The Materiality of Visitor Books: Observations from an Israeli Military Commemoration Site

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In this project, in which I am concerned with discursive mobilities and materialities in tourism, I intend to investigate visitor books as a unique medium of communication in a number of different sites. In this opportunity I wish to present and discuss one case study, which includes a visitor book that is located in a military memorial museum in Jerusalem, Israel. The project reflects some of my standing interests in everyday communication processes, which are sometimes titled in sub-disciplinary terms as, "culture and/as communication." In earlier works I was occupied with travel and communication in the sphere of tourism, and specifically with tourists' storytelling performances (Noy, 2005, 2007). Yet I realized that these performances, although making primary use of the oral mode of communication, were in effect anchored in material, embodied, and aesthetic realms. This realization led me to search for other types of performances in tourism, where the salient mode is that of inscription (writing), rather than oral; that is to investigate the inscriptional—rather than oral—economy of tourism (as de Certeau would have put it).
Visitors' books are commonly acknowledged as interesting cultural artifacts. Yet they are also fascinating surfaces of and for communication, and, due to their position within various institutions, they also supply an interesting instance of a public communicative medium.
Instead of directly approaching the discourse embodied in the book, in the form of visitors' entries, and perform various discourse/content analyses on it, I wish to view this institutional medium primarily from material, spatial and technological perspectives. I choose this approach because the western logocentric bias, as Derrida has taught us, has limited our understanding of semiotics to the sphere of representation. Hence, in attending to non-representational aspects, or at least contextualizing representation in other modalities, what is meaning, and how it is accomplished situatedly can become clearer. Here's what I mean.
From a spatial perspective, there are two interlinked aspects I will take up here: the space for the medium and the space of the medium. The former space concerns the institutional (museological) space allocated for the visitor book, or the space in which the medium is actually located and operating. This is true for various objects, communicative devices included: where the device is located has much to do with how it is consumed and with the meaning it assumes (cf. domestic, public, ceremonial and other spheres). (See Silverstone and Hirsch 1992).
There is something interesting in this regard to tell of the visitor book I studied. While visitor books are usually located by the exit of the institutional premises, thus enabling to capture visitors' overall impressions of the sites, attractions and exhibits they have seen, the visitor book at the Military Commemoration Site illustrates an exception. Interestingly, it is not located by the exit, but to the contrary, it is strategically positioned in one of the museum's innermost halls (see Figure 1). It is thus located in the area of the museum which is variously marked as the space of the "holy of holinesses" of commemoration. This is where the Golden Wall of Commemoration and the Eternal

Flame are located, and where an audiovisual installation fills the inner halls with the fallen soldiers' names and ranks voiced through in a severe tone.

Figure 1: The visitor book's impressive installation in the "holy of holiness" of commemoration

In this ideologically suffused location, a *subtle yet dramatic manipulation* of the function of the visitor book is accomplished. Writing entries therein does not reflect so much hindsight impressions or comments concerning the museum, its exhibits, artifacts, etc. Rather, inscribing in the "holy of holinesses" now assumes a ritualistic dimension, that of participating (rather than reflecting) in nationalist ideology and militaristic commemoration. Indeed, the fact is that most of the entries cite national(ist) discursive idioms ("May They Rest in Peace," "Next Year in Jerusalem," "In Their Death They Commanded Us to Live"), present nationalist aesthetics (in the form of logos, such as the Star of David, the Menorah, the Israeli flag, and more), and address the dead soldiers directly in words of deep indebtedness and gratitude ("Thank you for dying for our country") (see Figure 2 below).

Figure 2: A visitor book opening: Spaces for performances

Now we can proceed to examine the space of the book. Figure 2 (above) shows the space the medium holds and affords, as well as how this space is consumed by tourists and museum visitors. Concretely speaking, each opening (spread) is 26 cm by 34 cm. When multiplied by 100 (pages), the book affords 9 square meters: the size of a small room. This space is consumed used through a number of embodied practices: leafing, reading, gazing, and inscribing (signing, writing, drawing, etc), which allow visitors to look through and mark their visit in this small room. These practices join and compliment other practices that concern *access*: walking, traveling, approaching, etc., by which tourists and various other visitors arrive at: the Military Commemoration Site / Jerusalem / Israel.

Since the book is located inside a museum, it is consumed the other museum exhibits are. Yet it is interactive, and it registers and keeps (at least for a year, which is the book's "pedestal life") visitors' entries. Thus the space it affords is transformative: Upon inscribing visitors' entries instantaneously *become exhibits*, and their inscriptions cross the phenomenological abyss between that which is fleeting and that which is permanent. This transformation is of particular significance because it echoes and is a part of commemorative semiotics: the living and the dead, the present (tangible) and the past (intangible). Those who are commemorated are not only the fallen soldiers, but also the visitors.

Approaching the visitor book's technological dimensions, might initially not seem suitable, for after all, there is no digitality or electricity involved. Yet what the medium of the visitor book accomplishes at the Military Commemoration Site, it achieves precisely due to its technological features. There are several important dimensions here, one of which I can discuss in the present scope, involving the *additive* (incremental) feature of the medium. The additive or incremental quality of the book suggests that it can be viewed as an earlier version of internet talkbacks. Previous comments are left on the screen, to be read by and commented on by later contributions. Yet what seems to me to be intriguing about this visitor book is that the visual language used therein is far richer than average talkbacks. The medium's additive capacity allows two notable processes to take place: First, as mentioned, it allows inter-discursivity and a correspondence in the visual language of the entries different neighboring entries "talk with each other," in various ways. Sometimes these are subtle ways and sometime bold, such as cases where inscribers (valdalistically) erase firmer entries.

Second, it allows the creation of a *collective document* (see Figure 2, above). Viewing Figure 2 leaves no doubt that the opening is a collective achievement. Unlike personal letters or journals, the openings of this visitor book illustrate a crowd. The illustration is synchronic, although the process of accumulation is diachronic. This collectivized feature too touches on and accomplishes something important in terms of the institution's ideological agenda. It suggests a sharedness, an open and accessible space where individual presentations all share the same space democratically. (Like in the socialist Kibbutzes of the past, no private spaces exist here). A sense of being together emerges from these openings, where visitors from near and from afar jointly share a space.

There are of course many problems with this notion of shared inclusive space. I will conclude this

discussion by indicating two of them. Problem one, which concerns inclusivity, touches on a paradox that is visible on the pages of the visitor book (see Figure 2, above), between the inscriber's individual identity, and the highly collectivized demand, embodied in national ideologies (Zionism, in this case). This is apparent in the many cases where inscribers delineate their entries (circling them, underling them, etc.), in order to distinguish them from others' entries (and perhaps to make them more attractive as well). So the "open space" of the visitor book elicits, somewhat paradoxically, rather creative techniques of preserving individual identity in the midst of nationalist collectivism.

Problem two concerns exclusivity and not inclusively. It's true that the visitor book is openly available to anyone who decides to visit the commemoration site. No apparent restrictions are being exercised. Yet during the month I observed visitors there, there were *only* Jewish visitors. No members of other religions, and surely no Palestinians, who live in near by neighborhoods, and who enjoy the park at the very vicinity of the site, came to visit the museum. (The only Palestinians I met during my field research there were convicted delinquents, serving their "community service" sentences in no less than an Israeli National Commemoration Site). So the spaces and stages offered by the book are actually not as "open" and "democratic" as they might initially appear. When it comes to fostering a sense of national identity and shared fate, the book operates through both inclusivity and exclusivity: the visitors (Jewish) have to cope with the collectivizing feature of the commemorative media (inclusivity), while the stags are completely homogeneous by keeping the "other" away (exclusivity). (Nonetheless, the "other," the Palestinian/the Arab, of course reenters and reappears on the pages of the book, via racist hate entries).

References

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