‘See 500 sexy models reveal all.’ This motor-show slogan provides a graphic reminder of the traditional role of women in car culture – as adjuncts rather than drivers. Stephen Bayley’s 1986 essay ‘Sex, Drink and Fast Cars’ typifies ‘man’s relationship with his car as being all about power, as it is articulated by designers, stylists, advertising creatives and marketing professionals. For Bayley, a woman in a powerful car is ‘at once titillating and de-masculating’ and represents ‘an overt sexual statement’. The fact that this feeling seems to be mutual is suggested by the female journalist who admitted: ‘... men who are ambivalent about driving are not attractive to me. And it’s not just me.’ The masculine dominance of car culture is sustained even though an increasing number of women drive and work as car journalists.

Where women have not been used to eroticize cars as objects of desire, they have been cast by the producers of car culture as figures of influence on purchases by men. In the inter-war period, concern about the corrupting influence of women on design pointed to an increasing emphasis on comfort and aesthetics. Manufacturers excused model changes through reference to the influence of women on the market. During the late ’20s and early ’30s, Harley Earl’s Art and Color department at General Motors was viewed as excelling at such feminized features as style, colour and comfort even while Earl himself was concerned to recruit only male employees in case ‘any hint of femininity would handicap his struggle in the rough-and-tumble, masculine world of the automobile industry’. The 1920s US car producer Ned Jordan was acutely aware of the influence of women on car purchase and, consequently, the necessity of comfort, beauty and style in car design. However, Jordan also stands out as having been thoroughly seduced by the ideal of an independent woman driver, as most famously exemplified in his 1920s fantasy ‘Somewhere West of Laramie’, a eulogy to women drivers.

What is the reality of the role of women in car culture? Women have been driving in large numbers from the inception of widespread car use, as is exemplified by the setting up of the Ladies Automobile Club of Great Britain in 1903. In 1933, women held 12 per cent of driving licences. In 1964, 13 per cent of women held driving licences, compared with 56 per cent of men. By the late 1970s, 30 per cent of women and 68 per cent of men were licensed to drive. By 1993, nearly half of all driving licences, more than fourteen million in total, were held by women and more than a third of women drivers owned their own cars. In the UK, the proportion of men passing their driving tests has been higher each year since 1988. The number of women passing their tests has also been higher each year in this period. Therefore, significantly, more driving tests have been taken by women than men in the last twelve years, and the number of licensed women drivers is increasing more quickly than that of men.

In the early decades of private car use, in cases of joint ownership of a single family car, it was assumed...
that the male partner usually had the primary claim on it. Since then, however, the average number of cars owned by a household has increased. In 1951, 13 per cent of households owned one car, and 1 per cent owned two. By 1986, 17 per cent of households owned two cars, whereas by 1996 this figure had increased to 23 per cent. Households with three or more cars increased from 2 per cent in 1986 to 5 per cent in 1996. Today, 42 per cent of cars are bought by women, and 80 per cent of car purchases involve a woman’s input.

Car advertisers have assumed that while men use their cars for work activities, women drive for leisure. Once again there is a fault line between representation and present reality. For the period 1996–8, British men made more journeys for the purposes of commuting, business, education and leisure than women, who made more school runs and shopping journeys. But approximately 20 per cent of school runs are followed by a journey to work; it is clear that women use cars to help them combine work and childcare. So the assumption that cars are leisure objects for women is erroneous and trivializes the empowerment women have experienced, both personally and professionally, behind the wheel.

Women are not only influential on car purchases made by men, we have been driving in increasing numbers, buying more cars – to the extent that we represent nearly half of all car purchasers – and relying on cars to perform our various work roles. Little of this has altered the representation of women in car culture. Sean O’Connell has pointed out that, ‘Despite growing evidence of female competence at the wheel, the myth of greater masculine ability was not allowed to die.’ In May 1987, Your Car’s regular day-in-the-life column featured a driving instructor whose tutees were exclusively women described as lacking in confidence and competence. This isolated example is not drawn from a rich variety of representations of women in Your Car; we are absent to an astonishing extent. Two years later, Your Car offered a ‘Reader’s Lives’ account of a mother’s mismanagement of her car illustrated with a cartoon captioned ‘Honest Mum – I was laughing with you, not at you.’ The popularity of this strain of humour has led Roy Bolitho, for example, to write Woman at the Wheel, a compendium of jokes about women’s driving incompetence.

A recent study conducted in Northern Ireland provides interesting evidence of the mythical nature of man’s greater driving competence. The 1999 Road Survey Monitor for Northern Ireland reported that of the 75 per cent of men and 55 per cent of women who drove, 53 per cent of men and 37 per cent of women described themselves as ‘well above’ or ‘above’ average in their driving skills. However, the greater confidence of male drivers in Northern Ireland is not explained by their success in driving tests. 61 per cent of men passed their driving tests in the fourth quarter of 1996, as compared with 52 per cent of women. However, in the same period, 72 per cent of women passed the driving theory tests as opposed to 63 per cent of men.

A debate continues nonetheless about whether women or men are better drivers. The Transport Research Institute, the Automobile Association and the Royal Automobile Club have publicized reports confirming that women drivers are ‘safer and more skilful than their male counterparts’. Such statistics are countered by critics who claim that men do more driving and are therefore more likely to become involved in accidents. Elsewhere, biological explanations have been offered to ‘prove’ women’s lesser competence, such as the fact that the part of the brain
used for visualizing objects in three dimensions, estimating time and judging speed is smaller in women than in men.\textsuperscript{17} Women’s lack of confidence as drivers is exemplified by road-user support projects such as the one set up by Devon County Council, which was attended almost entirely by women.\textsuperscript{18} Such a lack of confidence is unfounded, however, so much so that insurance companies have routinely offered advantageous deals for women.

One explanation for the lack of confidence felt by women in the driving seat might have to do with the sort of seat it is. Both men and women may experience discomfort from car design geared towards the ‘international standards’ of body shape and size formed by the Society of Automotive Engineers.\textsuperscript{19} Seat design has traditionally been aesthetically rather than ergonomically oriented, compounded by the fact that more than a third of men drive with their legs extended and almost a third of women sit too close to their steering wheels.\textsuperscript{20} But women experience additional, specific problems with car design. A recent article on women’s seatbelt discomfort noted that while women buy around half of cars sold, their needs remain neglected in automotive design as shown by a seatbelt manufacturer’s admission that the company’s research and development have never entailed asking women about their experiences of car design.\textsuperscript{21}

Japanese manufacturers have been quicker than UK car manufacturers to provide the compact cars women desired. Recent cars targeted at women drivers include the Honda Logo, Nissan’s Micra, the Seat Leon, the Twingo, Ford’s Ka, the Yaris, the Matiz and the VW Lupo.\textsuperscript{22} Journalist Lesley Hazleton has described Detroit designers working with ‘paper clips taped to their fingers so that they’d know how it feels to open a car door when you have long nails.’\textsuperscript{23} Penny Wark, the motoring editor of \textit{Women’s Journal}, was incensed by the way ‘a report which purports to represent women’s views manages to leave the impression that women . . . seek safety, comfort, economy – and a place to put their handbag.’\textsuperscript{24} Wark went on to complain that the fact ‘that women, unlike men, react emotionally to cars’ is ignored.

Part of the problem might be the lack of women involved in automotive design and engineering. In 1999, of the 8,500 members of Retail Motor Industry Training, only 5 per cent were women, and this was an improvement on previous years.\textsuperscript{25} Ford has recently set up a ‘women’s marketing panel’ comprising female employees who have suggested larger and simpler dashboard controls and tailgate handles. Ford is apparently recruiting more women into its design and engineering departments.\textsuperscript{26} This activity is a necessary corrective to the association of men with technological know-how.\textsuperscript{27} However, it is not only in design that issues particular to women must be taken on board if manufacturers are to fully realize that sector of the market:

It is true that there are now several cars on the market that are designed specifically and accurately for women. But many men in the industry have yet to work our how to pitch them without resorting to ‘nippy runaround’ and ‘women’s car’ cliches, which they whisper but never include in brochures or press releases because they are terrified of being politically incorrect.\textsuperscript{28}

As an extension of the consultation groups mentioned above, guidebooks published to support and advise car owners address the experience of women in a variety of ways. The first example, Dorothy Levitt’s \textit{The Woman and the Car} (1969), advises on suitable dress and the need to carry a gun, the latter indicative of the North American provenance. More recently, Longman’s \textit{Cars: A Consumer’s}
Guide (1987) discusses all aspects of car ownership and maintenance, including the experiences of readers who feel marginal to car culture: ‘Many people “switch off” when technical terminology is used – especially if they are unable to visualise “big ends” or “crankshafts” and understand their functions.’ The book is trenchantly gender-neutral however, and replicates the male-oriented nature of much car culture in that of nine case studies of purchase and repair problems, only one mentions a woman (in a discussion of the legal intricacies of joint ownership). However, by 1993 Judith Jackson’s Every Woman’s Guide to the Car (published by the pioneering UK feminist imprint Virago) dared to discuss issues particular to woman drivers: ‘Although the market recognises the rapidly growing numbers of female buyers, sadly, there are still dealers who regard solo woman customers as insignificant.’ The same bias has been noted by women seeking car maintenance who are seen as sufficiently incompetent technically to be overcharged by mechanics in 80 per cent of cases. By 2000, the situation was only marginally improved. Only 30 per cent of car sales staff were female, and 80 per cent of women took a male companion with them when buying a car for a confidence boost, even though women bought almost half of the cars sold. One solution that has been suggested is to buy on-line.

The advertising of cars has been as important to the continuation of the industry as stylistic and technical innovations. Cars are durable, and purchasing one is therefore postponable. By the early 1970s, the world market for cars had reached saturation point. Advertisers have employed a range of co-existent approaches in order to stimulate the market. In the early twentieth century, car advertising was dominated by technical information; it was only in the 1920s that a shift towards ‘evocations of consumer desires for modernity, status, and autonomy’ was recognized. Subsequently, the history of car advertising ranged ‘from plutocratic to sexual display, through environmental concern to latter-day technophilia’. More recently, advertisements aimed at women as drivers have featured aspirational figures such as powerful career women, efficient mothers, women with desirable lovers and so on, all of which appeal to men and women simultaneously. One such example is Renault’s ‘Nicole-Papa’ campaign, which boosted sales to women to the extent that the Renault Clio was bought by men and women in equal numbers.

One significant recent trend in advertising has been the promotion of cars as fashionable accessories. Such an association is not exclusive to cars, of course. Other technological products have been presented as fashion accessories, including the Nokia mobile phone, which has been presented as the contents of a fragrance bottle, as jewellery and as a pair of expensive sunglasses. This approach may be seen as an attempt to make technology accessible and appealing through recourse to familiar forms. In addition, it implies the extent to which one’s technological
choices enhance personal identity and become, in a necessary corruption of McLuhan’s dictum, an ‘extension of woman’. This approach is not new. In 1961, Volkswagen used miniaturization to advertise the Beetle. An image of a woman holding a toy model of a car had the strap-line ‘Your Car Madam’; the same copy accompanied an ad showing a VW seen through the frame of a handbag handle and a gloved hand. Scale here was manipulated to connect the car with the woman’s glove and handbag, thereby presenting the automobile as another of her personal accessories.

In 1993, Volkswagen ran a print advertisement with the strapline ‘Discover the fragrance of Umwelt. By Volkswagen.’ The closing line of text ‘For man. For woman.’ recalled the slogans of Calvin Klein’s fragrance advertising such as ‘Escape. For Men.’ It offered a minimalist aesthetic at odds with the rococo extravagance depicted in this image of a man and woman in evening dress kissing on the bonnet of a car against a night-time cityscape. So while the text connected the ad to a particular fragrance campaign, the image and text combined to refer in a general way to the genre of fragrance advertising. The extended metaphor of this ad continued in the provision of folded piece of paper with the instruction ‘open fold to experience Umwelt’, which copied the perfume samples offered in women’s magazines. This ad appeared in such periodicals alongside actual examples of the perfume advertisements it was imitating. The intention was that no scent would be discerned because, as the copy informed us, the Umwelt featured a ‘turbo charger for less smoke’ and a ‘catalytic converter for less toxic gases’, thus creating ‘A fragrance so subtle you’d wonder if it was there at all’. So while this ad aimed to communicate technical information, it did so through the language and imagery of fragrance advertising, an essentially feminized sphere of visual culture. The fact that no fragrance was available presented a humorous critique of the hype of fragrance advertising. But this ad has another more insidious function: it offers technical information in the romantic disguise of fragrance advertising, albeit humorously overstated.

Peugeot has exploited the association of sex and cars more recently in a bid to meet and enhance the already buoyant female market for their cars. By 1995, women were buying 60 per cent of Peugeot’s new cars. The company’s TV campaign for the 106 featured a pastiche of the ultimate scene from Ridley Scott’s 1991 road movie, Thelma and Louise, itself a corruption of cinematic conventions of gender and genre. The 1997 print campaign for the 106 Independence also worked with gender subversion to achieve its aim.

The illustration (see over) showed an image of the Peugeot 106 car transfer-tattooed onto a woman’s hip under the words ‘Declare your independence.’
imperative language is a call to arms that recalls discussions of the importance of cars to a sense of personal freedom, whether one is male or female. Judy Wajcman has asserted that women’s relations to cars depend on practical issues such as safety, mobility and independence. Penny Sparkes is just one design historian to have noted the ‘desire, narcissism, envy and a quest for self-identification’ mobilized by cars for men and women alike. Recently, Stephen Bayley has rephrased his understanding of the meaning of cars to echo Wajcman’s feminist analysis: ‘The real emotional pull of the car is not sex, or social status, or all those things that we associate with car lovers – it is that the motor car gives you the sense that you are a free person.’

The woman in the Peugeot tattoo ad is depicted without legs, in the manner of voyeuristic imagery from the world of Classical Greek art and — particularly as the image is spread across two pages in close-up — pornography. Stripped down to her underwear, she displays to the viewer a personal physical feature in a manner suggestive of sexual proffering and intimacy. She remains anonymous in that we cannot see her face. Her mobility comes, it is implied, from the car she drives, but she has no car, only the image of one in the form of bodily ornament. She declares her independence by wearing a tattoo. While tattoos are intricately bound up with the expression of personal identity, historically of a tribal or sub-cultural nature, in the West they are increasingly employed as just another kind of adornment.

The Peugeot woman is not decorated with jewellery or (as far as we can see) with make-up, but with a tattoo, thus suggesting a permanent commitment to the car. In his study *The Car Culture*, James Flink points out that the cosmetics and car industries are united by the fact that both insist on achieving unusually high profits. The conservatism of the Peugeot ad is reflected in its text, which, while it begins with the words ‘Conformists won’t like the new...’
Peugeot 106 Independence,' continues in a manner conforming to gender stereotypes by referring to the 'range of metallic and pearlescent colours', 'special badging', 'body coloured bumper skirts' and 'cloth trim'. Technical aspects mentioned include a 'racy' gearbox, stereo radio, central locking and power-assisted steering. This image, then, while superficially offering something of a challenge to the traditionally masculine emphasis of car culture, is found on closer inspection to echo the imagery and assumptions of traditional male-stream car culture.

Another attempt at a car ad that communicates female power is the Peugeot image of the 106 logotype shaved into a woman's hair. Like the tattoo ad, this example straddles both stereotypical and subversive approaches to the business of advertising cars to women. It carries identical copy to the tattoo image. Again, the shaved motif functions as a decorative expression of the woman's identity through the act of label-display and its associations of brand allegiance, in the manner of branded sportswear. However, for a woman to shave her head remains an act of visible rejection of the normative ideal of femininity. Both the haircut and the motif shaved into it associate the product with the masculine imagery of sub-cultural street style, behind which lies a raft of subtler contradictory references with pop cultural, racist, homo-erotic and military nuances. All of these associations garner masculine power for the woman who presents herself in this manner.

These two advertisements are interesting for the way in which they negotiate feminine stereotypes. On the one hand, the ads offer a new visual language that places women in a position of power, as exemplified by the name '106 Independence'. On the other hand, the name evokes the timeworn association of women with an ideal of femininity reminiscent of the sexual-
ized women of extant car culture who exist to titillate male viewers. These advertisements exemplify the traditional association of women with fashionability, vanity and a concern for aesthetics – in this case, the emphasis on automotive aesthetics subsumes a concern for technical specification.

In 1997, Volkswagen advertised its new Passat with the line ‘Obsession from Laboratoires Volkswagen.’ The text continued: ‘The look of it. The feel of it. The fully galvanised body of it.’ The word obsession, the typeface and the washed-out, monochromatic image again recall advertisements for Calvin Klein. But another reference is made this time, to the hair and beauty products company Laboratoires Garnier. Obsession, unlike the unisex CK1, is sold separately for men and for women. This advertisement featured five men and one woman in white coats attending to the car, suggesting that the ad was intended to target a mixed audience, an assumption supported by its appearance in a national daily newspaper rather than a women’s magazine. This advertisement reveals the narcissistic relationship some consumers have with their cars, and the borrowed imagery, recalling a leading fashion company, suggests an emphasis on the Volkswagen’s design values. This text references two distinctly recognizably beauty products, but the image, by mainly featuring males, appeals to a mixed audience.

In sum, these ads represent a concerted effort on the part of car producers, via advertising and marketing professionals, to address the female sector of the car market. This is achieved through recourse to the language and imagery of fashion and beauty, realms associated with women. These advertisements subvert conventions of both gender and genre, thereby appealing to a knowing awareness in the target audience. However, such advertisements are only partly progressive. It appears that we are in a transitional stage in the history of advertising cars to women, one reflective of an ambiguous relation to stereotypes. References in car ads to unrelated women-centred areas of consumption such as fashion, fragrance and cosmetics are specific to a stage in which traditional, sexualized car culture has not yet thoroughly incorporated female consumers, referring instead to another feminized market sector. It is worth remembering that while advertisements are key tools for the enforcement of stereotype, they can also be a route to the dissolution of those very stereotypes.
GRACE LEES-MAFFEI, ‘MEN, MOTORS, MARKETS AND WOMEN’
