America's Love Affair with the Automobile in the Television Age

Karal Ann Marling


Stable URL:
http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0011-9415%281989%290%3A146%3C5%3AALAWTA%3E2.0.CO%3B2-G

*Design Quarterly* is currently published by Walker Art Center.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at http://www.jstor.org/journals/walker.html.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

The JSTOR Archive is a trusted digital repository providing for long-term preservation and access to leading academic journals and scholarly literature from around the world. The Archive is supported by libraries, scholarly societies, publishers, and foundations. It is an initiative of JSTOR, a not-for-profit organization with a mission to help the scholarly community take advantage of advances in technology. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.
America’s Love Affair
with the Automobile in the Television Age

KARAL ANN MARLING

There’s something wonderful, disquieting, and, in the end, embarrassing about America’s cars of the 1950s: the lunkers, the dreamboats, the befinned, bechromed behemoths that lurked in the driveways of our 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; the kind that Jim taught Margaret how to drive, thus precipitating the only spat ever to mar the Quaaluded domesticity of Father Knows Best; the kind of car that Ward parked at the curb in front of 211 Pine Street, Mayfield, USA (a suburb of Utopia).¹

They were the kinds of cars that drove foreigners to unseemly outbursts of envy, so extravagant and wasteful, so baroque and, well, so American did they seem in their excesses of horsepower and gadgetry. There are those, for example, who claim that the Englishmen Maclean and Burgess were driven mad by Detroit, that they were propelled into the arms of Mother Russia 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. “Whilst the Russians had been developing ‘Sputnik,’” wrote a disgusted Reyner Banham before his epochal meeting with Los Angeles and heavy-duty glitz, “the Americans had been debauching themselves with tailfins.”²

But there’s a greedy innocence about the pleasure such autos brought to the postwar United States, an innocence wasted on the jaded Brits. Chuck Berry said it all in a clean, simple lyric that would shame a T.S. Eliot:

As I was motoring over the hill
I saw Maybelline in a Coupe de Ville.
Cadillac rollin’ down the open road,
But nothin’ outrun my V-8 Ford ...³

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 their owners were straightforward: after the privations of the Great Depression, after the hardships and shortages of the war, victorious Americans deserved nothing but the best. Within a year of the surrender of Japan, twelve million GIs 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 television set: the

The television images reproduced in this essay are from Cars of the Fabulous Fifties (1987), a videotape compilation of TV commercials from that expansive postwar decade.

1. The television images reproduced in this essay are from Cars of the Fabulous Fifties (1987), a videotape compilation of TV commercials from that expansive postwar decade.
American Dream. In 1945, 200,000 new houses 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; 6,665,000 in 1950.\(^4\) 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 mores and manners were codified on the TV sitcoms of the 1950s.\(^5\) 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, Stephen King turned his attention to the big, American car in *Christine*, a 1983 novel. King’s hero, a nerdy tract-house teenager of the 1980s, quite literally 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.)\(^6\) The bonds of affection possible between man and machine had been noted earlier, of course. During the 1965 – 1966 season on NBC, the haplessly Oedipal Jerry Van Dyke found himself the owner of a 1928 auto that harbored the ghost of his late mom, a feminized, gas-powered version of Mr. Ed.\(^7\)

*My Mother the Car* was comedy (or so the network claimed) whereas *Christine* has sinister and, ultimately, tragic overtones. So many human feelings have been grounded in the crimson fastness of Christine that she becomes an animate being, a humanoid 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 designers of the 1950s, 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 market research, everyone who could afford a car already had one and, in 1927, production and sales plummeted for the first time. The answer was not Fordism: the durable, dependable, unchanging Tin Lizzie.\(^8\) The solution was
Sloanism or the annual style change, named for Alfred P. Sloan, president of General Motors. The object of such superficial changes, Sloan said, was “to create demand for the 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; the notion of the obsolescence of a serviceable product was transferred from the clothing of the upper class to the single most important industrial product made in America. With the help of the copywriter, status and symbolism became compelling reasons for buying a brand new car, even though the old, black Model T out in the yard still ran like a top. The purchaser of an auto was no longer paying for a piece of machinery: “He, or she, was buying a new life.”

Some old-fashioned ad men of the 1920s, according to the social critic Roland Marchand, balked at selling products on the basis of color and design. Was the old washing machine no good simply because it wasn’t “Karnak Green”? Was last year’s kitchen range beyond the pale because it lacked the fashionable applied tracery of the 1927 edition? But ethical objections faded beside the demonstrable results achieved by Sloan. General Motors adopted the annual overhaul in 1927 and the Chevrolet promptly overtook the Ford for the first time. The advertising that moved the new models was evocative and suggestive: it catered to dreams. GM, for example, conjured up the two-car family: the man who could present the little woman with her own runabout clearly stood to gain a stature unattainable by those déclassé types with one all-purpose buggy. Even Henry Ford joined the parade with the Model A and a new publicity campaign full of Fords in which the driver might speed over class barriers. 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.”

A miasma of adventure, sexual and otherwise, hung over the salesroom of the late 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, high fantasy: they all came with the easy-payment coupon book.

And the car was always a “she,” 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 the 1940s industrial psychologist Ernest Dichter decided that the typical American male looked upon the convertible as his mistress and the saloon model as his wife. But serious motivational research among the Big Three was 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.

Nonetheless, it cannot be said that the buying frenzy of the late 1940s 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 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. The streamlined dream car was, by today’s standards, 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 derriere 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, the former did help to define the latter: the car, said bodies styled by Raymond Loewy, Buckminster Fuller, and the rest, was a machine for zooming along toward a crisp, efficient, and thoroughly modern tomorrow.

Many of the theoretical considerations that went into the design of automobiles also determined the shapes of trains, submarines, airplanes. Thus it happened that Harley Earl, head of the Styling Section at General Motors, 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, fuselages, and 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 that day. “That viewing,” he wrote, “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.”

Although aviation imagery had appeared on cars before—the 1940 Ford and the Studebaker had propellerlike gizmos in front, revived in the grillwork of the 1950s—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.

By 1959, the Cadillac tail fin had acquired a life of its own: it towered three and one-half feet above the pavement. And as the back end rose, the front end strained forward: in 1953, Cadillac bumpers were finished off with new, factory-fresh “gorp” in the form of “bombs” or “Dagmars” (named for the late-night TV bombshell of the moment)—protruding breasts that were utterly devoid of utility and
impossible to repair after the most minor of collisions.\textsuperscript{19} Chrysler, which had shamefacedly entered the tail-fin derby later than the other automakers, tried to justify the more excessive of its three-dimensional embellishments as being “based on aerodynamic principles [that] make a real contribution to the remarkable stability” of the 1959 models.\textsuperscript{20} The competition made no such apologies for art. Lacking any pretense 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.

As the design historian Thomas Hine and others have suggested, the doctrine of luxury for all, 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 1950s. 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.\textsuperscript{21} 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, radar-equipped fishing rods, and hair colors with such names as Golden Apricot Delight and Champagne Beige. The glittery opulence of a Morris Lapidus hotel in Miami 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 the rest of America bought almost before the latest models had been unshrouded with appropriate fanfare every September.\textsuperscript{22}

According to Harley Earl, fins and Dagmars caught on because they gave customers “an extra receipt for their money in the form of a visible prestige marking for an expensive car.”\textsuperscript{23} In other words, the fin bespoke luxury, too-muchness, no-expense-spared largesse. Or, as the late philosopher Thorstein Veblen might have put it, the 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 one sympathetic

\textsuperscript{19} The evolution of the Cadillac tail fin, 1948 – 1959.

Detroit-watcher. "They were the stuff of dreams. And the dream was possible for everyone" — even Chuck Berry. The content of that classless American Dream is not something that was discussed a great deal at the time — a time when Jim and Margaret Anderson occupied twin beds and wore visible foundation garments beneath their nightwear. Nor has the subject proved compelling to cultural commentators in the thirty years since the disastrous Edsel 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) 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 chrome package: the Ward Cleavers and Jim Andersons of the 1950s led secret lives, infinitely richer and more disturbing than anything Walter Millty 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, it would seem, 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 manifest in booming sales figures. In 1927, the industry had first turned to the designer when profits fell. During the first week of August 1953, economists determined that the postwar sellers' market for cars had finally bottomed out. And once again, 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 twenty 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 tastes, traditional tastemakers and intellectuals refused to believe the evidence. "What the motivation researchers failed to tell their clients," wrote 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 [thereof], such as *Playboy* ..., *Astounding Science Fiction* ..., and television.\(^{27}\)

But for a decade or so — the flourishing of the two-and-a-half ton salmon pink steel space rocket with sexual appendages — Hayakawa and his fellow scoffers were 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 sculpture; on what can only be described as works of popular art in which the nation freely invested a fifth of the GNP. There is, in fact, in much of the story of Detroit in the 1950s an element of aesthetic self-consciousness, a tacit challenge to the self-righteous rigidity of modernist dogma, and what can only be described as 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 friends at New York’s Waldorf-Astoria during National Auto Show week, Earl held the first Motorama in the hotel ballroom there in 1949.\(^{28}\) Entitled “Transportation Unlimited,” the event set off the most evocative of the “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 breathless excitement. In 1949, a Buick Le Sabre XF-8 with sensors that raised the convertible roof in case of rain and the world’s first wraparound windshield was the big attraction. 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 opening on Madison Avenue, the first of the multi-media happenings.\(^{29}\) As
for the cars, people came to look at them in a museum-like environment, not to drive them or to 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 two million who attended every GM show, at any rate) had Motorama, the art of Neal Cassady and Jack Kerouac - cars that never moved, chromium statuary larded with primal emblems of war and lust. A parody on the pretensions of American high culture, Motorama answered extravagant claims for art with overt nods to jets and Jane Russell.

The notion of the car as work of art was reinforced in other subtle ways. In television ads - and the automakers were that new medium’s biggest clients - integrated into variety shows (remember Dinah Shore? “Drive your Chev-ro-lay, through the USA! America’s the greatest land of all!”) it was often practical to present an on-stage Motorama in miniature, with gesticulating models and revolving pedestals: Julia Mead, Lincoln’s elegant, upwardly-mobile spokeswoman of the period, used this format in spots on the Ed Sullivan show, for instance, and Pat Boone’s Chevy commercials also opened with a studio shot.30 Bevis Hillier, reviewing the common decorative motifs of the 1950s, notes the use of a picture frame to transfer the importance and prestige attached to a work of art to whatever turned up within its perimeters.31 The Motorama shot - the car as sculpture on exhibit - served much the same function, I think, on television. An establishing shot, it was usually followed by film footage displaying the car in motion, almost as an afterthought, a guilty admission that the work of art was also a means of taking Junior to the orthodontist.

It is noteworthy too that the footage of cars rolling down the new Hollywood 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 Julia and her mink stole are actually coursing toward the Beverly Hills Hotel. 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: the Motorama, the mini-drama (of which more later), the pseudo-documentary, the ersatz “lecture” by an expert (often Truman Bradley, the man who passed out checks for The Millionaire and hosted Science Fiction Theatre). What all these types have in common is an obsession with design, and specifically with a set of artistic principles that it is presumed the audience understands and appreciates. One of Truman Bradley’s outings — a long 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 notices that the shape of the rear end derives from that of a jet plane.

But even more to the point is the illustrated lecture by Professor Tom Foldes, “artist, author, educator,” which sold the 1955 Ford. Foldes shows precisely how draftsmanship — design — can make a static form move: speed lines (the old technique of streamlining) are additive and superficial, he insists, whereas good contemporary design bends the form as a whole toward the image the stylist wishes to create. “The expression of motion through design is the goal of all modern 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 function forcefully and imaginatively, we derive more pleasure from owning and driving it,” Professor Foldes concludes.

The Ford commercial is a stunning piece of television for several reasons. Its length seems excessive by today’s standards: network time was cheaper in 1955 and the audience still had a
reasonable attention span. Even given the willingness to stay on the couch, however, Foldes's chalk-talk is a remarkably 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 but what is more important, Detroit knew that we knew it too and hired experts, like Professor Foldes, to distinguish good art from bad.

This kind of pop-culture artiness infuriated sophisticates. While the Abstract Expressionists, by and large, ignored the whole vulgar spectacle (and bought foreign cars), pioneers of industrial art, like Raymond Loewy, fulminated against the so-called stylists and their "forward looks." In 1955, Loewy (recently fired by Studebaker, where he had been head designer since 1938), blasted the industry in an address to the Society of Automotive Engineers; that speech, printed in the Atlantic Monthly, details the case against Detroit, whose latest models Loewy called "jukeboxes on wheels" — aesthetic aberrations that masked the workings of the machine beneath layers of tawdry "flash." Much of what Loewy had to say made ethical sense: the weight of increased ornament and big, smooth autobodies had led to over-horsed engines, rising costs, ruined roadways, and huge fuel bills (although the critic failed to ask why Americans loved their big cars despite these drawbacks). But Loewy's real objection to the 1955 model was its 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 clean-cut expression of mechanical excellence has become sensuous and organic."

In that one phrase — "sensuous and organic" — Loewy reveals himself as the puritan, morally superior to the herd; the monklike disciple of a modern movement which had tried, albeit 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, the place where their hopes, desires, and fantasies grew lush, convoluted, profoundly sensuous. They liked the new, efficient, rectangular dinnerware best when it was enlivened with boomerangs of turquoise and gold; the squared-off ranch house on a slab when it was warmed up with Early American accessories (remember the
eagle emblazoned on Ozzie and Harriet's impeccably geometric fireplace); a car when it came with a built-in vanity, a matching lipstick, Dagmars, and fins. They liked complexity, lots of stuff, scale, everything but the kitchen sink: in an odd 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 two- or three-tone 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 tolerable only because it takes the form of a sitcom, 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. Mother resists the urge to smoke on camera. Rusty and Terry pick wildflowers and discourse on the new styling features of the Dodge. Finally, Daddy decides to pick the requisite flowers to end the excursion 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 entitled "Family Argument" pits the typical American dad — bluff, stubborn, smarter (one hopes) than he seems; a Stu Erwin type and a veteran of earlier campaigns for wall-to-wall carpeting and a fur stole — against the wiles of his nearest and dearest. 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 a new automobile that becomes part of the family unit, a statement about its status and its collective self-image. And it is tacitly assumed here 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 1950s, the standard American car was a family car. Rarely, in fact, do obvious heads of households drive cars in commercials, and when they do, Dad shares time with Mom. Putting a woman behind the wheel — her standard motoring outfit, which consists of a hat with a veil, gloves, and crisp print
frock, 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 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 a new car dispensed with every hazard, every inconvenience, including the errant breezes.

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 they neither bought new cars nor (except for old Sis) guided the family’s buying preferences. But given half a chance, a California teenager would chop and stretch an old prewar Ford until it looked like a new Valiant with a hangover; 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.

But what, in the end, does the family car have to tell us about America in the Eisenhower years? That it was a more communal, a less privatized, a less pluralistic time? That emotions and aspirations were closer to the surface? That women, thanks to Maidenform, looked a lot like the cars they tooled around suburbia in, as did the rockets being tested by Chuck Yaeger and the macho, Right Stuff crew? That male and female, sexuality and violence, domesticity and high adventure, entertainment and economics, waste and technological efficiency came together in blatant, unprecedented, unparalleled, and highly original configurations? That the average American has probably never taken a greater interest in how things look, and why, and how they make him — or her — feel?

Well, that’s all true. But the most interesting thing about those old Fords, Chevies, and Chryslers is the hold they still have on the American imagination thirty years later. They beckon us to a long, smooth ride to foreverland in luxury fit for the gods themselves. Bruce Springsteen says it best:

Eldorado fins, whitewalls and skirts
Rides just like a little bit of heaven here on earth,
Well buddy when I die throw my body in the back
And drive me to the junkyard in my Cadillac.

And now that I think of it, that’s probably where Elvis is. The first thing he bought with his newfound wealth in 1956 — the year Tupelo gave him a welcome-home parade — was a candy pink Fleetwood
sedan for his mom. Gladys Presley didn’t drive. So the car sat in the driveway outside Graceland, a two-ton love trinket, a symbol of love, money, and home, a statue, a monument to the tragedy of dreams come true. It sits there still.

1 For family drama of the period, see Rick Mitz, _The Great TV Sitcom Book_ (New York: Perigee Books, 1988).
11 Marchand, _Advertising the American Dream_, 159.
14 Quoted by Cynthia Golomb Dettelbach, _In the Driver’s Seat: The Automobile in American Literature and Popular Culture_ (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1976), 97.
15 Rambali, _Car Culture_, 40.

This meditation on the tail fin began as a lecture presented in Walker Art Center’s _American Icons_ series on 1 November 1988. I am grateful to Margaret O’Neill-Ligon, Project Director of the series, for her help and support.

Karaal Ann Marling teaches American culture at the University of Minnesota and is pop culture commentator for Station KNOW, Minnesota Public Radio. Among her recent books are _The Colossus of Roads: Myth and Symbol along the American Highway, and George Washington Slept Here: Colonial Revivals and American Culture, 1876–1986_. Her history of the Minnesota State Fair will be published this spring; meanwhile, she is at work on a new book on the Battle of Iwo Jima.
A parade opened the All-American Soap Box Derby near the Goodyear dirigible hangar in Akron, Ohio. Here boys aged eleven to fifteen raced their homemade wooden cars in the event sponsored by Chevrolet, the media, and civic and fraternal groups. Each entry had already won regional events on a similar 975.4 foot slope.

Gravity alone drew the winner across the finish line in the Soap Box Derby. Begun in 1934, the contest gave boys the direct experience of aerodynamics in wooden cars of their own making. The national winner was given a college scholarship and a trip to Europe. Each of the estimated 60,000 participants in any given year had made his first contact with a Chevrolet dealership.

Hundreds of entries in the Fisher Body Craftsman’s Guild model car competition awaited judging in the late 1960s. Open to boys from twelve to twenty, the contest provided an outlet for creativity, which, like sports and scouting, channeled teenagers’ energies and drives into socially acceptable activities.