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From the earliest time, people settling in cities devised clever ways of moving things: the materials they needed to build shelters, the water and food they needed to survive, the tools they needed for their work, the armaments they needed for their protection—and ultimately, themselves. Twenty-first century urbanites are still moving things about, but now they employ networks to facilitate that movement—and the things they now move include electricity, capital, sounds and images.

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CHAPTER FOUR

Urban Violence: Luxury in Made Space

Sarah S. Jain

In American cities, cars and the urban form simply cannot be conceived in isolation of one another. Since the turn of the last century, the "public" spaces of the street have been accessible virtually only by car, and the hegemonic commodity fantasy consistently positioned through advertising equates the quality and desirability of cars with space taken – and fast. Both materially and representationally, access to public space requires private conveyance. In that sense, car culture offers a synecdoche of capitalism more generally, in which commodities are posed as ways to socially and physically enhance the agency of individuated consumers.

One could cite numerous advertisements to support auto industry promises of space-taking. Indeed, in recent advertising a new level of individuated aggression seems to be appearing. This violence is not bound by the advertising images, but has overflowed to the street space through aggressive vehicle designs and driving practices, which inform in ever more homogeneous ways how American urban spaces are occupied by vehicles to exclude pedestrians, cyclists, and other potential road users. The violence of urban space is made manifest in the hundreds of tiny and larger intentional and unintentional aggressive moves, which fester uneasily below the radar of policy makers and cultural analysts.

It is this convergence among violence, automobiles, and the American urban form that I seek to better understand here. My primary vehicle for the analysis of this problematic will be the six-minute film, Star, directed by Guy Ritchie, starring his wife, and available only – but freely – on the BMW website along with a series of other advertising films with high-profile directors. This film, according to the write-up on the website, pits Madonna against the driver of the BMW (Clive Owen) in a battle of wills. The storyline is roughly this: Madonna plays the role of an extremely unpleasant if beautiful "superstar." When she insists on being taken to the venue in the BMW, rather than her limo
parked nearby. Owen takes the opportunity to beat her with the car by driving fast and literally tossing her (or rather her stuntwoman) around the backseat.

The film offers many layers of artifice: the car, with its utterly dominated domestic interior; the fantastic journey across the city; the other vehicles readily giving way to the expertly driven BMW; the celebrities in the film played by real-life celebrities; and the perfected transgressive luxury of the BMW brand. The fantasy is one of escape, but the escape is not only about the car and its associated identities, it is about the places constructed by and through the car. Thus, I will use a reading of this film to argue that the car as commodity stands in a recursive relationship with the city: American urban spaces are not only built for the car, but are virtually only habitable through the car. Luxury is deeply imbedded in this mechanism on the one hand as the ideal and motor of consumption (social hierarchies – something to strive for), and on the other as the technological limit of how space can be inhabited. Thus, I argue that how the car works as a commodity, and its particularity through its materiality as a mobile commodity, is necessary to understanding the US urban form.

I make this argument through two more detailed readings. First, Star offers an interpretive venue through which to better analyze the spatial and epistemic relations among film, driving, and urban space, on the one hand, and among speed, violence, and representation, on the other. I argue that while car and urban form materialize each other in very obvious ways, the conditions of possibility for the particular way in which this has happened in the US are underlain by logics of moving images, luxury, and celebrity that mutually and compatibly produce each other. Neferti Tadiar has demonstrated in discussing the urban form of Manila, that flyovers constitute a particular social order. . . . Not only do they . . . represent, they are a system of representation: a medium. . . . [The formalist] form . . . is a mode of regulation and control but also a medium of desire which helps to produce the effect of subjectivity.

(Tadiar 1993: 155)

Here, I bring these orders of representation together further, in thinking about the material compatibility of the filmic medium and the car journey through an archive of visual culture of twentieth-century car culture films. Together, these have created certain possibilities for journeying through the city. I will suggest here that these possibilities rest on and render natural, class, gender, and mobility violence, and that Star, in the fullness of its self-irony, can help to render these visible. The production of the effect of subjectivity is continually and recursively consolidated through experiences of the city, roads, and visual culture. As BMW helps make clear, corporate interests have a hand in individuating these experiences and offering modes of transgression.

Second, I want to examine the ways in which the car both distributes and naturalizes these unequal “takings” of space. To offer one example, car safety works within a rhetoric that at once provides protection from the unnamed public menace of the other dangerous driver at the same time as it offers the means to over-ride the public inhabitation of these spaces. Woven within these takings are politics – too often left on the level of statistics – of physical violence, life chances, and risk.

Commodities such as cars have institutional and semiotic support that render certain aspects of them visible and the relations they spur as collateral to their materiality or the so-called attitudes that are supposed as intrinsic. “Every American wants a car” was a policy mantra of the 1990s and 1990s, interrupted only by a conscious effort on the part of former President Carter to make car size into a national security, rather than identity, issue. As I have argued in detail elsewhere, sometimes the acceptable damages of a commodity are class, kinds of social relations, such as they have with the introduction of sport utility vehicles (Jain 2004). But the policy mantras and statistics leave too much unsaid about humans and technologies.

The Film

The film runs six minutes and 56 seconds, and is rated PG. We begin with a close-up of Owen sitting at the wheel and shown from the hood (or bonnet), a view only available through the camera’s eye, and one that makes available a full-framing of the portrait in the car’s black luxury interior. A lush black leather interior surrounds Owen and a seatbelt indicates his connection with – literally, in the narrative of a not-unfamiliar deconstruction of “the star” (Madonna is not named in either the notes or the film, but she is clearly playing a version of “herself”). “The first thing you notice physically about this lady . . . ,” he notes, is her eyes. As the camera cuts to her sunglasses, he notes that “it is rare to actually see those eyes, cause they’re usually covered up – but when you do” (a pause and an appreciative nod), “it is worth it.” Then a cut to her hands as he tells of her “strong, powerful yet feminine” hands, and then of her voice. The voice is the ambivalent point: with it she has reached “giddy heights” and is “unrivalled in her world” – it is also the medium of her unpleasantness. As he recites this paeon, the camera follows her descending an elevator to a basement garage. She is flanked by two large bodyguards, who look to be of South-East Asian descent, donned in matching black suits and white shirts. Arriving at the parkade, she walks towards a camera set below with men dressed in black, cars, and white concrete pillars: a familiar scene from any shopping mall, university, airport parkade, or, equally, a scary scene in many American films. She wears very dark glasses, a thick gold neck chain and ear-rings, a black tee-shirt, black leather jacket with “superstar” bejeweled on the back, and bright red trousers. Surely she is packing something in the crotch of her pants: an area that will become a theme of the film. As the viewer gets a first peek, Owen completes his disembarrassment of her: “She is a complete cunt.”
Clipping the last letter of “cunt,” the film cuts back to her. This is where we are introduced to her manager, Glen, who is described by Owen as having no “backbone,” and who we see being mouthed off by the Star: “You are such an idiot,” she says, her notoriously bad-acting on high, “This is not what I pay you for.” “We’ll work it out, sweetheart,” he says. Madonna opens the back door to her limo and fairly screams, “Coffee. I want my coffee.” The only other woman of the film, a brunette dressed in tight black, hands her an un-branded cup. The Star responds icily, “It better not be cold.” Then, claiming to be so sick of black, she walks over to the silver BMW with Owen sitting inside. They converse briefly, he, cool, the only one not swarming around her eager to please, mentions that he is reserved for someone else. This is where the fantasy must start, since for a star of Madonna’s stature everything about the trip — including the name of the venue would have been invisible. A bodyguard leans in the window to tell them the performance is at the Palace, and the Star warns him not to get into the car but to “take the bus.” He jumps into a large black (bus-like?) SUV to tail the Star. She is eager to lose the trailing car, and as they leave the garage, fans pile on to the SUV. As she rushes Owen to drive faster, Owen says, in his understated Gosford Park delivery, “Well, marm, I wouldn’t like to put you in any danger.” She says, “Don’t ma’am me” — and just then the phone rings. It is Glen: “Is she doing okay?” “Yeah, she is fine, I’ll take care of her.” “No rush, show her the sights, give her everything I pay you for, breakfast, lunch and dinner.” Straight-faced Owen: “She’ll be there on time,” and glances in the rear-view. As he puts down the phone from this paternalistic wink and nudge conversation, Madonna harangues: “If you keep your eyes on the road instead of me, we might get somewhere.”

“Let me see what I can do,” he responds. And after a critical pause, “Sir.” The camera flicks back to her applying lipstick in the backseat, and the adventure begins as they peel out of the intersection. Rock music begins, Blu sings “Song 2,” with lyrics that include many repetitions of “woohoo.” The soundtrack also features screeching brakes, the screaming woman, and the foregrounded sound of the engine in a typical NASCAR trope. Owen says, “You just hold on tight sir,” as she airborne in the backseat, tries to grab him and is flung backward as he accelerates. Again, her crotch is featured prominently as she is pitched from side to side. (We see her empty cup flying around but no coffee). In an underpass area (which again, like the parkade offers a total car space) Owen pulls into an enclave and the soundtrack pauses as they wait for the tail car to pass by. Just as Madonna puts a black-gloved hand on the dashboard, Owen squeals out and catches up to the SUV, winking at the driver. The music changes to Wagner’s “March of the Valkyries” as the car (actually two cars, since one was destroyed in the filming) flies up over an overpass and through urban space that could be any town USA.

After more quick cuts, we reach the climax of the film and height of Owen’s skill. As Owen calls, “Well, we got you here, and in good time, too,” he simultaneously skids into a 180-degree turn that lands the car expertly at the kerb and the red carpet and, in an impossibly acrobatic move, reaches back to open the Star’s door. Pulled by the centrifugal force of the spin, Madonna flies out of the car to land on her butt onto the red carpet. A crowd of photographers awaits her, and stare in shocked silence. Here is where we see the Star’s “worth it.” The post-coital cry of the collective gasp from expression, looking down at her crotch, and then, as we are shown her coffee—begins to shoot. After the significant line-up of credits, a very brief message wear your seatbelt.

The film conveys a high level of artifice. The stunt woman looks nothing like Madonna; the road spaces are non-contiguous and there are various continuity, or editing, mistakes, such as no coffee appearing on her crotch until the last shot; the four choice of the title shot “star” plays on the science-fiction of Star Trek. Even the casting of Madonna in this role emphasizes the fictional. The Star, the stunt woman, and Madonna all overlap in the representations here: in on it and “getting it.” Despite the semi-slapstick approach and Madonna’s this film. The scenes were shot with a stunt woman who had to dye her hair, her director’s dubs that this professional stunt woman was “pretty bruised up,” in the shooting of the film – and traces of the chase are left all over the road in skid marks and scattered vehicles.

Much of the film time is taken with the Star getting a good thrashing. The film plays on a series of stereotypical car-film tropes. First, the chase, which can be read only as a pretext for speed since there is actually no real like digitized imagery of up-close tires and the joy-stick/gear shift of the car, as well as the setting of various urban nether-spaces. These combine with the characterisation of the diabolical European chauffeur (Owen is actually from New Zealand, which echoes both James Bond and Owen’s own Butler role in Gosford Park. Film reviewer Elvis Mitchell describes Owen’s character, with his exquisite concave facial structure that . . . could have been engendered by exacting Bavarian designers . . . He’s the driver, one of those laconic action samurai who are chauffeur, shrink, bodyguard and some kind of master mechanic . . . his elongated and cruel jaw line, suggests . . . a thug Bond. (Mitchell 2002)

Owen’s confident Commonwealth-bred masculinity contrasts markedly with the Star’s hysterical bitchiness. It is, in fact, hard to describe her behavior without resorting to gendered words: nag, bitch, hysterical. By the men, the
self proclaimed “super star” is referred to as “this lady,” “cunt,” “sweetheart,” “the bomb,” and “marm.” Yet when she finally registers her complaint against the latter, the designation of sir, along with the changing color of the traffic light begins the sadistic fantasy of her beating.

An audience will also be familiar – if not critically so – with the woman who seems powerful, and yet ultimately is portrayed as both pawn and victim. The film is utterly politically incorrect and stereotypically so. The plot-summary given on the webpage that offers the download, and that is repeated in many of the on-line and newspaper reviews, is this:

The driver faces perhaps his most perplexing challenge: Coming face-to-face with a hugely talented and successful rock star. But beneath her beauty lies a problem she always gets what she wants [sic]. Guy Ritchie directs Clive Owen and a surprise guest star in a battle of power against power.

If BMW’s ad department were suddenly taken over by feminist standpoint theorists, the write-up might look more like this: highly successful and rich woman brings on the jealous ire of her male inferiors. In order to get revenge for her success – which they take personally, they hire a driver to give her, in her own manager’s words “everything I pay you for, breakfast, lunch, and dinner.” The driver takes that as permission to assault her, through the vessel of the car, and ultimately to humiliate her in front of her fans. These fans/ paparazzi are all too ready to consume her humiliation in their own ways. The potential BMW consumer ostensibly identifies with the driver, or the vehicle itself and desires the automobile. These readings demonstrate how social valuations of space – the private space of the car and the social space of the street are utterly soaked in gender relations and how they are understood. In what follows of this chapter, then, I figure out how urban spaces and how the car, particularly through the chase film, renders these legible.

Speed in the City

Streets offer ostensibly public spaces. They are supported through taxes that everyone pays, and are, in theory at least, accessible to any driver. Though in some senses highly regulated spaces, many unlikely mixes occur: fleets tend to be incompatible, leaving room for dangerous mixings of large and small vehicles; abilities and ages of drivers and pedestrians vary drastically; notions of what constitutes fair or good use of the street differ wildly. Furthermore, as the continued – if limited – availability of publicly funded alternative transit makes clear, mobility is understood in political terms to be, if only in an extremely circumscribed way, a right, or at least, a basic need. But Madonna

made clear the hierarchies accorded to modes of transportation in the sarcastic comment to her bodyguard: “Take the bus.”

“The pleasure of driving” that BMW uses as its logo derives not from the car’s inherent superiority to the bus, but is contingent on symmetries among driver, machine, road, and city. Driving is a practice, its triumph only depends on the sociospatial spaces it traverses. In that sense, as much as the city offers tisement, driving depends on certain versions of urban space, and the car and its a figure that needs to be regulated and governed in accordance with sociability and efficiency, the “car and driver” creates urban space that sets the terms for how space can be used by other, less institutionally and materially privileged, users (Jain 2004).

The conditions under which the value of the luxury BMW is created is underpinned and given its dynamic through the way it enables the consumer cum driver to partake in the physical space of the city. Putting this analysis in the context of a film rather than of the city itself allows an understanding of the way in which the representations of spaces (the car, the city, and the film) very wealthy, representationally shifty celebrity: the cutting edge, if working these spaces are representational, the goal of the film advertisement is to change while to more closely examine how these modes of space and the characters they offer rest on regimes of physical violence.

After all, the excesses of the BMWs are not only in the latest curves of its side paneling, its leather seats, and bullet-proof glass, but in its engineering item, one that enables the BMW driver to transgress urban American spaces that have become congested, tedious, and banal ironically, but precisely, because it serves as the model for consumption and the means of social hierarchy life, and in turn makes these unlivable spaces “relivable” through fantasies through the various car chases, make this evident.2 This recursive relationship, BMW has cast itself in the rhetoric emerging from the safety research of the last four decades and the engineering it spurred. The company website devoted to the 5 Series model, for example, boasts that:

Behind every aspect of its safety technology is a rigorous intelligence that constantly works to maximize the safety of the car, its occupants and its environment. High-performance brakes, run-flat tires and innovations such as Adaptic Headlights are elements of its precise active
safety system. Passive safety is boosted by the BMW 5 Series’ extraordinarily high-strength occupant cell and its sophisticated Advanced Safety Electronics system. Because true driving pleasure demands more than a feeling of safety.  

BMW’s safety engineering does not come from a place of benevolent interest in public health. These safety innovations take place in the corporate-consumer circuit and are most useful in the context of the BMW’s technological superiority: high speeds require strong headlights and higher-performance brakes and airbags. In turn, this superiority is most useful not in terms of the automobile fleet and its habituation of the road as a public space, but rather, in the kinds of social logics that lead to a social and material one-upmanship. In bringing together a spatio-temporal order of the journey, Star unselfconsciously relies on these relations of automobility, film, and gaming and thus offers one way of understanding how space is consolidated as a valuable asset that can be taken, and, more specifically, that can be taken with the aid of the speeding commodity – the BMW. Thus, the violence of this advertising film is not something to be denounced, for denunciation obviates the ways that the gendered and classed violence provokes the transgressive luxury brand identity of BMW, mutually, with the representations of the city and of celebrity. 

In the film, the space of the car is constructed for the viewer in various ways. Owen is seen primarily through the front windshield, in the parts of his body that touch the controls, and occasionally from behind. The Star is seen, when seated, head-on from the front windshield, and from the side windows when in compromising positions. The car itself is viewed from a variety of angles: it has been filmed by another moving vehicle, with cameras attached to it to show, for example, smoke coming off the tires, and from cameras that look to have been placed along the side of the road. A number of spliced shots illustrate Owen’s control over the vehicle, braking, stepping on the gas, and so on, in a way that serves to pull together the action and reaction of the car, the road, and the backseat. 

This representation is as much about film and its limits as it is about the car; the history of cinema has pivoted shaped the way we understand these registers of motion, time, and space. Film is the ideal medium for representing the possibilities of the journey as a narrative: with its sole mobile eye it isolates, concentrates, and then follows the event of the journey. Karen Beckman notes this parallelism between the moving eye of the camera and the journey of the car in her reading of the film Crash. She writes:

The “rules” of this road (or film) are marked by gutters, bollards, and white lines, all of which perforate the unbroken “strip” of the road’s surface like sprocket holes, holes that seem complicit with the singular, mechanical, and unidirectional motion of the road.

(Quoted from Beckman 2003: 107)
space of the car and its environs as a complete space, and as one that, while not completely under his control, Owen solely negotiates and that is there for his enjoyment.

Individualized automobile trips also reconstitute social space through their own narratives of the journey: space experienced from the car is not social space, but carries its own register that has as its goal the privatization, or the taking, of units of space over time. If film creates the illusion of movement through the nimble substitution of still images, the car journey requires the progressive collecting and taking of units of space over time.

The moving space offered by the film or the car is very different from that of, say, the intersection, where each of these journeys, vis-à-vis their registers of speed, navigate around and sometimes collide with one another. As Derek Simons (2005), following de Certeau, has noted, the different registers of the journey come together at the intersection not as flow, but as a series of frontiers – pedestrians crossing streets and drivers making right turns and each base their decisions on the experiences that border their own journeys. The intersection is, perhaps, that place where the inherent social co-operation required by mobility is most obvious, and these are precisely the sorts of spaces that are missing from Star. Of course, narrative cohesion requires a narrative exclusion, and the recognition of other registers of space would, quite simply, break the storyline. Therefore, other journeys, other spatio-temporal orders, implicitly become the background for the primary journey represented in the film. To put part of the point in its most banal form, in Star, driving is not co-operative, it is transgressive. But these transgressive narratives do not dissipate once completed – they are enabled and made concretely permanent streetscapes, intersections, road signs, freeways, skyscrapers, and all the other trappings of car culture. These, because of the potential for so many journeys by so many car owners, become a permanent taking of social space regardless of the actual journeys taken. The road offers an exclusive space even when empty through the immanent takings of the automobile.

Star offers a twenty-first-century American urban flâneur, a means of making meaning of a city, “el armpito” in the Star’s own words, that has all but been evacuated of possibility for public or civic life. In his book Non-places, Marc Augé discusses the bizarre neither-society of airports, hotel chams, and freeways (see also Adey and Bevan, this volume, for a critique of Augé on airports). He writes of the subject traversing these non-places:

What he is confronted with [and as Augé points out, the subject of these spaces is masculine], finally, is the image of himself... The only face to be seen, the only voice to be heard in the silent dialogue he holds with the landscape-text addressed to him along with others, are his own: the face and voice of a solitude made all the more baffling by the fact that it echoes millions of others. The passenger through non-places retrieves his identity only at Customs, at the tollbooth, at the check-out counter. Meanwhile he obeys the same code as others, receives the same messages, responds to the same entreaties. The space of non-place creates neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude and simultaneity.

(Åger 1995: 103)

But the freeway is unique among these non-places; experienced through the unique combination of public, highly regulated, and commodity-driven space, of inhabiting this non-place in its unending efforts to build meaning into a place separate from the space it traverses. With its darkened windows, personal and high-quality sound systems, the privatized vessel of the car is increasingly the medium of the public non-place of the road. After Heisenberg, any observer also changes what there is to be observed: in making meaning, in consuming the city as a byproduct of a journey, it requires soundproof windows, the CO2 it emits, requires the high-quality carbon airbags boasted by the BMW. So in the move to render the city legible through up the most basic tools necessary for citizenship and the assertion of the right “Capital-intensive technologies of amplification – not only of speech, but also assisted) body has the character of a disabled subject” (Langan 2001: 468). Culture demonstrates this both through the class inequities of mobility (Bullard and Johnson 1997) as well as the physical threat of automobile injury and death.

To take the point a step further, when that disability is attached to the body rather than to the environment that structures it, the “coding” of bodies and encodes speed for some inhabitants, to the detriment of others, becomes invisible. Second, if one considers Langan’s point in terms of violence, rather than invisibility, the point emerges as something tragi-like this. When capital-intensive technologies such as automobiles are understood as self-reliant feedback loops (more speed requires better brakes means more airbags), the result is vast differentials in overall safety, and virtually no oversight for the “public” of the street. This can be seen in the increasing popularity of sport utility vehicles, where a perceived safety of SUV occupants has resulted in higher fleet fatality rates. While I have focused here on representation and the urban form, Star demonstrates how an acceptance of certain formations of techno-social identities (gender, class, celebrity) makes automobility a legible good and undergirds fantasies about the car as a desirable commodity. At the same time as these identities are stabilized through automobility, they consistently render logical, invisible, and acceptable class and gender inequities. They also render invisible...
what BMW offers. Within the fold of their planned homogeneity, parkades, underpasses, and on-ramps also harbor the terms of their own infraduction. The underground garage is always already the dangerous place where an evil man jumps out of the back seat of a car or where one plans a meeting with a double agent or FBI informant. Or, with their wide smooth tracks of asphalt they invite bigger living through speeding or skateboarding. These social narratives are as implicit to these spaces as concrete pillars, painted white lines, or the pleasures of automobility, remains invisible, shrouded under the cover of a common sense that understands automobility to be normal usage of the street rather than a good that is distributed by urban design and ideologies of consumption and luxury.

Conclusion

Many theorists have convincingly demonstrated that social regimes such as heterosexuality or whiteness depend on a "constitutive outside," or an Other against which normative socialities can be constructed. Bodies marked by race or gender, it is argued, have more difficulty in fulfilling cultural promises of human flourishing. Ann Stoler, for example has demonstrated that the social injury of race is "woven into the web of the social body, threaded through its fabric" (Stoler 1995: 69). Physical violence, too, is threaded through the fabric of American commodity culture even as it holds out the promise to resolve the hurts of everyday life. Imaginative and material accessibility to these regimes certainly cloves to certain groups along axes of race, class, and gender, as I have tried to demonstrate here. However, they provide a certain distance from the bodies physically marked by race and gender: anyone can buy a BMW and in so doing, partake more or less in a new social regime (at the same time as black drivers tend to be more strictly regulated than white drivers). In this way, the terms of address of the film are not so much along the lines of an identity politics, but rather, dictated by the anticipated presence of the luxury consumer, even as to fully partake in this identity of the "luxury consumer" means certain avowals and disavowals of other identities.

Star fashions a journey, in some sense fantastical, and in another simply reiterative of an everyday car trip. Therefore, it is worth our attention to look critically at this journey's components: a star being beaten, an apotheosis of speed and luxury, the derision of spilled coffee. These events and objects circulate and provide the possibilities for each other. While these may seem like trivial issues, it is my hunch that they have a lot to say about how the politics of consumption creates material worlds. In these worlds, a liberal notion of choice that adheres to some "base" material body is the least effective way of understanding how commodities and citizens intermingle and co-constitute. In fact, as I have tried to outline here, commodity violence is intricately tied
in with consumer promises and a commodity regime that comes along with the production, a regime that includes both the institutional and material frameworks that distribute goods such as mobility, and frame complaints such as fraud. For this reason, attempts to reduce road violence – from speeding tickets to hygiene films to driver’s education, have uniformly failed and will continue to do so until they search for different ways to understand the sociability of the road. I offer one entry point for such an analysis here.¹⁹

Notes

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2 These days it is assumed that streets are for cars. But any early history of automobile mobility by other users.

3 The description of the film here is virtually the same as that in my article “Violent Submission: Gendered Automobility” (Jain, 2005). The argument that follows, however, is completely different.

4 The 1936 film Master Hands (available at prelinger.com) represents all aspects of car manufacturing in a style that Rick Prelinger describes as “Capitalist Realism” (as a play on Socialist Realism). The soundtrack features Werner Wagner.

5 Astoundingly, the gender violence is utterly invisible to many audiences to whom I have shown this film. When I asked over 100 of my students in my Car Culture class at Stanford to fill out a short questionnaire on the film, violence or similar concepts were mentioned only twice, students typically found the film funny, entertaining, or occupationally boring. The two possible reasons for this are first, that the styling and caricature hides the violence or, second, that they simply do not see it; they are immune.

6 “The US has 3.95 million miles of roads – 1.1 miles per square mile of land. Based on an average lane width of twelve feet, these roads encompass an area of 12 million acres, equal to the combined area of Massachusetts and Maryland” (quoted in Highway Statistics Series 2001 Federal Highway Administration, Oct. 2002, Table 1B-4, http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/ohim/hbstx/index.htm. How can it be that in the field of noise, pollution, space-taking, and so on produced by automobile the luxury automobile driver consistently emerges as the cultural hero? ²

7 Particularly in Los Angeles, where the already incompetent police don’t stand a chance in their Ford Crown Royals.


9 In one of the best articles on car culture, Kieran Ross writes in Fast Cars, Clean Bodies, that the shared technologies of film and automobiles “reinforced each other. Their shared qualities – movement, image, mechanization, standardization – made movies and cars partners in our cultural and material consumption” (Ross 1995: 38). She quotes Louis Chevalier: “The pleasure of driving into the city will become, as the city is gradually effaced, the pure and simple pleasure of driving, the automatism of the automobile” (46).

10 Possenti on the other hand did not use cars in his films because they were too capitalist (Linda Campani, personal communication, September, 2003).

11 If industrialization has caused a crisis in perception due to the speeding up of time and the fragmentation of space, film shows the healing potential by slowing wherein “fragmented images” are brought together “according to a new law.” (Buck-Morss 1991: 268)

12 Many commentators have written about how the perceptual space of the car has given rise to what Chester Liebs has linked to the “architecture for speed reading,” or an architecture that allows for speed by changing time and place at 60 mph (Liebs 1985).

13 My colleague Jason Patton describes the problem of registers, or frontiers, as one of how: “the sidewalk has breaks when it comes to a road, whereas the road has no such material breaks.”

14 Carrying this observation to the quotidian journey, one might note such “road speak” in the double meanings of the word “pedestrian.” I believe that one of the key reasons on how they take too much of the “commons.”

15 Several people I interviewed for another project on Sports Utility Vehicles mentioned that these vehicles change the sociality of driving – no longer can you see a wave through a driver’s body language.

16 Noise would provide one fascinating political economy of the car. Joel Eastman quotes a Chevrolet’s general manager, who boasted in the mid-1950s, “We’ve got the finest “whizzing speed . . . unleashed it will rear nose to nose with an express train” (Eastman tising, automobile noise has been linked to a decreased ability to concentrate and sleep, and who lives near them, as Tom Lewis has written in Divided Highways: Building the Interstate Highway (1997).

17 Collision deaths account for about 89 percent of vehicle deaths each year, and they have increased slightly since 1980. In that year a total of 10,600 traffic collision fatalities was divided as follows: 6,500 car-car, 300 LTD-LDT, 3,600 LTD-car. In 1999, numbers were, respectively, 3,800, 1,800, and 5,200, for a total of 10,800, with the shift in fatalities attributed to LTD collisions reflecting the predominance of “light trucks and SUVS on US roads (Summerset et al. 1998, and Jokash 2000).

18 This argument could be taken a step further to think about how these models of luxury require engagements with capitalism. A colleague from the former East Germany tells me that BMW and Mercedes have now become the indicators of prestigious consumption, and eventually have a car – and spend their leisure in community pursuits. Now, however, a strong thread of the debates around culture, Kieran Ross writes that the shared technologies of film and automobiles “reinforced each other. Their shared
involving sedans) that there will be a fatality, and that the fatality will be an occupant of the smaller vehicle. The irony, then, is that the existence of SUVs on the road has led to a sort of one-upmanship view of car safety.

Works Cited


PART II
Re-configuring Co-presence