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The Invisible Car: The Cultural Purification of Road Rage

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Introduction

This chapter concerns a putatively recent phenomenon that has an unexpectedly peculiar relation to the car. The phenomenon is 'road rage', a condition that was thoroughly discoursed in the UK in the early to mid-1990s. Though there are numerous and contested attempts at defining road rage, we can, initially at least, draw upon the UK's Royal Automobile Club's minimal definition presented in their discussion document 'Road Rage' (undated). For the RAC, road rage is 'simply a term to describe a range of anti-social, ill tempered, foolish or violent behaviours by a minority of drivers'. Under the rubric 'anti-social, ill tempered, foolish or violent behaviours' come headlight-flashing, tailgating, cutting in, obscene gestures, obstruction, verbal abuse, running over offending drivers or pedestrians, using various objects to smash windscreens, stabbing with screw drivers and knives, spraying with ammonia, threatening with guns, poking, punching, throttling, beating. The RAC goes on to characterize road rage as entailing the 'altering of an individual's personality whilst driving by a process of dehumanisation' and as 'a total loss of self control' (p2). Accordingly, 'Given the wrong conditions almost anyone can lose their control' (p2). As will be noted below, this is, inevitably, a definition that is 'interested' insofar as it evokes the concerns and strategies of the RAC. Nevertheless, it does highlight the motif of 'loss of control', and links this to the process of driving, indeed, to 'almost everyone's' driving. On the surface, then, it would appear that the link between the car and road rage is pretty straightforward – things happen when driving which 'trigger' road rage.

However, driving is anything but a straightforward process, though it is certainly managed in smooth, seemingly straightforward ways (cf Lynch 1993; Mennell 1995), and the car is anything but a straightforward manifestation of material culture (cf. Michael 1998, 2000; Lupton 1999; Urry 2000). One of the things that is interesting about road rage is that, as an example of a 'moral panic' (Thompson, 1998), it serves as a condensation of a series of issues and anxieties in contemporary Britain. For example, in the print media road rage has been used to express worries about: the state of traffic on the roads and of the transport system in general; recent transformations in British society (people have become more selfish); and the increased levels of all forms of anger and rage (see below) which, it is claimed, are partly prompted by the rise of psychotherapy, with its injunctions to 'express oneself'. But, notice that in all these accounts, the car features barely at all. The car is, it would seem, a rather anonymous part of the immediate and extended setting wherein road rage is enacted.

This 'invisibilization' of the car in the context of media discourses on road rage is what is of interest in the present chapter. In what follows, I will describe instances of how the phenomenon of road rage is, to use Bruno Latour's (1993a) phrase, 'purified'. As such, the human and non-human components that make up road rage are separated – or rather, as we shall see, the role of the human (that is, human nature or human culture) is privileged even while the interconnections between the human and the non-human are tacitly assumed. After briefly reviewing previous work on some of the ways in which road rage has been constructed – that is, purified (especially by the major driving organiziations in the UK) – I will consider a number of discourses that have appeared in the media and that have attempted to contextualize road rage historically, cross-culturally or micro-socially. I aim to show how these contextualizations, while presupposing the hybridity of humans and technologies, simultaneously function to purify such hybridities: that is, the role of the car is downplayed; the car is, as it were, 'invisibilized'. However, I will also suggest that there are places where people do grasp and overtly articulate, albeit in partial and fragmentary ways, the role of the car in road rage. That is to say, there are discourses that minimally formulate the hybridity of the enraged driver. In conclusion, I very briefly explore some of the broader implications of these discourses of hybridity.

Some Initial Observations

John Urry (2000) has recently pointed out that the car has been strangely absent from mainstream sociology and social theory. This neglect is strange because the car has played such a major role in shaping the modern world. Needless to say, there have been various treatments of the car as an exemplar of material culture. Thus it has been seen to be instrumental in the signification of disparate forms of identity – subcultural (Marsh and Collett 1986; Rosengren 1994; Lamvik 1996), gender (Bayley 1986; Hubak 1996; O'Connell 1998) and national (eg Hagman 1994). Moreover, attention has also been drawn to its part in the material-semiotic restructuring of the Western world from the instigation of speed cameras (Stenhoien, 1994) and traffic-calming measures such as sleeping policemen (Latour, 1992) to such now commonplace architectural features as the garage and the motorway (Marsh and Collett 1986; Flink 1988). But there has been no sustained attempt to integrate the car into general sociological accounts of (post)-modernity – at least not until Urry's (2000) notion of 'automobility'.

Part of the reason for this general neglect has been the emphasis upon the 'social' and 'society' in social science (cf Urry, 2000). As Latour (1993a) argues, this division into the human and the non-human, the social and the natural has a long history which he calls the 'Modern Constitution' according to which we moderns have been predisposed to see only these dichotomies. As an example we can point to Bijker's (1995) very useful survey of approaches within the sociology of technology. According to Bijker: '. . . a general pattern can be recognized in which the study of technology and society has been developing. This pattern can, very schematically, be characterized as a sort of slow pendulum movement – a dampened oscillation' (p. 254). First there was outright technological determinism of society, then there was social shaping of technology, then back to a slightly less virulent form of technological determinism until now, barely oscillating in between these extremes, there are a number of approaches that examine the reciprocal determinations of the technological and the social. A particular arena in which one can begin to detect the crumbling of the modern constitution is that of ecopolitics, or what Latour has called political ecology (1997, 1998), where the complex mutualities of the human and non-human, the cultural and the natural – that is, of hybridities – are increasingly actively and self-consciously deployed in the process of doing such politics (cf. Whatmore 1997; Cussins 1997). Further, hints of an occasional grasp and valuation of such hybridities,

as we shall glimpse, pervade popular culture (also see Michael, 2000). Such a process of judgement of hybrids is important because, according to Latour, our modernist blindness to them has enabled their sometimes dangerous proliferation, most dramatically exemplified in the increasing pervasiveness of biotechnologies and their products.

However, the key purpose of this chapter is to look at how, in the case of road rage, such mutualities, reciprocalities, hybridities are (un)systematically expunged. Now, there are many discourses that have attempted to characterize, account for, or otherwise explain road rage. Prominent among the actors who provide such discourses are the driving organizations, the Royal Automobile Club (RAC) and the Automobile Association (AA). As longstanding advisors to government (cf. O'Connell 1998) and as providers of much newspaper copy, they are particularly important in shaping popular thinking on road rage. Elsewhere, I have analysed these organizations' contrasting analyses of road rage (Michael 1998, 2000). Suffice it to say in the present context that the RAC takes a largely humanistic or psychotherapeutic stance on road rage: people are dehumanized by virtue of everyday road-use frustrations and an artificial sense of insulation and empowerment provided by the car. As such the typical road-rager would benefit from therapy from a specialist – a process of rehumanization through the recounting of experience and expression of emotion. By comparison, the AA's stance is more behaviourist: road rage is the displacement of stresses and strains through the exercise of animalistic territoriality. The car is an extension of personal territory, and if this is impinged upon aggressive territoriality is triggered. Thus, to avoid road rage one needs to follow a series of behavioural injunctions to diffuse the sense of territoriality: avoid eye contact, do not manoeuvre suddenly, do not rise to the bait, and so on and so forth. What we have, in summary, are two opposing dehumanizations: for the RAC the tendency of the driver is to become more god-like, hubristic; for the AA, it is to become more rat-like, animalistic. Both organizations are engaged in the process of rehumanising – of changing the person, of indeed reinforcing offenders' 'normal' human agency which has been so disastrously transformed within the car.

Note that the car in both cases plays a part – it insulates and empowers, or it is an extension of one's usual personal body space or territory: hybridity is being tacitly assumed. However, in both cases there is also purification: the car and person are extricated from one another. Thus what is primarily being addressed is a 'generic car', or even more basically, a structured space that can be 'empowering' (that is, become

part of one's personal powers) or 'territorialized' (in the sense of becoming part of one's personal territory). Indeed, the car is, as noted above, a rather anonymous technological artefact whose rhetorical function in these accounts is to provide a setting in which certain psychological or evolutionary predispositions can be played out. In these accounts a 2CV affords as much empowerment or enables the exercise of as much territoriality as a Mercedes S Class. Despite appearances, then, the car is actually marginal in these accounts – and this is most obvious insofar as it is the human that is the primary point of intervention: Latour's modern constitution finds expression once again.

Now, this differentiation between the RAC's and the AA's accounts are rather fine-grained when compared to the way that road rage is explained more generally in the media. The accounts one finds in many of the extended news-media pieces tend to be 'perambulatory' in the sense of moving through the variety of understandings of road rage with a view to surveying them. However, this is so unsystematic, the accounts are put together, that is, juxtaposed, with such little sensitivity to the formal or intellectual tensions or contradictions between them, that preferable to any notion of 'discursive perambulation' would be 'discursive morassification'. For example, in Esther Oxford's article entitled 'Road Rage' in *The Independent* (25 January 1996) there are presented the following explanatory fragments: overcrowding on the road ('Given that 25 million vehicles clog Britain's roads, it is no surprise that road rage, an aggressive exchange between drivers, is reaching epidemic proportions'); discourteous driving ('Many were annoyed by drivers who cruised in the middle lane, overtook on the inside or were speeding in urban areas'); territoriality; the car as a protected environment; the threateningly animalistic qualities of the car itself ('Dr Marsh regards the design of headlights as particularly problematic. "Headlights give cars an animalistic quality – as do the four wheels. They are rather like horses. Lots of road rage incidents happen because people are not dipping their headlights. The headlights are seen as staring, threatening eyes"'); the primitiveness of our bodily capacities ('Our minds may be sophisticated, but our nervous systems are not'); different personality types (there are two types of people who are likely to succumb to road rage: 'psychopaths' (people with anti-social personality disorders) or 'narcissists' (people who believe that they are special, and that only they know what is 'right')).

What we see here is a process of trawling – a juxtaposition of different explanations drawn from different experts and commentators with no attempt to sort these out, to rank them, to bring consistency to them.

There is, as noted above, a sort of morassification of discourse. But what does this morassification perform? Let me suggest one reading of this unsystematized patterning of explanations. What is performed is the evocation of a choice of causalities, or enabling conditions, of road rage. That is, even if certain causal routes seem inappropriate or incredible for some drivers (e.g. the threatening quality of headlights), there are others which can slot into place to serve as triggers for road rage. This tacit representation of a free market of causalities, a multiplicity of potential causations and possible predispositions, seems to have the rhetorical function of signifying that we are all, *one way or another*, liable to road rage. It enacts the generality of road rage – its pandemic qualities – even if in the specifics of its causalities there is variation. We are all liable to road rage, even if the causal route by which we come to it is personalized.

The foregoing account has actually touched upon the contributory role of the car itself. Not only does it insulate and cocoon, it also has animalistic eyes that challenge and threaten. Beyond this, it is also a piece of technology which, for all its ergonomic sophistication, can become too complicated, too fast, for our nervous system which evolutionarily lags behind. However, while we can detect in this story a presupposition of hybridity, what ends up being emphasized is the problematic limits of people. As with the RAC and AA accounts, what is privileged is the human, indeed, the essential evolutionarily determined, psychologically bounded human. It is this that must be worked around. It is within these evolutionary limits that human agency and self-control must be enabled and exercised. In sum, while there is a tacit assumption of hybridity, it is not in itself addressed – it is curtailed, that is, mediated through commonplace discourses of essential human frailties.

Now, in contrast, there are also accounts which focus not on the changing of people, but on the changing of the technology. There have certainly been programmes funded by the European Union and other agencies assessing the relative merits of such innovations as in-car speed limiters and fully automated speed-control systems as against physical traffic-calming measures and in-car advice systems (for example, Várhelyi, A., Comte, S. & Mäkinen, T. Evaluation of In-Car Speed Limiters, Final Report. MASTER Delivarable 11 (report 3.2.3). Sent for approval to DG VII in September 1998 – http//www3.vti.fi/yki/yki6/master/deliver.htm). Less technologically advanced, more ironic, and perhaps more effective is John Adams' (1995) suggestion that if designers and manufacturers rendered the car less safe, less big, less responsive, less fast, less accurate

there would be dramatic decreases in the levels of road rage specifically, and of dangerous driving generally. Indeed, Adams takes this point to an extreme when he remarks 'if all vehicles were to be fitted with long sharp spikes emerging from the centre of their steering wheels (or, if you prefer, high explosives set to detonate on impact), the disparities of vulnerability and lethality between cyclists and lorry drivers would be greatly reduced' (p. 155). Now, these two variants of the technological fix simply reverse the locus of intervention from human to technology. Again, hybridity is assumed and again it is a limited version: technology acts upon a human essence in the sense that, for Adams' solution, less safe cars trigger self-preservational reflexes. In Latour's terms, the human and the non-human are kept separate insofar as there is no 'exchange of properties', as he would put it, in which both person and car come together to produce a different sort of entity that might suggest different sorts of heterogeneous solutions to the problem of road rage (see below).

In the foregoing we have briefly seen how a limited version of hybridity tacitly informs a variety of accounts. It grounds these accounts, but is also purified – articulated through a variety of discourses which reassert modernist dichotomies of human/non-human. One might put it this way: this presuppositional hybridity is 'penumbral': it is neither wholly in the shadow nor in the dark. The significance and function of such penumbral hybridity will be further explored in the next sections where I consider accounts of road rage which attempt to 'contextualize' it. By 'contextualize' I mean to denote a process of comparison with 'similar' behaviours which are situated 'elsewhere'. This 'elsewhere' takes, as far as I can tell, three forms: the elsewhere of history – the past in which earlier versions of road rage took place; the elsewhere of culture – those different societies in which activities comparable to road rage take place; and the elsewhere of what we might call 'microsociety' – those other local social situations wherein are found 'enraged' behaviours that resemble road rage.

To Contextualize is to Universalize

In this section, then, I consider three 'elsewheres' where rage, in various forms, is seen to be enacted. What we shall see is that the contextualization in relation to these elsewheres has the effect of universalizing road rage in the sense of invisibilizing the car – of showing that it is human nature or human culture that lies at the root of such behaviours. In contrast to these rhetorics, I will try to show how technology – in

somewhat reformulated form (the car as a heterogeneous, socio-technical network) – is crucial to such displays of road rage.

The Historical Comparison

On occasion we find that road rage is detected in previous epochs – the novelty of road rage is thus denied. I present two examples of such a process of contextualization that serves in the dehistoricizing of road rage. First, a letter to the *Independent* (26 January 1996), entitled 'Oedipal Rage', suggests that road rage was present among the ancients. (That it was thought worth publishing suggests that it was in some way of import)

> From Mr George MacDonald Ross
> Sir: The earliest recorded example of road rage ('Half all drivers are targets of road rage', 24 January) was surely when Oedipus killed his father in an argument over who had priority to drive his chariot over a narrow bridge. Perhaps ancient Greek priority signs were as confusing as ours!
> Yours faithfully,
> George MacDonald Ross
> Leeds
> 24 January

Secondly, Alex Spillius in the Guardian (28 October 1995) draws attention to a reported instance of road rage in the early part of the nineteenth century:

> Indeed the Oldie magazine recently printed an item of 'carriage rage' from 1817. 'Last week I had a row on the road . . . with a fellow in a carriage who was impudent to my horse. I gave him a swinging box on the ear, which sent him to the police, who dismissed his complaint,' wrote Lord Byron to Thomas Moore. (Being 'impudent to a horse' was not, by the way, a 19th-century euphemism equivalent to 'sheep scaring'; the other driver merely shouted at Byron's palfrey.)

What both these reflections do is, of course, to downplay the role of the car in the scene of modern day road rage. No longer is it a necessary component in the triggering of road rage – rather, it is the primarily social processes of disputation or impudence that are responsible for these historical instances of road rage. There is, it is implied, nothing historically unique about road rage – it has been a part of travelling

since time immemorial. The comparison between these instances and latter-day road rage is accomplished by assuming that what is 'fundamental' – that is, what serves as the criterion which draws these incidents into the same category – about road rage is the eruption of anger and the manifestation of violence by one person upon another. This eruption is triggered by social antagonism. It is not, in this sort of comparative narrative, admissible that these angers and violences might be qualitatively different. That is to say, the car-of-today, with all its complex cultural and material qualities, partially renders the doing of anger and violence historically distinctive. The point is to recover the car-of-today as a heterogeneous socio-technical network that frames a different set of conventions about how one should perceive the acts of others, about what counts as an affront, and about how one should display umbrage (see below).

The Cultural Comparison

In numerous articles we find prefatory remarks on the history of road rage as a phenomenon, or on the genesis of the term 'road rage', in which both phenomenon and term are traced to the United States. Usually, this is done disparagingly. Thus, it is presented as fitting that the phenomenon should first arise in the US – after all, it is in the US where, stereotypically, we (that is the British) would expect, or at least be unsurprised, to find yet another form of chronic violence. Further, that the source of the term 'road rage' is the US is also presented as something to which we (the British) should be resigned: the tacit story is that 'only in America' are such new conditions, syndromes, pathologies so readily identified and named. But there is another dimension to these accounts: once again a product of the US finds its way to the UK. We (the British) are, it would seem, the willing recipients of even the most excessive, the least digestible exports from the US – and this time it is road rage as both behaviour and category. Following Condor (1996) among others, we might suggest that this self-derogation might be linked to the performance of Englishness. The point here is that these sorts of account are about locating road rage in the peculiarity of a particular culture (that of the US) and bemoaning the fact that we are becoming like that culture, even a part of it. The act of 'bemoaning' is the performance of Englishness.

However, I want to examine a different sort of cultural comparison. Occasionally one comes across surveys of the way that 'road rage' is manifested in different parts of the world. In other words, there are

accounts of what would trigger road rage in different societies. The article I focus on here is Christopher Middleton's 'It's all the rage of the road' (*Sunday Times*, 25 June 1995), which provides an account of European cultural differences in the triggering of road rage and offers advice to holiday drivers on how to avoid encounters which may lead to the local version of 'road rage'.

Interestingly, before the author looks at the cross-cultural differences in road rage, there is a brief account of road rage in Britain followed by a quote from 'RAC psychologist Conrad King' expounding the 'dehumanization thesis', and according to whom '(dehumanization) is caused by road-use frustrations and an artificial sense of insulation, protection and empowerment provided by the car'. With this in place, the article goes on to provide a 'guide to European road rage' for holiday drivers in which, in order, we have profiles of 'road rage' in Italy, Germany, Spain, France and Greece.

In Italy:

> The one thing that winds an Italian up more quickly than hairpin bends is indecisiveness. A little stutter here, a moment of hesitation there, and the full ensemble of 100 car horns will be the result. 'You have to make up your mind and go,' says the writer Diane Seed, who has lived in Rome for 27 years. 'The important thing is not to catch the eye of another driver; it will be taken as a sign of weakness . . . Italian road rage tends to be noisy, rather than the sneaky French variety.'

In Germany:

> The worst thing you can do to a German is to block his all-conquering path down the autobahn. Because there is no speed limit on the motorways, the only cars that can survive in the fast lane are those that belong to the master race of motor vehicles . . . Middle-lane dawdling is virtually unknown, rebuked not by hooting or shouting but by the ferocious glare of headlights in one's rear-view mirror . . . So disciplined are German drivers that making abusive signs is a criminal offence; it is also unwise, since there are Germans who, in a state of road rage, can lose that methodical reserve. People who have tapped their foreheads to question another driver's mental stability have pulled up at the next service station to find themselves being challenged to a duel.

In Spain:

> If you are going to overtake a Spaniard, first check who it is. If it is a woman, you should be all right. If it is a man on his own, less good, and

> if it is a man with his family, forget it. From the average hombre's point of view, being passed by another car is a humiliation, all the more keenly felt if one's wife and children are watching. And the only way to wash off the stain of shame is to take revenge. Usually this will take the form of him re-overtaking you (either side will do) and then slamming on the brakes, secure in the knowledge that if you hit him it will be your fault on the grounds that (a) you were too close and (b) you're a foreigner.

In France:

> There is a particular bitchiness to road rage in France which, mixed with four-star anglophobia, forms an explosive combination . . . Paris is the worst place to be seen with British number plates. Whereas indigenous drivers cut up and are cut up with the insouciance of Napoleonic cavalry, it is seen as a slight beyond endurance to have the same done to you by a rosbif in a Rover. Once provoked, the French can be persistent in their desire for vengeance. One English expatriate was recently followed back to her home by an enraged French driver, who camped outside her house shouting anti-British slogans.

In Greece:

> The secret of happy Hellenic motoring is to stay constantly on the alert. 'Here everybody is violating every imaginable rule', says the writer Dimitri Mitropoulos . . . Even in the most tense situations, though, Greek road rage rarely boils over into violence. 'Because we let off steam on a regular basis, there is not the enthusiasm for fighting', says Mitropoulos. 'You may often see two men arguing, but they won't be hitting each other.'

I have presented these comparisons in some little detail because, in an albeit condensed way, they do convey some of the different – stereotyped – behaviours which are being brought under the rubric of 'road rage'. The key issue is what makes these stereotypes comparable – the same but different. Minimally, these rages all take place in relation to roads and cars, but the triggering mechanisms are somewhat different. Or rather, in each country different cultural values pertain: the mores, realized in the social conventions of what is to count as an affront and what a commensurate riposte, vary. Thus, in Italy it is hesitancy that triggers noisy horn-blowing protest, in Germany it is slowness that triggers headlight flashing and tailgating, in Spain it is overtaking that prompts re-overtaking and sudden braking, in France it is being English

and behaving like the French that necessitates vengeance, in Greece it is inappropriately following the rules that demands histrionic argumentation.

What the article accomplishes, then, is the assertion of cultural difference. The car is again invisibilized: it is effectively simply another setting in which 'national character' is made manifest. What is missed out of this account is the fact that the car as complex part of a complex heterogeneous socio-technical network (e.g. Latour 1987) that incorporates, and is incorporated by, 'national character'. To put it less ironically, the cultural conventions which structure the production of 'road rage-like' behaviours are related to the car itself, where the car is conceptualized as a distributed material-semiotic 'nexus' (Whitehead, 1929) or hybrid collectif (Callon and Law, 1995) that mediates, and is mediated by, local and global cultural and material conditions. The behaviours that are associated with the car are thus locally distinctive, but that localness has in part been mediated through the car which comes to have a local history, but also affects that local history. Moreover, that local or national history vis-à-vis the car is being worked out against other national histories. This, of course, is exactly what is being performed in the Middleton article quoted above. Thus, the car is embroiled in the (re)production of local cultural conditions, in part through processes of cross-cultural comparison.

But further, we should also recall that the car is an entity that, as both material and sign, flows cross-nationally and cross-culturally (Appadurai, 1990; Lash and Urry, 1994; Urry, 2000). As a material-semiotic artefact it is has been a means through which, according to Sachs (1984), the distinctly modernist predilection for speed and competition has been, in part, disseminated, globalized (see also Virilio 1977, 1995). It is these modernist predilections – heterogeneously embodied in the car as a series of conventions or scripts (see Akrich 1992) – that resource road rage, not some ahistorical, over-psychologized predisposition of feeling empowered in 'generic' metal boxes on wheels. Thus, the car itself has played a part in the globaliziation of 'road rage type behaviours' but this is in its complex, historical, *conjoint* capacity as a signifier of speed (and it has from outset been advertised in the terms of competition – from its beginnings car racing was seen as means of promoting the car – cf. O'Connell 1998) and material entity with certain physical capabilities (greater power, more responsivity, better road-holding, etc.). To reiterate, these globalized potentials are, however, realized in – articulated with – the local.

The Micro-social 'Behavioural' Comparison

Another set of comparisons again contextualize road rage, this time in relation to different forms of rage. Thus, we find rage not only among drivers, but also among cinema-goers, pedestrians, golfers. A particularly good example of this comparison across micro-social settings is provided in Roger Tedre's article 'Aggression: Suddenly, spectacularly, losing your cool is all the rage' in the *Observer* (15 October 1995). The by-line 'From cinemas to golf courses, unprecedented levels of stress in modern life are prompting more confrontations in everyday situations' immediately sets up the fact that it is 'unprecedented levels of stress in modern life' that result in the enraged displays which are to be listed, as if these 'unprecedented levels of stress in modern life' were somehow separate from the technologies that inhabit 'modern life' with us.

After a number of lurid examples of rage in a cinema, in a supermarket queue and in the process of walking along the pavement, Terdre summarizes with a list of different types of rage:

> Little things that irritate
>
> Road rage: Aggressive behaviour behind the wheel, headlight-flashing, obscene gestures, and verbal and physical abuse.
> Trolley rage: Often sparked by small children, slow unpackers and change-fumblers. Queue jumpers have felt the force of a fist.
> Cinema rage: Slow and sotto voce, but erupts spectacularly because of the confined location. Most tall people have been unwittingly on the receiving end.
> Pavement rage: A US import, typified by aggressive comments and shoving.
> Phone rage: Brought on by answering machines, voice mail and inefficient receptionists.
> Golf rage: The latest rage has hit the sport of gentlemen. Caused by slow players who do not allow faster and more experienced ones to go on ahead.

In addition to these there are a variety of other rages available: cycling – rage at pedestrians or drivers who are oblivious to cyclists; car alarm – rage at car alarms that go off unprompted or keep going off at intermittent intervals; tube – fury at the inefficiency of, and chronic tardiness within, the London Underground railway system; computer – anger

when the computer breaks down, or is too slow; rod – examples where anglers have turned on another whose dog had unsettled their fishing water; air – where aeroplane passengers become abusive toward airline staff or fellow-travellers.

Now, in these examples comparability is rendered across different 'forms' of rage by virtue of, as the by-line indicates, the 'unprecedented levels of stress in modern life'. These 'levels of stress' serve as the conditions by which we have become primed to 'go off': the slightest affront (or insult or inconvenience) and we become angered. Once more the technology is assumed to play a role but it is that of, it seems, both a partial trigger and partial setting. The hybridity is a limited one. If we were to think through these versions of rage in terms of heterogeneity, we might note that, on a general level, the commonality across these micro-social settings is one partly grounded in technologies which are a part of a socio-technical network in which time has become accelerated (Adam 1998; MacNaghten and Urry 1998), and wherein 'speed' is increasingly prominent (Millar and Schwarz, 1998). These technologies are, therefore, part of the network conditions of possibility for these 'unprecedented levels of stress in modern life'. This network includes mundane technologies such as cars and paving stones as well as those supposedly 'epochal' nanosecond information technologies. The point is that, in the above newspaper article, the role of these variegated technologies of speed (and the expectation of speed) in the generalized 'unprecedented levels of stress in modern life' has become obscured by the stress upon stress.

We might further propose that these 'technological settings', or these technological artefacts – car, fishing rod, bicycle, cinema, computer, pavement, telephone, shopping trolley – as networks, as nexûs, would entail a 'promise' that is inscribed in them materially and semiotically. At minimum, such promises would entail that the technology should not break down; neither it nor its user should be 'unnecessarily' impeded (cf. Michael, 2000, 1998). If impediments arise, are we right to see the reactions to these as of a piece across these different technological artefacts and their respective socio-technical networks? I would answer 'yes' and 'no': as we have seen, there might be something of a generalized, perhaps 'grammaticized' (cf. Michael 1996; Mulhausler and Harré 1990) modernist 'ethos of speed', but each actualization of this 'ethos' will be mediated by the local, micro-socio-technical conditions. In other words, there will be different qualities as well as quantities of speed attached to these conditions. These different rages in their different socio-technical settings reflect not simply a response

to a generic transgression – the very quality of the rage reflects its local setting. This, however, all needs to be empirically investigated.

In this section, I have listed a number of ways in which, in accounting for road rage, the hybridity of cars and persons is at once assumed and filtered through modernist dichotomizing or purifying discourses in which the human emerges as the explanation of road rage. Further, we have seen that this 'human' takes several forms. On the one hand there are specific and general human psychological predispositions (e.g. the feelings of insulation inside a car); on the other, there are cultural conditions whose horizons are extended temporally (across epochs) and spatially (across nation-states and micro-social settings). All I have done is to suggest that technology in general, and the car in particular, have constitutive roles to play too.

However, in my zeal to re-assert the role of technology – to give it equal footing with the cultural and the psychological – in such enraged behaviours I have perhaps swung too far in the opposite direction and underplayed the role of the human. What is needed is a way of articulating how the local and generic human are, like the local and generic (that is, modernist) car, mutualistically crucial in any worthwhile account of road rage. Accordingly, and in line with a number of approaches that speak of monsters (e.g. Law 1991), (low-tech) cyborgs (cf. Gray 1995) and material culture (e.g. Dant 1999), I now consider road rage explicitly in terms of human–non-human 'hybridity'.

The Rage of Hybrids

In the foregoing I have focused especially on the modernist process of purification in order to suggest ways in which hybridity, which we have seen assumed in a number of texts, might be directly addressed. As we might expect, however, there are instances where driving and road rage have been, at least in part, openly articulated in hybridic terms. So, running in parallel with the assumption – and purification – of the hybridity of road rage are commonplace partial articulations of its hybridity. Lupton (1999) detects instances of this when she suggests that people-in-cars tend to treat one another as 'cyborgs'. Thus, in her analysis of a number of drivers' accounts, she detects an 'elision of human/machine' (p. 64). As she puts it in her commentary on one respondent's account: 'The man describes his own car as if it were his own body that is being roughly handled: "He just gave me a shove in the back"' (p. 64). However, this elision might have as much to do

with the available metaphors we live by (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980) as with the emergence a *bona fide* hybridic vocabulary: the car has a 'back' too, after all.

More suggestive are the more tortuous and fragmented articulations in which, as I have noted elsewhere (e.g. Michael 1998), there does seem to be a developing language of hybridity. Thus, an Austin 1100 home page editorial (http://www.users.dircon.co.uk/-canstey/1100_ed5.htm – 18 August 1996) identifies a combination of car and person that is especially prone to road rage. This hybrid is made up of the modern car (eg 'Vauxhall Vomitra' (Vectra), 'Ford Mundano' (Mondeo) and 'Renault Mogadon' (Megane)) which is a 'deeply unpleasant place to be' – full of cheap plastic and synthetic seating materials that 'assault every sensibility'. Seated at the wheel of this modern car is a particular human figure, 'Rupert Rep' – an archetypical sales*man* figure – who is measured by his 'Total Plonker index' (where 'plonker' is British vernacular for a foolish, idiotic person). Together, these make up the most dangerous of monsters (Law 1991).

Let me now turn to a 'simple phrase' that one comes across again and again when road ragers attempt to characterize what the doing of road rage entails. A close 'reading' of this 'simple phrase' suggests that hybridity can be detected underpinning the most mundane accounts of road rage. In paraphrase this mini-narrative takes the following general form: 'When I get behind the wheel of a car, I am a completely different person.' A good example of this is taken from the TV documentary 'Inside Story: Road Rage' (BBC1, 28 June 1995): 'Now when I get into a car, my character changes . . . that sometimes I can't believe the things that I say, just come out of my mouth the way they do.' What this implies is a complex layering of discourse in which, in the course of what is effectively a simple excuse, there is an attempt to redistribute agency and reconfigure enabling conditions (cf. Scott and Lyman 1968). So, on the one hand, this statement can be regarded as an excuse – a shifting of responsibility where one is transformed from being a good, rational 'civilized' person into a foul-mouthed, aggressive menace. One's essence has been shown to be fluid. The speaker changes on coming into contact with the car. However, for this excuse to work, the car must remain a constant, an obdurate entity. Moreover, this obduracy is associated with cars-in-general: the use of the indefinite article ('Now when I get into a car . . .') suggests that cars-in-general have certain common properties that predisposes the driver to bad behaviour. But, this excuse can only function against a tacit recognition, or rather a neglect, of the culturally available knowledge that cars are

also designed to 'calm' one, as well as to 'enthuse' one. So, on the other hand, cars have an ambiguous identity (or contain ambivalent scripts, to draw again on Akrich's (1992) terminology): as Urry (2000) has remarked the car is both a racing machine (Porsche) and a safe family vehicle (Volvo). Naturally, these dual characteristics pertain not merely to the car as a singularity, but in its emergence within a complex socio-technical network. As culturalized material and materialized culture, the car prescribes *and* proscribes speed, competition (and thus the possibility of the performance of 'loss of control'); semiotically and materially, it enables *and* disables sensible, safe, cautious comportment. Thus, the essence of the car is itself changeable – its apparent obduracy is grounded in a marginalization of fluidity, of ambiguity. Now, it is the human actor who is obdurate, a singularity able to exercise agency in determining which 'version' of the car to actualize (Warner 1986). To put it another way, if on one side of the discursive coin we find 'Now when I get into a car, my character changes . . .', on the other we find 'Now when I get into a car, the car changes . . .'. More formally, drawing on Billig's rhetorical terms, the meaning of the former account only makes sense in the context of the latter. Billig phrases this point in the following way: 'The context of opinion-giving is a context of argumentation. Opinions are offered where there are counter-opinions. The argument "for" a position is always an argument "against" a counter-position. Thus the meaning of an opinion is dependent upon the opinions which it is countering . . .' (Billig 1991, p. 17). In the context of the modernist constitution, the 'opinion' 'Now when I get into a car, my character changes . . .' is countering the opinion 'Now when I get into a car, the car changes . . .'.

As Latour (1993b, 1999) has noted, these opposing accounts find parallel expression in relation to various human-technology interactions. In reflecting upon the reasons put forward for various killings in the United States, Latour, identifies two contrary views which neatly parallel the two phrases examined above: 'it is guns that kill' (people are at the effect of guns) and it is 'people that kill' (guns are at the effect of people). Rather than ascribing essences to the 'gun' and the 'citizen' – each being either good, or bad, or neutral, what Latour aims to do is to show how a new hybrid emerges – the citizen-gun – that entails new associations, new goals, new translations and so on. As one enters into an association with a gun, both citizen and gun become different. As Latour (1993b) puts it: 'The dual mistake of the materialists and of the sociologists is to start with essences, either those of subjects or those of objects . . . Either you give too much to the gun or too

much to the gun-holder. Neither the subject, nor the object, nor their goals are fixed for ever. We have to shift our attention to this unknown X, this hybrid which can truly be said to act' (p. 6). So, here, what should be judged is not the gun or the person (or in the present case, the car and the driver) – not object or subject alone – but the combination, the hybrid. And of course, as we have noted, neither the citizen nor the gun, driver nor car is itself pure, respectively pure human and pure machine. They come to each other as hybrids – in the concrete circumstance of their meeting, they move through and, are moved by, other humans and non-humans which are likewise hybrid.

We have caught a glimpse of this judgement of hybridity in the Austin 1100 editorial cited above. However, this differs from Latour's account: the editorial assumes respective essences for the driver and the car that comprise the road-rager: the car is in essence an unpleasant, aggravating place to be in (hence 'Vomitra' for Vectra) and the driver is a sales representative with a 'total plonker index'. Nevertheless, there does seem to be emerging a proto-judgement (evidenced not least in the present text) of hybrids – of cars-and-people. But a question that arises in light of this development is: who/what is doing the judging?

Concluding Remark: Judging Hybrids

The writers and speakers who have in the foregoing, in their various ways, described, characterized, accounted for, explained, purified and judged road rage have been, by and large, unproblematic. That is to say, these figures have themselves been purified: in the present account, they are pure humans who pass judgement. However, if we take seriously that humans are always already integrated into socio-technical networks, we should regard these statements not simply as issuing from pure humans, nor even as local instantiations of discourses or ideologies or narratives, that is, of 'the purified cultural'. Rather, we need to see these judgements as the product *of* hybrids, of socio-technical networks, of heterogeneous relations.

In light of this, a general and overly schematic comment is in order. There is a need to see these speaker/writers – these enunciators of judgement – as parts of networks in which, semiotically and materially (that is, impurely), purified humans and machines are on-goingly reproduced. Thus the enunciator is embroiled in networks in which they are constantly being performed, as Callon and Law (1995) would put it, as pure, singularized humans. From the huge array of cultural resources that go into making up the 'sovereign individual' (Abercrombie,

Hill and Turner 1986) to the mundane technologies of cash-dispensing machines, cars and turnstiles, hybrids are being at once constituted and purified, disentangled into humans and machines. When someone judges a hybrid, this is no less the action *of* a hybrid. What is needed, then, is a vocabulary, a range of conceptual tools, that can serve in the re-writing of this chapter in terms of hybrids, where the stories, excuses, accounts and comparisons can be addressed as road-rage discourses performed by hybrids, not least by the hybrids that perform road rage itself.

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