Driving Through Space: An Examination of the Car as Place

“I think that cars today are almost the exact equivalent of the great Gothic cathedrals: I mean the supreme creation of an era, conceived with passion by unknown artists, and consumed in image if not in usage by a whole population which appropriates them as a purely magical object.”

— Roland Barthes

Decade after decade, the car, that quintessential machine, has captured the imaginations of Americans everywhere. We sing songs about cars, we make movies about cars, and we live our lives in cars. In a very real way, a car is a place. It is somewhere we go, somewhere we have memories of, and somewhere we can revisit. Cars have become an integral part of our lives (or at least it feels that way). Yet, a car is not usually what we think of when we try to name a “place.” Cars move and they seem to exist in other places, like in our garages or on the road. But we cannot ignore a place where we spend so much time. Cars serve as a place within a place, a setting that hurdles through an outside reality. Cars give an impression of control and freedom, but what function do cars really serve? For something so ingrained in our lives, the effect cars have on our world and the way we see it is underestimated.

A World Within a World, Continually Displaced

When we are inside of a car, we create our own world. The car’s design is manufactured to block out noise, creating a “cocoon” that heightens everything inside. Karin Bijsterveld claims, “In their cars drivers can play their music loudly and sing along way out of tune without bothering others. They do so in a space that seems acoustically sealed off from the outside world. This renders that world into some sort of movie, not quite completely real.”¹ The car is calculated in a way that keeps us contained, and yet at the same time a large portion of cars are made of glass so that we can look out. How contradicting is that notion?

A car strives to keep our attention inward (letting us fill the car with music, sealing us off from the noise outside, giving us all kinds of buttons and controls to play with inside) and yet, at the same time, makes sure that we can see what is going on outside of the car. We are stationary; everything moves around us as if we were watching a movie. The car encourages us to turn the “outside” into a separate reality, apart from us and yet vitally important. If we fail to pay attention to the outside, it may very well come crashing into us, bursting our bubble.

A car creates its own place, managing to be both public and private. Jack DeWitt writes in his column, “There is something intensely private about driving through public spaces in a car. It is a time not for travel to some place but for thinking, feeling, looking.” Protected by walls of steel, hurtling along at high speeds, we feel invisible. We pay attention not to the people in the cars around us, but only to the hunks of metal swerving around, and trust that the other drivers do the same. We become so inwardly focused that it seems almost rude when someone peers into our domain. We believe ourselves to be alone, but it is all an illusion. Even when there is no one else on the road, we are never out of touch. We have OnStar, Bluetooth, and GPS technology tracking us along out way.

When we sit in a car, we are inactive. Our minds may be engaged, but our bodies simply apply a bit of pressure to the controls. We sit in a place that does not change. The inside of our cars are not buffeted by the wind roaring outside, but are calm, temperature controlled, and still. While we remain immobile, the outside rushes past, blurring and weaving in a way that makes it unreal. The “outside” even seems to disappear at night, when we cannot mark the changes in the scenery. In Cynthia Kadohata’s book, The Floating World, her character describes a driving experience: “There were no lights along the highway and sometimes it was hard to tell we were in a real car, because the scenery on either side changed hardly at all. It was like one of those pretend cars in arcades, where you have a seat and a steering wheel.”

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However, even though cars are movable places, they have affected the immobile world through which they travel. The outside world has adjusted to the car, catering to the road. Motels, gas stations, fast food drive-thrus, and even drive-in movies all sprang into existence because of the car. Our accessibility to the road defines the way we relate to the world. The pathways across the country serve as a permanent example of the car’s dominance as our form of movement. Jack DeWitt explains that “In the '50's the car won the transportation wars as superhighways, in the name of national defense, were built across the country tying car-dependent suburbs together. It is not surprising that three of the most insightful novels of the period, On the Road, Lolita, and Rabbit, Run, each feature at least one significant journey on American highways as emblematic of the postwar American experience.”

The car does not only affect the landscape, but dominates it. Pedestrians and other forms of transportation become secondary, as evidenced by the architecture and infrastructure. Inadequate sidewalks, unwalkable neighborhoods, and suburbs separated by distance all shut out anyone who might try to travel on foot or bike. The roads are constructed with cars in mind, their bright lines serving as a reminder that other forms of transport are interlopers in the car’s domain. The world has twisted itself to help people “experience” it without leaving their personally created world of the car. You can “see the USA in your Chevrolet,” as the old (recently reclaimed) jingle goes. Drive-thrus supply your mini-domain with food, drive-ins supply them with entertainment, and even a drive-in church can help you ascend to a third realm beyond you and your car.

Cars have a knack for breaking down our natural concepts of time. In a car, you get where you are going much faster than you ever could walking. Yet time seems to stretch when you are stuck in a traffic jam, unable to do anything about it. Driving on the highway, especially at night, the scenery blurs past and time seems to lose its meaning altogether. You are just sitting in the car, unable to track time by your physical activity or by the environment.

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outside. Time can evaporate when you are in one place and then suddenly another, with no real memory of how you got there. Such is the miracle of the contained space of the car.

**A Symbol of Control and Freedom**

We give places meanings and cars are no exception. The most common ideas associated with cars are control and freedom. While you may control a car when you drive it, how does this control extend beyond the functional use? When you pick a car, it represents you. Cars are personal because they reflect our personalities and preferences. Jonathan Raban argues that “The car is a special simulacra of the self; it goes where its owner goes; it forms his outer suit, his most visible and ubiquitous expression of choice and taste, it is most often seen briefly, on the move – like the citizen himself.” Yet at the same time, this control over our outward image is subverted by how cars are impersonal, all sharing a common structure and function.

Cars seem like a place we can control. We are in charge of how fast they go, how loud our music is, and even the temperature of our realm. At the same time, though, the nature of the roads we drive on tamper these power surges. We cannot change where the road leads; we can only follow it. We cannot control traffic or the drivers around us. We cannot even control the pedestrians or wildlife that end up in our path. As a passenger in a car—although we feel the effects of its removal from the “outside”—we do not have any control over our own destiny.

A car’s automated functionality undermines the illusion of control in a car. From the automatic transmission to the automatic windows, we lose more and more control over the functions of the car. Today, cars park themselves and with a push of a button can shut off your radio, lights, and engine. Indeed, Jean Baudrillard, in her book *America*, praises driving in cars along American highways as the ultimate *communal* experience, where individual

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responsibility seems lifted from us, taken care of by the pattern of movement and signs that seem to signal our destiny.

“Gigantic, spontaneous spectacle of automotive traffic. A total collective act, staged by the entire population, twenty-four hours a day...the freeway system is a place of integration...it creates a different state of mind, and the European driver very quickly gives up his aggressive, every-man-for-himself behavior and his individual reactions, and adopts the rules of this collective game...the regularity of the flows cancels out individual destinations...their signs read like a litany. ‘Right lane must exit.’ This ‘must exit’ has always struck me as a sign of destiny. I have got to go, expel myself from this paradise, leave this providential highway which leads me nowhere, but keeps me in touch with everyone...Why should I tear myself away to revert to an individual trajectory, a vain sense of responsibility?” 6

Cars have also traditionally represented freedom. The car serves as a symbol in countless works of art and literature, evoking an impulse to leave, to move on, get out, escape. Characters often dream about getting into their cars and driving out of their situation. The car manifests the power to leave a place, and for this reason some people drive for the sake of driving. They attempt to reclaim a feeling of power, even if they know they are not really going anywhere. Road trips often serve as a break from the mundane: a vehicle to something beyond the confines of day-to-day life.

Learning to drive is an important rite of passage for teenagers, an act that marks part of their journey into adulthood. It gives them a sense of freedom, both real and perceived. Real because they can now move themselves independently, without waiting for assistance, but perceived because they are most often still contained by the laws of the roads, including the extra restrictions placed on them at a young age. They are also still beholden to their parents who pay for or sign off on insurance.

The car’s ability to help us move through space fulfills an innate need we have for movement. As Bruce Forbes pointed out that Frederick Jackson Turner

    Also raised the theme of mobility, referring to the ‘restless, nervous energy’ of Americans as they moved westward; so much space available on the frontier allowed the discontented to escape to isolation or to new adventures. ‘Movement

has been [America’s] dominant fact, and, unless this training has no effect upon a people, the American energy will continually demand a wider field for its exercise.’ Several historians have noted the continuity with frontier values, as the automobile became the new mode of expression in a society that highly valued both individualism and mobility. Carrying frontier values, Americans drove off in their automobiles into new kinds of frontiers.7

We need to feel that we are progressing, that we are accomplishing something, but so often we undermine the perceived freedom of cars by driving in circles. Most of us do not drive out of our lives and off into the sunset. We drive to and from work, shuttling ourselves between the same places over and over again. The car’s sense of freedom, and the illusion that we are taking advantage of that freedom, only serve to make us complacent, to make sure that we do not try and leave the cages of our daily existence.

The Concept of a Car

Cars seem like an inescapable part of our lives. From the day we are born, we are shuttled home from the hospital in a car. As children, we play with miniaturized cars, simulating and practicing driving, simulating travel, simulating the passage of time we participate in as car passengers. We spend our whole lives building up our ability to steer a car, practicing with bikes, shopping carts, and video games. However, our idea of the car as a place, as a space with its own unique qualities and abilities, is built up over time through advertising and movies.

Advertising is everywhere, especially today: on the TV, on the Internet, on the radio, on the billboards, and even emblazoned on our t-shirts. Through all these media outlets and more, advertisers work to help us associate cars with different ideas that have nothing to do with gears and metal. Cars are featured as destinations. Manufacturers explain how their cars exemplify escape and change, while at the same time pushing the ideas of permanency, consistency, and endurance. In fact, advertisers associate cars with all kinds of ideas,

including safety, luxury, power, toughness, sleekness, fun, efficiency, and cool. For example, in Ford ads, trucks are shown hauling heavy loads and charging through rocky terrain, emphasizing their toughness and strength. And in every ad, just like the Ford ad, the person who drives the car takes on the qualities of the car. The car is a place that shapes the person driving it.

In addition to advertising, we learn to mythicize cars through film. Cars play an important role in countless different films, known as the “road movie.” The genre is highly self-referential, Bennet Schaber explains: “The list could go on, but is finally very much summed up in Lost in America (1985) when Albert Brooks proposes to Julie Hagerty that they hit the road ‘just like Easy Rider.'”

Movies and TV shows often place important conversations or confrontations in cars. When in a car, these scenes seem to lack a setting. The car feels disconnected and inescapable, and the confines of the car become the perfect place to shove the problems of the characters into sharp focus. Two great examples of this are Little Miss Sunshine (2006) and Crazy, Stupid, Love (2011). In Little Miss Sunshine, as Dwayne realizes that he is color blind which will prevent him from fulfilling his dream of being an Air Force pilot, he freaks out. It becomes immediately necessary to get out of the van in which he and his family are traveling. As his world begins to crumble and he struggles to gain his mental footing, he cannot stand to be in the transitory, ungrounded world of the car. He cannot bear to have this issue suffocating him any longer. He begins to push on the car as if he could escape it by will alone, but even then he has to wait until his father pulls the car over. Similarly, in Crazy, Stupid, Love, Cal is stuck in his car as his wife attempts to discuss her infidelity and wish for a divorce. The contained space traps him, maintaining the confrontation long beyond his comfort. He feels the need to escape the seemingly unreal reality that is unfolding before him in the car, and takes matters into his own hands by opening the door and jumping out, even though the car is moving. In both films, the car is a place

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unconnected to the outside world. No longer is it a tool to get away from the world, but a prison to escape from.

Cars even lend themselves to violent scenes. One of the most dramatic ways cars exist on film is in car crashes. We like watching car crashes because it allows us to live out the scenario of our deaths without actually subjecting ourselves to harm. As Jean Baudrillard has suggested, “Technology is never grasped except in the (automobile) accident, that is to say in the violence done to technology itself and in the violence to the body. It is the same: any shock, any blow, any impact, all the metallurgy of the accident can be read in the semiurgy of the body.”9 Paul Newland further elaborates in his work, “Something is happening in the screen car crash that involves the destruction of modern technology and the destruction of a body working in tandem. When the spectator witnesses a screen car crash they effectively witness a collision occurring between humanity and modern technology.”10

Car crashes can exist for comedic effect, or a purposefully violent effect, in order underscore the violent nature of a film. When we see car crashes in film, we see the full glory of the impact and after effects. When we see a car crash on the news, we only see the leftovers, the mess left behind. We rarely get to see the car crash occur. Except for in the movies. But then again, these are not “real” car crashes, they are staged. Yet they are what we think of when we see the remains of a “real” car crash. This is why we become obsessed with the carnage of “real life” car crashes, and why we slow down every time we see a wreck on the highway. It gives us a chance to remember the thrill of what we saw in the theater.

**Full Speed Ahead**

What is it that we think cars do? Simply get us from point A to point B? Cars are more than a tool to move us around. They are a world within the world. A place that bends our idea of time and what is real. A place that symbolizes freedom and control, even if it does not offer either. It is a place created in our minds by movies and advertisers, but experienced so often in our own lives that it becomes seemingly inescapable.

Cars suspend us in our own personal worlds. The bubble of the car becomes the bubble of our lives. Within this bubble, our car convinces us that we are in the world, experiencing it, masters of control and freedom. Like how we watch everything fly by in a blur outside our car, we are contented to watch our lives fly by on our TVs, our computers, our screens and windshields through which we see the world. We get to call ourselves aware without having to feel, without having to deal with the consequences of being in the world. When we travel in our cars we never experience the sore feet, sunburns, or frozen fingers that accompany long journeys. The worst we can experience is some stiffness, a little numbness. And that is what driving in cars makes us: numb. By going everywhere in cars, we make ourselves impervious to the world. Even after we have unbuckled ourselves and opened the doors, our minds cannot re-connect with the world. Sarah Ruhl ruminates on this phenomenon in one of her plays: “Walking — horseback — that is the speed at which the soul can stay in the body during travel. So airports and subway stations are very similar to hell. People are vulnerable — disembodied — they’re looking around for their souls while they get a shoe shine.”

Cars move at speeds unimaginable to our ancestors, so fast that they take us out of this world. But now we are always disconnected. We float through life, observing the world but never truly interacting. This is why we are so obsessed with car crashes. It is as if we yearn for the day when our bubbles will be punctured, when out of nowhere we will be returned to the world at large, really present for the first time.

How will this play out, a world full of disconnected people waiting to be slammed back to earth? It seems to have already set us on the path to ruin. Everyday we hear about a new way in which the world will end. I myself have survived around nine proclaimed Armageddons. But while a few voices cry out that global warming is real, the end of fossil fuels is imminent, the forests are disappearing, and our food cannot sustain our rate of

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growth, we continue to plow on as if we cannot hear. Maybe we can’t. Maybe we spend so much time in our cars that we cannot comprehend the things changing around us. Perhaps at some point we will become so complacent that we will drive ourselves, full speed ahead, off a cliff. Maybe the tires have already left the ground, but we can’t tell. We’re just spinning our wheels, weightless.