

Tekst 7

On the road to nowhere

Traffic: Why We Drive the Way We Do (And What it Says about Us) by Tom Vanderbilt

- 1 Anyone who claims to be able to drive well and talk on a mobile phone at the same time is lying. Any boast of competence on the road is a good indication that someone is a terrible driver. It suggests he, and it probably is a he, has no idea how hard driving is.
- 2 Our bodies have not evolved to move much faster than 30km/h. At higher speeds, our senses, our reactions, our risk-assessing antennae don't work properly. So when we get behind the wheel of a car, stripped of critical faculties and clad in mechanical armour, we become 32. It is a combination that does not bring out the best in humanity, as Tom Vanderbilt discovers in *Traffic*. If the topic sounds banal, that is the point: we have become desensitised to the awesome complexity of life on the road.
- 3 Manoeuvring through traffic is one of the most mentally taxing things any of us does. Vanderbilt meets engineers who have tried unsuccessfully to build robots capable of doing it. 33, *Homo sapiens* has hardly mastered the art. In the UK about 3,000 people die every year in traffic accidents. And while driving feels easier the more you do it, the level of risk doesn't change. The mobile phone user thinks that because he has never crashed while writing a text message, he won't do so in the future. But it isn't skill that has kept him safe – it's luck.
- 4 Real evidence fuels Vanderbilt's study. He has travelled the world looking at people's behaviour and at how policy makers have tried to influence it. Occasionally, *Traffic* reads like a geeky dissertation on the relative merits of rival highway codes. But most of the time it is a metaphor for the challenge of organising competing human needs and imperfect human judgment into harmonious coexistence.
- 5 Vanderbilt builds a chain of interlinking paradoxes. The first is his observation that car culture is militantly individualistic, but driving is a very social affair. Most people on the road are in private vehicles, projections of personal space where they listen to music, eat, drink and ruminate. Surveys consistently find that, while people hate being stuck in traffic, they also have preferred minimum commuting times. They see a good quarter of an hour spent in the car as quality time.
- 6 These mobile sitting rooms have to navigate around each other, which also means signalling their intentions. That is hard enough when locked into a chrome carapace, let alone when also moving at speed. It is impossible to make eye contact at 50km/h. The difficulty of communicating on the road, combined with



the necessity of trying to if we want to survive, is the source of most episodes of road rage, which Vanderbilt calls traffic tantrums. In the private realm of a car, we expect to be able to use certain basic social tools. When we find these are of no use, we experience something like the exasperation of the toddler, whose capacity for self-expression has not developed at pace with its needs. The problem is compounded by an illusion of anonymity. Sensing that we are somehow invisible in the chassis, we perpetrate impoliteness that would be unthinkable in a face-to-face encounter. We struggle to put our individual needs – the assumed urgency of our journey – in the context of the collective need – everyone else also has somewhere to go.

- 7 That leads to Vanderbilt's second paradox: the slower we all go, the faster we'll all get there. The main cause of traffic fatalities is cars bumping into stationary objects and pedestrians. But the main cause of big traffic jams is cars bumping into each other, which they do because they are moving too fast for drivers to judge the risk involved. Yet making people slow down isn't easy. They ignore speed limits or, rather, they see them as a guide to what drivers less skilful and in less of a hurry should do. Devices intended to control traffic flow often make people behave recklessly.
- 8 This leads to Vanderbilt's third paradox: to make roads safer, sometimes you have to make them more randomly hazardous. Streets are generally designed to compensate for human stupidity. Cars are guided by thick white lines down lanes wide enough to allow meandering. Helpful signs announce the existence of bends. This approach to road design is meant to be forgiving – it assumes people will make mistakes and indulges them. The problem is that when you forgive people, they take liberties. Our capacity for seeking risk expands to fill the space afforded to it. We drive as fast as the road will let us and then a bit faster. We are more 37 hazards when we are told in advance they are coming.
- 9 We are safer when we drive as if anything may happen at any moment. Vanderbilt cites approvingly the example of Dutch engineer Hans Monderman, who has pioneered a counterintuitive approach to laying out roads – let people work out the hazards for themselves. That means no signs, no traffic lights, no lanes, no crash barriers and blurring the distinction between road and pavement. You make drivers crawl in a state of hyper-alertness. The idea is that you can design town and village centres so that pedestrian society 38 the world of the car and not the other way around. It is possible that this could only work in the Netherlands. But the point of the Dutch experiment is that it aims to change the culture rather than the rules of the road.
- 10 Vanderbilt does not try to solve the question of how people are supposed to share common space while pursuing their private agendas, which is a basic challenge of civilisation. That does mean the book lacks a resounding conclusion. Most of our traffic problems seem to come down to the innate weaknesses of our species. We have been stuck in the same jam for centuries. The only difference technology makes is that, in a car, we can go nowhere even faster.

Raphael Behr in *The Guardian Weekly*, 2008

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- 1p 32 Which of the following fits the gap in paragraph 2?
- A more frightened and more aggressive
 - B more stupid and more powerful
 - C more vulnerable and more fearsome
- 1p 33 Which of the following fits the gap in paragraph 3?
- A But then
 - B Consequently
 - C Even so
 - D For this reason
- 1p 34 Which of the following is in line with paragraph 4?
- A Vanderbilt emphasises the inefficiency of rules and regulations.
 - B Vanderbilt paints a picture of man's dilemmas that extend beyond his problems in traffic.
 - C Vanderbilt questions the negative impact of conflicting regulations on people's behaviour.
 - D Vanderbilt underestimates man's ability to assess complex situations.
- 1p 35 Welke twee van de onderstaande beweringen komen overeen met de inhoud van de alinea's 5 en 6?
- 1 Fast moving traffic restricts communication with other motorists.
 - 2 People consider all time spent on the road a necessary evil.
 - 3 Motorists underestimate the difficulty of getting signals across to other road users.
 - 4 The prevention of accidents requires a certain amount of social interaction.
 - 5 People become furious when other drivers' behaviour puts their safety at risk.
 - 6 Drivers' instinct says that their own safety comes before other people's safety.
- Noteer de twee nummers.
- 1p 36 Which of the following is made clear in paragraph 7?
- A Drivers are apt to ignore speed limits when there is not much traffic.
 - B Drivers tend to be overconfident of their abilities.
 - C Fast drivers are more likely to get injured in traffic accidents than slow drivers.
 - D The possibility of being fined does not deter fast drivers.

- 1p **37** Which of the following fits the gap in paragraph 8?
- A afraid of
 - B attentive to
 - C complacent about
- 1p **38** Which of the following fits the gap in paragraph 9?
- A adjusts to
 - B conforms to
 - C imitates
 - D interferes with