A Gendered Economy of Pleasure:
Representations of Cars and Humans in Motoring Magazines

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This paper contributes some thoughts on cultural signification to the feminist investigation of the co-production of gender and technology. Focusing on the popular genre of motoring magazines, it discerns a pattern organising men and women in opposite relations to cars. Men's relationships with cars are premised on passion and pleasure while women are figured as rational and unable to attach emotionally to cars. This "gendered economy of pleasure" is traced in an analysis of motoring magazine representations of cars and humans. Further, a DVD representation of the Volvo YCC, a concept car developed by women for an imagined female user, is discussed in relation to this semiotic pattern. The paper is conceptual in that texts are interpreted in order to bring forward aspects of meaning-making that are not immediately obvious. The objective is to think through one aspect of the cultural production of the car as a masculine technology.

Keywords: cars, gender, pleasure

This paper suggests a way in which to think about the cultural construction of the car as a masculine technology. Interpreting representations in motoring magazines, it traces a "gendered economy of pleasure" that organises the symbolical meanings of relationships between humans and cars. The objective is to contribute a critical perspective on cultural meaning-making to the feminist interrogation of the co-production of gender and technology.

The symbolical association of cars with men and masculinity is a cultural phenomenon in conflict with everyday experience. Women and men all over the world drive, buy, take care of and love cars. Women and men in cars violate laws and social norms, they speed, drive drunk and get road rage. In spite of this, the car continues to be regarded as a masculine technology. This paper addresses the continuing reproduction of the symbolical link between men, masculinity and cars. It turns to motoring magazines as a "text" in which patterns

of cultural signification can be detected. It does not present a comprehensive analysis of the genre, nor does it claim to address a representative sample of magazines. It argues that a close reading of a selected sample of motoring magazines makes visible a pattern that organises the symbolic construction of cars as a technology for men and for doing masculinity.

The paper begins with a presentation of previous research on gender in car culture. This is followed by an outline of a conceptual framework that connects cultural analysis with feminist constructivist technology studies. Then it turns to a close reading of representations of cars and humans in a selection of motoring magazines. This part is divided into three sections that address: the textual production of the car as a desirable object; the symbolization of relationships between humans and cars; and the construction of women and femininity in relation to cars. The sections detail the dynamic of meaning production in the gendered economy of pleasure. In the remainder of the paper a DVD representation of the Volvo YCC, a concept car developed by women for an imagined female user, is analysed in relation to this pattern. Based in approaches from the humanities this paper does not put forth empirical data and results, but interprets texts in order to bring forward what is not immediately obvious, or intended by the authors.

Cars and Gender

There is a lot of academic writing about the car. A variety of approaches and research interests in the humanities and social sciences have converged on cars as objects of research. Three works focussing on cars and gender are of particular interest for the present paper.

Virginia Scharff's (1991) detailed historical investigation of women and automobility in the USA documents how the car was claimed as a territory for men, from its invention in the late 19th century. This study shows that the first makers of cars imagined it as a technology for men; however, many women contested this idea and took to driving. Scharff describes US women's use of the car for work, leisure, competition and political campaigning until the end of the 1920s. At every turn the women who claimed the rights to the utility and fun of cars had to fight, not just against cultural customs, but also against outright hostility from men and other women. Scharff adopts a sceptical attitude to gender, which enables a thorough questioning of the co-production of gender and technology in the changing contexts of struggle over the boundaries of femininity and masculinity. According to her, an effect of the cultural construction of the car as a technology for men has been the trivialisation and denial of women's role in a society where the car is a central technology.

Scharff's illumination of the active exclusion of women from car culture in the early 20th century points to the fact that it takes work to construct a technology as symbolically gendered. As she puts it: "There is nothing inevitable about the masculinity of technology, even when the automobile, often considered a kind of metallic phallus, is concerned" (Scharff 1991: 175).[1] That cars are seen as masculine indicates that work to make it so is being undertaken.

Merrit Polk's (1998) investigation of

everyday attitudes to cars in Sweden in the late 20th century addresses commonly held opinions. She distinguishes between two kinds of masculinization of the car. The first is numerical: there are many more men than women involved in the manufacturing and maintenance of cars. She argues that this cannot be the determinant for the gendering of the car, since all technology production is numerically dominated by men, but washing machines, refrigerators, cookers or hairdryers are not regarded masculine. Hence, Polk approaches the masculinization of the car as a cultural process. She operationalizes this process into three aspects—the car as an object, knowledge about cars, and driving as an activity—to conduct a survey. She asks whether these aspects of a car are viewed as suitable for men or women, and whether they are associated with masculinity and femininity. Her results show that the interviewed women did not consider themselves as being in control of the family car, nor did they think of themselves as emotionally attached to the car. They also claimed to be less knowledgeable of the mechanical workings of cars than men. Women and men reported no differently with regard to the experience of driving, or the skills involved. Polk's study highlights the continuous cultural gendering of the car. Despite using the car in the same ways and perceiving no difference with regard to driving, her interviewees still thought of the car as a masculine technology.

Ulf Mellström (2003) provides a detailed anthropological study of the masculinity of car cultures. His interest is to specify different ways of constructing masculinity in relationships with technology, with the car as an example. The study addresses the relationships between embodiment, symbolism and identity by "focusing on the patriarchal privileges and masculine homosocial bonds that are being mediated and communicated through the interaction of men and machines" (Mellström, 2003: 17). The cultural tie between men and technology intrigues, because although both men and women use technology it "is pervasively a masculine cultural expression, women's technical skills are rarely defined as such" (Mellström, 2003: 18). The meaning technology has for identity differs for men and women; for men "an identification with technology is self-evident and taken for granted. It is often part of what it means to be a man" (Mellström, 2003: 19). This close connection between masculinity and technology encourages Mellström to analyse the pleasures and joy of technology, which are important for the homosocial practices that exclude women from technological spaces. His analysis draws attention to the work technology does for masculinity, and it indicates that the continuing reproduction of the car as a masculine technology also involves the production of men.

These three studies of gender and cars outline the issue at stake. The link between men, masculinity and cars is an effect of continuing processes of cultural meaning-making. The present paper contributes to the critical analysis of these processes. In contrast to the different empirical projects of Scharff, Polk and Mellström, it is textually oriented. It links to feminist and post-humanist perspectives on technology, and draws on approaches from the field of cultural studies.

Cultural Representations and Technological Materiality

Addressing a general feminist readership, Wendy Faulkner argues that technology is socially and symbolically gendered (Faulkner, 2001). She presents the agenda for feminist constructivist technology studies as the investigation of the co-production of gender and technology. Her own programme is oriented towards ethnographic research in contexts of technology construction and use. The present paper adopts the broad agenda, but it focuses on what Faulkner calls the "symbolic".[2] To avoid some of the connotations of immateriality of this term, that is, to underline that imagery and ideas are also materialised in print and other media, this paper appropriates the notion of representation, as employed in cultural studies.

One way to connect cultural representations, social interaction and technological artefacts is provided by the notion of "script". Presented by Madeleine Akrich (1992) this concept is intended to address the way in which technology design encompasses processes in which social worlds are projected. Designers "define actors with specific tastes, competences, motives, aspirations, political prejudices" (Akrich, 1992: 208). They imagine the relationships between the actors, assuming "that morality, technology, science, and economy will evolve in particular ways" (Akrich, 1992: 208). Akrich insists that designers are not neutral mediators of open-ended social orders but that they project future contexts of use in normative ways. They "attempt to predetermine the settings that users are asked to imagine for a particular piece of technology" (Akrich, 1992: 208).[3]

Script is a metaphor pointing in two directions: to sociomaterial practices and to representations. Feminists have studied the practices of technological scripting empirically, and elaborated the notion to address the ways in which "designers will consciously or unconsciously privilege certain representations of users and use over others" (Rommes, 2002: 17-18). In ethnographic research among engineers they have found that it is common that "the resulting scripts reveal a gendered pattern" (Rommes, 2002: 17-18).

Nelly Oudshoorn, Els Rommes and Marcelle Stienstra (2004) demonstrate the usefulness of script in a study of Dutch ICT design. In a comparison of the Digital City of Amsterdam (a public project) and New Topia (by Philips Research), they found that designers imagined a user very similar to a young, male computer enthusiast. This disadvantaged most real users, and women most of all, since many men managed to adapt to the requirements of the system. Further emphasising the role of the imaginary, the researchers introduce the notion of a "semiotic user" to capture "how, even in cases where users are not formally involved in the design, technologies may become adjusted to certain groups of users because of the incorporation of specific images of the future users" (Oudshoorn, Rommes and Stienstra, 2004: 31).

The notion of script can serve as a link between ethnographic studies and cultural analysis in a shared feminist constructivist project. While feminist ethnographers have investigated everyday processes of in-scribing, the present paper turns to the cultural representations

available to engineers, designers and users of technology. These representations circulate in the culture they inhabit, and can be assumed to influence the ways in which these people make technological artefacts for imagined contexts and users.[4]

Other social studies of technology have also worked with the notion of script. Mike Michael (2000) argues that the in-scription by designers does not exhaust the actual meanings of artefacts. According to him multiple scripts are inscribed in every artefact and they are not necessarily "consistent with one another" (Michael, 2000: 82). He argues that many artefacts are polysemic, that they figure in more than one script. The lack of consistency among the scripts that guide the use of any one artefact is an important feature for understanding different uses, because "these scripts, in being contradictory, serve in the reproduction of complex, even antithetical, and from some perspectives at least, 'subversive', modes of behaviour" (Michael, 2000: 82). This elaboration of the notion of script is particularly relevant in relation to the car, an important, widely spread technology that is the target of many different social discourses.

Script is the metaphor that organises the present paper's approach to the relationship between cultural representations, engineering and design processes, and material artefacts. From this perspective, motoring magazines can be viewed as one type of cultural representation that contributes to the meaning of cars. They add to the complex social, cultural and material production of cars and their users in contexts of many conflicting representations and practices.

Technology, Humans and Subjectivity

The notion of script does not address the ways in which users are brought in contact with artefacts. In this regard, John Law's (2001) elaboration of the notion of "interpellation" is more useful. He argues that the many different representations of technological artefacts produce imagined subject positions (or semiotic users) that appeal to different humans. Exploring the various dimensions of pleasure offered by military technologies, and their associated representations, he finds a variety of interpellations that address different desires. Among them are: "the pleasure of prosthesis, that of the extension of the body" (Law, 2001: 11) and beauty—"to 'recognise' the aesthetics of a machine is to be interpellated" (Law, 2001: 12). Interpellation is not simply a question of attraction, it is a process in which subjects come into being. By becoming interpellated humans are constituted as subjects in specific regimes of meaning. Law asks how objects interpellate us, and finds a wide range of different factors, in material practices and cultural representations. Drawing on Law's discussion, this paper also understands motoring magazines as one form of interpellation of humans into automobility.

Approached through the notion of interpellation, the car can be viewed as an artefact that constructs subjects. Michael (2000), focusing on everyday personal experiences of agency in human relationships with artefacts, discusses how the car affects the human. Analysing "road-rage" he argues that the physical experience of being in a car is constitutive to the agency of the car and

driver hybrid, or the "co-agent" in his terminology. The car's physical design "relaxes us, it removes us from the stresses of everyday life, but it also makes us feel godlike, powerful, all too ready to exercise our territorial imperatives" (Michael, 2000: 89). The car also enables "us to comport ourselves with normative grace, but also to attain great speed, to compete" (Michael, 2000: 89).

A more complex concept of the co-agent than Michael's rather prosthetic idea would include immaterial elements, taking into consideration the interpellation of humans into the semiotic user position of driver. Such a conceptualisation of agency is provided by Dianne Currier (2002) in an elaboration of the notion of "assemblages", as "functional conglomerations of elements" that are not understood as "unified, stable, or self-identical entities or objects" (Currier, 2002: 531). This notion exceeds the body-plus-artefact, co-agent, in insisting that "a self-identical body or object does not exist as origin, prior to or outside the field of encounters that articulate it within any specific assemblage" (Currier, 2002: 531). This idea ties in with other post-humanist conceptions of agency, for example, Bruno Latour's (1992) understanding of hybrid (human/artefact) agency, and Donna Haraway's (1991) well-known figure of the cyborg.

Combining "script" and "interpellation" with a post-humanist approach to subjectivity facilitates an analysis of the co-production of gender and technology that includes the influences of cultural representations. It approaches technology and humans as both produced in complex processes, where identity and subjectivity are outcomes. It enables a shift in focus, from gender identity as a cause for the masculinization of cars, to the production of different genders in complex relationships of meaning.

Technology and Pleasure

Law's discussion of interpellation identifies pleasure as an important dimension of human relationships with artefacts. In addition to attracting humans to a technology, pleasure and emotional attachment are important for the success of artefacts. Bruno Latour (1996) identifies "love" as the force that held the train project ARAMIS, a heterogenous network of elements and actors, together. When the love was lost the project failed. Design theorist Harvey Molotch (2003) argues that "[L]oving a look, design practice indicates, can stimulate dissatisfaction, experimentation, and reconfiguration in ways that increase technical skills and capacities" (Molotch, 2003: 57). Loved artefacts become successfully integrated in the life of societies, unloved ones fail. Loving a technology encourages users to learn more about it and how to make best use of it. However, talking about love for, and pleasure with, technology is a gendered activity.

In a recent study Tine Kleif and Wendy Faulkner (2003) noticed that hobby robot builders and professional software engineers constructed their interaction with technology in terms of pleasure and joy. Their ethnographic study showed that men and women behaved very similarly, but talked differently about their relationships with technology. Finding too few female robot builders to draw any conclusions, Kleif and Faulkner note that the software engineers talked

about enjoyment in ways that differed by gender: "few of the women used the language of thrill and excitement to describe their feelings about working closely with technology" (Kleif and Faulkner, 2003: 301). Talking about the emotional involvement with the technology was a way to establish social belonging. The engineers felt that pleasures "were most easily shared with colleagues or peers; they formed an important part of the culture" (Kleif and Faulkner, 2003: 307). Those who did not express their relationship with technology in terms of joy and excitement became outsiders. Two of the men in the study, who "had gravitated away from coding into management and requirements, differed from their other male colleagues" (Kleif and Faulkner, 2003: 301) by placing "a higher premium on their careers than on fun" (Kleif and Faulkner, 2003: 301). They "claimed to prefer the people aspects of their jobs to coding" (Kleif and Faulkner, 2003: 301). These men, and all of the women, were viewed as not belonging to the group of "real" software engineers, those with the closest emotional, and by implication also the most skilled, relationship with technology.

In Kleif and Faulkner's study, pleasure with technology comes forth as a way to qualify as a skilled member of the community. In that community, the expression of pleasure with, and love for, technology was gendered in ways that made it more difficult for women to become equal participants. Emotional attachment and pleasure with technology were masculinized in a manner that eased the way into the community for men. The verbal enactment of passion for technology constructed women as less close to it, and therefore not part of the core group, whose behaviour and reasoning defined technology, pleasure and skill.

Kleif and Faulkner looked at gender differentiating talk in a mixed gender workplace. In comparison, love for cars is also closely intertwined with the construction of masculinity in homosocial communities. Ulf Mellström (2002) discusses a community of male motor mechanics in Penang, Malaysia, who constructed masculinity in relation to the automobile. They stressed that skill and craftsmanship were located in the body of the mechanic. Mellström concludes that "[K]nowledgeability for the mechanics of Penang involves seeing, listening, muscular exertion, touching, calculating, and not least competently practising a locally situated cultural competence of other people's lives and life situations in the community" (Mellström, 2002: 464). In another car centred community, Swedish hobby mechanics, Mellström found that the men ascribed feminine personalities to their automobiles and formed relationships of desire with them. One interviewee described his car "as a woman lying on her side with her 'flesh' located on the right spots" (Mellström, 2002: 474). He also formulated his relationship with his car in terms of social process, he was "trying to get to know her" (Mellström, 2002: 474). This was described as interaction: "I think I need another five years at least before we really know each other" (Mellström, 2002: 474).

In the communities Mellström studied, the cars and the knowledge about them served as material bonds between men. In his understanding, "[T]hese homosocial masculine practices continuously exclude women and perpetu-

ate highly gendered societal spheres, in which men form communities based on love and passion for machines" (Mellström, 2002: 475). He concludes that "many men create truly gendered spaces through their interaction and relationships with machines" (Mellström, 2002: 475).

Much research on pleasure with technology focuses on the intellectual enjoyment in mastery and control. In contrast, Mellström's study shows the importance of the physical relationships between men and cars for the construction of expertise and male communities. However, physical interaction with cars is an everyday experience for all drivers. To use a car one has to touch it.[5] The meanings of touch are culturally produced; different kinds of touching, and the touching of different objects, means different things depending on who does the touching, how it is done and who or what is being touched. Constance Classen argues that "[W]e learn what to touch, how to touch, and what significance to give different kinds of touch" (Classen, 2005: 13) in a way similar to how we learn language. The analogy with language points to the complex relationships that give touch particular meanings in historical and cultural contexts. In a gendered world, women's and men's touch takes on different meanings. In an article on the media treatment of the race car driver Deborah Renshaw, John Sloop (2005) highlights the different valencies of gendered bodies in cars. Sloop points out that the men (journalists and their interviewees) who commented on Renshaw made a point of stating that her gender made no difference when she was in the car. They invoked gender to deny its relevance. According to him, nobody ever does this in relation to male race drivers. That the body in the driver seat, touching the car, was female, did make a major difference with regard to meaning-making in racing culture.

The physical relationship between humans and technology becomes even more important in a post-humanist framework, which does not position human consciousness as the autonomous site from which agency derives. The acting subject is not simply the human self that uses artefacts, it is constituted in the relationship between the different bodies. For agency to emerge, the human and the artefact have to be brought in contact. Interpellation into assemblages with cars rely on pleasure, but in a post-humanist frame pleasure needs to be rethought – unless a traditional conception of the subject is reintroduced in the analysis. Feminist philosopher Elisabeth Grosz suggests that we understand sensuous pleasure as follows: "[T]he intensification of one bodily region or zone induces an increase in the excitation of those contiguous with it" (Grosz, 1995: 197). An important aspect of this is to not think about these two entities as: "the one completing the other (a pervasive model of the heterosexual relation since Aristophanes), for there can be no constitution of a totality, union or merger of the two" (Grosz, 1995: 197). She insists that this kind of pleasure is not exclusive to interaction between humans: these intensities "charge all erotic encounters, whether the amorous relations of the carpenter to wood and tools, the attachment of the sadist to the whip" (Grosz, 1995: 197-198). This is physical pleasure that resides in the relationship between bodies, it has no direction towards a

point of consummation. It does not transform into something else, but remains in a specific relationship. This idea points to the possibility of addressing the role of sensuous pleasure in human-artefact relationships in ways that does not presume a (gendered) human subject that precedes the interaction.

Motoring magazines revolve around representing relationships with cars as providing pleasure. They create imaginary spaces for subject assemblages, predicated on pleasure, into which the readers can project themselves. However, these relationships are not open to everybody, but policed by a gendered economy of pleasure.

Motoring Magazines

Motoring magazines is a genre of speciality magazines. They represent passion in text and images, and appeal to readers who share a particular interest. Borrowing from Benedict Anderson (1991), we may view the readers of speciality magazines as participants in an "imagined community": a group of people who do not know each other and never meet, but who know of each other as a community, sharing a particular interest. Similar to Mellström's hobby mechanics, the imagined communities produced in motoring magazines are male homosocial gatherings, but in contrast to those, they are constructed through consuming representations in the magazines.

There is a plethora of motoring magazines that address many aspects of car culture: custom cars, classic cars, antique cars, racing, off-road driving and so on. I selected four English-language magazines, available at newsagents: Australian *Motor* and *Wheels*, and *Auto Express* and *Top Gear* from the UK. The principle of selection relies on established humanities approaches – these magazines are interesting with regard to the question under consideration. The ambition is not to construct a representative sample, but to generate a unique text that conveys some of the possibilities in the production of cultural meaning at a particular time and place (cf. Gadamer, 1975).

These four magazines target mass-produced cars, marketed to the public in the respective country. They undertake road tests, give consumer advice, and report news about and analyses of the car industry. They also feature some more exclusive cars, as well as interviews with celebrity car owners and racing drivers. All four magazines carry extensive loads of advertisements for cars and car related products. Many of the cars they represent can be bought on the market, and are new models of normally priced cars that many readers may be looking to purchase. Some of the cars featured are way out of the financial reach of most people, including the intended readership. This indicates that the representations are the objects to be consumed. In these magazines cars are "consumed in image if not in usage by a whole population which appropriates them as a purely magical object" (Barthes, 2002: 340).

Motor is a glossy monthly magazine focussed on racing and sports cars, and according to its self-presentation it targets a male audience in the 18-55 year range (*Motor* 2004:132). *Wheels* (another monthly magazine) credits itself with being the oldest and most authoritative car magazine in Australia with a 50-year

history. It also maintains an extensive website.[6] The weekly *Auto Express* claims to be the "UK's biggest selling weekly car magazine" (*Auto Express 2005*: front page). The monthly magazine *Top Gear* illustrates the interrelatedness of media forms, in that it is a magazine version of a UK motoring show on TV (which is also broadcast in other countries).[7]

The rationale for this selection was to see if there were significant differences regarding content that could be explained by title or national culture. None were found. Looking through issues of the magazines published previously to the ones selected for the following discussion, it also became clear that the variation between different issues pertains to what cars they write about, and to what car owners get featured. The similarities between titles and issues facilitated the selection of one issue of each title for close reading. The latter comprise a 700 pages long "text" that this paper works with. Had there been discernible differences with regard to title or nationality, or between issues, it would not have been possible to treat the magazines as one cultural text.

The reading of the magazines was done in the ordinary humanities way of interpreting text (cf. Fish, 1989). It also draws on feminist cultural studies of technology and on cultural studies. This adds a critical approach to the narrative production of gender in relation to technology (Balsamo, 1996) as well as a semiotic view of the text as the site for meaning-making (Hall, 1997). My reading does not claim to be exhaustive or comprehensive; representations are always open to new interpretations.

In the following analysis, the interpretation is presented with extensive quotes, in order to both exemplify and to increase the transparency of the analysis. The discussion is organised along three dimensions: the representation of cars as objects; the relationships between humans and cars; and explicit writing on gender.

Objects of Sensual Appeal

One feature, immediately obvious to the reader of these magazines, is that they do not simply describe cars: they produce objects of sensual appeal. The vivid textual representations make materials take on new meanings:

> Few things in the car world reek of speed more than carbon fibre. Smooth as steel but warmer to touch, there's something both sexual and technical about the way its resin-coated cloth weave captures and reflects light. If you like carbon fibre, you'll love the way it justifies the L in BMW's M3 CSL. Coupe Sport Lightweight, BMW's road or track star is dripping with the stuff: centre console, door trims, front airdam and splitters, composite ducktailed bootlid, rear diffuser, engine airbox, even the roof panel. The last part alone accounting for not just the obvious 6kg saving over its steel equivalent, but also a lower centre of gravity. (Evans, 2004a: 44)

Carbon fibre figures prominently as a sensual material in these magazines in representations that combine text and images. This material can be seen as well as felt. In contrast, another important sensory aspect cannot be captured in images – sound.

> Awesome. There are so many words to describe it, but just the one will do. A thumping, burbling, rumbling muscle car lurks under the unassuming skin of Audi's $225,000, smoothly styled, svelte

> RS 6. At cruising speed, with the slightest crack of throttle, there's this deep, slow rumble, when you can almost hear each individual oversquare piston inducting, compressing, igniting and exhausting, seeming to take as long as it does to read those five words aloud. It's a truly thunderous note, from the time the key twists the ignition on and electric fans spool up like a Boeing on the runway, to the way it fires up like a lion taking its first morning growl, and settles at 750rpm into a deep, smooth, reverberating burble. Hunkered down over fat guards and 19s, as its V8 howls to 6500rpm auto-mandated shifts, the RS 6 reinforces *MOTOR*'s single biggest failing: that we can't convey sound. That's the RS 6 signature, and a very big reason why we're in love with Audi's fastest, most powerful production car to date. (Evans, 2004b: 95)

While it is impossible to convey sound through print, the representations in the magazines are elaborated with presentations of knowledge about the technical details responsible for it.

> The good stuff is that the GTO goes hard and sounds excellent. Deleting the exhaust system's crossover-pipe (and neatly turning it into a structural member) allowed individual tuning of the two separate exhaust tracts for each cylinder bank, so the GTO whuffles, throbs, and bellows like no LS1-equipped Holden or HSV. (Hawley, 2004: 27)

The magazines tie together sensory experiences with technical knowledge to heighten pleasure. A similar link is made between the visual appearance of a car and knowledge about design traditions.

> Low-slung and sleek, yes, and certainly a good-looker from most angles. The now-chrome grille is contemporary Alfa, but the deep flanks and shallow glasshouse lack the grace of many of the innovative coupe groundbreakers that litter Alfa's history. (Robinson, 2004: 44)

> The Brera oozes Italian flair from every panel gap. This is not surprising when you learn that it was styled by the legendary Giorgetto Giugiaro and is bolted together by design house Pininfarina. Although it may lack the "smack-in-the-face" impact of its GTV forerunner, it's a muscular shape that manages to look fantastic from every angle. You'd have to be miserable not to fall in love at first sight. (Askew, 2005: 22)

The aesthetic value appears not to be subordinate to function, the look of a car can be more important than its engine power:

> Zero to 100 takes 5.7 seconds, but it's the add-ons that make it special: like the 18-inch Carrera alloys with 5mm hub spacers to fatten the track, 10mm lowered coils, brown roof and matching leather interior, short shifter and commemorative numbered plate. (*Motor*, 2004: 16)

When the magazines come across cars that they do not like these are represented in equally emotional terms:

> Too expensive, second rate interior quality, mediocre ride, and undistinguished dynamics, we think. (*Wheels*, 2004: 20)

This way of representing cars turns them into extra-ordinary objects, not all likeable but always the focus of engaged comment. In the articles quoted, the texts are complemented by photographs that portray the cars from different angles, with inserted close-ups. There are no humans in these images, the position of semiotic user is held open for the reader.

The mixture of description of technical detail with sensuous pleasure –

physical, auditory, and visual – creates a close link between knowledge and passion. A reader interpellated by these articles is positioned as a subject that desires cars for their sensuality and beauty. This desiring subject is distinguished by an ability to appreciate features of cars that are not obvious to the common driver, who would not know the terminology, the technical detail or the historical tradition.

The love for cars as objects may be taken to new heights in these magazines, but there is a broader cultural and historical tradition of making cars objects of awe and desire. In 1957, Roland Barthes found that "cars today are almost the exact equivalent of the great Gothic cathedrals: I mean the supreme creation of an era, conceived with passion by unknown artists" (Barthes, 2002: 340). The appreciation of the car is, in Barthes's view, emblematic for modernity; however, even if the aesthetic and the sensory appeal of a car are culturally important, the celebration of them in the motoring magazines would appear a bit excessive.

Beyond Fetishism

It would be undemanding to read the representations of cars in these magazines as fetishist. Recalling Scharff's (1991) concluding words on the conception of the car as a "kind of metallic phallus" could point in this direction. Such a reading would have commonsense appeal; it would make it easy to distance oneself from the genre, and to distance the genre from the mainstream. There are also allusions to fetishism in the magazines themselves. They hint towards this link in the way they define themselves as cultural objects in terms of readership and their emphasis on love and passion for cars. Because this association is so easily made, it is interesting to reflect on what it does for the production of meaning.

"Fetishism" is commonly understood to refer to a misdirection of desire, a mistaken assignation of value.[8] Instead of wanting that which is really valuable, the fetishist desires an object to which the value is transferred. One consequence of regarding desire for sensuous pleasure through relationships with technology as fetishist, is to reduce the number of people who will talk about it. To express a physical interest in technology becomes inappropriate. Another consequence is the creation of a connection between the love for artefacts and masculinity. Fetishism of the sexual kind is, in a psychoanalytical articulation, a masculine trait: "its existence in women is assumed to be impossible" (Grosz, 1995: 141).

It is not necessary to think of desire in a way that makes the love for artefacts inappropriate. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guttari (1987) conceptualise desire differently. In their view, "[D]esire has nothing to do with a natural or spontaneous determination; there is no desire but assembling, assembled, desire" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 399). They view desire as constitutive of function: "[T]he rationality, the efficiency, of an assemblage does not exist without the passions the assemblage brings into play, without the desires that constitute it as much as it constitutes them" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 399). This conceptualisation of desire is compatible with a post-human understanding of the love for technology as crucial for its success.

Even when there is no explicit gendering of the ways in which cars and their qualities are described in the magazines, the connotative association of love for cars with deviant male sexuality may mean that these representations are more likely to interpellate men than women. And only some men, rather than the majority identified by *Motor* as the intended audience. This association projects the semiotic user as a man who dares to cross some boundaries regarding the appropriateness of object to desire. The potential openness of the representations of cars as objects of sensuous appeal to humans is closed off through the association with fetishism. Instead, the love of cars is turned into a slightly suspicious passion, shared by a particular group of men.

The Feel of a Car

The physical relationship between cars and humans is another aspect allocated a lot of space in the magazines. Although sometimes accompanied by pictures of the cars, these representations are mainly textual. Some have the form of first person accounts.

> Fast forward is quite clearly his [the driver's] preferred pace of play, and that's bad news for the man in the left front seat. Eyes wide shut, wedged into a temporarily unadjustable narrow-frame bucket, my body is fighting the distinct urge to pass water and my brain is switching to last-rites mode. Who would have thought that passengering could be as bad as bungee jumping or riding the Big Dipper? (Kacher, 2004: 67)

This story links the experience of travelling in a fast car with a professional racing driver, to the kind of thrill one can have in amusement parks. Another author recalls a past that links the experience of a particular car to youthful excess:

> I used to drive the previous, goggled-eyed version [of Subaru Impreza] a lot, making a rake's progress about the countryside, the turbo-wheeze and AWD grip getting me drunk on the idea that when it came to driving I was, in fact, shit-hot. Such delusions were further encouraged by the Las Vegas styling and mouthy boxer engine, and only finally deterred by one or two near-death experiences. (Bright, 2005: 82)

These and similar stories about aggressive driving and speeding link risk with fun in a way that makes us recognize them as part of the polysemic discourse that endows cars with contradictory meanings. At a time when most road safety authorities emphasise the need to bring down speed, this is an interpellation that emphasises danger as play for those who enjoy the thrill of transgression. Commentators in the magazines are ambivalent with regard to official road safety measures such as speed cameras, which traffic authorities adamantly claim bring down speed and thereby also the number of serious accidents.

The personal stories of experiencing cars pay much attention to the body. They are also gendered masculine in two ways. One may appear circumstantial: the authors are men (like most motor journalists). The other pertains to the cultural connotations of the kind of risk-taking involved. In contemporary culture representations of voluntary physical endangerment are often linked to men. When women do things involving

physical risks their gender is often a topic for discussion, as was the case for race driver Deborah Renshaw mentioned above.

Another type of representation of the feel of a car focuses on the quality of the ride. These texts are less personal: the emphasis is on evaluating the quality of tested cars.

> For a start, the ride is lovely and soft in town, the fluid suspension giving the required fluid results, and it's helped by the seats, big enveloping buckets as comfy as bean-bags. (Horrell, 2005: 152)

The driver environment, important for the pleasure of driving, also gets assessed, with regard to a number of aspects.

> Our test car's cabin is decorated in a tasteful, sporty black, with quality making a significant advance over the last generation. Seats are great for support and adjustment, and you get a fine driving position with good visibility. A smart, ergonomically sound dash and neat instruments also work well. (Nunn, 2004a: 52)

Comfort and pleasure are highly valued.

> The quirky rear end is less prominent in the flesh and the interior is quite un-French; it's actually easy to get comfortable in, with plenty of adjustment in both seats and steering. (Evans, 2004c: 32)

These evaluations also pay attention to the adjustment of the internal environment of cars to different human bodies.

> Inside, Nissan has pulled out all the stops. Although the Note may not be as tall as its rivals, a low seating position means that headroom is excellent, even for tall occupants. (Hardy, 2005: 26)

The emphasis in these assessments is on whether the car offers a comfortable physical space that the driver can take pleasure in.

All drivers can understand and enjoy these aspects of a car. These representations do not invoke technical terminology. They do not allude to shared emotions, other than enjoying comfort and a good ride. As interpellations they addresses everybody who can and wants to drive a car. It is perhaps also this type of representation that is most closely linked to the writing on cars in mainstream media. Many newspapers carry regular motor attachments, or pages, in which similar reviews appear. Car manufacturers also quote positive reviews in their marketing, and it may influence the scripting of cars. However, as a field of expertise car reviewing is tightly linked to the imagined homosocial community of men constituted in motoring magazines.

A Shared Masculine Pleasure

The genre of motoring magazines is explicitly aimed at men; the visual appearance of these magazines play off that which is considered masculine in contemporary Western culture with regard to colours, graphics and typefaces. The journalists with bylines in the four magazines are all men and their address is of a "we" type that can be interpreted as inclusive of other men, as for example in this column in *Top Gear*:

> [Gavin] Henson tested an Aston Martin DB9 for me a few months back in his home town of Cardiff. Cardiff's a manic place. Saturday night downtown is like the running of the bulls in Pamplona, only in Wales the charge comes from a scary assortment of

> overly fleshed girls wielding handbags and piercing Valley accents. (Hart, 2005: 74)

In this issue of the magazine all interviewees and featured car buffs are men, as are all humans that get explicitly mentioned in relationships with cars in any of the magazines comprising the cultural text under consideration.

To be part of the community of people who these magazines represent as enjoying cars, you do not only need to be passionately interested in cars, appreciate their appeal as objects, and enjoy the feeling of a comfortable driver environment; you also have to be a man. Women are represented as being different in ways that make them unable to relate to cars in this manner. In these magazines men's passion for cars is premised on a construction of women as rational and un-emotional. The magazines can be understood to produce an imagined male community by contrasting men's love for cars with the lack thereof in women. A piece in *Motor* in which the columnist Cockburn writes about negotiating the purchase of a new car with his wife is illustrative.

> She says we need another car. This is right up my alley, say I. After all, selecting a car is all about style, character and the satisfaction of knowing the rich history and traditions of its maker and who better than… She signals silence. Like a pointed pistol. We already have, she says, two cars chosen just that very way. Now we need one that actually *does* something. On a regular basis. This is an admirable concept, I concede, but not, for some reason, one that has ever dominated my list of priorities. That it might become the *only* one is a very novel business indeed. (*Motor*, 2004: 144)

This story is an example of a non-antagonistic, non-devaluing, textual performance of gender as absolutely dichotomous. The female character is not subordinate or lesser, but different in a way that means that she will never be able to love a car for its own sake. The latter is a crucial aspect of becoming a member of the imagined community of car lovers, consisting of emotional men, inaccessible to rational women. This flips the often documented assumption of emotions as feminine and rationality as masculine.

The magazines extrapolate the masculine love for cars to the automobile industry:

> Passion has always been, hopefully always will be, a vital part of the car industry. It's what sets the business of building cars apart from so many other manufacturing industries. The process of bringing together metal, rubber, glass and plastic to create a product is not unique. Heck, a fridge contains all of the above. But how many fridge company bosses do you know who are truly passionate about refrigeration? (Blumer, 2004a: 9)

Whatever doubts one may have about the emotional commitment of the CEOs of multinational corporations, it is obviously important for the journalist, the magazine, and the projected reader to believe in a shared passion – a passion different from the attitude projected onto the producers of domestic technologies (artefacts often associated with women). This shared masculine passion is formulated in a way that transcends divisions of power and class. This is an interpellation that invites men into an imagined homosocial community in which social and cultural inequalities, or distinctions, do not matter; they are

overcome by the gender specific relationships to cars. Love and passion for cars are the great equalizers.

If interpreted along the lines of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's (1985) discussion of the construction of heterosexual male homosociality, the linking of love for cars with men, by opposing it to the way women relate to cars, can also be understood as a way to do heterosexual masculinity. Sedgwick argues that male homosociality is constructed in "diacritical opposition" (Sedgwick, 1985: 2) to male homosexuality, in a way that structures men's relationships with each other. Contrasting men's love for cars with the lack of such in women produces two genders in a complementary relationship, with male homosocial desire not directed at men, but as a side-effect of all men's love for cars. In our society male homosociality is constructed as a radical disruption of a possible "continuum between homosocial and homosexual" (Sedgwick, 1985: 1). In the imagined homosocial community of men in the motoring magazines, love and desire are directed toward the car in a way that excludes the possibility of homosexuality in this community. For a man, to express and enact a love for cars in present day western culture is also a way to perform heterosexual masculinity in the company of men.

Women and Cars

These magazines make it clear that relationships between women and cars have very different meanings from those between men and cars. *Top Gear* car reviewer Alisdair Suttie articulates this in a story about the new Nissan Micra with a headline reading: "C+C=Ladyboys!" The review opens:

> Call the Micra C+C a girl's car and Nissan will happily agree with you. Mainly because 65 per cent of small convertibles are sold to women, and Nissan's aiming its latest small cabrio straight at them. (Suttie, 2005: 91)

This is followed by a positive assessment of the look, comfort and driving qualities of the car, and he finishes: "If this is a girl's car, I'm a lady", which the reader is probably supposed to find amusing.

The formulation of the positive qualities of the Nissan Micra coming as a surprise in a "girl's car" implies the opposite, that an association with women is usually bad for a car. This is certainly the case in *Wheels'* review of the Saab 9-3 Aero in which an analogue with femininity appears at first to give the car an interesting, risky edge:

> Like a woman of the night, the 9-3 Aero seduces from the shadows; bold red colouring and taut body, draped low over gleaming 17-inch wheels, draw the eye irrevocably. Even after several months on fleet, this head turner from Trollhättan still warrants a second glance. (Blumer, 2004b: 123)

However, in this story beauty is only on the surface; the simile comparing the car to a woman is rapidly followed by a critique of the car's quality.

> Ride quality is one of the main sources of disappointment. Even allowing for the fact that low profile Pirelli P Zero tyres stretched over guard-filling alloys must inevitably bring compromises, the Saab's ride is appalling. There's too much crash-through from sharp ridges, potholes, and surface irregularities. And it backs this up with the acoustic accompaniment of suspension clatter. (Blumer, 2004b: 123)

In these magazines an association with

women or femininity is not good for a car; getting away from femininity is presented as an admirable move on behalf of manufacturers.

> Instead of soccer mums, the main target is BMW 3 Series and Alfa 156 wannabe drivers with young kids in tow, who want a drive that gives them Euro sports sedan dynamics, or something close, while still doing the wife-plus-kids bit. (Nunn, 2004b: 46)

In contrast to the sensory qualities and the physical feel of being in a car that were more open to interpretation, the stories that mention women, or femininity, explicitly excludes. They claim the car as a territory for men. Women are excluded by being projected as unable to understand the pleasure of cars. Femininity is a feature that devalues a car, because it is associated with less pleasure and inferior quality.

The negative charge of the link to women and femininity in the motoring magazine representations is contrary to the way in which Mellström's hobby mechanics gendered their cars. In that community the feminization of the car constructed a heterosexual dyad of man and car, which did not facilitate the presence of actual women, but valued the imaginary feminine. In the motoring magazines both women and femininity are explicitly excluded.

The negativity of a connection with women is a feature of the gendered economy of pleasure that appears to spill over into the wider car culture. A news media report on a new Porsche addresses the dangers facing its SUV, the "Cayenne", which has women as the prime target group.

> Porsche's appeal to female buyers carries risks. The last thing the Cayenne needs is to be tagged as a car for soccer moms, even if it has a 350-horsepower, V-8 engine and a top speed of 150 miles an hour. (Landler, 2003)

The problem is that this is not an emotionally appealing car. The company chief executive is quoted to have said:

> "…let's be honest, it's the first Porsche that actually makes sense to drive" /…/ "All our other cars are driven on the basis of emotion." (Landler, 2003)

Women's interest in this car is constructed as a threat to brand image by Porsche, a logic that echoes that expressed in the motor magazines.

In the gendered economy of pleasure, men are constructed as emotionally involved with cars because of their masculinity. Women are represented as inherently different, rational and impassionate, unable to truly love a car for its own sake. Passion is made to equal knowledge and skill. An association with women and femininity devalues the car in the eye of the connoisseurs. The emotional involvement also constructs men as experts, and others often appear to listen to what they say. In the light of this, the Volvo YCC, a concept car created for the female professional, becomes very interesting. To develop a car with women as the preferred users is an outright challenge to the gendered economy of pleasure that dominates car culture.

A Car for Women in the Gendered Economy of Pleasure

The Volvo YCC received more attention from the regular news media than most other concept cars, which came as no surprise as it was designed by women and explicitly targeting a female market

(Styhre, Beckman and Börjesson, 2005). According to a DVD on which the team presents the project (Dockhouse, 2005), the idea for the car originated among women working in Volvo's design department. This DVD is a cultural representation that can be interpreted in relation to the pattern organising the production of meaning in the motoring magazines.

The YCC design team can be understood to address the problems that an association with women causes for a car, firstly by not commenting on the fact that they are women. They speak of a shared vision, and leave the gender of the designers and engineers for the audience to observe.[9] The obvious femaleness of the design group contradicts the idea that only men can put passion and expertise into a car. On the DVD, the passion for cars that the group members share is brought through both in words and in the ways the car is filmed. The silence observed with regard to their own gender can be understood to preclude denigration. These women come through as an integrated part of Volvo, they are not presented as exceptions. No journalist could possibly object to the expertise of Volvo engineers on the basis of them being women. Making women with expert knowledge visible within the car industry disturbs the idea of expertise deriving from a gender specific masculine passion. Seeing women working as designers and engineers in the car industry explodes the idea that it is part of an imagined homosocial community of men. The projected gender-based link between the reader interpellated through motoring magazines and the industry is broken.

The idea of a car for a female user stands in direct opposition to the gendered economy of pleasure. On the DVD, the YCC design team re-articulates the existing gender dichotomy to the advantage of women. The construction of gender as binary, and the stereotyping of women and men, is not critiqued, but inverted. The team argues that the projected user, a confident, successful, female professional, is a more discerning and rational customer than any man. Their catchphrase is: "If you meet the expectations of women, you exceed the expectations of men". They make explicit the female professional as the semiotic user, and the DVD shows that the car is scripted for her. She is not interested in auto maintenance, hence the YCC had no bonnet. This is a technical feature that undermines the fantasy of love for cars equalling technological expertise (indeed, it upset motor journalists according to Styhre, Beckman and Börjesson, 2005). In this regard the YCC brings out in the open the fact that the only reason to open the bonnet of a new car is to fill up the cleaning fluid for the windscreen (for which the YCC had an external cap). No new car is open to mechanical intervention by the average driver. The car engine of today is a complex computerised system that requires specialised instruments as well as training for intervention.

On the DVD the all women YCC design team make themselves visible in a culture constructed as an imagined homosocial community for men who share a passion. They talk about women as car buyers to count with, in a value system where cars made for women are seen as inferior. Their script also makes visible the complexity and inaccessibility of automobile technology, in a culture that equates passion with technical

expertise. This is a challenge from within that does not question the construction of gender as dichotomous and innate.

The Gendering of Car Culture

Judged from the number of titles in newsagents, motoring magazines are an economically viable genre, and their ways of representing cars in a gendered economy of pleasure spill over into representations of cars in other media. There are TV shows that borrow the format of motor magazines; in the UK there is an entire cable channel called "Men and motors". Above, a mainstream newspaper was quoted as an example of the same logic. Motoring magazines also enjoy close ties with the automobile industry. This is expressed in their interviews with industry representatives, as well as in their access to new cars for test-driving and to car exhibitions for reviews of actual and potential new models of cars. The industry also contributes to the economical productivity of the genre through extensive advertising.

The logic, called a "gendered economy of pleasure" in this paper, obscures women's actual relationships with cars. Volvo's concept car challenged it by inverting the valuation of femininity and masculinity, but it was still premised on the idea of women's and men's absolute difference in relation to cars. In the representations of this car, women were constructed as rational and stereotypically feminine just as they were in motoring magazines. However, the YCC team claimed this to be a positive trait in a car user.

The YCC was created at a time when more women than ever control their income and buy their own cars, independently of men, and the automobile industry is said to experience difficulties in communicating with women (Lees-Maffei, 2002). Attempts so far appear to operate within the gendered economy of pleasure, addressing women as not being relevant to car culture, and as being a group in need of special treatment, whose interest in cars does not come "naturally". Grace Lees-Maffei (2002) documents efforts by car manufacturers to interpellate women through advertising that links cars to the perceived feminine interests in fashion and beauty.[10]

As of yet no stable symbolization of women and cars in positive relationships, comparable to that of men and cars, has been produced. Nor is it likely to come into existence, if the gendered economy of pleasure, made most explicit in motoring magazines, dominates car culture at large. In this myth, femininity is constructed as a feature that takes away the pleasure from relationships with cars. In the examples above, ascribing to a car the feminine role of "seductress" (Saab 9-3 Aero) served as a contrast to the lack of pleasure in driving. The definition of a "girl's car" was counter-intuitive to the pleasure that the reviewer experienced driving a Nissan Micra. Actual women were represented as a threat to men's passionate relationships with cars because of their rational female disposition. Within this economy of pleasure, it is impossible to represent cars in a way that would interpellate women through articulations of pleasure. Since pleasure is an important aspect of the production of human-car assemblages, this pattern of meaning-making obscures what people actually do, and symbolizes cars as a technology for men.

Summary

This paper was motivated by an interest in the cultural construction of the car as a masculine technology. In agreement with previous research, it found this intriguing, considering the widespread use of cars by women as well as by men. Initially, a theoretical position linking cultural analysis with feminist constructivist technology studies through the notion of script was outlined. From there, a post-humanist approach to subjectivity, which allowed for a discussion of pleasure as an aspect of interpellation humans into assemblages, was elaborated. In order to find a way to think through the ways in which cars are culturally linked to masculinity, the very particular – but yet seemingly influential – genre of motoring magazines provided an interesting cultural text. The interpretation uncovered a pattern working as a gendered economy of pleasure, an economy in which men and women are constructed as opposites and the car as an object that ties men together across social differences in a homosocial imagined community. Finally, this figure was used as the context to interpret a self-presentation by the team behind the Volvo YCC. This presentation was found to challenge the gendered economy of pleasure from within in a way that inverted, rather than rejected, the present way of gendering the car.

Notes

1 Historians continue to challenge the “naturalisation” of the bond between men and cars. One example is Georgine Clarsen (forthcoming) documentation of women driving across Australia and establishing as garage owners in the 1920s.

2 That cultural representations are important aspects of the gendering of technology has been argued with regard to other technologies, e.g. computers (Wajcman, 1991) and mobile phones (Churchill and Wakeford, 2002).

3 A similar thought can be found in design theory, where the work done by designers is explicitly linked to culture: “…the designers have their special role, in ways their practices indicate, to connect ‘soft’ sensibilities of art and culture with the ‘hard’ production facts” (Molotch, 2003: 52).

4 That cultural norms and expectations influence the material construction of technologies is also argued in product design. Molotch claims that “[T]he popularisation of the germ theory of disease led to a new anxiety of cleanliness, prompting appliance makers to sheath kitchen equipment and bathroom fixtures in white porcelain” (Molotch, 2003: 101-102).

5 Touch as crucial for human interaction with artefacts is well recognised in product design according to Norman (2004).

6 *Wheels* print magazine is presented to presumptive subscribers on the website http:/wheels.carpoint.ninemsn.com.au (22-11-2006).

7 The online version of *Top Gear* is at www.topgear.com (22-11-2006).

8 A different approach to fetishism in relation to artefacts is taken by Tim Dant (1999: 40 ff.). He distinguishes between “commodity”, “sexual” and “semiotic” varieties of fetishism in a critical analysis of the limitations and possibilities of this concept for analysing the relationship between humans and technology. He adopts the notion as a conceptual tool for discussing the ways in which the cultural value of artefacts exceeds their technical function.

9 And so the audience did: a study of the media reception of the YCC notes that all articles reporting on the car (almost 300 were studied) commented on the gender

of the design group (Styhre, Beckman and Börjesson, 2005).

10 A recent commercial for Mercedes, broadcast on North American television autumn 2006, appears to have picked up on the YCC team's conception of the female user. It features what looks like a successful female professional, who expresses her liking of the powerful and technologically advanced car.

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