



# AMERICAR DREAMS

## (An Introduction)

*Drive ten thousand miles across America and you will know more about the country than all the institutes of sociology and political science put together.*

Jean Baudrillard, *America*

Even though Baudrillard's catchy piece of advice as for the most effective method of exploring America's landscapes (both real and imaginary) comes from his postmodernist travelogue limited to its titular country, it is probably difficult for anyone interested in contemporary car cultures not to extend Baudrillard's praise of the driving experience and perceive it in cognitive rather than transportation terms, not necessarily bounded by national borders. True, American driving culture and all its related contexts—its remarkable history, its contribution to social mobility, its spectacular cars, its mythologies, the list goes on and on—is not only the oldest one historically, but—given its ties with American life-styles, politics, social stratification and the overall consumerist mindset—also the most extreme one. From Henry Ford's Model T storming millions of American households at the beginning of the 20th century to Elon Musk's Tesla Roadster shot into space in the second decade of the following one, cars have shaped American horizons, both private and collective, like no other machine. In the process,

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they have conquered most of the environments we inhabit or visit, leaving a permanent imprint on our lives, regardless of our relationships with or attitudes towards them. As Daniel Miller aptly summarised, “[w]e may not be enthralled to cars, but the relationship of much of humanity to the world became increasingly mediated in the course of the last century by a single machine—the car” (Miller 2001:1).

Miller makes an obvious point here, so familiar to all those who have ever explored, contemplated or enjoyed even a portion of their cognitive horizon through the windscreen: even though American automobility serves as a natural point of reference here, mediating our modes of being-in-the-world with the aid of a car is by no means an exclusively American phenomenon and not even a Western one. Regardless of whether their availability is a means of political control, like in the post-WWII Eastern Bloc countries, or whether they remain objects of consumerist desires in contemporary affluent societies, cars have successfully conquered our planet and ourselves, not least by facilitating social circulation and founding several industries, but first of all by both inspiring and feeding on our dreams of freedom, unrestricted travel and social promotion.

And it is precisely their relentless ubiquity combined with their formative influence on our collective and individual milieus alike that allows Miller to reveal what he refers to as “the evident humanity of the car” (Miller 2001:2). Miller proposes a perspective which “examines the car as a vehicle for class, oppression, racism and violence, all evident products of our humanity,” adding that the car’s “humanity lies not just in what people are able to achieve through it, nor yet in its role as a tool of destruction, but in the degree to which it has become an integral part of the cultural environment within which we see ourselves as human [...], a term that touches the specific and inalienable individuality of any particular person” (Miller 2001:2).

To Miller’s notion of “inalienable individuality,” we could add another context that contributes to cars’ humanity and turns them into genuinely postmodernist machines, namely their ability to deconstruct most of the foundational binarities shaping our contemporary social horizons. In the public space of the road

or street, no other machine seems capable of protecting our anonymity better than an inconspicuous Honda Accord or Nissan Altima,<sup>1</sup> or, on the contrary, of allowing for self-expression of our youthful energy and dynamic personality (or a mid-life crisis) than a Chevy Corvette convertible, thus locating us on the preferred side of the audience-stage, or private-public border.

Should we choose the latter option, possibilities only begin to multiply. Putting aside blatant examples of luxurious cars used as tokens of personal wealth and prosperity, American society's political preferences—consciously or not—fall neatly into visibly discernible patterns as demonstrated by the last presidential elections. According to *Forbes.com*, in the heavy-duty pickup truck segment, Republicans outnumbered Democrats by eight to one, whereas a Democrat was likely to be seen behind the wheel of a small or mid-sized hybrid or electric vehicle twice as often as a Republican (Howard 2020).

Does this mean that from the socio-semiotic point of view, cars have been promoted, and from the obvious indicators of wealth and lifestyle, they have been elevated into components of our political identity? Or perhaps they have gained a specific political identity on their own and soon for a prospective buyer will be described not solely in terms of their body types, powertrain details or engine capacity, but also as left- or right-wing ones? That day is probably yet to come, but one thing seems relatively certain today: the very fact that we have somehow allowed them to become part of the political debate and that they have secured a place at both ends of the political spectrum already means that the meanings we ascribe to them—and subsequently use as indications of our own agendas—are much more profound than we might think.

Naturally, the left-wing vs right-wing opposition as perceived through the prism of cars is by no means the only binarity at stake. Gender and race stereotypes are next (if not the first) in line. Even though cars, or automobility in general, has been traditionally treated as the domain of white masculinity where the battle of the sexes has been habitually won by men armed

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1. See "Top 10 Most Popular Cars in America (2020)."

with the staple arsenal of speed, power, size, noise, skill and so on, it is easy to see that today the eponymous white masculine superiority has been significantly diluted if not pacified by the ongoing popularity of SUVs, especially the generally available mid-sized ones. Particularly in the context of gender stereotypes, SUVs seem to lead a double life. On the one hand—due to their higher ground clearance and four-wheel drive—they tempt men with the promise of exploration and domination over the natural environment, but on the other—due to their family estate-like boot space, numerous safety and comfort features and often seven seats, they connote family values and a general aura of domesticity and predictable family leisure.

This bridging of two prospective destinations, somehow combining external exploration with internal relaxation, and of the accompanying social and racial positions in one vehicle seems to have gone a step further, offering not so much ‘a little bit of home outside of the house’ but often a much more radical reversal of gender roles with men—white or otherwise—more and more often marginalized or removed from the picture altogether, a thing which has not gone unrepresented in, for instance, the discourse of popular advertising. The 2021 Ford Bronco Sport commercial features an all-(black)women outdoor expedition into the wild and remote American countryside, plainly unavailable for a non-SUV, whose opening mottos, as expressed by the African-American female off-roading hiker-bikers, are “They might think we don’t. We do,” “Think we won’t? We will,” and “Can’t see us going there? Look harder.”<sup>2</sup> A different commercial of the exact vehicle<sup>3</sup> features two women and a guy in another Bronco desperately trying to keep up with them and in the two-and-half-minute-long ad barely saying a word, while the women keep exchanging enthusiastic opinions about the Bronco’s off-road capabilities, the blessings of its G.O.A.T (Goes Over Any Terrain) system, praise its horsepower output, and occasionally, although in a rather condescending manner, refer to the guy behind. In one go, three of white masculinity’s classic stands—exploration, technicality and superiority over women—have been stormed and conquered

2. See “The 2021 Ford Bronco™ Sport: We Do | Ford.”

3. See “The 2021 Ford Bronco™ Sport: Walkaround | Bronco Sport | Ford.”

by a group of active females, unafraid to go out there in a stereotypically masculine vehicle.

But the cars' ability to challenge and dismantle traditional oppositions does not stop at the doorstep of personal identity issues, even though to the political, racial and gender contexts we could add the social significance of automotive heritage, the role cars perform in forming sub-cultures, all manner of car-related sports often juxtaposed with pro-environmental issues, or their dabbling in various kinds of criminal and counter-criminal activities, to name but a few. All these have turned out to be indispensable components of American national identity, varied and diversified as it is, and yet sharing a number of common traits which turn a nation into a community. Built from childhood memories of family road trips, learning to drive in an empty parking lot, earning peer respect after a successful donut, despairing over the first fender-bender, repairing or customising one's first ride, or taking sides in heated disputes over the superiority of Richard Petty over Jeff Gordon, these automotive rites of passage cut across racial, class, religious, sexual or political differences creating a network of formative senses, at the same time unique and collective.

But that is not all. As objects in themselves, cars have been critically approached in numerous ways, not only those constrained to their personal/collective significance or everyday practical use, including the ensuing infrastructure, economic and environmental issues, and all the aspects which John Urry refers to as the "system of automobility." (Urry 2005: 25–39) They have also, if not in the first place given the subtitle of RIAS's current issue, inspired artistic works, representations and mythologies, creating an invisible infrastructure of meanings and emotions and, most importantly, further inspiring our contemplations of their more and more significant, though occasionally ambiguous, roles in our lives.

Nowhere have these roles been more spectacularly represented than in the world of art, notably the moving pictures. Hence it should come as little surprise that most of the papers gathered in this volume revolve around their depiction in films, television series, music and painting. Clearly, of all the above, cinema has turned out to be their most hospitable host offering cars their own movie genre—the road movie. But the favour did not remain unreturned;

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cars' complex interactions with their drivers and their environments exceeded their roles of soulless machines carrying movie protagonists from point A to point B as they started to become legitimate partners in their drivers' or owners' exploits, elevating themselves to the status of proper characters or—pun intended—characters.<sup>4</sup> True, not all memorable cars which (who?) marked their presence in America's cultural history—visual or otherwise—from James Dean's Porsche to JFK's Continental to Kowalski's Challenger to Ken Block's Fords, deserve that name, but, regardless of their significance for the stories they tell or participate in, they are all part of the vast space of America's semiotic heritage and as such contribute to and enrich that space's mythological potential.

However, to fully understand those visual narratives' myth-making significance a brief historical introduction appears necessary and this is where David Jones's article "America's Automobile: Affection or Obsession, Myth or Reality?" comes into play. Locating American car culture against the background of both social and political changes taking place in the 20th century, David Jones takes us for a journey not only across that culture's historical development but also across its makers, designers and, last but not least, customers partaking in the creation of its mythological foundations and constantly interpreting and re-interpreting the premises of the American Dream through the automotive lens.

That Dream, like most dreams, has its ups and downs, which are topically illustrated by the story of the Mercury brand in Skip McGoun's article "Crazy 'Bout a Mercury." Inspired by K.C. Douglas's "Mercury Boogie," the article offers an insight into the world of spectacular customisation, musical inspirations, and ruthless customer politics, sealed by the brand's tragic demise in 2011. But the story of Mercury is not to be forgotten. Like the story of Saab, it is a cautionary tale warning us about the machinations of corporate giants at the same time pointing to the fragility of less mainstream initiatives, which should be appreciated, if for no other reason, for their passion and originality, two traits so inspiring for all kinds of customisation projects, once again blurring the boundary between utility and art.

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4. For a deeper analysis of the notion of "character" in car movies, see Mazurek (2020: 255–267).

This boundary is further obscured, if not completely erased, in Ewa Wylężek-Targosz's "Car Painting in America," an article devoted to analyzing three of Edward Hopper's paintings, each featuring automotive motifs. Contrasting Walt Whitman's enthusiastic exultations of the existential possibilities released by hitting the open road and Henry Ford's bold promises of enabling each American family to "enjoy [...] the blessing of hours of pleasure in God's great open spaces," with melancholic solitude radiating from Hopper's paintings, the article highlights the cars' silent presence in our relationships both with nature and one another, turning them into indispensable props of our experiential horizons, which—though often only partly present in our field of view—are nevertheless always there.

This subtle presence is juxtaposed with cars' identity-forming potential in Eric Starnes's "The Rebel Behind the Wheel," which explores various mythological paths in the *Dukes of Hazzard* TV series. Of those paths, one seems particularly important, namely the emergence of the Redneck Rebel, a modern-day cowboy figure who had traded his horse for a muscle car and epitomises a Southern anti-hero with all his (rather than her) staple features, including conservative American values as well as a rebellious attitude towards all forms of official authority (especially when they obstruct his moonshine running operations), a celebration of Southern individuality and, above all, the love of freedom and of 'doin' the right thing one's own way.'

Offering a contemporary insight into the road movie tradition is Sasha Gora's "Buddies, Lovers, and Detours," which analyses two films that, in the spirit of *Thelma & Louise* rather than *Easy Rider*, redefine the premises of the genre. Both *Queen & Slim* (2019) and *Unpregnant* (2020) challenge the idea of the road trip as a predominantly masculine adventure and place in their centre an African-American couple and two teenage girls, respectively. Though very different in terms of their plots, both movies dismantle the habitual affiliation of men with their machines and reclaim the road for those who, historically speaking, have been denied access to it, at least in terms of gender and racial stereotypes perpetuated by the movie industry.

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But a closer look at the road movie genre will reveal that, in fact, it has never been preoccupied with white men and their machines only, as we learn from James J. Ward's "Existential Definition at the End of the American Road." Reaching into three classic movies of the 1970s, *Zabriskie Point* (1970), *Vanishing Point* (1971), and *The Gauntlet* (1977), the article exposes a number of much more profound contexts for which the road provides an intertextual outlet voicing dilemmas of the counter-cultural revolution, growing distrust towards institutional authority and existential desires for personal transformations. Through these concerns, the road unveils its true nature, so deeply ingrained in American culture, as the place of change, a peculiar testing field for political ideas and individual illusions alike, verifying them against the harsh realities of the utopian pursuits of ultimate truths.

Finally, by way of conclusion, in Tomek Burzyński's "Pandemic Automobility," we are returning to some of the original questions concerning the ongoing feedback loop between moving vehicles, social structures, and personal identities, this time from a sociological perspective. Approaching both the car and the social attitudes it evokes as an indicator of larger socio-economic operations, the article emphasises the dark side of American automobility, including health risks, environmental pollution, cruel economy and rampant consumerism. All these resulted in approaching the car as a source of problems rather than their solution, an attitude surprisingly reversed by the Covid-19 pandemic where the car is at least partly redeemed as a means of personal protection against the virus and facilitating social distancing without forcing its occupants to give up on their personal mobility.

Naturally, all the articles gathered in this volume—despite their diversity—do not cover or even discuss all the contexts in which we can locate the car, not least because of the limitations in publishing space. The real reason is that—as hopefully all the articles will demonstrate—the car is such an elusive and multi-layered object that grasping its universal and undisputable gist is hardly possible. As an object of material reality, technological complexity, aesthetic refinement, social mobility and personal phantasy, it may only be tamed by a partial definition, necessarily insufficient and selective. In fact, grasping its essence may only

be possible from a historical perspective, after its reign has come to an end and, who knows, perhaps not so distant in the future, when we will all be driven in (and by) sterile eco-friendly electric autonomous vehicles (of whom nobody makes movies any more) oblivious of the inexplicable magic of the open road, we will look back with regretful nostalgia and reminisce about the guilty pleasures of listening to the roar of a V8 or recall the pure sensation of chasing the vanishing points calling us from the ends of our horizons, both real and imaginary.

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