

The dream merchants



“You are never dedicated to something you have complete confidence in. No one is fanatically shouting that the sun is going to rise tomorrow. They know it’s going to rise tomorrow. When people are fanatically dedicated to political or religious faiths or any other kinds of dogmas or goals, it’s always because these dogmas or goals are in doubt”

Robert M. Pirsig

Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance

THE CAR INDUSTRY sells dreams to willing buyers. Dreams of independence, dreams of beauty, dreams of power & glory. When you look at the costs to the individual, to society and to the planet, you quickly see that it’s a rather tarnished dream, yet its grip is as strong as ever.

Here’s the dream that a car offers: “I can make you a better person than you are now.” Despite the traffic jams, horrific accidents and environmental costs, people still fall under this spell.

This spell dulls the intellect of driver and politician alike. Young men climb into cars and feel invincible. Car ads

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often show vehicles being used in a way that would get you prosecuted if you drove that way in real life. Cars capable of doing 200km/h are sold every day, yet the legal speed limit is half of that.

Individual responsibility is a great idea, but no one in their right mind could approve of an industry that actively promotes the very sort of driving which is known beyond doubt to cause accidents.

Car companies sell illusions. In order to sell illusions, there has to be a public willing to buy them. Read the average car magazine, see the ads devoted to things like radar detectors which encourage people to cheat speed



laws. Read the rationalisations: ‘cars don’t kill, bad driving does’.

The dream has many willing buyers. Luxury cars are sold to people who would very much like to believe they are better than average. All the high tech vehicle features such as traction control are as much an ego statement as a serious attempt at road safety.

Any attempt at regulating the car industry or its enthusiastic supporters is met with an incredibly childish response.

Ralph Nader, the man credited with saving millions of lives on American roads, is inevitably portrayed as a fun-spoiler. Attempts to enforce speed limits, the wearing of seatbelts, or virtually any restriction on the rights of drivers to drive anywhere at any speed are often met with howls of outrage by driving enthusiasts.

The reason for people’s strong response has got little to do with speed limits or safety devices. You can sum up the entire dream world of the motoring enthusiast in four words: *‘don’t fence me in.’*

Everyone, from the Dalai Lama downwards, has been fascinated by cars at some stage. It’s a healthy and natural curiosity and a manifestation of the human pursuit of happiness.

However, as with sex, desire is healthy, obsession unhealthy. Everything we do deeply affects others around us, and when our interest in cars moves into a ‘freedom at all costs’ obsession, the rest of the world tends to suffer.

It’s not just a small group of nutters who are fascinated by cars, however. Cars may offer only fantasies of power, but there’s no shortage of customers

Given the shoddy, unsafe rip-offs that have characterised the car industry almost from the turn of the last century, you’d think that car enthusiasts would hate the people who foist this trash on them.



The police punish motorists for behaving in exactly the same manner as the driver on the car’s advertisement

But no, just as junkies see the pusher as their best friend, car freaks see the car companies as some kind of well-motivated friend who has their best interests at heart.

Motoring journalists strain to say positive things about new cars and rarely seem to notice the faults that everyday motorists have to live with. And after a while motoring writers’ articles start to bear a curious resemblance to the shiny ads sitting on the page next to them.

Writers are dreamers too; most car reviewers would be better described as *racing journalists*. Everything they write is judged according to whether it would make a good racing car – one cam is bad, two cams are good, four cams better still.

A car that reliably transports a family to work, school and on holidays is always called *boring*.

According to most reviewers, a good car is one that can out-accelerate a Ferrari and corner at three times the legal speed limit. Just what the hell has that attitude got to do with everyday motoring?

We don’t have a problem with people who enjoy racing cars for a hobby, provided it’s done safely. But who gave them the right to judge cars on behalf of the average motorist?

Further, the exciting cars are also generally either expensive or unreliable, or both. When the reviewers are raving about the latest Alfa Romeo sportscar, it never occurs to them that this dream car may be some poor sod’s nightmare in two years’ time.

Some cars run well for hundreds of thousands of kilometres, some don’t.

Whereas most reviewers are concerned with a vehicle when it is shiny and new, we are concerned with the car both when it is new, and when it is old or ageing.

Some motoring journalists are just reporters doing their job as best they can. However, many motoring journalists start out as racing enthusiasts who write about their hobby and then gradually mutate into little pilot fish who willingly swim alongside the sharks that run the car companies. It’s never far from their immediate consciousness that if the car companies die, they die too.

What is truly amazing is how blind enthusiasts are to the sheer nastiness of the car industry. Aside from the obvious links between the German car industry and Hitler, the Ford Motor Co, General Motors and a host of American car magnates were active supporters of the Nazis.

The American Great Lakes were virtually killed dead by industrial pollution, much of it caused by the companies that chrome plated all those lovely 1950s car bumpers and hood ornaments.

Those who warmly greet the news of a new model from Ferrari and General Motors should remember the utter disregard both Ferrari and GM held for their customers.



Enzo Ferrari – another Fascist party member – saw his customers as rich idiots who were there solely to finance his racing activities. Many new Ferraris were knowingly sold in appalling condition.

Anyone who seriously believes that car companies can be trusted to regulate themselves should search the web for the article *Pinto Madness*.

The reason people are so blind to the bad points of cars is, quite simply, *romance*.

It's like the cowboy myth. Cowboys bore little resemblance to the characters in Westerns; they led poorly paid, miserable lives and often died young from ailments like infected compound fractures and influenza.

And yet the image people want is of happy cowboys sitting around a campfire playing the guitar and singing *Home on the Range*. The myth goes on because people want it to go on.

The same applies to cars. We don't see the steel, the polluted factories and the road carnage; we gaze at the sensual red Ferrari and feel the myth of freedom.

Unfortunately, the freedom myth requires vast open spaces, and when millions of people all try and live the dream at once, you get the modern Americanised world – overcrowded, polluted, frightening and above all, frustrating.

Modern cars are capable of cruising at speeds that only a racing car could achieve in the 1930s, yet the reality of car ownership is generally a series of short trips and frustrating delays.

The dream continues as if the world were one big unpolluted road, just waiting for the dreamer in his dream car.

However, when push comes to shove, the most practical way to move people around is to organise an efficient public transport system, yet such sys-



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tems are always strongly resisted by both the motoring press and car enthusiasts because they break the dream.

Public transport means you're no longer in control of your life. You sit as a passive passenger while someone else controls your journey. You have to share the transport with other people you don't like.

Many people would rather die than face that •

Cars & the six basic needs

“Cars represent the most emotional purchase a human ever makes. Nothing counts in an individual's life as much as a car. A car is freedom, mobility, it's accessible, everybody can get one. You do things to a car. You give it a nickname. People don't have nicknames for their house, but they have nicknames for cars. They're reluctant to leave it sometimes, there's almost a bereavement when it breaks down. When it does break down, there's a terrible resentment. 'You're letting me down.' It's still a mechanical device, but they treat it in almost a humanistic way. It becomes a friend of the family”

*Martin Goldfarb
Canadian car researcher*



The psychologist Erich Fromm spoke of five basic needs that everyone shares:

- 1) A need to know who we are and where we fit in
- 2) A sense of unity and grounding
- 3) A need to have an 'object of devotion'
- 4) A need to feel effective
- 5) A need for stimulation and excitement

We'd like to add one of our own:
6) A need for attention

The interesting thing about cars is that for many people, cars may provide some or all of the six basic needs – that's the reason that cars are so important. No other object in their lives comes close to being so important .



Let's look at cars and what they mean to us:

1) **A need to know who we are and where we fit in.** Humans have come to dominate the planet because they have learned to work together in groups. Because these groups have been a critical factor in our survival as a species, we take group membership very seriously.

The old tribes may have all but disappeared, but the basic tribal principles are still going strong. The old tribal relationships exist intact within our 'peer group', and within this group we play out roles that are millions of years old. If you ever doubt the strength of the human tribal instinct, try doing something that your peer group does not approve of. The businessman who dyes his hair green, or the punk rocker who suddenly cleans up and puts on a business suit is likely to be instantly rejected by the very people he needs to survive. This rejection can be very painful.

By buying a car that represents our group, or the group we would like to be part of, we demonstrate our belonging, which gives a feeling of membership and, often, status within that group. The businessman with his new BMW is an obvious example of this, but there are other less obvious but equally true examples.

Young working class males, for example, will deliberately drive rough old cars in order to gain status within their peer group, which demands antisocial or challenging behaviour from its members. As they grow older, more wealthy members of the same group will drive large Australian or American V8s with beautiful paint jobs to show membership of a modified version of the same 'club'.

An elderly middle class lady might tell you that she just wants a cheap and reliable car to get her to the shops and bowling club, but that is not strictly true in most cases.



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She also wants a car that will not cause her embarrassment when she parks it at her friends' places or at her peer group's communal areas such as the bowling club. She probably wants something clean and shiny and neat, in order to fit comfortably inside a peer group that demands cleanliness and neatness of its members. Try offering the punk rocker the old lady's car, or try offering the old lady the punk rocker's car and you will see once more that practicality is a very small part of our relationship with cars.

2) **A sense of unity and grounding** – A parent holding a newborn baby often feels a deep sense of union – "I am you, you are me, we are one".

We also may get this feeling lying in the arms of a loved one, a mystic may get it when praying or you yourself might get a sense of unity and grounding while watching a beautiful sunset at the beach. However we achieve it, this sense of unity and grounding is very important to us; it's the aim of virtually every religious and philosophical path, and once we have experienced it, we know exactly how we wish to live, even if we fail to achieve this wish.

When we're feeling grounded we feel calm and settled. The opposite of a sense of unity and grounding is conflict and confusion – 'spinning out'. Yet deep down, even people who habitually 'spin out' have a craving for peace and calm certainty.

If you're not getting an ongoing sense of union from meditation, you can get a quick fix from a car – try taking a convertible out with the softtop down along a long, open road at sunset. Aside from feeling your cares blow away with the wind, you will often get a sense of unity and sometimes grounding that may last for a long time after the journey ends.

3) **A need to have an 'object of devotion'** – We all love certain people and wish to be around them. Also, however, we love certain environments such as our favourite garden, fishing spot or beautiful park. We often have certain objects such as a favourite cat, tool or painting. All of these objects have the same function of being people or things that we are in some way devoted to.

When you see the amount of money that goes into making cars look beautiful, you can see instantly the role that cars have as objects of devotion. Young men – often before and after they get their other objects of devotion – such as girlfriends – will spend thousands of dollars and every spare moment making their car into a living, powerful, beautiful object.

4) **A need to feel effective.** Even if we spend half our day stuck in traffic jams, we still fall for TV ads that show cars speeding down empty beaches or cruising sedately down picturesque country lanes. Why? Because even if we have nowhere to go, cars give us the option to go where we like, and that's very important to us. We come into this world virtually completely powerless, and much of our childhood is spent under the control of adults. Thus, we crave control over our lives.



Our need to feel in control on the outside is always a 100% reflection of how powerless we feel on the inside – control freaks always feel out-of-control inside.

Because cars symbolise power and control, they are the almost inevitable next step for a young man with a sense of powerlessness. The bigger the engine, the more power.

This desperate need for a sense of power also explains the close links between the ‘don’t fence me in’ car nuts and the pro-gun lobby – both technologies appeal strongly to people who want to feel that no one can mess with them. Even the clichés are the same: ‘guns don’t kill, people do.’

There is a clear profile of the more extreme petrolhead. They almost inevitably have one or more authoritarian parents or parent figures, and they learned early in life that fun was often not allowed.

From an early age bikes, carts and cars came to symbolise freedom and escape, and there was inevitably an ongoing battle between the parents and child over such activities. That’s why petrolheads who feel restricted tend to act like hurt eight-year-olds who’ve been told to put the bicycle away and come and have a bath. They act like that because that’s exactly what their early life was like – a series of lost battles for freedom.

Because of their background, petrolheads see the state/police/teachers/officials in much the same way as they saw their parents – ‘they’re out to get me, to spoil my innocent fun’. This attitude also explains the almost comical paranoia towards any kind of regulation.

You don’t have to spend much time around such people before the tired old clichés get trotted out – about the engine that ran on water, but the oil companies suppressed it, about the new carburettor that did 500km to the litre, but they killed that off too. How the



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government wants to put all cars over five years old off the road, etc, etc, etc.

Freedom is pretty much a state of mind. The Dalai Lama doesn’t seem to need a car in order to feel that his life is complete. It’s perfectly natural that the repressed European peasants who populated America should see freedom as an absence of unfair controls, the ability to own land and drive freely over vast spaces.

However, this ‘freedom’ has been largely at the expense of the rest of the planet. America has 6% of the world’s population, but uses about one third of its energy. The oil that powers the American dream will start to run out within this lifetime, even if we can somehow stop the developing nations from copying America and her wasteful ways.

Freedom comes from the inside out, not the other way around.

5) **A need for stimulation and excitation** – everybody needs a little fun and everybody needs to explore the world outside home. As long as everyone else

isn’t out looking for stimulation and excitement at the same time, cars give you the opportunity to get out and have fun instantly. You don’t need bus timetables, you don’t need a destination, you just get in and drive.

6) **A need for attention** – babies that don’t get attention can quickly die, and there is strong evidence that children who get attention grow more and live happier lives. That’s why attention is so important to us, and if we can’t get attention for being good, then we’ll settle for getting attention for being bad. As with our need to feel effective, our need for attention is always a 100% reflection of how loved or unloved we feel on the inside – people who constantly need to be admired and noticed feel small, unloved and unnoticed on the inside.

If you want to show that you’re better than your neighbour, buy a flasher car than him. It’s a cheap (and sometimes not so cheap) way of gaining status, at least in the owner’s eyes. Many people feel quite small inside, and buying a grand car often makes them feel more important. The fact that men are attracted to long, phallic-shaped cars has long been noted. As American psychologist Dr Joyce Brothers put it:

“For some, it’s a sexual extension. Their car says to others, ‘I’m a very successful human being. I’ve got lots of power and lots of drive.’”

Whatever reasons we have for driving a car, it’s obvious that cars have a powerful hold on us. In the overcrowded world of the future, it’s obvious that the freedom days of cars are numbered, yet most people will give up their cars only when they have no choice.

There’s a famous story from the Great Depression, when a writer asked a poor farmer why he clung onto his Model T Ford when he couldn’t afford even a bathtub. The farmer replied indignantly: “Because I can’t drive to town in a bathtub!” •

