

# Aberration: The Automobile

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## Introduction

It is said that the automobile industry created and brought life to the cities, but once again official history dangerously misrepresents and distorts the facts. In reality, it is responsible for the destruction of viable human communities and emblematic of death culture all over the world. The auto industry's monopolistic power kept Detroit and the rest of the world from creating alternative urban environments and consciously built car cities and a car world, chopped up and destroyed by incredible expressway systems—cities and a world for cars, not for people.

The automobile is a murderous weapon, responsible for 40,300 to 50,000 deaths and one and-a-half to two million disabling injuries yearly in the U.S. alone. Between 1913 and 1985, 2,530,119 people were killed in the U.S. in traffic accidents. Countless others were killed and injured on the job, in the production of the automobile. These figures have been on the rise all over the “civilized” world for the past five years. They are called “accidents” and yet they are assumed, calculated, expected—acceptable losses that go with the territory. Sterile, cold statistics somehow blur the bitter reality of this horrifying yet preordained massive slaughter.

The automobile is the embodiment of a culture of waste—the waste of human lives, of natural resources, the waste of people's time and energies. A blatant example of material waste is the phenomenon of the abandoned car: 7 million cars are junked each year in the U.S. The automobile lays waste to the landscape with its unending network of roads and freeways. It lays waste to the environment, creating acid rains that critically threaten the ecosystem, polluting the city air and thus perilously increasing the incidence of respiratory diseases. In its production, each automobile creates 50 barrels of toxic waste.

And we waste our days on this commodity that wastes us. Think of the time spent shopping for and purchasing a car, buying car insurance, getting licenses, driving permits; the time spent in maintenance and repair; the time spent waiting in your car in traffic jams, on the road, waiting at lights, in gas stations, in auto supply stores, in traffic court; the time spent looking for parking spaces and running nervously back and forth to parking meters; and worst of all, think of all the time spent at work making money to pay for it all. The car is clearly the focal commodity of capitalism. It purports to free us, but it binds us tightly in to a maniacal mechanical circle that parcels out our time in a frenetic stop and go.

City dwellers grow up listening to the constant roar of freeway traffic, engine noises, squealing brakes, and horns outside their windows. Most seem unaware when the urban disquiet breaks the “acceptable” decibel levels. Most seem not to notice when yet another “necessary” invention, like the car alarm, fills the day and night with countless frantic interruptions. Perhaps they adapt somewhat to the noise. Perhaps they grow quietly insane.

As the accompanying article from the French publication *Encyclopedie des Nuisances* recounts, the automobile, in its quick shift from luxury to necessity, has become an insidious obsession. Myopically perceiving the qualities of “speed” and “efficiency” as crucial and invaluable, people willingly accept the machine that leads them into a cycle of doom. They mindlessly allow it to control their lives and shape their environment.

“Aberration” is a clever and poetic treatise on the automobile. It exposes the technological trick played on humankind at the expense of the earth’s natural beauty, at the expense of community, at the expense of our very lives. Although its focus is Europe, it adeptly expresses many of our own sentiments about this commodity that has so thoroughly and so devastatingly transformed our daily existence.

—Lynne Clive

## **Aberration: The Automobile**

(This text was collectively translated in Montreal—with some stylistic changes by the FE staff.)

Aberration in people’s lives is not a passive phenomenon caused by a deceptive world that deludes their judgment. It is the consequence of non-reasoned acts whose sequence derives its logic from seemingly immediate constraints which are never questioned. Generalized aberration feeds on this lack of awareness. Since commodities and their circulation are the essence and basis of this social organization, we have chosen to consider the resulting aberration from a particular yet exemplary perspective—by looking at the circulation of a key commodity: the automobile.

Until the Second World War, the automobile was generally a luxury belonging to one class (FE note: this is more true of Europe than of the U.S.), which is apparent in the quality of production of that era and in the satisfactions one could experience from a landscape that had not yet been transformed for the automobile’s use. But the market has its own needs, and regardless of the sumptuousness of yesteryear, the privately-owned automobile was also destined for the poor, becoming what even an economist like E.J. Mishan (in *The Costs of Economic Growth*) called the greatest catastrophe of this century.

An increasing proportion of activity was organized around and for it, and already the first indications of success were appearing: in the U.S., the victims of a three-day-long traffic jam were lifted provisions by helicopter, and, in 1953, filled with auto-non-mobiles for the first time, Rome glimpsed the end of its eternity when a several-hour-long horn concert demonstrated beyond a doubt the joy of her accession to the modern economic disorder, to the orgies of moving at a snail’s pace and to the revels of circulatory thrombosis.

In order to develop, the cities believed that they were honoring themselves by copying everything that was disagreeable from the suburbs. The expressway reached more people and regions, infesting the countryside and giving mass recreation an appearance of noble modernity. After this triumph, the addiction to the pneumatic tire had definitely shaped people’s habits. The central truth involved was no longer necessarily an inflated statement: “The automobile is a working tool, and not at all for driving around.” (Francois Michelin, *Ingenieurs de l’Automobile*, October 1979)

## **An Implement for Self-Punishment**

The ordinary wage-earner must devote a quarter of his or her working time to support something that is definitely not a ballet dancer and that resembles an implement for self-punishment (see *Le Temps Qu’on Nous Vole*, Jean

Robert, 1980). And the infamy of this finality corresponds to what the economy calls well-being, which in this case is only the pseudo-facility of traversing the landscape of alienation. As always, this is only realized by damaging and altering the purpose of what had originally been produced. The luxury that the automobile was meant to incarnate, which, like any other luxury, implied privilege and ease, was never intended for modern wage-earners; it was through a fascinating aberration that luxury has lent its name to the inconvenience of modern objects. But for all their mobility, these common objects cannot yet circulate by themselves. To wear out and fall into decay, they need the very workforce they have to transport, which, in its turn, suffers the same fate.

We must therefore turn our attention to their owners and keepers—the drivers. Motorists, who work to go to work, are doubly ill-treated, and are directly controlled by the police down to their least significant actions. The network of roads is the drivers' immense work camp, subject to the arbitrary annoyance of a corps which is specialized in repression. Feared as potential murderers, motorists personify to perfection the human model of a decadent society; they are obedient and aggressive; powerless and anxious to dominate; pathetic and narcissistic. They lack two virtues when operating their machines—sophistication and mastery. In effect, they exist only as representatives of the objects they put into motion. Isolated inside their machines, what is only a functional connection between things assumes for them the unreal form of relationships between people. However, they are confident in the future and believe in progress with the same conviction with which they drive—that is, until the statistically inevitable catastrophe.

Their religion does not vanish in a haze of theological quibbling; it is quite concrete and indisputable, with redemption through labor expressed in horsepower. But religion cannot exist without fanaticism and sweat, and boredom's crystallization as a salary constitutes the only thing our motorized citizen is still able to fight and even kill for. In the zones where blasphemy, or at least impiety, reigns, the faithful even organize militias and, weapons in hand, sit up all night guarding their cars parked on gloomy lots. Because tomorrow they will have to fulfill the moral contract that ties them to their automobile-ball and chain and its developed terrain.

But, as with any other religion, what counts is the ritual and not the result. Otherwise, this one would have already broken down because of this simple observation: the average motorized city-dweller's speed is approximately twice a pedestrian's. However, if the social time required to produce the means of transport is added to the traveling time, the average global traveling speed ends up being inferior to that of people of the Paleolithic age. Such an objectively laughable result would legitimately disturb the user and planner if objectivity constituted a criterion of judgment in this society. No such luck! And what might only provoke a smile becomes a cruel joke when one realizes that reaching this point necessitated upsetting the rural and urban landscape from top to bottom.

## **Everything is Organized in Military Fashion**

The initial development of the automobile attained its limits quite rapidly; its very success provoked a situation in which it was impossible for it to be used. The most visible cause of the destruction of cities has been their adaptation to automobile traffic. This adaptation summarizes quite well how the intensification of commodity traffic overcame the subsequent aberrations of its propagation, through aberrations which were even more vast, until new developments permitted new automobiles to be put into circulation, awaiting a new suffocation.

Henceforth, in the ideal city—ideal for the automobile, that is—one third of the surface is destined for the circulatory network, one third for parking and one third for residual activities. But this remarkable achievement reached perfection with the construction of a vast road network exclusively meant for the automobile—expressways. Here we find the subjective motive which justifies the objective aberration of the means of traveling—the journey.

It is well known that expressway construction and the motorization of the labor force was one of the components of the mobilization of the German proletariat under National Socialism. Both the Volkswagen and the Panzerwagon could circulate on the expressways, with the military excursion constituting the other original blemish that dominates the modern journey. Everything submits to the same demand for speed and efficiency and to the same reality of slowness and waste. One can be certain to lose time, at best, and at worst life itself. During the elaborate maneuvers of going on vacation, which for the great majority of motorists is the opportunity of a real trip, everything is organized in military fashion. On "D" Day, the general staff organizes radio guidance for the

legions of vacationers. From the weather report to light aircraft reconnaissance flights, from reminders about necessary discipline to extrication itineraries in case the offense gets bogged down, everything has been foreseen for traversing hostile lands, from rescue squads to the installation of special tribunals.

Then the balance sheet is drawn up. Naturally, the losses are in proportion to the undertaking: during one year in a reasonably bellicose country like France, fatalities amount to the equivalent of a large infantry division, and the number of injured to several army corps. Such a criminal slaughter is perfectly accepted by the population as a natural disaster about which, by definition, nothing can be done. This incredible fatalism well demonstrates, once again, the general loss of common sense in our era.

## **A Wandering Which is Purely Formal**

These grotesque or tragicomical aspects are the consequence of a journey that has become pure motion. What modern travelers find everywhere, because of their separation from the scenery they traverse only with their eyes, is their submission to a time that does not belong to them. Fragments of petrified reality which line the route—residues of a formerly-lived totality in which they once made sense—become literally inaccessible and are indicated solely to prevent the driver from dropping off to sleep. And since the remains of ancient history are not sufficiently displayed along the expressways, monuments that can't be seen must be pointed out; it must be indicated that the motorists are in fact traversing the countryside of the region in which they find themselves.

Such an impoverished route, whose arbitrary pseudo-reality culminates in the noteworthy monument or the not-to-be-missed scenic view, still requires security-inducing rest stops where the neo-travelers will be able to satisfy their elementary needs with the usual products from the supermarket. The nomads' wandering is purely formal, said Hegel; they carry their world with them. In the same way, the modern travelers move through their now motionless world and the familiar commodity precedes them everywhere; it is already there waiting for them.

At the next stage of this logic, one finds the *ex nihilo* fabrication of synthesized realities which are meant to be laid out along the expressway's axis—typical villages, frontier towns, disneylands and the futuropolis. To get there—to these dumps of the spirit—the motorists should have acquired a new way of orienting themselves which no longer has anything to do with a concrete practical human sensitivity (even one as ludicrous as that which permits people to find their bearings because they turned right once and left twice). But there is no longer any other means of going from one point to another except by following the posted instructions—threatening subtitles of the misery of the landscape. Mistakes are not anticipated and they are irreparable; one is obliged to wait for the next exit leading to another labor or leisure unit. A sense of direction which might still bind us too much to primitiveness is substanceless and useless here. The different means that used to exist for “going straight ahead,” whether in the city or the country, choosing a series of streets or roads, are abolished by a redundancy of turn-offs which evoke psychotechnical tests for rats in a laboratory labyrinth.

## **Autonomy Turned Into its Opposite**

What was promised by automobile motion—autonomy—turned into its opposite, not only in the pseudo-choice of a destination, but also with respect to mastering the machine. Once again, fairytale electronics promise to remedy everything, initially by giving a new look to technical and social archaisms. They make the machine speak, and already city nights are filled with screams of raped cars. But humanoidisation by computer systems tends to more directly entail technical aspects. “It is not so much technology itself that will upset the automobile world, but the substitution of human intelligence, which is too unreliable, with an artificial one.” (Michel Guegan, *Les Dynasteurs*, supplement to *Les Echos*, October 9, 1985).

Since cars are work tools, their drivers have the same responsibilities towards the social organization that the operators of any other machine have, and whim becomes an offense and subject to prevention, as in any other labor activity. “Administering proper functioning, pampering the drivers, electronics will simplify their lives, but

in a certain sense will place them in a state of supervised liberty. New traffic conditions in the year 2000 will ill-tolerate excesses of temperament, and electronics will help to establish a new social order on the roads" (ibidem).

We'll forego comments about the police fantasies of these two bit standardizers. We will simply note that the sophistication and diversification of this archaic machine into hundreds of identical models evokes to a certain extent a kind of evolutionary dead-end similar to that of insects, rather than the arrival of a new age. The demiurge of this evolution in production remains the market, which today depends exclusively on the creation of pseudo-needs for which people agree to work. The automobile has fulfilled its role to perfection as motor of the economy for 50 years at the cost of harmful effects that we have only touched upon here, and of others that we have left out, for example, its massive contribution to generalized pollution or the insane waste of resources it demands. But it seems more important to us to conclude by denouncing what augurs rather than what has already occurred.

## **People Continue on Their Way to Atomization**

As usual, our best arguments come from our enemies, in this case from those fanatical partisans of modern alienation who are satisfied with what exists and at the same time by what is being established. "The automobile has structured our physical space since the beginning of the century. Electronics and telecommunications are beginning to structure our intellectual space. Will they renew economic and human geography as well?" ask the editors of a special issue of the magazine *Sciences et Techniques*, modestly entitled "Revolution of Intelligence."

To prevent the apparent neutrality of the formulation and the final question mark from disturbing the reader's positivist convictions, they specify further on in the text: "The steam engine has replaced the physical resources of people or animals. This time, it is a conceptual mastery which is promised, and no longer only the physical one offered by the automobile." And a representative of MIT, Edward Fredkin, is able to conclude, with the brutal frankness which is specific to a continent that voluntarily ignores contradictions: "Artificial intelligence is evolution's next step."

Thus, fortunately, the abstract movement allowed by the automobile is completed by the motionless movement of telecommunications. People continue on their way to atomization, and separation increases to the point of being a programmed loss of independent thought. Through the gratification of needs that were created by its former development, the economy has discovered a new world with possibilities as limitless as the fundamental dissatisfaction it produces. Because what characterizes this new market is that the underlying modern commodity—the message (from software to banal TV entertainment)—has become purely non-material. All the madness of a mode of production which has become independent from people reaches its inevitable conclusion when none of its premises are radically questioned. And the disasters we have become used to are nothing in comparison to those we can expect.

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