Discussion: Are cars visually threatening to pedestrians?

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Bayley *et al.* overlook an important aspect. Cars are not threatening to pedestrians; it is car drivers who pose the threat. Pedestrians use the visual appearance of an approaching car to judge the character of the driver and thus the threat posed. From experience, certain types of car—such as the ‘discreet’ prototype example and some sports utility vehicles (SUVs)—are driven by people who tend to be less attentive of what is happening in the street around them. On the other hand, visually aggressive cars are often driven by people who are attracted to driving as an activity. Such people tend to be very focused on what is happening in the street and so pose less of a threat. Individuals will have formed their own opinion based on experience, but they use a car’s visual appearance to judge the threat from the driver, not the car itself.

Authors’ reply

It is quite right to insist that the threat to pedestrians comes from the car driver, rather than the appearance of the car, and that pedestrians use the appearance of the car to judge the character

of the driver; indeed these are among the main conclusions of our study, and as such we hope they are clearly spelt out in the paper. But this was not really the point of the exercise. What seemed striking to us was that our volunteer subjects saw little visual threat in the vehicle at all. So I do not think we are in any disagreement here.

On the other hand, we were not sure about your other points. We have no evidence to suggest that people who drive SUVs are less attentive than other drivers. Nor is it clear to us that SUVs are less visually aggressive than other vehicles—our volunteer subjects tended to say the opposite. Nor do we have any evidence that people who drive cars that are considered visually aggressive are more focused and pose less of a threat. The subjects in our study felt otherwise; they associated visual aggression with the sorts of car that are driven by aggressive young male drivers, and that as pedestrians they would do well to keep out of their way!