

On Driving a Car and Being a Family: An Autoethnography

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Driving a car and riding inside one strike most of us as utterly mundane activities, about which little can be said and from which even less can be studied. Except for a number of scholars who have “everyday life” as their primary site of investigation, most look oddly at investigations of such routine activity as car-driving. This is certainly the case where driving is pursued in everyday urban settings, or settings that do not include any outstanding routes, events, or destinations. These eventless events are perhaps the epitome of the banality of routine urban life. Such are the trips I wish to discuss in this chapter. Specifically, the trips I want to discuss took place during the spring of 2006, when I would take my then-first-grade daughter, Noa, to her school. Although only few years have passed since, if I had not taken notes at that time, none of those mundane occurrences would have been remembered, or survived for reflection. This is true simply because there was nothing in particular to remember or to report about.

As Michel de Certeau (1984) famously argued, this quality of mundaneness, which is a consequence of the structure he called the “Ordinary,” is nothing less than an ideological structure located at the political, moral, and ideological base of late modern life. In this structure, ordinary activity is unsigned, unreadable, and unsymbolized (xvii). If no one attends to it, it dissolves unattended, and we are gradually less and less informed about the practices and the environments that shape our lives, about the meanings they embody, and about the historical struggles in which we engage through them. Autoethnography, I argue, is a critical component of this endeavor.

Addressing motion itself as it is embodied in modern transportation systems is done in this chapter by examining the social practices and material settings of everyday car travel. In what follows, I argue that different social systems are embodied by and performed in the same place and in the course of the same interaction while driving. My aim, which is to show autoethnographically how multiple and situated social roles and meanings emerge in and through car-driving, will be accomplished by looking *inside the car* and by addressing how people *inside it* make use of the social possibilities and material affordances that are available by the car. This I accomplish through the sensitivities that reflexive and autoethnographic methods make available. Hopefully, with the help of reflexive methods I will be able to draw a *sensitive* portrayal of the inside of the car, that is, a portrayal that addresses the

senses.

I argue that there are two social systems that emerge as relevant to this inquiry, which are juxtaposed in the events of taking my daughter to school. These social systems are the family, on the one hand, and transportation and specifically automobility, on the other. By referring to the family and the transportation as social systems, different roles, practices, meanings, spaces, and power relations are referred to. Because both systems are mutually informative, studying the interplay between them is illuminating. One can gain insights into families from studying cars and vice versa: the practices of driving can be understood when observing families. In fact, in what follows these systems emerge as enmeshed in each other, and are only analytically describable; in the reality of everyday life families and cars are mutually constitutive.

I use the term “system” following John Urry’s (2000) influential thesis, concerning the “System of Automobility.” According to Urry (2004:26), the automobility system is “an extraordinarily powerful *complex* constituted through technical and social interlinkages” (emphasis in original). Urry suggests a notion that is holistic, and that consists of multitude of sites, actors, spaces, practices, and representations, all of which are loosely (inter)connected, and comprise, together, a whole that is larger than its parts. While there are other possible conceptualizations of the term system, I find Urry’s lead productive because it is conceptualized specifically in relation to transportation. In addition, Urry does not limit the system to “external” influence, but on the contrary, he necessitates linkages with other sociomaterial systems for its vitality and operation. Hence, it establishes a heterogeneity and multiplicity of interconnected and interconstitutive networks, which loosely link practices, meanings, and material objects and settings that might otherwise be rendered unrelated.

Autoethnography as a Tactic of Everyday Life

In the ensuing discussion I use two excerpts taken from my field notes, where I wrote my impressions of the motorized trips with my daughter to school. I use reflexive autoethnographic methods; methods where the observer is also an actor in the observed scene, for a number of reasons. First, reflexive methods allow us access to knowledge that might be otherwise inaccessible and undocumentable, including feelings, daydreaming, emotions, and the like, particularly as these emerge in intimate relationships. Reflexive and autoethnographic methods allow getting “into the head” and body of the researcher as a social actor, and gaining an insider’s perceptive. The

perspective of/from the inside is of unique significance in the research of automobility, which has notoriously centered around quantitative research of the outside of vehicles. This type of research has systematically neglected dealing with activities, emotions, and perceptions that occur inside the car (Sheller 2004 and other chapters in Featherstone, Thrift, and Urry 2005).

In de Certeau's terms, observing and documenting everyday occurrences that happen to one's self amount to a "tactic." Unlike the "strategy," which is an institutional activity that has power working for it (scientific discourse included), the tactics are everyday activities that are temporal and elusive; they are in the service of individuals who try to cope with hegemonic systems and "turn events into opportunities" (xix)

Second, because I am an independent scholar, my research expenses are funded solely by my personal budget—or, more accurately (and more relevant to this research), my family's budget. Under these limitations, researching everyday events suggests a feasible possibility and a way of making virtue out of necessity!

The Domestic(ated) Car

While little can and needs to be said here in terms of the relationships between the object of the car and the system of transportation—the former being a central actor in the latter—I wish to elaborate a bit about the relationship between the car and the family. The car offers a domestic(ated) space of intimacy that extends the family's (stationary) spaces of residence. One needs to merely observe how family members jam themselves into the car in the mornings—each on her or his way to a different destination—to see that the car is an extension of sorts of the house. Different concepts have been suggested regarding these relationships. Jean Baudrillard (1996:67), for instance, argues that "[t]he car rivals the house as an alternative zone of everyday life; the car, too, is an abode...a closed realm of intimacy" (see also Paul Virilio's notion of the "domestic car" Redhead 2004:116). For both Baudrillard and Virilio the car offers a small space that replicates the spaces (rooms) and the objects that are typical of modern houses (a "duplication of accessories" according to Virilio and Redhead [2004:116]). Likewise, the activities in the car are similar to some degree to those that transpire in everyday domestic spaces, including interactions and conversations, playing, and more. While I tend to view the car as a continuation of the family's spaces—an additional room perhaps—Baudrillard and Virilio view cars' spaces as competing or alternative spaces. The point, however, is that the interior of the car resembles the appearances and functions of the interior of house

rooms, both occupied and inhabited by members of families.

In the heading above I use the inflection “domestic(ated)” simply to indicate that as a technical invention, the motorcar was not intended to perform “socially” (as is the case with many technological inventions, such as the telephone; see Fischer 1994). As Laurier and colleagues (2008:2) recently noted, cars have “become places we inhabit without necessarily being places designed to be habitable.” I therefore do not argue that the car is essentially domestic, but that its appropriation by families domesticates it time and again, each and every time it is used.

Traces inside the Car

Before I attend to *inhabited motion* in and of the car, an observation regarding the domestication of the car is due. The observation concerns the inside of the parked car, which is my 1996 black Fiat Punto. It is a small car, with manual gear, and a 1.2 liter engine.



Figure 1: The outside of the Punto (Yael waving from the inside)

I bought it 6 years ago, from a sleazy wristwatch merchant, who had on his wrist a watch worth a dozen times the value of the Punto he was selling. The

observation entails everyday artifacts that are not part of the car, and that their laying about therein amounts to a phase in their biography (Appadurai 1986). A list of these objects, found in my car on a morning in the spring of 2006, includes the following:

- Seven empty bottles of mineral water;
- Candy wraps, parts of dolls, and a few games on the back seat;
- Noa's new scooter, made of iron, on the back seat floor, folded in an embryonic posture;
- A number of parking tickets on the dashboard;
- A number of seminar papers in pink and yellow nylons folders below, on the floor.

The objects given above tell us something about the meaning of the interior space of the car, how is it used and by whom. If I did not indicate earlier that this list is the contents of the interior of a car, it could have easily been thought of as a list of objects found in a (messy) family storeroom. Indeed, while writing it I feel a bit embarrassed about what the readers might think of me and of the car (I want to add explanations and accounts). This tells something of the intimacy of the space, and how describing it compromises something private.

Yet the messiness of these objects actually makes some sense in terms of functionality of interior (sub)spaces. Noa's (then 6 years old) and Yael's (my younger daughter, then 2 years old) traces—including dolls, candy wraps, and Noa's new scooter—are expectedly found in the back seat, which is the children's scene in the car; parking tickets and seminar papers are in the front, near the driver, where objects related to driving and work life would be found; mineral water bottles, which indicate that I spend enough time in the car so as to have to take care of drinking water, are also located near the driver. Like my daughters' candy wraps, the bottles tell that the car is not simply a vehicle for transportation, but also a place inhabited, a place where consumptions and other practices, such as playing with dolls and talking, transpire. These subspaces suggest heterogeneity of functions and meanings in a space that is physically limited, but not dull.

On the Way to School: Interactions and Inter(e)motions

The excerpt below describes occurrences that took place during a morning like many, after I took Yael to her preschool, a short stroll from our apartment, and then returned home and took Noa in the car to school. Orly,

my wife, would leave off early for work. This explains why there are only two family members partaking in the conversation reported shortly. This is a typical state of affairs of everyday life of urban families, where, during weekdays, only precious time is spent together as a whole. It is during weekends, holidays, and other special occasions that families spend time together, which indeed make for festive occasions where family-ness is celebrated (Haldrup and Larsen 2003).

The trip to Noa's school, which lasts about 15 minutes, is a routine urban drive, rather irritating due to morning congestion in the narrow and ill-maintained Jerusalem streets. The following strip includes excerpts from a conversation, and some reflection, from that period.

* * *

"Daddy?"

I hear her low voice coming from behind, though I can't see her. I've been humorously contemplating installing a double rear view mirror, like the ones Taxis have, so that I'll be able to look through two rear angles and not one, and see both the rear of the car (outside the vehicle), and the rear seat (inside the vehicle).

"Yes, sweetie," I answer.

"Can Nitzke come to visit me today?" She asks with the right touch of a melodious plea to her tone.

"Great. That's a great idea. I'll call Ruthi to see if she's available this afternoon, ok?" I reply/ask.

"Ok."

I let the car slide a bit forward toward the car in front of us. It is decorated with orange strips and black flags, and in it I see a large male driver with a large skullcap. A typical morning traffic jam, with cars honking, nerves and everything, by the old train near the Repha'im Valley junction.

I insert the cellular earphone into my ear, and I press the green bottom and hear the "peeps," which means I'm connected.

"Hi Ruthi. Good morning. What's up? It's Chaim, Noa's father."

"Hi, how've you been?" She is driving Nitzan to school and she sounds in a hurry.

"Hmm, Ruthi, I wanted to ask, hmm, Noa suggested that we meet Nitzke after school, and I wanted to ask if that's ok with you, or if you have any plans or something?"

"Hmm, I'm sorry. On Tuesdays Nitzke has Judo classes."

"Aaah, ok. Simply Noa thought about it, and so I wanted to check."

"Sorry,"

“Never mind, no.”

“Maybe we’ll plan for another day?”

“Yes, we’ll talk.”

“We’ll talk. Bye.” I press the phone’s red button.

“Mmmh, sorry sweetie,” I return to Noa, and now I too add a touch of a melodious plea to my tone.

Later on our way we pass three speed bumps. They are located one after the other on the same road, a few minutes’ drive away from school. Passing on top of them, preferably fast, is an amusing attraction for Noa. Like her mother, Noa loves amusement parks and rides, where she experiences tilting and jerking sensations. The bumps supply a bit of this sensation.

As we approach the bumps I announce: “Hey, Noa, look, the bumps! Are *you* ready?!” Noa knows what’s at stake, and utters a sound of excited anticipation. This is her reply. She urges me to drive faster, so passing the bumps will be felt more effectively. This I do, and the first and second bumps are a success: things inside the car—including Noa and me—are up in the air for a few milliseconds, and both the car and the things in it make the adequate noise as they land. Noa utters an excited chuckle of jubilation. The third speed bump is always a disappointment because it is rather flat. But Noa is satisfied. She had a bit of an amusement park ride experience on the way to school.

Daddy-Driver

The interaction above proceeds with an address directed at me. While Noa could have made the request directly, she begins with an address, namely “Daddy?” This is a situated choice, which, in the context of car conversation, carries particular consequences. The settings of the interior, notably the physical divide between front and back seats, implies that everyone faces the same direction and little room is available for movement. As a result, there is usually no direct eye contact between those in the back and those in the front. While the classic settings of interpersonal communication are those of face-to-face interaction (Goffman 1959), the settings in the car create a normative condition where we have face-to-back interaction (between front and back seat occupants, and side-to-side interaction between same-seat occupants). The lack of direct eye contact, so central to face-to-face interaction, means that interactants are not aware of each others’ availabilities in terms of engaging in conversation. This condition requires that more checking be done before actually engaging in interaction. This is why an address is certainly in place, both checking and demanding my availability.

But addressing me specifically as “daddy” (*aba* in Hebrew) also establishes

gendered identities and social roles. The evocative “daddy” is an utterance that (re)establishes simultaneously the roles of child and male parent. These roles index the social system of which they are a part—that of the family, which is hereby being performed. The reply, “Yes, sweetie,” confirms this. Father (*aba*) is now available for conversation: he confirms that there’s an open channel of communication and he acknowledges occupying the role of father in the interaction.

Performed inside the car, this exchange establishes the power relations that are characteristic of both the automobility and the family as patriarchal systems. It is no coincidence that the child (in this case a female) is at the back seat, and the parent (in this case a male) is up front by the wheel. Occupants of the back seats enjoy less privileges in terms of viewing the road, and have far less access to the car’s systems and devices (both those relating to driving and other features such as playing the radio and the CD).

These power relations are shaped by the “architecture of visibility” (Laurier et al. 2008:9), which form the situated politics of viewer/viewed. As I indicated earlier, face-to-face interactions are infrequent in the car, and the configuration of looks between the front and back seats usually includes mediated, face-to-mirror interaction. When in the car, my daughters routinely try to avoid being seen by me through the mirror, which they accomplish by squeezing themselves to the sides of the back seat. Also, they sometimes whisper to each other. They thus practice whatever freedom they have by avoiding my visual (and acoustic) surveillance. This is why I sometimes think of the double-lens mirror that is mentioned in the excerpt. These mirrors, which are usually installed in taxi cabs, allow a broad view of the back seat. Such optical devices indicate that the space of the vehicle’s back seat is as much a sight of visibility as is the road, or, put differently, that for taxi drivers the inhabited road should be monitored inasmuch as the back seat.

Noa then proceeds with the request, which concerns arrangements for her to meet her friend Nitzan (fondly nicknamed Nitzke) later that day. The request gives us a clue as to what is on the mind of the 6-year-old passenger. On the way to school, Noa is already contemplating the way *back* from school. It might be that she is bringing together the beginning and the conclusion of her school day, which brings her to contemplate what to do in the afternoon. It might also be that she had made previous requests to see Nitzan, before we entered the car. Car conversations oftentimes reverberate conversations that had occurred earlier, both in prior trips and before embarking (Laurier et al. 2008:18). This occurs often in our family, as different moods and emotions, such as Noa’s or Yael’s frustration when we do not agree to something they want in the morning, or our frustration at their slow pace of getting ready to

leave the house, are carried from the apartment into the car.

Having Nitzke come over has consequences in terms of both the transportation and the family systems: a positive answer confirms the parent's approval to have a friend over, and the driver's approval of picking up both girls after school, and taking the guest back to her home when the visit ends. These are of course different considerations that demand different consents, and relate to the systems evoked in and through the interaction.

Calling Nitzke's Mom

My consent is followed by an action, namely contacting Ruthi, Nitzan's mother. But before I do so, there are things that need to be attended to immediately. The jammed traffic has begun moving slowly, and I slightly lift my leg from the brake pedal and let the car slide forward a bit. Here is a case where events that concern the system of transportation, and occur outside the car/to the car, impinge on the interaction inside it, and demand the driver's attention. As Laurier (2004) observes in his research on people who spend hours doing office work in the car while driving UK highways, occasionally traffic-related occurrences intervene with the office work done in the car. In these occasions, the attention of those by the wheel shifts from office work to driving, or, in the terms employed here, from the roles that relate to the work system to the roles that relate to the transportation system. Although plain, the maneuver requires my action momentarily, and I am drawn from the inside of the car, where Noa and I are interacting, to the traffic (interacting) outside it. This is a shift between the roles of the parent and the driver, where the latter's perspective now assumes the foreground. Oftentimes these shifts are marked by such utterances as "just a sec, sweetie, I'm driving."

The driver is establishing communication with someone outside the car via the cellular telephone, but at the same time he is also looking outside. What the driver now sees is a car that has a number of political bumper stickers and ribbons and flags on it (in light of the heated culture of political bumper stickers in Israel, this observation is common, more so in Jerusalem). The small black flags and the orange-colored ribbons represent ultra-right-wing political association (usually stuck on cars of orthodox Jewish settlers in the Occupied Territories). Like political bumpers, flags and ribbons make use of the performative quality of the infrastructure of automobility, which is a consequence of its high degree of visibility. These (political) communicative devices teach us that driving is as much about seeing and showing as it is about getting from one place to another, and that much of what goes on in the road is, one way or another, political.

A feature of the dominant mode of automobility's visuality concerns car windows' two-way transparency. Not only are bumper stickers available for observation, but also some of the *inside* of others' cars. Here it gets tricky, as Katz (1999) shows, because what we see is usually ambiguous, a fact that allows speculations and projections, and contributes to the construction of other cars' interiors as fertile resources for imagination and daydreaming.

Finally, there is also a *reflexive* quality to the activity of looking *at* and *into* others' cars. For it might well be that they, too, are looking *at* and into *our* car. Here again, the (external) appearances of the car and the (internal) contents are interlinked.

I will refrain from elaborating further on the conversation with Ruthi, but I will indicate that throughout it the two roles—now (with two parents on the line) doubled—are in (inter)action. Both Ruthi and I are parents and drivers simultaneously and intermittently. We both need to take care of our families and our moving cars, and we both have to talk and coordinate activities with each other as both parents *and* drivers.

Speeding over Speed Bumps

The last event reported in the excerpt concerns the speed bumps we pass on the way to school. Here the roles of father and driver are juxtaposed in a way that I find fascinating. Speed bumps, like traffic lights, lanes and signposts, are an integral and mundane part of the transportation infrastructure. This means that we usually pass them without noticing. Yet sometimes and under particular circumstances, we “turn events into opportunities” (de Certeau 1984:xix), or in terms of objectification, we embed objects into our life worlds (Tilley 2006:60). On this morning, the particular circumstances that are involved are emotional, and concern my feelings as a father toward my daughter. Recall that a few minutes ago I was not able to successfully complete Noa's request regarding meeting her friend. And I now feel guilty of having disappointed her. It is with these feelings, *fatherly emotions*, that I approach the speed bumps as a *driver*. The emotions play a pivotal role here in shaping the driver's decisions and behaviors (Sheller 2004).

As we approach the speed bumps, I draw Noa's attention, foregrounding the bumps and the occurrence of passing over them against the routine of “everyday” car travel. This is how I succeed in awaking in Noa a sense of anticipation in the midst of a routine. The latter is fragmented *from within*, by highlighting one of its elements, and suggesting an encounter that is improvised and unexpected. A truer phenomenologist than me would point out the evocation of vertical motion in what is otherwise a plain of horizontal

movements, in disrupting the order of everyday driving.

In this case the driver, through the set of possibilities that are available to him, *helps* the father (defined as well by a set of possibilities and commitments), in becoming a *satisfying/satisfied parent*. If the plan to meet Noa's friend has failed, perhaps there is something else that father can do to make her happy. The speed bumps emerge in the driver's consciousness as a timely resource, and the driver speeds the car in order to make the most of this opportunity. As vividly described in the excerpt, this is indeed what happens. Passing on the speed bumps in a speed that is higher than a "routine" speed produces the hectic consequences—psychical and embodied—that the father had wished for. And the daughter is merry.

What is so interesting here is the quality of the interconnection between the roles performed by the person behind the wheel. Unlike most instances that come to mind (including the example above and Laurier's [2004] examples), the driver here *lends help* to the father. The roles that are at play here are interestingly *complementary, or mutually enhancing*, and not exclusive or impinging.

Conclusions: Driver-Father

In this chapter I explored the domestic(ated) car as a lived and inhabited space. Following Urry (2004), I employed a systemic autoethnographic approach in the capacity of observing and understanding spaces, interactions, materials, and roles in and around the car. This approach allows a synthetic, rather than analytic view, that celebrates diversity and multiplicity. This was evinced in the twofold roles I examined: that of the parent/child, and that of the driver/passenger. These roles were both enabled by and embodied through the two systems found relevant to this inquiry: family and automobility. Of course, in different empirical explorations different systems may emerge as more or less informing, and with them different roles, meanings, and practices.

Studying the space of the car requires overcoming the externalities of cars (Miller 2001), or surfaces (Warnier 2006), and attending with detail to what is found and to what occurs inside the car. Cars have been traditionally studied from the outside, in terms of their technical performances, and their relation to transportation infrastructures. Acknowledging interior life and sociality of cars by way of autoethnography means weaving their inside and their outside together (it is in the inside of the "container" that things are transformed, mixed, and sometimes assimilated [see Warnier 2006]), and reconnecting the personal quality of the car with the public domain of the road. As Laurier and

colleagues (2008:3) nicely put it, “the outside doesn’t happen without the inside: without the local organization and activity of the car, the external concerns of those who study transport, disappear.” This was achieved by attending to two excerpts that move from looking *at* the inside of the car, to looking *in* it and *from* it.

Exploring car travel through a reflexive ethnographic approach, which specifically captured a father-daughter conversation, turned out to be illuminating because the conversation was produced in the car. More conceptually accurate, my exchanges with Noa are illuminating not because they took place simply *in* the car, but because they are *part* of the events that take place therein, including driving and being a passenger. Thus conceptualized, the ontological status of the “car conversation” carries twofold consequences: it teaches us about the (situated) nature of conversation and about and the (interactional) nature of car travel. As I indicated in the introduction, this choice is best thought of in terms of a de Certeauan “tactic,” and not as a research method; it was not conducted in order to learn about a given condition, as it was an act of endowing the condition with meaning.

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