

The Despotism of the Image

Contributed by Dmitry Orlov
22 November 2006

Editor's note: This is the heartiest laugh I've had for a long time, and it's because Orlov zeroes in so well on the dominant culture's irrational attachment to the images of the car and the suburban house. - JL

The ostensible goal of this Web site, and the small but enthusiastic community that surrounds it, is to change the culture. We all recognize that the contemporary mainstream culture of over-consumption and unbridled growth is toxic on every level -- physical, emotional, and cultural -- and is accelerating on a collision course with resource depletion, climate disruption, and environmental devastation. We all want to jump off in time, or, perhaps lacking the necessary courage, to find ourselves lucky enough to be thrown clear.

What this means in reality is anything but clear, and the best that most of us manage is some small display of personal virtue -- recycling plastic packaging, bicycling instead of driving, taking the train instead of flying, growing a bit of our own food, eating organic, using energy-efficient light bulbs, investing in renewable energy, and so forth. These are the tokens by which we recognize each other. How such personal virtues are defined is a matter of personal taste: some consider driving a hybrid car sufficient, while others prefer eliminating cars from their lives altogether. Some seemingly necessary steps, such as learning to live without oil-based plastics and other synthetic materials, seem beyond all of us. It seems to be something of an article of faith that if we all did enough of such things, whatever they may be, then the problem, whatever it happens to be, and however we choose to define it, would in due course be solved, and civilized life would go on just like before. Just yesterday, in company, light after-dinner conversation happened to breeze past the topic of energy, and how the British were lucky to discover coal just as timber was running out, and were then lucky enough to discover oil and natural gas before the coal ran out. And now that they have all but run out of oil and natural gas, "there will be enough renewables to power it all!" was the swift retort. To those of us who have the right technical background, and understand the physical quantities involved, this claim is preposterous, but I knew better than to object.

You see, I realize that it is a requirement of this culture that we all project an image of unbounded optimism and faith in our technological prowess. Anything less is automatically labeled as defeatist, fatalistic, and lacking in imagination. What is meant by this word is not the active work of the intellect, mind you, but the passive, voluntary acceptance of a set of common imaginings, or images. The most important images comprising this artificial reality, the ones at the core of this realm of enforced fiction, are the ones that, on the surface at least, have to do with personal dignity and physical comfort.

I sometimes have a chance to observe a clash between two competing images: that of personal virtue (bicycling) and that of personal dignity and personal comfort (driving). I am a year-round bicyclist in a northern city where temperatures occasionally dip below freezing, and where it sometimes snows. It is a liberal city, meaning that many people here share this sense of personal virtue that attaches to tokens of eco-friendly behavior, such as bicycling to work -- not that they would consider doing it themselves, of course, unless the distance were short and the weather perfect. But quite a few of them wish to experience this virtue vicariously, and, seeing me suited up and wearing a helmet, strike up conversations with me in the elevator, on the way to work, especially if it's hot or cold or raining or snowing. Often they ask me how I keep my feet from freezing (I wear wool socks) or how I avoid falling down on ice (I use studded tires) or how I negotiate those steep hills (I push hard with both of my legs).

My answers, although offered quite cheerfully, are invariably greeted with silent disappointment, and it is interesting to ask why that is. Perhaps it has something to do with this: bicycling for me is not a matter of personal virtue, but a way of conveying myself between places with a maximum of pleasure and a minimum of fuss and aggravation. I do so with complete personal dignity and physical comfort, because my experience of these things is based on my actual emotional state (which is generally placid) and physical comfort (which, for me, involves a healthy dose of pain, and results in good health and a sense of well-being). My suspicion is that the dignity and comfort of my car-dependent elevator companions does not have a basis in personal experience, but is bound up with some other, atavistic impulses, which find their fullest expression in the image of the automobile. They are disconcerted to find it bested by a primitive, engineless, two-wheeled contraption.

It is possible to erect a virtual mountain of rational, logical, quantifiable arguments against cars and in favor of bicycles. A most amusing line of analysis involves computing their relative effective average speeds. First, compute the total cost of ownership of a car, including purchase price, financing costs, maintenance costs, registration, tolls, traffic tickets, and so forth. Now, include all external costs: road construction and maintenance, damage to health caused by air and water pollution, loss of productivity due to death and maiming in auto accidents, associated legal costs, and, of course, military budgets needed to equip the armed forces to fight for and defend the oil.

Now, take the drivers' average income and hours worked, and find out how many hours of labor it takes to cover all of these costs. Add to that the actual time spent driving. Now take the number of vehicle miles traveled, and divide it by the total number of hours spent both driving and earning enough money to pay for cars. Rather than give you the answers, I encourage you to do your own homework, but I can tell you that the end result of this exercise is always the same: the bicycle is faster than the car, and, depending on one's assumptions, driving is slower than walking.

Another amusing line of analysis involves the subject of public safety. There are some overall practical limits on how long one's daily commute can take, generally under an hour each way, regardless of distance traveled or form of transportation used. Thus, the relevant safety-related statistic is still accidents requiring hospitalization and fatalities, but per unit time rather than per unit distance. And here, it turns out, bicycles are somewhat safer than cars, even in congested urban areas lacking in bicycle paths or bicycle lanes. And although everyone's health suffers from the effects of car-related air pollution, the daily exercise of bicycling mitigates against them to some extent, further increasing the gap.

Thus, from the point of view of public safety, bicycles win as well. Similar types of analysis can be applied to trains, rickshaws, or pogo sticks, with similar results. In short, there seems to be no point in looking for rational explanations for why people prefer cars, or even to think of cars as serving a need for transportation. Their perceived comfort and convenience is but a culturally engineered mirage; if the convenience were real, Al Gore would have made a film about it, perhaps titled "A Convenient Truth: Why I Drive a Car." It is about time we acquiesced to the fact that their primary function is to satisfy a powerful set of atavistic urges.

In its anatomy, the automobile is clearly descended from a certain quadruped ruminant of the equine family, cross-bred with a buggy. Along the way, it gained some predatory genes, giving it a rather vicious disposition, and an often vicious aspect to its facial expression (headlights and grille). It has two eyes (headlights) and four legs (wheels). It likes to run in herds, but resists being overtly constrained, either in direction or in speed. It obeys foot-signals from spurs (gas pedal) and hand-signals from reigns (steering wheel).

There is a large variety of breeds, most of which are prized for their ability to run fast, although they rarely do so. Their main function is to impart a certain sense of nobility to those who own them, whether by giving a gentleman-on-horseback aspect to the driver, or a lady-in-a-carriage aspect to the passenger. As with horses, their sometimes overpowering flatulence does nothing to degrade this sense of nobility.

The car's secondary function is to allow its owner to wield power over life and death. If it were regarded strictly from a public safety perspective, private ownership of cars would have been banned long ago. In fact, what makes a car so enticing, and makes it such a powerful image within the public imagination, is that it is "an inherently dangerous instrumentality," as a lawyer once put it. Unlike a horse, which has two eyes and a brain, and, left to its own devices, will avoid running into things, a car is only too happy to collide, and requires constant vigilance.

This trivial but active supervision, which, to avoid sudden death or serious injury, must be maintained at all times, is at once intensely boring and exciting. Iggy Pop once captured the spirit of this contradiction: "In the death car, we're alive!" In a car-dependent society, millions of people are at all times actively involved in the act of avoiding instant death. In due course, cars and the carnage they produce come to be regarded as forces of nature.

One periodically hears of plans to create "smart highways," and, looking beyond the obvious implication that the current highways are indeed "stupid," it becomes obvious that the cars that travel them are "stupid" as well. Redesigned purely with transportation in mind, an automobile would look quite different.

Three wheels is quite enough, and four is quite excessive, as evidenced by many examples, from race-winning solar cars to Buckminster Fuller's Demaxian vehicle. The drive wheel, front and center, would steer, but would also be designed to run in a groove, eliminating the need to steer except when maneuvering. Hitches front and back would allow cars to be linked together into trains for improved efficiency. When not hitched to the car in front, a simple infrared sensor would regulate the speed so as to keep the proper braking interval. Minimum and maximum speed limits would be bar-coded onto the pavement, and the car would obey them automatically. The engine would be an outboard, lowered onto the front wheel using a hoist and clipped in position, to make it easy to switch out for maintenance or replacement. The bottom of the car would be sheer and watertight, and its drive wheel would have paddles on its sides, allowing it to traverse bodies of water. For storage, it would pivot and stand upright within a small footprint.

But such design exercises are futile: they are a rational approach to an irrational set of requirements. Stupid cars, and the people for and by whom they are designed, will be with us for a long time. Their image is indelibly imprinted on the

public imagination whenever little boys roll their little toys around the playroom floor, murmuring "Vroom! Vroom!"

Conversely, it is the downfall of our current public transportation systems that they are designed strictly with transportation and public safety in mind, and fail to satisfy the atavistic urges of their ridership. In adhering to the image of a safe and foolproof public service, they fail to deliver either the thrill of victory or the agony of defeat, and the unsatisfied commuter must make do with impatience, unease, and boredom.

A properly designed streetcar would have either no doors at all, or doors that shut definitively and with great force after a peremptory warning. It would not stop at stations but only slow down just enough to allow passengers to jump on and off. It would be equipped with running boards and external handrails, allowing passengers to display their acrobatic skill by riding on the outside, saving themselves the cost of a fare.

To keep the lawyers at bay, all passengers would be required to sign a waiver absolving the streetcar company of all liability, and traffic laws would be amended to give streetcars absolute right of way in all circumstances and to place all other traffic automatically at fault in case of collision. The fronts of streetcars could then be equipped with plows to sweep aside any object blocking the tracks, eliminating delays due to accidents. The inevitable carnage would provide a constant stream of public safety lessons, courtesy of the tabloid press.

Not only would such a system be cheap and efficient to operate, but it would also, in due course, breed an agile and alert ridership, whose daily displays of bravery and physical stamina would produce a camaraderie and an esprit de corps that is so sadly lacking in the effete and pampered commuter of today. Of course, such a service is an impossibility, for it would go against the image which public transportation is called upon to fulfill: the image of a public charity, serving the young, the old, the poor and the unwell; in short, something called upon to exist for the benefit of those unlucky few who can not drive.

In more and more places, public transportation is made untenable by a condition known as "suburban sprawl," which, more than anything else, fosters car-dependence. The cause of suburban sprawl is the suburban house, and, just as it would be a mistake to look at the car strictly as a form of transportation, it is a mistake to look at the suburban house strictly as a form of housing. Although it provides a set of modern amenities, it must also conform to a certain image, and, just as with the car, we will find that it is this image that best explains both its typical location and its typical form.

It is a common misconception that the main function of a suburban home is to provide shelter, when it is quite obviously and clearly to provide parking. In a car-dependent society, access is controlled by limiting and controlling one's ability to park. Public parking is always limited and often not available, and semi-public parking -- at stores, malls, office parks, and other private institutions -- is limited to those who have money to spend or otherwise have some business to transact there. While the car confers freedom of movement, it is the freedom to move, via public roadways, between places where one is not free but must fulfill some specific social function, be it working, shopping, or some other socially sanctioned activity. Even if you wish to escape the oppressive strictures of society for a while, and spend time in a wilderness area, you will find that, in a car-dependent society, even wilderness keeps business hours, and closes its parking lots shortly before dark.

In short, the only freedom the car confers is the freedom to drive to and fro between places where you are not free, and the only true exception to this rule is your own driveway. No proper suburban home can be without one: it is your own private highway that leads to your own private house. This image dictates that it be expensively and unnecessarily paved, and not with paving stones, for then it would be a walkway rather than a driveway, but with asphalt. Suburban driveways are not paved for the benefit of the cars, which can handle dirt roads, and clearly not for the benefit of the now commonplace off-road vehicles, but for the benefit of satisfying some innate drive within their drivers: the urge to own a piece of the road.

The symbolic function of the suburban home is to serve as the final resting place at the end of the long drive home. Peace and quiet are considered to be its most essential features, and although the overt preoccupation is with safety and security, its source is an irrational urge for ultimate peace. If a suburban dweller were to trade both the car and the house for an apartment within city limits, the increased chance of becoming a victim of violent crime would be more than offset by the decreased chance of dying in an auto accident, and so the choice is not a rational one from the standpoint of safety.

The real concern is not with safety but with the embodiment of an abstract image of peace. Zoning regulations and bylaws restrict noisy hobbies and deviations from community standards, for it is a sacrilege to violate the eternal slumber of the suburbanite. The ideal suburb features an unbroken expanse of manicured grass dotted with little neoclassical monuments, all slightly different yet all essentially the same. This is the essential décor of a cemetery: the house is in fact a family crypt. Not surprisingly, the final destination of the death-car is the death-house.

All other functions of the death-house, save one, are superfluous, since people can, and do, eat, sleep, and have sex in their cars. As cars grow larger and commutes become longer, more and more of the living is done inside the car, with the sepulchral dwelling only used to unwrap fast food, keep beer cold, and fall asleep in front of the television set. But the death-house has one room that is essential, because it offers services a car cannot provide. This is the bathroom, and it contains the shower, and, of course, the toilet. And not just any toilet: a chamberpot or a bucket of sawdust simply would not do. No, it must be a most unlikely contraption that allows one to defecate directly into a pool of drinking water (which may be deodorized according to taste) and flush it down with copious amounts of more drinking water. How curious it is that while other carnivores have an instinct to bury their feces, to avoid spreading disease, these ones insist on mixing theirs into their drink! Various expensive artifices, none entirely successful, are then needed to keep the drinking water and the sewage apart.

If the urge to defecate into drinking water seems irrational, then what of its ultimate purpose, which is to deny that the body smells? The flush toilet is a tool for denying that the body smells on the inside; the shower, with the help of enforced daily ablutions and chemical deodorants, does the same for the exterior. The urge to deny that humans smell like humans is very strange, because these same people happily tolerate the smell of their cats and dogs, who rarely bathe and smell precisely as they should. In fact, humans do smell, no worse than dogs or cats, and the healthier specimens generally smell just fine, although a junk food diet makes for a rather unpleasant funk. The obvious suspicion is that these people, who drive death-cars and live in death-houses, make every day a bath day because they feel compelled to present an odor-free facade, out of fear that the subliminal stench of death they cannot help but sense wafting all around them might be emanating from them.

Contemporary mainstream culture of over-consumption and unbridled growth, which we would so much like to change, to save ourselves, or to save the planet, or a little of each, is not now, and was never a rational proposition. It is the realization of dark, irrational, self-destructive urges, which were programmed into us through some evolutionary accident, and which are now, and for a short time longer, being given their fullest expression by the availability of cheap and abundant energy.

Appeals to rationality or good sense are futile, because the motive force is a set of indelible, immutable images, which are imprinted on simple minds and at an early age. These images are easy to ridicule, and although ridicule can be powerful, its effectiveness is restricted to those few who have the capacity to understand it. Voltaire was quite thorough in his treatment of the Catholic church, and yet these priests are still with us today, blessing things indiscriminately and fondling altar-boys, because the average churchgoer never had any use for Voltaire.

A much more promising approach is to create new images, of great seductive power, and still simple enough to leave a deep impression on a simple mind. This is the stuff of dangerous politics and revolutionary change: a path rife with unintended consequences, and certainly one to avoid. All that remains is the possibility of an individual effort to free yourself from the despotism of the image.

As for the rest of the consumers who are sold on the images of death, dignity, and comfort, we can be sure that the free market will meet their demand. Those with deep pockets will receive a truly luxurious death that may include a personal museum of transportation and library set amid formal gardens, while those at the opposite end will only be able to afford death in a brown paper bag, but is that not the essence of consumer choice? We should hope that their culture of death dies with them, and, being numerous and diverse, we should hope that this happens long before our species becomes an endangered one.

* * * * *

For a wealth of articles on car-free consciousness and the road-fighting movement of the 1990s, see the archive of the Auto-Free Times (renamed Culture Change) Magazine, at

culturechange.org/auto_free_times.html

Carbusters Magazine:

carbusters.org