

Road to Nowhere

Gyorgy Scrinis, *The Age*, Op-Ed, 21/1/1997

What is currently being referred to as 'road rage' can be seen as a more extreme form of the aggression and abusive behaviour that has long existed on our roads. The source of this driver behaviour, I suggest, can ultimately be traced back to the way the car so thoroughly transforms the way in which the driver engages with the world behind the wheel.

The appeal of the car as a mode of transport derives not only from its speed, but also from the level of personal autonomy and independence it offers. The combination of speed, power and autonomy creates distinctive ways of experiencing time and space, and the people and environments we encounter on the road.

The speed and acceleration of the car creates a certain 'compression' of our experiences of time and space. What might seem like a momentary hold-up for a pedestrian, cyclist or public transport traveller, is encountered as an unbearably long delay to the car driver: a few seconds seem like minutes, a few minutes seem like hours. This time-space compression radically shortens and erodes the driver's patience and tolerance of others. Any interruption to the journey leads to frustration.

The car is considered a 'time-saving' device, yet it also *intensifies* the desire to 'save time' such that drivers feel that every second or minute must be saved wherever possible. Drivers may take relatively dangerous risks to cut a few minutes off a journey, risks that are out of all proportion with the benefits to be gained, at least from the perspective of the non-driver.

Competitiveness on the road is also a result of the road-scarcity that the car creates. Given the speed and space demands of the car, the road is transformed from a commonly shared and abundant space into a scarce commodity. Behind the wheel, other road users are no longer encountered as fellow-travellers or as sources of social interactions, but instead as either obstacles to be avoided or as rivals competing for scarce road space. The car creates scarcity and competitiveness in the same way as does an economy dominated by commodity relations.

The car also encapsulates the driver, physically separating them from any more direct interaction with the people and environments they travel through. The trajectory of car engineering is towards ever more conditioned cabins that further seal-off the driver from any more direct or unmediated experiences of their surroundings, and create a totalizing technological environment within the car. The enclosed cabin, the speed of car travel, and the demands placed on the driver, make it difficult for them to develop a concern or empathy with the people or places they flash past. The world is encountered as a series of images that flow through the television-like windscreen.

In these ways, the car profoundly mediates and shapes the driver's mode of encountering the world. Drivers come to confront each other not as vulnerable, mortal, all-too-human beings, but as human-machine hybrids. Social relations between persons begin to take the form of instrumental relations between machines.

Ilya Ehrenberg had already recognised this in 1929 when he wrote: "The automobile has come to show even the slowest minds that the earth is truly round, that the heart is just a poetic relic, that a human being contains two standard gauges: one indicates miles, the other minutes."

Impatient, abusive and aggressive driver behaviour are the result of a combination of these characteristics of the driving experience: time-space compression, road scarcity, the encapsulation and anonymity of the driver, the physical excitement of

being in control of a mechanically powerful machine, and the general chaos and imminent danger of collision on the road. People who are otherwise calm, patient and considerate in other spheres of everyday life can become uncharacteristically aggressive, or at least severely tested. The most aggressive behaviour, of course, results when these characteristics intersect with particular forms of masculinity.

The more recent emergence of so-called 'road rage' probably has its sources in developments both on and off the road. On the road, there is an increasing level of car dependence and increasing distances being traversed as the pace of contemporary lifestyles continues to accelerate, and these intensify the characteristic pressures of driving. Off the road, there is the increasing incidence of anonymous violence, growing feelings of powerlessness, an erosion of co-operative and shared experiences, and an increasingly instrumental approach to other people and life in general.

Road rage must to some extent be seen as an inevitable part of a car-dominant culture, and has its sources within the driving experience itself. This runs counter to the notion that technologies are 'neutral tools' which simply extend and enhance our physical or mental capabilities, but do not otherwise shape the people or societies that use them and conduct their lives through them. But if we begin to recognise the ways in which cars and other technologies so thoroughly shape and transform the character of social relations and ways of understanding and acting in the world, then this assumption of technological neutrality is undermined.

Rather than seeing the driver as being in complete control of their vehicle, perhaps the car itself is to some extent in control of the driver. Or more precisely, the car transforms the character of the person behind the wheel even before they begin to assume control of their vehicle.