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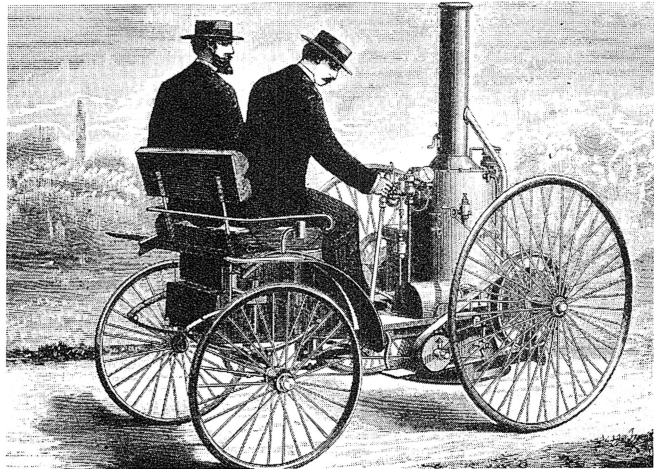
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Driving: Fifteen Lessons in Destiny and Despair

Allan Hepburn

Allan Hepburn teaches English at the University of Toronto at Scarborough. He has published articles on Edith Wharton, Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, Nancy Mitford, opera, contemporary Canadian literature, and other subjects. He is currently writing a book on espionage fiction.

This essay is dedicated to Michael Ciciretto, Dean Cooke, Mark Kingwell, and Barbara Morris — readers, thinkers, critics, friends.



*The Pleasures of Merely Circulating.
Driving a Stanley Steamer, circa 1890.*

1. Unconscious

When you drive, what do you think about?

Restive Mr. Toad, overcome by egotism in the children's classic, *The Wind in the Willows*, steals an automobile to satiate his driving urges. Behind the wheel, he enters fugue-like oblivion: "As if in a dream, he found himself, somehow, seated in the driver's seat; as if in a dream, he pulled the lever and swung the car round the yard and out through the archway; and, as if in a dream, all sense of right and wrong, all fear of obvious consequences, seemed temporarily suspended" (111). Mr. Toad sacrifices everything for a quick, reckless jaunt. While driving, he thinks of no one, nothing, not even his own safety, not even the law.

Hart Crane in "Modern Poetry" thinks driving is poetry. Writing duplicates "the familiar gesture of a motorist in the modest act of shifting gears" (262), a gesture so spontaneous and unthought-about that the machine seems a mere extension of the nervous system.

Driving is poetry; driving is oblivion. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau enjoins

us to consider the ways that culture is the result of “systems of operational combination” (xi), which is to say, the actions that everyone may perform given the appropriate means and skill, and the diverse ways in which those actions express themselves. Take driving as an instance of a system of operational combination. Most people in the industrialized world drive. Roughly six hundred million cars roam the planet. One car exists for every two North Americans. Everyone, however, has different driving experiences and skills. Most people abide by rules of the road that dictate, as a precondition of driving, assumptions about fairness and legality (no speeding, no driving with bare feet, no driving in the left-hand lane in North America unless passing slower vehicles, no driving in the right-hand lane in England unless passing slower vehicles, no driving recklessly, no driving with open bottles of alcohol at hand, no underage driving). Driving requires a comprehensive if nearly unconscious knowledge of social behavior and laws. It requires meticulous understanding of local systems of meaning and justice as well. It is legal to turn right on a red light in Ontario, but is it legal to do so in Alabama or in North Dakota?

Quite apart from driving as a nexus of legal and technical behaviors into which we are born, and which we accept obediently, we endlessly tell stories about driving. These stories, in de Certeau’s terms, help make a daily event meaningful when it might otherwise remain unnarratable or outside meaning. Such stories have entered the twentieth-century repertory as tales of anxiety overcome: driving for the first time, getting a driver’s license, having near-brushes with death on the freeway, being stopped for speeding, undergoing long cavalcades of holiday traffic, dodging through congested expressways to get to a rendezvous or a plane, taking lonely long-distance trips, driving a getaway car. We see, just as endlessly, television and film clips that establish direction and narrative progression through shots of cars and their drivers. Driving as an action is not the same thing as driving as a representation, whether in film, photography, or fiction. While driving expresses psychological states, the way driving gets narrated or filmed converts those states into significance.

Driving is a simulacrum of narrative. Storytelling, like driving, requires scenery, motivation, characters, movement, destination, pit stops, and detours. Driving, in representational terms, seems like filler: the necessary but unimaginative “establishing” shot in which a character crosses the landscape, or the plot contrivance that signifies, in freak accidents or cars-that-run-out-of-gas-on-backroads-in-the-country, a stroke of uncontrollable randomness. Sometimes, as in the film *Speed*, driving becomes an all-or-nothing proposition: the lives of a busload of Los Angelinos depend on the controlled recklessness of super-driver Sandra Bullock. Driving, in such narratives, is a convenient metaphor for destiny. When we want to express our sense of randomness in life, we talk about car accidents, or hit-and-run incidents. When we want a code for the inexplicable, we talk about conditions (rain, ice, blizzards) that force us to drive badly, or actions (speeding, running a red light, not checking blind spots) that prevent us from controlling our fates effectively.

Driving is also a convenient metaphor for privacy. A car, as the extension of private space — equipped with *my* stereo playing *my* music and decorated with *my* bumper stickers and *my* fuzzy dice — seems like an inviolable piece of

property, as intimate as a bedroom, as personal as a birthday. The “gadget cars” driven by Batman and James Bond, outfitted with guns and carapaces and lassoes and grappling hooks and computerized weapons, are the cultural projections of phantasmic masculine privacy that cannot be violated, according to the circular logic of automotive masculinity, *because it is in a car*. Am I a man if I do not drive? Do I control access to my privacy as I drive? Laboring under the misapprehension that driving expresses character, many drivers perform stunts and strategies that really ought to be kept out of public thoroughfares. Driving is a metaphor for privacy, not privacy itself. Road rage is possible only when the intensity of privacy ratchets up to an untenable degree. Drivers get irate when they think that they are more entitled to the “privacy” of the road and the “privacy” of their cars than anyone else. A General Motors motto made motorized privacy an aspect of political volition: “It’s not just your car, it’s your freedom.” The road-enraged forget that a car is, notwithstanding all the advertising and mythology to the contrary, just a mechanical contraption designed to move people from one place to another, not a private space. This knowledge has been deliberately repressed in order to make driving seem an inalienable aspect of personality.

As a projection of misguided car privacy, road rage results in vigilante policing and nightmarish ambushes. In Don DeLillo’s *Underworld* (1997), a Texas killer stalks the highways and shoots victims randomly (155-60). One of his victims, a middle-aged man driving a Dodge, is videotaped by a girl pointing a camcorder through the back window of the family car. She doesn’t videotape the Texas highway killer, who must have been driving next to the man in the Dodge. Everyone conjectures that the killer must be left-handed, or maybe right-handed, because of the manner in which he pulls alongside cars and fires. Everyone conjectures that the killer must be deranged or maybe rational, because of the merciless and systematic nature of the killings. Meanwhile the video of the murdered driver loops endlessly across television news channels. The serial killer disappears among the anonymous users of Texas highways. Like the invention of the “drive-in movie theater” that allows the cinemagoer to remain cocooned in a car while mingling in public, the killer emerges when distinctions between private rights and civic responsibility erode. Because everyone takes to the roads in *Underworld*, nothing distinguishes the drive-by shooter from anyone else. Like every other driver, he takes his privacy with him from the garage to the interstate and back home again. The anonymous killer is the product of driving fetishism — driving as an expression of individuality and style — that begins with the suburban husband washing and waxing his car in the breezeway every Saturday morning and ends with the glorification of Formula One race-car driver Jacques Villeneuve, or his equivalent, zooming at high speeds around a race track and squeezing other cars (not “drivers” really, but cars) into compromised and sometimes dangerous positions. The Texas highway killer treats other drivers as objects or prey, not as citizens and equals.

In the evolution of car ownership through the twentieth century, as the skills required to maneuver a car have become easier because of technical innovations (power brakes, windshields, headlights, power steering), driving, as an action performed but not thought about much, substitutes for unconscious

desires. As you drive, are you immersed in a la-la land of reverie? Even as you wheel around a corner or across a five-lane freeway, are you planning dinner? Are you scouting for policemen with speed guns? Are you puzzling out problems of metaphysics? Are you pretending to be Mario Andretti? Are you trying to see what the driver behind you looks like by sneaking surreptitious peeks in your rear-view mirror? Are you picking your nose, as Jerry Seinfeld does in one notorious episode of his sitcom? Driving allows a pause in psychic life. In that pause, wishes and anxieties take shape. With its suggestions of aggression, wrath, offensive or defensive postures, luck, skill and competence, driving defines an aspect of modern unconsciousness. What cannot be stated outright, we are driven to represent.

As a representational medium, film has been especially fond of driving. In the twentieth century, the movie camera, a machine, loves the car, another machine. How many times have you seen a shot of two cops on a stakeout sitting in their car sipping coffee from styrofoam cups? How many times have you heard someone say, "Stop the car! I'm getting out"? How many car chases are there in all movies and television serials? The birth of cinema at almost the same moment as the invention of the car makes driving the *sine qua non* of motility, of speed. Cinema would be nothing without cars. (A parlor game: name ten movies, excluding "historical" period pieces, that *do not* include cars in any shots. Now name ten famous oil paintings that *do* include cars. Draw conclusions about stasis and movement in these representational media.) Movies glamorize driving through driving shots and car chases. Some of the first films are about pure locomotion: trains filmed by the Lumière brothers, rockets filmed by Méliès, firewagons filmed by Edison. The obsession with speed and images together forms the history of modernity: swiftness as an aesthetic that distorts reality. The scenic changes outside car windows as one drives approximate the scenic shifts of motion pictures, the car window a television or movie screen, a space of impossible, elusive reality.

We drive for the same reasons we watch movies: to keep reality at bay. The car shot (interior, tight, compressed, close-up) enforces intense communication or rapport. By squeezing people together, the car shot usefully exaggerates situations of intimacy for amorous or professional purposes. Think of Michael Douglas and Karl Malden airborne on the high hills of San Francisco. Think of all the out-of-sync studio shots of couples sitting in cars as scenery zips by in the background at the wrong speed. Think of the high-glam car crashes that killed Grace Kelly, James Dean, Princess Diana. In truth, car shots and car deaths remind us that driving does not guarantee invulnerability. On the contrary, what we had hoped to prevent by driving — experiencing intimacy, being touched, knowing reality — comes back again in the car shot or in the "tragic" knowledge of driving fatalities.

2. Wreck

Driving is a coy trope for avoidance. In John Irving's *A Widow for One Year* (1998), Ruth Cole (a novelist) sends a postcard to her soon-to-be husband (an

editor). They have not slept together yet. Ruth feels unsure about committing to this man. An 1885 Daimler appears on the postcard. Ruth writes on the back: "Do you need a new car? I'd like to take a long drive with you" (316). The metaphor, "a long drive," means, and does not mean, something sexual. Ruth thinks she wants a long drive, but she has shown only ambivalence to her boyfriend up to this point. She's idling in neutral.

In the opening chapters of *A Widow for One Year*, a gormless sixteen year old named Eddie is hired to chauffeur the alcoholic writer, Ted Cole, around the Hamptons. Cole has lost his license after two drunk driving convictions. Cole's wife, Marion, drives a Mercedes. She sits on the fender of her car at Montauk waiting for the ferry, with Eddie aboard, to arrive from Connecticut. Eddie drives Marion home: "It's nice to be driven,' she told Eddie. 'Ted always drank too much. I was always the driver'" (65).

This novel builds up the principle of randomness through acts — and accidents — of driving. What cannot be controlled in the universe, in human destiny (as Irving depicts it), is sudden, accidental death. Marion and Ted's two sons die in a head-on collision. Despite the implicit principle that randomness governs human affairs, the accident is not inexplicable. While waiting to make a left turn, the heedless teenaged driver turns his wheels left in anticipation. When his car gets rammed from behind by another vehicle, it shoots into the path of an oncoming snowplow. Bad timing. The boys are killed. The parents, sitting in the back seat, survive. The accident structures the life of Marion and Ted ever afterward. Marion never stops mourning her dead sons and fails to love her daughter Ruth, born after the boys die. The bourgeois aesthetic that governs *A Widow For One Year* requires an emphasis on driving and automobiles as emblems of circumstantial, uncontrollable fate. Yet this is false consciousness, since cars are not agents of doom. Drivers are.

Repressed because too painful to think about, the accident resurfaces at crucial moments, as when Ruth learns to drive. Ted tells his daughter Ruth about the tragic accident while she, a neophyte driver, grips the wheel in heavy traffic heading for Manhattan. Ted makes Ruth a skilled driver by forcing her to suffer through the tale of woe. She cannot escape his story. All crucial conversations take place en route to some destination or other in *A Widow for One Year*. While driving, one is a captive to a passenger, to the radio, to the road, to a destination. In the universe of this novel, driving remains fixed as the sign of destiny, for better or worse. As such, driving has a desperate shade to it: an accident might happen at any moment. Like the car that veers off the road in an "accident" movie (*Misery*, about a car crash in a snowscape, comes to mind), driving has dire consequences (sicko Kathy Bates dragging collision-ruined James Caan back to her remote house where she imprisons him, breaks his kneecaps with an ax, toys with his mind). Destiny is plot. Driving is the fulfillment of destiny.

3. Blur

Blur arises in the twentieth century as an antimechanistic aesthetic value. When Filippo Tomasso Marinetti in his "Futurist Manifesto" (1909) declares

the supremacy of the machine, especially the automobile, he announces the advantages of speed and its concomitant aesthetic of blurriness. "A racing car whose hood is adorned with great pipes, like serpents of explosive breath," writes Marinetti in his tenets of futurism, "is more beautiful than the *Victory of Samothrace*" (41). He extols the "man at the wheel" and "the beauty of speed." Marinetti, alas, drives his car into a ditch and has to have it pulled from the sludge. Speed is not necessarily a positive value.

In television commercials advertising cars, blurred lines allow the consumer the luxury of not having to know too much. Everything — laws, scenery, meaning, environment, feeling — in and around the car runs together. Blur signifies a high-speed-chase obsession with movement that defies thoughtful reflection. Blur signifies evasion and escape. It signifies art, not machine, because it makes a heap of chrome, rubber, steel and vinyl look pretty. It signifies, above all, postmodernity, in which the capacity of the camera to nail down discrete moments of time as a tool of scientific investigation is exasperated. Blur retaliates against the modernist imperative to make film reveal nature's secrets, as when Eadweard Muybridge in 1872 proved to Leland Stanford's satisfaction that horses, in full canter, had all four hoofs off the ground at once, an effect of speed unverifiable by the naked eye. So much for horse power. Blur runs against the grain of scientific clarity: the freeze-frame drop of splashed milk; the lapse-time opening of a flower; the canter of a horse.

Blur proves the camera's slowness. A photographer can induce blur as an effect of overlong shutter speed, in combination with low ASA film sensitivity. Blur is not accidental. When commercials and billboards want to show an "artistic" effect of speed, they use blur for its anticommercial appeal. Postmodernity has made blur an ethos, a signature of catch-me-if-you-can equivocation and flight.

Blur advertises fun. *This car drives so fast — 0 to 60 in 2.5 seconds — everything's a blur.* To have fun means not to notice things too sharply. For a speeding driver, the world outside the car turns unstable, topsy-turvy. Constant points of reference exist only inside the automobile: radio, passenger, ashtray, tape deck, glove compartment, maps. In the twentieth century, the car is the refuge of interiority and happiness. Happiness does not move because happiness exists inside, not outside, the automobile. Happiness continues while the car moves, while someone drives. Blur, as an exterior effect, enhances happiness, because that which stays out of focus defines the object in focus. Driving expresses and fulfills the gleesome sense of interiority, the giddy pursuit of happiness. For that reason, everything outside the car remains a blur.

In Lillian Bassman's elegant photograph of a woman and poodle in car (1961), the aesthetic of blur is compounded by semiotics of gender, freedom and style (see figure 1). This photo says: "I drive therefore I am free. I do not need a companion, except my poodle. My primary allegiance is with my car." The darkest patches of the photograph are the car's interior, the woman's gloves, and the woman's sensibly-tied-at-the-throat, I-won't-ruin-my-hair scarf. The darkness of these areas links the interior of the car with the interiority of the woman. The viewer has no access to what she looks at. She looks ahead. She drives away. The blurred edges of her body, the not-quite-focused

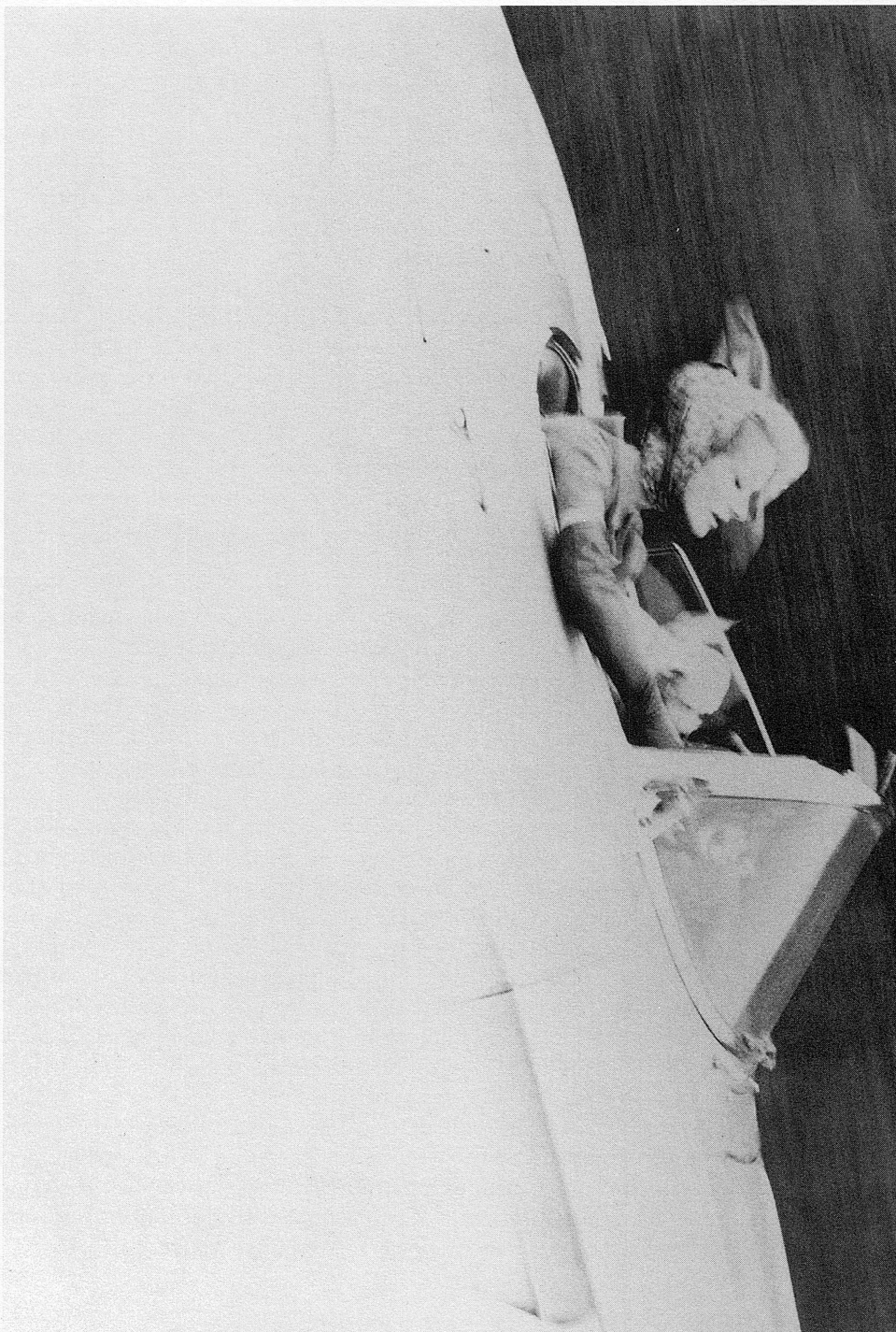


Figure 1. Lillian Bassman, "Lisa Fonsgraves, New York." Harper's Bazaar, May 1961. © Lillian Bassman. Courtesy Howard Greenberg Gallery, New York City.

profile of her face and arms, make her ghostly. In this sense, blur defies the body, the human silhouette. She's here; she's gone. This driver has no time for people standing at the side of the road. She is a modern woman of the '50s for whom all roads open. Like those country maids glimpsed by yearning Marcel from the window of a train at level crossings or local stations in *Remembrance of Things Past*, this photograph encapsulates the erotics of transience. For a moment, a driver, alone, is glimpsed in the street. She is the object of attention — erotic yet thwarted, erotic because thwarted — insofar as she is unavailable. She is Lisa Fonssagrives, supermodel. This moment is a sighting of a celebrity, a moment in which the witness is humbled by a fleeting contact with glamour. Unlike Marcel, whose eros grows exponentially as he realizes that he need not have any physical contact with the women he sees (a relief for Marcel, in truth), the viewer in Bassman's photograph suffers from immobility and vulnerability. Positioned to the side of the car, the viewer is no one, is not looked at, is passive. The voluptuousness of this photograph is not in the woman who drives but in the implicit abjection of the spectator who cannot even make herself or himself noticed. The poodle, watching out the window, doubles the driver's indifference. Dash and seat details suggest that the car is a stylish Mercedes-Benz. The woman's independence is therefore a condition of her class status. She doesn't need the approval of the passer-by or the photographer snapping her picture from the curb because she is wealthy enough to drive a snazzy automobile. Driving anoints her with independence.

The repertory of erotic images dictates that this photograph be read as cryptically pornographic. Streets are sites for momentary erotic thrills. In Baudelaire's poem, "To A Passerby," a woman in the streets of Paris, fleetingly glimpsed, becomes for the poet an object of fascination, even a fetish (in the sense that Freud uses the term to mean an "obstacle" to fulfillment). Only because she cannot be retrieved, except in memory, is she converted into a love object. Similarly, in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Leopold Bloom cranes his neck to catch a glimpse of a woman's undergarments as she steps up to board a tram in the streets of Dublin; another trolley intercepts his glance and Leopold fumes about missing the opportunity of seeing a woman's frilly pantalettes. In Bassman's photograph, the street is not visible but is a precondition for the woman driving her car. However, this photograph departs from that male tradition of furtive glances and voyeuristic art by making this woman control her visibility: she drives her own car. She ignores the implicit eroticization of her body, which won't come into focus, which can't be kept still.

Do not cut yourself off from blur. Wear a long scarf. Make it white silk and let it hover on the breeze. Let the wind whip its fringe into a frothy cloud of tassel and textile. Prove that you are postmodern too. Drive with the convertible top down. Open the sun roof. While you do this, think of how a sun-roof might have saved Isadora Duncan's life. Drive gaily. Drive fast. Blur.

4. Convertible

In *Pillow Talk* (1959), Rock Hudson drives Doris Day to Connecticut in a convertible, despite chilly autumn weather. Tony Randall tries to bribe Doris Day into marrying him by offering her a red-upholstered convertible. Rock Hudson favors sporty cars that are far too small for his he-man frame. In *Pillow Talk*, he folds himself into a roadster too tiny for his lanky legs. Convertibles mean danger, mean “playboy,” mean on-the-edge masculinity. In *Magnificent Obsession* (1954), speedster Rock gets picked up by sensible Jane Wyman, who drives a convertible. In *Giant*, James Dean drives a huge cream-yellow Rolls-Royce convertible to flaunt his newly acquired oil wealth. Isadora Duncan dies in a convertible. Grace Kelly scoots along the Riviera in *To Catch a Thief* in a convertible. Marcello Mastroianni drives Anita Ekberg to the Trevi Fountain in *La Dolce Vita* in a convertible.

Two-door convertibles have a different semiotic valence than do solid sedans or covered cars. Convertibles are permeable. They can be accessed by hopping over the door, the way William Holden playing a man about town in *Sabrina* does. Convertibles are open to scrutiny. They are open to weather. They form a boundary between publicity and privacy that is constantly being infringed. The staring public or the shutter-happy paparazzi can invade a convertible. While driving a convertible, you lose things. Maps, scarves, papers, kleenex fly off the dash into the wild blue yonder. The body approaches edges of control; it too may fly out of the car. Iconic red convertibles permit sportiness, verve, disintegration, youthful recklessness, or even the fulfillment of death wishes. Convertibles let too much of the outside into the car: too much air, too much turbulence, too much gawking. This is part of their charm. They are vehicles designed for the vulnerable, for those who crave exposure, such as beauty queens in local parades, or sports teams celebrating victories with ticker tape and confetti. In a convertible, you feel the adulation of the public. You feel famous. On the open road, the wind brushes your face, an ersatz contact with nature since vehicular speed causes the effect of breezy caress, not natural air movement. Only with a convertible can you get quite this close to being a creature of air and light: a nymph, a sylph of the automobile yielding to the elements.

More than most cars, convertibles spell destiny. A deep-seated fantasy about the convertible derives from Isadora Duncan’s death by strangulation. In *Isadora* (1968), starring Vanessa Redgrave as the lithe, eurhythmic dancer, the most famous sequence is surely the one that shows her long silk scarf wafting on the air then revolving rapidly around the wheel axle. Isadora, arching backwards as the scarf-noose tightens at her neck, gags and dies. The convertible, however luxurious it may be, leaves her exposed. She is too excessive, too much of a show-off, too flagrant to live. She demands punishment for her excess. The ambivalence of her place in society — dancer, floozy, *artiste* — makes her come to an untimely end.

Beware the convertible. Take a cab.



Who Drives Whom? Rock Hudson and Dorothy Malone in Written on the Wind (1956) cruising with the top down. Cinematheque Ontario.

5. Taxi!

The taxi, like the big yellow cab waiting in a downpour in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, is the rented-by-the-minute or rented-by-the-quarter-mile threshold to a new life.

The taxi promises anonymity. You pay for a rolling space you can temporarily call your own, the way, for instance, Sean Young and Kevin Costner, having sex in the back of a limousine in *No Way Out* (1987), think they have paid for a few square feet of privacy.

The taxi allows indulgence in fantasies of class elevation: *I'm rich enough to take a cab and pay a driver*. High school kids going to a prom in a rented limousine open the roof and lean out to wave and holler to no one in particular. They beg to be seen.

Driving Miss Daisy (1989) perpetuates the American myth that no fundamental differences separate black, compliant, male chauffeur from white, bossy, female employer. The two unlikely characters end up relying on each other. Class distinctions break down. By contrast, Marcel Proust fell in love with his chauffeur, Franco Agostinelli, because he knew that the line between rich and poor, homosexual and straight, *littérateur* and *conducteur* could not, according to the rules of turn-of-the-century French society, collapse. Proust was turned on

by the infringement of class distinctions that loving Agostinelli incurred. The love affair took place under the shroud of anonymity that the chauffeur was required to display as an aspect of his employment. Proust, much smarter than Miss Daisy, used the code of anonymity to his advantage. Instead of overlooking class divisions, he made erotic and professional obligations coexist and thereby maximized his pleasure in being driven, as it were, by Agostinelli.

In Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976), the taxi, even though a public conveyance, concentrates the erotic and personal despair of Americans. Robert DeNiro, playing cabbie Travis Bickle, picks up and drops off fares anywhere in Manhattan. His cab is a mobile therapist's coach. Lunatic riders spill their problems; Travis keeps his eye on them in his rear-view mirror, as if he can't look at anyone directly (see figure 2). Least of all can he look at his own problems directly. An ex-marine who served in Vietnam, Travis has more pathologies than anyone he transports. Using his taxi as a shield that prohibits contact, he stalks women, much as Jimmy Stewart in *Vertigo* stalks Kim Novak, with his car. Travis's sexual dysfunction, his relentless terrorizing of women, his pill-popping, and his mania for urban artillery are symptoms of a psychosis he cannot express. "You're only as healthy as you feel," Travis says. He should know. He takes his illness to the streets. Driving all night does not cure him. Driving becomes another symptom of his alienation and aimlessness.

6. Onomastics

Oldsmobile Cutlass Ciera. Nissan Pathfinder. Nash Rambler. Desoto. Hudson. Pierce-Arrow. Volkswagen Beetle. Dodge Diplomat. Buick Riviera.

Car names, both brands and marques, reveal a history of corporate America over the last century, including the invasion of multinationals into the US market. Names show the fondest dreams of Americans. The Ford Model T, for instance, has a humble, Taylorized, glamorless functionality about it, much as IBM spells out exactly its global mandate and *raison d'être* as a creator of business machines. No guff obscures the nature of the commodity. It just does its job. The product of trial and error, the Model T evolves so far as T, then needs to go no further. The K-car attempted to replicate this car-in-every-driveaway functionality, much as the plain-named Volkswagen, as a Nazi invention of a car (*der Wagen*) for the people (*das Volk*), bespoke practicality. However, the "series" cars, such as BMW manufactures, have upped the ante on the simple alphabetical or numbered product. Like knowing RBIs in baseball, memorizing the features of a 1995 BMW 325iS as opposed to a 1998 BMW 540iA — not to mention a 1998 Audi A6 1.8T Quattro Tiptronic in Racing Green Mica — requires a mind for nuance that can only become superannuated and that can only be shared with other car enthusiasts. To possess the numbers is to possess the car in a manner of speaking. Unreal numbers coat the reality of the car world as a means of asserting order amidst chaotic specificity. Numerical exactness represents, then replaces, the phantasm of choice in the marketplace.

Certain cars and manufacturers — Ford, Mercedes, Daimler — belong to the person-as-car category: Ford as creator of the Ford company; Mercedes as the daughter of the man who invented the eponymous Benz. Some names sig-



Figure 2. Cabbie as Therapist and Should-Be Patient. Robert DeNiro in Taxi Driver. Cinematheque Ontario.

nify animal motility: Impala, Colt, Eagle, Tercel, Mustang, Jaguar, Fox, Pony. Some hearken back to a frontier mentality of hardship and conquest: Buick, Cherokee, Pontiac, Land Rover. Leisure, grandiosity, luxury, or perhaps a touch of the military, await drivers of post-World-War-II products made for touring, such as the Malibu, Fifth Avenue, Grand Am, Lincoln Continental, Corvette. Phony Frenchness, of the kind widespread in the 1950s and 1960s, is available in the LeBaron, LeSabre, Cavalier, Coupe de Ville, Parisienne. Contemporary names emphasize intangible qualities, especially civility and expansiveness, using vaguely familiar words, sometimes Latin in appearance: Civic, Infiniti, Lexus, Acura, Integra, Omni, Miata, Jetta, Passat, Precidia, Fiat. One acquires foreignness, or even shades of mystery, with a Saab, a Toyota, a Porsche, a Citroën, a Peugeot, a Honda, a Lamborghini. Most astonishing, however, is the potential cross-fertilization of names, the unlikely hybridization of Buick with Fifth Avenue, for example, or the hermetically redundant Chevy Chevette. In car onomastics, fantasy triumphs over urban reality. You are probably not what you drive except, perhaps, in your imagination: cavalier, diplomat, escort, cherokee, eagle. *Never been to Paris but I'm the proud owner of a Parisienne.*

The origin of "sedan" and "cabriolet," the "landau" and the "brougham" in the carriage trade of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries squares uncomfortably with the motorized cars of the late twentieth century. The landau, a four-wheeled, horse-drawn carriage first manufactured in the German town of

Landau, seems a far cry from the contemporary horsepowered car. A “cabriolet” is a two-wheeled carriage drawn by one horse and offering a leather hood or screen to protect the occupant of the “cab.” It’s the origin of the word “cab,” meaning “taxi.”

To name is to create false consciousness. To drive is to perpetuate false consciousness.

7. Death Drive

Ever since Daisy Buchanan struck down Myrtle Wilson in *The Great Gatsby* (1925), women have taken a bad rap for driving.

When Katharine Hepburn tries to pull out of the parking lot in *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), she rams into several parked cars, glances over the steering wheel with carefree take-me-or-leave-me *sprezzatura*, and wedges her monstrously huge Packard against a tree.

Women, however, are not always represented as impossibly bad — or murderous — drivers. In Joan Didion’s gloom-and-drugs novel set in L.A. and the California desert, *Play It As It Lays* (1970), driving is a form of gambling and desperation. Driving nullifies pain. When her husband leaves her, the protagonist Maria (pronounced Mar-eye-ya) gets up early to drive the L.A. freeways. For mysterious ritualistic reasons, lost in the valiumed, bourbonized mind of Maria, she has to be

on the freeway by ten o’clock. Not somewhere on Hollywood Boulevard, not on her way to the freeway, but actually on the freeway. If she was not she lost the day’s rhythm, its precariously imposed momentum. Once she was on the freeway and had maneuvered her way to a fast lane she turned on the radio at high volume and she drove. She drove the San Diego to the Harbor, the Harbor up to the Hollywood, the Hollywood to the Golden State, the Santa Monica, the Santa Ana, the Pasadena, the Ventura. She drove it as a riverman runs a river, every day more attuned to its currents, its deceptions, and just as a riverman feels the pull of the rapids in the lull between sleeping and waking, so Maria lay at night in the still of Beverly Hills and saw the great signs soar overhead at seventy miles an hour, *Normandie 1/4 Vermont 3/4 Harbor Fwy 1*. (15-16)

The ritual of driving every morning removes Maria from her out-of-control life. Driving compensates for everything else that she cannot name or explain. Anorectic, abandoned, lonely Maria has no viable means for expressing herself. Her greatest emotional release occurs as she crosses four lanes of heavy traffic diagonally to hit an off-ramp “without once braking or once losing the beat on the radio . . .” (16). The highways of L.A. become a maze in which to work out the successes and defeats of her fate.

Driving, Maria does penance for her mother, who died accidentally in the desert one night when her car rolled into a ditch and she was eaten by coyotes before anyone found her. When Maria goes to a hypnotist hoping to recover

her sorry past, she fails to recall anything except moments of driving. She drives to a parking lot where she meets a man wearing white pants; he navigates her to a suburban house where she has an abortion. Maria and the man in white pants talk about the differences between Cadillacs and Camaros. "There was no more to it than that," says the narrator, as if car talk ought to be a code for something more meaningful, more tragic (79).

Maria drives "aimlessly" from Las Vegas to the desert (129).

Maria drives to Romaine to cry.

Maria drives to the middle of nowhere and takes a hotel room.

Barefoot Maria steals an actor's Porsche and goes joyriding. For the hell of it. For the fun. To forget.

Maria, suffering from insomnia that no number of drugs can cure, puts herself to sleep by imagining that she's driving.

Maria has a minor accident with her Corvette.

Hoodlums try to bust into Maria's car.

Maria's motto could be "I drive therefore I drive," because driving serves its own ends and means nothing beyond itself. Or her motto could be "I drive therefore I am not," because driving prevents her from thinking about her existential dilemmas. Driving allows her not to think at all.

Driving in *Play It As It Lays* flirts with the desire to lose everything, to run into a gully or die in the desert, to sink into a lake with the car windows rolled up, to recover the past by duplicating it, to drive until there are no more highways to drive on.

8. Modern Instances

In 1927, Virginia Woolf took driving lessons. Virginia and Leonard bought a secondhand Singer automobile in the summer of that year, and Virginia could barely contain her enthusiasm for the freedom that the motor would bring her. Indeed, in the culture of the 1920s, the car had cachet for women, since it allowed them to come and go as they chose. Virginia's friend Vita Sackville-West could jaunt to the train station to pick up her lovers without having to rely on nosy chauffeurs. For a while, in the summer of 1927, Virginia could talk of nothing but motor cars. "I can think of nothing else," she writes to her friend Ethyl Sands (*Letters* 400). Leonard wrung his hands and fretted about Virginia's state of mind during these lessons. After a few weeks, Virginia drove through a hedge and the lessons ceased. Leonard commandeered the Singer after that.

Although Virginia stopped driving, she translated the exhilaration of driving into *Orlando* (1928), her cryptobiography of Vita Sackville-West. The effects of speeding through town and country in a motor car register as the ultimate modernist experience — fast, blurred, impressionistic. "People split off the pavement. There were women with shopping bags. Children ran out. There were sales at drapers' shops. Streets widened and narrowed. Long vistas shrunk together" (306). The world, cinematized, is delivered up in bits. The transported, driving body grows slack with high-speed impressions. "After



Figure 3. Sex and the Death Drive. Tamara De Lempicka, Autoportrait (Tamara in a Green Bugatti). Private collection, Paris.

twenty minutes the body and mind were like scraps of torn paper tumbling from a sack and, indeed, the process of motoring fast out of London so much resembles the chopping up small of body and mind, which precedes unconsciousness and perhaps death itself that it is an open question in what sense Orlando can be said to have existed at the present moment" (307). Driving is a form of death. As Freud says about travellers (although he was thinking about trains and was himself an anxious train traveller), all images of travel are coded representations of death. For Woolf, as for Freud, travelling approximates unconscious impulses, particularly a desire for the stasis of death that lurks in the mind of everyone who drives.

Tamara De Lempicka's 1925 *Autoportrait (Tamara in the Green Bugatti)* contradicts the unconscious tug towards death by making driving an erotic, sleek, alluring, and wholly conscious event (see figure 3). In this modernist painting, De Lempicka's scarlet, puckered, kiss-me lips invite trouble. But her hat helmeted to her head, her pale, hooded, don't-mess-with-me eyes repulse any advances. This woman can drive. No way will you get into her Bugatti. The death drive pertains to the spectator, who is challenged by De Lempicka's gaze. She is the essence of modernity: capable and lethal. Get off the road. Or learn how to drive.

9. Nostalgia

Everyone drove in the 1950s, according to retro-flicks, TV comedies, and novels that revisit that era. *Grease*, *American Graffiti*, *Happy Days*, and *This Boy's Life* all require the car as a sign of the happy-go-lucky Eisenhower years, when a hamburger was not a bad thing for you and learning to drive was a rite of passage. In representations of that period, often created twenty years after the fact, no one questions automotive hegemony. Indeed, widespread nostalgia for the 1950s may have been the result of fuel and automotive crises in the 1970s, such as the oil scare induced by OPEC countries, declining auto sales, and long lines at filling stations.

When John Travolta swivels his 1970s hips and sings "Greased Lightning" during shop class in *Grease* (1978), he parodies a popular notion of the '50s as a carefree car culture (see figure 4). This paean to automobiles retrofits 1970s sexual liberation to an earlier, allegedly simpler decade. In the glitzy, Ziegfield Follies world of *Grease*, the boys are really more interested in the appearance of sex in car parts, including racing stripes, white tires and plastic hoods, rather than in cars themselves. These boys want flash, not serviceability. Travolta's pumped-up performance in *Grease* duplicates Elvis Presley car movies such as *Spinout* (1966) and *Speedway* (1968), which, as imitations of Presley's own obscure origins as a truck driver, were already nostalgic returns to the "uncomplicated" car culture of the 1950s.

In *American Graffiti* (1973), as in most 1950s retro movies, teenagers require cars to have sex in. As a meditation on cruising and hot rodding in the 1950s, this film feels intensely claustrophobic because the action relentlessly returns to tight shots of people in cars. It manufactures a feeling of sexiness



Figure 4. *Human Hood Ornament*. John Travolta and choristers as grease-monkeys in *Grease*. Paramount Pictures. Cinematheque Onatario.

because couples never get away from each other in the front seat. The car is the teenager's bedroom outside the suburban bungalow. Cramped, steamy, uncomfortable — the seat of a car, as a place to make out, has no virtues. The car, in truth, is anti-sex. When teens get it on in the back of their parents' cars, they are not defying their parents. They are fulfilling the imperative of car-ness to make everything a living room: all space is an extension of the family rec room, a continuation of private life in the streets. Hip to the fact that their parents must have sex sometime, somewhere, their kids take that knowledge on the road in borrowed, souped-up cars.

Sometimes they have to steal a car to prove their freedom, as Tobias Wolff confesses in *This Boy's Life* (1989). He sneaks off with his stepfather's car, speeding a hundred miles an hour down empty roads. As the family dog in the passenger seat "placidly watched the white line shivering between the headlights I chattered like a gibbon and wept tears of pure terror. Then I stopped the car in the middle of the road, turned it around, and did the same thing headed the other way" (174). What does it matter whose car it is as long as the joy rider can express happiness temporarily by driving? So what if the car runs out of gas, breaks down, drives off a cliff, veers left or right. Joy-riding is tragic knowledge that the young are being let in on, the sort of knowledge that brings on inexplicable tears of gladness and terror. In later years, they can look back on these joy rides, with their intimations of liberty, and see them for what they were: illusions. On the one hand, the car is freedom; Toby's mother flees



Figure 5. 1950s Nostalgia. Photograph: Superstock, Montreal.

in a Nash Rambler from an abusive boyfriend. On the other hand, the automobile is death; a trucker smashes through a guardrail in the mountains in the opening pages of Wolff's memoir while travellers gather at roadside to look at the smoldering crash.

Cars are inherently tragic. You rarely see a car in situation comedies, which are usually shot inside a studio. Even in a series like *Happy Days*, with its greaseball-gooftball stereotypes of the '50s, car shots are restricted to low-grade, tight-sweater, necking scenes. Most of the action takes place in simulated living rooms and garages. Even Fonzie, a mechanic, drives a motorcycle in the series. No car = no sex. In one episode, principled Fonzie turns down a married, uptown woman who makes herself available to him. Fonzie explains, "I don't take what ain't mine, understand?" (quoted in Watson 147). For all his swagger, he's not getting any. Cars don't appear often on sitcoms (ever see any of the barflies from *Cheers* drive home?) in part because studio shots are cheap-

er. Comedy à l'américaine depends on cozy interiors: living rooms, bars, offices. The car is parked in the drive. The car sits in the garage. The car is too painful to consider. If the truth be known, the real 1950s car, as in *North by Northwest* (1959), is the vehicle of abduction and alienation.

In the 1950s, the father drives. No one wears seat belts. Straight is the road. Everyone smiles. Everyone is positioned as carefully as the family members in Degas's painting of the Bellelli family: mother, in passenger seat, is dispossessed, remote from the two kids, who are clearly aligned with smiling dad. Blonde girl looks to the future with father. Mother, eyes closed, sees no one; she's lost in private, smiling misery. Is she worried about her son, who searches her face for recognition or affection? Yet she turns to solicit children's attention. Maternal concern in face of personal despair? A happy family. Out for a drive. Everyone smiling. Everything banal. Straight ahead, as in a cliché. Everything unreal. That's what we long for. Nostalgia. (See figure 5.)

10. Autobiography; or, How I Learned to Drive

I am five years old. It is 1966. My father has bought a new car, a blue Ford with aerodynamic ridges along the side that rise into quasi shark fins at the trunk. I sit in the car with the doors locked. The key is in the ignition. Gripping the steering wheel, I bounce up and down on the seat. I just manage to see out the windshield at the apex of each bounce. I turn the key. The radio comes on. I am driving. In my imagination I am driving. I turn the key further. I am driving, driving, driving.



A Car as Matrimonial Accessory. My parents on their wedding day, 17 April 1952, flanked by their best man and maid of honor.

It is 1972. I am in grade 5. I give a speech on "The Story of My Life." It is received with strong approval from my classmates (applause! huzzahs!) and from my teacher Mrs. Nixon (an A). I advance to the semifinal round of speeches, which involves a q & a. The principal, Mr. "Red" Leeder, known for his rudy countenance and quick temper, judges the semifinals. The speech, delivered from memory, goes well. In the question period, however, Mr. Leeder asks me what my first memory is, the first moment I can consciously recall. I blurt out, "driving home from the hospital . . ." My voice trails away. I meant to say, "driving home from the hospital after a vaccination when I was 3," but somehow my voice ends before the sentence does. I blush. I realize that I sound absurd, as if I can remember everything that ever happened to me from the second or third day of my existence. Mr. Leeder, high of color, judges harshly. I do not advance to the school finals.

It is true, however, that one of my earliest memories involves my mother driving me home in the family car after a painful vaccination. I was not quite three.

I rarely drive. I don't own a car. It astonishes me that people drive as much as they do; it seems like an unconscionable waste of time. Hunting for parking, looking for gas stations, changing oil, paying tickets, all these activities are so remote from my consciousness that I worry I live in avoidance. Am I denying the twentieth century? Have I failed a *Zeitgeist* test? Driving, like parallel parking or motor repair, is a technical skill. It's democratic. It doesn't require inordinate strength, intelligence or artistry. Is my not-driving an act of snobbery?

I learned to drive by necessity at the age of six, when my father, with characteristic panache, told me to get on a Ford tractor and drive. As a rule my father never explained anything. Driving, like all tasks, was supposed to be self-evident. Briefly told what a clutch was and how to accelerate, I drove the tractor around the hay field and down the road. The only way I could change gears was to stand upright on the pedal and force it down with all my weight. My father neglected to tell me how to stop. I figured it out for myself. In short, I remember almost no time before driving.

My father has a prankster's idea of liberal education: what doesn't kill you will teach you something. He once told me to drive one of his dump trucks down the county road on a delivery. Only when I was approaching a stop sign and tried to halt did I learn that I had no brakes. I geared down and yanked the emergency. I coasted home after making a hair-raising tour of the neighborhood and performing a daredevil left turn (no traffic coming!). I geared down and drifted slowly into the back of another truck, nudging it very delicately in order to bring the dump truck I was driving to a full stop. My father, puffing with anger, bolted up to the truck and upbraided me for driving badly and running into another vehicle. No brakes. No sympathy. Nothing except fury. I suspect that, if he reincarnates, my father will come back as a vehicle, like the mother in the 1950s TV series, *My Mother the Car*, his voice issuing plaintively from the radio.

My father fixes engines all the time; he always insisted on making me hand him wrenches and ratchets as he trolleyed underneath various automobiles. I

hated doing this. I made a point of not paying attention to the intricacies of motor construction. I snuck away as quickly as I could in order to read books or play the piano, leaving my father to fetch his own tools.

I get distracted when I drive, mind-numbingly, yawningly bored. People who say, "I like to drive," mystify me. Driving must give them time to meditate, to think through problems, to revel in a few minutes or hours of privacy. When driving, I think of other things: books unread, the idiocy of talk radio, my inability to repair cars, the meaning of Heidegger's "clearing of being," what have you.

For one year, I owned and drove a 1977 Ford Fairmont that I inherited from my grandmother. The car was 13 years old, had a caramel-colored interior, a hunter-green paint job, and a leaky gas tank. The brakes failed once on the New Jersey Turnpike. I didn't panic, since I didn't want my friend Robert to think death — his and mine — was imminent. By pumping the brakes, I managed to build up some pressure and coast to a halt (I seem to have trouble knowing how to stop).

My friend Ginger pasted a sticker on the bumper of my Ford Fairmont: REPENT FOR THE END IS AT HAND! With not a moment's regret, I sold this jalopy for \$235 to a young guy studying car engineering in Detroit. I've never owned another.

It is 1975 or so. I am a restless fourteen year old who is mostly invisible to his parents. I am a model student, an aspiring pianist and scholar, an above average runner. I am sitting in the passenger seat behind my mother as she drives. As an experiment, I cover my mother's eyes with my hands while she takes a corner. I cannot say what possesses me to do such a thing: latent death wish; belief in my mother's supernatural powers or superior driving skills; thoughtlessness. I only do it once, but it makes me realize that self-governance is the best way to respect the fate of others.

My mother's name, by a strange quirk of coincidence, is Audrey Hepburn. Her father died in a drinking-and-driving accident in 1953 when he failed to make a corner on a country road two miles from his home. My mother was not yet 21 when her father died. She never spoke of this accident. She has never spoken of her father at all, ever.

11. Audrey

In *Roman Holiday*, Audrey Hepburn (not my mother) runs off with Gregory Peck (see figure 6). Eddie Albert snaps pictures of them as they carefreely cruise through the *strade* of Rome on a scooter. Audrey and Gregory always remain in focus. The city whips by: Coliseum, Trevi Fountain, et cetera. Rome's a backdrop. What matters is the speed of seeing the city, not the sights themselves. Blur lends a pleasing been-there-done-that quality to tourism. Inside a Fiat or on the saddle of a Vespa, the tourist grazes Rome. Like a proverbial "Sunday drive," touristic driving is a form of not seeing, of willfully setting forth in order to go wherever the road leads. Tourism imposes "fun" on landscape without requiring knowledge of history, geography, people, or culture.



Figure 6. *The Perils and Pleasures of Tourism*. Audrey Hepburn and Gregory Peck in *Roman Holiday*. Paramount Pictures. Cinematheque Ontario.

Audrey Hepburn does not drive. Audrey is driven. In *Sabrina*, for instance, William Holden chauffeurs her, then Humphrey Bogart takes her for a spin. Driving has clear associations with class membership for Sabrina. She waits to be picked up at the train station when she returns from Paris, carrying a suitcase and leading a poodle. William Holden screeches to a halt in a convertible sportscar and gives Audrey a lift home, poodle and all. Her father, a chauffeur, drives professionally and skillfully. Every day he conducts Humphrey Bogart into Manhattan; in the car, if need be, they can communicate via telephone connecting back seat to front. As Sabrina's father says, conversations between classes must be formal and technologized. He tells Sabrina that "There's a front seat and a back seat, and a window in between." Not driving serves as a marker of Sabrina's breaking away from her identity as a chauffeur's daughter.

Even in *Two for the Road* (1967), a film co-starring Audrey Hepburn and Albert Finney, Audrey takes the wheel only two or three times — even though the film centers on a London couple who drive through the French countryside over a period of a dozen years. Finney does almost all the driving: in an MG, in a Mercedes, in a Fiat. Every time Hepburn gets into the driver's seat, the car stalls, or the key flies out the window, or she passes over the duty of driving to Finney. Even the sportiest sportscar is a bore to drive, Hepburn implies with take-me-or-leave-me winsomeness. One watches this film to admire the aqua-

striped shirt, the shimmery mirror-dress, and the oversized '60s sunglasses that Audrey wears. To be chic, she eschews driving. To be entrancing, she walks. To be faithful to her persona, she gets into the passenger seat. Just along for the ride.

12. Prey

Driving is a predatory act in Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958). People crouch behind their steering wheels and watch each other. They drive to detect. They drive to catch. They drive to discover.

Police detective Johnny (Jimmy Stewart) drives through the sunny streets of San Francisco. He's methodical, focused, *driven*. Hired by a suave ship-building magnate named Gavin Elster, Johnny tails Madeleine (Kim Novak), who drives a lima-bean green Rolls Royce, or some equally impressive and elegant car. Green is Madeleine's color; when she first appears at a restaurant, she wears a dramatic green gown. Allegedly possessed by the spirit of her mad ancestress Carlotta Valdes, Madeleine doesn't remember what she does with her time all day. She "wanders." Johnny "wanders" too, and proposes that he and Madeleine "wander" together. She takes his hint and falls in love with him.

When first tailing Madeleine, Johnny sits in his car. Hitchcock positions the camera on the hood of Johnny's car and peers in the windshield at him as he grips the steering wheel, urging it now left, now right, according to the dictates of his predatory desires. He must find out Madeleine's secrets. He will drive until he finds where she goes, what she does with her days. In the background, through the rear window, San Francisco Bay flashes by, along with other breathtaking Vistavision panoramas of the city. This is some of the most glorious cinematic footage ever made. Johnny doesn't speak; he simply drives. When he gets exasperated because Madeleine weaves aimlessly through the city, he raises his thumbs off the steering wheel in a gesture that says, "why am I wasting my time?"

The sequence of Johnny's driving flips from his point of view to a direct and uncompromising stare through the windscreen at Johnny, a conventional shot-counter-shot that shows both what Johnny sees (Madeleine's car) and what Johnny looks like (as if glimpsed from Madeleine's rear-view mirror). The spectator's point of view doubles the perspectives of predator and prey in the narrative. The viewer, like a backward-looking hood ornament, never lets Johnny out of sight. This driving sequence functions as a moment of therapy. What Johnny hopes to hide manifests itself in moments of inadvertence. Just as Johnny thinks he can get to the bottom of Madeleine's psychosis by pursuing her, the spectator thinks that, by playing the role of therapist, he or she can figure out what secret motivations and anxieties cause Johnny's disabling vertigo. Almost everyone in this film manipulates and diagnoses everyone else: Midge (Barbara Bel Geddes), once engaged to Johnny, tries to make him fall in love with her again, but ends up irritating him more than helping him; slick Gavin Elster manipulates Johnny into following a woman who is not the real Mrs. Elster; Johnny behaves like a crypto-therapist who transfers his fears and

aggressions onto Madeleine; Madeleine thinks that she can cure Johnny by coming back incognito after her “death” — an incognito that is an “authentic” identity — and convincing Johnny she loves him; the least convincing therapist in the entire script, the hard-core Freudian doctor who diagnoses Johnny’s “melancholia,” does not understand that Johnny loves only women whom he can follow surreptitiously (Madeleine), not women who love him candidly (Midge). When Johnny sits catatonic at the rehabilitation center, he duplicates the passive, unfocused desire first occasioned by following Madeleine in his car: an act of predatory, aimless, masculine creepiness. Indeed, his aphasic moments recall the alleged aphasic moments suffered by Madeleine. He displaces all his symptoms onto Madeleine (aphasia, melancholy, aimlessness, haunting) because Johnny cannot accept responsibility for his own past or faulty behavior. The sequence in which Johnny drives is a moment of reversal. He begins to believe that Madeleine, not he, is ill.

Because Johnny follows Madeleine in his car, he falls in love with her. Or he is falling in love with his own illness. While driving, he formulates a plot, a plan, a desire. This is what happens when one drives: desires bob up; confusions coalesce into generalized need. Driving is not an inactivity. Objects of desire gradually enter the driver’s mind. Although idle pursuit seems like the epitome of boredom for Johnny, boredom itself is not unproductive. While bored, the driver may reach a *détente* with warring feelings. While bored, Johnny begins to feel desire. In his car, refuge of privacy, Johnny is Orpheus looking for lost Eurydice. He needs his car as a shell for his desire. However, it is a see-through shell, like one of those transparent balls that contain snowy,



Figure 7. Wet Date in San Francisco. Jimmy Stewart carries drenched Kim Novak to her car in Vertigo. Universal Studios. Cinematheque Ontario.

magic kingdoms. His boredom screens his perverse desire to off-load his anxieties onto Madeleine (see figure 7).

When unrehabilitated Johnny goes looking for traces of lost Madeleine, he goes on foot. The degree of his breakdown is signalled by this shocking, un-American activity: *he walks; he does not drive*. He restores his coercive masculinity not merely by making Judy dye her hair, wear Madeleine's clothes and visit the same restaurant where Johnny first saw Madeleine. He also starts to drive again. He abducts Judy, dressed as Madeleine, for a long drive down the peninsula to the Spanish town where Madeleine died. At the wheel, Johnny wears a sour, set, conniving, evil grimace. At the wheel, Johnny believes that his life is in his hands again. But it is not. He scarcely knows what he is doing. At the wheel, he reenacts a past that he cannot control. Driving, he is never fully himself. He is, instead, a bundle of anxiety and despair.

13. AM/FM

In car culture, to move is to be erotic, or erotically expressive. This is proven time and again in popular songs.

Pop music has an affinity for cars and driving: Gino Vanelli's "Black Cars," the Beach Boys' "Fun, Fun, Fun," the Beatles' "Drive My Car," Marianne Faithful's "The Ballad of Lucy Jordan," John Mellencamp's "Jack and Diane," Prince's "Little Red Corvette," Aretha Franklin's "Freeway of Love," the Cars' "Drive," Everything But the Girl's "Drive," Bruce Springsteen's "Driving in My Car," "Wreck on the Highway," and "Racing in the Street," and so on. Springsteen's songs require an in-depth knowledge of car parts and motor construction, whereas the Beach Boys think of cars almost exclusively as Tonka toys for grown-ups. In almost every "car tune," the singer is a driver, as when, in "Racing in the Street" (1978), Springsteen sings, "I got a sixty-nine Chevy with a 396 / Fuelie heads and a Hurst on the floor / She's waiting tonight down in the parking lot / Outside the Seven-Eleven store / Me and my partner Sonny built her straight out of scratch / And he rides with me from town to town."

Aretha Franklin vows she's "going drivin' on the freeway of love in a pink Cadillac." She owns her destiny, even if the pink Cadillac makes her look like a prize-winning Mary Kay cosmetics salesperson. When Franklin growls, "take a ride in my machine," we cannot help but hear the double entendre suggesting that hers is no ordinary machine. The song echoes Elvis Presley's cautionary tale about ambition in "Baby, Let's Play House" (1955): "You may go to college, / You may go to school. / You may have a pink Cadillac, / But don't be nobody's fool." For Presley, the pink Cadillac destroys his girlfriend's class affiliations and ruins their chances of "playing house" together. Franklin, not interested in playing house, decides who rides in her sleek, pink car.

Not standing for any pinko girltalk, Prince uses macho domination techniques of persuasion in "Little Red Corvette": "Move over baby, give me the keys / I'm gonna try and tame your little red love machine."

Driving is implicitly erotic in pop music. Car metaphors scarcely disguise the intention of Prince or Aretha Franklin. The effect of this is to render all

eros mechanistic and meaningless. In a car song, the worst that can happen is an unlucky brush with the law, or a sudden crash, or, less seriously, having a father who forbids you the keys to his funmobile.

14. Frenzy

The difference between American films and French films is simple. In French cinema, two men fall in love with one woman and express varying degrees of animosity towards each other until the triangle works itself out. In American films, two men, unable to express their love for anyone, least of all for each other, get in a car and drive around the United States. The car is the object of adoration. Sometimes in an American film, as in *Bonnie and Clyde*, a woman is allowed to get into the car and drive about with a man, but in the end, she must be shot to death with many, many bullets to prove that a woman in a car is an unnatural sight. If you don't believe this to be the case, consider the outcry occasioned by *Thelma and Louise*. According to the laws of the genre, two women in a car must run afoul of the law.

The *locus classicus* of errant driving is Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. "Sal Paradise," a.k.a. Kerouac, hitchhikes from New York to Denver, from Denver to San Francisco. Later, with "Dean Moriarty," a.k.a. Neal Cassady, Sal drives to New York from Virginia, and from Hoboken to New Orleans to the West Coast. "I only went along for the ride," Sal says about starting on a trip to California (129). Quickly, he changes his tune to disingenuous mysticism. Uncertain what to believe in, Sal believes in belief — an abstract category that consoles him for his existential emptiness, which no amount of driving fills up. He wonders, "What was I doing? Where was I going?" (138). The frenzy of driving back and forth across America replaces destiny, for having a destination seems like the same thing as having purpose. Kerouac wants his readers to think aimlessness is destiny. *Getting there is all the fun; driving is meaning!* But all the back-and-forthing, to-and-froing in *On the Road* doesn't prove that wandering is destiny. That is just Sal's alibi meant to hide his existential panic. Driving in this novel signifies a massive repression of what Sal feels or thinks.

Sal hates to drive. He especially hates to drive while Dean cuddles with his girl Marylou beside him in the front seat. The seating arrangements are peculiar. All three sit side by side. Sal sees and hears everything that happens between his two road buddies. Worse, Sal has a crush on Marylou. She teases him with promises of sex in the indefinite future. Sal and Marylou hold hands while Dean sleeps. Then all three strip buck naked and drive across Texas into the setting sun. Sal does not comment on this postmodern Lady Godiva stunt, except to say that wild-man Dean thinks it up. It is impossible to judge what prompts Dean to commit such an outrageous act, just as it is impossible to know what Sal thinks of sitting next to naked Marylou and naked Dean, since Sal never indulges in reflection or psychological observation. He deliberately represses emotion — except mystical joy and childlike superlatives — for the sake of staying on the road. Driving, therefore, encompasses all the complex, unspoken emotions circulating among these characters.

Sal does not have a license to drive. However, Dean “insisted I drive through Baltimore for traffic practice; that was all right, except he and Marylou insisted on steering while they kissed and fooled around. It was crazy; the radio was on full blast” (134). Time and again in *On the Road*, Sal represses painful events by turning the radio up full blast and driving on. Driving is the mode of avoidance in this novel. “What is that feeling when you’re driving away from people,” he asks, “and they recede on the plain till you see their specks dispersing? — it’s the too-huge world vaulting us, and it’s good-by. But we lean forward to the next crazy venture beneath the skies” (156). Why examine the past, or feelings of regret, or the sadness of farewell, when you can jump into a Hudson and escape everything?

15. U-Turn

But one word more. I once met a woman who went to a psychiatrist to find ways of dealing with her timidity. She had an older sister who overshadowed her in all things. She never learned to drive, yet lived in a small town where driving was essential for socializing and shopping. The psychiatrist told her she suffered from timidity because her competent elder sister made her feel inadequate. “Do something for yourself. Go get your license,” said the psychiatrist. She did. And her confidence, from that day forward, soared. So she claimed anyway. Driving, it seems, can cure.

If driving seems to be a practical solution to space-time separation (I want to be across town by 5:15, and therefore shall drive), it also has entered our repertory of tropes for intimacy and anger, symptom and remedy, freedom and constraint. While driving, we figure out how to deal with obstacles that obstruct happiness, even as we formulate new obstacles that prevent us from getting there.

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