Feminist automobilities:

the car as place

Dawn Robins

The car is essentially a masculine subject area. It is imbued with many masculine connotations and controls the public space. Automobility research looks at the relationship that people have with their cars, concerning itself with a genderless car-driver cyborg system that maintains neutrality over masculinity. Place formation and how the car is viewed and utilised see positive meanings attached such as 'freedom', 'power' and 'courage' but there are also negative feelings of 'fear', 'threatening', 'confined' and 'bound to' through work and home commitments. This research, which I conducted using feminist methodologies in 2006 (Robins 2006), looked at the gender differences between the use of the car and the power relations surrounding it.

The aim of the research was to pay attention to the implications of a gendered character of automotive spaces and places, and to how feminist representations of space and place transcribe into the concept of the car. How people feel about their car can be an emotive subject, so getting a better understanding of why we choose the car over other methods of transport will help to target measures to reduce usage, congestion and pollution.

A focus group methodology was used to elicit a richness of data, and the findings indicated that, although all genders have similar emotions to driving, the formation of the car as place offered new and fruitful ways to view the topic.

Key Words

automobility, gender, masculinity, femininity, space, place, security, fear, public, private, home, actor network theory

Introduction: gendered transport

Studies of gendered spaces began in the 1970s as a way of increasing the number of women in academia. Historically, men have written geography about men, for men, and women have effectively been written out of history. It is now generally accepted that there are distinctions between masculinity and femininity across space. Masculinity appears to dominate space, enjoying the freedom to move within it, while femininity finds its natural place by learning the place of things (Leslie 1993). Whereas masculine identity is defined by the control over space, feminine identity seems to become that which is controlled by being bounded (Leslie 1993:693).

Women's space tends to be seen as the home, and is often described as the ultimate feminine space, yet it is also a site of conflicting metaphors, such as reproduction and production, safety and violence, freedom and oppression. Seamon (1979) argues that the home is an intimate place of rest where a person can withdraw from the hustle of the outside world and have some degree of control over what happens in this limited space (Cresswell 2005). Yet for many, the home is a place of seclusion, tyranny and continual work and demands. Although this is not necessarily always a gendered issue, it is, in the main, women who feel trapped and bound by the home.

Image 1: Starting an automobile, 1907

A rare sight in the early days of motoring

Credit: © SZ Photo / Bridgeman Images

Gendered transport is a fairly new sphere of attention and early work saw the rejection of the 'neuter Commuter' and acceptance of the term 'transport-disadvantaged'. By studying women and their transport needs, it quickly became evident that transport was not freely accessible to all. Originally, men made cars for men and women could not turn the crank handle to start the car. Hence, they could not drive (Image 1).

In later years, cars were not accessible to many women, as the pedals were too far away for shorter women to reach. Women in the 1950s, 60s and 70s, with prams, pushchairs and shopping were often denied access to the buses, taxis and even trains. This was due to their inability to navigate stairs and steps, and there were rarely places on the transport mode to store such large items (Image 2).

Technical innovation and design have since helped to sort out many of these issues, but there are still many threats to access that aren't just physical obstructions, but rather manifest in the form of violence and both physical and sexual assault.

Image 2: Front cover of 'John Bull', June 1957 (colour litho)

Credit: Private Collection / © The Advertising Archives / Bridgeman Images

Automobilities

It is only in recent years that Automobilities has developed into a unique car-driver assemblage (Dant 2004) that has gripped the imaginations of social science academics. No longer just a product, machine, mode of transport or commodity, the car-driver is a part human/part machine cyborg system of interlocking networks that coexist independently but remain necessarily related to each other (Thrift 1999). John Urry sees the concept from the perspective of 'the system' that links together car, driver, roads, fuel supplies and 'other novel objects, technologies and signs' (Featherstone 2004:2). Automobilities uses 'actor network theory' to see the relationships that are developed within and around mobility to understand the impacts that are involved. This allows a variety of unseen actors, both human and non-human, to play a role within the research sphere, and allows for an integrated approach that incorporates the many facets of the subject.

Urry and Sheller (2000) came up with six components of Automobility. These are Automobility of:

1. manufactured object;
2. item of individual consumption;
3. a powerful complex of technical and social linkages;
4. quasi-private mobility;
5. a dominant culture, and
6. environmental resource user

(Urry and Sheller 2000).

The car is the single most expensive item after a house, yet it drops in value significantly as soon as it is driven off the forecourt. It is this value that is seen as humanising the car. The status symbol, 'pimped' vehicles and accessorising contribute to making the car not just a prized possession but a canvas for a multitude of emotional senses to be added to the term 'Automobility'.

Humanising the car is described by various researchers as 'feeling the car' (Shelley 2004) and ascertains that the 'car materialises personality and takes part in the ego-formation of the owner or driver as competent, powerful, able and sexually desirable' (Shelley 2004: 225). Thrift (2004) sees the car as a suit of armour that provides a protective shield enabling the driver to act as a powerful weapon, with the right to fast and carefree travel, aggressively approaching traffic, heedless of any danger. Individual consumption also allows for an understanding of how drivers interact with the technology available in the car (Thrift 2004). Technology is also a masculine area, in which marketing to men aims technology advances such as sound systems and ABS braking, while marketing of cars for women concentrates on space, safety and security issues.

Automobility has reframed the notions of mobility by providing what has become known as 'quasi-private' mobility (Urry 2004). The car provides 'timeless mobility' that coerces people into an intense flexibility (Urry 2004:28). No longer restrained by timetables, screaming children, and anti-social behaviour of other travellers, the car driver enjoys instant mobility to any number of destinations, opening up choices for where to live and work, what leisure activities to partake in, and how and where to socialise. Coupled with this newfound freedom, though, is the fact that although Automobility allows for versatile mobility, it has also

allowed for out-of-town retail outlets, suburban living and mobile working, thus ensuring that the car becomes a necessity rather than a bonus. This has shown to be particularly problematic to women, who now find that they have to juggle children, work and leisure over greater distances (Pickup 1984; Jarvis 1999; Kwan 2000; Hjortho 2001). The more people own cars, the further afield facilities become, leading to congestion and safety issues. This creates a scenario where what had started as a time-saving innovation has become a time-consuming, energy-consuming and socially debilitating pastime (Urry and Sheeler 2003).

Outstanding questions

Urry (2006) rightly questions the linear thinking behind the increase in car use that has led to the expansion of infrastructure necessary to cope. One surely has to question in greater depth, however, whether these journeys are necessary. One could argue that *all* journeys are necessary, either because of the need to transport oneself to another location or because of a psychological need to be mobile. What we should be asking is why the *car* is chosen as the method of mobility, what specific attributes the car either materially or psychologically provides that are lacking in other modes of transport, and whether the gendered differences apparent in journey distance and frequency are apparent in the reasons for modal choice.

Automobilities research in more detail

In my introduction, I set out briefly why this research should take place, what it hopes to find out, and how. To recap, the aim of the research was to look at the implications of a gendered character of automotive spaces and places, and at how feminist representations of space and place transcribe into the concept of the car. The research objectives are to:

1. *Understand the power relations around the car, including usage and ownership.* For instance, who gets the driveway/garage? Who decides what car to buy and when? Who gets to drive when the family go out?

2. *Determine how a car is used, and explore perceptions and attitudes towards the car.* Is the car an escape? What is stored in a car? Are there gendered differences in the gadgets and accessories purchased?

3. *Understand the activities which take place within the car.* Do family meetings take place? Is homework discussed? Are music and media enjoyed? As I explained in the introduction, how people feel about their car can be an emotive subject, so getting a better understanding of why we choose the car over other methods of transport will help to target measures to reduce usage.

Feminist Methodologies

As the purpose of this research was to ascertain peoples' attitudes to and perceptions of their cars as things other than a mode of transport, a qualitative methodology of focus groups was chosen. Six focus groups – three female and three male – were carried out in West Sussex, a county where the percentage of cars per head of population is 10% higher than the national average. It was decided to take a feminist approach to the research, as a gendered paradigm was needed.

Feminist methodologies have received a lot of scrutiny over the years, as arguments have abounded over how best women can research women. Feminist methodologies look at the meanings behind social constructions. Feminist standpoint epistemology argues that a hierarchical society will produce different standpoints (Hesse-Biber and Yaiser 2004). Standpoint theory gives the researcher the opportunity to critically examine the lives of marginalised as well as the dominant social groups.

Positionality, or situated knowledge, is a process that enables all actors to see where they are 'positioned' in research, and to understand the role of other actors. Figure 1 below shows this process.

> 'This is where debates about positionality and situated knowledge usually diverge. In the latter, research is not done only by 'people', but by sociotechnical hybrids, cyborgs and actor networks. More than just people. Boulder cams. Tape recorders. Passports. Paper. Other 'co-agents'. Collectively. More thoroughly entangling the lives of selves and countless others. In fleshy ways.'

(Cook 2005)

Figure 1: Situated Knowledge or Positionality

Source: 'The view from somewhere' (Keith 1992, cited in Cook 2005)

When analysing the focus group transcripts, special attention was given to interpretation and emphasis. The main themes used in the discussion are power relations surrounding the car, what the car is used for, understandings of space as a place, and the gendered differences of the relationships people have with their car. As the object of the research is to look at gendering, the analysis takes a feminine slant, to enable a comparison with previous literature.

Gendering Automobilities: some findings

The public and private spheres

If the public sphere is dominated by the masculine, and the private space inhabited by the feminine, then one could be forgiven for thinking that the increase in car use by women translates into a breaking out of this conceptual theory and an attempt at equalising the gendered spaces. Unfortunately, this is not necessarily the case. Many women feel restricted to what they can do with the car due to feelings of insecurity, safety and intimidation.

> "I feel safe in my car but I don't feel safe, shall we say, out of it. I mean I feel safe inside the actual car, I can lock the doors, turn the music up, and it is quite a powerful feeling of safety and security. But I don't feel safe when I stop. Whether it is either a car park, traffic lights or even outside my house. I dread breaking down and I hate going somewhere I don't know."
>
> [Linda: 26yr old.]

Thrift (2004) discussed the concept of the car as being a suit of armour that gave a sense of power and dominance over the landscape, whereas for women, the power is in the sense of defence against the perceived masculine landscape and the threats this engenders.

Sam, a health worker said,

> "I used to live in London and have lived abroad so am used to lots of people and public transport and I actually think I felt a lot safer then, than now... Why is it car parks are so dark, quiet and out of the way? Have you ever tried to find a garage in a strange town when you are nearly out of fuel? There aren't any! There are signs for pubs, hotels and churches but never garages and when you do find one it is shut."

This highlights the issues of public spaces being unwelcoming and even frightening for women, especially at night, and confirms the theory that masculinity appears to dominate the landscape, enjoying the freedom to move within space (Leslie 1993).

Freedom or control?

Although many of the interviewees thought the car would be a revelation and vehicle to freedom, it quickly became apparent that quite the opposite had occurred.

> "I use the car now because it seems like I have no choice. I fought hard to be able to have my own car as I thought it would give me the independence I wanted but now I find myself trawling all over the place, picking up and dropping off at all times of the day or night".
>
> [Sue: 30yr old].

This is felt to some degree by many of the women in the groups, particularly those with children. Besides the powerful emotions of independence and freedom, there was a feeling of being controlled, timetabled, regulated and channelled into a cycle of never-ending journeys to unconnected places on an almost 'on-call'

basis. This constant venturing into the public sphere does not seem to lessen the feelings of fear and insecurities. Instead, the car provides a barrier against the public space and, rather than strengthening the control over the public space, it appears the car is only a thin veil behind which to hide. Particularly with women, effectively taking their private space with them in the guise of their cars, ventures into the public spheres are occurring less frequently than it appears.

Gendered bodies and lifecycles

Gendered bodies and lifecycles are an important area for understanding how we feel about driving at any given time of our lives. Feminist literature argues that our bodies are socially constructed, have material and discursive forms, and are subjected to social controls. Combined with the argument that our actions are dependent upon the lifecycles that we pass through, you have enormous restrictions placed on the mobility of different genders. Gendered statements are rife in the Automobilities realm, with innuendos such as 'boy racers' and 'women drivers' highlighting the derogatory view of women. An off-hand comment by Mandy (40yr old sales manager), caused an outcry when she stated: *"I think I am a good driver, Andrew, my husband, always said I drove like a man."* This perception of men being better drivers than women has no empirical grounding, and is just a stereotypical view that seeks to undermine the ability of women.

The cyborg-human car assemblage is seen in the way people view the car-driver. Simon stated that if he saw a woman driving a sports car with the top down he would find her 'sexy'. Metros are for old men, BMWs for arrogant aggressive drivers, and Mondeos are company cars. The lifecycle of women plays an important part in what women drive. Many women stated they had the family car whilst their partner drove the car he wanted.

> "I always wanted a Mini but had to have a car suitable for children and family life. Now the children are grown and driving themselves, I can at last have the car I want. I must make the most of it though as my mum is getting increasingly arthritic and I will probably have to have a vehicle she can get into soon."

> (Heidi: 48yr old)

Men, on the other hand, did not seem to see the constraints that women saw:

> "I've got two cars; a Morgan which is my fun car and another fun car I suppose, a Golf GTi. I rarely take passengers, so I can play music and do what I want. If we go out as a family we take my wife's car."

> (Peter: 52yr old)

Gadgets

When it comes to gadgets, the genders are actually similar. Each likes the comfort and security features, and the entertainment accessories were seen as beneficial to all. Stereotyping can also be detrimental to men. Although being portrayed as mechanically minded, many men faced concerns over both the use and the reason for many of the car's technological accessories and, whereas women felt comfortable in their ignorance, men felt frustrated and helpless.

"I've just learnt where the air-con button is and I admit I am constantly setting off the alarm when I open the doors."

<div align="right">(Richard: 54yr old).</div>

Power relations

Power relations within the home have been researched extensively (Fraad, Resnick et al. 1994; Ahrentzen 1997; Domosh 1998). They include the division of labour within the home, economic decision-making and technology use. Power relations surrounding the car encompass all of these areas, and there appears to be clear distinctions between who carries out particular tasks involved in car ownership.

Purchasing decisions tend to be the male prerogative:

"We went together to look for a new car. We had discussed what we wanted but tried a few out and then I chose the one I wanted"

<div align="right">(Steve: 28yr old).</div>

Divisions of labour around who drives is also quite clear-cut;

"I drive and she looks after the kids",

<div align="right">Simon: (38yr old).</div>

Where the car is parked is also contentious:

"My dad gets the drive and I have to find a space in the road somewhere" Kelly (22yrs). "I get the drive but only because he has the garage. It is a double garage and one side is his Beemer and the other is his prized possession the Escort Mk1"

<div align="right">Sally: (33yr old).</div>

The Car as Place

When we looked at the car as a sense of place, we saw that the conceived space is predominately masculine and not, as first considered, generic. The production, manufacture and distribution of cars is predominately large scale, heavy technology and public sphere orientated, and therefore predominately masculine. Who owns the car has an impact on situating the car within place, and young people who shared a car with siblings or parents had little fondness for the car, and did not consider it as their first car. Feminine personalisation came in the form of cuddly toys, blankets and pillows, whereas masculine personalisation centred on gadgets and accessories such as spoilers and speakers. Naming first cars was common and all, without exception, remembered fondly their first car.

When asked about their perceptions of the car as place, the differences became apparent. The majority of men felt the car was a mode of transport and, although comfortable and enjoyable, it was little more than that. Many of the women, on the other hand, felt that the car was far more than just a mode of transport. They felt strongly that it was not just a personal space but also a private space, an extension to the home and more importantly, a refuge:

"I would say those awful teenage times, you know, when you can't communicate, you realise they are taking up more of the house than you and you just need to get out. I would say I was going for a drive and escape to the countryside and drive around the scenic bits … you go back feeling refreshed."

(Sue 36yr old)

For some, the car is a means of escape to another private space:

"My car allows me to get to where my horse is kept which is an escape for me."

(June: 32yr old).

For others it is the escape:

"Before my son left home, I would sometimes have had enough of him and I would take the car and park up down the road and read for a bit. I kept a blanket in the car for these occasions."

(Sue: 43yr old).

Driving with a purpose was important for men, but women were happy to drive for the sake of driving.

What people used their cars for was sometimes very personal and at other times very practicable:

"The car is the one space I can talk to the children without the distraction of computers, TVs or games machines. On the other hand, it is lovely when it is just myself and my husband as we get to talk and have quality time."

(Sally: 41yr old)

Image 3: Office on the move

In many instances both men and women used their car for additional purposes – as an office (Image 3), tool shed, gym bag, horse tack room etc. However, the layout of the car posed some interesting topics of conversation.

"I don't like taking passengers as my front passenger seat is my handbag…I have it laid out with my phone, sandwiches, drink, and diary etc. all within easy reach, and I don't like it disturbed."

(Lisa: 51yr old)

"I keep some horse treats and my wellies in the car so I can stop off and see the horses when I want."

(Tina: 28yr old).

"I teach football so have all the kits and balls etc. in the boot and they stay there between matches, apart from washing."

(Simon: 36yr old).

Massey (1994) describes place as open and porous, and the boundaries of the car as place are indistinct, because there is a tendency to see the car as another room belonging to the home, an escape either to somewhere or within. The car is just as Dant (2004) describes: a set of clothes, part of the everyday fabric of our lives. Yet it is also a place we visit, somewhere on which we bestow a fondness and identity, but also a site of conflicting emotions of safety, security, threat and danger.

Conclusion

There were few differences between the driving experiences of the different genders – both either liked or disliked driving, and reacted in similar ways to congestion and other drivers. Differences were found in the consumption of cars (the use of the car and the activities that take place within it), rather than in the act of driving. It can be argued that, as Dant (2004) described with his notion of a driver-car, the fundamental aspect of Automobility is that it does not have a gender. Human beings necessarily relate and react to the car in order to carry out tasks enabling independent mobility. But then Automobility is more than just a driver-car, more than merely a series of signs, symbols and values, once it is included in the realm of everyday living. The means that behind access, use and desire are included in the means of understanding. To be gendered then, Automobility needs to extend itself from its original isolationary stance, and reposition itself within the social sciences, to allow the multiplicity of voices to be heard.

Place is a necessary construction, enabling us to live fulfilled lives (Cresswell 2005). Places are not designed, they 'become', and yet the car is *designed*, both with the driving experience and journey type in mind. This research has shown that the car has become an ultimate place for many women. It is a private space with which the female user can enjoy and protect herself in the public sphere. It has become somewhere we can endow with our individuality, personalise and 'feel at home in' and yet take wherever we go. It seems we are now so mobile that we take our places with us in order to remain fulfilled. Cars are made, yet the place they become develops gradually from the possessions we bestow on them to the emotions they elicit.

The transport infrastructure is constantly evolving, as is the concept of gender, with shopping centres and large industry locating close to motorway networks, thus ensuring that car use becomes a necessity. This assumption of car use entails further demands and restrictions on those who are unable to use this method of transport, making the transport-disadvantaged even worse off. Fuel systems, car design and economy may well change, but as we consistently turn to the car to reach further into the public spaces, the car will surely continue to be seen as a place of safety and security, and be further endowed with the personal identities that we give to our homes.

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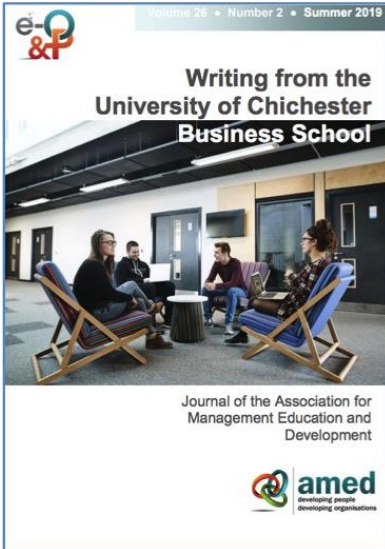
Acknowledgements

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Dr Dawn Robins completed a BA (Hons) degree in Geography with a 1st Class Honours and, in 2005, was awarded the Wiley Prize for academic achievement and a full Scholarship to complete a Research Masters Degree at the University of Southampton. In 2006 the Economic & Social Research Council (ESRC) awarded her a full Scholarship to study the impacts of the privatisation initiative on the passenger railway in Great Britain for her Doctorate. Dawn combined her research with working as an Analyst at the transport consultancy, OXERA, and also the House of Commons Transport Select Committee where she provided the expertise in rail and general transport policy as an Inquiry Manager.

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