

Driverless Cars=Automotive Vasectomy

by Joe Bissonnette (October 2016)



Cars, single family suburban homes and churches are the physical expressions of much of what is great about America. The hopes and dreams of America divide along the questions of whether churches embody our most exalted calling or our greatest deception, single family suburban homes create a nation of kings or a despoiling blight of soulless zombie dormitories, and whether cars are the shiny armour we wear, a sort of missile we ride like Slim Pickens in *Doctor Strangelove*, a rigid Freudian spear, a ship of autonomy – well, actually both sides agree that cars represent all these things, the disagreement is whether these are good or bad things.

Of course a car is really about an engine; the disciplined hardness, the blind relentlessness, but most of all the carefully regulated explosions which violently fire the fossilized remains of long-dead giants, these are the jointly assented facts – the question is whether they represent triumph or tragedy. There are also electric cars, but most on the Right consider them to be a form

of automotive vasectomy. The Tesla is admittedly a pretty awesome looking car, but Elon Musk claims that what we believe to be reality is probably a computer simulation. And conservatives just can't bring themselves to lay out the big bucks for a car that isn't real in a world that isn't real.

But the big issue, the automotive Rubicon, is the advent of the driverless car. While GPS navigation might be kind of OK, GPS guidance control is to cars what soviet style concrete high-rise buildings are to single family suburban homes.

Sure, your apartment might make you feel like a fierce bird of prey perched upon a cliff as you survey tiny humans below, but rather than building community, apartments are famous for the misanthropy of the elevator. Years pass without a word between people who live separated by a mere 6 inches of concrete. Solitary and bored, they stand side by side each day, shuttled up and down, facing sliding steel doors etched with pornographic graffiti as they sleepwalk to and from their stacked concrete tombs. They are physically closer, but in every important way, miles apart. The only civic virtue among apartment dwellers is privacy.

The neighbourhood of suburban single family homes on the other hand is a vast patchwork of kingdoms. Fences and lawns and flowerbeds and sidewalks, kids on bikes, dogs on leashes, road hockey, baseball diamonds, barbecues and lots of churches. All these things are ordered to both the realization of the family as a vested stake-holding unit and the free but harmonious interaction of individuals and families within the community.

In a similar way there is a Red State robustness as we wear the sleek sexiness of a Corvette, the "can do" resourcefulness of a pickup truck, the big dream optimism of a SUV or the realized virility of a family-size passenger van. The car as an extension of self, ennobles. Sure, the driverless car like the apartment building, has an obvious practicality. It will bring with it lower insurance premiums, fewer road fatalities and more efficient traffic streams. They are an inevitability for the millions who spend hours commuting every day and they may become mobile offices – because of course we can never have too many productive office hours. But the real impetus behind driverless cars is a new opportunity for marketers to monetize. John Baruch writes in *Nature*: "car manufacturers may find that the information they glean from tracking the lifestyle of their customers is worth much more than their

vehicles.” Many of the big players – Google, Apple and Baidu do not think driverless cars should even have a steering wheel. They don’t even get the car part of driverless cars. They just want to maximize online time for commuters.

But if/when this happens, whatever these things are called, they will no longer be *our* cars, even if we are part-owners through some pastel-themed co-op. Driverless cars will be driverless cabs – or buses – and the eclipse of the car as a projection of self will also be the end of the most effective school of the most important civic virtues: clear-eyed trustworthiness, steely resolve and confidence in the enlightened self-interest of others.

To drive a car is to wield 2 tons of lethal steel. It requires clarity and confidence, composure and decisiveness. To drive on a highway is to pass thousands of strangers travelling in the opposite direction, sometimes at a combined speed of 150 miles an hour. It is a daily ritual which enlarges us. We feel power, responsibility and a small measure of greatness. The car is the antidote to the cubical. It stakes out an essential position in what conservatives know to be an intractable tension between the state and the individual. And it has been an integral medium through which the United States, in glorious paradox, has defended the greatness of the individual.

While in our obtuse confidence we might sometimes miss this fact, the psychological importance of the car as heroic armour has never been lost on the enemy. At the height of the Cold War, General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev, while visiting the U.S., pointed to the opulent tailfin of a Cadillac and asked: “What does it do?” With a cold, functionalist four word question he bore down on the spiritual dissolution of the post-war West, represented by the rising spirit of minimalist efficiency which was then eclipsing glory, grandeur and beauty. It was a stiletto cut which induced confusion, and the next year, perhaps because of a mythic automotive design directive from the POTUS, the fins were gone. It was as if Khrushchev had asked a peacock: “Why the plume?” Only a peacock philosopher would have had the presence of mind to answer that the superfluous is the most essential part of peacockness. But unfortunately at that moment there were no peacock philosophers on hand to defend the triplet sisters – beauty, truth and goodness.

Of course utopian liberals don’t see it that way. To them, driverless cars are a highly desirable technological inevitability, a massive deflation of the

distended American male ego, and a further destabilizer of the other two archaic embodiments of American greatness; the single family suburban home and the church. Very few people head out from the single family suburban home to take the family for a dispirited minimalist Sunday afternoon bus ride. Very few people drink deeply of the driverless, vegan, metrosexual cup of utopian dissolution of the self, and then take the bus to church.

Like so many of the technologies which have re-ordered our lives, the driverless car seems to be driven by an indifferent inevitability; yet another mildly satisfying conquest achieved by code-writers over blood, sweat and tears Americans. And even our vigorous protests are unlikely to induce too much pupil dilation in their bespectacled, barely human eyeballs. No doubt our romantic protests have been factored into some algorithm and will come into being and pass away with the predictability of *rigor mortis*. The revenge of the nerds has been relentless and merciless. But electronic sophistication notwithstanding the laws of basic physics still apply. The pendulum will swing. 'taint over 'til it's over.

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