



Roads for change: changing the car and its expressions

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The roads are a microcosm of society. Driving is infused with practices of social and cultural inter-relating in many forms. Pervading social practices, constituting driving cultures, allow the smooth flow of mobility via the car as well as the expression of aggression as a means to facilitate mobility. Changing cultures of driving requires confronting some of the most deeply maintained aspects of Western culture.

Car dependence, environmental impact and fatality and injury rates are significant issues in considering mobility worldwide. Even more than this, the car expresses and facilitates aspects of Western culture based on individualism, getting ahead and level of wealth, as well as an aggressive means of achieving at the expense of others.

The paper looks at the need for change in the way cars are used and the underlying emphasis in approaches to driving, on supremacy and force. A series of projects, Driving Cultures, considers the social and cultural influences on driver behaviour. Drawing on a number of sources, including focus group discussions with young drivers, car advertising, and social and cultural theories of mobility, such as those of John Urry and Zygmunt Bauman, the violence of the car itself and its shaping influence in contemporary life are considered. A focus on the examination of social and cultural attitudes as the areas in which change is necessary, it is argued, needs to extend to expectations of the future.

Keywords: Cars, mobility, driving

In this paper driving culture will be considered as an articulation in the sense that Lawrence Grossberg (1992) used the concept, originally from Gramsci and elaborated in Stuart Hall (1986) and Ernesto Laclau (1977), in his book on rock music culture. Grossberg aims to provide an alternative to cultural studies that equates culture with communication, in order to “describe the complexity of effects and relations circulating through and around culture” (45). He is concerned with “particular configurations of practices, how they produce effects and how such effects are organized and deployed” (45).

Articulation is a continuous struggle to reposition practices within a shifting field of forces, to redefine the possibilities of life by redefining the field of relations – the context – within which a practice is located. (54)

Through the idea of articulation, as it applies to driving cultures, it is possible to encompass, not only discourses relating to cars and driving, but also the implications of the car itself and the associations and attachments to cars expressed in discourse. While emotions have cognitive as well as affective aspects, and can take systematic forms in relation to particular practices, they are expressive in themselves, not just representative. The emotive aspects of articulations relating to cars enable and facilitate associations with cars through meaningful connections that are not only discursive. Though they are often expressed within discourses, these meaningful associations include aspects of the context that are invisible because they are taken for granted, while at the same time the meaningful associations shape and articulate the context.

According to Grossberg the context requires not just description but consideration of the way it is taken up, in order to help identify investments in the practices (56). It is not a matter of describing experiences or reconstructing historical contexts in search of underlying codes. Experiences become facts among other facts for Grossberg (62-63) informing the broader context of the articulation. In *The Individualized Society* (2001) Zygmunt Bauman picks up the point that articulation worked best in research-theory battles with its focus on forging connections between practices and effects, while also taking into account the different unpredicted effects that may follow. Bauman goes on to point out that in the examination and articulation of life stories and experiences, the ability to look at the bigger picture becomes problematic. He states:

All articulations open up certain possibilities and close down some others. The distinctive feature of the stories told in our times is that they articulate individual lives in a way that excludes or suppresses (prevents from articulation) the possibility of tracking down the links connecting individual fate to the ways and means by which a society as a whole operates ... (9)

Articulation of life stories remains important as “the activity through which meaning and purpose are inserted into life” (13) but it is just as important to expand the boundaries of articulation “by bringing back into view the areas banished to the background and left out by the life stories” (13). Discourses of driving express emotional positions that have political implications. Individual expressions relate to systematic modes of responding in the traffic environment. The experiences of individuals in their use of cars, need to be looked at in the context of the promotion and dominant discourses of cars.

Within driving cultures there are a range of expressions exemplified in people's experience of cars and driving. The enthusiast is car centred and the commuter mobility centred. Tourism involves the car as a means to enter and explore, for the enthusiast it involves the experience of the vehicle on the road, pushing the limits and penetrating the harsh environment. The commuter values convenience and comfort and perhaps privacy in maintaining the use of the car. These various experiences merge somewhat in the flow of traffic where the central issue becomes moving ahead.

Often driving is associated with thrill and excitement, especially when it comes to flash cars and speed. Enjoyment in these circumstances is associated with the idea of free

flowing movement, unobstructed by traffic, where speed is open. Responses to the restriction of speed and the impediments of traffic can be aggressive, and fast cars and speed are often associated with aggression. Pleasure is derived from passing all the other cars along the way and at speed additional to what is prescribed.

The association of cars with mobility in the sense of domination is not far below the surface of many representations of cars. The commuter can come to feel they are being left out or left behind in the traffic as others seem to get ahead in the flow of traffic, pushing their way aggressively forward. The car dominates the environment, aggressively carving its way through all social and cultural contexts. The car in itself is dominating by its sheer weight and force. John Urry (2001) points out that “sociology has regarded cars as neutral technology”. He argues that the consequences of the car and its logic have been enormous through the reconfiguring of civil society and people themselves. The car has had many unintended consequences. The pollution and overcrowding problems and the planning implications – women isolated in suburbia, the increased distances of commuting, the budget for road building and maintenance – the frustrations and demands on the individual of the convenience of cars, were not envisaged in the early days. Not only were the limitations not imagined in the promises of enhanced freedom, but the car as machine was considered neutral in its effects.

The limitations of the logic of the car and car systems include the reduction of choice, the physical separation of home and workplace etc, and a shortage of time. The car becomes necessary to the extent that alternatives such as walking, cycling, bus and rail appear inflexible and inconvenient (Urry, 2001). The systems of organisation, rationality and logic presupposed by the car in turn produce resistance, according to Urry. Urry cites local protests over the expansion of major highways, and objections to expanding road networks by environmentalists. We could also note the infringement of rules by drivers, as a resistance to the logic of the system where both car and driver become the irrational resisters, evading the inevitable logic of the system.

In addition to this the car represents or symbolises hierarchical mobility. This is an aspect of mobility that is best enunciated by Zygmunt Bauman. Individuality is expressed through competition and domination in Western cultures and the car is central to this expression. Bauman emphasises the role of increasing speed in making it possible to be ahead of the rest. He states, referring particularly to global mobility: “Speed of movement, and particularly speed of escape before birds have time to come home to roost, is today the most popular technique of power.” (2001, 12) Domination and escaping responsibility seem to be the main aim of increased speed of movement and the implications of some forms of mobility are certainly left out of the equation. The theme of domination is evident in many forms of car promotion and advertising and discourses of driving. The car offers the means of escape through aggressively getting ahead of the rest.

Alternatively enjoyment is associated with the movement itself and the progress of the journey even with its inevitable traffic obstructions. This other sense of mobility is less aggressive and associated with the commuter rather than the serious enthusiast or competitor. The commuter is often seen as having no real connection with the car or any sense of “real” driving. Speed is seen as cool and “macho” whereas slow driving is “feminine” or “old-fogey”, and skilful, fast driving is the means to get ahead and to relieve stress and frustration (Silcock et al. 2000).

The serious enthusiast is appealed to in everyone, especially males, and is expressed in new and better ways through the car. The enthusiast is prepared to take the risks involved in serious driving and is not controlled, but rather controls his environment through domination. The car as an emblem of masculinity, progressive identity, individuality and freedom, is invested with emotions associated with the image of oneself that goes with it, and the way others are viewed as affecting one’s ability to sustain that identity. The emotional attachments and expressions involved in the use of

cars in our society will be discussed by considering advertising and focus group discussions.

Racing associations

The individualism associated with cars is a competitive individualism fuelled by the constant promotion of new and better, faster cars. The image of the racetrack is often invoked to show a particular car as “ahead of the rest” in performance, power and speed. A recent advertisement for the Ford Falcon shows the car on the track with the latest race version, indicated by the slogans painted all over it. The road version is shown as even better than the racing version due to the level of comfort it has built into it, while at the same time exhibiting all the features of the powerful race car. Holden have a Commodore ad where only the engine is required to emphasise power and performance, shown in the sounds of the revving engine on the factory floor. The sounds are transferred to the next ad in the same campaign showing a young man driving the car with a small boy in the back giggling at the impressive noise and the fun of the ride.

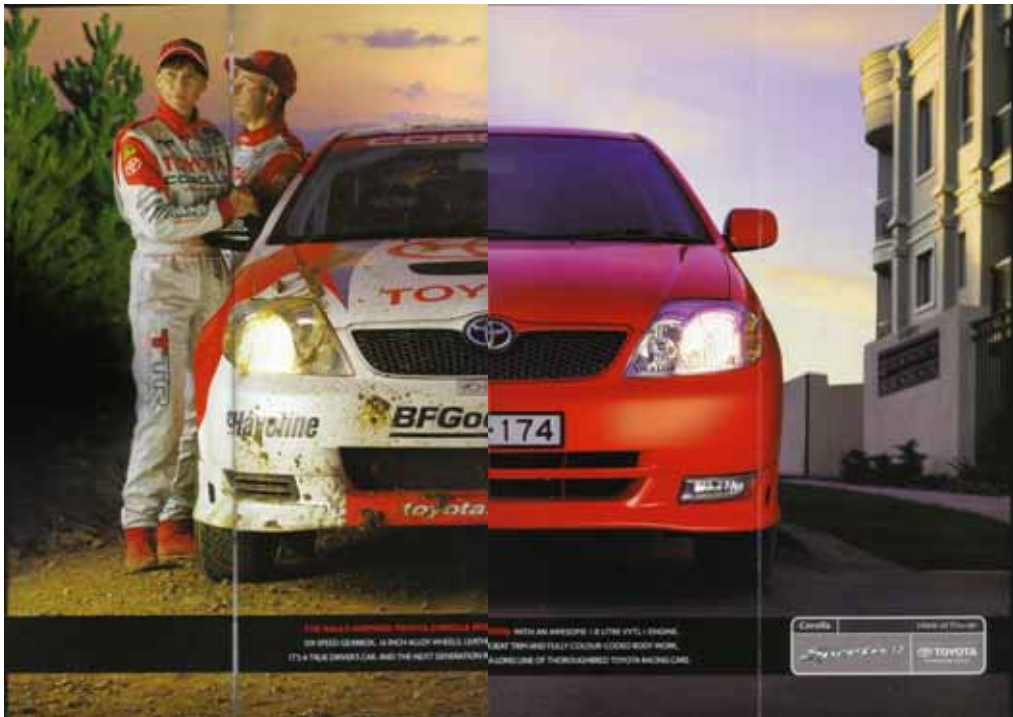
The racecar and the race driver are often considered the models of good cars and good driving. Racing is highly competitive and aggressive but a point that is not emphasised in the association of cars and racing is that racing is conducted in a highly controlled environment. The racetrack is the emblem of free expression – go as fast as you can. The only constraints are the car and your ability. This is real freedom. The racetrack is given over to the cars and their drivers to tear up as they will. Winning and going fast enough to beat others, is also allied with the expression of freedom – the right to be better, to defeat and overcome. This is the ideal of the car and the conditions under which many expect cars to be able to operate.

The controlled conditions of the racetrack limit the damage that the cars and drivers are able to inflict on by-standers, officials, spectators, and each other. There is always the risk for the driver of being killed or injured, or there is not a race. The best the technology has to offer, the skill of the driver, and speed, are the ingredients. This is what the car is all about. This is the embodiment of real car appreciation and enthusiasm. Skill and handling allowing the driver to take corners at high speed, manoeuvre the vehicle at high speed from amongst other vehicles, accelerate and decelerate at the right pace, control slides and drifts and push car and driver to the absolute limit of their capabilities, are included in the abilities established for driving from a racing perspective.

E. S. Turner reviewed *The Bughatti Queen: In Search of a Motor Racing Legend* by Miranda Seymour in the London Review of Books (2004). In this historical account of early road racing Turner begins: “The Paris-Madrid road race of 1903 was a wonderfully disgraceful affair. Three hundred cars set out, conferring death and dismemberment along the dust-choked roads south. Six of the drivers were killed outright and nearly twice as many gravely injured. The hospitals were stuffed with mangled sightseers. By the time the surviving drivers reached Bordeaux the race was called off, and in Madrid the garlanded welcome arches were quietly dismantled.” (25)

Rally driving is similarly appreciated and upheld as “real” driving. The race and rally driver are considered the model of good, skilled driving, and lack of such skill has long been regarded as the problem with the average driver and the reason for road carnage. Real car handling skill is heralded as the solution, however this kind of skill is not what is needed on the road. Research has shown that most drivers have adequate skill for everyday demands and acquire it fairly quickly (Christie, 2003). The problem, rather, is seeing the roads and responding to them as anything like a racetrack and in

this, the way the car is portrayed and promoted is a substantial part of the problem. It excludes other ways of thinking about the car.



This magazine advertisement (Wheels Magazine, August 2003, inside front cover) shows the rally car and the road car as two sides of the same car. The drivers dressed in the full rally suit ads to the racy appeal.

The text from this advertisement for Toyota's Sportivo states it's a "true driver's car", and uses terms such as "awesome" and "thoroughbred" relating it to both rally driving and racing:

The rally-inspired Toyota Corolla Sportivo. With an awesome 1.8 litre WTL-I engine, six-speed gearbox, 16 inch alloy wheels, leather seat trim and fully colour-coded body work, it's a true driver's car. And the next generation in a long line of thoroughbred Toyota racing cars.

Another advertisement for the Sportivo emphasises the "thrill", unbelievable power and racy technology and looks:

The adrenaline-fuelled Toyota Corolla Sportivo. With an aerodynamically efficient body and the unbelievably powerful ZZZ-GE engine, it's every inch a driver's car. This 1.8 litre WTL-I engine (variable valve timing lift with intelligence) delivers a massive 140 kw of power through a six-speed close-ratio gearbox, and the Sportivo is the only Corolla that has it. Sports suspension and brakes, fully colour-coded body kit, sports alloy wheels, sports front seats and leather seat trim all come as standard. From just \$29,990, nothing will ever be as thrilling. (Wheels, August 2003, pp.46-47)

The performance and power of many cars are emphasised as "rally bread" or as "race bread" with car companies scurrying for the upper hand in technology on many levels, from the engine capacity and handling on corners, to the inside comfort and safety. Now that the fashion for low petrol consumption has subsided, the emphasis is even more on the power of the V8, which is being produced again by Ford and Holden and also by makers such as Saab and now Toyota. Honda flashes a race car across the screen at the end of every ad for one of their cars. Mitsubishi shows both its Lancer and Magna on the rally circuit in television advertisements. Somehow the violence of the race and the rally, and their inappropriateness as a model of driving is overlooked.

Cars are the tenth leading cause of all deaths worldwide and the leading cause of death by injury worldwide with 1,170,694 lives lost in 1998 (Australian Transport Safety Bureau 2004). The serious injuries are even higher in number. In New South Wales alone in 2001 there were 22,682 injury accidents with 29,913 people injured (NSW Roads and Traffic Authority 2003). The Australian Transport Safety Bureau statistics report for serious injury (2004) states that on average 22,000 people are seriously injured on Australian roads each year. Injury rates are not mentioned as often as fatalities in the media and in safety campaigns, even though the report of the Australian Government commemorating World Health Day (ATSB 2004) notes that according to the UN there is a lack of information on the extent of the problem of road traffic injuries (10).

The ways in which the car is articulated allow and tolerate the violence that is incurred in order to maintain individualism in its current expressions – as competitive, dominating and aggressive. The dilemma is the increasing need for control to manage the spiralling force and presence of cars. The car is promoted as the means and emblem of individual expression and at the same time performance, power and speed are standard features of many cars. More power, better performance, faster acceleration are constantly being generated and promoted to make the car and its driver stand out. Sports packs on cars are increasingly popular making them look more like real race cars. The race car has moved further and further away from the road car and yet the alliances are being emphasised more than ever. Formula One cars are a breed of their own, but they are related to the road car through technology.



These pictures are stills from the Honda television commercials. In the one on the left we see the Honda Formula One car morphing into the road sedan. The one on the right shows the tag that is seen at the end of most Honda commercials of a race car shown in red, zipping across the screen revealing the words “The Power of Dreams”.

The V8 supercars and the Falcons and Commodores are seen as the same even though the additions made to the race car are rare on the road – the kind of suspension, engine modifications and tyres and so on, needed for the racetrack are not likely to be found in the road car. It is the look that is sustained, the aggressive, competitive racy styling including alloy wheels and body trim.



Again these pictures are stills from television commercials where the vehicle was shown on the race track driven by young race drivers. In the Falcon ad the driver and passenger, both race drivers, muse to themselves about all the extras and sports features. The passenger thinks, “Look at him, he thinks he’s king of the road”, the driver asks “So, what do you think?”, and the passenger answers, “About what?”. The idea here is not to admit that the other (male) is driving a really good car. In the ute advertisement the competitive dialogue continues between the drivers about who is driving the best vehicle.

Aggressive implications

For Bauman, violence is a contested concept and the contest is centred around legitimacy. “Violence is illegitimate coercion; more precisely, coercion which has been denied legitimacy.” (208) The struggle is for the right to articulate and define what is legitimate. This struggle is apparent in discourses of driving where it is not a matter of eliminating violence but of legitimising “useful and necessary” coercion (211).

The car itself is often the legitimiser of coercion. It can be driven to emphasise and express dominance. Behaviours such as tailgating, flashing lights, overtaking dangerously and speeding are increasingly regarded as aggressive (Jonah, Thiessen and Young, 2001). These behaviours have had a history moulded by and moulding expectations. The view that “slower” drivers should move out of the way of the faster ones has enjoyed a high level of acceptance.

In focus group discussions with young drivers a range of views were expressed on issues such as what to do about others wanting to go faster than you, wanting to go faster than the driver in front and speeding, but they often contained some evident experience of aggressive driving¹:

Yeh a lot of the time if the car is coming up behind you – really fast you know you're doing 60 or the limit and they're coming up real fast behind you and you know they want to take over you – that often makes you speed up – makes you do things you shouldn't. (Male, Bathurst)

Yeh – some people I know um they were driving up near the coast or whatever and they were driving along and there was this guy sitting right on their tail and they were P platers I think and the guy behind wasn't, he was older or whatever, and he sat right on their tail so they kept braking slowly and then the guy just ... up his speed right past them – went right in front of them – just slammed his brakes on and they ran straight up the back of him – they couldn't do anything and ... were stuffed and just because of road rage and stuff – and it was just weird you know [laughs]. (Male, Lithgow)

Some offered justifications for aggressive behaviour with exaggeration of the slower speed or responses of others:

If you're going along a certain – say a 60k zone where there's no cars around um and it's not the centre of town at night or anything like that you know where it's an open area and they're doing 35/40 you'll – like you're not going to hang right back – like you'll be up there behind them – not ridiculously close but closer than two seconds [male agrees] to sort of say you know this is pretty ridiculous here. (Male, Bathurst)

This young woman expresses a fairly extreme response that many share, to being held up for what probably amounts to a few seconds:

You know I hate that – I hate it when ... the light's green and that ... they're just day dreaming [others laugh and comment] – it kills you - not because you want to speed or anything but it's just like – wake up – hello you're stopping traffic [others laugh]. (Female, Wiley Park)

These young males excuse their behaviour by finding apparently obvious reasons for their choice of speed:

Exactly 60 ... exactly 60 or just speed up a bit more – overtake [male agrees] and that's why we overtake – I know it's a bit dangerous or ...
Yeh but sometimes you have to speed as well so you know ...
Big main roads – on a big main road and you've got big semi-trailers in between you – you're not going to sit there driving in between them like at 60 – of course you have to speed up. (Males, Belmore)

Some claim comfort and familiarity as the justification for extra speed:

If you're on a road that you do know you tend to go a little fast because you feel a little bit more comfortable with it and use that. ... If you're more comfortable with the road – faster speed wise – faster everything wise. ... a lot of the time you'd go faster than the speed limit. (Male, Bathurst)

The expectations of car travel are highlighted in this discussion where boredom is considered a major issue when driving:

SR: Going fast all of the time [females agree] why do you like that do you think?
Gives you a rush
It gets you there quick I think [female agrees] 'cos I get bored easily [others agree] and as soon as you get there like it's better. (Females, Lithgow)

A male in the same group disagrees and offers an alternative view:

I don't like going fast – I just like the drive just getting there. I just like going from A to B. (Lithgow)

This young woman describes her experience of “just driving” as something she doesn't really think about much:

I don't take notice – I'm just like – I just want to get where I'm going – that's it - it's not like I say oh my god if I speed this is going to ... with me that's how it is – I don't really think about you know drinking and driving and stuff – not until I actually you know see pamphlets or like – I don't really think about it much. (Female, Wiley Park)

The implications of car travel are often taken very lightly, including by young women, as some of the following quotes suggest.

A general flippancy about driving is expressed in this comment:

Yeh – red means slow down – green means go and orange means go really fast. (Male, Bathurst)

The increasing expectations and sensation of speed is illustrated in this comment:

160 kms in a brand new Holden commodore is like driving at 30 kms in one of these little Mitsubishi colts. (Male, Bathurst)

The way in which the car is used to hurry things up and increase experience is expressed here:

What sort of things do they tell you to do?
Oh speed up – speed up – oh there's a cute guy down there [others laugh] – speed up [others laugh and comment] – it's only an orange light [laughs] that's what they try and do. (Females, Wiley Park)

The girls in this discussion are using social opinion about young males to their advantage without necessarily thinking about their actual driving and how much care they take:

Guys tend to get in more crashes than girls do so we tell them to shut up ... like we are more aware even though we might speed or whatever [others agree] no I watched ... and I heard that women are more what do you call it ... as drivers. [other agrees] (Female, Wiley Park)

80/70 – she was going like – she was flying – we wanted to get shopping before it closed [laughs] ... driving fast. (Female, Wiley Park)

The car as a way of expressing oneself and the pleasure of driving in a way that could be considered intimidating and is certainly dangerous for other road users is illustrated in this comment:

My tires are pretty bad at the moment 'cos of the 360s I've been doing ... around corners. (Female, Lithgow)

In many of these comments the car is taken very lightly and its effects on others and the social environment considered very little. These views are very car centred and this is not surprising given the pre-eminence given to the car throughout the history of the development of car systems. Other views were expressed by young people in these focus groups that did show an awareness of the environment around them, and some concern about the damage the car can do. These comments have been chosen to illustrate one of the problematic themes of driving discourse – the unquestioned priority of the car and the lack of recognition of its destructive potential.

Though it is impossible to say whether there is more aggression today than there was in the past, road users consider aggressive driving to be one of the most significant problems of driving today (Shinar and Compton, 2004), and road traffic and its effects have been viewed by people from all social sectors as the most widespread urban problem (Appleyard, 1981).

The struggle to articulate and define what is legitimate and the legitimacy of coercion on the roads appears to be related simply to what the car can do and not countered by the destructive consequences that can follow from what the car can do. The ability of the car to go faster overrules the appropriateness of faster speed. It is a tool for saving time, for catching the shops in the last minutes before they close from wherever you are, for reaching someone quickly who is able to be seen and therefore not to be missed, for relieving boredom and so on.

Re-articulating the car

I have referred elsewhere to the expectation that the speed of car travel will continue to increase into the future (Redshaw, 2004). Expectations fuel the experience of drivers, egged on by car companies and their bigger, better, faster promotions, of easier, faster mobility as well as the added associations of unlimited freedom and expression. The reality of the limitations of cars is a direct result of their increasing presence and performance, as well as the dangers of the internal combustion powered vehicle.

Rearticulation of car use requires remodelling expectations and associations of the car. Some of the associations of the car that have been discussed in this paper are “obvious” – the lethal effects of cars and the racing alliances – but nevertheless are masked or glossed over. These need to be explicitly examined and their consequences and implications highlighted. Aggression appears to be inherent in the use of the car,

especially when considering the dominant articulations. This is not how it necessarily has to be however. The theme of dominance and aggression is one articulation among others that emphasises at the same time as it masks, the danger and destructive ability of the car.

It is important to consider the relations that involve cars and not just the externalities as Daniel Miller describes them in *Car Cultures* (2001). Placing the car in the social, cultural and political contexts through which it is articulated, requires looking at the implications of the relations that support and sustain the car in its present forms.

There are other articulations of cars that are not predominantly expressive of aggression. Maxwell (2001) describes some of these: convenience foremost, individuality and space, for women particularly, and the caring that the car facilitates in taking friends, family, the aged, to appointments and places of interest. Other articulations and associations of the car need to be emphasised and promoted at the same time as the car needs to be understood as forceful and damaging. Its effects on the environment in terms of fuel emissions are only one aspect of the problem of the internal combustion engine powered vehicle. The effects on the social environment of the car being used to carve a path into and through every aspect of social and cultural life, as well as a way of dominating the environment, are clearly extremely costly.

While not all enthusiasts are mad speed freaks who drive on the road as if they were on a race track, there is the strong association of the internal combustion engine with speed and power and this is part of what is enjoyed about the car. Those who would see the public road as a race track without necessarily even realising it, are prepared to accept an aggressive intrusion on every aspect of human life. The expectations created by the continual association of cars and racing, even though the two should be considered completely different, help to encourage and maintain the aggressivity of the car and its place in people's lives.

The paper has sought to consider some of the articulations of the car including the way in which aggression is promoted through the association with racing in its many forms and the implications of this. Advertising examples and comments from focus groups illustrate the emotional themes that pervade the driving experience, with expectations of faster and more immediate mobility fuelling experiences of boredom and impatience. The need to further consider the broader articulations of cars and driving is clear and must include a range of ways in which cars are used and experienced in people's lives.

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¹ 6 focus groups were conducted with young provisional licence drivers through schools in NSW as part of the Driving Cultures Project. The focus group discussions were centred around questions of control relating to cars and driving. The material from the transcripts of focus groups discussions selected here relates to the significant range of comments on dangerous or aggressive driving, especially when it appears to be an expected or taken for granted aspect of driving for these young people.