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"Looking back at the history of automotive enthusiasm, it seems the vengeful hand of Nemesis has been at play: what began as a grandiose advance toward liberation ended in a finely woven net of dependencies... However uplifting sitting behind the wheel might be, once there are twenty-four million automobiles on the road the train of consequences that each vehicle drags with it must be seen vastly to exceed the dimensions of the car itself. Unlike a vacuum cleaner or an electric razor, the automobile is an apparatus whose operation implicates nonparticipants; it produces, as the economists put it, obligatory exogenous effects. Noise, pollutants, accidents, the consumption of space... The dreams of yesterday have produced the nightmares of today."

-- Wolfgang Sachs

This issue of the **Reprint Mailing** is devoted to excerpts from **For Love of the Automobile:Looking Back into the History of our Desires** by Wolfgang Sachs, translated from the German by Don Reneau. (U.C. Press, Berkeley,CA. Copyright (c) 1992 by Regents of U.C.) Dr. Sachs, a Fellow of The Institute for Cultural Studies, Essen, Germany, is also editor of another recently published book, **The Development Dictionary:A Guide to Knowledge as Power** (Zed Books Ltd., London, 1992)

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Disenchantment — The Aging of Desire

> Running out of gas, Rabbit Angstrom thinks as he stands behind the summer-dusty windows of the Springer Motors display room watching the traffic go by on Route 111, traffic somehow thin and scared compared to what it used to be. The fucking world is running out of gas. But they won't catch him, not yet, because there isn't a piece of junk on the road gets any better mileage than his Toyotas, with lower service costs. Read *Consumer Reports*, April issue. That's all he has to tell the people when they come in. And come in they do, the people out there are getting frantic, they know the great American ride is ending.[1]

With these lines John Updike opens *Rabbit Is Rich*, his novel about the splendor and misery of the 1970s, expressing the sentiment that underlies the gin-drinking, numbingly self-satisfied world of Rabbit Angstrom in the petty-bourgeois town of Brewer: the great American drive is coming to an end. The excitement over the automobile has gone flat, a tiredness is setting in, and conflicts are arising in the political arena. In the 1970s there grew for the first time a discontent with the automobile: fathers had to make household budget cuts to be able to pay the higher price of gasoline, and politicians suddenly had to heed countless civil protests and curry a distanced relation to the automobile in order to maintain their popularity. The days of great promise were over, the times of heady planning past; disillusion pressed to the fore, and cynicism even broke through.

What had happened to the high-flying project of motorization? Where are all the expectations and desires—the hope, ultimately, for a better life? It is not as if they had disappeared: 1.2 million visitors attended the 1983 International Automobile Show to admire the newest creations. But the consensus of the early decades was broken: while some still got a shine in their eyes, others laughed scornfully as they danced around an idol of the golden calf, which was erected by protesting citizens' groups outside the show. The great transformation of the 1950s, accompanied by the drumroll of progress and prosperity, had come a long way and unquestionably changed the face of Germany profoundly. But it had led to something completely different from what our fathers had hoped. The air has leaked out, the dreams have turned stale, and even the hymn of praise of the unwearied has the sound of a spiteful "nevertheless": the love of the automobile has cooled.

The historical project of motorization—pressed forward economically since the beginning of the century by industry, incorporated socially through the striving of social classes for prestige, and colored culturally by exciting images and dreamworlds —lost its power to per-

1. John Updike, *Rabbit Is Rich* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), 3.

suade at the very moment of its triumph. Indeed, the failure was so profound that some wanted to turn back the wheel of history, if they only could, among them not only citizens demonstrating against the highways eating up the landscape, but ministers in the seats of power as well. A change of theme had occurred: whereas earlier the drives and ambitions of entire social epochs had reverberated in the automobile, the consonance was broken in the seventies, its tones turned shrill. The automobile itself had not changed, but the passions and utopias embodied in it had lost their buoyancy. New images of the good life were gaining ground, for which the automobile (and with it the ideal of a society made for cars) had become quite nearly the essence of modernized wretchedness. The promises of motorization, it appears, have left behind automobiles without promise.

When a federal minister proclaims the automobile "enemy number one of the environment," when street construction projects provoke demonstrations, when the bicycle enjoys a new popularity, then clearly a break has occurred in the history of automotive enthusiasm. Desires and objects are not married eternally to each other; they can fall into conflicts and drift apart, until finally the relationship is destroyed. Desires make their retreat when, over the long run, they are disappointed and subverted by contrary experiences.

They can search for other objects offered by technological progress—the current enthusiasm for microcomputers, for example, reflects a leitmotif or two from the early years of the automobile. Otherwise the desires simply get drawn into a whirlpool of doubt, losing so much legitimacy that they become obscured by other hopes and values. Just as the needs expressed in the automobile were, generally speaking, born in the second half of the nineteenth century and represented a break in the history of needs at that time, so can they age and pass away at the end of the twentieth: in both instances a turning point in the history of culture is marked. Needs are not facts of nature. They are learned and can be unlearned when circumstances are no longer hospitable to them.

From Traffic Jam to Traffic Jam

> Summertime is surely the nicest time of the year, since everyone has time. And when the sun shines, people want nothing so much as to get away: quick, quick, to the sea or the mountains. Look out, the time for vacation has come! Between the wish and reality runs the Autobahn, a gray band 7,919 kilometers long dividing travelers from their destination even as it links them to it. And on weekends between June and September in Germany all hell breaks loose on the highways, and every year it is the same. Vacationers rush off en masse at the same time in the same direction, all wanting if possible to arrive on the same day they depart. Then everything races to a halt in a traffic jam—to everyone's great dismay . . . a snail's pace, delays, accidents—in temperatures nearing the nineties. A police spokesperson called the Autobahn "the longest sauna in the world."[2]

2. *Die Zeit*, 1983, no. 32.

What most damages the automobile's attractiveness is its success. Mass motorization itself is responsible for bringing experiences in tow that undermine enthusiasm for the automobile. This fascination was, simply put, born in a time when the automobile still possessed the value of a rarity, in that only a few people possessed one. The feeling of being independent of the masses and not ruled by schedules flourished only so long as the streets remained free of auto avalanches and traffic regulations, just as the sportive joy of speed first gained its power of attraction when free roadways yet beckoned and one could race triumphantly past carts, carriages, and the early midget motorcars. The joy of driving, in short, rests largely on relative advantages—that is, on advantages that others do not enjoy, because they do not possess an automobile and are therefore relatively immobile and slow.

With mass motorization, however, the picture has changed, and the relative advantages the automobile once conferred have dwindled: the more cars, the less joy. Now the masters of space and time are held captive by clogged streets, now the pleasure of speed falls by the wayside of full highways and high-powered competitors. The desires become fragile because the conditions under which they first grew up no longer pertain. Driving is no longer reserved to the few able to enjoy their privilege at others' expense; on the contrary, many have in the meantime squeezed behind the wheel, and now their cars hinder other cars, their desires get in the way of other desires. Privilege evaporates in this mutual blockade, with disillusion spreading in its place. The desires get old because experience continually denies them. Modern street traffic destroys the very hopes that created it.

It is apparent in hindsight that the utopia of mass motorization rested on the illusion that the pleasure of early motorists could add up to a general mobility prosperity for the masses. Yet this utopian projection failed to consider that the desires of individuals—in a space subject to limited enlargement—will necessarily run into and diminish each other, and as a result the anticipated prosperity lagged far behind expectations. The automobile belongs to a class of commodities that cannot be multiplied at will. Because its attraction requires the exclusion of the masses, the democratization of car ownership destroys its advantages.

The more drivers there are populating the streets, the more the desired jump in speed shrinks; but in the situation of a general traffic jam—on late afternoons in the city or Sunday evenings on the highways—not only do relative advantages shrink, but new burdens grow up as well. Once a certain traffic density is surpassed, every approaching driver contributes involuntarily to a slowing of traffic: the time that the individual driver steals from all the others by slowing them down is greater many times over than the time he or she might have hoped to gain by taking the car. From traffic jam to traffic jam, the time needed to get

from the office to home or from home to the vacation spot gets longer; with every additional car each minute is worth less in distance. Tempers flare; everyone is stealing everyone else's precious time; annoyance reigns everywhere, and rage: the pleasure in time won turns into fury over time stolen. And in view of the clogged streets, there rises in the throat a cry that, again and again in the history of motorization, has swelled to a shrill chorus from all the frustrated drivers: we need more streets and we need them now!

Under the title "The Metropolitan Traffic Crisis" (subtitled "Permanent Congestion in the Streets—Pedestrians Faster Than Cars"), the *Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung* had sounded that call as early as 1926:

> Not only in all-too-crowded New York, but even in spacious Berlin, there is tedious congestion at certain times and places, for example, Brandenburg Gate. . . . On the same number of city streets as before the war, three, four, five, and six times as many vehicles, most of them motor vehicles, are driving now. . . . The question involves increasing the number of traffic arteries; it is a problem for the city planner, not the police. The city planner must, finally, construct the necessary tunnel and bridge passages—above and under the ground; that is the only solution. It must be done quickly.[3]

Ever since then work on exporting congestion by means of new streets has proceeded without interruption. Desires constantly under threat demand offensive defense: in the battle against traffic jams, bypasses and loops, expressways and highway routes sprung from the ground—stolen time would be made up for by increased bypass kilometers. And the old story is repeated with beautiful regularity: in no time at all, new strips of asphalt entice the bus and streetcar riders into cars, thus encouraging, over the long run, more car ownership and more moves to the suburbs. Nothing stimulated traffic like street construction. And as soon as the new loop suffered its first traffic jams the devaluation of kilometers began anew, right alongside the devaluation of minutes: since traffic moved more slowly on the newly built bypasses, drivers now took longer to cover the loop's longer route to the office. If mass motorization has the—inappropriate—result that more time is needed for the same route or less distance is covered in the same time, then everyone is worse off than before. No wonder we hear the beams creaking in the house of desires.

Solitude in a Crowd

Much as the outwitting of time often ends in congestion, the urge for the romantically remote often discovers only the old and familiar. The automobile made the longing to flee the confines of daily life in the city—off to untouched nature and unspoiled customs—into a general good. With mass motorization the saga of popular wanderings now got underway, the four-wheeled search for blue blossoms. The utopia of the leisure society, where the common man, though inextricably tied

3. *Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung*, 1926, no. 21, 645.

up in wage labor, also enjoys its opposite in the evenings and on weekends, by being able to move agilely from the office into the mountains, from the firm into the woods—this utopia is closely related to the automobile and drives many onto the roads. In 1975, approximately 80 percent of leisure and vacation travel was accomplished with the automobile.

Admittedly, mass motorization has changed the rules here as well: just as the advantage of being faster than the others has shrunk, so has the advantage of being able to travel farther. The attraction of a distant locale—whether a still pond or a lonely stream—is founded on the expectation that it will be accessible to only a few people. As soon as millions of weekend nature lovers start strapping their camping tables and surfboards to their car roofs and go swarming off on the search for solitude and the pleasures of the landscape, all of them involve themselves involuntarily in destroying, simply through their presence, the very solitude and pleasure they all seek. "It is not yet known," wrote Jürgen Dahl in *Die Zeit* in 1971,

> to what extent a people is really willing and able over the long run to forgo traveling in their automobiles to the last refuge of quiet, to the desired oasis, destroying that oasis with exhaust and noise. Flight, even when it is so well prepared, always remains a last resort. Organized mass flight can only end like the story of the hare and the tortoise: when all the refugees have reached their destination, they find there that which they wanted to flee.[4]

The attraction of the distant locale relies on exclusive accessibility; it deteriorates when hordes of automobiles invade it. Streets line the seashores and parking lots fill the mountain fields; the world that counters the industrialism of daily life is itself being industrialized. Vexation and disappointment are unavoidable. Nor is the automobile-centered suburban lifestyle immune: as soon as all the others move in, the wilderness slips farther away, and so looming urbanization pushes the next development even farther into the country surrounding the city. And of course the immediate solution—to retreat from the urbanized countryside by fleeing to ever more distant destinations—only leads to another dead end: space becomes completely bereft of secrets, and no more surprises lie in wait for the tourist's gaze.

Because the automobile loses its advantages as it becomes democratized, the social limits of advancing automobile consumption, like the physical limits of energy and clean air, pressed to the fore in the 1970s. Not only is the supply of gasoline, and of breathable air, being exhausted, but desires are becoming exhausted as well. With mass motorization individual aims that promise advantages quickly add up to a social sum with fatal consequences; thus the original aims are turned into their opposite. In a kind of counterproductive collaboration, al-

4. *Die Zeit*, 1971, no. 28.

though each individual acts rationally, all of them together act irrationally. This dilemma becomes evident in manifold experiences and eats away at the hopes that once surrounded the automobile. A series of Allensbach surveys found that in 1960, 63 percent of car owners derived great pleasure from driving; in 1981, however, the figure stood at only 41 percent.

Smith and Jones Catch Up

In 1911 the membership list of the recently organized new German automobile club read like a "Who's Who," teeming with bankers, manufacturers, and military officers. Car ownership indicated a person's position in society. Those who were graced with earthly goods displayed their automobiles to communicate with conspicuous inconspicuousness where they belonged and what worlds separated them from the man on the street. To imitate the wealthy and distinguish oneself from the eager have-nots—such was the motivation that gave the car a larger-than-life image and sank the roots of longing for an automobile deep into popular sentiment. In the 1950s particularly, the automobile was the focal point of many hopes for upward mobility, and the statistics prove that income groups, one after the other from top to bottom, outfitted themselves with cars throughout the postwar years. Does it not do irreparable damage to the attractiveness of the automobile if the few lucky ones turn into a whole nation of drivers? It was with some melancholy that a journalist in 1981 glanced backward:

> Certainly, it all began rather slowly, but that simply made it more tantalizing: automobiles were there to be seen, unattainable at the outset, being beyond the means of those whose first concern was simply to pay the grocer. A little later one could at least begin to calculate how long it would take to accumulate the necessary savings, and the dreams became a little more concrete. Finally, somehow, the time came: . . . the car sat in the drive. Now real life could get underway: wash the car, wax it, polish the chrome on Saturdays, and then a weekend outing; enjoy the envy of neighbors and work associates; comfort the children when they'd gotten a punch in the nose from their jealous, carless peers. The world of the automobile seemed holy, the sector became the leading economic indicator. . . . It just isn't that way anymore. One holy world after the other turned out to be a soap bubble. Even overhead cams can't make up for it in the end.[5]

With mass motorization, the one-time luxury item has sunk to the level of a universal commodity. The exhilaration is past and daily life resumes: that banal piece of standard equipment that is now part of every household no longer gives cause to turn up one's nose. Because the automobile is not in short supply anymore, its simple possession no longer serves as a distinction. It has lost its differentiating power as a symbol: the desire for social superiority no longer finds in the automobile as such a means of gratification.

5. *Vorwärts-Spezial*, August 1981, 18f.

Yet, when everybody owns a car, the kind of car one drives can become important. The increasing differentiation since the mid-1960s of car types according to performance categories proves that the desire for social distinction has shifted its target: now the urge is to own a higher-class automobile. A big, high-performance car can at least secure little victories on the street; by allowing owners to mark the difference between themselves and the rabble, it displaces social superiority into spatial superiority. "At 140 kilometers per hour," an advertisement for the 1970 Citroën DS began, "the DS regains its distinction; at 140 kilometers per hour everything begins to return to its proper order. The fast lane is once again reserved for the DS, leaving others to look on as it quietly but inexorably pulls away."

Admittedly, the joy of high-performance cars did not remain untroubled either. In 1963, drivers of cars exceeding 1500 cc could still feel special, since only 18 percent of cars had such power; by 1979, however, this advantage had melted away, for 50.5 percent of drivers could boast of such a car—any question of exclusivity was moot. The symbolic value of a big car has also been undermined by inflation: those who moved up to a higher performance category to preserve a social distinction soon realized that they had been fooled, for the competitors—their social inferiors—were also seeking to reduce the gap. To maintain their relative position, then, they had to exert themselves all the more, to walk up the down-escalator, so to speak: not to move forward is to fall behind. Thus high-powered motorization lost the power to mark difference—especially since the underdogs, enjoying ever more purchasing power, could so easily manipulate the symbol themselves: then the socially disadvantaged end up driving the biggest cars.

Mass motorization prepared the way for the status-conscious, beginning with the upper strata, to turn from automobiles and focus on other prestige items, like airplane trips and second homes. The charismatic force of big cars declined; a smaller car does just as well these days, and an enormous automobile no longer demonstrates anything but status anxiety. Even advertisements allude to this unspoken consensus, like one showing a doctor and a pretty woman in front of the hospital talking about his rather modest Fiat Ritmo. She asks, "Why don't you drive a prestigious car like the other doctors?" He answers, somewhat condescendingly, "Presumably because I'm a psychiatrist." There is relief for the psyche, then, for those—even doctors—who can find their casual satisfaction in a Ritmo. The hope that for half a century now has been attaching all those dreams to the automobile is used up: the possession of a car lifts one above the Smiths and Joneses about as much as does the possession of a vacuum cleaner.

The aging of desire—is it the result of a dialectical process, in the true sense of the term? The cultural attraction of the automobile was so strong that it created the material conditions that now undermine the original attraction. Mass motorization depreciates the earlier hopes

and looses contrary experiences that grew in protest against a society built for the car. With the breakdown of the old consensus during the 1970s, the automobile has become a bone of political contention. Caught in the trap of disenchantment, attitudes toward the automobile become polarized. One response is to grow desperate about achieving happiness: to attack the problem of urban congestion by building wider streets, the overcrowding of the landscape by opening up new regions, the loss of prestige by fleeing to ever higher performance engines. But another suggests that we abandon the old dreams: to discover, in the face of congestion, the qualities of prudence; to reconstruct, in the face of overrun distant attractions, our sense of home; and to glimpse a new privilege of status in the sovereign renunciation of the automobile.

The Dominion of Long Distances and Speedy Execution

In Greek mythology, an ominous figure ready to prove that pride goes before a fall is always present: those who tempt the gods entice Nemesis, the goddess of vengeance, into the affair, who causes their haughty behavior to rebound to their detriment. Icarus (included, contrary to the sense of the myth, in occasional triumphal histories of transportation as the first flight engineer) learned the horrible lesson of his limitations: the wax holding the feathers of his wings together was no match for the hot rays of the sun, and he crashed and sank into the sea. Looking back at the history of automotive enthusiasm, it seems the vengeful hand of Nemesis has been at play: what began as a grandiose advance toward liberation ended in a finely woven net of dependencies.

It was not that the longings for automotive freedom were wrong, but that the promises of motorization proved deceptive. The automotive compulsion grew alongside the liberation gained from the automobile: even if the desires have been used up, we cannot easily choose to do away with the automobile, because it has been transformed from a luxury item into a piece of equipment presumed necessary for survival. All the doors seem to have slammed shut; none offers a way out of the transit-intensive society. Does then—and this question is asked especially by the young—the future have a chance?

In Remembrance of Time Gained

Of drivers responding to the Allensbach survey of 1981, 36 percent took no great pleasure in driving; they were, they indicated, on the road because they had to be. The enthusiasm has gone flat; the dictate of necessity has pressed to the fore. For many, it seems, the automobile has changed from an article of pleasure to an enforced article of utility.

Whatever the individual motives for owning an automobile, drivers, against their will, are nothing more than the inheritors of the hope of "covering ever greater distances in ever shorter amounts of time" by means of cars.

This prospect, it will be recalled, gave wings to the early "automobilists" and later enticed many to play a trick on fleeting time and obstinate distance by buying an automobile. But success here proved to be a boomerang: the jump on time and distance that car owners once enjoyed has melted away with mass motorization. Even worse: what was once a jump has now become so common that there is scarcely any escape from its domain. Everyone assumes that the other has access to a car and so silently expects auto-mobilization: the school transfers remedial instruction to the afternoons because the teacher has no trouble returning; the therapist sets up shop in a nice area away from the city center because clients all have cars anyway; and the plant demands punctual arrival at an inopportune time because the workers can get there early enough by car. Time has certainly been gained with the automobile, but the gain is no fun if it becomes an obligation. Today's obligations are made of what formerly were desires. What was once a head start has been generalized and incorporated into the rhythm of daily life. In a society whose time regimen is based on the automobile, it is no longer true that people take the car to work; rather, it is the latter that puts them to work.

The time gained, however, has not disappeared without a trace, though one certainly does not find it where one most expects. Contrary to popular belief—and this is proved by a multitude of studies from many countries—drivers do not spend less time in transit than nondrivers. Both groups expend an average of seventy to eighty minutes every day on their mobility. Nor are drivers more frequently on the move; they leave the house slightly less often than nondrivers. Those who buy an automobile, that exalted "time-saving machine" of the early years, do not take a deep breath and rejoice in extra hours of leisure; they just roll over greater distances when they do go out. Rather than saving time, the automobile makes it possible to seek out more distant destinations; its powers of speed are cashed in not for less time on the road, but for longer routes. Having a car in the garage invites one to find a job in the next county instead of at home, or to prefer the club downtown to the local bar. The driver's gaze squints into the distance and selects a destination well over the horizon. The driver's lifestyle consumes space. Whether purchasing some furniture or simply going swimming, drivers, as if in seven-league boots, traverse an ever wider range. Motorization exploded the arena of activity. The time gain is reinvested in longer distances.

Mobility-Consuming Distances

All of this seems fully within the spirit of the hopes vested in the automobile, but in hindsight we can recognize the blind spot in the utopia

of ever-increasing mobility. The places where we meet friends, visit the doctor, or simply buy a loaf of bread have not held still but to a large extent have wandered off themselves. Residential arrangements do not remain the same but grow along with the exploding radius of activity. The city, and the village too, are less concentrated, with the result that destinations once located in the neighborhood are moving out along an ever broader circumference. Whether we want to do our shopping, visit friends, or go to work, we have to bridge longer distances, for the mom-and-pop grocery has disappeared, the friends have moved to satellite cities, and the plant is now on the other side of town.

Life is being broken up into space, because individuals and institutions alike often base their location decisions solidly on the assumption of the automobile. In Hamburg, for instance, between 1959 and 1979, 226,000 people moved from the core city into the suburbs, purchasing proximity to nature at the cost of a longer commute. Things are combined, consolidated, centralized, and rationalized, and shopping centers, like magnet schools, leisure centers, and industrial parks, contribute to the thinning out of neighborhoods, forcing customers out onto lengthy journeys. The cities and rural areas are being reconstructed in such a way that soon everyone will need an automobile. Exploding distances allow for practically no other choice than to live a transit-intensive lifestyle. Everywhere people are traveling farther—between 1960 and 1980, the average distance covered each day rose from 13.2 to 22 kilometers—but whether according to desire and fancy or duty and obligation remains to be seen.

If among these extra kilometers some are made necessary because what was once nearby has now moved away, is it not nonsense to celebrate increased mobility as an increase in the quality of life?

> When the milkman no longer comes to the door, it is a dirty trick to portray the possibility of going oneself to fetch the milk as desirable mobility. And the freedom to choose any conceivable mobility in the exercise of a profession only means that, rather than moving on the labor market, one is instead moved by it, and in the most dreadful way. . . . The supermarket in an open field far from the city first became possible through private motorization; if it did not exist, we would be supplied by private grocers, who are now in agony on account of motorized competition. And so on. The possibility of transportation has become the necessity of transportation. The freedom to change places has produced the compulsion, if you will, to travel to pursue a profession, or to acquire goods, or to do anything else, all of which not long ago was accomplished with a minimum of movement. . . . That Immanuel Kant never left Königsberg in his entire life renders him pitiable to ridiculous in the eyes of our fast-paced contemporaries, because they fail to consider that to stay in Königsberg in the eighteenth century was altogether less tormenting than being chained in the twentieth century to Düsseldorf.[1]

The dream of gaining freedom through mobility thus ends in a vicious circle: one acquires an automobile—one travels farther—important

1. Jürgen Dahl, *Die Zeit*, 1973, no. 46.

destinations wander out of the vicinity—they can scarcely be reached without a car—and so others see themselves compelled to switch to the automobile . . .

A Nation of Passengers and Commuters

The lengthening of obligatory journeys has produced something approaching an anthropological mutation: for a generation now, many have found themselves scarcely able to make it through the day without being strapped to an engine. A new basic need has taken its place next to such venerable ones as clothing, food, and shelter: the comprehensive need for transportation. Such a pass was unthinkable even for our grandfathers, who, unless they lived in a large city, undertook at most an occasional trip by rail but otherwise managed the range of their daily world with the help of horses or their own two feet.

Whether one is rich or poor, whether an automobile driver or a bus rider, it makes no difference. If 77 percent of all people working outside the home in 1982 got to work by means of motor conveyance, then practically everyone has become a prisoner of transportation. Given this fundamental shift, the rumpus between those who champion the private automobile and those favoring public transit seems like an argument over the superior path into the same imprisonment. The traditional leftist utopia of publicly organized transit (preferably free of charge) would indeed be more democratic, but it would result in a sort of democratic despotism: all would be equal in their dependence on a transportation system.

With its rapid development into a means of mass transportation—a decisive transformation—the automobile has lost its one-of-a-kind dignity and become a mere cog in a comprehensive machinery. As a result, its aura as a means to gratification has been lost as well. The final judgment is sober: the private automobile represents merely a mode of access to a social transportation machinery whose logic compels journeys having nothing in common with the pleasure trips of earlier years. Long distances and the accelerated pace of daily life often leave one no choice but to acquire a car. In a society centered around the automobile, the purchase of a car easily becomes a matter of self-defense, a way to avoid—whether on the labor market or in private life—a loss of status. More cars truly do not mean a higher quality of life. How many new registrations in fact signify acts of self-defense, aimed at maintaining one's position, rather than stabs at gratification, aimed at getting one step closer to the good life?

The promises have become obligations, and the one-time instrument of gratification a means of self-defense. The masters of space and time awaken to find themselves slaves of distance and haste.

The Decline of Autonomous Mobility

The more zealously automobile enthusiasts recast the world according to their view through the windshield, the more emphatically is forced to the fore an insight that is actually nothing more than a platitude: in short, even the most passionate driver will sometimes go by foot.

However uplifting sitting behind the wheel might be, once there are twenty-four million automobiles on the road the train of consequences that each vehicle drags with it must be seen vastly to exceed the dimensions of the car itself. Unlike a vacuum cleaner or an electric razor, the automobile is an apparatus whose operation implicates nonparticipants; it produces, as the economists put it, obligatory exogenous effects. Noise, pollutants, accidents, the consumption of space—by now every child can repeat the automobile's litany of sins: no more green on the trees, and frogs end up flat as flounders; lead in the blood and noise rattling the nerves. The dreams of yesterday have produced the nightmares of today.

The polluting of the social environment will eventually catch up with the polluting of the physical environment. Streets disrupt our walks, and intersections annoy our eyes; composure is undermined by the hectic, and the homeland unravels into distances. Making cars also leads to the breakdown of environmental conditions in which a nonmotorized lifestyle flourishes. The compulsion to be on the move has so changed city and countryside that simply being there is no longer any fun. Why else is everybody always on the road?

The Uninviting Here

The domination of distance has brought with it a revaluation of space: the gaze is directed at distant locales beyond the neighborhood, and the immediate spatial world has declined in significance. Yet the attractiveness of the distant is purchased at the cost of a demotion of the near. That which is gained at a distance is often lost close to home: in villages and city neighborhoods the opportunities to shop, to have repairs done, to meet friends, or simply to let oneself be carried along in the movement of the world have dwindled. Instead it has become harder for elderly persons to visit their doctors, children no longer have fields and streams in which to play, and housewives find themselves left behind in bedroom communities.

The "emptying" of the villages and the "desolation" of the inner city have become virtual clichés, formed in the slipstream of the automobile's greed for distance. The part of society that is visible with one's own eyes, accessible on one's own feet, is smaller. Nothing happens in the neighborhood anymore: the corner store has capitulated to the shopping center on the outskirts of town; the local dressmaker has

lost her customers to the department store downtown; people desiring a walk hurry off in their cars to the nature paths; and a driving school moves into the corner bar. The local area, once easily mastered on foot or with a bicycle, thins out and has less and less of interest to offer. The social fabric held together by foot traffic tears apart. Thus we note a paradox: the motorization of society, the project of quick accessibility for one and all, has pushed an important piece of the world away and made it—especially for those who have no automobile—less accessible than before. In parallel with the mobility of the motorized rose the immobility of the nonmotorized.

Yet there is more: the immediate vicinity, with its nooks and alleys, its stubborn particularity, is blocking the way. It puts a brake on the speed of those who, exulting in motorized power, want to rush along the fastest route to their distant goals. Precisely where the neighborhoods are tailored to the short and winding paths of pedestrians (which was, indeed, the point of the medieval city structure, with its tight network of narrow ways), that is where things are excavated, shoved aside, evened, and unified, until the village green is made into a thoroughfare, and the beer garden becomes a parking lot. Penetration in the straightest line possible is what counts. War has been declared on the niches and yards, the narrow streets and little squares, on those places where the subtle texture of neighborly relations makes its architectural stand. For the gaze greedy for distance, the living space of the immediate vicinity degenerates into mere thoroughfares, into a dead space between the beginning and the end; the point is to overcome this space with the least possible loss in time.

The results of this rage for passing through are everywhere visible. On streets that, not so long ago, were graced with trees and lined with little shops and cafés, populated with playing children and chatting neighbors, dozing grandparents and busy passersby, now there is tin, concrete, and endless tumult. The space available for children in particular has been reduced so drastically that today the order "Go to your room!" has largely replaced the earlier "Go outside!"

Urban living spaces have become transit strips with waiting areas. Built in the name of forging quick connections between people, through roads have led instead to separation. Because each new thoroughfare cuts not only through residential areas, but also through contact networks, it can become an unsurpassable hurdle, especially for children and the elderly. In any case, main arteries accelerate through traffic at the expense of pedestrians and bicyclists, who have to look for overpasses and wait for traffic lights to change. In addition, of course, the inhabitants are left with noise, filth, and the increased risk of accidents, not to mention their justified complaints over the modern form of land theft: in 1974, 14.5 percent of the total area of Frankfurt was given over to traffic, as opposed to 6.9 percent in 1950. Thus is the immediate vicinity placed in the service of distance and degraded into a space for transit.

Who owns the roads? When this question was decided in favor of the automobile in the first decades of the century, no one could have known that one day the car's dominance would be poured over the streets in concrete. As long as only public ordinances maintained the primacy of the automobile, as long, in fact, as the naked power of the engine paved its own way, this dominance was controllable. But today, now that it has been institutionalized in expressways and residential structures, that dominance seems almost natural—indeed, some streets are no longer fit to be anything but a space devoted to transit. Not only are the nonmotorized not allowed to appropriate the street space, but—more portentous yet—they are no longer *able* to. Where space is carved up according to the automobile's demand for passage, little is left for the pedestrian to experience, see, or do. Space conformed to speed destroys space conformed to the pedestrian.

Pedestrians (and bicyclists) love the minor and incidental. They feel good where the buildings wear different faces, where the eye can wander over trees, yards, and balconies, where there are people to meet or watch, where they can linger, join in, and get involved, where a multitude of impressions and stimuli can be had along their short way. The area one can cover by foot corresponds to space that is closely knit, multifarious, and rich in events.

The situation is wholly different for drivers: they hate surprises and demand predictability; only drawn-out monotony gives them security; only large billboards can capture their attention; only straight, broad, and uneventful routes guarantee them a quick passage without interruption. The car driver tolerates variety only in the rhythm of kilometers, whereas for the pedestrian, space made to conform to speed is faceless and boring.

The automobile contributed significantly, of course, to the ruination of the structural and social "ecosystem" in which pedestrians and bicyclists feel at home. The pedestrian needs a thick, intertwined, even entangled locale. It is not without reason that places built by their inhabitants to their own measure often resemble labyrinths—one thinks here of a Moslem medina or a medieval city. The labyrinth is the ideal structure for a people who rely only on the power of their own legs: it encompasses in the narrowest possible space a multifaceted world and creates security for those who spend their daily lives there (if confusion for strangers).

The opposite of the labyrinth is a space planned for the automobile; with a priority on rapid through transit, no environment hospitable to the pedestrian is possible. The most decisive consequence of motorization is the destruction of the vital basis for nonmotorized movement—and this goes for the all-around "clean" car as well. As a saying current in Los Angeles goes, "Pedestrians are people on their way to or from their cars." The automobile has arranged for itself a radical monopoly,

one that causes not other firms, but entire ways of life to disappear. "This profound control of the transportation industry over natural mobility," Ivan Illich wrote in 1974,

> constitutes a monopoly much more pervasive than either the commercial monopoly Ford might win over the automobile market, or the political monopoly car manufacturers might wield against the development of trains and buses. Because of its hidden, entrenched and structuring nature, I call this a *radical monopoly.*[1]

Those in the Shadows . . .

The right of unfettered movement has, in the wake of motorization, been transformed into an obligation toward transportation. Indeed, transit-intensive distances and the uninviting here have created an environment in which the nonmotorized can scarcely survive. But what happens to those people?

To be sure, individuals without a car are not well off: they have the choice of either taking the time and trouble to use mass transit or not going anywhere at all. Many a grandpa in the countryside will just shrug his shoulders in resignation when he wants to buy shoes or visit the doctor. Lacking a car, he has only the unpleasant alternatives of rocking along in a bus for half a day or just staying home. Not much is available within the range of his own legs, and important destinations have been pushed too far from home. Those without an automobile find their power over the space for which no car is needed devalued, while their access to the space outside this narrow range is withheld. Motorization has created a new form of inequality.

In a pedestrian city in earlier years, say Tübingen in the nineteenth century, just about everyone but the lame had the same power over space, because all—with the exception of coach owners, and even there the discrepancy was not so great—were subject to the standard set by their legs. With motorization, the dominant classes acquired another means of exercising power over space, and accessibility—formerly generally available—became a scarce good that could be had only through the purchase of transit kilometers. Thus was laid the foundation for transport-based technological inequality: the better off grabbed the newest means of transportation more quickly than the less prosperous could keep up. The gap between the privileged and the unprivileged widened—to the increasing disadvantage of the nonmotorized because, in the struggle between the two groups, autonomous mobility was the inevitable victim.

1. Ivan Illich, *Energy and Equity* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 45.

For those who insisted on relying on their legs, the imperialism of the motor soon demonstrated their handicap. A reporter detailed her bicycle trip through Frankfurt under the title "Lost in an Avalanche of Tin":

> The first dilemma [comes] on Berliner Straße at Kornmarkt. Bicycle riders always ride on the right, but the right lane goes around the corner. So it's straight ahead into the speeding traffic of the other two lanes. Ride around the Theatertunnel—a blue sign says it's reserved for cars. The only thing that prevents me being run down by the traffic turning right is braking to a halt. A gravel truck goes by, little rocks flying. . . . I can't disappear into thin air, even if the plaintive drivers seem to be demanding it. So I somehow squeeze into the middle lane, mentally pulling in my head.[2]

In fact, the 1913 call to protest by the Freiherr von Pidoll, who warned that general use of the streets would be destroyed by the monopolistic ambitions of the automobile, had a nearly clairvoyant quality: those who do not succumb to being driven off the streets risk life and limb. In 1980, 56.3 percent of local traffic casualties were pedestrians or bicycle riders; whereas on average only 3 percent of pedestrians came away without injury, 79.5 percent of automobile occupants were unharmed. Reliance on leg power, moreover, is much more in vogue than the view from behind the windshield would like to acknowledge: in West Germany in 1976, 40 percent of all movement from place to place was accomplished on foot or by bicycle (not counting children under ten years of age; should we include them, approximately half of all such movement—including long-distance transit—would have involved no use of motorization).

Why, despite all the dangers and repression, is nonmotorized traffic much more substantial than motorization, in its rapture, suspects? The answer is as simple as it is surprising: only a solid third of West Germans have constant access to a car. In 1978, 18.6 million private automobiles were registered, in a population of 62 million. Although in 1979, 61.8 percent of all households had a car in the garage, many households consisting of a single person or elderly individuals or earning little income often have no horsepower to which to resort. Even in motorized households, not every family member manages to get behind the wheel; children and teenagers are excluded first of all, and not every adult has a driver's license. Moreover, men set the tone with automobiles: only 17 percent of all men had no driver's license, as opposed to 58 percent of women. By including the undermotorized groups in our calculations, we arrived at a simple fact: the majority of the population lives at the dead end of motorization. Those who reap the benefits of acceleration are predominantly employed twenty-five- to sixty-year-old males. Children, teenagers, the elderly, housewives, and people with low incomes profit only marginally.

2. *Frankfurter Rundschau,* 1980, no. 145.

While the motorization wave did substantially overcome class inequalities in car ownership (workers no longer fall dramatically behind civil servants, professionals, or farmers), it nevertheless reinforced a new type of inequality: the one between members of society regarded as productive versus unproductive. Motorized power over space is distributed according to one's proximity to, or distance from, the money-generating production process. Those who do not work in the service of output, well, let them move more slowly. Some are accelerated, others slowed down; time saved for one person goes on the books as time lost for another. The net result might be the same, but the opportunities for mobility have become polarized—and in no sense have they increased across the board. In the myth of the "automotive society," the minority of financially productive people are taken to represent the whole of society. No one sees those standing in the shadows.

Prospects—No One Wants the Blame

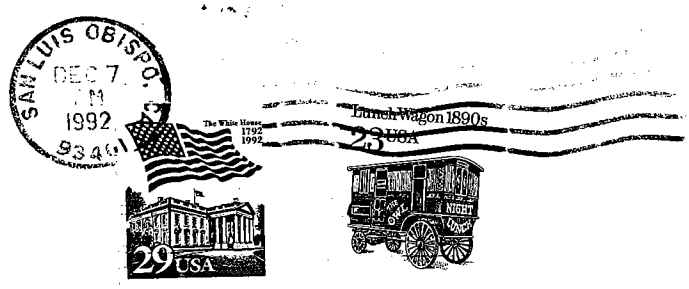
No one willed the outcome, but everyone contributed to its cause. Under the slogan "Freedom of Choice in Means of Transportation," half the population pursued the promises of the automobile and switched. Everyone can give rational reasons for doing so, from Otto Julius Bierbaum in 1902 to an anonymous driver's ed student of today. But no one wanted to contribute to lung cancer, denude the pine trees of their needles, or keep the children locked indoors. Only the advantages count in considerations of private utility; they, after all, are subject to individual calculation, whereas the damages are distributed so thinly that they appear only on other people's accounts. The utilities are individualized, the damages socialized.

Although rational in personal terms, "free choice" proves nearly irrational socially. There is no guarantee—and this is the chronic error in talk of "free consumer choice"—that it leads to the happiness of the greatest number, when each person is seeking to maximize his or her own satisfaction. Even when we find ourselves up to our necks in harmful consequences, a kind of structural irresponsibility blocks the necessary change of course. The only thing those who renounce driving are guaranteed is that they lose an advantage; it is in no way certain that others will follow their example and so cause the damage in fact to decline. Indeed, probably the opposite is the case: if the number

of cars on the road drops, then driving becomes worthwhile for others, and those who have forgone driving have accomplished nothing more than their own loss of social position! That is why so many, in spite of all the disenchantment, remain steadfastly true to the automobile. Individual renunciation carries with it no promise of social effects; at most the automobile opponent clears the way for the automobile enthusiast. Not even the health freak, who scorns pork because it is loaded with heavy metals, shies from taking a short car trip—thereby insuring that foods keep their lead reserves up.

Through the decades, transportation policy has accepted the challenge of accommodating the demand for private automobiles. Until the 1970s no attempt was even made to consider the social rationality of motorization and address the common good through a corresponding policy. Thus, the automobilization project ran aground on its own consequences. Every additional kilometer produces less and less benefit; it compels more people into transit, slows down the nonmotorized, and lets the mountain of garbage pile up. Every additional automobile takes away on one side what it promises on the other; every bit of growth destroys more value than it creates. A rise in the number of kilometers driven per person and per motor vehicle lowers the quality of life another notch—and that condemns more than just the transportation system to the state of a colossal running in place. At the same time, the way back is blocked, because driving has in many ways become a matter of survival. The desires of yesterday rain down on us as the compulsions of today.

The project that began nearly a century ago as a story of liberation is today wedged in between a transportation compulsion on the one side and mounting burdens on the other: it has become the story of dependency at an ever higher price. Waste disposal and remedial costs—from catalytic converters to noise reduction walls to reconstructive surgery—are on a steady rise. It will require considerable expense just to stop any further destruction of the natural and social environment. This dilemma between falling utility and increasing burdens, the dead end into which the promises of automobilization have led, forms the background to the conflict over the future of transportation and society. What should happen? The crisis is giving birth to new designs, which in the debate about the future will focus on far more than just the automobile.



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