

Autolouge: Poetics of the Vanity Plate

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At first sight, vanity plates seem to represent a revolt against the systematic means of automobile identification provided by the standard license plates issued by the government. While on standard plates, registration codes progress incrementally, vanity plates allow automobile owners to intervene upon this process by selecting alphanumeric digits of their own choosing. Owners create, in effect, a personal composition unique from the regulatory serial number produced by the state. Despite the possibilities for creative personal identification in this medium, the vanity plate ultimately achieves the same goal as the standard license plate: the visible registration of the automobile. And yet, the state takes only partial credit for the seemingly endless and preternatural examples of linguistic innovation. Although the state restricts the number of digits that vanity plate authors may employ based on the size of the medium, the purchasers of vanity plates transcend the constraint by employing poetic strategies. Familiar words acquire new spellings as plate authors manipulate letters and numbers, maximizing the limited space of the plate by phasing out expected portions of short phrases or words.

As I will demonstrate, interest in vanity plates lies not only in the spatial restrictions that

guide the composition of personality plates, but also in the reception of vanity plates in culture. The desire to select and to express personal identity emanates from a rigorous and rhetorical commercial environment that places a premium on the automobile as a symbol of wealth and power. Even the most expensive automobile is just one unit in a capricious ocean of similar makes and models. Vanity plates advertise the intellectual stealth of their owners, and moreover, test the interpretive skills of their readers. The medium of the vanity plate is a conversation, or *autologue* between drivers and readers, a linguistic exchange in which author-drivers inscribe words – or alphanumeric combinations resembling words – against metallic tablets that driver-readers or reader-pedestrians consume and interpret in turn. In the end, the personalized license plate may have less to do with *vanity* – a word with etymological ties to concepts of worthlessness and futility – and more to do with the fine-tuning or complete reinvention of individual iconography made possible by the intersection of the automobile, the law, and language.

As we will see, the introduction of the license plate in the early 20th Century raised immediate concerns from drivers who expressed outrage at the unsightliness the new registration numbers caused their vehicles in Britain (Nigel and Pettifer 205). Under the new law, early drivers argued that license plates lowered their recreational vehicles to the status of the numerous delivery carts in the streets bearing unseemly placards, advertisements, and logos. For many drivers, vehicles clearly represented more than a means of transportation. Then, as now, cars operated as status symbols signifying both the wealth and the social importance of their owners. Vehicles also represented purchasing power, particularly in North American, where the vanity plate has flourished.

The success of the vanity plate may have to do with particular American fascinations. As Jean Baudrillard states, America manifests itself as “neither dream nor reality,” (1988: 28) but as a simulation of the desires and possibilities encoded in the rhetoric of that dream. Baudrillard argues that the automobile, rather than substantiating or fulfilling the desire for “justice, plenty, rule of law, wealth, [and] freedom” (77) actually helps to promote the decay, blurring and outright disappearance of the America promised by the dream. Due to these processes, along with sheer speed, Baudrillard calls driving “a spectacular form of amnesia,” a spell broken only “when it runs up against a known face, a familiar landscape, a decipherable message” (1983: 9-10).

Discussing his travels in Arizona, Baudrillard postulates that “speed creates pure objects,” (1988: 6) but notes that “driving like this [at an elevated speed] produces a kind of invisibility, transparency, or transversality in things, simply by emptying them out” (7). Driving “obliterates” (9) the landscape, and with it, the “worldly semiology” of signs that continually confirm, through buildings, ads, and road signs, the outwardly commercial and ideological presence of an America. The stuff of America, conceptually speaking, is eradicated through speed, the point of entrance into the “dream” as it is promoted by both the visual and linguistic tactics of advertising. The desert, linked to dreams by its dusty and surreal properties, also represents the expansionist drive to conquer the frontier, the urge of the individual to charge into space, and enjoy the liberty of owning property.

Baudrillard claims that the automotive behaviors of Americans “tells you more than you could ever learn from its political ideas,” (54) suggesting that, unlike the *idée fixe* on freedom and liberty encoded in the country’s legislative documents, cars approach or indeed *simulate*

those ideas:

The way Americans have of leaping into action, of taking off so smoothly, by virtue of their automatic transmission and power steering. Pulling away effortlessly, noiselessly eating up the road, gliding along without the slightest bump ... All this creates a new experience of space, and, at the same time, a new experience of the whole system. (54)

Of course, Baudrillard speaks from the viewpoint of a foreigner, allowing himself to reproduce America in a dreamy and emphatic tone. Baudrillard does not suggest what his “leaping” Americans are leaping into and moreover idealizes the technical precision of automobiles that are also known to spew chemical and noise pollution while dangerously gathering together on the vertiginous streets and highways that Baudrillard favorably labels America’s “arterial network” (55).

Although Baudrillard accuses the car of erasing the ideas of freedom and liberty proposed by America, he claims at the same time that the car perpetuates these ideas; the phenomenon of the personalized license plate emerges, arguably, as a decipherable series of messages from within Baudrillard’s deleterious amnesia of speed. Like the car itself, the language of the vanity plate is a simulation. As one aspect of the *autologue*, the vanity plate functions as a simulated and deviant English, utilized by authors operating under constraint.

From the viewpoint of the “writer” in the *autologue*, two problems emerge: the parallel constraints of form and content. Formally, the restriction of eight characters on vanity plates in the province of Ontario is due to the physical parameters of the plate, a mere 5.5” x 11.5”. The government not only restricts the number of digits a driver can use to create a personalized license plate, but also renders each plate *hapax legomenon*, dissolving the

possibility of repetition, eliminating plagiarism by engendering poetic permutation. Plate authors must innovate within the shrinking realm of possible utterances by abbreviating words or replacing vowels and consonants with the phonic properties of numerals.

For readers, the context of vanity plates shapes the interpretation. Paul Ricoeur argues that “words do not mean outside of the sentence,” (69) suggesting that words maintain constant semantic relationships with other words as they are defined by “opposition to other entities within the same system” (69). When interpreting the vanity plate, the car becomes like a kind of sentence. The make, model, year, and even the movement of the automobile contribute to the overall message of the plate, initiating a kind of narrative expectation in the imagination of the audience. As we will see in the analysis below, a recklessly driven car bearing the plate “JST CRZY” (Just Crazy) semantically satisfies the concept indicated by the text while describing the behavior of the driver behind the wheel. Conversely, a subversion of expectations occurs when a plate promising “MOM” produces a male at the wheel, overriding the logical antecedent evoked by the word ‘mom.’ In the *autologue*, the message of the vanity plate works in collusion with the vehicle, which operates as a collection of refractory signs that constantly position and reposition the meaning of the plate within a representational system.

The automobile has never simply served a utilitarian function. As a symbol of wealth and social mobility, the car speaks volumes about its owner. The vanity plate is also a deliberate mechanism of metaphoric conveyance, entering intelligible text into the social sphere in addition to information already provided by the materiality of the car. Plate authors work within rigid constraints creating poetic messages that produce unpredictable

interpretations in their readership. Readers rely upon context when formulating responses to vanity plates. The theorists alluded to in this paper conceive of language as a recombinative structure. The interweavings of text rely on both the microscopic relationships between individual words and the macroscopic rehearsals of ideologies based upon these independent units.

The following develops these concepts outlined above by discussing the historical origins of the license plate followed by comments on vanity plate authorship and audience reception.

History

A discussion of the license plate as an historical object must take into account the fact that no two regions introduced the license plate at the same time or in the same way. Perhaps the only common denominator that links the various license plate histories – apart from the eventual omnipresence of the plate itself – is the fact that early automobile designers did not incorporate the license plate into the exterior design of the vehicle. The invention of the license plate satisfied governmental concerns regarding the logistics of traffic control and statistical enumeration. The aesthetics of the license plate in Britain, for example, caused citizens to balk at the idea of identifying their automobiles with serial numbers. License plates repulsed wealthy drivers who felt that their vehicles were aesthetically injured by the markers, and moreover linked their cars to the unseemly commercial vehicles that carried placards and advertisements in public spaces.

Following World War II, American automobile owners increasingly modified their

vehicles as part of their quest for individuality. Penny Sparke, author of A Century of Car Design, notes that both blue and white-collar drivers “wanted to be able to outdo their neighbors as a means of expressing their fashionable lifestyles” (17). Designers of “mass produced utility vehicle[s] therefore had to learn to emulate the custom-made coachbuilt cars of the wealthy” (17) in order to foster a stylistically varied automotive market that would encourage desire in consumers. Even when the fabrication of the license plate was still in the hands of car owners, license plates stood between the object of the car as a *vehicle* for personal expression and the visually demarcating requirement that all automobiles on the road be licensed and registered, with proof of registration hanging in clear view. The “symbolic language” and “visual identity” (Sparke 8) of the car were “disfigured,” as early British drivers argued, (Pettifer and Turner 203) by the arbitrary assignment of nonsensical serial numbers.

By contrast, the Americans received registration regulations amiably. The American impulse to succeed at the personal and geopolitical levels in accordance with the “American Dream,” combined with the media’s methods of symbolizing these nationalistic urges and ideas, firmly placed the automobile in the realm of individual spending power as a form of personal expression. Consumer items – like the cars themselves – vanity plates followed the remarkable ability of the car to signify social status and wealth, transcending the importance of the vehicle as a tool of convenience for the modern age.

In The Way Cool License Plate Book, Leonard Wise discusses how the American car owner:

made his or her own license on a rubber pad or metal plate and bolted brass numbers on it. In some states, people made plates of rubber or had them made at the local saddlery or blacksmith shop. In Canada, most people made plates out of leather or rubber, and in some cases they painted the numbers right on the car.
(10)

Moreover, long before plates were standardized and issued by individual states and provinces, drivers could have their plates made virtually anywhere. Eric Taylor's License Collecting Site, for instance, gives the example of F. W. Sumner of Moncton, New Brunswick, a wealthy motorist whose travels across the border resulted in custom porcelain plates made by the Baltimore Enamel and Novelty Company in Boston, Massachusetts (Taylor 2003).

In terms of automobile engineering and design, an interesting difference between the latest models and the automobiles produced at the beginning of the 20th Century is that current automobile design accommodates the presence of a state-regulated license plate and is therefore part of the cost of driving. In this way, the vanity plate provides a means of intervening on this system, one that fuses governmentally enforced requirements with the desire of drivers to express their identities as holistically as possible via the medium of the car. The text of the automobile, which is associated with America and its elusive and varied "dream," is reunited with its owner via the vanity plate. Although the first true "personalized" license plates were those constructed by their owners, textual manipulation did not occur until standardization, when owners could purchase their own arrangement of serial numbers. Each province in Canada and each American state, however, adopted a regular system of manufacture and distribution at a different point on the timeline. Although these eponyms raised against metallic skin first appeared in Connecticut in 1937 (Juran 2003), they were not

permitted in California until the nineteen seventies (Nussbaum 4), where they are now ubiquitous. Although vanity plates reify the notion that the car is representative of its owner, subverting the sequential assignment of bland serial numbers, vanity plates, like standard plates, still succeed in fulfilling the purpose of the legislature: the visible communication of the registration of the automobile. Even so, the composition of vanity plates offers car owners a venue for self-expression in terms of poetic craftsmanship and lexical mutation.

Authorship

Authors of personalized license plates face rigorous constraints on both the form and content of their compositions. Formal constraints involve computational limits that are maximized by allowing the permutative combination of all the letters from the alphabet with the Hindu-Arabic numerals 0 through 9. Constraints on the content of vanity plates are twofold. For the purposes of efficient registration and the effective recall of information regarding individual automobiles, the state requires that plate authors compose a unique word or phrase, rendering each plate *hapax legomenon*. This condition leads to multiple versions of the same phrase or word, produced by the plate-author's ability to abbreviate or truncate words, employ alternate spellings, or enunciate in entirely new ways by combining alphanumeric.

The formal constraint of space limits authors of the Ontario *autologue*, to take my own local example, to a maximum of eight digits. Mathematically speaking, a high number of combinations exist, particularly because the medium encourages authors to combine numbers and letters. According to a pamphlet released by the Ontario Ministry of

Transportation:

The possibilities are (almost) endless ... You have millions of possibilities when designing your personalized plate. Open up a whole world of new combinations and select words.

The Ministry places a premium on “design” and “combination,” but also acknowledges that “select words,” or words that fit the eight character limit without requiring alteration, function as valid forms of self-expression in the *autologue*. And yet the pamphlet includes two photographed examples of “combination” plates, but no examples of “select words,” as if to advertise that the uniqueness of owning a vanity plate hinges upon the employment of the combinative strategies that make vanity plates so recognizable. The examples “PL84SALE” and “BCRE8TVE” utilize both omission and the insertion of numerals to minimize the phrases ‘Plate for Sale,’ and ‘Be Creative’ for use within the eight character limit. The Ministry’s admission that limits exist for the possibilities of permutation is both true and false. Dashes, ampersands, tildes, and all typographical symbols other than A-Z and 0-9 are restricted from use in the *autologue*. And yet, new jargon, neologisms, and slang enter the English lexicon every day. As well, plate authors may devise or incorporate acronyms that may not necessarily resemble proper words at all, such as the string of “NHL,” “ILVNHL,” and “NHL4EVR.” In these cases, the plate owner demonstrates not only individual creativity, but signals his or her membership in a larger group of hockey fans. People who purchase charity plates or plates reflecting certain interest groups operate in a similar way and may compound the effect of engaging in such communication by creating messages that amplify their cause.¹

¹ I gratefully acknowledge my anonymous reader for raising this point.

No matter how many selections are available in theory, plate designers may only enter words into the *autologue* that are not already “owned” by an Ontario driver. This constraint leads plate owners back to the same problems of serialization posed by randomly generated plate numbers. The plate FRED, for example, may only occur once in the province of Ontario. To combat this rule, the second Fred who desires a FRED plate may choose FRED2, or some other combination of the name Fred with a marker of differentiation. At present, personalized license plates in Ontario cost over \$200 to manufacture, with a yearly licensing fee of more than \$80 (Ontario Ministry of Transportation 2003). Words and phrases remain unavailable for use by others for as long as the plate owner maintains registration of the plate. Where the words are not integral to the personal identification of an individual such as FRED, the restriction of uniqueness on vanity plates leads to multiple and inventive permutations of individual words. The restructuring of words depends upon the vowel and consonant sounds made available by the introduction of numerals into the palette of vanity plate spelling. The sounds of the words “one,” “two,” “four,” and “eight,” correspond with the equivalent visual designations, 1, 2, 4, and 8 and are used to enunciate only those words containing those sounds. In this way, the poetic authorship of personalized license plates entails restrictions on form and content. The impact of formal constraint results in a tremendous amount of variation within a rigorously determined space. Inverse homonyms, instances such as ‘2BRNTOB’ / ‘BBRNO2B’ suggest that the visual signs of language are tremendously flexible in their ability to arrive at the same meaning.

According to the Ontario Ministry of Transportation, vanity plates are approved by a “review committee, which may reject the plate if it is considered to be objectionable” (Ontario

Ministry of Transportation 2003). The Ministry's website identifies five broad subject areas that plates are liable to offend committee members, and by extension, citizens and drivers of Ontario: "derogatory / profane / racist / sexual / religious" (ibid). Based on a liberal assumption of taste, any number of words and slogans suitably defy each of these categories. The obvious expletives, such as 'FUCK' and 'SHIT' are restricted, as well as are the generic and popular slang manifestations of the words used to indicate human genitalia. The ministry also disallows any plate with a message that promotes hate or resembles hate propaganda. The Ontario Ministry of Transportation makes an appeal process available to drivers in the event that a plate is rejected by the committee, but makes it clear that vanity plates hold serious ramifications beyond the personalization and decoration of the automobile.

Plate authorship also entails problems of content. Equipped with a defined censorial apparatus, the Ministry of Transportation in Ontario attempts to quash uncouth plate statements at the point of ideation. The absence of irritants in the *autologue* hinges around social and political temperatures and the relationship individual words maintain with global events. Nonetheless, the *autologue* stimulates imaginative reading, interpretation, and the development of an interchange between driver and audience that sometimes betrays remarkable lapses between interpretation and intent. The *autologue* presents us with the problems of reading, conditioned expectations, stereotyped signifiers, and the duplicity of narrative.

Readership

The power of the word in the *autologue* extends beyond the intentions of the author.

Paul Ricoeur locates the power of multiple meaning in reading in what he calls polysemy: “that remarkable feature of words in natural languages which is their ability to mean more than one thing” (65). Ricoeur further specifies that the interpretation of polysemic words occurs in the context of other polysemic words:

The simplest message conveyed by the means of natural languages has to be interpreted because all the words are polysemic and take their actual meaning from the connection with a given context and a given audience against the background of a given situation. (71)

Vanity plate messages do not occur in a void, but are located in what Baudrillard might term a hologram of internal and external signs. The internal signs are the alphanumeric digits of the message itself and are bound by the vincula of the plate. For instance, standard and vanity plates in the province of Ontario feature the word “Ontario” above the registration digits, with the message “Yours to Discover” spelled out below. These messages provide a geographic context and statement of mood that distinguishes all Ontario plates from license plates in British Columbia, Alberta, or Manitoba. Beyond the region of the plate itself, automobiles may bear bumper stickers that act in collusion with the message on the vanity plate. A plate that reads “PR4MM” for instance, when accompanied by a bumper sticker urging “GO LEAFS GO, geminates two thematically related messages that seem to satisfy one another. In order for the Toronto Maple Leafs to “GO” at the game of hockey, they must sufficiently “PR4MM” as athletes. Geographically specific, the performance of the Maple Leafs, of course, is “Yours to Discover” in Ontario. Moreover, if we find that the “PR4MM” license plate is adhered to a small, gray Mazda pickup truck, we can engender a reading in which the plate comments on

the performance of the vehicle itself, i.e. *the little gray Mazda that could*. If we find an I. A. T. S. E.² decal on the Mazda's windshield, "PR4MM" illustrates the occupation of the vehicle's owner in the film industry. A series of potential narratives emerges, mysteries or puzzles proposed by the combination of the vehicle's marginalia with the substance of its vanity plate. Interpretation of vanity plates takes the contexts of the vehicle's make and model, the identity of the driver, and the location of the vehicle into account. A holistic entity, the car operates like a sentence in which the vanity plate both transfigures and undergoes transfiguration in relation to other intelligible signs. The hermeneutics of the *autologue* provides many opportunities for readers to construct narratives about drivers based, not only on the messages of their vanity plate, but on their age, gender, location, automotive behavior, and the make and model of the cars themselves. As Umberto Eco argues, however, readers are capable of bringing excessive flavor to the act of interpretation, counteracting the delimiting force of polysemy on hermeneutic activity (30).

Dave Beaven's explanation of his vanity plate "BN2BWLD" (Born to be Wild), for example, details his perception of the phantasmagoric myth of the Mustang as postured by advertisers: "We wanted to have a fitting name ... [W]ith the birth of the Ford Mustang in 1964, the car has carried on the tradition of the wild, untamed Mustang horse's spirit" (*Readers Share C1*). Beaven's emphatic analysis of the "wild" and "untamed" aspects of his Ford Mustang collide into a narrative built upon the popular reception of the Mustang make and model in society. The slogan "BN2BWLD" linguistically fulfills the expectations laid out by the traditional cultural narrative, which suggests that the automobile itself – as it is

² International Alliance of Theatrical and Stage Employees.

metaphorically linked to the animal – was “born to be wild.” In order for the narrative expectation set up by the symbolism of the car to achieve the confirmation or fulfillment triggered by the vanity plate, Beaven’s audience had to first figure out what “BN2BWLD” meant: “Numerous people would approach us, and make comments about the plate. Some people would ask what the letters of the plate spelled, or what they meant. Mostly, the plate received a few chuckles, from those who figured it out” (C1). In order for Beaven’s plate to operate like a sentence, the message on his plate first required readers to decipher the truncations and the alphanumeric mutation of “BN2BWLD.” Readers then thematically linked the message “born to be wild” with Beaven’s prescribed ideas about the “wild” and “untamed” qualities of the make and model of his car. Essentially tautological, Beaven’s intended micro-narrative repeats its own antecedent: *Mustangs are wild and untamed, therefore my Mustang is born to wild*. In addition, Beaven expresses his own fantasy of *having been born wild*. The “fitting name” on the vanity plate fulfills the expectations set out by the owner, but only for “those [plate readers] who figured it out” (C1).

Associations between the behavior of the automobile and its vanity plate also result in narrative interpretation. The Virginia vanity plate “JST CRZY,” mentioned in the introduction, prompts or teases the curiosity of plate readers. Why are the car and its driver “Just Crazy?” What are the criteria for appearing “Just Crazy,” as opposed to plain “Crazy,” or any other number of possible adverbial permutations? When the physical operations of the car are added to the vanity plate phrase, however, a polysemic narrowing of the words “JST” and “CRZY” provide an appropriate thematic that matches in significance and helps specifies the “craziness” in question for readers of the plate. When the Orlando-Orange County

Expressway Authority captured 705 images of the 23 year old “JST CRZY” driver running through toll booths without paying for nearly a year, at least one aspect of what “JST CRZY” meant was answered: “Wesley Ridgewell, who initially denied being one of Florida’s worst toll scofflaws, had accumulated more than 700 violations and 100 tickets in a year-long campaign of zipping past toll booths” (A2). The statement “JST CRZY” on the vanity plate ironically confirms the behavior of the driver. The revelation received narrative-interpretive treatment by the press who in turn solidified the nature of the driver’s comportment with a reading of the plate-message: “Toll delinquent is ‘JST CRZY’ for fines” (A2). In this example, the problem of interpreting Ridgewell’s plate began with the Expressway Authorities, who recognized the thematic link between the erratic driving behaviors and the message of the plate. The micro-narrative compelled a reporter to prepare an article for national distribution in North American newspapers in the form of a conventional story. The conclusion of the news story further fulfills the narrative conditions of “JST CRZY” by detailing additional components of Ridgewell’s driving record that also match the combined behavior of his vehicle and the tenor of its plate message: “Mr. Ridgewell, who has a dozen convictions ranging from speeding to drunken driving, had his license suspended for three months and imposed a \$15, 000 fine for missing an earlier hearing” (A2). The objective tone of the article confirms Ridgewell’s “craziness” proposed by the vanity plate by reducing the polysemy of “JST CRZY.”

Visual details about the driver can also overturn the narrative commenced by the plate message. A vanity plate that reads “MOM” initiates a narrative expectation in which requires the presence of a ‘mother’ behind the wheel. If a teenage son, for example, occupies the driver’s seat at the time of interpretation, a subversion of the narrative set out by the

conditions of the vanity plate occurs, usually to humorous or ironic effect. Canadian comic Ron James relates the following anecdote from his travels in Los Angeles:

I was driving behind a Bentley convertible. The vanity plate read "L'il Bunny." The L'il Bunny behind the wheel had flowing blonde hair. It seemed the quintessential California moment. I zoomed in to pass her and take a peek. It was a 112-year-old emaciated husk. It was King Tut's girlfriend. I screeched, "Ahhhhh! What Pharaoh gave you a license?" (*Ron James WH14*)

Conditioned not only by the make and the model of the car, but his visual perception of the driver at the commencement of interpretation, the act of interpretation initiates an investigative appetite in the interpreter. James' desired outcome objectifies the female driver based on the sexual connotation of the phrase "L'il Bunny," which no doubt recalled the Playboy Mansion and Bunny, another "quintessential" aspect of California. James' anecdote deflects the resultant disappointment following his recognition of the Bentley driver's true nature. In this case, "the emaciated husk" is at odds with the image the words "L'il Bunny" placed in James' mind. The comedian's attempt to fabricate equivalencies between the perceived promises of the plate (a sexy young woman) and its subversive outcome (an older woman) forces narrative closure. The words "husk," "King Tut," and "Pharaoh," introduce a consistent thematic that centers the transgression on the Bentley driver, when in fact the act of trespass belongs to the interpreter. The subversion of James' lascivious desires result in the anecdotal punishment of the woman driver. The true hilarity, however, lies in the malapropism produced by James' reading of the plate. The comedian's reading of the vanity plate might have relied instead on his own deprecation in lieu of perpetrating outmoded sexism in order to produce humor.

Vanity plates that do not immediately yield a meaning word or phrase are indeterminate and instill a sense of mystery or indeterminacy in plate readers. “10SEHIC,” for instance, relies so heavily on the combination of numbers and letters that the plate’s meaning is not immediately apparent. There are multiple ways of sounding the intended words out, but only the correct manifestation fulfills the intended meaning and satisfies the plate-reader. “10SEHIC,” a compression and alphanumerical mutation of “Tennessee Hick,” initiated a lexical puzzle after it was spotted by the Cosgrove family. The meaning of the vanity plate remained unclear until an external clue provided a sufficient solution:

While travelling from Saint John to St. Stephen this summer with my wife and daughter, a car passes us with the license plate “10SEHIC.” We were puzzled as to what it meant so we proceeded to follow it in order to see if we could decipher it. The car turned out to be from Tennessee and after some thought, my daughter came up with Ten-S-E-Hic or Tennessee Hic. (*Readers Share C13*).

The characteristic combination of alphanumeric digits was the first sign that the license plate carried a meaningful message, even though the message itself was not immediately clear. The family’s recognition of the vanity plate format promised a meaningful message that the readers could not decode until another aspect of the license plate confirmed the geographical habitat of the automobile and contextualized the sounds created by the combination of numbers and letters. Sounding-out the plate reduced the message to individual units in a compressed sentence that took on meaning only after a potentially correct conclusion for the puzzle was known by the plate-readers. The reader’s desire to make sense of the plate was fulfilled, but only because the meaning of the plate ultimately made sense in relation to the meaning of its immediate context, signaled by the vincula of the plate.

Each of these cases shares the common factor that vanity plate messages are conditioned by the context in which they are perceived by readers. The formal constraint of truncating words and inserting numerals initially poses problems of translation for plate readers, which was the case for readers of both “BN2BWLD” and “10SEHIC.” In each example, readers required familiarity with the context of the utterance in order to constitute a meaningful statement in accordance with all the available signs. These messages had to correspond in a thematically appropriate way with the conditions presented by the vehicles themselves. Concinnity also proves crucial when interpreting the meaning of a plate involving a driver’s behavior. The owner of the plate “JST CRZY” may not have intended his message to thematically rhyme with his highway activities, but the “intention of the text” made it possible for others to do so. According to Eco:

Since the intention of the text is basically to produce a model reader able to make conjectures about it, the initiative of the model reader consists in figuring out a model author that is not the empirical one and that, in the end, coincides with the intention of the text. (64).

“JST CRZY” was further made to fit the profile indicated on his plate by the mechanisms of journalism, which discovered a history of willfully reckless driving. However, no indication was given whether or not all of the driver’s infractions occurred while his automobile carried the “JST CRZY” plate. Without the contextual evidences to adverbially describe the driver’s behavior, “JST CRZY” is subject to “infinite conjecture” (64) by any number of readers. Eco argues that the interactive process of interpretation occurs between words in the context in which they appear and as they are reassembled during the process of interpretation. Vanity plates engender narrative expectations that readers confirm, subvert, or find indeterminate.

Vanity plates, like the cars to which they are attached to, *transport* their readers to a conceptual space where an idea is investigated, validated, confirmed, or potentially disregarded altogether.

The intelligibility of the vanity plate is contingent upon its location in a nexus of other signs and other interests. The reader must be motivated to interpret the plate through metaphoric seduction. Plates that resemble words seduce readers into acts of interpretation. The consequence of entering text into the *autologue* is unpredictable because the potential for unanticipated interpretations is at once high and limited by circumstance. Interpretations are intermediate and accrete detail as information about the context of the plate is learned. At least part of the “vanity” of the vanity plate assumes residence in the readers, particularly where authority is involved. As Eco suggests, “as soon as a text becomes ‘sacred’ for a certain culture, it becomes subject to the process of suspicious reading and therefore to what is undoubtedly an excess of interpretation” (52). Considering that the textual matter of vanity plates take up so little space, and is composed under the limiting, but productive constraints of configuration and content, it is remarkable that the vanity plate should undergo such rigorous discernment. The function of the vanity plate is at once to foster creativity and individualization to the satisfaction of the author, as well as to offer pleasure to the reader, and yet the potential for interpretation to go awry is unlimited.

The case of Jehad Al-Iweiwi of Markham, Ontario presents one such case. Al-Iweiwi inadvertently associated himself through his vanity plate with the terrorist group al Qaeda, whose ‘jihad,’ or ‘holy war’ against America reportedly resulted in the destruction of the World Trade Center. Recalled by the Ontario Ministry of Transportation, Al-Iweiwi’s plate, “JEHAD,”

drew an interpretive connection between Al-lweiwī's first name and the activity of the terrorists. According to the deputy registrar of the Ministry of Transportation, James O'Mara, "the ministry attempts to not knowingly manufacture plates that may be considered offensive to the general public" (O'Mara in *Toronto Star Sports* 03). Al-lweiwī, however, ordered his plate seven years prior to the catastrophic events that radically educated the world about the al Qaeda's *jihad* against the Americans. The censorship of the "JEHAD" plate results, in part, from differing translations of the word itself. Al-lweiwī, who translates his name as "striving" in English, found his identity under attack as a result of the ministry's misinterpretation of his name. As Umberto Eco demonstrates, incorrect interpretations occur when the intention of the author and the intentions of the reader are misarranged (68). Refracted by world events, Al-lweiwī's vanity plate found itself under scrutiny for the transmission of a message its author did not intend. Deemed unacceptable, the ministry recalled the plate post factum, suggesting that the ultimate constraints for authors of vanity plates reside with the instigator of the phenomenon and final interpreter, the government.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the advent of the vanity plate links directly with a desire for individuality in an environment of essentially similar commodity exchanges. This distinguishes the reductive language of the vanity plate from text-messaging and emoticons in that those forms do not pertain to the visual form of the devices used to distribute their messages (a closer comparison might be the permutation of email addresses in order to

secure a word already seized by another user on a given server). Moreover, the personalizing effects of the vanity plate come at a cost to the car owner, who purchases the privilege to individualize his or her serial numbers and must reregister the plates at regular intervals. While the automobile itself already represents the purchasing power of the owner, the vanity plate opens owners to expressions of style, that unlike bumper stickers, outwardly represent individualism within the rubric of consumerism as though in a kind of collaboration with the legislating state.

Comprised of many kinds of plates, the *autologue* places a premium on intelligible serial numbers and operates on a principal of expectation. We notice the occurrence of language, absorb and contemplate the messages, and erect meaning from similarities and differences between the signs. The language of the *autologue* repeatedly points to something other than the automobile in the same way that the automobile points to something other than itself. The cultural impact of the vanity plate, like the political, writerly, and readerly aspects, rests upon the recognition that these plates misdirect attention away from the plate itself, driving the mind into a realm automated by a rotating tyre of morphological language. Vanity, from the Latin *vanitas*, meaning *emptiness*, is a misnomer for a representative activity that produces daunting problems and rewards for participants in the *autologue*. The language of the *autologue* transports plate readers away from the literal vehicle via the metaphorical vehicle of the vanity plate. The vanity plate appeals to the ego, while at the same time transcending the individual by speaking to the imagination. The dialogue between drivers and the state, drivers and other drivers, and drivers and pedestrians emerges mindfully from within the degrading blur of randomly assigned serial numbers. Owners of vanity plates

refuse the mediocrity of the sequential code, consciously manipulating language as the basic force behind all literal and conceptual discourse.

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