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The Eroticism of Logistics

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The Eroticism of Logistics

Abstract

This article draws attention to the reproduction of logistical power in what is identified as the eroticism of logistics. Eroticism here describes the way that transmission is understood as a seamless conveyance of goods or an intimate communication across a surface. It is first argued that this eroticism is found in attempts to define modernity as logistical that ought to be rejected in favour of a more grounded account of rerouting. It is then demonstrated that this latter account best accommodates the findings of critical logistics studies, where logistical spaces are shown to be fractious and the movement of goods far from smooth. It is finally argued that whilst an erotic principle of transmission lends itself to a reductive account of logistics that sustains its violence, a postal account of transmission better captures the experience of getting the goods whilst situating logistics within a critical space.

Keywords

Cargo Mobility; Critical Space; Global Logistics; Media Philosophy; Postal Phenomenology

The Eroticism of Logistics

Logistics is the organisation of the trajectories of things. It is also understood as a management science for the achievement of that organisation. A tension exists between these levels, between the enactment of logistics and its idealisation. Craig Martin (2013) observes that the drive for efficiency through standardisation and control has created an industry ideal of surface spaces for freight to move across. This vision finds its expression in popular writing on globalisation, such as Thomas Friedman's *The World is Flat* (2007) or Marc Levinson's *The Box* (2016). Martin Parker (2013, p. 373) identifies the latter, with its influential history of containerisation, as the standard account 'of how the world was made flat, so that things could move more easily'. As Gregson, Crang and Antonopoulos (2017) observe, the danger is that these dominant ideas obscure our view of logistics in action, imposing ideals of seamless object mobilities over much trickier and more laborious spaces (something they note plays out in even critical accounts such as Martin's). Nicky Gregson (2017, p. 344) goes as far as to suggest that 'one of the defining features of contemporary social science research on logistics is its tendency to recite logistical power'. As such, it is unsurprising that we see this 'surface ideology' (Martin 2013, p. 1053) play out in social theory too. Paul Virilio's work on logistics suggested that speed of movement produces 'a pure surface' (2008a, p. 132) or 'logistical glacis' (2006, p. 41) such that 'everything arrives without having to leave' (2008b, p. 16). And whilst Virilio was mostly concerned with conceptualising the way that things appear to move, that they are experienced as moving from the perspective of those in receipt, we also see these ideas put to work in accounts of the material instantiation of logistics. For example, in *The Stack* (2015) Benjamin Bratton draws on Virilio to argue that the integration of logistics and e-commerce has produced a 'flat world' for the movement of objects (p. 131), a flatness characteristic of what he goes on to call 'logistical modernity' (p. 231).

This article begins from the position that to avoid simply reciting logistical power, it is important to reject those imaginaries of logistics that achieve its ends by providing cover for its claims to being an apolitical management science and not an ideological disfigurement of the world that hides the violence and suffering of globalisation (see Chua et al, 2018). In the first section it is argued that any claims to living in a logistical modernity ought to examine the critique of logistics inherent to earlier attempts at capturing the times. Without making claims to being in any particular kind of modernity at present, it is shown that postmodern thinking provides a useful approach to a critique of surface ideology by emphasising the fragile

contingency of spaces that are rerouted for the movement of goods. The second section then substantiates the desirability of this conceptualisation by capturing the fractious and often elusive mobilities of cargo, and the frictions and sometimes irreparable tensions of logistical spaces outlined in critical logistics research. An idea of logistics as a process of rerouting and not as the achievement of surface control is shown to retain a critical space for examining the hidden and often injurious enactment of object mobility. The final section then demonstrates that the conceptual underpinning of surface ideology is an example of what the media philosopher Sybille Krämer (2015) calls erotic transmission, where communication is imagined as an intimate movement of the one to the other, and that it ought to be replaced with an adaptation of her postal account of transmission, which would acknowledge the fragile connections of the process of rerouting. This work identifies the conceptual tendency that sustains ideas of a flat world but also offers in its place a more workable alternative. Ultimately, the article develops a theoretical approach to the study of logistics that avoids the way that its eroticism reinforces and legitimates logistical power.

Logistical Modernity

One of the problems of defining our time by logistics is that it is difficult to locate any clear historical break that gives us a license to say that now we live in logistical modernity when before we did not. Logistics has a long military history stretching back to classical antiquity (see Cowen, 2014). As an ascendant business logic or 'science', logistics possesses a decidedly mid-twentieth century maturity (see Danyluk, 2018). The 'logistics revolution', so vividly encapsulated by Bonacich and Wilson (2008), the culmination of intermodal containerisation, a shift from push to pull systems of inventory and the success of a just in time philosophy, is usually dated to the 1970s, a spatial fix to the crisis of accumulation. Logistical practice is updated, and its application broadened, but it is not clear that it is useful or meaningful to see it as anything more than a process of human organisation manifest in flickering intensities through time. Another problem is that this kind of periodisation tends to capture a particular space much better than it does a given period, and in capturing it seems to make it stand still. Henri Bergson (2002, p. 208) had a nice line on the problem of parcelling out time: 'when we try to cut it, it is as if we suddenly passed a blade through a flame – divide only the space it occupied'. Gilles Deleuze (1997, p. 86), expanding on Bergson, suggested that the result would be 'a badly analyzed composite' where space is conceived of as 'ready made' and time merely

its consequence. Bergson understood time, in the sense of duration, as a rolling heterogeneity, a succession of qualitative changes that blur into each other, but talk of modernity of various stripes tends to fix time to a privileged space, to the exclusion of both its exterior and any interior alterity, and so speaks with a narrow register. It is difficult therefore to imagine any logistical modernity, let alone one that trades across flat surfaces, that does not privilege a Western experience of getting the goods.

But the most telling problem, if we go in for this sort of periodisation, is that logistics was already included in the price of postmodernity. For David Harvey (2004), who recognised the historicism of the postmodern whilst rejecting its political coherence and moral substance, the most significant shift it charted was that from Fordism to flexible accumulation, amidst the economic crises of the 1970s, citing just in time production and lean logistics as key factors in the time-space compression that shaped the period. Fredric Jameson (1992, p. xix), who saw postmodernism as a useful if limited way of understanding late capitalism, pointed to 'new forms of media interrelationship' as a key feature, adding, parenthetically, 'very much including transportation systems such as containerization'. And it is possible to read Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (2005) as an account of how the production and transmission of knowledge succumbs to a post-Fordist logic that is essentially logistic in nature. Here Lyotard developed his account of how a principle of performativity – of the optimisation of the relationship between input and output – is applied to knowledge, which is then reduced to bits of data that are made to fit into the new channels of circulation, whilst whatever does not so fit is abandoned and forgotten. Data circulation is operational according to a principle of performativity because, by stripping away any information determined to be redundant, it becomes more easily communicable to the point that it becomes itself a commodity to be exchanged.

The shipping container has been read in similar terms, as akin to data or a form of storage that is not so much rooted but routed (see Gregson, Crang & Antonopoulos, 2017), and Benjamin Bratton (2015, p. 46) points to the almost symbiotic relationship of logistics and informatics when he suggests that containerisation 'migrated the packet switching from telecommunications onto the transit of physical objects (or perhaps the other way round)'. Lyotard's concern in thinking logistically about knowledge, developed further in his essay '*Logos* and *Techne,* or Telegraphy', included in *The Inhuman* (2004), was that once we value knowledge for its operationality or performativity we lose its cultural context. Once digitised,

data ‘are rendered independent of the place and time of their “initial” reception, realisable at a spatial and temporal distance’; this then ‘removes the close contexts of which rooted cultures are woven’ and so we end up with an uprooted and then standardised ‘teleculture’ to the exclusion of whatever resists being unmoored and which is therefore voided (Lyotard, 2004, p. 50). What we see here is that thinking logistically about data produces another world-flattening account of standardisation, where the rough edges are knocked off space and culture, resulting in an image of a flat surface across which now both cargo and cultural commodities flow without friction. This is an unhelpful way of thinking about the human environments and effortful labours that facilitate cargo mobilities, but it is also worth noting that data do not move seamlessly through flat spaces either, hitting bottlenecks, encountering regional variations in speed and cost, and risking derailment by territorial conflict (see Starosielski, 2015). So: whilst we can discern logistics at the heart of the critique of postmodern knowledge, it is a reproduction of the standard or dominant account that Martin Parker (2013) warns against.

It is in the essays Lyotard wrote subsequent to *The Postmodern Condition* (2004), namely ‘Answer to the Question: What is the Postmodern?’ and ‘Note on the Meaning of “Post-”’, collected together in *The Postmodern Explained to Children* (1992), and, especially, ‘Rewriting Modernity’ from *The Inhuman* (2004), that we find a more useful frame for a critical engagement with logistics. Here Lyotard argued that the end envisioned by modernity was a kind of totality, a uniform end of history, such that the idea that the ‘post’ of ‘postmodern’ signalled a following on sequential to the modern was itself a very modern idea, suggesting a conversion to something new as if it was possible – or necessary – to make a clean break. He argued that any such rupture would be a forgetting, and that this was at odds with what the postmodernist set out to reveal. Lyotard (2004, p. 24) ultimately found ‘rewriting modernity’ to be preferable to ‘postmodernity’, finding the attempt to periodize cultural history, ‘pre’ or ‘post’, pointless since ‘it leaves unquestioned the position of the “now”’. It was better, he thought, to think of modernity as running into itself, colliding with itself but eventually finding its way, as the past runs into the future, the *now* an unmeasurable point amidst the flow (as Bergson also had it). What we think of as postmodernity Lyotard came to see not as a new age but ‘the rewriting of some of the features claimed by modernity’, and this in two distinct senses: the rewriting of society by the commodification of culture and by new technologies of production and distribution; and the obligation of the artist or the theorist to bear witness to the unpresentable, to be attuned to this rewriting and what is not represented in it, such that

‘rewriting [also] means resisting the writing of that supposed postmodernity’ (2004, p. 34, p. 35).

This first sense is useful for thinking of the spatialization of logistics, although perhaps ‘rerouting’ would better capture the way that object mobilities run into each other, into dead ends, are cut up or cut off, come back on themselves or over each other. ‘Routing’ suggests the making of a path but also, in the context of war, a disorderly flight from the battlefield. To emphasise rerouting, then, would suggest the fractalization of the line of flight of objects and the way that spaces are organised and disorganised and reorganised by the demand for turbulent efficiency in logistical systems. Perry Anderson (2006, p. 31) dismissed Lyotard’s account of rewriting as ‘lame’ – because it gave up on periodicity and made of postmodernism a perennial process – but Anderson also astutely identified the importance of the sublime or the unpresentable to this evolution in Lyotard’s thinking. This commitment to transcendence has been interpreted as a barrier to proper critique of the processes that postmodernism was meant to capture. Harvey (2004), for example, was particularly critical of the way that, as he saw it, the postmodernist’s rendering of an impenetrable other led to a lack of confidence in moral judgement, an acceptance of economic power and the triumph of aesthetics over ethics or political economy. But ‘rewriting’ in its second sense, as bearing witness to what resists representation, could be vital to a critique of the latent worlds that harbour and convey our goods, the cargo mobilities and logistical spaces that are sustained by great but often hidden labours and that are rewritten according to the demands of global trade. For Lyotard (1992), to bear witness in this way was not an indexical act but the evocation of a feeling that there is something that escapes us, that perhaps necessarily escapes what we can hold in thought, such that we might communicate, not an image of the thing itself, but an imprint of its excessiveness, a feeling of the sublime. It is uncomfortable work, because it admits of and pushes against the limitations of what we can grasp, but the alternative risks flattening the world just to critique the immiseration of our experience of it. To make this case it will first be necessary to set out precisely what is unpresentable in global logistics.

Surface Ideology

The idea that logistics does not operate through ready-made environments, across smooth surfaces or a flattened world, but is instead enacted across spaces that ought to be understood

as rolling heterogeneities, made up of a succession of qualitative changes that blur and collide into one another, is supported by recent critical work on logistics. Anna Tsing (2009) rejects the homogenous framing of supply chains and highlights the structural role of difference in mobilising goods. Bonacich and Wilson (2008) suggest that the way freight moves is so complex that no-one can hold the full picture at once, and that trying to plot it all out would be a task equal to mapping the internet. Birtchnell, Savitzky and Urry (2015, p. 1), in their work on cargo mobilities, describe logistics as a kind of 'orderly disorder' and Kate Hepworth (2014) observes that even the most sophisticated choreography comes undone in its encounter with the messiness of the environment it seeks to govern. Nicky Gregson (2017, p. 359) finds this inevitable, since there is always a pushback to attempts to overcome space; circulation is met by friction and resistance and there will always be 'a stickiness to the circulation of goods in terrestrial space', no matter how advanced or streamlined the logistical systems themselves become. This friction is not surprising if we understand logistics not as smoothing out space but as fracturing or fragmenting it, a process of rerouting that suggests not a slick surface for cargo mobilities but something more like a gluey scree field.

One of the difficulties in bearing witness to the spatial enactment of logistics is that, even though so many of our things travel by sea, urban lives tend to be disassociated from the oceans, making less obvious the deep dependence of urban living on sea freight (Birtchnell, Savitsky & Urry, 2015). The problem is particularly acute, as Anim-Addo, Hasty and Peters (2014) explain, because the sea, since it is beyond the land, is often thought of as empty, devoid of meaning or beyond understanding. This, in turn, feeds the idea, flagged by Gregson, Crang and Antonopoulos (2017), that the sea is a free for all, an empty space for the easy mobility of goods, as if maritime cargo encountered no friction simply by virtue of being carried across water; no shipping lanes or port congestion – no chokepoints. The sea then becomes a space understood simply in terms of its facilitation of cargo mobilities, a surface on which commodities are on the move. Hepworth (2014) points out that, despite interest in containers and containerisation, the ship itself is a largely forgotten space of global capitalism, a situation compounded by the flying of flags of convenience and the difficulty of getting to grips with their origins. Labour unrest at ports has received sustained critical attention (see Bonacich & Wilson, 2008), but one of the quintessential workplaces of an economy premised on the global mobility of consumer goods floats by largely unnoticed. The labours of air freight are similarly out of mind, undertaken at dark hours in securitised spaces (Budd & Ison, 2015), although the relative visibility of aircraft compared to ships lends itself to the impression that the sea is an

empty space to be flown over. Critical attention to sites of injurious labour is made difficult by disassociation from the seas, the invisibility of shipped mobilities and the darkness of air freight.

Once freight makes its way onto land it becomes more visible. Intermodal containers carried by lorries and overtaken on motorways or loaded on trains and passing by on rail lines, bearing the logos of big-name but broadly unfamiliar carriers, not to mention the curtain-sided trucks identified with some esoteric variation on 'logistics solutions', are common features of the mobile landscape, even if the exurban distribution centres that punctuate their excursions are largely anonymous, often visible from the road but home to indiscernible working experiences and hidden injuries (see Hill, 2020). But there is a sense, articulated by Julie Cidell (2015), that academic attention has been focused on maritime cargo mobilities at the expense of the movement of freight by land. This is a concern shared by Gregson (2017, 2018), whose work not only corrects for this tendency but illuminates the meaningful spaces the lorries and their drivers inhabit and co-create. This takes us away from the from-the-outside experience of illegible trucks emerging from anonymous warehouses, scuttling down unremarkable motorways and stopping at non-place services, revealing acts of nomadic dwelling in cabs where drivers sleep and cook and eat, and which now must be understood as sites of habitation. These spaces are not empty or void. Nor are they smooth or even really all that efficient. Gregson's work gives a strong sense of the waiting around, in and out of the cab, the tailbacks and layovers. And there is a convulsive inefficiency to the trajectories of parcel vans and courier motorbikes, the micro-logistical extensions to the doorstep, making logistics as much a function of retail as it is production, and that are directed around urban environments in sometimes haphazard fashion by apps that plot out routes that are unsystematic and achievable only by hurried, often reckless driving (Hill, 2020). It is as often bad choreography as good that comes apart when the goods come off the sea and roll against the riprap landscape of their landed mobility.

Logistics is often more complex and less sophisticated than it might appear – that is, when it does appear – but there is a tendency to reverse this proposition in a way that sanitises the process. Martin Parker (2013, p. 369) ascribes this tendency to what he calls 'container theory' and the way that an idealised image of the intermodal container as a hyper-mobile object, perfectly geared to mobilities by sea or road or rail, took hold of the conceptual imagination. But the ubiquity and standardisation of 'the box' has been overstated (breakbulk and pallets

are still common, and containers are not even uniform in dimension) and the observation that a container can move easily from a ship to a train to a lorry tells us very little about the ease of its migrations on the whole. Gregson, Crang and Antonopoulous (2017) argue that the reality is of heterogenous units bumping along a patchwork of spaces that do not lie flat, that are held in tension and fraying at the seams – coming apart in places. We call this *global logistics* when really it is a functioning mess of local routes and actions. This in itself makes it difficult to grasp, before we then factor in the ways of seeing and not seeing at play: disassociation and seclusion and anonymity and esotericism. Philip Steinberg (2015) worries that cargo escapes representation because it is hidden and ever moving, that perhaps it is impossible to represent cargo mobilities at all. And yet this impossibility makes the task of presenting the unpresentable even more urgent.

This is a challenge that has been taken up convincingly via engagements with the 'follow the thing' methodology. The attempts of Caroline Knowles (2014, pp. 7-8) to trace the migration of flip-flops reveal the ways that 'people and objects hump awkwardly along the pathways they create as they go', how they 'grate against each other, dodge, stop and go, negotiate obstacles, backtrack and move off in new directions, propelled by different intersecting logics'. She shows how difficult it is to keep up with all of this, impossible in places to follow the flip-flops or access the makeshift or improvised geographies they occupy. There is value in recording the failures, performing the forlorn pursuits, showing the gaps. Cook and Harrison (2007) offer a useful example of this in their account of following a bottle of hot pepper sauce from production to consumption, revealing only in conclusion that the coherence of their story was somewhat stitched together, that direct connections could not be traced. Alison Hulme (2017) argues that 'following the thing' was a method fit for early globalisation but unsuited to the changeable and ruptured paths of contemporary commodities. We should replace the dominant idea of the standardised container, moving effortlessly across modes of transport, smartly around the world, with, Hulme (2017, p. 159) writes, an image of 'the grinding rust of the container ports', where there are spillages and breakages and smuggling and accidents – and all manner of things that go unseen. Showing how something becomes unfollowable, she concludes, is just as valuable as following it, and so we should focus on the gaps in the trails, look for failures and aberrations and fragmentations, because the way things fall apart reveals the nature of the system – and allow it to be successful. Container theory would then give way to a representation of ruptures.

That logistics facilitates the movement of perfectly mobile objects across seamless spaces is an illusion. Or, rather, it is an industry vision, a flattering self-image that has taken hold and become a surface ideology that then determines or disfigures the way that logistics is seen by others (see Hill, 2021). It takes hold because it describes the appearance of logistics from the privileged perspective of those getting the goods – spaces tend to feel less flat and journeys less smooth for those lugging them – and ideologies are always more effective when they flatter the way the world is already brought to mind. This is problematic insofar as it feeds the push for what marketers call 'ubiquitous commerce' (McGuigan & Manzerolle, 2015) – the removal of all borders and constraints to exchange – by making it appear to be already the case. This in turn fuels the indirect power that companies can exert over policymakers through the allegiance of consumers (Culpepper & Thelen, 2020), won over by the ubiquity of commerce sustained by the appearance of goods moving across smooth surfaces. And this is what is so unfortunate about playing along with the fast and flat image of logistics, because it is often done with the intent of holding that power to account. It is not just that a critique of logistics falters when the point of attack is usually its selling point, since economic goods and moral goods speak different languages, but more acutely because, by buying into that image, it loses sight of its critical space. Bratton (2015, p. 131) concedes that the flattened world of logistics is 'far flatter for objects than it is for people', but even this risks romanticising the ease of object mobility since it is difficult to imagine how objects have flat trajectories whilst the people have an uphill struggle, given that the people are conveying the objects. A rejection of surface ideology is an essential precondition to the foregrounding of the violence and vulnerabilities produced by the exercise of logistical power. As spaces are rerouted in turbulent and damaging ways, it is important to challenge the dominant narrative through an act of rewriting that makes visible both the unpresented and the unpresentable. But this is made more difficult by the fact that the surface ideology is not only attractive because it picks out the way the world appears from a certain perspective, but because it is underpinned by a model of transmission that is itself attractive. A critical rewriting of logistics hinges on identifying this model and then replacing it – which is the work of the final part of this article.

Postal Phenomenology

In her *Medium, Messenger, Transmission* (2015) Sybille Krämer identifies two competing principles for an understanding of communication: the erotic and the postal. By extending this

media philosophy to logistics it is possible to see an erotic logic underpinning surface ideology and a more desirable postal principle that can be mobilised to understand the rerouting of logistics. According to the erotic principle, communication is a symmetrical and reciprocal act between parties, a form of interaction that transmits understanding and aims at the unification of discrete bodies in the form of community. Accordingly, during the 'proper' function of communication heterogeneity is translated into homogeneity, difference into identity, in the pursuit of consensus or the generation of a single voice. Krämer (2015, p. 22) writes that the erotic principle 'presents communication as the synchronization and *standardization* of formerly divergent conditions among individuals'. Synchronisation and standardisation become the means of bridging or overcoming the distance between individuals, a distance that is phenomenological as well as geographical, and that is best understood as a difference between inner worlds. Crucially, when thought this way, the persistence of the medium in communication becomes obtrusive to the extent that it disturbs unification, since its presence is a reminder of communication's provenance in separation. The medium is then understood as periphery since the objective of communication is held to be an unmediated merging of inner worlds. The medium as messenger is expected to convey a message across the distance of difference, all the while keeping that message unchanged before then retreating into the background. This idea of communication is named erotic because it envisages the coming together of those engaged in the act, an intimate merging of interlocutors in an act of perfect immediacy. Krämer observes that it is generally held to be more philosophically valuable than its postal counterpart but argues that whilst it is possible to find this oneness in communication, mostly we do not – and it is not necessarily desirable to either. The erotic principle is dominant, then, but picks out neither the ideal nor the general form of communication.

A similar eroticism of conveyance can be identified behind the surface ideology that attaches to logistics. There are important differences, for example, that logistics serves consumption and not community, and so is not envisaged as symmetrical or reciprocal. And when we move from dialogue to logistics we are no longer talking about the transmission of understanding – and in many respects, the opposite of this situation appears to be desirable from a public relations standpoint. But surface ideology imagines a logistical enterprise that accomplishes unity, such that production is effortlessly joined to retail and consumption; the smooth surface or logistical glacis that unites these functions creates an image of a homogenous space; and the single voice here becomes a simple void, the empty sea or flattened space – and if erotic logistics speaks with a single voice, then it is the voice of those at the near end of the supply

chain. In such a way, the synchronisation and standardisation of logistics overcomes distance rather than simply traversing it, if only because this way of understanding it overlooks the interior sites of the logistical process, the ships and warehouses and lorry cabs, and the lifeworld of the logistics workers. Such things get in the way of visions of a seamless territory for cargo mobilities, and so the medium of transmission is made to disappear – with the exception, perhaps, of the container since it usefully becomes a vehicle for an image of perfect synchronicity and standardisation – whilst the goods simply appear at their destination. Surface ideology is erotic, then, because it imagines the seamless coming together of production and consumption, and it has become the standard or dominant account even though it rarely describes what logistics achieves in practice.

Krämer (2015) sets out to reject the erotic and rehabilitate the postal principle of communication. According to the postal principle, communication cannot transcend phenomenological or first personal limitation to achieve unity and perfect understanding, and is best understood as an attempt to bridge distance whilst keeping that distance in place, and to negotiate difference without demanding that it acquiesce to consensus. Krämer (2015, p. 22) writes that the postal principle 'presents communication as a production of *connections* between spatially distant physical instances'. Underpinning this is the idea that the distance between sender and receiver can never be collapsed, that the medium occupies the space between the two whilst keeping them separate, and that all communication is essentially made up of separate acts of non-reciprocal transmission. Communication would then aim at co-ordination between different parties, rather than bringing together the inner worlds of separate entities; the messenger, then, speaks with a foreign voice and gives just a glimpse of what is on their mind. Communication would then be understood as conveying only a trace of what is closed off to others and with which to co-ordinate actions and behaviours. The medium remaining in place, rather than retreating to the background, is essential, since without it there is no bridge between interlocutors; a medium occupies the middle, which Krämer argues is obvious enough but seldom front and centre of media theory. At its heart, the postal principle maintains that communication is not a dialogue but a dissemination, that successful dissemination reinforces the difference and distinction of those involved and makes present the non-presence of the sender.

It is perhaps unsurprising that a principle named postal might better explain logistics as a co-ordination of the sending and receiving of goods. The language of bridging is perhaps unhelpful

when returned to a spatial context, since here it suggests going over or transcending a geographical feature, but the idea of logistics as primarily an act of making connections, and not of synchronicity or standardisation, provides a more accurate account of the way that it occupies space. This is an idea of logistics in which the distance between production and consumption is not collapsed but traversed by a tangle of routes, connected by separate acts of transmission between multiple sites, and that recognises cargo mobility as a multitude of discrete conveyances and not a continuous flow. Thought of in this way there can be no 'generalized arrival' (Virilio, 1996, p. 132): the voiding of the departure and the journey, as if the goods simply appeared without leaving, is revealed as the product of an erotic model of logistics – and is corrected by the return of the middle ground in the postal model. More than synchronicity, a postal logistics is a kind of co-ordination, a bringing together of patchwork spaces to facilitate the clunky mobility of goods. This keeps the distance in place without removing the seams and flattening the complexity into a surface. It also recognises that the act of communicating freight does not reveal those cloistered patches, the interior sites of logistics, that it speaks with a foreign voice that can be impenetrable to those in ultimate receipt of the goods. But by keeping the medium of transmission in mind something of these spaces is evoked. Parcels speak of vans and warehouses; pallets of lorries and distribution centres; and even containers speak of ships and docks, if thought of in terms of connections and not standardisation. But what they say is not always intelligible, the medium is non-indexical, and the paths taken often unfollowable. Cargo carries with it a trace of the routes travelled and the sites occupied, even if it can only communicate that they remain out of reach or beyond thought's grasp.

The erotic model of logistics seeks to overcome the experience of the unpresentable by positing a pure surface, whilst the postal model grapples with this transcendence by accepting the contingent mess of a world of things on the move and, despite everything, tries to present something of it – to communicate what escapes representation. The postal model of logistics deserves to be robustly defended because, by emphasising connection, it makes logistics an intermediary of sociality. It recognises that we share a world with others whose experiences of and in logistics are hidden and non-identical to our own and who occupy sites of dwelling often inaccessible. The trace allows for an encounter with the hidden, not by revealing everything, but by presenting its hiddenness. 'The presence of the trace', writes Krämer (2015, p. 174), 'bears witness to the absence of what caused it'. And this reveals a certain responsibility: a trace is faint, elusive, unpresentable even, but, as in communication with another whose inner

world is inaccessible, there is a responsibility to do justice to what is communicated, even though it only hints at what it wants to reveal. A critical engagement with logistics then entails doing justice to what this trace makes present: the non-presence of the spaces and labours of cargo mobility.

Concluding Remarks

Adherents of logistical management science might like to imagine it can flatten the world to increase efficiency, but it is another thing altogether to imagine that such a thing could be achieved – or has been achieved. Cargo does not move about as effortlessly as we imagine bits of information to do. But it is useful to think of logistics in terms of communication, not least of all because global trade is one of the more integral forms of transmission known to a capitalist society. As David Morley (2011) points out, an understanding of communication that includes the mobility of commodities, capital and people, as well as being how Marx and Engels understood the term, reveals the enduring importance of material geographies despite the presumption that digital technologies today have a dematerialising effect. Logistical systems do not flatten the world for the smooth transmission of goods and the idea that they do is bound up with the eroticism of logistics.

What is so often compelling about Sybille Krämer's work is that it gives an idea of theory as the development of situational understanding. Benjamin Bratton (2015, p. 131) identifies a 'renewed philosophical interest in the agency of inanimate objects' that he associates with intrigue at 'the landscapes of shipping containers'. But the conceptual contributions to be made must be situated within the material geographies of those object mobilities. Caroline Knowles (2014) suggests that our understanding of globalisation is dominated by grand theories that overarch the world but cannot hope to capture its complexity and plurality and calls for a shift in scale – for more modesty. A postal phenomenology of logistics seems to fit this brief, speaking to the various accounts of logistical spaces and practices synthesised above, recognising that there remain gaps that are never quite grasped, and better identifying these global processes as a form of rerouting that demands a critical attention that attempts to reveal the hiddenness of what is hidden.

Modesty is a vital part of seeing the world responsibly. There is often less to be seen through grand theories or neat modernities than by accepting the limitations of our vision. We live in a world of heterogenous spaces occupied by others, and it is this world, our world of connections, a clunky and fragile and confusing and fragmented world, that commodities move through – and that facilitates their moving. Our goods do not move effortlessly across surfaces and nor do we look in on logistics from the outside; we receive the goods, they are conveyed to us, for us, and that picks out a responsibility to the people and to the spaces that made this possible. We are all moving parts in the logistics story, and our engagement with logistics is critical to the extent that we are moved to bear witness to what it communicates.

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