

If it feels good, do it

Cars are among the few private places left . . .
and only you know who you are in private

BY RALPH KEYES

• I became interested in the car as private space when friends of mine began screaming inside their automobiles.

The first person to tell me about this, a father of five in his late thirties, explained that within his van, driving to and from work, was the only time he felt free to rage—spit and holler—let it all out. He called it his Private Therapy Van. Just roll up the windows and howl, go crazy if you like. No one will ever know what you're doing in there.

My friend with his Private Therapy Van intrigued me, and I began asking people what they did alone in their cars, mentioning that one guy I knew screamed. With amazing frequency, faces would light up and heads nod vigorously as they heard this. "Hey, me too," they'd say. "I scream in my car sometimes, but I didn't know anyone else did."

One friend, a college counselor, shouts on the freeway whenever his tension and anger reach the boiling point. He mentioned his in-car screaming to a meeting of colleagues and found several nodding, laughing, saying they did the same. Sometimes they advised clients to follow suit.

A San Mateo schoolteacher began screaming in her car two years ago, on the advice of a therapist. This therapist had suggested vigorous shouting, laughing, crying—anything to let off tension. But my friend lives in an apartment and said she had no place to do this. No problem, replied the therapist, just get in your car and let go.

I began to wonder if there weren't some formal or semi-formal movement afoot. The screaming part itself isn't so bizarre—from Primal Screaming to Bio-Energetics, loud vocal emissions have become a common part of therapy—but doing it in an automobile did seem highly unusual.

Viola Litt Callaghan, a Transactional Analyst in San Francisco, said she got the idea from her work as a traveling auditor nearly 25 years ago. She was taking singing lessons at the time and used to practice in the car during long, lonely hours on the road between widespread appointments.

Later, after becoming a therapist, Ms. Callaghan started advising clients to let off steam loudly from time to time. Most pleaded lack of a private place to do this. At home, even in the bathroom, the family—or neighbors—might hear. Remembering her own in-car singing, Ms. Callaghan started saying, "No problem. Just get in your car, roll up the windows, turn on the radio, take off and let loose."

Ms. Callaghan knows other counselors who recommend bathroom screaming, but no one else who recommends the car. She raised the question at the recent meeting of Transactional Analysts in San Francisco and found only one other colleague—a woman who advised clients to make faces while driving along the freeways.

Screaming is only the most dramatic example of private behavior within the car. Columnist Art Seidenbaum of *The Los Angeles Times* says he knows novelists who construct paragraphs inside the car, an insomniac who finds freeways his

most relaxing environment and one father who uses time driving alone to argue with his family so he can be nice when they're actually around him.

Jack Smith, Seidenbaum's colleague at the *Times*, calls freeway time "the only time we're free; free from the telephone, free from things we ought to be doing, free from any kind of interruption but the occasional necessity of prudent steering or braking to avoid catastrophe." Smith got so much response to this position that two follow-up columns were necessary to handle the load. One woman, an anthropology teacher, wrote Smith that she found freeway time "glorious." "Those times of privacy and contemplation, of separateness and selfness, when one can be truly alone and thoughtful. I sometimes think freeway driving was made for philosophical thought and problem-solving that no other situation can afford." An interesting view.

My own informal survey has uncovered everything from thumb-sucking to masturbation going on within cars. Nose-picking is the run-away first choice for in-car entertainment, the most common activity on the freeway after driving. Singing is also quite common, and my personal choice for time alone. I yodel, badly, and find other drivers are the only people who will put up with it—so long as my windows are tightly closed—although I do get occasional stares.

One woman, a mother in her forties, confided that she often sucks her thumb while driving. I asked if that was a life-long habit and the woman replied, no, that it began just over a year ago when she asked her six-year-old why he sucked his thumb and he said it tasted good. He suggested that she try it. She tried it and liked it. Now this woman reports sucking her thumb regularly, but only when alone and often while driving.

Another teacher of sociology, a PhD. in her late thirties, says she used to masturbate while driving the lonely roads of Texas as a girl. But this is much more difficult on California's freeways, she reports, especially with all the semis passing by, and an occasional convoy of Marines.

A Los Angeles swinger, interviewed by two television reporters, was not so inhibited. "I even do it in my car," she told them, "driving down the freeway when the traffic is bumper to bumper and getting all upset about it. One hand stays on the steering wheel and the other hand goes on me."

Other activities that my survey turned up included crying, line-learning for plays, dictating, fantasizing and "telling myself secrets." The list goes on and on.

One San Diego sergeant told me he'd seen "Everything from making love to smoking marijuana," but, when pressed for verification, admitted that the most torrid thing he'd observed in 14 years was a guy driving a Corvette at 85 mph with a girl on his lap. "I did see a guy playing a harmonica once," he added lamely.

Other policemen told me of seeing drivers shaving, eating, applying makeup, filing their nails, combing hair, reading and, of course, picking their noses. Women especially seem to sing a lot, one told me, and many drivers seem just to be talking to themselves. He said you can tell the difference by

Ralph Keyes is a Fellow of the Center for Studies of the Person in La Jolla, California. He is also the author of *We The Lonely People*, published by Harper and Row.

whether the driver's head is keeping time with the movement of his lips as he barrels down the highway.

Some of the policemen were philosophical about all of this; others were very stern: drivers should pay attention to driving and nothing else . . . for safety reasons.

There is a safety question involved in the insulation of today's cars. At 70 mph on a smoothly-flowing freeway, with the windows closed, air conditioning on, tape deck blaring and mind off on a business deal—who notices the car ahead screeching to a halt as a dog crosses the road?

Rear-end collisions, which constitute a high percentage of all accidents, usually result from such inattention. But this is difficult to prove, as is the role of distraction in any collision. Some accident reports do note whether the radio or air conditioner was on in any of the cars involved. But what driver will admit to taking a bite out of a ham sandwich just before an accident, let alone screaming?

Though the role of personality factors in causing accidents is subject to much debate, there is general agreement that the use of automobiles to express aggression is widespread, and a common contributor to accidents. One 1966 study of South African drivers found that those classed as high-accident risks scored low on control of aggression and high on anxiety, while demonstrating frequent incidence of antisocial attitudes (as judged by the Thematic Apperception and Social Relations Tests). The maker of this study concluded that people drive as they would *like* to live.

Or, as one English observer put it, a driver doesn't *change* behind the wheel. "His personality does not change. There is one significant difference: when the driver is in his own car there is more freedom to demonstrate the presence of unsocial, irresponsible and, even, antisocial traits."

Walter Cronkite tells of being viciously side-swiped one afternoon by a blue-and-white four-door sedan with a dent on the right front door. At a dinner party that night, hosted by a biology professor of impeccable courtesy, Cronkite recounted the incident. All present agreed that even civilized men can become brutes when protected by two tons of glass and steel. As the evening ended, the host offered his guest a ride home in his blue-and-white four-door sedan which, Cronkite noticed as he got in, had a dent in the right front door.

"There is good reason to presume," writes Dr. F.A. Whitlock, a forensic psychiatrist interested in drivers' behavior, "that a large number of otherwise mild-mannered persons manifest surprisingly aggressive behavior once they get behind the steering wheels of their cars. The irrational nature of much of this conduct can be inferred from the quality of the behavior and its expression by persons who normally show most of the features of civilized, social restraint."

But the question remains, which face is more real: the civilized, restrained pedestrian, or the aggressive, hostile driver? The point is that within the privacy of one's car, protected by all that metal and virtual anonymity, one is free to engage in behavior rarely permitted "in public." The question thus is not so much "What do you do in your car?" as "What do you do in private?" Privacy is the key word.

Air conditioning has fundamentally altered the social role of private motor vehicles. In the first half-century of our automobility, very few cars were air conditioned. The proportion of cars built with air conditioning in 1955 was just over one per cent and, by 1964, the proportion was still only 18 per cent. By 1970, however, the figure had shot up to nearly 60 per cent, this not to mention the million or so air conditioning units which are installed annually on unequipped cars.

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Godzilla



Humbert Humbert



Tip-to-toe Loveliness



Kicking Dog

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In order to retain the conditioned air (and keep out the spray of automatic car washers), seals on car windows and doors have improved markedly in recent years. As a result, people who first rolled up their windows to enjoy their new air conditioning have found that driving is pleasanter all around that way . . . smoother, quieter. You can hear the radio better. It's simply more peaceful as a place to listen.

This is the practical effect of the modern air conditioning system and its poor relation, better vent systems. The social effect is to make driving an ever more insulated and private undertaking.

A group of students at the California Institute of the Arts was asked to describe their most intimate space. For the majority it was their car. The twenty or so students were largely 18- to twenty-year-olds, had just left home and could claim no other environment to call their own. "It was clear," said their professor, "that the auto was their most personal space. There were lots of deep-seated yearnings wrapped up in that thing."

Many of the students had vans which they would use to get away in, or even as mobile staging platforms for media productions. But since the car itself was the meeting point for owner and friends, going somewhere—to a drive-in or the like—wasn't really necessary. The vehicle was its own destination. Even owners of small Volkswagens reported these as intimate space. Some said they'd go out to the parking lot and sit in the back seat of their Beetles sometimes, just to get away from it all.

The car as personal space is a topic almost completely overlooked by those interested in automobility, environments or human behavior in seclusion. In a widely-quoted observation, Buckminster Fuller once called automobiles simply an extension of the house, a front porch with wheels. But this missed the point entirely: the car is one of our least public spaces, a hideaway which is private on the road and more private yet when driven into seclusion.

Commerce, as usual, is far ahead of the academy in smelling this social trend. The cars Detroit produces grow ever more insulated and equipped to entertain lone drivers. FM radios have become common in cars and the renaissance of that medium is based on driver-listeners. A whole sub-commerce has grown up around cassette instruction tapes, which are often marketed specifi-

cally for in-car listening. And Auto-Tape tours can now be purchased—cassettes which make it unnecessary to leave the privacy of one's car to tour regions, cities and national parks.

This could be seen as a problem—a highway safety problem especially. Firemen with whom I've talked say they're already driving more defensively to cope with drivers who don't respond to their sirens. One veteran of 13 years driving a fire truck says it's far harder to get cars to pull over now than before—partly because there are more of them, and partly because cars are more soundproof, their drivers distracted by stereo, "and some of them wearing those damned earmuffs (earphones)."

But this is not a car problem so much as a privacy problem. The car is so attractive as a place to be alone only because we have so few opportunities for seclusion in city or suburb. We will not successfully confront any of the social problems posed by automobiles until we deal first with the related issue of privacy and our need for it.

Privacy, in the physical sense, means simply a place to be alone. In the psychological sense, privacy means freedom to be one's self. For most of us, that's only when we're alone. For that reason perhaps, most of us have felt the intense desire to have personal, private space of our own. Very often, this takes the form of a car of our own, for a car is the most easily procured form of attainable personal space.

Before we can deal successfully with our hunger for a personal car, we must provide as well for each person's need of a place to call his own—a personal space. Everyone needs a space which belongs to him alone, and few of us have it—in our homes, or anywhere. "We've got to have a type of housing that gives more privacy," says Margaret Mead, "so that young parents, for example, don't have to go sit in the car to have a conversation out of earshot of their children."

Psychologist Sidney Jourard has long argued that a healthy society must provide places for seclusion, for emotional respite, to all its members. He recommends that each community provide not only hospitals, but retreat centers where people can retire in privacy for an emotional recharge. Were such centers available, he speculates, we might have much less need for mental hospitals.

We might also need fewer cars. ●