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THE TRANSFORMATIVE
AESTHETICS OF CARS**

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Abstract

As an introduction to this issue, this article touches on the topics addressed in the other articles. It discusses the transformations of the body that come about through interactions and integrations with the car. The capacity for speed offers a transformative opportunity, creating a velocitized body that relates to landscapes in a new way. Also discussed is the separation that comes about through the car's interiority and shell-like qualities, which offers shelter from outside threats and transforms social relations between individuals. Recent examples of drive-thru Covid testing and a drive-thru art exhibition illustrate how the protective quality of the car, and the separation it entails, was taken advantage of by both hospitals and art galleries.

Keywords

Body, Transformation, Embodiment, Phenomenology, Velocity, Sexuality.

1. Introduction

Last year I spent hundreds of hours commuting to and from work. The roundtrip was between 200 and 300 kilometers each day, and the majority of the distance was on highway 401 which holds the record for busiest highway in North America (and arguably busiest in the world, though many countries do not record such data). I nearly crashed twice, I saw two cars engulfed in flames on the side of the road, a transport truck container ripped in half, and two identical black pickup trucks in a collision. Much of my commuting time was spent moving below 10km/hour, when I would try not to fall asleep. Commuting was my only time alone that year, and I began to see my car as if I were a hermit crab taking on a temporary shell. I could hide there, escape into its interior safety, as I had in my childhood while waiting for my father to return from a work meeting or other appointment where I would feel uncomfortable. The steel, plastic and glass offered an effective separation from the world that I could retreat into. This retreat was cathartic, as last year I was recovering from the end of my marriage and adjusting to my return to Canada after 15 years abroad. Within this shell I could have private moments of desperate weeping as well as screaming rages without the social repercussions such expressions would have in other places surrounded by

as many people. If someone happened to see my expression while driving, it was a transitory encounter as the continuing flow of traffic swept us apart.

These hours spent in my car were filled with life, yet commuting is somehow a time separate from living, time we feel has been lost or taken away from what we prioritize as our real lives, the activities and relationships we attempt to focus our energies on. The separation that driving a car invokes may be somewhat straightforward to note, but along with this separation come transformations that are not so straightforward. This introductory text attempts to introduce some ideas about this relationship between person and car with the aim to parse out the particularities of these transformations through discussions of sensorial experiences and symbolic social interactions. The articles that follow explore some of these aforementioned topics, through aesthetics of the car in a number of examples. They also demonstrate the integration of cars with our understandings of gender, identity, and culture, through the sensorial material experience of these car aesthetics as well as through the symbolism that is applied in a process of social identification. The sensorial experience of cars is explored in a creative work by Jondi Keane, offering an example of artistic research through drawing and creative writing. The aesthetics of the appearance of the car and its materials inside and out, and how these are gendered both by those who modify their vehicles and by those who build and market them to consumers, is explored in Angela Cope's *Colour Pops, New Car Smells: The Feminization of Saran before Saran Wrap*. The car (or truck) as symbol of the individual and representative of a local culture is addressed in Megan Greene's *The Motor Vehicle: A Musing on The Aesthetics of The Canadian Oil Sands*, where images of particular trucks and their modifications are used in popular culture to represent a people and a place.

My own interest in this relationship between person and car came about through this year of long commutes, which I looked forward to as a cathartic retreat into a mobile architectural shell. This commuting time offered me a chance to be alone, between a house full of my multi-generational extended family and my work on film sets with a hundred colleagues. Henri Lefebvre suggested that the commute is a 'constrained time' of life, similar to the office Christmas party or other such compulsory work-related event, as it is unpaid time we must sacrifice to maintain our employment. Yet this may be an enabling constraint, as it creates an interstitial phase between work and home identities as well as a dissociation from the surrounding environment. As such, it might offer an opportunity for a necessary remediation. In *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies*, Kristin Ross writes,

The commute [...] has become the respite, the retreat. A miraculous object, the car can compensate for the destruction it has created—it can protect the driver and offer solace from the conditions it has helped create. In this the automobile follows the established order of the capitalism of which it is the twentieth-century emblem; for the established order of capitalism, as Mark Angenot points out, only subsists by repeating ‘I didn’t want that,’ and by looking around in the disarray it has wrought for the means to restabilize. In the later compensatory myths of the car it is its protected interior space that takes on value, its quasi-domestic (but also anti-domestic) function: a home away from home, a place for solitude or intimacy.¹

Rather than a non-site moving within a timeless space, the experience of the commute offers us what we lack in our daily lives. This moment of obligatory constraint, living through the traffic jams created by our conflicting desires for suburban lifestyle and city careers, throws upon us self-reflection, a chance for daydreams and fantasies, or a cathartic release of emotions either inwards or outwards towards other cars and drivers.

2. Shell and shelter, extension and transformation

Through selection of fabrics, patterns, materials and advertising strategies (further explored in Angela Cope’s article in this issue, ‘*Color Pops, New Car Smells*’), the car interior has extended comfort into this ‘quasi-domestic’ mobile architecture that we retreat into as if a shell of protection. This is furthered by the safety mechanisms implemented, from airbags to cameras, in order to offer that essential architectural function of shelter. The interior of the car is heated, air conditioned, softened with various types of foam, and surfaces are designed to be pleasing to multiple sense modalities. In order to achieve a sensorial separation from the exterior world, sound insulation is used to dampen road noise and so offers the potential for the driver to customize their interior soundscape. In 1924, Kelley’s Motors installed its first car radio, and since then listening to music while driving has become an essential part of being in a car.

*Here in my car
I feel safest of all
I can lock all my doors
It's the only way to live in cars.
Here in my car
I can only receive*

*I can listen to you
It keeps me stable for days in cars.
Here in my car
Where the image breaks down
Will you visit me please
If I open my door in cars
Here in my car
You know I've started to think
About leaving tonight
Although nothing seems right in cars.²*

I was in traffic in London once and had a problem with some people in front. They tried to beat me up and get me out of the car. I locked the doors and eventually drove up on the pavement and got away from them ... It explains how you can feel safe inside a car in the modern world, which is probably why you get things like road rage. When you're in it, your whole mentality is different, in a car. It's like your own little personal empire with four wheels on it.³

This domestic quality of the direct experience of the interior also leads to a change in our relations to other drivers. Their humanity is reduced while we are both driving on the road. The social relations between drivers are greatly different from those not mediated by the metal, plastic and glass of the car. Road rage might be the clearest example of this difference, when we act aggressively in response to our assumed anonymity while driving. Matthew B. Crawford writes that '[w]e feel free to yell curses at others while driving that we never would on a sidewalk. And of course, there is more reason for cursing on a motorway, as others in *their* private cars are very much in one's way. Where previously the street had the character of a commons, it is now a place of *competition* for something scarce: street capacity.'⁴ This quality of shell and shelter offered by the insular qualities of the car lead to transformations of our ways of perceiving and

interacting with the world, as it increases our capacities for motion, and changes our manners of relating to landscape and other people.

Despite being designed to allow panoramic vision of the surrounding environment with large windows, to allow egress through multiple doors, the thin separation between interior and exterior serves to build an impermeable if not impenetrable shelter. The separation is one of contradictions as the mobility of the car affords access to landscapes and locations yet protects from those visited environments. This separation is illusory, but it does serve to recast embodied perceptions. The phenomenological and psychological dichotomy of this separation may echo what Gaston Bachelard describes as ‘shelter’:

whenever the human being has found the slightest shelter [...] the imagination [will] build ‘walls’ of impalpable shadows, comfort itself with the illusion of protection—or, just the contrary, tremble behind thick walls, mistrust the staunchest ramparts. In short, in the most interminable of dialectics, the sheltered being gives perceptible limits to his shelter.⁵

The shelter of the car operates as a kind of architecture to both enclose and protect the body while creating the exterior world as a separate sphere. Perhaps it is a combination of the safety mechanisms, the physical durability of the enclosure, paired with the sound isolation and interior climate control that establishes the architectural quality of an interior environment.

3. Cars and Covid-19

During the recent Covid-19 pandemic, this shell-like protective quality of the car became entangled with the requirement to separate oneself from other people and perhaps that uncontrollable world outside one’s bubble. Some Covid testing locations were drive-thru operations to avoid transmission of the virus in waiting lines. I visited one when I had some symptoms of the illness. The parking lot location was repurposed with new white lines painted over the yellow parking spot demarcations in order to corral the arriving patients into a systematized array of waiting lines. Two tents were built on the parking lot, the first for taking a patient’s information, the second for the test. The degree to which the window was rolled down was a concern for the nurses, instructions were given for this as well as for how to withdraw one’s facemask from one’s nose but still cover one’s mouth. Signage was prevalent throughout; all motions of car and driver were choreographed.



Fig. 1 and 2: Drive-thru Covid-19 test at the Etobicoke General Hospital, Canada, April 2020. Photos by author.



Fig. 3: 'Immersive Van Gogh' production (<https://www.vangoghexhibit.ca/>) in Toronto, Canada, September 2020. Photos by author.

Also, during the Covid-19 lockdown when all museums and galleries were shuttered, the 'Immersive van Gogh' exhibition in Toronto was marketed as drive-thru experience as a way to safely enjoy art and culture without risk of infection. I was curious to experience driving around in an art exhibition, but the fantasy I had about a kind of demolition derby of visitors racing around inside a museum was not realized, and instead rules, regulations and directives were imposed towards a scripted experience. I drove into a shipping and receiving dock, up a ramp and into a space large enough for 10 cars to park in side by side. Signs instructed drivers to tune into a specific radio station playing the exhibition soundtrack. Meanwhile a rolling snack bar and souvenir vendor made the rounds from car to car. When the projection began, I realized that I would have had a better view from an SUV than from my compact hatchback.

I was more fascinated with the interaction between spectator and exhibition than with the show, as I watched the woman in the SUV next to me watching the projection through her phone as she recorded it, offering an immediate multiplicity of moving images in layers of replication and projection, while she sipped on her snack bar drink. There was a moment when my rearview and side mirrors allowed views of the projection behind me, so my car assisted in my consumption of the

Mobility and speed effect their own transformations through our integration with the car. Aside from the physical separation this hermit-crab-like construction provides us, the car allows for different forms of motion and result in different sense of freedom. Although quotidian routines lead us to follow repetitive routes, as car advertisements promise us we believe in our capacity to escape both our environment and the tedium of our daily lives through the mobility the car affords. Jean Baudrillard writes,

Movement alone is the basis of a sort of happiness, but the mechanical euphoria associated with speed is something else altogether, grounded for the imagination in the miracle of motion. Effortless mobility entails a kind of absence of responsibility. The effect of speed's integration of space-time is to reduce the world to two-dimensionality, to an image, stripping away its relief and its historicity and in a way ushering one into a state of sublime immobility and contemplation [...] Beyond a hundred kilometers per hour there is a presumption of eternity (as also, perhaps, of neurosis...)⁷

Through speed comes a transformation of state both in physical capacity for motion and in patterns of thought. Furthermore, the high speeds we achieve in cars increases our separation from the surrounding landscape. This two-dimensionality that Baudrillard describes and the flattened image of the world that results from it transform our relationship with landscapes we pass through. We are not disembodied, but we become another form of body, one that can no longer integrate itself into the landscape as before.

This separation of dimensional planes was present in earlier forms of high-speed travel. In discussing train travel, Wolfgang Schivelbusch writes of the transformation of our ways of perceiving the landscape as a result of this newfound speed and mobility. He writes,

the depth perception of pre-industrial consciousness was, literally, lost: velocity blurs all foreground objects, which means that there no longer is a foreground — exactly the range in which most of the experience of pre-industrial travel was located. The foreground enabled the traveler to relate to the landscape through which he was moving. He saw himself as part of the foreground, and that perception joined him to the landscape, included him in it, regardless of all further distant views that the landscape presented. Now velocity dissolved the foreground, and the traveler lost that aspect. He was removed from that 'total space' which combined proximity and distance⁸

The automobile has increased our velocities and further dissolved the foreground, and with it our integration into the surrounding landscape. Our mode of perception while travelling in cars

is either towards the distant horizon or the very close, such as our phones/tablets/screens. My childhood memories of sing-songs and observation games during long car trips are likely forever gone, as if I were a child today, I would certainly be watching my favorite TV shows on my phone.

5. A surface of symbolic extensions

There is an embodied dimension to our experience of the car as we extend our capacities for movement through it, and perhaps our senses by extension into it. This could be seen as a form of transformation into another body, one that has these increased capacities for velocity, and one that employs the materials of the car for sensing the surrounding environment. This sensorial extension continues into the social realm as the surface of the car comes to be a symbolic extension of the individual driving it. Paradoxical to the experience of the car as a place of shelter and a medium of social separation, the car is also a medium of social interaction as it operates symbolically to exhibit aesthetic values, group membership, and cultural identity. The shell can have an expressive capacity as it not only separates and conceals what hides within it, but also can display identity. This is often an idealised identity, one that is made public by expressed intention rather than spontaneous expression as persona is extended onto the exterior surface of the car. The selection and customization of the car's exterior components and materials aims to express a form of popular aesthetic discourse, as the car has come to be seen as an extension of the driver.

This notion of the car as both an embodied sensorial extension of the individual and as idealized expression of the individual's social persona is presented J. G. Ballard's novel *Crash* (1973), as well as David Cronenberg's film adaptation of the novel (1996), which explore a fictional group of car crash fetishists. The aesthetic sensorial (if not sensual) relationship with the car and with its way of engendering particular social interactions is taken to an extreme. In the novel, the role of the car as a mediator of social interactions is examined in the situation of a car crash. In that violent event, a merging of the living and non-living materials, bodies and cars, comes about through the transfer of energies, both kinetic and libidinal. Ballard describes a sexual dimension in this encounter between body and material surroundings. When bodies and the metal and plastic of the cars collide at high speed, the transfer of energies is manifested in the physical trauma of breaking living and non-living materials. For Ballard's characters, this results in a transformation of their sexual desires. He writes, "This obsession with the sexual possibilities of everything around me had been jerked loose from my mind by the crash."⁹

These characters also fetishize both the scars and physical transformations that the car crashes have left on their bodies as well as the interior materials, dials, and interactive

mechanisms of the cars themselves. This extension of one into the other gives example of the car as extension of the body towards a new form of being. Here the extension is more than symbolic as it includes marks of this interaction, marks of this violent event of integration. Other examples are more symbolic, such as the aesthetic modifications people make to their cars or trucks to further demonstrate their identities on the surface of their vehicles. These aesthetic decisions are complex and often particular to a place and culture, for example the jeepneys of the Philippines, the truck art of South Asia, the chiva buses of Colombia, the colectivos of Argentina, American hot rod culture, among others. In these instances of local car cultures, each idiosyncratic in its particular aesthetic language, the functional qualities of the car are overlaid with a surface that is symbolic as much as decorative. Such popular cultural expression envelops the quotidian utility of the automobile with surplus meaning.

The relationship between person and car exists in the everyday comings and goings of our lives, and for the most part the experience of this relationship is banal. The significance of this relationship can be made apparent by such aesthetic expressions as the aforementioned car modifications or speculative fictions like Ballard's *Crash*. This aesthetic enveloping of the utilitarian object as well as the somaesthetic embodied extension into it suggests there may be something in this relationship and its particularities that can reveal aspects of popular cultural expression and the ways we extend ourselves, bodily and otherwise, into what surrounds us.

¹ Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the reordering of French culture*. Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1995, p. 55.

² Gary Numan, "Cars," side two track 4 on *The Pleasure Principle*, Beggar's Banquet, 1979, record.

³ Gary Numan: <https://www.ozy.com/good-sht/getting-back-behind-the-wheel/3906/> (accessed Oct 18th 2020, original unavailable?)

⁴ Matthew B. Crawford, *Why We Drive: Toward a Philosophy of the Open Road*, New York: Harper Collins, 2020, p.10.

⁵ Gaston Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1969, p. 5. Trans. Maria Jolas.

⁶ <http://patft.uspto.gov/netacgi/nph-Parser?Sect1=PTO2&Sect2=HITOFF&p=1&u=%2Fnetacgi%2FPTO%2Fsearch-bool.html&r=1&f=G&l=50&co1=AND&d=PTXT&s1=9272708.PN.&OS=PN/9272708&RS=PN/927270> (see 'images' page 4) (accessed 27.2.2020)

⁷ Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, trans. James Benedict. London and New York: Verso, 1996, p. 65.

⁸ Wolfgang Schivelbusch. *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2014, p. 63.

⁹ J. G. Ballard, *Crash*. New York: Picador, 1973, p. 29.