For Love of the Automobile

Looking Back into the History of Our Desires

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS
Berkeley · Los Angeles · Oxford

1984

Independent as a Lord

Searching for a fitting image for the meaning of the automobile, the French philosopher Roland Barthes came upon one of those comparisons that illumine the nature of a thing: he called the car "the Gothic cathedral of modern times." This is a surprising metaphor on first glance, for what do automobiles have in common with these light-filled edifices yearning toward the heavens? But a second glance uncovers the point: automobiles, like cathedrals, are symbols of a culture. However acute in vision, one would be blind who stood before a cathedral and saw nothing more than a shelter from wind and weather for the faithful. And one would be just as blind who stood before a shimmering automobile with its engine humming and saw only a vehicle for transporting people and their goods. As the cathedral is not merely a shelter, so the automobile is more than a means of transport; automobiles are, indeed, the material representation of a culture. Although both creations contain considerable engineering artistry, under the technical design lies a cultural plan in which the assumptions of an epoch find expression. The engineers, with their calculations and drawing boards, create something that is important to the public and toward which the energies of an epoch are directed, whether that be the love of God or the love of speed.

Far from being a mere means of transport, automobiles crystallize

life plans and world images, needs and hopes, which in turn stamp the technical contrivance with a cultural meaning. In this interchange, culture and technology prove mutually reinforcing. Technology does not simply fall from the sky; rather, the aspirations of a society (or a class) combine with technical possibility to inject a bit of culture into the design like a genetic code. Yet neither do lifestyle and desires emerge from the thin air of culture; instead they coalesce around a given technology. A technological invention is often accompanied by cultural creativity. The invention gives dominant motifs a new material form, whereupon new motifs are invited to develop. What ideals, what life projections have accumulated around the automobile? What drives have marked its technical design, and what new lessons has it revealed? For the lessons surrounding the automobile are still new, and are not, as the occasional triumphal automobile book announces on page one, to be traced back to the ancient Greeks or anywhere else. The history of technical development proceeds hand in hand with the history of cultural acquisition. Although the latter offers technology a place in life, it can also turn and make the technological product obsolete when the feel of life in a new epoch is no longer reflected in the technology. Technical achievements come and go; what was once learned from them can be forgotten. The Gothic cathedrals, though, unlike the automobile, built for eternity, became antiquated in the fifteenth century; yet they still perform masterfully in the present, helping tourists and schoolchildren decipher the spirit of a bygone age.

Masters over Schedules and Routes

For those in the nineteenth century who were particular, traveling by railway imposed unwelcome demands. While some salon cars certainly resembled a grand hotel on wheels, the luxury of first class could not conceal that gentlemen from more refined circles in fact forfeited sovereignty: they were inmates in a system of mass transit. Because of technological progress, they were forced to give up the carriage, with its potential for improvisation and freedom, and subordinate themselves to external constraints. "Traveling by railway," came the warning from *Meyers Konversationslexikon* of 1850,

> demands the most punctual arrival of travelers at the train station, because the steam engines wait for no one; and canceled tickets and baggage claim checks must be carefully preserved. Moreover, one must take care to remain on the train at stations where it is not stopping for at least five or ten minutes, because the train can easily roll away, leaving the traveler in the lurch.

Racing furiously for the train; lost in a cloud of smoke and noise and desperately seeking directions to the correct car; fumbling the ticket out of a jacket pocket for the surly conductor; then to be shot rattling across the country—and all this under the penetrating gaze of the common people. No, this was an affront to proper order, a blow struck against the good old days. The railway delivered the traveler up to an anonymous machine and was degrading to a cultivated style of life. With the railway the independent traveler became a dependent passenger, conducted from place to place like a piece of freight. Passengers were, indeed, "transported," a word that until now had been applied only to prisoners or a salesman's wares. To be a mass transit passenger, an indifferent appendage equal to everyone else in the enormous wheelwork of the railway, ran against the grain for those refined individuals who, relying on their own property, were accustomed to indulging an independent and stylish enjoyment of life. "The railway," Otto Julius Bierbaum complained,

> transports us—and that is the direct opposite of traveling. We are condemned to passivity—whereas traveling signifies the freest activity. Traveling is throwing off the yoke of rules. The railway binds us to a timetable, makes of us prisoners of regulations, locks us in a cage, which we are not allowed even to open, let alone leave, when we please. Between telegraph wires—symbols of this entangling of our personal freedom—we are hauled at a speed that completely eliminates the possibility of welcome sights, not from one place, but from one train station, to the other. . . . Whoever calls that activity "traveling" might just as justifiably pass off a parade march as a stroll. The whole purpose and benefit of letting oneself be hauled in this way is based in overcoming distances. . . . The old drinking song "Stupor, stupor, you're my pleasure, stupor, stupor, you're my desire," would be a worthy hymn for the undertaking.[1]

But now the railway had a competitor: the automobile, which appeared on the stage just as the refined world was coming to terms with travel by train. The memory was still alive, however, of the time of carriages, when one was one's own master and could drive a private coach with pride, and this memory deeply colored the attitude toward the new motorcars: it seemed the glorious days of carriage travel had

1. Bierbaum, *Eine empfindsame Reise*, 269.

Faces of the railway. The rush for cars when the excursion train departs Paris for the sea, 5 francs. Caricature by H. Daumier, 1852.

come again. Automobiles promised to resurrect the old independence of self-propelled vehicles, to help individual authority regain its own, for they offered emancipation from the inconveniences of the railway: the regimentation of the timetable, the compulsion of the unwavering rails, and—not least—the perspiration of the crowd. The transition from carriage to railway had jeopardized the confidence of status-conscious groups. Now the sovereignty lost could be recreated by moving from the railway to the automobile; indeed, enjoyment would be even fuller on this new, mechanized plane. No more being ordered around by shrill whistles; no more surrendering the baggage into who knows what kind of hands. Gone forever the undignified existence of a passenger!

> A blissful prospect: never to be plagued by the fear of missing the train. We will never have to cry for stewards, never have to count again and again, one, two, three, four—did he bring everything? My God, the hatbox! Is the umbrella there too? We will never run the risk of being locked in a compartment with insufferable people, where the windows cannot be opened even in oppressive heat if someone is along who suffers from a fear of traveling in trains.

Bierbaum indulged his obituary for the railway as he headed off with his wife and, of course, a chauffeur for Italy. Gazing at his Adler-Phaeton, his luggage secured to the back, he reminisced about his time as a "box person" in a train compartment. His newly arrived automobile opened up entirely new vistas to him:

"You are looking for your suitcase, good sir? It's over there somewhere—and the lady's hatbox too . . ." Caricature by H. Daumier, 1843.

> We will decide ourselves whether we drive fast or slow, where we stop, where we want to pass through without delay. We will be in the brisk, fresh air for days on end. We will not drive in dark, terrible caves through the mountains, but over the mountains. In short, gentlemen, we will truly travel, rather than have ourselves transported.[2]

It appeared that with the automobile had arrived nothing less than the end of the age of transport—"transport" being the essential characteristic of the railway, because it moved masses of people from one place to another, organized according to the unyielding logic of a centrally directed apparatus into multiplicitous, daily-recurring movement: locomotives, tracks, and schedules. Those who used the railway, playing their part in the progress toward a greater mastery of space, had to give themselves over for good or ill to the logic of this apparatus, this "iron cage of subjection" as Max Weber might have called it. These objective constraints ran counter to the love of individuality professed by elevated sorts, who placed great value in shaping their lives by their own decisions and developing their own unique patterns of expression and behavior. This was the sentiment of the fashion writer Countess Ida Hahn-Hahn, for example, who in 1841 tried to see the railway as a "travel outing"; but, she determined,

> for a genuine trip, I find it altogether unseemly for a person. Through train travel one is degraded into a bundle of goods, and forfeits the

2. Ibid., 20.

On the passenger train. Between a butcher and a drunk. Caricature by H. Daumier, 1839.

> individual senses and independence. Normal human consideration is not extended to a bundle of goods; the only obligation is to send it on. . . . The steam locomotive aims only at leveling and centralizing—the two obsessions of those who call themselves liberal. . . . All limits, sense of place, pleasures, and needs are likewise leveled. For a pittance, old and young, fine and common, rich and poor, human and beast alike glide along behind a steam engine.[3]

The railway confronted bourgeois-aristocratic circles with a dilemma that runs throughout the history of industrialization: while the increasing mechanization of social life did indeed open up unexpected possibilities, it nevertheless threatened that well-tended subjectivity, that self-consciously personal lifestyle that, particularly since the romantic era, the bourgeoisie had developed to shield themselves from mechanization. On the one hand, the locomotive fascinated: mechanical force made it vastly superior to the horse, limited by its corporeality and therefore subject to exhaustion; and the pounding uniformity of its movement inaugurated a new mastery over more extensive space. On the other hand, the railway inspired discontent, dismay, and melancholy, because a bit of the art of living fell beneath its wheels, it proved so able to shrink the distance on which cultivated superiority was based—the distance not only from the common people, but also from a life subject to regulation.

The automobile, then, presented the possibility of escape, for it returned resonance to a world of sentiment that in the age of the railway had become obsolete: the attraction of travel guided by nothing but individual pleasure and mood. By uniting mechanical force with self-determined mobility it opened the way to harvesting the fruits of the transportation revolution without having to pay the price. It was almost as if a new outbreak of individuality loomed:

> We want truly to travel again, as free gentlemen, with free self-determination, in the freedom of the open air. And the fact that we will have more to do, that we will be faced at every moment with the need to make decisions, is an advantage of this resurrected art of travel. Traveling in an automobile includes not only a massage for the body, but one for the spirit as well, and that is precisely why . . . the power of invention, the perception, the processing, the internalization of external impressions, is intensified.[4]

A genuine auto-mobile, a self-propelling craft, which troubled one with neither schedules nor preset routes, a pledge of freedom and individual pleasure—that was the perception that made the automobile so attractive against the background of train stations and tracks. Thus did the excitement over a new technology grow out of disappointment with the old, thus did yesterday's critique of progress prepare the way for progress tomorrow. The feeling of independence was born of the contrast with the railway.

The Individual Is King

In fact, according to a 1974 speech by the president of the German Automotive Industry Association, J. H. Brunn, "the desire to be master of time and space without dependence on schedules was not invented in an automobile factory. It accords with the nature of the modern person and comes from the consumer. Everyone should be able to use the means of transit that best suits his or her individual needs."[5] As carefree as can be, he challenged critics of the car (this was just after the first energy crisis) in the very title of his speech: "The Automobile Is Another Bit of Freedom." Although "the nature of the modern person" invoked by the chief automobile manufacturer was fully unknown to our grandfathers, he was addressing the sentiment that underlay the

3. Quoted in Manfred Riedel, "Vom Biedermeier zum Maschinenzeitalter. Zur Kulturgeschichte der ersten Eisenbahnen in Deutschland" (From early Victorian times to the machine age: On the cultural history of the first railroads in Germany), *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte* 43 (1961): 119.

4. Bierbaum, *Eine empfindsame Reise*, 292f.

5. J. H. von Brunn, "Das Auto ist ein Stück mehr Freiheit" (The auto is another piece of freedom), Speech to the VDA-Mitgliederversammlung, Baden-Baden, September 27, 1974.

automotive economy: the mass desire to be free of fixed rails, schedules, and other people.

Again and again traffic analysts have plunged into intricate investigations of why so many people prefer a car to the bus, streetcar, or subway, only to arrive at the obvious: in order to be independent in time and space and also socially, by being able to choose one's own means of transport. Bierbaum's excitement in his day over the self-propelled vehicle has in the meantime become a mass sentiment; people today forsake the streetcar for gasoline carriages in droves. Indeed, the automobile is all the more enticing now because, in contrast to Bierbaum's times, the question has long since ceased to be one of replacing the occasional train trip with the pleasure of an unfettered drive in an automobile; the issue now involves preserving some measure of independent mobility inside the machinery of daily transit. As the "forwarding of people like bundles of goods" became a virtually inescapable fact of daily life, the automobile—if no longer in the actual memory of a cultivated carriage journey, then at least in the hope for a bit of freedom in the general business of transportation—came to be the focus of desires for individualization.

With generalized mass transit grew an urgent need for the automobile. Countless passengers preferred, like Bierbaum of old, to drive themselves. Why stand in the cold at a bus stop, why tediously patch a route together from tram line to tram line? This sentiment nourished the call for "freedom of choice in transit," which has drowned out the voices of other, divergent interests in transit policy for decades, causing mass transit to lose the competition with the automobile. In response to new pressures for mobility, automobile production increased and, contrary to every intention, stimulated a new round of clamoring for automobiles. Consumer expectations of the sort aroused by advertisements like that for a 1955 jalopy, the Maico 500, caused the demand for cars to soar: "The daily irritation—commuter trains filled to overflowing, overloaded streetcars, oppressive crowds—no wonder many people arrive at work in a bad mood. Is there no remedy? Of course there's one: motorize yourself! With Maico, for they are the cars of tomorrow."

This desire was not pulled out of the thin air of cultural significations, but was based on realities already incorporated in technological products. Cultural significations cannot make their mark arbitrarily; they must first exist as a possibility in technological form and function. The characteristics of the automobile confirm the idea of independence and allow it to appear as natural. Unlike the railway, an automobile can be acquired privately and is therefore always at the owner's disposal. Because it is not bound to the tracks (and sometimes not even dependent on roads), it can be driven almost anywhere. Because one person steers it, it need not be shared with others; similarly, it can satisfy any particular desire of the driver in terms of speed. Finally, there is the multifaceted character of modern cars: they are just as good for displaying status as for being loaded with surfboards. Equipped with this dowry of design, the automobile is fit for marriage with the desire for an unfettered lifestyle, a desire that can be undermined only by the experience of one person's craving for freedom colliding with that of another, resulting in traffic jams everywhere.

It is not at all accidental that the automobile is engineered to service individual needs. A design gradient favoring individualization runs through the whole history of modern technology. From major machinery to household appliances, this tendency is always evident; the transition from the railway to the automobile may be the most spectacular example, but only because the shift from churchtower clock to wristwatch, cinema to television, community laundry to washing machine, or adding machine to pocket calculator was less obvious (though the transition from mainframe computers to personal computers is not likely to be outdone in any respect). The industrialization of human activity—of mobility, time, visual entertainment, washing, calculating, and communicating—seems to establish itself first of all in large settings requiring collective use. Only when such innovations acquire a more compact form do they become familiar, rather like a comfortable pair of slippers, and begin to leave their mark on daily appearances and gestures.

The model of transformation seen in the automobile is everywhere: what once was a public commodity is now assimilated to private ownership; what once had to be sought out at a particular place now becomes everywhere available; and what otherwise ran according to an impersonal time plan can now be had anytime. We find in the production of implements that can be used by one person, anywhere, and anytime—that is, in a manner that is independent socially, spatially, and temporally—a deep-seated purposiveness of technological development. Consider, for example, the progression from cinemas to the console television to the portable television to the video cassette recorder: what once could be seen only collectively, in a distant hall and at a predetermined hour, can now be admired by everyone on his or her own, in the camper or in the living room, morning or night.

It is given in the structure of many advanced appliances that they in no way interfere with the private caprice of the individual. Agreement with other people is rendered superfluous, dependence on a particular place eliminated, and the individual can ignore all impersonal temporal rhythms—therein lies the advance. The ideal buyer of these appliances, whom it is their purpose to serve, is the individual as king, the sovereign who wants to use them according to personal discretion and without social, spatial, or temporal constraints. And such an atomized collection of customers is ideal for the industry; a mass market is attainable only through individualization of the appliances to be sold.

Technological development—embodied in screws and switches, tools and, ultimately, appliances—has reached a state which, although self-evident to modern culture, nevertheless signified a profound transformation of the traditional conception of life and has only gradually over the last two centuries become reality: namely, one in which the individual is preeminently and completely grounded in his or her own right, and all ties to society and to nature are subordinant to one's private decisions. In this scheme, the individual is not part of a whole—whether of a tribe, as for a Sioux; an ancestral line, as for a Kikuyu; a hierarchical social system, as for a Hindu; or a social order ordained by God, as for the European absolutist—or even of a village, family, or household. No, each person is master of him- or herself. Without getting involved in the details of Western intellectual history, we can note that the word *individual* has been common in its current meaning only since the end of the eighteenth century; the former meaning, of course, is found in the sense of "what an individual," suggesting the skepticism once reserved for persons lacking any social obligations. This basic category of our culture also shapes technological development, for in tools and machines what we consider to be fundamental finds expression. Technology is the material reproduction of a culture.

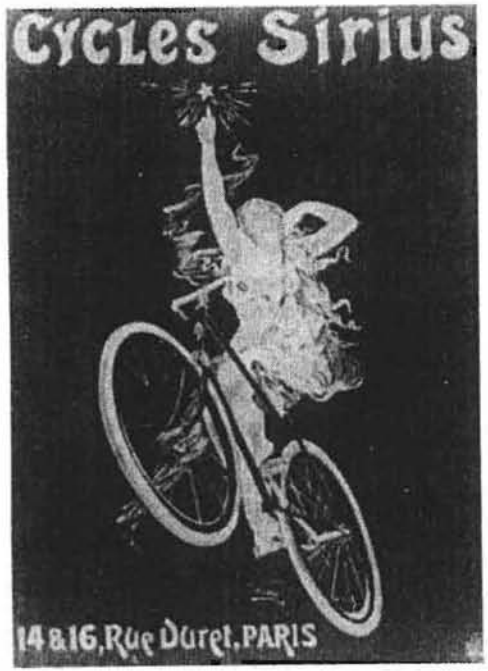
But not only that. In the progression from major system to household appliance, technological development, programmed by the cultural code, strives to make this independent individual materially possible. Automobile or washing machine, video recorder or microcomputer—all are the realization, in the concrete form of an apparatus, of a cultural ideal that has long since migrated from the world of philosophical thought into people's emotional world. Technology fulfills the desire to leave behind burdensome social, spatial, or temporal ties and become one's own master.

The idea of "another bit of freedom through driving," to use the slogan of the automobile industry association's president, finds resonance as long as large numbers of people are steered by the modern ideal. But the more it achieves reality through mass motorization, the more unavoidably the desires for independence slowly change their hue: rubbing one's tired eyes, one discovers a new form of dependence behind the independence gained. Ultimately, all of these "independence machines" depend on streets and power lines, pipelines and radio waves, which in turn bind the individual with multiple ties to industries, power plants, drilling rigs, and broadcast stations. Supply networks and production apparatuses must be called into being to supply us with another increment of freedom in our private lives—a dependent independence, however paradoxical that may sound. While Bierbaum, glad not to be transported in a train compartment like freight, toasted the automobile with hymns of freedom for having released him from existence as a passenger, it dawns on us, driving eighty years later in tight columns on the city freeways, that even self-propelling vehicles can form a transit system organized according to impersonal requirements. With Bierbaum we became drivers rather than passengers, but since then we have metamorphosed once again from drivers into passengers, even if self-propelled.

Riding the Iron Steed

It was not, however, the automobile alone that gave the joy of independent mobility a place in society's affections. Another invention that appeared almost simultaneously shared this honor—namely, the bicycle. In the same years that Carl Benz was testing his gasoline-powered carriage in Mannheim, John Kemp Starley was getting the bugs out of the low-wheeled cycle, an invention that was to ring in mass distribution of bicycles. One had, indeed, dared to ride the high-wheeled velocipede only at the risk of one's neck; balance was always precarious, since the center of gravity was in the front and crept ever higher the bigger—and therefore faster—the front wheels became. Because a slender tree root was all it took to throw the rider head over heels into the dust, at best only athletic gentlemen attempted them, in riding pants and with a well-upholstered helmet on their heads.

In Starley's design, the driver's legs were suspended a comfortable distance from the ground between two medium-sized wheels, and the chain drive allowed even unathletic riders, soon on air-filled tires, to glide smoothly down the street. A real bicycle craze broke out only as



Poster by H. Gray, 1899.

the turn of the century neared, with young and old alike swinging into the saddle. The police had their hands full maintaining a surly authority over the fleet-wheeled people. After the American import trade brought widespread price reductions, the bicycle also became accessible for less well off groups: of the approximately one million bicycles in use in 1903, some 30 percent belonged to workers.

Riding on their iron steeds, many now enjoyed a mobility formerly reserved to the fancy gentleman on his high horse. One's own forces were multiplied in an ingenious interaction between muscle power and mechanics; traveling smartly along, one left the pedestrians behind, elated by a newly won power over space. Zola depicted it in his novel *Paris:*

> The two let their machines carry them down the hill. And then this happy rush of speed overtook them, the dizzying sense of balance in the lightninglike, breathtaking descent on wheels, while the gray path flew beneath their feet and the trees whisked past at either side like the slats of a fan as it unfolds. . . . That is the endless hope, the liberation from the all too oppressive fetters, across space. And no exaltation is better; hearts leap under the open sky.[6]

The speed is intoxicating, the mobility liberating, the exertion inspiring—that is the experience of riding a bicycle, and it was now becoming common throughout society. It is hardly surprising that the bicycle also drew its attractiveness from a contrast with the railway.

> The bicycle is subservient to no time schedule; it is free. It does not follow the beaten path, rather roves along a thousand freely chosen paths. At every hour, in every direction it carries its rider. It serves nothing but individual need; it does justice to the endless variety of human desires and endeavors.[7]

These were the same feelings as the automobile inspired: here too was the pleasure in unfettered mobility, but with an incomparably more modest vehicle and therefore accessible to much of the population.

The bicycle offered liberation from the regimentation not only of the local train, but also of daily life. Whoever seeks to distance himself can have two reasons for doing so: to get away or to arrive. To get away to the distant metropolis, to flee the oppressive conditions and lack of prospects at home—this desire to change one's lot through mobility had already been awakened by the railroad. How many village strolls led to the train tracks, how completely the train station replaced the village oak as a meeting place! It was the magic of redemptive distance that enticed. To escape the watchful eyes and stubborn rules of daily life, even if for only a couple of hours—this desire could be fulfilled with a bicycle. The young could escape the nagging of their parents and the workers the oppression of their cramped apartments; the bicycle delivered the sheltered daughter from her knitting and the pale clerk from the company books.

A forceful step on the pedals also saw the birth of a new self-confidence, and with the lively bicycle came often enough a lively spirit of enterprise. Since it had suddenly become so easy to get away and hold

6. (Paris, 1898), 389; quoted in Hans-Erhard Lessing, ed., *Fahrradkultur* (Bicycle culture), vol. 1: *Der Höhepunkt um 1900* (The climax around 1900) (Reinbeck, 1982), 5.
7. L. Bertz, quoted in ibid., 6.

one's own through distance, many felt their inner independence fortified, thus gaining a previously unknown sense of freedom. The new movements required—the pedaling and balancing, not to mention the very fact of bodily exertion in public—also symbolized a kind of moral liberation, especially for women: "What must absolutely go in the junk room, for starters, is the corset. Deep, brisk breathing, as riding a bicycle requires, can happen only given full expansion of the breast. How can the poor breast expand if it's stuck in a plate of armor? . . . The best and freest feeling," the lady cyclist boldly continued, "comes without reservation from a completely unconstrained upper body. For me, it even makes a great difference . . . whether I ride completely unbridled or with—even if it's very loose—a brassiere."[8] The bicycle became a symbol for the "new woman," who had shed her fetters and started on her sovereign way through the manifold offerings of the world. This escape from oppression provided a model of personal experience that the automobile could tap only decades later, when it became accessible to people who believed it allowed them to flee all manner of oppressive conditions.

While excitement was building over the automobile in terms of distant trips, bicyclists were taking pleasure in the new accessibility of nearer goals. The bicycle enlarged the immediate vicinity and multiplied the destinations that could be reached in a short period of time; whether to the factory to work or the lake for a swim, to church in the neighboring village or a flirtation in the woods, in the bicycle saddle one felt oneself the master of one's native territory. For the first time an achievement in transportation technology invigorated local life—for the railway had sooner enticed travelers to regard themselves as masters of the nation (and later, the airplane as masters of the world). Rural roads, moreover, increasingly empty because of the draw of the railway, were now becoming more lively; where traffic had dwindled to the occasional rural wanderer, now travelers were once again on the move from place to place. Perhaps the railway had opened up space on the level of the nation, but the bicycle was opening space at the local level.

Contemporaries were not blind to the fact that this feeling of freedom cost much in the way of panting and sweat. Indeed, because it required physical exertion, the bicycle was unsuited as a symbol of class; a privileged status, after all, meant to have impersonal energies

8. Ibid., 20.

at one's command, with others doing all the sweating. It was therefore with a note of defiance that Wilhelm Wolf remarked in his 1890 book *Fahrrad und Radfahrer* (Bicycle and bicyclist):

> Whoever is in the happy position of having a horse to ride or a horse and carriage commonly looks down on the bicyclist with a tinge of compassion; it seems to him nobler to be conveyed by animal power than to accomplish movement through his own exertion. All that "kicking about" does not appeal to him, for he cannot help but think that the bicyclist, in pedaling his machine, is executing essentially the same leg movements that our dear God prescribed everyone for walking.[9]

If for no other reason, the bicycle was not quite presentable in the refined world. Thus it failed to rise to the level of a symbol of social superiority, which would have inspired a mass desire to imitate.

The defect of physicality worked even more strongly to the bicycle's disadvantage as the use of motor power became widespread. Because the bicycle did not move without muscle power, it remained an outsider among the new technologies with their aura of progress, for it was precisely in the substitution of mechanical power for muscular exertion that the point of progress was recognized at the time. Eugen Diesel, in his description of the three-month waiting period for his first automobile, stated flat-out that

> bicycling was a wretched substitute in the interim. I did indeed go faster than before; I felt myself to be an automobile—I imitated the shifting of gears, acceleration, adjusting of the ignition, and nearly succumbed to the hallucination that I was a driver. But it was a damned disadvantage that the motor was missing and the pedals would not go by themselves.[10]

Sitting in the bicycle saddle, his legs kicking, the young Diesel imagined himself an automobile driver: shifting, pressing on the gas pedal, letting the engine roar. How many later generations have not experienced the bicycle exactly like this!

There was nothing to be done about it, though—the bicycle fell victim to the contemporary view of what constituted technological progress: overcoming physical limitations through the power of the motor. With no regard for the fact that technological progress was contained

9. Wilhelm Wolf, *Fahrrad und Radfahrer* (Bicycle and bicyclist) (Leipzig, 1890; reprinted 1979), 5.
10. Diesel, *Autoreise 1905*, 19.

even in parts like the bicycle chain, most people regarded motors as the very essence of progress; they contained the magical promise of putting a yoke on the apparently inexhaustible energy of nature and doing the work for human beings. Even though the bicycle multiplied bodily energy extremely efficiently and broadened people's arena of activity many times over, it remained captive to the defect of corporeality; over the long run, therefore, it would be at best a disagreeable substitute vehicle for the nonmotorized.

In retrospect, though, it must be noted that not only did automotive technology—with the chain, the hub, and the air-filled tire—reap the gains of bicycle technology, but the attractiveness of the automobile in particular was nourished on the feeling the bicycle inspired. The iron steed extended the boundaries of spatial experience for the masses and so stimulated desires for increased independence of movement. Mobility in the immediate vicinity was now a fact of life. It was from this reservoir of popular experience that motor vehicles drew much of their attractive power; they promised, after all, an unbelievable increase in mobility. The bicycle, then, in more ways than one, was simply the first along a path that, followed by the motorcycle, ended in the small car just as soon as the purse allowed. The bicycle mobilized desire for an automobile.

Little Escapes

As time went on, the joy of fast-moving freedom, established in daily practice and desires by the bicycle, came to color attitudes toward the motorcycle and automobile as well. The occasions on which people felt a need for wheels to get away for a while, the opportunities self-propelled vehicles have offered for some measure of liberation from oppressive circumstances, are countless. The husband breathes a sigh of relief as he sinks in behind the wheel, having slammed the door on his wife's biting words; overjoyed to have escaped the workaday grind once more, the young worker throws his machine in gear on Friday evening and races off into the open potential of the weekend; relieved, the young mathematics student, academic drudgery causing his tiny garret to close in about his ears, revs his Citroën Deux-Chevaux before making his way to his favorite bar. A change of scene, the chance to breathe different air for a while—such are the motivations, under the leitmotif "flight from obligations," behind the automobile's summons.

The same motif tumbles abundantly from the screen and the pages

"500 Marks—and Whitsuntide in an Opel." The automobile as a symbol for unfettered joy in life. Advertisement from Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung, *1929, no. 38.*

of literature: the flight into vacation from the routine; the flight of the young from parental proscriptions; the flight of the criminal from a closing trap. In film and television the appearance of a car signals a change of scene; the hero screeching away in a car has replaced the cowboy of old riding off into the setting sun, majestic music rising in the background. Especially in American literature of the fifties and sixties, the automobile symbolized the feverish freedom of breaking loose and getting away. In what is arguably the most famous example, Jack Kerouac's *On the Road,* the hero of the "beat generation," Dean Moriarty, completely absorbs the stimulation of the highway's promise

of infinity. And in John Updike's *Rabbit, Run,* Harry Angstrom sits cramped behind the wheel, tormented by the fear that his life, with the whining children at home and his wearisome job selling used cars, has reached a dead end in his disgruntled little town. He takes off for the virginal, easygoing life of the south: "He wants to go south, down, down the map into orange groves and smoking rivers and barefoot women. It seems simple enough, drive all night through the dawn through the morning through the noon park on a beach take off your shoes and fall asleep by the Gulf of Mexico."[11]

Car commercials, too, use this reservoir of significations, indeed, do their best to keep it alive, because it wraps the automobile, as a commodity, in a cloak of meaning that, by stimulating buyers' desires, opens up their purses. The Toyota Land Cruiser leaves boulders and streams easily behind and then masters a wild rapids: "Toyota gives you the freedom to get off the beaten path!" The commercial stresses that a Toyota is not simply a means of transportation, but stands for a lifestyle. To the car are attributed nonmaterial characteristics that derive from an obviously inexhaustible world of locales, where the conqueror of impassable terrains, the natural man far removed from civilization, the adventurer facing endless obstacles, appears as the hero of freedom and independence. The commercial, by integrating the product into a system of established significations, that of the adventure saga, itself becomes clothed in those same significations. Hence a single commercial image, in moving beyond the product's technical usefulness, illustrates the logic of advertisement: the world of products is translated into a world of significations, and vice versa, and all possible significations appear to be purchasable in the form of products.

Just by clothing the product in the qualities of freedom and independence, moreover, the ad conveys information about the character of the Toyota owner: a man "who wants to get off the beaten path." The ad copy even conflates the two, the car and the owner: the car is so rugged that it delivers independence from "mud, snow, and inclines," and, accordingly, its owner proves himself capable of overcoming the conventional rules and routines of daily life. The character of the Toyota mirrors that of its owner: both love freedom and neither is conformist. It makes no difference that the car will probably never be driven along the Amazon; its symbolic power works amid the asphalt and traffic lights of the city too.

11. John Updike, *Rabbit, Run* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), 25.

It is obvious that commercials do not draw their power of persuasion just from the inventiveness of graphic artists; rather, they sound the very melody that originated with the bicycle and then accompanied the use of automobiles and motorcycles: the joy of minor emancipations thanks to easy mobility. In this realm of experience, freedom is abbreviated to freedom of variation, change comes to mean breaking away, and solutions are to be found in leaving everything behind. To have no wheels—the thought is coupled with fears of remaining stuck in the given, of being subject to the controlling gaze of others, of losing oneself in the daily grind. The desire for change and emancipation is objectified in the automobile. It is no wonder that for many young people the acquisition of a car is a prerequisite to being accepted in the world of adults, or that women may, on occasion, assert their freshly won self-confidence with a sports car.

Mobility and distance can be liberating; this experience, however, stems from two contrasts that lend these freedoms their particular power of attraction. On the one hand, as the early history of the bicycle reveals, the fascination with moving forward rests on the counterexperience of immobility, the unavoidable attachment to static conditions of life; on the other hand, the pleasure in distance relies on the fantasy that out there at an appropriate distance a completely different life beckons. Would not these preconditions grow increasingly misleading as mobility becomes a social norm that allows everyone to be constantly in transit? If everyone is breaking free, the joy of distance may well decline; if all are driving off in search of foreign experience, it is natural that those very distinctions for which they quest become hazy, and distant goals prove strikingly similar to home.

Universal mobility takes the magic out of distance. It is not by accident that Toyota has to reach into the extreme distance—the jungle—for its commercial; where else are the paths not already beaten? Nor is it happenchance that Updike's Harry Angstrom, having left his provincial nest behind for the Gulf of Mexico, loses his way in a nighttime chaos of signs, motels, and highway interchanges, so that, driven crazy but sobered, he turns back and, nodding off from exhaustion, finally mistakes the automobile itself for his lost destination: "He thinks again of his goal, lying down at dawn in sand by the Gulf of Mexico, and it seems in a way that the gritty seat of his car *is* that sand, and the rustling of the waking town the rustling of the sea."[12]

12. Ibid., 40.