

Hate Cars!

Fifth Estate Collective

from *The Eighth Night of Creation: Life on the Edge of Human History* by Jerome Deshusses

Today there is no city that the automobile has not turned into a vast parking lot, no avenue that is not a rectilinear traffic artery bordered by concrete sidewalks and strips of sickly, dying dusty, grayish grass. It will soon be impossible for people to talk to each other in the street except by walkie-talkie, impossible to breathe except high up in the mountains (where the air is only a little less toxic than elsewhere, and cars will soon be as numerous as tourists, anyway), impossible to cross a lane without thinking of the danger of being run down and killed, impossible to regard other human beings as other than so many Sunday mechanics mucking about underneath the artificial armor of their coachwork...

Hands gripping the steering wheel, eyes glued to the speedometer as the radio blares, the driver can no longer use speech. The semantics of the automobile is skimpier than the language of pre-paleolithic society. Of its dozen or so elementary signals, some nine of them are nothing but surrogate blows that signify intimidation, anger, and fright (for example, the index finger circling at the temple as the driver passes another car with a blast of the horn or a flash of the headlights). There is only one—a sort of Boy Scout salute—that more or less expresses thanks.

Medically speaking, a driver has no single organ operating in its natural state. At a hundred kilometers per hour, tension becomes almost tectonic. The adrenaline content of the blood rises, the digestive system ceases to function, the coronary arteries constrict (this is a prelude to a heart attack). The nervous system goes on a state of alert, and awareness is fully mobilized, for the rules of the asphalt chessboard are grim. Each error must be paid for; the lightest penalty means one's purse, the heaviest one's life.

Space is eaten up, counted carefully, weighed in the scales: so many liters per hundred kilometers. Timetables grip the traveler like the jaws of a vise; the automobile made them possible, now they make the automobile indispensable. Time is measured in cans of oil, slopes in degrees of inclination from the horizontal, hairpin curves in the number of gear shifts—and everything is measured in money. A highway has plenty of reading material: lies on the billboards, figures denoting kilometers, police orders, military instructions. One is held to ransom all the way from the toll bridge to the service station, and what with motorized brigades and police patrols and electronic controls, one might as well be in a barracks. "Caution," "dangerous curve," "squeeze right," "no passing," "stop," "60 maximum," "go," "pull over," "yield," "switch off headlights," "do not blow horn."

On top of all these injunctions come the threats of calamities ahead: "avalanche," "slippery road," "school crossing," "falling rocks," "factory exit," "concealed side road," "fog," "major accident, 1 kilometer ahead" (and one can see those sinister red lights blinking). It is impossible for the drivers to avoid catastrophe if they miss their exit so they must watch for the signs: only one kilometer to go, slow down, only 500 meters, shift down, take care, right turn signal on, sharp bend, scissors motion with the feet, grip the steering wheel tight. What remains of awareness must be directed towards the machinery: they must know where the distributor is, be prepared to get their hands covered with grease changing a spark plug, be able to use a jack and wrench to change a tire, to clean a windshield that is sticky with the entrails of mosquitoes and moths. An eight hour trip leaves them with shaky legs. Their expression is set, they are drooping with fatigue, their nostrils have gone dry in the tepid, polluted air, which is often laden

with stifling smells of plastic, benzine, and burnt rubber. The intersections are maddening, the curves irritating, the trees along the roads pillories. The countryside doesn't matter—they can't see it, anyway. Grey as tombs and smooth as billiard tables, the freeways asphyxiate meadows, woods, even villages. Each section of the road means the death of a thousand trees. The French autoroute A-86, in the Yvelines, cost four hundred hectares of forest.

Each lineup of cars, each traffic jam spells irritation, anger, impotent powerless rage. The horn blasts seem to multiply all by themselves; the driver's lungs fill with benzopyrene from the car ahead, which is going flat out but still seems impatient. In New York and Los Angeles during the evening rush hour, signs light up instructing drivers to switch off their engines: the air is becoming dangerous. Yet nothing discourages the craze for the automobile. Many attempts have been made in the United States to penalize the lone drivers; it costs them more to cross the Golden Gate Bridge, but they remain alone. The authorities in Osaka have considered making gas masks obligatory, but people would go on driving even if they had to wear scuba gear...

Not only does the automobile degrade everything and everybody, not only is it dirty, not only does it stink; it is also ugly in all its styles. A car's "beauty" is reckoned by its price, its speed, and its comfort—in other words (in order) by cash, competition, and flash. As with "beautiful" refrigerators and "beautiful" washing machines, bad taste and charlatanry combine to give the machine exactly what the customer expects to find in it. They recall the excessive elegance of bygone days in an attempt to compensate for the gas gauges and all the bric-a-brac of extraterrestrial pseudo-technology. Thus, the assembly lines drip paint, solder, and chrome, turning out hundreds of thousands of mauve cabriolets, cabbage-green coupes, and violet sedans. But the ideal hidden beneath this disguise is always the rocket, the shell, the tank.

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"As for automobiles, they come to reflect and sum up the marvels of consumption. They mirror a society without history, except when they are burning."

—Jean Baudrillard

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