

# THE VEHICLE AS A MEMORY VESSEL



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# **The Vehicle As a Memory Vessel**

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## Abstract

We often see vehicles as normal daily objects, but our human relationship with vehicles runs deeper than we think. Whether or not we are into vehicles, the connections we have built with them are deeply intertwined into our personal lives and society. But how do our personal connections with vehicles look like?

The research in this essay focuses on unravelling the emotional complexities inherent in human-vehicle interactions, with a particular emphasis on understanding the impact of emotions on driving behaviour and our attitudes towards vehicular existence. As cars and motorcycles are closely intertwined with my own life, I am using an autoethnographic approach in my writing. I am combining personal experiences and stories with literature and research theories. The narrative of this essay is shaped by several key elements drawn from my own sensory experiences related to my fear of driving. Through these key elements I will explore themes of community, anxiety, isolation, control, gender, the vehicle as a bodily and mental extension, and human-technology symbiosis.

In addition to addressing my personal experiences and connected theories, I aim to identify different elements to propose opportunities for transformative growth and understanding. The purpose of my research as an artist is not only to facilitate healing for myself, but also to offer insights that may be valuable for policymakers, mobility scientists, urban planners, and automotive manufacturers. Ultimately, I seek to encourage the development of mobility solutions that prioritize emotional resonance around user-centered design.

*Keywords: Human-Machine Symbiosis, Emotional Connections, Vehicles, Cars, Fear of Driving, Community, Isolation, Space Taking, Gender*



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## 01 **Driven by connection** (About the past)

In my family a lot of time is spent with vehicles, during jobs, free evenings, weekends, and days off. It is a way to earn money, learn, discover, have fun, be active, de-stress, and connect with friends and new people. For as long as I can remember, growing up in the house I did, people constantly came and went. They would drop by to have a look at my family and friends working on their vehicles, to just say hello, to lend a hand with tinkering on one of the vehicles, or to share a beer at the end of the day. Some of these people passing by are so familiar with our home that they knew where to find the fridge with the beers, and would settle down comfortably on the couch. "*Doe alsof je thuis bent*", which means "*My home is your home*", is the guiding principle at my family home.

They share their home to foster a small community; a home influenced by other people who are part of the vehicle subculture. The continuous movement of people in and out of our home added a flow of stories and conviviality. Some brought knowledge with them, others came to seek advice. But what does it mean to share a home? According to Bachelard (2014) the house can be used to analyse the soul; our current and forgotten memories. And that by remembering these 'houses' and 'rooms' we learn to abide within ourselves. (p. 21) When others engage in such an intimate shared setting like a house, it could create a collective reflection. When we share our experiences, dreams, and fears it adds to the collective brain that is being created. As knowledge is shared and advice sought the common thread of this community will stay; the vehicle is celebrated as a protagonist. Celebrating these events at our home made it a safe place where I could be my authentic self and was surrounded by a positive atmosphere. From a young age, I mainly have experienced positive things related to vehicles, both within the community and with family as well as personally. However, not too long ago, for me, there was a turning point. What I love to do became hard to love.

# FAMILY PORTRAIT

DAD



MOM





ME



BROTHER



## **02** Sensing the drive *(About the turnaround)*

For a while now, I sometimes experience the fear of driving. When I have periods with a bit more stress, the things that my mind cannot process anymore will manifest in my body. I experience vague bodily complaints that make me feel foggy and it is consuming my dopamine. When I feel like this, I know my body will react at unexpected moments. This will most of the time manifest itself as anxiety when I am driving.

A few years ago, I experienced a panic attack on the highway. I was on my way to work and had to cross a high bridge. At the time, I did not understand what was happening to me. I started to hyperventilate, my muscles tensed up, and an overwhelming fear washed over me. Crossing the bridge while driving the car felt like an extreme threat. In a rushed decision, I pulled over to the emergency lane just before the bridge. When I stopped I was breathing heavily, almost as if I had been running. In a small fraction of time, I noticed another vehicle behind me. It was a van from Rijkswaterstaat, the Dutch Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management. The driver of the van knocked on my window and asked me to step out of the car. He asked me if I was all right. For the first time, without fully understanding my feelings, I cried. I told him I did not feel all right and that I felt overwhelmed by stress. He comforted me, telling me that it was okay, and began to talk me through the panic attack. Towards the end of the conversation he mentioned that he had experienced something similar himself.

Having this conversation with him felt like a validation of my feelings, which brought me comfort. After a few minutes, I began to feel a bit better. The man suggested to drive to a safer place; a nearby fuel station past the bridge. At this major highway there were digital road signs above each lane that could indicate numbers for speed limits, but also signs with a cross that could indicate that the lane should not be used. To help me transition from the emergency lane back to the busy highway, the man displayed a cross on the sign above the lane next to the emergency lane. This was a signal to other drivers to not use that

lane, creating space for me to merge back into traffic. Once he signalled and ensured it was safe, after a few doubts, I merged into the lane. I finally crossed the bridge and safely reached the fuel station. We parked there and he suggested that I should call someone to pick me up. I called my mom, who was at home alone. She could not reach me without using another vehicle, so she decided to come on her motorcycle and drive ahead of me on the way back. While I waited for my mom, the man from Rijkswaterstaat said farewell and continued his day. Just as my mom arrived, he returned to check if I had left. My mom and I expressed our gratitude for helping me, and we decided to drive back home. My mom drove in front of me with her motorcycle. The whole journey I could not help but cry. I felt a deep sense of shame. Until that point in my life I had always enjoyed driving, but this incident showed me that I also can have experiences where I am unable to do so.

*The ConVairCar by Henry Dreyfuss (1974) is an example of how I would describe my feelings.*



When I experience a fear of driving, it is like all my senses are turned up to the max and I end up not understanding what I am feeling anymore. At that moment, I am having a hard time figuring out my emotions because I am feeling way too much at once. That is why, when it comes to feeling at ease in a vehicle, so many things matter to me: how I perceive things while being inside the vehicle, the smell inside the vehicle, how warm or cool it is in the vehicle, the way the vehicle moves and vibrates, the materials the vehicle is made of, the shapes of the vehicle, and also which sounds the vehicle makes. My senses play a crucial role in how I navigate while driving and how I interact with these objects in the world. During some moments when I experience a fear of driving, certain senses stand out. For example, the sensation of being trapped on the road, especially during heavy traffic, in the worst case in a traffic jam. Also, I do feel an intense sense of isolation in certain cars and I am hyperaware of both my physical presence and my chaotic thoughts.

A thought that often crosses my mind is from Spoerl (1961), who argues that it is not the vehicle that is dangerous but the driver themselves (p. 176) There are moments when I feel the vehicle is beyond my control, leading me to question my agency. Spoerl's perspective is in contrast to my experiences, encouraging me to contemplate the actions I apply to this object and their resulting consequences, which are largely influenced by my own emotions and sensory experiences. This motivates me to delve deeper into understanding my interactions with this object.





## **03** Cocooning in metal *(About the isolation)*

During that same period as my first panic attack, I was on my way to work for an artist in Amsterdam in the evening, approximately an hour's drive away from my home. On my way there, still in the daylight, I grappled with the same fears. To cope with these fears, I frequently put up the volume of my car's music. It brought comfort to my overwhelming emotions.

At the end of the evening, when we were almost done with our job for the artist, we noticed music on repeat coming from outside. We looked through the window into the darkness; we had a view of the industrial area's parking lot where the artist's studio was located. Through the drizzle we spotted a lone car with its interior lights on, and inside the car a big haze of smoke. Inside that vehicle, which had a melancholic tune of an American folk song on repeat, we observed a person with coloured balloons that were expanding and contracting. This individual isolated themselves for a few hours, with loud music on repeat, getting high by utilizing helium-filled balloons. The person in this car, surrounded by a haze and repetitive music, made me sad. It was not just a figure in a car; they embodied a profound sense of sadness and isolation.

Bijsterveld (2010) portrays the car radio as a tool that provides companionship to a person who is alone in the car. It becomes an instrument within a cocoon, helping people mentally distance themselves from the outside world. The music inside this isolated space allows you to shape an atmosphere. Cranking up the volume lets you tune out the car's noises and movements, and makes you drift away in your thoughts. It makes me ponder how altering the space's focus towards personal isolation impacts your actions and the relationship between you and the vehicle.

Developments in contemporary electronic automobiles involve the intentional design of the engine's sound and the interior ambiance of

the car. For example, car designers aim to replicate silence in cars as it is considered to create a more pleasant, safe, and enjoyable driving environment. In an article about Rolls-Royce Valdes-Dapena (2020) discusses the Rolls-Royce '*Ghost model*', and highlights how designers faced the task of mimicking the ideal sound of silence. However, the prototypes encountered challenges as the vehicle turned out 'too' quiet. Leading to issues such as individuals losing their sense of movement orientation. I have come to realize that modern (electric) cars evoke a bigger sense of fear in me compared to vintage cars. Growing up around vintage cars allowed me to physically connect with them through the vibrations and the distinct sounds they produced. Driving a vintage car demanded more manual involvement, engaging my sense of orientation in a symphony of vibrational feedback and auditory cues with every action required to move the car forward. In such an environment, for me, there is less room for the mind to wander. The quietness in the Rolls-Royce '*Ghost model*' also led to issues where individuals became uncomfortably aware of sounds like their own breathing or the subtle friction of clothing against the interior surfaces (Valdes-Dapena, 2020). Upon reflection, I catch myself holding my breath during my panic attacks. An attempt to silence the sensations, only to find that this amplified my hyper-awareness. In some cases, I compulsively played music on repeat. Creating a musical escape in my cocoon calmed me down. It temporarily took my mind off upsetting and unwanted emotions.

During the stressful beginning of my anxiety, someone decided to park in front of my house at midnight. The person in this car turned up their volume very high, creating a loud echoing symphony that bounced off the surrounding buildings. The same sentence from the same song was repeated: "*I want my kisses back, I want my kisses back.*" It was repeated manually and this person managed to repeat this sentence precisely over and over again. It kept on going till the early hours of the morning. After a while, when they finally had quit the music, I managed to have a few hours of quiet sleep. But I found myself having to wake up early again. When I stepped out the door of my home, the car was still there. It was a light blue car, the windows were fogged up and were

were covered with silver anti-freeze sheets on the inside. It seemed like a heartbroken and intimate space. I could not help but sense that the individual in the car was navigating through a haze of lovestruck and sadness, encapsulated within their cocoon. The big contrast of the morning silence made me reflect on the compulsive and repetitive nighttime behaviour of this person. The repetitive noise, the fog, and the emotional message of the music in a small space influenced the atmosphere of this car. A human with its sad energy housing the metal cocoon, making the car its own entity.

*"I want my kisses back!"*





MY HOME



YOUR HOME



## 04 Taking space

(About societal and personal ideals)

Lupton (1999) mentions that a sense of space and the freedom to move is important to the populations of Western societies. These attributes are reproduced and intensified by advertising and marketing strategies around cars, which frequently employ terms and images denoting freedom, power, autonomy, success, potency (sexual and otherwise), and mastery. The irony of the mass-produced and mass-consumed car, however, is that in its accessibility, it has resulted in city streets being choked with traffic. We are shaping society by moving ourselves around in vehicles, just for our contribution to the economy and personal importance. Illich (2001) suggests a method for a multidimensional balance of human life that can serve as a framework for evaluating man's relation to his tools. In each of the several dimensions of this balance it is possible to identify a natural scale. Because when an enterprise grows beyond a certain point on this scale, it first frustrates the end for which it was originally designed, and then rapidly becomes a threat to society itself. He also claims that these scales must be identified, and the parameters of human behaviour within which human life remains viable must be explored. (p. x, xi) But how can we analyse our relationship with this tool?

Barthes (1991) describes cars as the following: *"I think that cars today are almost the exact equivalent of the great Gothic cathedrals: I mean the supreme creation of an era, conceived with passion by unknown artists, and consumed in image if not in usage by a whole population which appropriates them as a purely magical object."* (p. 81) By observing a vehicle you can capture an era by its technological advancements, aesthetics, economic conditions, and societal values. An object is a messenger, where, at the same time, you can see an absence and a perfection of an origin. What if you would analyse your vehicle? Could it tell more about your relationship with history, society, and culture?





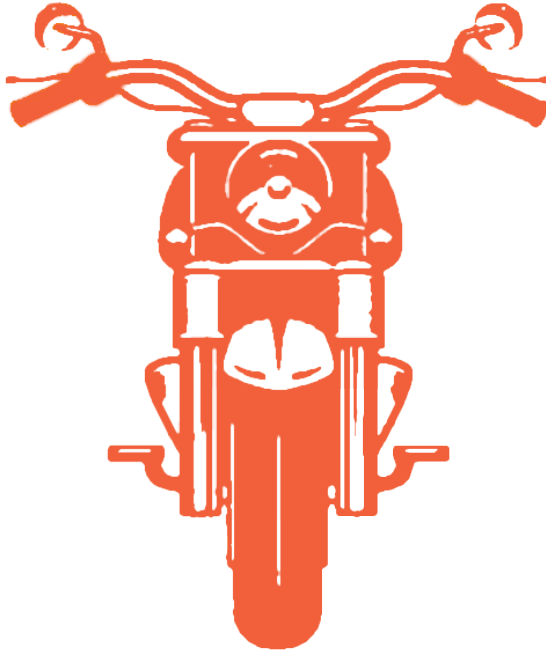
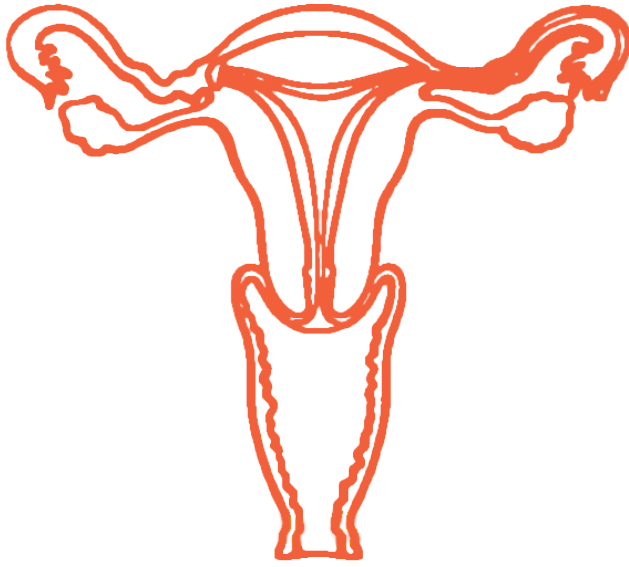
Vehicles do not only change society. As we seek to exercise our 'democratic right' to drive, it is also influencing ourselves on a personal level in how we think and what we become. It also changed me. I grew up surrounded by different kinds of motorcycles and car subcultures. But there is one I feel most attracted to. When I was 8 years old, I attended a motorcycle event with my parents and brother. The event was organized on the road of a dyke. At that age, I had no idea what to expect. That day I naively put on a t-shirt with a cute skull, that also had a small chain with diamonds embroidered on it on the left side. The first thing I saw when we entered the entrance to the event was a woman with large breasts, proudly pulling up her shirt while sitting on a motorcycle, posing for a photographer. When we walked further, there were a lot of chopper motorcycles, beards, and leather. You could also smell the smoked eel from the eel smoker everywhere. At the end of the street we entered a bar. While we were waiting in line a woman said to me: *"Nice skull on your shirt, oh! And you also already have a nipple piercing?"* And pointed to the chain of diamonds that was embroidered on my shirt just above my chest.

Growing up within these subcultures has always felt like a warm welcome. It was not until later in my life when I began driving myself, especially the motorcycle, that I noticed a shift in my perception of being associated with this object's role in society. Particularly as a woman. Lupton (1999) argues that there is a strong element of eroticism inherent in the power offered by vehicles, which is related to drivers' belief that they can take charge of this power and manipulate it for their own ends. One of my earlier memories linked to this statement occurred on a dating app. Despite feeling hesitant, as I did not want to come across as too 'dominant', I did not dare to put a picture of me and my motorcycle on my profile. I decided to post the picture, as I aimed to connect with someone who shared my interests. However, I noticed a change in responses to this picture. Some responses I received, mainly from men, were: *"Hi, you seem interested in BDSM?"*, *"You have thick dick energy!"*, and *"Do you like being dominant?"*

What happens if you treat an object as something magical? In fictional stories a magical object often contains a lot of power and, depending on who owns it and how this person controls it, has a good and a bad side. It is that throughout history, people have faced exclusion from vehicles based on gender, sexuality, and ethnicity. Vehicles, blending human and machine, intertwine physical experiences with control and power. Balmar and Mellström (2019) explore the interconnectedness of car cultures, driving, and gendered identity with embodiment, space, and risk-taking. They argue a symbolic association between men, masculinity, and cars exists. And that this association is particularly part of the control of (re)production of cultural meaning relating to vehicles and the vehicle subcultures.

What could these defined meanings signify to me? As a young woman, I have certainly heard stereotypical comments pass by: *“Oh, you must be a lesbian, right?”*, *“You do not look like someone who would ride a chopper motorcycle. Do you even know how to operate this vehicle?”*, *“You must need your trailer for your horse, right?”*, *“How is it possible that you have learned to drive multiple vehicles?”* and *“Shall I reverse the car for you?”* I had not considered the control aspect of driving and vehicles before. It was someone else’s projection, image or maybe even fantasy, that made me aware of this perspective.

What makes me curious is that the rise of automated mobility disrupts not just conventional ideas about control and driving, but also the entire driving system itself. Cars and driving serve as arenas where masculinity is shaped by intimacy, technology, cyborgization, popular culture, and daily practices. In the near future, drivers may transition from active controllers to passive passengers, as the driving task shifts to car designers, engineers, and networked computers. Automated mobility not only disrupts control but also challenges the existing driving system, impacting one’s affordances, senses, thoughts, feelings, and power dynamics. This transition towards automation may lead to a re-evaluation of traditional notions of masculinity and foster a more passive relationship with vehicles. Could this also lead to a possible feminization of auto-mobility, potentially even de-gendering future vehicle cultures?





## **OS** The extension (About the psychical structures)

When we drive a car, it responds to our bodily movements and becomes an amplified part of our body. We become 'enhanced humans'. Cars tend to be thought of as part of the body. I can connect to this thought with a specific car in mind. I used to drive a dark-green vintage car. I adored that car. The square shapes, the sound, the functionality, and especially all the road trips I got to experience in it together with my friends. I knew its shape, vibrations, sound, and operation by heart. It fit me like a perfect piece of clothing. What I loved most about this car were the rear windows. The previous owner of the car had a child with Down syndrome. When my family bought the car the windows were still in good condition. However, after we paid for it and came to pick it up a few days later, we discovered the child had scratched into the two rear windows with a sharp object. This child had imparted a piece of their experience with it, perhaps a sort of a final goodbye. I imagined it as a kind of artwork. The scratches as a piece of jewellery added to this piece of clothing.

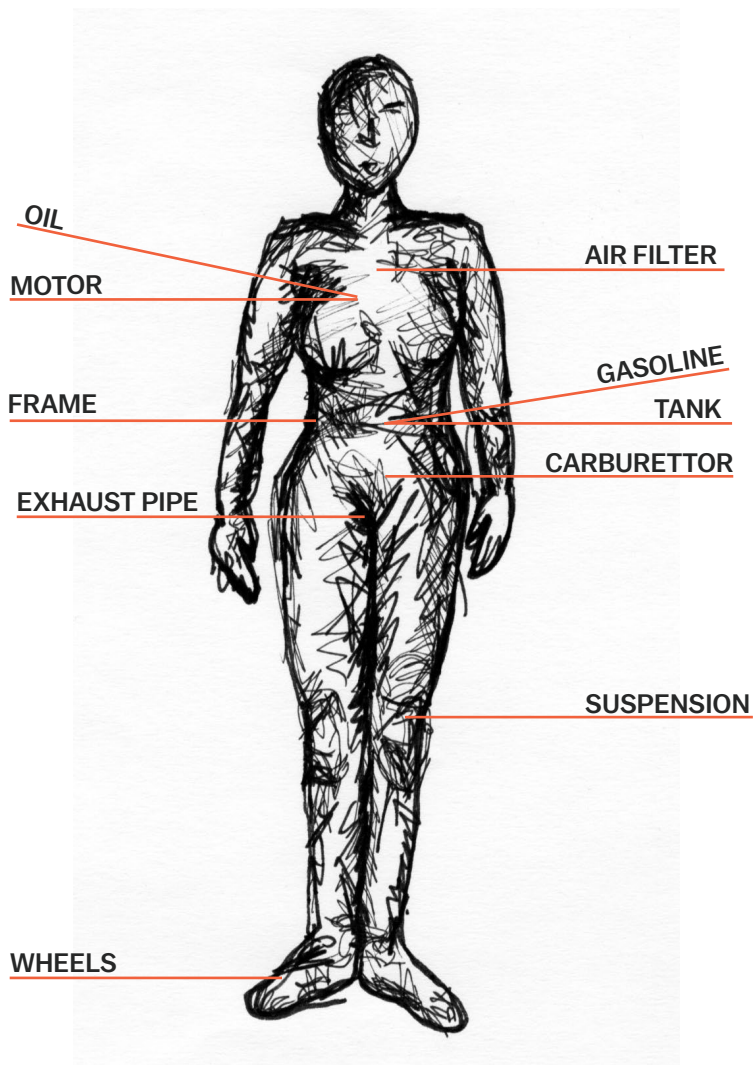
My father once bought another dark-green vintage car to trade. It had a less pleasant history. The vehicle had been acquired by a dealer specializing in items from individuals who had passed away and were left without any friends or family willing to inherit their belongings. When we arrived to collect the car, it still contained very personal and detailed objects of its previous owner. It made me very uncomfortable. It was obvious by the belongings that this person was very lonely and had bad interests. To refurbish the car, we cleaned it out and threw away his personal belongings. After it was refurbished, we went for a test drive. On the way the car faltered. It created a moment of silence as we were listening for what could be going on. *"To the roadside!"* my father yelled. And there we were, at the side of the motorway in the grass. My door was stuck, but we saw that the wheel had fallen off once we got out. The bolts had come loose. From the shock, I hugged my father. Even before I could notice, the car was already on a jack and my father took three bolts from the other wheels so that he could

mount the wheel that had come off. And so, we drove home again. On the way back I mentioned that I was shocked, to which my father replied: *"It can happen, we just go on, another little lesson in life."* After this event I knew for sure, I did not want to drive this car anymore. Both the history of the car and the repeating negative events made me unsure about taking this car on the road. I felt a disconnection in the relationship between me and this object.

Lupton (1999) states that we tend to project fantasies of perfection upon the car, as a superhuman body, which could make us feel more powerful. The idea of human and non-human creatures in (spiritual) myths, stories, movies, and games is deeply intertwined. The horror/sci-fi movie *'Titane'* by Julia Ducournau (2021) explores the complex relationship between the human body and machines. Through its narrative, Ducournau suggests that the human body can be both vulnerable and resilient, capable of adapting and even merging with technology in unexpected ways. The boundaries between organic and mechanical are blurred, raising questions about the future of human-machine interactions. In what ways do we portray the vulnerability and resilience of the human body concerning machinery? Mayer (2018) mentions that Western doctors used to see the body as a machine made up of separate parts. Now, we are realizing that our bodies and brains are influenced by many factors, like our lifestyle and environment. Instead of treating each part independently, we understand that they work together as a whole. Before, if something went wrong, we would just try to fix or replace the broken part without really understanding why it happened. But the machines we used to base this idea on, like cars and planes from forty years ago, did not have the advanced technology we have today. They did not even consider the role of the brain. As technology has improved, our understanding of the body has changed too. (pp. 15-16)

What if we turn around the concept of the vehicle as an extension of the body, to the body as an extension of the vehicle? Would our perceptions and behaviours towards vehicles change? Taylor (2021) mentions that if we would engage with our bodies as if they were

vehicles, they would merely be a tool to get through the day. Like cars, we would pay attention to our bodies only when necessary, refuelling them with food and occasionally taking them to the 'shop' when something seemed off. But this approach is not sustainable. Unlike cars, our bodies are not replaceable; they are not disposable. (p. 95) If we would reconsider our mindset towards our bodies, could that transform our experiences with the vehicle?











## **06** The movement *(About the mental infrastructures)*

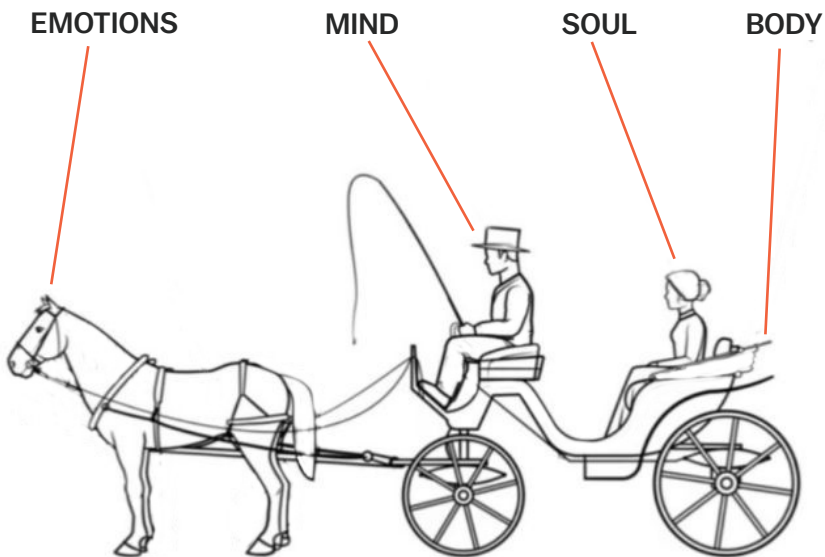
When I think about driving, I have noticed how it affects what I do and who I am. While cars can be risky and harm the environment, they also bring happiness and a sense of freedom. Balmar and Mellström (2019) say that to understand why cars are still popular, we need to consider people's emotional connections with them. Personally, feeling both happy and scared while driving helped me see things differently. It was fear that made me take a step back from the pleasure of it all. Experiencing these mixed feelings made me think about my experiences in a new way.

My happiest times in the car were as a child. Despite some long rides, it was cosy and nice to sit in the back and pass the time. I was transported without having to do anything, and there was a sense of safety being in the back of my parents' car. This sentiment is echoed in an advertisement mentioned by Lupton (1999). In this advertisement from a car brand they compared the interior of the car with that of the human uterus. The advertisement was withdrawn after complaints. As it used to be a close-up of a heavily pregnant woman's naked stomach to symbolically represent the car in question, arguing that the car was as safe, secure, and comfortable for its occupants as the uterus is for a fetus. What if we are not only enclosed within the body of a car when we drive it, but we are also one with the car, just as fetuses are with the person who carries them? Unlike fetuses, however, as drivers, we have far more control over the (metal) body that encases us. This comparison reminded me about symbiotic entanglements that can develop from mother to child during pregnancies. Even though we do not consciously remember our time in our mother's womb, we can somewhat imagine how safe we felt inside the womb or develop a symbiotic trauma transferred by our mother.

This symbiosis raises the following question for me: can a personal connection leave an imprint on an object? At my family's house the people that came over not only brought their tales, but also their

vehicle; a mechanical companion that has been with them through thick and thin. In an interview with Kukielski (2023) Daniel Lind-Ramos mentioned: *“To take care of an object is to take care of a memory.”* The more you interact with a vehicle, the more memories you will associate with this machine. Through time the vehicle essentially becomes a large memory vessel. Where the memories create an entity with this object throughout our decisions and experiences.

From the moment I saw the dark-green vintage car at the seller it sent shivers down my spine. My impressions of the car were loaded with negativity, casting a grim atmosphere around it. As we approached it, we noticed all the personal belongings. Between the mess there was a work pass with a passport photo and personal details of the previous owner. At that moment, I found myself imagining a persona, pieced together from the objects that had remained within the car and all the clues they offered. It was as though the spirit of the owner still lingered within the vehicle.



*The Inner Carriage Metaphor by George Ivanovich Gurdjieff.*

Spoerl (1961) mentions: *“The car only has a soul because of its driver.”* (p. 176) He is suggesting a symbiotic relationship between the driver and the vehicle, where the body, brain, and soul of the driver intertwine with the mechanics of the car. When our souls give vivacity to our bodies, the vehicle becomes like an extension of ourselves. So, the way we sit in our bodies, act inside the car, and drive on the road toward destinations, makes the connection between our mind, spirit, and the vehicle stronger.

It is the powerful interconnections between machines and humans that encompass emotional connections, memories, and a sense of self. As we navigate through our days, our experiences behind the wheel, we shape not only how we perceive ourselves, but also how we relate to the world around us. Through understanding and embracing these connections, we gain valuable insights into our existence and how we inhabit both our physical selves and the mechanical companions that accompany us on life’s adventures. Each moment spent with a vehicle leaves an imprint on our psyche, including the risk of dying and the fuel for living. If we change the dynamics of our minds and our thoughts, we also may change the ways we inhabit our bodies. By acknowledging the intricate relationship between our minds, bodies, and vehicles, we open ourselves to the possibility of transformation.



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