

# NOTE TO USERS

This reproduction is the best copy available.

**UMI**<sup>®</sup>



**Metallic Mask:**  
A History of Car Modification

by

David L. Thomas

A thesis submitted to  
The Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research  
in partial fulfilment of  
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

School of Journalism and Communication

Carleton University  
Ottawa, Ontario  
September, 2005  
©2005



Library and  
Archives Canada

Bibliothèque et  
Archives Canada

Published Heritage  
Branch

Direction du  
Patrimoine de l'édition

395 Wellington Street  
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4  
Canada

395, rue Wellington  
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4  
Canada

*Your file* *Votre référence*

*ISBN: 0-494-13423-2*

*Our file* *Notre référence*

*ISBN: 0-494-13423-2*

#### NOTICE:

The author has granted a non-exclusive license allowing Library and Archives Canada to reproduce, publish, archive, preserve, conserve, communicate to the public by telecommunication or on the Internet, loan, distribute and sell theses worldwide, for commercial or non-commercial purposes, in microform, paper, electronic and/or any other formats.

The author retains copyright ownership and moral rights in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

#### AVIS:

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque et Archives Canada de reproduire, publier, archiver, sauvegarder, conserver, transmettre au public par télécommunication ou par l'Internet, prêter, distribuer et vendre des thèses partout dans le monde, à des fins commerciales ou autres, sur support microforme, papier, électronique et/ou autres formats.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur et des droits moraux qui protègent cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

---

In compliance with the Canadian Privacy Act some supporting forms may have been removed from this thesis.

Conformément à la loi canadienne sur la protection de la vie privée, quelques formulaires secondaires ont été enlevés de cette thèse.

While these forms may be included in the document page count, their removal does not represent any loss of content from the thesis.

Bien que ces formulaires aient inclus dans la pagination, il n'y aura aucun contenu manquant.

  
**Canada**

### **Acknowledgements**

This thesis has certainly been a bit of an emotional and intellectual roller-coaster, but what a ride! I could not have made it here alone.

I would first like to thank my thesis supervisor Paul Attallah. Your intelligent commentary and questions have really helped me along the way. Thank you for your infinite patience and dedication – for always showing me the light at the end of the tunnel.

Along the way I have encountered many other inspirational and great teachers at Carleton. These people have motivated me and encouraged me along the way, and I have them to thank for being so positive, and also for tolerating my occasional tardiness. In no particular order (well alphabetical actually): Ross Eaman, Charlene Elliott, Derek Foster, Robert Fournier, Sheryl Hamilton, Norman Hillmer, Karim H. Karim, Richard McGrath, Joseph Ngare, Dwayne Winseck. Thank you all.

Special thanks to Chapters for letting non-paying customers loiter there – I have spent countless hours there devouring the latest automotive magazines, and learning quite a lot about car culture in the process.

Big thanks go out to my family: To my mother Susan for heavily financing my first car – a Cadillac which I drove during high school. To my father Michael for allowing me the use of his laneway and garage over the years – I appreciate you not crying (too hard) over spilt oil. To my brother Dylan for “riding shotgun” during my first test-drives when we ‘borrowed’ my parents’ car late at night...

It has been a fun ride and I thank all those who made this possible.

Cheers,

Dave Thomas

**Abstract**

While celebrating individual freedom, the automobile is also a mass-produced commodity embedded within economies of scale and industrial practices. To purchase an automobile as 'unique' as its owner, an automobile which celebrates the autonomy of this particular individual purchaser, therefore becomes problematic. Car modifications are an attempt to resolve this contradiction. Car modification, therefore, is a form of meaning making that takes a characteristic artefact of industrial civilization – the automobile – and re-shapes it into an expression of cultural worldviews neither intended nor foreseeable by industrial origins. This thesis examines the history of car modification from its inception to the present. More specifically it augments that history by contributing an analysis of the least studied period of car modification which occurs between 1975 & the present.

**Table of Contents**

Introduction.....	1
Chapter I – Literature Review.....	12
Chapter II – The Early Years: Cars become culture.....	35
Chapter III - The Golden Years: Cars are <i>the</i> Culture.....	56
Chapter IV – The Tuning Era: Hot Rods Go Digital.....	81
Chapter V – Persistent Themes in the History of Car Modification.....	112
Conclusion.....	151
Bibliography.....	162
Appendix.....	169

## Introduction

The car was a 1985 BMW 5-series sedan with shiny black paint and black leather seats. It was lightly modified with a chrome exhaust pipe jutting out from under the bumper, and a very dark “drug dealer” tint. We were driving down highway 7 towards a party in Perth at around 10pm, when I noticed a car not far off my rear bumper. “That guy is right on my tail! Is that a Mustang, I can’t really see with my dark tint,” I asked my friend in the back. “Yeah it’s a Mustang!” replied Leo from the backseat. “Watch this – My BMW will destroy him!” I laughed to my friends. With those words of affirmation I proceeded to signal left and aggressively pull into the oncoming lane to overtake the car in front of me. The Mustang followed suit, and we reached speeds of 150-160km/h on windy Highway 7 with its 80km/h speed limit. “Man that guy is really keeping up!” After two minutes of heated pursuit, the “Mustang” turned on its lights and sirens, and I realized that I had just given a vigorous chase to a marked police cruiser – not smart! To make matters worse, when the police officer knocked on my window, I was unable to open it since it was broken, so I opened the door suddenly – this startled him and he quickly pulled me out and escorted me to the back seat of the cruiser...

This is the most exciting story I can recount from my own experience as a car modifier, and I certainly learned a lot from it. The first thing was that friends should not always be trusted; second, that pitch black windows were not ideal for visibility. Most of all, I learned that the desire to flex one’s ego in a car can have serious consequences. Modified cars are an interesting form of communication that encompasses many dynamics; furthermore, as someone who has participated in this community and also observed its behaviour for many years, I find it an interesting topic of communication.

It is a subject that does not simply affect the members of the various subcultures that make it up; rather car modification is part of a wide-reaching cultural habit that is visible all over the world in many different communities. This cultural phenomenon is a perfect example of the type of object studied in communication.

For over 100 years the automobile has enjoyed tremendous popularity and exercised enormous fascination, for whom “Americans have a love affair with their cars,” is a clichéd expression that rather nicely describes the relation between humanity and automobility. A seductive ideology of freedom and power attaches to the automobile, to such an extent that the car has literally taken over the western world as *the* way to get around. Despite numerous negative side-effects, such as pollution and the restriction of public space, the automobile nonetheless enjoys a seemingly insurmountable advantage over alternative methods of transportation. The ideology of the automobile naturally pervades print advertisement, media depictions, and even popular conversation. Each new car is born within and as an expression of the ideology and its simultaneous celebration of individualism, autonomy, freedom and power. Yet many owners are still not satisfied. For them, the automobile presents a problem. While celebrating individual freedom, the automobile is also a mass produced commodity embedded within economies of scale and industrial practices. To purchase an automobile as ‘unique’ as its owner, an automobile which celebrates the autonomy of this particular individual purchaser, becomes slightly problematic. Car modifications are an attempt to resolve this contradiction.

Once a new car leaves the showroom floor, whatever the manufacturer's intentions, its meaning will change as it enters into the uses and intentions of everyday life. Different uses than were originally intended will occur, and car modifications are an outstanding example of this process. If the automobile is a text written by an industry, it is also a text consumed and interpreted by innumerable readers in ways which escape the intentions or imaginings of the original authors. At the very best, the automobile is a *contested text* whose meaning while occasionally stable is forever undecidable. Car modification, therefore, is a form of *meaning making* that takes a characteristic artefact of industrial civilization – the automobile – and re-shapes it into an expression of cultural worldviews neither intended nor foreseeable by industrial origins. Car manufacturers – whether they are located in Detroit, Japan, India, Germany, or elsewhere – seek to imbue their products with meaning. Car modifiers, by subjecting their vehicles to a variety of modifications, seek to personalize them in such a way that they signify meanings different from those associated with a car on the showroom floor. Alterations to the engine, interior, and exterior all play with the original factory 'message' to create a different sort of automobile. Some changes are subtle some are radical. Since the Ford Model T took the world by storm in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to the recent success of the Honda Civic in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, people have been modifying *affordable* cars to make them their own. This thesis examines the history of car modification from its inception to the present. More specifically it augments that history by contributing an analysis of the least studied period of car modification which occurs between 1975 & the present.

As a mass produced commodity, the automobile is certainly amenable to a political economic analysis. Indeed, numerous such accounts of the automotive industry have been conducted over the years.<sup>1</sup> So numerous are they that they may actually open a space for another type of analysis, a more culturally sensitive reading of the automobile and its meanings. The political economic approach, rooted in industrial matters, tends to obscure cultural meanings which often occur outside the industrial organization and without its knowledge, consent, or approval. For example, to know that SUVs return a higher per unit profit than most other types of automobile may tell us why Detroit manufactures so many SUVs. It is less helpful, however, in telling us why so many consumers also want to own them. This shortcoming is evident in Flink (1988), a political economist whose excellent history of the North American automobile industry is widely regarded as one of the standard texts in the field. However, he is concerned with macro influences which shape the industry and pays scant attention to actual car owners. Therefore, if it is at all useful to think of the automobile, analogically, as a text, we may say that for the political economic and industrial approach, the meaning of the text lies firmly with those who produce it. The automobile manufacturers, the authors of the automobile text, have their reasons and motivations which they build into their artefacts and the eventual automobile consumers, the individual purchasers, take up those meanings and make them their own. The moment of production fully exhausts the moment of consumption such that it becomes justifiable and reasonable to pay scant attention to individual owners. Their behaviour, in a sense, is already accounted for by the strategies and actions of the industry. In this view, production fully maps meaning.

---

<sup>1</sup> Flink's *The Automobile Age* (1988) is an excellent example which will be reviewed in the next chapter.

Car customization, however, confronts us with a refutation – or at the very least a complication – of that view. It points to a practice of car ownership which is utterly uncontained by the strategies and intentions of the automotive industry. It is an *excessive* or perhaps even *oppositional* practice which lies beyond the strategies of the industry and which seeks to make its own ‘other’ meanings. In this sense, car customization locates the meaning of the automotive text in the activities and behaviours of the individual owners. The strategies and processes of the industry are certainly important but they are no longer the final word, they no longer fully exhaust the meaning of the car. On the contrary, they now become fodder for critical or ironic or oppositional commentary, mere raw material for another process of meaning making which they can neither contain nor foresee. This is the space opened, somewhat paradoxically, by the hegemony of the political economic and industrial approach to the study of the automobile. It is a space which attends to this ‘other’ process of meaning making, from below as it were, rather than from the commanding heights of the industry. It is the space which this thesis seeks to occupy. It does not reject or dismiss the influence and importance of the industry but neither is it satisfied with the proposition that the industry alone exhausts the meaning of the automobile.

There have also been many accounts of the cultural history of early modified cars, with countless titles on hot rods and customs. However, there is a scarcity of sources on the *modern sport compact movement* whose origins date back no earlier than the mid-1980s. Therefore, while studying car customization generally as an example of meaning making, this thesis will also attend more specifically to its most recent manifestations and will attempt to draw the various eras of the phenomenon into a single project.

It is fair to say that this thesis adopts an approach which can broadly be associated with cultural studies. It focuses on the sources which capture the culture of cars as a process of communicating meaning. It hopes, therefore, to avoid reducing human agency either to a proxy for ‘the superstructure’ or to a reflection of the infrastructure. By placing importance on the role of subcultures in making the automobile, it avoids reducing the history of the automobile to a rather dull account of economic and business imperatives. However, by arguing for the autonomy of human agency, it also does not suppose that such relatively unconstrained behaviour necessarily results in world-historic, revolutionary or other breathless outcomes.

To give a full and accurate account of the history of popular car modification, numerous sources have been combed to see how individual and group identities have been created through various streams and eras of modification. Therefore, in addition to the cultural studies strand of the thesis, there is a strong anthropological element. I have personally lived through and participated in the ‘modern era’ of car modification. Consequently, the thesis has a strong ethnographic or ‘participant observation’ bent, particularly in the chapter on sport compact cars. While I did own a modified car – the BMW mentioned at the beginning – I have never undertaken radical changes to any of the numerous vehicles I have owned. However, as an observer I have participated in car culture for years – be it cruising with my friends in their modified cars, attending car shows, participating in online forums – most of which are heavily populated with people interested in modification. My observations enjoy the luxury of being rather ironic, since I have never fully immersed myself in the social structure of modification.

In short, I have nothing to prove in modifying my car and may therefore occupy a liminal space, both inside the culture as a somewhat passive participant and outside the culture as a not-fully-invested observer. Not surprisingly the majority of the cars I have owned have been completely unmodified. Unlike some ‘ethnographers’ who may get absorbed into the culture, my viewpoint on modification leans towards that of an observer who remains critical of the world of modified cars.

As someone who thoroughly enjoys driving, I must mention that driving enjoyment is obviously a strong part of the mystique of the automobile, and a crucial element of car modification. Many car modifiers are probably best classified as *philobats* – a term which the psychoanalyst Michael Balint coined to designate people who enjoy thrills of all types. Philobats enjoy thrills from “motility and the psychology of movement” (Wollen 2002, 14). Naturally, therefore, many of them also enjoy driving an automobile. Not only do they enjoy it, but they also assume control over the ‘equipment’ they use in order to achieve thrills; moreover, in the case of automobile enthusiasts, they attempt to master the art of driving in order to practice it with such a high degree of smoothness that it comes to appear effortless. Ever the optimist, the philobat will often take risky chances since he believes in “the illusion that it is within his power to overcome any obstacle” (Wollen 2002, 16).

There are three basic elements of a car that make it fun to drive: power, handling, and look.<sup>2</sup> Since these qualities can make a certain car enjoyable to drive, modifications to cars are typically intended to improve one or more of these elements. There is a wide range of attitudes with respect to what is an enjoyable quality in a car.

---

<sup>2</sup> Certainly there are a multitude of factors which people enjoy about their cars, but I have selected these three as being the most important qualities to car modifiers.

Some people enjoy outright power, which provides fast acceleration and strong G-forces. To others, a nice car means one which provides incredible cornering speeds, which provide G-forces from the side. Perhaps the most multi-faceted element is the look of an automobile. As a mobile means of expression it is imbued with very powerful cultural values and connotations; furthermore, the act of modification can re-create and accentuate these in new and fascinating ways.

There are three big, somewhat overlapping and definitely hard-to-delineate eras, of car modification: (a) from the beginning of car manufacture (roughly 1900) to the beginning of World War II, (b) the period from 1945 to the mid 1960s (the so-called Golden Years), (c) the period from the mid-1970s to the present, the age of imports and computerization. The practices described below are not usually exclusive to any particular era although various eras tend to be characterized by constellations of practices which become dominant at specific times for complex reasons related to the cost of automobiles, the availability of spare or junk parts, the state of technology, the degree of background knowledge (i.e., GIs returning after WWII often had a much higher degree of mechanical sophistication, acquired in the army, than their predecessors in the 1920s and 1930s), attitudes towards style and design, processes of institutionalization (i.e., the creation of ‘racing clubs’, the launch of specialized publications, the rise of auto shows, the emergence of Internet chat groups, etc.), and so on.

From very early on the automobile was imbued with a very powerful ideology that remains to this day, one of freedom and power. The earliest cars, those which pre-date the Model T launched in 1908, were very much individual creations manufactured in

small numbers. Even after the Model T, small run individualized car manufacture continued for many years, especially for the wealthy.

Harley Earl epitomizes the world of exotic cars designed for the rich in California who wanted to project various images. Indeed, Earl designed unique models for such movie stars as Fatty Arbuckle and Tom Mix and was instrumental in launching the idea that a star's image could also be moulded through the star's vehicle. In contrast, the affordable car for the masses – the Model T – was a mass-produced unremarkable design. It promised a type of anonymous individuality, an indistinct autonomy available to all and signifying none. When its owners began modifying it, a variety of interesting new meanings were created around it. The earliest *hot rodders*, often working with Model Ts, typically removed more parts than they added, and their cars became an expression of a very functional *speed aesthetic*, a possibility only latent within the Model T. In a sense, they were doing with their raw material what Earl did for the stars.

Economic developments after World War II provided car modifiers with new opportunities for experimentation, especially as numerous affordable used cars became available. Ironically, the hot rod speed aesthetic was itself beginning to seem 'traditional'. Nonetheless, even into the 1950s, many car modifiers favoured the early 1932 sport coupes precisely for the ease with which they could be customized and the effectiveness with which they signified speed. Significantly, it was also at this very moment that Detroit began to introduce more and more powerful cars called 'rocket ships' not only because of their horsepower but also because of their self-conscious attempt to imitate aircraft as symbolized most dramatically by the tail fin of the 1950s.

Clearly, the speed aesthetic had been absorbed by Detroit and was now re-circulated to consumers through standard Detroit models.

No less significant is the fact that by the 1950s, Harley Earl himself had become the head of design at General Motors and the ethos of car customization now inhabited the very body of the industrial beast. Nonetheless, up until the mid-1960s, these were still years of exuberance, when cars were driven for fun and neither environmental nor safety concerns loomed large in the public mind. During that time, both car modifiers and Detroit began to focus on accentuating the look of the car through various body modifications, resulting, in the case of Detroit in the so-called 'dream car', and in the case of car modifiers in the design aesthetic frequently associated with 'car customization'. Customizers were all about sending the right meaning about their car rather than about speed.

As American brands declined throughout the 1970s, Japanese and German cars became very popular with the general public. Indeed, numerous imported brands now enjoy a passionate following amongst various groups, and the phenomenon of *sport compact modification* has grown quite popular. Like the rest of society, cars have gone electronic and modifiers have incorporated various high-tech elements into their cars. In-car entertainment (ICE) is a very popular part of this crowd, and it provides a mobile sound and light show for many of the sport compact 'tuners' (so called because they now 'tune' their cars digitally).

Whatever the era, car modification is a passionate hobby that colours the automotive scenery. In a heavily industrialized industry that mass produces millions of

cars every year, it provides a means for car owners to offer an interpretation of and commentary upon one of the central aspects of 20<sup>th</sup> century material culture.

Some of the modifications are ironic in their interpretations while others exhibit a downright hostile aggression towards the popular definition of the automobile.

Regardless of the individual messages, the hobby of car modification taken as a whole is a fascinating look at the re-interpretation of something that significantly affects nearly every human in the western world. The insights about car culture which were revealed throughout my research shall prove fascinating.

## Chapter I - Literature Review

### Timeline

Although this chapter reviews pertinent literature, the concepts discussed are sufficiently novel and the phenomenon sufficiently unknown to require a timeline that will help locate the events described.

- 1863** – Henry Ford is born
- 1880 - 1900** – Bicycle craze sparks demand for better roads, as well as interest in personal mobility
- 1885 - 1910** – Inventive years of automobile development where entrepreneurs and inventors created their own conception of popular transportation
  - Cars are expensive novelties and so ownership is limited to the affluent and elite of society
- 1893** – Harley Earl is born
- 1896** – Henry Ford Invents the quadricycle (a homebuilt automobile)
- 1908** – Ford Model T introduced
- 1908 - 1927** – Model T enjoys tremendous success thanks to mass production
- 1912 - 1930** – Bolt-on bodies (ex. speedster) transform the staid Model T
- 1915 - 1940** – Farmers modify their Fords in order to make them more utilitarian on the farm
- 1920 - 1940** – Blue-collar workers in Southern California modify Model T's for speed by removing body parts, sourcing junkyard parts, and creating a functional speed aesthetic. They do this because this is pretty much the only thing they *can* do; it comments ironically on the Model T (a slow underpowered car) and individualizes it.
- 1925 - on**
  - Dry Lake Racing is very popular
  - It was originally open to amateurs “run what you brung”
  - Later professionalized in the 1950s
- 1929** – Ford Model A introduced
- 1930 - 1960** – Model As become the most popular choice for a hot rod

- 1932** – Ford Model A coupe with powerful V8 engine introduced
- 1933** – First drive-in movie theatre in New Jersey
- 1940 - 1945** – World War II – information about the modified cars in California spreads everywhere as G.I.s share their hobby with each other
- 1943 - 1946** – Automobile production in the United States is halted so the factories can focus on wartime production
- 1947** – Henry Ford dies
- 1945 - 1965** – The Golden years of car modification – hot rods and customs flourish
- 1945** – *Hot Rod* enters the general lexicon of modified cars, as a description for a car modified for speed or performance. ‘Rod’ referring to the connecting rod which is an integral part of the engine. ‘Hot’ connotes images of power and energy. Naturally there are also obvious sexual connotations as well.
- 1945** – *Customs*. A custom is a car modified for looks. They take a hold in the modification scene for in order to distinguish themselves from the first generation of modifiers, who linger on with their modifications for speed, some of the new generation of car modifiers turn towards *appearance*. The mainspring of the transformation, therefore, is *the fact that car modification had itself become a tradition fully as worthy of ironic commentary as Detroit itself*.
- 1948** – *Hot Rod Magazine* is introduced
- first ‘official’ car show organized at National Guard Armory in LA on January 23-25, 1948 to give the hobby a more positive appearance
- 1950 - 1960** – Detroit’s styling war means American cars have annual model changes and fantastical space-age styling
- 1955** – Eventually, though, modifying cars for speed itself becomes ‘traditional’, the expected thing to do, so expected, in fact, that even Ford produces faster cars.
- 1957** – *Custom Cars Magazine* is launched by Petersen, the same publisher who introduced *Hot Rod Magazine* 9 years earlier

- 1960 - 1970** – Volkswagen’s Beetle is the first truly successful import car in North America with record sales throughout the 1960s.
- 1964** – Ford Mustang introduced and the muscle car era begins / Hot rods & customs decline
- 1965 - 1980** – Years of various attacks on Detroit based on safety, environmental, and fuel consumption issues
- 1969** – Harley Earl dies (and metaphorically – so too do the American Car manufacturers)  
- The first Hondas are unloaded at the docks in Long Beach, California
- 1975 - on** – Honda’s Civic and other Japanese imports take hold of the market
- 1985** – Modification of import trucks takes on cult status in California, bringing with it sport compact cars
- 1989** – *Sport Compact Car* magazine is spun off from the popular *Mini-trucking* and the hobby gets way more exposure
- 1990 - on** –Import tuning takes a stronghold and sport compact cars dominate the popular modification scene. *Import tuning* captures the dynamic of this hobby which modifies imported cars, and tunes them electronically. *Sport compact* describes the vehicle they use – most often compact cars with sporting pretensions
- 2000 - on** –Car Manufacturers recognize the popularity of the new generation of car modifiers, and introduce many high performance factory models. Examples include the Subaru WRX STi, and the MazdaSpeed6
- 2001** – *The Fast and the Furious*, a Hollywood blockbuster, depicts one fantasy version of the sport compact scene

### **The Literature**

Given the centrality of the automobile to modern life, it is no surprise that numerous books deal directly with this subject. In order to make for a manageable study of modified cars, this literature review will focus on several key readings that relate most directly to the topic at hand. There are a few readings that cover general information about automobility, as well as the social uses of this technology.

It is fair to say that a lot of the literature reviewed here covers the early years of car modification; furthermore, the current age of modification (since 1975 and referred to as *sport compact modification*) will not form part of this review. It will occur later and will be based largely on news and magazine articles, as well as primary sources. This will provide a basic overview of the backbone of this study, and a brief summary of each source provides its key themes and arguments.

### **Automotive Industry – General Topics**

James Flink's *The Automobile Age* (1988) is a very comprehensive look at the history of the automobile, particularly in America, where it is, according to him, a central part of the capitalist society: "...to understand the worldwide automobile revolution one must put center stage the world's foremost automobile culture" (Flink 1988, iix). This is very much a political economic look at the automobile industry, with a large number of production statistics quoted, and a focus on production methods such as Sloanism wherein "Consumer dissatisfaction with today's car was engendered by the innovation of the annual model change, which called for major styling revisions every three years, functional or not, with minor annual face-liftings in between" (Flink 1988, 234). One chapter, "Japan as Number One," describes the economic nationalism that helped build a domestic automobile industry in Japan, that later "shifted its emphasis dramatically to exports. By 1976 exports accounted for 50.5 percent of Japan's passenger car production..." (Flink 1988, 329). This is a comprehensive look at economic machinations, but it offers no information as to how any of the various brands (both American and Japanese) were marketed to the American population.

In short, it leaves out the ‘culture’ part. Nevertheless it does contain useful information pertaining to the mass production and economies of scale of the Ford Model T, *the* first popular modified car.

Naturally, the literature also provides numerous criticisms of the automobile from a variety of angles. Perhaps one of the earliest criticisms of Detroit excess was John Keats’ popular book *The Insolent Chariots*. Written in 1958, it provides a fanciful look at the American automobile industry with colourful chapter titles borrowed from *Paradise Lost*; for example, “Whence and what art thou, execrable shape?” (Keats 1958, 20). Numerous witty cartoons, and the colourful writing style, make this a fascinating read that proposes automobiles should just be machines and not symbolic artefacts. One of the most famous criticisms of the automobile was Ralph Nader’s influential *Unsafe at Any Speed* (1965). This book meticulously examines the design flaws in American cars that the manufacturers overlooked in the interest of making more money; moreover, it had a strong impact that led to government safety regulations. Both of these texts provide a simple backdrop of opposition to the exuberance of American automobiles.

A few critics take up the issue of social politics and the different ways in which the meanings of a technology, the automobile, are contested once it enters widespread use. Clay McShane’s “Gender Wars” in *Down the Asphalt Path* (1994) offers a very comprehensive, if somewhat reductive, explanation for why American women made up such a small fraction of drivers during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century; moreover, it ultimately describes some of the background behind the male’s embrace of automotive technology. This piece argues that the battle to control car culture was essentially a one-sided effort, perpetrated by the insecure 20<sup>th</sup> century male.

The second wave of industrialization during the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century brought major changes to family life, as more and more people moved to the city. Modern day man began to work in emasculating white-collar jobs which no longer required physical strength; in addition, work removed the family man from the home so that women and schools became the main agents of socialization. As a response to this, modern man ‘co-opted’ certain physical and emotional traits in order to legitimize the sexual segregation that affected most middle-class occupations. With respect to the automobile, mechanical ability was embraced as a ‘masculine’ trait, as was driving. Control of this new technology became a way to reassert masculinity, a successful means to maintain dominance over the family.

*For Love of the Automobile* (1992) by Wolfgang Sachs is an in-depth look at the history of the automobile in Germany. While it is set in a European context, his essential theme that automobiles are a material representation of culture, and that culture and technology are mutually reinforcing is useful for the nature of this study. Beginning in the innovative early years of car development, Sachs describes the initial perception of the automobile as well as its use as a pleasure toy for the wealthy; furthermore, he maps out its progression down through the income brackets by the mid 1970s. This first part of the book looks at various cultural changes in the perception of automobiles that occurred over time. It is the second section, “Desires”, which offers insightful descriptions of many of the pleasurable uses of the automobile.

The most interesting and applicable chapter of this second section is “Victorious Speed” which describes how motor sports – car racing – helped popularize the image of the driver as champion by attaining high speeds.

By placing the racecar driver on a pedestal, the general public came to hold this as an ideal form of driving, which eventually began to influence how they saw themselves as drivers. Sachs cites a couple of studies done in the 1970s which show that many drivers really enjoy the pleasure of driving fast and the associated risk and excitement. Notions of power and control are a key part of this mastery of the automobile, which magnifies the human abilities, the “power of purchased force” as Sachs puts it.

Purchasing an automobile allows the driver a perception of being in control, and it basically acts as an ego magnifier where “masculine fantasies and feelings of omnipotence crystallize about the automobile” (Sachs 1992, 115). Sachs is keen to point out that the power afforded by the automobile differs from those types of power which pre-dated it such as actual force, prestige, or wealth; indeed, this new kind of power is open to anyone who can afford to purchase a fast car. Of course the implied power that comes with owning a car is not unlimited; moreover, this chapter quickly points out the constrictive nature of city streets and other traffic that exacerbate a feeling of competition amongst drivers. In this cutthroat inner-city driving scenario, the best defence is a good offence in the form of large fast car, which allows easy overtaking.

Sachs moves away from the empowering factors of magnified speed, into a brief discussion of the changing nature of time around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Conceptions of time are tied into strong notions of modernity that place emphasis on linear progress; indeed, the train is seen as the main symbol of the quest for mastery over time. This strong desire to conquer time is even better served by the private automobile that offers more autonomy to drivers than the train.

Coupled with the love for speed which is nurtured through motor sports, the desire to conquer time is manifested in automotive design; indeed, Sachs finishes off this chapter by showing how the technological design of automobiles is geared first and foremost towards creating ‘speed machines,’ which are “as suited to the delays of city traffic as a chainsaw is for cutting butter” (Sachs 1992, 124).

There are a few collected works on the automobile and culture that are very useful to the analysis undertaken in this thesis. Thoms, Holden & Claydon’s *The Motor Car and Popular Culture in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (1998) offers a variety of interpretations for the symbolism inherent in the modern automobile. They argue that the automobile “brought new concepts and language to the realms of production; [essentially] revolutionizing patterns of work, leisure, and residence – it has generated a plethora of changing signs and symbols in all areas of life from sidewalk to cinema” (Thoms 1998, 1). In the first section of this book, Holden’s chapter “The Car as Symbol” does a good job of mapping out very generally the importance of the various changing meanings associated with the auto. Individualism is cited as one of the omnipresent values tied to the automobile; however, each country tends to have a unique interpretation of the automobile.

Thoms delves further into images surrounding the status signals that inevitably relate to the purchase of a vehicle in Britain. This rather short piece highlights the efforts made to build brand values with strong associations attached to them. “Cars & Girls – the Car, Masculinity, and Pop Music,” is a fascinating look by Heining at the way cars and masculinity are often associated in pop music from the 1950s.

Heining recalls the countless songs from this era that deal directly with this theme, many of which quite blatantly use the car as sexual imagery. Overall this collection of essays offers some useful analyses of different aspects of automobile imagery.

*Autopia* (2002) is another collected work, edited by Wollen & Kerr, that offers various short essays on different aspects of car culture. This lengthy book is a fast read because of the short nature of the essays, and it does offer some relevant material for this thesis. In the introduction, the word *Philobat* is offered to describe the sort of driver who aims to perfect his/her driving skills, and thus assume complete mastery over machine. This term is certainly applicable to various characters within the car modification world, including early hot rodders in California. They began competing on the dry lakebeds in the Mojave Desert and quickly spread to numerous drag strips around the country (Wollen 2002, 19). Patrick Field examines the ever-popular coupling of cars and music in “No Particular Place to go” which discusses various rock n’ roll musicians’ vehicles.

From the political economy perspective, Matthew Paterson examines the automobile in *Car Trouble* (2000). This is a very thorough analysis indeed which also provides some of the motivations behind the ideology of the automobile, specifically car culture’s fascination with speed. This analysis discusses issues of “modernity, speed, and identity” and the deep entrenching of car ideology within the collective imagination. Paterson goes on to discuss notions of progress and modernity being strongly associated with the speeding up of time and the eradication of distance; moreover, he is keen to point out that “speed is one of the main motifs underlying popular constructions of the car” (Paterson 2000, 102). Not surprisingly, speed is the issue around which critiques of the automobile are often focused.

Much of Paterson's research is very much in-synch with Freund & Martin's work. In their book *The Ecology of the Automobile* (1992), they include two useful chapters on the ideology and phenomenology of the automobile. "Chapter 5 – The Ideology of Automobility" looks at the hegemonic role of the automobile and the beliefs that help perpetuate it. Although it does not discuss modified cars *per se*, it looks at a few of the dominant themes (mobility, speed) that perpetuate normal automobile culture, and which are exemplified in modified cars; indeed, the belief that the "mere possession of an automobile provides... freedom" while widespread is not true. Automobile ownership is associated the world over with democracy and geographic mobility is a strong value, particularly in North America. The ability to travel where and when one wants is a crucial part of the sense of freedom which the automobile connotes. Freedom of movement is a crucial part of a democracy, and car modifiers ultimately embrace this since their hobby is centered on the automobile.

Their analysis goes on to examine the powerful symbolism of the automobile, with reference to various writers and to pop culture examples. The television show *Viper* (1994-1999) is cited as exemplifying the image of the independent powerful persona, free to move as he pleases. Likewise, a Nissan ad is offered as a classic case of how "status can be purchased through a motorcar" (Freund 1993, 87).

Freund is quick to point out that although certain vehicles can give the illusion of power or status, the reality is that every driver is at one point or another subject to the constraining reality of busy traffic, such that the ability to drive on empty roads is an exception rather than the rule. Naturally, the issues of pleasure and sexuality, both

strongly tied to automobility, are mentioned as the final ideological thrust perpetuating the hegemony of the car in modern society.

### **Modified Cars – General Sources**

Witzel and Bash's *Cruisin' Car Culture in America* (1997) is a very good source; it offers an excellent historical chronicle of 'cruising culture' which encompasses the two main types of modified cars, hot rods (modified for speed) and customs (modified for looks). They focus primarily on the golden age (1945-1965) of car modification. Witzel and Bash believe that the pleasures of car culture are taught to children right from birth, when they first enjoy a ride being wheeled in the hospital cart! Naturally, this is followed by numerous exposures to wheeled transportation in strollers, on pedal cars, playing with model cars, etc. Early family outings in the automobile help cement this love for the automobile.

After laying out their basic premise that *cruisin'* is a natural part of America, the book describes the culture surrounding the drive-in restaurant, the chosen locale for meeting during the 1950s. It maps out the various intricacies of this subculture from the types of vehicles, to the modifications, to the rules and behaviour of its members. There is a lot of focus on 'Main street' as providing the main strip for cruising activities, and also for teenage mating: "[there was] good reason for the attraction of the bright lights of the cruising loops: the goal to meet members of the opposite sex" (Witzel 1997, 49). In the 1950s, the drive-in restaurant provided the ideal place for people to mingle safely. Ironically, the popularity of this venue led to its downfall as irate restaurant owners got sick of teenage delinquents loitering and making trouble.

Their actions late at night were not the only aberrant behaviour for building a hot rod was in itself “one of the most counter culture activities you could indulge [during the 1940s and 50s]” (Witzel 1997, 72). Young men around North America could, at this time, very easily and inexpensively modify their cars to make them fairly high performing for the standard of the day, and many scrap yards provided a cheap source for used engines and even entire cars. They would take these newly re-vitalized cars, and ‘test’ them out on public streets in a display of showmanship and competition. Often, these battles would take place on the main drag, and thus came to be known as ‘drag racing.’

### **Hot Rods and Racing**

Given the proximity of Los Angeles to a variety of empty dry lakes, it was natural that many young car modifiers would take their cars there for fun to test them out, and to race in a spot where higher speeds could be obtained (Batchelor 1995, 11). Small groups would meet to race there with a “bring what you got” format that allowed almost anyone to race; this occurred from the 1920s onward. Oftentimes they would race against each other with several cars competing side by side on the dusty lake beds. This was not always safe and accidents would often occur. The Southern California Timing Association (SCTA) was formed in 1937 to manage these races (Batchelor 1995, 17).

These days were not to last, however, as drag racing, the preferred activity of the hot rodders, became a professional undertaking during the 1950s; indeed, the original relaxed format of dry lake racing quickly became a popular event whose eventual sponsorship by high-stakes investors drove out small-time competitors. Dry lake racing

remained popular since its inception, yet the formality increased over time; indeed, it is best associated with popular car modification up until the 1950s when dry lake racing made the transition to full professionalism with strict regulations and formalities which meant more pecuniary investment was necessary to compete. The dry lake racing scene is notable for having both 'drag races' which are short, usually ¼-mile timed runs on them, and longer high speed runs to see the top speed of a vehicle.

Drag racing was not only limited to the dry lakes, for a relatively small area was needed for this type of competition. The most popular length of a drag race is the ¼-mile, and the format is typically two competitors racing head-to-head. Numerous abandoned air strips leftover from World War II provided the perfect place to engage in this activity. As a result, many drag strips opened up around North America to meet the demand for this popular hobby.

Just as big money quickly moved to commercialize the racing stream of hot rods, the cars themselves were soon co-opted by the major manufacturers during the 1960s. Witzel's book *Cruisin' Car Culture in America* (1997) concludes with a description of the Detroit muscle cars which effectively took standard production models, dropped in massive engines and then added a few 'custom' chrome accents here and there. By the mid-1960s, when these muscle cars had become fully popularized in the mainstream, the sun was setting on the golden era of hot rods. This comprehensive book also contains a chapter on custom cars (cars modified for looks), which were built more for visual impact than performance reasons. Ultimately, the authors finish off with a description of the *post-modern* hot rodding experience, which is a toned down organized affair that

discourages street racing; however, they do mention very briefly that Japanese cars are the hot rod choice of today's youth.

Ganahl's *Hot Rods and Cool Customs* (1999) is full of lovely bright colour photographs but also provides a decent historical background of the phenomenon. In the introduction, Ganahl is keen to point out that the hot rod is purely an American trend, born in California during the great depression when many young men could not afford the latest cars. The Ford Model A coupe succeeded the Model T as the car of choice for modification because of its low price and light body. Ganahl is keen to stress the original ethic of function over form when modifying vehicles; indeed, the 'go fast' look that emerged early on was as a result of purely functional changes. Like any membership group or subculture, there was a system of informal rules known only to the rodders of the day.

After briefly describing the initial birth of hot rodding, this book goes on to detail its spread to a more mainstream audience. World War II temporarily shut down drag racing in California, as the young rodders were enlisted to fight. It was during the war that they spread their culture to other young soldiers from around the country; moreover, with Pearl Harbour, the military focus shifted to the Pacific such that many soldiers were suddenly based on the West Coast at various military bases and were able to see first-hand the hot rods that prowled the streets of Southern California where they were stationed.

Following the war there was a pronounced change in modification culture as economic prosperity meant that many young men were able to purchase new or nearly new automobiles. There was a definite shift towards more customs – cars built for looks

rather than speed. The bulk of the rest of the book goes on to describe exactly what hot rods and customs are, through the use of numerous full-colour pictures with very brief subtitles. Overall, it is an excellent book for defining the cars of the “Golden Era” from 1945 to the 1965.

Very few books offer a good history of the contemporary (since the mid 1980s) import car craze, yet Alan Paradise’s *Civic Duty* (2000) which focuses on how to modify Honda Civics, does provide a brief one. The historical background maps out the emergence of Honda imports in the United States, and goes on to explain the mini-truck hobbyists who soon moved on to modifying small Japanese cars. Due to its popularity with modifiers, the Civic is practically the Model T reincarnate in terms of widespread sales and a healthy aftermarket. Perhaps not the most sporting car out there, it still provides an excellent base for performance and aesthetic modification. This book is written in a very breezy colloquial manner, with plenty of cool expressions which the author uses to try to appeal to the young enthusiasts who modify Honda Civics.

### **Hot Rod Culture**

*The American Hot Rod* (1995) by Dean Batchelor is *sine dubo* one of the best books to chronicle the history of the hot rod. Batchelor focuses on the first 50 years from 1920 to 1970, with a particular interest in dry lakes/salt flat racing since he was a participant in many of the races. While it focuses largely on the activities of hot rodders in Southern California, his examination admits that there were racing activities all over North America. With a detailed first-hand analysis of all aspects of the culture, this is perhaps the most comprehensive look at hot rod culture in California.

In the years from 1915 to 1940, there was not very much official support in the sense of available aftermarket parts or ‘how-to’ literature. Consequently, car modification truly was a grassroots phenomenon, young men tinkering with old cars in their driveways. “Anyone building a car in the 1920s & 1930s had only their own imagination and their friends to go on” (Batchelor 1995, 13). Eventually the Southern California Timing Association (SCTA) was formed in 1937 to lend some legitimacy to the sport and to organize official race meets. They only had about six of these race sessions per summer, so a large part of racing activity still took place in the streets. World War II quickly put a hold on racing activity and it did not really blossom again until afterwards.

Batchelor does an excellent job of mapping out the popular hot rods of the day; indeed, he dedicates a chapter to describing the Ford Model T, as well as another lengthy discussion devoted to the Model A, B, & C Fords. The discussion is often very technical with detailed mechanical descriptions of the various performance modifications that were available. There is a nice balance of technical and social imperatives behind the various modifications, so that the reason for certain auto icons like the Ford ‘deuce’ coupe are made evident.

In addition to a thorough description of the commonly modified vehicles of the day, *The American Hot Rod* makes mention of the hot-rodding culture that centered around top-speed racing activities at the dry lakes and salt flats of the American Southwest, and expands into the popular sport of drag racing. The short final chapter of this book is about the various publications associated with the sport.

*The All-American Hot Rod* (2004) is an excellent hardcover compilation edited by Michael Dregni which features numerous short essays written by famous hot-rodders. Reading this book gives a very thorough picture of the many facets of American Hot Rod culture, which was very much a grassroots movement that was really “an underground art form that defies a straightforward chronicle succinctly tied up in a bow” (Dregni 2004, 23). Allan Girdler’s essay “Hot Rodding in the Days before Nostalgia” gives an excellent account of his personal experience in this culture. As a young man, he drove a variety of low priced cars with homemade performance modifications; indeed, these cars were often ‘works in progress’ with unfinished aspects. Back in the post-war boom, there were countless numbers of used cars selling for next to nothing; moreover, it cost nothing to drive them since the plates went with the car, and few people had any insurance!<sup>3</sup> Some of these *jalopies*<sup>4</sup> certainly bordered on dangerous with bald tires, poor brakes, or generally unsafe workmanship. Allan describes one of his neighbours who had chopped the roof on his car, and drove it without windows, because he had not finished cutting new glass. Clearly, it was a simpler time.

Jay Carmine’s essay “My Old Hot Rod” recounts similar tales of handiwork on hot rods in which his friends would do their own paintjobs. The standard look for many rodders was primer black, yet one of his friends ventured to paint his car with a converted vacuum cleaner. Like many of the authors in this book, Carmine is keen to stress the use of a hot car to attract women. This compiled book also features essays that discuss hot rod movies; furthermore, there is a section on hot rodders who made the transition to

---

<sup>3</sup> Like the safety standards of the day, insurance provisions were non-existent or lax at best. With time and an increasingly litigious society, the necessity for insurance became important.

<sup>4</sup> A Jalopy is an old, dilapidated automobile. Likely derived from the Spanish word *galapago* (tortoise) to describe the slowness of some of these run-down cars.

professional or semi-professional racing on legal drag racing strips. Overall, it is an excellent look at the culture of the golden era of car modification, and it will prove useful for discussing this time period.

Contemporary books have very little coverage on sport compact cars, yet *Japanese Super Cars* (1992) offers some interesting reading. This book is a focus on the factory ‘hot rods’ that emerged in the early 1990s as the Japanese attempted to compete with some of the best exotic cars in the world. It provides background on some of the early 1960s performance offerings including the Nissan 240sx. The majority of the reading is focused on the coverage of higher priced performance cars, so it is not terribly useful with respect to sport compacts; however, it is a good source to have.

In “The Hot-Rod Culture,” (1950) a brief article written near the start of the hot rod boom, Gene Balsley begins by citing the popular view of the hot rodder as lawbreaker. A quotation from the director of the New York Division of Safety puts forth the argument that the creation of a fast car proves the intent to break the law by speeding. Balsley is keen to point out that the hot rodders’ self-perception differs greatly from this. They view themselves as actively modifying the poorly produced stock cars<sup>5</sup> of Detroit, an activity “which is seen largely as an engineering protest against Detroit” (Balsley 1950, 357). This protest is classed loosely into “ascending ranks of prestige” by Balsley who lays out a description of four different types of hot rodders. Beginning with those on the lowest rank, who rebuild cars in a simplistic cosmetic fashion, hot rodders range all

---

<sup>5</sup> A ‘stock’ car is one that is in the condition it was ‘stocked’ in the dealer showroom. A popular form of racing later emerged called stock-car racing, since the cars outwardly resembled the showroom models. However, for the duration of this thesis any reference to a ‘stock’ car is a motion to the street-legal model available in the showroom, and not the racing version.

the way up to the ‘top-rank’ racers who prepare cars for the track. Certainly a short article, but the classifications prove applicable to contemporary modified cars.<sup>6</sup>

A more recent article, *The emotional experience of class: Interpreting Working-class kids’ street racing in Helsinki* (2004) is an excellent recent study of street racing culture in Norway. Heli Vaaranen essentially argues that the working class engages in street racing as a night time counter experience to its daytime experience of drudgery and blue-collar work. Her ethnography really gets inside the Norwegian street racing culture with plenty of interviews, ride-alongs, and observations; however, it is a somewhat bleak depiction of the sad lives of the members of this subculture. Her notion of “rough bravado” is an interesting and well-articulated description of the audiovisual aggressive style of car modifiers with their pounding stereos, dangerous driving, and general attitude. While this study has its merits, the explanation for car modification limits it to a rather functional perspective, night time customization as compensation for daytime drudgery, leaving out the constellation of other factors which might also shape the phenomenon. Nevertheless, it provides some useful information.

### **Custom Car Culture**

No discussion of modified cars would be complete without some mention of the man who was perhaps *the* original customizer, Harley Earl (1893-1969).

---

<sup>6</sup> At the lowest rank (4<sup>th</sup>) is the poseur who merely changes a few aesthetic pieces in a “mechanically useless” effort (Balsley 1950, 355). The 3<sup>rd</sup> rung still represents “hot rods in the loosest sense of the word,” for here horsepower increases are limited to simple bolt-on parts and exterior “ornamentation” is still used. At the 2<sup>nd</sup> rank Balsley begins to assign respectability, for it is here that the customizers remove all excess styling baubles from the vehicle and make intelligent changes to increase acceleration and handling. At the highest rank are the truly competitive salt lake racers who build streamlined cars out of old airplane fuselages.

Bayley's book *Harley Earl* (1990) captures the story of this early design genius. Like the early hot rodders, he began his work in California, but the similarity ends there. Earl worked for his father designing cars for the stars in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Together, they made all sorts of bolt-on accessories and even complete car bodies to provide the rich and famous with cars that stood out from the crowd. One early customer was the infamous Fatty Arbuckle, an entertainer extraordinaire who later became a murder suspect. Shortly after World War I, the Earl Auto Works was incorporated into General Motors, and Earl was hired on as a stylist. Eventually, the supreme customizer became head of styling for all General Motors divisions, and he worked feverishly to give mass-produced cars a 'custom' flavour. This was particularly emphasized during the 1950s boom when the annual model change meant that drastic alterations were made each year to keep buyers interested in new cars.

Perhaps one of the most fascinating looks at early custom culture is John Dewitt's *Cool Cars, High Art: The Rise of Kustom Culture* (2001). In this interesting and intelligent examination of modified cars, Dewitt claims that since the car is a "central symbol of the new mechanized world, it is therefore a key foundation of any legitimate modern art" (Dewitt 2001, 29). He argues that biases in the art world have excluded such 'working class' works as cars from serious aesthetic discussion; moreover, he says that hot rods (cars customized for speed) and customs (cars customized for looks) offer an interesting glimpse into teenage culture during the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. By altering mainstream constructions of the automobile, car customizers question certain key societal values. In creating art in such a manner, they act as a powerful subculture with certain oppositional elements to middle-class values. These adventures in 'Blue-Collar

Modernism' are a way for the artists to "make the car completely their own" (Dewitt 2001, 58). Indeed, in this subculture, ownership of an unmodified car is a sign of failure.

Dewitt is careful to delineate the two major streams in car customization culture: Rodders (modifying for speed or performance) and Customs (modifying for appearance). The former adopt a minimalist purity of design in which they seek to strip the car down to its bare essentials, all the while accentuating its sole purpose, speed. Most of the changes they make are in order to lighten the car or jack up its performance. Engines are always modified by rodders in order to exact every last ounce of power from them. While they *do* focus mostly on functional changes, Dewitt is keen to point out that rodders also exercise some 'artistic' liberty through subtle nuances such as the sound of a tuned engine, often altered so as to express exactly the right meaning about its intentions. Even more fascinating is the emphasis put on 'turning the car inside out', the process by which hot rodders focus on the engine by removing covers and dressing it up with chrome accessories in order to make *it* the beautiful part of the car. This twist on convention is an integral part to spreading their subversive message.

While the rodders have an almost futuristic view of pure speed, DeWitt also points out that customizers are much more concerned with making the car look individualistic. They re-interpret car design by modifying the body and interior of cars in a variety of ways. During the early 1950s, "a new way of categorizing" custom alterations emerged: "Mild Customs, Semi-Customs, and Full Radical Customs." This was useful for describing the various levels of effort put into any said custom. Once these two key divisions (hot rods vs. customs) in the subculture have been described,

DeWitt delves into his analysis of ‘Kustom Kulture’<sup>7</sup> as art work. “The Golden Age of Customs” chapter does a very thorough job of describing the trends and influences during the 1950s, as well as portraying the various “masters” working in the field, people such as Von Dutch, Barris, and Winfield. Finally, this examination of automobile-as-art wraps up with a look at current *post-modern* impressions of this 1950s customization culture. Overall, a good examination of the phenomenon but it does not cover the present import tuner scene and its artistic twist is somewhat unique.

*The American Custom Car* (2001) by Pat Ganahl was written as an intended “companion piece” to Batchelor’s work on hot rods (reviewed in the last section), and as such it offers a very thorough examination of custom cars. Customization can encompass many different makes of car and various modifications; moreover, Ganahl narrows his analysis to the ‘golden age’ of the mid-1940s & 50s customized American cars. While hot rodders and customizers are frequently one and the same, it is important to note that customs generally cost more to acquire (often new vehicles) and to modify (expensive bodywork), and consequently even though they are popular, they represent a minority compared to hot rods..

Ganahl traces the early ‘genesis’ of custom car culture in the mid-1930s, when the new ‘fat-fendered’ cars come out from the factory, cars that had less easily removable body parts. Naturally these new heavier cars were not as suited to drag racing, and so many people modified them for looks rather than speed. After mapping out the basic era and vehicles, Ganahl delves deep into some of the various customizers who modified the

---

<sup>7</sup> Kustom Kulture captures both hot rods and customs, each with their own aesthetic. “In the early 1950s, for some unknown reason, George Barris always spelled custom as well as other “c” words, with a K” (Ganahl 2001, 165). The spelling with a ‘k’ is emblematic of the culture itself which modifies existing structures in order to create its own meaning. Incorrect spelling is a bit of an ironic affront to mainstream convention!

vehicles. Numerous photos of the Barris brothers' custom vehicles abound, and there are detailed descriptions of the various changes. Since customs were not used for high-speed runs at the drag strip, their main form of official display was at organized car shows. *The American Custom Car* also discusses very extreme forms of customized cars in the chapter on "Silly Show Cars." These really outlandish, fantastical creations were built solely for display, and were for the most part not suited for everyday use. Finally, this book wraps up with a return to the present, and a discussion of modern day clones of classic custom cars – many of which did not survive the ravages of time. This is indeed an excellent companion to Batchelor's work, and it provides an excellent source for discussion of the golden era of modified cars.

Overall, these are a few of the key sources that will be used in this analysis of the modified automobile. There are numerous readings, but this is a thick slice of some of the most relevant ones. Unfortunately, there are not a lot of books which talk about modern day modified Japanese cars. Therefore, much of the research on these cars will be based upon primary sources such as contemporary articles and the sport compact community.

## **Chapter II – The Early Years: Cars Become Culture**

The advent of a few key communications technologies during the 19<sup>th</sup> century allowed for humanity to radically change the dynamic of both space and time. Inventions such as the telegraph and the railroad fundamentally transformed the ways in which business was conducted; indeed, much more control and precision over shipments and inventory was now possible. This was certainly an excellent macro-level change in the efficiency of society, but it was a new technology – the automobile – that would give a new sense of power and control to the average citizen. By looking at the early years of auto development and the ideology of the automobile,<sup>8</sup> it is possible to gain a better understanding of the specific motivations behind its growing popularity. The inventive years (1885-1910) of personalized transportation and its popularity provide a backdrop to the phenomenon at study. More pertinent to this study is an analysis of the ‘grassroots’ mainstream modification of cars by people of modest means. Because the automobile was so ubiquitous it was an excellent readily available expressive material; indeed, if it was not mass-produced, car modification would not be nearly as vibrant. Mass production breeds similarity, but it also invites people to fight against it by creating their own new meanings; therefore, it is necessary to understand why the automobile is popular to understand why people modify cars. Since the automobile is symbolically potent, it is itself a communication technology. Indeed, modifications of the original design by individual owners may say more than the modifier intends because it will be interpreted beyond their ability to control and because as a practice modification is

---

<sup>8</sup> The ideology of the automobile is one where freedom and power are qualities bestowed upon those who own and drive an automobile. This is bolstered by numerous cultural references from countless sources, so much so that the role of the automobile becomes almost natural. It enjoys hegemony as a result of this ideology.

necessarily rooted in ambient culture. The auto holds a special part in meaning making for it is a mobile shell which may or may not, depending upon the 'reader,' contain certain implied assertions about its driver. Early automobile modification (1920-1940) was based very much on the love of speed, and practised in very rudimentary ways by young male blue-collar workers located primarily in and around Southern California on the leading mass-market automobile, the Ford Model T; furthermore, the modification rule during this initial period (1920-1940) of car culture was 'function determines form.'

### **Early Transportation History**

Before the advent of the automobile, people were dependant upon the horse, railway, and ultimately foot travel in daily life. A brief prehistory of transportation before the car will lead into an examination of the pioneering years of automotive design and invention (1885-1910). This will result in a very important analysis of the basic ideology behind the automobile, which came to be imbued with such aspirations as speed, power, sexuality, freedom, masculinity, and status. Once the basics have been covered, it will be useful to contrast the dichotomy between the fully customized luxury automobiles of the day that were built for their wealthy owners and cars mass-produced for average people. Since those who would purchase a Model T did not have significant discretionary income, the original modifications were carried out very much in a home-crafted piecemeal fashion where form was determined by function. Performance-enhancing modifications were one manifestation of this trend, and an examination of the early street racer sub-culture (1920-1940) will round out this chapter.

Street-racers with hot rods were found especially in Southern California where the phenomenon originated because of the climate, the large number of migrant workers and the availability of cheap used automobiles after the depression – they were early car modifiers who had a passionate love of speed.

### **Early Automotive Design**

Early automotive design is characterized by innovation and competition amongst numerous designs for the ‘horseless carriage’, all claiming to have the best solution for automobility. Naturally, from this period of intense multi-national competition arose an eventual ‘winner’, the internal combustion engine. There were various experiments from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century onward with three main types of propulsion: steam, electric, and gasoline. For the most part, the railroad was still “far superior given the bulk of steam engines and poor roads” (Flink 1988, 2). Furthermore, in the period between 1865 and 1890, many locations even enacted restrictive legislation that limited road-going steam vehicles to a maximum speed of 6km/h (4mph) (Flink 1988, 2)! This was a legislative initiative implemented in order to stymie the development of the automobile, and bolster the dominance of railroads.

Nevertheless, it was during the 1880s and 1890s that the nascent bicycle industry laid some important groundwork for automobile development. The bicycle craze was two-pronged in provoking a desire for a much improved road network in France, Britain, and the United States, as well as in providing manufacturing knowledge for the manufacture of steel frames (Flink 1988, 4-5).

As a result, many of the first automakers began by building bicycles. From there some diverged into steam and electric-powered vehicle manufacture, with the majority turning to gasoline engines.

Steam cars certainly managed to grab attention with their smooth-running nature and simpler engines, but they had a few significant problems: they were highly inefficient compared to gasoline engines in terms of the amount of 'fuel' required to produce power; they suffered numerous mechanical problems due to the need to maintain high pressure; they ultimately lacked power compared to gasoline designs (Flink 1988, 7). By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, steam engine design had stagnated. Similarly, the electric cars of the era were also much more inefficient to run, "far more expensive than the gasoline automobile to manufacture and about three times more expensive to operate" (Flink 1988, 10).

While electric power did enjoy limited success, particularly in electric trolleys, it could not compete for long.

Gasoline power managed to rule the day and has remained dominant ever since. Europe was the initial hotbed of development, with France and Germany emerging as the leaders in automotive design. In 1876, Otto produced the first 'modern' interpretation of a four cylinder four-stroke engine<sup>9</sup>, and managed to sell over 600 cars by the First World War (Flink 1988, 13). It is important to clarify that early inventors were not working in a vacuum, for competitors were very aware of new developments in automobile design (Flink 1988, 14).

---

<sup>9</sup> A four-stroke engine is one which has four stages of movement during which the piston (1) moves up to intake the mixture, (2) compress it, (3) cause an explosion which forces it down, and (4) exhaust gases are expelled

The famous Paris-Bordeaux-Paris race of 1895 really showcased the success of the French auto industry, and was perhaps its last great gasp before decline; indeed, the Americans were very much inspired by it, and that year over 500 automobile patents were received in the United States Patent office (Flink 1988, 22). While early American designs were primitive, they managed to sell well, and by 1899 approximately “thirty manufacturers produced an estimated 2500 motor vehicles” (Flink 1988, 24). Within less than a decade, American auto manufacturers pulled firmly into the lead and the path was set for the leading world automotive industry.

During these early years of exuberance and limited production (1885-1910), entry into the world of automobility was restricted to the upper classes. “Before the model T in 1908, most car owners probably employed chauffeurs to drive, and repair” their automobiles (McShane 1994, 126). The cost of acquiring an automobile was high, and despite the reliability trials of the day, it was still an imperfect technology. Mechanical breakdown was all too common, and travel was not made easier by the muddy, rutted roads of the day; indeed, snow removal in large cities was a post World War I phenomenon (McShane 1994, 127). (see appendix photo 1) It is interesting to note that media coverage of the time reinforced the high-class perception of the automobile. A case study of the *New York Times* indicates that early news coverage, before the introduction of the Model T in 1908, contains numerous stories in its high society pages that portray the rich playing with their automobiles, indicating that they are a luxury item (McShane 1994, 128).

### Changes in Ideology

Due to the powerful associations between the automobile, social status and freedom, its enduring role in society is partially explained. These associations, when pushed to an extreme form, are also later responsible for motivating people to modify their cars. Before looking at the types of automobile available, it is useful to explain why it was so successful to begin with. The book *Spatial Formations* by Nigel Thrift (1996) nicely summarizes four major consequences that were brought about during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early-20<sup>th</sup> centuries due to the new communications and transportations technologies:

- 1) Change in the consciousness of time and space, with increased attention paid to smaller distinctions in time. Watches become an important item during this era;
- 2) Literary texts treat speed both in terms of a celebration of machine-driven acceleration, and conversely – protests against the hurried nature of life;
- 3) There is a change in the nature of subjectivity and the body is now an anonymized parcel of flesh to be moved about;
- 4) Finally, prevalent social metaphors emerged reflecting the preoccupation with speed, notably ‘circulation’ and ‘progress.’ (Thrift in Paterson 2000, 103)

Quite clearly, motivations to travel and communicate with utmost rapidity became a central part of modern day thought. It is also clear from early on that the automobile conferred a sense of status upon its owner; however, it is the sense of power that it instilled in the driver that is also relevant as an ideological motivation for ownership. By mechanically multiplying the strength of the driver, he “perceives himself as master of this force and experiences it as an enlargement of the self” (Sachs 1992, 114). Thus it is only natural that the ego is boosted by the ability to accelerate as quickly as possible.

The automobile is unique in being a technology that now confers power on an individual, no matter how weak, simply because of his purchasing power. It allows for the attainment of “power without the consent of others, power that is no longer earned” (Sachs 1992, 115).

This sense of power is often manifested in a lusting for higher and higher speeds – for in the driver’s mind to drive the fastest car is to be seen as the most powerful person. Speed is essentially “the premier cultural icon of modern societies” (Freund 1993, 89). Driving at a high rate of speed provides a sense of excitement due to the inherent risks in the practice. Basically, “driving fast invites one to balance on the edge between power and impotence, and then enjoy the gratitude of not having crashed... [it makes people feel] larger than life” (Sachs 1992, 113). Naturally, competition arises in busy urban environments and driving becomes a series of small battles where a fast car offers an advantage. The dangerous nature of speed makes it the centre of numerous critiques focused on the automobile. Street racing culture arises directly out of this inherent excitement in driving fast.

Travelling on the train was a demeaning process for the rich, for they were subject to set schedules and the lower-classes; the automobile, however, provided independence since the traveller could chose exactly which route to take and when (Sachs 1992, 94). This essentially provided a sense of power, which was altogether thrilling; moreover this thrill is valued in itself and is *therefore* a marker of individualism. From power to thrill to self, the automobile is a technology which heightens our sense of individualism. Even so, this sense of independence does depend upon major infrastructure such as roads, the auto industry, the gasoline industry, etc. (Sachs 1992, 100).

Simply stated, as the automobile becomes democratized, impending traffic flows and dependence on infrastructure seriously limit driver freedom. Despite these limitations, freedom remains a very key theme in automobile ownership, perhaps due to “deep psychic connections between freedom and movement” (Paterson 2000, 100).

### **A Psychological Approach to ‘Gendered’ Technology**

One of the recurring appeals of automobility is the sexual nature often attached to the automobile. Sex and sexuality are important themes entrenched in car culture right from the beginning. According to McShane (1994), the battle to control car culture was essentially a one-sided effort, perpetrated by the insecure 20<sup>th</sup> century male. The second wave of industrialization during the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century brought major changes to family life, as more and more people moved to the city. Modern day man began to work in emasculating white-collar jobs which no longer required physical strength; in addition, work life was now separated from family life so that schools and mothers became the main agents that socialized children. In response to all this change, modern man ‘co-opted’ certain physical and emotional traits in order to legitimize the sexual segregation that affected most middle-class occupations (McShane 1994, 151). This argument is rather reductionist as it roots ‘ideology’ in apparently universal male motivations rather than seeing it as socially constructed, but nevertheless it offers insight into how some men may have embraced the automobile early on. With respect to the automobile, McShane makes the specific point that mechanical ability was regarded as a ‘masculine’ trait, as was driving; therefore, control of this new technology became a way

to reassert masculinity, a successful means to express dominance over the family (McShane 1994, 152).

### **Sociology is Destiny: Social Reasoning is Designed-in**

While the automobile was powerfully appropriated by men during the early years, it is interesting to note the “unusual capacity for the automobile to project both feminine and masculine imagery – an ability to carry erotic appeal to both women and men” (Freund 1993, 91). Quite simply the automobile has a quirky eroticization based in its dual aspect as: 1) male: “A virile power symbol”; or female: 2) a “Seductive, attention-grabbing, gaudy or glittering mechanical mistress paraded for the benefit of his peers” (Cagle 1994, 24). Regardless of any given automobile’s “gender,” or if it was appropriated by men, it clearly offered a site for major changes in courtship for both sexes, releasing young couples from the restraints of the family living room. The automobile became the new site for young lovers to exchange passionate kisses, and it is even alleged that Ford designed the seat on the Model T so as to be too short for sexual intercourse (Flink 1988, 160)!

### **Automobile as Gendered Symbol**

Traditionally the automobile has been a masculine symbol – a phallic-enhancing symbol – where attractive females have been used to sell the product. Witness the countless advertisements with a pretty model draped over the hood, and even the common presence of sexy young women at auto shows.

It is not surprising that numerous ads attempt to associate a mix of “animal vitality and technical precision” (Freund 1993, 93). These masculine images were also reinforced in the pop culture of the day, such as the song “Love in an Automobile,” by Anderson (1912), which shows how an automobile could be used to attract a particular money-hungry female (McShane 1994, 142). Films of the era are bursting with the romantic adventures of men who use cars to show status, to free them from daily urban toil, and to provide a carriage for seduction (McShane 1994, 143); furthermore, even juvenile literature such as *The Adventures of Tom Swift* (1910) relies heavily on the same themes which further reinforce the status projected by early automobiles (McShane 1994, 145).

### **Automobiles as a Status Symbol**

As a means of sending various messages of status, power, freedom, and masculinity the motorcar was an excellent tool, but even before World War I, increasing numbers of automobiles meant that status as a driver was not simply awarded through the simple act of purchasing a motor vehicle. It now also depended upon the *design* of the car. Car designers are important figures since they helped give cars different shapes that implied various meanings. “Not only did they decide on the car’s changing appearance, they also invented its symbolic language as it moved from plaything of the rich to marker of futurity” (Sparke 2002, 8).

“Horseless carriage” was the name used to describe many of the very first automobiles; moreover, the term was not far off the mark since they were literally carriages with engines attached to them. The word car is in fact an abbreviation of the word carriage. Coach-building and carriage design provided much of the initial

foundation for building cars. The standard of the day was to build a metal chassis (or frame) in a simple shape, often resembling a ladder. Coachwork made from wood and metal, upholstery, and the method of propulsion would then be bolted on top. Due to this ‘body-on-frame’ set-up it was not uncommon for many car manufacturers to simply make frames with an engine bolted on, which were then sent to various coachbuilders who would custom-build the bodies. In this manner, wealthy car buyers could choose their own body design and colour of vehicle.

### **Customization for the Rich**

One man stands out as a good early example of this practice, for he was both American-born and catered to the rich and famous in California: Harley Earl (1893-1969). His father was a coachbuilder who specialized in making wagons and carriages, and switched over to automobile bodywork in 1908 with the creation of Earl Automobile Works (Bayley 1990, 23). Initially it offered bolt-on accessories but quickly shifted to full-body fabrication in 1911. Much of its business was directed to the Hollywood film industry, producing carriages and special vehicles to be used as props. Naturally, the film stars of the day also commanded attention-getting vehicles, and Earl was the man to see about this. From 1918 onward, Earl was very much in control of the business and his “sensational designs” were gaining recognition; indeed, he had the privilege of custom building a car for Fatty Arbuckle for the remarkable sum of \$28,000 (Bayley 1990, 30). (see appendix photo 2)

“In a world where the mass market was getting black cars from Henry Ford, Harley Earl was already supplying his cars for the stars in polychromed variety and in

very high degrees of finish” (Bayley 1990, 31). At the time, car distributors played an important role in helping customers get the exact car they wanted, and the distributor for Cadillac on the west coast often dealt with Earl (Bayley 1990, 32). The purchase of the Earl Automobile Works in 1919 by Don Lee, the west coast Cadillac distributor, was a smart decision that ultimately would catapult Earl’s dynamic sense of style right to the top of General Motors design where he would finally offer the masses the choice to build their own ‘unique’ cars. For the moment, the cars offered to the masses were hardly unique at all. Enter Henry Ford (1863-1947). (see appendix photo 3)

### **Automobile as Emancipation**

“Henry Ford probably could have been elected president of the United States had he really wanted the office” (Flink 1975, 68). Such was the popularity of the man who helped lower the costs of production by changing the very way a factory was orchestrated. These radical changes enabled him to offer an affordable car to the masses. During his youth, Ford grew up on a farm but detested the nature of farm labour; indeed, Henry was a natural mechanic whose time was spent experimenting with watches by taking them apart and putting them back together. Over the years, he worked at numerous mechanically related jobs before going to business school in 1884. By 1891, he was working for the Edison Illuminating Company in Detroit, while working in his spare time on creating a car (Banham 2002, 26). Finally in 1896 he built his first car, the quadricycle, which he was unable to fit through the door of his backyard shed. Ford grabbed an axe and feverishly smashed down the brick wall so he could liberate his invention (Banham 2002, 28).

After a few years of struggling to get started, the Ford Motor Company was created in 1903, and began building fairly low cost vehicles (Banham 2002, 34). Even though he shared the market with 2200 other brands at the time, Ford managed to sell his cars in moderate numbers; however, it was the seminal Model T, introduced in 1908 that was truly bought up by a receptive public (Clymer 1955, 12). (see appendix photo 4) For the time its simple design offered a few ‘new’ features to automobility: a planetary transmission,<sup>10</sup> left-hand side steering, enclosed driveshaft, and a one-piece engine block. The Model T was a quirky beast that was often very difficult to start, and when driving up hills the carburetor would often run out of gas – necessitating ascension in reverse so that gas would flow into it! (Clymer 1955, 17-19) Another gas problem was related to the fact that there was no gas gauge on the car; instead, owners used a small black ruler to dip into the gas tank to check the level.

Despite the Model T’s eccentric character, people really admired the car, and began purchasing it in large numbers. The dealers were certainly accommodating by taking horse and buggies as trade-ins towards the car (Clymer 1955, 16). Sales were good, but Ford realized that the initial manufacturing system was largely based on handmade production; therefore, his solution was to implement the rolling assembly line into auto production. In 1913, a system of pulleys was used during final assembly of the cars, and this new efficiency managed to cut production time in half from 12.5 hours to 5 hours 50 minutes (Banham 2002, 38).

Ford’s drive for efficiency resulted in the famous declaration in 1914 that the “Model T is available in any colour you like, as long as it’s Black!” (Banham 2002, 38) Black paint dried quickest and therefore made production more efficient. Over time the

---

<sup>10</sup> A Planetary transmission offered relatively easy and smooth shifting.

system of moving assembly lines was perfected and production time kept dropping, which also drove down the price of the Model T. This was an excellent system for mass-producing cars in a short amount of time, but was not well-suited for building unique vehicles.

Coupled with the innovations in method of production, Ford introduced a brilliant new way to motivate labour – the \$5 day. In 1914, this increase in salary meant that even those on the lowest rung of the ladder were still being well paid (Banham 2002, 43). This act of charity was hardly that but rather a shrewd business move that enabled Ford to maintain a more stable workforce by reducing attrition, as well as making the factory more productive since the employees were now working 8 hour shifts – three of which could be run in one day. Another anticipated benefit was that even the lowest worker could afford to buy what he produced, which ensured that the common man would have access to the automobile, and that wages would return to Ford as profit.

Owing to its very simple design, that became outdated well before the end of its 19-year run, the Model T was a perfect candidate for aftermarket accessories. Many of the parts offered for the car were not the type of modifications that would impress present day consumers, rather they were simple options that never came standard on the car – such as gas gauges, electric starters, and speedometers (Clymer 1955, 192). During the early years of the Model T's introduction, period print ads attempted to portray the prestige associated with electric starters! It is important to note that these accessories were made by outside companies and not Ford itself. Efforts at serious meaning making were found in the custom car of the era (1912-1930), which consisted of a Model T with

a speedster body dropped on top.<sup>11</sup> Since this modification was based purely on changing the looks, it was done to create a new image for the owner of the automobile. By adding on a racy body, the look of the car would suddenly change, and the owner's visible intentions as a driver were radically different; furthermore this is a way of creating new meanings around the automobile. What was once a staid and anonymous Model T suddenly became an attractive and exciting speedster.

It should be mentioned that most owners handled repair and maintenance of their cars personally and, coupled with the burgeoning aftermarket for Ford Model T's, they often carried out their own changes with relative ease; moreover this was partly due to necessity since there were very few mechanics and service stations. A large number of rural farm owners actually modified their own parts so that they could use their cars to plough the fields, pump water, saw wood, and even generate electricity (Clymer 1955, 11). It really was the people's car, since the people imbued it with numerous meanings by using it in countless ways that were not intended at the factory. For example, many farmers transformed it from a passenger automobile into a tractor by putting on off-road wheels and affixing a plough.

Another factor that predisposed the Model T to enormous success was the fact that there was virtually no competition from foreign-makers of affordable cars. Only a handful of imports made it to North America, perhaps because the domestic product was more suited to the rough road network; furthermore, those cars that were imported during the 1920s were expensive luxury cars for the moneyed classes (Sedgwick 1970, 22).

---

Granted there were increasing numbers of sports cars imported in the 1930s and early 1940s, but these were mostly brought in by a limited market in New England (Sedgwick 1970, 22). In addition to limited external rivalry, there was less and less domestic threat as consolidation on the home market caused independent car manufacturers to slowly die off one by one. From hundreds of brands at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were only 48 left in 1929, and within a decade this was reduced to the ‘Big 3’ – GM, Chrysler, Ford, and a handful of major independents (Sedgwick 1970, 26).

Ford’s “wonder car” (the Model T) was mass-produced on a large scale at a low cost, versatile for its owners, and sold in a market with very little competition – yet how exactly did it become *the* choice for early car enthusiasts? By the 1920s, the Model T was very plentiful and so the cost of acquiring a used Model T was very low. This gave it wide appeal. There were other low-cost cars available, and they should not be written off completely, but this chapter will focus on the Model T since it was the most popular. Intrepid young men wanted to improve their underpowered Fords, and so they began using their mechanical skills to modify and increase the horsepower. With only 20 horsepower in stock form (i.e., from the factory), the Model T was woefully underpowered, and so little tricks were done to increase its performance. These modified cars were naturally tested out on public roads to see if the modifications had proven worthwhile.

Backyard mechanics were present throughout the United States and the world, but a few factors coalesced to give Southern California the edge for automobile racing and modification, particularly the warm climate and flat dry lake beds which were close to Los Angeles (Batchelor 1995, 13). Many enterprising young men in the area chose to

modify their aging Model Ts in order to gain more horsepower. 'Enterprising' is the key word here, since any modifications were usually homemade by the car owners themselves. There were some automotive publications available, yet they were hardly inspirational: 1) Trade magazines which discussed manufacturing problems and 2) racing magazines that discussed the latest oval track competitions (Batchelor 1995, 13). Neither type of publication provided an interesting look at car modifications.

The numerous bolt-on aftermarket parts available were not usually competition related, although there did exist some early specially built performance parts for Model Ts. Out of Indiana, the centre for oval-track racing, there came a few companies which produced 16-valve heads, pistons, etc., which could literally double the horsepower of a stock engine (Batchelor 1995, 13).<sup>12</sup> While they were designed specifically for racing cars, early hot rodders began buying them up in such large numbers to be used on road-going vehicles, that eventually they were marketed directly for road use (Batchelor 1995, 37). For many young racers, the local junkyard was the place to find that special something. The scrapage rate in the United States was so exceedingly high at the time, with 2.5 million cars sent to the junkyard in 1930 alone (Sedgwick 1970, 20), that there was no shortage of available options.

This study focuses on the Model T because it was the car that the racing crowd in Southern California first modified because they were plentiful, easy to modify, and very inexpensive. This car did not exist in a vacuum, for there were other brands and models, but it remained the figurehead of car modification for many years, quite simply due to its numerical presence. Despite the depression, and a sharp drop of 75% in automobile

---

<sup>12</sup> 'Stock' as in 'stock engine' or 'stock car' means 'as delivered from the factory'. A stock car is, therefore, a car manufactured as part of the factory stock. It is an unmodified factory original.

production, car registrations fell only 10% from 1929 to 1932 (Sedgwick 1970, 19). Americans were still buying cars, and the newly designed Ford Model A was a natural choice. Factory horsepower doubled from the Model T's lethargic 20 horsepower to 40 horsepower – so right out of the box it was a serious contender for the enthusiast crowd (Batchelor 1995, 50). The stronger engine was also well suited to modification. There were certainly other affordable cars available, and even a V8 available from Ford, but the overall comfort and familiarity with the 4 cylinder engines meant that they were the choice for most hot rodders through the Second World War. Dean Batchelor, who lived in Southern California during the blossoming years of hot rodding, provides an excellent, if somewhat vague, definition of what a hot rod is: “any production vehicle modified to have more performance” (Batchelor 1995, 8). Although the universal term hot rod is widely understood these days, its actual use was not really seen before the end of World War II; indeed, no magazines, newspapers, or racing programs ever used it until after the war (Batchelor 1995, 8).

While *bolt-on* modifications enjoyed popularity, it was *bolt-offs* that typified the young racers. In order to save weight, unnecessary body panels would be removed from the car. Fenders were usually the first to be removed, as well as headlights, bumpers and anything that added extra girth. By simplifying the body style of their cars to reduce weight they were following an informal edict of ‘form follows function’. (see appendix photo 5) The streamlined look of a Model T speedster<sup>13</sup> very clearly indicated the owner's intention to use it as a speed machine.

---

<sup>13</sup> A Speedster is a two-seater body with no roof on it, and a low-cut windshield – the ultimate in sporty style.

Interestingly, this celebration of visceral motion is very much in synch with the Italian futurist movement of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti published his manifesto of Futurism in *Le Figaro* in February 1909 (Humphreys 1999, 6). Futurism is very much about the exaltation of speed, violent struggle, rebellion against all that is old, and about a passion for industrialisation. One of Marinetti's main goals was "to introduce a new aesthetic, which would express the mental and physical sensations of life in the Machine age" (Rye 1972, 13). This new aesthetic would attempt to convey a sense of dynamism and motion in art, as well as a certain level of tension. "There is no fear more stupid", Boccioni declared in his sculpture manifesto, 'than that which makes us afraid to go beyond the bounds of art we are practising" (Rye 1972, 90). With their stripped down, purpose-oriented cars, the early generation of hot rodders echoed a sentiment of being about absolute speed in an almost artistic manner. The chassis was lowered to decrease wind resistance, and big tires in the back increased traction and acted as a gearing aid for acceleration. These two changes increased performance but also created a powerful aesthetic that communicated the intentions of the owners, for they "originated with a desire for speed" (Ganahl 1995, 8).

Absolute speed was the first thing on the minds of the young men who participated in racing on the streets of California:

They could be found at any of several hangouts in the Los Angeles area... [that] served food and provided a great place to see one's friends and bench race, but they also functioned as the planning areas for street racing...the races organized at the various car club hangouts were serious affairs --- quite often with money riding on the outcome. Occasionally races were for the car itself. (Batchelor 1995, 21)

Illegal street racing was a dangerous pastime with a certain mystique about it that appealed to young adventurous men; furthermore, the lack of drag strips meant that desolate highways were an obvious choice for these races. Naturally there was a public backlash against this type of behaviour and by the mid-1940s the National Safety Council and Hearst newspapers had collaborated in order to start a propaganda campaign demanding a ban on all forms of racing (Witzel 1997, 86). Finally, the California government reacted in 1945 and implemented two laws: 1) bill #908 “every motor vehicle shall have four fenders and mudguards;” 2) bill #910 “No equipment designed to increase the horsepower of the motor shall be present” (Witzel 1997, 86). The target was ultimately the whole lifestyle associated with the young outlaws who participated in “boulevard brawling” – fights for jackets, alcohol, car parts, etc. This was clearly a form of moral regulation intended to vest authority for the proper use of cars in the automotive industry, and to recover it from the young – an attack upon a subculture based on its perceived social class.

Anti-social street racing was not the only outlet for male aggression, for dry lake racing quickly became very popular. There are several dry lakes formed from dried mudflats which are located in the Mojave dessert (Batchelor 1995, 12), and they are all within a few hours drive of Los Angeles, so they were a convenient and popular place to race. As early as 1933, the Muroc Racing Association Program conducted various speed trials at Muroc Lake. Match races would be held with up to five contestants who would all compete from a rolling start. It was very popular and somewhat dangerous with large clouds of thick dust billowing across the racetrack (Batchelor 1995, 16). (see appendix photo 7)

On December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1941 the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbour, and America was suddenly at war. Hot rods and the people who made them were enlisted to fight, and vehicles changed hands for next to nothing. Some were mothballed as their owners went off to battle. When the war ended, the influx of returning GIs would be itching for some fast wheels and the phenomenon of car modification would reach new peaks during the golden years – the 1950s – when new cars became widely affordable, and when they already came customized from the factory.

During the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the striking dichotomy between rich and poor began to narrow, as the everyday Model T enjoyed widespread customization of various sorts. While the rich enjoyed lavish bespoke coachwork on luxurious machines, farmers turned their cars into tractors, and the intrepid young men on the West Coast relied on simple removal of body parts to achieve their desire: a love of speed. This brutal performance aesthetic is very much an unconscious echo of the European futurist movement with its deliberate exaltation of rapid transportation. Form determined by function was the style characteristic during this era of populist car modification, but it would soon take a different turn during the booming 1950s, as cars began to reflect the jubilant climate of the day. The early years of car modification must not be forgotten for it was during this time that cars like the Model T became part of the general pop culture; moreover, when owners chose to modify their cars it really made them symbolically relevant to their own personal image.

### **Chapter III – The Golden Years: Cars are *the* Culture**

Automobile production had been put on hold for almost half a decade, as the factories geared up for fulltime production of war supplies: trucks, munitions and airplanes. Following the war, Europe lay in tatters but the United States remained an all-powerful force. This induced both exuberance and energy as a result of being the major democratic power in the world. This also provided excellent fuel for an economic boom that manifested itself with the creation of a full-fledged consumer culture that would be the envy of competing economic models. Indeed, the optimism of the day was demonstrated by the increasing number of private motor vehicles on the road. Naturally, the sheer number of cars meant that modification was the path chosen by some as a good way for self-expression to differentiate themselves from the masses, to make themselves more visible. Even though the factory offered many options in an attempt to cater to this phenomenon, people still wanted to add their own unique touch to their cars. As a result, depending on the type of changes, the post-war years of car modification are characterized by two very distinct streams of activity, hot rods (cars modified for speed and performance) and customs (cars modified for appearance). Freedom of choice ruled the day and owning a unique car made its proud owner feel special about being different from everybody else; driving a cool car conferred instant status. It was a status of a different sort, however, since all cars confer some status upon the driver; moreover, the modification of cars is more of a meta-commentary upon status in general and the products of the automotive industry. By modifying the products of major manufacturers in interesting and unusual ways, the average car owner was able to feel a sense of power, even if it was more imagined than real.

The following pages discuss the ‘golden years’ (1945 to 1965) of automotive modification. Before describing the nuances of the modification sub-culture, it is useful to look at the general social and economic factors which allowed for the explosion in car ownership. The new type of cars mass-produced by Detroit are an important key to understanding this situation, since they are a noteworthy reflection of the cultural climate of the day – witness the numerous space-age design cues that find themselves incorporated into new cars. Compared to the pre-war cars, the designs were adventurous, exciting, to the point of being overdone in many cases. Moving from the factory designs to the people’s designs, the evolution of hot rods (modification for speed) and customs (modification for looks) will be laid out in detail. Custom cars really blossomed in this period because new car ownership became an affordable reality for many, and aesthetic upgrades were often chosen over performance parts. Cars do not modify themselves, and so the two main types of modified vehicle will be situated within the larger “Cruisin’ culture,” to borrow the title of Witzel’s (1997) fascinating book. Automobile modification during this period was strongly tied to the pop culture of the day which was itself a youth-based entity; moreover, the music, movies, and main hangouts (drive-ins, etc.) of teenagers work concomitantly with trends in mobility throughout the 1950s. This chapter comes full-circle from Earl’s factory customs of the 1950s to a brief examination of the ultra-popular factory hot rods that emerged in the mid-50s, and culminated in the 1960s during the era of the Detroit muscle car.

### **Foundations for Car Culture**

With the end of WWII, the American war machine ground to a halt almost overnight, and leaders searched for a new outlet to keep the economy going; consequently, the transition from missiles to televisions, tanks to cars, and soldiers to consumers was almost natural. It is important to mention the role of television as an almost emblematic force in shaping consumerism, for it was both a high selling consumer product itself, and the medium through which to promote other goods. “Rapid suburbanization” meant that living arrangements shifted radically, and car ownership became a necessity in order to function (Dewitt 2001, 21). The “car was at the centre of life in post-war America, since it represented victory in the war and the essence of a good life” (Dewitt 2001, 21).

Essential to a car culture was a pervasive and high-quality road network. Luckily this vision of vast sweeping interstate highways would also be a labour-intensive project that would generate plenty of jobs and keep the economy rolling. It was only partly begun during the depression with the New Deal, which focused mostly on city and country roads (Rae 1971, 75). Local efforts initially subsidized interstate construction through local-bonds, state contributions, and later, toll roads. Toll roads were at an all time high during the 1950s, until the 1956 U.S. Interstate Act came into effect (Rae 1971, 81). Like many transportation and communication systems before and after it, the initial argument for construction of a road network was rooted in concerns for national defence.

The result of this important Act was the increase in funding from a 60-40 ratio to a 90-10 federal – local ratio, and essentially the “passage of the...Interstate Highway Act ensured the complete triumph of the automobile over mass-transit alternatives in the

United States and killed off, except in a few large cities, the vestiges of balanced public transportation systems that remained in 1950s America” (Flink 1975, 372). A ravenous consumer culture coupled with an excellent road network assured the dominance of the automobile.

One of the unintended consequences of war was the spread of different cultures around the world as well as within North America. A lot of the young “roadster jockeys” who enlisted to fight told other GIs from around the United States about their modified cars back in California; undeniably, many young soldiers were actually stationed on the West Coast and saw the cars firsthand (Ganahl 1995, 22). Upon the end of the war, a lot of the servicemen decided to stay in California and they moved directly to the heart of hot rod culture, the San Fernando Valley next to Los Angeles (Witzel 1997, 126). These “car-starved returning vets joined those who had endured car shortages and gas rations at home – both were free to create the cars they had dreamed of” (Dewitt 2001, 20-21). Their creative spirit was further bolstered by new mechanical skills which many had acquired while manufacturing and repairing an assortment of war machines.

Creativity found its way into another crucial aspect of car culture that was the literal foundation for that generation of vehicles: the manufacturer’s styling department. Car design took a turn for the fantastical as the ethos of the day was incorporated vigorously into metal. Not only did exterior design border on the extraordinary, but horsepower increased drastically as bigger and bigger engines were bolted in. The result was a series of rocket ships that rivalled any of the cars that had come before them in terms of extravagance. One brand certainly stands out during this period as the most extravagant, as the leader in design: General Motors.

## **Factory Design**

General Motors was the number one car maker because it embraced the concept of planned obsolescence very early on; indeed, at its annual sales meeting in 1925, there was a realization that market saturation meant that an annual model change was necessary in order to stimulate buyer interest (Bayley 1990, 41). Thus a certain level of customization can be attributed to the cycle of capitalism. Up until this point, cars were produced with very little concern for aesthetic novelty, of which Ford's unchanging Model T is a good example, since it remained almost identical to itself for two decades. The creation of the Art and Colour department at GM in 1927 was "an important moment in the history of modern material culture. It was evidence of a widening appreciation that machines have life and that it is the designer's role to give form and expression to that life" (Bayley 1990, 50). The appointment of Harley Earl as chief of the department in 1927 was a significant decision that would turn car design "into the entertainment business" (Bayley 1990, 73).

Perhaps the most important design cue to emerge during the reign of Harley Earl as design king, were the fins which eventually adorned the rear end on most of the mainstream American production cars of the 1950s. A direct result of the war aesthetic, these ubiquitous fins were inspired by Earl's visit to a Lockheed P38 warplane a few years earlier. After a heated struggle with the other executives at GM, they were approved and became the styling *coup-de-grâce* on the 1949 Cadillac (Bayley 1990, 70). It was Cadillac's best sales year to date, and the feature eventually trickled down to the lowest model on the range. Styling features like this gave the buyer "what Earl called a visible receipt for their dollars" (Bayley 1990, 73).

These space-age styling excesses that characterized the era only got more flamboyant as the 1950s rolled on. By the end of the decade almost all of the brands had assimilated this design feature, with Ford finally putting fins on its cars in 1957. The excess of the age peaked in the 1959 Cadillac with its 42-inch tail fins! “Under a hood almost the size of Texas nestled an engine almost as big as California... welcome to the world of eight miles to the gallon” (Willson 1995, 58). (see appendix photo 1) From there, there was a gradual decline as cars became less ostentatious. Styling excesses, multiple body styles, and abundant options meant that every car buyer could feel like he was driving a unique car with ‘custom’ features. Ironically, it was the 1941-1951 Mercury that was most popular with the custom car subculture because it was a sleek unadorned base upon which to build a ‘true’ custom. (see appendix photo 2) The car with the least customization – the Ford Mercury – allows the customizer to construct a hierarchy or status structure which is not already tightly controlled or pre-determined by Detroit. Therefore, the activity of the customizer must necessarily be understood as both *an aspiration towards status* and as a criticism of the existing status structure. It may be ironic commentary but it is also *angry commentary*.

The question of authenticity is very much a part of any subculture, and Kustom Kulture, the name given to car modification of this time, is no exception. In an effort to co-opt the appeal of unique automobiles, Detroit finally manufactured factory ‘customs’ with a plethora of options that sold well to the general public. They may have offered a superficial level of uniqueness in terms of combinations of colour, trim, and options, yet these fin-adorned behemoths were not authentic customs in any sense of the word.

“In Kustom Kulture it was impossible to be truly cool if you drove the wrong car or a badly done car. *To own and drive a stock car showed a failure of nerve* [italics mine]. Driving a kustom with bad bodywork, that was poorly thought out was to make yourself a joke” (Dewitt 2001, 17).

The spelling with a ‘k’ is a clear indicator of social class, which is precisely the motive for wanting to create a counter status structure. Customizers can buy a car but not the car that would reflect them *as they see themselves*. Consequently, rather than reject the status structure altogether and become Marxist revolutionaries, they accept the premise of the status structure but merely seek to construct their own structure. Hence, *resentment* is at the basis of car customization, which is why it is an *angry aesthetic*. Clearly then, there is a code of acceptance within the culture, such that the simple act of purchasing a new car no longer conferred instant status upon the purchaser. Issues of masculinity emerge again, for driving a stock car represents a weak man. What makes the culture special is a few compulsions that drive the participants to: 1) “do it yourself,” 2) “individualize it,” 3) “make it better than or different from the mass offerings,” 4) be a renegade to mass culture (Ganahl 2001, 7). Middle class car buyers may have been satisfied with their new factory rocket ships, but the simple act of buying a car was not enough for car modifiers – rather it was the act of modification that gave them their legitimate status.

### **Hot Rods (cars modified for speed or performance)**

Car culture was taking an even stronger hold on North America during the 1950s, and there were even more used cars available than during the initial modification craze of the 1930s. This was the age where for \$20 a running car could be purchased and driven home right away with plates already on it; moreover, insurance and vehicle safety standards were not strictly enforced so few people observed them (Drake 2004, 38). A growing number of teenagers purchased used cars and many chose to modify them. It certainly helped that many high schools offered auto repair as a class – one which was very well-liked by the author - Witzel (Witzel 1997, 23).

Some of our collective—um, forgot to say most kids in this era would settle for the family sedan once a week. They thought we were loonies and wastrels, which I suppose we were... one day I was driving my girl cousin into town. The sixty-pound flywheel came off the crankshaft, made a circuit inside the bellhousing, then burst out the bottom of the bellhousing, taking the transmission with it, and exploded on the pavement. We coasted to a halt, trailing gear lube and bits of cast iron. I walked to the nearest house and called my brother to come push us home. When I got back to the car, my cousin said, “Try it now. Maybe it’s OK.” I looked down at the slurry of oil and iron, and said nothing. (Girdler 2004, 28)

This delightful excerpt from Allan Girdler’s “Hot Rodding in the Days before Nostalgia” (2004) describes his early years as a teenager who modified old cars for fun. There is an aura of childhood innocence about his tales of mechanical breakdown and being stopped by a police officer repeatedly for not having fenders – when he was on his way to get them repaired every time! His piece exudes the true tinkering ethic that automobile lovers hold dear, the ethic that drove them to add modifications which altered the performance or aesthetics.

Improvement of performance was the number one goal of the post-war hot rodders. In fact, the term 'hot rod' truly caught on in the festive years following 1945. Much as before, young men sought to improve the performance of stock cars in various degrees. Balsley offers an ascending rank of prestige within the hot rod world, which enables classification of the modifications along a structure of status. At the lowest rank (4<sup>th</sup>) is the poseur who merely changes a few aesthetic pieces in a "mechanically useless" effort (Balsley 1950, 355). The 3<sup>rd</sup> rung still represents "hot rods in the loosest sense of the word," for here horsepower increases are limited to simple bolt-on parts and exterior "ornamentation" is still used. These first two tiers represent the rodders who are the troublemakers depicted in the media. It is only at the 2<sup>nd</sup> rank that Balsley begins to assign respectability; for it is here that the customizers remove all excess styling baubles from the vehicle and make intelligent changes to increase its acceleration and handling. At the highest rank are the truly competitive salt lake racers who build streamlined cars out of old airplane fuselages (Balsley 1950, 356). Ranking the various levels of modification is important since it assigns a level of detail to the analysis of a very diverse subculture.

By now, the Model T had been out of production for two decades and this grandfather of hot rodding was no longer the car of choice. If anything, the "1932 Ford line of cars, particularly the Roadster, Victoria, or three-window Coupe, were some of the best-looking cars of the 1930s... If you were a "hot rodder" in the years between 1940 and 1955, the chances are you wanted a '32 roadster... In the immediate post-WWII years [they] were everywhere... It was not uncommon to see twenty to thirty of them in a single day" (Batchelor 1995, 79). (see appendix photo 3)

This new Model A, the successor to the Model T, remained very popular for so long since its V-8 engine came with more horsepower than previous factory engines, and they were increasingly easy to modify from the mid-1940s on as the aftermarket finally shifted away from the original 4-cylinder engines (Batchelor 1995, 81). Consequently, more and more aftermarket parts became available for modification of the V-8 engine.

Ford's tenure with the rodders would not last indefinitely, since the 1950s saw the introduction of a few factory powerhouses from other companies that would eventually become popular as well. General Motors introduced powerful overhead valve V-8 engines in its 1949 model line of upscale cars such as the Cadillac; however, Chrysler was quick to follow with its famous "hemi" engines that became the new engine of choice (Batchelor 1995, 88). Finally, Chevy introduced its own V-8 in 1955, and it "became the engine of choice not only for racers, but as replacements for Ford engines in street rods and customs" (Batchelor 1995, 89). Many rodders would mix and match manufacturers' engines and bodies to maximize the performance of their old Ford roadsters. They had to be intrepid in order to beat the factory 'hot rods' that were beginning to appear. For example, in 1957 the Chevrolet Bel-Air came straight from the factory with 283 horsepower, and stylish body cues – heady competition for the homebuilt rods and customs (Dewitt 2001, 88). Technology leaders would pass the proverbial crown during this period, but the cultural ties held by hot rodders to the familiar four cylinder, and the later Ford V8, are what delayed the acceptance of bigger and better engine designs.

Given their inherent speed nature, it is no surprise that many hot rods were raced on public streets – as the drivers demonstrated their mechanical prowess to others.

Jay Carnine recounts his youthful street racing exploits in “My Old Hot Rod.” (2004) Most of the races in town occurred spontaneously when two modified cars came side by side at a red light; moreover, they were done at a low speed up to about 80km/h at which point they would start easing off the gas. Nevertheless, racing in town was fairly high risk, and Carnine relates how “half the time you’d get caught, get a ticket, lose your license for a week, two weeks, a month and worse” (Carnine 2004, 47). The car of choice for his specific peer group was the 1949-1950 Ford coupe, which was most often painted in black primer. This intrepid gang of friends would use various means to spray the primer on, including modified vacuum cleaners (Carnine 2004, 47). To say that all street racers in the 1950s drove ’32 roadsters is a fallacy as this story shows. There truly were so many variations on the hot rod theme.

This cult of speed was further celebrated on the numerous drag strips that proliferated post-war as old abandoned aircraft runways were appropriated for racing (Witzel 1997, 78). Dry lake racing remained popular as well, with thousands of spectators turning out, and an incredible 224 cars running in October 1948 (Batchelor 1995, 69). Changes in how different cars were classed by the Southern California Timing Association made competition more equal. If anything, the fifteen years after WWII were the best ones for hot rodding, since it still retained a bit of its amateur status – people were still racing for fun and not money (Batchelor 1995, 71). The National Hot Rod Association was formed in 1951 to administer the countless drag strips across the country and by 1956 there were 130 legal drag strips in operation (Witzel 1997, 81).

### **Custom Cars (modified for looks)**

In the world of car modification, hot rods are to customs as Batman is to Robin. While Batman packs a powerful punch, Robin is an elegant pretty boy who completes him. Just as some car owners want to project an image of power, many remain more interested in looking good while they drive. Together, rods and customs work hand-in-hand to offer superhero alternatives to mainstream transportation, and the car scene is surely much richer as a result. During the 1950s, customs came to be known as “lead sleds” because lead was used by body shops to fill imperfections and shape contours into the body (Witzel 1997, 112). Customs initially emerged in the mid-1930s when the first rounded body-styles appeared, but they did not really see widespread success until after the war.

The custom ethic was slightly different from that of hot rods, since making a custom was sometimes more expensive than a hot rod. Improvements did not involve removing fenders or other body parts but quite the opposite. Customs are all about the visual impact, and so chrome add-ons and sometimes various costly body modifications were performed. Many of the first car customizers had previously dabbled with hot rods and now wanted a car that was more reliable; furthermore, they tended to buy newer, sometimes brand new cars to modify (Ganahl 2001, 33). Many of the returning servicemen had saved up considerable pay during the war, and it was not uncommon for them to spend it on this costly hobby. Whereas before the war nobody could afford to customize, often painting their cars a section at a time, everything changed with the increase in disposable income after WWII (Ganahl 2001, 24). What did not change was the general style, one of smooth, streamlined vehicles (Ganahl 2001, 33).

Perhaps the biggest reason for the growing popularity of customization was the relative dearth of new vehicles. War-time production had halted automobile manufacturing from 1943 to 1946, and there were “no new models offered until 1949” (Ganahl 2001, 38). Early pre-war cars were not very costly and so it made perfect sense to invest money in paint and other aesthetic touches in order to refresh their look. In addition to this major condition for the success of customs, there were a few other key developments in and around 1950. Firstly, there was the Barris Brother’s innovative 1940 Mercury which they designed for Nick Matranga; indeed, this sleek creation was the toast of the media and the public (Ganahl 2001, 38).<sup>14</sup> The second major factor that fell into place was the seminal 1949-1951 Mercury, which was part of the self-generated hierarchy that customizers accepted. It incorporated a mix of old and new styling cues that was still a very familiar look; this made it a good choice for further customization (Ganahl 2001, 41). The third factor which cemented the rise of the custom car was the public exposition of such vehicles, starting in 1950 at the Oakland Roadster Show. By putting customs on display as items of wonder, interest was stimulated within the general public (Ganahl, 2001, 38). The car show will be further detailed below.

If anything, the fantastic customized cars of the 1950s were a form of subtle protest against the status quo since they generate their own hierarchy parallel to the mainstream one. The car is used as the site of conflict where the customizer is able to refute the view “that the automobile is the great leveller” (Dewitt 1997, 28).

---

<sup>14</sup> The Barris Brothers, George and Sam, were two innovative customizers in the Sacramento Area of California. They were bodymen by trade and the Mercury which they created for Californian Nick Matranga was enormously popular and featured on magazine covers and the custom car show circuit. Matranga is not an important figure himself, but as was the practice of the day famous custom cars would become known by their owners’ last names, even if it was Barris or another custom shop which did the work. Thus there are the Matranga Merc and the Hirohata Merc, to name just two famous customs, both wrought by Barris. (Ganahl 2001 pp 33-36)

Taken as a personal possession, the modified vehicle is the most powerful way for a blue-collar owner to take back some control in a somewhat inflexible class system, since it is “the most significant thing that distinguishes him from everyone else” (Dewitt 1997, 28). Although Dewitt may characterize this activity as a rejection of the capitalist system, this is untrue, rather it is actually a full-fledged acceptance of the hierarchies of status, the customizers enthusiastically embracing it by generating their own alternative status; hence, they *comment upon* status even as they reproduce it. Certainly an ambitious project, customizers undertake to challenge potent corporate designs in a way that separates them from the average ‘ignorant’ consumer (Dewitt 1997, 80); moreover, they accomplish this by reproducing it in an ironic commentary. The work of Barris and others can best be described as art, at worst, according to Dewitt, as a countercultural fight against mainstream class values. Different amounts of effort produce radically diverse types of custom car. Customization is certainly an acceptance of the *process* of class distinction but not of the *terms* of class distinction.

Each and every custom car lies at a different spot on the spectrum of modification; however, they usually share a few key traits:

- Lowering the car through suspension, frame, body, and roof surgery
- Removing chrome and emblems to let the body styling dominate
- Moulding separate, assembled parts into one flowing statement
- Extensively and appropriately using parts from other cars, such as grilles, bumpers, and taillights
- Applying deep, organic, hand-rubbed colors to accent the forms

(Bentley Bradley in Ganahl 2001, 41)

As mentioned earlier, these modifications were done to a newer class of cars, for when young men turned to search for good candidates for customization, they found that the junkyards were bereft of smaller cars which were already in the hands of hot rodders; as a result, larger enclosed vehicles were more plentiful and a better physical size to maximize visual impact (Witzel 1997, 104). Like their hot rod counterparts, the degree of modification was also classified for customs. Two predominant categories emerged to define their style: mild and wild. Just as the name suggests, 'mild' customs have very minor cosmetic changes such as upgraded wheels, removed trim, or lowered suspension (Witzel 1997, 113). At the other end of the spectrum sit the 'wild' or full-radical customs where major changes to the styling have been undertaken. These often include a chopped roof, a "channelled" body and modified panels (Witzel 1997, 113). There is also a third category which catches those modifications that fall in the middle, semi-customs. This third type incorporates minor body modifications that still maintain the original basic shape of the car (Dewitt 2001, 75).

At the low-end of customization there was a burgeoning aftermarket for spare parts. The major mail-order companies caught on to the popular trend and began offering a multitude of bolt-on accessories. Teenagers flipped through the pages of the J.C Whitney catalogue and saved up to buy custom grilles for "as cheap as \$27" (Dewitt 2001, 27). "For less than \$100 (about a month's part-time work) a high school student could create a 'custom' look" (Dewitt, 2001, 27). This low cost means of car modification made it accessible to the very mainstream youth market, which in turn drove the hobby to new heights of popularity.

### **Paint Innovations Create Radical Style**

Ultimately as the classic custom-car cues became more affordable and more widely imitated, the customizers had to do something that really positioned their work against the norm. New developments in paint technology were one way to completely alter the look of any given custom car. One of the most striking new innovations was created by Joe Bailon at his body shop when he mixed red toner with clear lacquer and applied it to a gold base. The result was the now infamous candy apple red (Witzel 1997, 117). It was unique in being the first paint to have a really vibrant shine to it, the gold fleck creating a perpetual wet look. In order to carry out a professional paint job, the costs were high as it was a lengthy process. “Unlike the home-built hot rods assembled by trial and error, customizers sometimes used brand new automobiles as the starting point” (Witzel 1997, 120). Another innovation in the world of paint was the now infamous pin-stripping done by Kenneth Howard. Otherwise known as Von Dutch, he took the skills he used to paint signs and applied them to the automobile; moreover, he used artistic pin-stripping to accentuate various curves on the body of a car (Witzel 1997, 120). Sometimes ‘scallops’ (like an elongated flame or water droplet) would also be painted on in order to create an exhilarating visual effect. Candy apple paint and scallops were quite innovative at the time and a striking way to comment upon the mass produced automobile. Flames were also another radical paint technique that created a striking automotive presence. (see appendix photo 4)

### **Cars as Art**

One interesting interpretation of the Kustom Kar culture is advanced by John Dewitt who argues that the re-imagining of cars was more than just an effort to confirm masculinity. Rather, he sees it as a form of art that is dismissed by elite cultural critics. Dewitt goes so far as to venture that academics “seldom equate cars with dreams” since they mostly drive Volvos! (Dewitt 2001, 36) This false stereotype is ignorant in itself, but his description of customs as a form of blue-collar modernism is fairly convincing. Essentially, the modified car has many features in common with art, including the facts that: they are well-made; designed with imagination; and painted with plenty of expression (Dewitt 2001, 38). By changing the original meanings of the car, customizers manage to turn it into an expressive medium that arouses an emotional response in the audience – cars become art.

### **Youth Culture**

A notable trend of the 1950s was the emergence of youth culture. After bearing witness to the inescapable automotive society for most of their lives, it was inevitable that many teens would also want to participate in car culture. The two meld seamlessly during this period. An “endless parade of billboards, magazine ads, radio programs, TV commercials, and popular films assailed the senses with automotive propaganda.... At the Drive-in, virtually every motion picture featured new cars and hot rods” (Witzel 1997, 20). This is one example of effective and widespread indoctrination into car culture.

Coupled with the low price of a used car, and general prosperity, it meant that teenagers could afford to buy their own cars. Many teens looked to motion pictures for inspiration on what was exciting and cool.

### **Pop Culture and the Automobile**

Movies featuring hot rods and customs were omnipresent at the theatres and drive-ins of the day. They were very much the latest version of the classic western theme, yet they featured cars instead of horses. Storylines were simplistic affairs that featured the “simple triangle of good guy, bad guy, and the girl” that comes between them (Dregni 2004, 86). These tales of morality were usually settled with the classic ‘show down’ between good and evil – in this case it took the form of an illegal drag race. There would always be a lesson to learn by the end of the movie, as one social ill or another was decried by the producers (Dregni 2004, 87). Modified cars made for exciting adventures but they were clearly not legitimately accepted by the mainstream. For this reason, token messages about the ills of hot rodding were included in many movies. (see appendix photo 5)

Another form of mass entertainment that was strongly linked with cars and youth was rock’n’roll music. This risqué name was itself slang for sexual activity, and it was purely oppositional to adult culture. Tying themes of love and adolescence together, many songs also dealt with the automobile. The development of the transistor radio meant that by the mid-50s, the in-car radio was cheap and had widespread success. As such, the music of a generation both talked about car culture and became a part of it since people listened in their cars.

An enormous number of songs were written about the automobile, with approximately 500 automotive-related songs between 1961-1965 alone (Dewitt 2001, 24)!

Issues of gender and masculinity were also strongly linked to cars in these songs, with the universally popular “cars-get-you-girls-theme” appearing frequently (Heining 1998, 97). The language used in these songs was clearly masculine with stories of aggression and battle, with the winner coming out on top; moreover, such usage of language is useful because it shows how men define themselves and relate their sexuality to the possession of a vehicle. The Beach Boys’ famous song “Little Deuce Coupe” (1963) is an example of this effort to depict the singer as all-powerful because of his car: “I’ve got the fastest set of wheels in town” (Heining 1998, 103). With a backdrop of competition and sex-filled songs, it is no surprise that car culture was further bolstered. For any young man listening to the latest rock’n’roll song, the implication that a hot car equalled success with the opposite sex was all too explicit.

### **Enthusiast Literature**

As part of the total car culture of the day, car magazines also helped legitimize car modification to some degree, providing articles and event coverage in an accessible format. The introduction of *Hot Rod Magazine* in 1948 was an explosive development that foreshadowed the popularity of the phenomenon. “Pete” Petersen introduced it to meet the growing need for modified car literature, and so the coverage focused almost exclusively on hot rods since they were so popular at the time (Dregni 2004, 60). A result of this successful undertaking was that it allowed him to build the number one automotive periodical publishing company, Petersen Publishing.

In due course, the new magazine and those associated with it, actually helped create the National Hot Rodding Association three years later (Dregni 2004, 60). While there were a few customs featured in hot rod magazines, the long-term rivalry was felt in the publishing world as well. If anything, *Rod & Custom* has had good coverage over the years; moreover, it was the 1957 launch of *Custom Cars*, also by Petersen, that offered the best coverage (Ganahl 2001, 44).

### **Car Clubs**

In an effort to both legitimize and organize their hobby, numerous clubs and associations were created by rodders and customizers to create rules and regulations, hold events, and socialize. Beginning in the mid-1930s, there were a few unofficial clubs in Southern California, but it was not until 1938 that the formation of the Southern California Timing Association really got the ball rolling (Batchelor 1995, 117). As the name suggests, this organization conducted timing runs on the dry lakes in Southern California. There were naturally many much smaller local clubs that would meet and organize events or hold unofficial street races. They varied from very straight groups to the criminal fringe. “See, the problem was that in the ‘50s, there were people that were like, really square, and then there were people that were really interesting that were criminals. There was no in-between” (Williams 2004).

### **Showing the Car**

Regardless of criminal inclinations, clubs of all sorts enjoyed a good car show. The first major car show was actually organized in an effort to stem the wave of negative publicity surrounding modified cars. Held at the National Guard Armory in LA on January 23-25, 1948, this public relations triumph did an excellent job of showing the public that modified cars were a professional affair requiring a lot of effort (Ganahl 2001, 57). Not long after this successful event, indoor car shows proliferated and began judging the cars competitively; moreover, the ultimate competition of the events meant that people took them much more seriously and many show cars were never driven on the road. Curiously enough, some entrants took it to such an extreme that their participation in the hobby became a never-ending rebuild of the same car in order to win points at the next competition (Ganahl 2001, 38). Aside from the formal car shows that spread around the country, a lot of informal rendezvous occurred in parking lots when car clubs and friends would meet to check out each other's rides.

These informal meeting spots were often on the main street in town, where people were attracted to the vibrant atmosphere at night time. As a result, one of the most popular activities of the day was the "cruise" through the main strip in town. It was the common ground where all types of people would intermingle and socialize. One amusing game that was played when stopped at the traffic light was the *Chinese Fire Drill*. Witzel recounts how the occupants of a car would get out and run around it until the light turned green, and then jump in the closest door (Witzel 1997, 43)! This car-based game exemplifies the entertainment aspect of this cultural activity.

“Main street was one big singles bar” (Witzel 1997, 49); indeed, given the conservative social climate of the day it was the perfect place for young people to meet members of the opposite sex.

### **A World of Drive-ins**

To meet the demand of the car culture, a new phenomenon began springing up in the 1930s, and really exploded during the 1950s, drive-in restaurants. “After WWII there were drive-ins everywhere, and you could probably find a roadster or custom car in any one of them at almost any time.” (Batchelor 1995, 67) Their open concept was ideal for interpersonal communication to arrange a street race, flirt with an attractive mate, or show off a nice car (Witzel 1997, 53). Unfortunately, the crowds of rowdy teenagers would often get rather out of control, and by the mid-1960s, drive-ins began closing (Witzel 1997, 57). The counterpart to the drive-in restaurant was the drive-in movie theatre. First conceived in 1933 in New Jersey, they enjoyed very limited success up until the end of World War II. During the post-war boom, their numbers swelled to a high of 4,063 in the United States, at which point the strength of television slowly led to their decline (Flink 1988, 161). Their success at the height of the tailfin era was emblematic of the central role the automobile played. These late night hot-spots provided yet another excellent place to show off one’s automotive handiwork. (see appendix photo 6)

### **Hooliganism and the Backlash**

Oftentimes, these late night cruises would spiral down into an orgy of loitering, vandalism, drinking, brawling, and street racing. As such the mainstream view of the hot rodder was a very negative one; they were interpreted as a sort of evil incarnate on the roads. The hegemonic disgust with the behaviour of young car modifiers found itself into an unusual place, a comic strip. *Hot Rod Happy* (1950) combines all of the negativity associated with the hot rod scene; indeed, the main character is depicted as a “lawless, spoiled, delinquent, disrespectful cad” (Balsley 1950, 353). Naturally there were numerous police crackdowns beginning as far back as the 1930s, and various laws designed to curb the ‘unlawful’ modification of cars. (see appendix photo 7) This type of backlash is a classic response when a subculture is deemed threatening to the general public. Moral panics often ensue and token measures are taken in order to assuage public fears.

Police crackdowns were not the last trouble facing the world of modified cars, for the automotive manufacturers were about to wreak a powerful blow to the hobby. “This one hit the ground running – galloping in fact, for the Mustang rewrote the sales record books soon after it burst onto the market in April 1964” (Willson 1995, 120). Enter cars like the Ford Mustang and the Pontiac GTO which ushered in a new era of car culture. Detroit had finally managed to offer car buyers a fairly powerful performance package right off the show-room floor. These new factory hot rods, or muscle cars, could easily run with some of the hottest home-cooked hot rods; indeed, with speed like this available at the turn of a key, the decline of home-built rods was inevitable. Mimicry is the highest form of flattery, and the cooptation of car modification by the manufacturers meant that

car modification had truly become more than a fringe car culture. As a symbol for speed, power, and adventurousness, the hot factory performance models were a safe alternative choice for mainstream car buyers.

The golden age of hot rods and customs (1945-1965) was an exciting time with many new developments. Due to a number of key factors, the custom car was able to truly shine, and the designs became more and more provocative as the years rolled on. New innovations in paint meant that reinterpretation moved to a higher level, which some would classify as art. Detroit was no longer asleep at the wheel, and the styling genius of a few extravagant designers echoed the euphoria of the times; indeed, the factory 'customs' which were produced in the 1950s were stunning chrome goliaths that represented an age when everybody could drive a pseudo-individual car. Modified cars entered the mainstream more generally through pop culture; indeed, rock'n'roll and movie themes were frequently laced with odes to the motor vehicle – most often a modified one. As the hobby became more organized, various clubs & organizations gave it more legitimacy, and the car show helped demonstrate the talents of a few to the accepting public. Car magazines also emerged at this time to provide information and entertainment to a growing number of hobbyists. Eventually Detroit managed to co-opt the hot rod movement, with the introduction of a powerful assortment of muscle cars in the mid-1960s. Everything was gravy for the time being; however, a variety of new developments would change forever the nature of modified vehicles, including one which shall be further discussed in detail – the import. Imported cars from Europe and Japan began entering the North American market in the 1960s in increasingly large numbers.

Good things *do* come in small packages, and they became *the* choice for car modification in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

#### **Chapter IV – The Tuning Era: Hot Rods Go Digital**

*“I do believe a pink Hummer broadcasting gangsta rap is the first official sign of the coming apocalypse...” (Parker 2004, 24)*

SEMA (the Specialty Equipment Marketing Association) is one of the biggest automotive shows of the year devoted to custom cars. Indeed, the diversity and variety of modified cars today is staggering, as people of all types endeavour to improve factory performance or individualize their cars. While the golden age of car modification during the 1950s could best be described as an American phenomenon with Southern California leading the trend, today’s scene is international. A raft of changes has occurred since the mid 1960s, and although popular car modification maintains many continuities with earlier times, it also incorporates significant differences. The most striking feature of this new age is the absence of American automotive hegemony, for Japanese and European manufacturers have cannibalized world markets and risen to the top of the ladder. The purchase of the American company Chrysler by the German Daimler-Benz consortium in 1998 bears eloquent testimony to this phenomenon. In this new electronic age of car modification, young car customizers prefer small imported cars; moreover, the phenomenon has become so widespread that aftermarket parts constitute a multi-billion dollar industry in the United States alone. The hobby is no-longer referred to as hot-rodding but as *import tuning*, a sport which captures a triple dynamic: the participants often strive to attain authenticity by returning their imported cars to the specifications of their country of origin; on-board computers require subtle ‘tuning’ in order to maximize engine performance; electronics are also used heavily to provide the boom of digitally-optimized ICE (In Car Entertainment).

Post-war American exuberance was made manifest in the fantastical rocket-ship designs that found their way onto public roads during the 1950s. At the same time, however, the Volkswagen Beetle, a small economy car from Germany slowly began to enter the North American market; moreover, this oddity took a firm toehold in the 1960s when it became a runaway success – the small import car was here to stay. Following the Beetle’s triumphant success, Japanese automobiles began gaining in popularity during the 1970s. Numerous attacks on the excesses of Detroit from those concerned with safety and the environment consistently weakened American manufacturers’ share of the market, while the oil crises of 1973 and 1979 created fuel shortages that fully legitimized the use of a small car. The Japanese cars available exhibited excellent quality and enjoyable driveability and therefore became top sellers around the world; furthermore, their easy availability meant that it was not long before people began modifying them. Honda’s small Civic model has become *the* face of modified cars today, since its abundance makes it very affordable; moreover, it is inherently light with good handling which makes it an excellent candidate for performance applications. Due to its popularity, a huge aftermarket of assorted parts exists for this car. This new age of car modification has blossomed into a vibrant culture that is visible almost anywhere around the world. Contemporary car shows, magazines, television shows, movies, Internet forums, and even videogames all exhibit the passion associated with car modification, a hobby which has gone mainstream and now captures numerous demographics. The grease monkey with wrench in hand, who once tuned his car by ear, has been replaced by the laptop-toting tech geek who tweaks his car using sophisticated digital fuel maps.

Nevertheless, the outlaw image associated with excessive speed remains, and public outrage over street racing is as alive as ever. Some things never change...

### **Automobiles go Digital**

During the 1970s, computer technology and informatics began to play an important role in postmodern society, and it is not surprising that they also found their way into automobiles. A useful analysis by Wernick outlines an interesting development that took place during this period: in the world of electronics, the mechanism takes second stage, and so for 'imaged' [advertisement] cars "looking modern came to mean being linked to computers and all they connote" (Wernick 1991 p.74). From the 1970s onward, computers have played an increasing role in maintaining control over various in-car systems, starting with fuel injection management.

The effects of this on the world of car modification have been enormous. Where once a car could be tinkered with in the driveway, now "most home mechanics are restricted to cosmetic changes, such as installing a new sound system or putting light-up dragon heads on the wiper fluid nozzles. *Almost anything that makes a car perform better is going to involve electronics* [emphasis mine]" (Schneider 2005, C8). Present-day modification is an altogether new culture when compared to that of the hot rodders of the golden era; indeed, so much so that hobbyists now refer to themselves as "tuners." It is a suitable name for the activity of refining and upgrading the complex computer systems that now run most cars. With modern in-car computing now approximately 1000 times as powerful as the Apollo Moon Landers (Schneider 2005, C8), it takes new skills to modify successfully.

Although the present-day tuning movement has its roots in Southern California, the omnipresence of automobiles and automobile culture around the world means that tuning culture is an international affair. Canadians, Europeans, Australians, and Americans, to name but a few, all take part in the act of modifying cars, and there is more diversity than ever. People modify everything from minivans, to SUVs, to old Cadillacs in varying degrees. Since the interest of this study is on the affordable “popular” choice for modification, the analysis will focus on sport compact cars that make up the bulk of the ‘tuner’ scene. A sport compact car, as the name suggests is a compact-sized car with sporting pretensions; furthermore, affordable is a murky term that depends on a variety of factors, but suffice it to say that the interest here is in cars that the average person could purchase, whether new or used. While a brand new BMW might cost \$90,000 off the showroom floor, once it hits its tenth birthday it becomes affordable to just about anybody. As a result, many used luxury cars are also popular candidates for affordable modification. (see appendix photo 1)

### **Reasons for the Decline of North American cars**

To understand the popularity of imports, it is first necessary to learn how they were able to gain a toehold in the first place; moreover, the decline of the once dominant American manufacturers left a large gap open in the car market. According to John Jerome, during the “crucial period of the late 1960s and early 1970s...the [American] automobile industry began to die” (Jerome in Flink 1988, 377).

Attacks were three-pronged focusing on the core issues of safety, fuel economy, and pollution; indeed, while these challenges did not topple the Americans, they weakened them to the point where external competition could steal market share. At the time “oil dependence and escalating fuel prices seemed like a far greater threat to the future of mass personal automobility than its alleged social costs” (Flink 1988, 378). In addition to these major flaws, the general design process was antiquated and the cars produced were hardly cutting-edge. All of these factors helped bring the industry to its knees, while the imports gained a foothold. Safety and emissions equipment ultimately increased the cost of making a car by approximately \$1699.20 (\$475.92 safety / \$1223.28 emissions) in the 1984 model year (Flink 1988, 382). Besides the financial cost to the American manufacturers, the design challenges to meet these new standards meant that cars were improved in a piecemeal fashion.

Ralph Nader’s scathing attack in *Unsafe at any Speed* (1965) brought widespread attention to the designed-in dangers of popular automobiles. With a detailed analysis of numerous design flaws and the carnage they caused, his account is a very convincing one. So much so, that Nader succeeded in spearheading government safety regulations on automobiles. Finally, in 1968, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration implemented 17 mandatory requirements including safety belts and padded dash boards in order to make cars safer (Flink 1988, 384). Public safety recalls were also instituted in order to avoid preventable deaths as in the Corvair debacle. Despite their reluctance, the manufacturers did at times invest quite heavily in safety equipment; indeed, GM actually invested \$80-million in its 1974 air bag program, which unsuccessfully sold only 10,000 units in a few high-end Cadillacs and Buicks (Flink 1988, 385).

This was the exception to the rule, and an unsuccessful one at that, since for the most part safety standards had to be forced on the manufacturers.

As early as the 1950s, residents in Southern California recognized that automobile pollution created unpleasant and unhealthy smog conditions. Much like the implementation of safety regulations, emissions controls were fought at every stage by the manufacturers. When finally they did submit to pollution legislation, their response was a haphazard approach of cramming “de-smogging devices on already overly complicated conventional engines.... [In fact,] by the early 1970s de-smogged conventional engines got 10-15% less gas mileage than earlier uncontrolled engines” (Flink 1988, 387). The better solution would have been to design new efficient engines, but that would have cost large amounts of money – something corporations never like to spend on extraneous costs.

In addition to being notorious polluters, American cars were the archetype behind the expression “gas guzzler.” A comparison of the Corporate Average Fuel Economy (CAFE) between imported cars and American cars confirms this; in 1974 the average was 22.2mpg for imports versus only 13.2mpg for domestic cars (Flink 1988, 388). This state of automotive gluttony would suffer a strong shock when, in the fall of 1973, the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) implemented a total oil embargo against the United States and the Netherlands (Flink 1988, 389). Gas prices skyrocketed and long lines-ups formed at gas stations across the United States. Not surprisingly, small car sales went through the roof, rising “to 39% of U.S sales, and as high as 60% in the Los Angeles area during the first four months of 1974.” Most of the small cars available at the time were imported and their market share grew rapidly.

### **The First Successful Import**

No other vehicle presaged the success of the small import car better than the Volkswagen Beetle. (see appendix photo 2) It was the archetype of rational thinking – a car designed from the ground up as an efficient, affordable, people’s car. The Volkswagen is also an illustration of successful rebranding which answers the question: how do you take a propaganda tool of the Nazis and turn it into a marketing success in the US? A series of quirky self-deprecating ads re-made the Beetle into a lovable harmless underdog that made sense as a practical purchase. Unusual insect-derived styling worked in its favour, and many people found the “bug” to be an attractive purchase. In 1950, Max Hoffman the successful importer of exotic cars to the U.S. began pushing Beetles on various dealers with growing success. They sold on word-of-mouth and a few favourable reviews in magazines, such that by 1954, of the 50,000 cars imported to the U.S., 34,000 were Beetles (Price 2003, 57). Anti-German sentiment was still high but the cars appealed to those who wanted to be different from the masses; indeed, they were popular among intellectuals and gave rise to the popular figure of the ‘Volkswagen bore’, the tweedy, pipe-smoking intellectual who would corner people at parties and bore them to tears with good things to say about his car. In April 1955, Volkswagen of America was formed in New York to handle importation, distribution, sales, and service. Different Beetle-based models were offered such as the Karmann Ghia ‘sports’ coupe, and the Type II – transporter van.

The most interesting aspect of the Beetle occurred when it left the world of advertising and the neutral dealerships and became a part of North American culture.

One ad cheekily made light of this immersion in culture when it quoted an American housewife: “I don’t want an imported car; I want a Volkswagen!” (Steinwedel 1981, 60) The oddball German Beetle had become as American as apple pie, driven by all sorts of people. At the peak of its popularity it was “embraced by the Beat generation as the ultimate anti-establishment vehicle” (Price 2003, 64). Many people liked the car because it was ugly and different – a way of setting themselves out from the rest of the masses in their large gas guzzlers. The act of driving a Beetle was a cultural statement about the owners, which showed that they did not belong to the masses of car buyers – rather that they were critical thinkers driving a ‘smart’ car. In essence the reason for the success of the imports like the Beetle, and the failure of American products, was a cultural one. It is certainly bolstered by, hemmed in by, and rationalized by real world events such as the oil crisis, but it is cultural above all else. Eventually this type of thinking would spread and later cars like the Civic enjoyed tremendous success.

The fads surrounding the Volkswagen symbolized the mood of the time. Beetle-stuffing was very popular on college campuses; as many people as possible would cram themselves into and onto a Beetle, and then try to drive it. Another interesting fad associated with the Beetle was related to the inherent air-tightness of its cabin. For a long time people had noticed that in order to shut the door, it was helpful to crack the window a bit – something that was even joked about in advertisements. It did not take long before a ‘waterbug’ fad started wherein there would be Beetle races in the water (Steinwedel 1981, 81).

Customization of Beetles was more than a fad, especially in Southern California, where the dune buggy craze was very popular. Since the body is attached to the frame with only 18 bolts on each side, the Volkswagen is largely responsible for the popular kit car market. Kit cars consist of a light fibreglass body which is fairly easily assembled by the purchaser at home; moreover, body styles come in a wide variety from Ferraris to dune buggies. Its everyday accessibility to anyone from surfers to priests meant that customization of the Beetle took as many forms as its owners. Pop culture even embraced the car as a living being with the Disney produced *The Love Bug* (1968) starring Herbie #53, the friendly Beetle who saves the day (Steinwedel 1981, 90). Herbie is a living car with emotions, perhaps the most unusual modification of all.

The Beetle's reign as top import waned in the 1970s due to a few reasons. Japanese competition was probably the main factor, as Japanese manufacturers finally succeeded with cars that conveyed “an aura of stylish simplicity that appeals to many younger car buyers” (Meyers 1984, 87). It certainly did not help that the weak U.S. economy meant that the price of a Beetle rose by nearly half from 1968 to 1973 (Steinwedel 1981, 135). At the same time as it came under increasing pressure from its competitors, Ralph Nader also issued a scathing attack on its safety deficiencies in the 1971 report *Small – On Safety*, which dissects the Beetle’s inherent design problems. By the mid-1970s, the Volkswagen was almost 30 years old and largely “seen as outdated, cramped and slow, with dodgy handling... VW needed a new people’s car” (Noad 2003, 41). Enter a slew of box-shaped cars with front wheel drive and water-cooled engines.

Volkswagen effectively repositioned itself by designing cars that were the complete opposite of its former self. One seminal model, the GTi, is perhaps the grandfather of the modern day European Tuner scene, and its role will be detailed further on.

### **Japanese Competition**

Volkswagen's Beetle is noteworthy for being the first major import success, and while its unchanging nature worked to make it the success that it was, it ultimately led to its downfall, similar to the Model T. Another nation was producing small cars at the time – Japan. Due to a variety of cultural and economic factors, Japan with its very high population density and crowded streets, produced cars which were generally very small compared to American vehicles. They proved very popular at home, when personal car use skyrocketed from the mid-1960s onward during the “my car era” (Sparke 2002, 207). This was a time when it became both economically affordable and fashionable for individuals to strive for personal vehicle ownership. By the early 1970s, the Japanese domestic car market had reached saturation, so naturally Japanese manufacturers focused on international markets (Flink 1988, 328). The Japanese government was very supportive of the automotive industry and provided numerous loans and aggressive tariff barriers to protect it; in fact, by carefully undervaluing the yen versus the dollar, “Japanese products including automobiles were cheaper in both U.S and world markets” (Flink 1988, 330).

The Toyota Toyopet and the Datsun 1000 were the first two entrants into the American market, but they proved to be woefully underpowered for safe freeway driving (Flink 1988, 339). As a result, the sales were rather lacklustre, and it was only with bigger models such as the Toyota Corona in 1965, that sales began to increase. 1968 was the breakthrough year when sales rose to 182,547 from a paltry 7,517 in 1963! Throughout the 1970s, aided by the fuel crises, sales increased rapidly so that by “1975 both Datsun and Toyota surpassed VW in U.S sales to become the leading exporters.” (Flink 1988, 339)

Japanese cars were mostly small and rather unexciting at the time, until the Datsun 240Z arrived in North America in the late 1960s. Jackson describes an early encounter:

The purists in our little group laughed at the idea of a Japanese sports car, but the 240Z - with its 150-horsepower in-line 2.4-litre six, its MacPherson strut suspension, its all-synchromesh four-speed gearbox and its exceptional fit and finish – proved us wrong. It had all the attributes of a European sports car and few of the vices. (Jackson 1992, 6)

Due to its high-value nature with excellent quality and performance coupled with competitive pricing, the 240Z sold very well and made the idea of a sporting Japanese car more commonly accepted. (see appendix photo 3) Descendants of the original Z car would later prove to be popular choices for modification. Yet ultimately it was an economy model – the Honda Civic – that would signify the 1990s tuner movement at its best.

In the golden age of the 1950s, cars were classified loosely into two main categories: hot rods (modified for performance) and customs (modified for appearance).

These nomenclatures are still valid, but I will briefly nuance them by offering Paradise's five categories of car modification – strip, sport, show, lowriders, street -- which offer a bit more precision when describing the current scene. Hot rods would fit in the first category, *strip*, which refers to drag strips and the cars made to run on them (Paradise 2000, 12). This type of car typically has a stripped down interior and heavy engine modifications. While fine for drag racing, it nonetheless has some downsides including: “Major dollars are needed to achieve greater horsepower... Car looks ugly Monday through Friday” (Paradise 2000, 12). Cars in the *sport* category *do* have performance modifications, however, their goal is improved handling on a track; this makes them more affordable since costly engine changes are not necessary. Affordability is the last thing on the minds of owners whose modern day customs fit the *show* category, for much like the show cars of the 1950s and 1960s, the cost of elaborate paint and chrome accessories is high. “Owning a full-on show Civic will require three things: lots of cash, lots of clean soft cloths and lots of space for trophies” (Paradise 2000, 13). *Lowriders* are still popular today, as people strive to make their cars hop to music using airbags or hydraulic suspension. Perhaps the most common type of modified sport compact is found in the fifth category, *street*. Combining a mix of performance and aesthetic improvements, this jack-of-all-trades “doesn't do one thing exceptionally well” (Paradise 2000, 13) but can offer increased acceleration and the “creature comforts” to go along with it. Hence, in *street cars*, hot rod meets the custom in the age of compact car tuning, for while young modifiers may undertake heavy engine modifications for increased power, they still want the creature comforts of ICE – toys like in-car television, loud bass

speakers, and neon lighting to draw attention. Cars in the street category are a mix of hot rod and custom.

A lot of the modifications are done more for appearance than for actual performance, echoing the customs that blossomed during the golden years (1945-1965). It seems that in this new age many car modifiers subscribe to the edict that form leads function. For example, Honda Civic and VW Golf owners spend hundreds of dollars at a Vancouver muffler shop to purchase “performance” exhaust systems that are so big the lack of back-pressure can actually lower the performance in some cases (Richler 2005, FW03). Laurance Yap, a Toronto-based automotive journalist, who has written widely on modified cars, tends to agree that “these days most of the modified cars you see cruising around late at night are more about show than go,” (Yap 2003, G01) since the first modifications done are usually visual – tinted windows, sporty wheels, and a loud stereo.

### **JDM – An Obsession with Japanese Culture**

Whether form follows function or vice versa, it is certain that Japanese sport compacts dominate the current age of modification. Various models from Honda, Mazda, Nissan, and Toyota (in addition to their respective luxury brands – Acura, Lexus, & Infiniti) dominate the tuning scene. The obsession with Japanese culture has manifested itself in the JDM movement, and the recent *drifting* craze – two inherently Japanese cultural elements. It is important to note that this attraction to these cultural elements is rooted most strongly in working class desires, and it should not be confused with the aspirations of the higher-class towards different elements of Japanese culture

such as sushi and high-end electronics for example. JDM stands for Japanese domestic market and drifting refers to the sport of sliding a car sideways. North American modifiers who worship the JDM try to return their North American-spec vehicles to the specifications of the Japanese market.

The reason they do this is because North Americans usually receive the lower end of the models with much less horsepower, whereas the Japanese home market is rich with high-performance options and accessories.<sup>15</sup> More so than anything, the Honda Civic is *the* import car of choice for many tuners, and as such it forms not only the face of Japanese-focused tuner culture, but of import tuning in general. The Honda Civic is the Model T of today.

### **Honda Civic – Model T Reincarnate**

It arrived rather quietly in the United States in 1969 as a tiny two-seater coupe with a paltry 52 horsepower – a minnow amidst a sea of sharks (Paradise 2000, 1). The muscle car era was in full swing at the time, but what may initially have seemed like folly, quickly turned into success. Within a few years, Honda had developed a stronger dealer base and sales increased dramatically thanks in part to the oil crisis. It was the 1975 Honda Civic with its CVCC engine that would really make sharp in-roads; indeed, it was a well-made small car whose quality approached that of the German car manufacturers. Before long, people realized its performance potential with its light,

---

<sup>15</sup> North American versions are usually rather tepid because of strict emissions and safety standards combined with fears that high-powered models will not sell well. Only recently are more powerful versions being imported.

responsive chassis. Oscar Jackson was a pioneer who took a modified Civic to the track beginning in 1976 and managed to beat other entrants in larger cars (Paradise 2000, 4).

Despite its early potential as a performance car, there were very few aftermarket parts available. Traditional American cars still held sway with the general public, and consequently the majority of add-ons were made for them.

Oddly enough, it was through the world of small trucks that the sport compact would ultimately gain acceptance. Japanese-made trucks from Datsun and Toyota proved very popular in the late 1970s, and numerous small truck clubs were formed; furthermore, a lot of these “mini truck clubs started allowing customized compact cars to tag along as ‘mascot cars,’ since many of the female partners of the male membership preferred small cars.” (Paradise 2000, 4) Gradually, the fad of customizing small compacts grew to be more popular than mini-trucks; indeed, in December 1989, *Mini-Truckin’* magazine introduced a seminal spin-off, *Sport Compact Car*, which finally addressed this growing culture of modifiers (Paradise 2000, 5). “Within months the Civic had become a cult car for import performance enthusiasts,” (Paradise 2000, 5) and it remains to this day the number one car of choice.

On the used market, a roadworthy Civic can be had for as little as \$1500 with provincial safety standards and emissions certification, so naturally there are a lot of younger buyers for them. They are visible in almost any city, with their tinted windows, loud exhausts, and bass-filled stereos. “As the automotive equivalent of the Swiss Army Knife enthusiasts have used the Civic for all types of Projects” (*Performance Auto & Sound* 2005, 310).<sup>16</sup> (see appendix photo 4)

---

<sup>16</sup> Honda Canada did an excellent job of capturing the diverse enthusiast base in a television commercial featuring some of its devotees entitled “Civic Nation.” The ad features numerous modified Civics cruising

Part of the success of the Honda Civic as a modifier's car of choice has been helped by the easy interchangeable engines amongst different auto platforms. "The B-series engine is the import enthusiasts' equivalent to the Ford 4-cylinder of the 1930s and 1940s. It holds tremendous popularity as the performance engine of choice for the Honda/Acura nut" (Kojima 2003, 120). There are numerous variations that come in a variety of models such as the Civic Si, Del Sol Si, and the Acura Integra; furthermore, the foreign variants, particularly those offered to the Japanese domestic market, offer more horsepower. Installation of these engines is relatively simple since many of them easily bolt into place in the Civic giving it much higher horsepower than available from the factory.

However, the Honda Civic is not the only popular car with import tuners, and if anything, its outright commonality and popularity can be a disincentive for many would-be purchasers. Other popular choices include the rear-wheel drive Mazda RX-7, and the Nissan 240sx; indeed, the latest drifting craze (sport of sliding a car sideways around a turn) has meant that the rear-wheel drive 240sx particularly has enjoyed a resurgence in popularity due to its ideal format for the sport (*Performance Auto & Sound* 2005, 314). At the newer end of the scale, the Nissan 350Z and the Subaru WRX rally car are just two of the very sporty choices available. Even Mazda's successful Miata, which is underpowered in North American specification, is starting to become more popular with the tuning crowd as the prices drop for used exemplars.

---

the streets of Toronto at night, accompanied by hip hop music. It closes with the word "represent" across the screen, which is a cool way of saying represent your culture – in this case the Civic car culture. This is a nice celebration of the tuner crowd that has thoroughly embraced Honda's best-selling car.

Import tuners are not satisfied in the least with the rather mundane North American versions, and so there is a general fascination with returning cars to Japanese Domestic Market specification – JDM. “U.S drivers typically receive watered-down versions of Japanese-made cars, so import tuners strive to restore the vehicles to their uninhibited – and often flamboyant – roots.” (Fernandez 2003, 1JH)

There were numerous different levels of trim and engine configurations that never made it over to North America; moreover, by obtaining these parts, an import tuner can lend an air of uniqueness to his car while simultaneously increasing performance with quality factory parts. JDM remains a very important part of the Japanese enthusiast car scene.

In addition to modifying cars to Japanese specification, car customizers also seek to emulate some of the sporting practices of the Japanese. One interesting activity to emerge from this desire to emulate the ‘authentic’ Japanese culture has been the adoption of a practice called *drifting*. Originally adapted from rally-racer techniques, illegal street-racers on the windy Japanese mountain roads found that controlled sliding allowed them to corner faster. Like many underground movements, it grew quietly until more attention was given to the sport from the media and aftermarket companies. There is something rather exciting about cars sliding sideways at up to 160km/h with smoking rear tires! Daijiro Inada, who founded the Tokyo Auto Salon, created the D1 Grand Prix in Japan in 2001 which institutionalized drifting; furthermore, it finally became an official sport in North America when the D1 Grand Prix was brought to Irwindale, California in August 2003 (Vose 2004, 103). American drivers were able to compete against the top Japanese contenders to see who had the best controlled drift. Drifting is the latest element of the Japanese tuner scene to attract interest from car modifiers around the world.

### **The Euro Scene**

Japanese cars and culture certainly contribute a large part to the present-day popular culture of modified cars, but they are not the only choice in this age of global culture. European manufacturers have long made cars that are enjoyable to drive, and it is arguable that the Volkswagen GTi virtually created the modern sport compact car. While the previously mentioned Beetle was a major success in world markets, it was not by any means a performance car; consequently, it was the seminal Golf GTi (or Rabbit GTi in North America) that really improved Volkswagen's reputation as the producer of cars that were fun to drive, effectively tying the idea of German engineering to driving enjoyment in an affordable mass-market package. The GTi basically set the stage for every Volkswagen to follow. "Despite its extreme youth, the Golf GTi is as much a classic as any Ferrari...Few other cars have penetrated the suburban psyche as deeply as the original VW Golf GTi" (Wilson 1995, 216). (see appendix photo 5) Introduced in the fall of 1975 for European markets only, the 110 horsepower Golf virtually invented the 'hot-hatch' market; suddenly people could drive a 'sports' car that was also practical (Seume p. 103). Unfortunately, the North American market was only offered a bunch of bland Americanized Rabbits, with gaudy velour interiors that one motoring journalist described as "brothels on wheels"; finally in 1982, the Volkswagen GTi journeyed across the Atlantic, albeit with a restricted 90 horsepower engine to meet emissions standards. European versions did not require catalytic converters at the time.

Nevertheless, what had originally been created as a limited production racing homologation special<sup>17</sup> still survived with excellent handling and a sporty nature.

On the more upscale end of things, the self-proclaimed “Ultimate Driving Machine” - BMW - has long enjoyed success amongst car enthusiasts since the introduction of the *Neu Klasse* 1500 sedan, a cleanly-styled mid-size car that combined practicality with a certain sporty flavour that was lacking in other contemporary cars. “When they started to appear on German Autobahnen in 1963, people were staggered at the speeds which these sporty-looking cars could achieve” (Bladon 1985, 9). The 1500 set the mould that would shape BMWs up until the present day, and its offshoot, the 2002 coupe, was what made BMW in North America. Max Hoffman, who was the main importer of German cars during the 1950s and 1960s, demanded that BMW send over a car with more horsepower, and so it did. In 1967, *Car & Driver* declared that the little 2002 coupe was the best small car they had ever driven (Buckley 2001, 72). BMW was successful in North America based on the sporty 2002, and so a certain level of driving pleasure came to be associated with the brand from very early on.

Today, it is an enormously successful brand with a full range of models from roadsters to SUVs, but BMWs do not sell for economy car prices. As a result, the trend is for older more affordable vintages such as the popular 3 and 5-series to be the model of choice for the majority of BMW tuners. Other up-market European brands like Audi, Mercedes, and Porsche also attract effervescent crowds of auto enthusiasts who often choose to modify their cars to attain higher performance. Even the staid Swedish-made Saabs and Volvos attract a very limited tuner audience.

---

<sup>17</sup> European racing requirements mandated that a manufacturer had to build 5000 street-legal ‘copies’ of a racing car if they wanted to participate in the races. These ‘copies’ would feature the same engine displacement, and the same body which sometimes came bedecked with aggressive spoilers.

Much like their Japanese counterparts, many of the European-only models offer higher performance than their North-American spec'd versions. During the 1980s and 1990s, the constant struggle to meet emissions and safety regulations meant that North American versions often suffered from more weight and less horsepower. Not surprisingly, the Euro tuner crowd has always striven to attain original 'Eurospec.' Similar to the JDM crowd, the goal is to obtain a unique and better performing car using original parts that came on European domestic market versions. While not typical of the whole scene, there is definitely a strong desire by many to improve their cars with 'superior' European parts. These original versions are often steeped with autobahn mythology that gives the North American tuner the impression that his 20-year-old BMW is still a fine driving machine since it was built and engineered for use on the speed-limitless highways of Germany.

Across the ocean in America, the land of 90km/h speed limits, the domestic sport compact car is a little different from its Japanese or European cousins. Small American cars were introduced as a retaliatory action in the face of competing small cars from Japan and Europe. They have never quite had the design success, or quality of manufacture, as other world offerings, yet a few models are popular with the tuning crowd. The Chevrolet Cavalier is very similar in size to Japanese compacts and it offers the same basic package, a 4 cylinder engine and 'relatively' nimble handling. People who own these cars refer to them by their factory name – J bodies. Nevertheless, there is very little aftermarket for this class of car, and "the four routes to tire shredding performance in a J-Body are engine swaps, turbo charging, supercharging, and nitrous oxide, all of which require a considerable financial sacrifice as everything must be

custom fabricated” (Bleakney 2002, G30). The Dodge Neon and Ford Focus are similar to the Cavalier since they also enjoy a limited enthusiast base, but nowhere near the success of the Japanese & Euro tuning scenes.

In addition to the three schools of sport compact tuning – JDM, Euro tuning, and domestic sport compacts, it is interesting to look at the retro rod crowd since it celebrates the hot rods of yore simply because they are oppositional to the new computerized cars of today. “No \$15,000 paint jobs, no computer thingy with a shit load of wires, just scratch-your-head-and-figure-it-out technology with no more than four wires running from the engine” (Stegall 2005, 52). This opposition to technology is an interesting part of the nostalgia crowd. The Poor Boyz is one such club in Ottawa that enjoys driving old American muscle cars. “Unlike many import tuners, the Poor Boyz don’t have loud sound systems to match their engines” (Mannion 2004, DO23). A sound system would detract from the experience of driving a car and hearing the engine at work. This ethic of simplicity is a pervasive part of the retro school of car modification.

All of these streams of car modification form part of a growing market of general vehicle modification that is generating billions of dollars of sales annually. “In 2001, U.S. sales on aftermarket parts for sport compacts – the segment that covers the tricked-out Neons and Civics – rose by 25%, to US\$1.5-Billion” (Sternbergh 2003, SP1) . Approximately 60% of this money is being invested in “appearance accessories” that enhance the outward visible appearance of sport compacts. The market is so popular that it has more than doubled since 2001, to reach sales of US\$4.1billion in 2004, with growth in ICE leading the segment (Saunders 2005, C1).

The general popularity of the sport compact niche has not gone unnoticed by the major car manufacturers. Some have been slow to react, but more and more factory 'tuner' models have recently been introduced to the ravenous public. Much like the muscle cars of the 1960s, modern-day factory tuner cars offer lots of performance right off the showroom floor. The upcoming Mazda Mazdaspeed6 is an excellent example of factory cooptation. Rather than wait for the tuner crowd to modify the engine, Mazda has already installed a small 2.3Litre turbocharged engine that produces 272 horsepower / 280ft-lbs torque (Parker 2005, 72). (see appendix photo 6) This is an awesome amount of power for a small sedan, and it is controlled by a sophisticated electronically-managed all-wheel drive system. Another factory tuner car which has already enjoyed tremendous success is the Subaru WRX – a street-legal rally car. “To distinguish the 300-horsepower, rally-bred WRX STi from lesser sports cars, the Impreza WRX STi features an aggressive-looking, rally-inspired hood scoop” (Subaru Canada 2005). (see appendix photo 7) Their language is very confrontational, as is the flamboyant styling of the WRX STi, which features, in addition to the hood scoop, a huge wing on the back that borders on the comical; nevertheless, for the pilot of said vehicle, it offers a piece of authentic imagery that demonstrates the racing capability of his car. The American-made Dodge Neon SR-T is a similar effort with a turbocharged engine and large spoilers; indeed, its name “SR-T” stands for Street Racing Technology. There are countless other factory 'tuner' cars that have all attempted to co-opt the popularity of the movement.

Most aftermarket parts are still produced by smaller companies and the automobile manufacturers are largely left out of this market. Recently, they have made strides to tap into this lucrative market. Even though Honda produces many models

which are a key part of the tuner culture, it “controls only about 10% of the trade in aftermarket parts” (Sternbergh 2003, SP1). Some manufacturers are offering their own performance part lines, such as the GM parts line American Tuner series, which caters directly to the J-body crowd. “Even higher-end makers are into the tuning thing now: check out the BMW stand, where you can now order an M3 with a “competition” package that includes bigger wheels, tires and brakes, along with aerodynamic modifications executed in beautiful carbon fibre” (Yap 2005, G28). Clearly there is room for growth in this market and the auto manufacturers are courting it more aggressively.

Proof of the massive success of car modification today is found at numerous car shows around the world; moreover, these shows allow enthusiasts of Japanese, Euro, and Domestic sport compacts to showcase their work in a celebration of their culture. As with many things in car culture, the first major sport compact show was held in California. Hot Import Nights started as a small outdoor car show in Long Beach in 1998, but it has since taken the import car show circuit by storm with a cross-country tour in twenty U.S. cities and two shows in Britain (Guzik 2005, E18). It is an exciting carnival atmosphere with light shows, loud urban music, and scantily-clad go-go dancers. Two stages have different musical acts on them, and the lights go off at night-time to create a funky atmosphere. The formula is working, since the various shows in the tour enjoyed a staggering 30% increase in attendance in 2004 (*Business Wire* 2005).

On the Canadian front, Darknights is very similar to Hot Import Nights since it offers a showcase of tuner cars with plenty of urban culture. This year there will be three stages with all types of entertainment ranging from dance shows to bikini contests to “all out pie eating contests”! (Darknights Nationals 2005)

The atmosphere for many of these big mainstream shows can best be described as “a car party, a celebration of music and automobiles and style that’s quickly finding itself going mainstream” (*Wheels* 2004, g14). So mainstream, in fact, that auto manufacturers are increasingly sponsoring booths at these shows, like the General Motors twenty-car presence at last year’s Darknights (*Wheels* 2004, g14); indeed, there is no better place to show the fanatics of tuner culture the latest ‘hot’ factory models.

One of the most important shows of the year associated with car modification is not even open to the general public – SEMA! The Speciality Equipment Market Association Show has become a huge event held annually in Las Vegas; moreover, it is *the* place for aftermarket manufacturers to introduce new products and display the latest concept cars. The last show in November 2004 did a great job of representing the US\$4.1-billion a year industry, with a turn-out of over 100,000 industry insiders who came to view new products that were exhibited in more than 2,000 customized vehicles (Parker 2005, 24). (see appendix photo 8) It is the official spot where tuning culture becomes a business investment and the latest trends are commercialized.

Car shows provide an official meeting place for car enthusiasts, but it is the unofficial meets at various urban locales that form the background of the hobby. Young people still cruise the main strip, and meet at the local coffee shop to show off their cars as they did back in the golden age, but a new phenomenon has emerged – big box malls. With their large parking lots, and distance from residential areas, they provide an ideal meeting place for impromptu night time car shows. Toronto has one of the most vibrant tuner cultures in North America and people often meet at various spots in Woodbridge or Woodbine & Highway 16; indeed, “the real crowds only gather after midnight... it’s

common to see a couple of hundred cars show up” (Yap 2003, G01). Unlike the movie depictions of debauchery, the scene is relatively calm with people talking quietly and a few cars at a time coming and going into the night.

The calm of the cruise spots is quickly replaced with the adrenalin produced by illegal street racing. Competition is a part of any performance modification, and naturally, many tuners do race their cars to see who is faster. Impromptu races sometimes attract very large crowds of racers and spectators, and it is not unknown for 500 cars to show up to a single race in Toronto (Moulton 2002, DO.7). The thrill of illegal street racing is infectious and despite police crackdowns and the inherent risk, this activity will surely continue. Speed and competition are simply a part of the sport of modification; indeed, the addition of more horsepower is often done with the intention of beating other ‘competitors.’

Legal racing is a strong part of the hobby, and numerous drag strips around the world cater to everything from conventional dragsters to the relatively new sport compact class. At a more formal level, the National Hot Rod Association has created the Sport Compact Racing series which has now been running since 2001. As with many aspects of car culture, it enjoys greatest success in “the Southern California market, Englishtown, and South Florida [which] are hot beds for sport compact racing and represent the biggest sport compact drag races in the world” (NHRA 2005). The professionalization of the sport is evidence of the mainstream popularity of sport compact cars.

### **Sport Compact Magazines**

The overall popularity of modified cars means that there are numerous modification magazines that cater to various enthusiast niches. *Sport Compact Car* was introduced in December 1989 to capture the new audience of sport compact tuners, and there are now hundreds of different titles that appeal to different tastes. *Euro Tuner* is just one example of a European-centred magazine that focuses on Volkswagens, while *Sport Compact National* is a Canadian magazine that features locally modified Japanese cars. Some of them trade on adolescent humour to get their point across, like *Super Street* magazine. It features countless sexual innuendos in the titles of its articles: “Don’t Get Blown! 9 Easy steps to turbocharger sizing;” and “Lube up – Power & Protection Can be found in a bottle” (*Super Street* 2005, pp 100, 117). *Max Power* is a British magazine that has sexy photos to back up its innuendos, with numerous topless models throughout. Overall, the current crop of tuning magazines offers inspiration and ideas in an entertaining format to their readers, as well as technical articles on popular modifications.

Tuning culture has attained mainstream popularity, and the current crop of television shows is further proof. Numerous titles abound with various spins on the theme of modification: *Ride* with Funkmaster Flex as the host focuses mostly on celebrities and their outrageous rides; *Monster Garage* teams up a handful of experts to change the function of an automobile; *NOPI Tunervision* (Number One Parts Inc.) offers race coverage, and behind the scenes footage; *Pimp My Ride* is MTV’s fun show which picks a random viewer and modifies his jalopy; *Over haulin’* takes unfinished project cars and turns them into show quality cars (*Performance Auto & Sound* 2005a, 308).

*Pimp My Ride* does not focus exclusively on sport compact cars, but it does cater to a young audience; as a result, the candidates for vehicular modification are always college-aged kids who drive beat-up used cars. The show always ends with them cruising in their newly modified car, and stating something to the effect that with a nice car their life will be changed; indeed, the powerful theme of automobility transforming the driver's life is at the root of car modification.

A crucial meeting place for present-day car modifiers has not been mentioned yet, however it hosts a huge community and offers a great knowledge base for support – the Internet. Online car forums are a place to discuss a variety of modification issues, as well as cars in general. Participants can ask questions about a particular repair, or give others advice on how to do that repair. The multimedia nature of the Internet means that photos can easily be posted to show which part needs to be adjusted, or what a member's car looks like. In addition to providing information about mechanical issues, forums provide a site for buy and sell classifieds, planning events, and even off-topic discussion. There is certainly a lot of wasted bandwidth, but with numerous forums available that relate to almost any type of automobile, the Internet is a very valuable resource for learning specific details about a car. In addition to online forums, countless aftermarket parts manufacturers do business through their homepages or on online auction sites like eBay. Personal web pages allow import tuners to showcase their modification history in detail, as well as providing others with information on how to do it.

Hollywood has always enjoyed stories that deal with young carefree souls embroiled in a world of danger and conflict; as a result, hot rods were perfect fodder for 1950s teen action movies, and that same formula has been successfully applied today.

*The Fast and The Furious* chronicles the adventures of an undercover police officer who infiltrates the street racing culture of Southern California. Released in Summer 2001, it created a sensation and did very well at the box office taking in US\$40-million in the opening weekend and going on to gross over US\$200-million worldwide (*Box Office Mojo* 2005). In order to portray tuner culture authentically, the producers were careful to learn as much about the real street-racing scene as possible; indeed, to be truly authentic they courted real street racers and featured their cars in the movie (Paul 2003, I). Similarly, *2 Fast 2 Furious*, (2003) was the successful sequel that featured the gritty underworld of Florida street racing.

In the digital age, virtual worlds are a popular place for many people to conduct various activities. Videogames have aggressively targeted youth culture by focusing on popular interests and themes; as such, car racing games have proven to be widely popular. Titles like *Midnight Street Racer* and *Grand Turismo 4* cater to people who want to virtually street race on virtual public roads. *Grand Turismo 4* offers a plethora of exotic cars as well as more regular cars; indeed, at the beginning of the game, players can choose from two used car showrooms which contain mostly 1990s models. Much like real life, it offers a chance for modification: "If you're looking to do some fine-tuning of your car's setup, you can click on the wrench icon next to selected parts to tweak to your heart's content" (Ekberg 2005). Both on real and virtual roads, the tuning culture pervades many facets of life.

The world of car modification has always had an allure that appeals to people who use their cars for risky thrill-seeking, and it still occurs today. Illegal street-racing may be a small part of the tuning world, but a rash of high-profile accidents has brewed up a

lot of controversy and moral panic surrounding the hobby. Numerous legal initiatives seek to control street racing by enforcing draconian vehicular standards; indeed, four states currently have pending legislation to ban outright any aftermarket exhaust systems (SEMA 2005). By offering police such legislative tools, lawmakers are trying to control the hobby by making it impossible to practice. In addition to restrictive laws, many police undertake blitzes in order to target illegal activity; however, oftentimes ‘innocent’ hobbyists end up feeling persecuted by this. At the Darknights car show in Toronto in 2003, police aggressively targeted show-goers: “The only black cloud all weekend was a so-called blitz being mounted by the police and the Ministry of Transportation, which closely resembled sharks circling a school of herring” (Grainger 2003, DT2). One anecdote from this show suggests that “one young guy” was pulled over six times in one evening for having a loud exhaust.

Although the police may be perceived as rather harsh at times, they are not afraid to take a fun approach to managing street racing. As early as 1997, one police force in Los Angeles was building a 500-horsepower Honda Civic with \$50,000 in donations, which it would take to the drag-strip in order to “help build a rapport” with the import crowd (Bostwick 1997, 3). More recently, the Take it 2 the Track event in Ottawa, Canada offered young enthusiasts the chance to race at the Ottodrome for free; moreover, the message sent out was that no police tickets would be written (Wood 2005, C2). Instead the focus is on education, with various information sheets showing exactly how much a street racing conviction could cost. Whether or not such initiatives are successful remains to be seen, but they certainly offer a way for the police to develop a more positive relationship with the sport compact community.

Another ‘crime’ of which many modifiers are accused is poorly executed modifications. The term “riced-out” or “rice rocket” is used to describe a car that is poorly modified in a tasteless fashion; moreover, the name derives from the fact that the cars are usually from Asia (Japan), and many of the enthusiasts tend to be Asian (Sternbergh 2003 SP1). Many of the modifications, if poorly executed, will earn the bearer more than infractions from the police and fashion police – in the end they will have a car that has worse performance than the original. Lowered suspension and huge wheels can actually make for a harsh and uncomfortable ride, while a noisy exhaust can become irritating on long highway jaunts. A reverse trend has begun to emerge in which car owners retrofit their cars to original specification. The owner of Quick Muffler, Abe Khoury, may sell a lot expensive exhaust systems, but many of his customers have decided to quiet down their exhausts in order to attract less police attention (Richler 2005, FW03).

Since the end of the muscle car age, American car companies have crumbled under pressure from legislative and competitive interests. Import cars have very shrewdly staked out a place in foreign markets, and they have come to be accepted as the *ne plus ultra* of car design. As used models trickle down into the marketplace, they become easily affordable to a wide and mostly younger audience. Beginning in California, the modification of these small sport compacts has become a popular phenomenon all over the world. Three main groups make up the tuner culture of today: Japanese, Euro, and Domestic. Oftentimes there is an effort to modify cars using the original ‘superior’ parts that were available in their home markets.

Much like the hot rod culture of the 1950s, the success of the tuner movement has drawn considerable attention. Numerous aftermarket companies produce billions of dollars of parts on a yearly basis to feed the insatiable appetite of enthusiasts. At the design level, automobile manufacturers are incorporating performance and custom elements into new cars which they market using references and cues to sport compact culture. A myriad of car shows, magazines, movies, and informal meets celebrate this culture and feed the needs of what is becoming a very mainstream activity. Nevertheless, despite major differences in the vehicles that are modified today, many of the same themes remain present. Without further ado, the next chapter will tease out the similarities and differences found over the course of the last 100 years of car modification.

## **Chapter V – Persistent Themes in the History of Car Modification**

Automobility has undergone many fascinating changes over the last 100 years as it progressed from its inception through a long period of incremental changes. The basic layout of the archetypal automobile with its gasoline-powered engine, four wheels, and a trunk has persisted throughout the years; however, technological developments and cultural imperatives have subtly – and unsubtly – coloured the design of automobiles. Perhaps the most interesting changes were not the many advances in factory car design, but the changes which occurred after cars left the showroom, when individuals modified them for various reasons. Then cars become a canvas upon which to paint elements of individuality, struggle, and commentary; car modification becomes an interesting and telling reflection of society. This study has focused on the history of the *popular* culture of modified cars since this quite naturally is the most prevalent, and perhaps the most vibrant slice of car modification; indeed, the elite world of exotic cars and expensive modifications is certainly glamorous, but not readily visible on everyday streets. In this segment, normal individuals use their ingenuity and creativity to create their own affordable pieces of the automotive puzzle, rather than simply throwing money at an exotic car as is the case for the rich and famous. Their chosen medium of modification is usually one of the more affordable and familiar automobiles available, and the quest for change can take interesting paths. The history of popular car modification is certainly a very lively one with numerous recurrent themes, among which issues of status, masculinity, individuality and the entrepreneurial ethic loom large. As the history of this hobby progresses there are changes in all of these areas, but they nevertheless maintain strong commonalities over time.

The following paragraphs recap the history of automotive modification. They make the specific point that automotive modification must be understood as a broad phenomenon of which the customization of the Golden Age (1945-1965) is only one, albeit well-known, example. All eras are tinged with the DIY ethic – the majority of modifiers do not pay others to do all of the work. To be as clear as possible, it is useful to think of Henry Ford as an early car modifier with his hand-built quadricycle, and even of farmers as car customizers when they modified their cars to ease a variety of agricultural tasks. This entrepreneurial ethic remains a strong part of what it means to be a car modifier; moreover, doing as much of the work oneself gives satisfaction and is a way to truly make the car an authentic product of the individual.

If anything, the entrepreneurial or ‘Do-it-yourself’ (DIY) ethic is an integral part of car modification, from the pioneering days of home-made automobiles (1885-1910) to the present. Naturally, the very early days of automobile invention were the result of creative men who literally hand-built their own one-off designs in sheds and small workshops. Henry Ford was one such figure whose first automobile, the quadricycle, was too big to escape from his shed; he therefore knocked down the wall to remove it (Banham 2002, 28)! Ultimately his very successful Model T would offer affordable automobility to the masses.

As the automotive infrastructure – the network of garages, mechanics, specialty shops, popular knowledge, etc. — was still in its infancy during the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many automobile owners employed chauffeurs to maintain their vehicles. The affordable Model T, however, was a car for the masses which permitted many owners to take matters into their own hands and conduct their own maintenance and

repair. Farmers were enterprising by nature, and many of them were automobile owners; moreover, their modifications were usually utilitarian – turning their car into a water pump, impromptu tractor, or the like. In terms of early automotive hobbyists who modified their cars for sporting reasons, this was practised mostly by blue-collar workers in Southern California. Their rather simple methods often consisted of removing as many inessential parts as possible in order to lighten their vehicles. Early performance upgrades were usually accomplished by removing inessential parts oneself and by wandering the local junkyard.

This entrepreneurial spirit continued into the Golden Age of modified cars (1945-1965). Countless teenagers could now afford old jalopies, and home-made modifications were the order of the day. Before the golden age, parts were most often sourced from junkyards, and what aftermarket parts existed for the Model T were more concerned with improving its functionality. By the early 1950s, a burgeoning performance aftermarket parts business existed, and thousands of different ‘bolt-on’ parts were created and marketed directly to appeal to the ‘do-it-yourselfer;’ indeed, the appellation ‘bolt-on’ is meant to signify that installation is literally a case of bolting the part onto the automobile. These simple and affordable add-ons were meant to increase the performance of the car in some way. It was also during the post-war era that custom cars that focused on looks really became a part of popular modification; indeed, new paint technologies meant that turning an old car into something fresh was now possible.

During the current era of the import (1975-2005), computer technology has played a crucial role in car design and manufacture. Where once an engine was operated with strictly mechanical devices, the computer chip has now become the *de rigueur*

means of management. Computerization of the automobile is now found everywhere from the engine compartment, to the climate control, to the satellite navigation. In order to tune an engine today, new skills are needed in order to tweak the computers. Some elements require the help of computer diagnostic equipment which in turn may lessen the value of a backyard mechanic; however, the mark of many hobbyists is still rooted in hands-on modification, and, ironically the computer provides the best means for fighting back at the digitization of the automobile! Online forums, accessible only by computer, provide an excellent resource for interested auto enthusiasts to seek and give mechanical advice about their cars. Secret tips are shared on how to read the fault-codes from the omnipresent in-car computer – the ECU (Engine Control Unit), and numerous “How-to” guides show in great detail with high-quality colour photos how to repair or modify certain devices. The DIY ethic is not dead in the present day, but very much alive and well, and the invaluable resource that is the online community has become an integral part of car modification.

In addition to its entrepreneurial membership, popular car modification is marked by another key aspect – affordability. Quite clearly, affordable low-cost vehicles will always be the first and most popular choice for modification by people of moderate means. The Ford Model T was the most widely sold vehicle of its day and its general availability and extremely affordable pricing meant that it was a natural choice for many car modifiers. Henry Ford’s goal with efficient mass production was to drive the price down so that anybody could afford to buy one; moreover, this low cost now meant that used examples – jalopies – were even cheaper to buy.

For this reason, the Model T was the most affordable choice, and a very common project car – the removal of trim pieces producing easy performance gains at no cost to the car owner. Power upgrades were possible, and there were a few aftermarket cylinder heads available, but for the most part hot rodders went to the local scrapyards to pull pieces off other cars.

Throughout the Golden Age of modification from 1945-1965, many people still turned to the tried and true and very affordable Ford Model A as their choice of hot rod. Later on during the 1950s, the '57 Chevy became a newer option with its powerful engine straight from the factory; moreover, by this time there were many low-cost cars from different manufacturers. The hot rod school of modification was still rooted in the part-removing, junkyard-sourcing ethic, so affordability remained strong. On the custom side of things, which modified cars for their appearance rather than their performance, the relatively humble 1940-1951 Mercury became a good base upon which to build, since custom car hobbyists undertook relatively ornate changes to the bodywork and paint and it was a good simple design to work on. Since customizers were purchasing this model used, the cost of acquiring one was very low. It was both affordable and modest in design, providing the perfect base for elaborate changes.

The Honda Civic is actually reviled by many modifiers, but this is by virtue of its ubiquity – for it forms the face of car modification today. As a new car it was and has remained a top seller for a few decades, so numerous used models are found everywhere, making it affordable and the first obvious choice for that 'unique' touch. In the Euro scene, Volkswagen's cheapest car, the Golf, is the first choice for many.

Not surprisingly, Chevrolet's entry-level Cavalier, the J body, is a very popular choice among domestic car modifiers. The popular TV show *Pimp My Ride* is an excellent celebration of many of these 'average joe' car modifiers, since the program takes the old beaten-up cars of young car owners and injects thousands of dollars of expensive body and electronic baubles into them. This show is very much in line with the popular American dream, since it shows in a rather corny fashion how the modification of these affordable cars can give instant status to their owners – they are ordinary people and yet they can project an image of success with the right automobile. The youth watching can empathize with the participants, and it reaffirms their belief that with the right luck they might one day live the life of a millionaire. A nice car is perhaps the most attainable part of the American Dream. Celebrity is part of this dream as will be discussed further on.

### **Cars and Status Structures**

As a very visible and mobile means of expression, it is only natural that the automobile has come to be embraced as the ultimate status symbol in the car-oriented societies of today. The various artefacts and people associated with cars and car modification fit into a loosely aggregated hierarchy of tastes. Herbert Gans' *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste* (1974) offers good definitions for describing this phenomenon. In a heterogeneous society, there are countless choices to be made from a variety of 'contents' and cars are no exception; moreover, these "choices are based on similar values and aesthetic standards" (Gans 1974, 92). A particular set of values and standards will constitute a *taste culture*, while "a group of people who make similar choices for similar reasons" makes up a *taste public*

(Gans 1974, 92). Due to different standards for different publics, each one will have its own specific interests; indeed, the current import tuning scene is an example of this with various streams of Japanese, European, and American enthusiasts. Suffice it to say that there are taste structures present in all eras of car modification, and that these contain within them a hierarchy of cultures ranging from high to low. The assignation of various car cultures to these hierarchies is somewhat arbitrary, but it is possible to assign different classes into a loose aggregate as I have done throughout with a focus on popular car modification. It is important to note the presence of such structures since they implicitly and sometimes explicitly inform commentary on the world of car modification.

### **The Inevitable Marxian Twist**

John Dewitt's analysis of Kustom Kulture in *Cool Cars, High Art: The Rise of Kustom Kulture* (2001) offers an interesting analysis of the way in which blue-collar modernism attempts to reject the hierarchy of class and car design put forth by Detroit. Different cars are targeted at different income brackets and meant to appeal to various aspirations by representing certain levels of status. Dewitt's argument is a rather Marxian take on car modification, which pits the blue-collar proletariat against the mighty capitalist engine, and implies that the proletariat wishes to overthrow the mainstream conception of the automobile. Therefore, according to Dewitt, these blue-collar revolutionaries are essentially using their bold and beautiful designs to reject the class structure altogether. "The customizer does not accept the view that the auto is the great leveller... [The car] is the only thing that protects him from a losing battle with the more privileged" (Dewitt 2001, 28). On this account, car modification is a 'revolt of the

masses' against capitalist oppression. It therefore invites us to 'read' car customization in those terms: hot rodding becomes masculine protest against emasculation, customization emerges as a form of artistic expression inevitably neglected by the class system of art criticism, drag racing is transformed into wilful contempt for the law, etc. This is certainly an appealing narrative that works well in a book whose focus is the artistic aspect of car customization, but it is not realistic. It too hastily conforms the facts to its fantasy rather than shaping its narrative to the facts. Most modifiers have already lost the 'class struggle' and have accepted their role in society. They are usually more concerned with the practicalities of financing their current modification than with overthrowing the capitalist system. They know, often without rancour, that they will never acquire high paying jobs or the cultural capital associated with an affluent lifestyle. If car modification represents for them a quiet 'revolt' – and there is no reason it should not – it takes the more comfortable form of an ironic commentary on car culture rather than an outright rejection of it. This allows it to be read in purely aesthetic terms but does not deny the fact that it reproduces status hierarchies even as it seeks to stand outside them.

The inevitable Marxian narrative is the culturalist counterpoint to the inevitable political economic analysis of the automobile industry. Both are suggestive and potentially valuable steps but both also reduce the cultural to a by-product of the economic. Ultimately, it fails to account for the ways in which the paragons of capitalist activity – Hollywood movie stars, Henry Ford, Harley Earl, etc. – may themselves be counted amongst the most important car modifiers. Behind this inability to account for counterfactual evidence lies an inability to *see* the evidence. Indeed, to reduce car modification to anti-capitalist protest, it is necessary to assume *first* that the processes of

capitalist production fully and satisfactorily exhaust the meanings of the automobile against which the proletariat rises up. Yet, not only are the automobile's meaning not exhausted by the industrial process itself but there is also less than no evidence of mass uprising against the automobile. Indeed, such protest as exists is characteristically a middle-to-upper middle class, intellectualist phenomenon associated with authors such as Ralph Nader rather than with the 'working classes'.

### **Customization as Compensation**

A more likely account of car modification is advanced by Heli Vaaranen in the article *The Emotional Experience of Class: Interpreting Working-Class Kids' Street Racing in Helsinki* (2004). Although her study is set in Finland, the basic motivations are applicable more widely to car modification from a variety of places and eras. She essentially argues that "the emotional experience of class builds on stunted ambition, stagnant class locations, and feelings of injustice, lived through the racer's exclusion from access to competition in commercial culture...this exclusion of the working class is socially reproduced as an emotional experience... [which]...takes place in the cultural performances, that is, in weekend excesses including street racing" (Vaaranen 2004, 2). Their sad daytime lives of blue-collar drudgery are brightened up by the night-time excitement and debauchery found in the street-racing subculture. This sentiment can just as easily be applied to the jaded North American working class who modify Civics. Vaaranen's thesis brings up some good ideas, but the logic is a bit flawed in that it makes car customization a 'compensatory' activity. Many young people certainly do lead dull

wasted lives but they do not all turn to car customization. Hence, a dull life may be a necessary pre-condition to car customization but it is hardly a sufficient condition.

Her compensatory theory begs more questions than it ultimately answers, for by making customization a *compensatory* activity it necessarily suggests that customization itself is equivalent to any other compensatory activity. Yet this cannot be unless we can explain why non-customizers fail to turn to customization or why customizers fail to engage in non-customizing compensatory activity. In short, there is something beyond mere compensation which draws specific individuals to specific activities. A greater attention to the nuances of modification – hot rodding, customization, drifting, tuning, etc., -- gives us entry into the constellation of impulses and concerns that account for car modification. This is, therefore, a highly functionalist reading because it sees the activity of car customization as fulfilling a felt need; it is ‘functional’ in the sense of allowing individuals to adjust, and in allowing the overall social system to continue functioning. Suffice it to say that customization does spring from a culture of resentment and exclusion, but it also incorporates other impulses.

### **Customization as Commentary**

So in terms of status it is important to state that car modification is never a rejection of status hierarchies, for it accepts the process of class distinction; it is rather a contestation of the *terms* of class distinction. If anything the activity of car modification passionately embraces the notion of taste and class structures by generating its own alternative status. No matter the era, or the type of car modification, the simple act of using a mass-produced object as the base for various modifications is an outright

acceptance of the system. Modification can be done subtly or not so subtly as car owners aspire to a higher status, and it is in this way a criticism of the *existing* structure but not a rejection of structure *per se*. Depending on the nature of the modifications it can be a rather ironic commentary on the automobile (i.e., the most fantastical ‘dream cars’), a blatantly hostile statement about status and the automobile (i.e., stripped down dragsters used for illegal street racing), a loving statement on the nature of status and the automobile (i.e., a Japanese import returned to its original specs), etc.

If anything, the early years of motoring are marked by the role of the Model T, which was designed for simplicity and all around ruggedness. Ford wanted to sell as many as possible, so by dropping the price he was able to make it more accessible, and thus make more profit. One of the greatest ironies is that many of the rural owners of this car undertook modifications in order to use it as a useful farm implement. The crankshaft could be hooked up to a variety of things to pump water or saw wood, and many farmers even used their Model T to plough fields; moreover, these modifications are a commentary on the automobile as more than a means of transportation. Indeed, the modifications are not *about* the Model T *per se* but rather *about* the inventiveness of the farmer or about pragmatic solutions to enduring difficulties or about the usefulness of horsepower, etc. They express a rather pragmatic ethic about the usability of the car. Henry Ford was originally a farmer’s son, so it may be ironic that his mass-produced invention was often returned to its ‘roots.’

Early hot rods may have been a celebration of speed and the automobile, but they were also a harsh view of the mass produced offerings. The blue collar mechanics who created the hot rods hated the fact that cars were adorned with all sorts of unneeded parts

which only added undue weight. The act of literally ripping-off a variety of parts – fenders, hoods, bumpers – constituted a visceral disagreement with the definition of the automobile as per Detroit and of the system of representations to which it was bound and which justified the useless adornments. Hot rodders were not trying to dispute the role of the automobile but to make it their own by imposing upon it their definition of its role. Most basically, the primmered, loud, and grubby hot rods of the early pre-war era were a way of showing others that affordable cars could be made exciting and fast, that their meaning need not be limited to range established by Detroit. Angry that they could not afford a Duisenberg, for example, and at the system which made the Duisenberg unattainable, these brutish creations were a way of waving the middle-finger at society, without actually engaging in a fist fight.

This commentary on automobility is pervasive throughout the post-war years of modification from 1945-1965. The custom trend which emerged strongly during this time was very much concerned with altering the look of an automobile to make it appear more sleek and beautiful. By using elaborate body modifications and decadent paint, customizers were playing with the factory perceptions of what makes a beautiful automobile. This is truly a form of ironic commentary, since the customs of choice were rather plain base-model cars that were made to look incredibly unique and expensive. Custom owners enjoyed the attention without having to spend the fortune that a new Cadillac or the like would cost; indeed, many of them would incorporate grilles, badges, and wheel covers from more expensive cars to make their econo-cars *look* expensive. It is a testament to the customizers' ingenuity and sense of fun, to their bricolage, that unremarkable cars could be made to look so special.

Hot rods also persisted very strongly until the mid-1960s when Detroit finally listened to their commentary and produced its own hostile aesthetic of muscle cars. During the 1950s many rodders still relied on the quintessential hot rod, the 1932 Ford Roadster. In an era of ornate factory designs, it provided a simple, brutal speed aesthetic which angrily differentiated the hot rod from mass produced automobiles. Newer cars were also made into hot rods, yet black primer still remained a popular way to paint a car. It was a flippant way of saying “I don’t care about the flashy paint jobs on new cars;” furthermore, its gritty aesthetic was an angry offence to drivers of clean and pretty new cars. One popular paint job of the time was anger incarnate – vibrant red and orange flames painted on the hood. This brings up connotations of extreme heat and even the fires of hell, and it is the exaggerated counterpart of the black primer. If black primer says “I don’t care for your prettified vehicle”, garish colours say “I really don’t care for your prettified vehicle”.

Modification in recent years is still very much a commentary on the popular definition of the automobile. The Japanese school of modification has chosen the Honda Civic as its poster-child, and delights in bragging about its qualities. What could be more ironic, or oxymoronic, than a “fast economy” car? Modified Civic owners take great delight in the irony that their once underpowered economy cars can – with the right power upgrades – beat traditional muscle cars and even high-priced exotics. They are not content with the manufacturers’ silent declaration that economy cars must perform poorly, while the rich enjoy speed in expensive cars. In fact, the whole JDM school of modification is a quest for more power at a relatively low cost; indeed, the appreciation of this aesthetic is almost a sarcastic way of grabbing back the power (literal) that was

never brought over to North America. Additionally, though, the tuner scene also expresses profound respect for the work of the automotive industry as it returns American imports to their original specifications. Tuning could clearly only happen from deep inside car culture, from that point that can look back on the history of car modification itself and abandon its oppositional aspects in order to embrace industry standards. If anything, the tuning scene is at least partly ironic commentary upon car modification.

A rare luxury car will attract attention wherever it goes since it is, by virtue of its uniqueness, something worth looking at. Sadly, most average people are excluded from purchasing this type of automotive message. Sport compact tuners are very resentful about the old rich men driving expensive cars, and so they angrily fight back with sensory tactics that Vaarenen very nicely describes as an exhibition of “rough bravado.” ICE is just as much about in-car entertainment as it is out-of-car aggression! The market for loud stereos is very strong nowadays, as young modifiers search for ways to draw attention to their mass-produced anonymous cars. Similarly, in Chapter 4, it was mentioned that many modifiers add on loud aftermarket exhausts more for the look than for any real performance gains. Large chrome wheels enjoy tremendous popularity because they inject an element of flash into an otherwise bland car; however, many are so big that they radically decrease driveability. The practice of “rolling” the fenders is a way to make these bigger wheels fit by actually rolling the fenders up a few inches so they will not scrape against the tire! Like a slap across the face, the pounding base and raspy exhaust note of a modified sport compact will attract attention wherever it goes. They have succeeded in angrily fighting against the attention factor of expensive cars. But this anger can breed more anger as a response for many members of the general

public look down upon this rough aesthetic and the sort of hooliganism that often accompanies it.

### **Pseudo-Millionaires**

Due to the inherent link between the automobile and status, there has been an omnipresent theme of emulating expensive cars. This phenomenon first appeared when sporty speedster bodies were created for the Ford Model T; moreover, the staid and unremarkable sedan could be converted into a classy and unusual speedster by quickly swapping on the new body. In this fashion, the modifier could have fun with the expensive style of an exotic sports car, purchased at the fraction of the price – an ironic commentary on price hierarchies. Similarly, in the second era – the Golden Age – custom cars came into their own and employed a variety of luxurious devices.

As mentioned previously the cars of choice during this period were commonly available cars, but this did not stop customizers from incorporating elements from more expensive brands like Buick and Cadillac. Witness the popularity of adding Cadillac grilles and wheel covers to make a lowly Chevrolet appear more expensive. Today, many import tuners seek to emulate higher end cars as well, with Honda Civic owners adding in Acura leather interiors, and VW Golf aficionados seeking out Porsche wheels. The latest boom in ICE (in car entertainment) reflects a desire for car owners to imitate the high tech gadgetry normally only found in the most expensive cars.

### **Customization and Celebrity**

Customization is very much caught up in a desire to attract attention, it wants to be seen, and in so doing to make the owner 'talked about' and noticed, that is to say, to make the owner 'famous' – well-known for being well-known. If the car is about individualism, then the customized car is emphatically about individualism.

These desires tie very strongly into a powerful culture of celebrity which shadows the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Various mass media have assured that public figures in both the political and entertainment sectors enjoy tremendous exposure. More recently the proliferation of television and the Internet assure that everybody gets his "15 minutes of fame" as predicted by Andy Warhol. As a mobile means of status expression, the automobile can provide a way to make its owner the object of attention – a 'celebrity' while driving.

In the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, expensive cars were literally one-off customs meant for rich owners. Harley Earl built extravagant bodies for the rich and famous of Hollywood so that they could project their celebrity even while driving.

Hot rodders attracted attention of a different sort with their loud, aggressively styled hot rods. Perhaps it was the police that stopped them most frequently to ask about their car, but the looks they would get roaring around town would assure a nominal level of celebrity – even if imagined to some degree. Since theirs was an angry commentary on the automobile, angry looks from others would only serve to satisfy their desire for celebrity – even if it was of a negative tone.

Hollywood grasped the saleability of teenage angst in a vibrant slew of popular movies which described stories of mayhem and hi-jinx associated with hot rod culture. Hot rods had become celebrities in their own right as they dashed across the silver screen.

The emergence of customs during this period (1945-1965) is all about capturing the attention of the public. With their chopped roofs and pearlescent paint jobs, customs are meant to exude a level of exoticism that would attract admiring stares and glances. “It’s a real head-turner” is a popular expression that persists to the present day to capture this aesthetic imperative.

The act of “head-turning” has gone electronic in the last 20 years, and pounding bass from high-powered speakers provides an audio assault on passers-by who will quickly turn to see what all of the commotion is about. On the visual side of things, many customizers like putting neon lighting under their cars to create a cool ‘underglow’ effect; indeed, like a marquee on a movie theatre, this is meant to draw attention towards the modified car. When combined these audio-visual touches are hard to avoid and guaranteed to attract attention wherever the car is driven. In fact, many such noticeable modifications are celebrated online in the forums when members post sightings of other modified cars. They will refer to seeing other members cruising on such and such road, almost in a way that mimics the practice of celebrity sightings!

### **Male Showmanship**

Now why would someone want a fast car to gain status or pounding music that hurts the ears? The simple answer is: it is what men do *in this context*. Competition, aggressiveness, and showmanship whether spontaneous and innate or socially constructed are all aspects of masculinity found in the world of car modification. All eras of this car-focused masculinity involve communication through the medium of the modified car. While there have been many changes in the nature of the automobile and the expression

of sexuality over the last 100 years, car customization still remains a popular site for the expression of masculine values, and it incorporates all sorts of signifiers traditionally associated with masculinity – so many in fact that it can easily become almost a parody of itself in certain instances. Even the females involved in customization are touched by it; either by being seen as conventionally feminine – the busty chicks who hang around the customizers – or as endowed with masculine qualities – the brainy chicks who can actually customize and who become all the more desirable for it. That, of course, leads to the implied homoeroticism of car customization. If females are rendered more desirable for the acquisition of male characteristics, then the males who already possess them may also be desirable to someone.

Right from the early beginnings of automobility, cars were a contested site for the sexes. In a rather reductive approach, McShane argues that many men embraced the automobile as a site for male prowess, by acquiring specific knowledge of mechanics and driving skills. Control of this new technology became one of the ways to reassert masculinity, a successful means to express dominance over the family (McShane 1994, 152).

Since the automobile was a private and mobile space, it became a place for young couples to experiment sexually, away from the controlled space of the family living room. In this fashion, it offered more freedom to both sexes, from the restrictive moral codes of the day. Many men used the status of the automobile in order to try to show women that they were successful; indeed, the auto became a tool used by some to show their masculinity. An early song “Love in an Automobile” (1912) captures this newfound use for the automobile by showing how a car is used to attract a money-hungry female

(McShane 1994, 142). The early car modifiers were the archetype of rough masculinity – greasy blue-collar mechanics and bodymen, whose “fuck you” attitude, expressed in their old beaten jalopies with their missing body trim and primmered paint, was the epitome of class position and ruggedness. Car customization was certainly the occasion for the expression of traits typically associated with masculinity; however, this is not to say these traits are somehow natural, or that car customization necessarily embodies them – yet the two do coincide frequently.

During the golden age of car modification (1945-1965), general affordability meant that almost anyone could own a car. Yet to “own and drive a stock car showed a failure of nerve,” (DeWitt 2001, 17) for it did not express any special skill or ability within the custom subculture. The act of modification is what proved to some that one was a ‘real man,’ someone who possessed mechanical skills and specific knowledge about cars. The ‘cool’ guy was someone who knew what was what, yet who made it look easy, for cool is the negation of (the very real) effort required in the acquisition of skill and knowledge. In this instance, masculinity as expressed through cool was intended more for the other males in the group than for the females.

At the time, the drive-in era of restaurants and movie theatres was in full swing, and owning a nice car was essential for courtship rituals. *The All American Hot Rod* (2004) is a fanciful look at this era, with numerous first-person essays that reminisce about the “good ole’ days.” Almost all of them make some mention of using their cool cars to attract members of the opposite sex. It seems that during the postwar boom, not owning a car resulted in virtual impotence. Rock’n’roll music from this era is replete with these classic themes of masculinity and the automobile, with literally hundreds of

songs about cars and the image they can project. “Little Deuce Coupe” by the Beach Boys is a song where the singer is telling a girl about his hot car: “well I’m not braggin’ babe so don’t put me down, but I got the fastest set of wheels in town.” Cars remain throughout this era a means to communicate strong values about masculinity.

One of the most memorable lines in the movie *The Fast and the Furious* is rapper Ja Rule screaming: “Ménage!!!” (*The Fast and The Furious* 2001) during a street race, in reference to the French expressions “Ménage-à-trois” or threesome. It seems that a beautiful female observer had promised him a sexual adventure with her and her female friend if he won the race. He lost. This classic portrayal of the “cars get the girls” theme is comical, but drives at a deeper motivation for owning a modified car which has persisted throughout the history of the automobile. Traditional masculinity still rears its head in the contemporary car modification scene.

### **Something to hide? Hyper-masculinity and Modification**

Much like the cars today, the means of expressing what it is to be a man have also gone electronic as witnessed by the proliferation of loud in-car entertainment systems, which according to Vaaranen “functioned as an erotic invitation to young women.” Her study of blue-collar hot rodders in Helsinki reveals a culture which in some respects is a virtual copy of 50 years ago, for these contemporary modifiers perceive a lack of car knowledge and ownership of a stock car as feminine and weak qualities (Vaaranen 2004). She goes on to describe brilliantly the image of the modern day car modifier: “This style of crudeness, throbbing low-bass music, vulgarity, a signal of danger, and a thousand variations coalesced in an audiovisual style I call “rough bravado.”” (Vaaranen 2004)

A street racer interviewed in her study recounts his exploits in a nearby town, where he courts a different girl every night. Clearly, then, the automobile remains a strong site for the expression of a certain brand of sexuality that remains intertwined with traditional conceptions of masculinity and the mating behaviour it encapsulates.

One of the most interesting expressions of this modern day hyper-masculinity is found in the enthusiast magazines and online discussion forums in which many car modifiers participate on a frequent basis. Both provide strikingly chauvinistic and even misogynistic commentary and depictions, often to the point of denigrating an opponent by accusing him of being a homosexual. This behaviour functions as a way for males to determine status among other males, and it is important to note that it is not reflective of all car modifiers; rather, this chauvinistic behaviour is extreme to the point of becoming almost a mockery of itself. Magazines that target the modified car market are moulded to appeal very strongly to the core male demographic of readers, and as such they often use sex to generate interest. If anything, these constant references to hyper-masculinity may be the best way to deflect attention from the fundamental homo-eroticism which may really be at stake. A bunch of young men huddled around a greasy car in a dark garage can certainly look suspicious if read the right way, thus this pseudo-chauvinism is almost a defence mechanism for the apparently fragile masculinity of many members of this group.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> In *The Hearts of Men* (1983), Barbara Ehrenreich makes a similar observation around *Playboy* magazine. While *Playboy* is emphatically heterosexual, its advertising base consists overwhelmingly of electronic and other consumer items for the urban dweller. Unfortunately, in the 1950s, any unattached male urban dweller with an interest in consumer goods was obviously not heterosexual. The problem then was how to advertise consumer goods to men while avoiding the stigma of homosexuality. The answer was found in the emphatic heterosexuality of *Playboy* whose readers could indulge their consumer desires behind the emphatic screen of their insistent heterosexuality. Suddenly, for a man to know about finger foods only meant that he was a sophisticated seducer and not a confirmed bachelor.

The magazines follow a range from the rather innocent depictions of ‘import girls’ standing next to cars, to the soft-core pornography found in the glossy pages of the British *Max Power* magazine.

The Canadian produced *Modified Magazine* sums up this ethos best on its website: “Fast cars and beautiful women go hand in hand, if we didn’t have the most beautiful and captivating women we would be performing an injustice” (Modified.com 2004). This magazine and website both appear to be American in content with a listing of events mostly in the United States. The magazine is fairly tasteful as import magazines go, with a lack of sexist commentary in any of the articles. The first page of the May 2004 issue consists of four bands of colour each encapsulating a different modified car, and on the left quarter of the page is a large photo of female model dressed in a thong with her backside to the camera, looking longingly back (Modified Mag 2004, 1). Across her back is the label: “Look inside for more.” The sexual connotations are obvious and this imagery cements the link between cars and sex.

Inside the magazine, a Toyota advertisement has a large photo of a Subaru WRX with the slogan “A Tire for those who have a taste for the finer things in life. Driven to Perform.” Filling the right quarter of this ad is a tire tread, upon which is set a Polaroid picture of three attractive women in club wear – “Jenn, Mika & Blanca : 3 of the finest!” (Modified Mag 2004, 24) Once again, this ad strongly implies a relation between automotive performance and sexual performance. This magazine is fairly tame as they go, and the depictions are not really out of step with the more racy sexuality now present in general pop culture.

The notion that driving is a man's domain was first secured near the turn of the century, and some of this belief remains to this day. A reader letter entitled "Know your Place," in the March 2004 issue of *Banzai* re-asserts this viewpoint. In this instance a man loaned his car to his "missus," and she accidentally backed the car into a post, damaging it. He jokes that it was caused by "a stressful day's shopping," and that "her bags are packed"; indeed, he ultimately advises any women drivers that driving is too complicated and that they should stay in the kitchen "where you belong" (*Banzai* 2004, 25). This celebration of women's inferiority was written by a reader, but was nevertheless printed because it may reflect the readership of this magazine.

The masculine image of the import tuner very much relies on chauvinism in the popular British car magazine *Fast Car*, which declares that it is "The World's Best modified car mag... Yo mumma won't like it" (*Fast Car* 2004, Cover). Right from its very inception it defines itself as being anti-feminine since it is not something a mother, or a 'momma's boy' would like. Throughout the pages sexist and often misogynistic views are voiced directly by the editor. To begin with the page numbers are all three digits followed by 'FUK', for example: 007 FUK. In the "Streetlife" section, one finds coverage of recent car shows, but this car content must contend with large photos of two schoolgirls' naked bottoms peaking out from under their skirts, while on the facing page is a picture of two women kissing. The car photos play a decidedly secondary role. On the last page of the magazine are photos of numerous cars and import girls, with outright sexist captions. Examples include: "Never put your foot under a ride with hydraulics you stupid Tart!" and "Spread'em and show it" (*Fast Car* 20004, 181). Language like this coupled with sexualized photographs clearly reinforces the idea that the readership wants

to be thought of as profoundly heterosexual, almost as though it were insecure about something or had something to hide.

Sexualized imagery is also used to depict male – male power relations in the world of competitive modifications. The article “Suck on this” in this issue of *Fast Car*, describes a modified Mini, and announces that its subwoofer is “the biggest throbber ever felt in the opposition’s ass!” (Fast Car 2004, 56) Homoerotic imagery is present but in a manner that shows the featured car as dominant over its opponents. This ‘rape’ imagery is present throughout the discourse on modified cars and becomes especially evident in the discussions of individual modifiers.

No mention of masculinity and modified car magazines would be complete without a glance at Britain’s very popular *Max Power*. This was perhaps one of the first compact car magazines to really push the boundaries of the format by accentuating naked women. Their photo spreads are befitting of the pages of *Playboy*, and their latest issue is no exception. A three-page spread of Victoria Silvestedt opens with the caption “she likes drinking tequila and she’s got huge tits. Perfect...” (Max Power 2004, 27) This emphasis on women as sex objects is nicely delineated on the last page of the magazine *On the pull*. This section has photos of real girls at various cruise nights around Britain, and each one is accompanied with a small “VitaStats” box. Of course, the vital questions asked are all about the girl’s sexual preferences: “How many dates till you shag?;” “Favourite sexual position;” “Come quietly or scream;” “Face or boobs;” “Spit or swallow” (Max Power 2004, 254). Once again, to be masculine in the world of sport compacts is to think of women as sexual conquests. The magazine’s website [www.maxpower.co.uk](http://www.maxpower.co.uk) seems almost more focused on women than on cars!

The 'top story' consists of a large photo depicting a woman's breasts (or legs...) in the center of the webpage, and it provides a link to a max-babe's nearly nude photos.

In the various sections listed atop the webpage, 'Babes' is right near the top – stressing yet again the hyper-heterosexuality of the magazine.

These magazines are part of a long tradition of girlie magazine which even includes the classic garage pinup girl. There is a long tradition of 'girlie' imagery in places where males traditionally congregate: the garage, the barber shop, the mess hall. Several things are at play here. One is the sheer pleasure of the taboo image; indeed, such images only become offensive when they circulate outside the traditional places of congregation. The second is the 'signalling' system; the girlie picture is an implicit demand that all the males in attendance assent to the statement 'hey, we're all guys, here, right?' Failure to appreciate the girlie picture tells us something we would really rather not know but also allows us to maintain the purity of the space (as a space that only men inhabit). Third, is a protest against the real or perceived influence of women ('wedding bells are breaking up that old gang of mine'). Fourth, as these contemporary car publications are very likely directed at teenage or young adult male readers, there is also an appeal to the rebelliousness of that age group; not for nothing are young males the best army recruits: they like to hang around together, they tend to be fairly strong, and they have a desperate desire to fit in (which means they follow orders well). Here is another way of showing them how they can fit in, by adopting the presumptive patterns of hyper-masculinity.

These exhibitions of hyper-masculinity provoke some interesting and conflicting observations. Firstly, it may be part and parcel with the modern day trend towards more

open displays of sexuality, where it is in fact an example of the waning of the distinction between private and public in the sense that what may once have been consumed privately is now paraded publicly. This is a somewhat liberating view of the phenomenon. Yet perhaps there is a more constraining element to these displays of hyper-masculinity. Perhaps it is a situation that Foucault would aptly describe as follows: while appearing to be transgressive and liberating, such images are actually highly constraining because they establish a norm – an impossible norm – to which we must now aspire. Hence, these displays may be constraining rather than liberating.

### **Angry Discussion**

Pop culture and enthusiast magazines are always a useful way to survey a specific group, but they may not always be perfectly accurate. For this reason, it is necessary to observe the actual subculture and the way its members interact. Online discussion groups are an excellent way to observe the language and banter of a specific subgroup, and how it interprets the world. In this case, various elements of masculinity such as the possession of skill and specialist knowledge, competition, and more obtusely, elements of chauvinism, sexism and homophobia are all seen to be a visible part of Canadian street racing culture. For this study two regional discussion boards were selected, one in Ottawa, *Redliners*, and one in Toronto, *Toronto Street Racing*.

Before analyzing the specific content of these two discussion forums, it is interesting to note that the way these groups are organized allows them to “both create and preserve gender as an organizing bias within sport” (Shackleford 2001, 233).

Essentially they fit the basic definition of a fraternity, which stretches back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The first facet of a fraternity, as the name suggests, is that the membership is male; indeed, *Redliners* has an almost exclusively male membership, save for a few women. Second, fraternities are “bounded by proprietary knowledge” (Shackleford 2001, 234), and this is certainly the case of these two forums where participation requires a savviness about various mechanical terms and engine codes. A 1993 Honda Civic Si, for example, would be called an ‘eg6 running a b16a engine,’ or perhaps it might have a turbo which would make it a ‘boosted’ ride. The third feature which is present in fraternities is the practice of rituals which build a sense of solidarity amongst the members. Both web groups offer a means for racers to organize group meets and car cruises, often on a weekly basis; moreover, they now have a forum for sharing what happened during these events, and in their daily lives by posting up ‘kill stories’<sup>19</sup> and ‘sightings.’ Finally, fraternities exhibit a sense of outward group identity (Shackleford 2001, 234), which is less relevant in this instance, as many members do not brag about being part of an online message board. Nevertheless, discrete *Redliners* stickers do exist, and some members place them on their windows to show affiliation. In all cases, a fraternity follows rules – published and unpublished – in order to maintain fraternal relations. These two sites are no exception, and they rely very much on traditional elements of fraternity to assert behavioural codes and to police deviancy.

Chauvinism and sexism are tied together in the belief that women are naturally inferior to men, and they are very strong themes that crop up in the discussions on *Redliners* and *TorontoStreetRacing.com*. One post in the off-topic section of *Redliners* is

---

<sup>19</sup> Kill stories is a metaphor to another traditionally male activity – hunting. It is a place for members to describe various on-street competitions where they out-raced an opponent.

entitled “Irony, because some of you just don’t get it” (Upinhere 2004), and contained a basic definition of the word *irony*, put forth by one of the few female members.

The response by one member, “Sickboy,” was: “Stupid whore: See: ‘Upinhere.’”

Clearly, not a very clever response, yet it nevertheless illustrates how a woman is attacked by focusing on her sexuality. Another blatant example is found in the *Smack* section of *Redliners* when “Civ\_Chick\_97” asks “Sprayin”: “So why do you waste your time talking to people on this board if we’re all losers?” Answer: “Shut your cockholder!” (Sprayin 2004) These are just two of numerous examples where women are put down in a sexually-degrading manner. Many members have a ‘sig’, which is a photo or quote that always goes at the bottom of their message. On

*TorontoStreetRacing.com* the member “knockedoutawd” uses a sig photo consisting of a woman lying on the ground with a black eye, and a man’s legs and clenched fist in the foreground – superimposed with the caption “Punch her in the face... To prove you’re right” (V6killer 2004). This photo trades on anti-social representations of male-female relations and, though perhaps an attempt at dark humour, comes across as ultra-chauvinistic and offensive; indeed, it seems likely that any female member of the forum might feel uncomfortable conversing with such a character.

In all of these examples, women are depicted in a very negative manner, and this anti-social behaviour is almost given safe harbour by the moral absence of the other board members; moreover, such talk is so rampant on these discussion boards that it is possible to conclude that this form of sexism is an important way for some members to angrily comment on the status of women (or their own status) in society today.

Their dying gasps of chauvinism are expressed in sexist cries by this impotent group of select car modifiers; moreover, to many observers this form of hyper-masculinity comes across as ridiculous.

Tied in with a hatred of feminine qualities in women is the tendency to find the same features very unappealing in men. Homophobia is the irrational fear of homosexuals and it is commonly used as a way of policing behaviour; moreover, it is the preferred means of insulting someone on *Redliners*. In fact, it is so popular, that included along with the other ‘emoticon’ cartoon faces<sup>20</sup> is a pink smiley-face with long eyelashes and an extended arm with the hand cocked down – meant to symbolize a ‘limp-wristed’ homosexual. Examples of gay-bashing abound including a response by “transformers” in which he uses the gay emoticon not once, but four times, to insult “sleepinghatch” (Sebmour 2004). Similarly, performance modifications that do not meet the favour of certain members are even branded in homophobic language, as in the case of Altezza lights. They are essentially Lexus-style rear brake-lights that many Honda modifiers put on their cars; moreover, a lot of members on *Redliners* dislike them and as such have taken to labelling them as “fag-tezzas” (SHO 2004).

By examining the discussion on street racing boards, it seems obvious that this brand of hyper-masculinity deems feminine qualities to be unacceptable in both men and women; therefore they are censured through sexist and homophobic remarks. The ultimate insult to a man is perhaps the questioning of his masculinity by depicting him as homosexual or, worse yet, as a victim of male rape. Rape imagery is tied into the ‘fag’-name calling, and represents a powerful way to express one man’s masculinity as being

---

<sup>20</sup> Emoticons as the name suggests are ‘emotion icons.’ In order to convey someone’s tone on the Internet, it is often useful to put one of these cartoon faces to show anger, sarcasm, happiness or whatever emotion – since they do not always come through in the text.

utterly dominant over his opponent. Rather ironically, it also lets the accuser participate in the fantasy of homosexual rape while appearing to deny it. To beat another man in a street race is symbolically pictured as a violent act of rape. “VR666’s” post on *TorontoStreetRacing.com* is indicative of this power-macho imagery with the title: “flat black vs. white turbo dodge Anal Raping of the year!!” (VR666 2004) This post is appropriately found in the violently-named “Kill Stories” forum on the site, and it describes his vanquishing of a competitor. Another discussion in *Redliners* about Cavaliers vs. Integras has a post by “92teg” that uses this violent sexual imagery: “haha, kitted up stock j-bodies calling a kitted up stock prelude which would rape any one of them RICE, that’s funny isn’t [it?].” (92teg 2004)

After examining the types of discussions that take place in two popular racing ‘fraternities’ it becomes clear that certain portions of the street racing scene are very much imbued with expressing an angry version of traditional masculine views where feminine qualities are despised and subsequently denigrated. Questioning a man’s sexuality is a very popular way to insult him in these modified car communities, almost to the point where it has become a default character slur. Certainly the ‘tough’ talk that takes place in online discussion groups is never quite like the real-life conversations that go on in this community, but it gives a very useful indication of some of the stereotypes and thought processes of the group. In an age of equality and emancipation, it is interesting to note how traditional masculine values are still being toyed with in one dimension of the modified car world as a form of protest. This anti-social language is perhaps one of the reasons that important aspects of car culture are often associated with the lower classes; indeed, because it is angry and ignorant and because, rightly or

wrongly, those traits are most often associated with the lower classes. If anything it reinforces the notion of car modification as angry commentary.

The contrast between the online world and reality is almost comical for the attendees of any of the local parking lot meets seem *nothing* like their online profile, nor do they look like any of the handsome muscular characters in the Hollywood movie *The Fast and the Furious*. If anything the majority of modifiers at a recent Ottawa meet in July 2005 were a mix of pale and weedy teens and twenty-somethings. Take out the cars and put in stands of comic books and *Star Wars* memorabilia, and the two would fit easily together. Perhaps the truly cool kids have better things to do late on a Friday night than trying to prove their level of worth through an automobile?

### **Official vs. Personal Design**

One important theme that runs throughout the history of car modification is the dichotomy between official or elite sources of automobile manufacture and the colourful ‘underworld’ of the car modifier. The fascinating modifications are an ironic and often angry commentary on the hierarchy of society as manifest through the automobile; moreover, the difference between official and sub-cultural interpretations is what makes the history of this pastime so interesting. Without mainstream automobiles, modification would be unnecessary since every car would be unique. Thankfully, the era of mass production and anonymity means that those who chose to differ from the norm create interesting and telling objects.

“In a world where the mass market was getting black cars from Henry Ford, Harley Earl was already supplying his cars for the stars in polychromed variety and in very high degrees of finish” (Bayley 1990, 31). This quotation nicely sums up the dichotomy between rich and poor during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Affordable mass-produced cars like the Model T were not in the least individualistic and so intrepid owners turned to a growing aftermarket to add on small upgrades and bits of trim. Early speed freaks relied more on a ‘bolt-off’ approach whereby the removal of parts created lighter cars and the definitive hot rod aesthetic. Paint technology was not yet at the point where customizers could dress their cars in vibrant colours, so the custom scene was rather weak at this stage.

The postwar age of car modification (1945-1965) is a rich one, for it was during this age that the car manufacturers offered a myriad of options as well as an annual model change – more to generate capital than because they were really concerned about people buying a one-off custom car. Nevertheless, there was variety and it was during this time that car manufacturers truly began to ‘design’ cars for their aesthetic appeal. On the flip side, new paint technology and general prosperity also meant that car customizers were able to lavish extravagant personal designs never before seen upon their cars. Hot rodders remained fairly traditional and continued to celebrate cars from the pre-war era, particularly the 1932 Ford Coupe; however, rolling into the 1960s, the car manufacturers managed almost fully to co-opt the hot-rod movement with a slew of high-powered factory muscle cars which reigned into the early 1970s.

The dichotomy between official design and car modification exists in the present day as well, for the tepid products of many manufacturers (including the Imports) are rather mild-mannered and unexciting. In addition to increasing the power or modifying the looks of their once humble-cars, the sport compact modifiers (1985-2005) have gone electronic and in-car entertainment (ICE) is now a popular addition. Loud-bass, flashy neon lighting, and in car television screens are not offered from the factory and so they provide an exciting way to liven up a once dull sport compact. Similarly to the 1950s, the manufacturers of today have taken notice of this popular subculture and a raft of high-powered factory tuner-cars are one-by-one being introduced to the general public. The tension between official and subcultural interpretations of the automobile will no doubt persist into the future.

### **Authenticity is Important**

The notion of authenticity is a form of in-group discipline, as group members seek to define what is and is not an acceptable form of car modification. If anything, the quest for authenticity often drives car modification to the root of whatever trend or feature the modifier is trying to emulate. Failure to attain authenticity or the choice of the wrong modification can lead to ridicule or mockery from others in the subculture. The early years (1920-1940) is somewhat of an exception since it really was a movement that was localized in Southern California – they made the rules; nevertheless, the notion of authenticity crops up in Dean Batchelor's historical analysis, *The American Hot Rod* (1994), when discussing engine choices.

The Ford 4-cylinder with its humble 20 horsepower was nothing to brag about, but it had powered the Model T for 20-odd years; moreover, when it appeared with double the horsepower in the 1929 Model A, it seemed to have a future. The 1932 V8 (8 cylinder engine) saw an end to that, for it had a lot more horsepower – yet rodders still preferred the lowly 4-cylinder variants, so much so that it took a good ten years for an aftermarket to develop for the V8. This is a case of the desire for authenticity causing people to hold on to an old design even though it was clearly inferior.

This thematic is alive and well during the Golden Age (1945-1965) of custom cars. In an era when Detroit was producing brand new “Dream Cars” annually, anybody could afford to own a fantasy car – yet this was not authentic! These cars were mass-produced monstrosities that car customizers roundly eschewed in favour of the rather humble 1941-1951 Mercury. This sleek and simple car was a great base for customizers to construct an autonomous status structure that was not controlled by Detroit; in short it was an authentic expression of the subculture. By modifying an older car to suit their own style, they were creating their own message about the automobile.

The rapid quest for authenticity has gone international during the import craze (1975-2005), and the present JDM and Euro movements provide excellent examples. Anyone can afford to buy a Honda Civic, and spend some money on the typical modifications – tinted windows, chrome wheels, and a loud stereo; however, what sets the ‘elite’ modifiers apart is the fact that they have acquired rare parts and accessories that were only optional on Japanese domestic market vehicles. They have made the extra effort to assure that their car is the authentic car that a street-racer would have driven in Japan.

This quest has actually led to the importation of entire used cars from Japan, since owning a different model is the ultimate expression of authenticity. For example, the Nissan Skyline is a rear-wheel drive sports car with 300horsepower that was never sold in Canada; however, once they reach 15 years old they become eligible for importation, and for between \$10-25,000 a car enthusiast can own an actual piece of original Japanese culture. What is more authentic than a right-hand drive car model of which there is only a handful in Canada?<sup>21</sup> This is just one example of the omnipresent theme of authenticity that remains a strong part of modified car culture.

### **Driving Enjoyment**

With all this analysis of status, masculinity, and authenticity, it is easy to forget one of the more innocent themes that is inextricably linked with car modification: driving enjoyment. Modifications are done for a variety of reasons all of which are usually linked with enhancing the driving experience on either a tangible or even illusory level. The automobile became so popular early on because it gave drivers control over their own schedules and routes. Speed has always provided a natural intoxication in the form of adrenalin produced in a risky situation. Basically, “driving fast invites one to balance on the edge between power and impotence, and then enjoy the gratitude of not having crashed... [it makes people feel] larger than life” (Sachs 1992, 113). The early hot rodders fully embraced the futurist aesthetic which places function (the pursuit of speed) over form. Because they removed various bits of trim, their cars were very noisy and open to the elements so that the driver really experienced speed first hand.

---

<sup>21</sup> Japanese cars are driven on the opposite side of the road than in Canada. With its right-hand drive, the high-powered Nissan Skyline represents a unique form of transportation when brought to Canada.

This aesthetic continued into the golden age, for hot rodders continued to favour the simplistic designs of the Ford Model A roadster more than 20 years after its production. Detroit successfully appealed to this speed instinct with its ultra-powerful muscle cars. Today, the allure of speed is just as intoxicating as ever, and import tuners strive to increase their horsepower with turbos and high-output engines. Sanctioned and illegal forms of racing persist through all eras.

Going fast in a straight line is one aspect of driving enjoyment, but there are other important dynamics too. “Handling” which encompasses how the car behaves when driving – the overall feel, the way it travels around a corner, how it responds to bumps on the road – is another crucial piece of a satisfying driving experience. The Model T was certainly not a sports car but it was relatively light and its ubiquity made it a top choice for modification. Some of the early aftermarket pieces helped make the suspension more firm in order to allow for more predictable handling. Perhaps the first real ‘handling’ car was the successor to the Model T, the Model A. Its light weight meant that it was the choice for hot rodders but it also had the benefit of relatively dextrous handling. As cars got bigger and bigger following the war, handling was perhaps not the finest quality of the American-made offerings. It was really with small imported cars – particularly the Honda Civic – that the concept of a nimble-handling car became more widespread. The current sport compact craze is all about fine-handling, with countless aftermarket suspension and wheel accessories available. Superior handling was made the mark of the Euro crowd with the seminal GTi, and the notion that German cars (BMW, Porsche, and VW) have excellent handling remains a key aspect of enjoyment with this particular group.

One of the most fun aspects of modifying a car is creating a certain image – be it through the appearance of affluence, of speed, of aggression – in general creating an air of cool. Portraying or living a certain status is perhaps one of the main aspects of car modification since it sets the driver out from his surroundings and feeds his status as well as masculine desires. This expression of individuality is a major part of the enjoyment of driving which is present throughout the three main eras. The early hot rods (1920-1940) with their futurist-inspired look were all about speed, and their owners no doubt took great pride in driving a ‘speed machine’; indeed, in a time of rather plain factory cars, these rods were eye-catching and dangerous – to drive one was to be seen as a rebel. This outlaw image persisted in the postwar era (1945-1965), and was actually magnified by the popular Hollywood hot rod movies of the time such as *Dragstrip Riot*; indeed, many teenagers aspired to be cool by driving the right looking car. Customs blossomed during this period, and they are all about appearance. Dewitt recounts how driving positions evolved during the 1950s with a change from sitting upright with the focus on the driver to a seat-reclined position that said “look at my car” (Dewitt 2001, 18). Driving enjoyment certainly comes from appearance in the present day and the explosion of aftermarket body kits and wheels is evidence of the satisfaction derived from owning a hot-looking car. Beauty is important on the inside and a wide variety of racing-styled interiors as well as exciting ICE ensure that the inside of a sport compact will give its driver as much enjoyment as the outside.

### **The Automobile as Art**

Beauty is often a component of art and cars are no exception. The theme of cars as art is pervasive during the later history of modified cars. Early hot rods were certainly different from the design convention of their day but they did not really qualify as art. The extravagant custom cars of the golden age surely exhibit some qualities of art since they are “well-made,” “imaginatively designed,” and “expressively painted” (Dewitt 2001, 38). Dewitt argues in fact that this is a form of blue collar modernism which definitely qualifies as art but which is ignored by elites, and therefore is not widely accepted as true art. The same would hold true for the eye-catching sport compacts of today, for they are still considered as cars first and foremost, although many do appreciate their artistic qualities.

### **Quite a Variety...**

The history of automobile modification is a little over a century long, and it is very rich and varied. Countless individuals have added or invented an aspect of this culture and millions of different cars have enjoyed this treatment. Nevertheless, despite this seemingly infinite amount of activity, it is possible to identify a few key themes that emerge in the popular history of car modification. Since modification is often done to make a car individualistic, the entrepreneurial ethic remains a very strong tenet of this hobby. Paying someone else to do the work does not quite imbue the car with the same sense of self as would a home-crafted project. Individuality amongst a sea of identical cars is a tough prospect in the era of mass production, but a burgeoning aftermarket has emerged to meet these demands; indeed, this theme remains

and will remain a core part of modification. The desire for individuality is often rooted in a quest for status and a complex tapestry of taste hierarchies means that all cars possess powerful values about the status of their owner. Competition for status is perhaps a very strong masculine trait and it is not surprising that issues of masculinity are a very powerful part of many modifications. The hyper-masculinity which emerges in many of the magazines and discussions is almost pathetic, but it does serve to comment upon the changing role of men and the frustration it causes for some. A study of the language used in sport compact culture reveals the endurance of rather traditional chauvinistic and misogynistic values. Despite the often serious nature of many of these motivations it is important to recognize that car modification is often done for one simple reason – fun. Driving enjoyment derives from a few key qualities of an automobile – power, handling, and looks; moreover, while these are often tied to other motivations, they remain in themselves a rather simplistic description of the light-hearted side of this hobby.

### Conclusion

Besides being a car aficionado, I am also very passionate about motorcycles. In early spring 2005, I was driving down Scott Street in Ottawa on my Yamaha R6 – basically a street-legal race bike. By no means a maniac, I push my vehicles within acceptable limits on public roads. There was a car up ahead dawdling so I pulled into the passing lane and passed him at about 20km/h faster than his speed. Perhaps my exhaust is loud, or he did not expect to see a motorcycle out in late March, but this young car modifier took it as a challenge. Not half a block down, he barrelled past me in the slow lane and shot me a cocky glance as he passed by. At the next red light on Holland and Scott, we stopped together and I was able to see what appeared to be a lightly modified silver Honda Civic hatchback with large chrome rims, lightly tinted windows, and raspy sounding exhaust system. It was a friendly moment as we looked at each other and smiled. I gave him the ‘thumbs up’ sign as a gesture of ‘nice car.’ Perhaps he misconstrued my intentions and started aggressively revving his engine. Before I knew it, he had dropped the clutch<sup>22</sup> aggressively and with front tires spinning, his little Civic tore through the intersection in a cloud of smoke, accompanied by the squealing sound of burning rubber. Yet the light had not yet turned green! He stopped dead in the middle of the intersection, waited for a couple seconds, the light changed green and then with a chirp of his tires he tore off into the night. Fortunately there were no other cars crossing the intersection at the same time.

This ‘heroic’ display of rough bravado is just one piece of the diverse puzzle that makes up the world of modified cars and of car culture in general. Various approaches try to account for different elements of automobility in new and interesting ways.

---

<sup>22</sup> Dropping the clutch – is to quickly pull your foot off it so it engages very quickly.

By examining a long history of popular modified cars, it is possible to gain many insights into meaning making as related to one of the most prevalent artefacts of highly industrialized society, the automobile. Its presence is virtually inescapable and the interaction between it and society is very worthy of study. As soon as cars leave the showroom floor various meanings will be ascribed as they are used in a variety of ways, some of which were neither intended nor foreseen by the manufacturers. An interesting extension of this occurs when owners actually undertake not only to use them in different ways but also to modify them to suit themselves. The history of car culture is a very rich one with countless different subcultures within it, all trying to express various meanings about the automobile. Popular car modifications have always been the most visible subculture and make for an interesting study in their own right. Even 'popular' is a broad term which encompasses numerous sub-groups.

Chapter II was dedicated to the very early years of car modification and it began by examining the ideology of freedom and power that quickly enveloped the automobile. Right from the beginning it was a powerful status symbol that marked out its owners as they drove around. Early car modification was done by specialist firms like The Earl Coachworks, who charged Hollywood stars a small fortune to customize the bodywork on cars. Meanwhile, Henry Ford was aggressively hocking his Model T as an affordable means of transportation. Accessible even to impoverished farmers, it became the base for early popular modification. Many intrepid people in rural areas even modified their cars to perform a variety of agricultural tasks. Yet it was the gritty blue-collar mechanics of southern California who first modified cars not out of need, but out of felt need for self-expression.

The automobiles which resulted came to be called hot rods, though in their day, the 1920s and 1930s, they went by several other names, jalopy, dragster, speedster, etc. The goal of modifying cars in this way was for more speed. Consequently, most modifiers undertook to remove the body parts deemed 'inessential' and which merely added weight to the vehicle. This resulted in the powerful aesthetic of 'form follows function' which became the creed of these intrepid characters who did not worry about whether their cars looked pretty or not. Indeed, they may have revelled in the fact that their modified vehicles so unambiguously projected the message of speed, threat and social self-exclusion. Their aesthetic was decidedly angry and decidedly critical of contemporary automotive practices and of the social hierarchies which they embodied.

Modified cars exploded into the limelight during the postwar years, as examined in Chapter III. For a few years GIs had been hearing about the wonderful cars down in California, and eventually information about them spread all over North America. This interest, coupled with a young demographic and relative prosperity, meant both that automobile use became very widespread and that increasing numbers of owners chose to individualize their vehicles. Hot rods remained popular and remained true to their functional speed aesthetic; moreover, this subculture became the fodder for numerous teen movies and the occasional moral panic. However, hot rods were now joined by a new type of modification, the 'custom car' modified to enhance its appearance. Indeed, the custom car boomed after WWII since extensive body modifications were more affordable and since the hot rod aesthetic was itself increasingly seen as the passion of an older generation. Custom cars offered up a unique depiction of the automobile in a sea of identical copies.

At roughly the same time, the major automobile manufacturers themselves began to appreciate the desire for distinctness and were able to attach an economic price to it. Ever since Sloanism had been adopted by General Motors as a marketing principle in the late 1920s, Detroit had been in the habit of introducing annual model changes in order to ensure that last year's models would become obsolete thereby driving the public to purchase more new cars. The annual model change was, therefore, adapted to coincide with the presumed desires of car customizers. The result was the Detroit 'dream car', a space age design evocative of aircraft and bearing ever more fantastical tail fins. These factory designed cars, however, were not 'authentic' customs. They may have been sufficient for suburbanites but for modifiers they remained 'stock' cars and owning one was a sign of weakness.

Nonetheless, by the mid-1960s, Detroit had itself abandoned the 'dream car' aesthetic and switched to the 'muscle car' aesthetic of which the first exemplar was the Ford Mustang but the most characteristic exemplar may well be the Dodge Viper. Muscle cars met car modification on its very own terrain with considerable success.

However, both Detroit manufacturing and car modification underwent significant changes in the 1970s and 1980s as mapped out in Chapter IV. First, the dominance of American auto makers began to wane as a result of concerted criticisms related to car safety, environmental degradation and cost. This last factor was itself intensified by the fuel crises of the 1970s. As a result several smaller imported cars, that had long sought a toehold in the North American market, began to occupy a bigger and bigger place.

Not only were these cars often better designed, less expensive, and more environmentally friendly but they also proved to be more ‘driveable’, to induce a feeling of pleasure and freedom associated with the act of driving them. Indeed, Detroit had become complacent through the years of its dominance and had fallen into the habit not only of producing gas guzzling behemoths but also cars better known for their soporific smoothness than for their agility or excitement.

People liked the change and began enjoying the driving qualities of much smaller cars. Car modification followed suit. By the late 1980s, many in Southern California had turned to modifying small sport compact cars. Within less than 10 years, the phenomenon was very widespread and “import tuning” became *the* most popular form of contemporary car modification. In addition to being marked by the popularity of imported cars, the hobby is very much touched by computerization, and electronics play an important role in both initial car design and later modification.

One of the notable characteristics of the history of car modification is the prevalence of competing taste cultures. By virtue of their pricing and initial design, different car models have always been targeted at specific certain socio-economic groups. Virtually the sole exception to this rule may be the Model T itself which, as the first successful mass production automobile, entered the market before it had become segmented. Such segmentation and differentiation may well be one of the hallmarks of the process of distinction so characteristic of consumer society. The choice of model provides its owner with an implied status, a fact of the utmost importance. Friction occurs when those who cannot afford an expensive or desirable car desire something better.

Car modification is all about relationship to status and may be understood as a commentary upon it. More specifically, car modifiers generally accept the validity of status hierarchies in general, they merely reject the specific status hierarchy embodied in the mass market automobile. The form of their acceptance/rejection can be discerned in the types of modification they undertake. Indeed, the meaning of the resultant hierarchies can be extremely fluid. For example, a lowly Honda Civic can give its owner a higher level of status if the right modifications are incorporated than a more expensive automobile with the wrong modifications. Added performance can even allow it to outperform far more expensive and exotic cars, the ultimate status booster for its owner. Modification shifts status from the ability to purchase the right car to the ability to modify the right car, from socio-economic power to self-expression. Class mobility may be unattainable for many but driving the right car can at least afford them the feeling of having risen. In this way, modification is a commentary on the automobile. This thesis has sketched out a broad history of this phenomenon by looking at numerous sources, as well as based upon my own light ethnography. However, due to the complex nature of the various subgroups in modern day sport compact culture, future researchers in this area might find it useful to conduct in-depth ethnographies inside different slices of car modification; moreover, this would yield further information and nuances about individual groups and their motivations.

The association between gender and the automobile is multi-faceted and rather complicated. Certain approaches such as McShane's tend to reduce the complexity to simple affirmations such as 'masculinity dominates technology'.

Such affirmations invariably invite investigation of their operationalizability and usually discover exceptions, counter-evidence, anomalies, and so on. The approach should be as complex as the phenomenon. It may, therefore, be preferable to conclude that the automobile is a site in which the construction of identity and gender relations may be observed, and that for us, now, car modification frequently coincides with expressions of masculinity – but this is not a requirement of the hobby. Since the automobile is a mobile means of status it is an easy choice for any attempt to project an image. This can border on the ridiculous, as evidenced by the hyper-masculinity of some segments of the subculture. A form of modern-day ‘Tarzan’ chest-thumping, it can come across as either juvenile or anti-social. Suffice it to say that the automobile embraces all sexes and, depending upon who is using it, can project numerous meanings. This is important because many people are quick to assign it a single ‘gender’ or to make reductionist claims about its use as a symbol of masculinity. The point is not that it is never a symbol of masculinity; it is that in being such a symbol it does not capture a natural essence and may indeed conceal and reveal a wide range of identities which use masculinity for their own purposes or in ways inconsistent with the assumption of a natural masculinity. Each modified car encompasses different values and may be said to comment differently on gender. This thesis has certainly focused on the male expression of gender and its association with the automobile. Future research in this area may wish to attend more carefully to the relationship between women and cars. What role do women play in the world of car modification, besides that of ‘accessory’? There are female modifiers and they play an important role in car modification, but how and why and under what circumstances is it different from their male counterparts?

Perhaps one of the most powerful claims to be made about the history of modified cars is a dismissal of the notion of technological determinism. Technology does not determine how a machine – in this case the automobile – ends up being used in society. This is exemplified very early on with the Model T days which farmers would turn from a passenger car into a water pump; furthermore, individuals with a lust for performance managed to turn it into a race car with a functional look to suit its new purpose. Likewise, today, the economy car has been re-interpreted as legions of youth take bland Honda Civics and change them from economy cars into powerful sports cars able to outrun a Ferrari. Humanity is very resourceful and will always determine and re-assess the role of the automobile, or any technology for that matter.

This endless resourcefulness is one of the reasons for circumscribing the hegemony of political economic analyses. Again, the point is not that political economic approaches should not be used. It is that in using them we must also be aware of what is left by the wayside. In a manner analogous to technological determinism, political economic approaches ascribe to the production process too more ability to determine the meaning of the automobile and too little to the human agents who modify it. They tend to make little room for concepts such as subcultures, seeing them as functional by-products of the overall process rather than as autonomous agents, and to underestimate the role of individual re-interpretation in the process of meaning making.

For whatever reason a given automobile is modified, there always remains an essence of fun and enjoyment about it. As such, the image of the driver – the Philobat, the one who seeks out strong sensations – is strongly tied to the culture of modified cars.

Modifications often attempt to improve various dynamics of the vehicle's performance in such a way that they enhance the driving experience; moreover, this is an important part of the motivation for undertaking modifications. In addition to performance implications, the act of improving the looks of a vehicle can bring enjoyment in the form of increased attention and status aspirations. Increased enjoyment of a stock car is *the* reason why people modify it, or any car, although the motivation for this can be caused by many things depending upon the situation.

Car modification may express a fundamental and widespread human need which just happens to be practiced on automobiles. For example, fashion may be the oldest form of this need, for clothing, hairstyle, and jewellery have long modified the basic material of the human body and have long ascribed to their wearer not only a look but also a level of status and a mark of individuality. In the recent age, we have seen technology become fashion and vice versa. Witness the recent trends for customization of cellphones, personal audio, the success of the iPod, etc. The list is lengthy and there seems always to be a new consumer product meant to appeal to the individual; moreover, products are themselves endlessly modified, 'customized', to become even more individual. Like the pseudo-custom 'dream cars' manufactured by Detroit during the Golden Age, many unique consumer products are not unique enough to satisfy their purchasers. Customization has become so popular that it is now the object of a raft of reality shows covering everything from car makeovers, to home makeovers, to fashion makeovers, to surgical makeovers. The makeover is the anti-dote to living in a world of globalization and the feared "mono-culture" which many people view as all-encompassing.

Future research in this area may wish to locate automobile modification in the broader context of 'makeover culture', its appeals to individualism and appearance, and its appearance to forces such as globalization which may be perceived as threatening the individual.

One alternative to the car which confers a high degree of individuality upon its owner is the motorcycle. In North America, and particularly in Canada with its cold winters, it remains strictly a pleasure hobby. As a member of the motorcycling subculture, I can say that many of the aspects which motivate car modifiers can be found in this community as well. By virtue of their scarcity, simply driving any motorcycle brings a certain level of attention to the rider. Very little research has been done on the role of the motorcycle in meaning making, and it would no doubt prove a fascinating topic for future discovery since it is a rich culture with a variety of nuances. It actually has many advantages over the automobile, yet strong cultural barriers and associations with delinquency and criminality prevent motorcycles from being widely used in Canada. By understanding what motivates those few who do ride, perhaps effective marketing could slowly influence the attitudes of the general population.

Effective marketing is behind the rash of factory hot rods which are enjoying tremendous success lately; indeed, the manufacturers are listening to and watching this vibrant subculture in order to successfully co-opt some of its successful elements. Cars like the Subaru WRX STi, and the upcoming Mazdaspeed 6, offer tremendous amounts of horsepower to anyone who walks into the showroom. This begs the question: will this culture ever go fully mainstream? The answer is a resounding no.

It is not enough for many to simply possess a fast car, or even an exotic car worth a small fortune, since it does not necessarily make the owner 'one with the vehicle.' Car modification allows for a true sense of individuality both in terms of making the car one's own and in allowing the modifier to 'bond' with the car by getting to know its intricacies hands-on. The devotion people hold for their cars is a fascinating bond that takes on an almost spiritual level in many instances, and modification merely magnifies this bond. Car modification is not about turning cars into culture but about embedding culture into cars – this mass-produced object of industrialization takes on the qualities of a living being when it is dressed up, and the bond between owner and car strengthens. Future research in this area may want to examine the psychological or perhaps unconscious aspects of car modification which not only bond owner with vehicle but also permit the acting out of drives and desires through tinkering, investigation, handling, etc. As a commentary on modern industrial life, modification is a powerful way to express certain desires and aspirations that may or may not ever get truly met. Car modification is a powerful means of communication that offers rich nuances and insights into the role of the automobile in society.

### Bibliography

92teg (2004, April) "Lets play a fun new game.., Spot the pkb!" in *Redliners* URL: <http://www.redliners.ca/cgi-bin/ikonboard.cgi?s=407b67cf8a52ffff;act=ST;f=21;t=31196>, Ottawa, retrieved on April 4, 2004.

Balsley, Gene. (1950, Winter). "The Hot-Rod Culture," in *American Quarterly*, Vol. 2, No. 4. pp. 353-358.

Banham, Russ. (2002). *The Ford Century*. New York: Artisan.

*Banzai Magazine*. (2004, March). London: Unity Media, Issue 28.

Barthes, Roland. (1957). *Mythologies*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.

Batchelor, Dean. (1995). *The American Hot Rod*, Osceola, WI: Motorbooks International.

Bayley, Stephen. (1990). *Harley Earl*, New York: Taplinger Publishing Company.

Bladon, Stuart. (1985). *BMW*. New York: Multimedia Publications.

Bleakney, Peter. (2002, June 15). "Move over Asian sport-compacts; J-Body tuners dance to different beat," in *Toronto Star*. Toronto, p G30.

Bostwick, Charles F. (1997, May 14). "More Power to Deputy: Modified Car built to discourage Racing," in *The Daily News of Los Angeles*, Los Angeles, p3.

Box Office Mojo (2005). "The Fast and the Furious," in Box Office Mojo website, Url: <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=fastandfurious.htm>, retrieved on July 10, 2005.

Buckley, Martin. (2001). *BMW Cars*. St. Paul: MBI Publishing Company.

Business Wire. (2005, June 29). "Custom Cars, Magazine Models and Live Entertainment Hit Kansas City with Hot Import Nights," in Business Wire, Irvine, California. retrieved from LexisNexis Academic on July 1, 2005.

Cagle, Robert L. (1994, summer). "Auto-Eroticism: Narcissism, Fetishism, and Consumer Culture," in *Cinema Journal*, vol. 33, No. 4.

Carnine, Jay. (2004). "My Old Hot Rod," in *The All-American Hot Rod*, Michael Dregni Ed. Stillwater: Voyageur Press. pp. 35-41.

Clymer, Floyd. (1955). *Henry's Wonderful Model T*, New York: Bonanza Books.

- Collins, Robert. (1969). *A Great Way to Go*, Toronto: Ryerson Press.
- Darknights Nationals (2005). "Tri-stage entertainment," in *Darknights Nationals Website*, url: <http://darknightsnationals.com/Tristage.htm>, accessed on July 10, 2005.
- Dewitt, John. (2001). *Cool Cars, High Art: The Rise of Kustom Culture*, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Drake, Albert (2004). "The Way it Was," In *The All-American Hot Rod*, Michael Dregni Ed. Stillwater: Voyageur Press. pp. 35-41.
- Dregni, Michael (ed.) (2004). *The All-American Hot Rod*, Voyageur Press: Stillwater, MN.
- Ekberg, Brian (2005). "Gran Turismo 4," in Gamespot Website, url: <http://www.gamespot.com/ps2/driving/granturismo4/review.html>, accessed on July 11, 2005.
- Fast Car*. (2004, April). London: Highbury Leisure.
- The Fast and the Furious*. (2001). Film. Hollywood, CA: Universal Studios.
- Fernandez, Don. (2003, May 1). "Import Tuners': Owners turn cars into statements of 'show' or 'go'," in *The Atlanta-Journal-Constitution*, p 1JH.
- Flink, James J. (1988). *The Automobile Age*, Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Flink, James J. (1975). *The Car Culture*, Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Freund, Peter E.S. & George Martin. (1993). *The Ecology of the Automobile*, Montreal: Black Rose Books.
- Ganahl, Pat. (1995). *Hot Rods and Cool Customs*, New York: Artabras.
- Ganahl, Pat. (2001). *The American Custom Car*, St. Paul, MN: MBI Publishing.
- Gans, Herbert J. (1974). *Popular Culture and High Culture: an analysis and evaluation of Taste*, New York: Basic Books, Chapter 2 (pp. 91-160).
- Girdler, Allan. (2004). "Hot Rodding in the Days before Nostalgia," in *The All-American Hot Rod*, Michael Dregni Ed. Stillwater: Voyageur Press. pp. 35-41.
- Grainger, David. (2003, July 18). "Souped-up cars safer than jalopies: Cops eyeball 'tuners' but let unsafe, ill-kept cars roll," in *National Post*, Don Mills, ON, p DT2.

Guzik, Jon Alain. (2005, March 3). "The Alternatives; Everything gets tricked out; Hot Import Nights brings DJs, dancers and a nightclub atmosphere to the car show," in *Los Angeles Times*, p E18.

Heining, Duncan. (1998). "Cars & Girls – The Car, Masculinity and Pop Music," in *The Motor Car and Popular Culture in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, Thoms, Holden & Claydon eds. Ashgate: Aldershot.

Hull, Peter & Nigel Arnold-Forster. (1976). *Seventeen Sports Cars 1919-1930*, Bentley: Cambridge.

Humphreys, Richard. (1999). *Futurism*. London: Tate Gallery Publishing.

Jackson, Terry. (1992). *Japanese Super Cars*, London: Smithbooks.

Kojima, Mike. (2003). "Killer B," in *Sport Compact Car Engine & Driveline Handbook*. St.Paul, MN: Primedia.

Mannion, Shannon Lee. (2004, May 21). "Poor Boyz rich in car 'kulture': Vintage American Muscle," in *National Post*, Don Mills ON. p DO23.

*Max Power*. (2004, April). London: Emap Plc.

McShane, Clay. (1994). "Gender Wars," in *Down the Asphalt Path: The Automobile and the American City*, New York: Columbia University Press., chapter 8. pp 149-172.

Meyers, William. (1984). *The Image Makers*. New York: Times Books.

*Modified.com*. (2004). "Culture," URL:  
<http://www.modified.com/culture/models.html>, retrieved on April 5, 2004.

*Modified Magazine*. (2004, May). Toronto: Vertical Scope.

Moulton, Donalee. (2002, July 26). "There's Nothing new about street racing... or fatal crashes," in *The National Post*, Don Mills ON, p DO.7.

NHRA (2005). "NHRA XPLOD Sport Compact Racing Series enters fifth season," in NHRA Sport Compact website, url:  
<http://www.nhrasportcompact.com/2005/info/series.html>, accessed on July 11, 2005.

Nader, Ralph. (1965). *Unsafe at any Speed; the designed in dangers of the American Automobile.*, New York: Grossman.

Noad, Peter. (2003, December). "Model History: MKI Golf Ls/GLs," in *Volkswagen Driver*, issue 43, pp 41-44.

Paradise, Alan. (2000). *Civic Duty: The Ultimate Guide to the World's Most Popular Sport Compact Car – the Honda Civic*. Cambridge, MA: Bentley Publishers.

Parker, Phill. (2005, February/March). "Sema Show 2004," in *Sport Compact National*, Vol 4, No. 6, pp 24-31.

Parker, Phill. (2005a, February/March). "Preview: Mazdaspeed6," in *Sport Compact National*, Vol 4, No. 6, pp 72-73.

Paterson, Matthew. (2000). "Car Trouble," in *Understanding Global Environment Politics*, Palgrave: London, chapter 5 pp 95-117.

Patton, Phil. (2002). *Bug: The Strange Mutations of the World's Most Famous Automobile*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Paul, Eddie (2003). *The cars of The Fast and the Furious*, St.Paul: MBI.

Performance Auto & Sound (2005). "Top Tuner platforms," in *Performance Auto & Sound: 2005 Annual Edition*. Toronto: Solisco.

Performance Auto & Sound (2005a). "Top 5 TV shows," in *Performance Auto & Sound: 2005 Annual Edition*. Toronto: Solisco.

Price, Ryan Lee. (2003). *The VW Beetle*. New York: HP Books.

Rae, John. (1971). *The Road and the Car in American Life*, Cambridge MA: MIT Press, chapters. 4 & 9.

Richler, Jacob. (2005, April 30). "'Pimp my ride' is so passé: Paying to undo aftermarket excess is the latest automotive trend," in *National Post*, Don Mills, ON, p FW03.

Rye, Jane. (1972). *Futurism*. London: Studio Vista Pictureback.

Sachs, Wolfgang. (1992). *For the Love of the Automobile*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Saunders, Michael. (2005, June 6). "Hack Your Car: Big Money Drives Marketing Push to Bring "Tuner" Lifestyle to Every Part of the Country," in *The Boston Globe*, p C1.

Schneider, Greg. (2005, May 6). "Hot rod culture ruled by computers, electronics," in *The Ottawa Citizen*, Ottawa, ON, p C8.

Sebmour. (2004, April). "Thursday Night on Parkway," in *Redliners* URL: <http://www.redliners.ca/cgi-bin/ikonboard.cgi?s=407b67cf8a52ffff;act=ST;f=10;t=31459>, Ottawa. Retrieved on April 4, 2004.

- Sedgwick, Michael. (1970). *Cars of the 1930s*, Bentley: Cambridge.
- SEMA (2002). "2002 Automotive Specialty Equipment Industry Update," Speciality Equipment Market Association Market Report, url: <http://www.sema.org/images/pdf/31308.pdf>, retrieved on June 10, 2005.
- SEMA (2005). "Legislative Resources: Pending Legislation & Regulation," in SEMA Action Network, url: <http://www.semasan.com/main/main.aspx?ID=/content/SEMASANcom/HomePage>, accessed on July 11, 2005.
- Seume, Keith. (2001). *Volkswagen Cars & Trucks*. St.Paul: MBI Publishing Company.
- Shackleford, Ben A. (2001). "Masculinity, the Auto Racing Fraternity, and the Technological Sublime," in Roger Horowitz (ed.) *Boys and Their Toys? Masculinity, Class, and Technology in America*, London: Routledge.
- SHO. (2004, April). "Late 80's safari van, Fagtezzas and bass," in *Redliners* URL: <http://www.redliners.ca/cgi-bin/ikonboard.cgi?s=407cc48aab60ffff;act=ST;f=10;t=31529>, Ottawa, retrieved on April 4, 2004.
- Sparke, Penny. (2002). *A Century of Car Design*. London: Barron's.
- Sprayin. (2004, April). "General Message to you Losers," in *Redliners* URL: <http://www.redliners.ca/cgi-bin/ikonboard.cgi?s=407b67cf8a52ffff;act=ST;f=10;t=31459>, Ottawa, retrieved on April 5, 2004.
- Stegall, Roger. (2005, September). "German Rods," in *Ol' Skool Rodz*, Centerport, NY: Koolhouse publishing. Vol. 2, No. 4.
- Steinwedel, Louis William. (1981). *The Beetle Book: America's 30-Year Love Affair with the "Bug"*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc.
- Sternbergh, Adam. (2003, March 1). "Vroom with a view," in *National Post*, Don Mills ON, p SP1.
- Subaru Canada. (2005). "Impreza WRX Sti," in *Subaru Canada Website*, url: <http://www.subaru.ca/>, accessed on June 10, 2005.
- Super Street. (2005). "Turbo Issue," *Super Street Magazine*, LA, Primedia, Vol 9, no. 8.

Thoms, Holden & Claydon, eds. (1998) *The Motor Car and Popular Culture in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, Ashgate: Aldershot.

Vaaranen, Heli. (2004) "The Emotional Experience of Class: Interpreting Working-Class Kids' Street Racing in Helsinki," in *The Annals of The American Academy of Political and Social Science*.

Veblen, Thorstein. (1979[1899]). *Theory of the leisure class*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin. New York: Penguin Books. Chapters 4 and 6, (pp 68-101 and 115-66).

Vose, Ken. (2004). *Monster Nation: The Best Transformed Vehicles from Coast to Coast*. Des Moines, Iowa: Meredith books.

Upinhere. (2004, April). "Irony, because some of you just don't get it," in *Redliners*  
URL: <http://www.redliners.ca/cgi-bin/ikonboard.cgi?s=407b67cf8a52ffff;act=ST;f=8;t=31578>, Ottawa, retrieved on April 6, 2004.

V6killer. (2004, April). "any one want to race me, race for slips!!!" in *Toronto Street Racing* URL:  
<http://www.torontostreetracing.com/forum/viewtopic.php?t=4624>, Toronto, retrieved on April 10, 2004.

VR666. (2004, April) "flat black vs. white turbo dodge Anal Raping of the year!!!" in *Toronto Street Racing* URL:  
<http://www.torontostreetracing.com/forum/viewtopic.php?t=1245>, Toronto, Retrieved on April 10, 2004.

Wernick, Andrew. (1991). "(Re-) Imaging Technology: The Case of Cars," in *Promotional Culture*. London: Sage Publications. pp 67-91.

"What is D1GP?," (2005) in D1 Grand Prix USA – Professional Drift Website, url:  
<http://www.d1gp.com/index.asp?PageAction=Custom&ID=6>, accessed on June 3, 2005.

Wheels. (2004, July 24). "The Mainstreaming of tuner car culture," in *The Toronto Star*, Toronto, ON, p G14.

Wilson, Quentin. (1995). *The Ultimate Classic Car Book*. Toronto: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd.

Williams, Robert. (2004). "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Hot Rodder," In *The All-American Hot Rod*, Michael Dregni Ed. Stillwater: Voyageur Press. pp 165-168.

Willson, Quentin. (1995). *The Ultimate Classic Car Book*, Toronto: Harper Collins

Witzel, Michael Karl & Kent Bash. (1997). *Cruisin' Car Culture*, Osceola, WI: Motorbooks International.

Wollen, Peter & Joe Kerr, eds. (2002). *Autopia*, London: Reaktion Books Ltd.

Wood, Colum. (2005, May 20). "The fast and the curious: Annual cruise and car show geared toward drivers 16 to 19," in *The Ottawa Citizen*, Ottawa, ON, p C2.

Yap, Laurance. (2003, July 5). "Dark days for the hot summer knights," in *Toronto Star*, Toronto, ON, p G01.

Yap, Laurance. (2005, February 17). "Tuner-car culture moves from fringes," in *Toronto Star*, Toronto, ON, G28.

Appendix

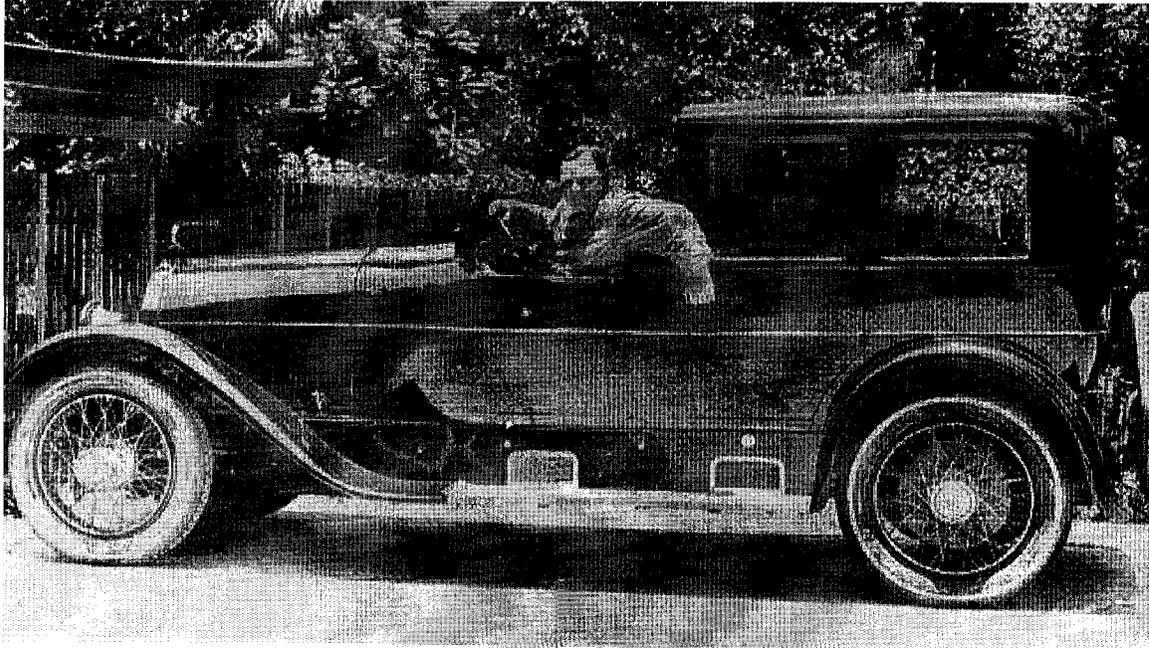
Chapter II Photos

Photo 1: A great day for a drive!



(Flink 1988, 101)

**Photo 2: Fatty Arbuckle in his Harley Earl designed car**



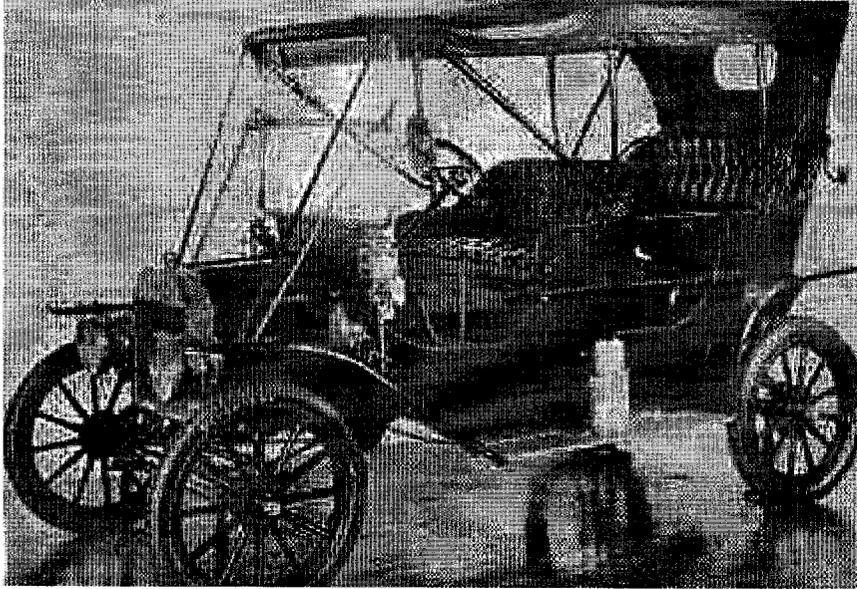
(Bayley 1990, 32)

**Photo 3: Henry Ford**



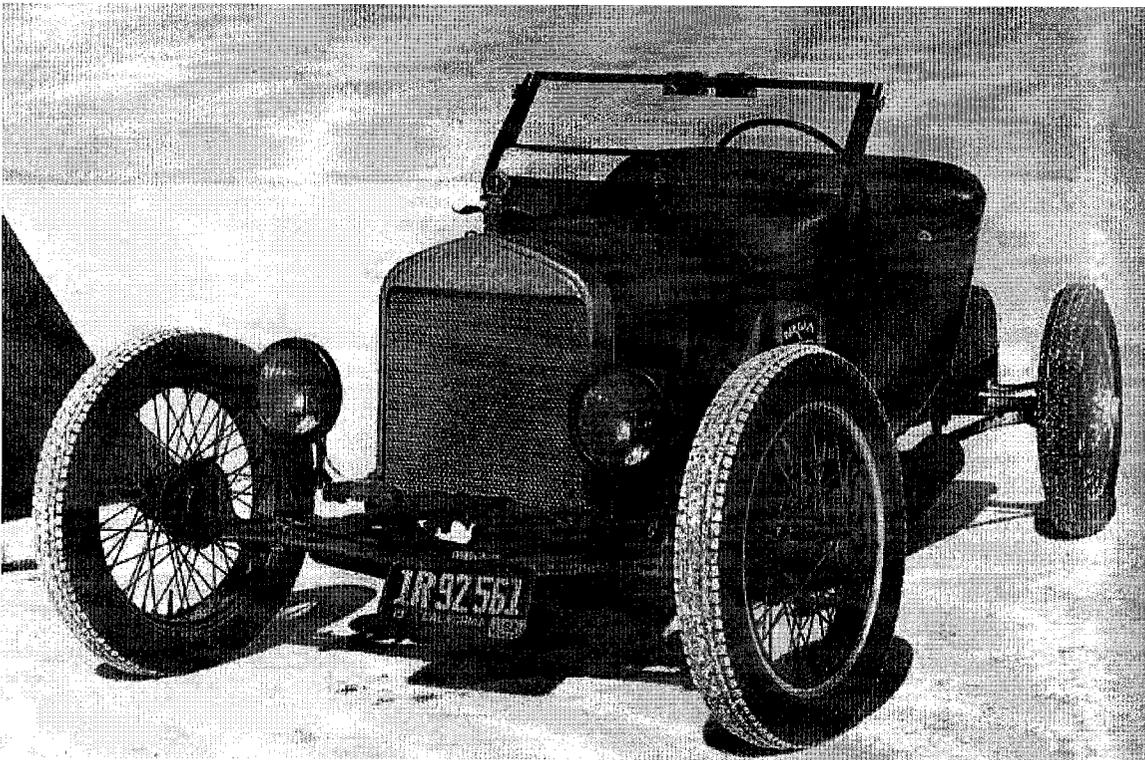
(Sparke 2002, 20)

**Photo 4: 1909 Model T touring**



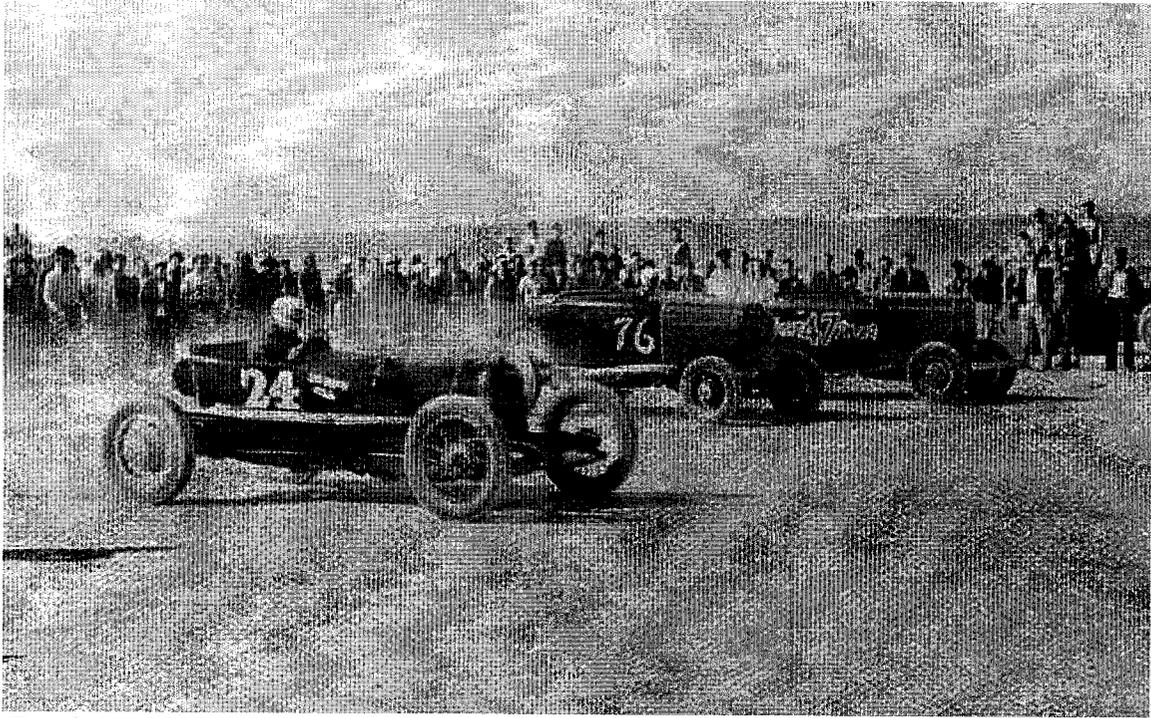
(Collins 1969, 56)

**Photo 5: An early Model T hot rod at the dry lakes**



(Batchelor 1995, 31)

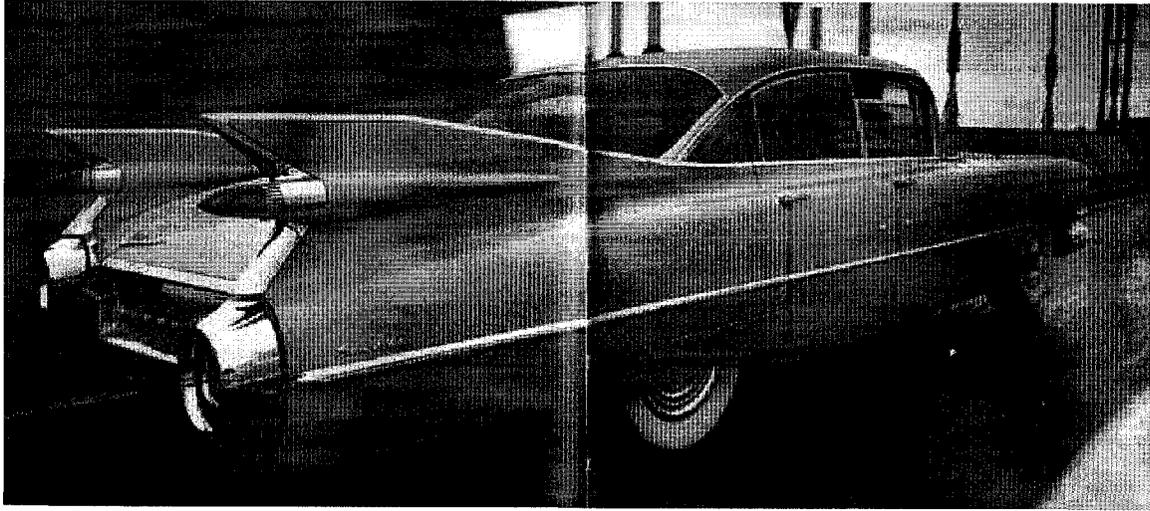
**Photo 7: A dusty race at Harper Dry lake**



(Batchelor 1995, 19)

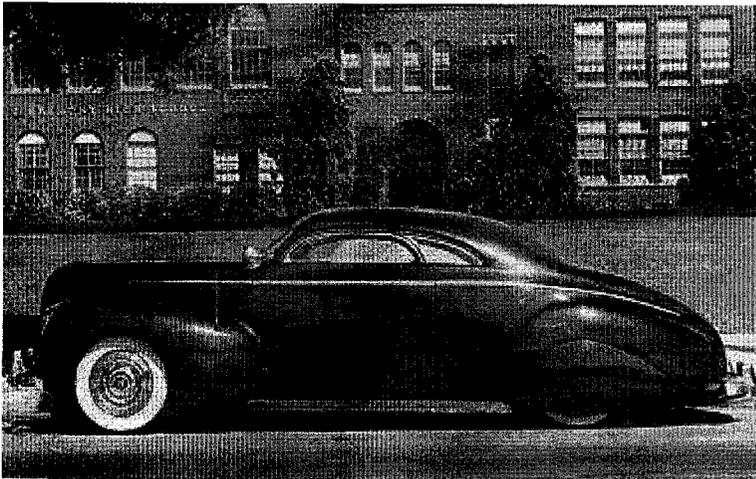
**Chapter III Photos**

**Photo 1: Boat or Automobile? The 1959 Cadillac Sedan de Ville**



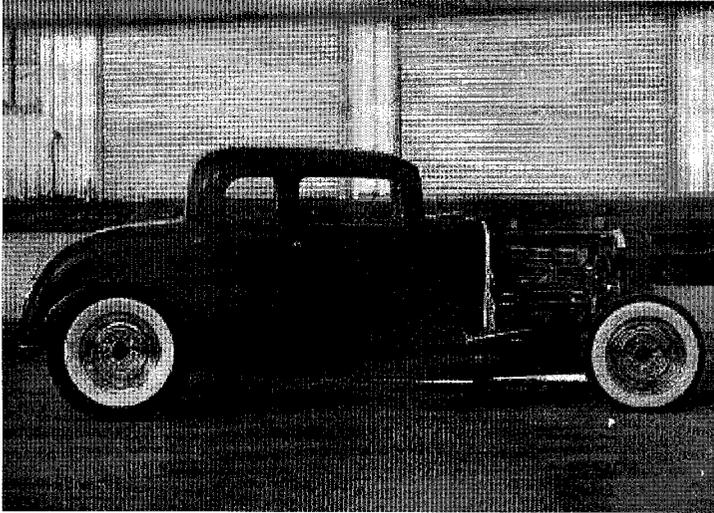
(Sparke 2002, 126)

**Photo 2 - The infamous Matranga Mercury created by the Barris Brothers**



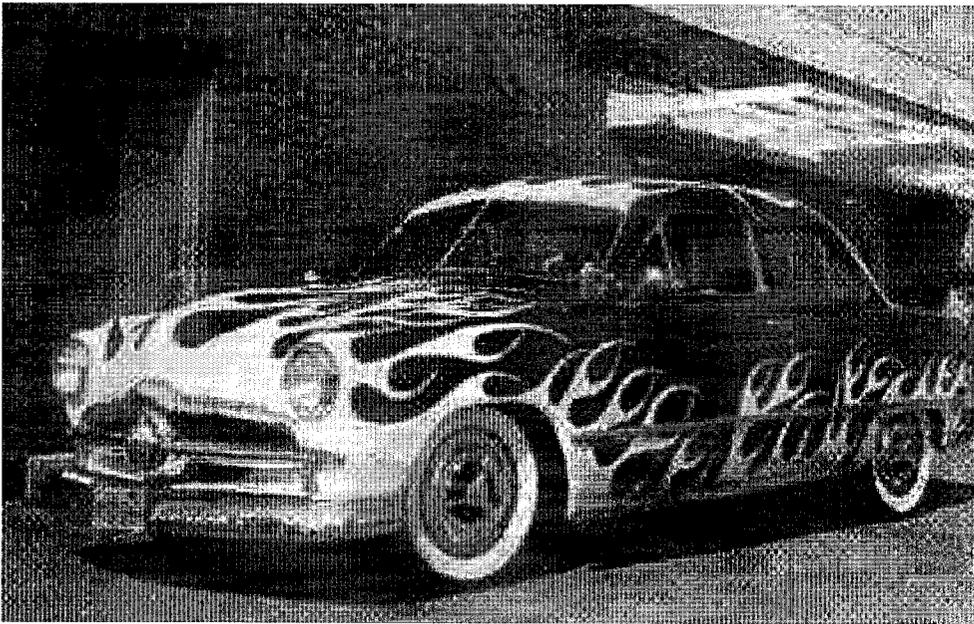
(Ganahl 2001, 28)

**Photo 3: 1932 Ford Model A five-window coupe**



(Dregni 2004, 154)

**Photo 4: A wild flamed paint job**



(Dewitt 2001, 98)

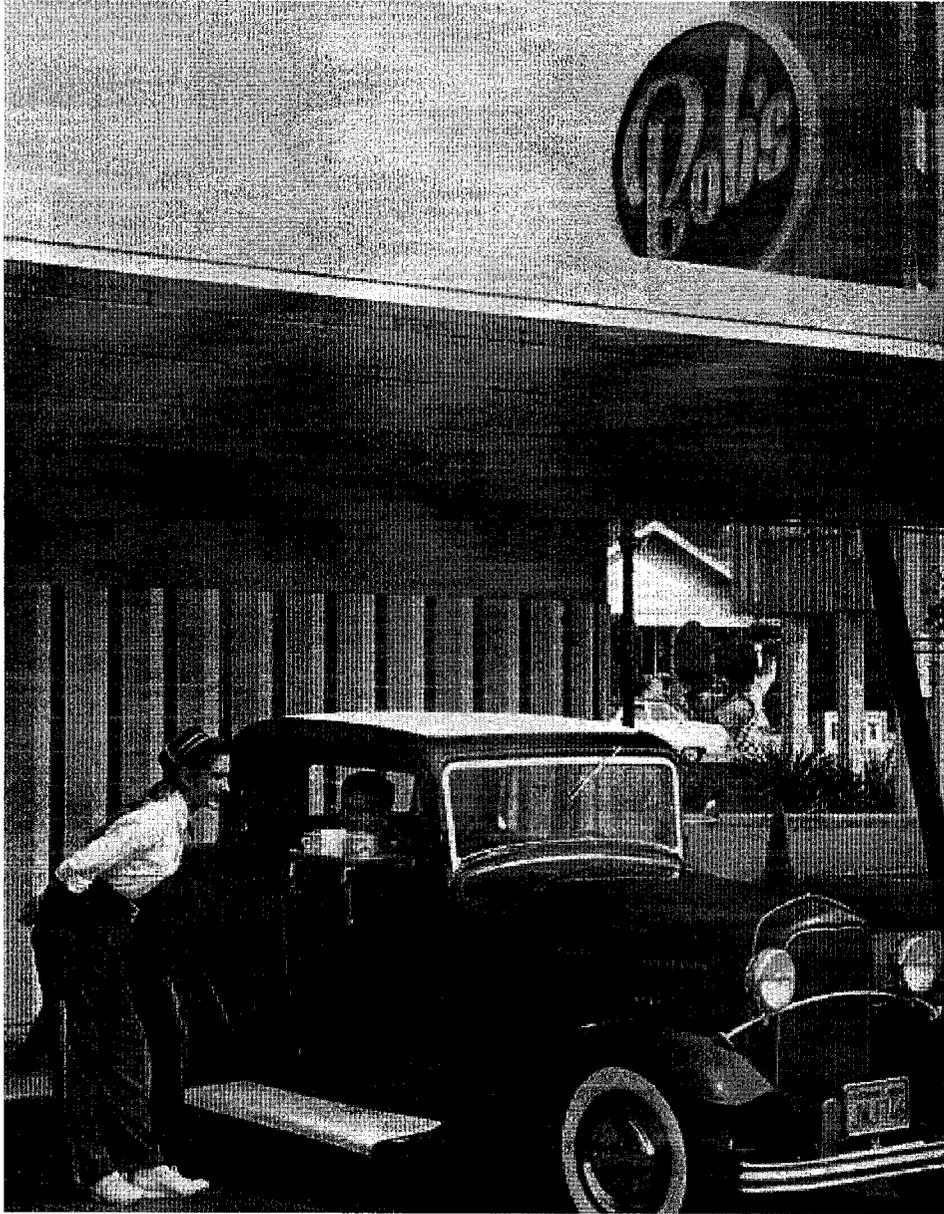
**Photo 5 – Hot rod movies**



CAR CRAZY FILMS: Clockwise from top left: Speed Crazy, 1959; Dragstrip Girl, 1956; Dragstrip Riot, 1958; and Hot Car Girl, 1958.

(Dregni 2004, 90)

**Photo 6: Bob's Drive in Restaurant – one of the most popular in California**



(Dregni 2004, 184)

**Photo 7: A young street racer meets the law**



(Witzel 1997, 66)

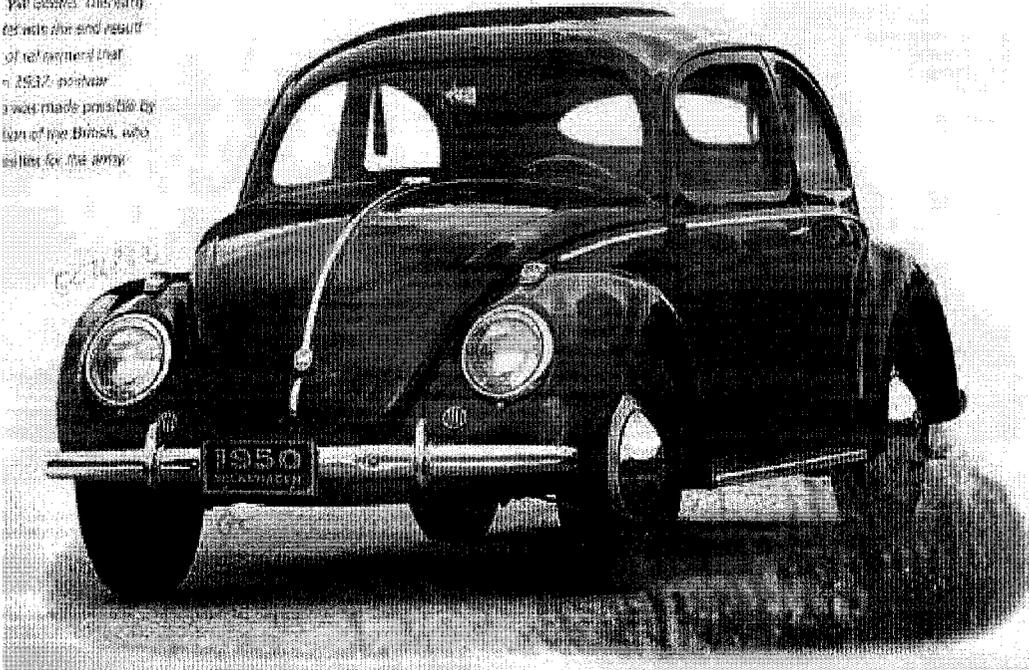
**Chapter IV Photos**

**Photo 1: My first BMW – a 1985 318i which I purchased for \$1200**



**Photo 2: The quirky Volkswagen Beetle**

The Beetle. This early  
 form is the end result  
 of refinement that  
 in 1937, no one  
 would have thought  
 of. The Beetle, who  
 waited for the army.



(Sparke 2002, 95)

**Photo 3: Nissan 240sx – The first successful Japanese ‘sports’ car**



(Jackson 1992, 6)

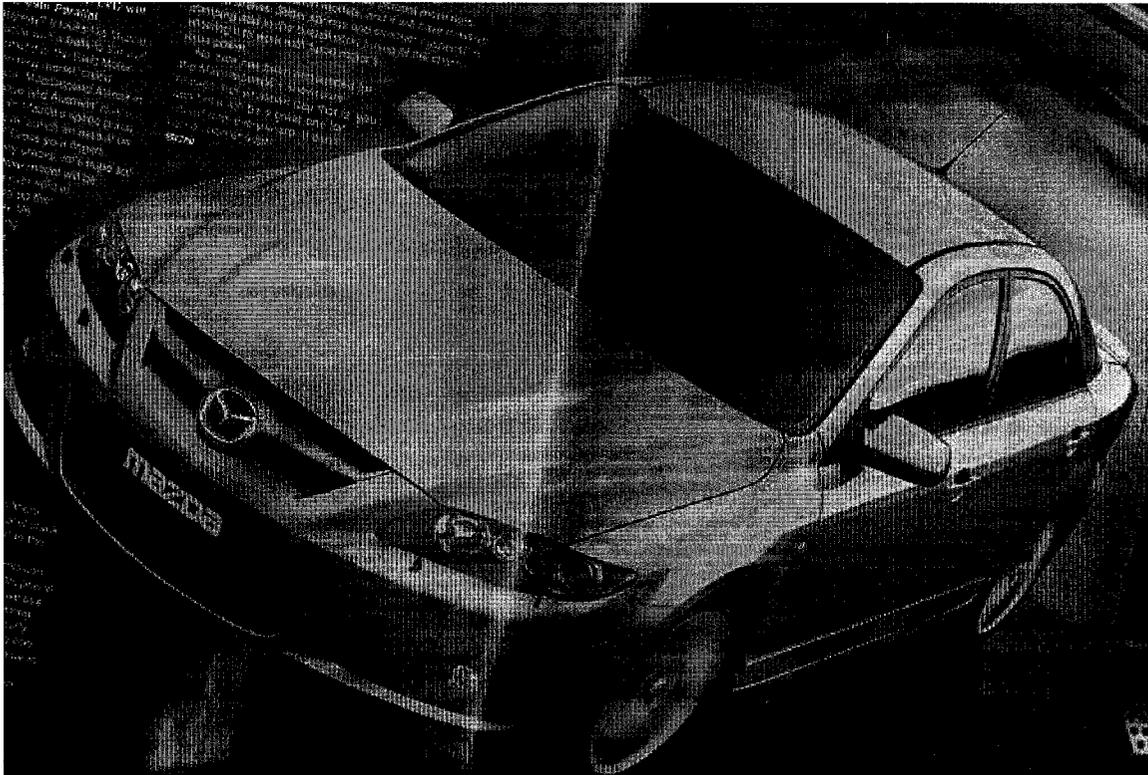
**Photo 4: My stock 1993 Civic Hatchback**



**Photo 5: The first 'hot hatch' – Volkswagen's venerable Rabbit GTi**

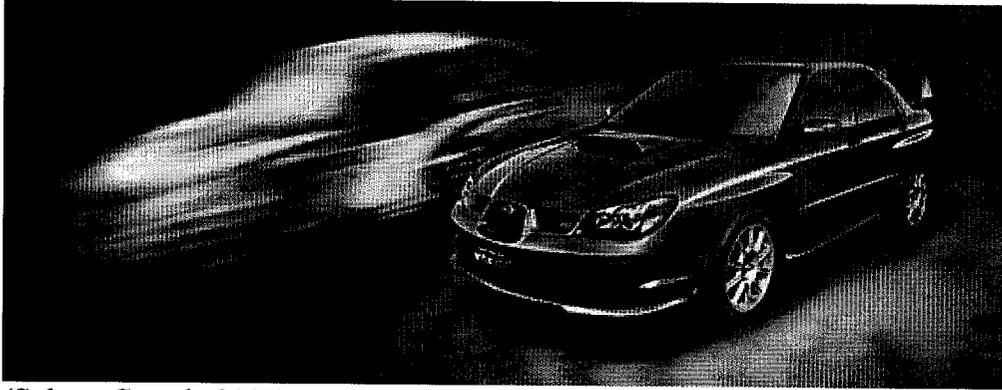


**Photo 6: Mazdaspeed 6**



(Parker 2005, 72)

**Photo 7: Subaru WRX Sti – a Factory Rally Race Car**



(Subaru Canada 2005)

**Photo 8 – A selection of modified cars from the 2004 Sema Show**

SEMA 2004

One astonishing sight was a Honda Insight race car in the Clutchmasters booth. Did they develop the world's first gas-electric front-drive dragster? Nope. It had a K20 2.0-liter motor. I still can't decide if I should be disappointed or relieved.

One product at SEMA that's sure to relieve the right feet of Mazda RX-8 owners is a brand new turbo kit. Pro Tech Performance ([www.protech-performance.com](http://www.protech-performance.com)) made it specifically for Mazda's four-door sports car.

Pegasus was a noticeable oddity at the SEMA show. This audio exhibitor played the

(Parker 2005, 26)