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“Driving-as-event”: Re-thinking the car journey

ABSTRACT

This article explores the possibility of ‘measuring’ the individual car journey in terms of the quality of the *cognitive* distance travelled by the car’s occupants. Literary texts constitute an invaluable resource in this regard since their focus on the interiority of the driving experience is of great help in the theorisation of what I refer to here as ‘automotive consciousness.’ In the discussion that follows, I propose that each and every car journey may be thought of as a unique and non-reproducible *event* in the lives of the drivers and passengers concerned on account of the variable psychological and situational factors involved.

**Keywords:** automobilities, driving, passengering, twentieth-century literature, motoring periodicals, night-driving, perception, cognition, affect.

## Introduction

I have made the journey often in two, and sometimes in three, days: and once I have done it in a single day. I found that to do it in one day changes its character entirely; it ceases to be a tour from one cathedral in England to another, and becomes stern travel. The experience is rounded and complete, and emotional pitch, in consequence, greatly heightened. Scotland, as you see it from Carter Fell, looks at you with different eyes when you have come to it hotfoot that very day from London.

(Maclehouse 1930, 59)

It is the work of social scientists to discern patterns, map trends and anticipate future developments across the social and cultural fabric of our lives, and, in recent times, this has included ground-breaking and visionary work on automobility (see double-issue of *Theory, Culture & Society* (2004) featuring articles by Dant, Laurier, Sheller, Thrift and others; Miller (2001); Wollen and Kerr 2002; Edensor (2003); Merriman (2007, 2012); Urry (2007); Dennis and Urry (2009)). What this research has paid rather less attention to, however, is the specificity of individual car journeys and the extent to which the exception may be seen to prove the rule for those of us interested in driving as a distinctive cognitive and affective ‘event’<sup>1</sup> as well as a cultural and sociological phenomenon.<sup>2</sup>

In this article I draw upon a selection of literary texts – most of them written during the first decades of the twentieth century – in order to reconceptualise our journeys made by car as unique interludes defined not only by generic utility (the commute, the weekend-drive, the road-trip etc), but also by the complex synthesis of perceptual, cognitive and affective processes that inhere in an individual event that is (in its totality) effectively non-repeatable. My argument is that even those car journeys that appear habitual and generic in the extreme –

the school run, the fifteen-minute commute up the road to work, the weekly trek to the supermarket – are arguably anything but since, on occasion, the aforementioned variables (perception, cognition, affect) may cohere in such a way that a particular journey comes to constitute a defining moment of a driver's (or passenger's) life. The same may, of course, apply to other forms of transportation (for example, the train journey, air travel or, indeed, the stage-coach (de Certeau 1988; Livesey 2016)); however, as this article will also demonstrate, it is the 'auto' in automobility that brings perception and cognition together with an agency and creativity that is arguably absent from more passive modes of transportation, and which lends a significance to *drives* in ways that rarely applies to *rides* (see also Katz, 1999, 32,33; Merriman 2007, 14; Dennis and Urry 2009, 40-1) and aligns certain types of motoring with cycling (Pearce 2016, 59).

As I have made clear elsewhere (Pearce 2012; Pearce 2014; Pearce 2016), none of these observations are written with the purpose of eulogising car culture, but rather to help us speculate on what other social and cultural practices (and not necessarily ones involving transport) may eventually replace the unique 'thinking space'<sup>3</sup> afforded by the motor-car. Further, the synthesis of mobility, perception and cognition facilitated by motoring is, with hindsight, so emblematic of the rapidly receding twentieth-century *zeitgeist*, that it is now becoming an indispensable historical marker in helping us measure the extent to which individual and collective consciousness has changed *post*-millennium. In other words, it is as though we are seeing clearly, for the first time, something that is soon to disappear forever and marking its specialness. For some historians and cultural theorists this scholarly nostalgia will be focused on the wonders of steam, or the railways, or of cycling, while for me it is the first century of motor-transport that inspires. As Nigel Thrift observed in 2004: 'one hundred years or so after the birth of automobility, the experience of driving is sinking into our "technological unconscious" and producing a phenomenology which we increasingly take for

granted but which in fact is historically novel' (Thrift 2004: 75). 'Historically novel', then, at the same time – according to forecasters like Dennis and Urry (2009) – that petroleum-fuelled automotive transport is facing its inevitable demise. Yet this is precisely why it is important for academics from across the Humanities and Social Sciences not to let the moment pass: as transportation evolves and mutates it is as arguably as important to keep track of the attendant changes in human perception, cognition and affect as in the technology itself. Moreover, we need to acknowledge the extent to which the seeing, thinking and feeling associated with different forms of transportation are profoundly in excess of the transportation-experience itself; in other words, driving, cycling, rail travel and other modes of transport will each engender cognitive practices which are unique *to* the event but not necessarily *about* the event.

For the purposes of this article I have elected to explore the driving-event through what has emerged for me as three of its defining features, namely: (1) its status as both a habitual practice and an unique event; (2) the fact that the unique character and quality of each driving-event can only be grasped retrospectively through acts of psychological consolidation; and (3) the fact that driving-events do not equate to what are more commonly thought of as 'car journeys' inasmuch as one journey may incorporate many events. Each of these features will be reflected upon with the help of a diverse collection of literary texts from the first five decades of the twentieth century. Some of these texts are autobiographical, some fictional, some journalistic essays and although most present us with the perceptions, thoughts and feelings of the driver, some of the earlier texts also represent the passengers' point of view. As I have discussed elsewhere (Pearce 2014), these textual sources must, of course, be distinguished from the fascinating ethnographic research undertaken by sociologists like Michael Bull (2001) and Sarah Redshaw (2008) in recent times. We need to recognise that the representations of driving in literary texts are often placed there for

narratological and/or symbolic effect rather than any particular interest in motoring in and of itself; however, this is not to negate their use for the cultural theorist and /or historian given that such representations are arguably our best way of accessing the changing experience of driving (be that somatic, cognitive and affective) from the drivers' and passengers' perspectives.

### **1: Driving: habitual practice/unique event**

Working with the literature(s) of motoring from across the twentieth century reveals that although the seeming paradox of driving/passenger being both habitual *and* the means to something remarkable has been there from motoring's earliest days, it is nevertheless a complex and evolving synergy. For example, viewed from a historical perspective, it is fair to say that, from its inception to the late 1920s, the experiential novelty and physical rigor of motoring meant that *most* drives had the potential to become notable events (Urry 2007,125), and to speculate that it is only in the latter half of the twentieth century that certain types of car use became completely taken for granted. This said, the literature also suggests that by the 1930s a good deal of driving and passengering was becoming familiar, routine and functional and, by extension, the opportunity for a variety of cognitive events (see note 3) that are less directly connected to the experience of the drive itself (Van Lennep 1987; Groeger 2000; Dant 2004; Laurier 2011; Charlton and Starkey 2011).<sup>4</sup> This historical evolution – from the uniqueness of the driving-event being centred on the experience of driving/passenger in and of itself to the thought-processes occasioned by it – is, I hope, demonstrated in the discussion that follows.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the other transhistorical variables that attend this complex interplay between the habitual and the unique: for example, the fact that while, on some occasions, the driving-event prompts thoughts and revelations to do with

the present (often in the manner of an epiphany), at other times it facilitates memories of the past, and often in such a way that the very familiarity and repetition of the driving-event (Edensor 2003, 155-6) connects the present to the past and rolls them together into an experiential continuity. Further, it will also be seen that the cognitive and affective revelations occasioned by driving-events are as much about people (the self and others) as they are about place and time, with several texts presenting us with drivers and passengers that appear to have become ‘different people’ by the end of their drive.

Acknowledging that historical distinctions do, nevertheless, apply to the habitual-yet-unique synergy, I begin my textual analysis with a discussion of Dixon Scott’s remarkable essay on his night-time drive through the New Forest in 1917.

Dixon Scott was a literary critic and essayist whose publications date from the period of the First World War but which ended, tragically, with his death from dysentery on a hospital ship in Gallipoli in 1915. His collected essays, *A Number of Things* (first published in 1917) contain two essays directly pertaining to motoring, ‘The Mysterious Road’ and ‘Motoring by Night’, with the latter constituting what must surely be one of the most expressive and self-conscious attempts to capture the novelty and uniqueness of the driving-event from this early period. As may be seen from the following extract, night-driving in the 1910s is experienced as being *so* cognitively challenging and enthralling that it is impossible to argue that it is in any way habitual. Further, the event is defined explicitly by, and through, the unfamiliar perceptual and cognitive experience itself and not by any associated thoughts it gives rise to:

You run for a time between hedgerows – and every dim bush seems to burst into a piece of branching coral; you might be sitting in a submarine. The hedges are followed by trees, by a long drawn avenue, the boughs meeting overhead; and now,

with the light from your lamps shattering against a complete arc of obstacles, your plank across space is suddenly converted into a snow-white tunnel boring through it. Of all that exists outside that frozen circle you are as unaware as a traveller in a London tube . . . You live in a circular world, in the centre of a leprous wreath. Oaks, elms, and beeches all part with their identity and submit to be woven into this haunting hoop – as white as a hoop of hawthorn. It always seems the same wreath. It quivers and fluctuates, making a weak rustle as it shivers; but never falls back. With nothing to measure your pace by, all sense of motion disappears. You seem to sit in a numb trance with nothing but the drone of your engine and the whisper of this mesmeric arch. Perhaps you are not altogether unrelieved when it is wrenched and tossed aside, and you are out on your naked gang-plank once more with the stars tumbling and twirling overhead. (Scott 2012, 43-4).

This, then, is an instance of a unique and seemingly mesmerising driving-event in which the challenge to perception and cognition created by the ghostly, acetylene-lit landscape suspends all thought other than the struggle to make out what things are (see also Sandy Isenstadt's excellent article (2011) on "driving through the American night" and Gordon Crosby's evocative drawing [Fig.1] reproduced below). In terms of duration, meanwhile – and looking ahead to the final section of this article – it is an event which terminates as soon the driver emerges onto the 'naked gang-plank' of the open road once more demonstrating the way in which even journeys defined by a common property (in this case, the novelty of a drive at night) subdivide into separate events as and when they are consolidated in consciousness in this way.

**Fig 1. Gordon Crosby, Auto-Suggestions No.10:**

**“The Mirage”, *Autocar*, 22 November, 1929.**

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As is the case with many of the literary accounts of motoring from the period, this is a representation of the driving-event which is also implicitly phenomenological inasmuch as the author focuses specifically on those sights and sensations that present themselves to consciousness in a new and ‘unprejudiced’ way.<sup>5</sup> Elsewhere in the essay, these raw experiences form the platform for a more extended philosophical meditation on the way in which night-driving may be seen as a means of personal transcendence:

There is something strangely moving in the spectacle. It is as though you had caught the country unawares – and found it much simpler and more innocent than you knew. And it is a realisation reserved for the motorist. Some part of it may be gained by the pedestrian, but not the best of it. He cannot taste the very essence of the situation – that sense of almost god-like detachment. He cannot swoop easily from point to point, with the calm surveillance of a bird. He is part of the landscape, bound up with its dreams; and we all know how the cold moonlight seems actually to clog the limbs of the walker as though it really were a web. It is an odd fact, too, that the noise of one’s car helps to complete the effect of aloofness. Footsteps bruise the face of the night, clumsily soiling the silence. But the drumming of your engine simply serves to cut you off the more completely from the dreaming earth. You seem to sway suspended in a net of sound. (Scott 2012, 47-8)

What is striking here, of course, is the extent to which the car is absolutely central to the moment of transcendence: not only does it grant the driver god-like, panoptical vision but



also – and perhaps surprisingly – its mechanical nature (‘the drumming of the engine’) assists the reverie. In contrast to my examples from later in the century, these are driving-events emphatically defined by the supremely visceral quality of the drive itself; however, as we have seen here, the ‘meaning’ of these sensations ultimately depend upon their being brought to consciousness and, to this extent, the journey arguably exists (in retrospect) as a unit of thought as well as an embodied experience.

By the late 1930s, motor transport – although by no means within the reach of the whole population – had established itself as a familiar and seemingly indispensable part of the infrastructure of Britain. Frequently referred to as ‘the golden decade’ of motoring (Demaus 2006; Thorold 2003), the 1930s can, indeed, be seen as a period in which driving (and passengering) came to be experienced as both mundane and special. Those fortunate enough to own a car were, by this time, taking their utility for granted; and yet, at the same time, the car was what could (literally) transport you to another world whether this be a weekend-trip to the country- or sea-side or a more ambitious holiday tour (Jeremiah 2012, 67-83). Jan Struther’s *Mrs Miniver* (1989 [1939]) references both types of motor-car use and is also an exceptional resource in terms of its depiction of the way in which the dynamic interchange between the habitual and the unique has become defining of the driving-event.

In the second chapter of Struther’s text, the reader is appraised of the central role played by the car in everyday family life and the fond affection with which the vehicle is regarded. This particular vignette, indeed, centres on Mrs Miniver’s sentimental anguish at saying good-bye to an old car, with the narrator self-consciously reflecting on the anthropomorphism involved in the relationship:

As for cars, they were a class apart, somewhere between furniture and dogs. It wasn’t, with her, a question of the pathetic fallacy. She did not pretend that cars had souls or

even minds [. . .] No, it was simply a matter of *mise en scene*. A car, nowadays, was such an integral part of one's life, provided the aural and visual accompaniment to so many of one's thoughts, feelings, conversations, decisions, that it had acquired the status of at least a room in one's house. To part from it, whatever its faults, was to lose a familiar piece of background. (Struther 1989, 5-6).

In terms of my own thesis, this acknowledgement that the car is an 'accompaniment' to 'thoughts, feelings, conversations, decisions' as well part of the material fabric of one's life is especially prescient, and the text includes many fascinating, and varied, instances of the form that accompaniment takes. The first, and simplest, are those instances where we see the familiar, habitual and – most importantly – comfortable nature of driving permitting, and prompting, Mrs Miniver towards all manner of philosophical reflection. One of the most entertaining of these is her semiotic analysis of the role of traffic lights in the chapter on 'Christmas Shopping'. Having got mired in the Oxford Street rush-hour, she considers the extent to which the emotional landscape of the nation is the process of becoming colour-coded:

The lights changed. She put the car into bottom gear, paused, then let in the clutch. It occurred to her as she did so that it was not only people's physical reactions to those three colours that had become automatic but their mental ones as well. Red, yellow, green – frustration, hope, joy: a brand new conditional reflex. Give it a few more years to get established, and psychiatrists would be using colour rays, projected in that sequence, for the treatment of melancholia; and to future generations green would no longer suggest envy, but freedom. In such haphazard ways are symbolisms born and reborn. (Struther 1989, 16)

This is an instance, then, in which an everyday driving-event (going shopping) becomes the occasion of a meditation – quirky yet profound – which arguably renders the journey unique and, if committed to memory (or writing, as here) will distinguish it forever from other, similar trips. Interestingly, this moment of insight is wrapped in another, more superficial, thought-train: what word is that wind-screen wiper mimicking? ‘Receive’? ‘Bequeath’? ‘Wee Free’? ‘Beef Tea’? (14-16) – which may also be seen to define the journey; this is, after all, the deliberation that Mrs Miniver shares with her husband, Clem, when she gets home. What the elegant form of the vignette suggests, however, is that this more whimsical pre-occupation is but the textual wrapping for the deeper, ‘semiotic’ thought that is, itself, induced by the inane and rhythmical beat of the wipers and the cocooned ‘time-out’ spent in the car.

Elsewhere in Struther’s text, meanwhile, we encounter a rather more complex engagement of the habitual and the unique in the form of a different order of driving-event: namely, the motor-tour holiday. The chapter entitled ‘A Drive to Scotland’ opens with the acknowledgement that Mrs Miniver and Clem ‘had driven up to Scotland every summer for fifteen years’ (Struther 1989, 48), and it is the novel yet repetitious nature of this activity (Edensor 2003: 155-6) that renders it both habitual and unique in and of itself even before one-off incidents are added in. As the text self-consciously observes:

Although they had driven up to Scotland every summer for fifteen years, they still felt a little stab of excitement when they came to the signpost at the top of Finchley Road which pointed to the left and simply said ‘The North’. It made a kind of chapter-heading to their holiday. (Struther 1989, 48)

What Mrs Miniver's reflection in this section points us to is the fascinating way in which those incidents which render a journey unique (the things one sees, the characters one encounters, the jokes shared between the drivers) become - in the case of repeat-journeys - part of an integrated memory to which new incidents are added, year on year, and old ones revisited. For the Minivers, these past incidents - the things which defined the driving-events at the time - are thought of in terms of 'memory-flags':

'This' said Clem as they topped a rise, 'is where we passed those gypsies two years ago.'

'I know,' said Mrs Miniver. 'I was just thinking that. With the skewbald horse.' It was amazing, the number of little memory-flags with which, on their minds' map, the road was studded. There were dozens of them now, and every year added a few more. (Struther 1989, 49)

For the young married couple, these miscellaneous incidents seen from the car (gypsies; a rainbow; a suspicious-looking man with a false beard) are used to mark ('flag') their deepening intimacy and to distinguish one year's journey from the next. In this way, the habitual becomes memorable, and the memorable, repeatable (see also Struther 1989, 48-50)).

In this section, I have attempted to show how one of the features that defines the driving-event is its characterisation as both habitual (at the level of utility and practice) and unique (*vis-à-vis* the idiosyncratic thought-processes it gives rise to). It is, however, a synergy complicated by history; in the early days of motoring, the extreme novelty and challenge of certain driving-events (for example, at speed or at night) meant that the thought-processes associated with the journey in question were almost all directed to the experience of driving

itself which is arguably in significant contrast to the reveries afforded by the modern ‘sealed’ car (Urry, 126-30; Merriman 2012, 2; Pearce 2016, 130). A further -- a-historical -- qualification is the recognition – implicit in the textual examples cited here – that driving-events fall short of being entirely subjective, even when measured in terms of the driver’s consciousness rather than the nature of the journey s/he is on. As we have seen, it is precisely the elements of the habitual and the technological in the practice of driving that shapes, structures and directs our thought-processes when at the wheel, be this Dixon’s struggle to reconfigure the ‘plank of light’ in front of him as a road, or Mrs Miniver’s hypnosis by her car’s windscreen wipers. Further, it is often the very *constraints* (Pearce 2016, 147-51) that driving otherwise imposes upon our thought-processes that would seem to facilitate those moments of meditation and revelation that render certain journeys memorable and distinctive.

## **2: The Driving-Event as Retrospective Consolidation**

It was in an earlier article for *Mobilities* (2012, 100-113) that I first likened the driving-event to a sequence of discrete thought-processes (perceptions, retentions, protentions, memories) folded back together, like a deck of cards, when the car finally comes to rest at the end of its journey. The contrast between mobility and stasis is a motif which recurs in the literary history of motoring and is given memorable expression in A. B. Filson Young’s account of a ‘pause’ in his jaunt with a racing-driver on the Isle of Man:

Once we stopped, drawing up by the fragrant roadside; and as the pulses of the engine died away, so died away the strange sensation of giant, divine life with which its breath had endowed us. No longer gods, we stood under a clump of hawthorn and gave ear to the first faint voices of the birds [. . .] In place of the rushing exhilaration of our stormy progress, the quietness of the morning now stole upon our senses. The

road lay full in our view for a mile on either side, empty. The great overture of the skies was nearly ended, and the eastern fires now changed from saffron to gold, were gloriously revealed as the curtain of cloud rolled away. (Filson Young 1904, 317)

Notable here is the way in which stopping, as well as speeding, can engender sublime and visionary consciousness with the juxtaposition of the two giving rise to some of the most intense experiences. To the best of my knowledge, however, no other commentator has yet conceptualised the moment of kinetic arrest (be this a temporary break in the journey or its final destination) as also the moment the traveller's mind (typically unconsciously) kaleidoscopes together the perceptions and thought-chains of the last stretch of the journey into a consolidated whole (be this in the form of a story, trope or emotion). Mrs Miniver's Christmas shopping expedition is an excellent example of this reflex inasmuch as, by the time she gets through the front-door and greets her husband, what remains of her journey – what distinguishes it – is her preoccupation with the windscreen wipers. Comparable to the cognitive reflex of the dreamer when suddenly awakened from a bizarre and convoluted dream, so, too, does the disoriented driver scramble hard to capture the gist of what his or her journey was about and what its significance might be.

Without question, one of the most evocative representations of this moment of 'gathering' at the end of a car-journey occurs in Virginia Woolf's essay, 'Evening over Sussex: Reflections from a Motor-Car' (Woolf 1941 [1927]). It is also a text that I have written about extensively elsewhere (Pearce 2014, 87-90; Pearce 2016, 26-28) and so, for my purposes here, I will focus merely on the 'moment of reckoning' itself:

The sun was now low beneath the horizon. Darkness spread rapidly. None of my selves could see anything beyond the tapering light of our headlamps on the hedge. I

summoned them together. ‘Now,’ I said, ‘comes the season for making up our accounts. Now we have got to collect ourselves; we have got to be one self. Nothing is to be seen any more, except one wedge of road and bank which our lights repeat incessantly. We are perfectly provided for. We are warmly wrapped in a rug; we are protected from wind and rain. We are alone. Now is the time of reckoning. Now I, who preside over the company, am going to arrange in order the trophies we have all brought in. Let me see; there was a great deal of beauty brought in today: farmhouses; cliffs standing out to sea; marbled fields; mottled fields; red feathered skies; all that. Also there was disappearance and the death of the individual’. The vanishing road and the window lit for a second and then dark. (1941, 13)

Gathering together both her impressions of the objects seen from the car (farmhouses, cliffs, fields etc) and the philosophical issues that have preoccupied her in the course of the drive, Woolf’s narrator – her ‘presiding self’ (1941, 12) – calls for a ‘reckoning’ that will first materialise, and then memorialise, the journey. Without this act of perceptual/cognitive synthesis, the driver/passenger is in danger of losing sight of the experience altogether or, as I have argued elsewhere, is liable to ‘drown in its detail and go mad’ (Pearce 2014, 89). Artistic abstraction, symbolized here by a little clay figure, figuratively conjured up in the course of the journey, is thus presented as a psychological survival strategy for the automotive tourist overwhelmed by sensory data.

Another early twentieth-century text to demonstrate the strategic necessity of event-consolidation is Edith Wharton’s *A Motor-Flight through France* (2008[1908]). Given that a motor tour (like its descendent, the road trip) extends over several days, weeks or months, texts like Wharton’s make explicit the distinction between the expedition (as a whole) and its constituent events. Indeed, as will be discussed further in the final section, journeys of even

modest duration will necessarily comprise multiple driving-events once we understand the latter in terms of the changing horizons of driver-consciousness rather than its material start-and-end points. Here is a short, but indicative, extract from the early part of Wharton's tour:

The same wonderful white road, flinging itself in great coils and arrow-flights across the same spacious landscape, swept us on the next day via Beauvais. If there seemed to be fewer memorable incidents along the way – if the villages had less individual character, over and above their general charm of northern thrift and cosiness – it was perhaps because the first impression had lost its edge: but we caught the fine distant reaches of field and orchard and wooded hillside, giving a general sense that it would be a good land to live in – till these minor sensations were swallowed up in the overwhelming impression of Beauvais [. . .]

Beyond Beauvais the landscape became more deeply Norman . . . though, as far as the noting of detail went, we did not really get *beyond Beauvais* at all, but travelled on imprisoned in that tremendous memory till abruptly, from the crest of a hill, we looked down a long green valley to Rouen shining on its river (Wharton 2008, 23-26)

As an early exemplar of the motor-touring genre, what Wharton's text demonstrates so beautifully is the way in which a long string of driving-events are gathered together in an act of retrospective consolidation at the end of each day. The fact that this consolidation is achieved in, and through, writing in diary format is clearly instrumental in shaping – indeed, subduing -- these impressions (even though my wider argument here presents the tendency to consolidation as a defining characteristic of the driving-event *per se*). What Wharton's extract also makes clear is that a day's motoring is not experienced as a *single* driving-event



even if it is recorded as one: changes in topography and architecture, as well as the various stops for refreshment – or, indeed, repairs to the car – disrupt the driver/passenger’s cognitive and affective impression of a landscape rolling past at the not inconsiderable speed of 20mph. As was the case for Woolf, this sensory overload gives rise to the cognitive necessity of rendering multiple events single in order for the motorist not to be overwhelmed by them. Wharton’s success in ‘managing’ her motor-flight in this way is evidenced by the fact that yesterday’s impressions have already ‘lost their edge’ (the many delightful villages they sped past have been merged into a schema of ‘general charm’), as well as her eagerness to embrace the ‘overwhelming impression of Beauvais’ and allow just *one* ‘incident’ to become the signature motif of this particular day.

It is nevertheless important to recognise that the process of ‘retrospective consolidation’ that I am presenting here as integral to a definition of the ‘driving-event’ is not necessarily led – as in these early twentieth-century literary examples from Struther, Woolf and Wharton – by external phenomena. It is quite possible – in the cocoon of the covered-car – to spend several hours behind the wheel without taking any notice of the landscape through which we travel apart from those factors (signs, lights, bends, crossings, other traffic) that must be observed in order that we proceed safely (see note 4). Whether performing a daily commute or undertaking a longer journey, drivers and passengers regularly think about ‘other things’ and to such an extent that the world outside the window is a blank and they could be anywhere (see Redshaw (2008, 51-77) for empirical evidence of this). Yet even in these circumstances, when the geographical context of the drive is cognitively redundant, the thought-consolidation process that marks the end of the journey or a particular phase of it, will still render it a driving-event according to my definition.<sup>6</sup>

It is most likely, then, that drivers and passengers (if not unduly distracted by their conversations or other things happening in the car) will participate in driving-events that

*combine* their impressions of the world outwith the windscreen with unrelated thought-sequences (day-dreams, anxieties, reflections, analyses) that *together* come to characterise a particular stretch of journey. As noted previously, in most instances such moments of consolidation will take the form of a fleeting shift from the unconscious to the conscious. The brief moment, perhaps, when we step out of our car and feel happy and relieved, realising that some issue has been resolved even if we are already forgetting exactly what it was, or what perceptual and other prompts along the way contributed to its resolution.

### **3: Driving - Event vs. Journey**

One interesting feature on my most recent car is a dashboard counter that measures ‘travel time’. This clock disregards temporary stops of less than two hours’ duration, contributing to the impression of the longer drive as a single temporal and cognitive unit. The fact that this is at odds with the typical driver-experience was implicit in my previous discussion of the role retrospective consolidation plays in the framing of the driving-event, and will be argued more closely here through a focus on the way in which a driver’s thought-train and / or mood may change direction in the course of a journey. This shift of focus from the *material purpose* to the *subjective experience* of driving is central to my attempt to distinguish between what mobility/transport scholars would refer to as a journey and what I am presenting as a ‘driving-event’. However, in order to avoid oversimplification, I also consider textual representations of longer journeys which *do* appear to have been experienced by the drivers in question as a cognitive and affective unity.

My first example of a driver whose journey is most emphatically *not* experienced as a unity is Dylan Trigg’s self-consciously phenomenological account of a motorway drive in *The Memory of Place* (2012). While this is a rather different order of text to the fictional ones I have engaged with elsewhere in this article, it is a perfect illustration of the way in which a

break in a journey can splinter it into two quite separate driving-events. Like Marc Augé (1995) before him, Trigg is so discomfited by his visit to a motorway service station that, by the time he climbs back into his car and resumes his journey, he is not only embarking on an entirely new driving-event but is experiencing himself as ‘another person’:

Once reinserted, the reconciliation between experience and orientation is neither instant, automatic, nor transparent. Instead, as the journey toward the final destination commences, a gradual and irregular emission of what the body has previously absorbed comes to the fore by way of an embryonic body memory. In the car, I feel disquiet. Something has altered, and it is as though I can still feel some trace of the service station on my skin, even though I am not fully aware of the extent of this trace. Not only does the car feel different, but so, too, does my body. I grip the door handle with excessive force, attempting to replace myself in a world that existed prior to the onset of anxiety [ . . . ]

The strange world of the service station is now with us, in the car, permeating the interior, infusing the homely atmosphere with a decidedly unhomely aura. The encroachment of an elsewhere serves to undermine the clarity of journeying toward place as a unified whole. In contrast to the clear unfolding established at the beginning of the journey, now, continuity has been broken while identity simultaneously loses its assurance. (Trigg 2012, 154-5)

In this instance, then, the pause in the journey is significant not only because it enables the driver to consolidate and define what has gone before into a distinct event but because it instigates a change of mood/mental focus so profound that the euphoria often associated with

motorway driving is dispelled – and to the extent that the subject feels he has lost the assurance of his own identity.

Reflecting upon such cognitive and affective ruptures for the purpose of my own definition of the driving-event, I would nevertheless propose that it does not require anything as uncanny as a visit to the ‘non-place’ (Augé 1995) of a service station to bring about this sort of change. As Merriman (2004, 10-11; 2007, 210-12), in his critiques of Augé has also observed, it takes the smallest tweak of cognition and/or circumstance to alter the direction and temper of our thoughts and feelings; and, in the course of a typical day, such sea-changes are manifold whether we are driving a car or not. However, inasmuch as a driving-event may be seen to both sustain and sharpen thought-trains, it is not surprising that the ruptures that characterise car journeys (be this a stop at a service station, a change of music, the interruption of the mobile phone, something seen through the windscreen that sparks a particular memory/anticipation) have become associated with significant mood-swings, relationship crises and sudden changes of direction in the story or plot of literary texts (for example, Rosamund Lehmann’s *The Weather in the Streets* (1991 [1936]); see also Pearce 2016, 182-7).

Needless to say, such disarticulated driving-events are at the opposite end of the motoring spectrum to the ‘total’ experience of an uninterrupted drive of several hundred miles, such as Alex Maclehouse’s 1930s ‘motor-flight’ from London to Scotland cited at the head of this article (see epigraph). On such occasions, landscape and ‘mindscape’ blur and fuse to such an extent that they *become* the driving-event: no secondary act of consolidation is necessary. What makes Maclehouse’s text so exceptional, however, is its awareness that a long journey by car can take such different forms, that its ‘character’ can change so ‘entirely’, depending upon how it is driven. For my purposes here, this pinpoints the difference between a journey of over three-hundred miles presenting itself to the driver’s consciousness as a

single, unified impression – something ‘rounded and complete’ (Maclehouse 1930, 59) – or as an aggregate of manifestly discrete driving-events or ‘incidents’.

The adrenalin-fuelled challenge of driving as far – and often as fast – as you can without stopping, finds one of its best-known literary expression in Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (2000 [1957]). During one seventeen-hour marathon drive, Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty (with two ‘college-boy’ hitch-hikers occupying the back-seat) stop only three times: once to eat breakfast; once when they are pulled up by the police; once to buy gas. These short breaks appear to do nothing to disrupt the coherence of the driving-event, at least from the perspective of the driver’s (i.e., Dean’s) consciousness. This seamlessness is achieved, in the first instance, by Dean’s refusal to sleep; and, second, by what Sal perceives to be his simple but determined focus on three things: ‘a fast car, a coast to reach, a woman at the end of the road’ (Kerouac 2000, 209). This demonstrates how the driving-event can direct, and sustain, certain thought-trains to the point of obsession (in Dean’s case, ‘gurls, gurls, gurls’ (Kerouac 2000, 211), and suggests that for a longer journey to survive, intact, as a singular event, stops (with their inevitable distractions) have to be minimized. Indeed, what we see in Dean is a driver who, like Kerouac himself as ‘author-of-the-scroll,’<sup>7</sup> determinedly protects himself from interruption until the work (of driving) is done (see also Virilio (1995[1984], 105) on the contemporary driver’s supposedly exclusive focus on his/her destination). Anything less than this resolute single-mindedness – part conscious will, part unconscious proclivity – will necessitate a new beginning and, inevitably, a new state of mind. For Kerouac’s passenger-narrator (Sal), the race to Chicago is a mind-trip too far (‘I shuddered. I couldn’t take it anymore’ (Kerouac 2000, 213)) and, although this is ostensibly a somatic response fuelled by fear of crashing, it may also be seen as the surrender of consciousness itself. Lacking the driver’s adrenalin-fuelled concentration, the passenger is unable to endure the never-ending ‘reel’ of phenomena (things seen, things thought) that flash upon his

inward-eye and, like Woolf's narrator in 'Evening over Sussex', Sal ultimately needs a curtain to fall in order to stave off madness. Dean, by contrast -- his thinking honed and abstracted by the demands upon his motor-reflexes and his single-minded objective -- has no need, or desire, to stop. Indeed, preserving this sublime driving-event pure and intact is his non-negotiable goal.

This, however, is hardly typical motoring (though many of us will know family and friends who have, at some point in their lives, sought the thrill and challenge of the 1000 mile 'streak'). More usual, as I hope to have demonstrated here, is the fragmentation of longer journeys into discrete, microcosmic driving-events, both on account of the way in which we plan our routes and inhabit the modern car (where music, phones, and 'sat-navs' are constant distractions) and as a result of the memory-prompts (Mrs Miniver's 'flags') that lie in ambush along each and every roadside.

## **Conclusion**

When presenting an early version of this article as a seminar paper, I was asked by a colleague about which theoretical model of 'the event' I was working with, to which I truthfully replied 'none'. As I explain in note 1, my choice of the term was purely instrumental: I needed a concept to denote a unit of (mobilised) time-space that could be contrasted with others (e.g., the journey) and applied to the driver's consciousness as well as to his/her physical transportation. The need for this descriptor arose as soon as I started working on the cognitive dimension of driving and realised that none of the existing terminology delimited, or specified, what we mean by a 'drive', let alone accounted for the role played by the driver's consciousness. Working with literary texts that span the twentieth century, it quickly became clear that a 'drive' can be recreational or functional, long or short, the whole of a longer journey or merely one of its component parts. As a textual critic

wishing to home-in on particular driver experiences, it was thus essential that I discover a term that would allow me to specify the changing ‘horizons’ of a journey by car (no matter how short or long), both with respect to the changing road-environment and the driver’s thought-processes.

As it happens, a few of these philosophical engagements with ‘the event’ do resonate with my rather more functional annexation of the term (see note 1).<sup>12</sup> Žižek’s short essay (2014) is a useful intervention in this regard, bringing the concept’s long philosophical history into provocative contact with the material connotations that attach to it in the contemporary world (many of which are violent and/or cataclysmic). Following Badiou (2013), Žižek is nevertheless at pains to argue, and demonstrate, that the event can be personal and/or ‘minor’ as well as public and/or ‘major’, and in ways that echo my own conceptualisation of the driving-event. Starting from the premise that ‘an event is thus *the effect that seems to exceed its causes*’ (2014, 3), Žižek confronts the spectre of causality that this otherwise useful definition raises, before drawing another distinction between events which ‘change the way in which reality appears to us’ (frame-breakers) and those which are ‘shattering transformation of reality itself’ (Žižek 2014, 5). While he then proceeds to unpick this binary, also, I would suggest that the ‘frame-breaking’ category neatly accommodates the nature of the cognitive transformation facilitated by the driving-event as I have expounded it here, especially since visual prompts encountered on the road are often (though not always) involved.

However, as noted above, it never was my intention to locate my concept within the long philosophical tradition that engages, either directly or indirectly, with ‘the event’. My far more modest objective has simply been to identify an appropriate item of vocabulary for the aspect of driving – and driver-experience – that I am researching; and in the hope that other mobilities scholars will find my quest of interest. With reference to the latter, it is also

important to re-iterate that I am by no means the first to explore the ‘subjective’ and/or affective conditions of driving, or the importance of taking such factors into account (both somatic and psychological) when specifying all that is distinctive (and often appealing) about travel by car (see references at head of article). However, with the notable exceptions of Edensor (2003), Merriman (2007; 2012), Laurier (2011) and Laurier and Dant (2011), such considerations have been directed to an exploration of the cognitive and other skills needed in the practice of driving *per se* and not the vast spectrum of ‘other things’ the driver may be thinking about at the same time. This then becomes an illustration, I hope, of the way in which text-based scholarship can make a positive contribution to the ground-breaking sociological and psychological research already conducted in the field.

‘Getting inside the head’ of a driver *qua* driver is a challenging task since most ethnographic practices will involve engaging the driver in conversation, in which case it will be the conversation itself that pre-occupies and directs his or her thoughts. The self-recording of a driver’s thoughts while on the move may bring us closer to capturing something of his/her automotive stream-of-consciousness, but it is a difficult and artificial (and potentially dangerous) monitoring process that inhibits the very spontaneity it is struggling to capture. Because of the limitations of all such methods, written accounts – whether autobiographical or fictional, created immediately after the event (Woolf, Wharton) or retrospectively (Struther 1989; Kerouac 2000) – constitute a rich, and fascinating, supplementary resource; while such representations of ‘mobile consciousness’ can never, of course, be used as scientific evidence of ‘what we think when we drive’, they can nevertheless help us *theorise* the process more imaginatively. Acknowledging – as my attempt at a definition does – that each driving-event has the potential to become something special and unique on account of what the driver’s thinking brings to bear upon it; and that any journey of reasonable length is likely to



incorporate many such events; we must rejoice that so many writers have sought to capture – indeed, consolidate – the defining quality of their (or their characters’) drives.

## Notes

- 1 ‘Event’: I am aware that this is a very over-determined item of vocabulary to annex in a cultural/theoretical context inasmuch as many philosophers have engaged it for their own purposes (e.g., Badiou, 2013; Bergson 2008 [1910], 2010 [1910]); Nancy 2001; and most recently Zizek (2014). However, as I discuss in the conclusion to this article, the term presented itself as the best linguistic choice for the (mobile) spatio-temporal interval I needed to conceptualise, but it is employed without reference to any prior philosophical applications.
- 2 The two automobilities scholars whose work has come closest to mine in its insistence on the specificity and potential uniqueness of each and every driving-event are Peter Merriman (2004; 2007) and Tim Edensor (2003). Edensor also highlights the role of driver-consciousness in distinguishing and determining the driving-event: ‘A relaxed awareness of road conditions cultivates a disposition towards thinking, planning, rehearsing encounters, and fantasizing, which becomes second nature, a part of the motorway driver’s habitus’ (2003, 161).
- 3 In *Drivetime* (2016) I explore, and distinguish between, the different sorts of thinking that driving (and passengering) facilitates through a wide spectrum of cognitive and affective applications; as well as day-dreaming and reverie, it is notable that driving enables more structured meditation and problem-solving.
- 4 Automotive psychologists and cultural theorists (including those cited here) – dating back to J. J. Gibson (1982 [1932]) – have long debated whether driving is a

skill that may be classed as ‘automatic’, hence permitting the (safe) practice of undirected thought, conversation and practical tasks (such as changing a CD). See Pearce 2016, 162-166) (‘Driving and Daydreaming’) for an extended discussion of this.

- 5 See Dermot Moran’s baseline definition of phenomenology: ‘Phenomenology may be characterised initially in a broad sense as the unprejudiced, descriptive study of whatever appears to consciousness, precisely in the manner in which it appears’ (Moran and Moody 2002, 1).
- 6 I recognise that this characterisation of ‘retrospective consolidation’ implies the sort of mobility-stasis binary that mobilities’ scholars like Peter Merriman have been keen to challenge (Adey on Bergson 2010, 5-6; Merriman 2012, 6-9). However, the fact that in many of the motoring scenarios I draw upon here the car’s stopping is no more than a temporary *pause* in a longer journey, also exemplifies the more ‘processual’ model of time-space that Merriman endorses. In terms of my own definition of the driving-event, I am less concerned about whether the moment of stasis exists in binary opposition to mobility or as a point on a continuum than that the driver/passenger experiences it as a *prompt* to take stock and move on.
- 7 Kerouac famously typed his first draft of *On the Road* on a continuous scroll of paper and without page or chapter breaks. This supposedly mimicked the uninterrupted flow of consciousness represented by the journey the protagonists take. See introduction to *On the Road* (Kerouac 2000: xix).

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