
Driving the Suburbs: Minivans, Gender, and Family Values

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Résumé

Depuis son élaboration en tant que marchandise dans les années 1970, la camionnette est construite comme un espace domestique au féminin, une réduction consacrée par des expressions telles « maman soccer » et « maman camionnette ». Le marketing des camionnettes depuis 1983 représente concrètement la réalisation des politiques pro-vie et anti-amendement sur l'égalité des droits de l'ère Reagan aux États-Unis, parce qu'il cloître les femmes dans de petites boîtes renfermant valeurs familiales, impératifs d'hétéronormalité, hyperfécondité et vie domestique en banlieue. Une lecture postféministe des camionnettes en tant qu'objets matériels permet de voir comment la conception et la fabrication des voitures ont délimité l'accès des femmes aux espaces publics et aux activités indépendantes. La rhétorique de libération par les véhicules loisir et travail révèle à quel point les femmes de la société du capitalisme avancé ont permis à la « maniabilité », à la « visibilité » et au « sens de l'aventure » d'évincer l'activisme politique confiant, le regard pénétrant et l'indignation.

Abstract

Since its inception as a marketing idea in the 1970s, the minivan has been constructed as a feminized domestic space, an elision ratified by phrases such as "soccer mom" and "minivan mom." The marketing of the minivan since 1983 represents, in material form, the successful realization of Ronald Reagan's pro-life, anti-ERA policy of the 1980s by physically putting women into little boxes that bundled "family values"—imperatives of heteronormativity, hyperfecundity, and domestic suburban life. A postfeminist reading of the minivan as a material object enables us to consider how car design and manufacturing have delimited women's access to public space and independent activity. The current liberation rhetoric of SUVs reveals the degree to which women in a late-capitalist society have allowed "ease of handling," "driver visibility" and "a sense of adventure," to displace bitchy political activism, vision, and outrage.

Since the introduction of the Dodge Caravan in 1983, minivans have literally driven through roads, suburbs, families, and women, thereby taking their place among the iconic cultural objects that construct late-twentieth-century life. In the first full model year, 1984, Chrysler sold more than 200 000 vehicles; by 1988, this number had climbed to 450 000.¹ Sales of all brands peaked in 1994, with 1 265 575 minivans sold.² Now firmly entrenched as both a vehicle and market segment, this phenomenon, which began as Lee Iacocca's brainchild for a teetering Chrysler, wrote itself into the suburban landscape as a "lifestyle vehicle," with more than forty makes and models currently available and eighty-three projected for the near

future. Marketing research, advertising, and use patterns confirm that the "minivan" (the word is a new coinage in English) serves as a nexus for bringing together a whole set of social scripts — of the nuclear family, of the renegotiation of women's domestic and professional lives, of suburban life and its modes of transportation, and of course, of motor vehicles as a complex sign system.

In this essay, I intend to discuss the minivan as having created a well-defined discursive space — mostly interior, as we all know — for bundling and defining familial and suburban social relations in a very conservative way. The vehicle creates a "myth" of family harmony, with everyone sitting in their own seats, during a time when divorce rates

have increased, teenagers have led increasingly independent lives, and two-career families are hard pressed to find time for both professional and domestic commitments. Since all objects play themselves out in this larger arena of socio-cultural politics,³ I intend to demonstrate that the minivan acts as a material shell for the retrograde conservative agenda of "family values" that became one of the dominant themes in political discourse when Ronald Reagan was elected at the beginning of the 1980s, a time that coincides with the introduction of this "family vehicle." I read the minivan's very high degree of identification with women as yet another example of the backlash against the second-wave feminist visions of the 1960s and 1970s that is marked by the failure to ratify the ERA and the assault on women's reproductive rights since the early 80s.⁴ It is a car that has literally and effectively boxed in millions of women, and by the new millennium these "little" boxes — or not so little, in the case of extended models — are driven to the "big box" environments of suburban housing developments, malls, and huge stand-alone Walmarts and Home Depots.

If we turn briefly to automotive history, we find that the much-heralded launch of the minivan as a new "concept" vehicle that emphasized interior space was repackaging an idea that had been around for some time.⁵ Writers for specialized magazines like *Popular Mechanics* and *Car and Driver* observed that a minivan-like vehicle, the Scarab, had been produced as early as 1932, but only nine were ever built.⁶ The Scarab had a long flat floor and the interior could be arranged for sleeping or a bridge foursome, having something in common with Airstreams, Winnebagos, and car campers. Vans and light trucks, for both commercial and commercial passenger use, had been introduced at a very early date. Station wagons were models that set out many of the goals that were later taken up in the minivan: they offered extended space to accommodate family members rather than goods or passengers being delivered. The folding third bench opened new possibilities for private passenger vehicles, as children wound up in a newly enclosed passenger space which, in a sedan, would have put them in the trunk. There is compelling statistical evidence that the minivan's success during the 1980s and the 1990s came at the expense of this former family vehicle as their paths converge and then lead in opposite directions on a graph of sales numbers for both vehicles in the late 80s.⁷

The most direct lines of descent for the design of minivans may be traced to the very successful launch of the Ford Econoline and Chevy Astro

series in the 1960s. The use of these vehicles was initially commercial, but they were marketed, eventually quite luxuriously, for personal use too. The layout was there in the 60s: two independent passenger seats in front, double doors for both side and rear entry. Yet another predecessor of the minivan which emphasized interior space and height was the Volkswagen Microbus, first introduced in 1950 by Volkswagen. Although it never achieved the kind of inevitable identification with the family that minivans enjoy, the VW bus remapped interior space by providing a strikingly different set of opportunities for social relations with its higher headroom and easier access for the eight passengers it seated. Moreover, VW buses, with their sunroofs and window space, provided prototypes of what was to become minivan "visibility." Of course, the VW bus literally wove itself into the political narratives of the 1960s and early 1970s, becoming highly visible as the vehicle of a "counterculture" that was engaged in various wars between the "establishment" and its luxury sedans, station wagons, and sporty coupes. In this context, the VW bus achieved an iconic identity, which interestingly it did not manage to pass on to Volkswagen's next van effort, the Vanagon. I would suggest that by the time the Vanagon was introduced in 1980, the VW bus script had played itself out, possibly tainting the Vanagon as a family car. In "Mini-Van Madness," an article published in *Motor Trend* in 1986, a reviewer pretty much dismissed the Vanagon as a vehicle best used "to stuff a dozen college students in it."⁸

Chrysler's 1983 models of the Dodge Caravan and Plymouth Voyager were in fact designated as light trucks but, from its very inception in the prototypes of the 1970s, the minivan was envisioned and designed as a family passenger vehicle, having an abundance of cargo and headroom. The minivan's most direct predecessor and namesake, "the Mini/Max," was designed at Ford in the late 1960s. It was envisioned as "a viable suburban transport module...a functionally sized box that could be employed for family hauling and shopping errands."⁹ Chevrolet tried introducing a similar vehicle with the Corvair Greenbriar, but it was on the market only briefly because of the safety concerns that doomed the Corvair itself. This family market segment clearly existed from the 60s on, for both Ford and Chrysler were to discover in their market research that there were 800 000 potential customers for such a vehicle.¹⁰ When Hal Sperlich, who had worked on the Mini/Max at Ford, followed

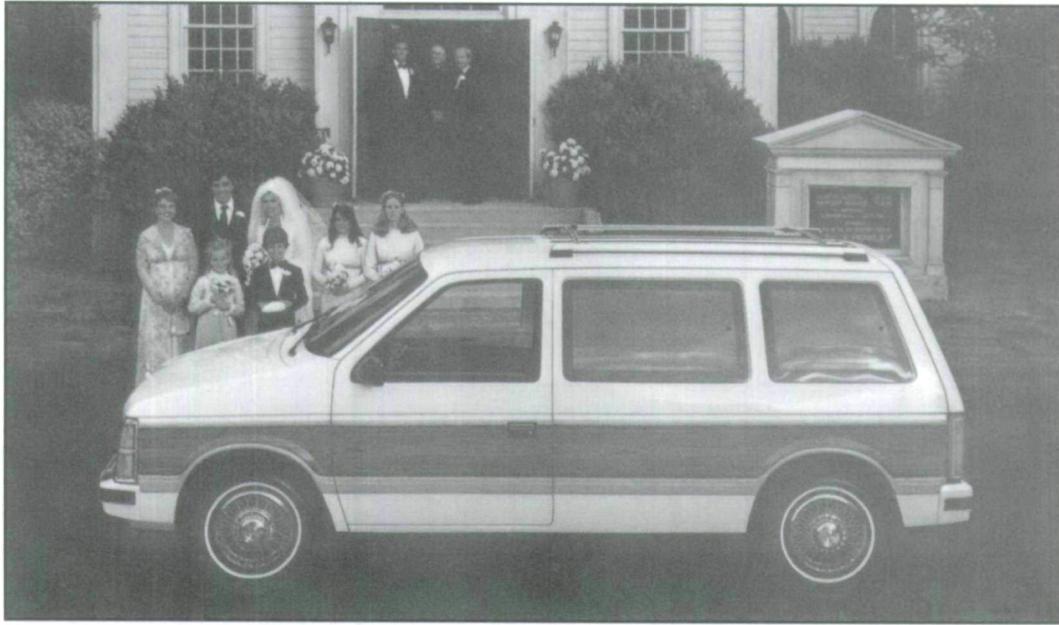


Fig. 1
 1984 Plymouth Voyager
 (Plymouth Voyager 1984
 brochure, CSTM 3064;
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Iacocca to Chrysler, he brought with him the commitment to T-115, as the prototype was called. During the planning and development stages, designers referred to the vehicle as a “super van” or “box on wheels,” and the first production version, driven by Iacocca himself (who ended up being locked in the car!) came off the Windsor, Ontario, assembly line in September 1983.¹¹

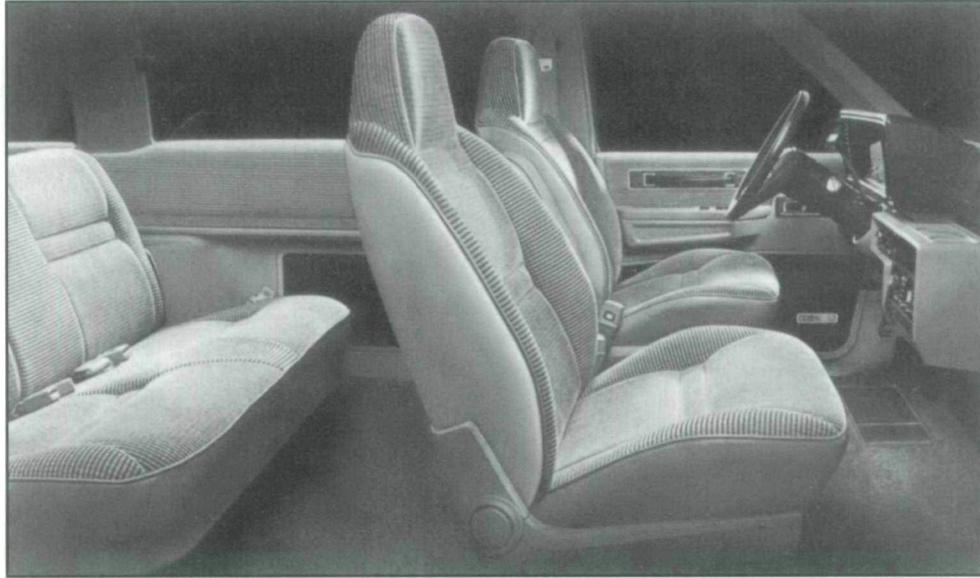
The designers achieved their objective of giving the minivan a “passenger-car feel” (as opposed to the Econoline and Astro) by building the minivan on the chassis of yet another successful Chrysler “family” car, the K-car. This was in keeping with the industry’s practice of updating basic platforms, by “reskinning” or even more prosaically, “perfuming the pig” (one of many sexist phrases that characterize the language of car design¹²). The minivan’s design emphasized the “functionality” of the vehicle so that it could adapt to family needs, from carrying the children (and the rest of their soccer team), to carrying groceries, to going on vacation, to carrying a 4 × 8 piece of plywood — the latter indeed became the standard unit measurement for the interior dimensions of a minivan. Its “shape-shifting” qualities led Chrysler to dub it the “Magic Wagon” at first, and to consider using the magician Doug Henning in order to promote it.¹³ Exterior design was consciously sacrificed in favour of this “functionality.” In 1997, an article in *Popular Science* defended the utility of “Versatile Minivans” in the practice of everyday family life: “Judged solely on image, the minivan comes up short against the upstart, more rugged sport

utility vehicle. But for a road trip, a softball game, the carpool, or any long list of domestic chores, minivans remain the ultimate people mover and car carrier...Performing a multitude of tasks — and carrying out each at least reasonably well — is nothing to be scoffed at.”¹⁴

The identification with families, reinforced almost uniformly in the advertising of minivans, was clearly an identification with *certain kinds* of families. Against the background of social debates concerning ERA, abortion, and the public lobbying for gay and lesbian rights, the interior of the minivan resoundingly affirmed the heteronormative family of two different-sex parents and children, the more the better. The minivan by both its design and marketing endorses and privileges scripts of marriage and procreation (Fig. 1). While there are exceptions among very specific groups of purchasers (e.g., sports enthusiasts), it is abundantly clear that minivans are not designed for single consumers or even for consumers who have a partner and don’t have children. Other market segments are left unrepresented — images of the car and its passengers endlessly and numbingly repeat, in a Baudrillardian loop, the husband in the driver’s seat, wife in passenger’s seat — unless, of course, she is alone in the car with the children. This seating arrangement literally disposes bodies in a way that reinforces traditional heterosexual and monogamous gender roles as they are defined by family relations — images of men and women who do not fit the stereotype of “relationship material” are rendered invisible by the minivan’s space.

Fig. 2

1984 Plymouth Voyager interior (Plymouth Voyager 1984 brochure, CSTM 3064; reproduced with permission of DaimlerChrysler Corporation)



Commercials and advertising are addressed to mostly white, middle-class, clean-cut, well-run families — according to the commercials, minivan drivers have their family relations under control, a fact which is represented by the collective disposition of all family members in the minivan at once.

The minivan also serves as an advertisement for a heteronormative imperative to reproduce, especially in the pro-life political environment of the 1980s.¹⁵ As feminist theorists have noted, such reproduction has been identified traditionally with political service to the state,¹⁶ in this case, Reagan's "Morning in America." With a minivan in their garage, American families "were on the move again." The minivan projects a hyperfecundity that flies in the face of actual statistics indicating average birthrates dropped among women in the early 80s, especially among working women who accounted for more than fifty percent of the workplace.¹⁷ A review of minivans in *U.S. News and World Report* was entitled "When Room for Five is Not Enough": "Just a few years ago, the only people your car had to satisfy were you and your spouse. Now things are getting cramped. Check off as many of the following as apply to you: your family numbers five or more; you overload the car on vacations; you carpool hordes of kids to and from soccer practice, Brownies and other activities essential to a modern childhood."¹⁸ The evocative phrases convey an explosion of children — "five or more," "overloaded," "hordes." In 1984, a title in the otherwise staid magazine *Money* screamed with sexual innuendo "Suburbia's Hot New Hauler," and described "families as piling into sporty alternatives to the station wagon," with a

background picture that placed children everywhere, including several popping out of the sunroof of a vehicle.¹⁹ Indeed with its phenomenal sales figures, it seemed as if the minivan itself were breeding, as suggested by article titles such as "How Long Does it Take to Hatch a New Car."²⁰

In thinking out how Dodge Caravan's and Plymouth Voyager's 175 inch (445 cm) body and 125 cubic feet (3.5 m³) of cargo space might act as a container for all kinds of packed social relations, designers departed from the normal practice of car design. The minivan was in fact designed from the inside out, with the interior space projected first, then boxed in by the metal skin.²¹ The design team did absolutely everything to maximize interior space, which committed them early in the design process to front-wheel drive. The three rows of seating, which would accommodate eight, were positioned to allow easy access, and the side doors were to become key elements in minivan design. The seating pattern can be seen as predicating a network of social relations and generational hierarchies in the van: parents comfortably sitting in the two front seats which afforded the roominess of front-wheel design, with the children literally being disposed and cramped in rows in the back. Clearly, there was a greater gap of space between the front seats and first rows of back seats so that while the minivan projected a space that could collect the "nuclear family" with all its accessories (e.g., pets, video game gear, etc.) and cargo, it actually set up seating patterns inside the vehicle which distanced children from their parents, thereby opening possibilities for separate and independent realms inside (Fig. 2).

Since car purchases are second only to house purchases as a family investment, the vehicle becomes a crucial socio-cultural site for the "performativity"²² of "family values" since the minivan's *raison d'être* assumes that large nuclear families will have occasion to travel together in a very close space. The marketing season for minivans is still March through July, reflecting the purchase of a minivan in time for summer vacations.²³ The identification of vehicles with children's sports teams, most notoriously soccer, envisage a kind of extended family that the vehicle might hold all at once. In keeping with Jean Baudrillard's positing of a regime of simulacra in late-capitalist societies,²⁴ commercials based on these activities on the TV screen or magazine page produce simulations of a Disneyland-like coherence to the family that overwrites and ultimately obliterates the many social statistics and popular movies (ranging from Stephen Spielberg's *E.T.* [1982] to Adrian Lyne's *Fatal Attraction* [1987], which contradict this idealized view of family life in the mid 1980s. I would thus suggest that the minivan was never a "futuristic" vision, but rather a repackaging of an idealized suburban domesticity that hearkened back to the station wagons of the 1950s. The wording of an advertisement for the 1950 Plymouth station wagon speaks the language of minivans: "Comfortably seats eight full-sized passengers. Both rear seats quickly and easily removed for maximum loading."²⁵ New container, similar script.

Historically, the minivan enters this larger social discourse of "family values" as a vehicle that aligns itself with the far-right politics of both Ronald Reagan, and his counterpart in the women's movement, Phyllis Schlafly, in the late 1970s and early 1980s.²⁶ When we think of the fact that the concept of a large vehicle had been fully worked out by the late 1960s in the Mini/Max, this huge market segment was just waiting to be tapped in the early 1980s by Reagan's constituency, "conservative family types aged 35-44" who were looking for a vehicle which would be a "lifestyle enabler."²⁷ The minivan "enabled" them to recognize and embrace, in sheet metal, anti-ER and pro-life positions which had become focused not on the question of women's rights, but rather on the consequences for "family."²⁸ While these same conservative families may not have been keen to identify themselves with this agenda in a political arena (especially educated women with children), purchasing a minivan in effect

made this decision for them. While sociologists have long recognized that the divergence between the rhetoric and social reality of "family values," the consequences of this conservative social ethos was remarkably successful in terms of conveying its rhetoric and restructuring of society not in words, but in the material objects which were so prominently acquired and displayed in the 80s. Minivans remind women that in considering issues of maternity and family, it is important to move outside of "mainstream" feminist academic discourse on these subjects, and to consider that ideologies of reproduction are negotiated not only in hospitals and birthing rooms, but in car dealerships, television advertising, and on the road.

The minivan's orderly disposition of the family resulted in the development of certain specific technologies for "handling" the family in separate areas of the vehicle. The seating itself, as we have seen, established vectors of power, depending on whether the father or mother was driving. Moreover, innovations in design represent a Foucauldian "microphysics of power"²⁹ that is exercised in all rows to hold these bodies together in this closed space. While the first models were rudimentary, the minivan evolved a very specific set of features which eroded the absolute control of the driver's instrumentation: independent climate controls in the rear seats, cargo bins, safety latches and sliding doors. New sciences, which were to spread to other vehicles, were perfected in the minivan. In 1989, *U.S. News and World Report* reported that the addition of "crannies for drinking cups" was "a future frill"³⁰ but now models contain as many as 17 cup holders, with automakers having developed a science of "cupology." And, of course, the minivan's evolution has subsequently constructed the commodity of "more space," which technically is space (largely air, thinly surrounded by metal) added to the original space since the introduction of extended models.³¹ The minivan plays a major role, I would suggest, in this commodification of "space" in the automotive industry, a quality which now seems to extend down to even the smallest compact car, perhaps fulfilling the mandate of the best of both worlds expressed by the original term, "Mini/Maxi." Ingenious solutions like the 60/40 split in rear seats may be seen as a ripple effect of this obsession with the shape-shifting quality of interior space in the minivan.

In light of this obsession with the design and disposition of interior space, the minivan is now best understood as an extension of the suburban

home whose owners were the most important market segment for these vehicles (Fig. 3). Statements to that effect are commonplace: after meeting with Caravan owners at consumer clinics, a marketing executive concluded, "These things are extensions of their homes."³² In 1997, an *Esquire* article recognized that bodies had been distributed into separate spaces, like rooms: "a mini is like a big family house in the summer, with everyone coming and going and nobody in anybody's way."³³ Minivans belong to the increasingly mobile extensions of a home (like a cellphone), reflecting the reality of suburban two-career families who commute, shop for groceries, and then return home only to transport children to school and activities. It is worth noting that the development of the minivan also parallels the development of new residential areas since the early 1980s. Except during rush hours, these areas tend to be inadequately served by mass transit, and thus the car becomes crucial in getting families into and out of these neighbourhoods.³⁴

In an economy of working women, Nancy Rubin has eloquently described such suburbs in North America as empty and deserted during the day: "The great suburban mansions and modest tract homes are often silent all day, mausoleums to a dream, the streets hushed until the schoolchildren return home."³⁵ The minivan has displaced the home as the locus of daily family life. Dean Stoneley, brand manager for the Ford Windstar, has spoken directly to this in a recent *National Post* article: "Consumers are busier than ever...With double-income families and longer commutes, I think people

are spending more time in their cars and generally trying to do more with less time, and they're looking for tools that allow them to do that. We are trying to help, by taking features that are currently in their home and putting them in their vehicle."³⁶ Emphasizing "functionality" on the go, one writer has described minivans as "Swiss Army knives on the road."³⁷

The continuing story of minivan design in the 1990s may be read as a narrative of the architecture of a mobile domestic space, a kind of Deleuzian "nomadology"³⁸ rather than the design of a car. With the addition of the left-side fourth door (which immediately established itself as a requirement for these vehicles), increasing glass space and visibility, more storage compartments and amenities for activities (tray tables, glass holders, cargo bins) and continuing design refinements, especially for rear-seat passengers, the minivan reflects the architectural tendencies of the expensive suburban home, which admits lots of light by means of costly window openings, has built-in "smart" appliances, and the latest in comfort systems such as central air and high-efficiency heating. Consumers come to the minivan with the same expectations that they have in buying a home, and the market has increasingly moved in the direction of higher-end models like the Chrysler Town and Country, which make the original Dodge Caravan and Plymouth Voyager look like, well, a box.³⁹

The current and future development of "home comforts" is about to bring the minivan to its logical conclusion as mobile domestic space,

Fig. 3
1984 Plymouth Voyager
(Plymouth Voyager 1984
brochure, CSTM 3064;
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Corporation)



rather than as a vehicle. Minivans already include on-board monitors so that rear-seat-passengers — read children and teenagers!! — can rely on the television screen for entertainment, as they do at home. The television, as Cecilia Tichi has argued, has been integrated into domestic life since the 1950s as “an electronic hearth”⁴⁰ and the extension of this hearth into the minivan’s interior demonstrates the degree to which the minivan has elided with a domestic space which is centered around televisuality.⁴¹ In a recent issue of *Parents*, a mother has agonized over whether she is being a responsible parent in using videos to keep her children under control, thereby extending these gender-specific parental issues into the car.⁴² In the future, we can look forward to Windstar Solutions, a Ford Aerostar concept vehicle whose name plate suggests that it will “solve” the problem of domestic living in late-capitalist America. When it was shown a few months ago at an automotive exhibition in Toronto, the minivan was equipped with a pull-down movie screen, a built-in microwave, washer-dryer, central wet/dry vacuum, refrigerator and trash compactor.⁴³

The splicing of these appliances from the home into the minivan targets women as ground zero once again, for in many instances women continue to bear primary responsibility for housework and child care despite surface myths of the sharing of household labour with their male partners.⁴⁴ The minivan’s ability to inscribe the discourse of “family values” on to a vehicle depended upon the remarkable extent to which the “chassis,” with its “skin,” had been designed specifically for women. As such, it belongs to the nineteenth- and twentieth-century technological developments which, as Ruth Schwartz Cowan has demonstrated, define domesticity as a female regime by identifying women, rather than men, with material objects and practices in the context of the home.⁴⁵ As we have seen in both corporate development strategies and in subsequent media advertising, women have been pictured performing almost inevitably interrelated “housewifely” and “maternal,” roles that contradict the complexity of the lives of women with families at the end of the twentieth century.⁴⁶ The minivan was a vehicle that bundled family relations in such a way that women would play a central role, no matter what the gender of the actual driver, but what women may have gained in mobility was boxed in by both the scripts of the box itself and by the fact that women are still tethered to jobs which are closer to “home.”⁴⁷ There was no



way they were going to get in this minivan and just drive! We might bear in mind that there are some statistics that show the inevitable identification of women with the minivan to be less than factual.⁴⁸

But women were built right into the minivan from the very beginning. Designers worried that women had “to feel comfortable” driving such a large vehicle. One of the solutions was, of course, built right into the car by using the K-car chassis. But this reference to “feeling comfortable,” which is repeated continually, itself demands further deconstruction of its rhetoric because the phrase makes clear that women need extra marketing research and design work “to feel comfortable” — the words themselves construct gendered patterns in relation to vehicles (Fig. 4).

It has been established that cultural objects are never neutral but almost always carry valences of gender.⁴⁹ Perhaps, of all material objects, the history of automobile design and marketing has been the most consistently sexist and gender-specific, with both language and design speaking the language of men. In her history of women’s uneasy relation to cars, Virginia Scharff has concluded that “sex has always outdistanced other factors as a focus of public debate about who could and should use motorcars.”⁵⁰ Cars assume a male audience and a male gaze as normative — styling features speak the language of aerodynamics and virility, accessories and instrumentation provide a sense of control and power, and highly sexualized advertising makes it clear that the bodies of women and cars (it’s not clear which has the priority!) share common assembly lines.⁵¹

Fig. 4
1984 Plymouth Voyager visor mirror (Plymouth Voyager 1984 brochure, CSTM 3064; reproduced with permission of DaimlerChrysler Corporation)

Fig. 5
 1984 Plymouth Voyager
 (Plymouth Voyager 1984
 brochure, CSTM 3064;
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 Corporation)



While there has always been some advertising directed towards women, in many cases it has been car-specific (e.g., the electric cars, station wagons, and the recent Saturn), with reference to particular makes and models that women “would feel comfortable driving.”⁵² Since a gender-specific car culture has been so dominant — my recent visit to a car dealership reminded me of the pitifully small number of saleswomen, even now⁵³ — the idea of a woman driving a car, let alone enjoying a car, was marked as a “deviant” script which played itself against the normativity of a male identification with the car. Earlier twentieth-century examples of cars that were marketed for women clearly show that women were seen as a niche market who, because of their disempowerment in relation to the vehicle, required softer, kinder models outside of the mainstream of auto design.

In light of this socio-cultural context, we can appreciate how high-pitched and insistent the minivan’s Althusserian call⁵⁴ had to be in order to reach women in such large numbers. In the development phase, designers repeatedly defined and assessed what they thought were women’s “needs”: they wanted to ensure that the car was “drivable by women, who find larger vans too cumbersome to maneuver and park”; they were aware of women’s wariness about a left-side door because it might expose “a small child to traffic.”⁵⁵ Ford ran television and prints ads showing a dozen mothers, all Ford employees, with their children, standing in a nicely formed circle around a Windstar minivan. The ads conveyed the message that not just any old women but *mothers who had their children standing right by them* had worked together on a recent redesign of the vehicle.⁵⁶

“Safety” was repeatedly framed as a gender-specific concern, exclusively identified with women (Fig. 5). The safety features, which figured so largely in the advertising (especially when Chrysler found itself confronted with poorly designed safety latches⁵⁷), may be read as devices that were meant to reassure the female driver that she *did* have control of the vehicle, despite its size. In 1977, as the T-115 “Magic Wagon” was being built on the car platform of the “K” cars, “women in particular seemed favorably disposed to it since it could carry kids and groceries yet wasn’t too big or intimidating.”⁵⁸ This fetishistic gaze of male auto designers looked closely enough to obsess about skirts: “a woman wearing a skirt or dress didn’t like to climb up and down from a tall vehicle”⁵⁹; a reviewer in *Money* declared: “Gone is the big, skirt hitching step up that annoys many women.”⁶⁰ At a premature launch of the vehicle in 1982, Chrysler assigned a public relations staffer “to woo” — note the sexist choice of the verb — women by offering special advance previews to editors of major women’s magazines. What better gendered endorsement of the vehicle than by having Martha Stewart, the doyen of domestic femininity, give the minivan her sanction by adopting the Dodge Caravan as her official company vehicle?⁶¹

While the measure of this maximized interior space was ostensibly the 4 × 8 piece of plywood, in both advertising and marketing, space was very heavily identified with the kinds of domestic chores that continue to be frustratingly identified with women’s lives in an era of supposedly equitable labour in the home. In “Mini-Van Madness,” the *Motor Trend* reviewers working for a guy car magazine found themselves travelling in unfamiliar, largely unmapped domestic territory after they had navigated the usual put-a-car-through-its-spaces route on freeways, city streets, and winding country lanes. “Before it was all over, we also put the minivan to use in most of the situations they were designed to handle — picking up some groceries, shuttling the kids to school, and stocking up with home improvements supplies at the lumber yard.”⁶² I would suggest that the rhetorical positioning of the last phrase in the syntax, evoking the 4 × 8 plywood, represents an attempt to recuperate masculinity after their brief sojourn in an embarrassingly feminized landscape.

The success in creating this market segment could be attributed more specifically in getting women to identify with *any* car so strongly by

making its body a grid against which a mix of domestic, reproductive, and servile imperatives were staged. By 1998, an article in *Popular Mechanics*, declared that “[t]he ancient conundrum ‘Which came first, the chicken or the egg?’ has been replaced with ‘Which came first, the soccer mom or the minivan?’”⁶³ The category “soccer moms” represented the apotheosis of a woman’s being in a minivan: the vehicle is the generator of a woman’s identity, yet it is yet another “child” to whom she has given birth. Off road, the minivan was to colonize the political life of these women, as “soccer moms” became a hotly contested demographic category in American politics during the 1996 election between Bill Clinton and Bob Dole. The language of one magazine appears to suggest that American society had been run over in an “accident” caused by, yes, you guessed it, “bad women drivers”⁶⁴: “America woke up one day in 1996 to find out that, through an accidental convergence of vehicle choice, children, sport and election year politics, they had become part of the hottest demographic appellation since ‘yuppie’ — the ‘soccer mom’.” The phrase, which piles on to the attributive adjectives that have been spliced with mom (e.g., “stay-at-home mom,” “working mom”) was in fact voted the “Word of the Year” in 1996 by the American Dialect Society.⁶⁵

By the election of 2000, “soccer moms” had morphed again into yet another vehicular body as “minivan moms” who were being “wooed” by Al Gore and George W. Bush as reported by an article in *Business Week*. Every movement of Maryann R. Gallagher, the typical “minivan mom,” is inextricably tied up with her vehicle. The minivan becomes a surrogate self and partner, all rolled into one.

*Every morning at 6 a.m. the Vienna (Va.) mother of three flies out the door and into her Plymouth Voyager for the 30-minute, jam-packed commute to her job ... At 3:30 p.m., she's back in the left lane of Washington's Beltway, doing 70 mph to race home in time to take her daughter to soccer. Gallagher, 49, then speeds off to the market, whips together dinner, and picks up the children if her husband, Frank, can't get away from his job as a manager at GEICO Corp.*⁶⁶

Almost every verb in this passage identifies Gallagher’s physical movement *as if she were her minivan* — she “flies,” “commutes,” “speeds off,” and “picks up.” She is “doing 70 mph” and “racing home.” Her day illustrates the social

reality that transportation now accounts for a larger proportion of the mix of domestic chores, much of it done by women.⁶⁷ But turning her into an automotive cyborg is not enough,⁶⁸ the article — written by a woman — makes sure that it deprives her of any illusion about her physical body through all too familiar ageism. Her age is prominently announced in stark numerals after her name, and the writer condescends to Gallagher’s middle-age by observing that “[m]inivan moms” are “slightly grayer and a little more tired than the Soccer Moms of 1996.”⁶⁹ The article reports that “they’ve grown more conservative” and we are left to wonder to what extent owning and driving the minivan has determined Gallagher’s political loyalties, her hair colour, the bags under her eyes, and her complexion.

At present, minivan sales are being eroded by SUVs, and it is evident, in television advertising and other types of marketing, that gender has played itself out so completely in the minivan over the past twenty years that both men and women are looking for “freedom” from the vehicle’s inscription of roles. In a *New York Times* article entitled “Minivan Crisis,” Ann Hood expresses feminist outrage towards the minivan, thereby trivializing the resistance which was once channeled toward ambitious claims for political, social and economic equity: “But what my husband envisions me driving is a minivan. ‘Why don’t you just move me out to the suburbs, put me in a pastel jogging suit and buy me a weed whacker for my birthday?’ I snapped at him...A minivan is everything I’ve spend my adult life fleeing, the 1950s suburban domesticity of my childhood. But now, as I am about to have another baby, the issue looms even larger.”⁷⁰ As we read this, we might measure Hood’s rhetoric of resistance, here entirely fetishized as suburban, against the politically engaged and outspoken feminist manifestos of the 1960s and 70s when Hood was presumably living through her teenage years. Her outrage about minivans, pink jogging suits and weed whackers might be compared with Betty Friedan’s out-and-out rejection of suburban life in *The Feminine Mystique* or Andrea Dworkin’s eloquent and radical rejection of the kind of heterosexual marriage that puts women in such compromised positions to begin with. How does being a husband give him the right to tell her what she is going to drive?

In *Esquire*, the feminization of the vehicle, which has put men in an uneasy position even when they are in the driver’s seat, now threatens

their virility directly. It asks "Do Real Men Drive Minivans?"⁷¹ Framing the same question, a television commercial shows an all-guy gym, and when a voice over the loudspeaker asks for the owner of the minivan to identify himself, he cowers in the corner, obviously embarrassed. In a machinic language of the phallus which recalls the macho Italian futurists,⁷² the mandate of SUVs is to "get them up in the air and make them husky," as opposed to a minivan which "makes buyers feel as if they were once again 'in the womb.'"⁷³

But this freedom, in a typically Baudrillardian twist, is yet another box, this time with all that an extended hood has come to represent.⁷⁴ "What sells now, it seems, is the illusion of freedom and individuality. In America, that has always been symbolized by the West, and these days drivers see the West-on-wheels in their beloved, beefy, vehicles."⁷⁵ Can you imagine "beefy" describing a minivan? But this traditionally male language of westerns and travel adventure has now written itself on to women who are presumably sick of their minivans, middle-age, and domestic life. Recent commercials for the Chevy Tahoe have shown single middle-aged women riding cross-country over deserts and Moroccan villages, and driving, à la Thelma and Louise, to the edge of a cliff. In these lifestyle vehicles, buyers face their mid-life crisis in a box, and the box has by now become a metonym for lived experience, as is indicated by the *New York Times* article entitled "Minivans Facing a Midlife Crisis at Age 14."⁷⁶ In this article, a woman declares: "There's nothing wrong with being a mom...I wanted to be a mom, yet I wanted my own identity."⁷⁷

This "backlash against the backlash" shows how successfully the family, and its reproductive practices, have been grafted on to the chassis of light trucks dressed up as cars. By 2001, new

reproductive technologies, especially with data from the Human Genome project now pouring in, threaten to disturb the binary gender and reproduction relations that made the minivan conceivable. A recent commercial for Pepsi One focuses on a wife who had just signed her name on the dotted line, as a typically geeky, obnoxious salesman congratulates her on having accepted her middle age and being "at peace with it." As she looks more and more distressed, she deliberately knocks the can of Pepsi over, and the soft drink washes away the ink of her signature. A suburban feminist like Ann Hood, she decides against the purchase, and walks out with her husband, who has been mute and off-camera, following behind. Where is she going when she walks out? How can this be read as a victory of any kind of women when it takes a can of Pepsi One, with the slogan "FOREVER YOUNG," to keep her out of the minivan? In a Baudrillardian hyper-reality, these are questions without answers, like koans,⁷⁸ but I would suggest that postfeminist theory achieves a kind of resistance in relentlessly pursuing and catching up with masculinist objects like cars, and subjecting them to a cold, clinical, market-driven assessment, which is all too familiar to automobile executives.⁷⁹ Based on the overwhelming record of women's victimization by the car industry throughout the twentieth century, a narrative of which the minivan is but a final chapter, it seems likely that the current liberation rhetoric of "hybrid" and "crossover" vehicles will lose its spark just like the electric car did, and we'll be left sitting in more boxes. It's time for powerful women drivers, taking a page from Oedipa Maas in Thomas Pynchon's novel *The Crying of Lot 49*,⁸⁰ to ditch the minivan, take the wheel, and drive on the freeway with their lights out, just to see what they hit.

NOTES

- I would like to thank David Gartman for reading an early draft of this essay and making some very valuable suggestions. Plymouth and Voyager are trademarks of DaimlerChrysler Corporation, and the photographs of the Plymouth Voyager minivan are used with permission from DaimlerChrysler Corporation. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the DaimlerChrysler Corporation for their co-operation. Illustrations are taken from a large format brochure (28 cm x 28 cm), unpaginated, entitled *1984 Plymouth Voyager*, PVWC-84-E, printed in Canada.
1. Brock Yates, *The Critical Path: Inventing an Automobile and Reinventing a Corporation* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1996), 33.
 2. Robyn Meredith, "Mini-Vans Facing a Midlife Crisis," *New York Times* (12 May 1997): D11.
 3. The bibliography for the ideological analysis of material cultural artifacts is now extensive, both with regard to theory and practice: e.g., Jules David Prown and Kenneth Haltman, eds., *American Artifacts: Essays in Material Culture* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2000), A. Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), Langdon Winner, "Do Artifacts Have Politics?" *Daedalus* 109 (1980): 121-43.
 4. Susan Faludi: *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York: Anchor Books, 1991).

5. Yates, *The Critical Path*, 17–26.
6. On the Scarab, see Mary Seelhorst, "Think It's New? Thing Again!" *Popular Mechanics* no. 5 (May 1998): 154, and Frank Markus, "The Scarab — Was This the First Minivan?" *Car and Driver*: 42 (1996): 143.
7. Meredith, "Mini-Vans Facing a Midlife Crisis," D11.
8. Jack R. Nerad, "Mini-Van Madness." *Motor Trend* 38, no. 1 (January 1986): 42.
9. Yates, *Critical Path*, 20.
10. *Ibid.*, 23.
11. *Ibid.*, 32.
12. *Ibid.*, 18.
13. *Ibid.*, 31.
14. Dan McCosh, "Versatile Minivans," *Popular Science* 251, no. 2 (August 1997): 84–88.
15. The radical feminist critique of reproduction as a form of subjugation in a patriarchal society was articulated in the 1960s and 1970s by writers such as Shulamit Firesone, Ti-Grace Atkinson, and Andrea Dworkin. For a summary discussion of their views, see Laura Umansky, *Motherhood Reconceived: Feminism and the Legacy of the Sixties* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 16–51.
16. See Lauren Berlant's discussion of birth and citizenship in "America, Fat, the Fetus," *boundary 2* 21 (1994): 145–195.
17. For profiles of working women during this period, see Kathleen Gerson, *Hard Choices: How Women Decide About Work, Career, and Motherhood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).
18. Francesca Z. Lunzer, "When Room for Five is Not Enough." *U.S. News and World Report* 106, no. 3 (January 23, 1989): 64.
19. Jerry Edgerton, "Suburbia's Hot New Haulers," *Money* 13, no. 4 (April 1984): 176–77.
20. Csere Csaba, *Car and Driver* 40 (July 1994).
21. Yates, *Critical Path*, 26.
22. On the performativity of socially constructed gendered relations, see Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1983).
23. Yates, *Critical Path*, 229.
24. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Phillip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext[e], 1983).
25. Yasutoshi Ikuta, *Cruise o Matic: Automobile Advertising of the 1950s*, trans. Japan-Michi Institute (San Francisco: Chronic Books, 1988), 40.
26. On Phyllis Schaflly and the defeat of the ERA, see Flora Davis, *Moving the Mountain: The Women's Movement in America Since 1960* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 385–411.
27. Dick Johnson, head of one of Chrysler's two major advertising agencies which were charged with promoting the redesigned NS model of the Dodge Caravan in 1994, cited in Yates, *Critical Path*, 206.
28. Faludi, *Backlash*, 229–241.
29. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 26, 139.
30. Lunzer, "Room for Five," 65.
31. On the challenges presented by the extra space in the redesign of the *New Series* in the 1990s, see Yates, *Critical Path*, 90–1, 182, 221–24.
32. *Ibid.*, 206.
33. Phil Patton, "Do Real Men Drive Minivans?" *Esquire* 128, no. 1 (July 1997): 92.
34. See Susan Saegert, "Masculine Cities and Feminine Suburbs: Polarized Ideas, Contradictory Realities," *Signs* 5, no. 3 (1980), supplement, S96–111, and Sylvia F. Fava, "Women's Place in the New Suburbia," *New Space for Women*, ed. Gerda Wekerle, Rebecca Peterson, and David Mortley (Boulder: Westview Press, 1980).
35. Nancy Rubin, *The New Suburban Woman: Beyond Myth and Motherhood* (New York: Coward, McCann and Geoghegan, 1982), 27.
36. Richard Foot, "Prototype For Minivan Has Washer, Dryer, Fridge, Vacuum," *National Post* (23 November 2000): A2.
37. Yates, *Critical Path*, 206.
38. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Nomadology: The War Machine*, trans. Brian Massumi (New York: Semiotext[e], 1986).
39. Yates, *Critical Path*, 210, 291.
40. Cecilia Tichi, *The Electronic Hearth: Creating an American Television Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 42–61.
41. For a recent theoretical discussion of television viewing in relation to driving, see Margaret Morse, *Virtualities: Television, Media Art, and Cyberculture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 111–112.
42. Michelle Krebs, "The Best Family Cars in America," *Parents* 75, no. 3 (March 2000): 149–152.
43. Foot, "Prototype," A1–A2.
44. While women in heteronormative relationships continue to perform the majority of household work and childcare (Martha McMahan, *Engendering Motherhood: Identity and Transformation in Women's Lives* (New York: Guildford Press, 1995), 235–246), the issue of "separate spheres" has been problematized: see, for example, the essays collected in Rosemary Marangoly George, ed., *Burning Down the House: Recycling Domesticity* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998); Rosalind Rosenberg, *Divided Lives: American Women in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992); McMahan, *Engendering Motherhood*; Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).
45. Cowan, *More Work for Mother*, 145–150.
46. See McMahan, *Engendering Motherhood*, 231–262.
47. See Fava's discussion of "locality-bound roles," "Women's Place," 137–138, and Cowan, *More Work for Mother*, 84. In *Taking the Wheel: Women and the Coming of the Motor Age* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), Virginia Scharff notes that after the Second World War, "the middle-class housewife roamed farther from home, but home was always in range," 170.
48. Keith Bradsher, "Was Freud a Minivan or S.U.V. Kind of Guy?" *New York Times* (17 July 2000), A1.
49. See Katharine Martinez and Kenneth L. Ames, eds., *The Material Culture of Gender* (Winterthur, Del.: Winterthur Museum, 1997).
50. Scharff, *Taking the Wheel*, 166.

51. See C. Edson Armi, *The Art of American Car Design: The Profession and Personalities* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press), 52ff. For examples of the sexist language of car designers, a recent article by James Bennet, "The Road to a Roadster," in the *New York Times Magazine* (18 February 2001): 32–37 makes it clear that exterior design remains a masculinist corporate discourse in 2001.
52. See Scharff, *Taking the Wheel*, 48–49; 111–33.
53. On the historical failure of women to establish themselves in car sales, see *Ibid.*, 83–85.
54. Louis Althusser, *Essays in Ideology* (London: Verso, 1984).
55. Yates, *Critical Path*, 26–27.
56. Bradsher, "Freud," A16.
57. Yates, *Critical Path*, 235–38.
58. Doron P. Levin, *Behind the Wheel at Chrysler: The Iacocca Legacy* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1995), 83.
59. Levin, *Behind the Wheel*, 83.
60. Edgerton, "Hot New Haulers," 180.
61. Yates, *Critical Path*, 31.
62. Nerad, "Mini-Vans Madness," 36.
63. Seelhorst, "Think It's New?" 154.
64. For historical examples of women's incompetence as drivers, see Scharff, *Taking the Wheel*, 26–33.
65. See the "Word of the Year" page on the American Dialect Society's Web site: www.americandialect.org/woty.shtml#1996.
66. Susan B. Garland with Richard S. Dunham, "Wooing Minivan Moms," *Business Week* (20 September 1999), 83.
67. See Judy Wajcman, *Feminism Confronts Technology* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 1991), 84, and Fava, "Women's Place," 135–136.
68. The prospect of a cyborg elision between the automotive body and human flesh has usually been gendered male, as in David Cronenberg's 1996 film adaptation of J. G. Ballard's novel *Crash*, and David Lynch's movie of it, *Crash* (1996). Donna Haraway has written about the opportunities that the cyborg body represents for women, especially in escaping biological scripts of reproduction: see "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 149–181 and "Investment Strategies for the Evolving Portfolio of Primate Females" in *Body/Politics: Women and the Discourses of Science*, ed. Mary Jacobus, Evelyn Fox Keller, and Sally Shuttleworth (New York: Routledge, 1990), 139–162.
69. Garland and Dunham, "Wooing Minivan Moms," 83, 86.
70. Ann Hood, "Lives: Minivan Crisis," *New York Times Magazine* (20 October 1996): 106.
71. Patton, "Real Men," 92.
72. On the futurists and cars, see Gerald Silk, "Proliferation and Assimilation," in *Automobile and Culture*, ed. Gerald Silk (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984, 57–75).
73. Bradsher, "Freud," A1, A16.
74. Armi, *American Car Design*, 50.
75. Meredith, "Mini-Vans," D11.
76. *Ibid.*, A1.
77. *Ibid.*
78. See the questions posed in the final chapter of Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, transl. Bernard and Caroline Schultz (New York: Semiotext[e], 1988), 103–104.
79. See Mary Wilton's *Car* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997) for an illuminating ethnographic study of the automotive industry, and David Gartman's critique of capitalist automobile design in *Auto Opium: A Social History of American Automobile Design* (New York: Routledge, 1994).
80. Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (New York: Harper and Row, 1996), 176.