

Making Motoring American: The Integration of the Working Class
in Automobile Film Advertising of the 1930s

by

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Abstract

This thesis examines a selection of automobile film advertisements from 1930 to America's formal declaration of war in 1941 as a means of analyzing the cultural narrative associated with automobile promotion throughout the Great Depression. The films depict the white, working-class male as the model driver and the automobile as a bastion of safety, as well as the key to a prosperous economy. While this shift in the representation of the automobile and its driver can be attributed in part to the reported saturation of the automobile market through the latter part of the 1920s and the economic uncertainty of the 1930s, semiotic analysis of the films indicates that the change was more than an effort to attract prospective consumers. Rather, the films' idealization of the working class was tailored to present a narrative of motoring that supported automakers and industrial capitalism in a period when both were being challenged.

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Introduction

One of the most widely viewed automobile film advertisements of the 1930s was General Motor's *We Drivers* (1935).¹ The film promoted responsible driving through two animated characters, Reckless Rudolph and Sensible Sam. Using the contest of wills and strength between Rudolph and Sam to highlight the importance of control, attentiveness, and caution in ensuring road safety, the film's narrator maintains that "Reckless Rudolph and Sensible Sam represent the dual personalities in all of us."² However, the film consistently indicates that Sam's cautious approach exemplifies the behaviour that "we drivers" should aspire to emulate. A later scene depicting Sam's victory over Rudolph in the boxing ring confirms his superior masculinity and, by extension, his suitability for driving. The informative, at times didactic, tenor of *We Drivers* regarding driver behaviour is fairly typical of advertisements from the 1930s.

Roland Marchand contends in his book *Advertising the American Dream* that the rapid proliferation of new products at the turn of the century resulted in an informational void that advertisers were delighted to fill. Potential consumers sought facts regarding new commodities and descriptions of what the items being promoted were capable of.

¹ Rick Prelinger is the founder of the Prelinger Archives, an archival database focusing on the collection of films. Founded in 1983, the collection was acquired by the Library of Congress in 2002. It has over 5,000 digitized films available online. <https://archive.org/details/prelinger>, accessed March 28, 2015. In his book examining a sample of the films held by the Archives, Prelinger "contends that *We Drivers* was shown in 7,000 theatres in the first ten months alone and was reportedly viewed by 24 million people in non-commercial venues. GM also produced booklets and texts of the advertisement in newspapers and it was reproduced in 1947, 1955, 1962, and 1976. Rick Prelinger, *The Field Guide to Sponsored Film* (San Francisco: National Film Preservation Foundation, 2006), 98.

² General Motors, *We Drivers*, produced by Jam Handy Organization (1935), 0:40. *Prelinger Archives*, accessed July 13, 2013, <https://archive.org/details/WeDriver1936>

Moreover, advertisements did more than outline the uses for, or the operation of, a product. They presented a specific image of their merchandise situated in consumers' lives, illustrating a particular lifestyle as a means of relating their product to a set of values or standards.³ *We Drivers* candidly offers instruction regarding the best methods of driving and deliberately outlines ideal conduct, but the advertisement is more than a valorization of good driving habits. The ad also describes who the model driver is, from the qualities they possess and their behavior, to their race, gender, and class. This consumer-centric approach emphasized the person using the product, rather than the product itself, not limiting the item's merit to its utility or physical attributes. Rather, the advertisements underlined the capacity of the merchandise to satisfy an immaterial psychological or emotional desire. Building on earlier trends, advertisements of the 1930s were less about statistics and more about telling a story or fitting a commodity within a pre-existing cultural narrative to "fuel a fantasy" that could be achieved through purchasing the product.⁴ While consumers might dismiss the factual argumentation of an advertisement regarding mileage, suspension, or aerodynamic engineering, the symbolism of the automobile, the attributes attached to the vehicle indirectly through the advertisement's characterizations of the automobile and its driver were less obvious in their presentation and, in turn, more difficult to dismiss.

³ Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920–1940* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), 164-167, 346-48. Marchand refers to advertisements that depicted a particular lifestyle to be associated with the product as "social tableaux" and contends that they did not accurately reflect reality. Nor were the advertisements that used this approach meant to. Rather, they were "reflective of the 'reality' of the social aspirations of American consumers." Or at least, what manufacturers presumed those aspirations to be.

⁴ James D. Norris, *Advertising and the Transformation of American Society, 1865-1945* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), 148-156.

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the cultural significance ascribed to the automobile in the film advertisements of the 1930s. While the depiction of the vehicle in these advertisements was not an accurate reflection of its place in American society, the meanings associated with the automobile were influenced by the broader culture. In examining a selection of film advertisements sponsored by General Motors and the Ford Motor Company between 1930 and the United States' entrance into the Second World War in 1941, I contend that they represent a change in the significance of the automobile in American culture. Advertisements produced in years prior portrayed the automobile as a vehicle of the upper class, assuming, as much early advertising did, that the desire to own an automobile stemmed from an effort to emulate America's most prosperous citizens. To some extent the social status attached to the car remained central to the vocabulary of automakers' advertising. Yet, the film advertisements of the 1930s also depicted the automobile as a vehicle of the working class, of the average American. While still a sign of status, the automobile had become an essential part of American life, rather than a superfluous extravagance. However, the delineation of the automobile as a symbol of the working class exceeded the principal discourse of cost-consciousness and value in a time of economic hardship.

By undertaking a semiotic analysis of both the visual and narrative elements of these films it is possible to understand not only the model advertisers hoped would appeal to prospective consumers, but how the stories that illustrated this archetype were influenced by broader cultural contexts. The presence of the working class in auto advertisements of the 1930s was about more than financial constraints and the saturation of the automobile market. A consideration of the specific values associated with driver

and labourer, and the way they are portrayed throughout the films, suggests the glorification of the working class was a means of countering negative perceptions of large corporations and industrial capitalism. While the film producers consistently used inclusive language and camera angles to craft a narrative that would appeal to prospective consumers, drawing on traditional narratives and broader cultural contexts, the result is a representation of the working class that would benefit the automotive industry. This industry-sympathetic account is not blatantly evident because the automobile and the life associated with it are presented as advantageous to the consumer rather than the manufacturer. Given that these films were often shown in theatres, it was important for them to be entertaining, as well as informational. Yet, underneath the rhetoric of moral conduct intended to appeal to buyers, automobile manufacturers were also careful to frame industrial capitalism and their own role in the economy as key to a broader sense of fulfilment and prosperity.

1.1 Historical Context

Automobile film advertisements of the 1930s rarely reproduced the stark reality of the Depression. Instead, they continued to highlight the vehicle's great potential, to illustrate the idyllic lifestyle associated with it, and to underscore its triumphs as a technology and a lynchpin of American industry. Still, the pressures and insecurities that resulted from the Depression manifested in the manufacturers' emphasis of the automobile's economic value and material quality, the comfort and security of driving, and the industrial strength of the automakers. Coupled with the attention given to superficial changes and style as evidence of continued technological progress, these

advertisements obliquely speak to the unease of both consumers and manufacturers about the country's economic situation.⁵

The refusal to acknowledge the grim realities of the Depression was not unique to automobile advertisements. Nor were the narratives presented in advertisements meant to be an accurate depiction of the world in which consumers lived. In her book, *Advertising as Communication*, Gillian Dyer contends that a successful advertisement does not represent the world as it is, but as a consumer should want it to be. To accomplish this, advertisers must fashion an ideal that satisfies the perceived desires of prospective consumers, in which the product being sold is vital to attaining that ideal. Dyer maintains that advertisements “do not mirror or reflect social meanings and conditions, but teach us ways of thinking and feeling, generally through fantasy and dreaming.”⁶ While Dyer's analysis is limited primarily to print advertisements, the concepts she outlines can easily be applied to film ads as well, suggesting that the film advertisements did not, and were not meant to accurately reflect the struggles of the Depression or the distribution of the automobile in 1930s America. Rather, the films depicted a romanticized narrative that normalized the concept of the automobile as a vehicle that was universally accessible and contributed to a prosperous American economy.

Film was an apt medium for promoting the notion of universal access. While early venues such as nickelodeons were considered low-class entertainment, the stigma of unsavory amusement dissipated over the course of the 1920s with the rise of lavish venues such as New York's Roxy Theatre, which opened in 1927. Even if people from all

⁵ Judy Vankin, *Driving it Home: 100 Years of Car Advertising* (London: Middlesex University Press, 2008), 38-44.

⁶ Gillian Dyer, *Advertising as Communication* (New York: Methuen, 1982), 11-13.

classes did not view films in the same building, motion pictures were a staple entertainment and what Steven Ross characterizes as a “genuine institution of mass culture—one that reached all Americans regardless of their class, race, gender, ethnicity or geographical location.”⁷ Dixon and Foster estimate that an average of ninety million people viewed films on at least a weekly basis by the year 1930. The popularity of the medium was a definite part of the appeal for advertisers, although films advertisements were not used extensively until the legitimacy of motion pictures was established in the latter part of the 1920s.⁸

The prosperity of this decade saw an increase in automobile production, responding to what some perceived to be a limitless demand for motor vehicles as automobile assembly became the nation’s leading industry. Yet, as the decade drew to an end, manufacturers were forced to acknowledge the limitations of the market as the number of people purchasing replacement cars surpassed the number of first time buyers. In order for the automobile industry to continue to grow, or even maintain its level of production, new markets needed to be developed. The increase in leisure time and wages experienced by America’s working class made its members viable candidates, as the plummeting numbers of automobiles sold throughout the first years of the Depression solidified the need for an expanded market.⁹ The undeniable popularity of film through the 1920s and 1930s across the class spectrum made the medium a logical choice to

⁷ Steven J. Ross, “Working-Class Hollywood: Silent Film and the Shaping of Class in America,” in *Movies and American Society* ed. Steven J. Ross (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 67, 66-73.

⁸ Wheeler Winston Dixon and Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, *A Short History of Film* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 89-90.

⁹ Ronald Edsforth, *Class Conflict and Cultural Consensus: The Making of Mass Consumer Society in Flint, Michigan* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 23-33, 136.

access the working class, as well as more established markets, in an effort to expand the potential consumer base.

1.2 Historiography, Theory, and Methodology.

Some examination of the content of automobile print advertisements from this period has been undertaken by historians such as Heon Stevenson, Peter Roberts, and Judy Vankin.¹⁰ Several authors, notably Lauren Boegen, Joseph Corn, and Steven Bottomore, argue that film advertisements are a valuable historical source and should be included in discussions of film history. They maintain that the body of literature produced by film studies is distorted by the omission because advertisement films comprised a considerable portion of early films. Their focus is on justifying the examination of film advertisements and industrial films as historical sources, rather than undertaking that analysis themselves. Boegen argues for the importance of industrial films as an extension of the popularity and prominence of motion pictures from the 1920s to the 1950s,¹¹ while Corn focuses on the use of industrial films as a means of studying corporations.¹² This is similar to David Nye's use of General Electric's photographic archives in his book *Image Worlds* as a means of examining the company's self-representation. Bottomore's work uses less primary source analysis than Corn's, but offers more concrete methodological

¹⁰ Stevenson, Roberts, and Vankin are certainly not the only ones that examine automobile advertisements. Lears, Sivulka, Marchand, and Laird also discuss automobile advertisements, but as part of more generalized studies of American advertising. Heon Stevenson, *Selling the Dream: Advertising the American Automobile, 1930-1980*; Peter Roberts, *Any Color So Long As It's Black...: The First Fifty Years of Automobile Advertising*; Judy Vankin, *Driving it Home: 100 Years of Car Advertising*.

¹¹ Lauren Boegen, "Reality Bites: Social Implications of the Early 20th Century Movie," *Constructing the Past* 4 (2003): 38-45.

¹² Joseph Corn, "Selling Technology: Advertising Films and the American Corporation 1900-1920," *Film and History* 11 (1981): 49-52.

suggestions of how proper historical interpretation of industrial and advertising films can be undertaken.¹³

However, none of the authors above puts his or her proposed theories and methodologies into practice. Both William Bird and Alain Michel address this omission. Bird looks at several of GMs films from the 1930s, but generally dismisses them as redundant presentations of automobile statistics, mechanical explanations, and streamlined aesthetics to give prospective consumers the impression of technological progress.¹⁴ Michel's work looks at industrial films produced by the French car company Renault in the early part of the twentieth century and concludes that their content is visual evidence of the lifestyles and ideologies that Renault was trying to sell to consumers, as well as the image it tried to create for itself as a manufacturer.¹⁵ While Michel concedes that it is not possible to measure the impact a specific advertisement might have had on a given audience, there is substantial evidence that indicates that advertising does influence consumer sentiment and behavior. My work examines the films Bird dismisses, looking beyond the dry figures to the conceptualization of the automobile evinced in the narrative and visual elements. Like Michel, I am looking primarily at the narratives and values the films are trying to associate with the product, rather than focusing strictly on the information they offer. I contend that film advertisements in the 1930s contributed to the creation and dissemination of the cultural discourse of automobile ownership as a mark

¹³ Stephan Bottomore, "Rediscovering Early Non-fiction Film," *Film History* 13 (2001): 161-166.

¹⁴ William L. Bird, *Better Living: Advertising, Media, and the New Vocabulary of Business Leadership, 1935-1955* (Illinois: Northeastern University Press, 1999), 122-138.

¹⁵ Alain P. Michel, "Corporate Films of Industrial Work," in *Films that Work: Industrial Film and Productivity of Media*, ed. Vinzenz Hediger and Patrick Vonderau (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009), 167-174.

of citizenship and status that was associated with industrial capitalism through the attributes and lifestyle attributed to the automobile and its owner.¹⁶

Consumers' responses to the representations of the products shaped society as the narratives were assimilated and became part of popular culture.¹⁷ In his book, *Land of Desire*, William Leach asserts that prior to 1880 people generally produced the items they consumed in their daily lives. Material possessions were the result of their own labor or the labor of someone else. He stresses that "elaborate associational meanings, moreover, that purported to confer on consumption autonomous identity, were not a part of social life."¹⁸ Industrialization altered this system. After 1890, production and consumption were both controlled by corporations, which resulted in an independent commercial culture designed to combat the potential problems presented by under-consumption by perpetually fuelling consumers' need to own particular products in order to identify or change themselves in a specific way. Commercial culture maintained that a person could obtain the qualities merchandise embodied through ownership. However, while the values associated with the product drew on consumers' status consciousness, anxieties, and interests, they were shaped by the corporations to suit their own concerns, simultaneously perpetuating the system of commercial culture and fostering consumers' desire for their goods. While early ads primarily explained what a product could do to supplement a person's existence, later advertisements, from the 1920s onward, focused

¹⁶ Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 2-10.

¹⁷ Juliann Sivulka, *Soap, Sex, and Cigarettes* (New York: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1998), xiii-xv.

¹⁸ William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 147.

on crafting a narrative that associated their product with a new and better life or self that a person could attain.¹⁹

As Marchand contends, the act of selling a product distorts representations of reality. Thus, 1930s automobile advertisements were not an accurate reproduction of society, but an attempt to produce an ideal that would satisfy or encourage existing desires of prospective consumers.²⁰ Furthermore, Judith Williamson explains that advertisements attach meaning to an object, drawing on pre-existing ideals, desires, and ideologies, what Williamson terms referent systems, to imbue the object with cultural meaning it does not have independently. While it is not possible to precisely measure the influence of a given advertisement, it is possible to dissect the cultural significance that the manufacturer assigns to the item being advertised.²¹ As a means of investigating the significance of particular items, Williamson recommends semiology.²²

Roland Barthes maintained that semiotic analysis with regard to advertising requires an acknowledgement of the complexity of the signs prospective consumers reflexively understand in their daily lives. The explicit informative message of the primary discourse, what Barthes refers to as the denotation of the object, is not a means of masking the secondary discourse, the connotation. Rather, the primary discourse is

¹⁹ Leach, *Land of Desire*, 147-150, 294-299.

²⁰ Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, xvi-xx. Marchand states that “if the metaphors, syntactical patterns, and verbal and visual ‘vocabularies’ of our common language establish our parameters of thought and cut the furrows along which our ideas tend to flow, then advertising has played a significant role in establishing our frames of reference and perception.” This, in turn, shapes cultural ideas and values as these schemas influence the way people perceive and understand their world and communicate that understanding to others.

²¹ Judith Williamson, *Decoding Advertisements: Ideology and Meaning in Advertising* (New York: Marion Boyars Publishers, 1978), 13-19

²² At its most basic level, semiology is the study of signs. Anything that has meaning is a sign, whether it is an object, a word, or a picture. A sign is comprised of two parts: the signifier, the object being studied, and the signified, which is the meaning attached to that object. Williamson, *Decoding Advertisements*, 19.

intended to *naturalize* the secondary discourse, reinforcing rather than concealing the object's cultural significance. Thus, people generally believe that their understanding of an object is related solely to its functional purpose not because the representation of its connotation is obtuse, but because it has been familiarized to the point that the connotative aspects of the object are perceived to be an accepted part of its discourse. Barthes explains that "there is always a meaning which overflows the object's use,"²³ which is both a product of and contributes to, the formation of culture.²⁴ Thus, semiotics provides a method of analyzing the cultural significance of the goods being advertised, by examining the meanings associated with the object beyond its base functions through words, images, or sounds.

The diffusion of these meanings is the focus of James Carey's outline of the ritual model of communication, which understands communication to be more than the transmission and reception of factual information. Rather, it is "a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed."²⁵ For Carey communication is "the construction and maintenance of an ordered, meaningful cultural world."²⁶ Advertisements allow corporations to portray a particular version of people, places, objects, and actions, which their product is essential to achieving, and to associate their product with a set of values and ideals they feel will satisfy consumer desires. Carey argues that "we first produce the world by symbolic work and then take up residence in

²³ Roland Barthes, *The Semiotic Challenge*, tr. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1988), 182.

²⁴ Barthes, *The Semiotic Challenge*, 176-182, 190.

²⁵ James W. Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 18.

²⁶ Carey, *Communication as Culture*, 26.

the world that we have produced.”²⁷ Or at least, that is the goal. Advertisements present a possible version of the world, creating a cultural meaning for the object being sold that exceeds its function in hopes it will appeal to consumers. If the secondary discourse associated with the product is successfully assimilated into broader cultural narratives it will likely result in change in the real world that mimics the discourse presented in the advertisements.

An understanding of culture is imperative for the ritual model of communication theory because of its emphasis on communication as a means of understanding and constructing culture. Carey derives his definition of culture primarily from anthropologist Clifford Geertz’s *The Interpretation of Cultures*, which was one of the staple cultural theory texts of the 1970s and 1980s. Geertz characterized culture as a system of symbols and meanings, a concept which Carey reproduces in his argument that culture is

best understood not by tracing it to psychological or sociological conditions or, indeed, to exclusively political or economic conditions, but as a manifestation of a basic cultural disposition to case up experience in symbolic form ... a symbolic container that shapes and expresses whatever human nature needs, or disposition exists.²⁸

However, as theorists throughout the eighties and nineties suggested, this symbolic, systematic approach to culture tends to dismiss the role of practice as culture. Likewise, the interpretations of culture as practice which followed generally dismissed the importance of symbols. Both approaches tended to exclude the other. Yet, William Sewell maintains that the two approaches are not, in fact, incompatible:

²⁷ Carey, *Communication as Culture*, 23.

²⁸ Carey, *Culture as Communication*, 49-50.

to engage in cultural practice means to utilize existing cultural symbols to practice some end. The employment of a symbol can be expected to accomplish a particular goal only because the symbols have more or less determinate meanings – meanings specified by their systematically structured relations to other symbols. Hence practice implies system. But it is equally true that system has no existence apart from the succession of practices that instantiate, reproduce, or— most interestingly—transform it.²⁹

Sewell’s characterization of culture as practices that derive their significance and convey their meaning through systems of symbols fits with Carey’s contention that communication is a means of forming culture because it includes Geertz’s definition of culture as a system of symbols. However, Sewell’s integration of actions offers a more tangible explanation for the potential that these symbols have to influence society, which Geertz’s primarily systematic definition of culture does not. Carey argues that it is the communication of meanings through symbolic representation which facilitates change. Sewell specifies that these alterations take place when the symbolic meanings understood within society are put into practice; it is these practices which “instantiate, reproduce, or—most interestingly—transform”³⁰ the system of meanings and by extension, society. It is this understanding of the role of communication in the formation of culture, as well as the potential of communication in its various forms to affect society that informs my examination of film advertisements. Sewell’s explanation describes the way advertisements contribute to consumers’ cultural understanding of objects. If advertising is a factor in the formation of culture, the message advertisements present and who

²⁹ William H. Sewell Jr, *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 164.

³⁰ Sewell, *Logics of History*, 164.

controls that message can have widespread implications for the development of the cultural significance of consumer products.

1.3 Thesis Overview

The results of this examination are compiled thematically in the three chapters that follow. Chapter One discusses the representation of the automobile of 1930s film advertisements as a working class vehicle through the consistent valorization of the white working class male, the ideal driver. The characterizations of the model driver in the advertisements sponsored by GM and Ford associated the mass produced automobile with a set of values that corresponded to the idealizations of the working class male in broader American culture. Specifically, the act of driving became a means of expressing autonomy, masculinity, and control, and the vehicle driven embodied these attributes as well. Moreover, using this particular conception of working class masculinity allowed advertisers to associate the vehicle with ideals that were incompatible with unionization, which was a serious concern for auto manufacturers throughout the 1930s.

Chapter Two examines the advertisements' portrayal of the automobile as a bastion of safety in a period of insecurity and instability, ensuring the wellbeing of its driver and passengers at any speed. While assigning responsibility for safety to the driver divested automakers of accountability regarding any of the potential consequences of driving an automobile, framing this obligation as a demonstration of skill also granted a measure of independence and control to the driver. Moreover, this representation rendered the manufacturers as conscientious and responsible, having done all in their power to ensure that the automobile was safe. In the face of strikes and government legislation throughout a period of industrial volatility, the depiction of the vehicle as

incontestably safe, while appealing to the consumer, also suggested the automakers did not require regulating.

Lastly, Chapter Three considers the affirmation of the labour force involved in the production of the automobile. Emphasizing the skill and control of the workers, the benefits of industrial capitalism for the working class, as well as the appreciation of the automakers for their employees, the portrayal of industrial labour in these advertisements directly contradicts the pervasive unemployment, worker discontent, and strikes that characterized the auto industry in the second half of the decade. The depiction of the purported benefits of industrial capitalism and the automobile industry focus on the labourers, but the representation of the manufacturing process is as much about supporting the place of the industry as selling the automobile. Associating the vehicle with a prosperous economy tied both the company and its product to the financial success of the working class.

Film advertisements of the 1930s demonstrated a concerted effort on the part of the manufacturers to present a narrative of the automobile and the life it could provide that incorporated the working class and appealed directly to potential consumers. However, the distortion identified by Marchand is equally evident. Advertisements framed the traditional ideals and contemporary contexts in a way that underscored the need for the merchandise the company was selling. The textual narrative is directed at prospective consumers, but a closer examination of both the textual and visual elements of these films indicates the depiction of the working class, the automobile, its production, was shaped to present a particular version of these ideals that favored the manufacturers. This distinction gains increasing significance within the context of Carey and Sewell's

work. If the communication of ideas is as much about crafting culture as transmitting information, then the aspirations of the automakers in these advertisements contributed to peoples' understanding of the symbolism of the automobile when the actions depicted in these films were replicated in the real world.

1 Chapter: The American Driver: Gender, Class, and Race

Because the first hand-crafted models were temperamental playthings driven by the wealthy, automobiles quickly came to symbolize affluence, extravagance, and prestige. The advent of mass produced automobiles in the United States extended the availability of the vehicle beyond the leisure class. While America's population nearly doubled from 1900 to 1940, the number of cars throughout the same period increased exponentially. David Blanke characterizes this progression by suggesting that "most Americans first read about the car by 1900, first saw one in action by 1910, first rode in one by 1920, and first owned a car by 1930."¹

The rapid proliferation of automobiles is certainly one of the defining attributes of early American automobile culture. Yet, Blanke stresses that the reduction in prices still excluded a substantial portion of the American population. He cites a report compiled in 1921 that estimated a family needed an income of \$2,800 to purchase and maintain a vehicle, when the income for the same year averaged \$1,300. Even if the study's estimate of the required income is inflated, as Blanke contends, his assertion that the automobile was not realistically attainable for all Americans stands, despite increasingly common conceptions from the 1920s onward of the automobile as the vehicle of "egalitarian social values and democracy."² Still, regional differences in automobile use diminished and

¹ David Blanke, *Hell on Wheels: The Promise and Peril of America's Car Culture, 1900-1940* (Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 2007), 42.

² Blanke, *Hell on Wheels*, 42-45. As with many elements of automobile culture, the increasing acknowledgement of the automobile as a symbol of "egalitarian values and democracy" throughout the 1920s is contradictory to an extent, because it was in the 1920s that Ford's Model T came under fire for its egalitarian style, offering each person precisely the same vehicle. The 1920s is also when GM began

ownership began to reflect rural-urban population distribution. According to historian James Flink, it was “the inequitable distribution of Coolidge prosperity” that prevented the automobile from becoming a truly universal commodity.³ When manufacturers deemed the market for new automobile purchases saturated in 1927, half of American families did not own a car.⁴ The desire to own an automobile was more equally distributed than the financial resources to buy one.

I would argue that Flink’s analysis regarding the distribution of automobile consumption does not give enough weight to the limitations imposed by America’s road system even through the 1920s and 1930s when increased interest in driving made road development a priority. However, the system of automobility, which John Urry defines as the mass manufacturing, status embodiment, economic networks, instant mobility access, and shaping of the landscape that resulted from the automobile, was firmly entrenched in American culture going into the Depression.⁵ While the economic hardships of the Depression prompted doubts regarding the system of mass production that made the automobile more widely accessible, financial difficulties and cultural uncertainty did not stifle people’s enthusiasm for automobiles. The sales of new cars plummeted from nearly five and a half million in 1920 to a low of one and a half million in 1932, but automobile registrations only dropped five percent during the same period. The considerable

promoting its varied marks as providing a “car for every purse or purpose,” actively promoting a gradation of brands to particular social or financial brackets within American society. By 1932, GM had surpassed Ford and held nearly half the market for American vehicles. James M. Rubenstein, *Making and Selling Cars: Innovation and Change in the U.S. Automotive Industry* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 185-193

³ James L. Flink, *Car Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1975), 142.

⁴ Flink, *Car Culture*, 141-143.

⁵ John Urry, “The ‘System’ of Automobility,” *Theory, Culture, and Society* 21, (2004): 26-27

difference in the decline of automobile purchases and auto registrations throughout the Depression suggests that even when people could not afford to purchase new cars, they continued to use and maintain those they had. Automobile manufacturers certainly suffered. The drop in sales was especially devastating to smaller companies, many of which were forced to close permanently over the course of the Depression. Yet, the challenges created by the system of automobility such as road development and the rising death toll associated with the vehicle's increased speed and power did not dissuade Americans that the automobile had a place in American life.⁶ The automobile of the 1930s was not strictly a frivolous plaything, but a conventional mode of transportation.

As conceptions of the automobile changed so did representations of the person that would drive it. American film advertisements of the 1930s depicted the driver almost exclusively as a white, working-class male, what GM's *Triumph of America* (1933) characterizes as a "man of modest means."⁷ The portrayal of the driver was not an indication of the most common automobile consumer. The driver exemplified what advertisers perceived to be the most universally acceptable image of a prospective buyer given their target audience. The saturation of the automobile market at the end of the 1920s, the circumstances of the Depression, and the subsequent "labouring of American culture," to use Michael Denning's expression, fostered a secondary discourse that emphasized the working class.⁸ The portrayal of the driver embodied the idealized

⁶ John B. Rae, *The American Automobile Industry* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984), 69-74.

⁷ General Motors. *The Triumph of America*. Produced by Jam Handy Organization, 1933. *Prelinger Archives*, accessed July 18, 2013, <https://archive.org/details/Triumpho1933>

⁸ Michael Denning. *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1996), xvi. Denning refers to the "laboring of American culture" as the development of the

lifestyle that the manufacturer wanted prospective consumers to identify with their product. The working class driver was meant to inspire a desire for the automobile that was as much related to the qualities of the man that drove the vehicle as the capabilities of the automobile itself. In the case of 1930s automobile advertisement films, the values associated with the driver were analogous to those of an ideal member of the American working class. Thus, automobile ownership and the act of driving were presented as a means of expressing or attaining American citizenship.

With only a few exceptions, the driver depicted in the automobile film advertisements of the 1930s is male. One of the most common perspectives in these films is a view through the front window of the automobile from the back seat as the vehicle is in motion. The camera is typically focused on two things throughout these segments: the view through the windshield of the automobile and the vehicle's dashboard. This perspective is used in some of the shorter films, such as GM's *The Safest Place* (1935) and *Safe Roads* (1935), which emphasize the necessity of careful driving to ensure automobiles are as safe as the manufacturers intended them to be once they leave the factory.⁹ While the driver is central to the narration of these films because of the importance placed on motoring conduct and skill, the driver is rarely pictured directly.

narrative, which acknowledged the working class both as a distinct entity and the embodiment of American values throughout the 1930s.

⁹ General Motors. *The Safest Place*. Produced by the Jam Handy Organization, 1935. *Prelinger Archives*, accessed July 13, 2013, <https://archive.org/details/SafestPI1935>. General Motors. *Safe Roads*. Produced by the Jam Handy Organization, 1935. *Prelinger Archives*, accessed July 14, 2013, <https://archive.org/details/SafeRoad1935>.

However, in the segments filmed from the interior of the automobile the hands on the steering wheel form part of the view out of the windshield, and these are typically male.¹⁰

This element does not change in films that use an exterior view of the automobile in motion. GM's *Streamlines* (1936) focuses on the design of the automobile as a matter of both safety and style. Images of the automobile being driven occur only in the latter part of the film and these are framed from outside the vehicle looking in. GM's *To New Horizons* (1940) and Ford's *Harvest of the Years* (1938) use a similar perspective. In all three films the driver that is pictured is male.¹¹ Even if the camera is at an angle that does not allow for a clear view of the person driving the automobile, as is the case in *To New Horizons*, the driver's silhouette is definable as male because of the hat he is wearing.¹²

Other films use an interior or exterior perspective of the automobile and its driver, but frame the segments so that the driver is fully included in the camera's view, expanding on this visualization of the driver to describe precisely what kind of man the ideal motorist should be. The model driver was not just a specific gender, but also a particular class. These trends are evident in *We Drivers* (1935), which depicts Sensible Sam's triumph over Reckless Rudolph. Sam represents the ideal driver, the driver that "we drivers" should aspire to be, according to the narrator. Sam is a young man, with a sturdy, fit physique, in contrast to Rudolph's gangly limbs and paunch. He also wears a t-

¹⁰ See General Motors, *The Safest Place*, 4:54. General Motors, *Safe Roads*, 5:43.

¹¹ See Ford Motor Company, *Harvest of the Years*, produced by Audio Productions Inc. (1938), 8:53-10:35, 17:46-18:09. *Prelinger Archives*, accessed July 15, 2013, <https://archive.org/details/HarvestOfThe>; General Motors, *Streamlines*, produced by the Jam Handy Organization (1936), 5:28-6:36. *Prelinger Archives*, accessed July 19, 2013, <https://archive.org/details/Streamli1936>; General Motors, *To New Horizons*, produced by the Jam Handy Organization, (1940), 4:18-4:24. *Prelinger Archives*, accessed July 13, 2013, <https://archive.org/details/ToNewHor1940>.

¹² General Motors, *To New Horizons*, 4:18.

shirt and a pair of plain slacks, while Rudolph wears a suit with coat tails and a top hat in an echo of a 1920s robber baron. Although no mention of class is made, the obvious preference for Sensible Sam's behaviour and the fact that he beats Reckless Rudolph in the boxing match between the characters at the end of the film reinforces the image of Sam's working-class maleness.¹³

As the Depression threatened the traditional image of the American man as the breadwinner, American culture began to venerate the physically fit body generally associated with the working class male. Emphasizing the virility and strength identified with a well-developed male body provided a means of alleviating concern regarding men's financial success by offering an alternative to income as a representation of masculinity.¹⁴ In his article examining the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) as part of the New Deal, Neil Maher cites accounts of men who considered themselves weak, pale, and emasculated prior to joining the CCC. These physical deficiencies were attributed to unemployment and the detrimental settings associated with the urban environment where they lived. When they began working for the CCC their bodies changed. They became tan and physically fit, traits generally attributed to hard, physical labor in a more natural environment. The CCC encouraged this perspective. Moreover, the CCC promoted its

¹³ General Motors, *We Drivers*, produced by Jam Handy Organization (1935), 9:35-9:50. *Prelinger Archives*, accessed July 13, 2013, <https://archive.org/details/WeDriver1936>.

¹⁴ Josep M. Armengol, "Embodying the Depression: Male Bodies in 1930s American Culture and Literature," in *Embodying masculinities: towards a history of the male body in U.S. culture and literature*, ed. Josep M. Armengol (New York: Peter Lang, 2013), 33-36.

purpose as “creat[ing] not only better bodies but better Americans,” specifically delineating a man’s physical status as an indicator of his suitability for citizenship.¹⁵

According to Michael Kimmel, masculinity in the Depression was also attached to specific attitudes, behaviors and perspectives. By embodying these traits, men could be confident of their masculinity regardless of their employment status.¹⁶ Kimmel maintains that throughout the Depression:

Masculinity was now understood to be learned through the successful mastery of a variety of props. Freudian assumptions grounded the male sex role – a static ahistorical container of attitudes, behaviors, and values that are appropriate for men and define masculine behavior... As at the turn of the century, a masculine physique could signify success; physical strength could stand in for strength of character.¹⁷

The contrast between Sensible Sam and Reckless Rudolph fits this paradigm well; the physically fit, young, working class male overpowers the less virile, albeit wealthier, man. Sam’s rugged figure, compared to Rudolph’s gangly limbs and paunch, and his physical prowess in beating Rudolph at a boxing match, are evidence of his masculinity. Casting Sam as the ideal driver then extends this definition of working class, suggesting that one’s physique and character contribute to one’s suitability for driving. Being a good driver or being perceived as a good driver allowed men to demonstrate their control over the environment through their mastery of the automobile. Automobiles were an extension of an individual’s personal territory and “to dominate and defend one’s territory, one has

¹⁵ Neil M. Maher, “A New Deal Body Politic: Landscape, Labor, and the Civilian Conservation Corps,” *Environmental History* 7, (2002), 443-449.

¹⁶ Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 144-150.

¹⁷ Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 152

to be competent.”¹⁸ The driver also has to embody the traits associated with dominance and the defense of his territory, such as physical strength, self-control, and technological proficiency. Yet, the reverse is also possible, that driving, like the work for the CCC, could offer men the chance of reclaiming their masculinity.¹⁹

From Dawn to Sunset (1937) reinforces the image of the working-class driver.

The film was produced as an effort to enhance GM’s reputation for worker relations following the company’s recognition of the United Auto Workers (UAW) in 1936.²⁰ Essentially, the film is a public relations work, an effort to represent a favourable image of the company after the damaging publicity of extended strikes. The film concentrates on illustrating GM’s work force being paid and spending their earnings, but it starts with scenes of the autoworkers beginning their day, including their trek to the factory. Many of the men walk, but there are also images of men getting into a car, driving out of a garage or driveway, and joining the procession of cars driving in the same direction as the men that are walking.²¹ It does not appear that the men driving to work are only white collar executives or office workers. One of the drivers is wearing a pair of jean overalls.²² Instead, the film seems to emphasize the fact that these are working men, specifically

¹⁸ Peter E. Marsh, Peter Collett, *Driving Passion: The Psychology of the Car* (Cape: The University of Michigan, 1986), 160-165.

¹⁹ Maher, “A New Deal Body Politic,” 442.

²⁰ Rick Prelinger, *The Field Guide to Sponsored Film* (San Francisco: National Film Preservation Foundation, 2006), 36.

²¹ General Motors, *From Dawn to Sunset*, produced by the Jam Handy Organization (1937), 2:12-3:20. *Prelinger Archives*, accessed July 18, 2013,

https://archive.org/details/0560_From_Dawn_to_Sunset_14_01_40_00.

²² General Motors, *From Dawn to Sunset*, 2:31.

men who work for General Motors, which has provided its workers with “new prosperity in a land where prosperity brings a fuller life to every man who labors and who serves.”²³

As McGovern indicates in his book *Sold American*, it was vital for companies to convince Americans that spending and support of the established capitalist system was to their advantage or it would not survive. Many companies produced similar narratives to *From Dawn to Sunset*, re-visiting earlier portrayals of consumption and industry relating consumption to American identity, to attaining and preserving the American Way of Life, a depiction that would predispose consumers to think about consumption in a manner that was favorable to manufacturers rather than unions and the government. McGovern maintains that “these campaigns illuminated abstract political ideals by situating them in local, historical, and nationalist events, scenes, and characters [and] placed ‘progress’ at the center of American history.” However, the campaigns still granted the active choice and independence of consumption to the individual consumer.²⁴

Furthermore, the premium on safety from *We Drivers* and other films such as *Safe Roads* and *The Safest Place* correspondingly emphasizes the active role of the driver. The responsibility for road safety is placed squarely the individual, rather than the automobile

²³ General Motors, *From Dawn to Sunset*, 1:03-1:09.

²⁴ Charles F. McGovern, *Sold American: Consumption and Citizenship, 1890-1945* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 266, 262-266. McGovern also notes that while there is some disagreement between Roland Marchand, William Bird, and Inger Stole regarding the coordination and cohesiveness of these campaigns, the three agree advertisements like *From Dawn to Sunset* that were widely produced by various corporations in the latter part of the 1930s “decisively influenced the resurrection of corporate approval between the Depression and postwar years.” He also identifies the advertisements produced in this period as a turning point whereby “progress” was more than a substantial influence in American history, it directly related “American history and empires to symbols – the goods and services made possible through corporate capital.”

or its manufacturer.²⁵ Nonetheless, this duty is framed positively, emphasizing the admirable qualities the obligation requires of drivers such as self-control, to successfully ensure the safety of himself and others, because he knows “the biggest factor in safety is the driver, who uses his skill and intelligence in driving.”²⁶ These characteristics were generally understood to be masculine traits, and therefore driving itself was both an affirmation and expression of masculinity.²⁷ Assigning equivalent characteristics to the factory workers in the industrial-focused portions of these and other films solidifies the working class man’s position as the ideal driver in the narrative of these advertisements. Just as the safety films underscore the importance of the driver’s control over the power of the automobile, the more industrial-centric ads, such as GM’s *Triumph of America*, present the factory machines as “giant tools under the control of thousands of men”²⁸ and highlight the fact that a machine “cannot move until its master puts both hands on the safety bar.”²⁹ Their control over factory machines made working class men ideal candidates for handling an automobile. It also places the man in a position of exerting active power over the machines, rather than having his actions and pace dictated by the machines, which was one of the objections of workers throughout the Depression era.³⁰

²⁵ At the same time, referring to automobile deaths as accidents removes the majority of the blame from the car and the driver, “allowing the automobile to be used with relative impunity.” Moreover, Marsh and Collett contend that vehicular deaths had become normalized by the 1930s, which was also the year newspapers stopped publishing automobile related deaths specifically. Marsh and Collett, *Driving Passion*, 154-155.

²⁶ General Motors, *Safe Roads*, 4:08-4:14.

²⁷ Daryl Adair, “Spectacle of Speed and Endurance: The Formative Years of Motor Racing in Europe,” in *The Motor Car and Popular Culture in the 20th Century*, ed. David Thoms, Len Holden, Tim Claydon (Brookfield: Ashgate, 1998), 121-2.

²⁸ General Motors, *The Triumph of America*, 9:04-9:09.

²⁹ General Motors, *The Triumph of America*, 9:56-10:01.

³⁰ Flink, *Car Culture*, 185.

Simultaneously, stressing the importance of mechanical prowess and self-control obscured women's position as drivers. Mastering oneself was believed to be impossible where women and other feminized groups such as immigrants and African Americans were concerned, a problem which was exacerbated by the gendered nature of the vehicle itself. Physically, the automobile was typically equated with the female body. At the same time, the mechanical power of the automobile was understood to be masculine, making the automobile male as well. The dual gender attributed to the automobile complicated discussions regarding the driver and intensified concerns regarding the vehicle's ability to grant women the capacity to move independently outside their proscribed domestic sphere.³¹ The novelty of the automobile in its early years had shielded women to an extent, allowing people to categorize them with the automobile itself as an oddity, an aberration. As cars became a common sight, the idea of women as drivers became the anomaly, rather than the vehicle they were driving, as had been the case with early automobiles. Driving was no longer a privilege granted to a few wealthy women who were generally allowed more social latitude, but an accepted way to travel or spend one's leisure time.³² The controversy surrounding women drivers made them unsuitable representatives of the universal ideal driver in advertisements, which strove to attract the widest consumer base. Thus, even when women were occasionally depicted as the driver in a film advertisement, they were presented differently than their male counterparts.

³¹ Deborah Clarke, *Driving Women: Fiction and Automobile Culture in Twentieth-Century America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 11-23.

³² Georgine Clarson, *Eat My Dust: Early Women Motorists* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2008), 11-15.

One rare example of a woman driving in a 1930s film advertisements is Chevrolet's animated fairy tale re-telling, *A Ride for Cinderella* (1937), which follows the classic tale of Cinderella fleeing the ball to get home before her sisters. The exception in this case is that Cinderella's means of escape is a Chevrolet, rather than a magical coach. It is Cinderella's flight that is the focus of the film. The plethora of obstacles she faces in the form of rough roads, fallen trees, darkness, rain, cold winds, and muck are meant to illustrate the durability and smooth ride a Chevrolet car provides. While her sisters and their coach are hindered by the obstructions, with the coach ultimately battered to pieces, Cinderella's Chevrolet is unaffected. The car, not Cinderella, is the focus of the segments detailing her drive. The interior of the car is lighted, presumably so the viewer can see that while Cinderella's sisters are literally bouncing about the interior of their carriage, Cinderella's ride is smooth. Her image remains stationary while the wheels of the automobile are constantly in motion, giving the impression that Cinderella is a passive actor, in spite of the fact she is the driver.³³

Furthermore, Cinderella does not remain the driver of the automobile. When Cinderella accepts the prince's marriage proposal with the Chevrolet as her dowry, the prince automatically becomes both the driver and owner of the automobile. The prince's response to Cinderella's initial rejection because she has no dowry is that he needs nothing more than her, "And the coach!"³⁴ Again, the interior of the vehicle is lit as the pair drives off. The difference this time is that rather than representing the driver primarily as an indistinct silhouette, the Prince is clearly illustrated throughout the entire

³³ General Motors, *A Ride for Cinderella*, produced by the Jam Handy Organization (1937). *Prelinger Archives*, accessed July 13, 2013 <https://archive.org/details/RideforC1937>

³⁴ General Motors, *A Ride for Cinderella*, 10:02-10:09.

segment. He is driving with Cinderella beside him, her head resting on his shoulder. When the couple gets into the car, Cinderella does not question the prince taking her place as the driver. With a man present she automatically becomes the passenger.³⁵ The film does not articulate this preference for male drivers explicitly, but Cinderella's unquestioning acceptance implies the prince's right to drive the vehicle.

A later film produced by GM shows an actual woman driving an automobile, rather than an animated one. *Easy Does It* (1940) focuses entirely on women drivers as a means of promoting the changes manufacturers implemented to make shifting gears easier. In some respects, the depiction of women is comparable to that of men. Similar camera angles are used to visualize women driving, from both the interior and the exterior of the automobile.³⁶ As with representations of male drivers, these dual perspectives present an image of who the driver is. Moreover, the film characterizes women as capable of driving cars prior to the advances that have been made, emphasizing the difficulty of house work, the strength and stamina it required, as an indication of their competency. The changes in automobile technology were thus not made because women were incapable of driving, but to eliminate "the amount of unnecessary work" and to free more energy to be devoted to leisure.³⁷

However, the portrayal of female drivers is not equivalent to that of men. The film does accept the tasks women do in the household as work, acknowledging the strength women demonstrate in completing their daily tasks. Women's duties in the home are consistently compared to the paid labor of men. The narrator maintains that "since a flat

³⁵ General Motors, *A Ride for Cinderella*, 10:27-10:50.

³⁶ General Motors, *Easy Does It*, 5:46-6:00.

³⁷ General Motors, *Easy Does It*, 8:12-8:25.

iron weighs about as much as a brick, a day's ironing actually uses just about as much muscle as brick laying. Flattening a towel or wielding a trowel. Even Steven."³⁸

Characterizing women's endeavours as work justifies the efforts of men to constantly design machines to make "the little jobs easier." If there was no work involved, such machines would be unnecessary. The narration ostensibly challenges the idea that women are not as strong as men, but as soon as the fortitude of women is established, the advertisement promotes products such as sewing machines and washers that prevent women from actually demonstrating their strength. While the film recognizes the work of women and their place as drivers they are still consistently categorized as the fairer sex. What the advertisement is presenting is the masculine perception of women's work and desires.

Unlike other films focusing on driving, the inclusive pronoun does not apply to the women that are driving the vehicle. Instead, the narration refers to "our modern girls," "our American girls," and "they," unlike the ads focusing male drivers that tend to use "we" and "us." It is this distinction, between male and female drivers, that allows the film to depict easy-shifting gears as an appeasement for female drivers, just as household machines were designed to ease their workload. Driving was associated with masculinity because of the skill, control, and mastery of machinery that it required. By framing efforts to eliminate the difficulty of driving as a means of satisfying women drivers, men could enjoy the benefits without being perceived as lacking masculinity. Moreover, the narration maintains that the sensitivity of the device meant drivers could "still be the real

³⁸ General Motors, *Easy Does It*, 2:53-3:20.

gear-shifting boss,” implying there would still be avenues for men to demonstrate their skill and mastery of the machine.³⁹

These two films are exceptions. Typically, the women of film advertisements are relegated to the role of passengers. *The Triumph of America* contains the two longest segments with women as passengers, but like the female driver, the representation of the female passenger is a particular type of woman. In both sections, the woman is pictured exiting a house and getting into the automobile with one or more children. After the automobile drives out of the frame picturing the country farmhouse or the suburban home the woman is not seen again.⁴⁰ While the two segments in *The Triumph of America* show working class women, there is an image of a wealthy middle-aged woman being escorted to the passenger side of a vehicle by a middle-aged man, presumably her husband, in *The Safest Place*.⁴¹ In these depictions of female passengers, young women are never shown getting into an automobile with just a man. The inherent danger of women’s access to automobiles was not solely due to the gendered nature of the automobile, but also the sexuality that women themselves tended to represent in broader culture. A young woman with a man in a car represented peoples’ fear regarding the use of automobiles for copulation, of cars breaking down in isolated areas or young girls being seduced into cars.⁴² Women driving, taking on a more active role through their control over the body the automobile represented, only compounded these concerns.

³⁹ General Motors, *Easy Does It*, 7:11-7:30.

⁴⁰ General Motors, *The Triumph of America*, 3:16-3:27, 3:48-4:13.

⁴¹ General Motors, *The Safest Place*, 2:35-2:49.

⁴² Clarke, *Driving Women*, 26-28.

A secondary role for women within the system of automobility illustrated in these advertisement films was that of a consumer. Judy Vankin contends automobile print ads from the 1930s often targeted women because of their emphasis on style. The economic hardships of the Great Depression affected even the largest automobile companies like GM and Ford, forcing them to devote less money to technological research and innovation because of the expense. To compensate, some advertisements provided meticulous descriptions of existing technology, such as Ford's film detailing the components of its V8 engine.⁴³ Other ads focused on the superficial and subjective elements of the automobile's appearance, such as comfort and design, to foster the pretense of mechanical developments. Streamlining was especially popular in 1930s automobile advertisements and often drew parallels to aviation, as in Ford's film, *Streamlines Make Headlines* (1936). While driving was ideally part of the masculine domain, appearance and fashion fell under the purview of women. As such, ads that concentrated on the style and aesthetics of the automobile sometimes targeted women as well as men.

Ford's *Science Rules the Rouge* (1939) offers an example of how film advertisements appealed to women as consumers. Rigorous scientific testing for quality and design is emphasized when discussing the car being driven and a man is at the wheel. However, when the interior of the automobile is examined, specifically the look of the seat upholstery, a woman is sitting in the driver's seat. She is never shown driving the vehicle. Although she has one hand on the wheel, at times two, her right hand is running

⁴³ Ford Motor Company, *The New Ford V8*, produced by Ford Motion Picture Laboratories (1932). Accessed from youtube.com July 11, 2013, posted by Peterson Automotive Museum, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=md6V_7QiIVY

over the upholstery of the seat while the narrator assures the viewer that the upholstery will “continue to look good for years.”⁴⁴ The appearance of the car’s interior is the subject of discussion and the woman’s focus. Her eyes never look out of the automobile, the driver’s door is open behind her, and the vehicle is inside, possibly in a show room. There is no chance of her driving the automobile, thus even though she is sitting in the driver’s seat, her presence there is passive with regard to driving, even though she is actively observing the automobile as a consumer.

GM’s *From Dawn to Sunset* affirms the place of women as consumers in the system of automobility. For more than half its length, the film focuses on the reward of consumption for the work carried out by the labourers. Women wave their husbands off in the morning and do not appear again until their husbands’ wages are being spent. Women in these scenes are presented as consumers or employees of the department stores, but in both cases, they facilitate the consumption that stems from the wages of the auto industry. These segments are set to music without voice-over, but the constant alternation between the long lines of men receiving their pay and those of men or women shopping implies a direct link between the money paid out by the automakers to their workers and consumers’ ability to shop.⁴⁵

The presentation of women as consumers was not unique to these advertisements by GM and Ford. In fact, early advertisements in the early 1930s sometimes made women responsible for spending enough to reverse the financial hardships of the

⁴⁴ Ford Motor Company, *Science Rules the Rouge* produced by Wilding Picture Productions (1939), 2:46-2:58. Accessed from youtube.com, July 19, 2013, posted by A/V Geeks, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BBbUAtrpWFk>

⁴⁵ General Motors, *From Dawn to Sunset*, 11:20-23:19.

Depression as in the cover of the *Ladies Home Journal* from February 1932, which showed a woman cradling an armload of parcels leading Uncle Sam along by the arm.⁴⁶ Shopping was women's way of demonstrating good citizenship by providing what her family needed. However, as the Depression stretched on, the representation of female consumers shifted. They were still portrayed as active consumers, but irrational ones, easily swayed by appearance and illogical desires for items. Their purchases were instinctual, rather than based on any skill that made them good citizens. Even if their role as buyers continued to be important to the American economy, they were characterized in a different way.⁴⁷ Regardless of the change, while the factory floor and the driver's seat are predominantly reserved for men in these advertisements, consumption was an element of automobility where women were welcome, regardless of their perceived senselessness. Female consumers did not represent a threat to the traditional role of men as the breadwinner nor did they embody the sexual anxieties that surrounded the automobile.

However, most of the segments that focus on the driver show a man driving alone in the automobile. As James Flink maintains in his book *Car Culture*:

individualism – defined in terms of privatism, freedom of choice, and the opportunity to extend one's control over his physical and social environment – was one of the important American core values that automobility promised to preserve and enhance in a changing urban-industrial society.⁴⁸

A person's ability to move geographically was closely tied to their social mobility in America, thus the mobility offered by the automobile was the epitome of status and social standing. The automobile represented a solution to the perceived social ills of urban life

⁴⁶ McGovern, *Sold American*, 234.

⁴⁷ McGovern, *Sold American*, 230-238.

⁴⁸ Flink, *Car Culture*, 38.

in the 1920s and 1930s, offering the chance to escape the city, to reconnect with the country's agrarian roots, without sacrificing the advantages of city life.⁴⁹ Films, such as *The Safest Place* or *We Drivers*, which stress the importance of a driver's conduct in the observation of traffic signs, proper breaking, or the use of headlights, primarily position the motorist in towns or cities. However, others such as *The Triumph of America* and *Harvest of the Years* feature wide panoramas of the American landscape, long stretches of open highways, and winding paths through hills and mountains.

Furthermore, the introductory scenes of *To New Horizons* show a progression of transportation from covered wagons and carts to trains and automobiles, interspersed with scenes depicting established American icons such as log cabins and fresh bread out of the oven.⁵⁰ Together these images situated the automobile within the traditional frontier narrative of Americans shaping their culture and their nation in their westward journey across the country throughout the nineteenth century. In his "frontier thesis," presented at the 1893 Chicago World Fair, Frederick Jackson Turner argued the frontier was what made Americans. He claims that the ideals and challenges presented by the frontier shaped America's political system, its values, and its economy. The frontier "promoted the formation of a composite nationality for the American people."⁵¹ Turner goes on to describe the qualities embodied by the American people as a result of the frontier:

that coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant

⁴⁹ Flink, *Car Culture*, 38-39.

⁵⁰ General Motors, *To New Horizons*, 1940.

⁵¹ Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1922), 22.

individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom—these are traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier.⁵²

However, it was not Turner's contention that modern progress be dismissed or that Americans should return to the colonial era. Rather, that it was crucial for Americans to find a new way of shaping American character because "the American energy will continually demand a wider field for its exercise," for movement.⁵³

As Peter Ling notes, there is considerable overlap between the attributes Turner applies to the model American and those associated with the ideal driver. The idealized narrative of the automobile offered man the opportunity to continue the exploration of the frontier, which the US Census of 1890 had declared officially closed. Forging American character through the exploration of the landscape, freedom of movement, independence, autonomy, and most importantly individualism, were crucial elements of American culture in the 1930s as much as when Turner spoke at the turn of the century. Advertising films presented the automobile as the means of expressing the qualities associated with the frontier American, ascribing them to the model driver through his mobility, his self-control, mastery of the landscape, and independence. According to Ling, "the automobile industry depicted the motor car as a means of escape from the world of work and duty to a realm of free travellers where motorists became explorers, wandering knights, gypsies

⁵² Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier," 37. Turner does concede that the challenges presented by the frontier in the latter part of the 19th century are somewhat diminished compared to the country's initial settlers. The resulting traits are thus "softened down" to an extent. However, the spirit of the character that the frontier forged and the qualities it invoked in the American people, according to Turner, remain intact and they are vital to the continued exceptionalism of the American people. Of particular concern at the turn of the century when Turner first presented his "frontier thesis," was the potential "threat" of immigrants entering the country, if the traditional means of Americanizing them was gone. Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier," 22-23, 37-38.

⁵³ Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier," 37.

and vagabonds...a motorist could allegedly touch his primal roots and satisfy an inherent nomadic urge.”⁵⁴

Automobile advertisements of the 1930s characterized the model driver as a working class man in a period when the working class was being integrated into romanticized narratives of American popular culture and paired the portrayal of his driving experience with conventional American narratives of national identity. This revision of the representation of the automobile extended the ideal of the automobile to include the working class, but also contributed to a conception of the automobile as a symbol of American citizenship as much as class status. As Marsh and Collett contend “associated with any car there will inevitably be a picture of the typical driver and a range of all the emotional qualities – levels of aggression, sex, thrill, ambition, etc. By manipulating these associations it is possible to alter the entire image, and therefore potential sales, of the car.”⁵⁵ Thus, driving was more than an expression of masculinity, it was a medium for displaying or expressing American citizenship.

Cotten Seiler argues that while driving was a mark of republican citizenship nearly equal to consumption, it had, since the advent of the automobile, been associated with a specific patriarchal conception of citizenship that excluded women and marginalized groups within America such as immigrants and African Americans.⁵⁶ Concerns regarding urban life were not solely linked to man’s connection with nature, or lack thereof, but also the heterogeneity of cities due to a rise in the number of migrants

⁵⁴ Peter Ling, *America and the Automobile: Technology, Reform, and Social Change* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), 110-112, 121.

⁵⁵ Marsh, Collett, *Driving Passion*, 52.

⁵⁶ Cotten Seiler, *Republic of Drivers: A Cultural History of Automobility in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 13, 41-58.

from Eastern Europe and the American south throughout the first quarter of the twentieth century.⁵⁷ Seiler maintains that “assuming the role of the driver required resources of class, gender, and race, despite a dominant rhetoric of universal and uniform access.”⁵⁸ Not all working class men were suitable representatives of the ideal driver. Immigrants and African Americans were generally characterized in American culture as effeminate, and thus incompetent technological actors like women, or they were regarded as hyper-masculine animals that were too savage to control themselves to the extent modern technology required.⁵⁹ Only white, non-immigrant men are portrayed as drivers throughout the films.

GM’s *Triumph of America* is the sole film that uses images of African Americans and they are never shown driving an automobile. Indeed, African American men and women are pictured strictly in agricultural and rural settings, picking cotton or cutting trees. They are not even seen in the same frame as an automobile. Rather, their place in the system of automobility is depicted as contributing to the system of production through gathering the raw materials required to manufacture the automobile. They are visually relegated to American’s agrarian past, separated entirely from icons of modernity such as the automobile and industrialized factory settings. Images of them picking cotton or cutting trees are an affirmation of their primitiveness. Moreover, the only form of

⁵⁷ Clarson, *Eat My Dust*, 65, 165-166.

⁵⁸ Seiler, *Republic of Drivers*, 58.

⁵⁹ Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 141.

transportation utilized by an African American in the film is a cart pulled by a team of donkeys to draw lumber from the forests, an antiquated form of transportation.⁶⁰

In his book, *Culture and the Advertisement*, William O'Barr contends that African Americans were often portrayed as incapable of using modern technology, including the automobile. Most advertisers did not consider accuracy and inclusiveness important in the representation of African Americans because they were not the primary target audience.⁶¹ Even if manufacturers acknowledged African Americans as a potential market, they could not embody the universal models of driver or consumer. Still, the automobile's associations with modernity and citizenship meant these images were about more than who should or should not drive an automobile. Discounting African Americans as suitable technological actors implies their unsuitability for citizenship within a modern context, affirming racial biases that existed more broadly in American culture. Tensions surrounding the place of the working class, wages, and employment stemmed in part from racial concerns, from what Valocchi describes as "the continued right to practice racial discrimination."⁶²

African Americans were not protected by the laws enacted throughout the 1930s to support unionization and the protection of workers. In the north, urban African Americans held some power, but both capitalist and white working class interests resisted the racial integration of political, industrial, and economic systems. African Americans

⁶⁰ General Motors, *The Triumph of America* (Pt II), produced by Jam Handy Organization (1933), 3:18-3:33. *Prelinger Archives*, accessed July 14, 2013, https://archive.org/details/Triumpho1933_2

⁶¹ William O'Barr, *Culture and the Ad: Exploring Otherness in the World of Advertising*. Colorado: Westview Press, 1994 (Colorado: Westview Press, 1994), 107.

⁶² Steve Valocchi, "The Racial Basis of Capitalism and the State, and the Impact of the New Deal on African Americans," *Social Problems*, 41.3(1994), 353.

were thus consistently consigned to subservient positions within these contexts.⁶³ Their characterization in automobile advertisements was an effort to replicate existing racialized barriers, perhaps even reinforce them, by depicting African Americans in ways the white working class would be comfortable with and support. Thus, they are represented as rural laborers or “darkies” singing spirituals in a rough cabin or in front of a bale of cotton. Furthermore, there is little difference in the depiction of men and women. While women are shown only the scenes surrounding the cotton harvest, both African American men and women are similarly limited to rural and folk narratives.⁶⁴

The only identifiable immigrant in the film advertisements appears in GM’s, *Just a Spark* (1937). The film is a celebration of the automobile as a tool for forest rangers and follows a man named Pierre, who needs to get help for his sick wife. The automobile allows the doctor to get to Pierre’s wife, but it also allows the rangers to deal with the fire threatening their cabin in time to save her. The only indication that Pierre is an immigrant is his accent. Unlike the representations of African Americans in *The Triumph of America*, Pierre and his wife are not visually separated from the automobile. However, Pierre does not own an automobile himself and is forced to run through the woods into town to get the doctor for his wife. The doctor, along with the forest rangers, all have modern vehicles which enables them to save Pierre’s wife and to fight the fire before it

⁶³ Valocchi, “The Racial Basis of Capitalism,” 355-360. Valocchi also maintains in spite of the fact studies of the politics of the New Deal often suggest Congress and President Roosevelt would have been more proactive in the protection and integration of African Americans without the constraints placed on them by the southern wing of the party, there was little political motivation for them to do so. The racial biases built into political and industrial systems meant there was little benefit for Roosevelt to actively pursue further equalization for African Americans.

⁶⁴ General Motors, *The Triumph of America* (Pt II), 4:28, 8:50.

can spread too far.⁶⁵ Pierre and his wife are limited to the peripheral, passive role of passengers, rather than automobile owners or drivers. Moreover, like African Americans, their marginalization has wider implications regarding American society, highlighting the perceived dangers of rural life. As reflected in this film, the heroic automobile was viewed by many as the solution to the difficulties and dangers of rural isolation.⁶⁶

The absence of immigrants and African Americans in these advertisements does not mean they did not own or drive automobiles in the 1930s. Because driving was a means of demonstrating power and control, both socially and over the physical landscape, the act became dangerous when undertaken by people outside of the dominant white, masculine narrative typically associated with driving.⁶⁷ As the advertisements of the 1930s progressed from a focus strictly on the concerns of the manufacturers to a more psychological approach that attempted to create ads that spoke to the desires and interests of the consumer, avoiding controversy gained importance as the secondary discourse of advertisements attempted to sell not just the vehicle, but a person and lifestyle with specific qualities that would appeal to prospective buyers. While Ford was slower to make this shift than GM, by the beginning of the war in 1941, both companies were producing advertisements that promoted automobiles through romanticized depictions of the automobile and its driver.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ General Motors, *Just A Spark*, produced by the Jam Handy Organization (1937). Prelinger Archives, accessed July 21, 2013, https://archive.org/details/0762_Just_a_Spark_M00268_04_09_00_00

⁶⁶ Ling, *America and the Automobile*, 17-26.

⁶⁷ Seiler, *Republic of Drivers*, 43. Seiler characterizes driving an automobile as “a display of blithe, arrogant, potentially destructive power.”

⁶⁸ Pamela Walker Laird, “The Car without a Single Weakness,” *Technology and Culture* 37, (1996): 803-808.

By portraying the driver as male, advertisers could avoid the spectre of potentially controversial women drivers; by depicting the driver as white, they skirted tensions around immigration and race. By emphasizing the driver's control, skill, and independence, advertisers could also subvert efforts to unionize. By presenting the driver as an autonomous successor of American frontiersmen, advertisers could depict an image of independent masculinity that did not fit within the collectivizing narrative of unionization. Moreover, joining a union against the automakers would mean opposing the producers of the automobile, which according to these advertisements, is what granted men freedom and allowed them to communicate their masculinity, indicating precisely the type of man they were.

2 Chapter: Safe at Any Speed

From the inception of the motor car, speed was one of its primary attractions. However, like the discourse surrounding the representation of the automobile driver, the way speed was discussed and its ideal expression changed to suit the wider cultural context. The automobile of the 1920s was typically promoted as a thrill machine and the ability it granted its drivers and passengers to go fast was one of its most prized characteristics in advertisements. Toward the latter part of the decade this began to change as the automobile came under fire for the rising number of injuries and fatalities associated with the vehicle's increasing speeds.¹ This shift was cemented by the increasingly conservative automotive culture of the Depression. While speed was rarely characterized as a negative quality, film advertisements ceased their forthright advocacy of speed in the 1930s, cautioning against drivers abusing the automobile's capacity for velocity, even as the promotion of the automobile's streamlined design continued to subtly naturalize the vehicle's speed.

This small caveat to the automobile's promise of exciting swiftness expanded throughout the advertisements of the 1930s. Rather than completely retract their adulations of speed from the 1920s, the advertisements of the 1930s focused on the enjoyment of the vehicle's inviolability, regardless of momentum. Overall, the advertisements' chief argument was that while the manufacturers had—at the consumer's request—gone to great lengths to constantly increase the acceleration that the automobile

¹ James L. Flink, *Car Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1975), 165.

was capable of achieving, they had increased the safety of the automobile even more. The automobile was characterized as the epitome of security, comparable to a person's home. While the validity of such assertions is debatable, the advertisements' promotion of the automobile as a nonthreatening place is evident throughout these films. While the automobile's rapid pace was still part of its allure, it was praised less for thrill than for the driver's ability to master and control the power the automobile's potential velocity represented. In the period of acute economic, cultural, and psychological anxiety, both the attribution of control and the promise of incomparable protection likely appealed to consumers, whether or not they were particularly concerned with the specific mechanical or physical dangers associated with driving an automobile.

GM's *We Drivers* focused entirely on the safety of the automobile. Nor was this film an anomaly. A few films sponsored by GM stressed the invulnerability of the automobile and Ford's generalized advertisements underscore this trait as well. The physical wellbeing of the drivers and passengers was a legitimate concern in the 1930s. Increased emphasis on the importance of style on the part of the manufacturer and the consumer as well as the implementation of the annual year model resulted in automobiles that were often too low to the ground, unbalanced, and had brakes that were incapable of stopping the automobile at high velocities.² Yet, further attention given to the importance of caution in automobile advertisements did not translate to an escalation in mechanical safeguards to protect the automobiles' occupants. Nor would consumers likely have been willing to sacrifice speed or style to enhance the vehicle's security, particularly speed. As

² Joel W. Eastman, *Styling vs. Safety: The American Automobile Industry and the Development of Automobile Safety, 1900-1966* (New York: University Press of America, 1984), 58.

Enda Duffy contends in her book, *The Speed Handbook*, the “ability to move rapidly and at will with the new technology of the automobile was among the first of a series of new personal empowerments made possible by major new technologies.”³ It provided drivers with a sense of freedom, excitement, and power inaccessible to them in most aspects of their lives.

Ford’s film *Streamlines Make Headlines* (1936) focuses on a new Lincoln, the Zephyr. The film is a story-based advertisement that follows a reporter who, after seeing a Lincoln Zephyr rush past, insists the car is his next big story. He rents an airplane to catch the car and hail the driver, who then invites the reporter to take a ride with him. Using the airplane to catch up with the automobile draws visual parallels between the two vehicles without a word being spoken. Flying was typically understood to be the ultimate freedom, the archetype of speed and modernity.⁴ Streamlining, which was a widely popular selling point throughout the 1930s, was inspired by aviation technology, and to an extent, strived to apply airplane design to automobiles. Airplanes throughout the latter part of the 1920s and early 1930s had evolved from open-cockpit wood and fabric biplanes to metal monoplanes, such as the Douglas DC-3. Throughout the Depression streamlining was translated to all aspect of technology from automobiles to refrigerators.⁵ Streamlining represented modernity, speed, autonomy, and freedom. Few Americans

³ Enda Duffy, *The Speed Handbook: Velocity, Pleasure, Modernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 117.

⁴ Peter Roberts, *Any Color So Long as It’s Black: The First Fifty Years of Automobile Advertising* (London: David & Charles, 1976), 97-100.

⁵ Rudi Volti, *Cars & Culture: The Life Story of a Technology* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2004), 70-73.

would ever fly a plane, but replicating the streamlined design in everyday objects allowed consumers to obtain the promised qualities of flight for themselves.

By filming the Zephyr and the airplane side by side, as if racing, the advertisement suggests that the automobile is a match for the velocity and autonomy of the airplane, emphasizing the similarity in their design and by extension, the attributes that this design represented. Moreover, the conversation of the driver and the reporter centers on the Zephyr, specifically its power, acceleration, and style.⁶ However, the driver himself is adamant that the real story of the Zephyr is not its swiftness or its design, but “the way she performs all around.”⁷ The discussion that follows ties the car’s performance specifically to the safety of the automobile. The car’s weight distribution means that there is no “side-sway,” the visibility is increased by the streamlined design, and the fact that it is low to the ground means that even if curves are taken at speed, it will not tip. These are all dangers addressed in the safety films of the 1930s. Yet, this film frames the automobile as the *solution* to these dangers, rather than focusing on the dangers themselves. The reporter comments that the passenger and driver are secure in the inside of the car, that if the Zephyr were “an ordinary car, I’d be rolling all around.”⁸ The dual promotion of speed and safety does not appear contradictory in this film or any of the other “safety” films produced in the 1930s. In its visual action the film highlights the velocity of the automobile, while the narration emphasizes its inviolability.

Illustrating the narratives in this manner allows the film to effectively convey the security

⁶ Ford Motor Company, *Streamlines Make Headlines*, (Wilding Pictures Production Inc., 1936), retrieved from youtube.com July 19, 2013, posted by TheHenryFord, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AstFT2cOEmo>

⁷ Ford Motor Company, *Streamlines Make Headlines*, 7:00-7:06.

⁸ Ford Motor Company, *Streamlines Make Headlines*, 8:40-8:54.

and the enjoyment of momentum simultaneously. Thus, emphasizing the automobile's safety adds to the demonstration of velocity, rather than detracting from it, without underscoring the tension between the two concepts. In his discussion of the promotional photographs produced by General Electric, David Nye contends that the relationships between an image and the accompanying text often work this way. When a person accepts an image as reality, the image guides the viewer's interpretation of the media as a whole, including the written narrative. The purpose of the text may be to guide a person's understanding of the image it is paired with, but as a rule the reverse occurs, whereby "the image legitimizes the text's description."⁹ In the case of *Streamlines Make Headlines*, this suggests that the images of the car quickly taking rapid turns and rushing down the straightaways validates the narration of wellbeing, while still indirectly promoting the speed of the automobile. Thus, the image and the text seem to concur, rather than contradict each other.

Ford's promotional film for the company's V8 engine emphasizes the automobile's technological superiority. The dry, largely informational script goes through every aspect of Ford's V8 engine in tedious detail, accentuating mechanical precision, smoothness, and longevity. The automobile's overall style and comfort are also highlighted, but even in this film devoted to the engine of the car, safety is described as paramount, above even style and comfort. The latter part of the film shows several of the Ford models that have been given a V8 engine, underlining their streamlined appearance

⁹ David E. Nye, *Image Worlds: Corporate Identities at General Electric, 1880-1930* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), 146.

and graceful lines, but the narrator states that “beauty is not everything in a car.”¹⁰ The scene changes from a showroom to an automobile track where the various Ford vehicles are being tested, driving over rough terrain and taking turns at high speeds. The narrator concludes that more than elegance, a Ford automobile “must have stability, power, speed, and it must be safe.”¹¹ Repeatedly throughout the films, the importance of quality and precision in the operation of the automobile is highlighted through detailed explanations of the mechanics, emphasizing the quality of the materials used, the rigorous testing at every stage of the automobile’s production and the constant innovation. In the 1930s, this could easily be, and likely was in part, an assurance of the automobile’s economic value. However, as the segment showing the automobile on the testing grounds suggests, it can also be related to the material excellence of the automobile itself and its ability to stand up to anything that it encounters on the road.¹²

GM’s films that are not specifically focused on safety often displayed similar narratives. *A Ride for Cinderella* depicts the automobile, Cinderella’s coach, overcoming natural obstacles throughout her flight home ahead of her stepsisters. The little gnome that has been guiding Cinderella prays for her welfare as she begins her journey and her automobile overcomes the obstacles placed in her path without faltering. While the prince and her stepsisters are battered and worn upon their arrival, Cinderella is free from harm, not a hair out of place. The automobile has protected her during her hazardous journey.

¹⁰Ford Motor Company, *The New Ford V8*, produced by Ford Motion Picture Laboratories (1932), 26:49-26:53. Accessed from youtube.com July 11, 2013, posted by Peterson Automotive Museum, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=md6V_7QiIVY.

¹¹ Ford Motor Company, *The New Ford V8*, 26:53-26:59.

¹² Ford Motor Company, *The New Ford V8*, 1932.

Moreover, the automobile is still in pristine condition when she arrives.¹³ The overall message that every obstacle placed in a Chevrolet's can be overcome affirms the company's more blatant statements regarding the safety of the vehicle.

The theme of safety continues throughout the films of the 1930s. GM's *To New Horizons*, which projected the company's vision for the automobile into the 1960s, was acutely concerned with the drivers of the future being able to navigate at high velocities on highways without being at risk. As the camera pans across a stretch of the model future highway of 1960, the narrator states that "the keynote of this motorway [is] safety, safety with increased speed."¹⁴ Furthermore, the narrator contends progress in methods of transportation is an indicator of "future progress in every activity." Increased speed and safety are the manifestation of man's mastery of space, "space for living and for working," which promotes the benefits of the automobile in connecting the rural areas of America with the cities.¹⁵ The command of space as related to movement was one of the elements of driving advertisements associated with the driver's mastery of the automobile because it demonstrated his independence. Ling characterizes the automobile's capacity for movement as the "annihilation of the barrier of space that separated [the] faltering agrarian culture from the industrial marketplace."¹⁶ The ability to move quickly was presented as an inherent part of mobility and evidence of the manufacturers' innovations and safeguards, just as controlling the automobile confirmed mastery over the vehicle.

¹³ General Motors, *A Ride for Cinderella*, produced by the Jam Handy Organization (1937). *Prelinger Archives*, accessed July 13, 2013 <https://archive.org/details/RideforC1937>

¹⁴ General Motors, *To New Horizons*, produced by the Jam Handy Organization, (1940), 14:55-15:06. *Prelinger Archives*, accessed July 13, 2013, <https://archive.org/details/ToNewHor1940>.

¹⁵ General Motors, *To New Horizons*, 16:37-17:09.

¹⁶ Peter Ling, *American and the Automobile: Technology, Reform, and Social Change* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), 26.

Ford's *Man, Methods, and Motor Cars*, which follows the production of a motor car, focuses primarily on the mechanical safeguards put in place, rather than the resulting acceleration.¹⁷ In reality, few advances in automobile technology were made throughout the 1930s. The developments highlighted in the film ads from this period were typically innovations from the 1920s. Other changes such as the lowered body did not make the automobile any safer. Technological innovation required a great deal of money for research and prototypes. Even among the biggest American automobile companies like Ford, General Motors, and Chrysler, funding for mechanical experimentation and improvement was scarce. Additionally, the planned obsolescence popularized by GM's Alfred Sloan in the latter part of the 1920s meant that consumers expected visible differences in automobiles from one year to the next. Manufacturers began to prioritize cosmetic alterations over technological improvements and often ignored design elements that they felt would not appeal to consumers' ever-changing sense of style.¹⁸

As a result, the automobiles of the 1930s were longer, lower, and wider to conform to popular ideals of streamlined elegance. They were also heavier and more powerful, without corresponding increases in the responsiveness of the brakes. Stylists were given priority over technical experts. While the fiscal limitations imposed by decreasing sales throughout the Depression prevented technological innovations, stylistic

¹⁷ Ford Motor Company, *The Ford Rouge Plant: A Story of Man, Methods, and Motor Cars*, produced by the Ford Motor Company (1937, 1941). *Prelinger Archives*, accessed July 18, 2013, <https://archive.org/details/FordRougePlant>. *The film *Man, Methods, and Motor Cars* was originally produced in 1937, but the version held by the archives does not have sound. Thus, my work is based on the version of the film that was released in 1941, which does have sound. I have not been able to find any record of whether the narration was altered from one version to the next.

¹⁸ Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920 – 1940* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), 156-160.

alterations gave the illusion of mechanical progress and change. The illusion of development suggested that the product being promoted was fundamentally different and better than previous models.¹⁹ This distinction was crucial because the saturation of the automobile market at the latter part of the 1920s meant that most of those that could feasibly obtain an automobile already had one. Most new car purchases would be made by people who already owned an automobile to replace older models, rather than first time buyers, while the influx of automobile returns would expand the market for second-hand cars substantially. To appeal to consumers on a basis of difference or improvement, distinguishing new models from their predecessors became vital. However, perpetually altering the automobile's appearance to produce a different car every year also reduced the time available for testing the automobile's technical viability. Giving preference to style meant that the mechanics of the automobile were arranged to suit whatever aesthetic changes were felt necessary. The technology vital to the automobile's operation came second.²⁰

Assurances of increased safety made newer models seem better than previous versions, whether there were actually any mechanical advances or not. This is not to say that manufacturers were actively working to build a dangerous car. Rather, the manufacturers' priority in the 1930s was assuring consumers the automobile was safe and the changes made contributed to their continued welfare. At this time there were no standardized safety regulations in the US. No governing entity, political or otherwise, held the power to ensure that automobiles were as safe as the manufacturers maintained

¹⁹ Eastman, *Styling vs. Safety*, 27-37.

²⁰ David Gartman, *Auto Opium: A Social History of American Automobile Design* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 105-107.

they were. Studies conducted on the subject of safety were inconsistent and the results were often inconclusive. There was also no reliable means of tracking auto accidents, the resulting injuries, or probable causes. State, federal, and local authorities all kept records, but not in any uniform way. Nor was collected information examined in a critical manner to determine what had caused the accidents and whether the number of accidents had increased proportionally to the number of registered cars or in total. The only definite statistic was the number of fatalities based on coroners' records, which indicated that the death toll had risen from 1,758 deaths in 1912 to 40,000 in 1937.²¹

By the middle of the 1920s, the reported upswing in deaths, injuries and property damage was a source of public concern.²² Newspapers tended to credit the cause of accidents to faulty steering or brakes, but Flink states that a 1924 study by the National Automobile Chamber of Commerce (NACC) Traffic and Safety Committee suggested that only seven percent of accidents were due to automobile malfunctions. The principal problem cited was careless driving. This assessment was easily accepted by the National Safety Council (NSC), which was dominated by the big automakers. However, due to the continued distress in newspapers and motoring magazines that had definitively retracted their characterizations of the automobile a "progressive force for change," the NSC decreed that ensuring the public understood the importance of careful driving was paramount. The data and the NSC's response to it suggests the emphasis on safety in the film advertisements throughout the 1930s was an effort to reassure the consumer, to create a discourse of the automobile as safe. It was not an effort on the part of

²¹ Eastman, *Style vs Safety*, 156-161.

²² Flink quotes *Motor Age* as characterizing property damage via automobiles "as one of the big economic problems of the day," although he doesn't cite which edition of *Motor Age* provides the quote.

manufacturers to provide a safer vehicle, but to shape consumers' perception of the automobile as a symbol of refuge.²³

Therefore, it was important to counter the perception of the velocity of automobile as dangerous if speed was to continue to be a selling point. The advertisements' dry explanations of the technological and mechanical elements of automobiles were offered as proof of the manufacturers' assertions that they had done their part to ensure the welfare of drivers and their passengers. Assurances regarding the care taken in the production of the automobile and the quality of the materials used solidified the representation of the automakers as responsible producers of a valuable product. For the film ads, as discussed previously, the source of the problem according to the advertisements was the driver misusing the power he had asked the automakers to provide. This position is confirmed throughout several of the safety advertisements, such as *The Safest Place* (1935), which contends that "when the car leaves the factory the only one thing is needed for safety and that's a careful driver."²⁴

The first scenes of GM's *The Safest Place* (1935) follow a man through his morning routine: getting a bath, going down the stairs for breakfast, fixing a picture on the wall, and taking a ladder outside to his garage. At each point he narrowly avoids a mishap, such as slipping on a bar of soap, missing a rung on the ladder, or stepping on a child's roller skate. The camera focuses not on the man, but on the dangers surrounding him that are barely avoided, framing his foot over the bar of soap or as it hesitates over the broken run of the ladder. By the second or third barely-avoided accident, a viewer

²³ Flink, *Car Culture*, 165-166.

²⁴ General Motors. *The Safest Place*. Produced by the Jam Handy Organization, 1935, 3:37-3:41. *Prelinger Archives*, accessed July 13, 2013, <https://archive.org/details/SafestP11935>.

might logically conclude from the images alone that the advertisement is illustrating the daily dangers a person's home presents. For this sequence, there is no narrator explicitly outlining this train of thought to the viewer; instead, the implication of danger is underscored by the song the man sings throughout this segment. The music is a continuation of the song that is played over images of a sailboat on rough seas with the opening credits which warns, "Sailor beware; sailor take care. Danger is near, sailor beware, beware."²⁵ The man sings or hums the tune throughout the segment. The repetition of "sailor beware" reinforces the suggestion of risk presented by the images. As the man leaves his house and slips down his front stairs, the narration begins, confirming the inferences of the images and songs by stating that there were nearly 4 million household accidents in 1934, "and how many narrow escapes, we'll never know. Let's get out of here before someone gets hurt!"²⁶

The initial approach of this advertisement, highlighting the dangers of the American home and making a traditionally safe place seem hazardous, echoes the scare-tactic ads that lost popularity throughout the early 1930s.²⁷ However, while the images coupled with the man's song and the narration that ends the segment allude to the perils of the home, neither the visual nor textual elements explicitly characterizes the home as dangerous. The majority of the film focuses on the solution to the constant risks

²⁵ General Motors, *The Safest Place*, 0:49-1:56.

²⁶ General Motors, *The Safest Place*, 2:01-2:11.

²⁷ Marchand refers to scare-tactic ads as those published primarily throughout the first months of the Depression that resorted to frightening consumers into purchasing their product by presenting an exaggerated account of the dangers of not buying the item being promoted. Marchand suggests advertisements in this vein were a somewhat desperate attempt to gain consumers' attention in the competitive market that struggled to sustain buyers' interest in the wake of the 1929 Crash. While *The Safest Place* does not explicitly direct prospective consumers to buy the automobile to prevent coming to harm, it does promote the safety of the automobile by emphasizing the potential dangers of the home, which was largely considered a safe space. Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, 100-103.

presented by daily life, the automobile, which the narrator concludes, “is the safest place to be.”²⁸ Or at least, the automobile is as safe as the driver’s home. It is unlikely that this comparison was made accidentally. By stating that the car is as safe as a person’s home the security associated with the American home is transferred to the automobile. Marchand contends this empathetic approach is more typical of print advertisements of the 1930s.²⁹ *The Safest Place* is technically selling an automobile, but rather than doing so strictly through an affirmation of its capabilities, the film associates it with a particular sentiment, safety. The contrast drawn so distinctly between the dangers of the home and the security of the automobile is not designed to evoke a logical response in the prospective consumer, but an emotional one. The sensation of safety is what the advertisement is selling as much as the vehicle it is identified with.³⁰

The Safest Place progresses to images of a factory with men working on an automobile assembly line, while the narrator insists every automobile has been carefully manufactured and rigorously tested so there is no possibility of danger from the automobile itself. In fact, the narrator goes so far as to assert that “if the car had an automatic driving system there wouldn’t be accidents.”³¹ The clear inference is that the driver determines the safety of the automobile. GM’s film *Safe Roads* (1935) illustrates the same point by comparing a motorist to a train engineer, arguing that the safety records of the railways have not wavered throughout the years, in spite of the constantly increasing speed of the trains. The engineers have continued to maintain the standards set

²⁸ General Motors, *The Safest Place*, 2:34.

²⁹ Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, 288.

³⁰ Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, 23-4.

³¹ General Motors, *The Safest Place*, 3:34-3:52.

for them and according to *Safe Roads*, drivers ought to strive to attain the same standards. Through the character of a retired engineer and his two grandsons, the film maintains that drivers are the engineers of the roads. Like engineers, drivers are responsible for ensuring the safety of their passengers, as well as the other drivers on the road.³²

Numerous parallels are drawn by the grandfather between the actions of a person behind the wheel of an automobile and those undertaken by a train engineer. As each comparison is articulated by the grandfather, who serves as the film's narrator, the scenes of the film alternate between automobile travel and train travel. When the importance of providing safe travel for automobile passengers is referenced, the image of an automobile's interior is followed by the interior of a train's passenger car. The grandfather maintains that the manufacturers have done their part to ensure that automobiles are safe, that they have "increased their safety even more than their speed,"³³ and he lists the measures that GM has taken to ensure that their automobiles are safe, citing turret tops, knee action, springs, and wider brakes. According to the grandfather, these innovations guarantee that "when sane, sensible driving rules are followed, these modern cars are a lot safer than the slower cars of yesterday."³⁴

Safety is paramount, according to the films produced by GM and Ford in the 1930s, but the ads also maintain that speed is the natural result of driving an automobile; in fact, greater safety is precisely what enables speed. Even as the grandfather is stressing the safeguards of the newer automobiles, he characterizes the improvements as additional

³² General Motors, *Safe Roads*, produced by The Jam Handy Organization (1935). *Prelinger Archives* accessed, July 12, 2013, https://archive.org/details/0142_Safe_Roads_M00364_09_00_48_10

³³ General Motors, *Safe Roads*, 1935.

³⁴ General Motors, *Safe Roads*, 3:50-3:59.

protection without sacrificing momentum. Speed is not a dangerous thrill, but the natural result of the technological development of the automobile: new automobiles are faster than older models, but they are also more secure.³⁵ Drivers are cautioned about their conduct, advised to brake on a downgrade or slow down when visibility is poor. However, the films also emphasize the novelty and pleasure of being able to travel from one point to another quickly, the thrill of acceleration with a V8 engine, or the way new automobile models hug the curves of the road, allowing cars to take turns without slowing. Speed in these advertisements is presented as both a physical sensation and an exertion of power over the physical landscape, allowing people to move rapidly from one point to another or reach previously inaccessible spaces. As Enda Duffy suggests, drivers' concerns over space and the mastery of the landscape stemmed from an interest in speed, "the velocities of movement – of goods, people, money, and power."³⁶

The narrator of *We Drivers* argues that "we drivers insist on having enough power to climb steep hills. We also demand quick starting and fast pick up. When engineers give us this power, speed naturally results."³⁷ If drivers desire increased speed, then they become accountable for the hazards associated with it, rather than the manufacturers. The manufacturers are just supplying what the consumer asked for. However, the narrator's consistent use of the pronoun "we" suggests that the responsibility is a shared one, implying a cooperative effort on the part of the community of drivers as a whole. The inclusiveness of the pronoun fosters a sense of belonging as much as responsibility and

³⁵ General Motors, *Safe Roads*, 1935.

³⁶ Duffy, *The Speed Handbook*, 8-11, 23.

³⁷ General Motors, *We Drivers*, produced by Jam Handy Organization (1935), 1:40-1:52. *Prelinger Archives*, accessed July 13, 2013, <https://archive.org/details/WeDriver1936>.

the film presents the onus as a choice on the part of a driver, represented by two animated characters, Sensible Sam and Reckless Rudolph. The two are drawn over the driver's shoulders, a standard angel and devil trope, while the narrator states that "Reckless Rudolph and Sensible Sam represent the dual personality in all of us."³⁸

While the ad initially presents the two characters as equal options, the film favors Sam's cautious, responsible approach to driving, which consistently echoes the statements that the narrator is offering regarding the conduct of "we drivers." When the narrator insists that "we drivers should always keep our cars under control,"³⁹ Sam urges the driver not to rush ahead as Reckless Rudolph is urging him to do. At other times, it is the interactions between Rudolph and Sam that emphasizes the preferred behaviour of the driver. Rudolph urges the driver to pass another car at night, gleefully muttering, "Here's where I get him."⁴⁰ Meanwhile, Sam advises the driver not to overdrive his headlights, narrowly avoiding Rudolph's apparent plot to cause the driver injury.⁴¹ The film illustrates that the irresponsible behavior encouraged by Rudolph is dangerous without stating it explicitly. Following his counsel repeatedly results in the driver barely evading harm. The film offers the viewer a choice, but as the film ends with Sam knocking out Rudolph in the boxing ring, it is evident that the approach that "we drivers" should adopt is Sam's. The phrases are consistently active, emphasizing the action that the driver ought

³⁸ General Motors, *We Drivers*, 0:40-0:44.

³⁹ General Motors, *We Drivers*, 2:42-2:46.

⁴⁰ General Motors, *We Drivers*, 3:44.

⁴¹ While the film never explicitly explains what "overdriving the headlights" means, the context of driving on a back road at night combined with a barely missed collision with an object that couldn't be seen until it was nearly too late to stop suggests that the phrase refers to driving at a rate of speed that gives the driver time to stop if something appears at the end of the range of what is visible from the light of the vehicle's headlights. General Motors, *We Drivers*, 1935.

to do. Moreover, construction of the sentences, as well as Rudolph and Sam's consistent advice to the driver, keep the focus of the advertisement on the driver more than the automobile.

GM's other "safety" films utilize a similar approach. They consistently employ personalized pronouns when referring to the driver of the automobile, even going so far as to use the pronoun "you," which singles out the viewers and personalizes driver responsibility. Both GM's *The Safest Place* and *The Other Fellow* speak directly to viewers in this way, emphasizing their obligations as drivers. The narrator states that "whether or not your car is the safest place depends entirely on you, the driver of the car."⁴² *The Other Fellow* is similar in its focus on the driver's conduct, however, it differs in that the primary character is a comedian, Edgar Kennedy. The film follows Kennedy through several incidents on the road where he plays the role of the ideal driver and those he encounters whose conduct is substandard. The point of the film is that often the "other fellow" is not the only problem when it comes to poor driving. Kennedy's character, for all he complains throughout the film about the driving of others, is brought before a judge for a traffic violation. The judge states that "you know we all can improve our driving conditions only when we see in ourselves a reflection of the other fellow."⁴³

The inclusive language of the advertisements is reinforced by the camera angles used throughout the films. Most of the scenes of the driver, the driver's conduct, or the mechanics of the automobile in use, are filmed from inside the vehicle. Primarily two angles are used. The most common angle looks over the driver's shoulder. This view

⁴² General Motors, *The Safest Place*, 4:44-4:51.

⁴³ General Motors, *The Other Fellow*, produced by The Jam Handy Organization (1937). *Prelinger Archives* accessed, July 28, 2013, <https://archive.org/details/OtherFel1937>.

allows the audience to see the driver as well as his viewpoint. Both *We Drivers* and *The Other Fellow* use this first perspective extensively. In *We Drivers* it allows the producers to impose Rudolph and Sam over the driver's shoulders so that both the characters and the barely-avoided hazards visible through the windshield can be seen.⁴⁴ For the second angle the image is framed as if the viewer is sitting in the driver's seat and focuses on his view or the vehicle's dashboard. This perspective is used a few times throughout *We Drivers*, but it appears more often in Ford's *Streamlines Make Headlines*. As with *We Drivers* and *The Other Fellow*, Ford's film has a few segments framed as if the audience was looking over the driver's shoulder. However, it also frequently narrows the view to the windshield or the instrument panel. These scenes reinforce the inclusive sense fostered by the language used throughout the narration, framing the driving sequences so that the viewer's perspective is inside the automobile, at times in the driver's seat, bringing the audience into the vehicle and implying their inclusion in the community of drivers the films are speaking to.

At the most basic level, assigning responsibility to the driver was likely an effort on the part of automakers to pre-emptively deflect criticism of their product. Potential risks were a legitimate concern as the press tended to blame defective automobile technology for accidents, injuries, and property damage related to the vehicle.⁴⁵ For driving to maintain its appeal, the possible dangers had to be presented as manageable. Depicting a favorable representation of the driver's obligation rendered inclusion in the category of "we drivers" as a positive attribute, rather than negative, in spite of the

⁴⁴ General Motors, *We Drivers*, 1935.

⁴⁵ Flink, *Car Culture*, 165.

implied burden of liability.⁴⁶ The assumption that the person watching the film was a driver bestows a measure of status to prospective consumers. The car was presented as a symbol of American citizenship as much as a particular class because of the films' characterization of the working class male as the archetype of an American citizen. The automobile provided a means of experiencing and expressing autonomy and control in a working class culture where these sensations were typically unattainable through other venues, such as industrial labor, or in the uncertain economic climate of the 1930s, work and life in general.⁴⁷ Thus, placing the audience in the driver's seat of the films, even if they were being used to promote the driver's responsibility, was still flattering, and an integral part of the potential appeal of an automobile to the working class. Being a driver, in spite of the emphasized obligations of the advertisements of the 1930s still evoked a degree of status. The automobile was still a symbol of arrival, but rather than arrival in the American upper class, it was the symbol of having become a true American, with all the mobility – literal and figurative – that this entailed.

⁴⁶ Flink, *Car Culture*, 142-143.

⁴⁷ Cotten Seiler, *Republic of Drivers: A Cultural History of Automobility in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 21-26.

3 Chapter: Man, Methods, and Machines: Affirming the Place of Laborers and the Industrial System

Automobile production had, since Ford's first implementation of the assembly line for flywheels in 1913, been associated with modernity, an ever evolving-marvel of technological progress and innovation. The more rapid the pace of assembly set by the perpetual operation of the machines the better: better quality, better price, and better automobiles. Consistently, the equipment of the factories was the focus of advertisements' depictions of automobile manufacture, rather than the men that operated the machines. It was the collaborative mechanics of the machinery that warranted praise and admiration, epitomizing the potential of technology. Especially throughout the first decade of mass production, the machines that manufactured the automobile were a point of interest nearly equal to the automobile itself. People came from all over the world to tour Ford's factory, potential consumers and industrialists alike. However, in the latter part of the 1930s there was a change in the way production was presented and characterized in the film advertisements produced by General Motors and Ford. While the machines and winding conveyers still tended to dominate visually, the narrative paired with the images concentrated on the labourers that had traditionally been relegated to the periphery of the story of auto assembly.¹

Whereas advertisements from the first half of the 1930s acknowledged working class men as automobile drivers, it was not until the latter part of the decade, 1937 or later, that the role of the working class in the manufacture of automobiles was highlighted

¹ Greg Grandin, *Fordlandia: The Rise and Fall of Henry Ford's Forgotten Jungle City* (New York: Picador, 2009), 35-40.

regularly. The reasons for this are not hard to fathom. In 1937 America experienced another drastic recession, comparable to that of 1929, which provoked doubts regarding industry and the Roosevelt administration's effectiveness in handling the Depression.² Roosevelt's initial response to the Depression was the National Recovery Agency (NRA), which was established by the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) in 1933. Its principal purpose was to establish restrictions and operational codes for industrial corporations, including instituting regulations for the hours and wages of workers. The NRA inspired a spate of strikes briefly in 1933 and 1934, but it was struck down by the Supreme Court in 1935. The workers and unions had no protection and ceased their strikes. However, only two months later the NRA's successor, the National Labor Relations Act (commonly referred to as the Wagner Act), was passed. The Wagner Act, along with others such as the Walsh-Healy Act and the Fair Labor Standards Act, reversed the balance of power between industry and the laborers, requiring employers to pay better wages, allow unionization, and give labourers the support to bargain effectively. These acts effectually relieved President Roosevelt of industrial support going into the 1936 election and thus, his policies continued to staunchly back labor, as he would need their benefaction to win.³ Steve Fraser describes the situation as the culmination of "the industrial insurgency from below...mov[ing] in synchrony with the reform impulse from above."⁴ Government policy combined with working class resentment resulted in a hostile atmosphere toward industrial corporations, especially

² Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 23-30.

³ Steve Fraser, "The 'Labor Question'" in *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order 1930-1980*, ed. Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 67-71.

⁴ Fraser, "The 'Labor Question,'" 71.

from 1935 to 1937 as the unions set about gaining better situations for their workers through a series of strikes.⁵

The result of this shift was that American automakers, along with other corporations throughout the country, were forced to recognize the working class as more than mere human machinery.⁶ The majority of the film advertisements celebrating the working class and the industrial system that employed them were produced during or after 1937, the year with the largest number of strikes in the country, which suggests that labor unrest and the threat of unionization of the working class were factors in the shift in the representation. The film advertisements had already begun “labouring” the narrative associated with the automobile in the first half of the decade, characterizing the working class male as the ideal driver. This model drew on broader American narratives of citizenship associated with the frontier, autonomous movement, and physical fitness to construct an appealing image of the automobile consumer in the wake of the market saturation at the end of the 1920s. However, the Wagner Act extended the power of

⁵ Ronald Edsforth, *The New Deal: America's Response to the Great Depression* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 243-252. The Walsh-Healy Act required federal contractors to pay union rates and was passed in 1936, while the Fair Labor Standards Act set a national minimum wage, maximum hours, and child labor laws, was passed in 1938. The Wagner Act established federal protections for workers and encouraged unions to use collective bargaining to set wages, hours, and working conditions. It gave strikers the leverage they needed to pressure corporations into negotiations. All three bills faced substantial opposition and of the three Edsforth contends that the Wagner Act was most effectively implemented, in spite of vociferous resistance from the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) and blatant disregard on the part of some companies. Notable among the companies that ignored the Wagner Act is Ford, who refused to allow unionization until 1941.

⁶ Forced is definitely the appropriate adjective with regard to the action of the automakers. Their capitulation to the combined influence of the working class unions and government legislation was not a willing one. Nor did they concede completely. General Motors, for example, employed the Pinkerton Detective Agency to spy on its employees and root out union members and sympathizers. Rhonda F. Levine, *Class Struggle and the New Deal: Industrial Labor, Industrial Capital, and the State* (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1988), 145-148. Ford's Service Department, directed by Harry Bennett, a boxer with ties to organized crime, was even more ruthless. James M. Rubenstein, *Making and Selling Cars: Innovation and Change in the U.S. Automotive Industry* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 28-29.

labourers beyond that of consumers and legitimized them as influential political actors and industrial producers. In the wake of these changes, the narrative of automobile advertising needed to acknowledge the contributions and value of the workers as well as reassure them that the industrial system, mass production, and capitalism were advantageous to them. The advertisements confer the advantages of the automobile to the system that produces it, while simultaneously creating an image of the automobile industry that values and benefits the workers.

The first film to pay homage to the labourers of the auto-industry was GM's, *The Triumph of America*. Historian William Bird contends it was likely produced specifically in response to a 1933 strike at GM's factory in Flint, Michigan, a dispute that was part of the labor strife associated with the implementation of the NRA.⁷ But the film's themes foreshadowed the labour-centric advertisements produced in the second half of the decade. The positive effects of the automobile industry and the value of the labourers are central elements of the film, rather than peripheral components. The labourers are described as integral parts of the industrial system and are even greater in value than the machines that they operate, which "are only giant tools under the control of many thousands of men."⁸

In one scene of *The Triumph of America*, a steel press shapes the bodies of the automobiles, while the narration states that "this mighty monster cannot move until its

⁷ William L. Bird, *Better Living: Advertising, Media, and the New Vocabulary of Business Leadership, 1935-1955* (Illinois: Northeastern University Press, 1999), 131.

⁸ General Motors. *The Triumph of America*. Produced by Jam Handy Organization, 1933. *Prelinger Archives*, accessed July 18, 2013, <https://archive.org/details/Triumpho1933>, 9:04.

master puts both hands on the safety bar,”⁹ making the machine subject to men and placing men in control of the substantial power that the instrument represents. Ford places a similar emphasis on the human element of the industrial system, referring to the men working in the factories as “specialists”¹⁰ and “skilled labourers.”¹¹ In the film tour of Ford’s River Rouge factory in *The Ford Rouge Plant: A Story of Men, Methods, and Motor Cars*, the narration is quick to establish the place of the workers in the Ford factory. As the camera pans over the Rouge grounds, the voice-over speaks not of the machinery, but of the men. “Factories, broad acres of buildings, ships, machines, are only methods. What is done here and how well it is done depends upon men. Methods and machines change. The earth and men endure.”¹²

The narrative presented by both Ford and GM throughout these films frames the role of workers within the industrial system not as a step down from that of the craftsman, but a step up, whereby industrialization was merely a successful and natural progression of the trades. Furthermore the ads maintain that the industrial system has not eliminated the need for trained craftsmen, but allows those craftsmen to produce a “car of better value for the buyer” than if they had been produced individually.¹³ This valorization of the tasks undertaken by factory workers neatly skirts the reality of Taylorism, which was specifically intended to eliminate the need for skilled workers.

⁹ General Motors, *The Triumph of America*, 9:51.

¹⁰ Ford Motor Company, *Harvest of the Years*, produced by Audio Productions Inc. (1938), 19:37. *Prelinger Archives*, accessed July 15, 2013, <https://archive.org/details/HarvestOfThe>.

¹¹ Ford Motor Company, *The Ford Rouge Plant: A Story of Man, Methods, and Motor Cars*, produced by the Ford Motor Company (1937, 1941), 7:15, 18:34. *Prelinger Archives*, accessed July 18, 2013, <https://archive.org/details/FordRougePlant>.

¹² Ford Motor Company, *Men, Methods, and Motor Cars*, 1:19.

¹³ Ford Motor Company, *The Harvest of the Years*, 17:45.

Taylorism was the study of motion, breaking down each task into dozens of smaller jobs that could be accomplished without the benefit of a trade. Speed and efficiency of production were valued over the people completing the tasks. By 1920 the majority of the jobs in automobile factories were unskilled. Automated tools had decreased production time and facilitated the assembly of a consistent product, but they also substantially reduced the skill required to operate them. The result was that workers were expected to keep pace with the machines and their unskilled status meant that they did not have the leverage to protest, because unlike their skilled predecessors, they could easily be replaced.¹⁴

While few within the working class were willing to forfeit a life of mass consumption and modern conveniences, the financial difficulties, unemployment, and mistreatment of laborers in the 1930s called into question the industrial system that made them possible. Many longed for the perceived simplicity and stability of non-industrial America, even as they refused to discard the trappings of a life of mass production.¹⁵ This crafting of a continuous history was not unique to Depression-era advertisements. Jackson Lears contends that at the turn of the twentieth century, “no matter how fervently they chanted the gospel of newness, advertisers knew they had to establish some common ground, some sense of old-shoe familiarity between the purchaser and the product.”¹⁶

¹⁴ Rubenstein, *Making and Selling Cars*, 124-127. The fact that machines were setting the tempo was one of the principal objections laborers had to the industrial system. As deskilled workers, prior to legislation that protected their right to bargain with their employers, they had little leverage. For skilled workers, the opposite was true. They set the pace and were able to bargain with their employers to a greater extent because they possessed a particular set of skills that the production of automobiles relied on.

¹⁵ Robert S. McElvaine, *The Great Depression: America, 1929-1941* (Toronto: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, Ltd., 1984), 157, 202.

¹⁶ Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 385.

Drawing direct ties between new methods of production and the old in the automobile films lent the established system of industrialization an air of inevitability, while simultaneously elevating the status of factory workers from unskilled to skilled workers. The position of the workers was further improved by a corresponding characterization of the factory machines as subject to the workers—rather than the other way around—throughout the film.

In American popular culture, factories and the machines that dictated the work and the pace set within them were generally perceived as a form of monotonous enslavement that restricted the men that worked there. The machines were understood to be in control of the men, as is suggested in Charlie Chaplin's film satirizing factory labour, *Modern Times* (1936).¹⁷ The film ads from the late 1930s present an opposing discourse, pointedly referring to the machines as mere tools in the hands of the workers and characterizing the men that operate them as their masters, placing them in control of the power that the massive machinery represented on both a literal and symbolic level. The machines are consistently described as subservient, subject to and crafted for, the benefit of the men controlling them. *Harvest of the Years* maintains that the machinery makes "the work easier, the burdens lighter, and thus enables men to produce more, earn more, not as daily laborers, but as specialists in their line."¹⁸ Furthermore, the advertisements insist that the industrialization of automobile production has created, not eliminated, jobs. In *Men, Methods, and Motor Cars*, Ford even goes so far as to argue

¹⁷ Duffy, *The Speed Handbook*, 132-134.

¹⁸ Ford Motor Company, *The Harvest of the Years*, 18:37.

that “the more [a machine] succeeds in serving man, the more jobs it creates.”¹⁹ The production of automobiles is aided by the machines filling the large factory grounds, but “it requires many more hours of work by human hands”²⁰ and “the watchful guidance of well-paid operators” to successfully produce the quality automobile that the company is offering.

At times this emphasis on the importance of the human element of automobile production is offered as proof of the vehicle’s quality, a vital element of the process that enables the automakers to provide the excellent product that they do. *The Triumph of America* maintains that “the great American value calls for the never-ceasing watchfulness of experienced workmen,” as though this was the only thing guaranteeing the quality of the automobile being produced.²¹ As Heon Stevenson contends, consumers were looking for advertisements to “justify the indulgence” of an automobile, to demonstrate its value. However, as Stevenson points out, this was problematic because value is “a nebulous characteristic.” Even discounting emotional or psychological factors, the definition differs from one consumer to another depending on the attributes of the automobile they prized most.²² While the challenge of establishing a product’s worth was not new, it was of critical importance in a period when financial resources were almost universally limited. In the case of the film ads of the 1930s, value was generally defined

¹⁹ Ford Motor Company, *Men, Methods, and Motor Cars*, 2:00.

²⁰ Ford Motor Company, *Men, Methods, and Motor Cars*, 7:30.

²¹ General Motors, *The Triumph of America* (Pt II), produced by Jam Handy Organization (1933), 0:24. *Prelinger Archives*, accessed July 14, 2013, https://archive.org/details/Triumpho1933_2.

²² Heon Stevenson, *Selling the Dream: Advertising the American Automobile, 1930-1980* (North Carolina: McFarland & Company Inc., 2008), 182-3.

as “better performance, new luxury, and greater convenience in transportation,”²³ which was ensured by the vigilance of the factory workers. The automobile represented more than a method of transportation. The vehicle also signified the benefits of its assembly, specifically, employment.

Other aspects of the workers that the advertisements chose to highlight suggest that the focus on the human element of automobile manufacturing extended beyond assurances of quality. The number of men employed by Ford and GM had little relevance to the mechanics of the automobiles or its luxury, yet the advertisements produced by both companies highlight the large number of men working in their factories. The narrator maintains that the “hands of thousands”²⁴ are required for the successful production of the automobile. Moreover, the men belonging to those hands are paid well for the work that they do.²⁵ The wages, the number of men employed, and the fact that the industrial machines improve the lives and work environment of the factory workers contributes little to advertisements’ argument regarding the tangible quality of the automobile being produced. Nor are the vehicles’ speed, its mechanics, and its safety affected by the treatment of the workers that produce it. These components of the automobile’s production are far less relevant to the narrative of the vehicle itself than to the lifestyle of the men who can potentially own one. By associating the automobile with this production system, which ostensibly values its labourers and does its best to make

²³ General Motors, *The Triumph of America*, 9:04.

²⁴ Ford Motor Company, *Men, Method, and Motors*, 18:34.

²⁵ General Motors, *Triumph of America*, 8:21.

them a priority over the machines they operate, the vehicle becomes representative of steady, valuable, employment.

Many Americans had expected the economy to right itself in the early years of the Depression. Corporations, governments, and even workers subscribed to the nineteenth century liberal view that if a worker was unemployed, it was due to his own ineptitude or lack of effort. McElvaine characterizes initial responses to the Depression as “bewilderment, defeat, and self-blame.”²⁶ By 1935, however, embarrassment over being unemployed had been superseded by resentment regarding the lack of help they were receiving from the government.²⁷ The United Auto Workers of America (UAW) was founded the same year and although factory workers were initially averse to joining out of fear of losing their jobs or jeopardizing any chance of getting a job in the future, by 1936 the UAW had 63 000 members. Roosevelt’s re-election in 1936 and the passage of the Wagner Act, as noted earlier, had changed the climate for unionization significantly and gave unions like the UAW the necessary leverage to operate effectually.

Most of GM’s factories were closed by the end of 1936 by sit-down strikes, which the government was unwilling to break through force. Ultimately, GM was forced to consider negotiations when its production dropped from over 2000 cars a day to 20 and in February, 1937, GM acknowledged the UAW as the bargaining agent for its labourers.²⁸ In one account of the strike, Watkins quotes a worker as saying of their victory that “the inhuman high speed is no more. We now have a voice and have slowed up the speed of

²⁶ McElvaine, *The Great Depression*, 82,

²⁷ McElvaine, *The Great Depression*, 172-8.

²⁸ T. H. Watkins, *The Hungry Years: A Narrative History of the Great Depression in America* (New York: Henry Holt & Co, 1999), 321-9.

the line. And are now created as human beings and not as part of the machinery.”²⁹ Chrysler soon followed suit, leaving Ford as the only hold out until 1941.³⁰ In this sense, the advertisements celebrating the working man were responding to specific changes in the political and industrial environment of the United States as much as they were adjusting to a shift in the market for the automobile. Early ads of the 1930s venerated the working class man as the ideal driver, broadening the prospective consumer base in a saturated market. These later advertisements were a continuation of appealing to the working class consumer, but responded specifically to the increased validation and influence of the working class not only as consumers, but as industrial and economic actors with concerns, ideals, and desires distinct from those of the upper class.

As explained in Chapter One, the image of the working class illustrated in these advertisements, whether as a driver or a labourer, presents a specific idealization of the working class male as an autonomous, white, and physically fit, man capable of mastering himself and the environment around him. For the labourer portrayed in later films, his independence and skill are emphasized in his command of the factory machinery. However, representing the factory labourer in this way was more than a means of appealing to the broadest potential consumer base and appeasing the dissatisfied labourers and unions protesting the dehumanizing conditions of industrial factories. Underscoring the industrial operative’s control, his skill, and his independence, values which echoed traditional narratives of the craftsman and the frontier, presented a narrative of the worker that supported and relied on the industrial system and capitalism.

²⁹ Watkins, *The Hungry Years*, 331.

³⁰ John B. Rae, *The American Automobile: A Brief History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1965), 131-137.

Automakers strove to counter the damaging narratives of striking workers while simultaneously appealing to prospective consumers, but the portrayal of the working class labourer as an independent, skilled man also contradicted other competing representations. Socialist and communist characterizations of labour and the working class gained increasing popularity in the wake of the financial turmoil of the Depression. In fact, communist and socialist labor management was instrumental in the organization of unions, which unnerved industry. The rise of socialist values was one of the rallying points used by industrialists to oppose legislation, such as the Wagner Act.³¹ While they did not succeed, the values associated with the driver and labourer throughout these advertisements suggests that automakers endeavored to foster a narrative that challenged socialist depictions of the working class.

The changes in governmental sentiment and policy regarding the support of industrial unions left automobile manufacturers with few options apart from acceding to collective bargaining. Strikes shut down large portions of their production and the financial pressures this exerted exacerbated the already substantial financial strain felt by automakers. The advertisement films do not address economics directly, but the automobile manufacturers were not left unscathed by the financial turmoil of the Great Depression. General Motors and Ford were large enough and had enough resources they were able to continue production, even if at a reduced rate. Other firms, particularly those in the luxury automobile market, such as Peerless, Pierce-Arrow, Duesenberg, Franklin, Marmon, and Stutz, did not survive. Some, such as Graham-Paige and Hupmobile, lasted

³¹ Ronald Edsforth, *Class Conflict and Cultural Consensus: The Making of Mass Consumer Society in Flint, Michigan* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 265-269.

through the Depression only to close in 1940. Packard, Willys, and Studebaker, persisted beyond the Depression, but never regained their status as substantial American automobile producers. The result was that the oligopoly of the “Big Three” was more entrenched than ever.³²

Still, the precarious financial positions of even the biggest of the automobile producers meant they were not able to weather extended shut-downs. Nor were the widespread images of strikes beneficial for the companies’ reputations, which had already been damaged by extensive factory lay-offs and wage reductions. Mention of strikes and reduced production is skirted throughout the advertisement films, although there are subtle hints. For example, when *Men, Methods, and Motors* provides the number of men employed in the Rouge Factory, it states that “more than 80 000 men [are] *usually* employed.”³³ The film makes no mention of how many men are employed in 1937 when it was first produced or in 1941 when a second edition of the ad was issued. Instead, *Men, Methods, and Motors*, as well as the other advertisement films, carefully highlights the principal benefits of industrialization, not for the corporations, but for the men employed by them. GM’s *To New Horizons* focuses on the model produced by the company for the Futurama exhibit at the World’s fair in 1939. Unsurprisingly, GM’s vision of the future centers on the automobile. However, it credits the industrial system and capitalism, with creating a better quality of life for all. The narration states that because of this system the “opportunities for the employment of men, money, and materials have increased and thus the highways of social and commercial development

³² Rudi Volti, *Cars & Culture: The Life Story of a Technology* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2004), 66-68.

³³ Ford Motor Company, *Men, Methods, and Motors*, 0:20. Emphasis added.

are widening without end or limit.”³⁴ The “new methods of work” employed by the factories contribute to more than just the experience and treatment of the men on the factory floor. While the film gives no indication of what these “new methods of work” might be, it maintains that hundreds of people have “benefited by broadening their scope of living, gaining by advanced means of communication and new methods of work.”³⁵ Moreover, factories and their methods, the employment that they offer and the wages that they pay, have improved the quality of life not only for those employed by the factories, but for all who come in contact with the industry, “spreading work and wealth into every state.”³⁶

In GM’s *Triumph of America*, industrial production is praised for cost reduction, making the product accessible to more people and “bring[ing] to the man of modest means all the advantages of fine car transportation.”³⁷ Increasingly, this “man of modest means” is presented as the ideal car owner throughout the film advertisements of the 1930s and according to them it is the industrial system alone that has made automobile ownership attainable. The films explain that the reduction in the costs of the automobile was made with materials and not men, assuaging any moral concerns over the wages of the laborers.³⁸ Ostensibly, industry both provides jobs and manufactures products at a rate

³⁴ General Motors, *To New Horizons*, produced by the Jam Handy Organization, (1940), 4:32. *Prelinger Archives*, accessed July 13, 2013, <https://archive.org/details/ToNewHor1940>.

³⁵ General Motors, *To New Horizons*, 13:25.

³⁶ Ford Motor Company, *Harvest of the Years*, 7:25.

³⁷ General Motors, *The Triumph of America*, 6:50-6:58

³⁸ This contention is ironic because overproduction and low wages were two of the principal causes of the Depression. Moreover, Flink credits the automobile industry specifically, above others. He contends that, while “it would be simplistic, of course, to say that market saturation in the automobile industry ‘caused’ the Great Depression in the sense that it was a sufficient condition for what occurred... What I am arguing here is that automobility played a key role in creating the most important necessary conditions underlying the Great Depression and that this role has not been recognized adequately by historians. Undoubtedly, the

that the working man can afford. Without it, these improvements on his quality of life would not be possible.

Additionally, the money that these working men put back into the automobile industry by purchasing a car benefits other non-industrialized trades. *The Triumph of America* states that “in steady streams, millions upon billions of dollars in payment go back to support miners, producers, and farmers, and makers of supplies.”³⁹ The advantages of the industrialized automobile industry, thus, are not limited to those employed by the automobile companies or even to those that buy an automobile. The films repeatedly promote the capitalist ideal of “spreading work and wealth into every state”⁴⁰ as opposed to the redistributive approaches of the New Deal or socialism.

Ford characterizes the industry’s approach as “a permanent program for progress founded upon faith in tomorrow It is faith that business could be worse and will be better.”⁴¹ That the imminent recovery of America’s economy relies primarily on the automobile industry is left unsaid, but the narration laid over images of steadily operating factories producing streams of automobiles certainly implies that is the case. As the product of this industry, the automobile represents a prosperous economy and the employment of working class men. It is no longer merely a means of transportation, but an integral part of the American economy, which values the men that make its success possible.

great affection that Americans have had for automobility has mitigated against perceiving that the automobile revolution contributed much to bringing about the worst socioeconomic crisis in American history.” James L. Flink, *Car Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1975), 167.

³⁹ General Motors, *The Triumph of America*, 5:00.

⁴⁰ Ford Motor Company, *Harvest of the Years*, 7:25.

⁴¹ Ford Motor Company, *Harvest of the Years*, 12:59.

However, the voice-over throughout these films is subverted to an extent by the visual narrative. While the importance of the men in the factories is stressed throughout the audio narrative of the films, the men are primarily seen on the periphery of the factory scenes. They are often represented by disembodied hands working on a machine, while the machine and its work are centered in the frame. When the narration of *Men, Methods, and Motor Cars* reiterates the importance of the hands of “thousands of skilled men” in accomplishing the production of the automobile, their hands are literally the focus of the camera.⁴² The press, not the man operating it, is placed at the center of the viewer’s visual field. The camera’s attention is primarily on the rise and fall of the mammoth press as it shapes the sheets of steel into panels for the body of the automobile. The man is dwarfed by the machinery.⁴³ While this could be construed as an effort to solidify the concept of the power of the operator, visually, the operator is secondary to the machine. In his examination of General Electric’s (GE) corporate photography from 1900 to 1930, David Nye maintains that GE’s photographs underscore the worker’s individuality and standing. In one example, the photograph is centered on the crane and the machinist, the man’s control over the device indicating his importance.⁴⁴ The prominence of the labourer is certainly the principal message of the narration that is coupled with analogous sections of film in GM and Ford’s film advertisements. However, unlike the photographs produced by GE where the man is at the central focus of the image, the majority of the factory scenes in the advertising films centre the camera’s view on the machine.

⁴² Ford Motor Company, *Men, Methods, and Motor Cars*, 18:34.

⁴³ General Motors, *The Triumph of America*, 9:51.

⁴⁴ David E. Nye, *Image Worlds: Corporate Identities at General Electric, 1880-1930* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), 80-82. Ford Motor Company, *Men, Methods, and Motor Cars*, 1941.

Moreover, while the narration emphasizes the value of the raw materials and non-industrialized trades, the visual component of the films concentrates on the mechanized system of automobile manufacturing. Goods acquired from industries such as farming or mining are rarely pictured in their unprocessed forms where they are harvested. The majority of the images featured are of the components being refined or re-shaped to suit the manufacturers' needs.⁴⁵ Iron is valuable not in its raw form, but as the engine block that the ore is molded into. The materials are only of value in their relation to the industrial process that will shape them into something else. Unrefined they have little value in the system of production. Furthermore, the highly racialized representation of the men working in non-industrialized trades implies the jobs are less substantive contributions to the American economy.

The most striking images involve the harvest of cotton and lumber in *The Triumph of America*. The men and women depicted in both of these trades are African American, suggesting these occupations are beneath white working class men and women. That African Americans are never pictured working in an automobile factory in any of these films, despite the fact they were employed by both GM and Ford, accentuates the implied gradation from non-industrial to industrial labor in the narrative of these advertisements.⁴⁶ White labour is equated with skilled, industrial craftsmanship, while the simpler task of acquiring the raw materials is associated with those deemed racially inferior. Portraying the differences of labour in this manner also elevates factory work, semi-skilled labor, above other trades. Racial associations of labor also played to

⁴⁵ General Motors, *The Triumph of America*, 1935. Ford Motor Company, *The Harvest of the Years*, 1938.

⁴⁶ General Motors, *The Triumph of America*, 1935.

existing racial tensions, ostensibly aligning the white working class with the white middle class, more than African Americans within their own class.⁴⁷ Furthermore, the depiction of natural resources and non-industrial businesses consistently situates these enterprises within the industrialization process, suggesting that their value is derived from their role in the manufacture of automobiles, rather than as businesses or assets in their own right.

This discrepancy between the visual and spoken elements suggests that the difference in the characterization of automobile production, factory labour, and American industry in these advertisements is not indicative of a distinctive change in the system of automobility. Rather, the change in the characterization of labourers was a continuation of the alterations made to the secondary discourse of automobile film ads in the 1930s in response to the more general labouring of American culture. Moreover, it was a response to specific shifts in the political and industrial environment of the United States whereby the government supported the formation and operation of unions. Early film advertisements of the 1930s venerated the working class man as the ideal driver, broadening the prospective consumer base in a saturated market and associated the automobile with a narrative of security in a period of tremendous uncertainty and fear. To create an image of the automobile that would appeal to the working class market, it was necessary to present a narrative of the vehicle's production that valued the contributions of the labourers and gave back to them. Ideally, their wages would enable them to

⁴⁷ Edsforth, *The New Deal*, 109-112. Edsforth also points out that African Americans were often associated with communism, playing to fears of the double threat of racial inferiority and socialist values.

purchase an automobile and grant them access to the lifestyle that the automobile represented outside of the factory.⁴⁸

The Depression called into question the value and place of the working class man and the long-term viability of American industrial capitalism. Associating the automobile with employment and a positive conception of industry was a means for automakers to present an ideal of the working class man inherently connected to their product in all aspects of their lives. Moreover, it allowed corporations to identify automobiles and industrial capitalism with an individualistic version of the idealized working class narrative, one intrinsically tied to mass production and capitalism, as opposed to socialist values. These films credited the automobile industry with the potential to revive the American economy, create jobs, and ensure the economic strength of the country. The automobile became representative of employment, independence, and a stable income for prospective consumers, encouraging members of the working class to aspire to own a car even if it was not attainable for them at the time. The depiction of the model labourer was tied to traditional narratives of the craftsman, emphasizing the independence, control, and skill of the factory workers. While appealing to labourers, this representation also ultimately served the automakers in countering socialist labor narratives and illustrating a version of industrial capitalism that benefited labourers as much as the corporations that employed them.

⁴⁸ Ford Motor Company, *Men, Method, and Motor Cars*, 3:13.

Conclusion

Automobile film advertisements of the 1930s drew from broader cultural contexts of the Great Depression and traditional narratives of American identity to portray the automobile, the men and machines that manufactured it, and the person that owned it. The result was a shift in the characterization of the vehicle from a frivolous pleasure of the wealthy leisure class to a practical, albeit comfortable and stylish, mode of transportation for the “man of modest means.”¹ Moreover, the “man of modest means,” the working class man, became the model driver, demonstrating skill, self-control, and mastery over technology and nature. Physically the automobile was identified with security and comfort in a period of uncertainty, while the industrial system that manufactured it was credited with America’s past and future economic success. These representations of the automobile and the system it propagated reflected advertisers’ perceptions of the working class man’s concerns in hope of encouraging the desire to own one.

The focus on the working class could be attributed in part to an effort to incorporate it into the idealized automobile narrative. Considering the saturation of the auto market in 1927 and the increased influence of the working class throughout the Depression, appealing to a broader market was likely a part of advertisers’ motivation.² However, in spite of a consumer-centric storyline that drew on inclusive pronouns such as “we” and “you,” and the focus on the human element of driving as a means of

¹ General Motors. *The Triumph of America*. Produced by Jam Handy Organization, 1933, 6:50. *Prelinger Archives*, accessed July 18, 2013, <https://archive.org/details/Triumpho1933>.

² James M. Rubenstein, *Making and Selling Cars: Innovation and Change in the U.S. Automotive Industry* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 183-188.

promoting the automobile, the narrative remained primarily concerned with creating an image of the vehicle that served manufacturers' best interests. What distinguishes the advertisements of the 1930s from earlier ads is that the latter films frame the manufacturers' interests as meeting the needs of consumers and fashion a version of driving and automobile ownership that spoke directly to potential buyers, appealing to them on a personal level.

The model driver was depicted as a white, working class man, one of the archetypes of a beleaguered masculinity in the Depression. He was assigned traits drawn from traditional narratives of the frontier such as independence, skill, control, and mastery over the landscape. This emphasis on independence and control constructed an example of the driver that was incompatible with the collective values of unionization. The automobile was identified as a bastion of security, the safest place to be, provided it was under the guidance of a skilled, careful driver. This depiction served the fundamental purpose of transferring any of the risks or negative consequences of driving onto the driver, rather than the manufacturer. However, it also presented an image of automakers as responsible entities that had done more than was necessary to ensure the wellbeing of their customers, implying they did not need the restrictive regulations of the government. The representation of the production process focused on the labourers, celebrating their contribution. They are credited with skill, control, and mastery of the massive machines required for automobile assembly, drawing on the established ideal of the skilled craftsman. In spite of the fact that assembly production was meant to eliminate the need for skilled labour, industrial capitalism was presented as a benefit to the working class. Yet, as with the advertisements' characterization of the driver, this description of the

labour force was incompatible with unionization and also countered negative accounts of industrial manufacturers that value machines over men. It was a narrative designed to appeal to consumers that creates an idealized image of the driver, the automobile, and the system of production that suits the manufacturers.

This distinction is significant because of the extensive influence of corporate advertising throughout the 1930s. Advertising was no longer about selling a product to fit within people existing lives; it entailed fostering the aspiration for a new life, a new self, that centered around the product being sold. Moreover, for the system of mass production to continue successfully, consumers had to be constantly inspired to buy. Consumption became a distinguishing feature of a more universal American identity, which included the working class in hopes of assuaging their discontent regarding the established system of industrial capitalism that required constant spending. Advertisements became a tie between all consumers, a common thread of mass culture that would, ideally, stimulate aspirations in the working class that complemented those of the manufacturers. Creating a dream or fantasy derived from social anxieties or ideals was not a new approach to advertising in the 1930s. Speaking of advertisements a generation earlier, Leach maintains that “corporate business now orchestrated the myths of American, and it was through business, with the blessings in many ways of the federal government and other agencies, that the American dream had found its most dependable ally.”³ What distinguished the films of the 1930s from earlier promotions was the fact that the automobile, which had become a symbol of technological supremacy and status, was

³ William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 377-378.

being endorsed as a vehicle for the working class in an effort to alleviate resentment against corporations and the industrial capitalist system.

The conceptions of the automobile communicated through film advertisements broadcast a particular interpretation of the significance of the driver, the automobile, and the system of industrial capitalism. Carey maintains it is advertisements' ability to convey such ideas that makes them an integral part of the formation of culture, of the symbolic understanding of everyday objects.⁴ When this understanding is put into practice, Sewell contends, that perception of the object is incorporated into the broader culture.⁵ It is this system that Leach suggests "orchestrates the myths of America." Thus, the lifestyle associated with automobile ownership was significant because of the implications it had for influencing American culture more broadly. The advertisements were designed to sell the automobile, but this was accomplished through characterizations of the driver that were associated with citizenship and American identity, of the industrial system as the key to a prosperous national economy, and the automobile as the standard mode of transportation. The ideals presented in advertisements were crafted to sell a product, but they did so by speaking to impressions of society that extended beyond the automobile's material capabilities. Corporations were able to speak to more than just product sales, but also the organization of society and its values. Moreover, films presented the opportunity to illustrate these images in a way that was distinct from print or radio advertisements. As such, analysis of film advertisements

⁴ James W. Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 18-26.

⁵ William H. Sewell Jr, *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 164.

can contribute distinct elements to the study of advertising narratives as a means of examining cultural representations of the automobile.

Film provides a layer of contextual visual information that is not available in print advertisements. In examining the driver in the first chapter, my analysis draws on the depiction of the advertisements' central character, the driver. However, the depth of my study relies heavily on the peripheral visual information that these advertisements present. The qualities associated with the model driver are, to a large extent, presented through the text of the films' narration. The appearance of the man driving the automobile is important and could likely be obtained in a print advertisement through what the man looks like, what he's wearing, and where the automobile is pictured. What distinguishes the film from print media is the volume of the visual and textual narrative presented in a twenty minute film as opposed to a single page in a magazine or a newspaper.

The difference in the visual elements of the two mediums is especially salient. A print ad might devote a lengthy paragraph of text to the story or information that the image is meant to highlight. A film might only be narrated at its beginning and end, as with *From Dawn To Sunset*, which includes a substantial portion of images paired with music.⁶ What distinguishes film is the constant motion of the images. This defining attribute results in an abundance of visual material for analysis. A single tableau or even a series of panels might show the ostensible separation of African Americans from the system of automobility, excluding them from the illustrated narrative. However, print

⁶ General Motors, *From Dawn to Sunset*, produced by the Jam Handy Organization (1937). *Prelinger Archives*, accessed July 18, 2013, https://archive.org/details/0560_From_Dawn_to_Sunset_14_01_40_00

cannot devote as much attention to precisely where African Americans fit – or do not – in the narrative of automobility presented. *The Triumph of America* details the position of African Americans extensively, relegating them to America's agrarian past working in the cotton fields or forest to support industrial capitalism, a concept that is furthered by their complete absence in factory settings. The only vehicle they are shown driving is a donkey-drawn cart. The depiction of African Americans as folkish, antiquated, and inferior is furthered by two segments of them singing spirituals, consigning them to their accepted roles within the system of automobility and American culture more broadly.⁷

Film also has more range with regard to the inventive elements of the narrative advertisers can present: the ability to present a world that differs from reality, the degree to which they can entertain their viewers, or include them in the story that is being told. A print ad might illustrate or photograph the interior of an automobile, even the view through the windshield. However, print ads cannot convey the sensation of movement and the visual experience of driving. The position of the camera throughout many of the driver-centric films such as *We Drivers*, *Safe Roads*, or *The Safest Place*, looking over the driver's shoulder or out over the steering wheel as the vehicle is in motion is not something that can be directly translated to print.⁸ These films literally place the audience in the driver's seat visually and affirm this position through the inclusive pronouns of

⁷ General Motors, *The Triumph of America*, 1933. Ford Motor Company, *Harvest of the Years*, produced by Audio Productions Inc. (1938). *Prelinger Archives*, accessed July 15, 2013, <https://archive.org/details/HarvestOfThe>.

⁸ General Motors, *We Drivers*, produced by Jam Handy Organization (1935). *Prelinger Archives*, accessed July 13, 2013, <https://archive.org/details/WeDriver1936>. General Motors. *Safe Roads*. Produced by the Jam Handy Organization, 1935. *Prelinger Archives*, accessed July 14, 2013, <https://archive.org/details/SafeRoad1935>. General Motors. *The Safest Place*. Produced by the Jam Handy Organization, 1935. *Prelinger Archives*, accessed July 13, 2013, <https://archive.org/details/SafestP11935>.

their narrative, as in Ford's *Streamlines Make Headlines*. This film allows the viewers to visually experience a race between a car and an airplane, drawing the parallels between flying and driving, as well as subtly fostering the enjoyment of speed.⁹ As advertisers focused more on selling consumers a lifestyle rather than just a product, the ability of advertisements to convincingly present a believable fantasy became increasingly important. The capacity of films to present a fictional conception of the world so comprehensively allows a more extensive analysis of the details of precisely what dream or desire advertisers wanted to associate with their product.

However, the comprehensiveness of the visual narrative presented by films also offers the opportunity to explore the contradictions within advertising narratives. While film enabled advertisers to present a wide-ranging and sensational account of the system of automobility, it also made the incongruities of the textual and visual elements of the idealization of automobile ownership and industrial capitalism more evident. With print ads, presenting a text coupled with a single image or series of panels that were in agreement was easier than a twenty-minute film wherein the images are constantly in motion, constantly changing. The visual elements of the film needed to hold viewers' attention, but the dialogue also had to characterize what was being shown in a manner that would appeal to those watching. The instances when the two components of the films are not in agreement are telling because they often underscore inconsistencies in the narrative being presented. For instance, while the textual element of *Harvest of the Years* focuses on the laborers, highlighting their importance in the system of automobile

⁹ Ford Motor Company, *Streamlines Make Headlines*.

production, the images consistently emphasize the mechanics of the automobile and the factory machines rather than the laborers. This discrepancy between the visual and textual components suggests that the emphasis on the laborers was an effort on the part of the manufacturers to counter broader narratives regarding the industrial capitalism and the treatment of laborers in American culture more broadly, rather than a genuine interest in serving laborers.

Film offered advertisers the opportunity to place viewers in the driver's seat, to illustrate the full scope of the fantasy they hoped to identify their product with. Advertisements of the 1930s were about selling a product by associating it with a lifestyle or a character that a person could aspire to, a new way of living that relied on the merchandise being promoted. Film had, throughout the 1920s and into the 1930s, been the most widely accessible means of entertainment. Movies allowed viewers to indulge in fantasy, to live vicariously through the characters on the screen for a brief period. However, two of the most popular plots in entertainment films of the 1930s were characters that questioned the established values and narratives of American culture or marginalized or oppressed characters that revolted, either individually or as a group.¹⁰ Neither of these themes supported the position of the automobile corporations in 1930. Either could be used to justify unionism, question the industrialist capital system, or encourage labour strife. Given the widespread viewership of films it is logical to suppose that automakers perceived film as the appropriate means to counter such narratives, as much as a more expansive medium for depicting the fantasy they wanted to identify with

¹⁰ Lary May, "The Big Tomorrow: Hollywood and the Politics of the American Way," in *Movies and American Society* ed. Steven J. Ross (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 135-141.

their product. In fact, the emphasis on the autonomy of the driver, the responsibility of the manufacturers, the celebration of the labourer, and the benefits of the industrial system for the working class, appears to contradict the general themes of popular films specifically.

Rick Prelinger estimates that *We Drivers* was shown in upwards of 7 000 theatres in its first 10 months alone.¹¹ Film ads were a part of the popular culture of the 1930s and as such, contributed to the culture that developed throughout that period. As Peter Ling contends,

the automobile, as a symbol, thus became infused with a volatile mixture of a reverence for the past and a fascination with the future, of a simultaneous yearning for stability and for dramatic change, of an acknowledgement of the collective, interdependent character of modern life alongside the wish of individual control. These conflicting feelings came to rest upon the motor car, enshrouding it in a complex imagery.¹²

The illustration of this complex imagery is reflected, to an extent, in the representation of the automobile and the driver in the ads of the 1930s.

To gain a more complete understanding of automobile culture of the 1930s it is important to examine film advertisements not just for the information that their textual narrative conveyed, but as part of the formation of the complex cultural understanding of what the automobile represented on an ideological level. The representation of the automobile in the films ads of the 1930s depicts a vehicle meant to appeal to the working class, placing the white, working class man in the driver's seat and describing the

¹¹ Rick Prelinger, *The Field Guide to Sponsored Film* (San Francisco: National Film Preservation Foundation, 2006), 98.

¹² Peter Ling, *America and the Automobile: Technology, Reform, and Social Change* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), 32.

automobile as a mode of transportation that is both attainable and beneficial. At the same time, these films demonstrate a concerted effort on the part of automobile manufacturers to engage in the discussion of American values and liberal capitalist ideology that were called into question in the wake of the Depression. Because advertisements were part of American myth-making, to borrow Leach's term, the narrative presented in film advertisements reflects the efforts of the corporations that sponsored them to counter the alternative views of American culture and values, such as those promoted by workers unions. Thus, automobile film advertisements of the 1930s were attempting to do more than sell a product, they were trying to foster a particular conception of industrial capitalism in a period when the previously established model was called into question by economic turmoil and cultural uncertainty.

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