# Presenting the Self in Everyday Life:
# The Personalized License Plate as Rhetorical Phenomenon[1]

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We all know that, when an individual enters the presence of others, they seek information about her or bring into play information about her they already possess.[2]  They are interested in such matters as her socio-economic status, her self-conception, her attitude toward them, her social competence, her trustworthiness, and so on.  Of course, she seeks the same information about them, trying to define the situation, trying to ensure that the encounter takes the course she would like it to take.  In this way, people get to know what is expected of them, not to mention how best to call forth the desired response from others.  We all realize that, in these everyday encounters, we convey vital information directly and consciously when we provide verbal documentary evidence about who we are and what we do and indirectly and involuntarily when we reveal non-verbal information about our attitudes, beliefs, and emotions.  We understand this interaction as the rhetoric of everyday life.

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[2]Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959) 1-2; Harold Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology*  (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1967) 9-11.

In this paper, we examine a mundane, seemingly impersonal, form of interaction which materializes whenever people take to the road in an automobile: we are interested in the rhetorical phenomenon of the personalised license plate (hereafter the PLP).[3]  In saying this, we say that the PLP is in fact an integral part of the impression being made by the driver, determining the information other people acquire about her.  We focus on how people consciously exploit the medium of the license plate[4] and on how the text can be read or decoded[5] with a view to understanding how such messages as 2QUICK4U and 2HOT4U foster and control impressions.

## 1. Studying Popular Culture

The approach we have taken builds on the work of a variety of socio-semiotics theorists, including Roland Barthes, Stuart Hall, and Pierre Bourdieu.[6]  It sees popular culture as a site of struggle, focusing on the tactics used to evade or subvert the forces of dominance.[7]  Analysts

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[3]The PLP has been in circulation in the USA since 1937, when the first personalised plate was issued in Connecticut.  See Sarah Jay, "Vanity in a License Plate is Spelled SOFINE," *New York Times* (25 December 1994, E2).  There, the PLP accounts for only 2 per cent of all registered plates.  As we know, PLP's convey messages that brag and swagger, posture and pun, declaim and disarm.  See Thomson C. Murray, *The Official License Plate Book: How to Read and Decode Current United States and Canadian Plates*, ed.  Michael C. Wiener (Jericho, NY: Interstate Directory Publishing Co. Inc., 1996). To appreciate the PLP phenomenon, one must turn to the notion of "conspicuous consumption."  First developed by Thorstein Veblen, in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Dover Publications, 1899), the term describes the practice of purchasing unnecessary and/or overly expensive goods and services in order to signal one's wealth and high status.  More recently, a number of analysts have reconsidered this idea.  In "Status Goods and luxury Taxes," *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 34 (1975): 141-54, Edward Miller discusses certain kinds of purchases, e.g., diamond rings, expensive clothes, and so forth − describing them as "costly signalling" − in *Social Limits to Growth* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977); Fred Hirsh speaks of them as "positional goods"; and in *Distinctions: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. R. Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1984), Pierre Bourdieu talks of the economic significance of "taste."

[4]Roland Barthes, "The Rhetoric of the Image," in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. S. Heath (London: Wm. Collins Sons, 1977) 32-51.

[5]Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," in S. Hall, D. Hobson, and P. Willis (eds.), *Culture, Media, and Language* (London: Hutchinson, 1980) 128-39.

[6]See Barthes (1977), Hall (1980), and Pierre Bourdieu,  *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. R. Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1984).

[7]See John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989) 18-20.

who take this approach argue that ordinary people use resources the elites (who control the cultural industries) provide to produce popular culture. In contrast to the mass cultural model, which conceptualizes artifacts in terms of unified meaning, the popular cultural model conceptualizes cultural artifacts as polysemic, open to a variety of quite different, even contradictory, readings. Some readings support the ideological meanings of cultural elites; others clearly oppose those meanings.[8]

## 2. Our Project

The project we report on here grows out of our on-going study of popular cultural artifacts, wherein we try to discover how some readings of these artifacts support the dominant ideology, whereas others oppose it.[9] In this case, we collected our data while driving in and around the city of Calgary over the course of a year, from 14 February 1994 to 13 February 1995. We always travelled with a small diary, so as to record the PLP's we saw. In every instance, we

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[8]Hall (1980) 137-38 identifies three reading strategies: (a) "dominant readings" are employed by readers who accept the dominant ideology;  (b) "negotiated readings" are employed by readers who accept the dominant ideology but who modify it to suit their  social position;  and (c) "oppositional readings" are employed by readers whose social position is in opposition to the dominant ideology.

[9]Our project grows out of our on-going study of cultural artifacts.  See Robert M. Seiler, "The Interactional Organization of News Interviews in Canada," in *Proceedings of the Canadian Society for the Study of Rhetoric,* vol. 3, ed. John Martin (Calgary: C.S.S.R., 1991), 114-28; "Word-and-Image Interaction in the Newspaper: Common-sense Constructions and Ideological Interpretations," in *Proceedings of the Canadian Society for the Study of Rhetoric,* vol.5, ed. Albert W. Halsall (Ottawa: C.S.S.R., 1995), 123-35; "Selling Patriotism/Selling Beer: The Case of the I AM CANADIAN! Commercial," *American Review of Canadian Studies* 32 (Spring 2002): 45-66; "Cultural Activities and Urban Spaces: Cinemas on Stephen Avenue, Calgary, 1920-1970," *Prairie Forum* 28.1 (Spring 2003a): 67-80; and "M.B. 'Doc' Marcell: The Official Photographer of the first Calgary Stampede," *American Review of Canadian Studies* 33.2 (Summer 2003b): 219-38; and Robert M. Seiler and Tamara P. Seiler, "The Social Construction of the Canadian Cowboy: Calgary Exhibition and Stampede Posters, 1952-72," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 33.3 (Fall 1998): 51-82; "High Anxiety: The Rhetoric of Crime Reporting in Canadian Newspapers," *Canadian Journal of Rhetorical Studies* 10 (September 1999): 97-112; "Ceremonial Rhetoric and Civic Identity: The Case of the White Hat," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 36 (Spring 2001): 29-49; and "David Alexander Colville: The Rhetoric of Ambiguity," *Canadian Journal of Rhetorical Studies* 13 (September 2002): 14-32.

recorded the following details: (1) the message displayed, (2) the make of vehicle, (3) the year of vehicle, (4) the date of observation, and (5) the note book used and the page number, thereby making sure that we never "invented" our information.  We identified as "candidates" plates whose alpha/numeric characters suggested some deliberate, as opposed to chance, arrangement.  For this reason, we would ignore a plate like THE 333, which we saw on a grey 1984 Honda Accord.  Usually, the passenger recorded the details.  (Surprisingly, we recorded the details of about 700 messages.)  Prior to analyzing them, we eliminated duplicate entries and by the process of systematic sampling reduced our corpus to 500.  Ultimately, we wanted to formulate a rhetoric of the linguistic strategies drivers in and around Calgary employ to project an impression of themselves.

## 3. Background

The study of communication can be subdivided into three areas[10]: (a) *syntactics*, which focuses on the problems of transmitting information; (b) *semantics*, which focuses on the problems of the meaning of the symbols employed to convey the message; and (c) *pragmatics*, which focuses on how communication affects behaviour.  While a clear conceptual separation of these areas is possible in theory, they are nevertheless interdependent in practice.  Our project touches on all three areas, but deals mainly with pragmatics.

In everyday life, we use the terms "communication" and "behaviour" interchangeably.  Thus, the data of pragmatics are not only verbal — arrangements of words and the meanings generated thereby — but also non-verbal — gestures.  From this perspective, it can be argued that all communication — even the communicational clues in an impersonal context — affects

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[10]P. Watzlawick, J. Beavin, and D. D. Jackson, *Pragmatics of Communication: A Study of Interactional*

behaviour.  When an individual appears in the presence of others, she organizes her "activity," verbally and non-verbally, so as to convey the impression that puts her in the best possible light.[11]  The sender is concerned not only with the effect her communication will have on the receiver, but also with the effect the receiver's response will have upon her, the sender.  Aristotle produced one of the first models to capture these dynamics:


**Speaker ÷ Argument ÷ Speech ÷ Listener(s)**


In *On Rhetoric*,[12] Aristotle writes that rhetoric affects decision making.  He points out that the successful rhetor must not only make the argument of his speech demonstrative and worthy of belief; he must also make his own character look credible and put his listeners, who are to decide the matter at issue, into the right frame of mind.

Today, theorists model interpersonal communication as a continuous, often simultaneous process, whereby one person (encoder/decoder) formulates a message about some referent (some idea, feeling, object, or experience) in some context, and sends it to some other person (encoder/decoder), who responds to the message, depending upon how he perceives and interprets it:


**Encoder/Decoder ø   Message ø   Encoder/Decoder**


By encoding, they mean translating the referent into symbols or sign-vehicles, such as words or

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*Patterns, Pathologies, and Paradoxes* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1967) 34-36.
         [11]See Goffman 1-3.

gestures, which are conveyed via channels of verbal or non-verbal stimuli.

In other words, if we agree that all behaviour in an interactional situation has message value,[13] we have to conclude that one cannot *not* communicate, however hard one tries. In a significant way, this statement conveys the very essence of rhetoric. Activity or inactivity, words or silence: all have message value; they influence other people and other people, in turn, cannot not respond to this communication.

Thus, we could say that all behaviour becomes rhetorical as soon as someone interprets it/responds to it on the basis of some interpretation, whatever the actor's intentions happen to be.[14] However, many acts are rhetorical by design, such as advertisements, music videos, editorials, and so on, in that they (a) declare a position and (b) seek to defend it or to make it attractive                    to                    others.                                        Using this more exclusive definition, we can say that rhetorical acts are intentional, deliberate attempts to influence others. Often, these acts take place within the context of, or are modelled on, face-to-face interaction.[15]

For the sake of this discussion, we define a rhetorical act as an intentional, polished attempt to overcome the obstacles in a given situation with a specific audience on a given issue to achieve a particular end.[16] In this case, via seven alpha/numeric characters, the rhetor evokes ideas, pictures, and experiences in those she addresses.

The power of the rhetor's character or ethos in this rhetorical act becomes more

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[12]Aristotle, *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, trans. George A. Kennedy (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).
[13]See Watzlawick et al 48-49.
[14]See Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, *The Rhetorical Act* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1996) 24.
[15]See Janet Beavin Bavelas, Sarah Hutchinson, Christine Kenwood, and Deborah Hunt Matheson, "Using Face-to Face Dialogue as a Standard for Communication for Other Communication Systems," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 22.1 (1997): 6-7.
[16]See Campbell 120.

understandable when we think about the ancient term. The Greek word *ethos* is closely related to our terms *ethical* and *ethnic*. In its widest sense, ethos refers not to the personality of the individual but to "the disposition, character, or attitude peculiar to a specific people, culture, or group that distinguishes it from other peoples or groups".[17] Understood in these terms, its relationship to the word *ethnic* becomes obvious, for ethnic refers to the distinctive cultural group, and the ethos of an individual depends upon how well she reflects the qualities valued in that culture. In other words, your ethos refers to the ways in which you as an individual mirror the characteristics idealized by your culture or social group. We judge the character of another by the choices that person makes regarding how she lives with other members of the community.

Clearly, as a site where individual and community "interact" on a day-to-day basis, where a person reveals something about herself as an individual and as a competent member of the community, the PLP message (we would argue) can be better understood in light of (a) classical rhetorical theory, particularly the notion of ethos; and (b) popular culture analysis, which encourages us to view it as a site of struggle, where an individual "makes do" with a procedure and a material supplied by those in authority, turning a legally required and (one might argue) a highly de-personalizing artifact — a license plate (which usually bears an alpha/numeric message of conformity) into a highly visible expression of self.[18] Moreover, the message can be better understood in light of (c) modern theories of inter-personal communication.

In the following pages, we attempt to combine these analytical frameworks with a view to providing some insight into the significance of what might well be regarded as a rather puzzling, even oxymoronic, postmodern phenomenon: the PLP.

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[17]Campbell 121.

[18]The sense of "self" used here derives from G.H. Mead who, in *Mind, Self, and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934), explained that the self emerges from social interaction with other human beings

## 4. The Personalized License Plate

The province of Alberta introduced the PLP on 1 May 1985, thereby making the so-called "vanity" plate available to suitable applicants for a fee of $150.  Records show that 2,607 sets of PLP's were issued for the fiscal period 1 April 1994 to 31 March 1995, thereby bringing the total number of PLP's in circulation in Alberta to 42,272 plates.  According to Peter Wong, 1,935,706 active license plates were in circulation as of 31 March 1995.[19]  In any event, the PLP accounts for about 2.4 percent of all registered license plates in Alberta.  Applicants must consider a variety of guidelines, including these:

1. PLP's must display no more than seven characters, i.e., letters or numbers, including spaces.  Applicants are advised that "0" (zero) or "1" (one) cannot be used in place of an "O" (oh) or "I" (eye) to make a plate unique.

2. PLP's must be unique.

3. Alberta Registries reserve the right to reject a request for a PLP for any reason. This means that an application can be denied if (a) someone already owns the plate, or (b) the message is on a list of off-limit plates (plates must not cause problems in terms of identification: one cannot request a plate saying QUEEN or PREMIER), or (c) the plate offends against "good taste," i.e., contains an ethnic, a religious, a sexual, or a political slur.

Clearly, the constraints on formulating a "unique" message, one that projects one's desired image, are formidable.

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via taking on the role of the other and/or internalizing the attitude of real and imagined others.
　　　[19]Peter Wong, personal communication, 6 June 1997.

## 5. Methodology

While reducing our sample to 500 messages, we noticed the PLP's falling into just a few categories.  We hypothesised that these categories might be linked to a number of rhetorical strategies.  In designing an apparatus for categorising the PLP's, so as to uncover the "rhetoric" at work in this medium, we took as our point of departure the words of Aristotle who, in identifying what contributed to the ethos of a rhetor in a rhetorical act, wrote that it arose from (a) good sense or social and practical wisdom, which he called *phronesis*; (b) good will or concern for the long-term interests of the community, which he called *eunoia*; and (c) good character or moral excellence, which he called *arete*.  We folded these elements into the schema we produced (see Table 1) to categorise the messages that make up our corpus.[20]

| PERSON | VEHICLE | SETTING |
|---|---|---|
| 1. name | 1. name | 1. name |
| 2. attribute | 2. attribute | 2. attribute |
| 3. achievement | 3. distinction | 3. distinction |
| 4. maxim | 4. maxim | 4. greeting |

**Table 1:  Schema for categorizing messages**

We explain this schema in these terms: Depending upon the inflection intended, every alpha/numeric combination of characters projects an image of "self" in terms of PERSON, VEHICLE, possibly a non-verbal extension of the person, or SETTING, by which we mean a

[20]In constructing this schema, we assume that phronesis, eunoia, and arête (or the absence thereof) will be expressed in the words a driver uses to describe herself, her vehicle, or her community.  Admittedly, the government regulations governing the choice of words on a PLP limit the degree to which one is allowed to transgress community standards with regard to these three qualities; nevertheless, the regulations allow sufficient freedom for drivers to display these qualities in varying degrees. For example, one could read GOOFY as exerting less phronesis than                                                                                                  SRVIVER.

focus on the rhetorical situation or (in many cases) the audience. We would argue that, with regard to the category called PERSON, the rhetor conveys the persuasive force of her character or individuality via (1) her name, including her (a) first name, (b) last name, (c) first and last name, (d) nick-name, and (e) name of the unit she belongs to or aligns herself with. Sub-category (e) includes those instances where the unit is not "family" so much as "business." As well, we noticed the tendency to convey a sense of "self" in terms of (2) an attribute or personal quality, or (3) an activity or an achievement, which serves as an index of status, or (4) a maxim to live by. These sub-categories represent the strategies the rhetors in this study employ to project an image of themselves.

As it happens, the other major categories break into the same sub-categories, with two minor variations. In terms of vehicle and setting, the first three sub-categories need little explanation: many rhetors project an image of themselves via (1) the make of the automobile they drive or via the name of the place they live, (2) a quality or attribute of the automobile or the place, or (3) some quality or distinction attached to the automobile or the place. In these cases, the terms "achievement" and "distinction" are interchangeable. The last sub-category, (4) maxim, is more complex. Many messages resemble maxims, but after examining them closely we concluded that they sometimes identify the effect drivers wish to achieve vis-a-vis the automobile and sometimes the drivers speak directly to a particular audience. Any message we could not de-code we regarded as a GREETING, that is, it speaks to a small audience, possibly members of the driver's family. We provide examples of these messages in Table 2.

| PERSON | VEHICLE | SETTING |
|--------|---------|---------|
| 1. name | 1. name | 1. name |
| MARIE | VOLVO | CALGARY |

| REESE | NISSAN2 | SASK2N |
| WEE YIN | | KENORA |
| COACH | | XFIELD |
| HEAVENS | | NANOOSE |
|---|---|---|
| 2. attribute | 2. attribute | 2. attribute |
| FRANTIC | HOT | EASY ST |
| FOXYONE | SPEEDEE | GREAT |
| HUMBLE | SPUNKY | |
| GOOFY | ZIPPY | |
| WITTY | VROOM | |
| 3. achievement | 3. distinction | 3. distinction |
| IMADEIT | ITSHERS | GOLD88 |
| IPUSHEM | DADZCAD | |
| WE SKI | HER JAG | |
| LIV2FLY | BABSTOY | |
| TOPBOSS | IAMHIS | |
| 4. maxim | 4. maxim | 4. greeting |
| LIVNLUV | FUN 44 | ZUMWOHL |
| DZIRTOB | SUM SHO | SMYL4ME |
| FLY HI | 2 DIE 4 | HELLO |
| UBUIBME | 4U2NVEE | IDARE U |
| YB NICE | YIBUY4N | SO WHAT |

**Table 2: Schema for categorizing messages**

## 6. Results

The vast majority of the messages we studied can be decoded according to a variety of semantic criteria, depending upon the approach one takes. We would argue that they fall into the pattern we had projected: PERSON, VEHICLE, and SETTING. The senders of these messages project themselves directly — as "individuals." However, 10 messages (2 per cent of the total) defy decoding altogether. We read these messages as puzzles, categorising each (by default) as a

"greeting," reasoning that each conveys a (private) signal directed to a very small, possibly self-selected audience.  The over-all pattern that emerges from our study is outlined in Table 3.

| PERSON | VEHICLE | SETTING |
|---|---|---|
| 1. name 295 | 1. name 008 | 1. name 024 |
| 2. attribute 021 | 2. attribute 012 | 2. attribute 002 |
| 3. achievement 031 | 3. distinction 037 | 3. distinction 001 |
| 4. maxim 015 | 4. maxim 008 | 4. greeting 046 |

**Table 3: Distribution of messages**

In this section, we gloss the major sub-categories, with a view to identifying the rhetorical strategies invoked in significant cases.

*6.1 Person*

No less than 362 drivers (72.4 per cent) project an image of themselves as "personalities" via the rhetorical strategies making up the category we call PERSON.

(1) *Name.*  In this sub-category, we include (a) first names (53), (b) last names (80), (c) first and last names (45), (d) nick-names (17), and (e) names of organizations, i.e., businesses and social groups, based on our perusal of the Telus Calgary and Area telephone and Yellow Pages directories.  With regard to first-names, we identified the following distribution: 2 couples, e.g., V AND W; 14 male, e.g., ALLAN, LARS, and WALDO; and 26 female, e.g., DEBBI, MAGGIE, and TANYS.  With regard to last names, more than half (47) convey the family name only (without such designations as title), e.g., CAMERON, LOPEZ, and WYLLIE.  Not

surprisingly, the names of 100 organisations or businesses (20 per cent) fall into the last sub-category. Altogether, 89 drivers project an image of themselves via the business (presumably) they work for, e.g., AVALON, HEAVENS, and TEASERS.        (2) *Attribute*.    A significant number of drivers (21) chose to "construct" themselves in terms of a particular psychological attribute. In a word, 11 messages convey a negative impression, e.g., FOXYONE, FRANTIC, and WILD; 4 convey a positive impression, e.g., HUMBLE, SRVIVER, and WITTY; 3 convey neither a positive nor a negative impression, e.g., OBUSYME; and 3 project a national stereotype, e.g., AUSSIE1 and 1 LIMEY.

(3) *Achievement*. Altogether, 21 drivers (4.2 per cent) chose to project an image via an important achievement. Significantly, 10 messages claim success in terms of a sport, e.g., LV GOLF and WE SKI, and 12 claim success in terms of an occupation, e.g., DZINER, PIANIST, and MUDMAN.

(4) *Maxim*. Finally, 15 drivers (3 per cent) project an impression via some maxim, by which we mean a statement of belief or principle. We would cite as examples the following: BUY LOW, FLY HI, and LIVNLUV.


*6.2 Vehicle*

Altogether, 65 drivers (13 per cent) chose to make an impression directly via the vehicle on which they display a personalised message. The sub-categories make this context clear:

(1) *Name*. As it happened, 8 drivers (1.6 per cent) chose to project an image via the make of the vehicle. In some cases, the messages described the familiar, e.g., LASER, NISSAN2, and VOLVO, and in others the message described the unfamiliar, e.g., COSSACK.

(2) *Attribute*.  Altogether, 12 drivers (2.4 per cent) chose to make an impression via an attribute of the vehicle.  These fairly tame messages included JIFFY, SPEEDE, and SPUNKY.  This strategy may suggest that the driver shares or at least values the attribute named.

(3) *Distinction*.  No less than 37 drivers (7.4 per cent) chose to project an image via some distinction associated with the vehicle, e.g., BABSTOY, DADZCAD, and DOTSPET.  According to this strategy, other drivers are forced to think of the owner when they see the vehicle bearing the message.

(4) *Maxim*.  Altogether, 8 drivers (1.6 per cent) chose to make an impression in terms of the status conferred by owning the vehicle in question, e.g., ABUVALL, SUM SHO, and 22 HOT.

*6.3 Setting*

No less than 63 drivers (12.6 per cent) chose to project an image of themselves in terms of the setting in which this communicational interaction takes place.  It might be argued that, in evoking the context this way, these drivers tried to establish a common ground with their audience.

(1) *Name*.  Altogether, 24 drivers (4.8 per cent) chose to make an impression via a particular place: 9 messages identified international sites, e.g., FRANCE, IRELAND, and TIBET; 5 identified Canadian sites, e.g., HURON, KENORA, and NANOOSE; 4 identified American sites, e.g., ROUTE 66, TEXAS A, and WALL ST.  Interestingly enough, 5 identified sites in Alberta, e.g., XFIELD, CALGARY, and DRAYTON.

(2) *Attribute*.  Only 2 drivers (.4 per cent) chose to project an image of themselves via an attribute of the place or the setting, e.g., GREAT.

(3) *Distinction*.  As it happened, only 1 driver (.2 per cent) chose to make an impression via the status of the setting itself, e.g., GOLD88.  In this case, the driver calls attention to the Winter Olympics, which were held in Calgary in 1988.

(4) *Greeting*.  Altogether, 36 drivers (7.2 per cent) chose to recognise the audience, thereby establishing common ground.  Seven in particular capture this spirit by opening a dialogue, e.g., EXQS ME, HELLO, and ZUMWOHL ("Good luck!" in German).  However, many chose to send greetings of a more provocative nature, including GETREAL, IDARE U, and SO WHAT.

## 7. Concluding Remarks

The presentation of self in everyday life can be understood as impression management.[21] In terms of the mediated interaction studied here, people (drivers) project an impression of themselves via a highly compressed message made up of alpha/numeric characters and the vehicle on which this message is mounted.  Via the vanity plate, we can catch a glimpse of individualism on our roads.

Understandably, the "rhetorical problem" presented by the PLP is challenging indeed. On the one hand, displaying a regular license plate (uniform and therefore arguably egalitarian) can   suggest   the   qualities   of   effective   ethical   appeal.   It   could,   in Aristotle's terms, signify good sense, good will, and good character.  On the other, displaying a PLP can suggest a lack of good sense and good will, depending upon the view one takes of "conspicuous consumption."  Thus, from the rhetor's point of view, the problem is one of formulating a message that balances the desire to stand apart from the community with a desire

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[21]Goffman 208.

to align oneself with it.

Not surprisingly, the vast majority of PLPs we studied convey an impression of self via the category PERSON.  The ratio of PERSON messages to VEHICLE messages, like the ratio of

 PERSON messages to SETTING messages, is nearly 5:1.  In terms of this ratio, Calgary drivers

can be described as "conservative," in that many project an image of self via traditional

rhetorical strategies, aligning themselves with authorities, such as family or business.

In examining the strategy employed to display a first name, we find another telling ratio,

i.e., motorists display twice as many male names as female names.  Again, one can read this

phenomenon in at least two different ways.  Displaying one's first name instead of a set of

randomly selected alpha/numeric characters is a highly subversive act; arguably, it is more

subversive than displaying one's last name, since the former strategy asserts the individual per se

much more strongly.  Read from this perspective, the message KAREN M is an assertive

statement, symbolically subverting the State and the Patriarchy, and presumably the ethos

projected is one that would impress some in the "audience" as favourable, others as

unfavourable, depending upon their attitudes toward women.

Such a message can be read differently, i.e., as a manifestation of "the female style" of

communication,[22] a style that defers to male authority, downplaying a public persona in favour

of a private one, and offers more intimate, confessional, and egalitarian interaction than does the

(supposedly) more assertive, power-oriented and impersonal (male) style of communication.

Understood this way, the ethos projected is considerably less authoritative and more informal

than that projected by a last name, and the rhetor who chooses this strategy may be said to have

achieved a balance between subversion and compliance via a transgression that is softened by

old fashioned "feminine charm."

A significant number of individuals (17.8 per cent) displayed the name of what is

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[22]See Deborah Tannen, *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*  (New York: Morrow, 1990) 14.

presumably their business, e.g., RAJDOOT, the name of a restaurant.  This strategy can also be read in several ways.  On the one hand, the message inflects prestige in two directions — toward the driver, by associating her/him with a successful commercial enterprise (perhaps a particularly ethos-enhancing strategy in a city where for many the entrepreneur is the dominant cultural hero), and toward the business enterprise itself, particularly if the vehicle involved is especially desirable.  Seen this way, displaying the name of a business reinforces the dominant ideology, valorizing the entrepreneurial virtues which (presumably) have enabled a particular individual to occupy a "flashy" vehicle.  On the other, this strategy can also be read as a subversive act, one that appropriates public space (a license plate is, after all, a regulatory apparatus of the state, if not an emblem of civil society) for (cheap) advertising.  Interpreted this way, a PLP that sports the name of a business is a triumph of commercial over civic values, i.e., for advertisers no public space is "off limits."

Some of the other, more daring, rhetorical strategies we observed are also revealing.  Consider the people who project an image in terms of attributes or achievements.  The message LLB MBA, for example, clearly subverts the uniform nature of the regular license plate.  We would argue that this message (it appeared on a 1992 silver Acura Integra) projects an aggressive persona; its matter-of-factness, almost impersonality, projects an authoritative ethos, the very image of success, measured by degrees, and hence social and economic clout to an "audience" who places a high value on education and professionalism.

These results reaffirm the view that, in studying popular cultural artifacts, such as album covers, comics, clothing, jokes, postcards, posters, and PLPs,[23] analysts can throw light on how

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[23]A number of WEB sites are devoted to license plate collecting, including the Automobile License Plate Collectors Association (the A.L.P.C.A.), which was founded (in 1954) to promote collecting, researching, and exchanging the license plate, and PL8S MAGAZINE, the on-line magazine devoted to license plate collecting.

central these artifacts are to the process of producing, reproducing, and resisting dominant ideologies.[24] Ultimately, what the PLP phenomenon registers is the ideological configuration of Alberta's late capitalist, neo-liberal society. In making use of the materials that this society affords them for constructing their private and public identities, individuals may at once contest and reaffirm hegemonic discourse. The rhetorical choices we have described represent negotiations of highly constrained and overlapping spaces, public and private, civic and commercial. Whether or not one reads a particular PLP message as a successful assertion of individual ethos in a drab, bureaucratic world, or as simply yet another (perhaps inadvertent) valorization of a pervasive consumerism, one that limits the rhetorical choices available for constructing ethos to choices among various brands of consumer products, will doubtless depend as much on one's ideological perspective as on a particular driver's rhetorical skill. The rhetorical practices which make up the discourse of vanity/conspicuous consumption, as people in Calgary understand this notion, illustrate the complexities of self-presentation in contemporary Canadian society.

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[24]Wayne Martin Mellinger, "Postcards from the Edge of the Color Line: Images of African Americans in Popular Culture, 1893-1917," *Symbolic Interactionism* 15.4 (1992): 413-33.

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