

The Cappuccino Community : cafés and civic life in the contemporary city.

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Field Report 2: *One or several cafés: an ethnographic report*

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### *The purpose of this interim report.*

This interim report forms part of the ESRC project 'The Cappuccino Community : cafés and civic life in the contemporary city' (R000239797). Its original data was drawn from various sources including the planned project ethnographies of a variety of coffee serving venues, favourite haunts of the researchers, novels, café guides and interviews. It can be profitably read in conjunction with our other initial interim report 'The basics of becoming a barista', and other publications as they become available (from the Cappuccino Community website - [www.geog.gla.ac.uk/~elaurier/](http://www.geog.gla.ac.uk/~elaurier/)). At a later stage in the project we will be a report on the *customer* perspective on the café. Our hope is that this report may serve a dual purpose as offering basic description for a social science audience and as a report for the wider public on some of the diverse ways in which cafés support communities.

### **Acknowledgements**

All of the various cafe staff and owners for their hospitality, their willingness to answer our often flat-footed questions. For suggestions for cafes to visit and accompanying us to many of them in fairly random order : Karen Burke, Hester Parr, Paul Turner, Emmanuelle Fabre, Ludovica Serratrice, Angus Dixon, Susan Batchelor, Maeve Dixon, Peter Dixon, Janice Winning, Lucy Davidson, Barry Brown, Julia Lossau, Jo Sharp, Stanley Raffel, Paul Routledge, Giles Gordon, Ana Gordon, Su Stewart, Andy Wilbur, Roland Atkinson, Nicky Burns, Vi Winnie, Moira Morrison, Ulf Strohmayer, Anne Sofie Laegran, James Stewart, Dave Gorman, Wendy Kirkup, Andy Cumbers, Frances Cresser, Areti Galani, Rebecca Randell, Laura Serratrice, Angus Whyte, Kathy Buckner, Roger Slack, Mark Hartswood, Marcus Redley, Venetia Evergeti, Ged Murtagh, Jon Hindmarsh, Nozomi Ikeya, Tonia Mezzini, Alan Munro, Leonora Munn, Keith Brown, Paul Ettinger, Lorraine Warwick, Douglas Moreland, Sally Ritchie, Erica Ritchie, Euan Ritchie, Derek Ritchie, Margaret Macleod, Isobel MacPhail, David Leask, Kathryn Boddy, Jennifer Gunnion, Katie Bruce, Kevin Harris, Mark Perry and others...

## FIELD REPORT 2: *ONE OR SEVERAL CAFÉS: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC REPORT*

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## **Introduction – one or several cafés**

This report will document ethnographically the diversity of forms of café life. Where a theorist would offer a prescription for the social mix and architecture of the ideal café we aim to offer instead a description of actual crowds and existing designs of ordinary and spectacular cafés. Where a critic would interrogate cafes as they currently exist for their failure to live up to certain utopian ideals, we have tried to learn about the everyday goods from dwelling in and on cafés. Where so many studies crave general explanations and predictive power over the here and now, we hope instead to register singularity as it is found in the how and near. To put it another way, while reflecting on what the admirable Ray Oldenberg (1997) first called the ‘great, good, place’ is part of the conceptual investigation we are committed to, we are equally committed to the observation and description of actual cafés and the likely respecification of good places for communities on that basis (Livingston 1987; Lynch 1993; McHugh et al. 1974). As such we are also touching upon community in its living diversity as part of our investigation.

Over the first nine months of the project we have accessed the broadest possible range of cafés. Each of our venues has occupied several possible and sometimes cross-cutting social types of café : franchise, neighbourhood, greasy spoon, child-friendly, department-store, internet, independent, Italian, espresso-booth, style, music, art gallery, bank, airport, railway station, city centre, suburban, trucker’s, university, late-night, bookstore and so on. Their 'crowd' and 'ambience' often altered between weekdays and weekends, between breakfast time, mid-morning and lunchtime and night-time. While we are in no way going to exhaust the varieties of categories of cafes that can be thought of, even as we describe each category we will touch off on other topics such as travel, crowds, children and so on, that they raise.

## The coffee booth 1 – civilizing the street



photo 1 – Coffee Booth at the Top of Meadow Walk

photo 2 – Close-up of booth

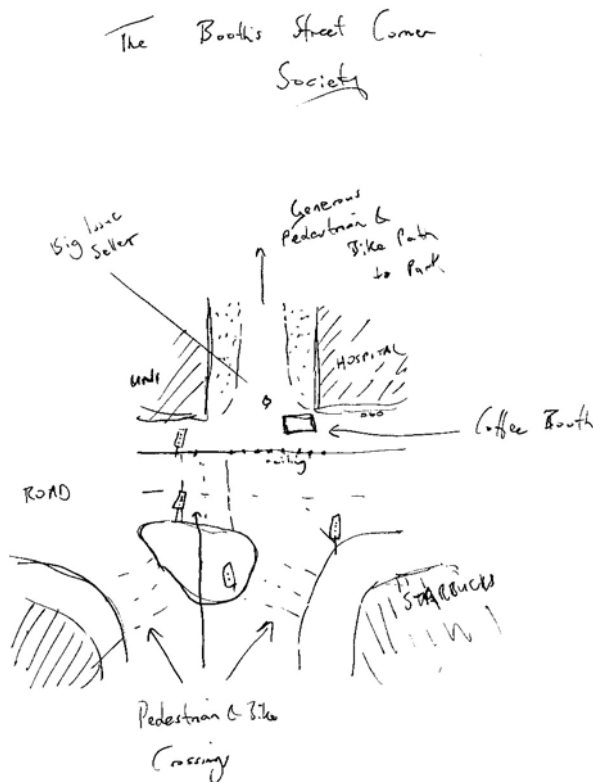
A coffee cart is a café with a few essential bits missing: four walls and a roof. It is perhaps the exceptional case for the café set-up. A coffee cart is mobile, it brings parts of the café into office foyers, parks and city streets. Although the cart is mobile each one has a ‘patch’ where they trade and so in a sense they are locatable in the city much as a permanent café is. In



Edinburgh old abandoned police boxes have been converted by a company called the California Coffee Company into coffee booths; one of the most famous (mentioned in many tourist guides and also a crime novel by local writer Ian Rankin) being between a major hospital and some of the university buildings (photo 2 and map 1). The booths aren’t mobile, they only provide the bare minimum of building: some shelter over your head while you order and wait for your coffee to be made and paper cups. Across the UK, AMT have set up their booths at or nearby railway stations, airports, hospitals and financial districts. They are tied once again to catching customers who want a coffee on their way to somewhere else.

Having an identifiable neighborhood gives the café part of its character as being sleepy suburban, bustling high street, university or business districts, and the booth is certainly no different in this respect. The difference is perhaps that it is more exposed and intertwined with the immediate space around it:

## field notes, August 2002



Along with the booth, there is a spot for a Big Issue seller that has been used for almost the last decade by a changing staff of single sellers. For the last four years a young guy with piercings and mini border collie with a stick obsession (are there border collies without stick obsessions?). There is a snack caravan that is intermittently open which trades off the hospital and the uni taking lunch breaks. It's a busy pedestrian spot with the uni on one side, the hospital on other, the edge of the old town close by and a Starbucks just across the road. There is a mix of lecturers, nurses, doctors, other medical workers, tourists, teenagers, a lot of drunks and down and outs (there are half a dozen homeless shelters nearby), blazered schoolkids from the private school across the road. In

*fact the kind of really diverse crowd that urban theorists dream of when they talk about cosmopolitan cities, social mixing or polyglossia on the pavements.*

This booth serves this crowd, people arriving from the street and the surrounding institutions. Staff of the hospital, still wearing white lab coats or nurses' uniforms, nip out to do coffee rounds for their departments, bringing back trays laden with lattes and cappuccinos. Lecturers steal away from their rooms for fresh air. At lunchtime sixth formers sacrifice dinner money for lattes and muffins. At the booth these different places mix for a while in a way which they otherwise do not.

Though we might assume it lacks a knowable mix of regulars, locals and strangers, that is not quite so. It has a sociability akin to the bar of a pub (Cavan 1973). People queue to make their orders (see photo 2), the queue gives them a membership as customers and they are no longer 'strangers' to one another. In fact the booths have a reputation for excellent quality coffee and merely by queueing for their coffee inference can be made as someone's fussiness over their coffee. While there aren't bar-flies telling their drunken tales of sorrow, often I have arrived at the booth to find the barista making small talk with one of his regulars who is lingering over his coffee. So there are nevertheless regulars who linger at the booth and the barista has to have some of the listening and counselling duties that bar tenders are expected to have (Cavan 1966).

When a booth opens up for the first time the way the life of the street changes can be remarkable. For a while there was an AMT inside Haymarket Station in Edinburgh, it closed for almost a year while the station was refurbished, eventually the booth re-opened outside the entrance to the station. Outside the station was a much better spot since it was actually on the street, as against inside the station building. At this point in

the street there is a wide pavement, a taxi rank, a few trees, a bus-stop. Not really a promising spot nor one that I had ever wanted to pause in. The booth's establishment has changed the way people dwell here. Instead of just the two sets of queues for the taxis and the buses, and the people rushing by for the trains, there are now people sitting, every day that it's dry enough, watching the world go by while they sup their coffee. Okay that's not quite right. There was always a bunch of people watching here – the taxi drivers chatting during slack periods and a few down & outs who lingered in an empty doorway for shelter and to catch some business from passers by. The booth has added to the population of this public space. This space stuck betwixt and between has been transformed by the presence of the booth and three tables with chairs. There are the café customers but perhaps more importantly the staff who are here in all manner of weathers and from early until late. Close by a café has opened up to one side its glass windows watching over this space as well. A public space needs people who are watching that space, not in any surveillance sense<sup>1</sup>, just to bring the space alive, to make it exciting and to make us pause and look and see what is there that might be worth watching. The answer is an old and simple one: 'people'. It is easy to forget that cities need to have places where people can sit, stand or stroll comfortable and watch other people.

#### fieldnotes December 2004

*Made me think about the enjoyment of a cup of coffee (or any hot drink) on a winter day like today. You sit outside, catch the chill in the air, the low amber sunlight on the buildings across the road, the rumble of traffic, the guys digging up the road nearby, taxi drivers swapping newspaper stories. A queue of other customers picking up coffees and teas for the train. Newly arrived passengers spilling out of the station doors. At the next table a woman with a toddler in a buggy. Trying to tease a grin out of the toddler. Swapping smiles with the mother. Again I find myself wondering. Will Britain keep this sort of life in its streets going? It still seems new and fragile and as if we might lose it again, withdrawing into pub, shop and café interiors.*

## The coffee booth 2 – where nobody knows your name

Aside from the high quality of the coffee served at the booths their baristas are known for their amazing recall of customer orders:

#### field notes, August 2002

*The Barista noticed me, and recognised me by way of a certain look (what kind of look? One that is followed by a smile). Or rather it happens – I said “macchiato please” first to which he responded with “one sugar isn't it?”.*

*“Yeah”*

*He no longer asks what sort of milk and always adds a dose of hot milk equal to the quantity of espresso and not just foam – which is just the way I like a macchiato but not the way that is usually made (in the UK at least).*

It is satisfying to have a coffee made just the way you like it and that is the kind of thing we expect our friends and family to know about us. There is more to the occasion than this however since the pleasant surprise when this first happens at the booth is the

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<sup>1</sup> Though they can be witnesses of course to any wrong doing and are likely to spot suspicious persons

realisation that the barista *recognises* you. She does not know your name, you have never been 'introduced' and yet the barista now recognises you and can provide you with a coffee the way you like it. As inhabitants of the city we recognise a set of persons by their dealing with us every day: the newspaper seller that sells us our newspapers, the ticket issuer at the train station, the pharmacist that supplies our medicine or some larger smaller collection of persons who we deal with each day. Though we recognise them by amongst other things their being in the newspaper shop, at the railway station and so on, knowing that we are one of many customers we do not expect them to recognise us. Or not at first. What happens of course is that as part of settling into our daily life in the city some of them do come to recognise us. Or more specifically they recognise what it is that we buy from them, be it our choice of newspaper, bread, train ticket, lunchtime sandwich, cat food or our regular prescriptions. The more we shop in supermarkets, the more such a possibility diminishes, where not only are we part of a mass of customers, where knowing what usually buy is delegated to 'nectar' cards, the staff themselves come and go. However the booth and the rise of the cafés' importance for us, is, then, as a place where there are a group of people who know us in this way.

Once this kind of recognition is place there can then be expressions of everyday generosity and hospitality (Raffel 2001; Raffel 2002). The barista at my local booth in Edinburgh had intermittent custom from me for six months or so when this happened:

Excerpt from email from EL to KB, 2002:

>When I went to the Californian Coffee booth for coffee, I tried  
>to offload one of the twenty pound notes you gave me last night and  
>he didn't have the change. And so he said somewhat poetically:  
>"if it weighs so heavily on your conscience then you can pay me  
>another time".  
>  
>when I still tried to give him the 70p that I had left in my  
>pocket, he then added that it ought not to weigh on my conscience  
>and no he didn't want a 70p deposit since his boss would just ask  
>'what's 70p?' The barista talks that way: 'what's 70p'

The economic value of his gift was almost negligible, the cost to me being £1.40, the cost to the company around about £0.30. It meant more to me or any other customer than finding the 3-for-2 offer on orange juice at a supermarket. His offering of this gift does not have the calculative aspect of customer offers and we could ask whether Tesco's could ever really give one of us a gift. The supermarket offers you an extra orange juice because it predicts that a certain percentage of customers will come back to their brand more often because it is associated with this offer. One of the staff of Tesco's could make a similar gift, though in imaging what that would be like, we realise how limited the powers of staff have become in the supermarket. This barista knows me and knows that I buy my coffee there and in making his gift, makes it a morally complex gift. He raises the issue of my having a conscience even as he suggests that I should not see a free coffee as, to remove his poetry, 'such a big deal'.

I am making a big deal of the baristas actions again here, and he would doubtless wish me just to 'take the bloody cappuccino and go!' Yet the point I would like to make is that to call it directly a gift would also bring certain obligations with it, whereas to keep it as a stolen drink that if I were excessively conscientious I would want to pay for next time I visit, is a way of telling me not to see, once again, what he is doing as a big deal and feel forever indebted to him or even to the company. He is showing that he expects I will come back, not that he has an expectation that I will pay for a drink which is, after all, free. Without wishing to over-romanticise Starbucks and Caffè Nero, they leave it in

their staff's discretion to offer free coffees as the occasion demands. Indeed, the 'Star buck' survives as a token that can still be given to customers by employees of Starbucks that entitles them to free coffee.

## Beanscene – children in public space

Set up in 2000 this regional chain of cafés has branches in Glasgow, Edinburgh and Stirling. They specialise in providing DJs and/or live music in the evenings, supply copies of the Scotsman newspaper for free, planned to have their own radio station:

### Quote from Beanscene Website ([www.beanscene.co.uk](http://www.beanscene.co.uk)):

The whole gig is inspired by the Coffee Houses which predominate in the Italian Quarter of San Francisco, one of THE most happening neighbourhoods on this planet.

Beanscene is home from home and we want you to spend quality time with us; morning, noon & night. For you to do that we appreciate that we must ensure that you have the widest possible choice.

So. Take a few moments away from the daily grind to get yourself up to speed with Beanscene. Smarter than your average Coffee House; read, digest and live the beautifully simple concept of coffee, music and conversation

Now Live: BYOB.....

'Not a lot of people know this' but you can bring your own wine and bottled beers to Beanscene and once you've handed us a few beans to open them for you, chill out in a smoke-free, totally mellow environment.

Our good friends at Oddbins will be delighted to supply you with a top selection of vino and bottled beer.

Here's a thought!

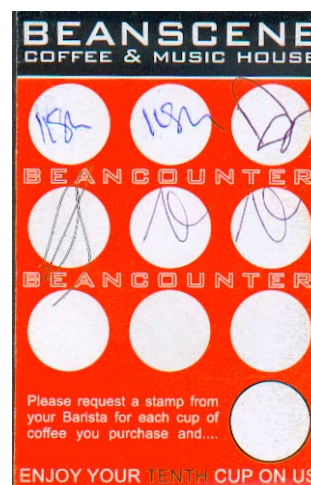
"A bottle of pure merlot, olives, brie, humous and crusty bread, great music, wicked espresso and oh so comfy sofas..."

While it initially began as a music-oriented café Beanscene has been adopted by parents as an ideal place to take their babies and toddler out:

### Excerpt from field journal, November 2002:

*Susan made a joke about Beanscene being called 'babyscene' – seems to be common knowledge in fact that Beanscene is the place to go if you have kids. Well, 'common knowledge' is not quite right – common knowledge amongst parents. It is one of those tips that is passed along from parent to parent as a thing for others parents to know – 'Beanscene is child friendly', has lots of high chairs and in the case of this branch actually has a playground out the back.*

On their daytime menu bags of 'scooby snacks' for the children feature as highly as olives and humous for their parents.



The Beanscene that I visited most regularly as part of the project's fieldwork is just off the main shopping street in a neighbourhood in the South of Glasgow. On a blackboard outside it advertises live music for free. There are tables and chairs in a small area set back from the pavement. Its colour scheme is various shades of brown and a bit of orange here and there (see for instance the coffee loyalty card above). It has distinctive dividing walls which have the company logo cut-out of them allowing you to have a glimpse through to the other part of the café. On the wall, black and white photos, some of children, and some of musicians, with a little bit of text about the artist who took them. In keeping with its contemporary colour scheme it is furnished with truly ample four seater leather sofas. And these are surely one of the reasons it grew popular with parents with babies and toddlers. Sofas are the young family seat par excellence, babies can sleep on their backs on them, toddlers can crawl all over them banging around without hurting themselves. Parents can sit so that toddlers can crawl all over them, and do. The wooden chair is unforgiving and sits just one bottom on it. The stool is an acrobatic feat for older children and adults. Best of all, Beanscene provided leather sofas off of which crumbs, baby rise, mashed banana and spilt apple juice, can all be wiped away. The convergence between leather sofas as fashionable interior design in bars and cafés and babies and toddlers in public has been a fruitful one.

What is striking is the freedom the children have at Beanscene to wander away from their parents in a public space. The cafe, or rather *this* cafe, carries with it a sense of safety where parents need not fear having their children injured, abducted or otherwise coming to serious harm.

**field notes March 2003:**

*I'm sat by the door at the back of the cafe which leads out into a wooden fenced play area out the back. Earlier a three year old boy was holding the door open – quite a physical challenge since it has a self-closing hinge. He dithered at the door and I was wondering whether he was worried about getting crushed in it if he tried to pass through. After a while he let it close then went back to his mum. It wasn't long before he came back again to hold the door open. This time calling out 'mum! mum!'*

*Meantime I was staring at him which I suspect the mum took to be a mild reprimand on my part about her child letting a draft blow across my table.*

*'Don't hold the door open' she called out. He continued to call for her until she came across, instructing him once more in not holding the door open. There was more though, and she quickly worked out that he wasn't merely playing at holding the door open. Looking where he was looking, he then asked her could he go out. She reassured him that yes he was allowed to go play in the playground but that he must either go out or come in.*

*Children's tendencies to linger in doorways. Stuck being unable to decide – in or out. An adult's instruction – in or out quickly. Hmmm but it's more, it's the adult's instruction as to what a child is to do with doors of public places such as a cafes. The child is being instructed in an awareness of other customers. or more specifically that a door held open is an object of potential annoyance to other customers.*

*Hmmm I say all this and the customers have a striking tolerance for the ear-splitting screams of various babies and toddlers. I watched two young businesswomen arrive and*

*they took a table even though the collective screeching and crying of the children was at school playground levels.*

Here surely is something of the ‘great good’ of the cafe which Oldenberg (1997) pursues: a public place where kids *can* play amongst strangers. While many studies of the child in the city have demonstrated how road traffic and fear of abduction have severely limited where their parents will happily allow them to go, here is a place of trust where parents let their children loose to explore and investigate.

In the situation above the toddler already shows an awareness of doors as looming and significant features of the organisation of buildings. He shows an awareness that we may need permission to pass through a door as he runs back to check with his mum. While we might see how the mother attends only to rules surrounding standing holding doors open, once she joins her child at the door she picks up on the reason he is opening the door. In looking out into the playground she can use her adult’s competent assessment of the scene for problems or threats it may pose to her child. While the child is looking at the playground, the mother is looking out for her child. In addition she is looking after other customers in expressing the etiquette of keeping doors closed when there could be a draft.

#### **field notes, March 2003**

*Two mothers sit with their children on a sofa. On a sofa placed back-to-back with the first another mother sits with her toddler. The toddlers make greetings over the backs of the sofa having climbed up to look over. The mothers notice this and smile indulgently. There is no talk between the mothers, they talk instead to their respective children, ‘well say hello then’.  
‘Say hello back’*

*After this the kids retreat – maybe their difference in ages is too great for each other. Maybe that’s as far into a greeting sequence as they can go. The mothers return to being back to back again on their sofas.*

Little children are not expected to know how to use the furniture in a café and their errant activities reveal much about our ‘proper’ use of furniture in public places and its arrangement. For the small child the sofa is a great climbing frame as much as it is a place to sit. And why sit still and do nothing in a place full of potential new playmates? So while the adults in selecting two sofas back-to-back expect that this should allow unacquainted groups to sit very close to one another without becoming involved in one another’s respective gatherings, the children exploit the proximity for their own ends to stare at one another and smile. Note how the parents at one level telling their children what such an occasion requires – do a greeting to this stranger who has returned your gaze and smile – also affirm their sense of what adults will need to provide for their children in such a setting. In doing the children’s greetings for them, a greeting that the situation requires has been done, yet the parents do not greet each other. While they then clearly recognise each other as good parents, and recognise a situation which expectably should produce a greeting, they use the children to do a greeting so that it is not theirs. Not being the adult’s greeting, there is no need for them to then build a longer conversation of pleasantries. Instead they wait to see if the children go any further than simply looking and smiling at one another – they let the children take the lead. And as the children back off, then the parents are able to take leave of the situation without having done greetings to one another that might require the adults to size up who has,

what Goffman<sup>2</sup> calls, 'leave taking rights' and how it will be done without seeming abrupt or unfriendly.

These are short exchanges between the unacquainted that could go on longer but equally can be left as what they are without them being: a failure to start a friendship or even to speak to another person directly. Babies and small children produce an excess of greetings from strangers – they are legitimate objects of attention.

#### field notes April 2003

*Talking over with a newby mum the other day. And also Mark Perry – who got me going on this... She, and Mark, talked about the importance of the cafe in terms of toilet facilities and repacking possibilities. How she mapped her day out across the city in terms of the breaks she could take in various cafes. When she was heavily pregnant there was the crucial importance of regular visits to toilets. With a baby the same and the important of nappy changing facilities.*

### Beanscene 2 – Starting [tonight]

In Beanscene the staff and customers orient toward the gradual ending of the daytime children's crowd. The music playlist switches in recognisable ways; the night that I have in my notes, there is more funk. It is a hearable thing by contrast with the softer pop tunes of the day. Beanscene, as was noted above, are serious about their background music. In fact nearly all the chains are serious about their music<sup>3</sup>. By the consistency of the selection of the daytime music you hear the contrast as first one funk track and then another comes on. The candles were laid out on the tables. Liquid wax, flickering flames and little children with their moth curiosity don't mix too well. The parents that haven't already headed home to feed their children dinner start to pack away their buggies and bags.

If we think for a moment that part of the staff's job is producing this shift in ambience, and doing it sensitively with regard to who can be part of one scene, then we see the staff's work in laying out one candle at a time. They show consideration in putting candles *first* on tables occupied by persons recently arrived and without children – candidates for the night-time audience. In my notes, the candles are put out in a noticeably unhurried and relaxed way. It takes up to quarter of an hour, when it is quite possible to do it in about two minutes. They ask some of the people if they are staying for the live music tonight and make further small talk, all of which further prolongs the lighting of the candles. They move tables and chairs to clear a space in one corner for the band. This is being done a good twenty minutes in advance of the band's arrival which is anyway a good hour and a half before when they are due to start playing. It eases the afternoon to a close, allows all the children and other people who don't want to sit through a live show to be evacuated without hurry. All these goings on are part of the way staff get [tonight] started.

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<sup>2</sup> (p110, Goffman 1963)

<sup>3</sup> Starbucks have compilations for sale and have a research team that work in the archives of one of the labels rooting out rare or unusual recordings from their back catalogue.

## Railway station café - sorting things out

field notes, August 2002

*The café is a Costa. It has been on this spot in the railway station for at least five years. The ticket purchasing and information desks are behind glass walls to one side. To the right is a shop that sells groceries and deli products. To the right and backwards a pub, a fast food join another café. Behind a row of cashline machines and the toilets. The chairs are widely spaced, so widely spaced that people walking through the station frequently walk between the table. A woman laden with luggage, still somehow carries a paper cup to a table. A quick glance at the departures board and she sits down and begins rummaging in her bags. Her tickets emerge, her purse is packed away and a banana is dug out of a carrier bag to eat with her coffee.*



Passengers at cafés in railway stations and airport will, more often than not, have heavy luggage which is lodged close by or under tables. They check purses, wallets and sort through things in their bags. And they give us a place to do this kind of work before we continue our journeys. In the case of the railway the switch in our mode of travel may well require looking out tickets to check our seat bookings, getting money out to buy food for the journey and going over what we have in our hands just simply to check we still have it all and how much we have. The café is a safe place for this sort of reorganisational and reminder work (Bowker and Star 1999). We observed similar re-packing of bags, filing away of receipts and first glances at products in inner city and shopping centre cafes, where once again people are becoming weighed down with all manner of objects.

How is the café safe for this sort of exposure of our things? Notionally anybody can walk in and sit down there beside you and relieve you of your newly bought goods or your purse. Unlike the street the café has its staff who monitor what is going and are in various ways, despite printed signs to the contrary, responsible for the care of their customers. The customers themselves have a concern for one another and for their place in a way that they don't for the street. It is, while they are there, their café, where street has a more temporary commitment to it. As they tend to glance around constantly, the café's customers can in their glancing what kind of people are there and the composition of those seated only changes slowly. When each table is taken, new arrivals can and usually are inspected as to whether they pose some kind of antagonistic relation to one's

own identity (be that finding oneself to be an elderly woman with your purse on the table or a young boy in football colours).

## Airport café – arrivals & departures

### field notes March 2003

*Earlier in the day K and I had breakfast out at the Costa at Glasgow Airport. We had to have it on the 'airport' side of the departure gates. K wasn't flying with me – just giving me a lift to the airport. A café on that side of the departure gates – a place where last meals are had together. Where friends, workmates, families and lovers have last conversations and say goodbye.*

We tend to imagine to airport goodbyes happening at the moment of parting at the gates. In reality it can happen at the car drop-off, at check-in and of interest here, in extended and preparatory ways at the airport café. The café's relationship to the journey is as somewhere where: 1. persons travelling have a coffee/tea/whatever, 2. groups of travellers and see-off-ers have coffee together, 3. persons waiting for travellers have a coffee, 4. the staff of the station/airport have coffee together. Consider then the way it sustains different expectations of its customers than that of the neighborhood café. What is our expectation of ever meeting or seeing the people at the next table to us ever again? In one it is minimal and in the other quite high. Yet such also is the romantic basis of the café in a place of transit. Encounters there are brief in the romantic way of 'Brief Encounter', because they ought to happen just this once. More can be risked because should it all go wrong we will never see each other again. At the same time the less we can be bothered because we will never see each other again (Ann Tyler's wonderful epitome of non-adventurous life 'Macon' in the *Accidental Tourist*).

### field notes March 2003

*Later I am waiting in the arm of Dublin airport that connects internal EIRE and UK flights. There are no tables and chairs that are owned by the café. The café is situated in the centre of rows of bench/chairs facing inwards. The rows are so arranged as to correspond to the gates but with no dividing walls or partitions etc. It is left up to passengers whether they wanted to sit close to their gate or not. The passengers sit and wait. A few go for coffee. It is mainly a waiting area, of course, rather than a café. After all it is only a subsection of passengers and staff that come across it. For some persons in the airport it is pretty much off limits.*

Does an airport cafe have regulars? Are equating it too easily with placelessness, forgetting that commuting creates regulars *en-route*. There will be people who are in airport lounges every morning of the week waiting for their flight. And there will be many travellers there in the way that I was there, so this kind of limited knowledge of a place is a relevant form of inhabitation for this kind of café. At the railway café, commuting every week from Edinburgh to Glasgow I became a regular. The time I spent there, and I am not sure how close this would be to rhythms of air travel, remained minimal as I was generally in a hurry to catch my train. Nevertheless I came to recognise the baristas and greet some of them. The customers, on the other hand, remained unknown to me. Here then is a different way that this sort of café is inhabited. Regulars know the staff but not their fellow regulars. We come and go too quickly to ever see one another.

## Tinderbox – café scenes

In this fashionable café in Glasgow a selection of the famous inhabitants of the city gather to do business with one another. Some who are acquainted only via their shared PR companies and representation in the newspapers nod at one another across tables. It is ‘a place to be seen,’ there are, of course, also bars and clubs to be seen in. What does this mean, ‘a place to be seen?’ A scene, of course, with all that goes with that (Blum 2003).

### field notes March 2003

*In the café today, what an assortment of movers and shakers. A prominent politician reading through briefing papers and chatting on her mobile phone. At the back of the café, the head of a major University research project M, who I grabbed afterwards, said that the politician is a regular there, as is a star from an award winning TV drama.*

For a start a café of this kind will have put a great deal of effort into making itself the most fashionable place in town. Getting top designers in to make sure its interior design was highly original and so was not a copy or just another Starbucks. The launch party. The playlist. The accessories. The Jetsons styled espresso machine. Attracting the right reviewers from the newspapers and magazines to make sure it was given the coverage in the kind of imprints that would pull in a cool crowd. The staff in Tinderbox are an exotic mix with elegant spectacles and often cheeky to customers. Well-trained they make consistently excellent cappuccinos with hearts or ferns patterned into the milk.

The celebrities of the day have to be tempted ‘bite’ nevertheless and be hooked. While this café is not bursting with Hollywood stars, top models and pop stars; it does have a national politician, some prominent academics, TV stars and lesser city celebrities who will know each other even if nobody is totally sure who they are. Their ongoing presence remains a marker of how modish a café is, and even with the mightiest efforts from its owners a café can be abandoned by its happening crowd (see for comparable downward curves of fashion in (Bourdain 2000)). Once these people are there, then they are people who *can* be seen. That is to say you cannot say: “Never guess what! I saw Eric Laurier at Cafe X the other day”, it needs to be someone seeable “You wouldn’t believe it! I saw Nicole Kidman at Cafe X the other day”. At a less global scale than Hollywood there are ‘local’ celebrities whose presence is nevertheless reportable to others who have a relation to this known person (Ken Livingstone in London, J K Rowling in Edinburgh, Alisdair Gray (author) in Glasgow).

We can note that any café like this is predominantly populated by people who do not expect to be recognised by anyone other than their friends, family and acquaintances. The crowd, at a cafe to be seen in, needs only to be peppered with celebrities. Once a place has established itself like this then it will likely be hard to get a seat but that doesn’t matter since the pressure to get a table there is a further index of its fashionableness. Even if you don’t get to sit right beside a celebrity to be able to observe one is to be able to collect some details for a story later. ‘Well she was never off her mobile phone’ or ‘he ate a huge piece of chocolate cake even though he was playing in the semi-final that night’.

## Tinderbox 2 – public intimacy



While celebrities make use of a place to be seen to manage the demands of their celebrity, ordinary members can make their own public displays of affection. There is a legitimisation to such displays that is perhaps made evident if we think of loving relationships that must remain hidden – people having an affair. The mere fact that two people are seen together in a café could be taken as evidence by those who know one of them that something is going on. If they are found sitting side-by-side in the manner of the couple in the photos then inferences will be made.



The cafe provides a space of display where those who love one another can show in the presence of strangers that this is so. In a similar way that Danny Miller (1998; 2001) has urged that we see how shopping, even at the lowly supermarket, is bound up with loving and caring between friends and family

members, we can examine, say, taking our friends for tea and a scone, a cappuccino and a biscotti. And is the café not a more hospitable place for a kiss, a hug or a rub of the shoulder?

Does the city not also need places like this? Places of comfort, convivial comfort, places that we can contrast this with landscapes of fear or intimidation. In Edinburgh, ‘Stonewall’ , set up in the eighties was one of the first gay cafes. It provided a public space for displays of love and affection, as well of course as a place go looking for people to cruise, pick-up and perhaps fall in love with.

## The Department Store – finding people like us

The café in the department store has a history stretching back to long before the arrival of the first round of beatnik and Italian cappuccino cafés in the 1950s. It is all too easily missed since it is hidden away, like so many cafés, within another institution and within that institution's building<sup>4</sup>. It is too easily assumed to be privatised public space since it is locked inside another place. Instore cafes were the dominant part of the sector until the explosion in the 90s and 00s of espresso chains (Allegra-Strategies 1999; Allegra-Strategies 2002; Mintel 1998).

### Excerpt from field journal, February 2003:

*Even though she was in her seventies and lost her breath climbing just one flight of stairs. my neighbour, Mrs Windsor went to the same department store for coffee almost everyday. Setting off by bus at around 10.00am it was a regular feature to her day. At her suggestion I am in a newly refurbished café in a well known department store. Around me are a collection of people mostly, though not entirely, ranging from the age of sixty upwards. There's little evidence that these 'seniors' have been shopping. There are a few waterproof Liberty pattern shopping bags – I'm one of the few that does have freshly handed over plastic carrier bags. It makes sense since Mrs Windsor went to meet her friends not to shop. She barely had two pennies to rub together so she certainly couldn't be out buying clothes every day. Her food shopping was done daily, bright and early, at the little fish shop, butcher and grocer round the corner from her flat - in her sensible shoes. Mrs Banks told me that Mrs Windsor knew the exact price of coffee in every department store and at some of the grand café and cocktail bars in the city centre. When she went for coffee she would don her high heels.*

The department store café, then, for so many of these old folks is not a place to rest after working up a hunger trying out new clothes and buying gifts for your grandchildren, though it can be that also. They go the department store directly to use the café. This popularity with the older generations is, in part, the ongoing legacy of the department store café, given that a decade ago it was the largest part of the café sector. The recent arrivals of Starbucks and Costa may not yet have slotted into well-worn ways of organising meetings with your friends. And why change if the department store works for you? There is an element here which more could be said about: how there can be places where we find people like us. We have already seen this in relation to Beanscene with its babies and now the department store for the seniors.

The café is what ethnomethodologists might call a 'device' (Garfinkel 1986; Sacks 1992b) which we can use to organise our everyday lives and to maintain contact with 'people like us' who are not necessarily people we are acquainted with. This is not quite the same thing as being part of a 'network' and is perhaps closer to being member of 'a public'. Contra the notion of the 'ideal' or 'utopian' and most of all 'cosmopolitan' cafe which is a pluralistic mix of all kinds of social types, rich and poor, black and white, male and female, young and old. The more we look at these varieties of cafés the more we come to see that they form places where communities that share some characteristic can gather. And is this so strange that community might be about belonging to some shared sense of what we are? We are parents with babies. We are Italians. We are residents of *this*

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<sup>4</sup> Consider WRVS cafés inside hospitals, cafés inside large office buildings and so on.

neighbourhood. The café is a place where the enjoyment of being together, even when we sit at a table by ourselves, can be manifest.

## The Department Store 2 – encounters in public

### field notes February 2003

*'Don't bite your nails' says a voice out of the corner as I'm faffing around on my laptop with the formatting of my research journal. It's the woman from the table across from me – the one with the fur hat.*

*It takes me a moment to focus. She has stopped by my table on her way out of the café.*

*'Don't bite your nails. I was watching you' she says again.*

*'Eh, well it stops me smoking' I finally reply, a bit disconcerted since I'm supposed to be the nosy one here. She laughs a little.*

*'Well you'll have to stop or it'll be, eh, bitter almond on your fingers'*

*'Oh yes bitter almond' and I laugh a little too. Seeing and then trying not to focus on the little beard and moustache that she has and that I can now see close-up.*

*'Well I try not to but when I'm concentrating on something I tend to...'*

*She glances at the screen of the laptop. I worry briefly that she'll read what I've been writing about but then realise that I've shifted pages so it's not on the screen.*

*'They're great these laptops aren't they' she says.*

*'Hmm yes. Small enough to fit onto a table'*

*'My husband has one but I prefer the other one'*

*'Oh really'*

*'Oh yes but the laptops are good aren't they'*

*'Well they do most of the things that the full size ones do'*

*'Yes, incredible my husband writes his lectures on them'*

*'Hmm'*

*'My son's an architect and he has one too and when he's at the house then he and my husband spend their whole time on them'*

*'Do they'*

*'Yes, I think I'll have to get one too.' We laugh.*

*There's a pause.*

*'Well remember, don't bite your nails'*

*'Really I'll try but it's hard not to' I say and we laugh and she moves off.*

What can we see in the café? If we think here the visibility of social life, about seeing what someone is doing, and being seen as doing what we are, for all practical purposes doing. If we think about showing 'what they are' as an ongoing concern of activities<sup>5</sup> persons as customers have production tasks in making apprehensible what they are doing and equally have recognition tasks in apprehending what others doing. Moreover customers have occasion to monitor other customers succeeding or failing to recognise what they are doing. The café provides a place where such monitoring can be extended well beyond the fleeting encounters of pedestrians<sup>6</sup> or shop customers<sup>7</sup>. Café customers, then, have certain entitlements to watch one another - 'I was watching you' - and equally as an ethnographer I was sitting observing too: café life and customers as part of a

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<sup>5</sup> for the exemplary study of posing for photographs or walking in the street see Sudnow (1972)

<sup>6</sup> as analysed in the classic article by Ryave and Schenkein (1974)

<sup>7</sup> See the analyses in (Lee and Watson 1993)

research project. Though it could be pointed out that I was exploiting the rights of customers to watch one another for other purposes.

The fact that the tell-offer is in motion toward expected destinations assists in anticipating and accomplishing the finishing of the encounter. The woman in the café is already underway in leaving, she is not heading toward the seat across from me to begin her stay at the café. To speak now does not raise the expectation that she will linger. When we look at what is occurring in the café what we can see is bound to what we can do next on the basis of what we see. What we can do is done with a sense of how we will be held accountable for what we are doing (these are classic ethnomethodological concerns). By her intended embodied course toward the café exit, following at the end of her time sitting drinking coffee, what she is saying is formulated as a parting remark. It does not have the consequentiality of an opening remark when forced to share a table with another customer (Cavan 1966; Laurier, Whyte and Buckner 2001).

The fur-hatted woman uses two 'observables' about me : the nail biting and the laptop on my table. The nailbiting she uses for her playful telling off and the other – the laptop? She pre-announces 'laptops, they're great aren't they'. The problem of the unacquainted: we have no store of topics to talk about. Erving Goffman (1981; 1971) wrote and Harvey Sacks (Sacks 1992a) lectured extensively on how we can start (and end) conversations in public places with 'open' topics: the weather, asking for the time, asking directions, asking for a light for a cigarette commenting on a current major event (a train crash, a sports final). Where Goffman sought to classify and systematize various forms of talk, Sacks has more procedural interests such as in what situations are greetings done, who can be done after a greeting, who has the rights to talk at any juncture, how are such rights secured and so on. The interest here, then, is that as unacquainted customers at a café neither of us has rights to greet one another. Were the fur-hatted woman simply to have said hello to me, I would possibly assume she mistook me for someone else, that she was suffering some form of mental illness and equally would be entitled to ask: "have we met?" One way then for her to initiate some talk with this stranger is to use my nail-biting as a resource. It is a commonly accepted 'bad habit' that I can be told off for doing. However, we might note that in Western cultures is not just *anybody's* job to do tellings-off in public places. Indeed it is certain person's responsibility (e.g. 'elders and betters') to produce such comments, this does not mean that they always will but they can, those persons having also to analyse the scene to locate themselves as encumbant with a moralised relationship of elder to a younger. A serious telling off might then be around littering or putting your feet on the seats. Biting your nails is of a lesser order but is still something that a person finding themselves to be in the relationship elder to younger can do.

The question arises is what we are doing merely producing and recognising observables? From a distance I can see her fur hat and make inferences from the hat. Up close I can see the hairs on her chin and make further inferences from that. Though for my part I do not take up her unplucked facial hair as something I could do a mean-spirited retort with. Observables which are clearly not *just* observables they are bound up with what features of others' appearances we can comment on and so they are not just 'matters of fact' (Raffel 1979).

Additionally can we speculate on the way the laptop as another commentable observable is switched to after the "telling off", where even though "telling off" was not entirely serious (and I am interested in how we could know that too). The laptop being 'great' is a

way of securing what she is doing as being friendly as against merely enforcing the norm of not biting your finger nails<sup>8</sup>. The penultimate thing to consider in what happens, is the woman managing to deliver husband as lecturer, son as architect as the conversation continues. These are the kinds of things that relevance her identity as 'wife', or rather, that 'mother' produces - having husbands and children with occupations. In bringing in these items that she is following up on the category first broached in her 'telling me off'. There something else of importance here – the production of respectable characters and regulars in cafés. The regular in the café has rights to say how things are done in this place and to point out to newbies when they are in the wrong.

Encounters such as these are tied to accounts of them in quite different ways from that of, say, doctors reporting on how a new patient presented themselves. While the latter has also to report on the patient as part of their job in creating a record (Raffel 1979) for certain city dwellers such encounter provide the basis for a story that can be told later. A wife can go home and talk about the 'young man' she teased in the café today. Moreover people in their retirement are quizzed about their days, where for those with more obvious jobs as parents, student, flower sellers the answer is easy, for some retired people answers can become difficult. Cafés provide the possibility of encounters that can counter the moral charge of a life becoming empty (where others might then try and fill it).

### **Caffe Nero – inner city**

A simple point we can take from what will follow as we look briefly at three Caffé Neros is that its brand like many others does not determine the crowd that will attend each particular café. At one of its London cafés not far from Covent Garden there is a mixed crowd of international tourists, shoppers, students and employees of nearby offices. No one crowd dominates this café. It is the *cosmopolitan* place, the ideal of Magris (1999) 'micro-cosms':

‘The San Marco is a real café – the outskirts of History stamped with the conservative loyalty and the liberal pluralism of its patrons. Those places where just one tribe sets up camp are pseudocafes – never mind whether they are frequented by respectable people, youth most-likely-to, alternative lifestyles or *a la page* intellectuals. All endogamies are suffocating; colleges too, and university campuses, exclusive clubs, master classes, political meetings and cultural symposia, they are all a negation of life, which is a sea port,’ p7.

While there are several 'tribes' as Margis puts it, this café also has small conflicts between these tribes. Office-workers tut about tourists taking ten minutes to make their orders at the bar. Students block tables with their books out for hours that tired shoppers want for ten minutes rest. As Oldenberg (1997) and Raffel (2003) point out in their different ways, just as much as tolerance and good-will may, disagreements and suffering may well also be vital to the good community.

### **Fieldnotes May 2004**

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<sup>8</sup> See Elias (1978 (1939)) on civility and the historical rise of injunctions against spitting and nose-picking in public places.

*a particularly bitter cold winter's day, the café even more packed than usual. Two guys with laptops had settled in for the afternoon, trailing power-cables across the floor and paying no attention to the many other long standing, long-standing customers hovering over them. There was palpable tension in the air and the staff pointedly cleared their table several times. Pressure was raised to a higher level by asking them if they wanted anything else to drink (Nero is counter service, so it is only under special circumstances that the staff ask you for an order at your table). Eventually the manager was summoned, telling them that firstly they must remove their cables immediately before someone tripped over them and secondly that they should remove themselves soon after and let others sit.*

The trouble with the mixed crowd is that they are busy with different and sometimes incompatible business in the café, unlike, say, the fans at the stadium for a pop concert. The two guys who are using the café as a proxy office are keeping office meeting hours. Officeworkers from nearby have fifteen minute coffee breaks and want to be in and out of the queue with their take-away coffee in hand as soon as possible. There is a clash of rhythms in the café.

### **Caffe Nero - international bank**

By way of contrast this Caffé Nero is based inside the building of an international bank. It has an entrance leading on to the public high street and a more heavily used entrance leading directly into the interior of the bank. Employees of the international bank walk in jacketless straight from their offices. No need to step into the outdoors. More like a canteen the café is dominated by shop-talk and the reproduction of the institution in its interior. Yet at the same time the café is still clearly an escape from rhythms and ambience of 'the office', a place to take a walk to and have conversations in that were of a different tenor to those held in my office or your office or in a formal meeting room. Yet unlike the Nero in Covent Garden there is no real disruption, where while such disruption can be irritating it can also be creative and productive. While sometimes this kind of café is good for staying in the groove, sometimes it simply leaves you stuck in the same rut.

There is a historical recovery of a way of working in this use of the café by an international bank because, of course, when Lloyds Insurance and several other London financial institutions began they were housed in London coffee houses (Ellis 2004). It was only later that financial institutions adopted offices of their own. But at what loss? What was it that the coffee house had provided that made them so good for doing business? Perhaps that financial transactions of this kind were not conducted in a market place? The ideal of trading floor or the fish market was not what suited a different kind of meeting, contracting, speculating and transacting. In the contemporary cafe which serves the bankers, they are noticeably at ease, the pace is not rapid and there is no jumping around and shouting. There is plenty of time to get a sense of what each other are like, to do the small gift-giving and tone-setting that is buying a round of coffee. There are no laptops to be seen and not even all that much paperwork, all of that extra material is upstairs.

Even though this may be a space for the financiers to take their time, and take it differently, this branch of Nero has been set up to serve coffee at a more rapid rate than

their norm. There is an Milanese railway station industriousness behind the counter. Discounts are given to bank employees. There is ample room on two floors so that no one fights for tables even at lunch-time. Part of the reason for the abundance being that the café ends up being used as a high class take-away sandwich shop. There are a few copies of the FT and the other broadsheets provided by the café; by the end of the day the place is spilling over with discarded copies of the FT. The rhythm of production cycles in the café are shaped by the hours the bank keeps: packed from 8 in the morning till 9, busy around 11, overflowing at one o'clock, a small rush around 4 and then quietening down after that.

## **Caffé Nero - schoolside**

Meanwhile near a secondary school another of Nero's branches fills up around three in the afternoon:

### **Excerpt from field journal, February 2003**

*Dropped in here around 3.15pm and discovered a crowd I hadn't yet met. In the queue schoolkids, some with their parents, some not. At the table by a door, a woman and her uniformed daughter chatting earnestly away. At another table, a young Harry Potter look-a-like with round glasses and his shirt hanging out, chomping on a big piece of short bread. He's joined by two older girls. His sisters? The rest of the cafe crowd – students from a nearby college. Two crowds that blend fine. For the schoolkids here, ranging from primary to secondary? College would then not seem so far away? Just from sitting beside tables of students gabbling away (group beside me have ranged from Tony Blair and are now on to the subject of daytime TV – they sound like law students).*

Some schoolkids wait here for their parents to pick them up. and some to fill in time before going home. From his work in the US Oldenberg (1997) makes much of the importance of cafés for youth and for the mixing of youth with other ages. As was apparent from the time we spent studying the suburban café crowd, these school kids were not tearing up the furniture and throwing food (which is a parody of schoolkids anyway). The cafe is not a school canteen; it is without the monitoring and supervision of teachers. In entering the café the kids are treated as customers like any other customers. They make selections at the counter, pay their money and have the same rights as anyone else to take a table.

### **Excerpt from field journal, February 2003**

*The Harry Potter kid is still here, half an hour later. Now sipping a can of coke? Don't think he bought that here, but he was eating their products earlier. Wonder how long he'll be stuck here? He's definitely got that waiting around look about him. There is the distinct possibility that one of his parents will collect him at five after work and drive him all the way back home to some outlying commuter town. That's almost two hours of hanging around!*

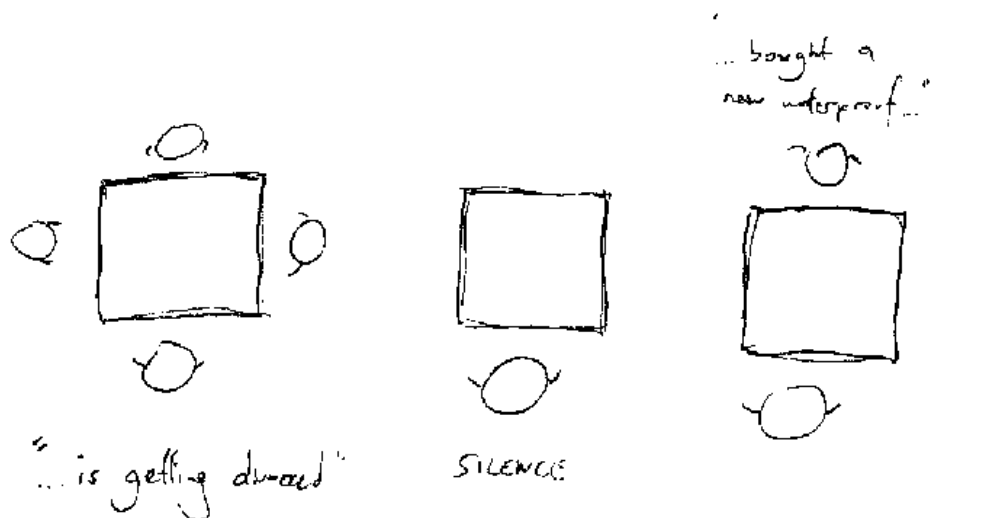
*Time passes, the school kids are somewhere else but have left their bags under the cafe table where they were sitting. One blond school kid sits at another table watching over their stuff... well barely. She spends much of her time with her back to it, staring out the window.*

But who would steal a schoolkid's things? Nevertheless the cafe produces security and trust. For the parents of these children the cafe is a place where they can rely upon the watchful eyes of others. Indeed once again, these may be part of the uses of the crowd. This café has a crowd in it (mostly other school kids and college students) amongst whom parents are comfortable to allow their children to hang around.

Returning to the point we began with it is clear that very different life worlds are being played out under the same brand name.

### Caffé Lucano – overhearing

Located near a major reference library and the law courts, this small café serves a mixed clientele of journalists, researchers, students, lawyers, other legal professions, their clients, tourists and various other passers by. Perhaps because many of the conversations occurring in the café were about court cases, where having one's conversations listened in to was a sensitive and potentially professionally hazardous matter, the issue of the over-hearability of talk in cafés was particularly pertinent. In the way that an elevator kills relaxed conversation between people because they can be overheard, the cafe is of interest since on the whole, even though people could listen in to one another's conversations, the conversations continue.



The badly-drawn diagram of the tables along one wall of the cafe shows their close arrangement, one that is not all that unusual in the cafés we have studied. If the lone occupant of the middle table looks at the people talking about waterproofs to his right then he is [listening-in] since their conversation is constantly available for his overhearing. As a single person not obviously engaged in conversation with another will likely try to either busy himself in some activity at his table or look at some proper object of his attention (if not the newspaper then the a painting on the wall opposite, a distant and inaudible group or the activities of the waitress). A single person in the café has to produce his activities to avoid someone seeing what he is doing as [staring at me/us/them] or equally [summoning the waitress]. So if he looks at a distant table or the

waitress he has to time this look to avoid catching her eye or looking too long at the table. Or he can do a middle distance stare.

'Closest table' is a category whose measurable distance will vary according to how busy the café is. If only two out of twenty tables are occupied then closest table might be far away, yet it should be avoided in one's looking. Moreover some breaching experiments could be performed whereby one sat in the physically closest seat at the next table to the only other occupied table. By doing so such a sitter would produce spying/snooping rather than whatever else it is they might be doing in the café. What we are beginning to describe here then is the relation between [looking] and [listening] in a café. Wherein by keeping one's looking divergent from those whose talk is available for overhearing one avoids snooping on them.

### **Cafe Scientifique – talking to 'the public'**

Two centuries ago the London coffee houses were known as the penny universities and played host to numerous learned societies (Ellis 2004). Just as business increasingly does its business in cafés, so we are also witnessing the return of learning to an inquisitive and inquiring public. 'Cafe Scientifique' ([www.cafescientifique.org](http://www.cafescientifique.org)) is an organisation in the UK initiated in 1998 by Duncan Dallas and based on 'cafe philosophique' a French organisation for the democratisation of philosophy set up by Marc Sautet (Moss 2003). Although a low cost, grassroots operation it has been supported financially by the Wellcome Trust, a charitable funding body increasingly committed to the public understanding of science.

From the Cafe Scientifique website:

Cafe Scientifique is a place where, for the price of a cup of coffee or a glass of wine, anyone can come to explore the latest ideas in science and technology. Meetings have taken place in cafes, bars, restaurants and even theatres, but always outside a traditional academic context.

The first Cafes Scientifiques were held in the UK in Leeds in 1998. Since then, Cafes Scientifiques have sprung up in Newcastle, Nottingham and Oxford and the network has now begun to expand to other cities in the UK. We hope that by 2003 there will be a thriving network of 20 to 30 Cafes that meet regularly to hear scientists or writers on science talk about their work and discuss it with diverse audiences.

Cafe Scientifique is a forum for debating science issues, not a shop window for science. We are committed to promoting public engagement with science and to making science accountable<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Accessed 2004.

In Edinburgh there have been regular monthly meetings for three years initially at Nicholson's (a café & restaurant) and currently at the Edinburgh Filmhouse Café organised in 2002 by Sarah Parry and 2003 by Tammy Watchorn. Recent talks by experts in their various fields have included: the male pill, genetics & eugenics, artificial intelligence, infectious disease, financial markets and more. The talks draw a large crowd which varies somewhat according to the topics. At the talks that I attended there have been a mixture of post-graduate students, policymakers, other academics, commercial scientists and a good proportion of persons without a professional interest in research.

Taken from one perspective, the format is a short talk followed by questions from the audience which does not seem all that different from a standard academic presentation. However the founder is quite clear about the difference that place makes:

Dallas's agenda is a radical one. "It's a café, not a lecture theatre," he says. "It's an opportunity to question scientists, to ask about their motives, their funding, their career structure. We usually have a short break between the presentation and the question-and-answer session, and that's important - by interacting with each other, the audience gets the confidence to ask questions on their own terms." quote from the Guardian, May 22<sup>nd</sup> 2003.

In Moss's article in Guardian and in my experience of attending Edinburgh's Cafe Scientifique it is clearly important that the 'expert', be they a neuroscientist or microbiologist or sociologist of scientific knowledge, is not giving a formal lecture. They are not provided with a platform, a lectern and their audience do not sit in tidy rows. The lecture itself does not fit into a course where its structure can be examined for its relation to a course with examinable parts (Garfinkel 2002, esp. Ch 7). The audience are not members of a shared institution (e.g. fire-fighters, accountants, hairdressers, surgery departments or university department) indeed they are, or should be constituting the 'public'.

At the outset of the talk there are nevertheless a couple of minutes during which as the official start time approaches, people sitting at their tables start to adjust their position so as to face towards the anticipated spot where the speaker will speak from. In the talks I attended with friends this was simply the table at which the speaker was sitting. Some of the audience are in the know about this and turn their chairs first and, often enough, are sitting in what becomes the 'front row'. Others in the audience, like ourselves who did not know what the speaker looked like, easily found her by the organisation of the café space in which the people were noticeably looking toward one person more than any other. Equally the speaker was seeable in the way that looked at everyone else to be looking and preparing themselves to speak to this audience. Like the best-man at a wedding, the introducer of the talk and chair, stood, coughed loudly and/or tapped their glass for attention. A hush would fall.

While you might want to criticise and say, well it's just a lecture after all. The work of the audience and the speaker was nevertheless to produce what we were attending as not a lecture. The audience did not abandon their tables and start to arrange their chairs in rows, they maintained the café's arrangement of persons sitting at tables even if that involved people twisting around, and ending up with cricks in their necks after an hour of so sitting. The 'expert' giving the talk attended to its informality by, in one case getting us to play a game with coins and on another by simply reminding us several times that he was not giving a lecture. The talk itself was written with a public audience in mind, with its one-offness in mind. In making this kind of address speakers for often highly

specialised disciplines are forced themselves into considering how they might engage interested others in their discipline's projects. Under normal circumstance membership of the discipline engages people in its projects and provides the skills to grasp the point and value of those projects. In a way the lecture in the café can be no more than an invitation and is threatened by its devolution into mere sales pitch.

To engage the audience at a practical level, as Dallas points out above, the post-talk coffee break is important. People sitting at their tables return to chatting to one another as friends and as members of their table, alongside being members of an audience. They have the chance to collectively work up what questions they would like to ask the 'expert'. Once the question and answer actually begins, questioners will nevertheless identify themselves, for instance, by what they do in ways that such a fact can be seen to be relevant to and may provide motives and reasons for what they are saying: 'my name is Ian Campbell and I am a surgeon'. And then there are those who do make the claim, 'my name is Liz Fraser and I'm here tonight with my friends and I just want to ask...' So we have a sense that although the audience has a sense of representing the 'public', its members are nevertheless potentially experts of varying, though and importantly, not colleagues nor members of the research team. They remain in this way a mixed crowd, retaining a sense of what an audience of the public should consist of.

Returning to the issue of the importance of the café as a place for siting a speaker who will give a talk. We can see that it is at a remove from the friendly discussion of news of the day and matters of folk philosophising that Oldenberg (1997) celebrates in his research on third places. These are not just topics arising amongst regulars sitting drinking their coffee, topics from what is happening in their lives, or in the newspaper or outside in the street. The ongoing topical orientation is in the public understanding of scientific matters and the café is being used a space for the reasoned and democratic conversations which Habermas (1989) sees as at the heart of civil society. The ideal speech situation is here materialised and located in space. Yet what we find is that in the flesh it is a borrowed place: the café lending elements of its rules of conduct to a community of learning<sup>10</sup>. Being in the situation of guests in someone else's place may well provide useful alternatives to being host and teacher.

## The transport café – life by the road

### Field Notes September 2003

*Our tip-off as to where we could find a decent trucker's cafe came from an elderly guy dressed in matching nylon jacket and trousers with his company logo embroidered above his heart. The car hire company had declined to deliver, sending their reliable old driver round to collect me. As we made our way out to their lot hidden amongst light industrial sheds, he told me that he had plenty of old mates in trucking. From when he was young he had dined in transport cafes, following in their foot-steps because he knew he would always get a good sized*



<sup>10</sup> Giving up the notion of staff serving refreshment, furnishing tables and chairs entirely, there are a number of examples of websites that call themselves cafés: [www.chesscafe.com](http://www.chesscafe.com), [www.collectorcafe.com](http://www.collectorcafe.com), [www.cafeprogressive.com](http://www.cafeprogressive.com), [www.giscafe.com](http://www.giscafe.com), [www.thirdway.com](http://www.thirdway.com), [www.celticcafe.com](http://www.celticcafe.com).

*portions and value for money at places frequented by truckers. There was a good one, 'The Star Truckstop' he told me, about an hour south of Glasgow. Then he went on to list a few more famous ones either side of the Scotland-England border.*

For almost as long as there have been long distance lorry drivers there have been transport cafés where they could park up, eat, drink and catch up with their mates (Hollowell 1968). In recent times their numbers have declined as they have suffered from the predations of chain outlets such as Little Chef and Granada and the changing economies of trucking. One of the best known - The Moss Transport Café - on what had been the A74 and M6 had recently closed. For us, the suspicion from the outset of our inquiry was the transport café would throw the present boom in espresso cafés into relief. They, like certain other kinds of café, have a longstanding relationship to cultures of transport and mobility. While the 1950s 'greasy spoons' of London ([www.classiccafes.co.uk](http://www.classiccafes.co.uk) (Maddox 2003)) are under threat from the high street competition of Starbucks and Costa, their dispersed counterparts are suffering from centralised service stations, Granada and Little Chefs. Happily the Star Truck Café is thriving. It has a good spot on the motorway north, providing a last stop off before drivers enter the central belt. Under new management for the last couple of years it has been turned around from a failing enterprise to an independent success story and was a runner-up in the award for best café in Trucker magazine. Outside the café there are the high-tops, long-loads and heavyweights of the road parked side-by-side on wide expanses of hard packed stone, rucked up in places by the first traction of the trucks' wheels as they pull away. Inside there is an equally generous space, a large dining area with lots of small tables, a cavernous washroom and a bar with projector screen for satellite TV.

### Field Notes September 2003

*At Star Truckstop we ate a substantial cooked breakfast and our well-used mismatching mugs were refillable for free from giant kettles of tea and coffee (photo 2). Kettles that spoke of Popeye forearms, portional generosity, crowded breaks and weak coffee. The customers were mostly men sitting alone reading newspapers while they ate, dressed in coloured nylon trousers and jackets badged with various haulage and logistics company names. Clothing tailored to take a beating from boxes and pallets and a soaking from oil and various other unwanted transport fluids. Each café has its local geography of rooms, tables and chair and its local population of customers and staff.*



*The trucker's life can be a lonely one, explained the manageress, and they are living though hard times at the moment with a Labour government trying to push freight back on to the railways. Alongside the traditional bacon, egg and chips, she tries to provide them with affordable and healthy meal choices. Her kitchen staff fill up flasks with coffee or tea for the drivers' journey ahead. There are some basic bedrooms for travellers that want to stay overnight, though most truckers have a bed at the back of their cab. It is a place where these lone drivers can catch up with their mates and sometimes they will make advance arrangements via their mobile phones or*

*CBs to meet up here. The union organises meetings at the cafe from time to time. Like many cafés, the transport café is linked to a particular work culture. The transport cafés furnishings have to be hard wearing. The drivers' boots tramp in stones and dirt from the car park. The café floor has a scuffed*

*durable lino covering. Its walls are hung with a collection of framed posters from art galleries in France that she collected during along holiday there. She had almost forgotten they were there but that we reminded her by asking about their origin. A long row of windows look out on to the parking lot letting the drivers and staff keep an eye on who's and what is coming and going.*

It is not just lorry drivers that use transport cafés. The transport polices and smaller van drivers use these places, as do various buses companies and car drivers too. Bus drivers also used them from time to time as pick up and drop off points for their passengers. Transport cafés become port-like with the truckers as sailors, occasional passengers and every once in a while things being deposited there (similar to Magdic and Sjostrand 2002).

In our quest for classic transport cafés, on the site where the Red Moss café once was we found a car park for a Travel Lodge. On the route of the old A6 we found another fabled 1950s cafe, its car park empty, grass growing out of its gutters and paint cracked and peeling. In their hey day these transport cafés and their staff had been such a central part of some drivers' lives that holidays were taken nearby and weddings were held in them. When motorways displaced A roads, café like the one we had been to could find themselves several miles and junctions away from the truckers routes. At such a point their days would be numbered, because like the 'Whistlestop Café' on a railway line when the railway line is closed or rearranged, the travellers are no longer taken to the door. Many of their most loyal customers continue to make considerable detours but that was seldom enough trade to keep these cafés going.

#### Field Notes September 2003

*A couple of miles further north at a new café set up by a diversifying farm to sit alongside its local and organic farmfoods shop, the resident butcher told us about his youth thirty years earlier. In those days he and his teddy boy friends had spent many late nights, after the rural dancehalls were closed, drinking cups of coffee and eating plates of chips at the transport cafés. The lorry drivers tolerated their choices on the jukeboxes though there were fights from time to time. Here was a lost history of the public sphere of transport, where local rural youth sat side by side with drivers from all ends of Britain and some from faraway places such as France, Germany and Sweden. It continues apparently in the Motorway Service stations where the teenagers from the local villages will drive up late at night to sit and drink coffee and watch the national traffic rush by on its way elsewhere.*

#### Caffe Florian – luxury and tourism

'Afternoon Tea £18' – The Menu

Our penultimate café is perhaps one of the most unusual. In March 2003 Caffe Florian ([www.caffeflorian.com](http://www.caffeflorian.com)), one of Italy's oldest and most renowned cafes, re-assembled a replica of one of its rooms inside the upmarket independent Howard Hotel. The 'Chinese Room' was installed for a month allowing residents of the hotel and well-off members of the public to have a 'truly indulgent and unique, cultural experience.'

Extra-ordinary lengths were gone to in order to replicate the Chinese Room: walls, mirrors, doors, tables, chairs, cutlery, waiters, coffee machines, beans, aperitifs, recipes

and more were all transported from Venice for the month. In addition musicians were employed to play the kind of music that is traditionally heard in the Piazza san Marco outside the cafe. Like a micro Las Vegas or Disneyworld it was the kind of place that theorists of simulation and replicas, such as Jean Baudrillard and Umberto Eco would have relished.

Unlike the replicas of ancient Greek temples in the USA, the cafe was not built to stay. Delivered in crates, sitting on another building's floor, it was only ever travelling through. Caffe Florian is an inversion of the transport cafe; it is the cafe that is transported. Where the transport cafe is the epitome of value for money, Caffe Florian, with afternoon tea at £18 is the epitome of conspicuous consumption. Where the Star Truckstop is about the hard graft of transport; Caffe Florian is about the luxuries of tourism. Where one is about unknown people recognised as regulars, the other is about the famous, the rich and the beautiful expectant of recognition. Yet like all customers their stay will involve selecting tables and chairs, customers and staff, coffee and cake, conversations, arguments and paying the bill at the end. There are expectations about what you should receive at each, and senses of when you have been ripped off or when you get something extra special. Neither of these places are about global branding, rolling out standardised cafes across the globe (though at the time of writing Caffe Florian is attempting to franchise, see [www.caffeflorian.com/corner.htm](http://www.caffeflorian.com/corner.htm)).

It would be nice to imagine that the articulated lorries containing the walls, tables and so on of the Caffe Florian stopped off at the Star Truck Cafe. That the driver feasted on a large curry and a mug of coffee.

## Offshore 1 – the neighbourhood looks at itself

Offshore, with its big windows, has a two way visibility to the street. The customers looking out at the locals walking by and passers by glancing into its interior. Several times when we were busy in a meeting over coffee we were spotted seemingly drinking coffee there. Having been spotted by old friends or family they popped in to say hello, leading to an interruption though not of quite the same kind as were trying to escape in our offices. While interviewing a lawyer and his wife in a café in Ayr, old friends of theirs spotted them mid-way.

Interview notes, 2003

*In terms of bumping into acquaintances and getting to know other people in the cafe – they say how they see more people they know when sitting outside. Why the window seat is also so popular in cafes. This is key after all isn't it – it's obvious but sitting outside you see all the passers-by along with other customers. Really nice point.*

*With near perfect timing a couple walk through the door who Ryan and Leonie met on while on holiday in Lanzarote and haven't seen since that holiday over a year ago. It's hard not to laugh and smile too much at this 'talk of the devil' moment. One thing I notice is that they stand up to talk – while I remain sitting. Trying to show that I'm not 'properly' with Ryan & Leonie? The standing up at the table is intriguing though... What does that do? Means that you can sustain quite a long conversation without sitting at the same table together? That the other couple can still walk on to their table without causing offence. our table is showing a complex situation by my sitting and their standing. Marking the fact that we cannot straightforwardly ask them to join us. Ryan & Leonie introduce me and explain that I'm there doing a 'survey' with them about cafes.*

*The result of this chance second encounter is that they get their diaries out and arrange meeting up for drinks/dinner on a weekend at the end of September. So here is the cafe not being a place where a friendship gets initiated but where friendship is potentially supported / revived / reinitiated. If we get away from either an instrumental or decisional sense of how friendships work – 'we 'choose' to be friends or choose 'not to be friends'. here we have how the place helps keep this friendship from disappearing. How many 'friends' do we lose each time we change jobs or move house. Look closely at what happens here too. They do not just make a passing greeting, they talk for a good five minutes standing up (apologies are made to me for how long they are occupied in chatting) asking what each other is up to, how long since they met and so on. Yet this is not the occasion to sit down at the same table together, this is deferred to a 'proper' drink later. Each is in the midst of doing something – shopping but also meeting with me. I'm not such a special case either – it could be a relative, an other work friend basically someone else that meant it wasn't just the two couples and that the two couples might have a complicated relationship with.*

*As it is they are very good at including me as much as they can. When the other couple leave at the end of their fifteen minute coffee they stop off to ask a little more about the research.*

These incidents are of interest because the cafe is a place in which one can be found like this, in a neighbourhood, just by the wandering past of friends, family, colleagues and acquaintances. Researchers on community have registered its importance as serendipity (Harris 2003). The open-ness of the café architecture provides a form of mutual awareness for the people in the neighbourhood. Those inside can look out and observe the goings on of the street, equally those on the street can look in and observe who's in

the café with who and at what time. Anyone who wishes, be they journalist, social researcher or woman in the street has access to this place where colleagues and community members gather in public.

## Offshore 2 – university life

It looks a little like the famous ‘Central Perk’ from the US sitcom ‘Friends’ with plenty of sofas and a few armchairs, the counter set back and a youthful crowd of students and artists. As Mark Phelan of the Sunday Herald (22/9/02) described it:

Offshore, Gibson St, Glasgow

This light, airy lounge full of oversized sofas sits right down the street from Glasgow University and should, in theory, be a hotbed of hyper-caffeinated student thinkers and guerrillas. It's not even nine in the morning, and the place is mostly empty. But manager Eve Pryde is familiar enough with the regular patrons to provide a breakdown of archetypes.

'Well, there's the philosophy students, with their books and hot chocolates. Music students have tutorials in here sometimes, they sing a bit and drink smoothies for their voices. And there is a bunch of militant marxists who come in. They get very heated, very gesticulative. They're a bit of a cliché I suppose.'

Fragment of overheard conversation: 'No, just stayed in last night, watched that programme with Ross Kemp, that SAS thing. Wow, violent. They had to shoot all these bank robbers in the mouth.'

*(below: Chris Philo in Offshore)*



The Cappuccino Community research project was planned in this café, it has been the place for regular project meetings and a place for re-writing articles. For us, as for many other people, the café is important as a special kind of workplace. We go there to work together uninterrupted by phonecalls or knocks at the door. We go there to drink good coffee while we work. It has a kind of equality to it since it is not *my* office or *your* office. It is not just that it is a whole lot nicer than either of our offices with its

sofas, smell of coffee, conversations to overhear and tall windows making it bright with light even on winter's days. It really is important that it is the Switzerland of meeting places, with neither party being the host nor the guest for the other.

## Closing Up

Each time we tell someone about our project examining cafés they will suggest at least one other café that we ought to visit, if not half a dozen. Recently, a friend advised us that we must go look at an independent café that is opening up in an art studio complex. Another saying that he had been in a cyber cafe that is combined with a hairdressers and hadn't Eric always wanted to study the social life of the latter as well? Yet another who is involved with funding an HIV volunteer's café alerted us to the ways in which many cafés are run on a voluntary basis as meeting places for vulnerable groups and for generating funding. One who would had been at a seaside 'radio' café that's been open since 1953 which has the possibility of examining the experience of Italian migrant experiences alongside the decline of the British seaside holiday. Another who is a biker mentioned a café that is a mecca for motorbikes on tour. The project's aim was only to deal with at most a dozen kinds of café and we have found ourselves dropping in on so many more. Hardly difficult since so many have been buzzing discoveries and hospitable surprises, while others cold, unfriendly or in other ways disappointing. From the project's point of view the tour had to stop at some point.

What we hope, then, that is becoming apparent is that our naming of cafés and what goes on in them in public, in constituting diverse publics, could run on and on<sup>11</sup>. Our small quest to document the diversity of cafés bears comparison to the mall odyssey of (Kowiniski 1985) who travelled across the USA constructing a history and present day report on the place of the mall in US society. It is akin to the ethnographic studies of restaurants in Joane Finkelstein's (1989) inspiring study of dining out and the four categories (convenience, nightspot, marketplace & home territory) of licensed drinking establishments in Sherri Cavan's (1966) classic Goffmanesque research on bar behaviour. We have tried however to use each cafés typical (or exceptional status) as a starting point to issues that it raises, issues that we will deal with in more depth in the academic papers produced by the project.

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<sup>11</sup> There are some noticeable absences in the focus of our ethnographic work such as the internet or cybercafe. In fact we did carry out two short field studies of internet cafés, but felt that ultimately this kind of cafe is the most extensively examined, due in part to its novelty and is covered through much more thorough field studies than our own by several different researchers (Stewart 2002; Lægran and Stewart forthcoming; Stewart 2002; Wakeford 1999; Stewart; Lægran 2003). We might note here that, much like cafe scientifique, the cybercafé has served as an intermediary between the home use of the internet and its use in institutions. Moreover as Lægran's work in Norway shows the cybercafe has served as a public gathering place for youth. The possibility of computer gaming on network PCs providing a cyber version of the traditional pool or table tennis table of youth cafés. From our brief study of a cybercafe what struck us was that whilst for many teleworkers the café is a place to get out of the house for a while and meet friends and colleagues, the cybercafe was often a place where travellers far away from home went to get back in touch with their friends remotely.

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