

Journal Title: *Wide Screen*
Vol. 9, No.1, July 2022
ISSN: 1757-3920
URL: <http://widescreenjournal.org>

PANDEMIC MODES OF AUTOMOBILITY: NAVIGATING HEALTH, SAFETY, AND ENTERTAINMENT IN QUARANTIMES

MICHAEL STOCK

Abstract: My essay examines the Pandemic-era rekindling of the romance with the automobile, making it (once again) one of the key places to access entertainment. Central to the regeneration of this love affair is the assumption that our car is a safe space, enabling mobility through a world where infection is potentially all around us. This assumption of the car as a safe space dates back almost a hundred years. For that reason, my essay is divided into two halves. In the first half I will examine the development of the automobile as both an extension of the home and the self, utilizing a phenomenological lens informed by the work of Gaston Bachelard and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In the second half, I will then examine how these ideas have shaped our conception of the automobile as one of the few (and favorite) safe spaces during the Pandemic – providing a unique bubble of health and safety in which we have been able to navigate a world many have perceived as infected and unsafe.

Look, in the moment of safety, people want to stay in their cars.
- Randy Garutti, Shake Shack CEO¹

The last drive-thru boom was in the 1970s.
The next one could be in the 2020s.
- Amelia Lucas, *CNBC*²

The car is a house.
- Roland Barthes³

For the first nineteen years of the 21st century it looked as if the automobile industry was doomed. Between bankruptcies, bailouts, layoffs and closures, to many it seemed just a matter of time. But then came 2020...and with it the coronavirus pandemic...and suddenly the automobile has become more important than it has been in *decades*. And not in entirely

¹ Amelia Lucas, "Pandemic sparks a Building Boom for Restaurant Drive-Thrus," *CNBC* (August 5, 2020). <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/08/05/coronavirus-pandemic-sparks-a-building-boom-for-restaurant-drive-thrus.html>. [Accessed December 16, 2020.]

² Ibid.

³ Roland Barthes, "Mythologie de l'automobile: la voiture projection de l'ego," *Réalités* 213 (October, 1963), 96.

new ways. Between the surprising rebirth of the drive-in movie theater, drive-in (or drive-thru) restaurants and the ever-increasing reliance on delivery culture, automobility is more central to entertainment and leisure than it has ever been – especially in the United States. As one *Washington Post* writer recently quipped: “If the response to the pandemic has been dysfunctionally American, perhaps the solution, playing off a love of the automobile can be quintessentially American.”⁴

Central to this Pandemic-era regeneration of the love affair with the automobile is the assumption that our car is a safe space, enabling mobility through a world where infection is potentially all around us. This notion of safety is not a new assumption. But rather an idea that began developing almost a hundred years ago. For that reason, my essay is divided into two halves. In the first half I will examine the development of the automobile as both an extension of the home and the self, utilizing a phenomenological lens informed by the work of Gaston Bachelard and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In the second half, I will then examine how these ideas have shaped our conception of the automobile as one of the few (and favorite) safe spaces during the Pandemic – providing a unique bubble of health and safety in which we have been able to navigate a world many have perceived as infected and unsafe.

The Origins of Automobility (And the Nest in the Shell)

For the first two generations of drivers (in the late 19th and early 20th centuries) the experience of automobility was an open-aired affair – a thrilling experience of being propelled through an environment while sitting *on* a machine. While the first enclosed automobile appeared in 1898 in the form of the Winton Automobile, and the 1906 Cadillac was the first mass-produced automobile with an enclosed interior, it wasn't until 1928, with the Hudson Essex, that the first truly affordable automobile with an enclosed interior hit the streets.⁵ With the standardization of the cab or cockpit that quickly followed, the automobile began to be conceived as having both an interior and an exterior – a soft nest that provided comfort inside a hard shell that provided safety. With this change came a resulting paradigm

⁴ Steven Zeitchik, “This is What Going to a Splashy New Movie Outside Your House Feels Like Right Now,” *The Washington Post* (October 16, 2020). <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/10/16/drive-in-movies-pandemic/>. [Accessed December 11, 2020.]

⁵ See Steven Parissien, *The Life of the Automobile* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2013) for an excellent history of the automobile,

shift where the traveler was now understood to be sitting *inside* the machine, and for the first time there was a certain sense of security being *within* one's automobile. Once behind the wheel the automobile seemed to offer an affirmation of self, becoming simultaneously an extension of the home and something close to a second skin transforming the driver into one's *auto-self*. While historian Cotton Seiler gives credit for this shift almost single-handedly to Alfred P. Sloan's advertising department at General Motors, which "explicitly invited consumers to link the sovereignty, speed, and thrill of the automobile to the expression of their gendered and classed identities,"⁶ it is the act of driving itself, i.e. being an active participant in automobility, that delivered and continues to deliver these sensations.

When the word "automobility" was first coined in 1896 it simply referred to the use of automobiles as the major means of transportation. Although the term originates alongside the first generation of automobiles, it was largely forgotten and unused until around the turn of the 21st century when Sociologists re-introduced it as part of their broader and ongoing examination of mobilities in general. The term now has a much broader definition, referring to the series of interrelated systems stemming from and connected to the automobile, including but not limited to transportation, the environment, social customs and popular culture. Literary scholar Sidonie Smith describes automobility as "the configuration of people, machines, landscape, urban geography, and culture that attends the increasing dependence upon the gas engine for transport in industrial and postindustrial societies."⁷ For communications scholar, Jeremy Packer, automobility refers to "the increased mobility that automobiles and other forms of personal motorized transportation allow," and "the increasingly automatic nature of mobility," as well as "the increased singularity and insularity that automobiles allowed for," all of which result in an "organization of society."⁸ Sociologist John Urry argues that "automobility can be conceptualized as a self-organizing, autopoietic, non-linear system that spreads worldwide and includes cars, Driver-Cars, roads, petroleum supplies and many novel objects, technologies and signs."⁹ For Cotton Seiler, historian and scholar of cultural studies, automobility is an example of what Michel Foucault

⁶ Cotton Seiler, *Republic of Drivers: A Cultural History of Automobility in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 5-6.

⁷ Sidonie Smith, *Moving Lives: Twentieth-Century Women's Travel Writing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 185.

⁸ Jeremy Packer, *Mobility Without Mayhem: Safety, Cars and Citizenship* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008), 293, 2.

⁹ John Urry, "The System of Automobility," *Theory, Culture, and Society* 21.4/5 (2004), 27.

called a *dispositif* – “a multifaceted, coordinating network of power [...] that comprises a ‘multilinear ensemble’ of commodities, bodies of knowledge, laws, techniques, institutions, environments, nodes of capital, sensibilities, and modes of perception.”¹⁰ As Seiler sees it, it was the sensations a driver felt of “agency, self-determination, entitlement, privacy, sovereignty, transgression, and speed [that] were instrumental in establishing automobility as a public good and thereby ensuring its growth as an apparatus.”¹¹

“The car is a house,”¹² Roland Barthes declared in 1963. For Barthes, the car was a reflection of self,¹³ just as surely as phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard had described of the house just five years earlier: “A house constitutes a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability.”¹⁴ For Bachelard, writing in 1958, the house was still the home, and the preeminent safe space that both embodied dreams and enabled daydreaming. In *The Poetics of Space*, he declares the “house image would appear to have become the topography of our intimate being.”¹⁵ For Bachelard, this body of images included the attic, closets, drawers, even the very verticality of the house. “Verticality is ensured by the polarity of cellar and attic, the marks of which are so deep that, in a way, they open up two very different perspectives for a phenomenology of the imagination,” he explains.¹⁶

But so too does the car reflect on our stability – either solid or illusory, moving or still. The seats, steering wheel, glove compartment, trunk, roof, mats; even the very vertical organization of the automobile speaks to us and reflects on our being. What Bachelard explains with regard to the house as home is equally true of the automobile, where so many feel at home: “A roof tells its *raison d’être* right away: it gives mankind shelter from the rain and sun he fears. [...] Up near the roof all our thoughts are clear. [...] As for the cellar [...] it is first and foremost the *dark entity* of the house, the one that partakes of subterranean forces. When we dream there, we are in harmony with the irrationality of the depths.”¹⁷ For the automobile, of course, the polarity of cellar and roof instead becomes the juxtaposition of the wheels and the roof and their relationship to what lies beyond the automobile, above and

¹⁰ Cotton Seiler, *Republic of Drivers*, 5-6.

¹¹ Cotton Seiler, *Republic of Drivers*, 41.

¹² Roland Barthes, “Mythologie de l’automobile: la voiture projection de l’ego,” 96. t

¹³ The title of Barthes’ 1963 article translates in English as “The Car As Ego Projection.”

¹⁴ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, Trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994 [1964]), 17.

¹⁵ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, xxxii.

¹⁶ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 17.

¹⁷ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 18.

below – the road and the sky. The boundaries of the automobile, though blurred by perception enabled by the windscreen and windows, still have distinct categories of interior and exterior with regards to embodiment, same as that of those of the house. As Bachelard describes of the house is also true of the automobile: on the outside, there is the shell; on the inside, there is the nest.

In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard returns repeatedly to the nest as a model for our own homes, which is an equally applicable model to consider when interrogating the interior space of the automobile. Bachelard's goes to great length examining a work from the 19th century devoted to "bird architecture" – Jules Michelet's 1858 book, *L'oiseau* – applying Michelet's insights regarding the phenomenological aspects of a bird's nest to a human being's home. Bachelard starts with its construction, and Michelet's insight that "in reality [...], a bird's tool is its own body," which in turn, is key to its comfort.¹⁸ But so too is that comfort built from discomfort. Here, Bachelard quotes Michelet: "The house is a bird's very person; it is its form and its most immediate effort, I shall even say, its suffering."¹⁹ Bachelard then goes on to point out that a nest is "a house built by and for the body, taking form from the inside, like a shell, in an intimacy that works physically. The form of the nest is commanded from the inside."²⁰

In the 21st century the interiors of our automobiles remain simultaneously our command center and refuge. The cockpit of the car offers us a degree of invisibility (and anonymity) and nearly three-hundred-and-sixty degrees of potential view on our seemingly infinite mobility. But at the same time, we are held in place by our seatbelts, held tight in the case of any sudden moves, held in place for all to see (from the shoulders up anyway, and depending on the tint of your windows and the elevation of the road). Offering stillness and movement, visibility and anonymity, safety and danger, the space of the automobile is in consistent flux, constant contradiction. With each use of the muscles, our human strength is multiplied by the exoskeleton of the automobile. Apply a few degrees of pressure to your right foot, and your velocity increases from zero to 60mph in a manner of seconds. A subtle shift in ankle flexibility and downward pressure finds us careening to a halt in half the time. Consider the empowerment of just these two basic proponents of propulsion in automobility,

¹⁸ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 100.

¹⁹ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 101.

²⁰ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 101.

then consider the psychology this engenders: super-speed and invulnerability, encased in metal.

Of course this is all assuming you are behind the wheel: at the helm, the driver, the pilot. If you are a passenger, then the goal is comfort, and therein lies another form of empowerment. Instead of pedals you have legroom. Room to stretch out. Relax. Do whatever you want as you are driven. The balance of power gives way as easily as that. Wherever we are seated in the nest, the interior of the car provides a space for thought and reflection; for our interiority, in effect, to stretch out. In the world of automobility it is the shell that keeps us safe. It is also the dividing point, the defining line, of interior and exterior; a hardened skin that ensures the safety of our own flesh and bone nestled inside, vulnerable, easily broken. As Bachelard describes of the home, so is true of our home on wheels, the automobile:

Thus, well-being takes us back to the primitiveness of the refuge. Physically, the creature endowed with a sense of refuge, huddles up to itself, takes to cover, hides away, lies snug, concealed. If we were to look among the wealth of our vocabulary for verbs that express the dynamics of retreat, we should find images based on animal movements of withdrawal, movements that are engraved in our muscles. How psychology would deepen if we could know the psychology of each muscle!²¹

[Bachelard, 1964, 91]

Although at first glance, the role of the shell seems primarily for the protection of the nest and its precious occupants inside, its purposes are mutable and multifold, differing radically depending on where you are located. For those outside the car, the shell is perceived as the car's body, a measure of the physical presence of automobility on the road. It can attract attention or render its occupants invisible (or, at least, anonymous) – depending on the style, shine, upkeep, etc.. The shell links the car to the timeline of automobile production; its lines and/or curves, in short, its *style* links it to a specific era (as exacting as a specific year to the eyes of a car connoisseur) – even as the time-space within the nest is often experienced as outside of time, or the specific time of a trip. In a city, the shell is typically experienced as one component in the community of vehicles that dominate the streets; one unit in the system of automobility. In the country, the shell is perceived as an anomaly, with the shell of metal and glass providing a cold, hard counterpoint to the organic, natural environment it moves through.

²¹ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, Trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994 [1964]), 91.

For those inside the car, the shell is perceived as a sort of exoskeleton, and particularly by the driver, as an extension of his or her physical body. It is what preserves the sanctity of the nest, and keeps other inhabitants of the road at what is perceived as a ‘safe distance.’ In his provocative and influential 2004 essay, “The Driver-Car,” sociologist Tim Dant argues that the relationship of the car and driver is symbiotic, and the combination of the car and driver acts as one body – a social being known as the “Driver-Car” that “results from the collaboration of human and machine” – not unlike the cyborg Donna Haraway famously interrogated.²² Informed by the work of phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Dant argues that there is an embodied relationship between the driver and car.

[...] For Merleau-Ponty visual perception is an orientation of the whole body to the world through which it moves. What is perceived in the visual field is complemented by the kinaesthesia of the body and its trajectory as a whole, by the sounds of the engine, the road and the wind on the car, by the resistance of steering wheel, accelerator and brakes – even the feel of the road through the wheels of the car.²³

[Dant, 2005, 62]

Described by some sociologists as a “hybrid,” by others, an “assemblage,” or even a “hybrid assemblage,” the interface of car and driver is a subject that continues to be interrogated in sociology more than anywhere else. Preferring the term “assemblage,” sociologist Tim Dant points out that while the word “hybrid” refers to the collaboration of human and object forms, the word “refers to the offspring of two species that are usually unable to reproduce whereas the Driver-Car is an assemblage that comes apart when the driver leaves the vehicle and which can be endlessly re-formed or re-assembled given the availability of the component cars and drivers.”²⁴ It is this assumption of the assemblage that enables our assumption of safety. Encased in metal and glass, we feel impervious. Something more than human, and simultaneously separate, each keeping to our own lanes – both figuratively and metaphorically.

²² Tim Dant, “The Driver-Car,” *Automobilities*, Ed. Mike Featherstone, Nigel Thrift and John Urry (London: SAGE Publications, 2005), 62. See also: Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149-182.

²³ Tim Dant, “The Driver-Car,” 72.

²⁴ Tim Dant, “The Driver-Car,” 62.

Encased in the shell on a road free of traffic, travelers can perceive themselves as the projectile both Wolfgang Schivelbusch and Paul Virilio describe, and move at great speeds.²⁵ At slower speeds, or even stopped, because of the heavy flow of traffic, it is the shell that marks your territory, preserves your precious position in a line of traffic that will get you to your destination before everyone behind you (seen in the rearview mirrors). As Kristin Ross describes in her crucial book on the rise of automobility in France, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture*, this too is a form of “liberty from social constraint that speed once promised to provide.”²⁶ The social constraints one is liberated from include the necessity of communicating with people around you (as you may feel compelled to do in a room full of people), or worrying what you say or do or even wear, within the protective confines of the nest within the shell.

No matter where we are inside the car – at the wheel, in the passenger seat, or one of the seats behind that – our experience of the automobile is a cumulative one. This sensation is both a product of lived experience and bodily memory, and this is part of our experience of automobility. Merleau-Ponty refers to this as *habit*, explaining that habituating oneself to an automobile (or a hat or cane) “is to take up residence in them, or inversely to make them participate within the voluminosity of one’s own body. Habit expresses the power we have of dilating our being in the world, or of altering our existence through incorporating new instruments.”²⁷ In the case of the automobile, Merleau-Ponty explains:

If I possess the habit of driving a car, then I enter into a lane and see that ‘I can pass’ without comparing the width of the lane to that of the fender, just as I go through the door without comparing the width of the door to that of my body. The hat and the automobile have ceased to be objects whose size and volume would be determined through a comparison with other objects. They have become voluminous powers and the necessity of a free space.²⁸

[Merleau-Ponty, 1945, 144]

²⁵ See Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: Trains and Travel in the 19th Century*. New York: Urizen, 1979; Paul Virilio, “Dromoscopy, or The Ecstasy of Enormities,” translated by Edward R. O’Neill. *Wide Angle*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (July 1998): 11-17; Paul Virilio, *The Negative Horizon: An Essay in Dromoscopy*, translated by Michael Degener. New York: Continuum, 2008; Paul Virilio and Sylvère Lotringer. *Pure War*, translated by Mark Polizzotti and Brian O’Keefe. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2008.

²⁶ Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1995), 55.

²⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Trans. Donald A. Landes (New York: Routledge, 2012 [1945]), 144-145.

²⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (2012), 144.

Even more applicable here than Merleau-Ponty's description of the car body as extension of our own is his example of the trained organist sitting down at an unfamiliar keyboard. Like the driver at the wheel, the organist "sits on the bench, engages the pedals, and pulls out the stops, he sizes up the instrument with his body, he incorporates its directions and dimensions, and he settles into the organ as one settles into a house."²⁹ Merleau-Ponty goes on to specify:

The entire problem of the habit here is to determine how the musical signification of the gesture can be condensed into a certain locality to the extent that, by entirely giving himself over to the music, the organist reaches for precisely the stops and the pedals that will actualize it. Of course, the body is eminently an expressive space. No sooner have I formed the desire to take hold of an object than already, at a point in space that I was thinking about, my hand as that power for grasping rises us toward the object.³⁰

[Merleau-Ponty, 1945, 147]

The traveler, like Merleau-Ponty's organist, activates her or his body-memory as soon as s/he gets into the car – adjusting the seat, visor, vents, seatbelt, stereo, etc. – in essence, interfacing with the car's various options, making the nest our own. Like the organist, the traveler incorporates the nest of the automobile and all its options of comfort and power into his or her bodily space, as either driver or passenger. This exact alignment of human body and car body empowers the traveler with an exoskeleton that extends his or her being-in-the-world; something more than human, s/he is now Driver-Car. As a result, it is the space of the automobile that becomes the preferred liminal space, a seemingly secure nest wrapped in a protective shell that provided a virtual living room on wheels where you could be with your family, go to the movies, go out for dinner, and of course do the shopping.

The Auto-Self Shifts to Pandemic Mode

Since the Covid-19 Pandemic began, we shop online and rely on delivery more than ever before – from mega-corporations like Amazon, Target, Wal-Mart to our local grocery stores like Von's, Ralph's and Bristol Farms. Every restaurant now has a delivery option, thanks to online services like Grub Hub, Postmates, Uber Eats, and Caviar and their fleets of tireless drivers. At the same time, restaurants with drive-thru windows have been booming, with restaurants like McDonalds, Burger King, Taco Bell and Snake Shack adding additional drive-thru lanes in 2020-21 and quickly adopting new "Go Mobile" designs encouraging no

²⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (2012), 146.

³⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (2012), 147.

contact ordering and curbside pick-up that will remain long after the Pandemic is over. As *QSR Magazine* points out in their 22nd annual report on drive-thru's: "The brands that are emerging strongest from the coronavirus pandemic are those with drive thru," indicating that access to automobility is increasingly aligned with brand recognition.³¹ On a related note, as a recent *New York Times* article points out: "Now, the drive-through, with its brightly-colored signage and ketchup-stained paper bags, has taken on a new importance in the age of social distancing."³² Many of the nation's largest restaurant chains, like McDonald's, Burger King, Taco Bell, Chipotle Mexican Grill, Shake Shack, Panera Bread, Wawa, and Starbucks, are all focusing on drive-thru construction during the Pandemic, prompting one *CNBC* story to exclaim: "The last drive-thru boom was in the 1970s. The next one could be in the 2020s."³³ So, like the 1970s, and before that in the 1950s and 1960s, the built environment of many of our urban spaces will be taking shape around the increased importance of automobility.

"Ultimately, the pandemic could provide a 'moment of redemption,' for drive-throughs," Adam Chandler, author of *Drive-Thru Dreams* (a history of fast food), pointed out in a recent *New York Times* article.³⁴ Echoing this sentiment, Shake Shack CEO Randy Garutti offered: "Look, in the moment of safety, people want to stay in their cars," as a part of his rationale for the chain adding drive-thru lanes for the first time in the company's history.³⁵ Restaurant owners aren't the only businesses expanding into the drive-thru business. California, Colorado, and, most recently, Nevada have legalized drive-thru windows for marijuana dispensaries. As Nevada state senator Tick Segerbloom reasoned, "Everybody in Las Vegas goes to In-N-Out or whatever else. What would be different about a dispensary?"³⁶

³¹ Sam Oches, "Inside the New Era for Drive Thru," *QSR* (October 2020). <https://www.qsrmagazine.com/drive-thru/drive-thrus-big-day>. [Accessed December 16, 2020.]

³² David Yaffe-Bellany, "Drive-Throughs Are Now a Lifeline for Fast-Food Chains," *The New York Times* (May 1, 2020). <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/01/business/coronavirus-fast-food-drive-throughs.html>. [Accessed December 16, 2020.]

³³ Amelia Lucas, "Pandemic sparks a Building Boom for Restaurant Drive-Thrus."

³⁴ David Yaffe-Bellany, "Drive-Throughs Are Now a Lifeline for Fast-Food Chains."

³⁵ Amelia Lucas, "Pandemic sparks a Building Boom for Restaurant Drive-Thrus."

³⁶ Blake Apgar, "Marijuana Dispensary Drive-Thru Windows Approved for Clark County," *Las Vegas Review-Journal* (August 19, 2020). <https://www.reviewjournal.com/news/politics-and-government/clark-county/marijuana-dispensary-drive-thru-windows-approved-for-clark-county-2099432/>. [Accessed December 16, 2020].

The drive-*in* restaurant is also thriving in the pandemic. As Randy Kaplan, co-owner of The Parkette drive-in in Lexington, Kentucky points out surprisedly: “This business was more of a novelty until now, but people’s mindsets are changing, and they’re re-examining things and discovering how a drive-in can be a fun way to eat out safely.”³⁷ For most states, dining rooms have been off-limits on or off for months now, but with a drive-in restaurant social distancing is built in, allowing for families and friends to “roll down their windows, keep a safe distance, ‘and eat together but apart.’”³⁸ Many terrestrial restaurants have embraced the concept, offering entertainment as part of the package, from drive-in concerts to drive-in movies to what is surely the world’s first drive-thru strip club/restaurant.³⁹ Drive-in religious services are likewise booming, with pastors, preachers and priests addressing their congregations from the front steps or roofs of their churches, looking out on their congregants in the parking lot sealed safely in their automobiles.⁴⁰ A Google search in 2022 will turn up a seemingly endless list of articles detailing, and usually marveling at the seemingly endless applications of automobility in the past two years. The list of options now accessible from the safety of your car would have been unthinkable before 2020: drive-thru communion, drive-thru confessional, drive-thru graduation, drive-thru wedding, drive-thru funeral, drive-thru naturalization ceremony, drive-thru veterinary appointments, drive-in music festival, drive-thru food bank, and the drive-by birthday party.⁴¹ In all of the drive-in/drive-thru forms of entertainment, honking your car’s horn has replaced applause, and the drive-by birthday party, similarly, involves a caravan of cars and a chorus of honking instead of song.

The only delivery service that suffered because of the Pandemic is the one dedicated to the delivery of human beings – ride-share car services like Uber and Lyft. This, too,

³⁷ Sandra Latham, “How Drive-In Restaurants Are Catering to Customers Amid the Pandemic, *Cheapism* (May 8, 2020.) <https://blog.cheapism.com/drive-in-restaurants-pandemic/>. [Accessed December 16, 2020.]

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ No, I’m not making this up. See Samantha Swindler, “A Drive-Thru Strip Club, Movie Popcorn to Go: Oregon Businesses get Creative During Coronavirus,” *The Oregonian/Oregon Live* (May 6, 2020). <https://www.oregonlive.com/living/2020/04/a-drive-thru-strip-club-movie-popcorn-to-go-oregon-businesses-get-creative-during-coronavirus.html>. [Accessed December 16, 2020.]

⁴⁰ Holly Yan and Chuck Johnston, “From Drive-In Theaters to Online Services, Churches Celebrate Easter in Safe and Creative Ways,” *CNN* (April 12, 2020). <https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/12/us/easter-church-services-trnd/index.html>. [Accessed December 16, 2020.]

⁴¹ For some pretty incredible photographs of most of these events, see: Benazir Weheilie and Marie Barbier, “How We’re Relying on Our Cars During the Pandemic,” *CNN* (June 24, 2020). <https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/07/world/gallery/drive-thrus-drive-ins-coronavirus/index.html>. [Accessed December 16, 2020.]

provides another testament to the perception of the increased insulation the nest within the shell provides. Only in this case it results in a threat to the passenger – sealing strangers inside the safety of the nest within a shell *too* close for comfort or safety. (Indeed, in the broader sense, the distrust of public places extends to all forms of public transit, upping the importance of the privatized space automobility offers all over again.)

Of course one of the most important drive-thru applications/innovations during the Pandemic was drive-thru coronavirus testing, which began in South Korea on February 23, 2020. In one of the first news pieces in the U.S. on the innovative new approach, the lead on a CNN story opened: “South Korea has come up with an innovative way of testing for the novel coronavirus – and it was inspired by the drive-through counters at McDonalds and Starbucks, officials say.”⁴² On what was probably the first television announcement of the innovative approach, CNN’s Ivan Watson reported that not only is the drive-in a quick and efficient approach, it is also safe because it limits the exposure of health care officials to the people they are testing.⁴³ Since then, it has seemed that the nest within a shell provided by automobility has never been safer – with the proof provided by the medical world’s embrace of the drive-thru model.

Here, it is as if the conception of the windshield (or, ‘windscreen,’ as it is termed in the U.K.) itself has changed...as if it has somehow...thickened. Now, not just a window on the world, but closer to the microscope, or medical screen, it ensures a safe distance from what is seen. Enabling a view that is conceived of as protected, not just from a critical distance, it is a view that can be conceived of as sterile. Travelers in the automobile assume that which is in the nest is safe behind glass, while anything outside of it could carry the virus. At the same time, those in the medical profession working at various drive-in testing sites across the world conceive of every nest as being potentially infected, and contained inside the nest. Even with the window rolled down the exchange performed between the person administering the test and the one(s) receiving it are conceiving of the time-space of the test as it is conducted both in- and outside the car as safe to all parties. Both parties in the

⁴² Ivan Watson and Sophie Jeong, “South Korea Pioneers Coronavirus Drive-Through Testing Station,” CNN (March 3, 2020). <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/02/asia/coronavirus-drive-through-south-korea-hnk-intl/index.html>. [Accessed December 16, 2020.]

⁴³ “How Drive-Through Testing Could Limit Coronavirus Contagion,” CNN (March 2, 2020). <https://www.cnn.com/videos/world/2020/03/02/coronavirus-outbreak-drive-through-testing-south-korea-watson-intl-ldn-vpx.cnn>. [Accessed December 16, 2020.]

exchange rely on the roles of the nest and the shell of the automobile to remain stable, clearly dividing and defining interior and exterior space (even with the windows down).

During the Pandemic, the automobile has reigned as an unassailable extension of the home; the safe space it provides extends to the safety of one's automobile. In the past two years, being in an automobile has been considered by most to be safer than being indoors, and arguably safer even than being outdoors. At the same time, the comfort the nest provides is now lined with an additional layer of nostalgia, which reinforces this feeling of safety. As one *New York Times* article points out, the appeal of the drive-thru is not only because "the experience of ordering a burger from behind the wheel feels more like a reasonable safety precaution than a cold transaction," but also because "to some, it also feels refreshingly normal."⁴⁴ At the same time, not only is it a reminder of pre-pandemic time spent in the drive-thru lane, but a nostalgic throwback to earlier times, when drive-thrus were introduced, or our experience of them, real or fictional, in the cinema.

The same can be said of the explosive rebirth of the drive-in movie theater. In an even more unlikely rebirth than the recent revival of vinyl records, the drive-in movie theater proved to be the only reliable option for public film exhibition in 2020.⁴⁵ Unlike the drive-in restaurant, few under the age of 60 had ever experienced a drive-in movie before 2020. So the experience for most was a throwback to times they never experienced personally, but had more likely only seen in the fictional worlds of cinema. At the drive-in movies, the time-space of the nest of the automobile is thrown back in time, suspended between a past they likely never experienced (or experienced a fictionalized version of it on screen) and a present that seems often too dark and overwhelming to be real. The comfort the drive-in movie seems to provide prompted one *Los Angeles Times* writer to describe the return of driver-in movies as: "a communal act for the age of coronavirus – that very strange time in which we

⁴⁴ David Yaffe-Bellany, "Drive-Throughs Are Now a Lifeline for Fast-Food Chains."

⁴⁵ In a move further legitimizing the drive-in theater renaissance (at least in the short term), the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences announced in October 2020 that drive-in screenings would count towards qualifying a film for the 93rd Academy Awards ceremony, April 25, 2021. Typically, the drive-in movie theater has been reserved for second runs and revivals or retro-themed films to heighten the previously-assumed retro experience, but in 2020, the drive-in theaters have proven the only reliable space for public exhibition. Just how long the Academy will extend this exception remains to be seen. (See Scott Feinberg, "Oscars: Drive-In Screenings Will Now Count Towards Eligibility," *The Hollywood Reporter* (October 7, 2020). <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/race/oscars-drive-in-screenings-will-now-count-towards-eligibility-exclusive>. [Accessed December 19, 2020.]

climb into our cars to be among other people.”⁴⁶ Alternately a Washington Post writer argued: “There’s a private-public dichotomy to drive-ins that perfectly complements this Zoom-ified moment: instead of feeling together on a computer screen while being separate, a drive-in offers the possibility of being together while feeling separate.”⁴⁷ And perhaps this too offers at least part of an explanation for the popularity and trust of the drive-in movie theatre. In other words, it appeals because it reminds them of Zoom. (Although at the same time, I would argue that some of the eagerness and ease of Zoom’s acceptance could, at least in part, be explained because of its similarity to the experience of being in traffic on a freeway.) Seen from either perspective, familiarity breeds comfort (and the assumption of safety) behind glass.

Similarly, just sharing the space of the road with other travelers is, in itself, a reminder of the pre-pandemic world, and an offering of normalcy on some level, even if the roads were less populated during the Pandemic. Spaced out on the freeway, suspended in space and time from all the cars around you, the traveler gets a simultaneous sense of safety and a sense of community that was otherwise highly absent in the world in 2020-21. Seen this way, the idea of highway safety takes on an entirely new set of meanings; in response, the nest and the shell, take on new responsibilities. The fact that just the act of driving itself (or riding along as passenger) is reassuring of normalcy, illustrates Merleau-Ponty’s *habit* at work in a somewhat different way. Returning to the instruments we know, like the automobile, activates our previous encounters with it. Automobility remains a constant, and our experience of the automobile is a cumulative one, no matter where we are inside the car – at the wheel, in the passenger seat, or one of the seats behind that. This sensation is both a product of lived experience and bodily memory, and this is part of our experience of the unique time-space of the automobile. Since 2020, that experience has perhaps been even more reassuring.

Building on the long-held conception of the automobile as a nest within a shell, the time-space of automobility has long been perceived as a bubble. This perception is crucial to

⁴⁶ Carolina A. Miranda, “Drive-Throughs and Drive-Ins Were Fading. Coronavirus Made Them a Lifeline,” *Los Angeles Times* (May 6, 2020). <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2020-05-06/coronavirus-drive-through-drive-in-were-on-the-way-out-the-pandemic-revived-them>. [Accessed December 16, 2020.]

⁴⁷ Steven Zeitchik, “This is What Going to a Splashy New Movie Outside Your House Feels Like Right Now,” *The Washington Post* (October 16, 2020). <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/10/16/drive-in-movies-pandemic/>. [Accessed December 11, 2020.]

its assumption as a safe space in all the examples above of booming auto-related service industries during the Pandemic – whether it is drive-in movies, drive-in or drive thru restaurants, drive-thru testing or vaccinations. Likewise, it also explains the dip in popularity of rideshare companies like Lyft and Uber during the Pandemic, when few felt comfortable sealed in a bubble with anyone they didn't know.

Interestingly, the model of the bubble has also been mobilized by epidemiologists and physicians in 2020-21 to conceive of the safe space necessary to avoid contagion. In the epidemiology of Covid-19, the social bubble is used to conceive of the number of people you are in contact with, mask-free, in an interior space. As Whitney Robinson, an epidemiologist at the University of North Carolina explains, the bubble evokes a concrete image of a “closed object with a defined inside and outside.”⁴⁸ With the popularization of the bubble, it soon dictated the confines of one's social space; of who you would interact with without a mask, who you would eat with, who you could safely hug. Bubbles were private; meant to be self-sustaining; and bound to the space of the home. The only place where these distinct bubbles were exposed to one another was in the car.

Conceived of itself as a bubble, the automobile was one of the few safe places social bubbles would come into contact with one another. This too might help explain the popularity of the drive-in movie experience, where not only can the bubble effect can be seen clearly, but it provides one of the few places where one bubble can see other bubbles from a safe distance. It is also one of the few locations where the usually singular time-spaces of each bubble are in sync with one another – if only for the duration of a screening. Of course, the same can be said of the experience of traffic, the drive-in theater, or for that matter, waiting in line to be tested for Covid. In each case, the occupants of each automobile were held in safe suspension from one another in a unique bubble of safe time-space, separate but equal, separate and safe.

Our experience of the time-space of automobility is inextricably tied to our habits in driving. Here, I mean both the habit of driving (in Merleau-Ponty's sense, discussed earlier), but also the habit of certain trips: repeated journeys to work or the store or the cinema, our favorite restaurants or bars or bookshops. These places we know are most often accompanied

⁴⁸ Rachel Gutman, “Sorry to Burst Your Quarantine Bubble,” *The Atlantic* (November 30, 2020). <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2020/11/pandemic-pod-bubble-concept-creep/617207/>. Accessed December 20, 2020.

by specific routes we know, and our trips there, as either driver or passenger, are etched in our body memories just as surely as the act of being a driver or a passenger. We know the sights and sounds, and they comfort us. Our experience of travel on these routes are often pathways to nostalgia. As cultural geographer Tim Edensor describes: “Routinized time-space paths become marked upon familiar space. And collectively, routes and places in which shared, synchronized movement, work and recreation are carried out link these individual time-space paths, identifying points of spatial and temporal intersection.”⁴⁹

Specifically, Edensor points out:

Roadside shops, bars, cafes and garages are points of intersection where individual paths converge. They become sedimented in the landscape and in the habit-body, providing a geography of communality and continuity. The roads along which people drive and the places they go to by car are spaces of circulation in which people coordinate and synchronize activities, stabilizing social relations in time-space.⁵⁰

[Edensor, 204, 109-110]

This *familiarity* is one of the most comforting aspects in of our experience of automobility. Familiar streets, paths you know; these choices often seem set almost by autopilot. But so too are familiar times; your daily drive to work or school; the weekly trip to the store on the way home; or in the case of overpopulated roadways of Los Angeles, scheduling trips around periods of known heavy traffic. The time-space of these paths can lead to both comfort and anxiety; the comforts of the known versus the dread of the daily grind, the fear of the rut. During the Pandemic, the return to these well-known routes has provided comfort, a sense of stability through continuity; we think: *at least these routes haven't changed*. With the comfort of routine comes the feeling of safety, traveling the same roads in the same way that we did in the years before 2020.

As we navigate intersections of sociality, possible meetings, communions, or conflicts, our bubble of automobility keeps us at a safe distance from everyone else – each isolated in our nest within a shell as we circulate through a community of equally encased drivers – at the testing station, vaccination center, drive-in theater, drive-thru restaurant, and on the road. While the time-space of these distinct locations is shared by all who travel on it, the time-space of each automobile is singular and unique, in effect, held in suspension both

⁴⁹ Tim Edensor, “Automobility and National Identity: Representation, Geography and Driving Practice,” *Automobilities*, Ed. Mike Featherstone, Nigel Thrift and John Urry (London: SAGE Publishing, 2004), 109.

⁵⁰ Tim Edensor, “Automobility and National Identity: Representation, Geography and Driving Practice,” 109-110.

from the road and from each other. As a result, each bubble is experienced as an individualized packet, nestled into its individual shell and in sync with each other on the road or in a parking lot, parceled out in lanes, awaiting our Covid tests or vaccinations, take-out food, or Hollywood's latest release. Windows up or down, we have room to breathe (and breathe safely) in a time and space that is simultaneously our auto-self and home away from house.

About the author: Michael Stock is a Professor of Cinema and Media Studies at the Southern California Institute of Architecture (SCI-Arc) in Los Angeles. His research interests in horror, science fiction, animation, and automobility are reflected in both the courses he teaches and his published work. Stock received his Ph.D. in Cinema and Media Studies at UCLA, and his M.A. and B.A. in English at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln.

Contact: michael_stock@sciarc.edu

Works Cited

Apgar, Blake. "Marijuana Dispensary Drive-Thru Windows Approved for Clark County," *Las Vegas Review-Journal* (August 19, 2020). Web.

Asgary, Ali, Mahdi M. Najafabadi, Richard Karsseboom and Jianhong Wu, "A Drive-Through Simulation Tool for Mass Vaccination during COVID-19 Pandemic," *Healthcare* 8(4) (November 9, 2020), 3. Web.

Bachelard, Gaston, *The Poetics of Space*, Trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994 [1964]). Print.

Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*, Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999). Print.

"Considerations for Planning Curbside/Drive-Through Vaccination Clinics," *Center for Disease Control*. Website (July 2020). Web.

Dant, Tim. "The Driver-Car," In *Automobilities*, edited by Mike Featherstone, Nigel Thrift and John Urry, 61-80. London: SAGE Publications, 2005. Print.

Feinberg, Scott. "Oscars: Drive-In Screenings Will Now Count Towards Eligibility," *The Hollywood Reporter* (October 7, 2020). Web.

Friedberg, Anne. *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994). Print.

_____. "Urban Mobility and Cinematic Visuality: The Screens of Los Angeles – Endless Cinema or Private Telematics." *Journal of Visual Culture* 1.2 (August 2002): 184-204. Print.

Gutman, Rachel. "Sorry to Burst Your Quarantine Bubble," *The Atlantic* (November 30, 2020). Web.

- Haraway, Donna. "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century." In *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, 149-182. New York: Routledge, 1991. Print.
- Latham, Sandra. "How Drive-In Restaurants Are Catering to Customers Amid the Pandemic." *Cheapism*. May 8, 2020. Web.
- Lucas, Amelia. "Pandemic sparks a Building Boom for Restaurant Drive-Thrus," *CNBC*. August 5, 2020. Web.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*, Trans. Donald A. Landes (New York: Routledge, 2012 [1945]).
- Miranda, Carolina A. "Drive-Throughs and Drive-Ins Were Fading. Coronavirus Made Them a Lifeline." *Los Angeles Times*. May 6, 2020. Web.
- Oches, Sam. "Inside the New Era for Drive Thru." *QSR*. October 2020. Web.
- Packer, Jeremy. *Mobility Without Mayhem: Safety, Cars and Citizenship*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008. Print.
- Parissien, Steven. *The Life of the Automobile*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2013. Print.
- Reid, Darin E. "What Are the Efficiencies of a Mass Vaccination Drive-Through Clinic Compared to a Walk-In Clinic?", *Homeland Security Digital Library* (2010). Web.
- Ross, Kristin. *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1995). Print.
- Shim, Eunha, Lauren Ancel Meyers and Alison P. Galvani. "Optimal H1N1 Vaccination Strategies Based on Self-Interest Versus Group Interest," *BMC Public Health* 11, S4 (February 25, 2011). Web.
- Schivelbusch, Wolfgang. *The Railway Journey: Trains and Travel in the 19th Century*. New York: Urizen, 1979. Print.
- Seiler, Cotten. *Republic of Drivers: A Cultural History of Automobility in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008). Print.
- Smith, Sidonie. *Moving Lives: Twentieth-Century Women's Travel Writing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 1985. Print.
- Swindler, Samantha. "A Drive-Thru Strip Club, Movie Popcorn to Go: Oregon Businesses get Creative During Coronavirus," *The Oregonian/Oregon Live* (May 6, 2020). Web.

- Urry, John. "The System of Automobility," *Theory, Culture, and Society* 21.4/5 (2004). Print.
- Virilio, Paul, "Dromoscopy, or The Ecstasy of Enormities," translated by Edward R. O'Neill. *Wide Angle*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (July 1998): 11-17. Web.
- _____. *The Negative Horizon: An Essay in Dromoscopy*, translated by Michael Degener. New York: Continuum, 2008. Print.
- Virilio, Paul and Sylvère Lotringer. *Pure War*, translated by Mark Polizzotti and Brian O'Keefe. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2008. Print.
- Watson, Ivan. "How Drive-Through Testing Could Limit Coronavirus Contagion," CNN (March 2, 2020). Web.
- Watson, Ivan and Sophie Jeong, "South Korea Pioneers Coronavirus Drive-Through Testing Station," *CNN* (March 3, 2020). Web.
- Weheilie, Benazir and Marie Barbier, "How We're Relying on Our Cars During the Pandemic," *CNN* (June 24, 2020). Web.
- Weiss, Eric A., Jessica Ngo, Gregory H. Gilbert, and James V. Quinn, "Drive-Through Medicine: A Novel Proposal for Rapid Evaluation of Patients During an Influenza Pandemic," *Annals of Emergency Medicine* (January 18, 2010). Web.
- Yaffe-Bellany, David. "Drive-Throughs Are Now a Lifeline for Fast-Food Chains," *The New York Times* (May 1, 2020). Web.
- Yan, Holly. "Want to Hang with Some Friends (Mask-Free) This Winter? Make a Covid-19 Bubble," *CNN* (December 17, 2020). Web.
- Yan, Holly and Chuck Johnston, "From Drive-In Theaters to Online Services, Churches Celebrate Easter in Safe and Creative Ways," *CNN* (April 12, 2020). Web.
- Zeitchik, Steven. "This is What Going to a Splashy New Movie Outside Your House Feels Like Right Now," *The Washington Post* (October 16, 2020). Web.