



AMERICA'S AUTOMOBILE: Affection or Obsession, Myth or Reality?

INTRODUCTION

Americans have displayed an affection for the automobile from its inception late in the 19th century, across the 20th century, currently entering the third decade of the 21st century. That is the thesis of this article, evidenced by constantly changing car production designs with upgraded performance specifications, together with automobile ‘hype’ on the silver screens of prewar movie theatres, in videos and advertising ‘commercials’ on postwar television, and on Internet monitors. Glossy magazine four-color photographs of cars prompted countless applications that gained value from ‘drive up’ motels, outdoor ‘drive-in’ theatres, fast food ‘drive through’ restaurants, even sprawling suburbs displaying ‘bed-room’ communities many miles away from urban centers where residents work. Most suburbs that emerged across the United States immediately following the Second World War were unreachable on foot. In America, public transportation is minimal in many regions. Places such as ‘Levittown’ offered returning military service personnel (veterans) an opportunity to own their own single-family detached home as an alternative to public housing, apartment-dwelling, or living with relatives. American suburbs owe their existence to the automobile (Manton 2012). This article will attempt to interface the fanciful with the practical aspects of motor vehicles, focusing on automobiles as they have evolved across periods of American history, burgeoning then shrinking

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then growing again in size, horsepower, fuel consumption, cost structure, to meet changing characteristics of American consumer demand that remains rather constant in volume across economic cycles. Akin to the Liberty Bell at Philadelphia's Independence Hall, or New York Harbor's Statue of Liberty, or star-striped fictional 'Uncle Sam' as a cartoon caricature, the automobile has become an iconic symbol, actual or mythological, of what America is in spirit, of the practical freedom the country delivers to everyone within its borders.

From 1899 to 1999, the world of technology changed geometrically. It is continuing to change as we enter the third decade of the 21st century. Many of these changes have involved military or manufacturing technologies in which individuals participate as end-using consumers. Automobiles both inspire and reflect individual change itself: people drive automobiles themselves instead of merely riding on them as they do on airplanes, buses, or trains. So, when in movies or on television new cars are displayed, Americans consider this to reflect lifestyle changes for the population generally, as well as for themselves individually. Currently, the administration of US President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. is trying to change the hearts and minds of Americans by luring them away from cars and towards trains that are more economical and environmentally-friendly (Plumer & Popovich 2021). Time will tell if this planned change will be sustainable. If it will last, this can be only the result of a normative-re-educative approach; neither a power-coercive nor a rational-empirical approach is likely to work, to take strategies from Bennis, Benne & Chin (1985). Americans have not displayed concern for wasted gasoline or unnecessary carbon emissions. They do not reward politicians who try to tell them what to do.

Starting in the late 19th century, extending over the entire 20th century, and still going strong as the third decade of the 21st century begins, is America's affection for the automobile. Actually, one might say fixation or even obsession, because that affinity is so powerful that it embraces all segments of American society. Americans as a people are besotted by the automobile: cars unite them in a way ethnicity, politics, religion, even major league sports, have not done. This is evident from strong automobile sales charts

that persist even during current cyclical economic recessions (unlike during the Great Depression when they slumped 75 percent), with dealership sales and profit margins maintained by 'captive lenders.' Examples of captive lenders include Ford Credit, Chrysler Capital, GM Financial Company, industrial lenders owned or controlled by automakers themselves (Charniga 2021). That Americans are mesmerized by the automobile is more evident from portrayals of the automobile in pictures, initially on the 'silver screen' in cinemas from silent films of the 1920s to 'talkies' of the 1930s, across wartime blackouts, on television from the 1950s, as well as in the sale of 'replicars' both capable of being driven on the highway and in miniature scale for children's play or adult collectors. America has changed its landscape because of the automobile: from the drive-up motel to drive-in cinema to drive-through fast food restaurants, then on to Interstate highways and eight-plus lane thruways ('freeways' in California) and wildlife crossings on bridges above or tunnels beneath highways from New Jersey to California, such as Colorado's Ecoduct (Vaičiuliaitytė 2017). Some cars are timeless, such as Henry Ford's Model T. Others are iconic to specific generations: New York City mayor and songwriter James J. (Jimmy) Walker's c. 1930 Duesenberg 'J' (Wallechinsky & Wallace 1981) and Chicago mobster Al Capone's armored 1928 Cadillac Town Sedan, which was used to protect President Franklin Delano Roosevelt *en route* down Constitution Avenue from the White House to the Capitol Building on December 8th, 1941 to deliver his speech in which he asked Congress to declare war on Japan following its bombing of America's naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, together with naval and air assaults across Asia the day before. Most iconic of all, probably, is the 1961 Lincoln Continental limousine bearing Secret Service earmark 'SS-100-X' that carried President and Mrs. John F. Kennedy with Texas Governor and Mrs. John Connolly in Dallas on November 22nd, 1963. On that day and in that automobile, President Kennedy was assassinated, Governor Connolly was shot, and politics in America changed. When Connolly recovered, he left the Democratic Party, joined the Republican Party, and much of the South followed, making SS-100-X even more iconic.

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In the early aftermath of World War II, General Motors engaged song writers Leo Corday and Leon Carr to script and compose “See the U.S.A. in Your Chevrolet, America is Asking You to Call; Drive Your Chevrolet in the U.S.A., America’s the Greatest Land of All,” thereby jumping on the post-war patriotic band wagon by urging a generation of new home owners to travel, selecting the GM Chevrolet as their family vehicle. This song became world famous as the theme song of *The Dinah Shore Show* on National Broadcasting Company (NBC), sponsored by Chevrolet division of General Motors from 1955 through the 1961 season. That song epitomizes the coupling of the American automobile with the United States as a country, together with American culture. As playwright Moss Hart reflected in his first Broadway play, *Once in a Lifetime*, quoted by David Kamp in “Rethinking the American Dream,” “[t]he only credential the city asked was the boldness to dream” (2009). Boldness to dream captures at once New York City plus the contribution the American automobile made to cities across the United States, enabling ordinary people and even those challenged by immigrant status, language deficiency, or poverty to “See the U.S.A.” even if their Chevrolet was a used model, aging, or not even a Chevrolet, but still running. Kamp went on in the same *Vanity Fair* piece to observe:

Hart, like so many before and after him, was overcome by the power of the American Dream. As a people, we Americans are unique in having such a thing, a more or less Official National Dream. (There is no correspondingly stirring Canadian Dream or Slovakian Dream.) It is part of our charter—as articulated in the second sentence of the Declaration of Independence, in the famous bit about “certain unalienable Rights” that include “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness”—and it is what makes our country and our way of life attractive and magnetic to people in other lands. (2009)

An automobile provides an ordinary American with “Liberty” to travel in “pursuit of Happiness,” core values from the *Declaration of Independence* (1776) as Kamp noted (2009).

It is more than that, however, in that the automobile and what Detroit automakers enlarged it to stand for became America itself. Across the 20th century, but actually from World War II onward, the automobile became the leading object of what may be called

America's *mechanical* Manifest Destiny, to borrow that phrase coined by John L. O'Sullivan (1845; *accord*, Johannsen, 2004) as applied to the continental expansion of the United States, 1803–1853. Of all the machinery invented or put to use in the United States, from Cyrus McCormack's "Reaper" to Eli Whitney's "Cotton Gin," the automobile expressed historically and expresses contemporaneously the core values for which America stands in practice: Freedom to Travel, extended to everyone.

EXPORTED TO THE WORLD

Iconic cars include American automobiles driven in Europe and elsewhere beyond America's shores. An example is former Polish First Marshal and Prime Minister Józef Klemens Piłsudski's 1935 Cadillac Fleetwood Special 355D, currently on display just outside of the former residence of Marshal Piłsudski, Pałac Belwederski, in Warsaw. During its presentation by former Polish President Bronisław M. Komorowski in 2014, Professor Jan Tarczyński, a historian, noted that when the vehicle was unveiled initially just before Marshal Piłsudski's demise, Poland's leader of the *inter bellum* period quipped he had been "bought a coffin" because it was so heavily armored by standards of that time ("President Presents" 2014). Vehicles belonging to famous American Allies and adversaries alike have toured the United States: this author as a teenager sat in a ZIS-115 (110C) once belonging to Marshal of the Soviet Union Josif Stalin when it visited this author's hometown in the United States on tour. Sitting in that vehicle was an instructive experience, because it and most Soviet automobiles resembled American cars closely. This was the author's introduction to American intellectual property and technology infringement by foreign adversarial powers that is rampant currently. Against all this background, the humble Ford Model T, produced from 1 October 1908 to 26 May 1927, has been designated repeatedly as America's most important automobile ever (Finlay 2021; Snow 2014; Watts 2006).

LITERATURE REVIEW: AMERICAN MYTHOLOGY

To the earth's population living outside of the United States, and to foreign-born Americans, little is held to be more precious than the 'American Dream,' whether intact or shattered. Single

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family home ownership is the key element of that dream, arguably the automobile comes in second. That is, unless the American Dream is shattered, as it is in some respects in “Reality Behind Absurdity: The Myth of American Dream” (Sua 2015), or in “Rethinking the American Dream” (Camp 2009). America’s fascination with the automobile lingers on, however, even in the post-pandemic era when General Motors closed some of its factories on account of shortages of computer chip production without which new technologies cannot operate—gadgets deemed essential to some upper-crust 21st century automobiles including blind spot assistance, rear video camera, automated parking, lane keeping and lane tracking, and navigational assistance. Reality stands behind absurdity in America’s dependence upon the motor vehicle. Unlike the single-family detached home, a car is a possession nearly every American can afford to buy if s/he wants it. An automobile is a partial fulfillment of the American Dream, where myth and reality juxtapose, and where for some the myth becomes the reality. As Barthes observed incisively, “myth is a system of communication, that it is a message. This allows one to perceive that myth cannot possibly be an object, a concept, or an idea; it is a mode of signification, a form” (1984: 1). To many Americans, an automobile is more than an object, “it is a mode of signification, a form” (1984: 1). It is at once an “American Dream” whether “reality behind absurdity” as contended (Sua 2015), or absurdity ahead of reality. Some have resolved to “rethink the American Dream” (Camp 2009), particularly as that aspiration evades capture in an economy afflicted by constant inflation, price-gauging, and plague; although home ownership and other facets of that American dream encounter shortfalls, the automobile stands firm in its capture and retention of its peculiar version of an American Dream in motion, on wheels, capable of propelling people forward and backwards, actually and metaphorically. An American automobile forms its own *metalanguage*, to borrow that term from Barthes (1984), because the automobile defines what many Americans want themselves to be or to become as they advance their own mythological imagery. Part of the thesis of this article has been addressed three and four decades back in books on *The American Automobile Culture* (Lewis & Goldstein 1983), *America Adopts the Automobile, 1895–1910*

(Fink 1970), *The Car Culture* (Fink 1975), and *The Automobile Age* (Fink 1990), together with historical accounts of the automobile's emergence such as *Henry Ford and Grass-roots America* (Wik 1973), detailing how Henry Ford enabled America to change its mode of transportation from the horse and carriage to a horseless carriage. Both "the design and resurgence" of the American automobile are addressed well in discussion of *The Automobile Age* (Fink 1990, 377–403). Another book, *The Automobile in American History: A Reference Guide*, chronicles the American automobile across the history of the 20th century (Berger 2001), as does *The Great Book of American Cars* (Montgomery 2002), largely in pictorial format. Each of these books addresses the actual image of the American automobile as a machine. None of them focuses on the American automobile as a larger-than-life metaphor, as cars have inspired and facilitated realization of the American Dream for so many car owners of different generations. This is the purpose of the present article. As times have changed, so has the American automobile, burgeoning in size and speed, becoming a symbol of upward mobility.

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AMERICAN AUTOMOBILE PERIOD DESIGNS

American automobiles have changed, sometimes reactively to technology and societal values, at other times, proactively, automobiles have changed America. Sometimes, the automobile has been linked to a decade or multiple decades, such as before 1920, during the 'Roaring Twenties,' the 1930s, Wartime period (1940s), the 1950s and/or 1960s, modernism and post-modernism. Automobile historiographers have linked the car's development to rising affluence in the post-World War I period, concern for wind resistance in 'streamlines' or rounded shapes of cars from the late 1930s, 'shine' from the bright colors of many 1950s cars reflecting emergence of a growing middle class of car buyers moving from the city to the suburb, 'rocket' motifs of some early to mid-1960s automobiles that displayed bursting tail lights, epitomized in the 1960 Cadillac design and metaphoric wording of "Rocket Oldsmobile" as if automobiles were propelled into space during America's competition with the Soviet Union once the latter launched Sputnik, its first satellite. Then, 'animal hunch' designs

from the 1970s that seemed to stress metaphorically an ability of a vehicle to leap forward rapidly then conserve energy at cruising speeds, akin to kangaroos, lions and tigers or other wild kingdom beasts typified in the higher rear, lower front end, designs of many cars of that vintage, including their model nomenclature designations such as Dodge “Ram” and Dodge “Charger,” Mercury “Sable,” Ford “Cougar” and “Mustang,” Buick “Skylark,” and Chevrolet “Impala.” In total, at least 33 automobiles have been named after animals (Edwards 2013). In fact, also, of a list of 32 cars listed as having been the “most iconic movie cars” of all time, three-fourths (24) are American (Maio 2019), with almost all of the American vehicles being ‘muscle’ cars one way or another in terms of a powertrain sufficient to escalate their speed from zero to 60 miles per hour in a few seconds. Rather evidently, American car buyers veer toward automobiles that look and sound robust and powerful, often more robust or more powerful than they are, increasing mythology over reality.

ENTREPRENEURS AND INVENTORS

Most widely associated with the American automobile is Henry Ford, founder of the motor company that bears his name, chief engineer at Edison Illuminating Company (Detroit Edison) before he left on 15 August 1899 to manage his own company in building a “Quadricycle” using a carburetor (regulates air to petrol mixture to facilitate acceleration or deceleration of a vehicle powered by a fuel-injection engine) Ford himself invented in 1898 (“Henry Ford Leaves Edison” 2009). In 1908, William Durant formed General Motors (GM), also in Detroit, Michigan, making that city America’s car capitol. Ford and GM drew on emerging technology such as C.L. Horock’s telescopic shock absorber (1901), Louis Renault’s standard drum brake pads (1902), and eventually an electric starter invented in 1911 by Charles Franklin Kettering (Carey 2019). Arguably, the most innovative and long-lasting design was for Chrysler’s ‘Airflow’ that emerged from 1934 to 1937, designed by Chrysler engineers Carl Breer, Fred Zeder, and Owen Ray Skelton (Stein 2009). ‘Airflow’ design was incorporated in many Chrysler cars such as DeSoto and Imperial, copied by Ford for its Lincoln Zephyr because of its wind-resistant aerodynamics, fully-enclosed interior,

and technological superiority, giving renown to 'Chrysler engineering' as a popular phrase, although it suffered from sluggish sales because it was an automobile introduced decades ahead of its time ("The Chrysler Airflow" 2014).

In 1913, Ford commenced to use the world's first moving assembly line in the crafting of increasingly heavier and more complex automobiles (Ford & Crowther 2003). At that time, Ford produced the Model T car, offering the public a car "in any color, provided it is black!" During the same period, 'Billy' Durant purchased Buick (1904), used it to form GM (1908), then Olds Motor Works (also 1908) that became Oldsmobile, Cadillac (1909) and Oakland Motor Car (1909), destined to become Pontiac (McIntyre, 2021). When Durant was removed from GM, 1911–1915, he backed Louis Chevrolet's company, leveraged that to regain control of GM between 1916–1920. Consequently, under Durant's leadership, GM consolidated its control over five automobile brands ("William Durant Creates General Motors" 2020). GM purchased control of automobile parts manufacturing companies, one being United Motors of which Hyatt Roller Bearing Company was a division, headed by Alfred P. Sloan, Jr. When Durant was eased out of GM again in 1920, Sloan became its chief executive officer, holding that post for 33 years from 1920 to 1953 (Sloan & Sparkes 1941; Sloan, McDonald & Sloan 1964). Between 1920 and 1947, for over a quarter century, the head of research at GM was Charles Franklin Kettering, inventor of the essential electric starter, leaded gasoline, and freon coolant used in refrigerators and air conditioners, and founder of Daytona Engineering Laboratories Company (Delco). At E.I. Du Pont de Nemours (Dupont) before he joined GM in 1920, Kettering developed the first practical paints that enabled automobiles to have bright enameled surfaces, characteristic of expensive 1930s automobiles then of most American cars from the 1950s onward, so American cars became changeable at low cost. Amongst many quotations attributed to Kettering is a statement stressing importance of perseverance: "it doesn't matter if you try and try and try again, and fail. It does matter if you try and fail, and fail to try again" (Boyd 1957, 91). When Sloan funded creation of what was to become America's leading cancer research hospital in New York City, he turned to Kettering

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to supervise installation of cutting-edge technology, as Kettering had done at General Motors, then that institution was named Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center (Weaver 1975).

In the 21st century, new automotive industry iconic names have emerged, namely Elon Musk as chairman and chief executive of Tesla, Inc., and Tesla's chief designer, Franz von Holtzhausen, who designed Tesla's four principal vehicles: S, 3, X and Y, brilliantly in each case. In fact, Tesla's Model Y remains on the drawing boards and in prototypes. An interesting question will be whether Tesla follows the Ford or the GM route in terms of make and model diversification if it continues to produce the world's most popular automobiles (Fosse 2019). Part of the answer to this question may depend upon the courses of action pursued by competitors such as Ford, GM, VW, others (Zakarin 2021), meaning the electric car market is becoming crowded, particularly with traditional fossil fuel automakers as they enter the market of electric and 'smart' automobile manufacturing, sometimes in partnership with high-tech Internet giants (Pyper 2019). Ford CEO Alan R. Mulally retired from Ford, the company he had turned-around to profitability, on 01 July 2012 (Hoffman 2012), joined the board of Alphabet, Inc. (Google) 15 days afterwards, reputedly to advise Google on use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in automobiles, including 'driverless cars' (Abuelsamid 2017; Albert 2020). Clearly, Detroit and Silicon Valley are concerned currently with cars and their 'effect,' much as American consumers always have been (Columbia 2021).

*Car Culture(s)
Machines, Roads
Mythologies*

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THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

At least a part, and perhaps a huge part, of America's affection or obsession with the automobile is derived from the American automobile as a myth. Gaines (2001), drawing on 'glossematics' developed by Louis Trolle Hjelmslev and Hans Jørgen Uldall with others from the Copenhagen and Prague Linguistic 'Circles,' distinguished between 'form content' and 'expression content' (Nöth 1990; Badir 2000), as articulated in the following excerpt:

Myth blends in with a message and denies its own existence through its apparent subordination to the content of the first and second order signifiers. When we become aware of myth, it shifts. We can look at an example of two moments that shift between watching a play

and watching someone in the audience engaged in reading the play. The play constructs an internal narrative, but watching the reader shifts attention away from the story content to the form of play and its relationship to its audience. (Gaines, 2001)

Subsequent attention to the same emerged with Taverniers, 2008, then Badir, 2014 and Hébert, 2000. Television culture has been explored in the context of myth (Fiske 1987; Silverstone 1988). In this article, the point is that the automobile is akin to Gaines's play: it begins with story content, then takes on an additional meaning on screen or on television in the vehicle's relationship to its audience. This is the reason why automobile advertisements on television sell automobiles to the audience that watches those cars on TV. Also, it is the reason why automakers compete to include their latest models as props for the latest movies and television series. Automobiles depicted on the silver screen or on television inspire viewers to purchase automobiles in their effort, perhaps subliminally, to become clones of or at least similar to characters driving automobiles in movies or on videos they watch. What are the reasons why anyone purchases a particular automobile, from where does the 'hype' originate to make American automobiles seem larger than life? Is it affection or is it obsession that drives Americans toward cars? Such research questions should be addressed. This article takes guidance from myths and symbols derived from television culture, then applies them to automobile culture both as a 'play' in movies and on TV and in the vehicles American consumers purchase, following the movement from internal to external narrative, meaning movement from defining self to one's self then defining self to others.

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INTERBELLUM COLLABORATION

American automaking oligarchs solicited and accepted accolades and money from Nazi Germany as that country rose geometrically across the 1930s to dominate Europe in the 1940s, before being crushed by Allied military in 1944 and 1945 as pointed out in 2005 by Henry Ashby Turner, Jr., Stillé Professor of History *Emeritus* at Yale University. Both Ford and GM traded mightily with the Nazi regime, leading some historiographers to conclude the rise of Hitlerism would have been slowed or derailed had not American automak-

ing giants collaborated to boost German technology. Henry Ford himself accepted Nazi Germany's highest recognition to a foreigner, the Grand Cross of the Supreme Order of the German Eagle in 1938 on his 75th birthday, 30 July 1938 ("*RareHistoricalPhotos*" 1938). Ford owned a small Michigan newspaper called *The Dearborn Independent* during the 1920s in which he published antisemitic articles reproduced widely across the burgeoning Nazi empire, such as "The International Jew, the World's Foremost Problem," republished by Nazi elite Theodor Fritsch in the 1930s (*Ibid.*). Hitler kept a life-size portrait of Henry Ford in his Munich office beside his desk, praising Ford as his 'inspiration,' accepting 35,000 Reichsmarks from Ford Europe on the occasion of Hitler's 50th birthday (Dobbs 1998). General Motors was little better under its longtime CEO Alfred P. Sloan, Jr., as Germany recognized by awarding a similar medal to James Mooney, GM Europe managing director, inscribed "for distinguished service to the Reich," that Mooney declined to return when criticized, arguing GM could not afford to jeopardize its USD 100 Million investment in GM Opel, Europe's largest automaker at the time (Dobbs 1998; Turner 2005). This highlights that United States automotive technology was held in the highest regard by Germany, long ranked as Europe's leading country in technology development. At the same time, it tarnished the reputations of America's leading automaking companies, owners and managers (Marriott 2006; Higham 1983).

TYPOLOGY OF AMERICAN AUTOMOBILE DESIGNS

American automobile literature identifies several epochs in the development of American cars stylistically and technologically: Antique Car Era (1893–1919), Vintage Car Era (1920–1945), Classic Car Era (1945–1972), then subsumed the Antique Era into a more encompassing Brass Car Era (1890–1919) and Electric Car Era (1890–1919) that currently must be renamed 'First Electric Era' to distinguish it from the 'Second Electric Car Era' that began with launching of Tesla's Model S on 22 June 2012 followed by marketing of Tesla's Models X, 3, and Y, each designed by American designer Franz von Holzhausen, with competitors such as Ford, General Motors, and Germany's Volkswagen in hot pursuit (Zakarin 2021).

It is helpful analytically to begin with the 'antique' car era, if only to contrast that with the periods to follow. During the 'antique' car period, automobiles resembled horse-drawn carts and carriages, simple cars resembling carts, more sophisticated versions copying carriages or horse-drawn coaches, simply adding motors. Hence, a colloquial nickname for an early automobile, "horseless carriage." Parallel to a horse-drawn carriage, a horseless carriage was functional, intended for transportation instead of making any derivative statement. This type of car was powered mostly by gasoline, although some were powered by steam or battery-sourced electricity, dominated America's streets in the period leading up to and during World War I, transitioning to the Vintage era automobiles by 1920. With World War I behind Americans, a period of unbridled prosperity ensued during the 1920s (culminating with the stock market crash on October 29th, 1929), in contrast to a period of economic downturn leading to hardship in Europe. So 'vintage' period automobiles appeared more and more in America across the decade of the Roaring Twenties, that designation owing as much to noise made by increasingly more powerful automobiles as to the noise of music in dance halls that flourished during the same decade. In fact, as American disposable income burgeoned during the 1920s, more American consumers were able to purchase private automobiles. General Motors under the leadership of Alfred P. Sloan, Jr. is credited with innovating "planned obsolescence" driven by frequent (rapidly becoming annual) design changes. Vintage cars spanned the 1920s and 1930s, plus the war years through to 1946 when the post-war era ushered in the age of the American Classic automobile. Although arguably the prettiest and most powerful, Classic period American automobiles made the list of the worst American cars ever made in significant number (Hamilton 2020), often due to sub-par performance, sometimes on account of bizarre styling. An American car must meet expectations of the buying public even if on occasion, or even more frequently, those expectations prove to be unrealistically fanciful. Ford Motor Company's Model T propelled early 20th century Americans away from the horse and buggy and into what would become the modern age. It is difficult to say that subsequent automobile changes did anything

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of the sort, besides making drivers happier. The “pursuit of Happiness” is an American ideal, as stated incisively by Kamp (2009). Beginning with Ford’s Model T and continuing thereafter, it may be said that the American automobile made people happier. This would be true as cars evolved from being mere machines such as the Model T Ford to become works of art, statements about success, culminating with statements of excess such as with the Duesenberg. Be that as it may, whether modest, flamboyant, or gauche, American automobiles evoke their own personalities, more often than not reflecting showcase personalities of their owners. An automobile conveys what its owner desires to showcase to others. That may be accurate, frequently is overstated, sometimes is understated, a testament to an American driver’s candor and sincerity, or lack thereof. In some respects, for many an American driver, the automobile displays the mechanical Manifest Destiny s/he desires to impart to onlookers, be that real, imaginary, or contrived to enlarge one’s affluence by display of an inaccurate opulence. Much as the original Manifest Destiny of the United States was fictional in the minds of 19th century statesmen because it did not command popular support and wrought havoc on Native American indigenous people, the American automobile can be larger than life as it captures its driver’s fantasy life more than it captures reality. Undoubtedly, the standard of the American Classic sports car was introduced in 1953 with GM’s Corvette and Ford’s Thunderbird (Carey 2019). Transitioning from the ‘vintage’ to the ‘classic’ periods were the ‘woody’ station wagons of different genres and cost structures, largely aimed at replacing the grand touring vehicles of the 1930s ‘vintage’ period with vehicles that afforded more room for growing postwar families (Notte 2021). By the 1970s, the station wagon market became subsumed into the Sports Utility Vehicle (SUV) and, more recently, into ‘crossovers’ that merged SUV with sedan designs, with Detroit automakers returning to functionality.

Both designs and technology changed each decade, such that 1920s vintage cars evidenced a transition from pure functionality to ascetic styling, with 1930s cars preferring ascetic styling or form over function, especially on more expensive makes and models. As some poignant examples, 1930s cars tended to display dual



Fig. 1. Ford Model T ranked as America's most important automobile. Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/de/Ford_Model_T_1909_Serial337_RSidFront_Lake_Mirror_Cassic_16Oct2010_%2814877235955%29.jpg (CC BY 2.0).

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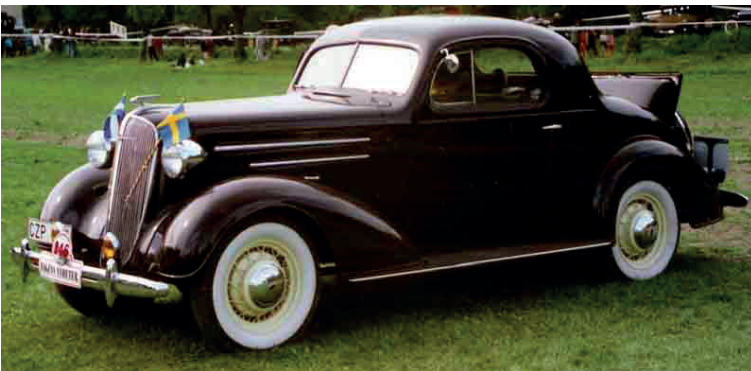


Fig. 2. 1936 Chevrolet Master Deluxe Series FD Sport Coupe. Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/f0/1936_Chevrolet_Master_De_Luxe_Sport_Coupe_CZP686.jpg (CC BY-SA 3.0).

side mounts, meaning a spare tire behind each front fender, left and right, just forward of its running boards or, alternatively, a single spare tire at rear above the bumper as on the 1936 Chevrolet Master Deluxe. On some 1920s and 1930s vintage touring cars, a trunk was mounted on or above the rear bumper into which to deposit suitcases or other personal property to take on a road trip. Beginning with late 1920s cars, continuing through the 1930s, vertical radiator grilles dominated the hood (bonnet) covering the engine, generally consisting of chrome designs, often with an automobile logo appearing on top of the grille. Most automobiles discontinued such ornaments with the 1940s, although European brands such as Rolls Royce and Mercedes continues to display respectively their “Statue of Ecstasy” and three-point star logo in the same location on many models, nowadays generally retractable for safety objectives, because in an accident, an ornament can penetrate the windshield, and security against theft (Shaw 2021).

During the 1940s, American automobiles changed again, much as they had in 1920, from the elongated touring cars of 1930s vintage to more compact, rounded, wind-resistant vehicles that ushered in the ‘classic’ car era that would survive the 1950s and 1960s, and even slightly longer. Beginning in 1937 but mainly from 1940, Ford introduced a more rounded styling on its Ford Standard and Deluxe models plus Lincoln Zephyr and Mercury (“Early Ford Store,” n.d.; “1940 Ford Deluxe,” n.d.), designed personally by Edsel Ford, only child of Henry and Clara Ford, with Ford’s first chief designer, Eugene Turenne (Bob) Gregorie (Crippen 1985). Classic era American automobiles tended to use shades of color, including two-tone colors, as methods of differentiation, beginning in the 1950s, arguably culminating with the 1957 Plymouth Fury “torque flight” that used push buttons instead of a shifting gear. This automobile was used in the movie *Christine*, with that car portrayed as having a mind of its own. In appearance, this was a ‘muscle car,’ similar to the 1968 Mustang GT390 used in the movie *Bullitt* and the 1971 Pontiac LeMans used in the action film *The French Connection*. In technology, the Plymouth Belvedere used in *Christine* was an antecedent of the 1982 Pontiac TransAm supercar named “KITT” used in the television show *Knight Rider* a quarter century afterwards, displaying artificial intelligence enabling it



Fig. 3: 1959 Plymouth Sport Fury. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plymouth_Fury#/media/File:1959_Plymouth_Sport_Fury_photo-13.JPG (CCO).



Fig. 4: 1961 Lincoln Continental of President John F. Kennedy. Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kennedy_Car_1961_Lincoln_Continental_\(31609510632\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kennedy_Car_1961_Lincoln_Continental_(31609510632).jpg) (CC BY 2.0).



Fig. 5: 1961 Lincoln Continental. Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1961_Lincoln_Continental_\(20960224924\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1961_Lincoln_Continental_(20960224924).jpg) (CC BY 2.0).

to maneuver driverless, talk to the character Michael Knight, recommend to him courses of action. Also, the *Christine* Plymouth was a precursor to the DeLorean Motor Company DMC12 used fancifully in the movie *Back to the Future*, where the car could transcend date and century as a time machine. Interestingly, nearly half a century afterwards, Chrysler Jeep is introducing the 2021 Gladiator Texas Trail, currently available in Texas only (Palmer 2021). This Gladiator is a reminder that many Americans continue to desire a ‘muscle’ automobile, as is the fact that the next *Fast and Furious* movie is scheduled to feature an all-electric 2021 Dodge Charger. Rather evidently, with the Internet viewed on a computer laptop in contrast to a television watched in the living room, American automobile consumers have come to develop a fixation on post-modern automobile technology in contrast to design by itself, desiring the same end result (powerful thrust) achieved with ‘clean’ and ‘green’ technology whenever possible. What the American consumer watches s/he continues to want to purchase. Thus, in the foreseeable future, it seems almost inescapable that American motorists will insist upon electric-powered vehicles providing them with the same, or even enhanced, ‘muscle’ as they grew accustomed to during the ‘classic’ car period. Next may be an electric *Christine* Plymouth or even an electric DeLorean time machine to take us forward into the past, fictionally, instead of *Back to the Future*.

Some American automobiles, notably during the Classic period, have made the list of most beautiful cars ever made. Understandably, that list included Aston Martin, Corvette Stingray, Ferrari, other competitor ‘designer automobiles.’ Also included on that list was the 1961 Lincoln Continental convertible and hardtop (no. 41) (“The Most Beautiful Cars Ever Made,” 2021). This author owned a 1962 Lincoln Continental convertible (1961, 1962, 1963 were almost identical), exactly like (possibly one of the same) twin Lincoln Continental convertibles owned by both United States President John F. Kennedy and attorney general Robert F. Kennedy (Redfern 2020). Although still in mint condition, the author owned it when it was much older!

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Five types of American car buyers can be identified, each with a watchword beginning with the letter “L,” including: “Lust,” “Love,” “Luck with Luster,” “Legacy,” and “Legend.” Each requires separate analysis although, to be sure, sometimes one overlaps another as in many typologies. By way of example, lust overlaps love generally, although the former tends to precede the latter in normal interaction. Also, legacy can become legendary, meaning that a legend is a legacy on a much grander, frequently longer-lasting, scale, *ceteris paribus*, as with examples such as the armored car mobster Al Capone had made that F.D.R. used, or the limousine in which J.F.K. rode when he was assassinated.

“Lust” is the motive behind some American automobile purchasers’ decision: to impress someone, such as a girl or boy friend, similar significant others. Typical of car buying for this purpose were the muscle cars of the 1960s and 1970s, manufactured before the ‘energy crisis’ that forced American automakers to downsize models. Such were the cars that silver screen movies and television series were made of, ranging from the 1969 Dodge Charger, named “General Lee,” used in the television series *The Dukes of Hazzard* (no. 1 on the “Most Popular Muscle Cars” list, n.d.) to the 1972 Ford Gran Torino (no. 10 thereon) used in the Clint Eastwood movie *Gran Torino* after which Ford named the automobile. Similar listings of Hollywood automobiles include an assortment of Chevy Chevelle SuperSport (SS), Dodge Charger, Oldsmobile 442, and Pontiac GTO vehicles (Oldham 2018). What the buyer of a Lust muscle vehicle wanted was power, an ability to increase speed from zero to 60 miles per hour in seconds. Ranking muscle cars in terms of how fast they went resulted in the 1966 Pontiac GTO Triple X winning the race as it appeared in the 2002 movie *XXX*, with the “General Lee” ranking only fourth, the 1971 Mustang Mach I used in the James Bond movie *Diamonds Are Forever* coming in sixth, with the 1967 Shelby Mustang GT 500 used in the 2002 movie *Gone in 60 Seconds* ranking only in ninth place (Bravins 2020). As pointed out in a recent article, it is difficult to pick a favorite among the range of typical muscle car contestants (E. Puckett 2021b) because, in the final analysis, they share more similarities than differences!

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“Love” is a separate motive that may (or may not) overlap with “Lust”: someone buys an automobile as a present for a significant other, usually a spouse or ‘kept’ person, ostensibly to show to the community the lifestyle to which the recipient has become accustomed. An example would be the expensive cars Kardashian family members give to each other as birthday presents (Thompson 2020). Celebrities in general are known to gift expensive cars to family members (Yagoda 2017). Sometimes this practice leads to questions, such as whether the gift really belongs to the donor who wants to shelter knowledge of it from business or professional stakeholders (Scherer 2018).

“Luck with Luster” is a third purpose underlying purchase of an automobile: to improve one’s status in the mind of a business competitor, customer or supplier, for example, to document (or pretend) that one has reached success, be that one an individual or a company. In this fashion, the car buyer is hoping the automobile will bring the person or company “Luck with Luster” in the form of more business, such as by publicly touting the company’s financial success (Zhang 2020). There is a down side to a firm’s purchasing or leasing vehicles for its executive employees: risk of tarnishing brand with an accident, morale among employees lacking this perquisite, taxation (Fraser 1967; Hodges 2015). As an example, the American commercial printing industry (glossy magazines and catalogues) is very competitive, historically generating an eight percent (8%) profit margin at best, but in the ‘vintage’ and early ‘classic’ car periods suppliers of ink products were known to purchase or lease new Cadillacs each year or so for the client printing company CEO *and his wife*, meaning two luxury automobiles to a customer. This changed necessarily from 16 August 1954, when Congress added the “ordinary and necessary” qualification to 28 U.S.C. section 162, allowing only an individual or a company to deduct automobile expenses on vehicles they used themselves, and then only if the expense is “ordinary and necessary” (“Trade or business expenses”). Providing a stay-at-home spouse with a free car would be neither ordinary nor necessary to a business, nor would a supplier providing a free vehicle to a customer executive be necessary. That was great news for taxpayers, bad news for recipients of graft in business and many local automobile dealers.

“Legacy” is a fourth objective underscoring automobile purchase: to leave behind a statement that reflects one’s stature as a concierge of fine art in the form of the automobile. Among celebrities, actor Clint Eastwood (E. Puckett 2021a), comedians Tim Allen (Symes 2021b) and Jay Leno are examples of celebrity car owners (Leno owns 169) (Parker 2016), but more ordinary Americans may perform this role as well, such as retired Eastman Kodak employee Ron Jones from Tennessee whose 175 car collection went up for ‘no reserve’ auction in 2021 (J. Puckett 2021b).

“Legend” is another objective in buying an automobile, meaning to leave behind someone’s vehicle to family or to an estate perhaps for the purpose of dedicating an automobile to one’s own memory, such as former first lady of China Soong Meiling’s 1980s Cadillac on display at the *Shilin* mansion park in Taipei, Taiwan (“Children visiting,” n.d.) or Polish Marshal Józef Klemens Piłsudski’s 1935 Cadillac on display at Warsaw’s Pałac Belwederski (“President Presents,” 2014).

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THE AMERICAN AUTOMOBILE AS A MYTH

In addressing the American automobile as a myth, also as a symbol that is part of the proverbial American Dream, one must separate the car itself as a machine from its value to driver, passenger, onlooker, as well as cinematic or television viewer. As automobiles take on larger than life significance, some American cars changed the automotive industry forever (Sapienza 2019). Chronologically, this seems to have taken place from the early 1920s with the emergence of silent motion pictures, gained momentum in the 1930s with “talkie” movies followed by color cinematography, peaked in the aftermath of World War II during the 1950s as color paints decorated automobiles of nearly every make and model in every price category. Here we can only summarize the unfolding of this event by referring to selected examples of the American automobile portrayed on the silver screen, particularly, also on television, from the 1930s to the present time. If as contended here Hollywood and television became automobile influencers by drawing consumer interest to a car’s external appearance, then sequentially the Internet should be credited with exerting a similar influence by drawing consumer influence

to vehicular technology, ranging from the electric car to standard or optional equipment (gadgets) available inside the automobile or under its hood. This author became aware of such a trend when on sabbatical in 2021 in the United States, where ordinary sports utility vehicles (SUVs) he rented nearly drove themselves, providing an ambiance when 'loaded up' comparable to foreign 'crossovers' such as Bentley Bentayga or Rolls Royce Cullinan costing nearly half a million dollars, superior to luxury sedans sold less than half a decade earlier. Standard packages include radar warnings of nearby obstacles ahead, behind, or alongside. In one sense, myth has become reality. Successful electric vehicles (EVs) tend to be larger than smaller. As a recent article documented with sales data stated, "if the US vehicle market has sent one message over the last decade, it's that Americans want large vehicles." The authors add that "[i]n 2016, analysts were shocked when the share of such automobiles—trucks, SUVs, and crossovers—surpassed 50% of the US auto market," although American truck owners have been over 90 percent male (Coren 2021). Before long, vehicles will be largely electric, such as the fully electric 2021 Ford Mustang Mach E available already but without an all-wheel drive option (Stern 2021). Once supply chain management of rare earth minerals required to make electric car batteries becomes solved with Asian suppliers that seems unlikely any time soon (Fingas 2021; Bryce 2019; Jamasmie 2019), the only real obstacle to dominance of EVs currently is that electric recharging stations have yet to be dispersed as frequently or reliably across American highways as gasoline filling stations (Redfern 2021).

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CONCLUSION

Americans purchase specific automobiles for reasons sometimes evident, at other times subliminal, hidden even from themselves. Vehicles they purchase or lease tend to be intended to make a statement, either generally to the public, or to an individual significant other to whom the statement is being addressed, possibly to themselves. Automobiles in the United States transitioned from antique "horseless carriages" to 'vintage' then 'classic' versions that lured buyers with style, color, and power controlled by planned obsolescence the automakers required to inspire

consumers to repurchase a new automobile every several years or sooner. This optimized carmaker profits. Styles of the 'vintage' period followed cars used in movies, 'muscle' power of the 'classic' period copied robust cars seen in movies as well as on TV, all-electric vehicles of the post-modern period focus on 'gadget' technology, with 21st century buyers of American motor cars becoming more concerned with the technologies they offer to the driver inside the vehicle, including safety features, than to the vehicle's exterior appearance or appeal, so reminiscent of 1930s automobiles. Some facets of the American automobile have changed very little: namely, its mythology as a symbol of "the pursuit of Happiness," of upward status mobility, and of an actual ability to travel beyond one's home to places far and wide in pursuit of at least a version of the American Dream. Without much doubt, however, across the 20th century and two decades of the 21st century, the American automobile can be witnessed as being at least as much myth as reality, perhaps more so. Americans, whether drivers, passengers, or pedestrian onlookers, display an affection for cars that borders on obsession. Automobiles have become America's *mechanical* Manifest Destiny. Whether divinely inspired or not, that destiny lingers on in the myriad of ways many Americans regard their automobiles.

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