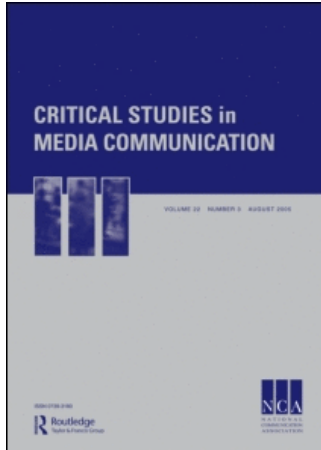


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# Mediation Materialized: The Semiotics of a Visitor Book at an Israeli Commemoration Site

Chaim Noy

*This article deals with visitor books as a dynamic medium of communication, and explores how material aspects of such a book—including its physical affordances and the spatial and institutional environment in which it is located—affect its capacity to create and mediate social meaning. In line with recent studies that set out to rematerialize communication and its devices, and, more specifically, to examine writing as an embodied communicative practice, it is argued that material considerations, while frequently overlooked, constitute preconditions of communication, and are organic to semiotic processes and formative in shaping them. The data analyzed are entries in, and observations on, a visitor book located in a war commemoration museum in West Jerusalem, Israel. It is demonstrated that, within the context of a national commemoration site, the visitor book proves to be a fascinating medium of inscriptive communication which is manipulated to serve as a cultural site of nationalist participation, commitment, and performance. The article draws on sensibilities from material and technological literature in order to shed light on the ways in which individuals interact with written environments and technologies.*

*Keywords:* Writing; Materiality; Affordances; Semiotics; Commemoration; Mediation

## Introduction

Widely acknowledged as interesting cultural artifacts, visitors' books constitute fascinating surfaces of and for communication. They are an interesting instance of a public and institutional communicative medium, typically found in institutions that exhibit acknowledged aesthetic, educational, or emotive attractions, such as

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museums, exhibition halls, and galleries. These attractions supply the “text” on which the visitors are invited to comment in the visitor book. *The Oxford English Dictionary* (1989, p. 696) defines the visitor book as a “book in which visitors may write their names and addresses and sometimes comments.” While this laconic definition may be historically accurate (MacDonald, 2005, p. 121; Woodruff, 1993), entries inscribed in visitor books today amount to much more than basic personal details and occasional comments, and include highly charged emotional and ideological impressions, suggestions, and narratives. Hence, beyond the basic functions of surveying visitors and eliciting feedback, the medium’s consumption and use give rise to additional semiotic attributes and related social functions, much as with other communicative media.

This broadening of the social meanings and functions of visitor books as a specific situated communicative medium is evinced not only in relation to the contents and genres of the texts therein. It also extends to the visual, namely graphic, modalities through which utterances are expressed and aestheticized and, overall, to the mediative processes that emerge in and through the usage of this particular medium. This article focuses on the wide range of characteristics and circumstances that account for this semiotic broadening, including the particular physical qualities and technological affordances that characterize the visitor book as a concrete device, the institutional setting of the device and its presumed meaning as an embedded object, and larger considerations involving the nature and ideology of the institution in which the medium functions.

In what follows, I argue that visitor books are dynamic spaces of articulation and display that serve as channels of communication between—and the constitution of—various social actors and entities, both concrete and abstract. In other words, the expansion of the medium’s semiotic functions stems from the creative ways in which users can interact with and through the device. The acts of inscribed communication in a visitor book do not serve as a purely functional means of conveying information as much as they constitute a dynamic, embodied, and aesthetic cultural site in and of themselves. Accordingly, I examine the relations between this medium’s institutional location, its communicative affordances, and the mediation objectives for which it is ultimately employed.

By definition, visitor books are public media: they elicit references to public attractions and, like these attractions, are located in public places. In these terms, they are part of a cultural experience (MacCannell, 1999). The present setting includes a twofold context, tourist museum representations and national commemoration, in a particular cultural context—Israeli society. More generally, and as in the case of other media—from answering machines and television consoles to discursive monuments—the space and environment in which the medium is located (domestic, commercial, memorial) has a substantial effect on its meaning and mediative capacities (Blair, 1999; McCarthy, 2001; Raz & Shapira, 1994).

As for the medium’s affordances, pertinent issues are its operative possibilities and how these permit, restrict, elicit, and limit various uses and meanings. The term “affordances” is used here following Gibson (1979) and the growing interest in the

materiality of technological devices, and specifically in the re-materialization of communication devices (Danet, 1997; Hutchby, 2001; McCarthy, 2001; Thrift, 2004). The material and spatial aspects of communication devices and environments have gradually begun to receive due attention in communication studies in general, and especially in research on writing as a mode of communication. Recent literature promotes an embodied and spatialized paradigm, which has overturned the traditional views that regard culture or society as more or less abstract. In the new turn, culture or society have come to be viewed as complex processual inter-relationships between the “mental” or “social” on the one hand, and the “material” or “corporeal” on the other (Graves-Brown, 2000; Miller, 1987; Tilley, Keane, Kuechler-Fogden, & Rowlands, 2006).

It should be noted that, unlike speech, writing necessitates some sort of technology in the form of *person–device interaction*. There is no such thing as “unmediated writing.” This new appreciation of texts from the perspective of inscriptive technologies and affordances entails the conceptualization of writing practices as material(ized) instances, anchored and embodied in socio-material, object-related, artifactual, and technological settings. A multi-disciplinary body of work, by Blommaert (2004), Haas (1996), Harris (1995), and Silverstein and Urban (1996), to mention only a few, attends to the relationships between texts and social processes of text creation (entextualization), as they emerge in highly contextualized, and often ideologically charged, communicative circumstances. Following Barthes (1968), de Certeau (1984), and Derrida (1976, 1976a) growing body of literature has inspired ethnographic and ecological approaches to writing as communication. Subsequent research has begun to shift from a focus on the formal products of writing to more informal, spontaneous, and highly situated modes of written communication (letter writing in urban cafes, and graffiti on public toilet walls, for instance; Laurier & Whyte, 2001; Nwoye, 1993).

In sum, a close examination of visitor books as a communicative medium and their rhetorical and performative operation sheds light, first, on the complexity of various concrete features of communicative media, and second, on the interrelations between material and spatial features, on the one hand, and the possibilities and modalities of creating meaning through various media, on the other. In line with this approach, this study resists the temptation to perform a variety of textual and thematic analyses of the entries that appear in the visitor book under examination. Inspired instead by critical perspectives on Western logocentrism (Derrida, 1976; de Certeau, 1984), it does not approach the volumes as treasuries of textual, linguistic, or discursive information (“data”). Rather, it regards them as embodied communicative devices which constitute dynamic spaces of articulation and display for the visitors and of the visitors, and which, at the same time, constitute material and institutional artifacts. In terms of Meyrowitz’s (1994, 1997) “medium theory,” the study seeks to explain how “the particular characteristics of a medium make it physically, psychologically, and socially different from other media . . . regardless of the particular messages that are communicated through it” (1997, p. 61).

### Approaching Museum Visitor Books

In the present research, the Ammunition Hill National Memorial Site (AHNMS) provides the ideologically laden institutional and physical environments in which the visitor book is located and consumed. These environments, following Deleuze (1995, pp. 7–8) comprise the preconditions for the utterances inscribed in the medium. The AHNMS is a war commemoration complex in West Jerusalem. Inaugurated in 1975, it honors those Israeli soldiers who died in the Battle of Ammunition Hill during the 1967 Six-Day War, and it celebrates the victory of the Israeli Defense Forces over the Jordanian Legion, the “liberation” of East Jerusalem, and the “unification” of the city. It comprises two main spaces: an outdoor site that includes the original trenches in which the fighting took place and the commemorative monuments, and an indoor museum.

The museum exhibits present information about the Battle of Ammunition Hill and the campaign for Jerusalem during the Six-Day War. Most of the features are commemorative devices, such as the Golden Wall of Commemoration, engraved with the names of the 182 soldiers who fell in the battle for Jerusalem. Another important commemorative device featured here is a short film about the Battle for Ammunition Hill. In addition, there are several maps and pictures that illustrate the battles for Jerusalem, and a variety of discursive artifacts (such as letters and personal journals written by the soldiers) which enhance the authenticity of the displays and serve to personalize the soldiers.

Over the last thirty years or so, Israel has seen the establishment of numerous small-scale educational-cum-ideological museums which document and celebrate agricultural and military Zionist endeavors and achievements (Katriel, 1993, 1997). These museums play a role in a larger nexus of cultural sites and rituals that are devoted to commemoration in and of the Sabra culture (Handelman & Shamgar-Handelman, 1997; Vinitzky-Seroussi, 2002). From the perspective of Israeli museology, the AHNMS Museum can be regarded as one of these because it shares a narrative whereby “a univocal version of the Israeli nation-building mythology is routinely reiterated in an unproblematic way” (Katriel, 1997, p. 151). The AHNMS Museum receives nearly fifty thousand visitors a year, most of them schoolchildren, Israeli Defense Forces soldiers, and Jewish tourists/pilgrims.<sup>1</sup>

Most of my research at the AHNMS Museum was conducted over four weeks during the summer and autumn of 2006. My investigation is based primarily on the materials found in the visitor book itself, as well as on observation of visitors and conversations with them regarding the inscriptions therein. The majority of the visitors I interviewed were either local Jewish Israelis or ultra-Orthodox Jewish tourists, mostly from North America. Both populations of visitors strongly identify with Israel’s Zionist ideology, and are supportive of the national and military ideologies promoted by the museum. Additional material was gathered through interviews with the management aimed at determining the museum’s ideological agenda, its perception of the visitor book, including the book’s perceived aims, significance, and usefulness, and the procedures for the book’s maintenance.

In order to investigate spatio-material and technological considerations, with an eye toward rematerializing communication and mediation processes, I find it important first to describe the visitor book as an object, and to describe the physical installation upon which it is set, and then to address the spatial aspect of the book's location within the museum. This leads to an investigation of broader considerations relating to the tension between communicative mobility and immobility in a globalizing world, where, following MacCannell (1999), many often play the role of "visitor" or "tourist."

### **Book and Installation: Access and Affordances**

Before addressing the actual properties of the visitor book as a concrete communicative device, it should be noted that the very presence of this medium on the museum's premises is meaningful and significant. Like other communicative devices that inhabit institutional environments and spaces (domestic, public, national, transnational), the medium itself does not only *convey* meaning(s) but also *projects* meaning(s) onto its surroundings (Blair, 1999; McCarthy, 2000; Silverstone & Hirsch, 1992). Similar to other media, the visitor book carries symbolic value and should not be viewed only in instrumental or functional terms. Because it evokes general notions of literacy, this medium commands a type of respect that is often reserved for written communication. Moreover, the medium of the visitor book itself elicits a kind of "visitor connoisseurship" in that it calls for articulate, expert-like appraisals of the quality of the exhibition. Hence, the very presence of the book implies that the visitors' opinions are considered important and worthwhile, and perhaps on a par with the establishment providing the book.

As befitting the commemorative setting and atmosphere, the visitor book at the AHNMS Museum is a heavy volume of dignified appearance. It has a hard leather cover bearing a military logo in dark red ink, and 100 large pages, measuring 26 cm by 34 cm, of thick gray parchment. Running down the center of each page is a line of four symbols printed in a light military green: at the top is the symbol of the State of Israel, and beneath it appear the symbol of the city of Jerusalem, the symbol of the Israeli Defense Forces, and finally the logo of the AHNMS (see Figure 1).

Except for the symbols, the large pages feature no lines or dividers. This technical characteristic is, in fact, crucial to understanding the operation of the medium, since it means that the inscribers—the users of the medium—are given a free hand in choosing and executing the various aspects of their inscriptions. They are free to choose the size of the inscription, its orthographic and graphic styles, the spatial relations between its components (intra-entry proportions), and its spatial relations *vis-à-vis* other entries already inscribed on the page (inter-entry proportions). Furthermore, inscribers can decide how to demarcate the borders of their inscription in order to set it apart from other entries (e.g., by surrounding or underlining it, as exemplified by some of the inscriptions in Figure 1). These are not trivial considerations, since they demand and presume a degree of writing proficiency

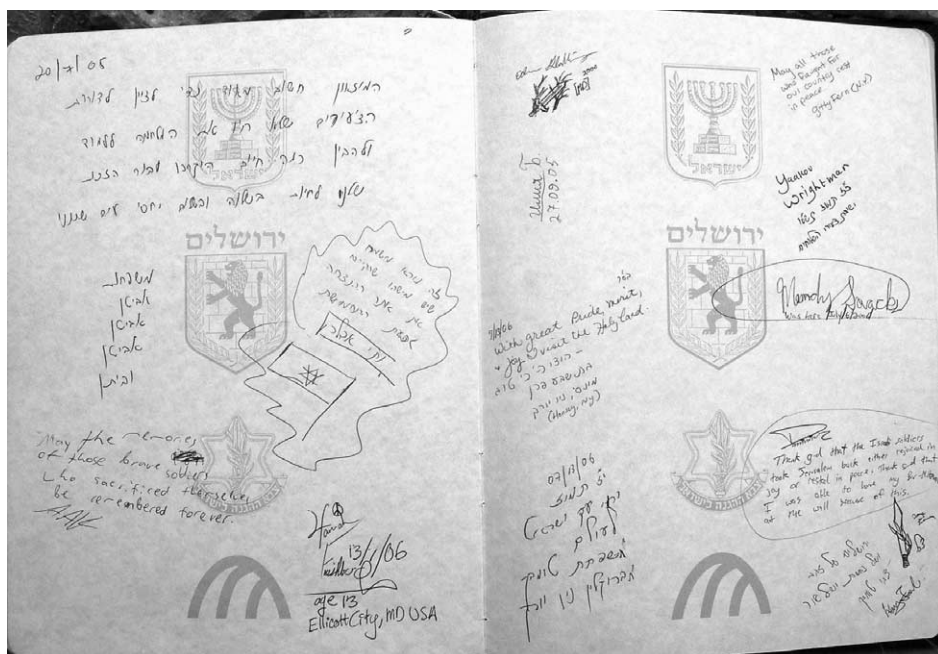


Figure 1. Inscriptions and logos: a spread in the visitor book.

and everyday artistic creativity, leaving many aspects of the production to the visitor's discretion.

As noted above, Figure 1 is representative of a typical spread in the visitor book. It includes fourteen entries which are dispersed across the pages, displaying a range of different sizes, textures, colors, and alignments; some of these entries are positioned diagonally or even at right angles to the bottom of the page. Consider the entry at the top of the left-hand page, for example. Apparently written by a proficient writer, it is longer than the others and set out more spaciouly. The entry stretches horizontally across the page, like justified "prose," while the accompanying signatures are laid out vertically, utilizing a wide expanse of page that was presumably blank at the time of writing. The entry below it (the text and flag surrounded by a squiggly line), which was perhaps added later, seems to have been fitted into the space that was left to the right of the column of symbols, across from the vertical line of signatures.

From an institutional point of view, the four printed symbols create an indexical connection between the object—namely, the visitor book—and the institution. While the very placement of the visitor book on the museum premises designates it as part of the institution, the printed symbols reassert this connection inside the book itself, on each and every page. At the same time, it seems that the inscribers, when faced with the challenge of producing a coherent and aesthetic entry, use the column of symbols as a vertical divider that helps them to arrange their entries on the book's large pages (see Figure 1). Alternatively, it may be that the inscribers generally tend to avoid writing upon the symbols because they feel it to be disrespectful.

Another aspect of the inscriber–medium interaction involves deciding when the page is full, which requires the user to start a new page. This was done, for example, by the inscriber of one of the entries at the top of the right-hand page, who estimated that there was not enough space left on the previous page. It was found that inscribers generally proceeded from top to bottom and from right to left, as appropriate to a Hebrew book (even though many of the entries are in English). The linear sequence of entries was disrupted in only a few cases. In several instances, inscribers—apparently observant Jews—skipped to the top of the next page in order to write the acronym *bsd* at the head of the page.<sup>2</sup> Entries added out of sequence can also result from other constraints. One book that I examined was still accessible to visitors despite being full, which caused inscribers to flip back and forth and to add their inscriptions wherever they found available space.

It should be noted that while the addition of entries generally proceeded from right to left, this was not the case when it came to reading. All the inscribers who wrote in the book also read in it, or at least leafed through it, but this they did in a haphazard fashion, not necessarily proceeding from right to left, or from the top of the page downwards. This fact indicates, as do ethnographic studies of literacy, that writing and reading are indeed interrelated, but not correlated, activities; one is not necessarily a mirror image of the other (Blommaert, 2004; Boyarin, 1993).

The absence of lines on the pages, or any other divider or organizing device, accounts for the overall graphic heterogeneity that characterizes the book's entries and pages. This "openness," the unrestricting nature of the book, along with the absence of institutional intervention, suggests that it may be viewed as a rather "loose" medium of communication that can largely be shaped by the visitors. The spacious pages, devoid of any dividing or guiding marks provided by the institution, do not designate separate spaces for individual, or personal, entries, and the entries and utterances thus form a collective (or collectivized) crowd. This quality of casualness and seeming lack of orderliness which is manifest in the medium is an interesting parallel to other communication patterns and forms of public culture in Israel (Bloch, 2003; Hazan, 2001; Katriel, 2004).

The second material aspect to be examined here concerns the accessibility of the medium, which has to do with its physical setting. The AHNMS visitor book is set upon an impressive-looking structure made of heavy black steel. The structure consists of two thick pillars that grow out of a circular platform slightly raised from the floor: a tall pillar and a shorter one on which the book is placed (see Figures 2 and 3). Thus the book is both framed and elevated—two important indicators of sacralization in tourism (MacCannell, 1999, p. 44). As a result of its placement, visitors can read and write in the book only while standing. To be precise, they must stand on the platform and lean over the book (as shown in Figure 2). We are once again reminded that writing and communicating are embodied activities, and that different media of writing involve different bodily postures and writing/reading strategies (Stewart, 1991, 1993).

According to current and former museum curators, the purpose of placing the book on a tall pedestal was to encourage visitors to keep their entries short so that





**Figure 2.** Visitors Inscribing in the visitor book.

they would not take too long to write or read, or take up too much space on the page. The placing of the book upon a pedestal thus constitutes a restriction. It prevents writers from using the medium while in a comfortable physical posture, which may have resulted in lengthier entries. Indeed, typically for this medium, the entries are short, usually even telegraphic, rarely exceeding thirty-five words (cf. Macdonald, 2005, p. 127). While the length of the entries does not depend solely on the physical posture assumed by the writers, the writing of short texts while standing is an organic part of the materiality of this medium and its interactional affordances. As the act of writing/reading is performed while standing, the act of writing/reading in the visitor book resembles the other activities performed by visitors during their tour of the museum (such as looking at pictures and reading explanations). In other words, the act of writing/reading in the visitor book is an integral part of the museum tour, and follows the flow of visitors' movement through the halls.

The last issue to be discussed here involves the writing implement, which, in this particular case, is not provided. The museum curators explained that they do not consider it necessary to provide one, since most people generally carry a pen with them. In addition, pens are occasionally pocketed. Consequently, interacting with the medium involves performing the physical gesture of reaching for a writing implement: women take a pen out of their purse, and men take one out of their

shirt pocket. During my observations, I was approached several times by visitors who asked to borrow my pen (which I was using to note down my ethnographic observations), and one cashier reported that visitors occasionally return to the museum entrance in order to ask for a pen with which to write in the book. They explain that they “forgot” their own, implying that they should have had a writing implement with them.

The absence of a writing implement affects the possibilities for inscribing in the book. For example, children and youths, who do not usually carry writing implements with them, are prevented from writing in the book unless they are provided with a pen by their chaperones or parents. The latter often use this as an opportunity to monitor and discipline what they write. When groups approach the book, members pass a pen to one another, demonstrating the social ties that exist between them and reestablishing their relations in and through the very act of inscribing (Laurier & Whyte, 2001). In the public space offered by the medium, the shared writing implement distinguishes the group’s inscriptions and inscribers from other inscriptions and inscribers; the more crowded the book’s pages, the more effort is required in order to demarcate social ties.

Another consequence of the absence of a writing implement is the overall visual heterogeneity that characterizes the book’s pages. While most entries are written in blue or black ballpoint pen, quite a few are written in red, pink, or green ballpoint pen, and some in green or blue marker, which results in an impressive variety of colors and textures. Apart from these common writing implements (ballpoint pens and markers), only one other type of writing implement was used, namely a correction-fluid brush. There were long strokes of correction fluid covering large areas on several consecutive spreads. These were made by the curator to erase those inscriptions that were viewed as being racist toward Arabs. However, since the strokes of correction fluid are visible, and since they follow the contours of the erased inscriptions, one can easily discern the original words. Hence, the white marks qualify as another form of writing, and the correction fluid functions as writing ink.

In an additional irregularity, two small notes, apparently torn from a school notebook, were inserted between the book’s pages. Headed by the Aramaic acronym *bsd*, the notes seem to have been written by religious youngsters. One can only speculate as to why these writers chose to use notes instead of writing in the book itself. Since the notes seem to have been written by children, perhaps it was difficult for them to reach the surface on which the book is placed. Alternatively, the use of notes may have a deeper significance, since it calls to mind the Jewish custom of leaving notes at significant places of worship, such as the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem or the tombs of saints.<sup>3</sup> This suggests a correspondence between sites of inscription where similar writing practices—entailing the use of a writing implement and writing surface brought by the writer—are followed.

These exceptions (the use of correction fluid and the use of notes) constitute instances in which the medium is breached or, alternatively, extended in different ways and for different reasons. They reflect additional cultural practices of inscription that undermine or circumvent the medium. In this context, it should be mentioned

that visitors sometimes choose to convey their reactions or feedback by means other than the visitor book (e.g., through graffiti, several instances of which can be found in various locations around the AHNMS,) or, alternatively, by sending or faxing letters.

As for the absence of a writing implement provided by the establishment, it is in line with the general “openness” of the medium: the book’s spacious pages, which lack any lines or dividers, and the minimal intervention of the management work to maximize the involvement of the visitors and the creative options available to them.

### “Deep” Writing: Inscribing under the Golden Wall of Commemoration

Institutions that choose to make a visitor book available typically place it near the exit, where it will be encountered by visitors just as they finish their tour (Macdonald, 2005, p. 125). This location crucially affects the spatio-semiotic function of the medium. Positioned near the exit, the book creates a space that is betwixt-and-between. While physically on the premises, it is often facing and anticipating the outside. Visitors who interact with the book are physically still inside, but are about to leave. The medium is thus positioned at a strategic liminal spot of openness and closure, and is ideally suited to elicit “an audience-contributed gesture of closure,” as Katriel (1997, p. 71, n. 75) notes in her study of settlement museums in Israel.

Positioned in this typical liminal location, the visitor book is well-suited to performing the following semiotic functions. First, visitor books function as outlets for *emotional ventilation*. This is particularly true in sites that are charged with political or ideological meaning, and thus capable of triggering a strong emotional reaction or response. In such sites, the visitor book provides the visitors with a sanctioned opportunity to discharge their intense emotions before leaving the premises, and to share their feelings and impressions *in situ*.

A second function, related to the first, is that of enabling visitors to *rehearse discursively* their impressions before departing. After leaving the site, visitors will be socially required to provide an account of their visit, and answer questions such as: “What did you see?” “How was your visit?” “Did you enjoy it?” The book affords an opportunity to experiment with expressing impressions in the form of concise and coherent discursive output. The utterances in the book can thus be regarded as rehearsals of *responses* in the sense used by Bakhtin (1986, p. 76) or Goffman (1976/1981). Although the book poses no explicit questions to the visitors, the entries therein are nevertheless response-utterances in terms of their genre, since: they are inspired by earlier utterances, both inside and outside the book; they “tell us something about the individual’s position or alignment in what is occurring”; and they are “meant to be . . . assessed, appreciated, understood” by others (Goffman, 1976/1981, p. 35). In fact, standing by the AHNMS visitor book, I sometimes overheard visitors discussing its aim and purpose. The explanation most frequently given—usually by parents to their children—was, “It’s a book in which you should write your impressions. What did you see? What did you think of it?” These oral explanations give an explicit and embodied voice to what is otherwise implicit in the medium—namely, the questions to which the inscribers are expected to respond.

In this context, it should be mentioned that the AHNMS visitor book contains a short handwritten note on its opening page. The note, signed “The Management,” requests visitors to write short entries that “show respect for the commemorated soldiers.” These instructions are repeated on a gold metal plate attached to the surface on which the book is placed. In addition to expressing the management’s concern about potentially disrespectful inscriptions, these instructions embody a stimulus to which the visitors respond. They constitute guidelines that both stimulate and help to regulate inscribers’ responses.

Third, a liminal location lends the medium a unique transformative function. Located on the borderline between the inside and the outside domains, it is a transformative communicative medium that facilitates a *shift from impressions to expressions*. During the tour, visitors accumulate impressions, and the medium offers a situated opportunity to try out—and to articulate—these impressions. The medium of the visitor book thus not only provides a space for rehearsing discursive output, but, more fundamentally, constitutes a space where the shift from impressions to expressions can occur.

The concept of “threshold” in the sense used by Simmel (1997) is useful in this context. For Simmel, the threshold is a spatial feature, positioned between spaces; at the same time it also has a social aspect, since it separates the individual sphere from the social one. Located on the threshold between the interior and exterior semiotic-bound spaces, the visitor book helps to “translate”—or mediate—the language of the in-side (im-pressions) into the language of the out-side (ex-pressions). The book serves to mediate the site’s semiotic premises, and to mark an overlap between internal (private) spaces and external (public) spaces.

Since visitors formulate their expressions in relation to other expressions already inscribed in the book, they can, as they transform their personal impressions into public expressions, compare and “adjust” them to former inscriptions. In his study of the Documentation Centre at the former Nazi Party Rally Grounds in Nuremberg, Germany, Macdonald (2005, p. 125) observes, “[T]he ritual of reading and perhaps also writing in the visitor book helps visitors to formulate their own position in relation to those of others.” Visitors who read and write in the book upon leaving the site are covertly attuned to the areas that one is expected to notice during one’s visit, and to the ways in which one should express one’s impressions after the visit.

Interestingly, however, the visitor book at the AHNMS Museum is *not* located near the museum’s exit. Instead, it is located in one of the museum’s innermost spaces, close to the “Golden Wall of Commemoration”—a wall of golden metal, illuminated by a flickering memorial flame, engraved with the names of the soldiers who died in the battles for Jerusalem (see Figure 3).

The placing of the visitor book close to the Wall of Commemoration was a deliberate choice made by the architect and the designer (G. Zippor, museum architect, personal communication, August 23, 2006). Located in this unique position within the “deep” interior of the museum (Geertz, 1973) rather than at a threshold location near the exit, the visitor book does not provide an opportunity for emotional ventilation or a space for rehearsing responses. On the contrary, the



**Figure 3.** "Deep" within: the book and the hall.

somber atmosphere and interior location of the hall serve to *intensify* the embodied experience of visiting the museum. In this setting, the medium enhances the sense of being in a particular, ideologically-charged space, and ritualistically augments the visitors' sense of participation therein. It supplies an interface for interacting with the institution and the ideology it embodies. If any threshold is crossed here, it is not the threshold between inside and out, but a threshold between an internal space and an even more internal space, or between a deep level and an even deeper level of ideological participation and commitment.

This setting for the book may be one of the reasons for the ideological cast of the inscriptions. Most of the entries do *not* refer to the quality of the exhibitions and artifacts displayed and employed in the museum. Rather, they are ideologically charged and express considerable emotional involvement on behalf of the inscribers. This is presumably because the entries represent, and are part of, the rite of partaking in the nationalist and militaristic ethos presented and enshrined in the museum.

Consider the following entry by a visitor from New Jersey (dated August, 2005):<sup>4</sup>

Thank you for dying for our country.  
 What you did enabled me and other Jews  
 to be able to live in *Eretz Yisrael*.  
 With great Respect, Shira, NJ.

Understanding the entry requires an awareness of the book's location near the Golden Wall commemorating the fallen soldiers. Shira's text, like many others, embodies an act of commemoration: it addresses those honored by the museum—gratefully, humbly, and, what is most important, directly. Through their inscriptions, the visitors thus demonstrate that they regard the book, in terms of its function, as a *participation medium*; as a medium that, in this particular spatio-semiotic location, affords “self-acts” of commemoration (Schwartz & Bayma, 1999). They contribute to, and become part of, the aesthetic materialization of commemoration represented by the engraved wall (Blair, 1999; Macdonald, 2006).

The notion that the medium's spatio-semiotic location crucially affects its meaning is supported by findings from sites that have several visitor books in different locations. Studies of such cases, although few, indicate that the different locations yield different types of expression. Stamou and Paraskevopoulos (2004), for example, investigate textual corpora culled from two visitor books in the Dadia ecotourism nature reserve in Greece. One of the books is located at the reserve's information center, where visitors learn about the reserve and about ecotourism in general, while the other book is located at the reserve's observation site, where visitors view raptors eating carrion off a feeding table. The study is mainly concerned with describing, measuring, and trying to account for the significant quantitative and qualitative differences between the two books.

Stamou and Paraskevopoulos (2004) account for the differences by arguing that the information center is associated with cognitive activities and learning, while the observation site stimulates more affective and bodily responses. The latter site is where the “intensity of the interaction” is greatest (p. 109). Furthermore, the study found that the different *content* of the expressions was correlated with different populations of inscribers, and also with a difference in the sheer quantity of entries. More than twice as many entries were produced at the observation site than at the information center. Moreover, international tourists, who comprise a group of “hard-core” ecotourists, preferred the observation site over the information center, and produced twice as many texts there than the local Greek visitors.

The visitor book at the AHNMS Museum, positioned next to the Golden Wall, and the book near the raptors' feeding table in the Dadia reserve are alike in that both are positioned in an aesthetically engulfing space, and *in the place where visitors experience the embodied and aesthetic climax of their visit*. In both cases, the visitors who use the medium are not on their way out of the site. Rather, they make inscriptions in the book as they observe and consume the centerpiece exhibited in and by the institution, and thus partake, though the act of inscription, in the most ideologically and emotionally charged activity offered. These visitors are not engaged

in an “exit ritual” (Macdonald, 2005, p. 125) but in an “entrance ritual,” whereby they symbolically “contact the attraction” (MacCannell, 1999). Through interaction with the medium, visitors enter authentic (“back stage”) symbolic regions that are otherwise inaccessible to them.

As the examination of the AHNMS book has revealed, this entrance ritual produces deep discourses which take the form of highly ideological and iconic entries. The ritual is performed within and through the medium, and attests to the central role played by aesthetics in the staged worlds of tourism and museums (MacCannell, 1999). The performative dimension of touristic and museum environments brings about “the enactment of intense, dramatic stories which bind the hostess and the tourist in an imaginative world” (Fine & Speer, 1985, quoted in Katriel, 1997, p. 147).

At the AHNMS, these deep discourses also tap cultural and religious patterns of communication and mediation. As observed by Katriel (1994), such discourses represent an “approach to the events of the past [that] echoes a familiar strategy in traditional Jewish thought, which . . . [is] more concerned with the timeless meaning rather than with the fleeting shape of historical events” (p. 12). The visitor book at the AHNMS Museum thus provides a communicative site where the functions of bridging and binding the eternal and the historical, or the abstract and the embodied, can be—and are—pursued effectively.

### **“I Was Here”: Global Travel and the (Im)Mobilities of Inscriptives**

Lastly, I wish to address a broader spatial context, one which involves the material aspects of the highly mobile world of late modernity. The globalized world is characterized by a profusion of travel and other mobile practices, central to which are the visiting and consumption of places, such as museums, parks, cultures, countries, and even whole continents (Coleman & Crang, 2002; MacCannell, 1999; Urry, 2000). Recent attention to the materiality and mobility of discourse, and to communicative resources in tourism and in other mobile aspects of globalization, suggests that language, too, can be fruitfully viewed through a dual prism of mobility and materiality (Blommaert, 2003; Larsen & Haldrup, 2006; Noy, 2007; Phipps, 2007). Applying these two perspectives to the act of inscribing in visitor books, we can place the book-as-object within a broader matrix of (im)mobilities, and shed light on the tensions between the object-ness of the medium, on the one hand, and the processual quality of the practices of interacting with it, and through it, on the other.

Indeed, the medium embodies a classic illustration of an attribute that is fundamental to written texts, namely endurance—an attribute that becomes especially salient in our era of intensified mobility, portability, and fleetingness. In the context of a commemoration museum, this medium is practically ideal, as it performs an act of commemoration each and every time an utterance is inscribed within it. In terms of the semiotics of tourism, the book constitutes an unusual type of “on-site marker” (MacCannell, 1999): as an object, it is both a part and a marker of the site in which it is positioned, and which it frames as an aesthetic attraction worthy of attention.

In an essay about writing on the Internet, Bowker (2007) asks: “What traces do we leave?” This notion of “traces” or “trails” also appears in other works on contemporary writing practices (Stewart, 1993, pp. 31–36). In a highly mobile global environment, traces are essential, as they are sometimes the only available means of constructing shared memory and history. From a perspective of mobility, inscriptions are the only traces that visitors leave behind in the museum (apart from their admission fee, their bodily secretions in public toilets, and a significant amount of trash), by means of which they “signal their passing” through the site (Stamou & Paraskevolpoulos, 2004, p. 106).

Hence, the space offered by the book is, like the AHNMS itself, intended to preserve what is transient; it a space where visitors’ voices, signs, and identities endure when their bodies have gone elsewhere. As Stewart (1993, p. 31) observes, “[W]riting leaves its trace beyond the life of the body.” These traces remain long enough to be consumed and responded to by other visitors, and to be incorporated into the overall impression of their visit. This stability has significant consequences: it enables visitors to interact with one another—to “meet” and “talk”—in and through the medium.

In time, these traces left by the visitors connect intertextually to form chains of national discourses and aesthetics, which project both backward and forward in time. They project back through previous entries, pages, and volumes—all the way to the inauguration of the AHNMS in 1975, to the first, or primal, visitor book, and perhaps to an even earlier time: the (mythic) time when the soldiers’ letters and diaries, many of which are exhibited in the museum, were inscribed. These traces also travel forward in time: inscribers’ utterances will be consumed by future visitors, and the book thus offers a touch of immortality, as it were, a modicum of immobility and stability amidst the dynamics of traveling and visiting.

In this mobile world, museums, whereto various objects travel through time and space to be consumed, have come to embody and symbolize constancy, along with the dialectics between motion and stillness (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998). As observed in Stewart (1993, p. 161), “It is the museum, not the library, which must serve as the central metaphor of the collection . . . [because it is there that] closure of all space and temporality within the context at hand” occurs. This is especially true for commemorative museums, such as the AHNMS Museum, in light of their commemorative commission and their frequently “authentic” locations. The particular location of the AHNMS Museum, at the very site on which the battle occurred, explicitly expresses the museum’s mission to capture and retain events that transpired, voices and words that were uttered, and the memory of the fallen Israeli soldiers.

The formidable appearance of the visitor book and its surroundings is primarily meant to emphasize the immobile and immovable nature of both the site and the medium. The impressive steel structure on which the book rests, and the cable fastening the volume to the dark iron pedestal, imply that the book is symbolically integral to the foundation of the museum. The heavy platform on which the book is positioned invites museum goers from far and near actively to leave a trace of their



own behind, with the promise that their utterances will be securely anchored to the surrounding Jerusalemite stone. Unlike most documents, which are meant to travel and create “paper trails” that allow for multi-sited re-interpretations (Laurier, 2003; Lynch, 1999), the visitor book—in the context of national-commemorative ideology—constitutes a sacred, unmoving Archimedean point.

In this environment, inscribed utterances which, in addition to a signature, may or may not include the explicit utterance “I was here,” are akin to speech acts. They are “inscribing acts” which achieve what they express by the very act of being inscribed. In the spread shown in Figure 4, most of the left-hand page is occupied by a Hebrew entry surrounded by a line, consisting of three words followed by three exclamation marks: “BITTON WAS HERE!!!” This type of inscription constitutes a spatial inscribing act that achieves its aim through the very act of being performed. The assertion is in the past tense, although both the producer who writes it and the consumers who read it obviously do so in (their) present. The inscription is aimed at future readers and readings, and is thus sensitive to the passing of time, and to the temporal/temporary nature of the visit and of the visitor’s physical presence at the site.

This bold inscription, which, in its inflated size and excessive punctuation, reflects an anxiety about the ephemeral, expresses a sentiment that is, in fact, implicit in all the entries.<sup>5</sup> With varying degrees of sublimation and articulation, all the entries convey the message “I was here/We were here.” The very act of self-positioning through the act of inscribing expresses presence. In fact, it constitutes a two-fold act of presencing and objectification: discourse is presented publicly, and at the same time assumes the quality of an object.

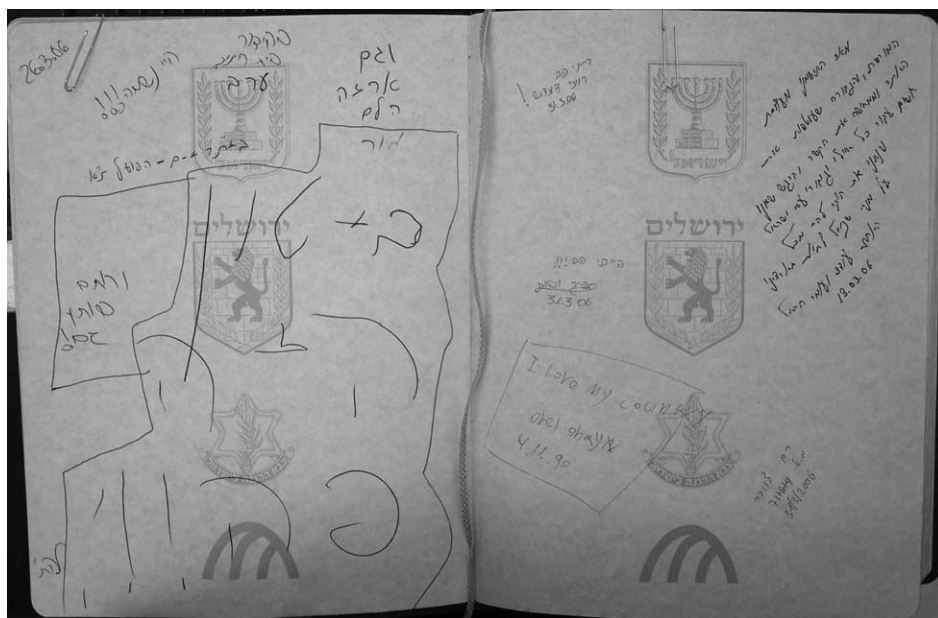


Figure 4. "BITTON WAS HERE!!!": presencing and objectification.

The desire to capture and preserve past events was also expressed by the museum director who, while giving me a tour, repeatedly used words such as the following to express the site's uniqueness: "You've got a place here, where there's *something* you can actually *feel* with your own [two] feet. [You can] move through the trenches. [You can] touch the bunkers. [You can] hear the stories. And people cling to that. This guy fell *here*, that [event] occurred *here*" (C. Nir'el, personal communication, August 2, 2006). In using these words—the discourse of authenticity—the museum director addressed the significance of the site's location, and stressed the dynamic commemorative work that needs to be accomplished.

Inscribing personal names and utterances near the Golden Wall of Commemoration implies that the dichotomy of movement and stillness is no less dramatic than the dichotomy of life and death. By engaging with the medium, visitors ritualistically bridge the abyss between the ephemeral and the eternal, the mundane and the heroic. This is why Shira's entry (above) does not seem odd or irregular, although it directly addresses the dead, or, in Goffmanesque terms, an audience that does not share the physical space of communication (Goffman, 1963/1980).

When the dividing dichotomies between life and death, or past and present, are made symbolically permeable, acts of commemoration enjoy the semiotics of reincarnation. In terms of mobilities, neither the dead soldiers nor the previous inscribers are at rest. Their traces and voices are repeatedly consumed (re-read) and responded to (cited, paraphrased), so that their voice repeatedly shifts between the states of rest and re-evocation/reincarnation.

## Conclusion

A consideration of material affordances and spatio-institutional environments is crucial to an analysis of the semiotics and mediative capacities of communication, and of the ways in which these can be manipulated institutionally. Study of actual discursive content must be preceded, or at least paralleled, by study of the conditions under which one can operate the medium and interact with it and through it. In this article I therefore resisted the logocentric temptation to attend primarily to texts and contents, and postponed their exploration and analysis to a later opportunity. Ecological investigations into the nature of communication media de-center the dominant logocentric approach by indicating that meaning does not lie solely in "text," if at all (as Derrida, 1987, argues). Re-materializing and situating communication and viewing the act of writing as a ritualistic social activity leads to a construal of the non-representational aspects of signification. In the case of the visitor book, what is communicated is the very act of inscription: not "words" but the embodied (inscribed) performances of participation.

The particular case examined above shows how, by providing a medium with specific qualities, and installing it in a particular spot—namely in the deep interior of the site—the management of the AHNMS manipulates the medium's communicative functions. Playing on the medium's familiar functions as a reflexive instrumental apparatus used for eliciting feedback, the institution enlists it in the service of highly

charged nationalist ideology (a “feedon”). A term that seems pertinent here is the “misuse value” of devices (Brown, 1999; McCarthy, 2000), referring to the potential for devices to be used in non-typical ways and to assume non-typical meanings. The unusual positioning of the AHNMS visitor book can be regarded as a “misuse” or “abuse” of the medium, which has been harnessed for commemorative goals.

This manipulation is not surprising, considering the two characteristics that typically affect mediative processes: first, the institutionalized environments of communication devices (domestic, public, ideological, etc.; McCarthy, 2001; Silverstone & Hirsch, 1992), and second—taking a social constructionist perspective on technology—the open-endedness, provisionality, and often unexpected consequences of various media. These characteristics, while analytically distinguishable, conspire to shape the semiotics of any given medium. From McLuhan’s (1964) “the medium is the message” to Meyrowitz’s (1994, 1997) “medium theory,” various media are viewed not only in terms of the different semiotics they enable, but also in terms of their different liabilities to manipulation. However, what is perhaps most interesting about the AHNMS visitor book, aside from the commemorative-nationalist ideology with which it has been imbued, is the very *subtle* shift in its function as a medium which results from its placing inside the museum’s “holy of holies.”

This manipulation is augmented by another, which involves MacCannell’s (1999) familiar notion of “tourist attraction.” While tourist attractions, in the usual sense of the term, are sites and (objectified) people which are visited or looked at by tourists, the visitor book, due to its interactive quality, has the capacity to transform the visitors *themselves* into attractions. Like the benches on the Atlantic City Promenade, which, MacCannell notes (1999, p. 130), face the passersby rather than the sea, the visitor book is somewhat akin in its function to a mirror in which visitors can see themselves and other visitors, and thus become their own attraction. This projection can occur because in tourism, the medium must appear to be morally disinterested if it is to be influential (MacCannell, 1999, p. 24). However, while the people strolling along the promenade are institutionally constituted as tourists engaged in a leisure activity, the inscribers in the AHNMS visitor book are institutionally constituted as performers of a nationalist act of ideological dedication.

These manipulations are transformative. Building on a cultural appreciation of writing as communication, we can say that the act of writing transforms the writer from a passive visitor into an ideological entrepreneur: In the course of their tour of the museum, the visitors learn and internalize its message to a degree where they can then repeat and externalize it, *inter alia* by inscribing an appropriate entry in the visitor book. This performance extends well beyond the actual surfaces of inscription provided by the medium. The surfaces of the book, and those of the AHNMS, unfold into the surfaces, as de Certeau would have put it, of the politically charged and conflicted city, or cities, of Al-Quds/Jerusalem. This is the “power over the exteriority” that characterizes texts (de Certeau, 1984, p. 134). It is also the power of signification of and transformation between signs, sights, and markers in tourism, where attractions (signs) can become markers of other signs (MacCannell, 1999, pp. 110–112). Relevant here are not only inscriptive practices that are widespread in

the spaces of Jerusalem, such as hate-graffiti, but, more substantially, the embodied sense of *occupying space*. Considering the colonial claims of the AHNMS, as represented in the many pictures and topographical maps of war zones, the inscriptions in the visitor book can likewise be viewed as acts of colonizing space since they create a symbol where none existed before. The medium of the visitor book thus assumes metonymic qualities: located authentically in Jerusalem, it affords acts of occupation and presencing *in situ*, in a collective space which is exclusively Jewish.

## Notes

- [1] Some of the groups that visit the museum do not reach the area where the visitor book is located. These are usually groups of soldiers, which are directed away from the exhibits commemorating the dead, such as the Golden Wall of Commemoration. Consequently, the number of potential users of the book is considerably smaller than the overall number of visitors.
- [2] Inscribing the acronyms *bsd* or *bh* at the top of a written page is a custom that emerged fairly recently among observant Jews. The former acronym stands for *besahadei deshmaya* or *besai'ata deshmaya* ("with God's help" in Aramaic), and the latter for *be'ezrat hashem* ("with God's help" in Hebrew).
- [3] The Wailing Wall, located in Jerusalem's old city, a twenty-minute walk from Ammunition Hill, is the holiest place of worship for Jews. Pilgrims often insert small notes into the cracks between the stones of the wall, on which requests, wishes, and expressions of gratitude are written.
- [4] The entry is written in English, except for the words *Eretz Yisrael*, which are in written in Hebrew. The layout presented here reflects that of the original entry.
- [5] Those familiar with the politics of ethnicity in Israeli society will probably acknowledge that Bitton is a recognizably Mizrahi name—that is, typical of Jews who immigrated from Muslim countries. Therefore, much like the well-known "Baruch Jamili" graffiti (which became famous in the 1948 War of Independence), the large "Bitton was here" entry can be viewed as a graffiti-like inscription, presencing and proclaiming Mizrahi identity in the heart of the Ashkenazi (Jews of European descent) militaristic Zionist establishment (see Katriel, 1997, pp. 104–110, 153, on representations of Mizrahi Jews in museums presenting the Zionist legacy).

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