetition. Like any routine or ritual that is practised without thought; daily routes, series of steps and climbs, veers and paces, leans and stops, in and around a building or area, underground transport system or high-rise office block, become part of us – they are what we know more than what we just remember. This knowledge recalls the answers given by Bolton housewives to the Mass Observation surveyors, the answers that were described as ‘irrational.’ The feeling that something is right or wrong. The idiosyncratic way of washing, hanging and folding, like the specific route from front door to train station, becomes physically engrained in the body of the person who practices or makes it. The repetition of this practice or this route becomes reassuring, reinforcing the remembered. Thinking about this in terms of the fire escape gives rise to two (not necessarily complementary or contradictory) ideas. The first is the internalised image (for want of a better word) that is built up over time, the knowledge that is yours without you knowing it; the steps into your bed at night when the light is off, the feel of the door handle, the category of objects, shapes, surroundings like Foucault’s chimneys:

Those everyday things that ultimately I no longer see, that life has grayed out, like those chimneys, those roofs that line the sky every night in front of my window.

Still, every morning: same presence, same wounds.45

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The second idea, important not to let go of, is that of the labile, fluctuating, sensitive and temporary felt surface of the self. This is the surface that gasps in pleasure at the sight of St. Paul’s, that flinches in a tunnel, that changes in, with, in reaction to space. These two ideas are both complementary and contradictory and it is the tensions between them that rest at the heart of this investigation. There is a constant negotiation between the carried, known image of the world, reiterated and internalized through repeated movement through it, and the body’s sensitive and changing reaction to it as it changes. The affront of the Hyde Park Hotel’s tower, breaking the skyline of Hyde Park was a collision of these two instances; the internalized felt familiar being disturbed by the newly made building. Similarly the unknown route into the fire escape of a building demands a realignment of the way that building is understood.

The realignment of these spaces is often towards a newly porous structuring of the city. These are trapdoors, places or means of ingress and egress, places from which to watch and be watched, places into which homes might stray. In Chapter Two, I wrote about the possibility of claustrophilia being a side-effect of the pleasure or relief offered by locked and limited spaces. Another way to think about claustrophilia is that these spatially and temporarily confined spaces offer a tangibility that is also felt as relieving or pleasurable. In an age not only of air-conditioning but also individualised home appliances and the internet there are fewer and fewer occasions which might see people encountering one another in the way the narratives discussed find facilitated by the fire escape. Didier Anzieu writes,

In the era of the third industrial revolution, the revolution of information, nuclear energy and the video, the repressed is the body. In our society, in which the language of machines and the mass media has become so predominant, in which long-distance communications have been perfected, generalized and automated, and in which the production and possession of ever more sophisticated and manufactured objects in infinite numbers are experienced as obligatory, physical and affective, closeness is being unlearnt.\textsuperscript{46}

In the narratives discussed, fire escapes seem to belong to a collection of semi-derelict objects and spaces which allow for this forgotten nearness, a site of potential coincidence (like the sleeper train and the launderette). The fire drill is an experience of coincidence (far more temporary than that of the sleeper train or even the launderette) and the escape is a


\textsuperscript{46} Anzieu, p.64.
porous space that inserts a degree of instability into the sealed off simultaneities of other lives in the city.

Figure 45. Fire escape bed.

An image which glorifies these attributes is ‘Children on a Fire Escape’ taken by the photographer Weegee (Arthur Fellig) in 1938. The photograph depicts discomfort and overcrowding but there is also something inescapably charming about it. Part of this charm lies in the allusion to childhood, signaled by an unabashed and pre-sexual collusion of bodies; the sought and found peace of sleep. Georges Perec writes “‘Italian’ beds are only to be found in fairytales (Tom Thumb and his brothers, or the seven daughters of the ogre for example) or in altogether abnormal and usually serious circumstances.” With this makeshift ‘Italian’ bed the image seems to cast its viewer in the role of the parent (or ogre), looking down upon an unaware collection of sleeping subjects. The viewer is implicated in ogre/parental feelings of tenderness, protection and care. The space only exaggerates this enveloping viewpoint. It is lopsided, cut up by washing line and pole, leaking out past ladders and into the building through an open window (out of which pour yet more children). The only firm ‘edge’ is that of the shelf-bed on which they lie which, in its

crowded state, seems perilous. Perec brings together fairytales and ‘abnormal’ or ‘serious’ circumstances. These are times when normal rules do not apply, when edges and boundaries begin to blur. The abnormal circumstance which has led to this appropriation of space (and the transformation of platform to bed) is heat. The summer weather has forced the home to spread out onto the balconies, onto any surface that can be found. This was, as Arthur Miller points out, a time before air-conditioning.

Miller writes nostalgically about the hottest summers of his youth, remembering a time when weather conditions could realign the contours of a city, before the demands of home cooling systems meant that gaps, windows and doors were stopped up to keep in the cool air. During one particularly sweltering summer ‘every window in New York was open.’ It was not just the heat that allowed children to sprawl out across the fire escape, class played its part too.

People on West 110th Street, where I lived, were a little too bourgeois to sit out on their fire escapes, but around the corner on 111th and father uptown mattresses were put out as night fell, and whole families lay on those iron balconies in their underwear.

Even through the night, the pall of heat never broke. With a couple of other kids I would go across 110th to the Park and walk among the hundreds of people, singles and families, who slept on the grass, next to their big alarm clocks, which set up a mild cacophony of the seconds passing, one clock’s tick syncopating with another’s.

Miller and Weegee’s depictions of city night time in the heat flirt with the surreal undercurrent that seems to accompany every manifestation of a strayed home. This is the point at which the boundaries that it bends threaten to be breached completely. Both are reminiscent of the nightmare chaos of sleeping bodies in the third class compartments of the night train and Dali could have painted Miller’s park, full of bodies and strewn with clocks. The prosaic gives rise to the surreal as hundreds of time-conscious sleepers sleep with alarm clocks next to their heads to make sure they get to work on time in the morning. Recalling the elongated threshold of the eruv, the temporarily altering surfaces of washi hung out to dry, and the bags of clothes taken to and from the home, the fire escape that is used (or missued) for reasons of expediency alters the cityscape or residential block in a way that is

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49 Arthur Miller, ‘Before Air Conditioning’, The New Yorker, June 22nd 1999
50 Miller, ibid.
felt by those around it. The fire escape is a potentially transformative space signaling, if not actually producing, pliable and instable skylines for those who live in the city.
4.5 Excessive to Function

The early escape ladders and routes of London were made to create a fast route out of a space that was no longer safe to be in. This of course is what escape doors and routes are designed for now. However these spaces, which are to be used only in the event of an emergency tend to be slow (if not static) parts of the buildings they are attached to. They are not spaces of rush or flow, their everyday use is paused, held still, waiting. The effect of their presence within buildings is like that of waiting rooms on train platforms or lifeboats on cruise ships, they work to a different time scale and gesture to a potential (unwished for) future. But they are not necessarily dead spaces, because their designated use is on hold, the way they are used depends entirely on the person or group who uses them. Like the airshaft and laundry room in Thomas Beller’s Manhattan apartment block the fire escape is an aspect of a building’s design which is somehow excessive to function. It is its very uselessness that gives it this excessive potential. Excessive to function (out of the order that governs the rest of the building) also means free of prescriptive function; the fire escape is full of possibilities. Because their designated function is on hold the way they are used in the meantime is always a misuse, involving some form of appropriation or invention. I’m aligning this misuse with the tactical practices discussed by Michel de Certeau, Luce Giard and Pierre Mayol in The Practice of Everyday Life Vol. 2. Living & Cooking. They write that the city is poeticized by the subject.\footnote{Michel de Certeau, Luce Giard and Pierre Mayol, Practice Vol. 2. p.13.}

I have recently made recourse to the dictionary to look up the word poeticize because although I have an inkling of what it means it is an inkling built up of inferences and inklings … In the Shorter Oxford English, it states that to poeticize is to give something poetic character. It states that poetic character is character pertaining to poetry. And that poetry is the expression or embodiment of beautiful or elevated thought; feeling in language, language formed so as to stir the imagination and emotions. Just below the definition of poetry are the definitions of po-faced and poffertje. Po-faced means having or assuming an expressionless or impassive face. A poffertje is a small light doughnut or fritter dusted with sugar as made in the Low Countries and South Africa.\footnote{Shorter Oxford English (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) p.2260.} There is poetry in the impassive face of the sugar-dusted fritter too. More than beautiful or elevated thought poetry is about subjective interpretation. To poeticize is not necessarily to elevate or make beautiful, rather it is to interpret in such a way as to alter. It is a linguistic act that subverts its subject. It is an unpacking of subjective experience that has the effect of eroding an objective one, it is transformative, even if only for a moment. It is this definition of the poeticizing act that I think Mayol must be alluding to when he says that the city is poeticized by the subject. The
city is interpreted, subverted and re-appropriated by its subjects. Mayol writes that ‘the subject refabricates it for his or her own use by undoing the constraints of the urban apparatus and imposing their own law on the external order of the city.’53 It is the subversive qualities of this act that aligns it with the use and interpretation of fire escapes.

Fire exits, stairwells and escapes are oddly un-administered spaces. Part of a building’s design that is (for the most part) excessive to function, they are spaces where waste or excess can turn to potential. The fire escape is full of possibilities. As you walk through the city you will see people use them as storage space, as back gardens, as spaces in which to hang washing or keep bikes. More variable interpretations occur in the spaces that are still designated as escapes (so must be kept clear of clutter). These misuses cannot be anything but temporary so the spaces are reinterpreted time and again. They are used as hiding places, vantage points, places to drink, sleep, smoke, take drugs, have sex, escape, and hide in. Fire drills are like little dérives in the working day. The space of the fire escape can be read as wasted space; the drill is in many ways a waste of time. It is this very quality of waste which, because it is unstable, disorderly and un-administered, allows for subjective appropriation, subversion and for the possibility of poeticizing the city.

Chapter Five. *Greasy Spoon*
5.1 Introduction

This chapter looks at the space of the greasy spoon and begins with an introduction to the term. Paying close attention to Richard Hornsey’s investigation into the side-street cafes of postwar London it thinks about the relationship between the wide-open space of recently bombed or regenerated London and the timed and spaced routines of daily life. In section two, The Milk Comes and the Post Goes, I read an agoraphobic attachment to the times and spaces of these routines in the architects of the Greater London County Plan and the citizens they hoped to organise. If the greasy spoon operates on its own time scale then what position might it occupy with regards to these timed and spaced routines? The home is the place where the routines and rituals of daily life are assumed to begin and end. It is also a place of work and washing up. With this in mind the grease of the greasy spoon is examined as homely matter out of place. In section three, Stay, I examine the distracted temporality of the spaces now and read the middle distance that seems to have accumulated there. Like the launderette there is comfort taken in the type of time spent in the space. There is relief found in limitation that recalls the launderette and the sleeper train. This is attributed to the smallness of these spaces and the uniformity of their menus. ‘Just’ is a word heard in the cafe that is suggestive of the measurements and adjustments customers make there. It opens up reflections on ideas of humility and goodness that are attached to the self-consciously titled home-made food. If in gazing into a middle distance, we are in fact tuning into a very specific type or point of contemplation, then in the ordering and combining of various items of food customers enact a tuning as well, attempting to get to a specific frequency or redress a point of imbalance.

The term ‘greasy spoon’ will be used here to refer a type of café that might also be called a workman’s café or caff. It is not a neatly contained category and this chapter will serve in one sense as an extended definition. It will work from the corraling of various behaviours and attributes which accumulate under or near the term drawing from accounts of cabmen’s shelters, transport cafes, twenty-four hour cafes, as well as establishments that would call themselves ‘caffs’ and those that wouldn’t. To sketch a quick outline, these are places which do not serve alcohol and whose affordable menu is based firmly around foods that are traditionally thought of as breakfast, the meal eaten at the break of day. The category of greasy spoon is ill-defined because the state is one places can arrive at accidentally, and decay into, as well as plan to be. The term serves as a way of talking about a series of establishments which might once have been in very different groupings. The way they are used means once modern coffee bars are now in the same grouping as cabmen’s shelters and workmen’s cafes. It is a certain type of use and attitude to time that this chapter reads in the greasy spoon.
The terms ‘greasy spoon’ and ‘caff’ are central to this investigation because they are ones which users of the spaces tend to ascribe to them rather than being ones chosen by the proprietors. ‘Greasy spoon’ in particular is felt to be a derogatory term so is much less likely to be found in menus or on signs. It first appeared in print in England, referring to a small restaurant, in 1949. The *Evening Telegraph* sets a tale of luck and coincidence in a café in St. Louis, Missouri, ‘aptly named ‘The Greasy Spoon.’1 ‘Aptly named’ here gestures to an assumed comprehension and familiarity with the phrase on the part of the article’s audience, the author feels it will be taken as read and does not need to be explained. The phrase does not feature significantly in printed material today, it was briefly popular in song, but seems to be one that remains for the most part spoken rather than written. Like the spaces it signifies it is anachronistic; it is still a word-of-mouth phrase. This might explain why even though it is a commonplace part of vernacular language (and therefore etymologically muted) something of its original nose-wrinkling distaste has remained. There is a visceral and graspable quality to the words and their coupling. Perhaps it is the very handled nature of the thing and the adjective ascribed to it that causes this residual etymological tidemark.2 We all know spoons intimately having put them in our mouths and held them in our hands for years. The feeling of grease is similarly familiar and similarly experienced through the sense of touch; they are handheld and fingertip sensations. ‘Greasy spoon’ is a phrase which is felt in our hands and (if we are unlucky) in our mouths even if we recognise it as signaling a type of place to eat.

1 ‘My Tartan Hankie Brought Him Luck’ *Evening Telegraph*, Thursday 7th April 1949, p.5
2 Jean-Paul Satre has written at some length on the psychic meaning of slime and the slimy (a possible iteration of the greasy). He finds it ambiguous, fluid and feminine. *Being and Nothingness* (London: Routledge, 1993) pp.604-609.
In 1949 there was a variety of places in which to eat outside the home. A Mass Observation report shows that on a trip to Blackpool people could choose from refreshment bars, fish and chip restaurants, ‘popular’ cafes and ‘fashionable’ ones. Holidayakers could also buy from oyster carts and bring their own makings with which to picnic on the sands. While eating outside the home was part of the tradition of being on holiday, external eating during the working week was less established. In The Spiv and the Architect, Unruly Life in Postwar London, Richard Hornsey writes about the awkwardness inserted into the cityscape by the presence of side-street cafes. Examining these spaces in the context of the ambitious urban planning projects of the time, he highlights the sense of conflicting ideas of time and space management. Hornsey pays close attention to the relationship between the plans and realities of city space at a time when the new was throwing the old into some kind of relief: ‘The crucial importance of this postwar moment lay in its concerted attempts to realign many of the dynamics of metropolitan life.’ His focus on the ‘down-at-heel café’ as a space that was felt to be alarmingly disorganised and consequently queer reveals that there was something specifically disorderly at work in the juxtaposition of café and city.

Hornsey identifies the ‘side-street café’ as one of a group of sites which were perceived as being interstitial, ambiguous and therefore problematic in postwar London. Ambiguity was a subversive presence for what he terms the ‘collective moral project’ of the time which sought to (re)construct social stability through ‘a set of collective engagements and activities that would interpellate all citizens into a performance of civic participation.’ Citing The County of London Plan, written in 1943 by architects Patrick Abercrombie and J.H. Forshaw, he highlights the planner’s ‘investment in regular cycles of individuated spatial repetition.’ These cycles, which started and ended at the threshold of the family home, were to be streamlined (in the case of the commute or holiday trip) and solidified as a form of social and moral ordering. There is a claustrophilic tint to the way this ‘fit’ and ‘order’ are articulated in the rhetoric of the plan.

Are we to continue the old haphazard methods or are we to work to a plan so that every new construction, road or open space fits into and builds up gradually an ordered, more healthy and beautiful town?

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3 The Places Where Food is Eaten, Mass Observation report, Blackpool (1941)
5 Hornsey, p.41.
6 Hornsey, p.49.
The implicit contrast made here between open space and the health and beauty of a town is significantly agoraphobic in tone. Open space, roads and constructions cannot be left to spill out, to leak or stray, instead they must fit into and build up the ever-expanding town. The necessary expansion must simultaneously be a compactment; a jigsaw-like accumulation in which every piece – even that of open space, has its place.

The planners’ investment in routine was underpinned by the legacy of the blitz. Hornsey suggests repetition became reassurance in the face of the trauma and destruction of the bomb damage. At the heart of the propaganda generated during and immediately after the blitz were precisely those cycles of routine and repetition which reinscribed a sociable orderliness. This was what the twinned photographs captioned ‘THE MILK COMES . . . AND THE POST GOES’ printed in a publication issued by the Ministry of Information (Front Line, 1940-1941: The Official Story of the Civil Defense of Britain) were seeking to reaffirm. (See Figure 46.) The images each showed a uniformed man in mid-action. Both are the single figure to be seen in a wreckage of bricks flanked by houses. One gingerly steps through the debris, his hands full of carriers stacked with milk bottles. The other bends down to empty the contents of the (still standing) postbox at the centre of the shot. The images stand at slight odds with their captions which remove the men and their bodies from the foreground, positing instead that it is ‘the milk’ and ‘the post’ which are propelling themselves through these scenes of destruction. It seems unlikely that the authors of the report were intending a supernatural personification of inanimate objects but the elision of the men from the captions gestures to a latent fantasy that the routine itself is keeping going of its own accord. It is the ‘coming’ and ‘going’ that the authors are invested in, the continuing cycle of beginnings and endings of days, the ingress and egress of an external system of order into and out of the home even after the home itself has been destroyed.

Much that had been familiar all their lives was being torn away in the blast of the high explosive, and Londoners did not weep to see it go. But, being human, they needed the feel of something fixed and persistent. In their normal daily work they found it and gripped hard.8

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This rhetorical account of the blitz draws together the impact of bomb damage with the tactics of survival used afterwards. Normal daily work is seized upon as survival tactic. The expression of this seizure recalls the description of similar survival tactics for an agoraphobic patient in the *American Journal of Psychology* in 1919. This account substitutes the gripped routine for the literally hand-held crutch.

I ride a bicycle along streets with comparative comfort where I should suffer agony to walk. In walking I feel less uncomfortable in passing along the street if I carry a suitcase or travelling bag—something to grip.9

The agoraphobe is able to appropriate various substances and surfaces as a means of lessening the effects of others. It is worth quoting at length from the case study of Helen, one of Eduardo Weiss’s patients.

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She felt extremely anxious at home, particularly during the night, if there were not eggs, bread, meat and at least one lemon in the kitchen … In the course of her neurosis she had developed the feeling that in the case of an attack of extreme anxiety, she would have to disrobe immediately and completely in order to overcome the unbearable attack of anxiety, she wore only garments which she made herself and which were closed in front with zippers, so that she could rid herself of all clothing by a quick pull of the zippers. She also wore specially fashioned shoes out of which she could immediately step.¹⁰

Weiss draws out a reading which ties a fear of starvation to repressed sexual impulses but the more persuasive theme running through the case (and all cases of agoraphobia) is a sense of sensitivity and reciprocity between Helen and her surroundings. She does not take off her clothes because she wants to be naked but because she feels overwhelmingly oppressed. Removing her clothes releases her in some way from the oppression but they are a substitute, something she can change and control standing in for something she cannot. If she feels anxious at home at night without a specific set of objects then having them there points more to a compulsive need for order rather than a fear of hunger. This relationship of reciprocal compensation was also read in the space of the sleeper train and Barthes’ dining car.

We can compare the agoraphobe’s horror of wide-open spaces and distance from home with the alienating confrontation of the hollows of a newly bombed city and recently gutted domestic scenes.¹¹ The confusion of boundaries that is at work for the agoraphobe can also be read in the exaggerated emphasis on the importance of the routine for the architects of the greater London Plan and employees at the Ministry of Information. It is gestured to by the metonymic blurring which means the edges of ‘daily work’ become something you can grip and feel. There is a slippage between time and the tactile. Like the suitcase or travelling bag, ‘the milk’ and ‘the post’ in Front Line are imbued with a sense of fixity and gravity which marks both a confusion of boundaries and an effort to redraw and rebuild the edges which make up ‘home’. Even the title of the publication speaks of metonymic experiences of space; the front line of battle is redrawn along the doorsteps and pavements of civilian space.

Writing about The Sunday Times and Observer picture supplements and the photo-magazine Picture Post, Ben Highmore contrasts the side-by-side appearance of images of

¹¹ For an adept analysis of the aesthetics of this psychopathology see Paul Carter’s Repressed Spaces; A Poetics of Agoraphobia (London: Reaktion, 2001)
bombsites, ‘socially concerned photojournalism often using grainy black-and-white film,’ and those of consumer goods and aspirational lifestyles, ‘nearly always using colour photography and showing images of food, fashion, interiors, holidays.’ The juxtaposition of these images was between void and the things that might fill it, between a frayed present and a streamlined future. The remains of destroyed spaces characterised by wide expanses of sky and barely recognisable buildings were displayed alongside a colourful series of objects, interiors and holiday vistas. The colour pictures can be read as offering a tangibly sturdy, attainable and attractive alternative to the gaping holes and crumbling structures which Highmore writes could easily have been either the remains of bombsites or buildings recently demolished under regeneration schemes. The colour photography depicting things and ‘futures’ set against the black and white ramshackle ruins has split the *Front Line* images into two; the objects and routines of continuity have been freed from the rubble and from the people who might be making or delivering them. Highmore’s set of images – depicting bombsites as playgrounds – show wild haired grubby children who the word delinquent seems to have been coined for, idling, playing and fighting in amongst the grainily rendered remains of the city. The point here is about the space and the way it is read. For the planners of the London County Plan, and socially minded photojournalists, there is a clear investment in the separation between an untidy present, characterised by open space and destroyed buildings, and an orderly future, characterised and indeed ensured by routine.

It is the backdrop of reassuring routine against which the ambiguity of the ‘side-street café’ was supposedly jarring in 1952. In his investigation into the constitution of queerness in postwar London Richard Hornsey writes that,

Tabloid reports about metropolitan male vice mapped out a selection of other, more public urban spaces that festered with excessive possibilities and illicit desires. The most prominent of these was the down-at-heel café. It was not that the cafés offered excessive possibilities however but rather that they offered possibility at all; they were unpredictable spaces that could not be controlled or fitted into the management of time and space. This troublesome quality can be attributed to the cafés’ spatial and temporal locations. In space they were conceived of as being ‘just off the main thoroughfare,’ ‘side-street’ establishments, already wayward and, in the way in which they avoided the straight line of the main road, somewhat bent. As well as being troublingly located to the side of the ‘straight and narrow’ they occupied ill-defined temporalities,

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precisely because their timings did not coincide directly with the timings of the promoted
daily routine. They were not contained by so called normal daily work. The milk might
come and the post might go but the café could still be open. Both of these factors meant
Londoners could visit them without being observed. What’s worse was that even if a man
was observed visiting a café he could pretend a perfectly respectable reason for being there.
They sold food, tea and coffee after all. Deviation from the normal could happen without
anyone noticing. Hornsey writes that ‘the side-street café was saturated by an unstable set of
spatial dynamics that could easily provoke promiscuously disordered forms of behaviour.’
The disorder of promiscuity was not of course the real source of fear that surrounded these
spaces. The more persistent fear expressed was that of homosexuality, the cafés were places
in which gay men could meet. Straight promiscuity, though hardly encouraged by the
planners and social commentators of this time, was for obvious reasons more visible and
therefore a lesser source of anxiety.

What is furtherly suggestive about the discomfort identified by Hornsey on the part
of the journalists, urban planners and police about these spaces, is that it was not confined to
their after-hour hours. There was just as much fluster generated by the ambiguity
permitted by the open space of the lunch hour that the cafés seemed to somehow extend.
The lunch hour was one of the puzzle pieces that needed to be better contained in the grand
plan of city living. So the space of the side-street café was in part only unstable because it
was a place in which people spent the interstitial parts of their day. The down-at-heel café;
functional, affordable, innocuous, acted as a net which held its shape and invited contents
that did not fit the prescribed shape of the ‘comings’ and ‘goings’ which were so important
to the planners’ vision of a healthy and beautiful town. It occupied a loophole of sorts, one
that revealed a series of alternative ‘daily’ cycles. Where homophobic commentators found
the dirty, the deviant and the perverted in these spaces of instability and disorder, a
journalist writing about a transport café in 1939 found instead a surreal and pleasurable
mingling of codes.

“We reckon on anything up to 150 meals a day,” the proprietress told me,
“Transport men are the mainstay of course, but we do a big trade with people

16 ‘We chose our own hours, and I think I can safely say that the Mayfair area is strongest in the
lunch hour when the people who work in the offices in Mayfair go for their lunch breaks. I am not
exaggerating when I say that 90% of the people I have arrested in the Mayfair area are actually in
their lunch break.’ Police Constable Butcher during the hearings of the Wollenden Committee. The
Spiv and the Architect p.105.
17 ‘There is a dirty café, off Shaftsbury Avenue, where dozens of the most blatant perverts meet,
calling each other by girls’ names openly.” Douglas Warth, ‘Evil Men’, Sunday Pictorial, 25th May
1952, p.6.
returning home from dances. They come here in their gowns and dress suits and order ham and eggs and sausage and chips."\(^{18}\)

We can take pleasure in the cohabitation of the incongruous gowns, ham, dress suits and eggs and notice that it is a pleasure that comes from the same point of origin as the personification of the milk and post in *Front Line*. If, in what we might call an agoraphobic tendency, we ascribe certain objects to certain hours of the day and to certain spaces, then when we find them *out of place* it can be both pleasurable and alarming. The dance-goers and transport men found each other mutually fascinating, reveling in the displacement and refreshment that we have ascribed to the spatial gape. These are the effects that Pipilotti Rist was trying to elicit with her washing lines of underpants strung out alongside Waterloo Bridge. Like the launderette, the sleeper train and the fire escape, these are spaces whose edges are not policed, giving rise to the possibility of chance encounter and coincidence.

Between 11.30 on Saturday and 2 o’clock on Sunday morning the place is full of dance crowds. One or two people have asked me, why don’t we build a special café for them but I believe it would kill the trade if we did. The dance crowds like the place because it’s homely and warm, and they like to play darts with the drivers. The drivers interest the dance crowd and the dance crowd interest the drivers.\(^{19}\)

The pleasurable incongruity is achieved through the brief abutment of different ‘daily’ cycles. Both groups are taking respite from movement in different directions. The dancers are on their way home, the drivers are in their version of the lunch hour; both are coming and going but tracing trajectories that slip the confines of the normal working day.

These strayed objects (suits and sausages, gowns and eggs), which we have assigned to certain places or certain hours of the day, are a key part of what is pleasurable and what Warth\(^{20}\) (et al) found disturbing about the cafés. In both cases what is disturbed is the investment made in objects and hours *belonging* to certain places and times of day. It is interesting to think back to Mary Douglas who writes, ‘Our pollution behaviour is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications.’\(^{21}\) Evidently the dirt and disorder detected by Warth is borne of a reaction to

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\(^{18}\) ‘In praise of transport cafes’, *Derby Daily Telegraph*, Wednesday 8th February 1939, p.4.

\(^{19}\) *Derby Daily Telegraph*, Wednesday 8th February 1939, p.4.


the dismantling of cherished classifications. But what is at work for the customers who take
pleasure in the matter of out place (and time) in the transport café?

There is an echo of these animated objects out of place or time in one of the phrases
which has come to stand for the spaces. ‘Greasy spoon’ was coined to refer to the less than
pristine condition of the cutlery in the ‘down-at-heel’ cafés in question. Far from being an
unfamiliar and unhomely item however, the ‘greasy spoon’ was something that was familiar
to most housewives long before the phrase signaled a place which was not home. If ‘the milk’
and ‘the post’ were items or routines which both hemmed and kept open the boundaries of
home and day, then the greasy spoon and the washing-up bowl were part of a routine which
nestled at the very heart and secret parts of home and day, stretching out time and rooting
the housewife to the sink in an unforgivable and unwanted way.

Figure 47. It’s the awful grease!

The Evening Telegraph, Wednesday March 18th 1936, p.6.

Grease, which these days might be thought to have more to do with engines, elbows and
Elvis, was the word used by every soap company advertising in Britain from the 1880s
onwards to sum up all that was loathsome about washing-up and everything that could be
banished by the use of their product. Hudson's soap flakes were promised to 'Make Grease Fly!' while Vim powder would help you 'get at that Grease!' It is hard to find a soap advert in this period which does not contain the word grease. The apparently ubiquitous substance was singled out as the worst element of washing-up, combining as it did attributes of nastiness and dirt with those of recalcitrance and contamination. Grease was stubborn, resisting the efforts of the washer to remove it, whilst being simultaneously fluid and smooth, oiling its way onto hands, tea towels, washing bowls and anything else that might be at hand. Rinso promised to take the brunt of the effort grease required with the magical absorbing qualities of their soap.

Don't put up with nasty greasy washing up! It's an endless job and so unpleasant! Instead, do your dishes quickly, easily, economically. Put some Rinso in your washing up water and just watch it absorb the grease. Just think, the lovely rich lather from a single tablespoonful of Rinso absorbs 10 tablespoons of grease!

The contrast between 'lovely rich lather' and 'nasty greasy washing up' is a promise of the transformation of a single substance. The advert fits neatly into Barthes' category of soap powder as opposed to detergent, performing the magic but selective action of absorption rather than eradication.

What matters is the art of having disguised the abrasive function of the detergent under the delicious image of a substance at once deep and airy which can govern the molecular order of the material without damaging it.

The luxuriant lather is endowed with further promises not to be abrasive with the inclusion of the image at the bottom of the advert which shows a feminine hand being held by a masculine one (despite all the washing up she's done, he still wants to hold her hand!). Although unpleasant and unwanted, greasy cutlery and crockery were originally items which had escaped from the home. As we go on to examine whether or not these spaces can be thought of as strayed homes today the presence or reminder of this not-so-sweet part of home will become increasingly relevant.

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23 Rinso advertisement Nottingham Evening Post, 1937.
25 I have a collection of images of these happily held hands, marriage prospects it seems were helped enormously by washing up powder.
It was not just the dirty washing up that had made its way from kitchen to pavement at this time; there had been a steady increase in the amount of cafés and restaurants which were opening, expanding the number of places to eat in outside the home. Ueli Prager, owner of the Mövenpick chain, wrote in 1959;

Today we experience a complete revolution in our social order and in our conceptions of society. In the Western countries, the social contrasts are decreasing more and more as the workers become members of the middle class. This development has naturally the greatest influence on the catering trade. Dining out in a restaurant has become a natural thing.26

The repetition of ‘natural’ here betrays a sort of bourgeois bio-politics at work behind an ardent assertion of societal revolution. That the heir to the Movenpick fortune might have an investment in the proliferation of and habitual use of cafés and restaurants comes as no surprise but the need to assert it in what was essentially a trade magazine for prospective restaurant owners and builders reveals an anxiety about the inverse, that eating in a restaurant might be unnatural. The ‘naturalisation’ that Prager was at pains to point out was by no means recognisable among the British working class. Richard Hoggart, writing in 1957, outlined their general attitude which boiled down to mistrust based upon how food not-from-home tasted and what it cost.

‘Home cooking’ is always better than any other … café food is almost always adulterated … the mistrust of cafés has been reinforced by the knowledge that they can hardly be afforded anyway.27

A middle-class but financially informed aversion to eating away from home can be read in George Orwell’s Keep the Aspidistra Flying when Rosemary and Gordon find themselves in a small country hotel. Money is a factor in the discomfort felt but this is expressed by the paralyzing effect the space has on its users.

Rosemary shrank nearer to him. She too was intimidated. … In such a place you couldn’t possibly say ‘Bread and cheese and beer’, ‘Lunch’ was the only thing you could say. There was nothing for it but ‘Lunch’ or flight.28

This sense of intimidation, of a ventriloquism that is enforced by a space, recalls the way in which ‘individuated spatial routine’ is described by Hornsey. The intent of (his postwar) planners and architects was to build (or expand) cities in which the space itself informed the choices made in it. What becomes unnatural for the users of these spaces is when this instruction is felt, or when you are made to feel as though you don’t fit. In the hotel dining room or high street café this instruction is felt as an intimidating interpellation, as a muting ventriloquism; ‘in such a place you couldn’t possibly say’, or as a bodily possession, where you are taken hold of and your movements controlled by the space you find yourself in. If you don’t fit in, you stand out. An introduction to the design of Barrie’s Restaurant in New York from the trade publication introduced by Prager makes explicit one of the spatial anxieties of out-dining in the 50s; that you might find yourself alone in a space that was too large to contain you. There are conflicting anxieties at work here, people do not want to be controlled by a space but they do not want to be exposed by it either.

Having entered the restaurant a surprising view opens out for him into the rear dining room with nice small tables for two. The single guest, who always feels isolated at a large table, is very appreciative of this.29

The side-street cafés described by Hornsey, like the cafés and transport cafés that are the setting for much of James Curtis’s pulp thriller They Drive by Night, are affordable and homely. They do not ventriloquise or strike dumb their customers. They are innately welcoming, they are cosy. This cosiness stems from the presence of the secret habits of the home; not the taste of the food or the comfort of the furniture but the secret, more intimate and rather more unpleasant habits of the home. Curtis’s hero Shorty smells these habits before he sees them when arriving at Sprockett’s Corner, a transport café on the outskirts of London.

Sweaty bodies, an open coke fire, cheap clothes drying from the rain, coarse, dirty fat used for frying eggs. Why, the joint smelt exactly like a cheap kip house.30

Shorty’s is a narrative on-the-run, just out of prison and wrongly accused of murder he falls (by necessity) into the nomadic routine of long-distance lorry drivers. For these men the cafés are temporary homes. Unlike the small country hotel, visited for an event or as part of an occasion, these cafés are used day in day out as the place in which you rest for a few hours or minutes before heading back on the road. They are used in this novel as a place it is possible to be in if you have neither home nor work to go to. The world Curtis sets his novel

29 Alexander Koch, Restaurants, Cafes, Bars p.16.
30 James Curtis, They Drive By Night (London: Jonathan Cape, 1938) p.45.
in is one that has been described as an underworld, the seedy underside of England, but a more accurate description would be side-world. This is the world that operates alongside but just out of sight, ever so slightly out-of-sync with the world it essentially services and avoids. The long-distance drivers are the reason the milk can come and the post can go.

Curtis begins the novel on the cusp of day and night, drawing his readers’ focus to the work behind the scenes of the start of a day.\textsuperscript{31} This side-world can be aligned with the parts of buildings that are revealed during a fire drill; cleaning cupboards, store rooms, post rooms – entirely alternative experiences of places you might have thought you knew. Shorty’s is a world of criminal activity, and off-time industry. For these ‘alternative’ but simultaneous systems the transport and all-night caff is a home away from home, a stable base.

A large part of the floor was sanded and in one corner stood an old grand piano … The counter was semicircular and a couple of men in dirty white coats were standing behind it. There was a ring of chairs by the fire. A couple of drivers were playing draughts and another three were grouped round their table watching them. Another half a dozen stood around the pin-tables gambling. Over the fire hung two notices. One in red said BEDS 1S 6d. The other in blue pencil read CUSTOMERS ARE NOT ALLOWED TO SLEEP IN THE CAFÉ. BEDS ARE PROVIDED AT VERY NOMINAL CHARGES.\textsuperscript{32}

For Shorty the transport café is precisely the space of encounter and exchange between strangers (mostly men) that Warth and the architects were so afraid it might be; a static place in which various time scales and economies meet and interact. Shorty exchanges money for transport and when he doesn’t have any money to offer talks his way into the lorries. For Cora, the girl he rescues on the side of the road, transportation is exchanged for sex. Prostitution on the road is depicted in this novel as being just as dangerous as prostitution in the city, there is nothing to chose between them. The café is used by both Shorty and Cora as a catalyst for movement, the place where they’ll buy a ticket of sorts, where an unpoliced economy of necessity still operates.

\textsuperscript{31} ‘Gradually it grew lighter. Men in wide sombreros and thigh-boots were washing the streets. Bums on the benches in Trafalgar Square shivered uneasily beneath the rough caress of the dawn breeze blowing up Whitehall; soon the parks would open. In the all-night café bars the waiters nipped their cigarettes and began to sweep the floor, for most of the night-birds had gone home and now the places would gradually fill up with people on their way to work. Milk-men clattered by. The last whores went home. Some by taxi-cab to Maida Vale, some by all-night tram to Kennington. In Covent Garden, Spittlefields, Billingsgate, the Borough Market, Smithfield, work was well under way.’ Curtis, p.11.

\textsuperscript{32} Curtis, p.45.
All day long she had sat about in Coventry in cafés. None of the drivers had dared to give her a ride while it was still daylight … Join the lorry girls and see England by night.\textsuperscript{33}

To contrast these spaces with the newly planned zones of entertainment and diversion of postwar London shows just what the planners were afraid of. They were not visible enough. They were open to disorganised flows of people, they were untidy.

In contrast to more administered sites of eating and drinking – the domestic dining room, the South Bank’s Regatta Restaurant, or the lunchtime recreation zone on the fringe of an industrial estate – the side-street café was not only concealed from view but remained open to a transient flow of diverse metropolitan types.\textsuperscript{34}

In this passage Hornsey suggests that there is something specifically uncontrolled about the side-street café; it is, unlike other zones marked out for eating and drinking unadministered. The sense of an ‘administered’ site is perhaps difficult to grasp, and it is problematic that Hornsey includes ‘the domestic dining room’ in this category. What can be taken from this inclusion is the predetermined nature of the activity that takes place within the Regatta Restaurant, lunchtime recreation zone and, to a lesser extent, the domestic dining room. If the site is administered it is a space which is managed, in which actions are executed or performed, on behalf of someone who is absent. When used in religious context the word means to execute or perform offices of religion, or to dispense a sacrament; which recalls the intermediary sense of ventriloquism felt by Rosemary and Gordon. You are administered by these spaces, dispensed with, spoken through. What Orwell captures so perfectly in the restaurant scene from \textit{Keep the Aspidistra Flying} is the administrative body of the waiter. Intermediary, obsequious, superior, the waiter stands between you and the kitchen, elongating to the point of agony the means with which you might get what you want. It is a strange scenario that sees the assembly of food as one task and the delivery of that food as another. The play of text (menu) and speech (ordering) inserted between seeing, desiring and consuming food is an amazing embellishment of artifice. In the side-street café, there are no waiters or waitresses, no intermediaries between you and the kitchen (open to the café or visible through a hatch); you watch someone else make you food, you do your own waiting.

The workman’s café, the transport café and the side-street café were all places which offered respite from the potentially unnatural and alienating experience of eating in a place that was not your home. They were comfortably untidy, grubby, and familiar in their

\textsuperscript{33} Curtis, p.56.
\textsuperscript{34} Hornsey, p.102.
dirtiness. On the one hand they allowed for encounter and the mingling of codes but on the other they were welcoming simply because you were left to your own devices. It was their functionality that made the spaces a point of tension for the commentators and planners (of the time). Because there was a completely innocuous use for the cafés the unpredictable encounter within could be masked. People could find themselves in a café for one reason and be distracted by quite another. People could also go to the café with precisely this kind of distraction in mind. For Douglas Warth (tabloid writer of the time) the chance distraction was indissoluble with the danger of the space. It was beyond the realm of his conception to think that men might go to these spaces with the intent of meeting other men and could see it only in terms of seduction by guile. Mayfair’s all-night cafés were understood as sites of ‘temporal disorder’, their ‘social danger lay in how [they] rendered its young lads vulnerable by trapping them within a promiscuous, distracting, functionally ambivalent space.’

The social disorder is borne of temporal disorder whereby the time of day does not at all mask or dictate the activities taking place. As we have seen the cafés were places where people spent the interstitial parts of their day, including the lunch hour and the ‘off’ hours of the side-world depicted in Curtis’s *They Drive By Night*. The cherished classifications of day and night, of place and practice, do not seem to sufficiently enforce behaviour; to many this is alarming. This alarm is expressed in Noel Coward’s tragic-comic romance *Brief Encounter* though here the distracting, functionally ambivalent space is a refreshment room.

I’m an ordinary woman. I didn’t think such violent things could happen to ordinary people. It all started on an ordinary day, in the most ordinary place in the world, the refreshment room at Milford Junction. I was having a cup of tea and reading a book I’d got that day from Boots.

Again we can read a latent unease about waiting and inactivity (even the active inactivity of reading a book and having a cup of tea). The ungodly collusion of the commute and the lunch hour, treated with such trepidation by Abercrombie and Forshaw, insert spaces and times of deceptive ordinariness into the city and its governance. In both instances the anxiety expressed is one of context.

This contextual insecurity was an essential part of postwar London and the rattling of its decorum. Hornsey reiterates this in his chapter on libraries in which he discusses the obscenity trial over D.H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*. The scandal surrounding the book was derived not so much from its contents but from the containment of those contents

35 Hornsey, p.102.
36 Laura Jesson (Celia Johnson) *Brief Encounter* dir. David Lean (Eagle-Lion Distributors, 1945). Laura’s declaration of ordinariness recalls that of Katherine in Christie’s *The Mystery of the Blue Train*. See Chapter Three.
in a form that did not declare itself. The scandal was that it looked (from the outside) like any other book, it could therefore corrupt the unsuspecting. During the trial, to highlight the implications of this subterfuge, ‘the judge asked the jury to assess the potential effects of the novel by imagining factory girls reading it during their lunch hour.’

This play of contexts, conjured by the judge to suggest contagion and contamination, a sort of anarchic insertion of the indecent and distracting into the working day and the uncorrupted minds of the factory girls, is a version of the deceptive ordinariness that so strikes Laura in Brief Encounter. In both cases there is a sense of matter out of place, exemplified by the gowns, eggs, tail coats and hams of the transport café, just as much as Douglas’s example of the toothbrush in the bedroom which is somehow unhygienic. The 1959 Obscene Publications Act had reaffirmed obscenity as the tendency to ‘deprave and corrupt persons who are likely, having regard to all relevant circumstances, to read, see, and hear the matter contained and embodied in it,’ a qualification that made obscenity in print a contextual offence rather than a strictly textual one. Hornsey aligns this sense of contextual offence with reactions to the presence and practices ascribed to the zigzagging men of postwar London.

The real threat of male vice, then, lay in how it imperceptibly overlaid the cartography of ordinary urban space while seeming to exceed its methods of quotidain spatial management.

The side street café occupied a point of precariousness as it revealed different and simultaneous interpretations of the same space.

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37 Hornsey, p.182.
38 Hornsey, p.180.
39 Hornsey, p.115.


5.3 Stay

If we were to ask what imperatives issue from the space of the greasy spoon today the most insistent would be ‘stay.’ The spaces occupied a point of tension for planners in postwar London because they seemed to extend the ambiguous space of the lunch hour and overlay their own time scale onto the prescribed and planned—for one. This extension, which troubles the edges of timed activities, is still at work today as the cafés are open at early or late hours, servicing the ‘side world’ of the modern city. But where they were once thought of as potentially disruptive they now seem to be neutralised, spaces in which a placidity accumulates. Hornsey writes,

The real danger of the café was that it replicated the transient flow of strangers on the pavement outside, while encouraging its patrons to linger over their cup of tea in a state of constant distraction.40

Today we could say that the real comfort of the cafés is that they replicate the transient flow of strangers on the pavement outside while encouraging (or creating) a state of constant distraction. This raises the question, pertinent to all the spaces examined, of why this exposure to transiency is experienced as comforting. Why is it an experience that is sought?

In Café Express at ten thirty in the morning two elderly gentlemen sit at tables on opposite sides of the small bright space. It is housed in the first hall of Leeds’ covered market and its walls are waist height where they stop and turn to air, you can see the neighbouring stalls and shops over them as you eat. The café is contained though and retains an air of stillness, the market only impinging with the occasional calls of traders (‘lovely bananas’) or if a passerby happens to recognise someone as they pass. The two men are wearing overcoats and caps and one has his walking stick on the table in front of him alongside a mug of tea. The other is massacring a plate of breakfast with a shaky tenacity that gives the impression of a night of near starvation. His plate, a smeared palette of black pudding and beans, is flanked by a tea and a side plate of white toast in what looks like strategic defense against incursion. He hovers above them, fork in one hand, slice in the other, staring straight ahead all the while and flinching slightly as he eats. The other diner is steady and placid. He too stares into the middle distance until he is hailed by someone outside standing on the path between the café and Essele Cosmetics. The man who greets him holds his hands across the barrier, and they talk like this, not letting go. He has been to have his heart checked at the hospital. They speak about somewhere he used to go with his wife and help each other to remember various details; street names, names and dates. A

40 Hornsey, p.102.
woman and a girl have just come from the hospital too. The girl has been sent home and is making phone calls to her employer telling her she is ready (and excited) to go back to work. They order toasted teacakes and the place is filled with a buttery melting smell. It is quiet, people speak quietly if they speak at all and the fridges and machines hum.

The café is being used as a place of deferral and delay, its customers are between places or else they do not want to go home just yet. The fact that people feel comfortable taking their time is made explicit by the presence on the wall of a small laminate notice printed in neatly spaced blue type.

Polite notice.

Could you please vacate your table once you have finished eating and drinking.
Thank you.

The presence of the sign does nothing to shift any of the people eating slowly in abstraction and the women behind the counter do not appear to care what their customers do. The atmosphere is overwhelmingly stilling, almost to the point of inertia. If we think back to Pierre Mayol’s equation for the ideal commute which is ‘marked by the necessity of a spatiotemporal coercion that requires travelling a maximum of distance in a minimum amount of time,’ we can see the greasy spoon or workmen’s café as an exemplary anomaly in the time/distance balance at work within weekday life. People allow themselves to be inactive in these spaces in a way that is not normally permitted outside the space of the home. Even the workmen who use the cafés for a large breakfast to break up a morning’s work tend to take their time, deliberating over tabloids spread across tables, or talking expansively with their neighbours or the café owner. I hesitate to move on from the word ‘inactive’ because it does not quite capture the very particular atmosphere and attitude of the café’s customers. It is better to come back to the word ‘distraction’ which suggests more of an active inactivity.

Something of this active inactivity is contained in the phrase ‘middle distance’ which is used to describe the way people stare at nothing, appearing to look without seeing. The phrase elicits feelings of vagueness, seeming to gesture towards a wavering and a nowhere space. But if we pay attention to the word ‘middle’ we see that a middle distance is in fact a very specific, very precise measurement. To come to the middle of something is to be at the single point which is equidistant from the ends or boundaries of that thing. It is the absolute centre (it is not middling but rather attuned and attentive to a point of absolute precision).

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One thinks of balancing acts, the tenuous tension of tightrope walkers holding poles in their hands, each part of the equation having to balance the other. It is a word that marries thoughts of space and time; spatially it is this precise single point but temporally it gestures more to what surrounds it, to what came before and after than to any middle ‘moment’. In both senses there is a sensitivity to being part of, part in, to being held in place only in relation to what came before and after, or to the limits from which measurements begin. It is important to point out that staring into the middle-distance is not behaviour that is confined to the greasy spoon, but it does accumulate there.

This accumulation is a result of the habitual use of these spaces for this very purpose. The active inactivity is an occupation of sorts and the decision to come to the café is made in part with the aim of finding this occupation. This state of distraction can also be thought of as an acquiescence to the passing of time. There is a slowness that seems at odds with the world outside and the impression is of a different time zone. This is partly because the people who use the spaces routinely are those whose time is already ‘out of joint’ in that it is different from the traditional or prescribed time of the ‘working day’ (the time signaled by the milk that comes and the post that goes). So we find shift workers and the unemployed; those whose work fits outside ‘normal’ working hours (policemen, construction workers, cabmen), alongside those outside of normal working age (pensioners and students). or those who expediency has sent there (the hungover, the delinquent, the sick). The Customers are between places, what is important is that they are between places and static; they stay put in the interstitial. Hornsey writes that the authors of the Greater London County Plan in 1943 were,

particularly attentive to those interstitial portions of the day in which the disciplinary imperatives of functional zoning appeared at their weakest. The commute, as a period of neither work, domesticity, nor properly leisure, had already been identified as a site of anxiety … the weekday lunch hour was another such potentially disruptive moment.42

The greasy spoon is a place in which people spend the interstitial portions of their day. It encourages the expansion of the interstice. There is a self-conscious stretching out of time in the repeated appearance in these spaces of the phrase ‘all day breakfast.’ The threshold meal of breakfast, which marks the break between night and day, is elongated and expanded, made available whenever. The weekday lunch hour is subverted and stretched all at once, upset by the presence in its midst of food which signals a certain time of day. There is an

42 Hornsey, p.50.
echo of this temporal subversion in ideas of a ‘middle distance’ and in Hornsey’s phrase ‘constant distraction’.

The middle distance is appreciated by one Stephen Dedalus who turns up in the cabmen’s shelter under Loopline railway bridge in Dublin at one o’clock in the morning in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. It is not just the interstitial mid point between morning and afternoon that is catered to by greasy spoons, there are those that stay open all night to cater for market traders, underground and railway construction workers, cabmen, and late-night revelers.

Over his untasteable apology for a cup of coffee, listening to this synopsis of things in general, Stephen started at nothing in particular. He could hear, of course, all kinds of words changing colour, like those crabs about Ringsend in the morning, burrowing quickly into all the colours of different sorts of the same sand where they had a home somewhere beneath or seemed to. Then he looked up and saw the eyes that said or didn’t say the words the voice he heard said – if you work.45

Stephen is acclimatising to a state of diminished inebriety which might account for this vague grasp on his surroundings but the language used to describe these moments is significant for our investigation of the greasy spoon and its near-relations, the cabman’s shelter and the twenty-four hour café. Because they straddle various time zones, because they replicate the transient flow of a pavement but give it a space in which to pause, they become sites of ‘synopsis,’ ‘things in general,’ and ‘nothing in particular’. This particular unparticularity has a very specific effect. Staring into the middle distance is an active inaction. In Stephen’s case he tunes into a synesthetic state of listen-seeing, *hearing* words change colour. It is a state of confusingly numb reciprocity, he is both present and absent; looking but not seeing. Joyce has presented us with a version of the ‘suspended reading’ described by Gaston Bachelard in which an unbidden daydream or memory arrests progress through a text.

In order to suggest the values of intimacy, we have to induce in the reader a state of suspended reading. For it is not until his eyes have left the page that recollections of my room can become a threshold of oneirism for him.44

Oneirism is simply dreaming (or daydreaming) which Bachelard aligns with the reading of poetry. He writes that the intimate memories of a dream are more powerfully captured by

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the brief and the bare, by 'mere mention rather than minute description' and that 'nuance bespeaks the colour.'\footnote{Bachelard p.12.} For this topoanalysis, which reads the effects of space rather than poetry, it is as though the generality of the café (or shelter) acts upon its customers in the way in which the written text acts upon Bachelard’s reader. Their eyes leave the page and they arrive at a sort of suspension, a middle distance. This is a phrase that marries thoughts of space and time, spatially pointing to a precise measurement and temporarily to what might surround something to make it a moment. In both senses there is a sensitivity to being part of, part in, to being held in place only in relation to what came before and after, or to the limits from which measurements begin.

Following Bachelard’s line of reasoning it can be suggested that there is something familiar in the general which appeals to the café customer without their noticing. This not-knowing is key because the state of distraction signaled by the middle-distance stare is not one which is arrived at intentionally. It is rather an unstudied circumnavigation of boredom; it is subtle, quiet and unobtrusive. The word ‘distraction’ has an odd concurrence with the measurement of a middle distance. Whilst we think of it as a state of mind, to distract, means in fact the action of drawing (something) in different directions, drawing away or apart, separating and dividing. This movement of division, of being pulled in two directions at once brings us back to the suspended reading described by Bachelard; the reader is drawn (by the text) out of the text; his eyes leave the page. The phenomenon behind the word distraction is a material one, spatial in its foundations dealing as it does with direction, separation and division. It is useful to think about it in temporal terms as well as spatial ones because distraction seems to trouble the temporal present as much as (if not more than) physical presence. To think about this we will make a short detour (out of the greasy spoon) into the theory of everyday life put forward by Michel de Certeau, Luce Giard and Pierre Mayol. Examining private space Giard writes that there is,

the involuntary confession of a more intimate way of living and dreaming. In one’s own place, it floats like a secret perfume, which speaks of a lost time, of a time that will never be regained, which also speaks of another time yet to come, one day, perhaps.\footnote{Michel de Certeau and Luce Giard, ‘Private Spaces’, \emph{Practice}, Vol. 2. p.146.}

So much of everyday life theory deals with these divergent speeches made by the arrangement of things (the position of furniture, the left place of belongings). The secret speeches of space and the objects in it are felt to be about \emph{lost} time and \emph{perhaps} time. The speech of the present (and presence?) is always about the past and the possible future – it is a
frustrating text to read. The present tense is the object of analysis but it eludes the analyst. It seems always to be in the other room, just around that corner, just behind this door which is open but closing. We said that the word ‘distraction’ has an odd concurrence with the measurement of a middle distance. If distraction is to be drawn in two different directions perhaps it is the point of the middle distance at which we feel this two-way tug most urgently. The greasy spoon is a space that permits the elongation of the interstice but also the relocation of a meal that is engrained in the intimate experience of the start of the day.

When I was growing up I got into trouble when I woke up too late for breakfast. Whenever this happened I would make myself some toast and set off into the streets with a handful of sustenance to be eaten on the run to the bus stop. My mother was appalled at the idea of a publically consumed breakfast and tried to impress upon me that I should either get up in time to eat at a table or not eat at all. She was not concerned about whether I ate a good meal before going off to school so much as she was about what it looked like to see me running from the house with toast in my hands. Whenever I catch other people indulging in this travelling-breakfast I see what she might have meant. The carrying-out of a meal as time-tabled and recognisable as breakfast seems to spell out a straying not of the home but from the home’s routine. A fist full of toast is as revealing (and as intimate) as the spot of tissue paper pinned to a chin with a fleck of blood; we can see instantly that that person’s morning has gone awry and we can see the trace of their routine. It is the routine itself that is intimate and private. It would invite a similar flurry of comradely raised eyebrows if we were to see someone brushing their teeth at the office sink or dropping off their children at school in their slippers and dressing gown. There is something pleasingly surreal about this mingling of codes that reminds us again of the spatial gape; breakfasting in the streets seems to disrupt (however briefly) the very street-ness of the street. The intimate and precisely timed meal of breakfast is very close to the space of the home and the start of the day. It is a strangely potent occasion. Walter Benjamin was attuned to the significance of breakfast, writing in One-way Street that it makes material (and definite), ‘the rupture between the worlds of night and day.’

If the interstitial portions of the day are those times between the bases of home and work (or in the case of the lunch hour, time between work and work) then what form do

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47 ‘At times we think we know ourselves in time, when all we know is a sequence of fixations in the spaces of the being’s stability – a being who does not want to melt away, and who … wants time to ’suspend’ its flight.’ Eugene Minkowski, Lived Time (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970) p.8.
48 Hangovers.
49 Umbrellas in houses.
these portions take for those whose days are not spatiotemporally split between two bases? George Bone in Patrick Hamilton’s *Hangover Square* moves between the tube station, the Express coffee bar, the telephone booth, the Corner House, a Lyons and a series of pubs. He does not have a job but has enough money to eek out pints, cups of tea and coffee and small plates of food in each of these establishments. Bone is schizophrenic (although he is not aware of this) and from time to time he will ‘click’ into one of his ‘dead’ moods. These moods are characterised by clarity of thought and purpose coupled with feeling removed from the world around him, as though he were temporarily deaf and numb. When he switches back he has no memory at all of the time that has elapsed since the ‘click’ in. He can lose days at a time. As such we read Bone’s endless drift from coffee bar to booth to table to bar not as accidental or incidental but as a necessary and desperate attempt to fix order to this disarray of time. The word fix brings to mind ideas of addiction and Bone’s circle of acquaintances are all alcoholics. What he is addicted to is this attempted fixing of time or the attempt to fix himself to time. He goes to these spaces to have a point from which to recuperate, to plan from, to bank something of the past against what might come next. He watches the clock and lets it funnel his movements from one space to another.

He waited till the clock pointed to eleven o’clock then he paid his check and went into the station. Then it was quarter to one and he went into the Corner House and got a small table to himself on the second floor.

Far from being extraordinary this time-attentiveness is something familiar to most people. Eugene Minkowski writes,

> When we are concerned with time in our daily lives, we take out our watch instinctively or look at the calendar, as if everything concerning time were reduced to assigning a fixed point to each event and then explaining the distance that separates one from another in terms of years, months and hours.

Bone uses the fixed points outside his home to bank himself and his thoughts, and to plan what to do next.

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52 Hamilton, p.69.
53 Hamilton, p.76.
54 Minkowski, p.13.
As usual he walked back to the station, bought his *News Chronicle* and went in to the Express nearby for his small coffee. . . . He read until his coffee came, and then he put the paper aside, lit a cigarette and began thinking again.55

The way in which newspaper, coffee and cigarette are used to space out time and thought are redolent of T.S. Eliot’s Prufrock who tells us, ‘I have measured out my life with coffee spoons.’56 We can read here a spatialisation of time that is felt acutely in the greasy spoon. Time there may be disjointed and distracted but it is still measured; you cannot while away the hours for free. Instead time is measured out in cups of tea or coffee, meals and the time it might take to read a newspaper from front to back. Dodie Smith’s Cassandra, who winds up in the Corner House near Bond Street in the middle of the night, measures out her time with cups of tea of diminishing strength.

I went over and over it all while I drank cup after cup of tea – the last one was so weak that I could see the lump of sugar sitting at the bottom of it. Then the waitress came and asked if I wanted anything more. I didn’t feel like leaving so I studied the menu carefully and ordered a lamb cutlet – they take a nice long time to cook and only cost sevenpence each.57

The definition of schizophrenia which Hamilton uses as an epigraph to the book explains the condition as ‘a cleavage of the mental functions associated with assumption by the affected person of a second’s personality’ (my emphasis). Hamilton makes a case for the schizophrenic nature of obsession through Bone’s unrequited passion for (the careless and cruel) Netta Longdon. In a furthering division he assumes not her personality but her daily routine, trying to fit his schedule around hers, compulsively counting up how many minutes it might take her to wake up, have a bath and get dressed just so that he can telephone her at the right moment. This leads to a debilitating cleavage. Time spent not thinking about her timing is felt as respite.

He went into the Express and ordered a small coffee. It was lovely to sit and read a newspaper without having to look at the clock all the time, arguing with yourself as to what time you should choose to phone her in relation to her bath and Mrs. Chope.58

55 Hamilton, p.69.
58 Hamilton, p.257.
Bone’s obsession and his sickness meet in this time-attentiveness so that we can read a pun in Hamilton’s definition of schizophrenia and wonder what it might mean to assume the personality of a second. The planning that Bone does in these spaces is a form of anchoring. In the face of an overwhelming series of seconds he spaces out his time.

To a lesser degree we can read the comfort derived from these spaces by their users today as a version of this anchoring. The way in which people describe the spaces, the way in which the pleasure taken in them is articulated betrays a claustrophilia that enacts the same blurring of boundaries that means the agoraphobe derives comfort from gripping onto something in their hand, a slippage between time and the tactile. Particularly important for those with time on their hands, this synaesthetic slippage is a repeating motif when people talk about why they take pleasure in these spaces. There is a surprising amount of affection shown towards rules and the orderly. Asked what it was he liked about Frank’s café in Blackfriars one man responds, ‘There are two lines. There is one queue for take away and one queue for staying.’ Another man interviewed about Madeira café in Vauxhall explains, ‘I only ever have two things. And they know what they are.’ The affection shown towards lines and queues, unspoken rules and routine, reveals these spaces as ones in which the burden of choice is removed. It is not just the smallness of the menu which is pleasing, the spaces themselves are pleasurably limited. Often filled with furniture that is nailed to the floor, the spaces are as rigid in arrangement as they are in use. This fixed quality is enjoyed with a claustrophilic relish. Edwin Heathcoate’s guide to the ‘caffs’ of London is a miniature A6 size book, mirroring the cramped conditions of the spaces it documents. He celebrates the smallness of the spaces, returning again and again to their edges and edging reminding us of the compartmentalised pleasure of the bento box.

inside the caff is tiny and cosy with tight booths and an extremely low ceiling

the leatherette seats are comfortable and the subtle curves on the edges of the tables sophisticated, but best of all are the little shelves for the green, Deco-ish sugar bowls … and cruets.

small, cramped and great

tiny, tidy and rather poignant

the vent and the wonderfully mean serving hatch

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The smallness of the spaces, though linked to their fixedness, does not just provoke pleasures of containment. There is also an element of the pleasures of den-making. Regency Café in Pimlico is high-ceilinged and airy but the space is divided in such a way as to make it seem as though each diner is restricted to a space no bigger than a single chair and half the table span in front of him. The nailed down furniture is two-tone, linking swivels of tope with a Colman’s mustard yellow. These scoops of rigid plastic joined by sturdy bolts are hardy and ugly all at once. The thick moulded table tops and inserts of Formica dividers are cross hatched in a bland pattern of blues, mustards and creamy beige. Coupled with the gingham curtained windows that separate you from the pavement outside it does seem as though you are on board a train, everything is compartmentalized, inside from outside, inside from inside. The Formica ‘dividers’ which rise between each table to just below shoulder height render a normal glance to your left into a peep, something nosey and invasive. Rather than looking you are looking over. There is a blend of voyeuristic and exhibitionist pleasures which makes the two-seaters intimate and oddly romantic, whilst being simultaneously redolent of bus stops. Eating here is an experience of bended knees, ungainly movements in and out of immovable furniture, a wedging in of limbs, a sitting-next to and opposite strangers, as you combat large white plates of hot and plain food.

The greasy spoon is a place of distraction, where people stare into space. But it is also a space where a particular kind of reading takes place. In the greasy spoon customers read tabloid newspapers. The stage whisper of tabloid headlines can be seen to encourage shared reading as much as they encourage synopsis and hyperbole. It is impossible to read a tabloid newspaper without the people near you knowing what you are reading about – if they can decipher the brash boast of the caps locks contents. The headlines shout their brief, alarming announcements and invite (or incite) multiple – simultaneous, readings. There is a visual eavesdropping at work, often uninvited (you’d like to be able to look away). In the greasy spoon people share their newspapers, read over one another’s shoulders and read aloud. It is a site of performed and public reading. Zadie Smith uses the café, the tradition of London Sunday brunch and the communal reading of newspapers to reflect upon people’s appetite for ‘trash’ or things that are bad for them.

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60 Heathcoate, p.150.
61 The ‘immovable’ Formica; ‘invented in Cincinatti in 1913 by Herbert Faber and Daniel O’Connor … intended as a replacement for Mica in electrical insulators’, was found to be a ‘cheap replacement for lacquer and was used as the material for diners, bars and the interior of the Queen Mary ocean liner.’ Adrian Maddox, Classic Cafes (London: Black Dog Publishers Ltd, 2003) p.84.
62 The simultaneous reading that takes place in the cabmen’s shelter in Ulysses is discussed in Chapter 6.
On the table lay a huge pile of newspaper … Everyone came to brunch with their ‘quality’ paper and a side order of trash. Tits and vicars and slebs and murder … Natalie pressed a knife to her egg and watched the yoke run into her beans.\textsuperscript{63}

In Bruce Robinson’s \textit{Withnail & I}, a series of preposterous headlines are intercut with shots of eggs frying in a pan of oil, an egg sandwich being eaten and spewing out its yolk, and other café customers reading while eating. The unpalatable onslaught of other people, jarring newspaper print (‘The Most Amazing Sex Change Ever,’ ‘Nude Aupair’s Secret Life,’) and runny eggs is too much for the film’s protagonist Marwood and he ‘has to get back.’\textsuperscript{64} Both Smith and Robinson depict text as something that is imbibed, that can be good for you as well as bad. The newspapers are aligned with the food, they become both ‘a side order of trash’ and something that is too cloud, too cloud and too revolting. Marwood’s inner monologue reimagines the strayed objects of the transport café (eggs, sausages, gowns and hats) as being joined by the strayed announcements of the tabloid press, equally untethered and far more disturbing. ‘Thirteen million Londoners have to wake up to this. Murder and All-bran and rape.’ Smith’s Natalie manages to observe the coincidence of breakfast and reports of murder with a more muted regard but for both characters the space is one of salacious detail and urban cacophony, newsprint with a side order of yolk.

\textbf{Figure 48. Small hatch, Franks.}

\textsuperscript{63} Zadie Smith, \textit{NW} (London: Penguin, 2013) p.251. It is worth pointing out that you can never order brunch in a greasy spoon. The all-day breakfast is an entirely different category.

\textsuperscript{64} \textit{Withnail & I}, dir. Bruce Robinson (Hand Made, 1987)
Figure 49. Just a tea, Franks.
Figures 50. & 51. Small space in the cabmen’s shelter.
The food’s good as well as cheap. Nothing ritzy mind you, but then transport chaps don’t want the fiddling Savoy.\textsuperscript{65}

Richard Hoggart wrote in 1957 that for the working classes, “Home cooking” is always better than any other.\textsuperscript{66} As a result, ‘small confectioners know they will fare better if they put “Home-made Bread and Cakes” over their windows.’\textsuperscript{66} This logic is still at work in the greasy spoons operating today. One of the key factors for their residual popularity is that they offer respite from overwhelming choice. Home, in these spaces of home cooking, means good and basic. A café that sells \textit{home-made} food (which is clearly cooked in the kitchen of the café) is invested in this goodness and this lack of pretension. On the walls or windows of most greasy spoons you will find small neon signs, cut to the jagged shapes of Batmanesque exclamation bubbles, which announce the presence of ‘Home made meals.’\textsuperscript{67} The knowing gesture towards the homely is one of the only points of artifice in the greasy spoon. It plays into a fashionable nostalgia which means that Ken Livingstone is photographed at one of the nailed down tables in the Regency Café in Pimlico for the front of his autobiography, and when I go to get a coffee from E Pelicci in Bethnal Green, I find it is closed for a Laura Ashley photo shoot.

The sensitivity and quiet attention identified in the arrival at a middle distance is also to be found in the measuring, adjusting and readjusting that takes place in the series of transactions that characterise a visit to the greasy spoon. If, in gazing into a middle distance, we are in fact tuning into a very specific type or point of contemplation, then in the ordering and combining of various items of food customers enact a tuning as well, attempting to get to a specific frequency or redress a point of imbalance. The word ‘just’ becomes salient. This word prefixes a series of orders and responses and inhabits an oddly self-reflexive linguistic space. On being asked if he wants coffee or tea, a man responds, ‘just a tea for me please.’ Similarly when offered a choice between Earl Grey or English Breakfast the reply is (more often than not) ‘just an English Breakfast.’ These \textit{justs} encapsulate one of the great fantasies about the greasy spoon, gesturing as they do towards something that is simpler, plainer, and lesser than the other options on offer. It is as though the choice of tea over coffee or one type of tea over another signals humility. The choosing of this ‘lesser’ option (in which we can include the choice to go to the greasy spoon in the first place) is a move that is humble but

\textsuperscript{65} ‘In praise of transport cafes’, \textit{Derby Daily Telegraph}, p.4.
\textsuperscript{66} Hoggart, p.35
\textsuperscript{67} ‘Home made meals. Shepherds Pie. RP 3 Vgr £5.60’, Sam’s, Bethnal Green road, jagged neon cardboard.
also self-consciously noble. There is an awareness (however faint) of both these emotions in these choices. And it is in the word just that we can read a conflict between them. The humble pride can be self-denying; just a tea for me (because that’s good enough for me) or self-justified; just a tea for me (because I know what’s good for me). The conflict stems from the implicit statement that what is simpler and lesser is also somehow better.

‘Just’ gestures to the measuring we are examining; the series of movements which mark an emptying out and a filling up; just a tea because I’m almost fine, I don’t need much, I’m just about right. Just works in counterpoint to another word that makes its presence felt in the greasy spoon, full. The Full English (which I am capitalising to reflect the way it is written in every café visited) is one of the fundamental points of reference and recognition for these establishments. It carries with it obvious undertones of patriotism but it is the sense of fullness that is more meaningful and more translatable to those who eat it or eat near it. The word ‘full’ is a marvelous one to attach to anything you are trying to sell; it speaks of its own fullness and the fullness it promises to whoever imbibes it. Eat a Full English and you will be full. The word speaks to the themes of measurement and balance as it reiterates that the body is a space and a container. It is something that can be filled. To be full is to be right. The sense of this rightness is articulated spatially when we look at the definition of the word; ‘containing all (of a substance) that its limits will allow; having no empty space, replete.’ (The reference to limits is key.) It is also ‘having eaten or drunk to repletion’ and something ‘complete, entire and perfect.’ The word crosses physical and emotional fullness and the repletion it promises is so definite that for many it is seen as too filling. (‘I couldn’t handle a Full English – just a half?’) It can tip us over into feeling ‘full’ which generally means more than full. The measurements we make in the greasy spoon are those which might help us find balance, return to a state we have been in before, through a series of minor adjustments.

This practice of attunement is reflected in the adjustable menu. There are not many places where you are encouraged to assemble your own (personally concocted) combination of food-stuffs to make up the meal you order. The adding and subtracting, the replacing and specifying, that is permitted in the greasy spoon is paradoxically revealing. If we make a humble choice by going there we are rewarded for this humility with a regal allowance of self-gratification once inside the space of the meal. There are Sets on offer and there is the Full English but there is also a list of items and every Set can be deviated from. Customers switch in or out black pudding for mushrooms, specifying that they want eggs scrambled or poached or fried. I have called this the space of the meal; within this space there is scope for kingly despotism, you can have it all your way. This brings us back to the claustrophilic

pleasure to be taken in the ordering of small spaces; a sort of retroactive diminishing of a space that can be controlled. Whether you are visiting because you are hungry, hungover or just to kill time the menu allows for all manner of adjustments and tinkerings which serve to realign any off-kilter. In this way it is reminiscent of the compartmental and compensatory pleasures of the sleeper train.

There are two items which stand outside the continually rotating roster of combinations; toast and a hot drink (namely tea or coffee). Like the French bread and wine analysed by Michel de Certeau; ‘neither is replaceable by anything that might take its place.’ There is an unspoken presumption that these two items will flank whatever breakfast you cobble together from the assortment of options. De Certeau writes,

To make a comparison in the outdated linguistics of the 18th century, bread and wine (and the category of condiments) are the consonants of the meal, its fixed points, its substantial toughness; the menu is on the side of the vowels, of accidental value. Alone, bread and wine do not constitute a true meal but both are hierarchically more indispensable than the remainder of the menu.

The indispensible nature of the hot drink is expressed in a Mass Observation account of a bomb scare at a Marble Arch Corner House in 1940. The restaurant manager made an announcement to his staff;

‘We have decided to open the café to the public … as you know we have no gas today. All salads are on, and, of course, tea and coffee.’ – At this there was a general laugh which seems to surprise him a lot.

The phrase ‘and of course, tea and coffee’ sparks a reaction among his staff which makes plain their recognition of the place tea and coffee occupy within the ritual of eating in a café. You are allowed one or the other (never both!) and as we have seen there is a different weighting to each.

The category of condiments alluded to by Certeau makes a visual spectacle of the familiarity of these spaces. The table dressing in the greasy spoon follows a very strict pattern. And what of the adjustable ‘vowels,’ the incidental parts of the breakfast? They are a profusion of basics, things that you call by their name. They are irreducible elements.

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70 Certeau, pp.85–6.
71 Mass Observation, *Directive on Parties (1949)*
themselves. Egg, beans, bacon, sausage, tomatoes, mushrooms, (black pudding and bubble, chips, toast). It is part of the lack of pretension promised by the greasy spoon that so many of these ingredients seem to be boiled down versions, things that cannot be made less. They are not ‘meals’ which are recognisably made from parts (lasagna, cake, stew) but rather individual items fitted together. Not the whole but the bits. What lies behind this culinary plain-spokenness? We can read a reduction, a plainness, a distillation to the (homely) atoms of food. Again there is the sense of humility bound up with pride, a sort of plain, bland goodness. What does the plainness say? It comes back to the tinkering measurements we have identified, the idea that through this neatly assembled meal of parts you might re-solidify yourself, build back something you have lost, set yourself up for the day. Seb Emina writes,

The great Western cooked breakfast can’t be straight-jacketed by anything so simple as a recipe. It’s better thought of as a sort of culinary Lego set whose satisfaction lies in the choices we make. Here are the building blocks of the full English breakfast.\textsuperscript{72}

Figures 52, 53, 54 & 55. Familiar condiments.

The strayed home of the greasy spoon is comforting and cosy, offering relief and rest of a particular kind. But it is also, with regards to its position in the city and society, disruptive. It is no longer viewed with the kind of suspicion that fell upon the side street café of postwar London but it still stands somewhat at odds with the tempo of the modern city. It is at once homey and out of order; at once a place of reordering and a certain delinquency. Thinking about the grease of the greasy spoon shows us that the homeliness of the spaces (and homeliness in general) does not always mean something pleasant or reassuring. The very homeliness of the dirt (material and temporal) that accumulates or strays into and out of the greasy spoon can itself be defined as matter out of place. The home that has strayed is dirty, like any dirt ‘it implies two conditions: a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order.” It is the contravention of that order that can be felt as alarming or pleasurably surreal as in the case of the spatial gape. We read the all day breakfast, and the coincidence of All-bran and tales of rape, sausage and gown, yolk and newsprint, as examples of the spatial gape where displacement and refreshment are the result of matter out of place. Like the launderette, the sleeper train and the fire escape that matter arrives in the space of the greasy spoon because it is open and static (recalling, as Hornsey states, the

73 Douglas, p.36.
pavement but holding its transience captive). The possibility for coincidence, for the mingling of codes or time scales or daily routines abounds. The most persistent imperative issued by the space is ‘Stay’, but this is not achieved through attentive service or plush surroundings (unlike in the sleeper train where paradoxically you have no option other than to stay put). Instead you are left alone, to your own adjustments and measurements, and are permitted to do your own waiting.
Chapter Six. Postcard
6.1 Introduction

The postcard may seem like the odd one out in this series of spaces. Because it is not a space. It is certainly not a space you can occupy or get into or pass through. And yet, it is an object that has a very particular relationship with space, with the space of the home, and with its complement, away. It is an object that exemplifies many of the themes that have been identified in the strayed homes discussed already, those of exposed edges and spatial sensitivities, of exposure and privacy. The postcard is often an expression of being away from home. In the section two, Holiday, I will talk about the fact that the postcard is written from a particular experience of time, an experience of time peculiar to the strayed home – an experience of the temporary. I will look back to ideas about impermanence that were part of the development of the eruv and read the formulaic expression of this time across postcards from On Kawara, Georges Perec and Jacques Derrida. In section three, Unmentionable Body Parts, I will pay attention to the backs as well as the fronts of postcards looking at the way intimate things were shown as well as said, to think about the relationship between these surfaces and the spaces they travel though. In section four, Picnic, I consider the unhinged nature of the form and the fact that it was marketed as an outdoor form of communication. I will examine examples from Tom Phillips’ collection of picnic postcards. The postcard is an object like the spaces examined already that seems to be occupying a tenuous position between function and some state excessive to that function. It is not a strayed home (it is not a space) but rather an expression of the experience of straying from home, an expression of the distribution of space and, I shall argue, time. The final section of the chapter, Extending the Edges, examines other examples of unhinged or bodily reading and writing to think further about the mingling made between the textual and the corporeal and the implications this has for our investigation.
6.2 Holiday

The postcard was introduced to Britain in 1896 offering an alternative to the two-parted letter (letter & envelope) in the form of a single card to be sent through the post. At this time one side of the card was reserved for the address and the other held a printed image or text with small space for a message. The new postcard was cheaper to send than a letter, the cost of which was calculated per sheet in addition to the price of an envelope. Address and message were brought onto the same verso side of the postcard in 1902, which is the format that is still in use today. In 2013 a survey published in *The Independent* found the postcard to be the most common form of communication between people from the United Kingdom on holiday and their friends or family at home. The spread of telephone and internet technologies has meant that the postcard and letter have been marginalised for the delivery of linguistic communication. The postcard is used in more and more particular and extraordinary circumstances, the most common of which is the holiday. These cards are often sent with an apologetic postscript explaining to the recipient, ‘you’ll probably see me before you see this.’ They have come full circle, initially regarded as objects of novelty (part of a craze and collected into albums) they became commonplace – as ubiquitous and useful as a telephone call or text message – they are once more, novel.

Postcard use is part of the everyday life of the holiday. Contrary to expectation, the holiday is also part of everyday life. It lies outside the regular and the routine but it is integral to the shape and order of that routine. It is part of a system of tension and release, a system exemplified by the week that is divided up into week and weekend, work time and play time. Rem Koolhaus, writing about the pleasure zone of Coney Island in the 1800s, states that, ‘a resort implies the presence, not too far away, of a reservoir of people existing under conditions that require them to escape occasionally to recover their equilibrium.’ He uses the imagery of equilibrium to conjure up a picture of the city (he has in mind the new metropolis of Manhattan) as a container of molecule-like inhabitants who bounce around causing a build up of pressure and heat. Releasing some of the molecule-inhabitants from time to time releases pressure and reduces the likelihood of explosions or rupture. We can equally imagine each individual citizen as a container of similarly mobile molecules. Life in the city is such that these containers need to turn their own pressure valves and they do this by leaving the city; they leave in order that they may return. In both these imaginaries occasional escape or release results in stasis. It does not permanently alter the system, rather it forms part of a self-sustaining cycle. The equilibrium Koolhaus uses to describe this cycle is the condition of a system in which competing influences are balanced resulting in no

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Koolhaus argues that regular visits and the routine expectation of a visit to Coney Island kept Manhattan cool. This division of time and space is exemplified by the plans of the Greater London County Plan discussed in Chapter Five.

Siegfried Kracauer, writing about the hotel lobbies of 20th century detective fiction and the churches of 1930s Berlin, offers a reading of the experience of these spaces that describes a similar sense of equilibrium. Kracauer compares the space of the hotel lobby to the space of the church or synagogue (to the house of God). One of the most persuasive comparisons he makes is between the different ways in which these spaces offer an escape from the everyday. His writing on the house of God is suggestive of a resort-like space that is integral to the continuity of the space it is separate from.

The congregation which gathers in the house of God for prayer and worship outgrows the imperfection of communal life in order not to overcome it but to bear it in mind and to reassert it constantly into the tension. Its gathering is a collectedness and a unification of this directed life of the community, which belongs to two realms: the realm covered by law and the realm beyond law. At the site of the church, but of course not only here – these separate currents encounter each other. The law is broached here without being breached, and the paradoxical split is accorded legitimacy by the sporadic suspension of its languid continuity. Through the edification of the congregation, the community is always reconstructing itself, and this elevation above the everyday prevents the everyday itself from going under.²

Kracauer presents the weekly church service as counterpoint or counterbalance to the rest of the week. He depicts it spatially; the service is elevated above the everyday, it outgrows the regular. It is both part of and separate from society, and it is through the tension between these positions that the one reinforces the other. Like the behaviours of the holiday compared to those of the everyday; ‘the law is broached here without being breached.’³ Both Kracauer and Koolhaus articulate homeostatic systems where the holiday, the church service, the pleasure resort and the space of the church are counterbalancing zones (in time and space) that serve to reinforce the general status quo. I wrote in the introduction to this thesis about how the terms ‘everyday life’ or ‘the everyday’ are often deployed as though the everyday were a fixed measurement, like the air bubble in a spirit level, from which everything else can be measured. The postcard, as an object that makes a leap between the two positions (between the everyday and the holiday), is a medium through which the

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³ Kracauer, p.175.
relationship between them can be exposed. This relationship, between work and rest, home and away, the present and the future, draws this investigation back to thoughts of the eruv, a structure built to ensure richer experiences of the Sabbath or day of rest.

A halackically-committed interviewee, in Robert Charles Ash’s investigation into the eruv, reflects upon the way the Sabbath alters the city. Ash writes, ‘for such Jews, time and space are of a different nature at least from most of the others around them.’ This alternative experience of space is different to that of Koolhaus’s escaping Manhattanite molecules and Kracauer’s churchgoers. For Ash’s subject, location has not changed, he has not moved out of the city or into a specific place but the space has been transformed. The time of the Sabbath itself is like a moveable zone – a cut out Coney Island – that has been overlaid on top of the cityscape. In *Between City and Desert* Manuel Herz and Eyal Weitzman explore the theological basis for the space of the eruv in a way that has relevance to the role of the holiday (or holy day) in everyday life. Herz and Weitzman examine how the space was conceived and specifically the material conditions for its development. They argue that there were two types of space for the writers of the Torah: city and desert. These two categories defined ‘the geographical matrix of Jewish history.’ Jewish history and Jewish law can be seen as a mediation between these two spaces; between experiences of place and of placelessness (experiences of the city and of the desert). Herz and Weitzman insist that practices that emerged from the time of placelessness, from the desert, look towards a future experience of place or fixity. Time in the desert was understood always as temporary. The practices and traditions developed there were therefore knowingly expedient and make-shift; ‘Placelessness was seen as a temporary and preparatory state in the process of transforming the nomadic tribes into a nation of settlers.’ This rootlessness, which aspired towards eventual settlement, led in the case of the eruv, towards the development of a notion of place that did not depend upon the geographical location it occupied. It did, as we have seen, depend upon an intricate set of rules governing the physical space and the practices that took place in it, but those practices were not tied in any permanent way to the specific place, country or state they took part in. This relationship, where practice is as important as

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4 ‘Though I appeared to be in the same time and space as all the other people walking up Broadway, I was suddenly in an alternate reality: I occupied a different time and space, a time called Shabbat and a halackically constructed space.’ Diamond, *Mountains Suspended by Hair: Eruv, A Symbolic Act by Which the Legal Fiction of Community is Established*, thesis submitted to the Department of Sociology, University of Leicester, May 2000. p.3. The interviewee continues, ‘I categorize and order the world from an undifferentiated hubbub. I begin to say, “This is permitted. This is optional. This is forbidden. This is required.”’ This way of describing order echoes Kracauer when he talks about the hotel lobby in detective fiction. ‘The composition of the detective novel transforms an ungraspable life into a translatable analogue of actual reality.’ p.175.

5 Robert Charles Ash, *Mountains Suspended by Hair: Eruv, a symbolic act by which the legal fiction of community is established* p.3.


7 Herz and Weitzman.
structure (and more important than place) is radically opposed to nationalistic notions of space which reiterate constantly the bond between a group’s identity and the geographical place from which they come. The *eruv* is contrastingly disruptive because as it refuses its own permanence it also ignores — or subverts — the permanent claims of others; ‘The *eruv* is a means of creating such an abstract notion of space, space which can be deployed wherever it is needed — portable, dynamic and private space.’ Whether the people using it were in the city or the desert, the *eruv* was always the same space; made by what took place in it rather than where it stood.

The argument about the radically abstract notion of place that the *eruv* created focuses on the oppositions between the categories of space experienced during its development. The sense that ‘notion of place had to be divorced from a specific geographical definition, and became a portable entity’, opens up a series of questions about temporary space and the desire for fixity that are provocative for this investigation. What Herz and Weitzman seem to reduce somewhat is the *eruv*’s dependence on the space of the home. When they write that it can be ‘deployed wherever it is needed’ they do not emphasise that this deployment will only ever be needed (and will only ever be possible) in a place where there are a number of spaces designated as homes and a public space that separates them. The *eruv* does depend upon a particular space — the space of the home, and upon its antagonist, space that is not home. It seems important to stress here that the *eruv* derives its ‘portable, dynamic [and] private’ qualities from the portable, dynamic and private qualities of the home. What Herz and Weitzman (and Ash’s) writing on the *eruv* reiterates is the disruptive potential of that space. It is space that depends upon its physicality but which can be deployed, translated and elongated through a series of practices, gestures and traditions. Whether the people using it were in the city or the desert, the *eruv* was always the same space. The *eruv*, the strayed home, and the gestures which figure these spaces subvert notions of continuity — how can a space be the same if it is moved over time? The *eruv* temporarily redraws the edges of the home, elongating the threshold so that it becomes a space you can occupy rather than just step over. You can carry and do things inside it that are only permitted on the Sabbath in the space of the home. The postcard, in its current incarnation, crosses the line that separates the home from the surrounding world. Hemming it by coming inside, bearing news of ‘away’ and rest. The postcard is inextricably linked to the holiday, coming from the unusual to the unusual, from the moment to the everyday. It works as a counterpoint to the ordinary whilst at the same time being commonplace and ordinary itself. The *eruv* (and the Sabbath) alter time and space through the practices that take place during or inside them, unlike the space of the church or the pleasure resort discussed by Kracauer and Koolhaus. The tension between these two systems of equilibrium

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*Herz and Weitzman*
(for both the Sabbath, the church service and the holiday serve to keep the balance and continuity of the everyday) is worth bearing in mind as we consider the postcard as an expression of a particular (un-homely) temporality.

If the practices derived in the desert were developed in expectation of having to later be fitted to the city it was because they were developed with an idea that the future would be more settled (spatially) than the present. The nomadic drift of the desert was made in expectation that it would one day end in settlement. This is suggestive of two different conceptions of time, the conception put forward by Herz and Weitzman where the present is unfixed and the future fixed, and another, which is arguably more prevalent today, that sees the past as that which is fixed and the future frighteningly unmoored. Leaving aside ideas of stress and relaxation, building and releasing tension, it can be suggested that the holiday or holy day occupies such a sacred space symbolically because it allows for an unusual (and longed for) experience of time. It could be argued that the release of tension felt on holiday comes from this novel and temporary experience of time. It is a section of time that allows for both the future and the past to be understood or experienced as fixed, as certain. If we think of the postcard as expressing a certain experience of time as well as space then its writing and reception becomes significant for this research.

George Perec’s piece *Two Hundred and Forty-Three Postcards in Real Colour*, which takes the form of two hundred and forty-three brief segments of text transcribed from the backs of imaginary postcards, plays with the banal mundanity of the postcard. The form of these cards reveals the relationship exemplified by them between home and the holiday as well as the everydayness of the holiday. What is immediately striking is the uniform nature of the messages. Each seems to have been written to a very strict set of rules. This is obviously part of the game Perec is playing but it is only effective because it so accurately recalls the form he is playing with. We have all written postcards like this, we have all received postcards like this. The relationship between home and away, between place and time, that these brief texts expose is one of simultaneous distance and intimacy. Examining their uniformity in detail reveals that only thirty of the two hundred and forty-three postcards do not open with locative clauses. The rest use as their lexical starting point a phrase locating them at (or in) the geographical coordinate from which they write. ‘We are here,’ they all insist. The placement of this ‘here’ is relatively vague. The name of the country, island, town or hotel is seen to suffice. And the name is all that is supplied of the place.

We’re at the Hotel Quirinal …
On holiday in Denmark …

Here we are in Draguignan …

Unlike letters, postcards are from somewhere before they are from someone. Contrary to expectation this where is entirely irrelevant. All postcards are in fact from the same place. They are from ‘away.’

Like the space of the eruv, that is dependent on its relation to the spaces it mixes and connects rather than the place it occupies, the starting point of the postcard is an ‘away’ that resists being tied to a specific geographical location. Like the subjectively given direction that only makes sense from the place in which it is given, ‘away’ only ever makes sense in relation to something. This means that whatever else it says, the postcard is always saying the same thing. Although in this sense it is immaterial where the postcard is from the writer will always reiterate the fact, even if the image on the reverse makes the announcement for them (which most will). This is a noticeably unnecessary piece of conventional overstatement which should remind us that although the geographical location (objective) is not important, the symbolic one (subjective) is; this is the location ‘away.’ The spatial phrasing of the postcard message is therefore revealing. Perec’s locative pronouns are as follows:

- near
- at
- off
- in
- from
- next to
- around
- through
- somewhere
- round
- close to
- along the
- on

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What is being said, again and again, is this, this postcard in your hands, is from elsewhere. The postcard announces, we (the writers) are somewhere you (the reader) are not. It is a form of communication that carries this message regardless of what is actually written, it carries this message even if it is left blank.

Perec’s cards that do not begin with declarations of place are still invested in the place from which the cards are sent but are more expansive in their attitude to where they are. The writers of these cards are covering distances, touring, taking in more than one spot; the writer is on the move. These authors use verbs to locate their point of departure. They are:

crossing
covering
exploring
visiting
doing
ploughing
taking

The difference between these forms is slight, each of these verbs is a spatially sensitive one, locating the author in a more active and less static way, but locating them all the same.


We’re exploring the Quatre-Cantons. Lovely weather. The shorelines are superb. People friendly and open. Love and kisses.10

To describe the rigid form of the postcards we can take these two examples as representative. Each begins with a locative clause. (We are here) It then describes something of what they are doing or have done in this place. (We are doing/have done this.) It then makes a leap in one of two directions (both of which amount to the same thing in the end); it will move from their activities to some form of affection towards the person the card is to. Or it will predict the return home (or next spot on the journey). So ‘love and kisses’ or ‘back on the 11th.’ These amount to the same thing temporally because they both make a leap from the writer, his current location in time and space, to the addressee (a leap in space)

10 Perec, p.223.
or the address (a leap in time and space). This temporal and spatial play takes place in every postcard presented by Perec. The postcard announces, we (the writers) are somewhere you (the reader) are not. It also says (hopefully) that they will soon be home. The holiday will end. The writer will return to where he came from, he or she is thinking of the person they write to; they are thinking about home.

On holiday in Ulster. … Reckon to be in Strasbourg on the 4th.

We've landed in Deauville … Many regards.

We're at the Hilton … Love to all.

We're crossing Ireland … Thinking about your sunburn!!!

We're at the Hôtel Unterwald … Back on Sunday week.11

There are distinctions to be made between the tonalities of ‘Thinking about your sunburn!!!’ and ‘Love to all’ but what Perec’s collection make such an accurate play of is the temporal leapfrog of the postcard. Each makes this triple jump of tense and space. The relationship between the near and the far is one that straddles a present and a future tense. In Chapter Two I wrote about how doing the laundry marked a transformation between the ‘then’ of the past and the ‘then’ of the future. The postcard makes a similar leap, between here and now and there and then. If the strayed homes examined can be thought of as spaces of commutation, as suggested in Chapter Two, then the postcard is a commuting object. The writer of the postcard is always aware of this commutation as they write.

It is this awareness that means the postcard contains self-consciously spaced writing. This is not just spaced in the sense of it being outdoor, unhinged, or on the move (discussed in the third section of this chapter), the writing is self-consciously spaced in terms of time. Like Derrida’s aphorism, discussed in Chapter Four, these messages seem to outrun themselves, quoting, citing and reciting.12 The message on a postcard is not sent in expectation of a reply. This makes it a very particular (and rare) type of communication. This aphoristic voice, sent, like the voice of God and authority, without expectation of reply, appears in the texts that exist in the strayed home. In each of the spaces texts appear that recall the temporal tone of the postcard. These take the form of unobtrusive instructions for

11 Perec, p.225.
use, lists, rules and announcements. These are texts that do not expect (or permit) response. That is, unless the response is in the form of obedience. If we take two of Perec’s postcards and look at them alongside notices already examined in the launderette, the greasy spoon, the sleeper train and the fire escape, we can notice the recurrence of this aphoristic voice.


We’re exploring the Quatre-Cantons. Lovely weather. The shorelines are superb. People friendly and open. Love and kisses.13

There is intimacy but also authority in the lack of expansion in these texts. The presumed shared knowledge on the part of sender and recipient means that collective categories like meals, nights, weather, shorelines and people, are delivered with brevity and absolute assurance that the meaning behind a phrase like ‘terrible nights’ will be understood. The temporal spacing is similarly presuming; the writer writes in confident expectation of the future; back on the 11th, love and kisses. This spacing of time recalls the instructions on the walls of the launderette which I’ve written about as being like maps; routes through time, trajectories to be followed;

No dye,
Check pockets,
Do not slam the door.14

Instructions like this imply a certain spacing of time, predicting and shaping futures with a peculiar mix of intimate authority. The same leap between prediction and instruction can be read in the text of tickets (analysed in Chapter Three) which spells out time and place explicitly; arrival time: 08.09. The intimate authority recalls the notice transcribed from the walls of a café in Leeds.

Polite notice.
Could you please vacate your table once you have finished eating and drinking.
Thank you.

There is something tender in the repetition of the word ‘you’ which is troubled by the anonymity of the voice that speaks this ‘you.’ Whoever they are they seem impervious to

13 Perec, p.223.
14 Boundary Estate Community Launderette, Calvert Avenue, 11th July 2011.
any response other than that of compliance. Moving from ‘could you’ to ‘once you’ to ‘thank you’ it traverses from a request to a condition to an assumption wrapping the reader into three tenses into one small text, holding their response between them. The move between these tenses recalls the temporal leap of Perec’s postcard messages, intimately distant, distantly intimate.

By drawing Perec’s examples together with thoughts about the everyday and the holiday, the pleasure zones of Coney Island, the church service and the rootlessness of the desert that gave birth to the dynamic space of the eruv I am trying to encourage a reading of the postcard that takes into account its spacing of time. The relationship it exposes, in its banal and commonplace way, inadvertently and quietly, is not anomalous. The postcard is interesting because, when examined, it reveals this spacing and balancing that is part of all linguistic communication and all spacing of time. Thanks to the development of much faster technologies of communication the postcard’s figuring of time and space can be seen to be even stranger if examined alongside them. But what I want to make clear is that what is happening in the postcard is not particular, only slowed to such a pace that we can look at it and see.

Perec’s piece was published just before the completion of the postcard projects of the Japanese artist On Kawara. The series, I Went and I Met, and I Got Up, took the form of postcards and telegrams sent by the artist to friends over a number of years. The I Got Up series saw Kawara sending two postcards a day between 1968 and 1979 which detailed his location, the date, and the time he had woken up that morning. These postcards exaggerate Perec’s sense of the formulaic even further, each being formed by an adjustable rubber stamp and each bearing even more identical texts. This heightened sense of the formula allows a compulsive and desperate self-expression to be demonstrated through the cards. It also recalls the strict and brief formula of postcards sent by soldiers from the trenches during the first world war. Paul Fussell and Allyson Booth write, ‘If a man was too tired to transcribe the clichés of the conventional phlegmatic letter … he could always resort to the government-generated postcard, which required only enough energy to cross out the inappropriate sentences and to affix one’s signature to the card.’ Oddly prescient of the new telling permitted and encouraged by social digital media the cards are at once intimate and starkly distant. They share the precise moment at which the sender’s day began, as well as his location, but do not tell anything else. The reader is left frustrated, curiosity piqued, appetite whetted, peering at the front and then back of the card like a detective left with only

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15 I am grateful to Ben Highmore for telling me about these postcards.
the most recalcitrant of clues. On the other hand, as Perec’s cards make clear, these postcards are representative of their form. ‘I’m here and not there’, is all that most postcards say. What Kawara’s card miss out is the promise of imminent return, none of his cards suggest that the writer will ‘be back soon’. The compulsive nature of Kawara’s telling is significant to the sense identified already, that the postcard from holiday comes from a specific experience of time. Kawara’s postcards are explicitly timed as well as spaced.

Kawara can be seen to be playing a Perecian game himself, by queering his (and his recipients’) relationship with the banal experience of waking up he allows for a new perspective on this everyday occurrence. Perec suggested some practical exercises in observation, instructing his readers,

You must set about it more slowly, almost stupidly. Force yourself to write down what is of no interest, what is most obvious, most common, most colourless.17

Kawara’s obsessive postcard sending can be seen as giving a deliberate attention to the colourless details of time and place, of routine and of the obvious. Reading this work leads in two directions, the first is towards questions about the experience of days, of waking and sleeping, of consciousness and unconsciousness. This experience of days – interminable,

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17 Perec, *Species of Spaces* p.50.
repeated, but also insistent and relentless – is expressed in such a way as to recall the postcards which announced nothing but survival, sent from soldiers to relatives at home.

Thousands of these postcards were sent to relatives after battles, where soldiers would cross out everything except ‘I am quite well’, this informing their families that they were still alive … these postcards constituted the first widely used ‘form’: infinite replication and utter uniformity.¹⁸

The second direction Kawara’s postcards lead is towards themes of memory, impermanence and the archive. It is impossible to look at his work without being reminded of Derrida’s Archive Fever which examines material supplements to spontaneous memory as a way of reading the history and possible future of Freudian psychoanalysis. Reading Freud’s archive and archaeological work alongside that of Jensen and Jensen’s archaeologist Hanold, Derrida credits Freud with the desire to find – to exhume – a clue, a piece of evidence that will explain itself; an imprint that is instantaneously self-evident.

An imprint that is singular each time, an impression that is almost no longer an archive but almost confuses itself with the pressure of the footstep that leaves its still-living mark on a substrate, a surface, a place of origin. When the step is still one with the subjectile.¹⁹

Drawing the postcard together with the idiosyncratic step, a footmark that identifies the gait and weight of its maker, reveals the fantasy, not just of Freud (and all historians, detectives and archaeologists) but also of all writers (not just of postcards). On the part of the psychoanalytic detective this is the desire to explain the present through the clues and evidence of the past. On the part of the writer it is the desire to survive the present (to live a little longer). Kawara’s cards play with both anachronistic desires offering clues masquerading as facts to the detective and creating an index-able archive of a lived life that is at once written and unwritten in a bid for immortality. Strangely his cards have more in common with the scratched graffiti found on walls, doors and desks than they do with the letter, novel or obituary. The former are always more emphatic in stating the current absence of the author rather than their one-time presence. This is why I have described them as compulsive and desperate, in their effort they seem to reassert that which they wish to avoid, rather like Perec’s own declaration of deferral which admits – even whilst espousing – the impossibility of holding anything still.

¹⁸ Fussell and Booth, pp.13-14.
Space melts like sand running through one’s fingers. Time bears it away and leaves me only shapeless shreds:
To write: to try meticulously to retain something, to cause something to survive; to wrest a few precise scraps from the void as it grows, to leave somewhere a furrow, a trace, a mark or a few signs.²⁰

The postcard is a commonplace example of this writerly desire, made in exile from the everyday, and sent back to it.

To analyse Kawara’s postcards alongside Perec’s and alongside the postcards I have found and read, sent and received, is to be struck by the fact that the experience of writing from a time and place to another time and place is always one that requires a suspension of sorts. Just as the holiday is part of the everyday so too is the experience of thinking about the future as balanced against the present. I am also concerned with the way they are seen to express something intimate in public. I have said that they are both intimate and recalcitrant. This recalcitrance is what makes them pleasurable to read; there is so much that they do not say! They are full of gaps, and in this sense open to interpretation and reinterpretation, suggestive and subjective. They are firmly rooted in a context (a time, a place, a sender, a receiver) but they are also brief and evasive. They are sent out of their context. In this way, reading the backs of postcards recall eavesdropped snippets of conversation. Agatha Christie was highly attuned to the possibilities of spoken words taken out of context (these drive the plot of the spatially curtailed Murder on the Orient Express and Murder on the Nile). The link between detective fiction and psychoanalysis has been well made as has the link between psychoanalysis and the postal system.²¹ The postcard and the eavesdrop are clues and proof but, as Derrida would remind us, are also deeply flawed pieces of evidence, flawed for the same reason they are cherished; for the way in which they open themselves up to interpretation. Psychoanalysis, detective fiction and the postal system are linked because they all depend upon the reading of text over time, they depend upon the reading and re-reading of clues. With the postcard that is brief and polite, sticking to a clichéd formula, the pleasure of deciphering is added to by the experience of turning over (and over) the card and trying to read between the image and the text, making sense of this coincidence of picture and word, ferrying between the two. The pleasure of detection should not be confused with the experience of straying from home or the experience of receiving a

²⁰ Perec, Postcards in Colour pp.91-2.
²¹ ‘One must consider the historical and non-accidental reasons which have tied such an institution, in its theoretical and practical dimensions, to postal communication, and to this particular form of mail, to its substrates, to its average speed: a handwritten letter takes so many days to arrive in another European city, and nothing is ever independent of this delay.’ Derrida, Archive Fever p.17.
postcard. Receiving a postcard gives rise to reading pleasures but it also crucially expresses spatial and temporal anxieties, it comes from elsewhere, it hems, balances, reminds and references.
6.3 Unmentionable Body Parts

![Figure 56. Annotated body parts on a postcard (from Paul Éluard's collection).](image)

The intimacy of the postcard was identified early on by its users and producers as one of its idiosyncratic attributes. The postcard can be imagined as a pair of as-yet-unwashed underpants being taken to the launderette, travelling through space, exposing the innermost secrets of the person they belong to. This thought is built upon a conception of the written as being just as much a part of bodily effluvia as sweat, blood, urine and feces. The written is, in so many ways, our insides come out. The written is also, problematically, at once more legible and more open to interpretation than these other bodily traces. The thought of a publically accessible envelope-free system of communication, was initially dismissed by the German postal director in 1825 as ‘an indecent form of communication on exposed pages.’

The language used here reiterates the mingling made between the textual and the corporeal; the postcard (at this point in the postal director’s imagination it was simply a plain card with writing on one side and an address on the other) is a naked body soon to be charged with indecent exposure. The writing upon it needs to be handed a coat, covered up, and hidden. It is hard not to be reminded of the idiom ‘washing your dirty linen in public’ which equates things which have been close to the body with things which should be kept secret. The impossibility of a secret, unexposed form of communication is what makes the postal

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22 Esther Milne, *Letters, Postcards, Email: Technologies of Presence* (Oxon: Routledge, 2010) p.104. As early as 1777 a French engraver in Paris published engraved cards with greetings on them to be sent through the local penny post. The idea was not popular because, not being enclosed under cover; the messages could be read by servants and others though whose hands they passed.’ Frank Staff, *The Picture Postcard and its Origins* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1966) p.10.
director’s dismissal significant rather than just amusingly prudish. Communication is implicitly and necessarily exposing. The director’s dismissal reveals an awareness of and an anxiety about this necessary exposure; if he must expose himself he at least wants to be able to choose to whom. Thinking about the postcard reminds us that we do not just speak or write, we speak and write to. And, just as crucially, we always speak and write from. The postcard makes explicit the space between this to and from, its pleasures (and perils) are what happens there. It is this space, formed by a ‘to’ and a ‘from’, and the issues of decency and exposure within it, which draws the postcard close to other questions already raised by the concept of a strayed home, questions not just of time but of the grubby parts of the home signaled by the secret, the hidden and the dirty. The qualms raised by the introduction of the postcard in 1825 preempt those which the introduction of the launderette was to raise one hundred and twenty years later. Issues of mixing and contagion, gossip and exposure were key. The postcard helps to highlight what might be felt to be straying in a strayed home; if the question was originally one which sprung from a skepticism about the phrase ‘invasion of privacy’ and everything that went with it, then the postcard is a good tool with which to think about what that privacy might actually be.23

The word ‘unmentionables’ is an outdated way of referring to underwear (bras, knickers, pants, socks, vests) and by association things that should not be discussed in public.24 It carries within itself a sense of irony; by mentioning it you are mentioning what you’re not supposed to be mentioning. It is significant to this chapter because it epitomizes a mannered understanding of what can and cannot be said and what does and does not belong. Some things are unmentionable because (so the feeling goes) they cannot or should not be spoken of; others are mentionable only depending on who you are with or where you are. In both cases there is the sense of something that is an aberration, something shameful and taboo. I have already discussed the work of Mary Douglas who understands the taboo as that which is out of place. She argues that things (or practices) are not innately bad or dirty but if they are out of place then they seem so. When we interrogate taboo subjects of conversation, this assertion is troubled. There are things that are so difficult to talk about that it would seem there is no place for them. The taboo can be split into topics which have

23 Ruth Padel has written of the Athenian stage and city; ‘Being in the city meant judging or inferring the interior of others on the basis of what they had done and said; from how they had, publically, seemed. The assembly and the law courts were a kind of theatre, the theatre an assembly-place, a court. In all these it was crucial that you could not see inside another person, and yet somehow, you must.’ ‘Making Space Speak’, Nothing to do with Dionysus? Athenian Drama in its Social Context (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1990) p.338. This sense of the unknowable other can be confined to this period or to any one period or place. It is part rather of the experience of living in a body in a world full of other bodies.

no place and topics which have no words. A topic which has no (spoken) place conforms to Douglas’s understanding of dirt and the dirty. The inappropriateness of talking about one’s underwear is at odds with the fact that (to the best of my knowledge) everyone wears it and does not think very much of doing so. Underwear is not innately inappropriate but talking about it somehow is. A topic which has no words on the other hand elicits a different reaction. If there is fluster, laughter, discomfort and disgust when people are forced to discuss or come into contact with their (or other people’s) underwear, the reaction to death is very different.

Contact with the dying, discussion about the dead, puts people into a state of relative inertia and numbness. Rather than the enlivening shock of taboo there is the sense of a dull anesthesia. Ways of speaking about the dying and the dead are extremely imprecise, as distant and hollow as most conversational commonplaces. There are a series of trite and unsatisfactory platitudes that seem to remove the speaker further from the subject they discuss; How do you do? How are you? I’m sorry for your loss. Like the word ‘unmentionables’ these empty phrases do carry with them a sense (however faint) of mentioning what should not (or cannot) be mentioned, even if it is only in the socially accepted fact that nothing is really being said. The formulas, repeated to comic or tragic effect by Perec and Kawara, recall this strange paradox of the unmentionable. There is nothing to say and nothing can be said. The continued voicing of this nothing is in itself expressive.

Soon after the introduction and rapid proliferation of postcards came the images of bodies and body parts on those cards. The saucy postcard was, and still is, a vibrant form. These surreal and not-quite obscene cards are some of the most persistent in type and certainly the most persistent in cultural conceptions of the form. No matter that the postcard was used just as much and just as automatically as the telephone came to be, or that it was no more public than a telegram, the idea of its publicity has remained key to the way in which it is thought about. Highlighting two forms of private parts, the presence of one in image form gestures towards anxiety about the textual material that was being sent through space alongside it. Since their inception the presence within the postcard repertoire of the obscene or pornographic has been constant; it was not just the ‘exposed’ messages which threatened propriety with their nakedness. Writing in 1933, the surrealist Paul Éluard noted that, ‘everything is a pretext to show female nudity,’ finding among the cards, ‘innumerable naked women, in unbelievable postures.’ Frank Staff found these but also ‘every sort of cat imaginable, posed in baskets, in tea-cups, under parasols, in flower-pots,

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wearing sun bonnets and having tea parties,' which should be of some comfort to anyone bemoaning the proliferation of ridiculous animals on the internet today. Thirty years earlier Éluard would have found his naked women in every kiosk, tobacconist and newsvendor in Paris. During the Paris Exhibition demand for these images was such that production went into overdrive. A police raid seized over 80,000 before the exhibition finished. News of the postcard plague reached London where the *Picture Post* remarked primly; ‘We are sure that no post office would forward such obscenity as is openly exhibited in the arcades on the Rue de Rivoli, or thrust into one’s hands by itinerant newsvendors outside the cafés.’ Though the *Picture Post* might have been surprised to hear it, Parisians were no happier about the images and a police raid seized over 80,000 of them later that year.

The obscene postcard survived its early glut, though in a somewhat muted form. James Laver, writing in 1970, notes:

‘[there were] even (sad to say) ‘obscene’ cards –the authorities soon clamped down on these, but seem to have turned a blind eye on the ‘vulgar’ cards which still embellish the windows of every shop selling seaside souvenirs.’

The distinction between obscenity and vulgarity is one made between the corrupting and the common place. In George Orwell’s assessment, the images on these vulgar cards were intended, ‘not as pornography but as a skit on pornography.’ The vulgar but harmless comic postcards, like the ‘saucy’ cards from the Paris Exhibition were sold as souvenirs, they were permitted not because they were ubiquitous, as Orwell asserts, but because they came from somewhere else. They were from the ‘holiday’ rather than the ‘everyday.’ The sender is exonerated because it is the place he is writing from that dictates the image, not him.

It was found that the tourists … were willing to buy all sorts of souvenirs, especially anything considered ‘naughty’ or in any way suggestive, and supposedly typical of Paris.

This sense of the ‘typical’ is what permits the sending of cards that are not in the least typical of the person who sends them. Postcards from Paris in 1903, were expected to be saucy. So too, the British cards which are swept to the unserious corners of seaside resorts

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26 Staff, p.73.
28 James Laver, foreword to The Picture Postcard and its Origins p.7.
30 Staff, p.63.
can get away with saying (or showing) things that would never be said or shown in polite, everyday society.  

These cards had been preceded by illustrated envelopes which offered a similar, unserious package for the post that came from holiday. Staff writes that in the 1850s the most popular series of illustrated envelopes were those showing seaside scenes; ‘They were mostly all comical, and showed ladies in long-trouseried bathing dresses being scared, when in the sea, by the proximity of male bathers.’ He adds, ‘considering that men bathed nude at this period of our history, the alarm of the ladies is not unnatural.’

The way in which the images on the vulgar postcards were described by commentators is revealing. Laver describes ‘immensely fat women bursting out of their bodices or leaning provocatively over the railings of the promenade.’ Orwell notes ‘breasts or buttocks grossly over-emphasized’ and ‘smacked bottoms and scrawny mothers-in-law’. In Laver’s description there is a sense of the women’s bodies encroaching on the space around them, bursting, leaning, pushing against the eyes of those who pass. The women in the images (rather than the images themselves) are being provocative. This is redolent of the palpable sense of invasion evident in the passage from the *Picture Post;* obscene images (of bodies and body parts) are being thrust into hands, there is no escaping them. Laver and Orwell compartmentalise the bodies they are looking at, seeing them in snapshot close-ups, bit by salacious bit. They paint a picture of women in sections, chopped up bodies, English sea fronts strewn with enlarged or shrunken body parts.

The ‘vulgar’ postcard was never the only option to send home from away. Writers could capture the mood of their holiday through images of charming vistas, well-known landmarks and picturesque locations. Sending evidence of their existence from the Canary Islands, Barcelona and Skegness did not necessarily require a smutty pun or picture. These cards followed in a tradition of hotel notepaper, souvenir pictures and embellished envelopes that were generally promotional material produced by the businesses which depended upon the tourist trade of the location in question. Frank Staff links the picture postcard with the visiting cards used by the middle and upper classes during the 18th and 19th centuries. The use of these cards was the practice by which a certain part of society met and communicated; the formalised system through which the paying and receiving of visits was organised. Were the bits and parts of the saucy postcard just the mutated descendant of the extended sociable hands and feet of the *cartes des visite*?

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31 This definition of naughtiness feeds into Orwell’s assertion that these are permitted sins, rules bent but not broken, the gentle release of pent up repression rather than an outburst.

32 Staff, p.33.

33 Laver loc cit. p.7.

34 Orwell, pp.156-159.

35 During the 1830s in England, quarto sized, pictorial writing paper, showing views, was available in all the major cities, seaside resorts and places of note. Staff, p.20.
Visiting cards were printed showing pictures, sometimes in classical style, but often depicting actual views, favourite topics being the ruins of antiques. As a rule they were delicately engraved, with sufficient space left somewhere in the design for the name to be written in … it could be said that these pictorial visiting cards are the direct ancestors of the picture postcard especially when it is remembered that messages were sometimes written on them.\textsuperscript{36}

The thought of going to someone’s house to leave them a card with your name on it to let them know you had been there seems farcically laborious by today’s standards but there is a similar urge at play in the scrawled messages on school desks or the graffitied tags on railway bridges. The urge to find ways into other people’s spaces and to announce one’s presence once there remains.

The intricacies of the visiting card system are described by Esther Milne who writes; ‘it was understood that many people were \textit{physically} at home when they were not \textit{socially} at home’. This negotiation between being physically present in person but absent socially also applied to the people leaving the cards; ‘etiquette manuals warned that servants be instructed on how to observe the difference between calling and card leaving’.\textsuperscript{37} It seems somewhat narrow in perception to say, as Milne does, that ‘there is nothing which so divided the lifestyles of the middle class and working class as the formality of calling and visiting’ but it is important to keep in mind that the privacy defended or organised by calling cards was limited to a small part of society. That definition of privacy is troubled and opened up by the questions that were asked of the postcard before its introduction; ‘would the public sacrifice their epistolary privacy? … Would they overcome their aversion to open communication?’.\textsuperscript{38}

The postcard did not threaten the privacy that relied upon stopping or admitting entrance to the space of the home any more than a letter would have done. It threatened the separate worlds inside the home (between the individuals in it; family members, employees and employers). Attention to the tradition of \textit{cartes des visites} reveals that \textit{within} the space of the home, there was still a negotiation at work. There is an unsettled sense of what presence means to privacy. The surfaces of these cards doubled as the social and physical surfaces of the people giving them; cards turning to extended hands, reaching for a handshake, turning to feet, getting a foot in the door. Their descendant, the postcard, was far less formal. The surrealist Paul Éluard finds not only informality but a certain vulgarity in his collection of cards;

\textsuperscript{36} Staff, p.10.
\textsuperscript{37} Daniel Poole and Esther Milne, \textit{Letters, Postcards, Email; Technologies of Presence}, p.96.
\textsuperscript{38} Milne, p.103.
Soon adults learned to love postcards because of their lack of sophistication … at most they are the small change left over from art and poetry. But this small change sometimes suggests the idea of gold.\textsuperscript{39}

\textbf{Figure 57.} Éluard’s secret parts decoded.

\textbf{Figure 58.} All the views at once.

\textsuperscript{39} Éluard, p.138.
Reading George Orwell’s essay on the art of Donald McGill alongside that of Susan Bordo on the relationship between anorexia and western culture is an uncomfortable but productive exercise. Orwell analyses and praises the bawdy seaside postcard in precisely the terms Bordo identifies as underpinning the visual themes of teenage magazines (hunger, appetite, suppressed desire, control). He credits the vulgar postcard with allowing the expression (however marginal) of the suppressed, bodily, part of a man’s character.

There is one part of you that wishes to be a hero or a saint, but another part of you is a little fat man ... he is your unofficial self, the voice of the belly protesting against the soul.\textsuperscript{40}

He sees the existence of the bawdy postcard as an inoculation against more drastic expressions which might issue from the little fat man; a form of blood letting to keep the social body calm and amenable. We can think again of the pressure valve of Coney Island releasing tension from the city of Manhattan; ‘The corner of the human heart that [the postcards] speak for might easily manifest itself in worse forms and I for one should be sorry to see them vanish.’\textsuperscript{41} His distinction, which clumsily summarised calls the body bad and mind good, is found by Bordo to be at the heart of the indoctrination which informs the body disorders, hysteria, anorexia and agoraphobia, and constructions of gender in general.\textsuperscript{42} Where the two writers meet is in the metonymic conflation taking place between

\textsuperscript{40} Orwell, p.163.
\textsuperscript{41} Orwell, p.165.
\textsuperscript{42} ‘Disdain for the body, the conception of it as alien force to the soul, is very old in our Greco-Christian traditions.’ Susan Bordo, \textit{Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body} (London: University of California Press, 1993) p.149.
one surface and another (between paper and skin). By this I mean that both writers describe a reciprocal relationship between these two surfaces (that of bodies on images and that of images upon bodies).

Orwell’s assessment of the postcards levels the responsibility for these images at the feet of the disappointingly slim women of England. He intimates that the images have been made to fill an unconsciously detected gap. His argument is that the crude joke and bordering-on-obscene image are artificial manifestations of what could not be seen, obtained or expressed in the real world. The ‘grossly over-emphasized’ breasts or buttocks were ‘natural enough in a country whose women when young tend to be slim to the point of skimpiness.’ The slim and skimpy, the absence of flesh in effect, produced these images. What for Orwell is an implicit system of compensation, reaction and counterbalance is explicit for Bordo who writes, ‘The attempt to subdue the spontaneities of the body in the interests of control only succeeds in constituting them as more powerful and thus more needful of control.’ Orwell writes that the enforced regularity, activity and ‘nobility’ demanded by society does not dampen the need for the kind of release permitted by the dirty joke so eloquently expressed on a McGill postcard or in a music hall performance. He makes a (surprisingly) Freudian case; echoing Kracauer and Benjamin in turn when he states; ‘there can be no doubt that these pictures lift the lid on a very widespread repression.’ Like the women assessed by Bordo who respond literally to a (visual) culture of composure, slenderness or domesticity by starving themselves or refusing to leave the home, Orwell describes the postcards as literal fabrications of what is lacking in the world and on the bodies in it. The relationship between image and reality is entirely mingled and collapsing, making distinctions alarmingly and familiarly fragile.

A scene is the subdivision of an act of a play in which time is continuous and the setting fixed. The obscene, as that which is not here, is elsewhere. The obscene always gestures to something disturbing to the fixed time and place of the current scene. It is offensive, indecent, corrupting. What elsewhere (or elsewhen) do vulgar postcards gesture to? Orwell ascribes it to suppressed bodily needs and cravings. Is the elsewhere an inner, bodily elsewhere that is at odds with the external societal scene? Tom Phillips writes of ‘the comic sort’ of postcard: ‘they are there in effect to subvert correctness of any kind.’ He reiterates Orwell’s sense that they keep order through permitted disorder; ‘by trading in ready-made prejudice they actually endorse its attitudes’ but wonders if this outlet is a thing of the past; ‘by 1990 its artists cast around in vain for any remaining taboo, for life had by

43 Bordo, p.146.
44 Orwell, p.159.
now left everything hanging out.'\textsuperscript{45} Siegfried Kracauer too saw them as a safe sidelined manifestation of something bodily that was not permitted or catered for in bourgeois life;

The displayed wares … satisfy primarily bodily needs and the craving for images of the sort that appear in daydreams. Both of these, the very near and the very far, elude the bourgeois public sphere – which does not tolerate them – and like to withdraw into the furtive light of the passageway … a place where, more than almost anywhere else, the voyage which is the journey from the near to the far and the linkage of body and image can manifest itself.\textsuperscript{46}

On the postcard stands which encroach onto the streets of London today, there is more evidence of a continuing tradition of souvenir-cards than vulgar ones. Perhaps the bodies on show in magazines and on pocket-dwelling screens are enough for the fat man to be getting on with for now. Outside newsagents or tourist kiosks, next to piles of slogan-emblazoned t-shirts, emergency mackintoshes and, for the most unlucky or unprepared of travellers, emergency suitcases, are affordable racks of postcards (generally priced between 25p and £1.) The impression made by these collections of cards is still surreal, these are still dream images rather than representations of reality. Pedestrians are confronted by a series of subtly different towers or lampposts poking themselves into open skies. Big Ben’s steeple top pushes a sharp point up and out. The dark and grey triangle of Tower Bridge cuts into another pale and wide space. A globe of lamppost, an underground demi-moon and the advertisement boards of Picadilly Circus all glow hopefully before a backdrop of purple night. The river sweeps its way in, winding over innumerable surfaces, a dark curve, intermittent, endless. Hovering at the edges of this mass of English grey, are five giant shapes, present in technicolour, looming Godzilla large. The disembodied head of Princess Diana simpers, beautiful, blazing, with a tiara tucked into the dense blonde curls of her hair. She is all eyes, mouth and earrings, her chin resting on the head of an improbable white bulldog who wears a smart union-jack waistcoat. He stops traffic, one huge red bus which looms over an even larger plate of fish and chips (a plate as big as Diana’s head, and more delicious). Next to the food is a teddy-bear dressed in the uniform of the keepers of the Tower of London; a beefeater toy. A stuffed guard. The subtext seems to be royal violence made cute by the manner of its deliverance. Look at these silly costumes, look at these body parts, vehicles, animals, heads. This is only the 50 pence stand. Beyond it, standing humbly in its shadow, the 25 pence rack waits patiently. There are more busses, a telephone booth, is that Battersea Power Station? Some large valentine-tinted hearts mingle with similarly red-jacketed soldiers, some horrible typography, which says London again and again in varying

\textsuperscript{46} Siegfried Kracauer, \textit{Farewell to the Linden Arcade} (London: Yale University Press, 1994) p.338.
jagged, disorderly, *cheery* fonts. And there, to one side, is the head of the Queen safely parted from her body, she is younger than she can possibly be, smiling in a crown.

Even though the internet has brought these views and snapshots to us in their droves, the postcard stands still reflect the near and the far that Kracauer identified in the Linden Arcade. Here we find images made by the zoom and the magnifying glass, the x-ray and the scalpel. Things are very close or shown from very far, they are magnified, cut out, rearranged. Are these daydream images as Kracauer suggests? They are certainly manifestations of the near and the far that seem to be characteristic of the daydream. They are also obscene in the sense that they make reference to an elsewhere, an off stage, another place and time. They are the image you send or take away. They can be read as fantasies of extended bodies, dreams of being smaller and taller, closer and further. It is not just bodies that are chopped up into parts by the postcard. Clearly the form lends itself to the bit, the part, the fragment. Even if the image attempts to summarise rather than isolate (the collection of views is a popular type), the way in which it is sold will always reveal the fragmentary and multiple nature of the product. You get to *pick* the view you like, the one you want to take away or send. Recalling the formulaic messages that will be written on the reverse these images do not pretend that experience can ever be unique or singular. There are always a series of ever so slightly different views to chose from. The contrast has been heightened on this one. A sunset inserted here. This one is identical apart from the smiling presence of a cartoon monkey. When I think about the postcard versions that have been made and that are being made of the Eiffel Tower my brain begins to squirm. I wonder if I will ever stop receiving postcards of the Eiffel Tower. At the foot of this giant key ring toy you rifle through rotating stands. You could take six versions of the same card, one to send to every member of your family. Or you could curate your own collection, tailoring the levity of the postcard’s message to its addressee (this is what I tend to do, there are some people who will appreciate a living shell-bedecked Coney Island mermaid, and some who will not.) What seems important is not the absence of the rude or titillating image (still to be found in seaside resorts) but the continuation of the extended and disembodied view that the postcards offer. The postcard stands of London today make us look at the views and body parts of 1900s in a different way, what is contingent is the way these cards offered close ups and birds-eye views, multiple angles and fragments. *Was this* the bodily need and repressed craving that the cards were satisfying? It is a need that still asks to be fed. Not for naked women necessarily but for views and parts that you had not seen before, and for evidence of having seen something, of having been somewhere; the arresting of motion, of holding life still.
Figure 60. The near and the far.
6.4 Picnic

This section will consider the idea of the postcard as an *outdoor* form of communication and the intermingling of that outdoor with that form of communication. It will do so through the trope of the picnic. A picnic is, ‘an occasion when a packed meal is eaten outdoors, especially during an outing to the countryside.’ The word derives from the French *pique-nique*, which was an 18th century term for a social event at which each guest would contribute a share of the food. The postcard was no more mobile really than the letters and envelopes that preceded it but seemed, from its inception, to appeal more pressingly to an urge to write in or from a specific place. This urge is an urge to write from a moment. The sense of an ‘outdoor moment’ exemplifies the type of freewheeling, unconstrained communication its producers wanted to encourage. The satisfaction of this urge appeared more possible for practical reasons and was later satisfied explicitly by the real photo postcard. The postcard (or post-sheet as it was originally termed) was harder than paper, it was stiffer and more resilient so travelled well. It was also smaller and palpably more *informal* which freed the writer from the time and effort that might have been required to write a letter. The object was handier and harder, the activity required to put it to use, streamlined. Von Stephan of the German Post Office wrote in 1865:

> How very troublesome … it is at present for anyone on a journey who wishes to write to his relatives telling them of his arrival or asking for some article that may have been forgotten! In the future such a one would take a ‘post-sheet’ from his portfolio and with a lead pencil, in the carriage or on the platform, fill it up and post it in the nearest pillar-box or railway letterbox.  

An essential part of the promotion of postcards (this conversational text was after all written by the Post Office with the intent of selling them) was the idea that they allowed for *writing-on-the-go*. Stephan appeals to the man on a journey who is busy, active and does not have time to waste. His postcard is a form of communication that moves *as he does*. It better accommodates forgetfulness and the need to stay in touch than the unwieldy letter.

Recalling that the text above was written with the intent of selling postcards provokes the question, did the urge or the means of satisfying it come first? There are cynical parallels to be made between the marketing of this new technology and the issues which surrounded the introduction of the telephone network in Britain during the 1930s when Stephen Tallents was hired to incite ‘a national telephone mindedness’ among the

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48 Staff, p.39.
general public. I am reminded of Mark Cousins’ scathing summation of the British Telecom advertisement tagline *it’s good to talk*. He concludes that yes, it’s very good for you if we talk. It is easy to see the postcard’s accommodation of the forgetful impulse as the postal service’s capitalising encouragement of it. (Do we have the postcard to thank for the fact that these days the importance of being on time has been eroded because we can always text to say we’ll be late?) Similar parallels can be drawn between the ease with which you could write to your relatives to tell them of your arrival and the exaggerated announcements of everyday ‘arrivals’ in the current digital form of ‘tagging’, ‘tweeting’ and ‘updating’. The definition of ‘occasion’ seems to have been stretched somewhat. Frank Staff, in his history of the picture postcard writes:

> With the creation of the postcard a new era in our social life was begun … Brevity was essential to enable people to write as much as possible in the small space provided. Long descriptive phrases and empty expressions of endearment which were so commonly used in letter writing now gave place to a minimum number of words.  

James Douglas, writing slightly more acerbically in 1907, declared:

>C[The Picture Postcard] has secretly delivered us from the toil of letter writing. There are still men living who can recall the days when it was considered necessary and even delightful to write letters to one’s friends … Happily the P.P. has relieved the modern author from this slavery.

The postcard can be seen to have permitted and encouraged a new kind of telling, making way (depending on how you looked at it) for a narcissistic voyeurism or democratic polyphony. Douglas gives voice to the first interpretation, Phillips the second. What its early promoters wanted to insist upon was the ease with which it could be written and sent.

> The continuing popularity of forms of communication which allow for this placing and writing *from* suggests that it is (or was) an urge regardless of the post office propaganda which encouraged it. One of the repeating themes in the promotional literature of the time is

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50 Staff, p.49.  
52 ‘One of the most common functions after 1902 was the exchange of news between members of a scattered family, each at service in different places … one of the reasons for the growing popularity of the postcard was the small demand it placed on the writer, in an age when schooling for most people, was over at 14.’ Tom Phillips *The Postcard Century* p.13.
that the postcard was an unhinged form of communication, set loose from the writing desk. Its use could be fitted to your whims and desires. Contemporary accounts show the popularity of this novel rootlessness. A caption for the image shown below reads,

The rage for picture postcards appears to still be the rage in Germany, as it is in this country. The people of Berlin want to write postcards even when sitting in an open-air restaurant. The cards the postman sells are written there and then, and promptly posted in the letterbox which he carries on his back.55

The subject of this illustration is the mobility of the postcard, not the fact that it will travel once you have written it but the fact that it travels to where you write. It is an open-air technology, and making use of it is aligned to leisure rather than work. The caption invites readers to enjoy the (still remarkable) spectacle of a ‘walking stationer and letterbox’ pleasurable not just because of the simultaneous personification of letterbox and objectification of the man who has become both shop and box, but because of what he permits those he visits to do. He is permitting and facilitating a heightened experience of self-consciousness. The experience is narcissistic, because it is self-regarding and voyeuristic because you regard yourself as though you were someone else. The terms are loaded negatively but I want to use them descriptively here. The urge to write from (which is an urge to place oneself more than anything else) gives rise to a paradoxical distancing. As you write in a place, you imagine an elsewhere and an elsewhen; you take leave of what is immediate to you. The caption continues; ‘the people of Berlin want to write postcards even when sitting in an open air restaurant.’54

54 Staff, p.59.
Writing a postcard, unlike writing a letter, was depicted as being part of leisure time, it was important that you did not have to stop what you were doing to do it. One article describes German travellers ‘alternating’ the sipping of beer with the addressing of...
postcards.' There is a pleasurable (picnic-like) mingling of normally demarcated activities; between the sips of beer, snippets of text. This happy cohabitation is echoed by Jacques Derrida, writing in 1987, who takes an erotic pleasure in the experience of writing whilst travelling, and without interrupting himself; 'I am writing to you between Oxford and London, near Reading. I am holding you outstretched on my knees.' Where the German travellers punctuate their postcard writing with sips of beer, Derrida takes sips from his surroundings, delighting in the temporal and material play allowed for by writing-on-the-go. These are picnic-like pleasures; shared, public and ever so slightly surreal. If the picnic snips out the space of the table from its usual place and puts it onto the ground, temporarily transforming where it lands, then the postcard performs a similar feat with the writing desk. Derrida’s knees are part of the game, the train and restaurant where the German travellers write are too.

These pleasures are clearly the pleasures of the spatial gape, instantly reminiscent of the disorder that comes with the redrawn edges of the intimate and homely. The relocated desk (or table top) is matter out of place, but playfully so. There is the coupling of displacement and refreshment, the rubbing up of two edges (two codes) against one another. The writers of postcards are well aware of the surreal possibilities of outdoor writing, embellishing their messages with evidence of their unhinged position, playing with the form. Guy Atkins, who writes about the messages of Edwardian postcards, delights in the postcard sent by Dorothy to her grandmother, writing from under the ground on one of the earliest tubes in London in 1913. She lets the movement of the carriage become part of the text she writes.

I hope you will excuse the squiggle as I am in the tube and it is rather shaky.

I received a postcard last summer which transplanted the first line of Dodie Smith’s *I Capture the Castle* to Cornwall to engage in some pleasurable spatial gapping. The pleasure taken in the outdoor setting of the beach is the same that is taken in the tube carriage; hands and feet are impinged upon by tide and juddering transport.

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55 *London Standard*, August 21st 1899
58 ‘I write this sitting in the kitchen sink, that is, my feet are in it.’ Dodie Smith, *I Capture the Castle* (London: Virago, 2003) p.1.
I write this sitting in the English Channel, that is my feet are in it . . .\textsuperscript{59}

It is not necessarily the environment that impinges, the tools of the practice can find their way into the texts they write, creating self-reflexive instances of incursion.

This pen digs so that I can’t half write and I don’t know if you can read it or not.\textsuperscript{60}

The postcard, in its picnic-like immersion in a moment, out of doors, on the hoof, is hemmed by the world rather than writing. James Douglas, writing in 1907, makes clear the surreal effect of this abrupt and unprecedented form.

It begins without prelude and ends without an envoy.\textsuperscript{61}

His sense is that rather than the material world impinging on the text (like the sea or the tube or the pen) the text leaks into or is squeezed over the image and the world. He describes the new form as though it is strangling him, somehow the space of the image is curtailing his breathing.

There is no room for anything polite. Now and then one can write on a blue sky or a white road, but as a rule, there is no space for more than a gasp.\textsuperscript{62}

All of these unhinged postcard instances engage in a play with contexts, which as we have seen echoes the snippets of eavesdropped conversation in the strayed homes already discussed as well as the disembodied voice of authority which speaks from the brief signs or instructions for use found there. Bearing in mind this play with contexts it is unsurprising to find Derrida in his element in the realm of postal communication.

Derrida’s \textit{The Postcard} is relevant here because of the attention he pays to the pleasures of writing in place. It is not, however, a book about postcards. Nor does he actually send a postcard in the way this chapter (and indeed author) sets as prerequisite for definition as postcard practice.\textsuperscript{63} Jacques Derrida, I am sorry to say, puts envelopes on all of his postcards. Perhaps he is trying to prove a point, as he is wont, about the

\textsuperscript{59} Postcard received Summer 2012, my collection.
\textsuperscript{60} Valentine Postcard, 1910, at The British Postal Museum & Archive, Freeling House OB 1995. 17/27
\textsuperscript{61} Douglas, \textit{The Picture Postcard} p.77.
\textsuperscript{62} Douglas, ibid.
\textsuperscript{63} By the same logic we cannot be diverted by the postcards sold in brown paper packages by Verloc in \textit{The Secret Agent} or Mr. Hire in \textit{The Engagement}. Nor can we dwell on the erotic photocards housed in Leopold Bloom’s first drawer (unlocked).
unprivatizable\textsuperscript{64} nature of all writing. In another essay he quotes James Joyce on the equivalence (in the eyes of the law) of postcards and publications. Once written and sent, the two men agree, the postcard is a public document. Recalling the obsessive and formulaic postcard games played by On Kawara and Georges Perec, his assessment of the form links its singularity with its proliferation.

Any public piece of writing, any open text, is also offered like the exhibited surface, in no way private, of an open letter, and therefore of a postcard with its address incorporated in the message and hereafter open to doubt, and with its coded and at the same time stereotyped language, trivialized by the very code and number.\textsuperscript{65}

Like Joyce, Derrida delights in the play of contexts, in the possibility that a postcard, like an action, might lie. He writes to a longsuffering receiver of postcard-stuffed envelopes, and confesses that he might not make be making himself clear; ‘I would like to address myself, in a straight line, directly without courier, only to you, but I do not arrive and that is the worst of it.’\textsuperscript{66}

The ‘Envois’ section of the book is made from a series of pieced-together (rescued) fragments of letters, written on postcards to a nameless recipient and edited (so we assume) to protect her privacy. What is surprising about this series of fragments is that they refer repeatedly to other forms of communication. Derrida spends as much time in telephone booths (walking from his office or desk at odd points during his day to phone to speak to the person he writes to) as he does writing the letters. (I call them letters because they are continuous pieces of writing that straddle a number of postcards and that are then sent together in an envelope). The person he writes to, Derrida’s you, is in another country. She is in another time zone which makes the play of written and spoken, missed and crossed, communication even more of a dance of time, place and distances than it might otherwise be. He tells her, ‘I am still keeping two watches on my arm.’\textsuperscript{67} He worries about the time difference, having to call in the middle of the night provoking a daydream about an as yet unavailable silent telephone.

\textsuperscript{64} I found this ungainly word in \textit{The Derrida Dictionary}; ‘in “Envois” Paris’s image of Socrates–Plato – one that is turned around and is turned over on a card – gets put into the post countless times. With, written on its back, the undecidable remains of an unprivatizable correspondence that nonetheless keeps its secrets out in the open.’ Simon Morgan Wortham (London: Continuum, 2010) p.221.
\textsuperscript{65} Derrida, ‘Ulysses Gramophone’, \textit{Acts of Literature} p.260.
\textsuperscript{66} Derrida, \textit{The Postcard} p.23.
\textsuperscript{67} Derrida, \textit{The Postcard} p.107.
When will we be able to call without ringing? There would be a warning light or one could even carry it on oneself, near the heart or in the pocket, for certain coded calls, some signal.  

Like the postcard writer who today makes an apology of sorts on the card he sends from abroad (I'll probably see you before you get this!), Derrida too is aware of the possibility that he may repeat himself or better yet contradict himself by writing (and sending the writing) at one time and speaking (and intercepting the writing of the other) at another. The play is between the different time scales of the different forms of communication. 'I'll call you soon,' he writes, 'Before posting this card I will have called you.'

His behaviour is redolent of the schizophrenic and obsessively split George Bone in *Hangover Square* who tries to fit his day into and around the routine of the impervious Netta.

It was now five and twenty to eleven, and he had to make his plans for the day. Phoning Netta was obviously the first requisite for this, but the question was, what time? … He had now some knowledge, through deep thought, inference and hearsay, of the main complications with which, daily, he summoned up the effrontery to interfere … The best time to phone her, the time at which she was likely to be in her best mood, was about a quarter of an hour after her genuine bath. Half an hour after, it was too late.

Derrida, with his two watches and his dependency not only on the words but also the voice of the person he addresses, is similarly split by a heightened awareness of the simultaneous existence of another. He has been infected by the sheer possibilities of the new telling and feels its curtailment acutely.

During trips, at those moments when I am inaccessible, between two ‘addresses’, when no wire or wireless links me to anything, to you, I die of anxiety.

It is as though his conception and experience of self has been extended by the new technology. We can think back to the walking postbox in Berlin, Freud’s material supplement to memory and Kawara’s disseminated archive. The experience of these processes recall Michel Serres’ theory of externalisation.

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71 Derrida, *The Postcard* p.28.
I called externalization the process by which our manufactured objects emerge from our organisms or their various functions. Here are examples: clothing derives from hair and skin and replaces them; the hammer struggles out of the forearm and the fist; the wheel imitates joints, ankles and hips.\textsuperscript{72}

Derrida’s Derrida and Hamilton’s Bone reveal that this externalisation is something that takes place with objects of desire as well as with objects of function. These fictional (or semi-fictional) men are externalised by the experience of love, want and fascination as much as they are by the means of expressing that love. Derrida’s is a more balanced (if still unhealthy) scenario than that of Bone. The relationship performed by the conceit of his lettercards in ‘Envois’, which appear to reply to censored replies, is at least a two-way affair. There is nothing for Bone to reply to which leaves his already split self ragged. This means that what for Bone is a traumatic and obsessive attempt at the cleaving of his routine existence to that of another is for Derrida (in the long run) a delicious game of perversion, subversion and contretemps. The materiality of writing is (in this section of the book at least) always an excuse to deliberate over the double-entendre, the pun, the perversion.

And I write to you that I love the delicate levers which press between the legs of a word, between a word and itself to the point of making entire civilisations seesaw.\textsuperscript{73}

More than anything, Derrida is diverted by the postcard pleasures of outdoor and out of sync writing, writing between things, during things and after things (whether these things are times or spaces). Whilst the material pleasures of writing are not isolated to the postcard they are exaggerated by it, by its rigid form and curtailed space, by its slow pace and two-sides. At one point the addressed, the desired, the absent, slips from his syntax and he seems to be writing to the thing he writes on, dear postcard rather than dear diary

I am finishing writing you in the street.\textsuperscript{74}

The playfulness that this unhinged writing elicits can be aligned with the playfulness of the spatial gape. For Derrida, all writing takes place ‘near Reading’, not just writing on a train or postcard. I am also aligning postcard-writing with the playful redistribution of bounded activities that takes place during the picnic. Part of the pleasures of the postcard are picnic pleasures; the spatial gape which comes from displacement and refreshment, the play of contexts, the mingling of the textual and the irreverently untextual (the shaking hand, the


\textsuperscript{73} Derrida, \textit{The Postcard} p.78.

\textsuperscript{74} Derrida, \textit{The Postcard} p.16.
creeping tide, the disobedient pen nib). All writing comes to us from somewhere else but the postcard shouts its announcement.

Looking at the postcards in James Joyce’s *Ulysses* reiterates the outdoor itinerancy of the postcard whilst reminding us that all texts can be placed in and out of context. The way Bloom reads a letter is such a bodily experience and such a journey (for the letter) that any assertion of a newly immersive or mobile form of writing must be taken with a pinch of salt. The body reading and absent mindedness of Joyce’s letter-reading has similarities with the reading being done by Will Self’s metropolitan who uses her mobile phone to navigate through the city.

She is disoriented – and yet her progress is a perfectly plotted trajectory through urban space: she looks into the glowing multifaceted jewel in the palm of her hand and here other parallelograms interweave, shuffle and montage in response to the tweezer motions and baton-flicks of her fingers.\(^75\)

Both texts examine the finger and eye reading that is troubled and augmented by the movement subjects make as they read. This ought to deflate claims that smart phones (like their predecessors the postcard) are more invasive, pervasive or bodily dismantling than other technologies that have come before.

While his eyes still read blandly he took off his hat quietly inhaling his hairoil and sent his right hand with slow grace over his brow and hair. Very warm morning. Under their dropped lids his eyes found the tiny bow of the leather headband inside his high grade ha. Just there. His right hand came down into the bowl of his hat. His fingers found quickly a card behind the headband and transferred it to his waistcoat pocket.\(^76\)

The letter he collects makes an odyssey of its own around his body, into and out of pockets, into and out of the newspaper he carries.

He slipped card and letter into his sidepocket.

He drew the letter from his pocket and folded it into the newspaper he carried.

\(^{75}\) Will Self, ‘Walking is political’, *The Guardian* March 30\(^{th}\) 2012  

He opened the letter within the newspaper.

Having read it all he took it from the newspaper and put it back in his sidepocket.

Fingering still the letter in his pocket he drew the pin out of it.

Two things are significant here; the mingling of private and public texts; he reads the letter inside and between the newspaper, and the way the letter travels; it is moved from place to place, it is mobile.

The picnic is outdoor, an occasion, it is shared. Even if it takes place on a city bench or on the floor of a hall, it has something of the countryside about it; it carries with it a whiff of the escape, the escapade, the holiday. One of the self-generated categories which Tom Phillips watched emerge from his collection of real photo postcards was that of the picnic. His collection of postcards spans ‘the postcard century’ and traces the trends of postcard portraiture. The picnic appears again and again, so much so that it comes to be one of the defining categories of the collection. Phillips writes,

The picnic is the province of the amateur with a camera, but the success rate is high thanks to generous daylight and the natural way in which people group themselves. With so many props and tasks, everyone has something to do, even if it is only eating.

We can examine a few of these pictures to think about the pleasures of the picnic and about how these might be expressed by postcard writing and receiving. In the first of his specimens we come across a family in the grass by the tires of their car. Father, mother, and two children. Father is jolly, making a pouring gesture that can be read by the camera; his arm is ever so slightly too straight, the thermos ever so slightly too tilted. His wrist angles sharply out, echoed in discord by his self-conscious grin. He grins at the teacup which is being held out to him, in a better approximation of natural angles, by his wife. Next to her we can see a picnic hamper with a sheaf of knives strapped to its lid. The two children (neatly male and female) look at their father. None of them look at the camera, but something about their studied ambivalence lets us know they know it is there. The boy has put a biscuit into his mouth which he slowly and absentmindedly sucks. In the over-

77 The Postcard Century; cards and their messages from 1900-2000.
exposure they are all a little too white, a grapple of white people spread upon the floor, sheltering by their car in an unfriendly field of grass. The image was made by Ford to advertise their Tudor Saloon which explains why the family are sitting so near to the thing, as though its engine were still warm and they all very cold. Phillips’ copy was sent in 1933 and the message on the back from Eddie in Bangor to Mr & Mrs Owen in Holyhead reads: ‘Shall come on the 12 noon bus from here tomorrow arriving about 1.30pm or I may change my mind and arrive an hour earlier. Shall be able to stay with you until Tuesday morning. Love to all. In Haste.’

The second specimen, also an advertisement for a car, shows another pantomime tea party. There is a more daring assortment of characters in this scene, in the 1960s you clearly didn’t need children to have a picnic, you didn’t even need a wife! Have we chanced upon a happy ménage-a-trois or are these smiling angular pieces just good friends? The postcard leaves us guessing. Cocked elbows, bent knees and pouring are still the fashion but this image makes a feature of its artificiality. The car is clearly in a studio or showroom; the people are clearly posed. Here we are, pretending to have a picnic. There is no food or drink. Or more accurately, there is only imaginary food and imaginary drink. They are playing. There is a cheerful mash of colours; white shoes, cups and saucers, pink and blue Hawaiian shirt prints, stripy blue-and-red picnic rug all setting off the mustard Vauxhall. The car is rather beautiful, indulgent accomplice to the japery going on in and around it. The message on the back, from P in Thetford to Mrs GBG in Hickling; ‘Afraid we shall not be able to come on Saturday as we are definitely going to the Gross’s … we enjoyed the day Sunday.’

Next, a birthday picnic in a field. With dog and cat trapped in laps. And one, two, three little girls with ribbons in their hair. The rug (which people sit around but never on in picnics of this era) is just the right size for teapot, milk jug and a tiny tin which holds a single spoon. To the right of the shot is a hamper with strapped down cutlery, naturally. All the food is gone, or else forgotten in the first place. The photograph is serious apart from the glint in the eye of the man with the moustache who sits with one leg bent under him and the other stretched out before. Next, a sleepy and disheveled group arranged under a tree. Two or three supine figures can be detected among the gaps between the others who sit up and smile or laugh. One horizontal girl has picked up her chin to her cheek, and catches the

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79 ‘Without even the benefit of sunlight or shining chrome to relieve its dullness, the Ford 8 looks drably utilitarian even when brand new. It seems to be parked on a suburban common. The nuclear family or Mr & Mrs Average has its picnic tea dressed in their off the peg non-finery. If they have a dog it’s a mongrel and probably called Spot rather than Fifi.’ Phillips, The Postcard Century p.168. fig.33q.

80 ‘Thirty years have not done much for British motor sales techniques. The picnic has moved into the showroom but the flask and hamper seem the same. The man’s shirt seems advances for the time but who wants a custard-coloured car?’ Phillips, The Postcard Century p.283. fig 62m.
eye of the camera as it catches her. It is sunny in an end of the afternoon kind of way, glinting through trees, grass-prickling. An open hamper waits to be packed up, a boy inspects the last bite of his bun. The final image is an arresting specimen, showing either a stroke of incredible good fortune, or an expedition that has been made specifically to that rock. It is a marvel. The group have transformed it into a miraculous, tilting table. The cups and saucers sit as if invisibly pinned to the un-level surface like a Spoerri snare painting.

Figures 62. & 63. From Phillips’ picnic postcard collection.

Phillips’ collection of picnic postcards are reminiscent of Daniel Spoerri’s snare pictures and not just because of their similar meal-time subject matter. Spoerri gave the following definition of the snare picture:
Objects which are found in randomly orderly or disorderly situations, are mounted on whatever they are found on (table, box, drawer, etc) in the exact constellation they are found… By declaring the result to be a tableau, the horizontal becomes vertical.\textsuperscript{81}

Both artists focus on the arrangement of things, which in their random order or disorder, create an image (a tableau) of reality. Fundamental to both men’s understanding of the reality that has been captured is an idea of naturalness. Phillips notes the ‘natural way in which people group themselves’, and Spoerri writes that he snares objects which are ‘found’ in the positions he finds them in. There is nothing natural about either activity (the objects did not grow out of the table, they were placed, positioned and the picnickers picked their places too). It seems pertinent to think about the unnatural which the men are positioning themselves or their images against. For Phillips the obvious comparisons are the posed studio portraits which grew in popularity and prevalence at the same time as the postcard. These featured fake backdrops, costume and occasionally props. They were unashamedly artificial and he notes the presence in many of a curtain or screen reaching the floor and floorboards stretching out in front of the photographed subjects, ruining the ‘effect’.\textsuperscript{82} Spoerri is positioning himself against (but also beside) the tradition of still life painting which depicted mostly inanimate subject matter, typically commonplace objects. The assertion of naturalness on both their parts is a denial of artfulness. There is the sense that there is something innately false about design. Posed objects or people imply a fiction, a narrative even, whereas found objects reveal facts. The natural just happens, it is random or chaotic, it is busy, it has its eyes closed, it is looking the other way. Phillips describes this as ‘authentic inconsequentiality’;

Postcards are crammed with random people, dressed as they really were at the time and behaving with that authentic inconsequentiality that makes everyday life so difficult to fake.\textsuperscript{83}

\textsuperscript{81} Daniel Spoerri, ‘Overview of Works’, www.danielspoerri.org (accessed December 2013)
\textsuperscript{82} ‘In larger cities more exotic studios flourished which would indulge wilder fantasies in more theatrical situations with appropriate costumes and guns. Here gun-toting cowboy could meet Indian squaw or a vamp in a top hat and tails could court a gypsy temptress. Pierrots were much in vogue and cross-dressing was popular especially in patriotic tableaux involving Britannia and lady soldiers.’ Phillips, \textit{We Are the People} p.18.
\textsuperscript{83} Phillips, \textit{Century} p.10.
It is of course the front and back of a postcard that offers a glimpse of these people of the time as they were at the time. The fantasy of the discovered (and collected) postcard is that it snares reality like a Spoerri snare painting. However, like a Spoerri snare, the ‘reality’ it captures has been taken out of context, turned on its head and positioned vertically on a gallery wall, it was also not ‘natural’ to begin with. The emphasis in its early marketing on the outdoor and unhinged potential of the postcard has been translated into a fantasy of what these images and texts might capture. A key phrase from correspondence of the ‘postcard century’ is ‘in haste’ (we saw it being used by Eddie in Bangor to Mr & Mrs Owen in Holyhead but it crops up everywhere). Drawing together the phrase with that of ‘still life’ reveals the root of the fascination with the postcard. There is the sense that it depicts a still life of ‘in haste’. Phillips’ assessment of the images is knowing, he understands the strange artifice of ‘the natural’ and thus locates the success of the picnic images in the fact that ‘everyone has something to do’. If the subjects are active, if they are not concentrated on the paradoxical distancing of contemplation of the present, then they appear real.

Figure 64. Spoerri’s table in a restaurant in the city gallery.
It was not their reality that made images of the picnic or holiday such popular subjects for picture postcards but rather the fact that these were the occasions or places people wished to send them from. As we have seen postcard writing was aligned with leisure, you did not have to stop what you were doing to write. If the object you sent could carry with it a sense of the leisure you were enjoying, a sense of ‘away’ then all the better. Frank Staff remarks on the emergence of popular series of images for illustrated notepaper and envelopes in the 1850s. These were of families at the seaside, picnicking.

Other sets show families picnicking on the sands, father in his top hat and tailcoat surrounded by his large family while the sea washed part of the meal away. In another picture father is shown sitting on the edge of a crowded rowing boat, the tails of his frock coat dangling in the sea.84

The mingling of codes, the displacement of objects and practices and their refreshing relocated presence, recalls the relocated undergarments of the launderette, and the eggs, gowns, bacon and hats of the transport café. It is reminiscent of the cut up and collage of the sleeper train and the coincidence of time zones permitted by the fire escape. The pleasures of the spatial gape can again be identified as matter out of place – and out of time. The postcard can be seen as being part of the technology of extension whereby whims and desires and the means of expressing them are extended and exaggerated. Because of their apparently unhinged nature they suit the needs of the body as it moves through space, allowing communication between more places and more time, allowing people to do more at once.

84 Staff, p.34.
6.3 Extending the Edges

It is the mobility of the postcard that meant it could travel with the writer on the go and then be sent home from away. The edges of the body and the home were both extended and hemmed by it. It is a form of communication that can move as you do, that permits you to write between places and from moments. As we have seen writing and reading are always material and immaterial, mingling the textual and the corporeal as text is taken into and spilled out of bodies via eyes, ears and skin. This mingling is characteristic of the types of texts we read as well as the ways we read them, and the postcard’s effects can be read in the immediacy of texts, tweets and emails today. We have said the postcard gave its users the sense of being able to do more at once. Rebecca Solnit reflects upon contemporary experiences of reading in her essay ‘The Day of the Postman’. This reading is various and simultaneous: ‘check my email while updating my status while checking the news sites while talking on the phone’.\(^65\) Thinking about the recent past of 1995, a time before twenty-four hour news cycles, before smart phones, before instantaneous access to the internet, she recalls a way of living that was less fragmented. This, she writes, was the day of the postman. She draws analogy for the fragmentation she experiences today from a short story by Kurt Vonnegut that imagines a dystopian society where, all people not being born equal, technologies are invented and enforced to make them so.

Ballerinas wear weights so they won’t be more graceful than anyone else … Smart people wear earpieces that produce bursts of noise every few minutes to interrupt their thought processes … We have all signed up to wear those earpieces, a future form of new media that will chop our consciousness into small dice. Google has made real the interruptors that Vonnegut thought of as a fantasy evil for his dystopian 2081.\(^66\)

Solnit’s essay, written in the summer of 2013, tries to trace the subtle and ongoing metamorphosis of ‘human character’ that is being effected by new technology. It bears a striking resemblance to the essay by James Douglas, written in 1907, which articulates ‘the silent revolution in our habits’ wrought by the postcard. Where Solnit feels the presence of the new means of communication as an interruption, something that fractures the relative time and pace that had gone before, Douglas by contrast sees the brevity and availability of the postcard as lengthening the time of experience as it shortens the time taken to relate that experience. I’ve said that postcard practices were the precursor to much internet

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\(^66\) Solnit.
practice today where people use and negotiate a form of communication that requires that they communicate over distances, and in sight of others. Indeed, much of the work done to try to understand what it is that is straying in a strayed home points towards a similar conclusion, that the internet has thrown certain private and public practices – and even definitions of these words – into strange and stark relief.

Solnit mourns the loss of letter-writing that text messages and email brought about but perhaps she should look further back, to the erosion wrought by the picture postcard. What the writers agree upon is in the sense that technologies of communication which can be said to extend and exaggerate the urge to write in place can have a retroactive effect on the experience of time and place, this is Serres’ externalization working in two directions. For Douglas the postcard has elongated the time of the trip, leaving him more time to be in a place rather than having to remove himself from it to go to his desk to write about it. He does complain however that ‘it is impossible to gaze upon a ruin without finding a picture postcard at your elbow.’ Solnit lives in a world where postcards (or their modern versions) are not just at the elbow, but in the pocket, on the desk and even (in a nearer future than the one imagined by Vonnegut), by the eyeball. She longs for the empty space and time that once existed between one place and another, ‘space for free thought is routinely regarded as void, and filled up with seconds and distractions.’ It seems we have to negotiate between the picnic-like pleasures of writing on the go, of mixing writing with what we have doing and the anxiety that is now felt in the void (the ever shrinking void) when we are not able to extend ourselves in this way, to leave a mark, or send a trace. There is an ambivalence about this void, is it respite or precipice?

Solnit’s imagery, which depicts a ‘new media that will chop our consciousness into small dice’, is redolent of the compartmentalised women and fragmented body parts of the saucy postcards that lined the streets of Paris in the 1900s. The chopped up bit also recalls the sections of cities and souvenir slices that make up the images on postcard stands today. They way in which the new media is felt to mutate consciousness recalls the metonymic experience of images articulated by Orwell and Bordo. The postcard, as an object that makes a leap between the two positions – in time and space – of the everyday and the holiday, is a medium through which the relationship between them can be exposed. This relationship, between work and rest, home and away, the present and the future, draws the investigation back to thoughts of the eruv, a structure built to secure a freer and more mobile experience of the Sabbath, a day built into the structure and ensuring the equilibrium of the working week. Drawing together Solnit and Douglas’s essays is to reiterate that the past is often regarded as more stable than the present, regardless of what technology is said to be currently improving or destroying it. The conception of time put forward by Weizman,
where the future is felt as something that will be better is at odds with the more modern sensibility that seems always to agree that the past was, if not better, than at least more certain, more fixed.

Reading the postcard as a surface (like the surfaces of sheets, clothes and underwear) involves a reading of the markings on that surface. Looking at what is mentioned and unmentioned in postcard texts and images reveals an anxiety about the surface itself even as the use of the technology becomes popular, pleasurable and widespread. Even though the technology came to be used automatically, these surface anxieties are still expressed. In 1865 the anxiety about exposure was explicit. What was framed as a question of propriety then is more familiar to modern ears as issues of privacy but the underlying kernel of an uncomfortable oscillation between what can and what cannot be shared or aired is still present. The postal officer’s condemnation of ‘an indecent form of exposed communication’ is redolent of the distrustful attitudes of some public laundry users interviewed by Mass Observation in the 1940s. There is an echo of the postal director’s inward shudder at the thought of letters let out without envelopes on in this housewife’s response to the question of public laundring; ‘the idea of all those clothes being washed together is distasteful to me.’87 The idea is distasteful. The sense of contamination through contact (even imagined contact!) with other people’s belongings (or in the case of the postcard, other people’s eyes) is reiterated again in this man’s response: ‘One knows one’s wife, the laundry girl one doesn’t normally know.’88 It is easy to smile at these sentiments but these visceral and genuinely felt reactions reveal a sensual metonymy which seems to be central to the idea of privacy itself. This is the metonymic association which makes accepted material limits of things indistinct or immaterial. It means the eyes upon an envelope, hands upon a pair of socks or even one item of clothing (your favourite dress) brushing up against another item of clothing (that man’s jacket) are all felt to be somehow touching you, as though the edges of these things were in fact the edges of your body.

If sending your clothes to the public laundry, to be washed with other people’s clothes was possibly besmirching, then writing an envelope-less message was to invite contagion in the other direction. Your words could be spread into the world, running like a black sock in a white wash. In the Lotus Eaters episode of Ulysses we find Leopold Bloom picking up, reading and then destroying a letter. It should not surprise us that the denoted organ for the episode (according to the Linati schema) is skin, nor less so that Gilbert lists it as genitals (which are more than anything, rolls and folds of sensitive skin.) The invasive

87 Mass Observation, Clothes-Washing, Motives and Methods an interim report by Mass Observation (June 1939) p.10.
88 Mass Observation, ibid.
potential of writing (it can get inside you, get into your head, make you sick, make you smile) is both muted and exaggerated by the materiality of the letter. The object can be stroked, smelt and held but it can also be folded, torn up and thrown away. Bloom does just this, scattering it in many pieces to the wind.  

Going under the railway arch he took out the envelope, tore it swiftly in shreds and scattered them towards the road. The shreds fluttered away, sank in the dank air: a white flutter then all sank.  

The episode plays with the lasting effect of one and the transience of the other; even though he tears up the letter, its words stay with him all day, brewing and percolating inside, occasionally erupting out of him, in the shape of speech and action. It is not just the words that are read and ingested. Skin, for all its shape and boundedness is also an opening, touch and feel allowing for a reading that has effects as lasting as the reading of text. The emphasis on porosity (prevalent throughout Ulysses) is significantly exaggerated here. As Bloom shifts his illicit letter from place to place about his person, smelling it, fingering it, reading it and taking it in, he watches supplicants at mass taking communion. Johnson points out, ‘the Eucharist itself is a material symbol of the Word made Flesh’. Joyce makes a case for the fleshiness of all words, their substantial effects on the flesh and their material presence in our lives as well as in our hands. The unpleasant presence of Bantam Lyons’ ‘yellow blacknailed fingers’ on Bloom’s newspaper are no less worryingly contagious than Lyons’ throwaway tip for the races or the paper’s own contagious refrain, which, even though ‘read idly’ resurfaces in Bloom’s thoughts throughout the day.  

The mingling of skin with surface, flesh with text, and bodily excretion with ink, calls to mind the transubstantiation of Roman Catholic communion. Johnson writes, ‘in Catholic theology, the Eucharist is more than symbol of Jesus’s body; transubstantiation transforms the symbol into material entity; the symbol has been occupied by the matter.’ This commutation of a thing into the-thing-it-represents is categorically not understood as metaphoric, we can say rather that it is metonymic. With Bloom’s blasphemous insistence that the communion wafer and the words of priest and paper alike be seen ‘as mere matter,’

89 Gerty Macdowal remembers doing the same thing to Reggie’s ‘silly little postcard’. Joyce, Ulysses p.346.
90 Joyce, Ulysses p.76.
91 Johnson, notes to Lotus Eaters, Ulysses p.797.
92 Joyce, Ulysses p.82.
94 Johnson, p.797.
95 Johnson, p.797.
Joyce reiterates the argument, made throughout *Ulysses*, that the body is the site of the transliteration of the senses, where everything (even the immaterial) materialises.

The difference between metaphoric and metonymic experiences of communion is relevant to the category of space we are calling strayed homes. The role of metaphor within language is clearly highly significant, seeming as it does to put flesh on the bones of words, figuring the figurative. Metaphor is a linguistic trope with which to describe figures of speech in which the attributes of one thing are expressed analogously as those of another. In this definition the two things remain distinct and their attributes are seen to be similar. The etymological derivation of the word, from *meta* (between, in the midst of) and *phero* (to bear or carry) suggests a shuttling between, the back and forth movement of a shuttle or relay; there is still the sense of space between two separate entities. This space is collapsed in the linguistic term metonymy which is the substitution of a word denoting a quality of a thing for the thing itself. This figure of speech is a change of name (*meta onyma*). One name has come to stand in (stand in the place of) the other. So a metonymic experience of surfaces and spaces could be seen to be more instantly affecting than a metaphoric one. In the communion service for the Church of England, the host is only ever a representation of the body of Christ whereas in the Roman Catholic service it is thought to be Christ. One is a metaphoric understanding, the other metonymic.

Michel Serres, working towards a theory of appropriation through pollution, offers another interpretation of this name changing. He writes that, ‘necessary for survival, the act of appropriation seems to me to have an animal origin that is ethological, bodily, physiological, organic, vital.’ He traces the remains of this animal appropriation in human behavior such as the ancient rites of ritual and sacrifice (blood as cleansing and sanctifying), which he reads as another form of marking territory. He would place the blood drinking and body eating of the Eucharist in just this appropriative cycle, though in this case the place being marked is the body (and by extension soul) of the worshiper.

The priest bent down to put it in her mouth, murmuring all the time. Latin. The next one. Shut your eyes and open your mouth. What? *Corpus*. Body. Corpse. … Rum idea : eating bits of a corpse why the cannibals cotton on to it.

Here the word *corpus* is spoken just before the wafer is placed into the mouth. You hear it before you taste it, it is announced before it arrives. Like the feel and scent of Bloom’s letter the surface of the body is once more shown to be multiply vulnerable; things get in in all

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96 Serres, p.12.
97 Joyce, *Ulysses* p.77.
sorts of ways. Serres would divide these varying sensual incursions into hard and soft forms of possessive pollution.

Unfolding historically, the movement will go from this ‘natural’ hard of bodies to the ‘cultural’ soft of signs. Appropriations especially will tend to occur less through discharges than with signatures on pages, or with images and words, proclaimed, posted or written; less by blood or urine than by acronym.88

The advert that catches Bloom’s ear and eye is soft because it dirties and appropriates without actually marking him. It is as innocuous as a tune, and yet he has imbibed it and it speaks from inside him, he has been, in Serresian terms, appropriated.

Soft pollution appropriates humans with often subtle links and a discreet consciousness. This softness is often invisible but covers the space of things and our relations just as fast as hardness.89

His conception of soft pollution seems to go some way towards the metonymic understanding of the confusion of boundaries I have been struggling to articulate while thinking about extended edges and strayed homes. The idea that these markings could be ‘invisible whilst also covering’ the space of our things’, feeds into a sense of jointly felt but separately constituted surfaces. Consciousness spreads in an aping of the appropriative proprietorial staining and marking that he describes. This has the effect of locating consciousness in property. He conflates the staining of dirt with that of words arguing that both lay claim to the thing they mark. To show the difference between soft and hard pollution he describes the red thread with which his mother marked his school uniform with his initials. Boarding at school, his clothes would be sent to the laundry to be washed and the sewn red letters would allow him to recognize them when they were returned to him clean. The removal of the hard pollution (stains and smells) reiterated the continued pollution of the soft markings; ‘my mother had somehow dirtied them. Even though soft, this new dirt resisted cleaning.’100 The point is not so much about the durability of one type over another but the appropriative effect (intent?) of both. Pollution lays claim to, exuding, spreading and taking. What is dirty is yours, what is clean is yours to take. Crucially, while soft pollution appropriates humans, humans are also soft (and hard) polluters. It is this continuous contagious contact that somewhere along the line gets folded into ideas of privacy, property and propriety, belonging and belongings. With Serres’ stains in mind we

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89 Serres p.62.
100 The magic and terror of uncleanable dirt; ‘even though soft this new dirt resisted cleaning, just like Macbeth’s hands and Bluebeard’s key.’ Serres p.23.
can think back to the washers at the ford in *Finnegans Wake* banishing the dirt and stains from the clothes they wash and becoming besmirched themselves in the process. This dirtying takes place not just through contact with hard stains; ‘Look at the shirt of him! Look at the dirt of it! He has all my water black on me,’¹⁰¹ but by the soft ones too; ‘Baptiste me father, for she has sinned!’¹⁰² We can think also of the pervasive *homely* grease of the greasy spoon, spreading as it did from the unwashable surfaces of crockery and cutlery in the home to the surfaces of those now self consciously homely establishments. Here, the home inscribes itself first in a stain and then in the memory of that stain. Dirt, like the words that get under our skin, does not stay where it is put, it is by nature already out of place.

¹⁰² Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* p.204.
Conclusion. *Strayed Homes*
7 Strayed Homes

This thesis opened with a quote from Paul Valéry asserting that, ‘Neither matter nor space nor time is what, up until twenty years ago, it always was.’ Valéry was writing with the presence of television and telephones imminent, envisioning a future in which, ‘we shall be supplied with pictures or sound sequences that, at the touch of a button, almost a wave of the hand, arrive and likewise depart.’ These technologies, at the time imaginary but familiar to us today, were expected to alter matter, space and time by shrinking the distances between things. The way Valéry characterises this is to compare the arrival of images and sounds with that of water, gas and electric power which he writes, ‘come to us from afar and enter our homes.’¹ This sense of far-away objects and amenities travelling to and entering the home is at odds with conceptions of the modern western house in which the immediacy of electricity, water, pictures and sound sequences is unremarkable and only reflected upon when they do not arrive at the touch of a button. Would a contemporary urbanite consider a living space homely without electricity and running water? One of the most traumatising aspects of moving house these days seems to be the time it takes for the internet to arrive. For the modern citizen having an internet connection is as necessary as running water. Clearly the matter, space and time that Valéry encountered in his daily life was organised differently to that of today. Through a reading of instances where practices that have come to characterise the space of the home (washing, sleeping, eating, waiting) take place outside the home this thesis has found a continuum of experience rather than its upheaval. That is to say that even though space is organised differently the way it is sensed and consumed is not.

The category of space I have called a ‘strayed home’ is a certain organisation of space. One of the consistencies this investigation has remarked upon is that the present is itself experienced as a new organisation of space, time and matter. It is often held up in contrast to the recent past as alienating and untethered. Like the home, the strayed home is peculiar because it is a space which seems to offer relief from this contrasting and upsetting present – which is not to say that it cannot be experienced as upsetting itself. To think briefly about the question of ‘the present’ and the way it is experienced as an upheaval we can think about the sense articulated by Valéry and his contemporaries, that space was shrinking as time was speeding up. Walter Benjamin articulates this when thinking about the cinematic and photographic image: ‘The fact is: “Bringing things closer” in both spatial and human terms is every bit as passionate a concern of today’s masses as their tendency to surmount the uniqueness of each circumstance by seeing it in reproduction.’² Commentators in 1839 imagined

² Walter Benjamin One-way Street and Other Writings p.235.
the effects of an expanded railway system in just these terms of nearness and immediacy, the shrinking of time by space.

Supposing that railroads, even at our present simmering rate of travelling, were to suddenly be established all over England, the whole population of the country would, speaking metaphorically, at once advance *en masse*, and place their chairs nearer to the fireplace of their metropolis … they would also sit nearer to one another … As distances were thus annihilated, the surface of our country would as it were, shrivel in size until it became not much bigger than one immense city.  

We are concerned here not with the technologies of modernity but with how their imagined arrival is expressed. We are concerned with the realities of expression. Both Valéry and the *Quarterly Review* imagine a future in which matter, space and time are radically different because they already feel the present as such. These imaginaries use the space of the home as a place which the new technology will come to alter. For Valéry the outside world is brought closer, its materials are available at the push of a button and the wave of a hand. For the *Quarterly Review* the geography of the country will shift, each individual being closer to the blaze of activity and industry in the metropolis and nearer to one another as well. These imaginary homes move towards the city and the city expands towards them. The future is a time where things will be nearer, faster, and this will alter the shape of the home.

This thesis has presented various current and continuing practices and spaces which show that the shape of the home is labile and that this has long been the case. It has given a series of instances and examples to offer an understanding of the home as a space that moves out as well as in. This outward movement has been read as contagion and metonymy as the homely matter out of place is seen to distort and alter the space it is in. Like the *eruv* which changes the space of the city through the extension of the home, the presence within a stairwell of washing hung out to dry alters the space through a series of new surfaces and lines. I use the word contagion because these things are seen to spread out beyond themselves, their meaning is contagious. Mark Cousins reflects upon the nature of ugly objects writing that they, ‘are experienced as being there and as something that should not be there. – The ugly object is an object which is in the wrong place.’ He writes that ‘contamination, at a logical level, is the process whereby the inside of an object demonstrates that it is larger than its outside or representation. It is not just that the ugly object has trespassed into a zone of purity, for the ugly object is voracious and, through contamination

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will consume the entire zone.' An item of underwear, as we have seen, can behave in this way. It is dirty, it is ugly, because it is in the wrong place. That wrong place is in this case, anywhere other than hidden, anything other than secret. We have also seen that mentioning these items of clothing can have the same effect, they are ugly in word as well as physical form. The sleeping body, in the train, in the tube carriage, on the street, is ugly in that it is present where it should be absent. We can think again of the idiom ‘washing your dirty linen in public’ which equates things which have been close to the body with things which should be kept secret. We can think of the obscene image that disturbs the fixed time and place of the current scene. These things out of place alter and contaminate the space around them. This thesis has read the comfort as well as the discomfort that can be the effect of this excess or displacement. Cousins writes,

The dirt is an ugly deduction from ‘good’ space, not simply by virtue of occupying the space but by threatening to contaminate all the ‘good’ space around it. In this light, ‘dirt’, the ugly object, has a spatial power quite lacking in the beautiful object. Broadly speaking, the beautiful object remains the same size as itself, while the ugly object becomes much larger than it is.

The ugly object is felt to be too close because it is there when it should not be. We want to get away from it and feel its presence as an offence, as an intrusion. The beautiful object by contrast makes us want to go towards it. We grow, we spread, as though we could become part of it. I am thinking of the beauty of certain buildings and spaces but we can also think of objects and paintings and people. The beauty of these things is also an excess of presence. Cousins writes that both the beautiful and the ugly ‘exceed.’ The things and practices of the strayed home have been analysed in terms of the spatial gape which is often pleasurable. These are ugly things (things in the wrong place) which are somehow welcome, somehow beautiful.

In Chapter Two this ugly beautiful matter took the form of the unwashed items of clothing which people move with from their homes. Ideas of laziness and gossip have attached themselves to the spaces and the people who use them suggesting that the waiting that takes place in the launderette is also out of place in a society that ‘recognises “rest” only in the forms of inertia or waste.’ In Chapter Three we read the compensatory behaviour of sleeper-train passengers and train designers who seek to counter the experience of travelling great distances at great speeds through an excess of napery (fussiness and

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5 Cousins, ibid.
6 Cousins, ibid.
fussing) or an investment in the streamline. These spaces invoke childish feelings of exaggeration and surreal sensations. Like Alice, passengers feel that they shrink and grow as they move further away from home, from the place where their measurements make sense. Narratives set on the train take advantage of the coincidences which can appear natural there. This led to discussion of the pleasurable thrill of coincidence which seems to throw plot into everyday life. In Chapter Four the edges of homes and buildings were seen to be made precarious by the trapdoor of the fire escape. The practices of people using fire escapes for reasons other than escape from fire have often been seen as dirty or delinquent. The use of these spaces that are built in the hope that they will never be used was read as analogous to Barthes’ sense of tactful reading which he describes as ‘a verbal operation that frustrates expectation, a perversion that plays with the useless detail.’ I analysed the use of the useless through the idea of function excessive to function.

In Chapter Five a reading of the greasy spoon solidified ideas about what kind of matter out of place most characterises a strayed home. It led to a reading of the middle distance which accumulates there and an understanding of time spent doing nothing as another type of dirt or matter out of place. Movement outside the home, like movement away from the past, leaves the subject open to the exogenous and endogenous incursions of and interactions with the outside world. Like the architects and the agoraphobes of Chapter Five we all feel more comfortable in familiar surroundings. Leaving the home, letting go of its spaced and timed order, is routinely traumatising. Chapter Five presented a reading of the routines, objects and practices that afford comfort in the strayed home of the greasy spoon. In Chapter Six these ideas were complicated through a reading of the postcard. The postcard expresses an experience of being away from home. It has been variously interpreted as an unhinged, unclothed and unserious form of communication. The chapter looked at examples of unhinged and outdoor reading and writing to think about the mingling of the textual and the corporeal.

In my introduction I laid out a plan to find secular *eruvin* in the city through a reading of its everyday spaces. I wanted to find spaces that represented or recalled the *eruv*’s elongation of the threshold, its distortion and subversion of space. I interpreted this subversion as being rooted somehow in the presence of the intimate or private in public. This was connected to the act of carrying objects to and from the house as well as gestures and experiences of rest. I wanted to push against the sense that privacy is something inert and centralised and think about the ways it can be thought of as active and reactive. I

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wanted to analyse the effects of this intimate straying. This led to a reading of the surfaces of clothes, buildings, bodies and postcards, a reading of surfaces that extended to the surfaces of days as well as things, of time as well as space. It led to a reading of the scenography of 20th and 21st century literature, film and advertising that paid close attention to the distracted and attentive consumption of space therein, and to the way these stories and images shape as well as reflect everyday spatial consumption. What began as an interrogation of the pleasures of redistributed and divided space (why was the sight of washing lines winding through the shared stairwell of my building pleasurable?) became a reading of spatial sensitivities in general. This expansion of focus was deliberate and led to a richer understanding of the spaces in question. The anxieties of strayed homes, the discomfort they can elicit as well as their comforts were discussed. The spaces examined are experienced for the most part as comfortingly familiar, their limits are felt as offering relief. Like the milk that comes and the post that goes, each space has its own set of reassuring routines, gestures and objects onto which visitors to it might grip.

This reading does not take into account the very real presence in many city-dweller’s domestic lives of the potential loss of their home or living space, through the inability to continue to pay rent or bills. Through its focus on the pleasures and practices of spaces that are not home it leaves unattended many of the practicalities of the space of the home. The form of this thesis required that the spaces written about were ones I had personal experiences of. I think there is great scope for a reading of the nightmare versions of strayed homes; the prison, the refugee camp, the internment centre, the halfway house, the brothel. But a project of this sort would require a different methodology. As for other strayed homes in the city, I am open to their presence and emergence. The London Transport Lost Property Department is a strayed home for objects, the archive of a distracted city created (inadvertently) by its absent minds and full hands. The library, with all its peace and quiet, and with its collectively enjoyed solitudes of reading, working and occasionally sleeping, has many of the qualities of a strayed home but you need a card to get in and it is a notoriously policed space. The presence of a librarian is distinctly un-homely. The telephone booth, the betting shop, the station platform and the waiting room are all spaces that operate at a slightly different kilter to the world outside, and that invite a particular relationship with time – whether it is measured in coins or minutes, against what you hope will come or what you hope will happen. They are not as mildly comfortable as the strayed homes examined here though. The time in them is generally governed more forcefully by an external order rather than the internal order or disorder of reordering, tinkering, adjusting, waiting, idling or dawdling. It has also been important that the spaces investigated are not sought because of their homely qualities. This is why the pub is not
investigated here as a strayed home. The spaces in question have become homely but they are not used for their homeliness.

The thesis has identified a category of space but has been as much about the difficulty of describing spatial experiences and impressions as it has been about the category itself. This is the difficulty of putting things into words, and the way words and images reciprocally shape experience. It has been through a reading of this difficulty of expression that an understanding of the experience of space and time as continual rather than particular has been arrived at. Through a reading of a series of spaces that can be thought of a strayed home the thesis has described tactile experiences of time. Another way to put this would be to say this thesis has read poetic space. What I mean by this is that there are spaces that operate poetically, that gape, that quote, that pervert or subvert certain prosaic systems and that give material form to experiences of time. The concrete allegory practiced by the eruv can be found in many interactions with space in the city. These instances of allegory are concrete because they are evidenced in the material, the tangible, the touched and the sensed. The smell of a launderette. The hum of its driers. The clatter of crockery in the greasy spoon. They are not concrete in the sense of being fixed. I said in the introduction that I wanted to follow the logic and the poetry of everyday speech, this is speech that makes clear the felt slippage between time and the tactile, the strange insensibility of the distracted apprehension of space, the irrational and the inadvertent. Victor Burgin writes,

In *Roget's Thesaurus* the word ‘fantasy’ is flanked by ‘poetry’ on one side and ‘visual fallacy’ on the other. The distribution of these terms is in agreement with the broad everyday use of the word. On the one hand, the term *poetry* involves a more or less intentional act of imagination; on the other hand, *visual fallacy* signals the unintentional, the hallucinatory. Whatever the case, whether the particular sense of ‘fantasy’ in question is nuanced toward the voluntary caprice or the involuntary delusion, in popular understanding ‘fantasy’ is always opposed to reality.9

The method of this work springs from and reflects a fundamental ambivalence about engrained oppositions between reality and poetry. Whether it is apprehended intentionally or inadvertently there is a great deal of poetry in the everyday. The poetic image permits an oscillation between the perceived and the felt. More than beautiful or elevated thought poetry works on the pivot between objective and subjective interpretation. To poeticize is not necessarily to elevate or make beautiful, rather it is to interpret in such a way as to alter. It is a linguistic act that subverts its subject. It is an unpacking of subjective experience that

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has the effect of eroding an objective one; it is transformative, even if only for a moment. A concluding emphasis on the poetic is not to distance the reading from reality or indeed the everyday, rather it is to bring the two terms much closer to one another; to see poetry not as a version of the everyday but as an accurate and attentive part of the daily grasping of the world. This means an admission of the presence of the concrete and the allegorical, for the feel of things, the sense of them, and the indescribable nonsense of them at the same time. The everyday is categorically not a time and space stripped of the magical or the strange. It is not to be reduced to a shopping basket which declares its basic values or humble ordinariness. Experiences of simultaneity, of magic and ritual, of pleasurable coincidence, of the surreal and of the daydream are part of the bread and butter of everyday life. The strayed home is a place where these experiences are temporarily located.

*Figure 66.* Airing the washing.
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