Chapter 4

The Semiotics of (Im)mobilities: Two Discursive Case Studies of the System of Automobility

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Introduction: textual auto(im)mobilities

This chapter explores two different yet related illustrations of textual (im)mobilities within the system of automobility. The term textual (im)mobilities relates to the occurrence of texts within systems of mobilities and to the ways that these texts become meaningful by using the unique resources that these mobile systems afford. In other words, this chapter investigates what happens when texts and (im)mobilities meet. The chapter argues that (im)mobile textual performances are accomplished, and that these performances concern the semiotics of texts as much as they concern the semiotics of (auto)mobilities.

The notion of (im)mobilities is explored through attending to mobile and immobile discourses that are part of the 'system of automobility' (Urry 2004), itself one of the most complex and under-researched mobility systems of late-modernity. As sociologists of mobility argue, automobility is the 'avatar of mobility' (Thrift 1996: 272). Automobility studies have rapidly developed during the last decade, suggesting insightful analyses into the formative role automobilities play in everyday life (Featherstone, Thrift and Urry 2005). The field employs various mobility sensibilities and sensitivities, dedicated to the empirical and theoretical study of mobilities, immobilities, and related concepts (proximities, connectivities, motilities, etc.), and of their consequences on contemporary societies. Specifically, works on automobility suggest a twofold appreciation of this concept whereby it is viewed simultaneously as a research paradigm (epistemological perspective) and as a social condition (a central characterization of sociality in late modernity).

The first case of textual occurrence to be explored concerns bumper stickers, which are short textual notices that are temporarily attached onto the external (rear) surfaces of cars. The second case concerns personal monuments which were erected in the memory of people who had died in car collisions, and are located by the side of the road. These cases illustrate textual mobilities and immobilities, as they ostensibly occupy two ends of the (auto)mobility continuum: while bumper stickers are generally viewed as cases of mobilized discourse, i.e. texts which follow the cars' mobilities, personal monuments are generally viewed as

cases of immobility, i.e. discourse that is inscribed onto monuments of stone and therefore unmovable (physically) and immobile (symbolically). Combined, these auto(im)mobile case studies suggest that the dialectics of mobilities and immobilities within automobility, are the *basic and defining features* of these public textual occurrences, and of the ways that they become socially meaningful or performative. These case studies also tell a story about the semiotic processes that transpire within automobility and about the politicization of mobilities.

Furthermore, both cases of textual occurrences assume meaning only under the conditions of *visibility* that are available in the system of automobility and are characteristic thereof. The notions of textual (im)mobilities and visibilities are linked, because visibility is what grants the spaces of automobility their status as public spheres, because visibility allows mobilities to be observed and detected, and because – with particular reference to textual occurrences – visibility suggests a degree of proximity by which reading (deciphering) these texts, or at least recognizing them as discursive occurrences, is possible.[1]

The present work furthers earlier investigations on the performances that texts inhabit in mobile socio-material systems. Earlier research probed commemorative visitor books that are located in highly symbolic sites, conceptualizing these books as an immobile platform located in a matrix of global travel, tourism, and mobilities (Noy 2008a). In another work, spoken (rather than inscribed) discourse was examined as it transpired in, and as part of the activities of, driving a car and of riding inside one (Noy 2009, forthcoming). These works share an ethnographic appreciation of (im)mobile (con)texts, and of how within these (con)texts and through the resources of (im)mobility meaning(s) is (are) created and communicated. Hence this chapter will try to 'read' texts as they extend unto the material (and other) realms of mobilities and immobilities, and suggest that they would remain quite meaningless if stripped away or decontextualized from their ecological and mobile 'place of being' (Heideggerian *Dasein*) or 'place of being on the move'.

As in earlier works in this field, this chapter's conceptual point of entry into the discussion of (im)mobilities of texts and the meanings they perform, concerns first and foremost the appreciation of the material dimensions of the texts, or the *materiality of texts*. This term denotes the material qualities of texts of different sorts, suggesting that these texts are not abstract semiotic entities. Texts make meaning insofar as they offer a decipherable code (i.e. language), which is implanted, engraved, written, inscribed, smeared, etc., in and on objects and surfaces, and is thus part of the actual social world. The appreciation of the materiality of texts and their embodied state in society, which is a post-structuralist appreciation, is presently inspired by two lines of research and theory. The first concerns works which evince a material, situated and interactional appreciation of discourse (see review in Noy 2008b); the second builds on Latour's (1987)

1 It is no coincidence that one of the leading sociologists in the field has also been influentially writing about visuality (in the context of 'the tourist gaze', see Urry 1990).

theorizing, and specifically on his view of the role documents play in science and in society.

(Auto)mobile methods

The research on which this chapter reports is part of a larger examination of semiotics and discourse in automobility. The methods used in this project are varied and are suited to fit the essentially mobile nature of the field (on 'mobile methods' see Noy forthcoming; Urry 2007: 39–42). Rather than 'freezing' social reality in order to 'experiment' on it, as traditional sociology has done, automobility research shows empirical sensitivities complemented by epistemological sensibilities to mobilities and related concepts.

The present research builds on ethnographic observations of and interviews with a range of social actors in automobility, that were conducted during the years 2004–9. These social actors include professional and laymen car drivers (57), passengers (in both private and public transportation), pedestrians (27) and car mechanics (6). With specific regards to the issues of bumper stickers (BSs) and roadside death monuments (RDMs) additional research was pursued in the following extent: 27 brief, on-road interviews were conducted in order to learn about BSs and related automobile practices. These exchanges took place in parking lots and in urban traffic lights, where moments of immobility were seized in order to afford interaction with drivers. The interviews (and accompanying photos) are usually taken from *within the author's car* during everyday traffic interactions in the city of Jerusalem (Israel). Since the research takes place *in situ* – that is on the road, special attention was paid to issues of safety, so that these interactions do not put anyone (interviewees and researcher in their capacity as pedestrians, passengers and drivers) at risk.

With regards to the study of RDMs, discursive and semiotic analysis of 58 RDMs (located mainly in rural and southern parts of the country) was conducted, complemented by 11 telephone interviews with social actors who took part in their construction (usually relatives of the deceased). Finally, as automobility pervades our everyday lives, my personal experiences and contemplations in and of automobility in Israel have also contributed to this chapter.

Bumper stickers: the mobilities of textual objects

In Israeli culture and especially in its political culture BSs are a celebrated phenomenon. The widespread use of BSs has received popular attention in the form of public discussions in the media and in popular songs, where the intensity

of their use and their oftentimes nationalist contents have been discussed.[2] BSs have also been researched, primarily in the fields of communication, discourse studies and folklore (Bloch 2000a, 2000b, Livnat and Shlesinger 2002, Salamon 2001). Reported findings indicate that between 30% and 80% of cars in Israel carry political BSs (Bloch 2000b: 435, Salamon 2001: 117). The variation may result from different periods when the samples were taken (in heightened political times there is a noticeable rise in the use of BSs), or from different urban locations of sampling, reflecting degrees of political involvement and forms of expression. However, even the lower end of the figures indicates rather high percentages of BSs usage on 'regular', everyday basis. Note that the figures refer to political BSs defined narrowly, that is to BSs that include explicitly political expressions. If BSs that are ideological in the larger sense are taken into account, the figures are even more impressive. Indeed, in what follows a broader definition of the political sphere is accepted, where various claims of identity and cultural preferences are also viewed as political expressions.

Bloch (2000b: 434) correctly traces the origin of the use of political BSs in Israel to the late 1970s, with the 'Peace Now' BS, which represented the Leftist political movement of the same name (Shalom Achshav in Hebrew). The widespread use of BSs followed, reaching the high figures that are reported in the research during the mid-1990s, following the major event that was the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin (1995). Further research has revealed how political meanings are communicated in Israeli's public sphere, how these short messages are discursively constructed, and how they assume meaning through intertextual references (such as paraphrases of contents and forms of earlier BSs). Yet it is worthwhile noting that in these multi-disciplinary contributions, very little reference is made to actual (im)mobilities, to the underlying infrastructure that enables them, and to semiotic implications that they carry within the realm of automobility.

As indicated earlier, the lead that facilitates the (re)conceptualization of the charged scene of BSs in Israel in terms of (im)mobilities concerns the *materiality of the actors* in the scene. Material sensibilities and sensitivities supply new perspectives into how meanings are created, sustained and negotiated in the local auto-BS scene. Hence in what follows, BSs will be conceptualized as 'textual objects' and not merely as 'texts'. This conceptualization will outline BSs' (im)mobile relations to other objects and their emergent meanings.[3]

The first two material aspects to be noted do not concern BSs themselves, but the materiality of cars, which are the *physical carriers of BSs*. Consider, for

2 I am referring in particular to the 'Sticker Song', which was written by one of Israel's foremost novelist, David Grossman, and performed by the famous rap group, the *Dag Nahash* (2004).

3 The literature offers a number of concepts describing the juncture of discourse, materiality and mobility, such as 'textual artifacts' (Silverstein 1996), 'graphic artifacts' (Hull 2003) and 'hybrid inscriptions' (Noy 2008b). I presently use the term 'textual objects'.

instance, Bloch's (2000b) account of the origin of political BSs in Israel, which lies in their widespread use by the Peace Now movement in the 1970s. Bloch accurately points out that BSs amount to a public medium of communication which is inexpensive, and which offers access to the public scene and is readily accessible to many citizens (Bloch 2000b: 443). However, in line with material considerations it should be noted that while BSs are admittedly inexpensive to produce and are usually distributed freely, *cars* are not so cheap and are usually not distributed freely. Hence, arguing for the wide accessibility of BSs evinces a naturalized (unproblematized) appreciation of the sphere of automobility and of the fact that what makes meaning is not 'texts', nor even the objects of BSs, but the *physical juxtaposition* of the textual object of the BS with the object of the car. Discussing BSs in relation to the leftist Peace Now movement (or to other social and political organizations), which initially used BSs in the late 1970s, remains incomplete without adding a neo-Marxist material sensitivity, which suggests the term 'bourgeoisie' be taken into account. Indeed, the leftist Peace Now movement consisted mainly of Ashkenazi Sabra Israelis (Israelis who were born in Israel but were of European background), of affluent quarters of (Jewish) society. This addition perspective sits nicely with the fact that mobilities of various types, and their accessories – cars and cars' BSs in this case – have always been a matter of privilege and of those privileged enough to enjoy them (cf. Urry 2004: 26).

Another contribution that material sensitivities give to the exploration of automobile BSs concerns the *volume of traffic*. While the figures mentioned earlier regarding the prolific spread of BSs in Israeli society are impressive, in the material context of automobility there is a missing link that concerns the density of the traffic and consequently the density of the *occurrences of BSs*. Consider that the local traffic congestion in Israel is approximately 128 vehicles per kilometre of road (or VKR) (measured in 2005–6).[4] This figure varies considerably across countries. For instance, Belgium, France, New Zealand, Poland, Spain, Syria, and the United States range between 20–40 VKR; Jordan, Mexico and the United Kingdom range between 60–90 VKR; and Germany and Hong Kong, China have above 210 VKR. These figures affirm the intensity of BSs on Israeli roads. Yet the point is not the specific figures, but the fact that the estimated percentage of BSs on cars means something quite different for the *actual experience* of people interacting within different systems of automobility. Without accounting for the material environment – car congestion, in this case – only a partial picture can be depicted with regards to the semiotics of (auto)mobility. The point is, again, that if BSs are detached from their physical carriers and their physical environment, the picture of how effective and meaningful they are is necessarily partial.

While these aspects attended to the materiality of cars, we now turn to the materiality of the BS itself, insofar as it is conceptualized as a 'textual object'. If BSs are objects of sorts, then according to Appadurai's (1986) influential thesis, they have a 'social life' that consists of spatial trajectories and paths of circulation

4 See Hamadi and Chittajallu 2008: 132–5.

that intersect with cultural, political and ideological semiotic grids. BSs are not merely 'texts' that are parts of 'systems of representation'; rather, they carry a value that is related to their quality of 'object-ness' and to their paths of circulation and mobility. This discussion enlarges the scope of mobilities with regards to BSs by addressing the mobility they embody over and above the mobility that is granted to them once they have been attached to cars. In other words, BSs' (im)mobility on cars' surfaces is only *one part of the overall mobility they enjoy*, and as we shall see, this fact is consequential in terms of the meanings they perform.

Consider how BSs arrive into the system of automobility. Paths of distribution of objects suggest various socio-spatial mobilities. Interviews with car owners and drivers indicated four major categories of distribution by which they attained their BSs. There are two modes of mass distribution of BSs and two modes of restricted or exclusive distribution. The first of the two modes of mass distribution concerns BSs' mobility along routes of distribution of mass newspapers. This form took place on a number of major national/political events (such as the Israeli invasions into Lebanon and Gaza), when BSs were coupled with the most widely distributed newspapers in Israel. At those times, anyone who bought these newspapers would have freely received stickers. This form of mass distribution is impersonal and accounts for some of the findings reported above, regarding the high percentage of BSs on Israeli cars.

Sixteen (of 27) interviewees indicated a second mode of mass distribution, which is of a personal nature. This mode concerns the distribution of BSs at urban junctions as part of national political campaigns. Recently, this mode of distribution was performed effectively by youths, who were mobilized by the nationalist Right wing movement which objected to Israel's withdrawal from the Occupied Gaza Strip (during August, 2005). As part of this campaign, the distribution of BSs at urban junctions proceeded on an everyday basis for a number of weeks, making effective use of the fact that cars must come to a stop when waiting for the green light, thus enabling pedestrians to approach them. In the terms used by Urry (2002), cars' temporal immobility offered occasions of 'co-presence' of pedestrians and automobiles, whereby the former could interact with the latter. As the campaign was intensive, nearly all drivers in the city of Jerusalem encountered these youths at one point or another. This implied that what is of interest is not so much the cars that had BSs, but rather those which *did not*. In light of the pervasive campaign, it became clear that cars which do not carry BSs are *saying something*; and that they belong to drivers who actively and repeatedly refused to put an anti-withdrawal BSs (which were usually also racist), on their cars. Hence, under conditions of mass distribution, sometimes the *lack of a BS* is indicative of an ideological stance and as such marks the vehicle that is BS-free.

While these modes of mass distribution reflect major events and political campaigns, most of the interviewees (21) indicated that they attained their BSs via limited modes of distribution. Two different types of sources were mentioned, both of which are of an exclusive nature. The first source concerns particular events which car owners (or someone related to them) had attended. The events

that were mentioned included a number of military ceremonies (the completion of infantry basic training phase, parachute course, and the like), political rallies and demonstrations and sport events in which BSs were given out freely. The second source representing an exclusive mode of distribution concerned particular places and attractions where BSs were offered (freely or with a charge). A visit to a Che Guevara Museum in Bolivia was mentioned, and so were visits to wineries in the Northern parts of Israel, to nature reserves, to opening parties for a number of local restaurants and bars in Jerusalem and welfare fundraising events.

Figures 4.1 and 4.2a supply illustrations of phases in the 'social life' of the textual object of the BS, as these take place on and off the road. Figure 4.1 presents the living room table in my apartment, during a political meeting with a candidate of one of the parties running for the parliament (the meeting took place on January 21st, 2009, three weeks before the general elections in Israel). The activists of the *Hadash* party brought various promotional items (pamphlets, shirts, notebooks, etc.), which were freely offered to those attending the event. Among them, the *Hadash's* red BS was also offered (appearing in the centre, near the empty coffee cup). The sticker has the party's name on it in both Hebrew and in Arabic, the text 'Building a New Left' (in Hebrew), and the party's webpage and icon. Note that the short text is a word play, because the Hebrew word for 'new' – *hadash*

Figure 4.1 Prepared for mobility: political BSs on living room table

Figure 4.2a (Auto)mobile traces of Shmeltzer's concert

Figure 4.2b 'I'm a Simple Jew'

– is pronounced exactly as the party's name. Also note the various promotional materials are mobile in different ways, such as shirts that are meant to be worn, and evoke different mobilities that require visibility.

Figure 4.2a is a photo that was taken near the Jaffa Gate by the Old City of Jerusalem in July, 2007. On the rear of a white Citroën, under the window, a white BS is pasted. The BS included two sentences, the first of which is larger and in Hebrew: 'I'm a Simple Jew.' Below, in smaller letters and in Yiddish (written in Hebrew letters): '*H'bin a Poshiter Yid*' (meaning the same as the Hebrew text). In the brief automobile interview, the driver, an Ultra-Orthodox Jew in his 40s, indicated that the sticker refers to an Ultra-Orthodox Yiddish pop star by the name of Lipa Shmeltzer, who recently released an album by this name (*H'bin a Poshiter Yid*). The driver got the BS at Shmeltzer's live concert.

Note that bumper stickers are only rarely located on cars' bumpers. Their preferable location is higher, in a more visible spot, usually on the rear window. This detail is in line with the appreciation of automobility as a highly communicative sphere. As Featherstone (2004: 8) notes, '[t]he automobile becomes a new form of communications platform with a complex set of possibilities', which include, on a basic level, 'the windscreen, windows and mirrors to the inter-automobile moving figuration of cars, and involve interactions and modes of presentation of the auto-self to others in the temporary "fluid choreography" of the shifting reference group of traffic'. It is within these visual affordances that BSs may flourish as they do. As indicated in the introduction, texts embody the notion of proximity because they are understood as codes that require up close visual attention in order to be deciphered. One of the local BSs humorously plays on this notion, as it read: 'If you can read this, you are too close!'

While the four modes of distribution described above offer socio-spatial paths through which BS move into and enter automobility, there are various modes through which BSs exit the system. Interviews with car owners, car mechanics and my own observations reveal three different types of events that are responsible for the removal of BS from cars, and thus for the completion of their 'social life'. The first and most pervasive event is that of the car wash (whether commercial or personal). Drivers indicated that when their cars are being washed they specifically remove BSs, either because these stickers are irrelevant (the event for which they were produced has passed, for instance), or because they were worn out and did not look nice or perform their communicative task effectively.

Two additional modes of removal of BSs were mentioned. The first is the active removal of BSs from cars by pedestrians who apparently did not agree with the sticker's message. From the experience of car owners with Leftish political BSs in Jerusalem (myself included), these BSs' are in use on car for little more than a few weeks before they are pealed off (sometimes with damage purposefully done to the car). Here, too, pedestrians interact with cars, making use of the fact that cars are at rest and that they are empty and not protected.

The second mode was indicated by Palestinian car mechanics (tinsmiths employed in East Jerusalem). This mode concerns cars that are sold by Jewish

settlers in the Occupied Territories to Palestinians. Since settlers' cars typically carry a number of political BSs, Palestinian auto tinsmiths indicated occasions when, after purchasing a car from settlers, their new Palestinian owners arrive at the garage asking for the removal of the stickers, in addition to the removal of other signs that indicate the ideology of the car's previous owners (such as the double shielded and darker windows, that are installed in settlers' cars in order to prevent injury from stones thrown at them). In other words, a re-doing or re-dressing of the object of the car takes place in these tinsmiths' garages, transforming the semiotic object of the car, enabling its mobility in different socio-ideological and national systems.

The socio-spatial paths that BSs travel on their way into automobility (distribution) and out of it are consequential in terms of the social meanings they perform. BSs enjoy mobility and have a 'social life' prior to their appearance within the system of automobility. This fact enhances the field of exploration of BSs, and the meanings that can emerge from these mobilities. These mobilities are nested within and built on *social networks and social travel*. In other words, there is a whole semiotic dimension to BSs which concerns their social mobilities prior to – and of course also during – their automobile phase. In this vein, consider the *Hadash* BS awaiting automobility on the living room table (Figure 4.1). This point in the life of the BS is a nodal one, because it lies – temporarily unmoving – between distribution and usage. BSs of this type can be traced back to particular social events and particular people who attended them and share similar social circles, class and ideologies. The same is true for the 'I'm a Simple Jew' sticker (Figure 4.2b). First, the driver's account was illuminating because the meaning of the sticker could not be inferred from its text. In fact, before the interview exchange I had thought of the text as one which belongs to Jewish racist BSs, many of which are visible on Israeli roads. Instead, the text indexes a very different discourse, one that concerns issues inside Ultra-Orthodox society, where it performs a subtle criticism by celebrating the common person as opposed to powerful rabbinical figures.

Second, what the driver verbally explained is implicated in the performance of the sticker as a material and mobile object, which is to say that it was given by someone in particular to someone else in particular at a particular (exclusive) social event. Of course, I did not know of Shmeltzer's concert, but this is precisely the point. Through circulation in an exclusive manner and within particular social networks, a crucial part of the semiotics of BSs is denied from general audiences. While research on BSs in Israel (above) stresses the popular and shared meanings BSs enjoy, the findings of this research indicate that meanings are shared – can only be shared – within particular social milieus, and there are degrees of implicitness of meaning that are concealed in the public sphere.

BSs' mobile meanings are therefore by no means limited to the meanings that are expressed through their content, or even to the intertextualities that they evoke. BSs do not amount to simple (textual) expressions in and of themselves, but to *mobile and material traces of events, places and peoples* (Noy 2007, 2008a).

These events are meaningfully deciphered by their selected audiences. Note that since a quarter of the cars examined in this research carried more than one BS (the remains of a faded green BS under the right window in Figure 4.2a can be discerned), these surfaces can be said to be telling of a number of events of which traces are co-present.

At some point during their social lives – after entering automobility and before exiting it – BSs and cars are coupled. This juncture is accomplished by the cohesive paste on the back of the BS, which, in socio-material terms, is an agent that accomplishes the temporal association of two separate objects. This conjuncture is also a case immobility, because in order to assume automobility BS must be well fastened unto cars' rear windows. Once on the car, it would be inaccurate to view the car as an 'object which has a sticker attached to it', inasmuch as it would be inaccurate to view the sticker as an 'object which has a car connected to it'. Neither view is accurate because the pasting of the sticker unto the car creates a new automobile actor: the BS-car. The new social actor amounts to a gestalt: to a whole that is more meaningful than the sum of its parts. The BS-car is a *discursive, social and oftentimes also political* vehicle. It embodies temporalities, such as those that are referenced via the paths and nodal events of the circulation of BS, and social networks. While the methods that were employed in this research did not allow the following of the routes and mobilities of the BS-car hybrid, it is reasonable to assume that they too follow paths of social networks through which BSs are mobilized (travel to and parking in workplaces, leisurescapes, schools, and to friends, etc.).

Textual immobilities: roadside death monuments in Israel

The second case study that illustrates the conjuncture of semiotics, texts and auto(im)mobilities is roadside death monuments (RDMs).[5] Commemoration monuments emblematically represent an attempt to capture and arrest activities and mobilities that are associated with life and living, and thus 'freeze' the memory of departed people or past events. Specifically, RDMs are erected in the memory of people who were killed in traffic collisions. They are typically located between 5–15 metres off the road, in a visible location, near the actual site of the collision. Their physical construction routinely includes a large stone on which personal information and the circumstances of the fatal collision are depicted. Oftentimes, icons and symbols that index automobility, the collision and/or the deceased are also included.

RDMs bring to the fore one of the incredibly dear prices that societies pay for automobility. Yet the problematic issue seems to involve not merely the endemic

5 I adopt the term RDM (following Reid and Reid 2001), from a number of terms that are used in the literature, because I reject the use of the term 'accident' (implying incidental causality).

collisions themselves, but their denial and erasure by powerful actors within the 'regime of automobility' (Böhm et al. 2006). As Featherstone (2004: 3) notes, the collision is denied,

> because it is not seen as a normal social occurrence, but more as an aberration. The victims are dispatched to the hospital, the car to the repair garage or scrapyard and the road is quickly cleansed of traces of the crash by the accident services and the 'normalcy' of traffic flow restored.

In the literature on RDMs, Henzel's (1991) work in North-East Mexico is notable, arguing that RDMs are complex semiotic constructions that embody secular commemoration. Later research examined various aspects, ranging from the motivations for the construction of RDMs, through the ideologies and meanings that underlie them and the concrete fashions by which commemoration is practiced, to comparative analysis (see reviews in Clark and Franzmann 2006, Hartig and Dunn 2002). The literature accounts for the emergence of RDMs in the 1980s–90s by (postmodern) tendencies for individualism in Western and Westernizing societies. The RDM is erected in order to tell a story of an individual, but as a social phenomenon it also tells the story of individualism. RDMs embody subversive and resisting voices, which challenge the erasure of the memory of those who were killed. The grassroot (non-institutional) type of activity that is involved in the construction of RDMs evokes a protest against normative and canonic types of commemoration. Oftentimes, these voices resist normative religious rituals of commemoration, usually in the form of Christian doctrines. RDMs also challenge the capitalist order, where the smooth and ceaseless operation of automobility is a crucial factor, regardless of the toll that societies must pay. RDMs 'endeavour to inscribe the site as a place of tragedy and remembrance, by refusing to erase the incident from public memory and allow drivers to relax back into the normal traffic flow' (Featherstone 2004: 3).

In Israeli automobile culture, RDMs became salient in the early 1990s as well – as were political BSs – as a result of the globalization of ideologies of individualism and privatization, and the accepted ways of celebrating them. Although the number of RDMs is continuously growing (there are presently about 1,000 RDMs in Israel), the only research conducted on the topic to my knowledge is Vardi's (2006) thesis focusing on personal versus collective-national memorialization. This is probably due to the historic hegemony of national and military memorialization in Israeli culture.

The first step in attending to the semiotics of immobility is acknowledging the *discursive nature* of these monuments. Memorials can perform effectively without linguistic engravements: various graphic icons and symbols can fulfill the goal of indicating what/who is/are commemorated. The case with RDMs is different because they are built in order to commemorate the *personal memory* of the deceased. This act necessarily concerns her or his personification, of which the foremost way is the evocation of the person's name. In the age of liberalism it is the

name and the autobiographical narrative that the name indexes, that supplies the common means of referencing individuality. RDMs' raison d'être is granting the deceased an individual identity, vis-à-vis the quantification of automobile fatalities in official records and in the media and the anonymous character of traffic (we usually do not know the names of people in cars). For this reason it is essential for the semiotic efficacy of RDMs that at least the deceased name will be specified. This is indeed the case with all the RDMs that I have recorded. While oftentimes RDMs tell a larger and more detailed story, the minimal discursive unit includes the deceased name(s), even if only the personal name.

RDMs effectively use the semiotic resources that are available in auto(im)mobilities. They do so via the use of one of the most emblematic embodiments of immobility, i.e. the memorial (or commemorative) monument, as it is located in one of the most emblematic embodiments of mobility, i.e. the system of automobility. Since traffic and the passing of cars are one of modernity's recognized symbols of fleetingness and evanescence, RDMs evoke the drama of immobility and the arresting of time in the heart of this foremost site of mobility.

In terms of signs in automobility, RDMs – like the traffic sign system – are reflexive in that they refer their viewers *back unto* automobility. RDMs do not invite people to purchase commodities nor to vote for politicians, but, like signs that indicate that a curve in the road is approaching or that a particular speed limit is set, they have an *event of automobility* as their reference. Uniquely, this event lies in the past and not in the future, thus running against the progressive (modern-liberal) ideology that automobility promotes. Put again, RDMs index an event that transpired on the road, and in this sense they tell a story not only of an individual person (or individualism), but also of an event of automobility – a constitutive event at that – the fatal collision.[6] RDMs can therefore be read as *documents* of a particular type, which engage in and offer an account of fatal automobile collisions. While it is clear that the conscious motivations behind the construction of RDMs revolve around the commemoration of those killed, their genre can also be understood as a semi-institutional document, located in the grey area 'between-and-betwixt' the formal system of traffic and personal commemoration. This document offers more than commemoration; it also offers ascriptions and the distribution of responsibilities with regards to actors in the scene of automobility.

When viewed in this light – as documents of this genre – the texts engraved on RDM interestingly correspond with another category of automobile texts, which also describe the events of the fatal collision and which also offer (in addition to descriptions) ascriptions regarding causes and responsibilities. Beckmann's (2004) intriguing work on the bureaucratic discursive reconstructions of automobile collisions, argues that the collision disrupts traffic and causes the dismembering of cars and drivers, which must be *reassembled by experts* in the form of reports that are produced in the aftermath of the collisions. With regards to fatal collisions,

6 See Brottman (2002), which is dedicated to the chilling cultures and aesthetics of car crashes.

Beckmann (2004: 92) rhetorically asks: '[t]he common journey of car and driver has ended with the accident – or has it just been interrupted?' In order to restore the physical flow of traffic and simultaneously in order to justify its price, the actors in the scene of automobility are transported (mobilized) away from the road (the physical scene), to various other theatres, such as courthouses, hospitals, police offices, laboratories and so on.

Beckmann (2004: 93, original emphasis) concludes that:

> '[w]ith the completion of the report form, the police officer automatically completes a *homogeneous* reality in which experts have agreed to take certain accident characteristics for "real" and "true" – *detached from personal interpretation.*' The objectivist and universalist genre of formal agencies' reports can be viewed as discursive performances which confront, but to some degree also complement the discourses that are performed via the RDMs. While the former establish the collision's 'objective truth' ('expert knowledge') the latter establish its 'subjective truth' ('lay knowledge'). Both, however, are engaged in power-struggle over sovereignty, knowledge and representation. Formal reports 'enable the governance of very specific social conflicts, labelled accidents. The classification and documentation of crashes is one central policy tool to reproduce a traffic system that has been, and still is, subject to a variety of controversial mobility views'. (Beckmann 2004: 95)

Surely, RDMs emerge as an alternative textual 'policy tool' and view, which (re)evaluate the fatal collision.

Figures 4.3 and 4.4 illustrate the play of (im)mobilities in RDMs' discourse of car collisions. These specific illustrations are located by the side of the highway on which I travel on a weekly basis on my way from Jerusalem to the college where I teach (located near the southern city of Sederot. These are two of six RDMs that I pass by on my way). These RDMs are located right off the road and are easily noticeable. While the arguments that tie their discourse to automobility are sometimes implicit and sometime explicit, the very location of the RDM in physical proximity to the road positions them within the semiotics of the automobility network. Their performance is thus accomplished indexically.

In addition to the spatial proximity to the road, the Ivannovs' RDM (Figure 4.3) accomplishes a meaningful act by textual and iconic reference to the collision and to automobility. In the top of the black plate an image of a (populated) car is describable. The image might be a reproduction of the Ivannovs' actual car, or an iconic reference to an automobile as such. In any case, the icon restores the actors – both car and people – to the state they were in prior to the crash (the 'ideal state'). Beneath it, the text, too, ties the monument to the event of the crash. The upper part is written in Hebrew: 'To the memory of Vitali and Natalya Ivannov who

Figure 4.3 'Forever with us': the Ivannovs' RDM

were killed in a car accident in this place. 28.1.2005'.[7] The lower part is written in Russian: 'Ivannov Vitali, Natalya. Killed 28.1.2005. You are forever with us. [We] remember. [We] love. [Your] children, brothers, parents'. These texts personify the dead in a number of ways: we learn who has been killed and that in this case the fatalities were two – a married couple with children; we learn that they were of Russian origin (note the code switch and the different tones in use in the different languages), and we learn of family ties and emotions working within the system of automobility (Noy forthcoming). Admittedly, emotions in automobility are not simply represented on the RDM; these memorials are an embodiment of emotions. According to the interviews, many of these monuments were constructed because of feelings of guilt that family relatives had felt toward those who were killed and the circumstances of their death.

7 While oftentimes the deictics 'here' or 'this' are used, automobility requires that RDMs will not be placed at the *exact* location of the car crash, which is on the road itself. Like the transposition made by documents, RDM is also located off the actual asphalt. I wish to thank Alina Liberte for her assistance in translating the text from Russian.

Figure 4.4 Ben-Simhon's RDM

In Figure 4.4 the juxtaposing of the RDM discourse with automobility is accomplished via iconicity (over and above its physical proximity to the road). While the text simply reveals the name of the deceased: 'To the memory of Ilan Ben-Simhon', the monument typically includes icons – in this case two similar steel icons of a tow truck – suggesting that the departed was a truck driver whose work was related to automobility. The only difference between the icons is that in the lower icon the personal name (Ilan) is inscribed diagonally on top of the towing track, as if being towed by it.

In both cases texts and icons reassemble and (re)claim the automobile actors – cars and people – prior to their breakdown. Hence these and other RDMs inhabit a point in the grid of automobile semiotics. In 16 (of 58) documented RDMs, authentic parts of the destroyed vehicles (cars, motorcycles and bicycles) were presented, usually welded into the stone. A multimodal type of document is produced, where the spatial location of the immobile text, together with material components of cars, challenge the official reports and suggest an alternative (im)mobilization and re-organization of the actors in the scene of the collision. If

collision documents reconstruct the driver-car pair, mobilize it and (thus) stabilize it *away* from the scene of the road, then RDMs do much of the same but insist on immobilization in proximity (i.e. within visibility) to the road.[8]

The process of documenting car collisions by experts (and laymen) relies on various (auto)mobilities. Physically, this is accomplished by the speedy arrival of various agents of automobility at the scene of the collision, such as police forces, First Aid and fire-force vehicles, representatives from insurance agencies, and, when there are fatalities, also a team of the Jewish ZAKA organization, which is in charge in Israel of collecting human remains 'in order to ensure a proper Jewish burial'.[9] So immediately upon receiving a report of a car collision, which creates an instance of immobility in the heart of automobility, a whole network of communications and automobilities is ignited, intended to remove and restore parts of vehicles and humans involved in the crash.

In a case I witnessed some time ago, a collision ignited a rather different system of automobilities. This occurred on August 23rd, 2008, while I was driving in my neighbourhood in (West) Jerusalem, around 6.30p.m. As I approached the traffic light, I observed that the car that was driving ahead of me and in the same direction tried to avoid stopping and waiting at the red light by bypassing the traffic junction. This illegal and dangerous manoeuvre includes taking a right at the traffic junction when the light is red (in the Israeli traffic system, vehicles in the lane turning right are usually not required to observe the light), doing a U-turn on that road to return to the junction and then turning (right) back onto the original road beyond the traffic light. The vehicle was a tow truck, the kind on which private automobiles are lifted and transported. But when the tow truck speedily crossed the lanes of the perpendicular road it hit a scooter that was driving there (a pizza delivery scooter).

As a result of the severe blow, the young scooterist lay on the road for a few seconds, unmoving. Having seen all of this happen, I immediately called the police and the First Aid emergency lines, reporting a car accident with an injured person. Also, I used my mobile telephone to take pictures of the vehicles involved. The police and the First Aid took their time, and after a few minutes had elapsed I called both agencies again. But I was not the only one making hurried phone calls from the scene of the collision. The young man who drove the assailant vehicle also made phone calls to friends of his, who were apparently also in the business of automobility. They arrived at the scene very quickly (there is a large industrial area with many car mechanics and garages nearby), and immediately started 'fixing' it. First, they encouraged the scooter driver to get on his feet, and to move off the

8 In a number of interviews with family relatives associated with the construction of RDMs, they indicated that they left their telephone number on the monument in case road workers or planners would wish in the future to make changes in the road. Hence, while monuments are physically and symbolically immobile, the dialectic of im/mobilities remain.

9 Quotation from www.zaka.us (accessed: January 27th, 2009). ZAKA is an Ultra Orthodox Jewish-Israeli organization, which has become highly visible on Israeli roads.

road and sit on a nearby pedestrian bench. At the same time, they started fixing the scooter and reassembling its broken parts. Within a few minutes, one could hardly tell that a serious collision had taken place. The police arrived a few minutes later. The officer (who was not in uniform and was with his family), did not leave the police van and instead of inquiring with the injured scooterist (still confused and shocked), had a brief exchange with those who tampered with the evidence. The ambulance too was late and the paramedic in charge insensitively insisted that the scooterist first admit that he wanted First Aid treatment (this is required by law). As the young driver hesitated (later telling me that he was not sure he wanted his workplace to know of the collision), the First Aid team left immediately without even examining his injuries.

The depressing emotions and helplessness that this episode raised were due to the fact that the worse part was not the preventable collision itself, but the criminal way it was covered up, the lack of minimal civic collegiality on behalf of the perpetrators, and the outrageous negligence evinced by the authorities. That aside, the point of the story is that car collisions ignite different types of (auto)mobilities, which share the task of *erasing the collision, its remains and consequences, and reconstructing the actors in a way that satisfies the needs and approaches of the powers that be*. This move of reconstruction can be accomplished by official agencies or, as with the collision I witnessed, by informal actors who can effectively operate within automobility. In light of Beckmann's (2004) type of analysis, in this case too the witness(es) – myself and others – stopped their cars and, moreover, disembarked from them. This means that the collision did not sever only the scooterist and the scooter, but also disrupted other actors in their scene from their vehicle, thus ad hoc (re)configuring the relationship between various vehicles and their drivers within automobility.

Conclusions: towards the *motile-text hybrid*

From a semiotic perspective, discourse and mobility are interlinked and are mutually informative: discourse charges mobility with meanings and vice versa, mobility charges discourse with meanings. What eventually performs meaning in the social realm is neither one (when taken separately), but a gestalt combination of both, which can be called the *(im)mobile-text hybrid*. Since the concept of motility nicely captures the dialectics and complex (paradoxical) interrelations between mobility and immobility, the *(im)mobile-text hybrid* can also be called the *motile-text hybrid*. Reciprocal semiotics, which underlie the emergence of the motile-text hybrid, can be studied only when methodological sensitivities and epistemological sensibilities are practiced in relations to both discourse and (im)mobility.

First and foremost, research must resist the temptation to analyse discourse outside the ecological environment wherein it functions performatively. As the case studies illustrate, there is never an authentically abstract or unmoving discourse. If the text is abstracted from its situated, mobile performance – for instance, by

neglecting to account for symbolic and material values of the private automobile – the semiotic picture remains crucially incomplete. In the present case, this abstraction concerns the fact that insofar as BSs are material objects, they come to be socially meaningful as they are physically attached to other objects which are, in one way or another, part of the system of automobility. By succumbing to the temptation to analyse texts of sorts by their representational value, texts are actually decontextualized, which, in terms used in this chapter, means that they are moved (transposed), by the authority of the researcher. This in itself is not necessarily an error (cf. Latour 1987). However, this means that reflexivity is required in order to trace the translations (in the Latourian sense), transpositions and mobilities that the researcher her- or him-self has endowed.

This is true for exploring mobility as well. A mobility sensitive perspective suggests a qualitatively different type of appreciation than that which traditional research would arrive at. There are various terms through which these differences can be discussed, but basically, the mobility paradigm and within it the field of automobility is interlinked to other cutting edge developments. These include material culture and studies in society, science and technology. These approaches reject traditional (structural) focus on systems of representation. Mobility studies focuses less on *what* this or that means, and more on how the textual object of the document moves, in what circles of distribution, in what trajectories of power, to what aims, with what authority, and what types on mobilities and immobilities are at play as it travels. In the accelerated world of late-modernity, these qualities are formative in terms of creating meaning. The qualitatively different type of knowledge that these sensibilities and sensitivities produce is evinced in the different approaches to BSs and RDMs employed above. Recent publications dealing with these topics, some of which have the title 'mobile discourse', miss the point because their appreciation of mobility is limited to a metaphoric allusion, which is usually restricted to only one mode of mobility. Of my own research experience I have learned how different findings and discussions emerge when more or less the same objects or texts – or textual objects – are under examination from different approaches.

The motile-text hybrid proposes that mobilities are discursivized and socialized, and for this reason they are also multiplied. After all, accounting for the materiality of the motile-text hybrid is only the first stage. That fact that these textual objects are discursive multiplies their mobilities and brings into their semiotic performance imagined, emotional, intertextual and other mobilities. In fact, in many ways texts make the mobile object socially hearable and visible. Note that this touches on the paradox of proximity of the motile-text hybrid in automobility: RDMs and BSs invite viewers to read their inscriptions, which can be accomplished only when very close. And yet in both cases this type of proximity is downright unsafe.

Lastly, in a recent critical appraisal of *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Thrift (2004) rejects de Certeau's (1984) strong discursive proposition, yet he suggests that other types of discourse are infiltrating automobility through the many high-

tech components (and their software texts) that are nowadays installed in cars. While this perspective is promising, this chapter attended to low-tech types of auto(im)mobile texts. The proposition is that regardless of whether the discourse is located on car rear windows or in CPUs under the hood, or whether it is high-tech or low-tech, as the research and theorizing of automobility expands we acknowledge the enmeshment of materiality, discourse and (auto)mobility in establishing meanings in situated ways, embodied in the *motile-text hybrid*.

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