

“The making of Multiple Mobile Places in everyday train commuting”

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I have frequently heard commentators at conferences talk of the rise of mobility as the “end of geography”. I presume they do not mean the discipline, but even so, such a statement is thought provoking. What is not “geographical” (both in real world and disciplinary terms) about people on the move? Why is geography equated with fixity and stasis? Mobility is just as spatial – as geographical – and just as central to the human experience of the world, as is place (Cresswell 2006:3)

Introduction

Mobility and Place are concepts that have often been perceived as opposites in the theoretical literature (Cresswell 2006). Flow, speed and globalization are some of the elements of mobility that have addressed as threatening the peculiarity of place. At the same time these elements of Mobility have in periods been viewed as the subject matter of mobility research with the consequence that everyday life mobility was put into the background (Sheller 2011). Adding also to the incommensurability of Mobility and Place, in the discipline of Geography, the conceptualization of Place has a history of limited capability to comprehend the aspect of change (Simonsen 2008). In the Place section of this paper a dynamic and sensitive concept of Place will be introduced.

To a large extent the mobile threat to the peculiarity of place has evolved around how mobility leads to a disembedding of social relations from place (Giddens 1990, Castells 1996, Bauman 2000). A recent study shows that “*a mobile everyday life for many people necessitates varying forms of belonging to place.*” (Fallov, Jørgensen & Knudsen 2013: 484) In this paper I will demonstrate how the social interactions amongst train commuters increase their local residential belonging while focusing on the production of Multiple Mobile Places in everyday train commuting.

The paper is based on mobile ethnographies carried out amongst commuters travelling by train. In Denmark, the commuters who live in the Region of Zealand in the south eastern part

of the country are the commuters who by far commute the longest distances between home and work. In 2013 they commuted 31% more than the national average and 57% more than their fellow commuters in the neighboring capital region (Danmarks Statistik). The mobile ethnographies were conducted during all four seasons of the year. The fieldwork concentrated on two different train lines that connect the capital region with its outskirts. The practice of commuting is readily accessible as a research field – getting on board the early morning and the late afternoon trains. While being there, the field unfolds itself as the train connects the commuters' home and work. Indeed, Bissel's call for "less hasty" research styles within the field of mobile sociology readily applies (Bissell 2010). A group of commuters that I commuted with for half my field period spent between 10 and 20 hours a week together in the train on the line between Rødby Ferry and Copenhagen. The group consists of 6-10 commuters who meet up in the train several times each week. Commuting and talking for hours about the banal everyday journeys made some of the commuters participating in the research start to wonder about the particularities and qualities of the situations in the train even during the periods between my meetings with them. And on my behalf I the participation in their commuter lives, sweetening with them in the summer, drinking beers with them on Fridays, and standing with them in overcrowded train wagons gave me great insight into the bodily and social challenges and benefits of train commuting. Commuting (the other half of my field period) on the Kalundborg – Copenhagen line allowed for relative short semi-structured interviews, biographical interviews and observations. In this way the fieldwork allowed for the participants to both show me and narrate their everyday life on board the trains.

Place

Place can with the use of Kirsten Simonsen's vocabulary be defined by two dimensions; the dimension of specificity and the existential dimension (2001, 2005). In this way Place becomes a localized articulation of social practices, social relations and social processes as well as the experiences and symbolic meanings various users of the place holds of it and ascribe to it (Simonsen 2001: 42). It follows from this that Place has to do with the differences between places and the unique constellations of a web of social practices and relations on the one side (i.e. the dimension of specificity) and on the other side to the meaning the place is given through the users practices on the place (i.e. the existential dimension) (Ibid.:43). Both the

dimension of specificity and the existential dimension are dynamic and the dynamic origin from the social life.

Social forces shape places and are in turn shaped by places. In other words when places are once constructed, they influence the way in which social processes and activities are performed. (Simonsen 2008: 15)

Approaching Place in this way is much in line with the thoughts of Doreen Massey who stresses the processual character of place. She writes:

If places can be conceptualized in terms of the social interactions which they tie together, then it is also the case that these interactions themselves are not motionless things, frozen in time. They are processes. (Massey 1991:322)

Social interaction is tied together in places and it follows from this that places are processeually constituted. Place is co-constitutive of social practice and meaning and, in turn, social practice and meaning constitute the specificity and existential meaning of place. This suggests that different place related identities and relations may coexist and that over time they give the place a continuous identity. David Harvey addresses this tension between duration and change in the social construction of Place. He writes:

Entities achieve relative stability in both their bounding and their internal ordering of processes creating space, for a time. Such permanences come to occupy a piece of space in an exclusive way (for a time) and thereby define a place – their place – (for a time). The process of place formation is a process of carving out “permanences” from the flow of processes creating spatio-temporality. But the “permanences” – no matter how solid they may seem – are not eternal but always subject to time as “perpetual perishing”. They are contingent on processes of creation, sustenance and dissolution. (Harvey 1996: 261, 294)

In this sense Places are open to change in both the social processes and meanings that constitute the Places. In the following part of this paper I will address how the social processes and the meanings on board regional trains produce Multiple Mobile Places. In doing so I will apply Simonsen’s two dimensions of Place which have proved useful to structure and interpret the mobile ethnographies.

The mobile Place's dimension of specificity or the localized articulation of social practices, social relations and social processes

The dimension of specificity in the Mobile Place deals with the fieldwork findings regarding the social practices of rhythms and rituals & the production of communities. In the following I will describe how the mutual influences between the specific character of the train and the social practices on board participate in the production of a Mobile Place.

Rhythms of the train

Applying the work of Lefebvre and Régulier on Rhythm (1958) as a frame of reference and the term everyday rhythms it is possible to sharpen our attention on the linkage of time, landscape and practice that the commuters do on their daily journeys. Most days on a specific location on the route related things happens and these rhythms produce a place characterized by a high degree of homeliness and routines. Already before the commuters enter the train they are busy with their mobility routines. They practice an alternative form of wayfinding in the way they weave an efficient route between home and work. In line with the descriptions by Laurier and Lorimer (2011) of co-driving commuters' negotiations of which route to take the train commuters also find shortcuts – they are just a bit different when the means of transport is a train. Finding shortcuts while commuting on trains is about choosing the departure with the fewest stops, placing oneself at a spot on the platform that allows one to be closest to the train and, once inside the train, choosing a seat that will conveniently facilitate a quick exit. Once the shortcuts are found they get practiced with attentive care and routinization. The routinization of ones 'own route' allow the commuters to have their mind on other things than managing the travel. However, the specific routinized route also creates for a specific place for the commuter to meet the same commuters every day. Sharing routes and routines certain overlaps between specific groups of commuters arise. These outcomes relate to the existential dimension of place and will be addressed in relation to the therapeutic potentials of the generation of meaning related to the forming of social communities and the ritualized travel.

As mentioned, while riding the train the commuters' ritualized practices weave time and landscape together. At the end of their morning trip, when reaching the second last station

before their end (i.e. the station Hedehusene) the commuters from Rødby Færge gather their things and put on their jackets. Once the train passes a certain highway between Hedehusene and their end station, Høje Taastrup, the commuters enter the exit area of the train compartment and stand ready to leave the train. Adding to this the arrival time and possible delays are calculated by looking at the clock while passing specific landmarks.

As the train advances and the social practices on board the train creates a variation of rhythms as conversations and sleep patterns increase and decrease along the travel. During the first part of the journey usually the commuters start out by talking when they meet up in the train. Then, within 5 to 10 minutes, conversation ends and is usually replaced by doings such as reading the newspaper, eating, listening to the radio, sleeping or other recreational doings. Due to the stops along the way these rhythms are repeated with various intensity as the trainride progresses and new groups of commuters meet up or depart. At the station Næstved this is particularly clear. Here on the morning trainride, a great number of commuters enter the train wide awake consequently waking up the commuters already in the train. Hereby the presence of the commuters from Næstved changes the last part of the journey. Oppositely, in the afternoon journey home from work, the opposite rhythms occur. The trainride start out very noisy and bussing and ends at the end station, Rødby Færge, in almost complete silence. Accordingly, these testimonies of how the activities in the train change due to the progress of the travel underline the dynamic character of the mobile place.

The homing practices (Winther 2009) produce a place that loses elements of its public character and becomes a place you get to know not so much by contemplation as by participation. The homing practices evolves especially around sleep as the commuters use their negotiated right to cut of conversations with reference to the need to sleep – a right most commonly used within families and practiced at home. During the same line of homing practices some of the everyday routines from the home are lifted into the train while commuters finish of their “work look” putting on the last pieces of jewelry, eating breakfast and drinking coffee. Adding to this are doings of waking up children by mobile phone, planning shopping and other home-related practices.

The commuting time in the train holds social potentials for interaction and forming of relations which is specific and to some degree follows everyday rhythms as the commuters rhythms are woven together as they are each other’s precondition. One commuter may only perform his ritualized practices if other commuters also follow theirs – e.g. choose the same set of seats,

stay quiet at the same parts of the journey etc. Part of the social rhythms does though go beyond the joint relation between landscape, time and action that are dominating in the above and follow logic of ritual practices.

Ritual practices and the production of communities

At large the train is a place where many types of social relations can occur simultaneously and where the commuters at anyone journey can manage a wide range of relations. But the practiced relations have a great say in determine which place is created at the specific departures. Using the perspectives of Ole B. Jensen and Eric Laurier on mobile relations it is possible to identify 4 different social categories containing various degrees of community and knowledge sharing in the train. *Mobile Others*, are created when individuals are not invited to participate in a social relation or *Mobile Others* create themselves by avoiding social contact. The large group of *Mobile Others* in train commuting share the lack of social interaction on board the train. Trains with predominantly groups of Mobile Others are relatively quiet and individual strategies of interactional avoidance are practice using artifacts like books, newspapers and headphones. The strategies of interactional avoidance can be practiced with small variations as a matter of routine but it can also be part of a wide range of strategies, of which some have a higher social content, which the commuters vary between.

The routines and rhythms of the journey play a significant role when *Acquaintances*, are created in commuting. Over a long period of time as, commuters meet up at the same time and place every day, they are able to transcend the group of *Mobile Others* and become an *Acquaintance*. (Transcending the group of *Mobile Others* and becoming an *Acquaintance* happens when commuters over a long period meet up at the same time and place every day.) They begin to recognize each other and greet each other. Also, whenever rhythms are disrupted new social possibilities occur. If the train gets canceled or delayed the group of commuters are put together in a situation where they share similar experiences and sentiments (e.g. annoyance, anger, frustration). This opens a 'crack' for social possibilities. As Ehn and Löfgren (2010) point out, part of this dynamic derive from the fact that a social waiting situation is experienced as shorter than an individual waiting situation. This can be the first step in forming a much tighter social bond where you dwell within the same community of

commuters each day for long periods of time – for some commuters until the ending of their working life.

The groups of commuters who purposely locate themselves together in the train I describe as *Mobile Withs*. They are mobile with each other and they form often very engaging social situations on board the train. If we look at the group of commuters from the station Rødby Færge through the perspective of Randall Collins (2004) part of the group's social success has to do with the bodily proximity while sitting in the train. The bodily proximity allows for successful ritual interaction where the commuters have mutual focus of attention and share their mood with each other. When a train wagon contains one or more groups of *Mobile Withs* the noise level increase as laughter and conversations are shared. Also, a conversation that begins within the group of *Mobile Withs* may be experienced as an invitation to participation by way of commenting by non-members due to the public character of the train. This becomes a way into an already constituted group of *Mobile Withs*.

Some commuters who commute in groups of *Mobile Withs* starts to interact outside the train as well. When exchanging favors like looking after each other's chickens, giving each other lifts to and from the train, sending postcards, lending out holiday homes, delivering hedge plants to each other, buying herbal medicine to each other's neighbors and so forth then the social relation has changed from *Mobile Withs* to *friends*. The forming of friendships which both are lived in and out of the train is a way to allow for friendships to take up a lot of time in a busy everyday life despite commuting up to 20 hours a week. By turning *Mobile Withs* into *friends* the train becomes a place where commuters can sustain and develop their friendship relations.

The existential dimension of the mobile Place or the therapeutical potentials and generation of meaning related to rituals of communities.

The existential dimension of the Mobile Place addresses issues of therapeutical potentials and the generation of meaning related to rituals of communities, as they are narrated while on the move.

Individual practices of regeneration, relaxation, daydreaming and sleeping

The mobile rhythms formed by the commuters' routinized practices allow the commuter to move attention away from the handling of the travel and towards other issues (Edensor 2011, Ehn & Löfgren 2010). The commuters in my study used great amounts of their commuting time to daydream, process or plan the day, read, sleep, talk, doing crosswords and other recreational activities which as Marlene Freudal-Pedersen (2007) points out can be difficult to make time for in a busy everyday life or as Ehn and Löfgren (2010) puts it difficult to allow oneself time to do.

Meanwhile, the way the train commute and the activities on board the train are perceived varies significantly. To one part of the commuters the train becomes a recreational place. Christina, a mother of two preschool children, emphasize how the possibility of working in the train does not appeal to her. To Christina, the train represents one of the few places in her everyday life where she can follow her own desires. She read magazines, eats, does cross words and chat. She is doing home and to her the train becomes a place where recreation occurs in the transit between her busy work and family life. Quite a few commuters perceive the train as a place for processing thoughts related to work and family life and value the separation of work and family life that is enabled by these reflexive mobile practices. Sleeping while commuting is another important mobile practice which influence homely life as it enables a later bedtime and hence more time to spend awake in the home.

Yet another mix of home and train relates to the widely used help the commuters receive from either their parents or local working partners – we can name this group of helpers for caretakers of mobility. They take care of the commuter's home-based everyday duties like delivering and picking up children to and from daycare, grocery shopping, cooking and so forth. By taking care of the duties that are difficult to manage for the commuters, the caretakers of mobility enable the commuters to have a recreational time on board the trains in exchange for home based duties. Complex family negotiations are part of most commuters' mobility narratives. This illustrates the importance of understanding the significance of the mobile place as related to the social relations outside the train.

The significance of the mobile place is also oriented outside the train through the use of the windows. By glancing out the window new inputs to contemplation or conversations are

collected “see the dear” or “now that house will soon fall apart”. The train commuters do not experience the stress pointed out by Böhme (2011) instead they routinize their glance and pay attention to changes in the landscape and the brighten of the day due to weather and seasonal changes.

Summing up the part of the existential dimension of the mobile place that has to do with terapeutical potentials are related to the individual practices of regeneration, relaxation, daydreaming and sleeping in the transition between home and work. In the following we will look at the part of the existential dimension of the mobile place that has to do with the significance of mobile communities.

Ritual outcomes of mobile communities

The Ritual ingredients of the interactional rituals amongst *Mobile Withs* and *Mobile Friends* deals, as we saw earlier, with sitting close to each other sharing bodily co-presence, having a mutual focus of attention and sharing ones moods. These ritual ingredients creates a collective effervescence and much of my field notes and transcripts are dominated by “*ha ha ha...*”. But the ritual outcomes are richer than this and do to an large extent explain why the groups of commuters intensify their relationships. It is through this perspective, inspired by Randall Collins, that I approach the social interaction in the groups of *Mobile Withs* and *Mobile Friends*.

One common ritual outcome is how relatively brief individual emotional energy forms the baseline for new ritual interaction. Another outcome from the groups of *Mobile Withs* and *Mobile Friends* is how long term group solidarity works by strengthening the bonds between participants. In this way, the mobile groups get tied closer together the more they interact. The exchanges of laughter within the mobile groups create increased solidarity and tighter social bonds as well as rewarding the individual with increased emotional energy. This combination of ritual outcomes is a likely motive for the commuters to locate themselves within the same mobile groups in the same corner of the train every day. Hereby the ritual outcomes and emotions created within the mobile groups contribute to the rhythms of and routines in the train.

The sense of belonging to a mobile group is communicated with pride: “There is no other commuter group like ours” Emil told me on several commutes we did together. The *we* that

are formed within the group contains elements of negotiation of shared moral standards often related to issues outside the train. “What do we think of the drowning accident at Præstø?” Trine asks when she returns to the train after three weeks sick leave. Stories evolving around episodes they have lived together in the train are used in a different manner and becomes to some extent symbols of their sense of belonging. The mobile Christmas lunch is one of those episodes. *They ordered take away in the train in the morning and two of the commuters picked it up in time for catching their usual afternoon train. The conductor reserved 1th class to the group and they decorated it with paper Christmas elfs, spruce branch and table cloths. They drank, sang and eat the whole journey and to top it all the conductor had made a song for them – about them. As the individual commuters reached their station of arrival they left the party and at the end station only two was left.* When the commuter group describes themselves as out of the ordinary they often turn to this episode, describing what happened but also how the other passengers reacted on their Christmas party and especially the conductors effort to support the party.

When the commuters talk with each other about each other it becomes clear that they enjoy knowing about each other’s peculiarities and also enjoy the others members knowledge of their own peculiarities. They often predicts each other’s actions, reactions, sleep pattern and also knowing how Henry for instance got the old crumbled map – knowing that he is too stingy to by one and being able to deduct that it musts have been attached to a weekly magazine or that he often clean at night. These insights into each other’s lives are comparable to knowing shortcuts – it demands a familiarity that not everyone have. Realizing they have this familiarity is a source of joy for the commuters.

Community and a sense of belonging are important for the commuters who forms groups of *Mobile Withs* and *Mobile Friends*. Being known by other commuters and knowing them is an ongoing invitation for interaction and not having this familiarity can be a stress factor “*I fell non-human if I sit between strangers*” Jeppe explains to me. Being reduced to an anonymous *Mobile Other* between other anonymous *Mobile Others* creates an unwanted tension for Jeppe and this is the main reason for his participation in a group of *Mobile Withs*.

When some *Mobile Withs* start to take care of each other outside the train as well they become *Mobile Friends* as we discussed earlier on. The significances of these Mobile Friendships vary a lot from practical help to emotional support and birthday celebrations but they share their roots in the local community outside the train.

Recapitulation on the making of Multiple Mobile Places in everyday train commuting

The friendship relations developed in the train contributes to the local belonging in the areas of residence as the commuters interact and help each other out outside the train. In their local areas of residence they give each other a lift to and from the train, take care of each other's chickens, exchange hedge plants, go bowling, lent out holliday homes, visits on birthdays or by specialized shoppings for each other. Adding to this residential belonging - which is increased due to the interaction outside the train – the residential belonging is also increased through the knowledge sharing inside the train.

The train becomes a place through the practices of the commuters on their daily journeys. The mobile place gets its own characteristics both through what the commuters are doing and the meaning they ascribe to it. It is characteristic for the train as a mobile place with a unique time and spatial orchestration that it encompass beginnings, endings, repetition, routines and renewals within the same materiality (the train wagon), but with a very varied content depending on where on the route and amongst which commuters the commuters are situated. All the commuters – and the other trains passengers – contribute with their practices to the production of the place on the actual departure. The train can be a place for resting, laughing or storytelling and it can both be a collage of individual activities and a web of social activities and sometime a variation. It can be a place for forming friendships and exchanging favors or it can be a place for reviewing the day or prepare for the day to come. The mobile place can have a therapeutically effect and participate in increasing the commuter's quality of life through forming social relation and other meaningful activities as contemplation, reading and regenerating but only given the predictability of DSB and the mobility helpers and the flexibility of the workplace.

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