



CARS AND SOCIETY

The history of customs narrated through automobiles

In the XX Century, the French structural linguist and semiologist, Roland Barthes, compared automobiles to cathedrals: 'a great epochal creation consumed in its image by a population who takes possession of a magic object'. As a matter of fact, from their birth onwards, **automobiles forcefully entered into the lives of industrial western societies, permanently changing both customs and traditions of the populations** who were using them. Several sectors of the society have been infiltrated by this means of transport, which gradually turned into a **cult object**, the mirror of a constantly and quickly changing world.

Automobiles became a **status symbol**, a **synonym of style and fashion**, objects used to show people's position within society. Do not forget to consider - for example - the role that automobiles had in some cinema productions, or even the appeal that products such as Ferrari, Porsche, Maserati, Lamborghini etc. have been oozing ever since the very beginning of their creation. And what about the myth of speed that the automobile has embodied above all **in sports and races**, a symbol of a challenge that tests people's limits? Not only is it a mythical object and a synonym of glamour and passion, but it also represents **danger**, a delicate issue constantly confronted in the daily news. Car accidents and young drivers either are their cause or their victims, revealing a more complex social and cultural disease.

Automobiles and design: planning and creativity

Italy is a synonym for fashion and style: the combination of these concepts has undoubtedly become expressed in the world of automobiles as well. From the very beginning, Italian car designers have always been creating, not only astonishing saloon prototypes, but also daily use automobiles. Therefore, production can be seen as a combination between **industrial series production and handcrafted distinctiveness**, the characteristics which led our country to stand out as a leading centre in the domain of design.

Italian design rose during the post war years and was «able to quickly cover the discrepancy of a production showing serious inconsistencies in consumption - Vittorio Gregotti, the architect, maintains – giving a strong impulse to the car industry and to a generation of new production activities».

Gian Piero Brunetta, Pierluigi Cerri, Giorgetto Giugiaro, Tomàs Maldonado, Adolfo Orsi, Sergio Pininfarina and Mauro Tedeschini are the most renowned representatives of the "magic" Italian industrial design, who turned this discipline into an **avant-garde school in shaping items for common use**.

During the years in which the Italian style increased in popularity, the so called "boom" years, Italy stood out as being the catalyst for a revolution in certain sectors: a break from past generations, the stigma surrounding women and the protests of young people; all areas deeply influenced the evolution of car design.

Women driving ...

The emancipation of women completely revolutionized the idea of cars: before, the ideal models were based on aggressive slender and sumptuous cars, and nowadays a more formal balance is chosen, able to combine comfort and suitability, combining all the environmentally friendly sustainable issues. Economy cars have a more compact, less aggressive and sensitive shape. The same values mentioned above are also used in the domain of advertising: here, from the very beginning, women have frequently been metaphorically represented, reminding people of grace and elegance, safety and reliability. Furthermore newspapers frequently used the image of women, highlighting their behaviour vis-à-vis this extraordinary innovation. They first showed their initial scepticism due to accidents, frequent stops for mechanical breakdowns, and the hard task of keeping their hair and clothes tidy. Their negative attitudes eventually changed, being replaced by a great enthusiasm for speed which they experienced in such revolutionary vehicles. Some cases became very popular and well known: **Ada Pace** - for example - called *Sayonara*, was a motor bike and a car driver in the 50s and 60s, and **Maria Teresa de Filippis**, was the first woman ever, who drove a Formula 1 Maserati car, in 1958 Belgium Grand Prix. In 1958 *Pilotino* (her nickname) raced 4 Grand Prix (Belgium, Monaco, Portugal and Italy). She retired in 1959, after Jean Behra's accident

and eventual death during the German Grand Prix. He was both the owner of the racing team and her great friend, who replaced her at the very last minute, using the car she would have used.

Automobiles and young people: from riots to current debates on road safety

During the years of the boom and in the 70s, **young Italian people became aware of their situation and broke all their connections binding them to past generations.** Young people's lives became a world apart, far away from the one of adults, with its own rules, utopias, dreams, aspirations and languages. The Citroen 2 CV and the Kombi Volkswagen van became the symbols of the **on the road generation**, a journey into their souls and a rebellion against an excessively rigid system represented by adults.

Nowadays the relationship between automobiles and young people has deeply changed its meaning, as its semantic field has: **road safety, civil education, breath tests and road accidents** are the issues surrounding the debate concerning this alliance. Young people, on the one hand, are victims of the enchanting language of advertising offering powerful and faster cars and, on the other hand, of the jungle of imposed bans and limits which try to solve a mainly social and cultural problem.

Movie cars: automobiles which made the history of movies

Similar to other art expressions, **automobiles have also been starring as leading characters in the movies.** Cars have always mirrored the habits of their periods of reference, the tastes and the social status of their drivers. This is the case for example, in the James Bond films, the most popular secret agent of the world of cinematography, where the protagonist is undeniably linked to his DB5 Aston Martin featuring in many 007 movies (*Goldfinger* - 1964, *You Only Live Twice* - 1966, *Thunderball* – 1965, just to name a few).

In some cases, cars have become the real protagonists of the plot: in the *Italian Job* (1969), which the British Institute ranked in 1999 as number 38 in the list of the one hundred best films of British cinema, the three Mini Coopers show a renovated futuristic landscape of Torino for the 100 years of the Unification of Italy. The Delorian of *Back to the Future* (1985), the Ectomobile of *Ghostbusters* (1984), Herbie, *The Love Bug* of the 1969 Disney movie; Benny- Roger Rabbit's taxi in the movie *Who framed Roger Rabbit* (1988), the *Gran Torino* of the grumpy Walt Kowalsky, a veteran of the Korean war and former Ford worker, in Clint Eastwood's 2009 film (*Gran Torino*); these are among the most anthropomorphic cars to link movie art and the world of motors.

By using the role of automobiles in movies, the distinctive aspects of societies and their metamorphoses (or rather inactivity) can be captured. Consider for example the modern relevance of the tough and painful passage to adulthood, as shown in *Rebel Without a Cause*, 1955), a testament on the rights of the post war generation in U.S. provinces, with its clandestine car races, alcohol abuse and gangs.

Last but not least, there are the descriptions of the welfare and the economic boom of the "roaring" years of the Italian movie production, such as 1962 *Il Sorpasso*, by Dino Risi, the manifesto of the so called "commedia all'italiana".

Cars, joy and pain ...

Those familiar with driving know that each model has its own peculiarities: each car, in its complex body, in its engine, and in its different shapes, in its bodywork, has its own character and soul. **The combination between men and cars is a trust-based relationship: a real interaction.** In sport this relationship reaches a level of outstanding refinement. The first car races dating back to the beginning of the XX century, the **Formula 1** and the **rallies**, the **Mille Miglia** and the **Nascar**, though not involving a direct body interaction, are defined as sports, because here men meet speed by using a personal invention. The relationship between the driver's skills and car performances have turned motor racing into a domain of technology and research, as well as becoming an advertising tool for car manufacturing companies.

Torino's Museo Nazionale dell'Automobile offers its visitors a display of the historical cars which competed during very important car races: the first car competition organized with a consistent group of motor vehicles dates back to 1894 (Paris-Rouen). Among the displayed models, visitors will appreciate the 1907 *Fiat 130 HP*, the car which raced at the Grand Prix of the Automobile Club of France on the Dieppe circuit; the 1930 *P2 Alfa Romeo*, considered as the father of the famous racing Alfa Romeo; the 1947 *Cisitalia 202 SMM spider Nuvolari*, whose name honours Modena's driver of the Mille Miglia race; the *Ferrari 500 F2* used by Alberto Ascari to win the title of World Champion in 1952 and 1953; the 1960 *Ferrari 246 F1* which was awarded to Mike Hawthorn in 1958. The 1980 *Ferrari 312 T5* is also displayed, the car marked n.2 (n.1 had



been given to Jody Scheckter) driven by Gilles Villeneuve, who passed away in 1982 during the Belgium G.P. driving tests.

From Marcel Renault's death on the Paris-Madrid to the myth of Nuvolari, to Ayrton Senna and Michael Schumacher, these men have challenged speed and become the anthropomorphic spirit of futurism, pushing their *roaring cars riding on grapes*hot (Filippo Marinetti).

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