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Cars, Climates and Subjectivity: Car Sharing and Resisting Hegemonic Automobile Culture?

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Al Gore brought climate change into ... our living rooms. ... The 2008 oil price hikes [and the global financial crisis] awakened the world to potential economic hardship in a rapidly urbanising world where the petrol-driven automobile is still king. (Mouritz 47)

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Six hundred million cars (Urry, "Climate Change" 265) traverse the world's roads, or sit idly in garages and clogging city streets. The West's economic progress has been built in part around the success of the automotive industry, where the private car rules the spaces and rhythms of daily life. The problem of "automobile dependence" (Newman and Kenworthy) is often cited as one of the biggest challenges facing countries attempting to combat anthropogenic climate change. Sociologist John Urry has claimed that automobility is an "entire culture" that has re-defined movement in the contemporary world (Urry *Mobilities* 133). As such, it is the single most significant environmental challenge "because of the intensity of resource use, the production of pollutants and the dominant culture which sustains the major discourses of what constitutes the good life" (Urry *Sociology* 57-8). Climate change has forced a re-thinking of not only how we produce and dispose of cars, but also how we use them. What might a society not

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dominated by the private, petrol-driven car look like?

Some of the pre-eminent writers on climate change futures, such as Gwynne Dyer, James Lovelock and John Urry, discuss one possibility that might emerge when oil becomes scarce: societies will descend into civil chaos, "a Hobbesian war of all against all" where "regional warlordism" and the most brutish, barbaric aspects of human nature come to the fore (Urry, "Climate Change" 261). Discussing a post-car society, John Urry also proffers another scenario in his "sociologies of the future:" an Orwellian "digital panopticon" in which other modes of transport, far more suited to a networked society, might emerge on a large scale and, in the long run, "might tip the system" into post-car one before it is too late (Urry, "Climate Change" 261). Amongst the many options he discusses is car sharing. Since its introduction in Germany more than 30 years ago, most of the critical literature has been devoted to the planning, environmental and business innovation aspects of car sharing; however very little has been written on its cultural dimensions. This paper analyses this small but developing trend in many Western countries, but more specifically its emergence in Sydney.

The convergence of climate change discourse with that of the global financial crisis has resulted in a focus in the mainstream media, over the last few months, on technologies and practices that might save us money and also help the environment. For instance, a Channel 10 News story in May 2009 focused on the boom in car sharing in Sydney (see: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EPTT8vYVXro>). Car sharing is an adaptive technology that doesn't do away with the car altogether, but rather transforms the ways in which cars are used, thought about and promoted. I argue that car sharing provides a challenge to the dominant consumerist model of the privately owned car that has sustained capitalist structures for at least the last 50 years. In addition, through looking at some marketing and promotion tactics of car sharing in Australia, I examine some emerging car sharing subjectivities that both extend and subvert the long-established discourses of the automobile's flexibility and autonomy to tempt monogamous car buyers into becoming philandering car sharers.

Much literature has emerged over the last decade devoted to the ubiquitous phenomenon of automobility. "The car is the literal 'iron cage' of modernity, motorised, moving and domestic," claims Urry ("Connections" 28). Over the course of twentieth century, automobility became "the dominant form of daily movement over much of the planet (dominating even those who do not move by cars)" (Paterson 132). Underpinning Urry's prolific production of literature is his concept of automobility. This he defines as a complex

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system of “intersecting assemblages” that is not only about driving cars but the nexus between “production, consumption, machinic complexes, mobility, culture and environmental resource use” (Urry, “Connections” 28). In addition, Matthew Paterson, in his *Automobile Politics*, asserts that “automobility” should be viewed as everything that makes driving around in a car possible: highways, parking structures and traffic rules (87).

While the private car seems an inevitable outcome of a capitalistic, individualistic modern society, much work has gone into the process of naturalising a dominant notion of automobility on drivers’ horizons. Through art, literature, popular music and brand advertising, the car has long been associated with seductive forms of identity, and societies have been built around a hegemonic culture of car ownership and driving as the pre-eminent, modern mode of self-expression. And more than 50 years of a popular Hollywood film genre—road movies—has been devoted to glorifying the car as total freedom, or in its more nihilistic version, “freedom on the road to nowhere” (Corrigan). As Paterson claims, “autonomous mobility of car driving is socially produced ... by a range of interventions that have made it possible” (18). One of the main reasons automobility has been so successful, he claims, is through

its ability to reproduce capitalist society. It provided a commodity around which a whole set of symbols, images and discourses could be constructed which served to effectively legitimise capitalist society. (30)

Once the process is locked-in, it then becomes difficult to reverse as billions of agents have adapted to it and built their lives around “automobility’s strange mixture of co-ercion and flexibility” (Urry, “Climate Change” 266).

The Decline of the Car

Globally, the greatest recent rupture in the automobile’s meta-narrative of success came about in October 2008 when three CEOs from the major US car firms (General Motors, Ford and Chrysler) begged the United States Senate for emergency loan funds to avoid going bankrupt. To put the economic significance of this into context, Emma Rothschild notes “when the listing of the ‘Fortune 500’ began in 1955, General Motors was the largest American corporation, and it was one of the three largest, measured in revenues, every

year until 2007" (Rothschilds, "Can we transform"). Curiously, instead of focusing on the death of the car (industry), as we know it, that this scenario might inevitably herald, much of the media attention focused on the hypocrisy and environmental hubris of the fact that all the CEOs had flown in private luxury jets to Washington. "Couldn't they have at least jet-pooled?" complained one Democrat Senator (Wutkowski). In their next visit to Washington, most of them drove up in experimental vehicles still in pre-production, including plug-in hybrids. Up until that point no other manufacturing industry had been bailed out in the current financial crisis. Of course it's not the first time the automobile industries have been given government assistance. The Australian automotive industry has received on-going government subsidies since the 1980s. Most recently, PM Kevin Rudd granted a 6.2 billion dollar 'green car' package to Australian automotive manufacturers. His justification to the growing chorus of doubts about the economic legitimacy of such a move was: "Some might say it's not worth trying to have a car industry, that is not my view, it is not the view of the Australian government and it never will be the view of any government which I lead" (*The Australian*).

Amongst the many reasons for the government support of these industries must include the extraordinary interweaving of discourses of nationhood and progress with the success of the car industry. As the last few months reveal, evidently the mantra still prevails of "what's good for the country is good for GM and vice versa", as the former CEO of General Motors, Charles "Engine" Wilson, argued back in 1952 (Hirsch).

In post-industrial societies like Australia it's not only the economic aspects of the automotive industries that are criticised. Cars seem to be slowly losing their grip on identity-formation that they managed to maintain throughout "the century of the car" (Gilroy). They are no longer unproblematically associated with progress, freedom, youthfulness and absolute autonomy. The decline and eventual death of the automobile as we know it will be long, arduous and drawn-out. But there are some signs of a post-automobile society emerging, perhaps where cars will still be used but they will not dominate our society, urban space and culture in quite the same way that they have over the last 50 years. Urry discusses six transformations that might 'tip' the hegemonic system of automobility into a post-car one. He mentions new fuel systems, new materials for car construction, the de-privatisation of cars, development of communications technologies and integration of networked public transport through smart card technology and systems (Urry, *Mobilities* 281-284). As Paterson and others have argued, computers and mobile phones have somehow become "more genuine symbols of mobility and in turn progress" than the car (157). As a result, much automobile advertising now intertwines communications

technologies with brand to valorise mobility. Car sharing goes some way in not only de-privatising cars but also using smart card technology and networked systems enabling an association with mobility futures.

In *Automobile Politics* Paterson asks, "Is the car fundamentally unsustainable? Can it be greened? Has the car been so naturalised on our mobile horizons that we can't imagine a society without it?" (27). From a sustainability perspective, one of the biggest problems with cars is still the amount of space devoted to them; highways, garages, car parks. About one-quarter of the land in London and nearly one-half of that in Los Angeles is devoted to car-only environments (Urry, "Connections" 29). In Sydney, it is more like a quarter. We have to reduce the numbers of cars on our roads to make our societies livable (Newman and Kenworthy). Car sharing provokes a re-thinking of urban space. If one quarter of Sydney's population car shared and we converted this space into green use or local market gardens, then we'd have a radically transformed city.

Car sharing, not to be confused with 'ride sharing' or 'car pooling,' involves a number of people using cars that are parked centrally in dedicated car bays around the inner city. After becoming a member (much like a 6 or 12 monthly gym membership), the cars can be booked (and extended) by the hour via the web or phone. They can then be accessed via a smart card. In Sydney there are 3 car sharing organisations operating: Flexicar (<http://www.flexicar.com.au/>), CharterDrive (<http://www.charterdrive.com.au/>) and GoGet (<http://www.goget.com.au/>). [1] The largest of these, GoGet, has been operating for 6 years and has over 5000 members and 200 cars located predominantly in the inner city suburbs. Anecdotally, GoGet claims its membership is primarily drawn from professionals living in the inner-urban ring. Their motivation for joining is, firstly, the convenience that car sharing provides in a congested, public transport-challenged city like Sydney; secondly, the financial savings derived; and thirdly, members consider the environmental and social benefits axiomatic. [2] The promotion tactics of car sharing seems to reflect this by barely mentioning the environment but focusing on those aspects which link car sharing to futuristic and flexible subjectivities which I outline in the next section.

Unlike traditional car rental, the vehicles in car sharing are scattered through local streets in a network allowing local residents and businesses access to the vehicles mostly on foot. One car share vehicle is used by 22-24 members and gets about seven cars off the street (Mehlman 22). With lots of different makes and models of vehicles in each of their fleets, Flexicar's website claims, "around the corner, around the clock" "Flexicar offers you the freedom of driving your own car without the costs and hassles of owning one," while GoGet

asserts, "like owning a car only better." Due to the initial lack of interest from government, all the car sharing organisations in Australia are privately owned. This is very different to the situation in Europe where governments grant considerable financial assistance and have often integrated car sharing into pre-existing public transport networks. Urry discusses the spread of car sharing across the Western world:

Six hundred plus cities across Europe have developed car-sharing schemes involving 50,000 people (Cervero, 2001). Prototype examples are found such as Liselec in La Rochelle, and in northern California, Berlin and Japan (Motavalli, 2000: 233). In Deptford there is an on-site car pooling service organized by Avis attached to a new housing development, while in Jersey electric hire cars have been introduced by Toyota. (Urry, "Connections" 34)

'Collaborative Consumption' and Flexible, Philandering Subjectivities

Car sharing shifts the dominant conception of a car from being a 'commodity', which people purchase and subsequently identify with, to a 'service' or network of vehicles that are collectively used. It does this through breaking down the one car = one person (or one family) ratio with one car instead servicing 20 or more people. One of Paterson's biggest criticisms concerns car driving as "a form of social exclusion" (44). Car sharing goes some way in subverting the model of hyper-individualism that supports both hegemonic automobility and capitalist structures, whereby the private motorcar produces a "separation of individuals from one another driving in their own private universes with no account for anyone else" (Paterson 90).

As a car sharer, the driver has to acknowledge that this is not their private domain, and the car no longer becomes an extension of their living room or bedroom, as is noted in much literature around car cultures (Morris, Sheller, Simpson). There are a community of people using the car, so the driver needs to be attentive to things like keeping the car clean and bringing it back on time so another person can use it. So while car sharing may change the affective relationship and self-identification with the vehicle itself, it doesn't necessarily change the phenomenological dimensions of car driving, such as the nostalgic pleasure of driving on the open road, or perhaps more realistically in Sydney, the frustration of being caught in a traffic jam. However, the fact the driver doesn't own the vehicle does alter their relationship to the space and the commodity in a literal as well as a figurative way.

Like car ownership, evidently car sharing also produces its own set of limitations on freedom and convenience. That mobility and car ownership equals freedom—the ‘freedom to drive’—is one imaginary which car firms were able to successfully manipulate and perpetuate throughout the twentieth century. However, car sharing also attaches itself to the same discourses of freedom and pervasive individualism and then thwarts them. For instance, GoGet in Sydney have run numerous marketing campaigns that attempt to contest several ‘self-evident truths’ about automobility. One is flexibility. Flexibility (and associated convenience) was one thing that ownership of a car in the late twentieth century was firmly able to affiliate itself with. However, car ownership is now more often associated with being expensive, a hassle and a long-term commitment, through things like buying, licensing, service and maintenance, cleaning, fuelling, parking permits, etc.

Cars have also long been linked with sexuality. When in the 1970s financial challenges to the car were coming as a result of the oil shocks, Chair of General Motors, James Roche stated that, “America’s romance with the car is not over. Instead it has blossomed into a marriage” (Rothschilds, *Paradise Lost*). In one marketing campaign GoGet asked, ‘Why buy a car when all you need is a one night stand?’, implying that owning a car is much like a monogamous relationship that engenders particular commitments and responsibilities, whereas car sharing can just be a ‘flirtation’ or a ‘one night stand’ and you don’t have to come back if you find it a hassle. Car sharing produces a philandering subjectivity that gives individuals the freedom to have lots of different types of cars, and therefore relationships with each of them: I can be a Mini Cooper driver one day and a Falcon driver the next. This disrupts the whole kind of identification with one type of car that ownership encourages. It also breaks down a stalwart of capitalism—brand loyalty to a particular make of car with models changing throughout a person’s lifetime. Car sharing engenders far more fluid types of subjectivities as opposed to those rigid identities associated with ownership of one car.

Car sharing can also be regarded as part of an emerging phenomenon of what Rachel Botsman and Roo Rogers have called “collaborative consumption”—when a community gets together “through organized sharing, swapping, bartering, trading, gifting and renting to get the same pleasures of ownership with reduced personal cost and burden, and lower environmental impact” (www.collaborativeconsumption.com). As Urry has stated, these developments indicate a gradual transformation in current economic structures from ownership to access, as shown more generally by many services offered and accessed via the web (Urry *Mobilities* 283). Rogers and Botsman maintain that this has come about through the “convergence of online social networks increasing cost consciousness and

environmental necessity." In the future we could predict an increasing shift to payment to 'access' for mobility services, rather than the outright private ownerships of vehicles (Urry, "Connections").

Networked-Subjectivities or a 'Digital Panopticon'?

Cars, no longer able on their own to signify progress in either technical or social terms, attain their symbolic value through their connection to other, now more prevalently 'progressive' technologies. (Paterson 155)

The term 'digital panopticon' has often been used to describe a dystopian world of virtual surveillance through such things as web-enabled social networking sites where much information is public, or alternatively, for example, the traffic surveillance system in London whereby the public can be constantly scrutinised through the centrally monitored cameras that track people's/vehicle's movements on city streets. In his "sociologies of the future," Urry maintains that one thing which might save us from descending into post-car civil chaos is a system governed by a "digital panopticon" mobility system. This would be governed by a nexus system "that orders, regulates, tracks and relatively soon would 'drive' each vehicle and monitor each driver/passenger" (Urry, "Connections" 33). The transformation of mobile technologies over the last decade has made car sharing, as a viable business model, possible. Through car sharing's exploitation of an online booking system, and cars that can be tracked, monitored and traced, the seeds of a mobile "networked-subjectivity" are emerging.

But it's not just the technology people are embracing; a cultural shift is occurring in the way that people understand mobility, their own subjectivity, and more importantly, the role of cars. *NETT Magazine* did a feature on car sharing, and advertised it on their front cover as "GoGet's web and mobile challenge to car owners" (May 2009). Car sharing seems to be able to tap into more contemporary understandings of what mobility and flexibility might mean in the twenty-first century. In their marketing and promotion tactics, car sharing organisations often discursively exploit science fiction terminology and generate a subjectivity much more dependent on networks and accessibility (158). In the suburbs people park their cars in garages. In car sharing, the vehicles are parked not in car bays or car parks, but in publically accessible 'pods', which promotes a futuristic, sci-fi experience. Even the phenomenological dimensions of swiping a smart card over the front of the windscreen to open the car engender a transformation in access to the car, instead of

through a key. This is service-technology of the future while those stuck in car ownership are from the old economy and the "century of the car" (Gilroy).

The connections between car sharing and the mobile phone and other communications technologies are part of the notion of a networked, accessible vehicle. However, the more problematic side to this is the car under surveillance. Nic Lowe, of his car sharing organisation GoGet says, "Because you're tagged on and we know it's you, you are able to drive the car... every event you do is logged, so we know what time you turned the key, what time you turned it off and we know how far you drove ... if a car is lost we can sound the horn to disable it remotely to prevent theft. We can track how fast you were going and even how fast you accelerated ... track the kilometres for billing purposes and even find out when people are using the car when they shouldn't be" (Mehlman 27). The possibility with the GPS technology installed in the car is being able to monitor speeds at which people drive, thereby fining then every minute spent going over the speed limit. While this conjures up the notion of the car under surveillance, it is also a much less bleak scenario than "a Hobbesian war of all against all".

Conclusion: "Hundreds of Cars, No Garage"

The prospect of climate change is provoking innovation at a whole range of levels, as well as providing a re-thinking of how we use taken-for-granted technologies. Sometime this century the one tonne, privately owned, petrol-driven car will become an artefact, much like Sydney trams did last century. At this point in time, car sharing can be regarded as an emerging transitional technology to a post-car society that provides a challenge to hegemonic automobile culture. It is evidently not a radical departure from the car's vast machinic complex and still remains a part of what Urry calls the "system of automobility". From a pro-car perspective, its networked surveillance places constraints on the free agency of the car, while for those of the deep green variety it is, no doubt, a compromise. Nevertheless, it provides a starting point for re-thinking the foundations of the privately-owned car. While Urry makes an important point in relation to a society moving from ownership to access, he doesn't take into account the cultural shifts occurring that are enabling car sharing to be attractive to prospective members: the notion of networked subjectivities, the discursive constructs used to establish car sharing as a thing of the future with pods and smart cards instead of garages and keys. If car sharing became mainstream it could have radical environmental impacts on things like urban space and pollution, as well as the dominant culture of "automobile dependence" (Newman and Kenworthy), as

Australia attempts to move to a low carbon economy.

Notes

[1] My partner Bruce Jeffreys, together with Nic Lowe, founded Newtown Car Share in 2002, which is now called GoGet.

[2] Several layers down in the 'About Us' link on GoGet's website is the following information about the environmental benefits of car sharing: "GoGet's aim is to provide a reliable, convenient and affordable transport service that: allows people to live car-free, decreases car usage, improves local air quality, removes private cars from local streets, increases patronage for public transport, allows people to lead more active lives" (<http://www.goget.com.au/about-us.html>).

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