Rotterdam Traffic Police and the Formation of a Modernist Mobility Dispositif 1915–1940

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Abstract

This study examines the historical roots and socio-political implications of modernist urban traffic regulation in the Dutch city of Rotterdam. It poses the research question: How does the emergence and institutionalisation of the Rotterdam Traffic Police between 1915-1940 help understand the formation of a modernist mobility dispositif in which urban street space is naturalised as dynamic space? Employing a genealogical and dispositif-analytical approach, the study explores archival materials and historical accounts of the Rotterdam Traffic Police. It uncovers the transformation of urban space into dynamic space prioritising continuous and efficient traffic circulation, often at the expense of other social functions. Key findings suggest that the modernist mobility dispositif, socially constructed as a natural evolution of urbanisation and motorisation, was instead a product of deliberate socio-political and institutional efforts, as the conducting of movement became crucial to the execution of state power. The enforcement of traffic discipline through police regulation, traffic propaganda, and the marginalisation of non-motorised and 'disorderly' road users facilitated this shift. The study's contribution lies in its challenging of the perceived inevitability of car-dominated urban spaces, highlighting the role of power dynamics in shaping urban mobility. It calls for a re-evaluation of urban space as a multifunctional entity rather than merely a conduit for vehicular traffic.

Keywords: kinopolitics, modernist mobility dispositif, modernity, naturalisation, traffic police

Introduction

In the summer of 2017, a group of adolescent boys caused a stir when they embarked on several bicycle rideouts throughout Rotterdam. Hailing from the city's south side and driving collectively under the name 'Team Domina', the kids defied prevailing traffic norms as they, instead of using the designated cycling paths at the side of the road, collectively drove on the (much broader) roadways. They performed wheelies and other tricks, forcing cars to adjust to the mass of cyclists as they drove in front of and between vehicles at will. With safety in numbers, Team Domina acted fearlessly, as some grabbed onto cars to move forward or tapped on car roofs. Jose, a 13-year-old boy who participated in one of the rideouts, captured the temporary reversal of social order in a short documentary:

> "This time we are the boss of the road. If we are not there, the cars are the boss. And when we ride on the road, we are the boss." (Van Zundert 2018, 12:55).

It is interesting that a 13-year-old perceives urban mobility in terms of power relations, since it is often not seen as a domain of power or politics. That it most definitely *is* became only more explicit when Team Domina hit Hofplein, Rotterdam's most notable 'traffic square', and posted the video online, causing it to go viral and attract national media attention (see Figure 1):

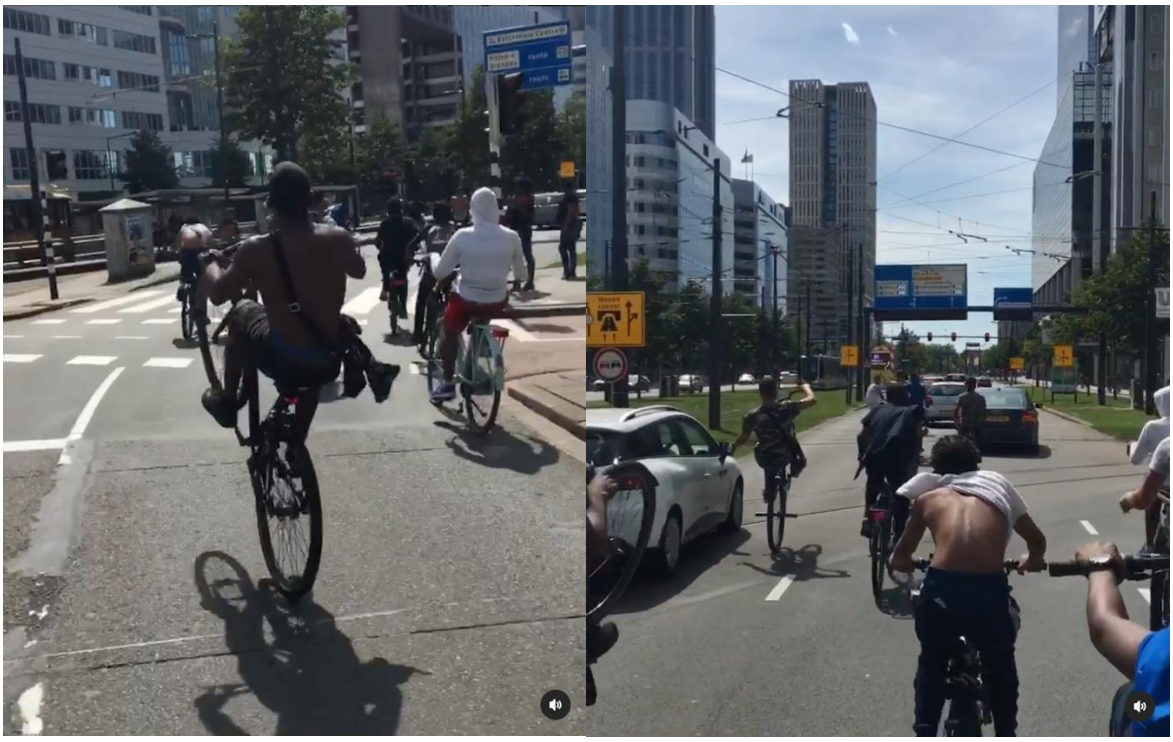
> "A video is circulating on Facebook showing dozens of youths trying to take over the roadway in Rotterdam by cycling over it in a group. The youths are pulling wheelies and playing music. One boy grabs onto a car to move himself forward. (...) The police spokesperson has never

> experienced such an incident before. “Not only cycling over Hofplein but also on one wheel: it should be clear what's wrong with that,” says Roland Ekkers. “I can imagine that this causes an eerie [*unheimlich*] feeling for other road users”.” (WNL 2017)

Although a fun and exciting transgression for the kids (see Rijnmond 2017b), media and police were not going to let the brief reversal of social order slide. Regional broadcaster Rijnmond (2017a) described Team Domina as “a cycling group (…) that has been terrorising the roadway for several weeks (…)” (Rijnmond 2017a). Some national media headlines included: “Cycling riot youth hijacks roadway in Rotterdam” (WNL 2017), and “Group of dozens of cyclists takes over the roadway” (Algemeen Dagblad 2017b). A populist-conservative city council member called the situation “life-threatening” and suggested that the kids should be forced to speak with victims of traffic accidents (WNL 2017). The police, also taken by surprise by this alternative mode of moving through urban space, struggled to control it, but quickly resorted to forceful measures, such as underrunning [*klemrijden*] them with police cars and motors (Algemeen Dagblad 2017a), and finally by arresting three 15-year-olds during a rideout (Rijnmond 2017a).

Figure 1

Reclaiming the streets



Note. Merged screenshots from an Instagram video by @teamdominaa (2017).

Marres and others (2018) note that to understand order is to change it, as many latent realities become visible only through some form of intervention or experimentation in that order. Even if not intended as such, Team Domina’s collective reclaiming of the roadway and the concurrent reversal of social order is a form of experimentation with different ways of moving

through space. This 'experiment' is about moving collectively rather than as individuated subjects; about joyful and playful movement; about taking up as much space as needed; about embracing some risk; about freedom from the materialised limitations of car hegemony such as narrow cycling paths and endless traffic lights. Through their experimentation, the kids from Team Domina press the 'buttons' of contemporary social order and in doing so "activate latent social realities" (Marres et al. 2018: 33).

Indeed, the reactions to Team Domina's rideouts reveal much about the ways in which traffic and public space are conceived of. Above all, they show that Rotterdam's streets have become completely naturalised as highways for cars and other fast-moving machines. This naturalisation is *embodied* in drivers, who have become so accustomed to having the street exclusively for themselves, that the situation of sharing the road with other road users causes fright and shock in them. Moreover, the reactions show that public space often referred to as 'road' is apparently something that can be 'hijacked', and when done so by young people (of colour, predominantly) they are referred to as 'riot youth' and 'terrorisers'. Crucially, such labels are not mere words; they have real consequences. Challenging the naturalised state of public space as car space, or more fundamentally as mere "dynamic space" (Provoost 1996: 9) invites the material forces of the police, who give substance to this conception of urban space with (the threat of) violence.

Instead of accepting this traffic order as being natural or inevitable, this master's thesis aims to uncover the *work* that had to be performed to get here. More specifically, it explores the origins of the ideal and practice of urban space as *dynamic space*, i.e. as a space where the function of continuous and efficient traffic circulation triumphs all other functions streets could have, such as socialising, play, and (small) commerce (Provoost 1996; Te Brömmelstroet 2024). These origins are studied through the early history (1915-1940) of the Rotterdam Traffic Police, which was a crucial institution in the formation of what I call the *modernist mobility dispositif* (MMD). This dispositif, or apparatus, was distinctly 'modern' in the sense that it proved a radical break with pre-industrial traffic, and consisted of distinct *knowledges and discourses* (rhetoric of modernity, logistics), *practices* (driving, cycling, walking, policing), *institutions and organisations* (traffic police, traffic 'safety' organisations, newspapers, cinemas, schools), *laws* (regulating both motor vehicles and pedestrians), and *subjectivities* (the modern mobile subject), that through their interaction collectively govern how we perceive, experience, and enact urban mobility. This results in the following research question:

> How does the emergence and institutionalisation of the Rotterdam Traffic Police between 1915-1940 help understand the formation of a modernist mobility dispositif in which urban street space is naturalised as dynamic space?

Before addressing this question, the next sections present the theoretical framework followed by the methodology. It will become clear that the lines between the two are not that clear.

Theory

Mobility as dispositif

A useful conceptual tool in examining mobility is Katharina Manderscheid's (2014) description of automobility as a *dispositif*. Manderscheid builds on Foucault, who introduced the concept of dispositif (or 'apparatus') to better account for the ways in which power is often diffused and embodied rather than (merely) hierarchical and coercive. Power is everywhere, says Foucault (1976: 93), "not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere". Power structures operate as apparatuses or *dispositifs* (the original French term) meaning as "thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble[s] consisting of discourses, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions – in short the said as much as the unsaid" (Foucault 1980: 194). To conceptualise automobility as a dispositif, then, means seeing how automobility shapes and is shaped by a heterogeneous ensemble of elements which in their complex interweavings produce car hegemony (Manderscheid 2014). Those elements include "discourses and knowledges about cars, objectified automobile landscapes, practices of movement and transport and the formation of automobile subjects" (Manderscheid 2014: 619). The dispositif itself is "the system of relations that can be established between these elements" (Foucault 1980: 194). It is therefore precisely through these links that power relations are structured.

Manderscheid (2014: 605) proposes a "dispositif-analytical approach to automobility", which serves as a tool for understanding automobility's multidimensionality by tracing the interconnectedness between its elements—on which more later. Crucially, this approach is not merely a tool for better describing mobility and its governance, but also for thinking about its subversion, since it reveals not only the stabilising links within and between its elements, but also their "inconsistencies, contradictions, and antagonisms" (Manderscheid 2014: 607).

A mobility dispositif ultimately governs what movement is encouraged and what movement is scrutinised or even precluded. Crucial in this regard are *knowledge* and *discourses*, which together form the element of the dispositif that

> attaches sense and meaning to practices of movement and mobile bodies, turning them into a social phenomenon. (...) [T]he emergence of the modern understanding of travel and transport formed the actual precondition for the governance and political institutionalisation of transportation and spatial planning policies. (Manderscheid 2014: 612)

The automobility dispositif is therefore, like any mobility dispositif, also a *discursive formation*, "embodying ideals of freedom, privacy, movement, progress and autonomy, motifs through which automobility is represented in [...] discourses [...], and through which its principal technical artefacts – roads, cars etc. – are legitimized" (Böhm et al. 2006:). It is precisely these embodied ideals of 'progress' and 'freedom' which are under scrutiny in this master's thesis. Understanding the roots of the discursively produced hierarchy of movement, that is, the prioritisation of certain movement over other, and the consequent prioritisation of certain lives over others, enforced by the repressive institutions of the modern mobility dispositif (most notably the traffic police), demands a turn to the discourses and knowledges that enabled the (re)production of this hierarchy in the period of transition to a modernist traffic; a

development that was accelerated by the 1940 bombing and consequent reconstruction of Rotterdam, but which was already underway long before the war, as this master's thesis sets out to demonstrate.

Modernity/coloniality

In a 2022 speech given to the Royal Dutch Automobile Club by Mark Harbers, the Dutch Minister of Infrastructure and Water Management shows how the (re)production of the automobility dispositif is enabled by modernist discourse:

> "Engineer Cornelis Lely – one of my predecessors at [the Ministry of] Infrastructure and Water Management – was not only the inventor of the Afsluitdijk and the Flevopolder, but also a great car enthusiast. In 1906 he devoted an impassioned speech to the automobile: "He saw it becoming cheap in the same way as the bicycle; he saw wide country roads, on which pedestrians, carriages, bicycles and cars moved brotherly side by side. He saw health, prosperity, progress, all thanks to the automobile.", wrote the newspapers. [...] Freedom, a liberal value of our modern society – advanced on four wheels. Literally and figuratively. And it still does." (Harbers 2022)

It is revealing that Harbers hails Cornelis Lely (1854-1929), who is considered by some to be "the founding father of the modern Netherlands" (Van der Ham 2007). Already at the end of the 19th century, Lely saw the automobile (and an integrated national highway network) as the freedom machine that would bring the Dutch nation prosperity and progress; that would, in other words, make the Netherlands *modern*. Lely's modernist ideas continue to shape Dutch identity to this day, which feeds off a colonial relationship to nature; off 'conquering' land and 'managing' water. The Afsluitdijk, a 32 kilometre long road bridge that connects the provinces of North Holland and Friesland, has a quote by Lely on it that says: "A living nation builds for its future". The dream of a Dutch nation is thus alive as long as roads are constructed. The 'freedom' that supposedly "advanced on four wheels" (Harbers 2022), was before anything else an ideological mechanism of nation-building.

The history of the MMD, and the traffic police more specifically, is interesting because it reveals how knowledge (or imagination) shapes and is shaped by power. The myths of progress and development associated with modernity and automobility were *enforced* and thus made real by the Dutch traffic police, while thousands of people were dying in traffic every year. This is a crucial insight, because the automobility dispositif "does not constitute a stable, well-working machinery but is inherently fragile" (Manderscheid 2014: 616). The quotes by Harbers and Lely show how the *rhetoric of modernity* (Bhambra 2014; Mignolo 2007) takes a central role in the (re)production of automobility as dispositif. But as Mignolo (2007) notes, the rhetoric of modernity is indistinguishable from the logic of coloniality:

> From the perspective of modernity, 'newness' is a motor of history and a constant celebration of 'modernity's progressive' power for the good of humankind. [...] It is in this narrative that the idea of 'revolution' has a strong appeal as it indicates radical changes forward toward newness, which is precisely the rhetoric of modernity. [...] The problem is that the celebration of newness and change shadows the consequences of such changes. [...] The rhetoric of modernity with its various distinctions [...] goes hand in hand with the logic of coloniality, which allows me to

> make the strong claim that coloniality is constitutive of modernity; that there is no modernity without coloniality. (Mignolo 2007: 476-477).

This again goes to show how history is not a linear process. Temporalities (past, present, future) are constantly intertwined, as the rhetoric of modernity (progress, development, growth) invokes the future in order to govern the (violent/colonial) present (Bhambra 2014). To add to Orwell, "[w]ho controls the past controls the future[,] [w]ho controls the present controls the past", and *who controls the future controls the present*. What Jasanoff (2015) has described as modernity's *sociotechnical imaginaries* (e.g. the electric car, the self-driving car) have been and continue to be crucial to the (re)production of automobility, as they make the violence that is inherent to automobility seem contingent and remediable (Braun & Randell, 2023). Building on these theoretical insights, this study sets out to explore how Rotterdam was imagined as modernist city, how temporalities (past, present, future) were mobilised to govern the present, and how this discourse obfuscated dynamics of power and oppression.

Circulation and kinopolitics

Movement is unequally distributed. As Manderscheid (2014: 605) notes, "not everybody and everything is on the move at the same speed, with the same resources and with the same room for manoeuvre, [and] not everybody is on the move at their own will". In fact, it could be said that nowadays, power is most clearly manifested through mobility:

> Domination consists in one's own capacity to escape, to disengage, to 'be elsewhere', and the right to decide the speed with which all that is done – while simultaneously stripping the people on the dominated side of their ability to arrest or constrain their moves or slow them down (Bauman 2000, as cited in Manderscheid 2014: 605).

Nail (2016: 114) notes that "the checkpoint (…) accepts both the impossibility and the undesirability of completely controlling all movement across border". Mobility dispositifs thus involve both a *productive dimension* (the enhancement of movement of goods, labour, and capital) and a *repressive dimension* (the criminalisation of unproductive movement) (Manderscheid 2014; Salter 2013). The importance of circulation can be traced back to "the Enlightenment idea of a world in movement and open to change where the free circulation of goods, ideas, and people created the possibility of progress" (Larkin 2013: 332).

Building on these ideas, this study examines how traffic police control movement but simultaneously assure the continuous circulation of people and capital; in other words, how they govern differentiated circulation. Nail (2016: 128) notes how "the police patrol manages social circulation in three ways: (1) it functions as a conductor of traffic to secure the optimum conditions of safe transportation, (2) it functions as the dromological support for speedy and efficient circulation and quick response time to criminality, (3) it functions as a 'move-on' power of mass mobilization against idleness, vagabondage, and riots". Moreover, Nail's concept of *kinopolitics* is of use, as it gives further substance and contextualises the ways in which the governance of movement is crucial to the execution of power:

> "Instead of analyzing societies as primarily static, spatial, or temporal types of entities, kinopolitics or social kinetics understands them primarily as "regimes of motion" regimes of motion." Societies are always in motion: directing people and objects, reproducing their social conditions (periodicity), and striving to expand their territorial, political, juridical, and economic power through diverse forms of expulsion." (Nail 2016: 24).

Method

Research material

The research material used in this study consists of (1) archival material, and (2) books and essays on the history of the Rotterdam traffic police.

Archival material

The most important material were archival documents of the (traffic) police. The reason for doing this archival research was to uncover the alternative possibilities that were not pursued when the traffic police, and the broader MMD, became institutionalised. In general, this is challenging because these alternatives have, since they did not materialise, disappeared in the shadows of history. This is complicated even further by the fact that this research is based largely on police sources. The police determine the content of the archives, and "what is actually in the archive is, of course, an ethical question – what's seen as worthy of preservation and why" (McKee & Porter 2012: 67). However, since traffic is one of the most technocratic and depoliticised fields of modern governance, I expected to find many traces of these alternative possibilities in the archives. Before the modernist traffic order was established, the traffic police and the broader local government of Rotterdam had to explicitly state that they wanted this form of policy and not another, because the latter is deemed unsuitable. This is precisely the kind of material I expected to find in the police archives, and I did.

The enforcement of traffic rules in Rotterdam was the responsibility of the Municipality Police until 1993. The archives of the Rotterdam Municipality Police are housed by the Rotterdam City Archives, which is where I found most of my research material. The Municipality Police archive is structured temporally (part I: 1845-1949 and part II: 1949-1994) as well as thematically, according to the police's areas of intervention, such as 'children's police', 'enforcement of public order', and, especially relevant for this research: 'enforcement of traffic safety'. Part II of the archive (1949-1994) was excluded because it did not fall under the period of interest. The time period 1915-1940 was determined after I had learned from one of the books on the history of the traffic police that this was the period in which the idea and practice of traffic police emerged (Gemeentepolitie 1990). All inventory numbers in Part I (1845-1949) under the task 'enforcement of traffic safety', in total consisting of several thousand pages, were examined in two steps. First, it was determined whether the material was useful for analysis, and if so, the included documents were examined for close reading (step 2). With all documents, their usefulness depended on their ability to form a(n) (partial) answer to the research question. Because I did not know what was in the documents before I went there, I decided to go through the documents in chronological order, starting in 1915 and ending

somewhere in the 1930s. Within the documents I scanned for discourse on modernity, the representation of space, traffic policing techniques, propaganda, and more, but I also let the material guide me.

Within the sub-archive 'enforcement of traffic safety' of the Municipality Police archives, the most useful documents were found in (a) "Dossier Verkeer, 1915-1923 en stukken van de Verkeerscommissie", which constists of inventory numbers 3314 (1915-1917) and 3315 (1917-1923), and (b) "Stukken van de Verkeerscommissie", with inventory number 3319 (1927-1938). The contents of (a) consist of internal and external correspondence, collections of newspaper articles, propaganda posters, and other documents. The documents in (b) are the minutes of Rotterdam's Traffic Commission, a commission appointed by the Municipality Council tasked with governing traffic-related issues in the city. The Traffic Commission met on a weekly basis and consisted of representatives of different municipal agencies, among them the Chief Commissioner of Police, Director of Public Works, Director of RET (Rotterdam's tram provider), Director of the electricity company, Director of the Cleaning Service [*reinigingsdienst*], and the city architect (Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant 1929). All minutes, which in total were hundreds of pages, were skimmed to get a general overview, and scanned for specific topics, such as traffic policing and education. The minutes are structured so that every time the commission discusses a new topic it is announced, so that it is easy to quickly go through and look for specific things. Most of the material was not useful for my analysis since much of it was on technical and day-to-day traffic issues. These could of course still be interesting as they can reveal everyday ways of thinking about traffic, but this was not the kind of material I was looking for.

The archival material already consisted of over a thousand pages – only the first part of the municipality police archive (1845-1949) already stretches 350 meters long (Stadsarchief Rotterdam 2024). Considering the time limits of this research, choices had to be made. The traffic police had many tasks, so documents on the traffic police's role in governing traffic during football matches or other sports events were excluded for this reason. Since the archival material could be seen in the archives only, I made pictures of all relevant material. For every (group of) picture(s) I made, I made a note in a document, very briefly summarising what the contents were per document number, I added quotes with page numbers, as well as some pre-analysis thoughts, sometimes also already making connections with the theory. In this way, I always had an oversight what kind of data I had, which was very useful when I started my analysis.

Written histories of Rotterdam traffic police

Another essential element of my analysis was a critical account of the existing written histories of the Rotterdam traffic police. Usually, the analysis of such works is part of the literature search. In this case, however, they were included and analysed as primary research material, and conceptualised as part of the MMD, since two of them were written by (individuals from) the Rotterdam Municipality Police themselves (De Jong 1948; Gemeentepolitie Rotterdam 1990), and the other by the then director of the Netherlands Police Academy (Van Reenen 1983). It would be highly unlikely that the authors of these works applied a critical sociological

perspective, in which the practice of traffic policing and its underlying assumptions were fundamentally questioned. Still, I considered these works to be especially interesting because they allow for an analysis of how the emergence, growth and development of the traffic police here is described by the police itself, and thus what discourses enabled its (re)production.

Analytical techniques

Analysing the emergence of a mobility dispositif requires understanding a historical crystallisation of discourses, practices, institutions, subjectivities, and more, into a complex web of power relations. This complexity cannot be dealt with by a pre-cut, step-by-step method. Instead, I built on three Foucauldian techniques that were helpful in making sense of the different historical documents: genealogy, dispositif analysis, and critical discourse analysis.

Genealogy

Following Foucault (1977), I reject positivist, linear, and essentialist conceptions of history. Rather than studying history for history's sake, I attempt to uncover how history shapes the present, in other words how the past *is* present. Genealogy is a historical technique that helps to trace the origins of present ways of doing and thinking. Instead of viewing past and present mobility systems as natural, logical, or inevitable outcomes of a gradual progression towards an ideal state, genealogy emphasises the contingencies, inconsistencies, and forms of agency that have shaped the history and governance of mobility. Studying history in this light reveals that "those things we have come to regard as natural, pre-ordained, ahistorical and thus unchallengeable are in fact contingent, context dependent and not permanent" (Donnelly & Norton 2011: 11).

With specific regard to (auto)mobility, Manderscheid (2014: 612) notes that "research on the history of the car has shown that in the beginning it was far from likely that the automobile would become broadly socially accepted and usable". The *motor age street*, as Norton (2007) calls the contemporary conceptualisation of city streets as automotive highways, had to be *invented* and reinvented when it was faced with resistance. In Manderscheid's (2014: 612) words, "rather than constituting simply engineers' technologically superior answer to some generic human desire or being some sort of historically inevitable development, the historic triumph of automobility is rooted in a whole range of social struggles, political interventions and scientific discourses and economic interests – and took place in a non-aggregate way in different settings".

This only goes to show that it makes sense to conceive of automobility as not merely modes of movement that is simply 'there', but instead as an apparatus tied together by institutions, practices, discourses, and subjectivities. My aim in this master's thesis was precisely to deconstruct the narrative that current mobility practices were inevitable, by reconstructing a crucial part of the genealogy of the MMD, with a specific focus on the emergence of the traffic police in Rotterdam. It thus helps understand the origins of specific constructions of urban

space as dynamic space as well as particular ways of disciplining newly invented traffic 'criminality'.

Dispositif analysis

To perform a dispositif analysis involves examining the interconnected elements that make up a dispositif and understanding how they work together to produce and maintain power structures (Manderscheid 2014). This means identifying the key elements of a dispositif, such as discourses, practices, institutions, and subjectivities, and exploring how they interact to govern behaviour, shape (and are shaped by) knowledge, and uphold certain norms. Through a critical examination of these elements and their relationships, an account can be given of the mechanisms through which power operates in a given context and, crucially, how this power can be subverted (Manderscheid 2014). Although drawing on the ideas of dispositif analysis, the aim here was not to produce an extensive overview of the MMD and all its elements, considering the limitations of this project in terms of size and timeframe. Instead, the focus was especially on a crucial element in the coming about of this dispositif, which is the *institution* of the traffic police, and how their practices and discourses were connected to other elements of the emerging dispositif, such as other institutions, discourses, and subjectivities.

Moreover, I attempted to understand the "historic 'urgence' to which the mobility dispositif gave a historically specific answer" (Manderscheid 2014: 609). This is, as Manderscheid (2014: 609) notes, to be answered through *locally situated genealogies* that help uncover "the conditions of possibility without harking back to transhistorical causes or laws". This is why I focus on early 20th century Rotterdam specifically, at the beginning of the motorisation of traffic. My focus on Rotterdam might warrant the question to what extent it makes sense to apply genealogy to a space cordoned off by regulation, i.e. the city of Rotterdam. Why spatially limit a genealogy that follows power along lines that extend far beyond the territorial limits of Rotterdam? However, my focus on Rotterdam is not intended to undermine the broader genealogical analysis but rather to provide a manageable scope for this study, given its limitations in size and timeframe. This allowed me to delve deeply into the particular historical, social, and political conditions that shaped (and where shaped by) the emergence of the mobility dispositif within this context. A localised approach therefore does not negate the broader implications of genealogical analysis but instead provides a concrete example through which the wider dynamics of power and governance can be illustrated.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis involves examining the implicit assumptions and presuppositions within a text that determine any understanding of reality and what is possible within it (Howarth 2000). It thus identifies the underlying beliefs that are necessary for a text (or any other discursive material) to be comprehensible. For example, underneath the statement that Team Domina's rideouts constitute a "hijacking" of the roadway (WNL 2017) is the implicit assumption that cars have an exclusive ownership (or rather usage monopoly) over public space which is referred to as 'roadway'. Another example can be found in the name the Rotterdam City Archives have

given to the traffic subsection of the Municipality Police archives: "enforcement of traffic safety". At face value, this categorisation might seem trivial; after all, is that not what traffic police are for? To keep us safe in traffic? That might well be (partly) true, but it does not tell the full story, since it reduces the traffic police's function throughout history to the fostering of 'traffic safety', whereas it is well-known that the policing of movement has other important functions, such as fostering and precluding different forms of circulation (Nail 2016). Moreover, what precisely is traffic safety? Whose safety are the police concerned with when they speak of 'traffic safety'? How does that definition obfuscate differences in power and safety that exist for example between automobile drivers and pedestrians?

Ultimately, discourse analysis uncovers the ways in which the language of mobility is not neutral or objective but performative and political, and how this shapes common perceptions of urban mobility and space (Te Brömmelstroet 2024). Crucially, the *critical* aspect in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is that it goes beyond merely identifying assumptions and presuppositions, aiming to uncover how these elements in texts and spoken language contribute to the perpetuation of dominance and oppression (Howarth 2000; Wodak & Meyer 2001). CDA helps to uncover how language use constructs social realities and power dynamics. After all, "it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together" (Foucault 1979, as cited in Howarth 2000: 67). In the case of the emergence of an MMD, this means examining how mobility discourses mask the power relations and ideological underpinnings that prioritise certain forms of mobility over others.

Analysis

From 'anarchy' to 'order': The birth of modernist traffic control in Rotterdam

Before the advent of automobiles and electric trams, the streets of Rotterdam were filled with with a diverse array of traffic participants, including horse carriages, handcarts, bicycles, horsecars, and pedestrians. Despite this variety, the speeds of all these travellers were relatively low. This slow pace enabled city streets to fulfil multiple functions, something which was not necessarily limited to Rotterdam:

> (…) [O]ur streets (…) used to be complex and diverse places that hosted a whole range of different functions. They grew over time in parallel with our cities and were regarded as 'the remaining spaces between buildings' (…). They functioned as largely ungoverned public spaces, as commons used for many purposes: work, trade, play, socialising and transportation. (Te Brömmelstroet 2024: 3).

For a long time, Rotterdam's streets were as much spaces of living as they were spaces of movement (Provoost 1996). The general slow pace of movement reduced the necessity for extensive formal traffic regulation or control. Although early forms of formal traffic control and surveillance had certainly existed, such as the granting and checking of vehicle licences (Meershoek 2007: 142), there had never been a specialised 'traffic police' tasked with governing

everyday traffic. However, with the onset of industrialisation, rapid population growth, and the concurrent advent of motor vehicles and trams saw the increase of several traffic issues.

From 1870 onwards, both Rotterdam's population and territory started growing rapidly, and so did the volume of movements and distances travelled (Meershoek 2007; Van Reenen 1983). Parallel to these *quantitative* increases in movement, the emergence of automobiles and other motor vehicles, as well as electric trams, constituted a *qualitative* change from pre-industrial traffic. The blending of various modes of transport moving at different speeds led to problems such as collisions and traffic jams (Provoost 1996). Around the end of WWI, this led to a traffic situation which was being described in several newspapers and magazines as 'chaotic', 'anarchic', and 'uncivilised':

> "(...) Rotterdam, the city without order and discipline, where no one knows what keeping to the right and left is." (De Maasbode 1917).
>
> "A Rotterdammer prefers to take the shortest route and usually finds it unnecessary to check if something might be in the way. The concepts of right and left are superfluous to him; after all, he has been accustomed from a young age to people bumping into each other." (Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant 1917).
>
> "(...) our busy and uncivilised noisy city" (De Tijd 1917).
>
> "(...) that there was no question of traffic regulation here, that on the contrary, everyone did as they pleased, so that true anarchy prevailed in Rotterdam." (Steinweg & Kamhoot 1917).

The rapid advent of motorised traffic, coupled with a lack of uniform traffic rules, was thus experienced by many as a state of 'anarchy' characterised by a lack of order, regularity, and discipline. There was a strong demand for a 'modernisation' of Rotterdam's traffic, with a traffic police force seen as essential to establishing 'order' in the city's chaos. Responding to this call, Rotterdam's Chief Commissioner of Police Adriaan Sirks introduced the first general traffic regulation in 1917, aiming to "ensure and maintain orderly traffic" (Sirks 1918b). Traffic rules were to be enforced "(...) in a uniform manner" (Sirks 1918b).

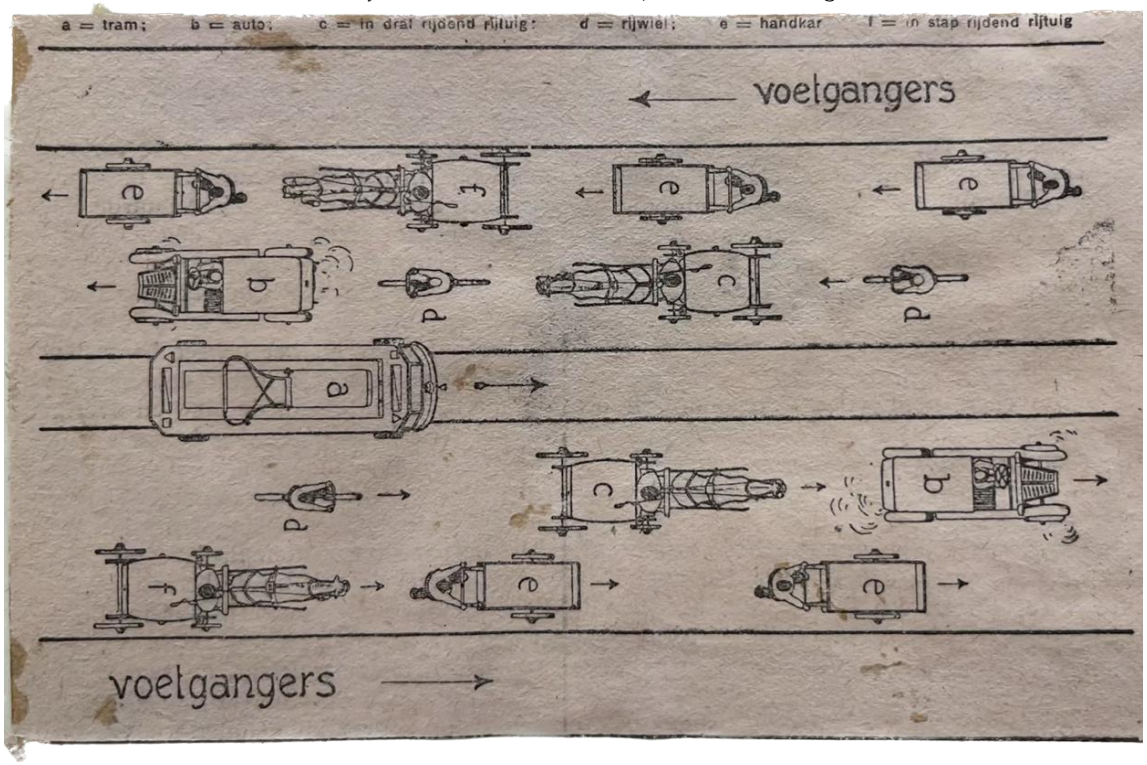
For the ideal of the 'orderly' modernist street to materialise, much had to change. Figure 2 illustrates the distinctly 'modern' street scene model implemented by the police through the general traffic regulation. Although the source of this illustration is unknown (Rotterdam City Archives, n.d.), an identical illustration in another newspaper had as its title: "A roadway, where order reigns" (Wereldkroniek 1921). This 'orderly' street seems to be designed primarily around speed: the fastest (and largest) mode of transport, the tram, occupies the centre of the street, and the closer to the pavement, the slower the vehicle.[1] The tram's central position in the modernist street is also visible in the 1918 municipal Act on the Street Police. One of the main principles of the Act is that "the tram rails should remain as free as possible and therefore may only be regularly used by vehicles moving at least at tram speed". The "needless obstruction" (De Maasbode 1918) of tram traffic by slow traffic like carriages and handcarts was

[1] In wider streets, tram rails also served as the demarcation line between traffic moving in opposite directions (Sirks 1917e).

supposed to be over because of this. The lane directly next to the tram was to be used by relatively fast vehicles like cars, bicycles, and carriages driving in trot [*draf*]. The lane next to the (pedestrian) pavement is for slower vehicles, such as handcarts and carriages driving in walk [*stap*] (1918 Act on the Street Police). Lastly, pedestrians get their own lane, but are simultaneously quite literally marginalised to the street's margins (Culver 2018).

Figure 2

The 'modern' street scene model for Rotterdam: "A street, where order reigns"



Note. Picture taken by the author, from Rotterdam City Archives (n.d.). Translated, it says "a=tram; b=car; c=trotting vehicle; d=bicycle; e=handcart; f=vehicle driving in walking pace", and 'voetgangers'=pedestrians.

The police archives house a collection of excerpts from newspapers and magazines that document a large part of the responses to the new traffic regulation. These excerpts also reflect earlier criticisms of Rotterdam's traffic 'anarchy', as many of these publications advocated for the creation of a specialised traffic police division:

> "[A] new traffic regulation proved to be urgently necessary here. Just as in Amsterdam before the introduction of traffic cops, here too there was complete anarchy in terms of traffic. (...) Gradually, Rotterdam can now compete quite well in the ranks of the great cities!" (Telegraaf 1917).

> "The chief commissioner of police is busy bringing order to the traffic chaos and reorganising the traffic system according to the demands of the times. New improvements are constantly being made (...)." (Het Vrije Volk 1917).

> "Rotterdam is increasingly on its way to becoming a world city. A good step in that direction is certainly the new traffic regulation (…). We cyclists all know the anarchy that ruled here in the city. Every driver drove wherever they pleased, and carriages and automobiles sought their way among the various types of vehicles, so that one often did not know where to shelter oneself on a bicycle, and accidents occurred all too frequently. Let us hope that the police succeed in bringing order to this chaos – and let us ensure that we do our part to cooperate as much as we can." (Maandblad Rotterdamsche Centrale Fietsclub 1917).

The excerpts highlight an aspect of urban street space that transcends its physicality, which Lefebvre calls the *representation of space* (Schinkel 2012). Rotterdam's city space, and the movement that goes through it, is imbued with specific meanings, echoing Larkin's (2013: 332) observation that "roads and railways are not just technical objects (…) but also operate on the level of fantasy and desire. They encode the dreams of individuals and societies and are the vehicles whereby those fantasies are transmitted and made emotionally real." More specifically, the excerpts reveal a discourse aligned with what Mignolo (2007) refers to as the *rhetoric of modernity*, characterised by the future-oriented language of development, progress, and growth, which, simultaneously to the obfuscation of the violence this necessitates (the logic of coloniality), defines the modernist project (Bhambra 2014). Traffic 'anarchy' was seen as a threat to Rotterdam's desired (future) reputation as a "great", "worldly" and "modern" city, which its economic and cultural elites aspired it to be. The establishment of a traffic police force, ensuring law and order in the streets, aimed to align Rotterdam with "the demands of the times" (Het Vrije Volk 1917). Above all, then, these excerpts illustrate how the sociotechnical imaginaries of modernity (Jasanoff 2015) were mobilised by a wide range of actors – from the police to the press – to govern the present; a present which did not just come about 'naturally', although that was certainly the narrative at the time, as can be seen in the following quotes:

> "The rapid progress and hasty growth of Rotterdam has naturally hindered a gradual and systematic construction, which would allow considerable attention to be given to the demands of future and anticipated large-scale urban traffic. It has not been possible here, as it should have been, for the authorities to have the facilities for traffic – the streets and squares – as well as the traffic regulations, in order *before* this traffic actually existed. The busy, chaotic street life of a large commercial city [*handelsstad*] had already dominated our municipality for some time before it was properly regulated." (De Maasbode 1918)

The rapid growth of Rotterdam and its (motorised) traffic is presented here as something that befell the city rather than something which was systematically planned. It is a narrative that is also seen in the police's own view of history, as demonstrated by the following quote by Rotterdam's Chief Commissioner of Police in 1990, Rob Hessing:

> "For the police personnel at that time, it must have been a very progressive idea to make the officer on foot mobile. Like now, in 1920 our force was dealing with modernisation. Motor vehicles were incorporated in the police to keep up with developments in mobility and transportation." (Gemeentepolitie Rotterdam 1990, "*De Verkeerspolitie anno 1990 bestaat 70 jaar*").

These two quotes reveal much about the state's view on the relation between technology and social change. In this view, 'modernisation' and motorisation are processes that transcend urban politics; they are processes to which the state must adapt to, rather than something it also actively shapes. The advent of motorised vehicles is presented as an inevitable consequence of industrialisation and rapid urban growth, thereby placing the phenomenon in a natural frame of reference, almost as part of a process of natural evolution in city development. In other words, cars are simply a fact of modern life, and thus city life needs to be physically and socially reconstructed to give them the space they need. This might seem like a trivial point, but this discursive naturalisation of 'modernisation' and motorisation is precisely what creates the context in which it is indeed only 'logical' to construct the resulting 'traffic anarchy' as a problem that can only be solved through the establishment of a new police force instructed to 'restore' law and order in the streets. This move completes the depoliticisation of urban mobility, as there is only one future towards the city is heading: one of order, regularity, and economic circulation.

This depoliticisation of the transformation of Rotterdam's streets obfuscates that the dominant discursive representation of Rotterdam as a 'modern', 'worldly', or 'commercial' city is deeply political. It confines us in thinking that the well-being of urban travellers is somehow necessarily tied to the destruction of public spaces, by reducing such once multifunctional spaces to mere highways over which increasingly faster vehicles are allowed to move. In reality, the formation of a modernist 'traffic order' was never natural or inevitable. It required a radical change in the complete nature of moving through space, and ages of custom from the pre-industrial traffic era had to be undone and unlearned. It required *work*; not only in the physical reconstruction of the city, but also in the discursive reconstruction of Rotterdam as a modernist city, and the coinciding formation of a new mobile subjectivity. In the next paragraph I focus especially on the unfolding of the latter, as the 'modern' mobile subject develops into one of the crucial elements of the MMD.

"Ensuring compliance": Modernist traffic propaganda and the production of the modern mobile subject

The transition from "street to highway, from living space to dynamic space" (Provoost 1996: 9) sparked a new wave of criminalisation that was supposed to bring 'order' to the hitherto 'anarchic' streets of Rotterdam. Activities hindering traffic flow were regulated or even banned completely. The local 1918 Act on the Street Police outlawed petty commerce like street vending, and recreational activities like kite flying and roller skating on pavements. Walking, a fundamental human activity, was suddenly subject to a range of punitive regulations, enforced by police. Breaking the new rules was increasingly enforced through fines rather than warnings (Sirks 1918a), as a directive from Sirks emphasised strict enforcement to achieve order in Rotterdam's streets:

> "Above all, everyone must be aware that only an unwaveringly strict enforcement of the regulations can lead to the intended goal; that drivers and pedestrians must be reminded time

> and time again how they should drive and walk, and therefore nothing should be overlooked." (Sirks 1917a)

Still, the police realised they could not achieve this new order solely through criminalisation and top-down traffic management. From the very beginning of traffic policing, the police were therefore focused on producing a new kind of mobile subject, who internalised the rules and norms of the modernist traffic order, and thus became their own (and others') traffic cop. Through an information and propaganda campaign in cooperation with newspapers, cinemas, schools, and other institutions of control, the police aimed—and succeeded—in 'educating' Rotterdam's citizens to become *modern mobile subjects* who walk, cycle, and drive with discipline and efficiency. Underlying these propaganda efforts was a fundamental belief in people's malleability, which was possibly also related to the coming of a new Chief Commissioner of Police:

> "Mr. Roest [the previous Chief Commissioner] wrote about the lawlessness of our people as an almost unstoppable social phenomenon; Mr. Sirks on the other hand has chosen the film [as a medium] to speak to the general public in an effort to persuade it to embrace order and discipline." (De Tijd 1917)

Sirks, Rotterdam's Chief Commissioner of Police between 1914 and 1933, believed in a strong role for the police in the production of this new traffic discipline, by nudging the people of Rotterdam to a new traffic subjectivity. In a broader effort to "ensure compliance" (Sirks 1917e) with the new traffic rules and norms, the police launched an information and propaganda offensive, not only by giving public 'traffic lessons' in the streets themselves, but also by getting the then prime institutions of the mass media—the newspapers and the cinemas— on board.

Newspapers and the 'public' interest

First, the police prioritised widespread public awareness of the new traffic regulations. Recognising the key role of newspapers as the primary mass medium at the time, Sirks sent a letter in May 1917, to five local Rotterdam newspapers. His letter urged the newspapers to publish the new traffic regulations and emphasise to their readers the necessity of obedience and collaboration with law enforcement. Sirks reminded the newspapers that "there is a public interest here, which can only be served well if drivers of carriages, automobiles, and bicycles cooperate; first and foremost, then, familiarity with the regulations is needed" (Sirks 1917b).

Here, Sirks says something crucial, which is again both deeply political and depoliticising. By framing the adherence to traffic regulations as a matter of 'public interest', Sirks positions these rules as universally beneficial and thereby as neutral or a-political: whether one is a pedestrian or a car driver, the rules and norms of the modernist traffic order will improve everyone's situation, if everyone cooperates. There was of course some truth to this: 'the' public interest *was* served by the regulation of traffic, since the unregulated traffic situation with automobiles and handcarts driving through each other *was* chaotic and dangerous, especially for vulnerable road users such as pedestrians and cyclists.

The problem with this 'public interest' narrative, however, is that it obscures the power

dynamics at play in Rotterdam's mobility policy. Urban space is *produced*, both materially and discursively, largely by and for the powerful, and it is consumed and reproduced by the powerless (Lefebvre 1999). By once again treating the advent of motorised traffic as the baseline upon which policy is formulated, automobiles and their drivers –then a rather specific (and elitist) 'public'[2]– are given a privileged position in urban planning. The fact that Rotterdam's commercial and political elites saw motorisation as a symbol of modernity played a significant role (Provoost 1996; Van Veelen 2022). Still, it was not just about automobiles: as noted earlier, public transport also had a central role in the modernisation of Rotterdam's traffic, a process that was more fundamentally about a transformation to dynamic space (Provoost 1996).

Sirks' proactive approach continued as he repeated similar communications countless times whenever new changes or regulations were introduced, maintaining a collaborative relationship with the newspapers, which also consistently adhered to his requests. This collaboration highlights the media's role as an institution of control. Through coordinated dissemination of regulations and modernist rhetoric, the newspapers and the police worked in tandem to shape public behaviour and enforce the envisioned modernist traffic order in Rotterdam.

"Not only the enjoyable but also the useful": Traffic propaganda in the cinema

Besides print media (newspapers, magazines) which published the most important regulations and instructions, the police were looking for more punchy ways of instilling the idea in people's minds that the modern virtues of 'order', 'regularity', and 'safety' were not to be achieved without 'traffic discipline' in all traffic participants. Hence, the police came up with the idea of displaying lantern slides with short propaganda messages in all of Rotterdam's cinemas. In an internal police letter, Sirks (1917c) noted that these police propaganda messages "must be formulated in short clear sentences that have the potential to 'strike a chord' with the public". The following newspaper excerpt, archived by the police, documents quite detailed how the modernist mobile subject had to be actively formed, and how the supposed necessity for order and discipline was from the beginning tied to the rhetoric of modernity:

> "In the street, the police are now on foot and on horseback ready to regulate people and vehicles. But at the same time, Mr. Sirks has devised a way to also impart more theoretical understanding to the public for order and discipline: the cinema. (…) Mr. Sirks has managed to secure the cooperation of the management of all cinemas to present to the visitors of those establishments not only the enjoyable but also the useful. (…) The public has unanimously received this original course in "maintien" for metropolitan life [*groote-stadsleven*] favourably; there were even those who signalled applause as a tribute to the policy of our chief commissioner. (…) We have no doubt that the works will be beneficial and contribute to Rotterdam gradually losing its provincial character" (De Tijd 1917).

Through the internalisation of (the need for) traffic discipline, or as the police calls it, a "more theoretical understanding for order and discipline" (De Tijd 1917), the police aimed to lessen their reliance on hierarchical and repressive authority. Citizens were envisioned as becoming

[2] Throughout the 1920s, the number of automobile owners was less than 10 per 1000 Dutch inhabitants.

controllers themselves, acting as their own and others' enforcers. The modern mobile subject knew their place in the street, adhered with strict discipline to uniform traffic rules, and crucially, internalised the traffic cop. The following propaganda posters, which were shown in the breaks of cinema movies, are indicative of this internalisation of control:

> "Obey the police, it is in your own interest."
> "A regulated traffic is also your concern; therefore, cooperate."
> "Learn how to drive and how to walk in 1917, then you will be able to do it in 1918."
> "If a policeman orders you something today, then do it immediately, and tomorrow by yourself."
> (Gemeentepolitie Rotterdam 1917)

In these propaganda posters, the same mechanism as with the aforementioned 'public interest' narrative is visible. The police present the rules and norms as reflecting universal interests, thereby completely depoliticising what is fundamentally a power struggle over what the street is and how it can be used. The following propaganda messages moreover show how this process of the internalisation of discipline relied on the social construction of new vices or sins, which mainly revolved around obstructing the continuous and efficient flow of traffic:

> "Do not cycle next to each other longer than strictly necessary."
> "The roadway is for the vehicles, do not walk there unnecessarily."
> "Cycle paths are for bicycles, for no one and nothing else."
> "Do not obstruct a tramcar; move off the tracks."
> "Follow given orders immediately, then you cause the least disturbance."
> "Do not stand next to each other; keep cycling."
> (Gemeentepolitie Rotterdam 1917)

"Traffic sins" and "undesirable elements": Public 'lectures' and contests

Another method of bringing about a sense of 'traffic discipline' in Rotterdam's citizens was by giving public 'lectures' in the streets of Rotterdam:

> "This first public lesson attracted extraordinary interest. A large crowd of spectators greatly rejoiced in the tangible progress of our city on the way to its reputation as a world city, just as carters, cyclists, and handcart and wagon drivers delighted in the fact that they are finally forced to collide with each other as little as possible." (Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant 1917)

The traffic police, then, *are* modernity's "tangible" progress. This shows how the MMD is never merely discourse: its ideas are materialised in the design of the street, but also by the police who *force* people into obedience, whether one is "delighted" by it or not. One interaction between a traffic cop and a group of students underscores the seriousness of the shift to a modernist Rotterdam and of the implication of being an 'undisciplined' or 'disorderly' traffic participant:

> "(...) a mounted police officer descended upon every innocent or unwilling student like a hawk on its prey, endeavouring to impress upon them that *in the order of our society, a disorderly citizen is an undesirable element*" (emphasis added) (Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant 1917).

In July 1921, Sirks expanded on his earlier traffic propaganda efforts by launching a photo contest titled "Traffic Sins" in a local newspaper. Aimed at "generating sympathy for traffic interests" and "highlighting traffic sins", the contest offered several substantial monetary prizes to the winners (Rotterdamsche Nieuwe Courant 1921). Anyone with a photo camera could join, and a jury consisting of policemen and civilians would select the winners. The lantern slides were to be published in the cinemas, the pictures elsewhere:

> "Requested are photos (or "lantern slides" made from them) of the so-called "traffic sins", such as: walking on the roadway without necessity; having a chat on the roadway; unnecessarily pushing a stroller on the roadway; crossing the roadway just in front of an oncoming vehicle; a couple in love riding a bicycle side by side on a busy roadway (…)." (Rotterdamsche Nieuwe Courant 1921)

Here, it becomes starkly evident that the function of Rotterdam's streets has been reduced to mere dynamic space, i.e. space through which only efficient movement is allowed. Even the public display of love is mentioned explicitly as a "sin"; this time not for paternalistic reasons, but for the sake of economic efficiency.

Circulation, traffic police, and state power

Foucault (1980: 195) argues that an apparatus is "a sort of formation which has as its major function at a given historical moment that of responding to an *urgent need*". In Rotterdam, the supposed 'traffic anarchy' which came with the advent of modern vehicles was one of the 'historically urgent needs' to which the MMD provided an answer. The newly emerged traffic police, a fundamentally new field of policing, was the cornerstone of this dispositif, as it was responsible for managing traffic flows, enforcing traffic regulations, and 'educating' the public. Thereby it functioned across various dimensions of the dispositif, from the formation of new practices, institutions, and laws to the production of modern mobile subjects. Van Reenen (1983: 50–51) argues that traffic policing constituted one of the first "non-repressive, problem-governing" police tasks, as the police step out of their "traditional role as regulator, enforcer of order, and investigator of criminal offences, and begin to regulate a part of public life [*maatschappelijk verkeer*]". A large part of the uniformed police force (including community police officers and mounted police offers was mobilised to ensure the everyday smooth and orderly flowing of traffic, which was considered a crucial precondition for the strategic position of both Rotterdam and the Netherlands at large.

Already in the 1920s, Rotterdam stood apart from other Dutch cities as its identity was not centred around preserving a historical city centre. Across much of Rotterdam, "the pragmatism of traffic and transport was more important than the urban planning canon of that moment" (Provoost 1996: 7). This pragmatic approach was largely driven by the city's port, which increasingly "set the pace and direction for the rest of the city to follow" (Provoost 1996: 9). Rotterdam was, and still is, primarily a 'port city', with its "network of canals, railways, and highways (…) forming the sine qua non of its existence" (Provoost 1996: 7). The city's emphasis on transport and commerce is encapsulated in its long-time slogan, carved in stone in the City

House: *navigare necesse est*, which translates from Latin to "to sail is necessary"; the second part of the quote, "to live is not necessary" was conveniently left out from the slogan (Van Veelen 2022). As a commercial port city, Rotterdam's existence and growth have always been closely tied to its ability to facilitate and prioritise efficient transport and logistics networks.

The police, who were strongly embedded in the city's governing bodies (Van Reenen 1983: 69), were rather transparent about their function as a crucial facilitator of logistical capitalism. In their 1990 booklet on 70 years of traffic policing in Rotterdam, the Municipality Police reflected on their historic and present function, describing the traffic police as:

> "a modern and well-equipped corps unit that manages the enormous flow of people and goods in and around Rotterdam. It is our contribution to the advancement of Rotterdam's economic position, both nationally and internationally. (...) It is [our] task to ensure that the large traffic flows find their way quickly and safely. After all, the Dutch economy is to a large extent dependent on the economic activity in the Rijnmond area, and in this context, transportation plays a role that cannot be underestimated." (Gemeentepolitie 1990, "*De Verkeerspolitie anno 1990 bestaat 70 jaar*").

The introduction of traffic policing laid the foundations for fast-paced, uniform, predictable, and thus *manageable* traffic flows, which were essential for the economic and strategic position of both Rotterdam and the Netherlands. For Rotterdam to function as a vital part of global logistical capitalism, as a crucial *zone of transport*, "where ships, lorries, aeroplanes, and data must pass through with as little friction as possible" (Schinkel 2020: 173), its streets had to be restructured both materially and discursively. Any 'irregular' movement such as parades, labour strikes, and political demonstrations had to be repressed as they obstructed the 'healthy' flow of traffic –conceptualising the city as a human body with 'arteries', 'veins', and 'flow' (Sennett 1994). In the minutes of the Rotterdam Traffic Commission from 1929, we can read that "in a busy working city like Rotterdam, such hindrances must be avoided" (p. 181).

With this in mind, it should not be of great surprise that in the 1930s, the traffic police would set out to greatly expand in size, not due to their activities in managing traffic flows, but due to their role in violently controlling unruly workers, unemployed people, and others in the 'crisis years' of the 1930s. Van Reenen (1983: 52), speaking of the institutionalisation of the Rotterdam Traffic Police this period, notes that "the specialisation thus establishes itself through non-specialist activities". Within years, this riot control function got so prominent that even the Rotterdam 'carbine brigade' [*karabijnbrigade*], the paramilitary predecessor of the Dutch riot police, came under the supervision of the chief of Rotterdam's traffic police (De Jong 1940; Van Reenen 1983). Perhaps this should teach us that the name of today's riot police, the 'mobile unit' [*mobiele eenheid*], should be taken more seriously, as it displays quite openly that *the police is the becoming mobile of the state*. Indeed, as efficient economic circulation becomes crucial for the execution of power, the state gets increasingly better in tactically penetrating and managing civil space. In Rotterdam, this was and continues to be uniquely evident.

This reaffirms Nail's (2016: 128) point that the police manage social circulation in three primary ways: they act as traffic conductors to ensure safe transportation, they provide rapid response to 'criminal' activities, and mobilise against unruly political forces. Nail's concept of

kinopolitics further substantiates this by emphasising the continuous movement within societies. He argues that societies are not static but are always directing people and things, reproducing their social conditions, and expanding their "territorial, political, juridical, and economic power through diverse forms of expulsion" (Nail 2016: 24). This aligns with the historical expansion and evolving functions of the Rotterdam Traffic Police and illustrates how the policing of urban mobility has always been about more than just traffic management: it underscores a broader strategy of controlling and optimising the flow of people and things to sustain and enhance state power.

Conclusion

The historical analysis of the Rotterdam Traffic Police and the transformation of urban street space between 1915 and 1940 provides crucial insights into the development of modern urban mobility and policing. This study has demonstrated that the emergence of the modernist mobility dispositif (MMD) in Rotterdam was not a natural or inevitable consequence of technological advancement and urban growth. Instead, it was the result of deliberate institutional efforts aimed at establishing a new order in urban mobility, one that prioritises continuous and efficient traffic circulation.

The introduction of the traffic police in Rotterdam marked a significant shift in the governance of urban space. Prior to the establishment of the traffic police, the streets of Rotterdam were multifunctional spaces used for a variety of social activities. The advent of motor vehicles and trams brought about new problems, as the mix of different modes of transport led to chaos and collisions. In response, the traffic police were tasked with regulating urban mobility, transforming the streets into spaces primarily designed for the movement of vehicles.

This transformation was driven by a discourse that framed motorisation and modernisation as inevitable and necessary for Rotterdam's growth and prosperity. The rhetoric of modernity, characterised by ideals of progress, efficiency, and economic growth, played a central role in legitimising the new traffic order. The police, media, and political elites all contributed to this narrative, presenting the regulation of traffic as a matter of public interest and safety. However, this narrative obscured the power dynamics at play, privileging certain forms of mobility over others and marginalising those who did not conform to the new order.

The enforcement of traffic discipline was not limited to the imposition of rules and penalties. The traffic police engaged in extensive propaganda efforts to shape public behaviour and attitudes towards mobility. Through collaborations with newspapers, cinemas, and other institutions that were not included in this analysis, the police disseminated messages promoting the virtues of order, discipline, and efficiency in traffic. This propaganda aimed to produce a new kind of mobile subject who internalised these values and acted as their own enforcer of traffic rules. I call this the *modernist mobile subject*.

This study also highlights the inherent violence and exclusionary nature of the modernist traffic order. Activities that did not align with the goal of efficient traffic flow, such as street vending, playing, or even walking, talking, and holding hands were either regulated,

banned, or stigmatised. The marginalisation of non-motorised road users and the criminalisation of activities that hindered traffic flow reflect a broader trend of prioritising economic efficiency over social functions in urban space. Moreover, the institutionalisation of the Rotterdam Traffic Police due to its riot control function in the 1930s shows how the formation of the MMD was never merely about controlling traffic as an isolated social practice. Rather, it made possible an increasing tactical penetration of civil space as circulation became crucial for the execution of state power. The traffic police have historically acted to create an economic space of efficient flow (the modern, industrial city), and were simultaneously active in the control of unruly political forces (striking workers, youths) that are both produced by and a threat to 'the economy'. In other words, the traffic police have contributed to the organisation and efficiency of urban economic life while also managing social and political tensions that arose within the city.

The reactions to Team Domina's rideouts in 2017, as discussed in the introduction, underscore the enduring nature of these power dynamics. The rideouts challenged the naturalised state of public space as car space, revealing the latent tensions in how urban mobility is governed, and thus *re-politicising* urban mobility—even if not explicitly intended as such. The media and police responses, which framed the boys as 'hijacking' and 'terrorising' the roadway, mirror the historical narratives that justified the regulation and control of urban space in the early 20th century.

In conclusion, this study challenges the perceived inevitability of car-dominated urban spaces and recentres the power dynamics involved in urban mobility. It calls for a re-evaluation of urban space as a multifunctional entity, recognising the social, economic, and political processes that have historically shaped its governance. By understanding the origins and development of the modernist mobility dispositif, alternative futures for urban mobility can be imagined that prioritise collectivity, play, creativity, and love, over mere efficiency and economic circulation. The historical case of Rotterdam serves as a powerful reminder of the need to critically examine and challenge the power structures that continue to shape our cities.

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Appendix: Ethics and Privacy Checklist

ERASMUS UNIVERSITEIT ROTTERDAM

CHECKLIST ETHICAL AND PRIVACY ASPECTS OF RESEARCH

INSTRUCTION

This checklist should be completed for every research study that is conducted at the Department of Public Administration and Sociology (DPAS). This checklist should be completed *before* commencing with data collection or approaching participants. Students can complete this checklist with help of their supervisor.

This checklist is a mandatory part of the empirical master's thesis and has to be uploaded along with the research proposal.

The guideline for ethical aspects of research of the Dutch Sociological Association (NSV) can be found on their website (http://www.nsv-sociologie.nl/?page_id=17). If you have doubts about ethical or privacy aspects of your research study, discuss and resolve the matter with your EUR supervisor. If needed and if advised to do so by your supervisor, you can also consult Dr. Bonnie French, coordinator of the Sociology Master's Thesis program.

PART I: GENERAL INFORMATION

Project title:
Car(cerality): A genealogy of the automobility dispositif in Rotterdam

Name, email of student:
Jim van Hagen, 498853jh@eur.nl

Name, email of supervisor:
Dr. Rogier van Reekum, vanreekum@essb.eur.nl

Start date and duration:
25 March 2024 until 23 June 2024

Is the research study conducted within DPAS YES – ~~NO~~

PART II: HUMAN SUBJECTS

1. Does your research involve human participants. ~~YES~~ - NO

   If 'NO': skip to part V.

Part V: Data storage and backup

Where and when will you store your data in the short term, after acquisition?
In my discourse analysis, the research material that is openly accessible (e.g. books, journals, newspaper articles) will be kept without any additional precaution. I am usually not dealing with sensitive data, since I am doing historical research with openly available sources. The only thing that could happen is that some material at the archives is limited in terms of accessibility and storage. In that case, I will follow the archives' rules.

Who is responsible for the immediate day-to-day management, storage and backup of the data arising from your research?
I am.

How (frequently) will you back-up your research data for short-term data security?
Not applicable.

In case of collecting personal data how will you anonymize the data?
Individuals and their names are not relevant to my research. I will not keep a list of (anonymized) names. I will only register names when it is relevant to answer the research question, which in most cases it is likely not. Moreover, since my material consists of public sources only, there is no anonymity in the material to begin with.

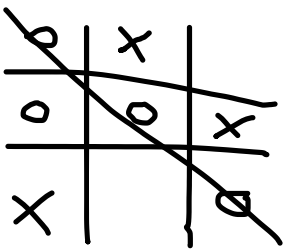
PART VI: SIGNATURE
Please note that it is your responsibility to follow the ethical guidelines in the conduct of your study. This includes providing information to participants about the study and ensuring confidentiality in storage and use of personal data. Treat participants respectfully, be on time at appointments, call participants when they have signed up for your study and fulfil promises made to participants.

Furthermore, it is your responsibility that data are authentic, of high quality and properly stored. The principle is always that the supervisor (or strictly speaking the Erasmus University Rotterdam) remains owner of the data, and that the student should therefore hand over all data to the supervisor.

Hereby I declare that the study will be conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the Department of Public Administration and Sociology at Erasmus University Rotterdam. I have answered the questions truthfully.

Name student: Jim van Hagen

Date: 19 March 2024



Name (EUR) supervisor: Rogier van Reekum

Date: 15-04-2024