

The car of just before tomorrow

 By [Arthur Goldstuck](#)

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The car of tomorrow will be self-driving, will all but eliminate accidents, and will transform roads, cities and working lives. But that is a tomorrow that is still a decade or more away.



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It is a tomorrow that begins in earnest three years from now, in the year 2021, regarded by many auto manufacturers as the deadline for autonomous cars to be built as production models. However, it will take at least another five years for a confluence of standards, legislation, insurance and in-road sensors to come together in a semblance of seamless integration with traffic. And then, another decade or more for self-driving to be the dominant mode of road transport.

It is astonishing that the car of tomorrow is so far away when we hear daily announcements of new capabilities, new licenses granted for autonomous vehicles, and breakthroughs in bringing this technology to the mainstream. And even more astonishing when one considers that many of these capabilities and breakthroughs are already being built into cars.

Tease to deceive

What all this means is that, in 2018, we will be able to drive the car of just before tomorrow. It will give us a tantalising glimpse of what is possible, but just like any seductive human being playing with the emotions of another, it will tease to deceive.

That predictive braking, designed to stop the car before it collides with the one that suddenly stopped up ahead? It helps with the collision that almost happened in front, but does little for the inevitable collision from behind, if someone was tailgating.

That self-parking feature that should already be transforming the design of city parking? It is still as difficult to use as regular, manual parking.

That lane assist, which gently nudges you back into the lane when it detects an inadvertent lane change or traffic approaching in the next lane? It doesn't work if the driver has a heavy hand on the wheel and accelerator, or an aggressive disrespect for machines.

Specs and features many will either not learn to use, or forget to use

These are great features, and will be a boon to the individual motorist and to traffic in general when they become standard features. But by themselves, in isolation of an autonomous ecosystem, they remain specs or selling features that many will either not learn to use, or forget to use. In this sense, they will be a little like smartphones, which have the computing power to take a spacecraft to the moon, but often struggle to guide a traveller from one address to another.

Integration of the smartphone with the car

“ On the other hand, the integration of the smartphone with the car will be one of the automotive success stories of 2018. ”

Ford has already led the way with its SYNC 3 connected car system, for several years now allowing smartphone apps to be mirrored on the car's infotainment system. Mass-market brands like Subaru and Kia have followed suit, understanding that built-in navigational tools designed with the car several years ago can't compete with the constantly updated navigation of a Google Maps or Waze app.

Embracing Android Auto and Apple CarPlay

In 2018, we can expect to see many vehicle makers embrace Android Auto and Apple CarPlay, which enable the mirroring of apps on cars' infotainment systems. With more widespread usage and customer feedback, we can then expect to see those platforms evolve from their current limited, clunky interfaces into truly useful, versatile and elegant ways to interact with a vehicle.

Eventually, charging R20,000 or more for built-in navigation as an added extra will be regarded as an insult to consumers. But that is still a few years away, and a highly fanciful notion for the car of just before tomorrow.

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