Autoeroticism: America’s Love Affair with the Car in the Television Age

There’s something wonderful, disquieting, and, in the end, embarrassing about America’s automobiles of the 1950s: the lunkers, the dreamboats, the befinned, bechromed behemoths that lurked in the driveways of several million brand new ranch houses in the suburbs (because they wouldn’t fit in the garage!). They were the kinds of cars, those bloated GMs, Fords, and Chryslers, that Danny Thomas and Ozzie and Harriet drove on TV. They were the kind that Jim Anderson taught Margaret how to drive, thus precipitating the only spat ever to mar the idyllic domesticity of Father Knows Best; the expensive standing set for the archetypal Anderson house had a blacktop driveway and attached garage right out in front, making the automobile a prominent part of the dramatic ensemble.¹

They were the kind of car that Ward Cleaver, “The Beaver’s” sagacious Dad, parked every week at the curb in front of 211 Pine Street, Mayfield, USA (a suburb of Utopia). The situation comedies were always set in mythical places like Mayfield, part small town, part exotic postwar California subdivision. Perpetually sunny, easy and perfect, the new West Coast way of life soon became the American ideal. The people who lived there apparently thought nothing of driving twenty miles for a routine afternoon of shopping, either. “Their enormous automotive mobility and the decentralization of their shops and playgrounds have tended to make conventional city
Andrew Wyeth has a reasonable claim to be called America’s first suburban painter: like the Andersons’ Springfield and the Cleavers’ Mayfield, his world is neither country nor city. But Wyeth’s Young America of 1950 describes that environment through the image of a boy on a fancy new bike, with whitewall tires and a carrier on the rear fender. Streamers flow from the handlebars. A foxtail tethered to the front axle bobs above his head, a juvenile reprise of the Stars and Stripes that fluttered over six young Marines in Joe Rosenthal’s famous World War II photograph of the flag raising on Iwo Jima. The painting is a sort of peacetime icon of security and abundance: unlike the teenagers of 1945, the boy of 1950 is safe and happy, doing what a kid ought to do. Yet there is something old-fashioned and not quite right about the boy on the bicycle, too. In real life, by 1952 or 1953 (if not before), there would have been new houses in the empty field behind him, and new cars in all the driveways, and he’d have been chauffeured to and from his Boy Scout meetings until he passed the driver’s test. In real life in the suburbs, Mom and Dad would have cautioned him never to ride his bike along the edge of the highway for fear of being run down by a speeding car. Because it is carless, Wyeth’s Young America seems sentimental, nostalgic, and false.3

It was the urbanist Lewis Mumford, addressing an international congress of city planners in 1957, who derided big American automobiles as killers—“fantastic and insolent chariots,” he termed them—and predicted that “either the motor car will drive us all out of the cities or the cities will have to drive out the motor car.” By 1957, however, the American family had already piled into the car and headed for Levittown or Southern California. Desi, Lucy, and the Mertzes from the apartment upstairs drove out to Hollywood during
the 1954–55 TV season, and in 1956 I Love Lucy moved to Connecticut for the duration. Desi became a commuter; the Ricardo family built a barbecue, met the neighbors, and hobnobbed at the Country Club. Perhaps they were lured away from town by advertising that wrapped up family life, suburbia, and new cars in one neat and appealing package. A 1956 Chevrolet campaign made the case for the two-car family with a scene showing a barbecue in progress on an expansive lawn out in front of a double carport somewhere in exurban America: “Going our separate ways we’ve never been so close! The family with two cars gets twice as many chores completed, so there’s more leisure to enjoy together.” General Motors, the company that made the Chevies, was the biggest advertiser of the decade. In 1955 alone, GM spent $162 million to persuade viewers, would-be suburbanites, and the rest of the nation to buy its cars. And in 1956 GM led the Top Ten Advertisers list again, nosing out Ford (number three) and Chrysler (a distant seventh).

The GMs, Fords, and Chryslers of the 50s were the kinds of cars that drove foreigners to exasperated outbursts of envy, so baroque and, well, so American did they seem in their excesses of horsepower and gadgetry. Detroit had lobbied hard for passage of the Interstate Highway Act of 1956, but from the other side of the Atlantic the logic of building huge cars to fill up the freeways created to accommodate a growing volume of same seemed a little strained. In the tighter spaces of a Europe in the throes of persistent postwar shortages, the design critic Reyner Banham recalled, American cars looked “like space ships, or visitors from another planet or something.” The intake scoop on the 1951 Cadillac was the supreme insult: the Caddy was air conditioned at a time when perhaps five buildings in the whole of Britain possessed such amenities. The design historian Bevis Hillier goes so far as to claim that English spies Maclean and Burgess were driven mad by Detroit, that they were propelled into the austere embrace of the Soviet KGB by the sheer garishness of the two-tone family cruiser with 285 horses under the hood. As Europe lay in ruins, the Yanks (who owned three-fourths of all the cars in the world) indulged themselves in a veritable orgy of Naugahyde and power steering. Quite right, what? Any decent chap might turn to espionage under such provocation. “Whilst the Russians had been developing ‘Sputnik,’” wrote a disgusted Banham (before his conversion to heavy-duty glitz during an in-depth study of Los Angeles), “the Americans had been debauching themselves with tailfins.”

The 1956 model year that followed the launch of Sputnik was a disaster for the U.S. automotive industry. New-car sales dipped to their lowest levels since 1948. The Edsel bombed. The economy slid into a recession. Ike’s ad men tried to persuade consumers to step on the gas: “You Auto Buy!” was the official slogan of the government’s psychological offensive against unpatriotic, stay-at-home thrift. The White House seemed unsure as to whether the recession had hurt the car business or vice versa. But the Russian Sputnik made everybody queasy about fiddling with annual model changes, color charts, and cosmetic engineering while the enemy was investing in serious rocketry. The contrast was all the more pointed in that the space rocket had been one of the most prominent motifs attached to the car by advertising. The Olds 88, for instance, was the “Rocket 88,” always paired pictorially with a sleek missile zooming skyward overhead. In the early 50s, the car itself still had a dowdy streamlined shape, all curves and bulges, despite a bumper that resembled the intake duct of a jet-interceptor. But the “Futuramic” engine under the hood went from 135 horsepower in 1951 to 202 (a takeoff speed of 110 miles per hour) in 1955: the Olds fed a growing appetite for speed and performed like rocket long before it actually looked like one.

One memorable advertisement for the Olds 88 even put Mr. and Mrs. America, hats and purses and all, astride a moon rocket, cartoon style. It wasn’t entirely serious. Speed, rocket ships, and their interstellar passengers took on an aura of fantasy and fun. And there’s a greedy innocence about the pleasure cars cum rockets brought to the postwar United States, too, an innocence wasted on censorious English design critics. Rock ‘n’ roll lyrics caught the mood best, as in Jackie Brenston’s “Rocket 88” of 1951 (an R&B song well on its way to rock) and Chuck Berry’s 1955 hymn to speed and freedom and the thrill of the chase:
As I was motivatin' over the hill
I saw Maybellene in a Coup de Ville;
A Cadillac a-rollin' on the open road,
Nothin' will outrun my V-8 Ford.7

Berry was pursuing Maybellene down the highway of desire in an old Ford. Behind the wheel of a 1955 Ford, so the catchphrase went, “you become a new man.” Buick ads—Buicks were often shown gliding among the planets like garish spacecraft—also strove to attach masculinity and sexual prowess to horsepower. Driving a new Buick, read one memorable line of copy, “makes you feel like the man you are.” John Keats, who made a career out of savaging automotive hype in the 1950s, dismissed the wording as “just another way of saying we can’t distinguish between illusion and reality, but that buying a Buick will create . . . the illusion that we really are what we really are.” But a Ford, an Olds, or a Buick was as much daydream as no-money-down, easy-credit-terms dreamboat. If the cars were complex beyond all telling with their Dynaflow pushbutton transmissions, their power brakes, automatic windows, vacuum ashtrays, retractable roofs, and wraparound windshields, the feelings they aroused in driver/owners were straightforward: after the privations of the Depression, after the hardships and the shortages of a war with no new models, victorious Americans deserved nothing but the best.3

Within a year of the Japanese surrender, 12 million G.I.s had been sent home, every last one of them in search of a girl, a car, a new house, and—although they didn’t know it just then—a TV set: the American Dream, what sociologists termed “the standard consumer package.” In 1945, 200,000 new homes had been built nationwide; in 1950, 1,154,000. In 1945, outside of a few labs, there were no television sets in private hands; in 1950 alone, 7,500,000 were sold. In 1945, 70,000 cars rolled off the assembly line; in 1950, 6,665,000. Between 1945 and 1955, the number of registered motor vehicles doubled; in 1955, Detroit shipped 8,000,000 new automobiles to showrooms.9 The good life rolled by on big, soft Goodyear tires. It was the car that fueled the new industrial prosperity, created the suburbs where new houses sprouted like dandelions after rain, and shaped the suburban lifestyle whose manners and mores were codified in the TV sitcoms of the 1950s. The car was the new Conestoga wagon on the frontier of consumerism, a powerful instrument of change, a chariot of fiery desire.

Never one to avoid looking squarely at the human emotions invested in the detritus of popular culture, the novelist Stephen King recently turned his attention to the big American car in Christine. King’s hero, a nerdy tract-house teenager of the 1980s, falls in love with a car—specifically, a red and white 1958 Plymouth Fury. “The new shape of motion! The forward look! Suddenly it’s 1960!” hooted that year’s TV ads. The bonds of affection possible between man and machine had been extolled earlier, of course. During the 1965-1966 season on NBC, the hapless Jerry Van Dyke found himself the owner of a 1929 auto that harbored the ghost of his late Mom, a feminized, gas-powered version of Mr. Ed.10 My Mother the Car was a comedy (or so the network claimed), whereas Christine has sinister, even tragic overtones. So many human feelings have been grounded in the crimson innards of Christine that she becomes an animate being, capable of growing a new bumper at will or sprouting a shiny new grille. But she is also capable of rage and murder and, in a perversion of the symbiotic relationship between car and driver that inspired the de-
signers of the 50s, the emotions of the machine become those of Arnie, her ostensible owner. The possessor is seduced, beguiled, and possessed by the aptly named blood-red Plymouth Fury. 

*Christine* is fiction, but the facts of the car business in 1950s America more than justify the premise. In the 1920s the auto industry had been faced with a crisis: by 1926, according to reliable estimates, everyone who could afford a car already had one, and in 1927 production and sales declined for the first time. The answer was not Fordism—the durable, dependable, unchanging Model-T. No, the solution was Sloanism, or the annual style change named for Alfred P. Sloan, president of General Motors. The object of superficial changes in detail on a yearly basis, Sloan said, was “to create demand for new value and, so to speak, create a certain amount of dissatisfaction with past models as compared with the new one.” In practice, then, a business once ruled by engineering took on the trappings of the dressmaker’s salon. In the late 1950s, in an effort to appeal to female buyers, the design chief at General Motors actually hired a group of women to produce a fashion show of feminized models for the 1959 season, cars with the distinctive colors of a designer line, fur lap robes, built-in cases for cosmetics, and matching luggage. “Beauty is what sells the American car. And the person we’re designing it for is the American woman,” said his counterpart at Ford Motor. “It is the women who like colors. We’ve spent millions to make the floor covering like the carpet in their living rooms.”

When Sloanism began back in the 20s, the notion that a serviceable product could be rendered obsolete by appearance alone was transferred from the apparel of the upper class to the single most important industrial product made in America. With the help of the ad copywriter, status and symbolism became compelling reasons for buying a new car, even though the old, black Ford out in the yard still ran like a top. “The automobile tells us who we are and what we think we want to be,” wrote Pierre Martineau, director of motivational research for the *Chicago Tribune* in the 1950s. “It is a portable symbol of our personality and our position, the clearest way we have of telling people of our exact position.” So the purchaser of an automobile was no longer paying for a mere piece of machinery. He (and, increasingly, she) was buying a brand new life. High style. Sex. Social standing. A rocket to the moon. Dealers observed that members of minority groups, often denied the satisfactions of housing and other property commensurate with their incomes, always bought Cadillacs. “If you’ve earned it, why hesitate?” asked the commercials.

At first, the ad men of the 1920s balked at selling durable goods on the basis of color and cut. Was the old washing machine no good simply because it wasn’t Karnak Green? Was last year’s kitchen range obsolete because it lacked the fashionable applied tracery of the 1927 edition? These ethical objections rapidly faded, however, beside the demonstrable results achieved by Sloan. General Motors adopted the annual overhaul in 1927 and the Chevrolet promptly overtook the Ford in sales for the first time. The advertising that moved the new models was evocative and suggestive. It catered to dreams. GM, for example, invented the two-car family: the man who could present the little woman with her own runabout stood to gain a stature unattainable by those déclassé types with one all-purpose buggy. Even Henry Ford finally joined the parade with a Model-A that came in colors. As the author E. B. White later noted in the pages of the *New Yorker*, “From reading the auto ads you would think that the primary function of the motor car in America was to carry its owner to a higher social stratum, and then into an exquisite delirium of high adventure.” And a miasma of adventure, sexual and otherwise, did hang over the auto salesrooms of the later 1920s like a cloud of high-octane fumes. There were the opulent settings, the bon-ton hauteur, but there were also the legendary Jordan ads in which the roadster became a wild horse, the parkway the prairies of the untamed West, and the New Woman in the driver’s seat a girl who was—ahem—just rarin’ to go. Romance, speed, freedom, fantasy: they all came with the easy-payment coupon book.

The car was always a “she,” too, even after the old Tin Lizzie gave way to her more glamorous competitors. As William Faulkner once observed (and George Babbitt proved), “The American really loves nothing but his automobile.” In 1939 and 1940 the marketing psychologist Ernest Dichter prepared an influential study entitled “Mistress versus Wife” for Plymouth, a new marque intent on finding out
why customers picked a given brand and stuck with it. Dichter recommended using convertibles in Plymouth advertising because, although few conscientious husbands and fathers bought sporty models, most longed to drive one. The typical American male looked upon the convertible as a mistress; "The open car was the symbol of youth, freedom, and human dreams." The sedan—the wife—was sedate, practical, and boring. Hedging Plymouth's bets, Dichter urged development of a four-door hardtop, combining the best features of both. But new product design and serious motivational research among the Big Three were put on hold for the duration during World War II, as auto plants churned out steel helmets and aircraft engines and the styling departments, like GM's pioneering Art and Color Section, turned their attention to camouflage.¹⁴

Nonetheless, it cannot be said that the buying frenzy of the late 1940s, when things finally got back to normal in Detroit, had much to do with compensatory fantasy. Everybody needed basic transportation and everybody bought a car that looked not unlike the streamlined prototypes once displayed at the Century of Progress Exposition of 1933 and the New York World's Fair of 1939. Forerunners of the Las Vegas-style "Motoramas" of the 1950s, the world's fair auto shows of the 1930s had spotlighted "dream cars," models that offered more or less realistic glimpses of future improvements—all in the spirit of making the customer anticipate trading in the model he was still paying for. By today's standards the streamlined dream car was a dignified exercise in modernist design principles, à la Frank Lloyd Wright. Speed was discreetly expressed by thin bands of horizontal fluting applied in triadic clusters. Air was invited to flow smoothly over fluid surfaces that eddied and bulged like the derrière of a Vargas pinup painted on the nose of a streamlined B-24 bomber. If form could not be said to follow vehicular function with any real accuracy, form did help to define function. Auto bodies styled by Raymond Loewy, Buckminster Fuller, and other well-known streamliners of the period (Loewy, Russel Wright, and the major industrial designers were also in demand by advertisers as celebrity endorsers for classy products) intimated that the American automobile was a machine for zooming along toward a crisp, efficient, and thoroughly modern tomorrow.¹⁵

Many of the theoretical considerations that went into the design of automobiles also determined the shapes of trains, submarines, and airplanes. Thus it happened that Harley Earl, head of the Styling Section at General Motors and a former Hollywood customizer to the stars (he did the bodywork on one-of-a-kind jobs for Fatty Arbuckle and Tom Mix) made friends with an Air Force designer who was testing new fighter planes at Selfridge Field, near Detroit. Shortly before the end of the war, Earl and his styling team (Bill Mitchell, Frank Hershey, Art Ross) were allowed—from a distance of thirty feet, under tight security—to examine the twin-tailed Lockheed P-38 Lightning pursuit plane, with its paired Allison engines (built by GM), fuselages, and stabilizing tail fins. According to Earl, who recalled the event in a first-person article for the Saturday Evening Post in 1954, automotive history was made on the spot. "That viewing," he attested, "after the war ended, blossomed out in the Cadillac fishtail
fenders which subsequently spread through our cars and over much of the industry as well. 16

Although aviation imagery had appeared on cars before—Studebakers and Fords of the 40s had propellerlike gizmos in front, revived in the grillwork of the 1950s; Loewy’s 1949 Studebaker would sport engine pods, a prop, and a gun-turret rear window—the pleasing little winglet or hump mounted on the rear fender of the 1948 Cadillac revolutionized the auto business. A housing for the stoplights, it was the first, embryonic tail fin and it was applied to a body that had been roughed out before Pearl Harbor, under the old dispensation of rational, form-follows-function thinking. But subsequent Harley Earl models took their cue directly from the fin. The car became an armature on which to mount a whole panoply of expressive shapes. In time, the car transcended its prosaic function altogether and became a piece of figurative sculpture, a powerful work of art.

The role of the stylist was well understood by the car-buying public and generally appreciated. A Look magazine preview of the 1958 models, titled “The Battle of the Stylists,” explained the size and shape of Detroit’s latest in terms of a twelve-year struggle for supremacy among those who chose the imagery and calculated the proper detailing of the fins. But for all the competition and secrecy, the GMs, Fords, and Chryslers displayed certain common features. “Dramatically larger, broader and lower, our cars are festooned with chrome,” Look announced. “They have almost as much glass as small houses!” The most interesting feature of the preview was a three-page color foldout comparing the Big Three’s tail assemblies in terms of loft, line, and decorative treatment. Function was not at issue. Form was paramount and the reader credited with an expert eye for fin profiles. It was important that, of the major marques, only the ’58 Cadillac retained the fin as a radical design element. Design was important, the source of breathless suspense and an insider’s pleasure in following the trajectory of a stylistic evolution. Yet Look also noted that a small body of critics ridiculed fins, and the stylists responsible for “the luxurious loungemobile,” as wasteful or silly, pointing to the recent success of the ugly little Volkswagen, which never changed.

The nay-sayers had a point. By 1959 the Cadillac tail fin had acquired a life of its own: it towered three and one-half feet above the pavement and terminated in multiple taillights, nasty, fearsome red things, shaped like frozen bursts of flame from the afterburner of a jet engine. And as the back end rose, the front end strained forward. After 1953 all Cadillac bumpers were finished off with factory-fresh “gorp” (a.k.a. superfluous embellishment) in the form of “bombs” or “Dagmars” (so called after the reigning late-night TV bombshell with the single name)—protruding breasts that were utterly devoid of utility and impossible to repair after the most minor of collisions.

Engineering-proud Chrysler, which had shamefacedly entered the tail-fin-and-chrome derby later than the other automakers, tried to justify the more excessive of its appendages, fore and aft, as being “based on aerodynamic principles [that] make a real contribution to the remarkable stability” of the 1959 models. But the competition made no such apologies for art. Lacking any modicum of functional justification, their added hunks of rubber and chrome existed simply to communicate. They were metaphors, analogs. And sold by analogy, the car of the 1950s—a chorus girl coming, a fighter plane going—was a semiotic anagram of considerable interest. 18

As the design historian Thomas Hine has suggested, the doctrine of luxury for all—what he calls “populuxe,” the postwar American Dream—helped to load down the car with an average of forty-four pounds of surplus chrome for the mid-line Detroit product of the late 50s. Whereas Harley Earl’s finny 1948 Cadillac was considered a bit much for the average Joe, by 1955 all of its most gratuitous features were also available on the humble Chevy. The 1957 Cadillac Eldorado Brougham, at $13,074 uninflated bucks, was a mobile seraglio hitched to a dashboard with a built-in tissue box, a vanity case, a lipstick that harmonized with the paint job, and a set of four gold-finished drinking cups. Along with the usual power accessories, deep-pile upholstery, padded interiors, coil springs, and bargelike proportions, the car offered the trappings of kingly ease to a culture that also gave the world the mink-handled beer can opener, the gold-plated charge-a-plate, whiskey-flavored toothpaste (for the morning after), radar-equipped fishing rods, and hair color kits with names like Golden Apricot Delight and Champagne Beige. The cars themselves were the
largest hunks of luxury around, but there were other automotive manifestations of the yen for the posh: the pseudo-aristocratic nomenclature attached to models like the “Eldorado,” dripping with fevered fantasies of gold; the delicious array of car colors that suggested a lush infinity of choices. In *Lolita,* Vladimir Nabokov ridiculed the illusion of choice. Humbert, his hero, tries desperately to identify a pursuing vehicle on the basis of its particular shade of gray but finds it impossible to tell the difference between “Chrysler’s Shell Gray, Chevrolet’s Thistle Gray, Dodge’s French Gray.”

In a 1953 survey of advanced paint-by-numbers kits, with row upon luscious row of color capsules, the design critic Eric Larrabee took note of a trend toward painting trays and wastebaskets and other household items instead of conventional pictures. Like cars adorned with gorp and gold-dipped cups, the kits betrayed a general hankering for decorated surfaces, added embellishment, and visual clutter, a kind of rococo sensibility also tapped by the glittery opulence of Morris Lapidus-designed tourist hotels in Miami, and by multicolored refrigerators “styled” after the prevailing shapes of cars (the classier the appliance, the more closely the decorative metal emblem affixed to the door resembled the familiar Cadillac logo). The refrigerator, in fact, was the closest thing going to the spate of two- and three-toned beauties that George Romney of American Motors dismissed as “Dinosaurs in the Driveway” and that the rest of America bought almost before the latest models had been unshrouded with blood-stirring fanfare every September.

In Harley Earl’s informed opinion, fins and Dagmars and the other stuff caught on because they gave customers “an extra receipt for their money in the form of a visible prestige marking for an expensive car.” Or, as Thorstein Veblen might have put it, the tail fin was the ultimate emblem of conspicuous consumption. “The cars of the 50s were like nothing that ever came off the assembly line before or since,” remarks a sympathetic Detroit-watcher. “They were the stuff of dreams. And the dream was possible for everyone.” Humbert Humbert. Chuck Berry. The family up the block, or on TV.

The content of that classless American Dream was not something that was examined closely at the time, a time when Jim and Margaret...
Anderson occupied twin beds and wore visible foundation garments beneath their TV nightwear. Nor has the subject proved compelling to cultural commentators in the thirty-odd years since the Edsel debacle did in the big car for good. In fact, the combination of sex (the bumpers and radiators: one Chrysler exec said he wanted the front of the dowdy Dodge to project the image of "Marilyn Monroe as a housewife") and aggressive, militaristic violence (those fins, with rows of fire-spitting taillights) hints at certain repellent aspects of the American psyche that neither the women's movement nor recent outpourings of national repentance for Vietnam have done much to alter. Sex and violence for all, served up in a flashy chromium package: the Cleavers and the Andersons of the 1950s led secret lives, infinitely richer than anything Walter Mitty might have imagined. And their cars, the ones with the rocket launchers and the 44-D cups, were first and foremost family cars. The nuclear family of the Eisenhower years apparently came by that title honestly.

If Harley Earl, Virgil Exner of Chrysler, and George Walker of Ford ("The Cellini of Chrome") could not name the national neurosis to which auto styling catered, they understood the outward symptoms manifested in booming sales figures. In 1927 the industry had first turned to the designer when profits fell. During the first week of August of 1953 economists determined that the postwar sellers' market for cars had finally bottomed out. Fortune, in the midst of a self-congratulatory study of the booming marketplace, sounded the first warnings that summer, despite the fact that 1953 had been the second-biggest car year in history. Some dealers were shipping new stock to used-car lots on the sly, the editors reported, and unless families could be persuaded to buy second and third vehicles, a major slump might be in the offing. What terrified those who saw signs of softness in Detroit was recent history. The auto industry had led the nation into the Depression in 1929. Could it happen all over again? Or would gorp make the difference this time around? Would buyers go for hardtops, "extra chrome work, . . . and bumpers to protect your bumpers?"

For the second time, the Big Three called upon the stylists to bail out Detroit with a campaign of "dynamic obsolescence." Fins spawned finlets, Dagmars multiplied, and the auto-buying frenzy of the 1950s commenced, as if on signal. In 1955 new car sales totaled $65 billion, or 20 percent of the Gross National Product. While the figures showed that the public was moved largely (and expensively) by aesthetic and imagistic considerations, and General Motors became the first corporation to earn a billion dollars in a single year by catering to such appetites, traditional tastemakers and intellectuals refused to believe the evidence. "What the motivation researchers failed to tell their clients," wrote the semanticist S. I. Hayakawa, "is that only the psychotic and the gravely neurotic act out their . . . fantasies. The trouble with selling symbolic gratification via such expensive items as [automobiles] . . . is the competition offered by much cheaper forms, such as Playboy . . ., Astounding Science Fiction . . ., and television." But for a decade or so—the lifespan of the
two-and-a-half-ton candy-pink steel space rocket with sexual accessories—Hayakawa and his fellow scoffers were dead wrong. Americans were willing, indeed eager, to spend huge amounts of money on objects that were symbols of their desires, reflections of themselves, expressions of their fantasies. On artifacts that succeeded or failed on the basis of appearance. On wheeled statuary, or what Eric Larrabee and David Riesman called “wildly imaginative metallic sculpture.” On what can only be described as works of popular art in which the nation freely invested a fifth of the GNP.

In the story of Detroit in the 1950s there is an element of aesthetic self-consciousness, a tacit challenge to the self-righteous rigidity of modernist dogma, and the first stirrings of a postmodern sensibility. Consider, for example, the GM Motorama. An offshoot of the old world’s fair car exhibits and the annual luncheons Sloan held for business pals at New York's Waldorf-Astoria during National Auto Show Week, the first full-dress Motorama was presented by Harley Earl in the hotel ballroom there in 1949. Billed as “Transportation Unlimited,” the event set off the most evocative of the company’s “dream cars” with a thirty-five-minute musical extravaganza. Dancers pranced; singers warbled; an MC extolled the virtues of the GM line. Showgirls pointed at the new Cadillac fin. Mounted on turntables, the autos pirouetted beneath colored spotlights. Until 1961 the Motorama (there were eight of them) served as GM’s most effective marketing tool and the scourge of the competition. As Autorama, it traveled from New York to the hinterlands, always greeted by enormous crowds and wild excitement. In 1949–50 the big attraction was a Buick Le Sabre XF-8 with sensors that raised the convertible roof in case of rain and the world’s first wraparound windshield. In 1954 Motorama introduced Earl’s never-to-be-built Firebird, a literal translation of a new fighter jet. But performance and plausibility were not the issues that kept the crowds coming.

The Motorama was a show, an exhibition, a flashier version of a New York art opening on Madison Avenue, the first of the multimedia happenings. As for the cars, people came to look at them in a museumlike environment, not to drive them or see them being driven (many of the non-production models didn’t have motors). They were displayed on revolving pedestals which moved not to suggest the open road but to facilitate a minute inspection of a three-dimensional form from every angle. If the critics Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg had their Jackson Pollocks to look at—frozen action; paintings rich in dark, personal meaning—the rest of America (the 2 million who attended every GM show, at any rate) had Motorama, the art of Neal Cassidy and Jack Kerouac: cars that never moved, two-toned chromium-plated statuary larded with primal symbols of war and lust. A parody of the pretensions of American high culture,
Motorama answered extravagant claims for art with outright extravagance, claims for hidden meaning with overt nods to jets and Jane Russell.

The notion of car as work of art was reinforced in other subtle ways and in other media. The automakers were the TV networks’ biggest sponsors. In television ads integrated into variety shows (“Drive your Chev-rolay, through the USA!” warbled Dinah Shore. “America’s the greatest land of all!”), it was often most practical to present an on-stage Motorama in miniature, with gesticulating models and twirling pedestals. A change from the hard-sell formula of radio ads, TV pitches for cars gained stature from their close association with programming, stars, and an artistic ambience. Julia Meade, Lincoln’s elegant spokeswoman, appeared in the Motorama format in weekly spots on the Ed Sullivan show, for instance, wearing evening dress, describing cars in measured tones, and running her manicured hands over the upholstery. Singer Pat Boone’s standard Chevrolet commercials, filmed on the set of the ABC Chey showroom, were clearly aimed at a younger crowd but opened with a comparable studio shot of a static vehicle bathed in spotlights. Reviewing the decorative motifs peculiar to advertising of the 1950s, Bevis Hillier has noted the regular use of a picture frame to transfer the importance and prestige attached to a work of art to whatever turned up within its perimeter. The Motorama shot—the car-as-sculpture-on-a-pedestal scene—served the same function on television and, eventually, in magazine ads for Lincoln, too. An establishing shot, it was usually followed by a quick cut to film footage displaying the car in motion, almost as an afterthought, or guilty admission that the work of art was also a means of taking Junior to the orthodontist.

Julia Meade was not a typical suburban Mom, either. She was as classy as a Lincoln, as tastefully turned out as any diva on Sullivan’s guest list. And Lincoln made her a celebrity, if not a star, the object of intense viewer interest. In 1953 a Look profile disclosed her behind-the-scenes aspirations to a Hollywood contract, her years of study at Yale’s drama school, and even her annual salary for walk-ons and commercials ($16,000). Meade was also noteworthy as the first example of a TV personality wholly identified with a single product;
Betty Furness’s association with Westinghouse products and James Mason’s soap testimonials on Lux Video Theater would come later. But her greatest claim to fame was her stately presence behind the wheel. It is noteworthy that, in Julia Meade’s segments for Ed Sullivan, location footage of cars rolling down a new California freeway or a suburban cul-de-sac succeeds in making motion virtually motionless. Cars never bob or weave. They never start or stop with visible effort. Only the changing landscape convinces the viewer that Meade and her mink stole are actually speeding toward the Beverly Hills Hotel or some other tasteful destination for the end of the commercial. In part, this technique appeals to a strong customer preference for the heavy, “mushy” car that denies any kinship with the surface beneath it. In part, the gliding motion refers to aerodynamics. The car seems to be a plane, liberated from earthly potholes and sharp corners. But the motionless motion demonstrated was also the aesthetic ideal embraced by the stylists who created the American car.

There were several kinds of TV car commercials on the air in the 50s: the Motorama type; the abbreviated domestic drama (of which more later); the pseudo-documentary; the ersatz “lecture” by an expert (often Truman Bradley, the scholarly-looking host of Science Fiction Theatre). What all these genres have in common is an obsession with design, and specifically with a set of artistic principles the audience is presumed to understand and appreciate. One of Truman Bradley’s outings, a documentary-format ad for the 1956 Chrysler line, contains a sequence in which the driver stops at a suburban golf course and a supermarket. In both venues, ordinary citizens burst into spontaneous tributes to Chrysler styling. It has “The Forward Look of Motion—even when it’s stopped!” exclaim the duffers, while the bag boy at the store notices that the shape of the rear deck derives from the aft end of a jet plane. But even more to the point is the automotive chalktalk invented by Ford Motor. Julia Meade’s husband, a professional illustrator, occasionally appeared with her on the two-toned Chrysler: “The Forward Look of Motion” in suburbia.
Sullivan show, drawing pertinent details of Lincolns and Mercuries. The series culminated in the illustrated lectures by Professor Tom Foldes, “artist, author, educator,” that sold the 1955 Ford.

In these ads, Foldes shows precisely how draftsmanship—design—can make a static form move. Speed lines (the old technique of streamlining) are additive and superficial, he contends, whereas good contemporary design bends the form as a whole toward the image the stylist wishes to create. “The expression of motion though design is the goal of all automotive styling,” he says: this means visor headlights surging forward, a raked-back tail assembly, and a highlight running from bumper to bumper in a smooth, unbroken arc. “When the design of a car expresses its functions forcefully and imaginatively, we derive more pleasure from owning and driving it,” Professor Foldes concludes. The Ford commercial is a stunning fragment of 50s television. For one thing, it is long by today’s standards. Network time was cheaper in 1955 and the audience still had a reasonable attention span. But even given a cultural willingness to stay on the couch, Foldes’s presentation is a remarkably detailed and sophisticated slice of Art Appreciation 101, with its distinction between superficial embellishment and form, and its assumption that genuine aesthetic pleasure is accessible to everyone—and available in the form of mass-market, manufactured goods. Detroit knew that it was selling sculpture and hired experts, like Professor Foldes, to distinguish good art from bad.

This kind of pop-cultural artiness infuriated real sophisticates. While the Abstract Expressionists, by and large, ignored the whole vulgar spectacle and bought foreign cars (though Pollock met his death in an Olds V-8 in 1956), pioneers of industrial design like Raymond Loewy fulminated against the so-called stylists and their “Forward Looks.” In 1955, shortly after his dismissal from Studebaker, where he had been lead designer since 1938, Loewy blasted the industry in an address to the Society of Automotive Engineers. Widely quoted and reprinted, his jeremiad detailed the case against Detroit, whose latest models Loewy called “jukeboxes on wheels,” aesthetic aberrations that masked the workings of the machine beneath layers of tinsel and cheap “flash.” Much of what Loewy said made ethical sense. The weight of increased ornament and big, smooth autobodyes had led to over-horsed engines, rising costs, ruined roadways, and huge fuel bills (although the critic failed to ask why Americans still loved their big cars despite such drawbacks). But Loewy’s real objection to the 1955 models was their shape. “Is it responsible,” he asked, “to camouflage one of America’s most remarkable machines as a piece of gaudy merchandise? Form, which should be the cleancut expression of mechanical excellence has become sensuous and organic.”

Designers like Loewy hated stylists: the very term was a profanity that smacked of crazed whimsicality, of superficial facelifts, of tinkering with decor and the fripperies of fashion while neglecting the deep-down, permanent beauty of art. Henry Dreyfuss, designer of the standard black handset telephone and General Electric’s clean-lined 1930s refrigerators, condemned the artificial obsolescence created by stylists of the 50s as manipulative and wrong because it worked by
"embarrassing people into buying." Automotive styling was a special case, however, because cars were so costly and so vital to the nation's economic well-being. "The engineer has had to take second place to the 'designer' and the market researcher," Eric Larrabee sputtered in his reprise of the 1955 models, "while the auto itself has come more and more to conceal its ancestry in surface transport and to engross a panoply of hitherto unrelated images—of a living room, a jet plane, or even (in certain hard-top models) a bathroom." "Never has it been so easy to identify a make or model, and never has it been so hard to see the basic structure of a car," fumed Industrial Design when confronted with the same crop of Detroit iron. "In defense of [the] riot of color one can say that the '55 automobiles look very much like what they really are—not necessities of life but expensive toys.”

When Detroit replaced designers with stylists, the automobile changed in a fundamental way. It became a "new entity," wrote Larrabee, "which would embody impermanence, escape, mobility.... There was no prototype for this kind of design." It lost its machine-like properties, its own reality. The principle was tacitly accepted that nobody really knew what a car looked like any more, either, so it could assume virtually any form that signified speed, modernity, and a ponderous luxury. The conflicting desires for bulk and for speed gave the automobile an increasingly neurotic flavor as the decade wore on. The messages became unclear. The sensory systems overloaded. And like any business dependent on style and mass taste, the auto industry ran the risk of consumer satiety, boredom, or disgust. Fashions in merchandise change. In the aftermath of the ascetic Sputnik, the sensuous and organic shapes that had seemed so enticing in 1955 looked pretty silly on the 1958 Edsel.

That single phrase—"sensuous and organic"—had revealed Loewy to be a design puritan, morally superior to the herd, the monklike disciple of a Modern Movement which had tried, without much success, to convince people to live in pure white cubes and commune with pure geometry. Although corporate America occasionally succumbed to modernist austerity in the interests of economy and an efficient image, Americans resisted the incursions of modernism into their private lives, into the places where their hopes, desires, and fantasies grew lush, convoluted, and profoundly sensuous. They liked the new, efficient rectangular dinnerware best when it was enlivened with flowers or boomerangs of turquoise and gold; the squared-off ranch house on a slab when it was warmed up with Early American accents (Ozzie and Harriet had an American eagle emblazoned on their TV fireplace); portable TV sets with two-toned cases; a car when it came with a built-in vanity, a matching lipstick, Dagmars, and fins. They liked complexity, lots of stuff, expansive scale, everything but the kitchen sink. In a backhanded way, their taste was closer to Jackson Pollock's than to Raymond Loewy's. And the car was its most public expression.

Detroit, or its hirelings in the ad game, appreciated the humor of the "loaded" model: the multicolor bus, a home on wheels, with extra exterior detailing and every interior amenity—everything but the kitchen sink. That sink is the visual punchline of a drawn-out commercial for the 1955 Dodge station wagon that takes the form of a situation comedy, an episode of Danny Thomas's Make Room for Daddy. The family finds itself in the woods for the day, although Daddy would prefer to be back in town showing off the new car to the neighbors. The children, Rusty and Terry, pick wildflowers and discourse precociously on the new styling features of the Dodge. Finally, Daddy decides to load up on flowers, too, to bring the excursion to an end, and winds up with an armful of poison sumac. But he has the last laugh as he opens the back of the Dodge and out pops a big, double sink.

Even when the Danny Thomas show is not the point of reference, the car is still shown in a familial context, closely related to the conventions of the sitcom. A 1954 commercial titled "Family Argument" pits the typical American Dad—bluff, stubborn, smarter than he lets on; a Stu Irwin type and a veteran of earlier campaigns for wall-to-wall carpeting and a fur stole—against the wiles of his nearest and dearest. The family gathers for a council of war around the console-model TV in a suburban living room. Junior is adamant, Sis seductive, and even Martha (solid old Martha) is convinced that the time has come to put "Jezebel" out to pasture. So they all go, en masse, to pick out an automobile that becomes part of the family unit,
a statement about its status and its collective self-image. And it is tacitly assumed in the ad that everybody will drive the car, a factor which may contribute to the babble of symbolism loaded on its rapidly swelling chassis.

The Thunderbird and the Maverick achieved later success at smaller scale as personal vehicles, like the British or Italian sports car, whereas throughout the 50s, the standard American car was a family car. Foreign models became chic in the mid-50s, as second cars. Before the decade was over, a million small autos had been imported and sold; many to successful men in gray flannel suits who parked them at suburban train stations by day. Or to readers of the new Playboy (founded in 1953), a magazine obsessively concerned with jazz, hi-fi sets, and hot sports cars. But American cars eschewed both the playboy image and any exclusive sense of identification with men. Rarely, in fact, do stereotypical heads of households drive cars in commercials, and when they do, Dad shares time with Mom. Putting a woman behind the wheel—her usual motoring outfit, which consisted of a hat with a veil, gloves, and a crisp print shirtwaist, was exactly what June Cleaver wore to PTA meetings—justified the purchase of power steering and power brakes. “I drive just as well as my husband in our new Olds,” chirps the perky housewife in a make-believe TV interview with “Roving Reporter” Bob Lamont. “You certainly look lovely after a whole day of driving around town,” he coos. The perennial hat, generally worn in a convertible model, was there to show that the new car dispensed with every hazard, every inconvenience, including the errant breezes.

In an otherwise damning look at the American car, the British social commentator Ashley Montagu did concede that the big auto “compensates for the weakness of the driver while endowing him with power that he can obtain in no other way.” But the most graphic expression of this automotive omnipotence was not the King of the Road ensconced behind the wheel. It was the image of the little woman in her hat and gloves, with one dainty foot on the accelerator and a finger on the push-button transmission, bound for the shopping center, or parallel parking like a man with the help of power steering. Jokes about women drivers became a staple of television comedy as housewives were forced to commute long distances themselves to run the family errands. Detroit dimly sensed that women played a major role in the purchase of their products. GM’s 1954 Motorama included kitchen appliances as a sop to feminine interests, for example, and all the automakers implied that color and design changes catered to the ladies’ eye for fashion. No wonder the car was a “she,” especially when contempt for the annual model change was on the agenda. John Keats compared the “sow-fat” American passenger car of the 1950s car to a nagging wife who, “with all the subtlety of a madam affecting a lorgnette, . . . put tail fins on her overblown bustle, . . . lifted her face—expensively—from year to year; incessantly demanded new gauds and different colors, developed ever more costly eating habits, [and] threatened to break the family budget.”
Teenagers, whose schemes for extracting the keys to the Plymouth Fury from Dad's pocket formed a staple of sitcom humor, rarely appeared in advertising because, it was thought, they neither bought new cars nor (except for Sis) determined the family's buying preferences. There were singular exceptions, however. Chevrolet's 1955 V-8 was the first domestic model pitched as a "hot car" to a youth market made up of boys with hot dates. Pat Boone, the wholesome, all-American alternative to Elvis Presley, did a weekly TV show for Chevy in the late 50s, when the automotive slump had forced complacent carmakers to look for new buyers. Teens with afterschool jobs and the college crowd were worthy targets, as Volkswagen had proven with its witty, deglamorized emphasis on economy and reverse snobbery. And in time, research proved that adolescents were important family trendsetters, with a relish for the slightly unconventional. Given half a chance, any California teenager would chop and stretch an old prewar Ford until it looked like new Valiant with a hangover. In Rebel Without a Cause (1955), set in Los Angeles, James Dean drove a customized 1949 Merc, "channeled almost beyond recognition. A souped-up version of adult tastes for gold, plush, and sparkles, the aesthetic of the rebel ran to chrome, furry dice, leather, and candy-coated paint jobs. Dean died in a little car, a foreign car, a month before the movie opened. It was a silver Porsche Type 500 Spyder, customized with racing stripes and the words "Little Bastard" painted on the rear end.36

The Dean smashup might have served as a warning against putting too much stock in kids' fascination with little cars. Instead, the wreck became a teen icon that ponted the eventual smashup of the family gas-guzzler. But the big car did not succumb to its own wastefulness, as might have been expected. No. It was a shift in taste and aesthetic judgment—the perception that American cars were ugly—that did in the loaded model with fins in 1958. The industrial designer Carl Sundberg quipped that "panning the American automobile has become a pastime that threatens to replace baseball as a national sport." George Romney of American Motors, which was tinkering with smaller cars, could not "recall a period when... car design was subjected to as much lampooning in newspaper and magazine car-
toons." The ugliest of the lot was the 1958-model Edsel, unveiled on September 4, 1957, after an unprecedented media blitz. Rumor had it that Ford spent $10 million on "tease" advertising for its first all-new car of the postwar era. There were planted "news" stories designed to whip up interest, too. The sociologist David Wallace, director of market research for the Edsel campaign, let the New Yorker publish his thirteen-month correspondence with poet Marianne Moore in aid of a suitable moniker (she suggested "Mongoose" or "Pastelogram"); the company eventually named the vehicle after the founder's son. Three million gawkers turned up at Ford showrooms all across America on opening day and 6,500 cars were sold. And then the ridicule began. Car thieves wouldn't steal one, they said. The distinctive oval grille looked like an egg, a toilet seat, an unmentionable portion of the female anatomy. The Edsel looked like an Olds sucking a lemon.37

It was ugly. Or if it failed to communicate much of the "personality" Wallace had endeavored to attach to the design through consorting with poets: brash, ambitious, highly visible. Or, perhaps, those were the very qualities that had begun to offend the discriminating eye in the fall of 1957, when the Edsel and the sack dress were both greeted with hoots of derision. Wallace's mind, the Edsel was the ultimate family car, neither masculine nor feminine, "the smart car for the... professional family on its way up." The car that "Looks Expensive But It Isn't," in the words of a slogan that baldly acknowledged the importance of status seeking. But by seeking to appeal to everybody, in a showy flourish of chromium ovals, the Edsel satisfied no one in particular. Teenage girls adored Elvis and the sack dress and boys in VWs, the sports car became the hallmark of youth and freedom, but the Edsel was just a blob of colored steel that added little panache to a trip to the supermarket. It was dull and ugly.38

The era of the family car was over, and its heyday is still a puzzlement. But it seems to have stood for family, house, and aspirations, all at the same time, with its welter of additive features. In contrast to the personal vehicle that came to replace it, the big multipurpose car pointed to a moment of real communal sensibility and a concern for making public statements about one's private life. Thanks to Maidenform bras, women looked a lot like the cars they tooled
around suburbia in, and so did the penile rockets being tested by Chuck Yaeger and America’s future astronauts—two sets of gender markers for every family car. His ‘n’ hers. Male and female, sensuality and violence, domesticity and high adventure, entertainment and economics, waste and technological efficiency all came together in blatant, unprecedented, and highly original configurations in gas-powered symbols that were the objects of minute scrutiny. The average American had never taken a greater interest in how anything looked, and why. In how it made the people who owned it and used it feel, and those who only watched it from the curb.

Or saw it on TV. When Elvis appeared on Ed Sullivan’s show for the third time, in January of 1957, he thanked his fans profusely for the cache of birthday and Christmas gifts he’d recently received and joked that he’d like to have given each one of them a new Lincoln in return, “but they wouldn’t sell us that many.” The remark was a graceful nod to Sullivan and his longtime sponsor. But there was more to it than that. Cars and their imagery, the display of the car, and the act of buying an automobile (and then giving it away, sometimes) had an abiding significance for the young King of rock ‘n’ roll. His “old” car, according to a 1956 article in Life, had been a Lincoln, fresh from the assembly line. He drove it for three weeks, parked it on a Miami street, and came back to find the pastel paint job covered with messages scrawled in lipstick by teenage girls. So Presley traded the dirty car in on a Continental Mark II and the Lincoln ended its days in the front window of the dealer’s showroom, still encrusted with love notes.39 Earlier that year, at age 21, he had already bought three Cadillacs—a canary yellow one, a convertible in pink and black to match his current wardrobe, and an all-white Eldorado—and a new tract house for his parents; the acquisitions attested to his success in a highly specific way, given the aspirations of families everywhere for a seven-room suburban ranchhouse and a big, new car. Despite the obvious prestige of Julia Meade’s Lincolns, the Cadillac was the big-car paradigm, the pinnacle of luxury and “visible prestige marking” to which all the others feebly aspired. The boy who bought a Cadillac, or three of ‘em, had made it in terms that respectable American mothers and fathers and their offspring could understand.

The number of Cadillacs that stood in the Presley driveway at any given moment in 1956 was difficult to ascertain. Some counted four, from which fans surreptitiously harvested the dust. Others thought they saw five, plus the Continental. One of the only times Elvis did anything impolite or less than respectable in his very public private life of 1950s stardom was a scuffle with a Memphis service station manager who told him to move his $10,000 Caddy because a crowd collected when the singer stopped for gas. Edd Hopper, the irate gas jockey, emerged from the fracas with a $25 fine and a black eye. It wasn’t smart to mess with Elvis Presley’s cars. They drew crowds wherever he went, but they meant something personal and private to him. On September 3, 1956, after he signed his record contract with RCA and made his debut appearances on network TV, the first thing Elvis bought with his newfound wealth was a pink Cadillac.40 Back
at Sun Records, a year earlier, he had recorded a song about a poor country boy with an upwardly mobile girlfriend. Like Chuck Berry’s Maybellene, observes the cultural historian Warren Belasco, Elvis’s girl in “Baby, Let’s Play House” is in the process of running away. Maybellene drives a Cadillac Coupe de Ville. Presley’s “Baby” is making her escape in a pink Cadillac, just like the one he would shortly buy. Women and cars were both elusive prizes, just beyond the grasp of a singer who drove a truck for a living. The pink Cadillac is a blatant, look-at-me symbol of having made it. It is also distinctly feminine, a love object, a sign of a ravishing desire to succeed, in the most conventional of ways. Elvis had lots of cars, and they came in outlandish colors, but numbers and colors were all that distinguished the quality of his longing from anybody else’s. This wasn’t life in the fast lane, either. Gladys Presley didn’t drive, so the candy-pink Fleetwood sedan he bought for his mother with his first big paycheck sat in the driveway, like a car on a pedestal in a TV ad, going nowhere in fact, but bound for dreamland nonetheless. A two-tone love trinket with white sidewall tires. A testimonial to love and sex, money and home—and family. A beautiful statue. A monument to the tragedy of dreams come true.41