

Review Essay

Autopia or Autogeddon? Recent Books on “Car Culture”

Rob Latham

Peter Wollen and Joe Kerr, eds. *Autopia: Cars and Culture*. Reaktion, 2002.

Daniel Miller, ed. *Car Cultures*. Berg, 2001.

Mikita Brottman, ed. *Car Crash Culture*. Palgrave, 2001.

In his editor’s introduction to *Autopia*, a collection of essays on the cultural history of the automobile, Peter Wollen echoes British author J. G. Ballard in posing a critical choice between “Autopia,” an enthusiastic embrace of the freedom and autonomy allegedly conferred by car ownership, and “Autogeddon,” an anxious acknowledgement of “the automobile’s dark side—car crashes, road rage, congestion, environmental damage, oil slicks, urban sprawl, car bombs and many other scourges” (10). To this list of scattered complaints he might well have added the following, more systemic indictments: the unchecked growth of powerful industries (big oil, big steel) at the expense of public transportation, the ongoing atrophy of communal space, and the increasing privatization of social experience—trends initially centered in the West but now global in their scope and implications. If not the essential cause of these massive changes, the automobile was most certainly their key agent, thus suggesting that a study of the motorcar might provide a

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unique platform from which to assess an entire century of cultural transformation.

While the goal of *Autopia* is indeed, as Wollen asserts, “to understand the complex ways in which the car has transformed our everyday life and the environment in which we operate,” an analysis that also involves “assessing the pros and cons of the automobile as a social and cultural force” (11), the book’s composite structure—an anthology of 36 new and reprinted pieces, some full-fledged essays, some excerpted fragments—undermines this impulse to comprehension. A wide-ranging mosaic of perspectives, the book suffers from the typical shortcomings of any such assemblage: lack of integration, unevenness of coverage, and questionable apportionment of space (flaws also evinced by the other two volumes under review here). *Autopia* is further hobbled by its specific format: designed as a coffee-table compendium, with glossy pages and an impressive array of illustrations, it clearly assumes a popular audience whose level of education and attention span mitigate against specialized vocabularies and lengthy analyses. The need to appeal to such a readership likely also explains the book’s title, which plumps for the sunnier side of Ballard’s dichotomy, though there are enough dire portents of imminent Autogeddon in its pages to satisfy the gloomiest of cultural pessimists. What is missing is a methodical examination of how the phenomenon of automobility has restructured social relationships; instead, readers must be satisfied with arresting and colorful snapshots that capture the forces of change at particular moments and in specific contexts.

These snapshots are sorted into four broad categories: “Cars in Culture,” seven chapters covering automobiles in art, literature, film, and popular music; “Cars and Capital,” eleven chapters studying automobiles in different national cultures; “Motor Spaces,” twelve chapters canvassing public sites and private spaces defined or engendered by the presence of cars; and “Myths and Motors,” six chapters treating the automobile’s iconic and ideological aspects. The rationale for this general structure is sketchy, and the editors make no attempt to explain it. The section on “Cars and Capital,” for example, does not focus on the political economy of the automobile, though the range of global coverage suggests a general contrast between capitalist and socialist economies, while the section on “Motor Spaces” provides a hodgepodge of materials on topics ranging from the geopolitics of expressway design to the pleasures of long-distance driving to the frustrations and mystifications of traffic. At times, an item grouped into one category seems more appropriate to another: Michael Bracewell’s essay “Fade to Grey: Motorways and Monotony,” a penetrating discussion of the techno band Kraftwerk, is included in the “Motor Spaces” section presumably because it references the German autobahn system, when it would probably have fit better into the section on “Cars in Culture.” Some items struggle to fulfill the expectations of their categorical assignments: Patrick Keiller’s “Sexual Ambiguity and Automotive Engineering,” included in the “Myths and Motors” section, makes a few vague stabs at an analysis of the gender ideology of car design, when what it really offers is a detailed production history of various European makes and models. Considering the fact that two-thirds of the volume’s contents are newly commissioned pieces, one would have liked to know the basic vision of the project communicated to the

contributors by the editors; absent a sense of these overarching assumptions, the chapters come to seem even more diffuse and impressionistic than they probably are. Despite these organizational problems, however, the materials the book assembles are in the main valuable and interesting, and the text itself is certainly attractively packaged.

The chapters in the “Cars and Culture” section include both broad surveys—e.g., co-editor Wollen’s essay on “Automobiles and Art,” which canvasses avant-garde appropriations of car iconography from Futurism to Pop—as well as more focused pieces, the strongest of which is A. L. Rees’s “Moving Spaces,” which provocatively analyzes how automotive travel, as represented in film, functions as a topographic allegory of narrative movement. Unfortunately, some of these chapters display the sort of vague, breezy generalizations one might expect from a coffee-table tome: for example, E. L. Widmer’s “Crossroads: The Automobile, Rock and Roll and Democracy,” which treats popular music’s response to the motorcar, offers a superficial tour rather than an in-depth investigation. And the pictorial orientation of the volume also likely explains why literature receives such short shrift in favor of film and visual art; only a single, short chapter, Allen Samuels’s “Accidents: The Car and Literature,” covers the topic, and it is rather too eccentric and elitist—Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* providing more of a touchstone than Stephen King’s *Christine*—to supply a reliable guide. But there is an upside to the picture-book format: in addition to the abundant illustrations gracing the individual chapters, each section includes what might be called a “visual essay” consisting of several pages of strikingly vibrant images; in the “Cars and Culture” section, this consists of eleven reproductions of car-inspired paintings and art installations by Francis Picabia, Diego Riviera, Robert Longo, Edward Kienholz, and others.

Sections two and three focus on “car culture” not as imaginative expression but as lived experience. While obscurely conceived, the “Cars and Capital” section contains some compelling material, such as co-editor Joe Kerr’s concise history of automobile production in Detroit, which highlights links between economic conditions and city geography, and the excerpt from Dirk Leach’s philosophical memoir of his stint as a laborer on the Mercedes-Benz assembly line, *Technik*. Yet while these pieces might lead one to assume that capital-labor relations are indeed a focus of this section, thus justifying its general title, the rest of the chapters are given over to treatments of national car cultures—Japan, the Soviet Union, Cuba, China, Romania, India, and South Africa—without any special emphasis on political-economic concerns. (Indeed, Kerr’s and Leach’s contributions may be seen as conforming with this geographical focus in their coverage of the American and German car industries.) Happily, several of these essays are quite strong—especially Ziauddin Sardar’s “The Ambassador from India,” which defends the eponymous vehicle as an emblem of Indian modernity, and Viviana Narotzky’s “Our Cars in Havana,” which ponders the pervasive presence of “vintage” U.S. vehicles in post-revolutionary Cuba. The latter chapter, along with those on the U.S.S.R., China, and Romania (by Michael R. Leaman, Geremie R. Barmé, and Adrian Otoi, respectively), suggests that the automobile, a quintessential icon of Western capitalism, bears with it certain social and spatial relations—most centrally, a tendency

towards privatization that expresses itself in the growth of suburban enclaves—that prove intractable even when imported into socialist terrain. But this judgment must be gleaned from insights scattered throughout the essays; there is no sustained attention to such systemic, structural questions, despite the section’s putative topic.

The “Motor Spaces” section is, as noted above, even more chaotically arranged, though it too contains its share of small gems. These include excerpts from such classic works of cultural criticism as Jane Jacobs’s *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* and Marshall Berman’s *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* dealing with the impact of the automobile on the urban environment. This section, in fact, features the highest proportion of reprinted pieces—seven out of the twelve chapters—which perhaps explains its more rambling feel, though a counterpoint between utopian and dystopian perspectives provides something of an integrating link. On the positive side, Andrew Cross limns the “indelible romantic tone” of the long-distance road trip (250), while Sandy McCreery counter-intuitively argues that traffic congestion “can be a beautiful thing” (311); more downbeat pieces are Ian Parker’s meditation on the fears and loathings of London gridlock and the excerpt from Jay Holtz Kay’s *Asphalt Nation*, which chronicles the geographical and aesthetic “maiming of America” accomplished by the interstate highway system (273). But these tepid effusions and morose ruminations seem shallow beside the more balanced assessments, such as Jacobs’s analysis of how the habits of pedestrians in cities have adapted to accommodate the flow of cars or the aforementioned, brilliant essay by Michael Bracewell, which—like its inspiration, Kraftwerk—celebrates the paradoxical “transaction . . . between irony and nostalgia” (291) that affords pleasure even in the robotic repetitions of driving. For all its scattershot quality, this section offers an engagingly diverse collection of views.

Not so the final section. While it is ostensibly a more cohesive unit, focusing on the symbolic meanings of the automobile, “Myths and Motors” offers a series of curiously uninspired chapters. Exceptions to this stricture are Roland Barthes’s scintillant memo on the Citroën, culled from his 1957 classic *Mythologies*, and a brief excerpt from Ilya Ehrenberg’s neglected 1929 masterpiece *The Life of the Automobile*; but these two pieces make up only five of the section’s forty-plus pages. By contrast, Keiller’s essay, mentioned above, is a dull overview of European engineering techniques spiced up with occasional pseudo-Freudian asides; Grace Lees-Maffei’s “Men, Motors, Markets and Women” is a fairly standard comm-studies analysis of automobile advertisements geared for female consumers; and Karal Ann Marling’s “America’s Love Affair with the Automobile in the Television Age” is as vacuous as its title implies (e.g., “after the privations of the Great Depression, after the hardships and shortages of the war, victorious Americans deserved nothing but the best” [354], etcetera ad nauseam). The treatment of gender ideology in these three chapters never rises above the platitudinous—though Lees-Maffei has the excuse that her analysis is actually centered on cultural stereotypes. The concluding essay by Martin Pawley, a study of the Dymaxion car designed by Buckminster Fuller, is more substantive but seems out of place, not offering much in

the way of an iconological appraisal.

While *Autopia* is basically a coffee-table tome, geared for a popular audience and thus filled with brief and largely undemanding material, Daniel Miller's anthology *Car Cultures* is precisely the opposite: academic in tone and orientation, it offers ten substantial scholarly essays examining the sociological and anthropological aspects of the automobile. Unlike *Autopia*, its illustrations are sparse, though it does contain something of a "photo essay": Jorada Verrips and Birgit Meyer's "Kwaku's Car," which chronicles the piecemeal restoration of a Ghanaian taxi-driver's jalopy. Another key difference between the volumes is *Car Cultures*' welcome provision of a synoptic editorial introduction: Miller's "Driven Societies," which, in its review of methodological debates and issues in the field, is so meaty that it constitutes a freestanding essay in its own right. According to Miller, the main "problem for the study of car cultures, as of culture more generally, is to retain the link between the micro-history and ethnography of experience and an appreciation of the way these are shot through with the effects and constraints of acts of commerce and the state" (17). In other words, the critic must strike a balance between an alertness to the overarching power relations inscribed in the automobile and an assessment of the diverse local uses to which this commodity may be put by differently situated communities. While individual chapters tend to come down on one side or another of this systemic divide between capital and consumers, the book as a whole achieves an admirably dialectical perspective.

For Miller, such a perspective must acknowledge, above all, the "evident humanity of the car," considered not only as "a vehicle for class oppression, racism and violence" but also as a mechanism for "objectifying personal and social systems of value" (2). His title, "car cultures," thus refers to these large-scale entailments of norms and practices emanating from the motorcar as a complex and mutable material object. Such a viewpoint differs radically from both capitalist histories of the automobile industry and vulgar-marxist critiques of the same since, according to Miller, these approaches share a reductionist functionalism that privileges the immanent values of commodity production and exchange over and against the more "intimate relationship between cars and people" (16). What the essays in his book strive for, then, is a perspective that "relate[s] the car to its wider context in political economy . . . but in such a manner that this sheds light upon, rather than being opposed to, the more personal and involved relationship between values of particular groups of drivers or passengers and their cars" (17). If at times the result threatens to tip over into uncritically descriptive celebrations of consumer "resistance" to commodified power, this is a risk worth taking in order to combat the draconian pessimism of most critical evaluations of the culture of automobility.

I must admit, however, that the chapters I found most congenial were those whose tone was colored by this prevailing negativity. Paul Gilroy's "Driving While Black," for example, strives to connect "the uniquely intense association of cars and freedom in black culture" (82) with African-Americans' "distinctive history of propertylessness and material deprivation" (84). While the consumption of luxury cars might seem to confer social status on an otherwise economically disenfranchised minority, this communal self-assertion must be understood in the larger con-

text of “the tacit enforcement of segregated space that is a growing feature of metropolitan life” (85)—a spatial apartheid defined, in no small part, by the forces of suburban privatization enabled by widespread car ownership and use. At the same time, Gilroy reminds us that, while the car tends to endorse “radically individualistic solutions” to entrenched social problems (86), it has also featured prominently in the articulation of black communal aspirations, especially as expressed through popular music, from soul through R&B to rap. Yet a critical appreciation for these positive valences must ultimately be “secondary to our grasp of the destructive and corrosive consequences of automotivity and motorization” for minority communities (87). This essay—the best in the book, in my view—establishes an ethical-political benchmark against which the more positive readings of “car culture” must be judged.

Generally speaking, these affirmative treatments manage to escape some of the more stinging strictures of Gilroy’s analysis by focusing on car cultures outside the United States, where the hegemonic character of American-style automobility is tempered by local forms of appropriation. Two essays focus on Scandinavia—Tom O’Dell on “Modernity and Hybridity in Sweden” and Pauline Garvey on “Driving, Drinking and Daring in Norway”—while others focus on non-Western cultures: Ghana, in the aforementioned piece by Verrips and Meyer, and two Australian aboriginal groups, in essays by Diana Young and Gertrude Stotz. Ruptures as well as continuities with U.S. models of car maintenance and utilization are consistently stressed, generating a nuanced sense of the global diversity of the automotive ethos. Garvey, for example, analyzes the James-Deanesque “exercises in transgressive daring” (136) that have come to inform Norwegian youth-cultural driving practices, but she also argues for “the socially embedded nature of drunkenness” (137), which makes for nationally specific inflections of speed racing and joyriding. Similarly, Stotz shows how the Nguru Abos of Northern Australia tend, like many Americans, to see the car as metaphorically male, but this perception is rooted in the “Warlpiri exchange system . . . based on a gendered relationship of rights and obligations” (223), not in a Western model of patriarchal technocracy. Perhaps the most fascinating discussion of ethnic adaptation is Young’s treatment of the lifecycle of the car among the Anangu of Southern Australia, where she argues convincingly that motor vehicles reinforce, through their incorporation into religious gatherings and magical practices, a “spiritual connection with the land” (52)—which is a far cry from the West’s longstanding (and much lamented) technological alienation.

The remaining essays focus on particular topics—Mike Michael on road rage, Michael Bull on the car as a mobile audio system, and Simon Maxwell on the ethics of automobile ownership—that facilitate pointed comments on the interplay of domination and resistance in “car culture.” Michael’s discussion, while acknowledging the institutionalized violence cross-culturally immanent in driving, also shows how feelings of anger and frustration are channeled into ethnically unique forms of expression in different European countries. Bull’s essay, which analyzes how drivers construct individualized musical “soundscapes,” concedes that these “aural privatized experiences” are implicated in the “industrialized soundworld” of the culture industries (188), yet he rejects Adorno’s “totalitarian” construction of this relation-

ship (191) in favor of a “more dialectical process in which drivers actively construct their experience[s]” (200). I find the latent utopianism of Bull’s argument unconvincing, but he deserves credit for shedding light on an undeniably popular function of the car—as a mobile concert venue—that has received scant attention in the critical literature. Perhaps the most fully dialectical treatment in this group of essays is Maxwell’s, which analyzes how consumers “reduce anxiety and guilt” (206) regarding “the social and environmental consequences of increasing levels of collective car ownership and use” (220) through a negotiated ethics that stresses individual thrift and altruistic concern for others. Maxwell’s model accommodates both the negative dimensions of car culture—its misuse of natural resources and privatizing deformations of social space—alongside its more affirmative possibilities: the “positive social frames of meaning of car use associated with care and love for immediate others, as well as care for others within wider social networks” (217-218). Unfortunately, his method seems to me unsound—a psychoanalytically-inspired ethnography that expatiates rather too ambitiously from a limited sample of banal observations.

What *Car Cultures* shares with *Autopia*, above all, is a concern to balance the utopian and dystopian trajectories immanent in the ongoing globalization of automobility. Given that driving provides one of the most intimate and intense technological experiences available in everyday life, it is not surprising that attitudes towards the car—both scholarly and popular—should have come to reflect our general ambivalence about the powerful machines that define and structure our world. The third book under review here, Mikita Brottman’s anthology *Car Crash Culture*, pushes this ambivalence to the very limit: like J. G. Ballard’s notorious 1973 novel *Crash* which has so clearly inspired it, the book tackles the theme of automotive accidents in a manner that is at once cautionary and celebratory. From Kenneth Anger’s “Kar Krash Karma,” the gleefully trashy exposé on celebrity deaths that opens the book, to Gregory L. Ulmer’s “Traffic of the Spheres,” the playfully postmodern proposal for a public “MEMorial” to car-crash victims that closes it, the volume manages to sustain a paradoxical attitude towards its central subject, critically arraiging the inherent hazards of automobility while at the same time reveling in the breathtaking power—even the quasi-sexual ecstasy—of the crash. As a result, it is an altogether more shocking—and entertaining—book than either *Autopia* or *Car Cultures* could hope to be.

It is also more imaginatively organized, with 28 chapters of new and reprinted material divided into five broad sections: “Car Crash Contemplations,” six meditations inspired by specific wrecks, both famous and obscure; “Car Crash Crimes,” six pieces canvassing the gruesome forensics of accident injuries; “Car Crash Conspiracies,” four essays spinning elaborate intrigues out of literal or figurative automotive deaths; “Car Crash Cinema,” five studies of narrative and documentary films dealing with collisions; and “The Death Drive,” seven probings of the public culture—the mythic and political aspects—of the crash. The book opens with Brottman’s long and fascinating introduction, which begins with an anecdote relating her own car accident, when she was a graduate student vacationing in Cyprus, and exfoliates into a searching examination of the psychosocial desires and repres-

sions—hedged around with or shading into “rumors, gossip, voyeuristic fantasies, private nightmares, conspiracy theories, and allegations of cryptic skullduggery” (xxiii)—informing the phenomenon of the crash in Western culture. This autobiographical framing of the issue gives the volume a personal charge lacking in the other two books; while it does at times gesture towards a scholarly purpose, including footnotes and other displays of erudition, *Car Crash Culture* is, like *Autopia*, clearly designed as a popular work—though with its sometimes uncouth tone and its provision of gross-out imagery (squeamish readers be warned), it is essentially the campy Gen-X cousin of Wollen and Kerr’s more soberly yuppified tome.

In her editorial conception of the car crash, Brottman casts a wide net, engaging not only literal automotive accidents but all manner of vehicular deaths, from John F. Kennedy’s assassination (covered in Pamela McElwain-Brown’s “SS-100-X,” a study of the Presidential limousine), to a suicide who leapt from the Empire State Building and landed atop a shiny sedan (topic of A. Loudermilk’s “Clutching Pearls: Speculations on a Twentieth-Century Suicide”), to the frequent use of a “death car” by serial killers to kidnap and transport their victims (treated in Michael Newton’s “Highway to Hell: The Story of California’s Freeway Killer”). A central thread in the book’s coverage—taking a page, once again, from Ballard’s *Crash*—follows our culture’s peculiar obsession with collisions involving celebrities, stunning events that loom as “instant constellation[s] of tragedy, sacrifice, mass fantasy, and monumental comeuppance” (xv), according to Brottman. Aside from Anger’s leering overview of the subject, individual chapters consider the deaths of Albert Camus (Derek Parker Royal’s “Rebel with a Cause”), Jackson Pollock (Steven Jay Schneider’s “Death as Art/The Car Crash as Statement”), and Princess Diana (Philip L. Simpson’s “Car Crash Cover-ups”), as well as the near-death of Pope John Paul II (David Kerekes’s “Papal Conveyance”) and the imaginary death of Paul McCartney (Jerry Golver’s “Why Don’t We Make Believe It Happened in the Road?”). Royal’s and Schneider’s essays are particularly valuable in that they speculate convincingly on how the public reputations of Camus and Pollock were transformed by their violent demises. References to James Dean and Jayne Mansfield are, predictably, pervasive; Howard Lake, for example, offers a potent meditation on these (and other) celebrity crash deaths in his “Jump on In, You’re in Safe Hands: Flash-Frames from the Automobile Cargo Bay Experience,” which adopts the point-of-view of the passenger in order to meditate on issues of social agency.

Some of the best—and, alas, worst—essays in the book attempt, as does Lake, to extrapolate the crash into wide-ranging theoretical or cultural allegories. On the positive side, Eric Laurier, explicitly deploying Walter Benjamin’s work on allegory, envisions accident sites as technocultural “ruins” in his essay “This Wreckless Landscape,” while Ulmer’s “Traffic of the Spheres” conscripts Georges Bataille to evoke the crash as a “sacrifice” that exceeds “the conventional capitalist understanding of profit, productivity, expansion, accumulation” (330). Less compelling are Julian Darius’s half-baked reading of the crash as a Christian allegory in “Car Crash Crucifixion Culture” and Christopher Sharrett’s hysterical polemic on the latent violence of the capitalist system, “Crash Culture and American Blood Ritual.” In contrast to these large-scale allegorical arguments, which use the car crash to

generate abstract models, other essays deal with the brute facticity of specific wrecks, in registers that vary from the painfully commemorative (e.g., William Luhr's "Stranger in the Night: A Memory") to the calmly dissective (e.g., the autopsy reports included in the "Car Crash Crimes" section). Indeed, Brottman should be commended for how effectively she constructs a consistent counterpoint between sweeping position statements and narrowly particular case studies.

That said, it must also be acknowledged that *Car Crash Cultures*, like *Autopia*, is something of a scattershot inquiry into its subject. Four of the book's five sections, while imaginatively conceived, lack cohesion—the exception being "Car Crash Cinema," which focuses on a specific medium and a shared set of canonical texts, especially David Cronenberg's 1996 film of Ballard's novel *Crash*. A pair of essays address this movie, and while Harvey Roy Greenberg's "Machine Dreams" and Brottman and Sharrett's "The End of the Road" differ in their judgments—the former seeing the film as an affirmative working-through of pathological desires, the latter as a dire prediction of social apocalypse—both are animated by the homophobic assumption that anal sex, metaphorized as rear-end collision, is a sign of cultural decadence and death. A pair of pedestrian (no pun intended) essays—by Tony Williams and David Sterritt, respectively—examine the accidents that feature at the cores of Jonathan Kaplan's *Heart Like a Wheel* and Jean-Luc Goddard's *Contempt*, while Brottman concludes the section with an energetic deconstruction of the morbid excesses of highway safety films of the 1950s and '60s, in particular the gory classic *Signal 30*. (These kitschy horrorshows seem to be enjoying something of a renaissance these days, as witnesses Bret Wood's recent documentary, *Hell's Highways: The True Story of Highway Safety Films*.) Alas, this collection of essays on film, the most integrally organized part of the book, is also, I feel, its weakest; in fact, the more jumbled and wandering sections provide greater readerly pleasures, perhaps because disorientation and chaos are major aspects of the car crash experience itself.

In conclusion, what are we to make of these three books on "car cultures"? While reams of drivel have to date been generated, on and off Madison Avenue, regarding America's putative "love affair" with the automobile, very little of critical substance has been produced analyzing the car as a vehicle (pun intended) of cultural formation and transformation. James J. Flink's *The Automobile Age*—a revision of his 1975 volume *The Car Culture*—is the only book I know of that addresses the topic with any depth or rigor. This work is still in print and well worth seeking out; a single-author historical survey, it has obvious advantages, in terms of focus and comprehensiveness, over the volumes under review here. Still, all three books I have discussed contain their shares of valuable and insightful material and can be recommended to readers, both scholarly and popular, interested in studies of this ubiquitous, complex, and vexing machine.