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### **Drive: Urban Experience and the Automobile**

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As argued in my previous work, it is evident that material conditions in architecture and cities such as glass, concrete or tarmac, texture, transparency and sound, may be engaged with through different activities such as skateboarding, looking and walking – and that, despite the often non-representational and non-theoretical nature of the practices involved, different cultural meanings may then result, such as those to do with ownership, control, pleasure and humor. It is in such engagements that there rests the full social potential of architectural and urban materiality, and where it becomes a true machine of possibilities (Borden 2001; Borden 2002; Borden 2004).

But why now turn to a consideration of driving and the experience of architecture and cities from the car? Firstly, and perhaps most obviously, there is the sheer quantitative presence of the automobile. Some 1 billion cars were manufactured in the twentieth century, and currently over 700 million are still operating – quite possibly 1 billion will be operating by 2030. And geographically, massive new economies and developing countries – notably China – are now developing a new car culture (Urry 2002).



Night-time traffic on the Bund, Shanghai (2005).

Photograph: Iain Borden

However, driving is not just a simple function of the quantitative expansion of cars and car journeys. Driving is not just the car and the road, but a gigantic ensemble, of cars and roads of course, but also of all kinds of different driving related architectures, from petrol stations to billboards, and of people, the thoughts we have, the actions we make, the images we consume and imagine, the meanings we derive, the codes and regulations we negotiate. It is also the speeds we drive at, the spatial conditions we encounter, the ways we look and listen at the landscape, the very emotions and attitudes we have towards driving and the city (Sheller and Urry 2000). As one early motorist, A.B. Filson Young (whom I quote several times in this article), stated:

*The true home of the motor-car is not in garage or workshop, showroom or factory, but on the open road. There it comes into its own, there it justifies itself, there it fulfils its true and appointed destiny. (Young 1905: 274)*

It is worth noting that, in this age of environmental concerns, some might be somewhat aghast at a study of car driving cultures. However, as Ruth Brandon concludes in her excellent *Automobile: How the Car Changed Life*, we must recognize “the intoxicating pleasures of automobility [for] we are all addicts now” (Brandon 2002: 385). With this in mind, an exploration of the cultural resonance, impact and values of driving is clearly a worthwhile direction to pursue.

Furthermore, given the vast literature available on cars and automobiles (I have over 70,000 references in my bibliographic database – an impossible number to review), it is curious how little thought there has been given to the pleasures of driving; there are a multitude of writings on car design, car production, marketing, racing, maintenance, economics, highway and road design,

traffic management, even art and cars, but comparatively little on the actual experience of driving itself.

So this schema seeks to map out the various pleasures involved in different kinds of driving – at different speeds, in different kinds of spatial landscape – and show how these pleasures relate to distinct encounters with cities and architecture and, hence, also produce similarly distinct political and cultural experiences. To this, I focus in turn on five distinct intersections of motoring speeds and landscapes.

## **Going Nowhere – Driving at 0 MPH**

The automobile, along with clothing, is one of the most explicit ways by which people express themselves. As such, one of the great joys of driving does not necessarily involve actually moving – simply owning or desiring a car, is often enough.

This much has been evident from the very birth of the car. To begin with, in the first years of the twentieth century, the car was essentially a plaything of the rich. Cars such as those made by Daimler, were incredibly expensive to buy and maintain – and self-declared car enthusiasts included Lord Montague (also founder of *Car Illustrated*), the then Prince of Wales (later King Edward VII), and William Kissam Vanderbilt (of the railroad family) (Brandon 2002: 39; Thorold 2003: 29-31). By contrast, Ford's Model T, produced between 1910 and 1927, was deliberately functional, and represented the values of the hard-working, straight-talking American farmer. By the 1920s, the market had become more sophisticated, and able to accommodate those American middle-classes who were keen to appropriate the automobile's symbols of wealth and leisure, while at the same time distinguishing themselves from the rural drivers of the Model T. What mattered most of all was the way the car looked: for example, the 1923 Chevrolet was nine yr-old technology dressed up in new clothes, while, four years later, the 1927 La Salle was designed by Harvey Earl as a kind of poor man's Cadillac.

But it is not just class and social status which the car has offered to the owner. For example, cars have been associated with such things as: *mass production* and hence the car has stood as a symbol of industrial progress or, conversely, the alienation of labor, as so brilliantly represented in Chaplin's *Modern Times* (Gartman 2004); *Hollywood fashion and escapism* – as designer Harvey Earl explained, "I try to design a car so that every time you get in it, it's a relief – you have a little vacation for a while" (Gartman 2004); *gender relations* – by 1910 there were already strong connotations of femininity associated with electric cars, easy-to-drive cars, family-oriented cars, delicately styled cars and so on (Scharff 1991); *technology, engineering and modernity* – perhaps the most pervasive cultural connotation of the automobile, and nowhere more obvious than in the aircraft styling of American post-war saloons with their sharp fins, exotic exhausts and bubble-shaped cockpits, all of which connoted consumerism and progress, while also promoting, in the context of the Cold War, positive associations with US military technology and power (Gartman 2004); *political identity* – consider here one of the most famous cars in motoring history, the VW Beetle, first designed and manufactured in Nazi Germany as the Volkswagen KdF Wagen (*Kraft*

*durch Freude*, strength through joy) (Brandon 2002: 203-5); *state capitalism and bourgeois society* – French intellectuals such as Henri Lefebvre have castigated the car for leading the French on the “high road to Americanization,” (Lefebvre 2002: 67) and for colonizing everyday life with “geometric space” of traffic circulation and parking spaces (Lefebvre 1991: 313); and, of course, *cultural identities* of all kinds – the recent onslaught of various minivans, retro cars, sports cars, sports-utility vehicles, 4x4s, eco-cars, MPVs, hybrid cars, etc. are all targeted at a particular market segment and a particular set of cultural identities which coalesce around not only categories of class and gender, but also sports and leisure, social life, sexual orientation, business and commerce, arts and creativity, safety and so forth.

From this brief summary of automobile design history, it is evident that the car as an object is capable of association with a substantive range of cultural, social and political meanings. But what about the actual usage and experience of cars? What, in particular, of the act of driving? How are these various cultural and political meanings played out in the actual use of the car and performance of driving, and how do these vary according to different spatial contexts?



Driving at a standstill. SELOC Lotus owners' club meeting at Bruntingthorpe, Leicestershire (2004).  
Photograph: Iain Borden

One way of pursuing the production of these cultural and political meanings would be, of course, to investigate the various sites of display in which these meanings are played out. The garage, the motor-show and the show-room, the drive-way, the lay-by and the owners club meeting, the magazine, the television program and the internet forum all, for example, offer places where automobile meanings are discussed and communicated in different ways. To cite but one example, the “Max Power” culture of highly modified cars thrives in semi-illegal gatherings held in the small hours of Friday and Saturday nights at out-of-town superstore car parks – and stereotypically in Essex. At these events the cars hardly move – except for occasional burn-outs of tyres and demonstrations of improbably powerful ICE (in car entertainment) sound systems. Immersed in crowds of baseball-capped young lads and thinly-clad women, dowsed in beer and alco-pops, and mediated by magazines such as *Max Power* and *Redline*, the cultural politics at such events create a certain kind of masculinity, part laddish and part working class consumerism, and which cocks a snook at such diverse systems of control as the police, car

insurance systems, the space of retail malls and the culture of BBC-watching *Guardian*-reading liberal intellectualism.

Yet, despite the undoubted social significance of these and other stationary forms of automobile usage, the direction I wish to pursue in this article is more connected to the notion of speed, that is with actual physical motion through urban environments, as it is here some of the most significant cultures of automobile driving are played out.

### **The Knowledge: City Driving 0-30 MPH**

The impact of automobiles and car driving on cities and architecture is, of course, immense. Apart from the visible impact of the cars themselves – whether moving or parked – there is also the whole range of roads, signs and street furniture, car parks and general urban form which we see everywhere in cities worldwide (Taylor 2003: 1613). This is a truly global and everyday architecture, one which scarcely existed a hundred years ago but which today occupies, for example, 50% of all land in Los Angeles and 25% in London (Sheller and Urry 2000: 746).

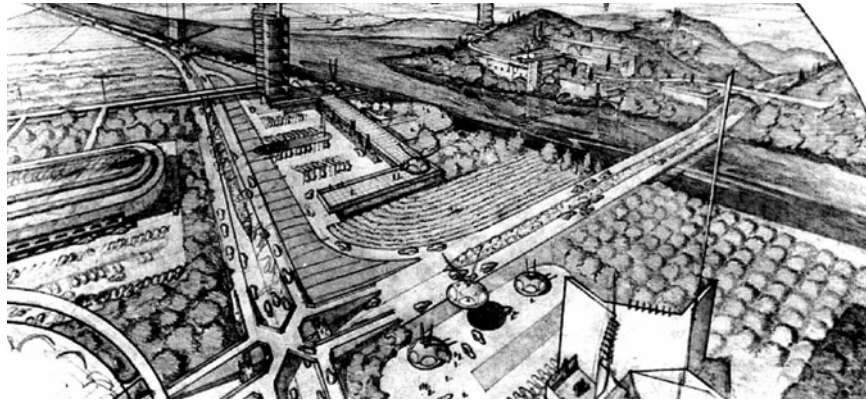


Automobile landscape, Baltimore (2002).  
Photograph: Iain Borden.

### **Democracy and Freedom**

So what are the cultural connotations of driving in this urban form? Most powerful of all is the notion that driving is the true harbinger of democracy, creating a world where all men and women are equal, where they can do anything, go anywhere, meet anyone.

In architectural and urban design, this is the promise of Frank Lloyd Wright's Broadacre City project, a de-centered American utopia where mobility, and in particular the mobility offered by the car, allows the dream to come true (Wright 1945; Wright 1958; Fishman 1982).



“Great roads unite and separate . . . roadside markets, garden schools, dwelling places, each on its acres of individually adorned and cultivated ground.” Frank Lloyd Wright, *When Democracy Builds* (1945). Drawing by John Rattenbury.

And this is the same promise of dense metropolitan cities, where, at a personal level, cars like the Mini have helped people to cross class and gender boundaries, and to express their individuality and liberation in the metropolis (Edensor 2004). For example, one publicity shot of the English television presenter, Cathy McGowan, taken in 1968, shows her smiling in the driving seat of her new Mini, while a building is under construction in the background – an image clearly intended to a strong connection between McGowan, the city, the car and the act of driving as a symbol of 1960s female independence and cultural innovation.

In particular, it is not just the ownership but the driving cars like the Mini which helped to create this kind of everyday democracy: driving, that is, as a kind of exuberance, of playful darting around city streets (Inglis 2004: 210-11). All of this is clearly seen in the original version of the film *Italian Job* (1969, dir. Peter Collinson) where the bullion-robbers escape through the alleys and inner courtyards of Turin in a celebratory and adventurous form of town driving, as well as in the 2005 television adverts by Vauxhall, which promote the compact Corsa in the UK as a car devoted to fun and games in the city, playing “Hide and Seek” amongst alley-ways, backstreets and hidden urban spaces: “Put the fun back in to driving.” (Vauxhall 2005)

Although many of these cultural representations of driving occur in the media formats of television and movies, it is nonetheless very much within normal people’s everyday lives that the city car operates, allowing them to negotiate the conflicts that may feel in their lives. For example, the SUV vehicle helps young parents reconcile the “uncool” drudgery of childcare and family life with the “cool” and exciting ideas of leisure and outdoor adventure (Sheller 2004: 231). City driving and car usage is, then, not just a dynamic act, but a way people construct themselves in relation to their metropolitan context.

## Signs and Mapping

But what does this experience of town driving entail? What particular visual and spatial experiences are involved? Perhaps the most obvious aspect of urban car driving is the reduction of city form to a series of signs, billboards and lights. That is, car driving offers a reading of the city which focuses on the abstract, the visual and on the surface.

Most famous here is the analysis of Las Vegas offered by Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Stephen Izenour (Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour 1972), which posits an architecture of decoration, symbolism, repetition and communication. The experience of the city here is highly semiotic, based on a reading of signs and signals as much as on a plastic, sensuous experience of actually driving through space (Taylor 2003: 1620).



Semiotic reading of the city. Shanghai (2005).

Photograph: Iain Borden

Despite views to the contrary, this kind of semiotic experience is not as culturally reductive as many would have us believe, for signs are capable of speaking to us in a multitude of different ways. For example, a single car journey will provide signs for traffic management, traffic direction, communication networks, entertainment, retail and historical traces of all kinds (Edensor 2004: 108-10). All of this is contained within people's everyday lives and routines, such that although this system of signs may not be consciously thought about, it is undoubtedly an immensely complicated and variable communication system.

There is also a condition of temporality in the urban driving experience. In city driving, as with the Mini, this means a temporality of the nippy, fast, short-lived. Driving here creates a sense of quick

communication, a kind of physical email. But these journeys are of course also held within a highly individualistic timetabling of instants and fragments of time – our individual journeys to work, for our social life and so on (Sheller and Urry 2000: 744). Thus the fast-pace of urban life is matched by the stop-start, quick decision, always alert, always impatient nature of urban driving.

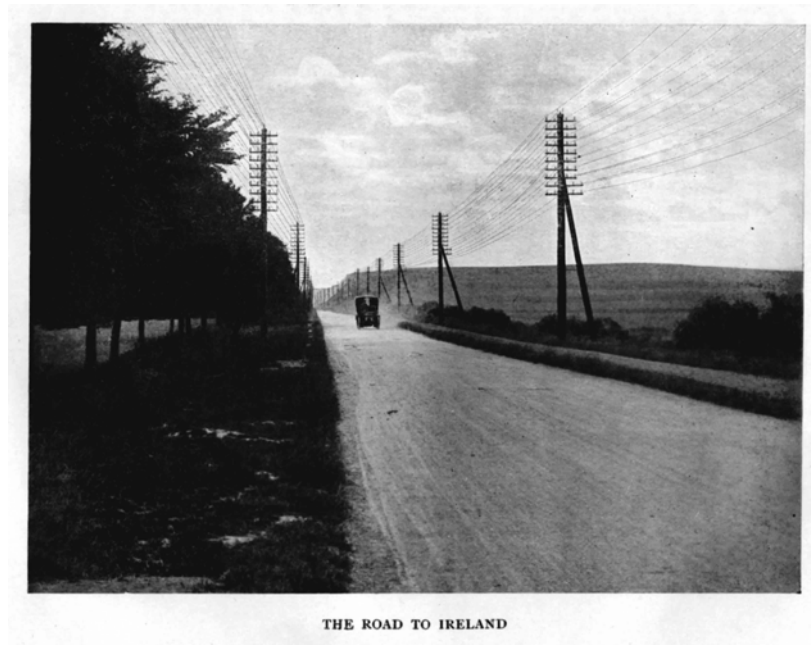
What urban driving produces, therefore, is an experience of visual signs and signals, of course, but also of time, hearing, smelling, judging space and size, danger and safety, impatience and frustration and an overall sense of every-ready alertness – qualities which counter the views of Lefebvre and others who see such activity as a purely sensationless, culture-free zone. For it is in the very dynamic of urban driving that we find its cultural meanings – meanings both as metaphor for, and constituent element of, modern urban life. Indeed, the situation is even more complicated in that the urban driving sensibility is certainly dulled, in that we do it many times and often routinely, but is also hyperactive, always aware of the changing state of the city around us (Taylor 2003: 1622). It is, therefore, an experience which represents the dual character of the city, that which is simultaneously anonymous, repetitive and flat, whilst also being personal, rhythmical and variegated.

To negotiate this complex condition, urban drivers have to generate a strong sense of control. Primarily this is achieved by cognitive mapping, that is of knowing where one is driving not only in the abstract terms of the street map, but also in the specific terms of the local and personal map. Given the mass of information and precise actions involved in remembering and implementing such mapping processes, is no accident that the London cab driver's test is often referred to as "The Knowledge," thus implying that such an understanding is in itself a complete comprehension of the capital. Yet the London cab driver's experience is far from being just about abstract maps and locations; urban driving is about mapping, of course, but also a whole range of related spatial tactics, such as short-cuts, merging techniques, doubling back, undertaking, pulling out, speeding, and so on (Thrift 2004: 47-8), a technique of spatial vectors (Virilio 1998: 20). All of this enables the driver not just to get around the city but to produce themselves as a metropolitan resident – as someone who not only knows the city, but knows how to personally live in an urban manner. The culture here is the challenge of the city to the self, and hence the ability of the driver not just to survive but to thrive within it.

## **Journeys – Countryside Driving 30-55 MPH**

From the start of the twentieth century, automobiles were far more than purely work-oriented machines – Henry Ford, the British car manufacturer William Morris and Adolf Hitler all saw the car as a means for families to go on gentle drives in the countryside (Brandon 2002: 79-80, 203 and 223-8). Principal among these motoring delights was simply seeing new parts of the country. As Filson Young declared, "the road sets us free [and] allows us to follow our own choice as to how fast and how far we shall go, permits us to tarry where and when we will." (Young 1905: 276) When they stopped, as they frequently did, inter-war motorists took photographs of their spouse on their new Kodak camera, went camping in motor camps, or visited the wilderness like Yellowstone Park.





“The Road to Ireland” – Holyhead Road, as illustrated in A.B. Filson Young, *The Complete Motorist*.

So when we become concerned about our over-use of the car in the countryside, and discuss ways of preserving nature, it is important to realize that our very experience of nature that we seek to protect has often been produced from the car and its leisure journeys through landscapes. (Taylor 1994; Sheller 2004: 231; Thrift 2004: 5 and 41-59) And of course this is exactly what car manufacturers play on when they include depictions of nature and the environment in their advertisements, typically showing 4x4s rushing through deserts and other wildernesses, with sand and dirt being thrown up dramatically from over-sized and deep-treaded wheels.

### **Landscape Kinaesthetics**

There are also other pleasures to the tourist drive, ones which are less dependent on traveling into new landscapes, and more on the sensual pleasures of mobile experience. This is quite a complicated argument, which has been rehearsed in artistic and literary debates (notably Danisus 2001), and it is worth summarizing its main features here under three categories: how objects appear differently, ways of seeing, and the effects of speed.

Firstly, driving heightens the Ruskinian distinction between “numbing habit” and “unmediated sensory experience,” which is to say that driving can shock us out of our normal, unthinking and disconnected relationship with the world, and instead makes us aware of the pure sensory experience of encountering the world around us. As a result, *objects appear differently*, so that which once was familiar now becomes strange. In other words, trees, buildings, other vehicles, etc. all look different from the car than they do from the roadside – and, in particular, often take on

the appearance of a “purposeless beauty,” whereby objects are divorced from their original context or function, and so appear as items of non-contextual contemplation.

Objects also appear differently in other ways. For example, one of the main effects of driving is that the mobile becomes immobile – i.e. that, for the driver, the car and other cars around it appear to be stationary, at a standstill.

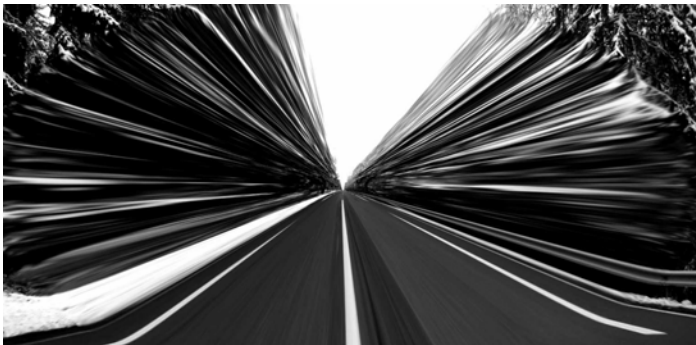


The mobile appears immobile. Nanjing (2005).

Photograph: Iain Borden.

Conversely, the immobile becomes mobile – i.e. cars animate landscapes, such that stationary objects appear to be moving. As Filson Young wrote of telegraph posts in Hertfordshire:

*As you pass [. . .] they begin to crowd together, by twos and fours, coming, you would think, from nowhere, flying in all directions over the ancient roofs of the town and past the chimneys and weather-vanes like gathering rumours or like flurried passengers making haste to be in time. (Young 1905: 291)*



The immobile appears mobile. Road near Nurburgring, Germany (2004).

Photograph: Iain Borden.

Secondly, the way we see when driving is different. By releasing objects from their context, the process of seeing these objects is in turn released from contextual knowledge, and, as a result, this seeing process becomes a form of seeing “in the first person,” allowing the driver to see what he or she directly sees rather than to see what he or she knows. This process is particularly attractive to artists, writers and other creative producers, allowing them to see things as pure seeing, and so to provide appropriate metaphors for modern life, rather than relying on seeing via the intellect.

Other forms of seeing are also implicated in the driving experience, notably the way in which the windscreen acts as a frame, limiting the landscape within a carefully prescribed boundary, and hence converting it into an object of pleasure. Through this frame, landscapes become fragmented by driving, rendered into a series of discrete objects, vistas, markings and so on, but also then reconnected and re-synthesized as a sequence – a specific narration, if you like, spoken by the particular driver, car and journey, or by the artist, as, for example, by Ed Ruscha in his seminal artwork, *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, which, as the title suggests, depicts the façades of Los Angeles architecture in a car-like journey along a continuous section of road.



Windscreen as frame. Malaysia (2004).

Photograph: Iain Borden.

Thirdly, *increased speed intensifies these kinds of experience*, exacerbating the sense of strangeness, newness and disconnectedness. In particular, the landscape appears in cinematic terms – notably those of framing, sequencing, editing, unusual juxtapositions and montage, changing pace, unexplained events and sights and so on, all of which is induced by the speeding, kinematic nature of driving. Furthermore, it is not just the landscape which is altered in this process, for the driver’s body is also animated by speed and a sense of being between control and out of control. Indeed, the driver’s body is no longer theirs alone. As one driver described, “It felt alive beneath my hands, some metal creature bred for wind and speed. . . . It was as though I became the car, or the car became me, and which was which didn’t matter anymore.” (Quoted in Mosey 2000: 186)



"It was as though I became the car, or the car became me, and which was which didn't matter anymore."  
North Weald (2003).

Photograph: Jim Johnson.

In short, the kinaesthetics of driving involves a substantial re-orientation of the experience of time and space, where sight, senses, intellect, landscape, meaning, artistic creativity and the human body are all potentially re-configured. As Filson Young wrote of driving:

*It flattens out the world, enlarges the horizon, loosens a little the bonds of time, sets back a little the barriers of space. And man, who created and endowed it, who sits and rides upon it as upon a whirlwind, moving a lever here, turning a wheel there, receives in his person the revenues of the vast kingdom it has conquered. He lives more quickly, drawing virtue and energy from its ardent heart. (Young 1905: 275)*

Driving kinaesthetics changes the viewer, the viewed, and the process of viewing.

### **Exhilaration and Existential Experience**

This, then, constitutes the experiential mechanics of driving experience. But what are the new meanings or qualities of human life which can be explored through driving at speed? Again, it is worth outlining the most significant of these potentialities.

As already noted, the driver's body is in part reconfigured by the driving experience, but what is involved in this process? As Merleau-Ponty noted, perception is oriented to the kinaesthetic awareness of body so that the body is 'geared' to the world around it. In short, the driver's body is not just processing information from the road and car in the manner of a machine, but is experiencing the process through body memory (Dant 2004: 71-2). And what that body experiences are sensations and qualities of the world largely unique to the state of motion and mobility. For example, via the car, the driver experiences such things as grip, friction, sliding, undulation, curvature, inclination, acceleration, deceleration, wind, noise, vibration, direction, vector, ripples, proximity and distance.

These are not qualities easily found when sitting still, walking, or even traveling in a train or airplane - they come from the direct relationship between driver, car and road. Primary here is the sense of adrenalin-fuelled exhilaration that often accompanies driving at speed, and anyone who has been in an open sports car will recognize this condition: the exhilaration which comes from truly sensing oneself in motion, and of feeling wind, air and noise as part of the movement. A feeling of recklessness, of being out-of-control, may of course heighten such an experience (Brown 1976: 25-6), but it is not essential. Rather what matters is the simple *possibility* of being out-of-control – a sense of nearing the limits of control, even if these limits are not ever transgressed. What matters, then, is the self, and placing the self in a realm where it is challenged and, consequently, reasserted.

So here we arrive at one of the most important aspects of automobile experience: driving as an existential condition whereby the driver seeks to express, confront, explore and produce the self through encountering the world outside of the self. This, of course, has been obviously explored in film, perhaps most famously in Stephen Spielberg's *Duel* (1971), where David Mann, played by Dennis Weaver, is constantly attacked by a truck. Although the film ends with nothing being explained, the true meaning lies in Mann's own resoluteness and determination: if he has learned anything, it is about himself.

In a similar vein, yet even more extreme, is *Vanishing Point* (1971), directed by Richard C. Sarafian, where driver Kowalski (Barry Newman) drives a white Dodge Charger in an amphetamine-fuelled police-pursued sprint from Denver to San Francisco. A former policeman and Vietnam veteran, Kowalski epitomizes, according to "Super Soul," the blind DJ who guides Kowalski via radio broadcasts, "the last great American hero to whom speed means freedom of the soul." In the end, rather than give himself up, Kowalski chooses to kill himself by plunging headlong into a blockade of bulldozers. Nihilistic and desolate rather than triumphalist, *Vanishing Point* portrays a degeneration of the human condition (Sargeant 1999). This is driving as the ultimate existentialist experience, a test for the driver's sense of who they are, and who they choose not to be.



*Vanishing Point* (1971). Dir. Richard C. Sarafian.

This is not, of course, to suggest that we should all swallow a bag full of blues, drive across the countryside at high speed, and meet our end in an explosive fireball, but this does point out something common to many driving experiences: namely, that many drivers prefer to drive alone, using the experience of control, power, discovery and potential danger to think about themselves, the world around them, and their place within it (Bull 2004: 248-9). Driving is not just an action, it is also a mirror.

Nonetheless, despite the undeniable connection between driving as the practice of a solitary driver, driving and the car can also be a space of conversations and relationships. Again, movies provide innumerable examples, from *Voyage in Italy* (Rossellini, 1953) to *The Getaway* (Sam Peckinpah, 1972), to *Thelma and Louise* (Ridley Scott, 1991), wherein it is the juxtaposition of the unfolding journey against the car interior which comes to the fore (Bruno 2001). As stories are told over the course of the journey, thoughts and feelings are all intensified. Here, driving can be a form of emotional nurturing, creating a space where intimacies grow and unravel.

### **Elemental Spaces**

It is no coincidence that much of the action in films such as *Thelma and Louise*, *Duel* and *Vanishing Point* takes place in semi-wilderness landscapes such as the desert, for the desert is used to symbolize future and progress as well as escape from the past. The desert, then, is a space for the imagination of limitless expansion, unshackled potential (Urry 1999: 5). So if the desert can provide one kind of existential mirror, what about more specific kinds of spatial elements, such as bridges and tunnels? These are what I call elemental spaces, certain spatial types which have the capacity to communicate distinct aspects of modernity (Borden 2000). To give but a few examples, what about the roundabout as a representation of efficiency, a very peculiar form of spatial efficiency, making us suspend critical thought (Augé 1995)? Or traffic lights as a representation of anxiety and suspense (Lefebvre 1995)? Or bridges and viaducts for separation and unity (Simmel 1994)? Or tunnels for death, disappearance and deliverance? It should be noted, however, that these are not just visual symbols. A roundabout must be circumnavigated and a bridge must be crossed if their cultural and political meanings are to be fully comprehended. So these are spatial elements which, in order to be read, must be driven. Which is to say that to truly appreciate a road we have to not just observe, but drive along it.

### **Motopia – Motorway Driving 55-100 MPH**

So what does happen when we drive along a particular kind of road or spatial element? I would like to take here the example of the motorway – freeway, or autobahn – which more than any other kind of road represents a kind of globally repeated, almost uniform, driving experience.

Many architects have, of course, been obsessed with urban constructions based around motorway type roads – whether Le Corbusier in his plans for the Ville Contemporaine, where the centre of the city is given over not to town halls or monuments but to a vast transport interchange

(Corbusier 1924; Fishman 1982; Inglis 2004), or the British architect and landscape designer Geoffrey Jellicoe and his designs for the new town of Motopia, constructed around a grid of elevated motorways and roundabouts (Jellicoe 1961; Robertson 2003: 15-18), or the American Norman Bell Geddes, and the “Futurama” city vision constructed for the 1939 New York Worlds Fair (Brandon 2002: 289-90).

Nor, of course, were such visions contained solely on the drawing board. Germany began construction of its autobahns in the 1930s – from 1933 to 1935 road construction consumed 60% of all public investment in work projects, and by September 1939 some 2,400 miles of autobahn had been constructed. In the USA, the first Californian freeway was the Arroyo Seco Parkway, later the Pasadena Freeway, opened in 1940 (Geyer 2001: 222; Brandon 2002: 201-2 and 342), while in the UK, the first long-distance motorway, the M1 from London to Birmingham, began construction in the late 1950s (Merriman 2001; Merriman 2003; Merriman 2004; Merriman 2005).

So what are the qualities associated with driving on these kinds of road? From the start, contemporary commentators were quick to identify the way in which motorways provided a whole new kind of space and construction, and how they raised questions such as how to drive, in what cars, with what kind of attitude and so forth. Other commentators noted the way in which the surrounding landscapes were designed to be free of visual distractions, or how service stations and petrol stations seemed to offer a new kind of foreign, youthful and general modern lifestyle. For example, the first M1 service stations were a favourite “place of pilgrimage for teenagers hoping for instant glamour.” Even more exotically, London’s elevated freeway, the Westway, opened on 28 July 1970, was seen as a place of progressive modernity, offering computer-controlled traffic, and was even compared with the continental lifestyle offered by Paris’s Boulevard Périphérique (Robertson 2003: 25-28; Laurier 2004: 261; Merriman 2004: 157-8). To give a sense of just how alien and foreign this new landscape felt to contemporary drivers, consider how Tony Brooks, at that time a Ferrari racing driver, described the new M1:

*To drive up M1 is to feel as if the England of one’s childhood . . . is no more. This broad six-lane through-way [ . . . ] kills the image of a tight little island full of hamlets and lanes and pubs. More than anything – more than Espresso bars, jeans, rock ‘n’ roll, the smell of French cigarettes on the underground, white lipstick – it is of the twentieth century. (Merriman 2004: 158)*

### **Placelessness**

If these were some of the initial reactions to motorways and freeways, what have 50 years or so revealed to us? What have decades of actually driving on these very particular roads given to us by way of urban experience? Perhaps most commonly of all, the motorway has been described by theorists such as Lefebvre, Augé and Virilio as being placeless, a terrain which is abstract, flattened, destination-focused, devoid of consciousness and bodily senses (Lefebvre 1991; Augé 1995; Virilio 1998: 17; Edensor 2003; Merriman 2004: 154). But although undoubtedly true in part, such descriptions are also highly reductive, and are often based largely on a comparison with public space conceived as people walking through a busy urban square.

But surely public life is not purely pedestrian? For example, different kinds of driving behaviour communicate different kinds of social connection, such as kindness through letting someone to filter or change lanes in motorway traffic, or aggression through tailgating, or social risk and adventure through overtaking - an action which is often moralized (Laurier 2004: 269-70). As Peter Schindler has noted in *On the Road*, a remarkable account of real driving experiences, it was actually driving on the urban streets of Shanghai, the countryside roads of Italy and the autobahns of Germany that allowed him to fully encounter and comprehend some of the most significant cultural characteristics of these countries' residents. For example, Schindler describes making a right-hand turn in Shanghai, across a seemingly impenetrable stream of bicycles, in the following terms:

*I almost closed my eyes as I turned. The ocean parted and I was in the promised land, on Mao Ming South Road, in the brief interval of time from moving east on Huai Hai Zhong Road to moving south on its perpendicular, what took place was remarkable. All the moving bicyclists, presumably alerted by my blinker, made room for me with consummate bicycling skill, the instant they saw my turn beginning [...] It was a miracle. There was no cursing, no hand-waving, no mean looks, nothing except a shared stoic acceptance on the part of the bicyclists that, in these circumstances, it was alright for me to turn right. That was a revelation. Might, I had learned, should not make right. Before driving in Shanghai, I was inclined to dismiss anything else as stupid. Yet here and then, it worked beautifully well. That was an unforgettable lesson that I could not have learned by taking the train or the tram, staying at home or meeting my neighbour on a deserted island. Plus, I think I could get to like such tolerant people . . . (Schindler 2005: 146)*

As Virilio states, speed "is not a phenomenon, but rather the relationship between phenomena." (Redhead 2004: 44) This much is then already clear to intelligent drivers like Schindler who, without recourse to theory, understand speed both implicitly and explicitly, comprehending subtle social relations from the movement of traffic and the behavioral patterns which this movement involves. There are, therefore, cultural politics at work in car traffic, but to be fully disclosed they have to be encountered through the actual act of driving.

## **View**

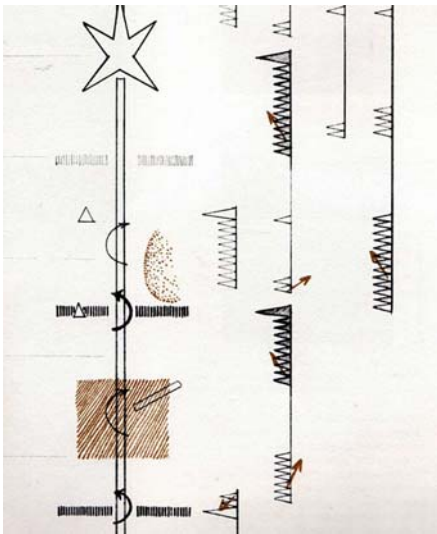
Besides these kinds of sociability, motorway driving also offers different ways of seeing. In contrast to the kind of placeless nowhere described by Augé and others, motorways in fact offer all kinds of images and associations (Edensor 2003), ranging from scenes of landscape, flora and fauna, power networks and other transport systems, as well as clues as to such things as accidents (the inevitable roadside emergency scene) forms of protest (bumper stickers), people and their everyday lives (views into fellow drivers' cars), and international connections (the numerous overseas trucks which pound up and down the UK's motorways). In particular, the visual regime of motorway driving involves a constant oscillation from the detail to the territorial, from the local to the global - one sees here a burst tyre, there an international transport system; here a fuel gauge, there a global energy supply.

*[T]his is the supreme charm of this kind of travel; that it takes us from one world to another [. . .] open to and conscious of the things that connect those worlds with each other, so that we see the change coming and know how it has come. (Young 1905: 276)*



Undertaken and viewed in an appropriate manner, motorway driving allows you to contemplate that which is out there as well as that which is close to hand.

Most notably, motorway driving, perhaps more than any other kind of driving, produces a kind of cinematic view through the windscreen, a place where high speeds mean that foregrounds are blurred and the distant view is privileged. The British architect Gordon Cullen and, after him, Appleyard, Meyer and Lynch in the US were particularly keen on this kind of driving experience, proposing a series of events along a highway, including transitions and other such cinematic devices (Appleyard, Lynch and Myer 1963; Robertson 2003: 34-5).



Cinematic coding of the highway. Appleyard, Lynch and Myer (1963).

In more everyday experiences, however, the result is not so much the kinds of notational and analytical codes proposed by Appleyard et al, and more that the driver creates what Virilio calls a series of “speed pictures” on the windscreen, images which are lined up with the windscreen, seem to accelerate towards it as they get nearer, and then, at the last instant, flee down the side windows (Virilio 1998: 12-13). Indeed, the visibility of motorway driving (as with most busy, traffic-centred driving) is even more dynamic than Virilio realizes, for driving vision is not confined to the panoramic view through the windscreen. Driving vision is a new kind of spatiality (Merriman 2004: 157), involving looking ahead, yes, but into the distance, mid- and close distance, as well as through side windows, side mirrors, and rear view mirror. A driver’s vision is not straight-ahead and steady, but fractured, simultaneously shuttling between different viewpoints and distances.

### **Temporality and Contemplation**

Besides vision, the motorway also offers a new kind of temporality, such as brevity, where a short section of road is measured by the time it takes to journey along it – which in the case of, for example, London’s Westway is about 3 minutes. More commonly, as anyone who has been to LA

will testify, motorway and freeway distances are often judged in terms of time, not miles. “How far are you from the UCLA campus? Oh, about 25 minutes.” Freeway driving makes cities a matter of not miles, but minutes.

Perhaps more commonly, however, motorway driving produces a sense of endless time, a time without beginning and end, and whose occasional stops serve only to reinforce their relentless character. Most extreme are motorways such as the M25 and the M60, loop motorways which literally never stop. As Chris Petit and Iain Sinclair note in their film of the M25, *London Orbital* (2002), the best depiction of the M25 is produced by surveillance and speed cameras - cameras which are never turned off. And this is, of course, why disruptions to motorways are reported so dramatically on the news. For example, when the UK Buncefield oil depot fire occurred in December 2005 the media reporting was almost as much about the closure of the nearby M1 motorway as it was about fire itself (Anon 2005).

This endlessness does not, however, necessarily produce the kind of pure boredom that many would have us believe is endemic to motorway driving. Several studies have shown that a great deal of work is done journeying along up motorways, either meeting at service stations and travel inns, or making phone calls, or even reading (Laurier 2004) – still others smoke, eat, drink, put on make-up and other such actions. But, more importantly, motorway driving is often used as a space of contemplation – where the very neutrality and supposedly boring nature of driving is re-invigorated by thoughts and memories. Indeed, the motorway offers a very distinct simultaneity, at once alert and focused on immediate traffic and speeds, and, at the same time, half-dreaming, half-distant, half-removed from the specificity of driving (Robertson 2003: 160-1).



Endlessness and contemplation.  
Photograph: Jim Johnson.

Yet another cultural layer is also frequently at play here. For music is, of course, one of the most powerful ways of achieving the interrelation between dreams and attentiveness, providing at once the catalyst for thoughts and, importantly, the rhythms and mental alertness which keep the driver connected with the road ahead. From radios to cassette decks, CD-players and now iPods, music is a constant presence for many drivers, a continual cultural mediation of driving experience (Edensor 2003: 161; Robertson 2003: 43; Bull 2004).

## **Technological Control**

This raises the question as to how a driver keeps in control of this new demanding modern condition. How does he or she know where they are going and undertake such a complex set of visions, sounds and actions?

To do this, the driver must become a different kind of person, someone who is – and this is something of a cliché yet still true – partly human and partly machine, a hybrid constructed from the driver's own actions and also, increasingly, from software control of engine, brakes, lighting and so on, as well as sophisticated ergonomics and instrumentation systems (Sheller and Urry 2000: 752-4; Thrift 2004: 48-51). Indeed, the car-human machine-body is now the single most sophisticated space that most of us routinely encounter - no other entity is as intensively conceived, designed and experienced as that of a driver driving a car in motion. Compared to driving, being at home, at work or even flying as a passenger is like being in a stone-age cave – the car and its interior in motion is by far and away the most intensively interactive space with which we now engage.

To give but one example of this, consider the sat-nav systems now fitted into many cars. Such systems allow cars to be located almost anywhere in the world within a few feet, let the driver to know where they are going, while also providing warnings of speed camera sites, congestion zones and accident blackspots, and simultaneously, through all manner of additional forms of connectivity, allowing wireless, Bluetooth telephone conversations, email, fax and internet connections to take place. And all of this takes place not despite of, but in integration with the driver moving across the country at relative high speed. This is what Virilio calls “accelerated temporality,” (Redhead 2004: 46) a way of knowing not only where one is physically and geographically, but also informationally. It is the mobile phone to the power of ten, offering increasing mobility of communication and transportation.

## **Altered States: Driving at 100+ MPH**

This brings me to the final section of this schema for the experience of driving: the condition of altered states, that is driving at speeds of, say, around 100 mph and more, and which produce driving experiences which are relatively devoid of site specificity, and which also carry with them particular dangers and associated psychological conditions.

### **Speed**

Since the eighteenth century and the arrival of new kinds of horse-drawn carriage, speed has been celebrated as a form of exhilaration, where the driver engages with the world around them through their mobility. In particular, speed has been associated with the transcendental, that is with moving not just from one place to another place, but from one state of being to another state of being: speed means flight, intoxication, rapture, horror, hallucination, a kind of modern day sublime (Schnapp 1999: 8-9). This is why the Futurists placed so much importance on speed, for

its ability to signify change, and this is also why high speed journeys must be considered in transcendental as well as quantitative terms; that is, speeds of, say, 100 mph or more seem to produce another kind of space and time, a condition which is at once tumultuous and threatening, but also calm and focused.

In many cases this involves actions which verge on the illegal, or even determinedly step over that line, as with the high speed night-time racing which occasionally breaks out on Tokyo's streets and freeways, and which is disseminated via the internet and through DVDs such as *Midnight Racer: the Ultimate Japanese Street Racing Video* (2004). Most notorious of all is *C'était un Rendezvous* (1976), directed by Claude Lelouch, which shows a very high speed nine minute journey through the Paris in the small hours of the morning. In this film, which has acquired near mythic status among driving communities, a camera is gyroscopically-mounted low down on the front of a car, creating a hyper-accelerated view as the unidentified driver hurtles past fellow motorists, through red-lights and along both wide boulevards and narrow back streets. Such depictions show something of the addictive, perilous, undoubtedly reprehensible yet also curiously compelling nature of high speed driving. As Filson Young described this kind of speed, such experiences offer "the exaltation of the dreamer:"

*The ineffable thrill and exhilaration of such a flight none but they who have experienced it in their own bodies can ever conceive. It is beyond everything else in our physical existence. It is the exaltation of the dreamer, the drunkard, a thousand times purified and magnified [ . . . ] And to your exalted, expanded senses the noise of the movement is heavenly music, the wind like wine of the gods."* (Young 1905: 285)



*C'était un Rendezvous* (1971). Dir. Claude Lelouch.

## **Death and Danger**

Such exaltations help to explain why many have tried to emulate this kind of high speed driving, either passively, through watching car chases on films such as *Ronin*, or through virtual reality driving games such as *Gran Turismo*, *Need for Speed* and *Grand Theft Auto*, or through the

burgeoning market in trackday driving at race circuits around the world. For example, the Nurburgring Nordschleife facility in Germany – originally constructed in the 1920s for vehicle testing, club racing and as a showcase of German engineering – has now reached almost iconic status as a place for drivers to encounter 13 miles of unforgiving, mountainous and tree-lined corners and straights. (Neubauer 1960; Lovejoy 1998-2006; Nixon 2005)

This raises a final point about driving, which is that such high speed experiences also carry with them the opposite of speed and exhilaration, that is to say they are inevitably accompanied by crashes, injury and even death. For example, at a recent trackday at the Nurburgring the morning briefing session started with an instructor telling the 50 or so assembled drivers to, “look around the room - by lunchtime, five of you will have hit the barrier.” This was not of course, an instruction to crash, but conversely that those present should, while driving at speed, try hard not to damage themselves or their vehicles. And what such a statement implies, therefore, is that the ability to control and *avoid* such accidents is part of the demanding pleasure of driving.

This is one of the reasons why driving is often seen as more satisfying than train journeys, for it brings the driver to the edge of herself or himself. Like skiing, skateboarding, surfing or other kinds of highly mobile sporting activity, in high-speed driving danger is neither denied nor celebrated, and instead is acknowledged and confronted. Some, of course, have actively sought accidents. J.G. Ballard and Andy Warhol, for instance, both explored car crashes as events of eroticism, mediation and repetition. But more generally it is the transcendental or cyclical nature of speed and the crash which appears within driving culture (Schnapp 1999). It is worth recalling that, in the Futurist manifesto, the seminal moment at which Futurism is born is Marinetti's account of a road-side recovery from a car crash he had in 1908, signifying both death and birth.

*With patient, loving care those people rigged a tall derrick and iron grapnels to fish out my car, like a big beached shark. Up it came from the ditch, slowly, leaving in the bottom, like scales, its heavy framework of good sense and its soft upholstery of comfort.*

*They thought it was dead, my beautiful shark, but a caress from me was enough to revive it; and there it was, alive again, running on its powerful fins!*

*And so, faces smeared with good factory muck – plastered with metallic waste, with senseless sweat, with celestial soot – we, bruised, our arms in slings, but unafraid, declared our high intentions to all the living of the earth:*

*Manifesto of Futurism*

- *We intend to sing the love of danger, the habit of energy and fearlessness. [...]*

*(Marinetti 1909)*

The birth of Futurism this begins with a renewal, and we should remember that this is what driving is ultimately about: the challenge to the driver, and her or his renewal, reinvigoration, each time they drive. Through driving, the human subject emerges as someone who has experienced one

of the most distinctive and ubiquitous conditions of the modern world and who has become, as a result, a different kind of person.

### **Postscript**

And this provides a final thought, namely that, if we are indeed to deal with the problems of congestion, pollution, energy consumption, health and safety that car use undoubtedly contributes towards, we must, in doing so, seriously consider the pleasures of driving as a way of understanding why people will not simply abandon their cars even if affordable, efficient and useful forms of public transport were suddenly to become readily available. In short, without addressing the cultural reasons as to why people like to drive, a purely quantitative, economic and/or functionalist approach to transportation will always fall short of its desired aims.

Indeed, the oft-stated functionalist approach to reducing the amount of private car driving – namely that journeys by car should only be made when absolutely essential – could be simply reversed. That is, car driving should never be essential, never be necessary; rather, driving should only be undertaken as a form of pleasure – and hence that the kinds of cultural activity outlined in this article could be even more enjoyably pursued.

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