

## [A Car of Her Own: Volvo's "Your Concept Car" as a Vehicle for Feminism?](#)

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### Abstract:

This essay probes the ambiguities surrounding [Volvo's] Your Concept Car on several levels. First, we explain how YCC configures women as creators and consumers. Second, we discuss discursive patterns arising in media coverage of the car. We find a frequent tendency to "domesticate" the women designers and consumers by using terminology that places the automobile within the realm of household activities, thereby relegating women to their "proper" role of homemaker and caretaker for others. Third, we place YCC in the broader context of repressive tolerance, showing how the emergence of woman-powered automotive design can marginalize the very constituencies it purportedly promotes. The discursive framing of YCC not only reinforces patriarchal restrictions on the "proper" sphere of women's knowledge and activities, but shows how women can become complicitous in their own oppression through the discursive choices they make. The decidedly mixed messages YCC sends reflect the complexity accompanying social projects that purportedly elevate the social and economic status of women.

**Keywords:** Automotive design | Women | Feminism | Consumerism | Volvo

### Article:

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Virginia Woolf observed that in order to create great art that articulates women's experiences and perspectives, women would need to establish physical and financial independence from men. Commenting that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction," Woolf (1928) wrestled with the paradox that women need to extricate themselves from patriarchy while expressing themselves through language shaped by patriarchy itself. An analogous set of paradoxes haunts the automobile industry, which serves as a microcosm of mature capitalism. How can women, marginalized from the means of production, participate in manufacturing products that reflect their needs and experiences without further distancing themselves from the means of production? Phrased more concretely, how can women's voices be

heard in the design and manufacture of an automobile in ways that do not accelerate their marginalization?

As the central commodity produced by and identified with capitalism for the past century (Urry, 2004), automobiles provide a logical site for exploring the connections between the means of production and social power. Indeed, the automobile may qualify less as a simple manufactured object than the site for “dominant cultural discourse” (Gartman, 2004, p. 169) to be articulated through the ways cars intermesh with the politics of language. Although some researchers have examined how the automobile has reconstituted the fabric of time and space (Urry, 2004), the automotive industry itself has remained a bastion of masculinity. That situation supposedly changed dramatically with Volvo’s unveiling of Your Concept Car (YCC), the first automobile designed entirely by women and targeting women consumers. Amid a flood of self-congratulatory promotion, Volvo first displayed the vehicle with the tagline “by women, for women” at the March 2004 Geneva International Motor Show. YCC is the first car in automotive history designed by an all-female design team (Associated Press, 2004). YCC, ostensibly a major step toward inclusion of women in automotive production and marketing, actually sends far more ambiguous messages about the roles of women in capitalist modes of production. While YCC does indeed represent a breakthrough for women designers in the automotive industry, it also can serve as a means for furthering patriarchal norms within the industry and in society at large. The mechanism of marginalization occurs via a process akin to what Herbert Marcuse (1965) labels “repressive tolerance.” The existing power structure fosters an apparently benign allowance of dissent. This implicit permission to differ defuses radical ideas and actions, claiming their existence as proof that the status quo is open-minded and beneficent enough to indulge such anomalies. Thus the more dissent, the more it can be co-opted as a sign that all voices are heard and no systemic changes are necessary.

This essay probes the ambiguities surrounding Your Concept Car on several levels. First, we explain how YCC configures women as creators and consumers. Second, we discuss discursive patterns arising in media coverage of the car. We find a frequent tendency to “domesticate” the women designers and consumers by using terminology that places the automobile within the realm of household activities, thereby relegating women to their “proper” role of homemaker and caretaker for others. Third, we place YCC in the broader context of repressive tolerance, showing how the emergence of woman-powered automotive design can marginalize the very constituencies it purportedly promotes. The discursive framing of YCC not only reinforces patriarchal restrictions on the “proper” sphere of women’s knowledge and activities, but shows how women can become complicitous in their own oppression through the discursive choices they make. The decidedly mixed messages YCC sends reflect the complexity accompanying social projects that purportedly elevate the social and economic status of women.

### **Marginalization from Modes of Production**

We might hypothetically possess ourselves of every recognized technological resource on the North American continent, but as long as our language remains inadequate, our vision remains formless, our thinking and feeling are still running in the old cycles, our process may be “revolutionary” but not transformative. (Rich, 1979, pp. 247-248)

Many feminist theorists such as Adrienne Rich (1979), Teresa de Lauretis (1993), and Diane Richardson (1996) have stressed the discursive construction of gender. The discourse surrounding YCC weaves a screen that filters perceptions of women, the choice of terminology associated with the car metonymically transferring to the women who created it or who comprise its target market. The car's design bespeaks "what women want" (Knox, 2004), a phrase that peppers popular press coverage of YCC. Not only can the patterns of language usage reflect patterns of dominance, but greater awareness of discursively forged social hierarchies can enable creative reappropriation of repressive terminology. The struggle to break free of patriarchy therefore coalesces in the struggle Virginia Woolf described: to speak as a woman within the bounds of a patriarchal lingua franca. Another alternative would be to transcend the masculine idiom, since as "we become acutely, disturbingly aware of the language we are using and that is using us, we begin to grasp a material resource that women have never before collectively attempted to repossess" (Rich, 1979, p. 247). The first step in reclaiming language is to recognize patterns of discourse that separate women from the masculine power structure while preserving that power structure as the entry point to social influence. Thus "language becomes an essential code in redefining and restructuring the world with women at its centre" (Rowland & Klein, 1996, p. 32). In the case of YCC, women may have engineered the car, but their own creation becomes a vehicle for keeping them strapped into the back seat.

The terminology associated with YCC demonstrates how "culture and rhetoric are mutually constitutive" (Cyphert, 2001, p. 390). In this case, the language surrounding the concept car both reflects and shapes genderbound cultural assumptions, especially as they pertain to automotive manufacturing. Simultaneously, the patterns of language use are generative by fueling a continuous spiral of language choices that reinforce the same social roles the female design team supposedly attempts to overturn.

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The very name of the automobile reinforces its status as an abstraction rather than a reality. As a self-proclaimed concept car, YCC retains its noumenal nomenclature, never acquiring a name derived from swift or ferocious animals (e.g., Mustang, Viper, Impala), specific human virtues (e.g., Focus, Accord), or euphonious neologisms (e.g., Sephia, Camry). The name reminds potential buyers that this car remains an idea. Any concept car qualifies as a prototype, "a vehicle for ideas, which may filter into production models" (Hales, 2004, p. C2). Both physically and discursively, however, YCC becomes distanced from the production line. Displayed at a Washington, DC art exhibit "[a]mid galleries filled with fashion, art and objects, the car designers' presence assured that form and function would be familiar concepts to anyone with a driver's license" (Hales, 2004, p. C2). Classified more as a curio or an aesthetic monument than a functional automobile, YCC keeps its distance from the manufacturing plants, trading the garage for the display pedestal, an object of marvel for admiring eyes. Recalling the role of women as aesthetically pleasing objects, the car is driven to exhibit halls where its shapely form can be admired.

Despite the cavalcade of compliments the concept car earned, its most enduring identity may be as a curiosity. Volvo (2004) praises the car as "a stunning concept vehicle loaded with innovative designs and features," adding that it has "an appealing design with smart storage solutions, easy

entry and exit, good visibility, minimum maintenance, easy parking and a car its owners can personalize.” Yet the novel design is relegated to a novelty as the car itself finds another home in an art museum instead of in automotive showrooms.

Your Concept Car (YCC), as it is called, is being shown at the Geneva International Motor Show and will make its first U.S. appearance at the New York International Auto Show in April. It also will go to the National Women’s Museum of Art in Washington, D.C., in conjunction with an exhibit of Nordic art by women, in late April, and will be displayed at Wellesley College. The YCC is unlikely to go into production as is, Volvo officials said, but features from it may show up in future production vehicles. (Volvo concept designed, 2004)

The Nordic art exhibit where the car was displayed bore the title “Nordic Cool: Hot Women Designers,” whose nomenclature intertwines sexual allure with aesthetic pleasure. The “women designers” rather than their designs are “hot,” and the title’s syntax does yield the phrase “Hot Women.” The car, far from a template for mass production, transforms into the antithesis of the assembly line: a unique, vaguely sexually enticing art object. YCC’s exterior style designer also migrated the machine to the purely emotional realm: “‘A car is something you buy with your heart and guts,’ said Anna Rosen, who gave the car its dynamic exterior styling. ‘It has to be really cool’” (Hales, 2004, p. C2).

Certainly art can have political implications and applications, but only insofar as “art, if taken seriously, intervenes in cultural conversations about individual and collective identities” (Schemen, 1993, p. 167), conversations that artistic creations cannot enter as long as they are classified as little more than intriguing curiosities. Naomi Schemen (1993) argues that art as a liberatory force challenges and offends entrenched systems of privilege. Stressing the aesthetic aspect of YCC and defining it as an aesthetic object outside mass production reinforce the very definition of patriarchy. Adrienne Rich describes patriarchy in terms that aptly describe the discourse surrounding YCC and its fateful classification as an artistic, idealistic accomplishment. According to Rich, patriarchy describes male-dominated groups “in which capabilities assigned to women are relegated generally to the mystical and aesthetic and excluded from the practical and political realms. (It is characteristic of patriarchal thinking that these realms are regarded as separate and mutually exclusive.)” (Rich, 1979, p. 78). YCC is and will remain a concept, an ideal, and aesthetically valuable to the extent that it is unique and does not provide a precedent for mass production. A BBC report on YCC summarily dismisses the prospect of the car entering production lines at all, despite the fact that concept cars routinely act as harbingers of upcoming models. The BBC story remarks offhandedly, “Volvo will never actually take this car into production, of course” (Madslien, 2004). At least one female journalist laments the message sent by Volvo’s failure to consider mass-production: “The car will have to stay a dream for the future as despite what women want in wheels, Volvo has no immediate plans to mass-produce the car, although they might incorporate some of the features in other newly designed vehicles. ... When will the world start giving women what they really want?” (Lategan, 2004).

### **Eve and the Auto-Genesis of Marginalization**

Your Concept Car was designed for an imaginary prototypical female named Eve. Shorn of her Biblical baggage, she supposedly embodies the empowered modern woman. “She is described as a modern professional woman in search of power, safety and convenience in an elegant package” (Hales, 2004, p. C2). Eve also represents the intended target market for YCC. She “wants all a man wants, and more. Her list is longer. She wants to store her bag and cellphone in a safe place, wants hassle-free parking, wants to get in and out of the car easily and in elegant style. She wants a vehicle that’s ideal to park and easy to maintain” (Car Connection, 2004). Eve still conforms to impractical fashion expectations. Since Eve often wears high heels when driving, the design of pedals and driver-side carpet had to accommodate this fashion dictate (Brown, 2004).

Eve might appear to be a progressive archetype, but her construction glosses over considerations of class that intersect with gender (hooks, 2000a, 2000b). It remains unclear how Eve might have achieved her high income and expensive tastes that mark her as successful by the standards of contemporary capitalism. Indeed, insofar as YCC embodies yet another commodity to mark class status, the automobile itself reinforces the commodity fetishism that requires status to be displayed publicly by tangible signs of economic prosperity. (The word “prosperity” does contain the word “property.”) Women become the focus more as consumers than creators. Volvo, with only one percent of the United States auto market, does have the highest rate of female purchasers (52 percent) of any luxury car, so YCC represents a step forward in marketing to women (Cars.com, 2004). Yet, only eleven percent of Volvo’s managers are women, compared with twenty percent for parent company Ford (Knox, 2003). Apparently Eve did not ascend the socioeconomic ladder by becoming a Volvo executive.

Social critic bell hooks observes that one method of perpetuating sexism, paradoxically, is “by the victims themselves who are socialized to behave in ways that make them act in complicity with the status quo” (2000a, p. 43). She has in mind situations that involve women acting against their own self-interest, such as the mutual antagonism that splinters groups of women who might unite effectively for social change (a phenomenon depicted as part of women’s socialization in the 2004 film *Mean Girls*). YCC enacts a larger and more empirically documentable phenomenon that could be called “self-marginalization”: participating in discursive traditions or patterns that demean one’s own group or deny its access to social privileges. Self-marginalization can be observed and traced discursively in the language marginalized groups use for self-reference. The all-woman design team for YCC engages in self-marginalization by adopting language that traditionally has been used to contrast the private, familial, and unpaid world of women with the supposedly more significant public, individualistic, economically prosperous and productive world of men. Instead of defending Eve as the “Modern Independent Woman,” discourse of the designers supports images of women as homebound, capricious creatures obsessed with personal hygiene and fashion.

Prevailing clusters of discourse characterize how Eve’s legacy gets configured in discussions of YCC. Discourse about the car consistently resides in the realm of domestic life, especially as an adjunct to kitchen and laundry. The terminology reinforces the accumulation of consumer goods as the symbol of success, portraying women as capricious and focused on appearances. Close textual analysis of these comments reveals marked convergence toward language that relegates women to the domestic sphere. This tendency in effect minimizes their roles as independent agents and relegates them to consumers whose preferences are portrayed as frivolous, picky, or

amusing. Design features discussed as part of the traditional realm of unpaid labor, especially the labors of the cook and domestic servant, connect the car to “women’s work” often “regarded as unskilled, marginal, transient, or simply ‘natural’,” despite the flattering image of Eve as a professional, affluent woman (Morgan, 1996, p. 7). A potentially radical innovation in automotive conception and construction gets “tamed” by interpreting it in ways that reinforce images of women as proprietors of the home, dutiful consumers, and whimsically superficial.

Design team member Tatiana Butovitsch Temm (2004) remarked that the car is “a bit like your living room, you know.” YCC offers several interchangeable seat covers and carpets, a veritable interior wardrobe. The seat décor options include “shimmering pale yellow with embroidered flowers...[c]omplemented by a bouclé-based dark brown carpet with strands of pale yellow linen. All the materials would work equally well in a living room. Many of them have never before been used in cars. Each seat top option has its own label, reinforcing the link with home interiors” (Automotive Intelligence, 2004). In the eye of the designers, the domestic benchmark of the living room replaces the reference point of high-performance machines. This shift in viewpoint was not lost on the press. A female reporter for the *Washington Post* noted: “Designers explained that they’d been inspired by a well-ordered living room instead of a testosterone-fueled cockpit” (Hales, 2004, p. C2). The testosterone rush or the return to domesticity provide the mutually exclusive, exhaustive options for women, mirroring the rigidity of traditional gender bifurcations. Even the car’s body design was placed within the gender dichotomy. One caption beneath a photo of the car remarks: “The car’s chunky styling was not what we were expecting from a bunch of girls” (Volvo YCC concept, 2004).

Kitchen and laundry room also provide reliable reference points for discussions of the car’s features. YCC includes specially designed paint that resists stains, so road grime, tar, and insect debris do not accumulate. The paint’s durability was consistently compared not to shields or armor (as in Armor All® protective coating), but instead to non-stick cookware. The “easy-clean exterior paint finish behaves rather like the coating of a nonstick pan—dirt finds it very hard to cling to in the first place and, if it does, it washes off very easily” (Design aimed, 2004, p. 12). The phrases “nonstick pan,” “non-stick frying pan,” and “Teflon pan,” consistently describe the special paint throughout media coverage in the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States (Moore, 2004; Job, 2004; Kemp, 2004; Alkhalisi, 2004; Barton, 2004). The linkage to kitchen utensils may have been catalyzed by Anna Rosen, a spokesperson for the design team. She boasted that the auto’s exterior was “as easy to clean as a nonstick frying pan” (Geller, 2004, p. 19).

Woman’s role as cleaner also surfaces in one of the most widely discussed features of the car: interchangeable seat covers and carpets with different designs and fabrics. Rather than concentrate on their durability or other practical features, reporters dwelled on the ease of cleaning (Pegg, 2004), reflecting an ongoing assumption that women would be especially concerned with implications for their role as designated charwoman. Thankfully the seat covers could be placed in a washing machine (Wernie, 2004), presumably alongside the other laundry that the woman of the house bears responsibility for cleaning.

The interior trim not only is washable, but capitalizes on the notoriously whimsical nature of women. Adding variety accommodates choice, but the choices women make apparently rely on

caprice rather than rationally justifiable needs or preferences. Seat covers can be changed to match a woman's mood (Design aimed, 2004) or simply whenever she feels she wants a change (Moore, 2004). A derisive Canadian review of the car criticizes its design as demeaning to women. The author notes: "In recognition of the adage that it's a woman's prerogative to change her mind, there are exchangeable seat covers in eight colours" (Kingston, 2004, p. SP1). Feminine frivolity gains reinforcement from the design team. Color and trim designer Maria Uggla quipped: "No need to trade in your car just because you have grown tired of its colour scheme" (Pegg, 2004, p. A28). The décor can change to match the driver's outfit, notes a woman reporting from Scotland (Smith, 2004), a point corroborated in American media coverage (Geller, 2004).

The car's features also reinforce images of women's fragility. There is no gas cap, so fingernails will not be broken trying to pry it open (Geller, 2004). Repeatedly the low-maintenance features of the car accompany references to the high-maintenance nature of women. For example, a BBC report mentions "an external filler point for washer fluid (no breaking your nails while trying to open the bonnet)" (BBC Top Gear, 2004).

Women also require protection—from dirt. The external filler for windshield washer fluid eliminates the "need to stick your head under the mucky bonnet" (Barton, 2004, p. 8). Gull-wing doors open upward to "preserve a lady's modesty when getting out" (Massey, 2004). Thus wearing unwieldy clothing becomes necessary from a prurient standpoint. Fashion dictates are enforced for a woman's own good, forcing design accommodations rather than challenges to the prevailing Puritanical prudence. The specially designed doors also safely guide dirty surfaces away from expensive shoes (Hales, 2004), thereby protecting extravagant purchases.

Finally, the car protects Eve's mechanical innocence by having a sealed hood, permitting engine maintenance and repair only by a qualified Volvo technician. "The design team decided early on that women preferred not to have to look under the hood" (Hales, 2004, p. C2). The car's computer sends an electronic message to the Volvo dealership when the engine requires service. Project Manager Temm admitted: "Honestly, the only time I open the bonnet on my car is when I want to fill up washer fluid" (Madslie, 2004). Her comment fits neatly with the BBC's tagline for the story: "Girl Power Softens Volvo's Edges."

## **Repressive Tolerance**

YCC exemplifies Marcuse's notion of repressive tolerance, a concept rooted in the discursive techniques that reinforce extant relations of power while appearing to offer an escape from hegemonic forces (Aune, 1994). Aune offers a vivid, concise description of how repressive tolerance works:

the system incorporates dissent by, in effect, patting it on the head, and then using its existence to confirm how good and tolerant the status quo is. ...Tolerance now serves the purpose of providing the illusion that freedom exists in society, while political power remains in the hands of elites. (Aune, 1994, p. 84)

Returning to the literary allusions, Volvo has reserved a space where women can indeed control automotive design. This room of their own, far from centrally placed, is consigned to a realm of fancy that remains distant from grimy factory floors. Project Manager Tatiana Butovitsch Temm enthusiastically describes the changeable seat covers by noting “you can, by that, not only change the look of your car—you know, you could have a very strict, very smart or more playful kind of interior, but you can also bring in new materials. You can bring in linen or wool” (CNNfn, 2004). The room for automotive design turns into a playroom. One woman observer at the auto show where YCC debuted remarked: “It’s Barbie’s car. But it is very pretty” (Fernandez, 2004).

An all-woman design team does qualify as an important achievement in an industry that designs vehicles almost exclusively from a male viewpoint. The celebration of apparent women’s empowerment, however, may be subverted as the artifact designed by women generates discourse that reinforces patriarchal attitudinal, behavioral, and aesthetic norms. Habermas notes that well-intentioned legislation (such as child care and family leave) to ameliorate economic practices that systematically impoverish women can turn into new forms of discrimination and instead of liberties being guaranteed people are deprived of freedom. In the domains of law that feminism is particularly concerned with, social-welfare paternalism is precisely that, because legislation and adjudication are oriented to traditional patterns of interpretation and thus serve only to strengthen existing gender stereotypes. (1994, p. 115).

An analogous situation arises with YCC. Although the target market seems to claim ownership of the car—it is *Your* Concept Car—the features of the car foregrounded in discourse gravitate toward the patriarchal parameters of the “feminine” sphere. Including women in the realm of automotive design in this case renders their contribution a collection of amusing “feminine touches” such as the vertically split headrests that can accommodate a ponytail, a feature acknowledged almost universally in media coverage of the car. By welcoming women into the realm of automotive design, women potentially contribute to the very social structures and forces that disadvantage them.

The car accommodates rather than challenges physical limitations imposed on women: cumbersome clothes are made more manageable by the gull-wing doors and retractable splash guards; unwieldy hair styles are endorsed by the ponytail-friendly headrests. Justifying the door design, “‘Sometimes you have clothes that are not really easy to move around in, so we wanted it to be good for any day,’ YCC exterior designer Anna Rosen says with a laugh” (Stevenson, 2004). These awkward situations are not so much special needs of women, but social conventions less likely to be questioned if they fit neatly into the car’s design. Instead of asking: “Why should women be expected to wear impractical, constrictive clothing?” the expectation remains intact because YCC makes fulfillment of the expectation easier.

A more vivid example of accommodation to (literal) constriction was the incorporation of “fainting rooms” and “fainting couches” into home and hotel architecture (Martell, 2004). Instead of challenging the norms of fashion that imprisoned women in corsets, structures such as the Franklin Hotel (opened in 1903) in Deadwood, South Dakota, included “a private parlor known as the fainting room. Often ladies would faint from the air rushing into their lungs when they released the tight corsets they wore to obtain the then-fashionable 18” waist” (Franklin



Hotel, 2002). Interlacing corsets and cars might seem far-fetched, but both instances illustrate how accommodation of oppressive practices perpetuates them.

Welcoming women into the inner circle of automotive design might actually jeopardize their position as an oppositional force to the androcentric automotive industry. To the extent that “feminism itself has become rescripted (but not disavowed) so as to allow its smooth incorporation into the world of commerce and corporate culture” (Banet-Weiser, 2004, p. 123), women achieve importance primarily as means to accelerate the accumulation of capital rather than as challengers to hegemonic structures such as class and gender hierarchies. Personalizing the car as “Your Concept Car” gives the illusion that the consumer actually guides the means of production when the car tends to make adaptation to “proper” feminine appearance and demeanor easier. “And for the ultimate in elegant egress, when the gull-wing doors go up, the sill rotates out and down, so costly stilettos need never brush against a grimy or greased surface—on the car, anyway” (Hales, 2004, p. C2). The car also boasts a “heel support pedal sensor” (Hales, 2004, p. C2). One skeptic disparages “a theoretical automobile that’s still telling them [women] how to drive” because so many functions are automated. Labeling the car as “yours” allies the automotive industry with the consumer (Aune, 1994), fueling acceptance of an automobile that enacts control of the driver rather than by the driver.

Satisfaction can extend not only to the product itself, but to the entire ideological system that allows the automotive industry to produce such a wonderful design. This “Happy Consciousness” treats every triumph of the capitalist productive mechanism as a vindication of the system as a whole. Marcuse defines Happy Consciousness as “the belief that the real is rational and that the system delivers the goods” (1964, p. 84). The idea of Happy Consciousness is that the interest advocated ideologically does not need to restrict the desires and needs of its audiences as long as any of the audiences’ goals can be met within the ideological framework. The fanfare for the first all-woman automotive design team celebrates the achievement of women. The appearance of advances in one area of capitalism, however, gives the appearance that the capitalist system per se is free of oppression and that restrictions on achievement reflect limitations *of* the individual, not limitations *on* individuals built into the system itself (hooks, 2000a). Tokenism serves as a political palliative, with the presence of the all-woman design team “effectively used to validate the existing social and economic structure” by the very people who protect the status quo from disruption by marginalized populations (hooks, 2000b, pp. 65-66).

## **Implications**

Your Concept Car demonstrates that a product does not necessarily become a liberatory device for women simply because it was formulated by women. Toril Moi (1997) observes a similar situation with theory: authorship by women is less important than the effects a theory can generate when appropriated to serve political purposes. Although Volvo touted YCC as a progressive step for women in the automotive industry, the involvement of women in automotive design highlights more than one *modus operandi* for sexism. The occasion of women taking charge of automotive design, far from signaling an unmitigated advance for feminism, actually reasserts patriarchy on multiple levels. Socially, women are relegated to the realms of art and inspiration, safely segregated from the means of production and implementation. Linguistically, women’s place is ensconced in the realms of the household, beauty, and lighthearted frivolity.

Inclusion of women in an automotive project hardly heralds greater inclusiveness of feminist concerns in the automotive industry or in society at large.

Habermas (1994) observes that institutionalized paternalism often produces new or renewed forms of oppression for women, but in the guise of liberties. The purportedly progressive corporate move of using an all-female automotive design team apparently opens new frontiers for women. Yet the new design has taken the exit ramp from the production line, entering the non-industrial realm of the aesthetic. The novel features that receive most attention are precisely those that accommodate the most restrictive roles associated with womanhood: impractical clothing that requires protection from dirt and stains (reinforcing images of purity and fragility), hairstyles that impede vision and motor skills (reducing competence for the sake of appearance), purely cosmetic and whimsical interior redesigns (recalling women as frivolous). The new automobile, far from challenging paternalism, incorporates design features that reinforce paternalistic expectations.

Translating our central contention into literary idioms, the promotion of and reaction to Your Concept Car grants women a room of their own, but this room may well have a locked door and yellow wallpaper. By celebrating women's access to a room (design of a concept car), the male-dominated automotive industry can claim accommodation of women while still consigning them to subservience or invisibility in the overall economic landscape (the automotive industry). If automobiles are not merely the objects of emotion but the manifestation of deep emotional and psychological commitments (Sheller, 2004), then the discursive construction of automotive design may have profound implications for the construction of femininity itself.

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