LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Lynne Pearce (2016) *Drivetime: Literary Excursions in Automotive Consciousness*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 256 pp., £70 (cloth), ISBN: 9780748690848.

Almost every other day brings another breathless report about the 'end of driving as we know it,' with accompanying speculation about the impacts on our personal and social lives. While some autonomous vehicle boosters have assumed that the attention once demanded by commuting will be redirected toward "productive" activities, others are less optimistic about the cognitive affordances of cars. As the travel writer Robert Moor put it,

> Arriving home from school or my after-school job, I was often stunned to find myself in the driver's seat, as if awakening from a drunken blackout and discovering that I did not remember a single moment that preceded it. This experience of mental auto-pilot is so common that psychologists have given it a name: driving without awareness, or DWA. Many readers currently blanch at the news that the roads will one day be filled with cars hurtling brainlessly along at high speed. But those people fail to realize one thing: They already are.

The view of driving as an essentially mindless activity has been a common trope for decades, ranging from popular journalism to the influential philosophy of writers like Jean Baudrillard and Paul Virilio. This discourse maintains that 'drivetime' is at best wasted time and at worst inculcates a kind of existential vacuity, with predictably disastrous social and psychological results.

It is to this discourse that Lynne Pearce's *Drivetime* delivers a provocative, widely researched, well-written, and intricately argued rejoinder. Starting with her own "auto"-ethnography, Pearce finds the 'driving event' to be 'an oasis in the rhythm of daily life,' offering an opportunity for 'non-referential speculation and/or the independent generation of ideas', which, in a world where thought is increasingly computer-mediated and operational, is not only unique but indispensable (4). The simple and almost plangent question that underlies her study is, 'Where will I do my thinking if "drivetime" is no longer available to me?' (200). However, Pearce's project is much more than personal: she has set out to chart the entire range of 'automotive consciousness' that driving (and, occasionally, passengering) opened up for people over the course of the twentieth century.

In contrast to those 'rather utilitarian' (38) approaches from neuroscience that have taught us about, say, reflex response times or what frequency of ambulance siren is the most attention-getting, Pearce uses texts to uncover a phenomenological understanding of the directions in which our minds head when we head out in our cars. Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and Jean-Luc Marion are along for the ride, but more important to Pearce are Henri Bergson and especially E.H. Gombrich, whose

'schema and correction' model of perception Pearce finds more relevant for motoring than 'pure,' presentist phenomenology. The idea is that driving, being an activity that imparts the sensation of moving faster than time, can distort the temporalities of everyday consciousness, allowing or even forcing events from the past and imaginations of the future to flicker into the conscious present. And it is this temporal whiplash that knocks us out of focused, operational thought into 'non-referential speculation,' into the territory of imagination, fantasy, and reverie.

Pearce establishes a four-part taxonomy, the first category of which, "Searching," is the most convincing, and also the most immediately relatable for geographers and literary geographers. "Searching" -- spontaneous, modest, whimsical motoring -- had its golden age in the 1920s and 1930s, when cars and roads were comparatively primitive. (The mythologies and discourses of motoring were also comparatively under-developed, but I will come back to this matter later.) In the travelogues Pearce reads from this era, the writers set out in their finicky, open-topped cars on explorations of the countryside, and in the process present the reader with, in at least one case, an experience of the 'phenomenological world so extraordinary that, during its course, the driver, too, has been 'shrunk' like the mountains, 'stretched' like the road and finally, if temporarily, 'stilled' like the forest' (82). Pearce's account of her own 2015 drive between Preston and Cornwall lacks the visceral turbulence of the early travelogues, but nevertheless manages to capture the way a mind can drift throughout a drive. Her quotidian observations are punctuated by moments of recognition and reflection, recollection and reassurance, preoccupation and then relief; "non-places" like gas stations and chain restaurants actually function as landmarks and memory triggers; and the sheer boringness of much of the event encourages her mind to wander. Above all, her interlude is unaffected and free of pretense or argumentative urgency, making it feel like the honest phenomenology she set out to conduct.

In the next sections, "Fleeing", "Cruising," and "Flying", Pearce focuses more on literary texts. Guided by Gaston Bachelard's and Ernst Bloch's conceptions of the 'reverie', along with the insights of Reyner Banham, the British architecture critic who learned how to drive 'in order to read Los Angeles in the original' (quoted on page 136), she shows us how the concentration and sensory stimulation of drivetime can allow characters to achieve nearly mystical states of heightened awareness. In "Fleeing", it is characters' 'pre-existing objectives and/or psychological mindsets that renders [their car trips] 'flights" to or from something in their physical or psychological lives (92). "Cruising" is 'open but purposeful' driving (131), while "Flying" is the type of driving that corresponds most closely to everyday notions of reverie, daydreaming, and the ego sublimation that Bachelard called 'dispersed consciousness'.

Many of Pearce's readings are astute, but she deserves particular praise for having found something new to say about *On the Road*. Describing an episode in which Dean's reckless driving has forced Sal to take refuge on the floor of the car, Pearce admires Kerouac's 'insight into the complex ocularity of automotive consciousness':

> Sal's multi-sensory response to his distress [...] confirms the extent to which (auto)mobility is apprehended -- and interpreted -- by the *whole body* [… and] foregrounds the proactive role of the intellect -- in particular memory -- in recording and analysing the visual components of the

> process. […] This description of how the road 'unwinds' itself in Sal's consciousness thus raises fascinating questions about what we are actually 'seeing' when we look out of a car window/windscreen. (112, italics in original)

Elsewhere, we meet Maria, from Joan Didion's *Play It As It Lays*, who, coping with the dissolution of her family, takes obsessively to the freeways of greater Los Angeles, where she regains and maintains composure. Pearce finds in Maria a driver for whom driving is like 'cognitive behavior therapy, [...] a means of controlling and directing conscious thought rather than indulging and/or annihilating her unconscious desires and fears' (148).

Compelling readings like these notwithstanding, a kind of epistemological slow leak begins to hamper Pearce's project. Aside from the perennial philosophical debate about the degree to which any kind of writing captures consciousness, Pearce also declines to acknowledge that novels, travel guides, and even memoirs have certain communicative goals, and are subject to the constraints of narrative and genre (not to mention commerce and the publishing industry). While Pearce recognizes that writers may have motives, she is all too ready to draw on 'hard science' and marshal it against writers when the matter in question is some negative aspect of automotive consciousness she wishes to deprecate. For example, referring to the supposed 'addiction' to the adrenaline rush of driving, she writes that it 'is scientifically unproven and hence the aspect of driving whose connotations have been most obviously appropriated by writers and artists for symbolic, and often sensational, purposes' (194). It may indeed be the case that people are not actually addicted to speed in the medical sense. But Dean's reveries while 'cruising' in *On the Road*, for example, are equally 'scientifically unproven'. And it does not follow that simply because a literary device seems authentic (rather than 'symbolic' or 'sensational') that it corresponds to a factual cognitive experience. Tellingly, when interviewed about the influence of her own driving habits on those of her characters, Didion said,

> Actually, I don't drive on the freeway. I'm afraid to. I freeze at the top of the entrance, at the instant when you have to let go and join it. Occasionally I *do* get on the freeway—usually because I'm shamed into it—and it's such an extraordinary experience that it sticks in my mind. So I use it. (Kuehl 1978: n.p., italics in original)

In other words, the cognitive experience Didion herself feels on the freeway (fear) was completely inverted in the fictional character of Maria (who finds control). This is not to say the automotive consciousness that Pearce draws our attention to in *Play It As It Lays* is unimportant or illegitimate. But it does tell us less about the effects of driving on thinking than about the effects of driving on writing.

Similarly, except for the mention of one magazine ad from the 1920s, conspicuously absent from the book is the role of marketing and commodity capitalism in the creation of expectations and desires when it comes to cars. Those of us, including Pearce, who were born well within the auto age, have had the images, slogans, and advertising jingles of Detroit-via-Madison Avenue washing over us from birth. Of course, it would be difficult to assess the ways in which, say, the entreaty to

"See the USA in your Chevrolet" actually influenced the way Chevy drivers experienced the world as "seen-from-the-car". But when people *write about* driving, they are entering this discourse, and writing is the material Pearce uses. Take one glaring example from Neil Young's memoir. With due respect to the great song writer, he seems almost to have plagiarized the advertising copy from a showroom brochure: 'It was an astounding vehicle in every respect -- magnificent power, unique styling, groundbreaking mechanical design in the convertible top mechanism, and a luxuriously spacious interior' (quoted on page 140). But rather than noting this and exploring the role of advertising in driving discourses -- or perhaps even interpreting Young's description as a tongue-in-cheek allusion to advertising language -- Pearce takes the commentary at face value.

One would also have wanted Pearce to differentiate automotive consciousness more convincingly from that of other speedy modes of transport. What about Samuel Beckett's famous bicycles, which turned characters into "Cartesian centaurs," overcoming the mind-body divide (Kenner 1968: 117)? What about Marcel Proust -- no stranger to reverie -- and his love of trains, which Pearce blithely brushes off? Another remarkable omission is any mention of professional drivers, those who spend far more of their lives in 'drivetime' than the rest of us; presumably their experiences would be invaluable in helping understand the dimensions of automotive consciousness. (The recent film *Paterson*, for example, features a city bus driver whose time at the wheel is an important part of the inspiration and brainstorming process for the poems he then writes in his free time.)

These caveats aside, *Drivetime* is an important contribution to automobile scholarship, especially for pointing our attention away from the car as mobility tool or status symbol and towards its ineluctable power as a 'prosthesis of the human mind' (1). This insight has implications for those seeking to understand the hold the car has on us despite its widely known social and environmental repercussions. Literary scholars might likewise take up her call to look beyond the drive as a simple "device" or perhaps explore the degree to which automotive consciousness is represented in other, non-prose genres. Thanks to her lucid writing and meticulously signposted structure, Pearce's book is likely to be accessible to a general audience, too, and give all readers something to ponder the next time they head out on the road.

Works Cited

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