

Men and Their Machines

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ABSTRACT

Extreme identification with automobiles is a predominantly male fascination. This paper reports on depth interviews with such men as well as observations conducted at various car shows in order to understand what these vehicles mean to American automobile enthusiasts. They see their cars as both extensions of themselves and as animate beings. The care they lavish upon these vehicles is both fetishistic and sacralizing. The paper concludes with an assessment of the positive and negative effects of their "auto-eroticism" on their lives and the lives of other family members.

There are few possessions as important to many adult American men as their cars. They often lavish more time, money, emotion, and effort on acquiring, learning about, and caring for these vehicles than they do on other family members. Those who are most involved in their vehicles include restorers of old automobiles, automobile collectors, members of car clubs, and those who show their vehicles at special auto shows and concours d'élégance. The present study involved both observation at such venues and depth interviews with 40 such men.

Love of automobiles, motorcycles, and trucks is an overwhelmingly male preoccupation (Bayley 1986, Marsh and Collett 1986, Miller 2001; Schouten and McAlexander 1992, Stone 1966, Stotz 2001; Weiland 1955), despite the fact that females buy nearly half of the cars sold in the U.S. (Lane 1991, Sanford 1983, Simmons 1983). The greater male passion for automobiles is less surprising given the association of such vehicles with power, danger, mobility, status competition, and industrial dominance over nature, all of which are stereotypically male fixations as well. But motor vehicles are more important to some men than others, and it is the more extreme automobile enthusiast who is the subject of this study. The research is based on depth interviews with 40 such men, and observations conducted at four concours d'élégance, two automobile show competitions, and a professional monster truck mud racing competition.

The men studied range in age from 19 to 70 and range in experience with cars from those who have recently purchased their first vehicles to those who have more than two dozen in their current collections. The cars and trucks they own are diverse as well and include a "monster truck", a 1905 Cadillac, a 1979 Subaru, a 1964 Bentley, a 1974 Pantera, and a 1990 Corvette. Nevertheless, a number of common themes emerged in analyzing these interviews and observations. Together they help understand the potency of the symbolism than many men invest in their machines.

CARS AND PEOPLE, CARS AS PEOPLE

Cars as Prosthetic Extensions of Self

In Thomas Pynchon's (1966) *The Crying of Lot 49* used car salesman Mucho Maas is an observer of lives as he watches customers "exchange a dented, malfunctioning version of himself for another, just as futureless, automotive projection of somebody else's life." For like clothes and houses, vehicles appear to act as prosthesis for many men (Belk 1988). As with our bodies, we control our car, we feed it, we recognize its waste products; we bathe it and apply cosmetic pastes; we attempt to nurse it through breakdowns, fits of coughing, and other ailments; and we inevitably observe its aging, perhaps to the point where only cosmetic surgery and parts transplants can prolong its life. No mere anthropomorphism, we identify our cars with our selves (Richards 1994).

We also personalize our vehicles in various ways in order to bond more fully with them (McCracken 1988) and make them a more direct expression of who we are (e.g., de Pyssler 1992; Hebdige 1988; Lefebvre 1989; Solomon 1992; Stern and Solomon 1992). A 33-year-old man who customizes his cars and trucks noted:

I kind of feel like if you are not driving anything that is you, nobody recognizes you, nobody knows who you are. [So you like to build your car like you?] Yes. That orange truck back there, all I would have to do is pull that out, drive it around the block, and I'll bet I would have five or six people telling me that they saw my truck the other day. I don't know, it starts to become you. Somebody knows that is your truck. There isn't any others running around that color, that way, that clean. Then you're noticed. People picture you that way. That is what you do and that is what you are.

In one common version of this identification with vehicles, the man takes on the characteristics of the cathected vehicle. Thus a powerful engine gives the owner who controls it a feeling of enhanced power, a beautiful automobile body provides the man a beautiful body, and high performance handling makes the man feel capable of high performance as well (see Bloch and Bruce 1984). Such identification with the car-as-body is also seen in the pain some men claim to experience when their beloved automobile is scratched, dented, or otherwise harmed (Neiderland and Sholevar 1981).

Sex Appeal. For those who see their cars as a sexual extension of themselves, damage to their vehicle can represent castration (Lane and Sternberg 1985). At the concours d'élégance held each year in Salt Lake City, the judges (all male) are careful to inquire of those whose cars they inspect whether there are any parts of the car they do not want touched or opened. If, this is an expression of aversion to homosexual approach, then the tactic of many concours entrants of placing mirrors under their automobiles in order to show their undersides can be seen as sexual exhibitionism. In a common variant of the sexual version of vehicle identification, certain men see possessing the right car as offering them a magical sexual charm that will make them irresistible to women. Jim, a 32-year old automobile mechanic, explains his belief in such magic:

[I] got a lot more woman in those cars. I picked up my girlfriend in that car... The MR2. I picked up a lot of girls in the Porsche too! ...*Definitely* a womanizing device, but only from the fact that my MR2 was so much different than standard [And that drives woman crazy?] It does. Their tits get hard. [He laughs.] [Would these woman go for you only after seeing your car?] Well of course before, because I have a magnetic personality. But after they saw the car that just cinched it up so they would want to take me to bed. Women have this thing with cars. What it is I don't know, but they go after guys that have the cars. If I wouldn't have had my little truck, my girlfriend wouldn't have taken me home with her—well, she would have anyway, but she wouldn't have stuck around if I didn't have the MR2.

In another view the automobile is an advertisement of male wealth rather than sex appeal and in the traditional equation men

offer (and women seek) wealth and power in dating while women offer (and men seek) youth, beauty, and sex (Belk and Coon 1991; Hirschman 1987). Others (e.g., Marsh and Collett 1986) suggest that women judge men by their cars because they see these automobiles as an expression of the owners' personalities. With only men in the current study, these alternate interpretations, as well as the underlying assumption that men's cars are important to women, await further work.

Status Symbolism. The power struggle Jim refers to near the end of the preceding quotation involves status competition through the conspicuous consumption of motor vehicles. Many men seek prestige through automobiles in order to enhance their self image without necessarily seeking to exchange this prestige for something else. Thus, Bill, a 34-year-old owner of a small restaurant, explains:

[Why weren't you satisfied with the Volkswagen?] Wasn't fast enough—not enough status, or speed. [Status and speed,—is that what you are looking for?] Yeah. [What car do you want to have?] A 928 [Porsche]. [How come?] Status and speed [laughs]. You need a car, because cars kind of like set you apart from anyone else. It shows where you have got in life, you know? Get in that fucker and you're either a Pinto driver or you're a Porsche driver. Same way in life. ... you want to be successful you've got to look successful. So you get in the car that gives you that look and you naturally become what you think you are.... Cars separate you from mediocrity. ... people treat you differently just through the car you drive. You are where they want to be right now. They will get out and say, "Fuck, this guy has a Porsche! What's he doing that I'm not? Why is he enjoying all this shit and I'm not?" Then they fuckin' treat you like "Come on in." instantly you can have more respect. ... No one is going to walk down the street to look at your portfolio. You either have a Rolex or a Porsche—and that sets you apart.

Auto-biography. In several cases the car marque becomes a heraldic device, as with a man in his forties who has restored several MGs, Jaguars, and a Sunbeam (all British) because his family ancestry is British. Often the purchase of old automobiles becomes a means of reclaiming a more immediate past. Two men in their seventies restored Ford Model A's because they used to have such cars when they were in high school. A 50-year-old owner of a wrecking yard has restored a 1947 Mercury that reminds him of one that a friend owned in high school and a 1957 Ford Sunliner like the one he had when he got out of the Army, even customizing them in the same ways as their predecessors. Another 60-year-old restored an MGTF like the one that was his first car when he was in college as well as an XKE like the one he wished he had in the 1960s. He explained: "People buy the cars they wanted to own when they were in school and couldn't." Another man has a replica of a 1966 AC Cobra (a \$25,000 reproduction of an original that costs ten times as much) and explained that the car came out when he was a senior in high school and he always wanted one: "It was every school boy's dream back then." This is consistent with observations by Dannefer (1980, 1981) and seems to be an attempt, especially by middle-aged men, to reclaim lost youth and all the excitement they associate with the period from their late teenage years through their early twenties. It was during this age period that they remember their first all-consuming interest in an automobile. The intensity of their present automobile involvement does not seem contingent on whether or not they were able to consummate their first auto purchase desires. A Freudian interpretation suggests that this is a transference or sublimation of sexual desires that also peak during this period of life (e.g., Weiland 1955).

Another way in which autos serve as autobiography for the men studied is as cues for recalling personal history, often aided by photographs of prior cars. Just as others use photographs of people in their family albums, automobiles are found to be prominent in family photo albums even for those not obsessed with automobiles (Belk 1991, Chalfen 1988, Lesy 1980), suggesting that they may serve more generally as temporal milestones in American society. Several men in the present study had photo galleries on their walls showing cars they once owned. Others had photos of cars they had restored, showing various stages of the restoration. Thus one man (age 58) looking at photos of his cars reflected, "Each car reminds me of a special time in my life." He later assessed his involvement with cars *in toto*: "It's my whole life." For if you are what you drive (Couch 1987), then prior autos and auto activities should be key building blocks for a sense of past to those men who believe this.

Cars as Beings

Cars as Children, Lovers, and Friends. Cars, for a number of men, are also regarded as if they were alive, and not mere machines. They often see cars as lovers or children. "It's my baby" said one man, while a prior owner of exotic Jaguar referred to its being "adopted" by a man in Geneva (see also Schneider 1971). The man with the Cobra replicar said, "It's kind of like my baby. I wouldn't sell the car to just anyone. They must take care of the car or it would be like child abuse—execution would be too good for someone who didn't take care of it." And another man claimed "I could not take [my cars] to the movies and leave them. I am very protective, like a mother with her children."

Others named their cars or trucks in ways that suggest it is seen as a lover more than a child: "My Cheree," "Shot Through the Heart," or "Candy," for instance. One car collector explained, "When I see a car I want, it's love at first sight. That's how it was with the Lamborghini. I saw one race in Europe and I just had to have one."

Having a collection of automobiles provides people with a second love—like a mistress. These men slip away from their wives and families to spend time alone washing, waxing, babying, and admiring their cars:

spending countless hours with a toothbrush and soap, cleaning under every inch of each rim, because of the uncontrollable emotional investment. This is why very few spouses condone their husband's addiction—they feel like they are competing with the cars for their husband's attention. These cars are also like an old friend. They are always there and always seem to listen and understand your problems. They're like an old familiar face you can turn to when you have nowhere else to turn.

And one man recognized the car-as-mistress analogy, but explained the "My wife would rather I work on it than on her girlfriend."

Car Personalities. Both particular cars and makes of cars are seen as having personal characteristics. Several men consistently referred to their cars as "she," noting "She's cranky," "She handles well," and so forth. One exception in assigning cars feminine personalities was the mud-racing and car-crushing monster trucks, where a masculine name is much more common, because of the emphasis on performance and power rather than just appearance. Here names included "Taurus," "Steamboat Willie," and "The Mud Stud." There were often inferences made about owner personalities based on the kind of car they drove. Bill, the 34-year-old Porsche owner explained:

I would not get into a Corvette. It performs maybe better than a Porsche, but it has the wrong status, wrong image! [What kind of image does the Corvette have?]

Polyester and gold chains, [laughs] leather jackets. They walk into a gas station, wing the gas card down, keep looking back at your car like yeah, I'm bitchin'. Porsche owners don't have to do that. [How does the Porsche owner behave?] Its either you or me pal, that kind of deal. Never looks at anybody; kind of more secure. Corvette owner, man he will wax his car out in the park first time he gets a chance, just to show everybody, "Hey look at me!" The 'Vette owner is someone who wants everyone to know that he has a Corvette. Where a real Porsche owner is secure about himself.

Nor did Bill find all Porsche owners to be admirable:

[So what do you think of the 944 driver?] Garbage, ego problem, punk: hangs out at Bourbon Street, hangs out at the Dead Goat, hangs out at Oscar's. People that buy 944's or 928's have major massive ego problems. They know nothing about Porsche. They buy them for the ego trip.

CARS AS SACRED OBJECTS

Great devotion is directed to activities involving automobiles for these men, such that, for them, automobiles can often be regarded as sacred (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989). For these men the cars and car activities in which they are absorbed are revered and regarded as fundamentally set apart from the ordinary profane world. Processes by which objects can be made sacred or kept sacred include ritual, sacrifice, pilgrimage, and separation from the profane world of commodities (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989). Each of these processes was observed among the automobile enthusiasts studied.

Ritual

There is some evidence that when greater importance is attached to cars, they are better cared for (Belk 1987). When performed with proper reverence, such washing and waxing of a car can be regarded as a baptismal ritual (Mol 1976). The importance of this ritual was suggested by Jim who washed his car every Saturday for the past 16 years:

[How much time would you spend driving it and working on the car?] On my own, probably every Saturday for a half day. [Every week?] Every week, religiously. [How important was this, would it come before a date or something like that?] Oh yeah, I did not go anywhere unless it was clean. Nowhere! But I think that's the same for most guys. ... But before, sometimes I would wash it everyday. Every day boy! That's the thing, you don't want to be in a dirty car.

Similarly, Bill explained the care rituals he performed on his Porsche:

On a good day, if I didn't have anything to do I could spend 4 hours cleaning it. Then jump in it, drive it to the gas station and feel good about it. ... Get a Q-tip with Armor-All on it and slide it down the seams, pull off the wheels polish them up, shampoo the carpet, all that stuff.

The most extreme care rituals are enacted by those who enter their cars in automobile shows. At one concours, every time a line of cars being driven or pushed to their assigned display locations stopped, one man jumped out and polished his wheels. Using soft paint

brushes, cotton swabs, toothbrushes, and toothpicks to remove stray dust is common. The "white glove" inspection by the judges in special white garments is a separate ritual by these designated "priests" and also highlights the sacred status of the cars and reinforces the care rituals their owners have performed on them. It is no wonder that after the rituals of restoration, care, and devotion performed on these cars, many who show them place "hands off" and "please to not touch" signs on their cars.

Perhaps a more widely shared ritual is the annual automobile show, as described by Greeley (1962):

The cult of the sacred car has its adepts and initiati. No gnostic more eagerly awaited a revelation from an oracle, than does an automobile worshipper await the first rumors about the new models. It is at this time of the annual seasonal cycle that the high priests of the cult—the auto dealers—take on a new importance as an anxious public eagerly expects the coming of a new form of salvation.

Fewer and less dramatic annual style changes in automobiles may have rendered these particular public rituals less frequent, but surely no less intense. Besides the anticipation of seeing new models in person, informants report scrutinizing automobile magazines and Internet sites for sneak previews and annual reviews of new models.

The rituals of automobile enthusiasts also involve secret or special knowledge shared by all "true believers," as Plascencia (1985) found among "low riders" in the American Southwest. This knowledge may be gained from definitive publications on a type of car (called "bibles" by their readers), but must often be supplemented by other magazines, Internet bulletin boards, and discussions interpreting and updating the classic sources. When men meet at auto shows as strangers they are then united by ritual discussions disclosing their shared esoteric knowledge of the automobiles they love. The litany of these discussions and the beliefs that constitute the dogma of automobile sects is illustrated by Jim, a Porsche owner and a true believer:

The original Porsche and the originator, Dr. Ferdinand Porsche was incorporated by Hitler to build the peoples' car, the Volkswagen. Since he has died his son took over and totally fucked up the company by building 928's and 944's. His father, Dr. Ferdinand Porsche was only interested in building the rear engine cars. A True Porsche enthusiast that has a basic knowledge of what the history of the car was, the history of Dr. Ferdinand Porsche—who he was, who he worked with—how the car performs, how the car treats them; a performance-oriented person that wants a car that handles, accelerates, brakes, and corners to the driver's ability. He is an enthusiast!

Another such automobile cult (there are many) is that of the Volkswagen 1300 or "bug" (Klapp 1969, Hammond 1970).

Salvation and Sacrifice

If Jim sounds a bit like an evangelical preacher, the sacred metaphor also includes a healing process in which enthusiasts are able to rescue and save damned automobiles from the abyss of decay and corruption by laying their skilled and caring hands upon them. The metaphor of saving these cars is one often employed by those who restore them. The process of restoration can also be seen as one of sacrifice and commitment of time, money, skill, and effort. For one 65-year-old who loves Model A's, it was an abomination to see one that had been turned into a street rod. He bought it in 1965 with the intent of restoring it to "the way it should be." Over the next

seven years he spent an estimated 4400 hours and \$20,000 stripping it down and rebuilding it into a 1929 Model A. Another man who had restored five vehicles spoke with pride of finding them in fields with only weeds and field mice attending them, and then bring them back to their former glory. Others spoke with similar pride of their restored cars and trucks as having started out as literal basket cases—mere baskets of parts. Bringing the dead back to life is the implicit metaphor in all of these accounts.

Pilgrimage

One man who shows the Corvettes he restores at Corvette shows around the U.S. refers to these shows as “heavens.” The greatest pilgrimage site for automobile believers is the annual show in Hershey, Pennsylvania, which is the largest in the country. The other prominent type of pilgrimage site for car restorers is automobile museums, such as the former Harrahs’ collection. When this collection was sold off, enthusiasts saw this as a great sacrilege.

Not all automobile restorers bring their cars out of their protective wrappings only for shows. Another type of enthusiast makes a different sort of pilgrimage by taking their cars, along with fellow enthusiasts, on special tours. These tours are for specific categories of cars such as one- and two-cylinder cars and the participants all dress in appropriate vintage clothing for the tours. As with religious pilgrims traveling by foot, the going can be slow. The smaller engine cars slow to 5 miles per hour on hills and traveling 70 miles takes all day. Being in the company of fellow pilgrims is an important part of these tours and results in a great feeling of kinship or *communitas*, as is typically the case with religious pilgrimages (Turner and Turner 1978). The automobile clubs to which many of these men belong offer a similar spirit of *communitas*. But the clubs are careful to include only true believers, and thus the president of a Jaguar club says, “Replicars [reproductions with non-original parts] aren’t real. A replicar [owner] could never get into our club.”

POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE EFFECTS

Social and Asocial Aspects

Cars and sports are so much a part of men’s conversational repertoires that some efforts to get men to really relate to one another have found it necessary to ban these topics of conversation (Adler 1991). Besides providing an external focus for conversations between men, cars and trucks are often cited by enthusiasts as a common interest that brings the members of their family together. While this is sometimes true, most often in the case of men and their sons, because men are the primary enthusiasts in most families and because these men seldom let others in the family drive their cars, the extent of participation by other family members is in most cases restricted to helping clean the car and attending shows. The wife of a man who restores Ford Thunderbirds proclaimed that she and her husband shared in this hobby. When I asked her for details, she said she helped clean it and, after pausing for a moment to reflect, added enthusiastically, “and sometimes he lets me ride in it.” Even this may be more social than other men who spend countless solitary hours in their garages with their cars. These men’s photo albums and wallets are full of pictures of cars and car shows, rather than people. This is not to say that all men studied preferred cars to people, and for younger men this was rarely the case. But for many men the car is more an escape from people than it is a focus of interaction with people. One man explained how escaping to work on his car provided him with therapeutic benefits: “Its nice because an inanimate object can’t talk back to you. I deal with a lot of rude customers all day and working on the car sort of helps to restore me to sanity.” The solitary nature of driving in an automobile provides

a similar benefit for others, and several men noted that when they are feel stress they jump in their cars and go for a drive.

Addictive and Compulsive Potential

Addiction is both clinically and culturally defined such that labeling something as an addiction requires both dependence and the cultural judgment that this dependence is undesirable (Walker and Lidz 1983). Contemporary Western culture does not commonly describe dependent love of another person as an addiction and it has also generally been willing to exempt dependent love of objects from this label as well (Belk, Wallendorf, Sherry, and Holbrook 1991). Nevertheless the self-diagnosis of addiction and being a “car nut” came up in a number of interviews to describe the restoration, maintenance, and collecting activity of these men. According to one collector:

The collecting of cars is also like an incurable disease. Once it gets inside of you, you can’t stop looking for a new car. Then once you find one you really like, you’ll go to extremes to get it, even if you can’t use or even sometimes afford it.

For another man who has been collecting and showing cars for 25 years,

It’s [my continued involvement] not for prestige or trophies anymore, but rather it’s more like a disease—like alcoholism. It’s something you just can’t shake. This is what caused the snowball effect in the first place. You start innocently enough in the beginning and before you know it, you’re hooked. That’s why I’ll be playing with my cars until the day I die.

For others, it is working on the cars that has addictive and compulsive aspects. A 25-year-old who is in college saw this danger and disciplined himself accordingly:

Because of school, I only get to work on them [his three cars] during the summer and on breaks. I have to avoid them during the quarter because if I ever started working on them I’d flunk my courses. Once I get started working on them, I can’t stop.

Thus, even though society may not label their behavior addictive, automobile involvement has a seemingly unavoidable attraction to a number of those studied.

Justifications

Given their absorption in their automobiles, these addictive explanations offered by auto enthusiasts might also be seen as justifications to others for what might well be regarded as self-indulgent behavior: I can’t help it; I’m addicted.” But other justifications are offered as well. One theme emphasized by several of those who restore cars is that, “It’s preserving history—our country’s history.” This justification was offered by one collector with 25 cars who was building a museum in order “to give the public an opportunity to enjoy my cars.” Most often such justifications invoke the cloak of science and attempt to suggest that the collector is trying to preserve rare examples of technologically significant accomplishments of civilization (Carter 1978). Less frequently an artistic cannon is invoked with the implicit or explicit rationalization that a thing of beauty is a joy forever. And in cases where the automobile or truck originated in the collector’s family, a more sentimental criterion of preserving family heritage and traditions is offered. One further justification or admission was offered by three of the automobile enthusiasts studied: the difference between a man and a boy is the price of his toys. Rationalizations aside, this playful

ludic aspect of automobile enthusiasm seems to underlie much of the behavior observed in this study.

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