

# The Car Cassandra



*Abstract: A voice from the future—Cassandra—reproaches us as Carmageddon approaches. We learn about the anti-car activism of the Taurinos in Barcelona, the Firebugs in Berlin. But Cassandra cannot change the past. Keep moving, please!*

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I write to you from the early years of the twenty-second century. Or, rather, from one possible version of your future. The very fact that I have been allowed to compose this text and warn you about certain dangerous behaviours of yours implies that I might be able to change your ways, and therefore make the future in which I am living moot and void. I might, in other words, by the sheer force of my Cassandra-like warnings, be able to destroy myself and the horrible world I know. The sacrifice will be worthwhile if it can give humanity in general a better future.

Your ancestors made a mistake when they allowed cars to take over their towns and cities. At the time, of course, it simply looked like the inevitable march of progress. After some initial caution—early drivers had to be preceded by men waving red flags—there was amazingly little restraint. Where were the towns, the cities, the nations which decided to banish these chassis-mounted suits of armour? Only Venice (and even here japesters like the Futurists and the Superstudio group proposed concreting over the canals) and islands like Hydra and Alicudi held out against the invasion of the wheel. And now, all over your world, as the poet Robert Lowell once put it, “a savage servility slides by on grease.”

The sinister political and psychological implications of motorcentrism should have been apparent from the start. Not just because Hitler and Henry Ford—who built the early motorways and the cars to zoom along them—were outright fascists, but also because to swing oneself into the driving seat of a car, slam the door and start the engine was to enter a different way of being in the world, one in which a sort of demon rose in one’s breast and took over one’s worldview. The fact that driving was fun should not have eclipsed the even more obvious fact that it brought evil attitudes to the fore: laziness, selfishness, impatience, rivalry, pettiness, boastfulness, foolish excitement, recklessness, entitlement, a tendency to besmirch the world one is passing through, to lack empathy for one’s fellow creatures and for nature.



The effects on landscape were equally insidious. Places were no longer ends in themselves; they became transit corridors. Cities which had been constructed for humans to walk through were bulldozed so that cars would have room to rush, to creep and to park. No matter how many lanes were added to highways, it was never enough: congestion kept getting worse. Suburbs sprawled, never able to reach the density levels required for even the most basic communal services to become economically viable. The very success of the car became its—our— greatest tragedy.

The human body itself began to change as unused muscle turned to fat, and fat to flab. Cars everywhere increased in size in order to accommodate the puffed-up humans who now occupied them. It became a classic vicious circle, an arms race: the more the car changed the world, the more the world clung to its cars. Over a million people were killed in traffic accidents worldwide each year, of which at least a fifth were children. But instead of reaching for political measures to restrict traffic, people invested in larger, stronger vehicles. The car that threatens your child protects mine.

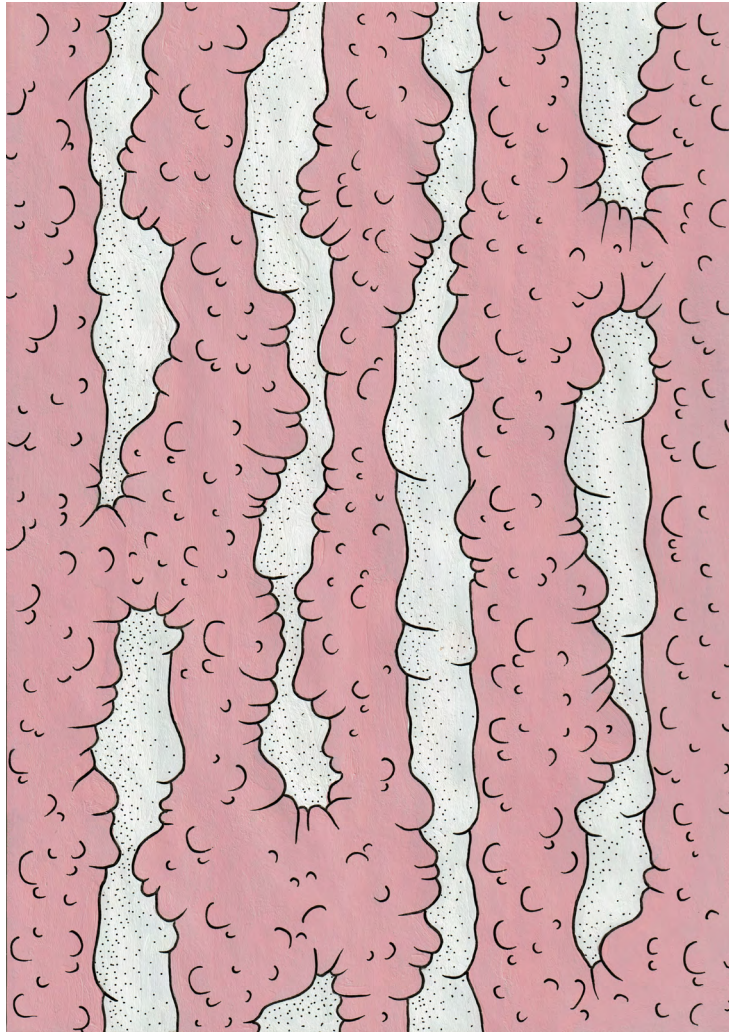
Anti-car policies were quickly squashed and stigmatised by a political class lobbied and bribed by the vehicle manufacturers themselves. Right wingers portrayed such policies as a war on driving or, more generally, an attack on freedom of choice. Those on the left contested that poor people, condemned to live in more remote, less well-connected areas, depended disproportionately on their cars, and that anti-car policies were essentially ways for the rich to attack the poor, the frail, the disabled.

In this way a well-intentioned green tax on diesel fuel brought President Macron of France into conflict with an angry coalition of provincial leftists and rightists, the *Gilets jaunes*, who were determined to continue motoring at the lowest possible cost to themselves, whatever the ultimate cost to the planet might be. Macron was forced to make concessions and withdraw his tax.

The socialist mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo, was more cunning. She launched a referendum in 2023 asking whether Parisians wanted electric rental scooters banned. They did, and the vehicles disappeared from Paris streets in September of that year. However, this was quickly followed by a second referendum, held in February 2024, asking whether citizens wanted to see more or fewer SUVs in central Paris. Thanks to a poster campaign characterising these tank-like cars as clumsy, deadly, polluting and “accidentogenic,” the vote swung against them. Unlike the scooters, though, the SUVs did not disappear overnight. All that happened was that non-resident parking charges in the inner city were increased. Those already rich enough to own, park and drive SUVs in central Paris experienced little hardship, and the town hall was able to hike its tax take while buffing its ecological optics.



A more idealistic campaign began in the late 2020s in Barcelona, thanks to a benign terrorist group called the Taurinos. The name combined bull-headed stubbornness with a reference to the 1969 film *The Italian Job*, in which Turin is brought to a standstill when its traffic light system is hacked by computer-savvy gold-robbers intent on attacking Fiat. The Taurinos infiltrated Barcelona's traffic lights—already considerably more generous to pedestrians than those in most cities—and programmed pedestrian signals to shine green for progressively longer times. Infuriated motorists started disregarding red traffic lights, which initially increased danger to pedestrians, but soon brought such chaos to the city's roads that traffic sat fuming in semi-permanent gridlock. Now pedestrians were able to slip easily between the trapped cars.



Berlin saw a more brutal approach. Car-torching had always been a May Day tradition in the German capital, but it soon became a year-round sport. Leftists burned the cars of perceived gentrifiers, rightists burned the cars of perceived leftists, Firebugs burned cars simply because they loved fire, insurance fraudsters burned cars to claim money, evicted squatters torched their old streets... And a handful of radical ecologists even burned cars as a protest against a burning planet. Their numbers soon began to grow.



The development of flying electric autonomous vehicles (or dragoncars, as they came to be known) in the mid-twenty-first century put paid to ground-level territorial disputes between humans and vehicles, but by then the damage had been done: a century of fossil fuel emissions had caused permanent anthropogenic changes to global temperatures, air, water and ice flows. Coastal cities were flooded as sea levels rose and the new aridity disrupted agriculture. The resulting famines led to massive migrations, which themselves sparked draconian political back-lashes and, finally, a devastating series of world wars. Man's love for the car—impossible to correct with the frail, corrupt and short-sighted political systems of your day—completely undermined him.

At the beginning of this essay I compared myself to Cassandra, the Trojan priestess. Alas, Apollo's gift to her was a double-edged sword. She would be able to make correct predictions about the future, certainly. But she would never be believed, and therefore her foresight would be useless to humanity. That same cruel Apollo, apparently, has built a variant on Cassandra's dilemma into my gift. I have been given the opportunity to warn you where your love affair with cars is taking you. Perhaps my words have even seemed—to readers stuck in the early 2020s—banal in their obviousness, given what you already know of the problems facing your planet.

It is this very quality of self-evidence that will prevent my glimpse into a horrible future from having much impact on your political processes. I am so right that I might as well shut up. There is also the unhelpful fact that my essay was published as a nicely-designed PDF on a Swiss art school website which few people—and especially few people with any influence—actually read. You may agree with the Cassandra of cars, but you will do exactly nothing as a result of hearing her argument.

Why did Apollo curse us—me and Cassandra—in this way? Immortals must be aware of what we call the Grandfather Paradox: one cannot travel back in time and kill one's grandfather, because then one would not be born, and would not be present in the future at all.

In a certain sense you, the readers of this essay from the future, are my grandfathers. I cannot kill you, nor can I change you in any way. I cannot sacrifice myself by making you change your ways to avert your arrival into the horrific world in which I am living, facing the inevitable consequences of your actions. You will travel to this point-of-no-return by car: slowly, filthily, inexorably. My voice has been a trick. Time's arrow points in one direction only.



## BIO

Momus is the artist name of Nick Currie, a Scot born in the 1960s. He has released approximately 40 albums of electronic folk music, written journalism for magazines from *Wired* to *Mousse*, performed in galleries and museums as “the unreliable tour guide,” and published half a dozen books of speculative fiction.

