

The region in the boot : mobilising lone subjects and multiple objects

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Abstract: Company regions are forms of space busy with the sorting and distributing of objects from one location to another. We argue here, in sympathy with actor-network theory and non-representational theory, that space is formulated by and formulative of its objects in mutually elaborating occasions and chains of work/activity/action/translation. The handling of objects that produces regions requires not simply that they are put in a place, but they have to be put in a *relevant* place. Finding the relevant *where* is bound to the relevant *when* in the sense that the uses of objects are bound to sequential considerations of the kind : *what happens next?* Regions are cultural, social, political and sometimes theoretical entities for economists, geographers and other professional social scientists but they are also topics of concern to regional managers of business companies who are unavoidably and pervasively involved in the practical activities of spatial organisation. In this paper we are pursuing the situated replication of socio-spatial technologies, or, in other words, how the same thing is done over and over again by the local employees, with both the materials that they have at hand and the contingent circumstances in which they locate themselves. In pursuing our analysis, we follow one particular mobile worker as she goes about her daily work of managing her region. What we attempt to excavate from our ethnographic material is the order that is endogenous to those activities. It is an everyday order that does not turn on spectacular technologies but rather on mundane ones such as stacking cardboard boxes, arranging items in the boot of a car, and driving around a city.

Introduction : issues and methods

Locating the company in its geography

The sales region may appear as a map you see pinned to the wall if you visit a trans-national company at its headquarters to do an interview with one of its managers: a map of key locations where this company's operations are conducted or to which they are directed, perhaps with thick lines drawn to mark its edges and sub-divisions. With some delight you think: 'Aha! A representation of the company region. Just what I was looking for.' When no one is looking you scan the map for clues, for signs that could be decoded, parts of a hidden ideological construction of space. Then, after hanging around at HQ for a while you notice that the members of the company largely ignore the map. They talk a lot about various places that you realise have pins stuck in them, although often they do not even mention the names on the map but rather the names of the people from these places. They talk about personalities, they talk about promotions, they talk about turnover and they talk about where the company's products go. You found the company easy enough at HQ, then, but where you wonder is the geography of its region to be found if not on the map?

In a tactical manoeuvre familiar to cultural geographers, critical theorists and sociologists of scientific knowledge, we want to move away from elaborate readings of the map, away from the boardroom overview, down to the ground level organisational labour required to make the company region happen. We want to shift out of the central office to observe some of the work as it is done by those whose daily business it is to manage a company's region or regions. This shift to find out what happens outside of HQ is not just about looking for 'where the action is' (Goffman, 1969) it also follows shift practices of other service sector workers (Laurier & Philo 1998) who increasingly suggest that their companies are ever more urgently pushing managers out of their central offices and into their regions.¹ Company policy from one TNC recommends that in the average five day week as many as three days a week should be spent visiting clients on site. Regional managers who spent all day at their desks are criticised for losing touch with their clients. In our research study the company had removed traditional office facilities for its regional managers entirely and expected them to use their cars as offices.

In what follows we will focus upon a workplace where the traditional central office environment has been emptied out and merged into the worksites of its dispersed customers. Or to put it another way some of the workers from the office have been sent out in their company cars with newly available mobile technologies (mainly telephony but also portable computers) to do more on-site service work with their clients. At this point we do not wish to speculate on the implications of these workers becoming more mobile, we wish instead to examine elements of what this form of spatially dispersed labour entails:

Life at work is a staple in our conversations, but we rarely talk about what we really do in the doing of a job. This omission extends to the professional literature on work: most such literature is not concerned with work as practice, by which I mean that these writings do not focus on what is actually done in accomplishing a given job. Instead,

¹ The need to be out on the road visiting clients, dispersed colleagues and customers has been a lifelong element of many jobs, but our fieldwork suggested that it is becoming a more important aspect of jobs not previously characterised by such a mobile existence. This view from our participants is supported by statistics gathered by the ESRC Transport Studies Unit (Goodwin 1995), who suggest that work-related journeys have grown to a figure of 70% of all journeys, thus they are now by far the commonest type of car trip.

most are centred on work as the relation of employment or on work as a source of the worker's identity. Although such writings are inevitably based on assumptions about practice, practice itself is usually taken for granted, and the basis of the assumption remains implicit. Orr 1996, p1.

Our investigation is akin to a 'shopfloor' description of work practices, except that for mobile workplaces there is no 'shopfloor.' Nevertheless their work practices remain reflexively tied to spaces, and for the kind of workers we are getting at here it is the spaces of their regions. Moreover, the activities here are the 'behind the scenes' aspects of service work, unseen by clients and yet without which sales performances (in as much as they are at all theatrical) could not be done.

We will only follow one mobile worker, but what our study lacks in extensivity it makes up for in the intensivity of bringing into view the myriad practical aspects of making regions. To extend our findings would involve further ethnographies of regional work of the kind we are doing here, not only for similar kinds of companies but also for other workers who have to do their work across regional spaces. By describing the practical activities of producing a sales region, we hope to show the *lack* of inevitability in the production of regions as spatial forms, underlining that they are likely to be quite precarious material accomplishments, locally established pockets of order in the changing arrangements of each and every company (see also Thrift (Thrift, 1996). Furthermore, in line with arguments about regarding institutions as ongoing, mutable and indeed *reversible* achievements (Philo & Parr 2000), we suppose that the company region is itself an achieved spatial order needing constant attention, repair and heterogeneous labours.² A company region, once of interest to an older version of industrial geography, is clearly a quite specific form of region – an artificial and constructed one – but we are proposing that our ethnographic descriptions of 'managing' a company region can inform broader debates about geographical regions less as pre-given 'natural' entities and more as fabricated 'social' entities (Allen 1998; Thrift 1994).

Of transporting objects.

We are in no doubt that the mobility of people and materials are centrally implicated in making company regions. This claim is hardly an exceptional one, but we hope that how we elaborate its implications may have some novelty, and it has underlain our joint research on the lives, experiences and practices of car-based mobile workers, a corner of which we will present here.³ Our car-based mobile workers, mostly individuals who 'go out into the field'⁴ to promote products and/or to offer services to established or potential clients, can be envisaged as occupying places *in motion* during working hours. Their cars are their places, and they function as office, storage and delivery vehicles repeatedly criss-crossing a defined, if changing, territory of operations. Mobile workers spend hours in transport systems, driving, sitting on trains, buses, tubes and walking. Only occasionally do they come to rest at meetings with clients in the latter's workplaces (their offices, premises, workshops) or with their fellow

² Following Crang (2000), amongst others (Du Gay 1996), we are widening the senses of labour to include, not just physical activity, but also emotional, dramaturgical, conversational, technological and other activities; and relatedly, with Crang, we agree that there are then different forms of 'surplus value' to be extracted from each kind of action.

³ See also on talk: Laurier (2001a); on travel Laurier (2001b); and on driving Laurier (2001c).

⁴ The resonance between their knowledge of 'the field', even of 'the region', and that of most academic geographers is intriguing; it would probably warrant further comment, which we do provide to a limited extent below.

workers at agreed *rendez-vous* points (a motorway service station, a known restaurant, coffee shop, café or bar).⁵ A few of these mobile workers are in business for themselves, but most of them are employees of larger companies with fixed HQs. The immediate and simple counterfactual is that, were the mobile workers not regularly and routinely ‘out there in the field’, moving and meeting, there would eventually be *no* company region: the region would cease being maintained and reproduced on a daily basis, and the map on the boardroom wall would gradually become a historical artefact with little associative power beyond its two-dimensional lines, blobs and spaces (Law & Hetherington 2000). Clients would be stolen by other TNCs, and HQ would have a weaker and weaker awareness of what is happening outside its walls.

The mobile workers do not move across their regions, in the form of, as it were, ‘naked subjects’. They travel with a complex assembly of equipment, some of it high tech and much of it not. Their ‘product’ is not a ‘naked object’ either, and appears as a complex topical assembly of packaging, documentation, advertising, contracts and so on. The practical problem faced by mobile workers is how much of their equipment can they transport and how can they get the ‘product’ to the clients’ distant places? In Hindmarsh and Heath’s (2000) article on a Restoration Control Office for a telecoms network put the tie between objects and workplaces very nicely, as they study:

‘how personnel within a complex working environment refer to and examine objects and, through their interaction, constitute the occasioned sense and relevance of particular features of those objects within the course of their workplace activities. In this way, we use the term objects very loosely, as a way of glossing a diverse range of (features of) tools; technologies and materials; paper documents such as logbooks and manuals; digital displays of text; diagrams and images; and artifacts such as pens, keyboards, telephones and the like’ (p527).

Akin to Hindmarsh and Heath, we are not pursuing ‘objects’ *per se*, but rather the relevance of particular varieties of objects as they are implicated in practices that are sometimes about representing but are as often involved in a richer weave of packing, loading, dropping off, picking up, marking (as in marking FAO) and very often in *announcing* the impending or current work of managing a sales region (see also Kawatoko 1999). This latter point about the ‘spatial announcement’ of objects within such practices will be elaborated in our later description and analysis.

The shift by Latour, Thrift and others toward taking ‘the agency of things’ seriously has raised questions about the extent and form of social agency that might be attributed to specific kinds of non-humans (Laurier & Philo 1999). In other work we have teased out aspects of the lifeworld of animals in cities and in society more generally (Laurier, Maze, & Lundin, 2002; Philo & Wilbert, 2000). Though we have taken inspiration from Latour’s widened sense of the social constituency as including all manner of things, from engineers, via seatbelts, non-material couplings, to domestic cats, we are wary about making too easy an equivalence between humans and non-humans or indeed between the very many kinds of non-humans. The social agency which we can find for each and every thing requires not only its close

⁵ Our mobile workers were at different levels in company hierarchies, with some participants in our project like a human resources officer ('Penny', in Laurier & Philo 1998) being quite senior (having her own non-mobile office and secretarial support) but with others like Marge being much more junior. For other work on contemporary nomadic workers and new technologies, see the Computer Supported Co-operative Work (CSCW) collections Dix (1996) and Brown et al (2001). For a history of travelling salespeople showing the long lineage of the car-based worker, see the delightful Spears (1995).

description as a historical entity, living, dead or inanimate, but also attention to which of its aspects are made relevant on any occasion of its use.

In this paper we are wanting to take objects seriously in how they are implicated and even assist in forms of social action. Moreover we are suspending what we might call the distracting glitter of certain kinds of objects, say diamonds or space shuttles, to allow us to build criteria which do not exploit the pre-given value of the objects in question. In so doing all manner of quite humble and mundane objects swim into focus, there are exemplary studies inspiring us in this respect such as Latour's (1992) description of self-closing hinge, Polanyi's (Polanyi, 1958) of a blind person's walking stick, even Foucault's (1987, p102, p115) remarkable excavation, inspired by Raymond Roussel of the 'small objects ... taking on the appearance of flashing beacons' within the 'infinitely chatty landscapes' so lovingly detailed by Roussel. One commonality in these contemplations on the place of objects in human activity is to register that they are historically fashioned tools or equipment always tied to complexes of technology and practice. In what follows we will investigate elements of a mobile worker's day that involve handling, moving and orienting to such 'grey' and apparently uninteresting items as cardboard boxes, plastic bags and shrink-wrapped bottles. We are specifically examining the reflexive tie between such objects as they get used in organising space and the spatial arrangement of these objects themselves, the latter of which is integral to how situated agents makes sense of said objects. All of this endeavour on our part will display how mobile workers transporting, packing and unpacking the likes of boxes, bags and bottles encapsulates a suite of previously hidden but arguable indispensable region-building practices.

Brief remarks on our practice as researchers

In keeping with policies of ethnomethodological studies, we have been committed to explicating the methods by which competent members get things done (where 'member' can stand for any agent categorically tied to activities). Ethnomethodological studies are distinct from most social and cultural approaches by virtue of not proposing that the formalised methodologies of the social sciences be administered upon research settings to deliver results. Instead the methods and methodologies of the social sciences are taken as one amongst many fields of practical action that ethnomethodologists have studied.⁶ As Lynch and Bogen (1996) recommended for their study of courtroom practice, we have used an 'underbuilt methodology'.

In our project Eric followed six different mobile workers all in the service sector (only one of whom we will report on here), talking, taking field-notes, seeing as much of the action as we could and where possible recording it on video for reviewing later. What is purposefully absent from our present account is 'war stories' (Orr 1996) of the mobile workers stuck between clients and HQ many instances of which Eric overheard and indeed was told during his time spent with mobile workers 'in the field'. Such talk is an important component of the daily work and of the region-building (see Laurier & Philo 1998) but in this paper we borrow a distinction made by Lynch (1985) in his studies of laboratory work. The divergence he pointed toward was between talk that speaks *about* the work and talk occurring as part and parcel of the *work as it happens*. The former is often part of having 'the tour' of the

⁶ On administering questionnaires see (Suchman & Jordan, 1990), on the coding of a transcript, see (Garfinkel, 1964) on ethnography, see Sacks 1992 and Wieder (1974), on using video see (Macbeth, 1999) and (Goode, 1994)

workplace as a visiting person, and it leads to the more common description of work in the social sciences. It is akin to what you might get if you interviewed someone about their job, where they will offer comments of the kind that anticipate what a social researcher might like to know, about identity, power relations, gender and the like. The latter kind of talk, which occurs *in* the work and *is* the work, is what we are more interested in here (i.e. 'pass me the blue form', 'I can't give you figures because the system is down'). Talk *about* the work is not only offered to visiting social researchers it is also used to introduce new employees to the job and is then entwined, assembled and made sense of with a growing corpus of on-the-job instructions/tips/war stories which lead to accomplishing the job. When Eric first joined each driver, he would be told about certain aspects of the job, and these comments inform the description we are providing of Marge's job, but our concern now is not to give readers 'the tour' but rather to use some detailed descriptions of parts of Marge's work to bring you into the situated nature of that work as an embodied and sequential course of conduct. This may mean that the text is hard to follow in places since Marge's activities cannot be grasped immediately if they are to be learned and appreciated for what they do.

A problem that has beset ethnographers since the 'textual turn' is whether they can ever truly *represent* the voices and experiences of the people they research and we are not about to ignore the fact that we too are using rendering practices to produce written documents which inevitably let slip details of what they purport to describe. Why non-representational theory, ANT and ethnomethodology have argued against privileging texts and speech as representation, and getting caught in writing as endless textual play, is because when researchers write something they are not *only* doing 'representation'. They do their activities not only in the sense of political representation, nor as always referring to something. They are writing as a practical embodied activity just like any other practical embodied activity, and to say that it is *all* doing representing is to miss the detail of whatever we are engaged in, as when a person finds a parking warden writing them a parking ticket and sees her or him writing something that really doesn't 'represent' their Irish-American identity properly. The parking warden is not wrestling with a text to make a just and honest or critical 'representation', they are writing a parking ticket. We are not always writing *about* something; in fact, we are usually writing something specific with purposes and motives which are part and parcel of the writing.

The writing in this paper hence might be called an 'exhibit', as in that we are trying to 'show' our argument. Along the way we will also make reference to video material, though it is of interest here only in as much as it makes available in unanticipated detail just how certain tasks were done. We will leave serious consideration of using video for another paper, and note only that its use as a technology for observing during fieldwork (and after) does not found any new discipline nor provide objective data. More over nor was its analysis disengaged from it 'being part of the work of producing, for colleagues, a practically adequate demonstration that something is the way the researcher says it is' (Livingston 1985, p63). Nor does video *only* provide for observing, and nor should the material it produces be mistaken for the embodied activities without which it could not be produced. It is an incidental way in which we have been able to get technical access to the detail of practical embodied activities *in situ*; there are other ways, though none of which carry any special imperative in their access to social phenomena.

Our initial sweeping references to the processes used by a company to organise its regions will remain, until we proceed to look at some of their specifics, " a gloss over a lively

context whose ways, as a sense assembly procedure, we found no need to specify" (Garfinkel and Sacks 1986: 164). By avoiding specifying exactly in advance what the region is, we risk appearing somewhat contrary in character. It is a risk worth taking, we believe, since the danger of offering precise definitions from the outset of an article is that they are at the best a collector of reader's interests and at worst they lead to stipulative treatments of social practices. Our ambitions are to show by the end of this paper how a particular region is routinely constructed out of numerous car trips, unpackings of boxes and lookings in car boots. Our attention is on practical actors whose work 'is never, not even "in the end" available for saying in so many words' (Garfinkel & Sacks 1986; p164): it just is what it is that they are doing. Paraphrasing Garfinkel and Sacks still further, we do not mean that mobile workers do not know what they are doing; rather, *they know what they are doing in the ways that they do it*.

Talk is one of the ways in which they do it, yet talk is all too often attended to at the expense of what else is occurring. Some access can be gained to what they are doing, as we have suggested above, by asking them explicitly 'what are you doing?' and related elicitory questions. These questions will be tolerated by busy people doing their job with the expectation that at some point *you* the questioner will work it out. Getting the point of what anyone is saying at the time is not resolved by transcription and coding of what is said, and yet it is routinely done. Deciding the correspondence between an informant's verbal formulations of their activities and the activities themselves cannot be resolved by merely quoting their talk about the work. Responses to questions offered as explanatory talk to visiting ethnographers 'become a part of the selfsame occasion of interaction' and thereby 'becomes another contingency of that interaction' (Garfinkel & Sacks, 1986; p165). Moreover, whilst talk can extend and endlessly elaborate the activities which it is telling, it is also made sense of by members as part of the preceding, current and consequent situation which it is contextualising, *and* is open to further elaboration by members for further purposes. This active sense of talk as *contextualising*, is a move similar to that of Thrift's non-representational theory in reminding us that context 'is not an impassive backdrop to situate human activity' (Thrift 1996; p3) and that the activity of contextualising is an indexical and open-ended one, settled only by and for practical purposes. What this implies for doing research projects is that, if we are to be genuinely *surprised* by what we hear and see in the field, then we must patiently listen to and look at the counting, measuring, evaluating and decision-making as it actually occurs, rather than looking with a clever coding matrix already in hand for the 'interesting' bits of our fieldwork that seem to fit the code (Harper et al. 2000). Thrift thus flips over 'participant observation' to 'observant participation' to emphasise *engagement* rather than distance in theory, and for him non-representational theory is about taking mundane matters seriously and thereby changing the avant-garde style of much work that passes as social and cultural geography. As Thrift puts it in his suggestions for what non-representational theory might be:

"(Adkins, 1996)his is *not* a new theoretical edifice that is being constructed, but a means of *valuing* and *working with* everyday practical *activities* as they occur. It follows that this style of work is both an anti-cognitivist and, by extension, anti-elitist since it is trying to counteract the still prevalent tendency to consider life from the point of view of individual agents who generate action by instead weaving a poetic of common *practices and skills* which produce people, selves and worlds" (Thrift 2000; p216).

Where we break stride with non-representational theory and push off somewhere else is in not pursuing performance as an apt metaphor either to organise our investigations or to position it

as any kind of contemporary structure of feeling. Our engagement with regional work did *not* lead us to prioritise its performative elements. It is an obvious point, yet we might as well re-iterate it: we found a workplace whose orders of action, entitlements and material arrangements did not carry over into other settings (such as opening a present at a romantic meal for two or feeding bears at the zoo). We did not find someone doing a *performance* of work or a performance at work. It seems to us that some of the dangers of over-rating performance, just as much as over-rating *representation*, is that we would miss just what it is that is going on in the here and now of a workplace. Or worse, without a commitment to some local practitioners doing the amazing yet ordinary and un-noticed work that they do, we would find ourselves sliding back into the realms of theatre, dance and the elitist attitude of high culture from which we shifted a moment ago when we accepted that language is not primarily a means of representation.

Marge at work

A lone employee in the company region

In the following three exhibits we would like to direct readers' attention to the relative absence of co-workers from Marge's workplace. These single-worker scenes provide a striking contrast to studies by ethnographers of organisations who are familiar with offices and watching how teams of workers collaborate, share tasks, and mutually find and solve problems in centres of calculation or co-ordination (Brown 2001; Luff et al. 2000, Suchman 2000, Harper 2000). Histories of travelling salesmen (Spears 1995) and ethnographies of taxi driving (Davis, 1950; Psathas & Henslin, 1967) have highlighted the lone-agent nature of such work and is not one that has entirely changed for Marge and her kind (even with the benefit of a mobile phone)⁷. Still relatively new to her job, this prevalent feature of her mobile workplace was an issue for Marge. She spoke of how she missed the sociable environment of working in the open-plan office where she had previously been an accountant at a metal-casting factory. When Eric was finishing his fieldwork with her, she commented on how she would miss his company during the day and her comments were echoed by all of the car-based workers that Eric accompanied.

Whilst it certainly should be noted that loneliness is one of the problems of travelling salespeople and mobile service sector employees, we are not seeking to critique that feature of the job, since our commitment is to displaying the distinctive ways in which such a job, where someone works alone, has to be organised. We might note that there are other jobs which share this feature – lighthouse keepers, sports professionals, park wardens, security officers, homeworkers, taxi drivers, novelists, parking wardens, and teleworkers of various kinds. Occupational category does not determine lone-working, since sometimes these jobs are done by a team of workers and equally there can be situations where some normally group working occupation only has one of its kind working rather than a team. Even for Marge, there were sociable elements to her job: meeting up with her team in specific cafés and bar at certain times of day (the title of our project, 'Meet You at Junction 17', was based on this kind of meeting place off the motorway). Mobile phones have also become a key resource for shoptalk (see Laurier 2001a & b) playing their part in helping workers to maintain an ongoing awareness of the location of other members of their dispersed work-team, what they are doing, where they are going next and whether their paths might cross. To bond their workers

⁷ See also the remarkable online history of taxi driving at www.taxi-l.org/cowboy.htm

and build their team spirit in an otherwise dispersed workspace meanwhile, the “Big Drinks Company” (BDC) organises a lot of nights out at clubs, promotional events, weekends away, and training weeks.

Marges⁸ work, as defined by her employers, was as an ‘area manager’ with responsibilities for liaising with clients and promoting existing and new brands of drinks. However, her job title and its official description did not cover in any adequate way a description of what her day-to-day work involved⁹. To gain competence in the job she had to learn from carefully watching and listening to her co-workers, all of whom were constantly giving her tips, pointers, stories of good and bad ways of working and embodied displays of the everyday conduct of this particular bunch of promotional and sales staff.

The largest part of Marge’s time was spent travelling around by car and on foot in order to pay visits to a host of public houses, clubs and other establishments which sell her company’s range of drinks products. Intermittently alongside her core venues, she also visited venues that did not use BDC distribution but might be persuaded to do so. For all of her clients, she outlined new products and new initiatives which were designed to attract customers (competitions, holidays, tee-shirts, compact discs and the like). Part of her role in the company, as she explained it to Eric, was to maintain the loyalty of establishments to BDC and its products, checking that the company was properly meeting their expectations in terms of delivery, quality and price. She did her best to extend the consumer base within current outlets, the range of BDC drinks ordered by such outlets and also the numbers of outlets ordering from BDC. During her on-site encounters in pubs and bars, she went over their sales figures and promoted branded products to her clients. Her promotion involved some guidance for them in the uses and display of numerous promotional objects such as posters, miniatures, competitions with prizes, free drinks offers and so on. The promotional work was a collaborative task in as much as her clients knew very well, and sometimes better than Marge about how to promote various drinks to their customers. Much of her legitimacy in the bars was secured on describing the latest promotions from her company and, crucially, when passing over new and/or requested promotional objects to clients. The ‘give away’ of poster and t-shirts, as Brown (Brown, forthcoming) notes for the ‘take away’ of brochures and maps in Tourist Information Centres, was key in the organisation of her interactions with her clients. In Brown’s study, the setting is one where mobile clients come to visit a fixed service provider, whereas for Marge the reverse is true. In each case, even so a considerable store of objects is kept that can be handed over, allowing for several things which we cannot detail but will mention briefly. Relevant features of the objects can be brought to the receiver’s attention by the giver; on the basis of seeing and handling the object, the receiver can ask questions immediately; and the objects can be annotated, adapted or rejected as inappropriate to the receiver’s plans. Finally, the give away allows for the management of the timing of the encounter through either quickly handing over the objects or keeping them back.

Regions, as they were dealt with by Marge and her co-workers, were key spatial categories which provided for the allocation of tasks to employees, for the distribution of goods, the monitoring of performance, the journeys and means of journeying of the workers. Regions were marked for Marge and her co-workers on maps with clear spatial boundaries, they did not have clear temporal beginnings and ends, as say does ‘project’ work has (see Lynch 1985 on the projects setting of a timespan). The spaces did change through time, with the TNC

⁸Names of individuals, companies and cities are changed throughout for the sake of confidentiality.

⁹ Brown (2001) looks at the particular agreed upon parts of a job that are recorded for the purposes of keeping an accurate and accountable timesheet.

merging regions, or the TNC merging with other TNCs and adopting their regional arrangements. As a unit in the business of the team to which Marge belonged, a region might require temporary management by another member of a team if its manager was sick or left the company. As Lynch (1985) notes with the temporalisation of scientific practices in lab work, extensive courses of inquiry are produced as part of the serial ordering of tasks in the lab's immediate setting. Taking a geographical approach, we are noting that the organisation of the extensive nature of TNC's business is characterised by its regionalisation. For each and every manager of a region their daily job proceeds through not only what to do next (questions of serial ordering), but also through where to go next. A spatialisation of materials is here used in and as the formulation of these pressing matters.

Packing for the car

The “dry store”, which we will look at more closely below, was where Marge and her team kept all of their non-liquid materials, chiefly promotional items such as umbrellas sporting brand logos, posters and tee-shirts, and cardboard cut-out figures used to advertise certain drinks lines. The BDC “wet store”, on the edge of the city, was a dedicated warehouse where all of the drinks products were stored, having been transported there from their points of production throughout the UK and across the globe. Marge was part of the service interface between the logistics of the high volumes of boxed BDC branded drinks and the slower rhythms of a conversational, form-filling and promotional material handling encounter between her and each and every client.

To get a sense of just what a normally obscure yet essential part of the job involved, we will look at Marge's work in the dry store a little more closely:

Exhibit 1 : Dry store



This activity takes a good twenty minutes. Preceding her entering the dry store she has checked over the list of items that she needs for 'today'. The unpacking takes place in a large

underground room (see above) crowded with boxes, entailing four purpose-built storage bays and one improvised one. There are also a few filing cabinets.

Frames : 1 2 3 4 5



Lines :

1. Marge checks the labels on a wall of boxes in an adjoining bay (i.e. not her assigned one)

2. Opens a large box
She pulls out a handful of postcards

3. Walks across the room
Transfers them to an open box on her trolley
Walks back
Looks at the labels on the boxes

4. Opens another box
Pulls out some glasses from a box in her bay
Walks with them over to the trolley
Walks back

Whilst I am asking her a question about which boxes belong to who, it reminds her that she has swapped some items with her boss and is to take with her some of her boss's promo material.

6 7 8 9



5. Marge walks over to her boss's improvised bay

6. Picks two boxes from the top of a high pile which requires her to stretch up for them

7. Walks with the boxes (they are clearly light-weight if big)

8. Adds the boxes to her bay

9. Walks back showing me the palms of her hand as a joke about how dirty the job is

Picks up another box
Carries it over to her bay.

It is a simple point: Marge had to walk amongst the piled boxes to get at the items that she will pack into her car boot for 'today.' The boxes, in their sheer quantity and spatial arrangement as stacks with passages between, required Marge to walk the unappreciated distances of a snooker player around a snooker table. The boxes are, on the whole, unrecognisable at a glance and required Marge to read their labels up close, so she had to get close enough to various piles to read their labels and to select the appropriate box of stuff. A second simple point : they need opening. With all the ease that standardised boxes give logistics in terms of handling quantities of goods, at the end of the delivery chain there are unavoidable hours devoted to breaking them down into their usable units. The trolley gave shape to her gathering of 'today's' promotional material. Alongside allowing her to move a large load of boxes, plastic-wrapped goods, cardboard cut-outs and other paraphernalia, the trolley served as a useful proxy for her car interior (see below).

As we noted earlier, Marge travels the interface between the uniformity of mass production and the bespoke tailoring of flavourings, t-shirts, posters, glasses, ice-coolers etc. She elaborates the spaces of her region with these objects as she unpacks brown boxes (repeating 1-4 from above) when each time she has to find the right box and extract quantities of items to fit roughly the number of clients who she will see on this day. She keeps working away at unpacking the boxes and stacking on the trolley until the trolley is full. Whilst order exists at all points, correspondingly ordering needs to be done at all points by those available with what is available. For Marge, working for BDC, her company does not provide a purpose-built structured space that she can use, although it does provide an endless supply of boxes. She and her co-workers use the orderliness of the local buildings, the history of the box stacks, the order of where they have to go today, what they have at hand, and still other cues as well, to continue unrelentingly to produce more organisation that they and others can recognise.

Stacking boxes has sequenced aspects in what gets packed on top of what, or below what, or in front of or behind what. 'First put down' tends to be 'last picked up' as new boxes get piled on top of old. Such a process can accumulate trouble for the accessors of stacked boxes if the products inside have expiry dates. In Kawatoko's (1999) seafood warehouse, the boxes that needed moving urgently as their contents approached their expiry date tended to be at the bottom of stacks. The problem was resolved in the seafood warehouse by the stackers using front, back and left and right spread, whilst the accessors extracted boxes from the stack in reverse (see Kawatoko 1999 for more details). In the BDC dry store, matters are less pressing, the stock will not go off and most of it is of low per-item financial value. Due to the constant cycles of product promotion much of it becomes junk fairly fast and so needs to be disposed of when products changed or promotions ended. In fact the pressure for its disposal came as much from the *push* of the constant arrival of more boxes of material rather than the *pull* of client demand. Nevertheless, stacking the boxes, like retrieving the boxes from her car boot, was implicated in the organisation of what objects go to where, and when. The piles were used to *prepare* Marge (or whoever else might be doing her job) for moving or opening any of the these boxes.

Switching away from Marge for a moment longer, in the high speed and highly staffed space of the seafood warehouse, Kawatoko (1999) discusses how the loads of frozen seafood brought into the warehouse are spatially arranged by the warehouse workers according to

information provided by written labels on ‘packages’ and ‘tags’ which tell them whether the fish is for sale in local markets or for factory processing. These labels also reveal relevant aspects of intended customers, the likely timings of deliveries to different customers, the types of fish and their varying ‘seasonableness’ relative to where it is destined, and so on. As Kawatoko (1999, p237) deduces, “[t]he workers use both the arrangement of goods and the tags and marks indicating the kind of food to make inferences about what is going to happen”, and the ‘resource workers’ – the more senior warehouse workers – complete complex calculations, written and then left on display to those who need to know on a blackboard, to ensure that the loads are spatially assembled in the most efficient manner (packing the space most fully but leaving loads easily accessible in the right order). Spatial placements and temporal sequences here dovetail, and Kawatoko (1999 p330) proposes that this example demonstrates how:

... diverse spatial resources are not contained within fixed boundaries but require ‘occasioned’ arranging. ... [T]he workers’s use of space in the refrigerated warehouse demonstrates that the arrangement of space is [an] ongoing and occasioned accomplishment with various resources, and simultaneously that arranged space becomes part of the resources for making projected actions visible.

Moreover, Kawatoko refers to the spatial disposition of loads in the warehouse as a ‘representation’, a *spatial announcement* of what the different loads represent in terms of both their at-a-glance quantification of big, medium and small quantities of different fish products and, more unusually, the future or ‘projected actions’ to be conducted on and with these loads, notably as they are removed from the warehouse to be distributed to different sites for processing or marketing (‘exchange’). This displacement of the term ‘representation’ to such mundane spaces is germane to our study of Marge’s regional organisation. It echoes Lynch’s (Lynch, 1994) ‘exploded view’ of representation, ‘examining what people do when they engage in an activity that makes one or another “representation” perspicuous’ (Lynch 1994: 149). In both our case and Kawatoko’s, the ongoing piling of boxes to form shapes and dispositions provides an embodied record of past actions and a shaping-up of future actions. We therefore follow Kawatoko’s move in deconstructing ‘representation’ as a monological concept. In mentioning representation, neither she nor us are implying a picture that refers to an inaccessible reality, nor a sign corresponding to a meaning nor an interior cognitive mental map that forms an inner picture of the outer world of the warehouse. We are simply raising the possibility of regarding this mundane, box-busy, spatially and temporally elaborated workplace as endlessly formulating ‘representations’ in the flow and direction of reception, storage and delivery labour in the arranging of the warehouse, yet we would not wish to say that the seafood factory is ‘doing representation.’

Marge was no novice in piling her boxes in relation to and as part of her day's work nor was she starting from scratch each day. She knew through looking at the piles every day and doing her travels from venue to venue how the organising of her boxes in her bay was implicated in the organising of her region. Indeed although she worked alone in the store more often than not, she did so with her co-workers in mind, as we see in Exhibit 1 (frames and lines 5-9) when she borrowed some boxes from her boss. The store was an asynchronously shared workplace presenting an interesting set of co-ordination problems managed through the placement of artefacts in space. Like tying a knot in a hanky, some boxes were left open – flaps akimbo - or brought to the front to serve as reminders that these items should be noticed. Sometimes the reminders were to themselves and at other times to their co-workers for whenever they were handling the boxes. The placement of boxes or their

status as open or closed providing additional spatial announcements akin to those mentioned by Kawatoko (1999).

Marge was concerned, like most of us, to avoid hassle if at all possible, and so she did her packing and subsequent unpacking with an economy appropriate to the excess of promotional material that was constantly flooding the store. Her packing and unpacking was economical in the sense that we could imagine much more formal and elaborate ways of matching items to venues involving detailed re-labelling on arrival, maps, labelled shelving, colour-coded boxes and the like. Instead, Marge did what she could in the time that she had available to do it by stacking items into more permanent piles by types of item and size of box. She and her co-workers also exhibited and found their work visible as spatially organised work using the zones in the store: arrivals, the four bays, and the trolley for taking things to the car. In other words, a lot could be inferred about a plain brown box merely by where it was currently placed, where it had been placed before, and whether it was open or closed.

In her walking back and forth with the cardboard boxes, Marge can be seen as ‘thinking’ space¹⁰ or, as Ryle might put it, she was using the space intelligently (see also Kirsh 1995; Latour 1986). Without rushing, falling, dropping, breaking her materials, she made an orderly spatial arrangement of the boxes, the promotional materials, from which she concurrently and subsequently selected items for giving to clients. It was also a practically reasoned matter of piling objects by their qualities as fragile, robust, flat, round and square and their impending destinations. In frame and line 9 (above) Marge shows Eric her dirty hands; aside from the joke that she is making, she is also showing where work *is*. In describing the "ways of the hand" on a piano keyboard required to make jazz, Sudnow makes an observation applicable to Marge's less glamorous but equally embodied making of her region. Sudnow's looking at his hands travelling across the keyboard, like Marge's hands on her boxes, ‘is party to a kind of imaginary conceiving of various aspects of the territory in which I was moving’ (Sudnow 1978, px) .¹¹ Moreover, our description of the dry store provides an interesting alternate to CSCW studies of workplaces joined in the same temporal frame by computer technologies, where virtual environments are used to articulate work tasks (Hindmarsh et al. 2001)). In our study we have a shared ‘real’ space where the workers make asynchronous visits and manage tasks through the spatial arrangement of artefacts (see also Brown forthcoming). The placement of boxes, plastic packs and so on is usually accompanied by talk either during coffee meetings or over their mobile phones : ‘I left the flavourings for Blue Bar out for you’.

Delivering things

In all of the hours that Eric spent sitting in the passenger seat with mobile workers like Marge, he almost never witnessed them using a conventional map. Occasionally they used an "A to Z" when they had time to park to check an address and work out a route to get there. Much more common was their voicing of route directions (Psathas & Henslin, 1967)(Psathas 1991; Schegloff 1972), either to themselves or when checking over the mobile phone with other mobile workers, non-mobile employees at head office or even clients being visited. As Marge drove across her region, she used her acquired local geography of the roads. The geographical knowledge that Marge was calling upon was, once again, not a ‘mental map’; it was, rather,

¹⁰ See Latour (1986)

¹¹ Sudnow's phenomenological investigation of jazz piano playing is particularly pertinent since he is concerned, as part of his making music through the play of his fingers on the keyboard, with "finding the way"; and indeed he compares it to finding the way from one house to another via various means (Sudnow 1978 footnote p148).

the occasioned use of what she knew from driving these roads many, many times and at this moment being on *this* road, at *this* junction, waiting to taking *this* exit, or *this* third turn on the left. Her step-by-step consulting of a visible road system gave her only a handful ways ahead, ways that were bound to the course she took. Marge's 'map' of the region's roads – if indeed we can call it this, and we have our doubts – was therefore less an abstract concept in her head,¹² and more a series of embodied engagements with hands and feet upon wheels, buttons and levers in response to her looking ahead at the roads she traversed. Her car, in the controls that it offered, on the paths that it can take, gave her a 'flatland'-like simplified route as an ongoing sequence of prompts to practical actions (Lynch 1993).

Thinking further about Marge's use of her car to deliver things, we would argue that distinctive to being a car-based worker was her ability to use the car as much *more* than just something for getting from A to B. The car also had to be part of the local arrangement of a large organisation, a link in the chain of its production, as Latour (1992, 1999) so often remarks, and it has to function as actor *and* network. In combination with more directly-related driving tools that her vehicle possessed to move around the city, Marge's car had to double as an operational work space, full of the different sorts of equipment and documents rendering it a 'mobile office' as well as a delivery vehicle. To serve these purposes her car became a tightly-packed storage space, full of diverse kinds of *objects*. In its sequential position between the warehouse and the bars and clubs, the interior space of her car was thoroughly bound up in the organisation of her region.

From the trolley (see above) at the warehouse loading bay, Marge divided her items into the front seat, back seat and boot of the car always with storage and swift retrieval in mind. The front seat area, aside from being her driving position, was most closely tied to her office activities of phoning, checking over documents and typing up on her laptop whilst sitting. The back seat had a mix of additional less relevant documents, clothing and usually some of the more fragile promotional items (such as polystyrene and plastic cut-outs), that could be accessed, albeit not without considerable bodily contortion from the front seat. The boot was only accessible when the car was stationary and Marge could get out to do certain tasks there. This fact had certain implications for the arrangement of her tasks, since obviously Marge could not check the boot's contents while in transit. Although a great deal could be said about Marge's use of the front and back seats, to be sure we are going to concentrate now on the work that she does at the car boot during two contrasting client calls. We have selected the work around the boot since it is an almost unnoticed (by researchers) zone of the car, and it is the place where the objects from the BDC store go to next before finally arriving at their destination in a pub or bar.

¹² We follow Wittgenstein (1953) and Ryle (1949), among others such as Garfinkel (1991), Latour (1999) and Coulter (1983), in rejecting, via an ordinary language critique, a Cartesian version of mind. In our view, Marge does *not* carry around a 'mental' mini-map inside her head which a 'mental' mini-Marge consults behind her eyes.

Repacks, and medium sized unopened white box is packed first
Leaves the opened pack of concentrates to the front

8. Closes boot

M : "... and it's all fruit flavours like plum and apple and cranberry and blackcurrant"
Opens rear door of car

10. Pulls out box of t-shirts with logo (unopened)

Closes door and then walks away with box in arms, bottles in her fingers, to the bar

In the talk that occurs during Marge's rooting in the boot, we can find the distinction between talk that is *in* the work and talk *about*, in this case, 'the product.' In the short history and listing of flavourings which we have left largely untranscribed, Marge instructed Eric in the some parts of the 'lore' of the product, mentioning its origins in Russia and so on (Cook et al. 1998). Before Eric elicited this response, Marge was visibly busy and involved in rooting around in her car boot. Even as she tolerantly ran through some on the spot 'interviewing' *about* flavourings, she remained engaged in trying to do what she was doing before she was interrupted. Her back was turned to Eric, she kept pulling boxes in and out, searching in the interior of the car, and her talk did not inform, shape or otherwise than very loosely formulate what she was doing in the car. Marge's first words: 'Oh excellent I've got some' are nonetheless characteristic of talk as part of the work. Not only was the 'some' pronoun only sensible through reference to the shrink-wrapped eight-pack of miniature bottles that she held in her hands, as Eric's 'what's that?' query shows, it was only sensible to those who do Marge's job. Without video material to check back to, the audio transcript would be frustratingly indecipherable, leading an analyst to ask 'some of what?' And without having an employee's competence in BDC products, what she had found 'some of' would remain fairly incomprehensible.

Her declaration on finding the eight-pack was not secondary to the silent work that she is doing as she rooted in the boot. It was located in the timing of her activities: it arrives as the eight-pack was displayed, and it formulated what she had been doing as an uncertain search. 'There they are' at the same point would have been heard as saying that she came to the car feeling certain that the flavourings were there. Yet her formulation provided something else: that there are some objects that Marge is well aware she had in the car and others that might or might not be there. To find out about these latter objects she has to consult the boot, in much the same way that we might hunt around in our kitchen cupboards to find out if we had a particular ingredient for a recipe. Marge did not search the whole boot, she proceeded quickly, knowing that if the flavourings were there, then they would be at the back. By comparison with kitchen cupboards again, Marge has put certain objects into certain zones within the boot and could thereby locate them without turning the whole boot over. Her searching was implicated in the spatialisation of the objects since the older and unused boxes get pushed to the back by the arrival of new and immediately relevant boxes. In the latter part of the description, as Marge replaced items from the parcel shelf back into the boot, we saw this process in action. The most recently used box of now-opened concentrates was packed toward the outside. By its placement it was made immediately available to Marge on the next occasion when she opened the boot. Her awareness of which objects are in the boot has been assembled in the acts of packing and repacking. The flavourings, for example, as a result of this occasioned search of the boot, have switched from *possibly* in the boot to *definitely* in the boot. Should Marge's next client not request flavourings, nor the next after that, the objects which are pulled out for use and then repacked will gradually push the flavourings to the back of the boot again. From what is going on in the boot, we can then build toward how it is that

when Marge is talking with a client, on being asked for some item, she would say: 'I have them with today, I'll go get you some,' or, 'Hmm, I'm not sure, let me go check.'

What is beginning to come out is the kind of organising that goes on each and every time Marge went to the boot. We are showing some of the ways that the work at the boot is predominantly *silent* work with objects. When Marge said things aloud, it assisted the ethnographer by highlighting as an *announcement* a significant moment in what she was doing when she would otherwise stay silent. It further formulated her activities to someone who could not be expected to fully share her perspective on her task. Just what Marge might be talking about she makes clear by her posture, by her brief pause to take what was an extended look at the bottle, which thereby emphasised that *this* was an object of her concern. By way of comparison, the white box went straight from the boot to the parcel shelf without Marge stepping back and taking that kind of look at it.

In her discovery that there were definitely some miniatures in the boot and their subsequent placement to the front of the boot space, we see her doing a little bit of spatial arranging that would leave things in a prospective order for the rest of the day. In other words the daily accumulating re-packings of objects in the boot fed consequentially into the preceding and subsequent business interactions of her day.

Exhibit 3. Looking confidently in the boot

Parked just off a busy street in the city centre, Marge is about to make one of her regular visits to a style bar which is part of a club.

1



2



3



4



5



1. Opens boot

2. Pulls out the white box of tumblers (unopened) from left

3. Lifts out bottle of new branded spirit line

4. Places it on parcel shelf

5. From right of boot in a large brown cardboard box (opened) she pulls out small shot glasses wrapped in loose transparent plastic (unopened)
Places shots glasses in heap beside spirit bottle

6



7



8



9



6. Pulls out a medium sized brown box containing base for rotating and illuminating the bottle of new branded spirit

7. Places it on parcel shelf
Opens it and checks contents

8. Leaves the car to feed the parking meter

9. Returns to car, opens back door
Picks up contact sheets to check if the club had requested any other items

M: "Fine"

Closes door

Picks up box, bottle and glasses from parcel shelf

Closes boot

Walks away from car towards bar

In this brief description Marge was at work in/beside her car again. It was later on in the day from the previous visit to a bar. She characterised this visit as a 'drop-in,' and had told Eric that she dropped in to this bar several times in a week and sometimes more than once a day. She knew these clients well, and they were important clients. Not only did they have a high turnover of BDC's products, they had a close relationship to the marketing of current and new products. As Marge put it, they had a more fashion conscious clientele who are both willing to try new products and were a test bed for launching new products. If products do not sell in these venues, then they may be delayed for a while and remarketed.

Marge did not have to pull boxes out of the way this time when she was accessing the boot since all the items that she needed were in the top layer where they could be picked up quickly. They were spread out across the top of the stuff in the boot from left to right, making a spatial announcement of just which items were to be delivered to this venue. The danger, for instance, of leaving an item for *this* delivery in the back seat would be that it would be forgotten by Marge and left behind. In this practical way Marge visualised for herself all of the promotional parts of the product that needed delivering here today. One of Marge's dilemmas as a lone worker was that reminding cannot easily be shared out to anyone else on her team. She had to remind herself constantly through the use of these spatial announcements about *what* items were needed in *which* places as she travelled. Packing played an integral part in providing such prompts or announcements from which she could make inferences later in the day when unpacking and repacking. Reminding, then, consisted not only in what she could remember as a lone subject, but also in its representation as the variety of items that she packed as *today's* deliveries and spares.

Returning to Marge, to unpack swiftly and confidently the right things for the right place now required careful preparation earlier in the day. Her objects were not in her boot simply to be seen as a variety of objects, for each one was an accountable artefact. They are accountable in the sense that we could ask Marge why each object was there, and she would be able to provide an account such as 'Blue Bar asked me for six packs of branded tumblers', or as earlier when she explained to Eric about the flavouring's bottles. On the occasion shown in frames and lines 1-9 above, meanwhile, when she explained that she was delivering the display equipment for the new product.

What the parcel shelf offered was a sequentially related spatial zone (see Evergeti 2000; Hindmarsh & Heath 2000) to get the glasses, bottle and base ready by placing them upon it in clear view (see illustration). A parcel shelf allows car-users the possibility of leaving items there while they are doing something else, as in Marge's case when she had to feed the parking meter. Although the items are still 'on hold' on the parcel shelf, she returned to her contact sheet for this client, to double check whether there was anything that she still had missed. She announced 'Fine' aloud: once again it might have been said silently to herself, or not at all, were Eric not standing by with a camcorder. Whatever it marked the end of the task of gathering stuff from the boot. *This* time her gathering of items from the boot was different, it was less speculative, more confident. She had packed items earlier in the day to be taken out now on the basis of pre-existing requests from the style bar. To get the task done for *this* time required unpacking, the shots glasses being moved from the boot to the shelf, as was the bottle of spirits. The base unit was quickly inspected to see if it had all its parts. Unpacking for this place was untroubled and relatively routine compared to the previous venue. She displayed the work as such in her busy involvement with it, only briefly saying 'Fine' as a gloss over the untroubled progress of her work in the boot. Even though routine, the product's

counter-top clever promotional display does not pop-up at the style bar whole, rather it arrives in small boxes, plastic wrappers, which will need further assembly *in situ* by the bar staff.

What emerges in this second description of Marge getting items out of the boot of the car is that each finding of materials, and each re-packing afterwards, has its spatial and temporal existence as “this time” and “this place”. Even though “finding the flavourings” and “unpacking the display” are seemingly good examples of what she was doing, they were also unique efforts to find what she needed there and then which were consequentially related to the organisation completed earlier, as well as making some provision for what she would do later.

Surely the work could be a little more exciting?

Now I adopt what is in a way a counter-strategy to the issue of ‘interesting’ and that is that I’m specifically picking utterly uninteresting data. Things which do not have for us any special lay interest. That means that in order to find its interestingness we have to find that whatever it is that’s interesting about it is what we can say about it. And we can then develop criteria of interestingness where we’re not exploiting kinds of things we ‘want to know about’ – scandalous topics, gossip etc. Things like an exchange of greetings are kind of ideal rather than, say, the discourse of kings or salon conversations, where we know in the case of the latter that it’s important and interesting, and it’s very hard in the first instance to ignore ‘what they say’, which you have to do (Sacks, 1992a, p293).

Part of our tactic when looking in detail at the activities that happen with really rather dull anonymous cardboard boxes was to wait to see what it would give us of interest, rather than, as Sacks notes, exploiting a kind of thing that might be taken to be interesting already, like ‘big decisions’ at HQ.¹³ The sales performance is another one of those more spectacular occasions in the making of a company region, and in no way do we wish to deny its importance, yet we would suggest that it has also perhaps hidden from researchers other constitutional elements of service-sector work.¹⁴ Somewhat counter-intuitively for cultural geographers, we have pushed ourselves away from events that resembled performances. With further restraint we have made ourselves look away from the maps on the walls of HQ in order to observe where and with what else the company space is being organised. Hopefully there is some surprise in the fact that we found cardboard boxes playing a key role in the spatial organisation of a company region.

¹³ As Bowker and Starr warn of pursuing the uninteresting: "There are many barriers to this exploration. Not least among them is the barrier of boredom. Delving into someone else’s infrastructure has about the entertainment value of the yellow pages of the phone book. One does not encounter the dramatic stories of battle and victory, of mystery and discovery that make for a good read’ Bowker and Leigh Star (1999, p322). This apt warning comes from their book on the histories and current workings of official classification schemes. Their study has strong affinities with ours, not only in its choice of fairly dry subject matter, but also since it spells out some elements of the endless work done everywhere locally by whoever is available, and responsible, to index and to elaborate upon the seemingly abstract and objective classifications of standardised codes (see also Brown 2001 on ‘timesheets’).

¹⁴ Indeed, part of our research has emphasised aspects of this face-to-face work, as well as showing how a kind of ‘facework’ also occurs over the phone (see also Laurier, 1998, 2001a).

In this paper we have sought to bring into focus the unnoticed work of mobilising diverse objects through activities that are spatially reflexive in that, just as the objects are used in practically ordering the space, so it is that the space is used to order the objects for all practical purposes. As Thrift (1996; 1999) urges in his non-representational theory of *time-space*, we have *dwelt* on the objects involved in region-making. We have shown how they form an equipmental complex for both managing a region and doing promotional work. While we have been wary of suggesting that these kinds of objects have a life of their own, we have shown how they become useful in a particular form of life. Moreover, we have brought out their agency in the joint field of action where a human subject is clearly not a naked agent (our particular subject was in danger of being lost among the abundance of materials that her job involved). As it turned out, our mobile worker was visiting the sites in her region in order not just to have the richness of face-to-face contact, but in order to hand over the particular parts of the company product for which she was responsible. In terms of their topology, the places that she and her work materials moved between connected up in a horizontal sequential order, where the workplace of the warehouse fed into the workplace of the car parked beside the venue, which then fed into both face-to-face meeting and future occasions of 'bootwork'. Marge's spread-out workplace did not provide her with any kind of overview; each task proceeded in a step-by-step arrangement shaping up the possibilities for what could happen next. In explicating these matters, we have tried to study the organisation of a region *in concretia* as an ordinary matter of transportation and its technologies.

Our selective exhibits hopefully offer the reader some grasp of the minutely ordered actions required for the management and servicing of a region. These local methods were indefinitely more diverse, rich and complex than was summarised in handbooks given to the TNC's regional managers or during their training sessions or throughout other written guides to management. The labour of service was never simply the enactment of scripts nor technical instructions nor the advice of bosses nor other members of the team. It relied on numerous commonsense competences with the materials at hand, such as selecting items to carry for each 'today', stacking boxes, checking items against lists, and so on.

‘...how do we pack the world into words?’

... I want to show that there is neither correspondence, nor gaps, nor even two distinct ontological domains, but an entirely different phenomenon: circulating reference.’ (Latour 1999, p24)

Our work also might add something to Latour's (1999) excellent study of a botanist, pedologist and geographer at work gathering data in the field where the earth of the Boa Vista is to be mapped and analysed. He studied the scientists' practical activities of progressive selection of quadrats for gathering samples, sampling, labelling, transportation, boxing, counting and eventual writing-up as a research report. Where Latour was revealing both how science is grounded in practical activities and how those activities are arranged in chains of tasks with particular methods and apparatuses, we are following a shorter section of a chain travelling in the opposite direction from centre of calculation to regional space, to reveal how business is grounded in practical activities (see also Boden 1996). For Latour, what was important was how referencing was stretched out, stabilised even as it was transformed, for the practical purposes of making something like a sample small enough and light enough to ship it from South America to Europe. We might say that he too, like Lynch, was exploding out scientific representation into myriad actual activities with objects : labelling a branch, filling out a logbook, filing photographs in a cabinet, comparing soil to a Munsell code chart. In comparison, we have looked at the far end of a commercial chain from the companies'

centres of calculation , and here on the dispersed workforce of the company region we are documenting the unpacking of boxes; the work of matching particular places to mass-produced promotional items. Our concerns have been to investigate how a region is tied to this circulation of products as a practical embodied activity with boxes, hands, car boots and more.

As a final reflection, it occurs to us that ‘unpacking’ is often used metaphorically by ourselves for the objects of our discipline: dense terms or argument that require explication as in unpacking ideological baggage. In considering some actual unpacking as an ordinary method, we have noted how it is the laying out of objects in space that formulates the space in terms of its current state while also shaping up future actions. Unpacking, then, offers a way of displaying and collecting things for current and later use. In doing so we find what we have from a collection wherein we did not necessarily know with certainty all that we had and we also discover what has been left behind. We may shape-up what we have for where it has to go next in our handling and laying out of the objects with an eye to where we intend to finally put them (Büscher 2001). An unpacker’s work is in resolving if something in a collection of items that *might be* there is *really* there. It can be approached with or without a list, with or without an intended find-able item (there are items that could not be found through unpacking). Depending on how the packing relates to the work we have to do, we can look confidently or speculatively into just what our vehicles contain. Taking our text as a vehicle, we have packed it fairly tightly and now hand the burden of unpacking it over to you.

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