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## Auto-anthropology, Modernity and Automobiles

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## CHAPTER 49

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# AUTOANTHROPOLOGY, MODERNITY, AND AUTOMOBILES

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
PIERRE LEMONNIER

THE mere presence of a chapter about classic cars, written by an ethnographer of New Guinea in a volume dedicated to the archaeology of the contemporary world is a theoretical statement of sorts. It means that, notwithstanding the question Latour and I asked about the possible differences between ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ technologies (Latour and Lemonnier 1994: 18), which several authors in this volume rightly address apropos ‘modernity’ or ‘late modernity’ (Harrison and Schofield 2010), I consider that some key features of the relationship that human beings build by making and using material things are common to humanity at large. By describing and analysing the interactions of a particular cohort of French (male) amateurs with old sports and racing cars, I aim at filling some poorly developed domains of the ethnography of car cultures, for, as Miller (2001a: 7) rightly put it, this particular strain of material culture studies lacks ‘an empathetic account of car consumption in particular social contexts.’ I do this in line with my previous approach, with respect to an anthropology of objects and techniques, that does not leave out material actions on the material world (Lemonnier 1992, 1993, 2012). A Maussian inspired paper, if you prefer, that raises an anthropological question having to do with what is at the core of the anthropology of objects, techniques, and material actions, namely: What do interactions with the material world do that words alone could not do? The answer I propose is that baby-boomers interested in old cars build, in a partially non-verbal way, a core of shared representations, emotions, practices, and strategies.

To get to this result, which parallels what I have theorized about particular artefacts of the Anga of New Guinea (Lemonnier 2012), I have had a retrospective glance at experiences in my own life, with no particular agenda regarding ‘auto-anthropology’ (Harrison and Schofield 2010: 92, 196; Muncey 2010). Beyond the poor pun, the ‘auto-’ category here refers to the particular object I focused on (my old car) and to the way I have enmeshed and put together historical sources, personal experiences, souvenirs, and observations. This interpretation of bits and remains of my own kid’s or teenager’s material culture is not a

'family archaeology' (Ulin 2009), for I have not excavated anything but boxes of model cars, piles of magazines, and other boxes full of photographs, museum catalogues, and race programmes. It is rather a sort of ethno-history, based on memories of the 1950s and 1960s that are only that, memories, but also on a participant observation that goes back to the early 1970s (when I was seriously planning to undertake an ethno-psychiatry of motor racing [sic!]). I have no notebooks about it, but even though I was already an aficionado, I rapidly tried to have a sort of 'view from afar', if I dare quote Lévi-Strauss (1983).

Actually, once one agrees that the study of material culture is by definition multidisciplinary (e.g. Buchli and Lucas 2001; Dobres 2005; Graves-Brown 2000; Harrison and Schofield 2010: 89–105; Knappett 2005; Latour and Lemonnier 1994; Tilley et al. 2006), whether the ongoing interactions with particular cars of the mid-twentieth century belongs to archaeology, history, or anthropology does not matter much. After all, it is certain that the study of the remains of the contemporary world leads us 'beyond the traditional realms of archaeology' (Harrison and Schofield 2009: 198). However, if I follow Olivier (2011; see also Olivier, this volume), for whom archaeology, 'because it questions objects that have survived from the past, is not that much about what the past times looked like, but rather about what happened to those things made by men of the past', then the life-story of classic cars also belongs to archaeology (see also Merriman, this volume).

Moreover, be  witness to a near past, classic cars *are* remarkable objects. First, unlike other cars, they  or became 'ordinary objects' (Dant and Martin 2001) and remain an illustration of the  rendering abstract of any practical goal in the interests of speed and prestige, formal connotation, technical connotation, forced differentiation, emotional cathesis, and projection in fantasy' (Baudrillard 2005 [1968]: 67). But, most of all, unlike the millions of destroyed or recycled cars, those sports cars considered as 'classic' (as early as the 1970s) constitute a small minority of vehicles that have survived and are still used. Indeed, many of them have begun a second racing career and have remained almost unchanged over forty or fifty years. They therefore illustrate what has to be done so that artefacts do *not* become archaeological items. As we shall see below, some of those classic cars are an illustration of the energy deployed year after year to freeze an object in time and protect it from decay. Not only they have not become 'hazardous waste' (Burström 2009: 133), but often the car you can see now on a circuit is supposedly the one that a given driver drove on a given circuit on a particular day, or even at a particular moment of a race: during the tests or as it was on the starting grid. They also counter the idea that new cars are always better (Sachs 1984: 136–49).

The anthropological contextualization of these artefacts nevertheless sheds light on the making of the European car culture in the 1950–60s, i.e. on a system of thoughts and material actions that pervade our everyday life and which we now take for granted. That was the period when racing cars were explicitly associated with the idea of progress, because the novelties tested on the track were supposed to be the makings of tomorrow's car. Then, as today, racing cars were 'impressive, active manifestations of human technical ability' (Shackleford 1999: 188). As for the amateurs—mostly men in their sixties—who can *now* afford to buy, drive, and collect these cars, their interest in racing cars of the 1950s and '60s is a direct result of their having grown up in a particular cultural and historical ambience in which cars had a particular place and importance. They were raised in a car-related civilization in rapid development. Such was my case in the mid-1960s, when I first encountered a version of car culture that differed from mine. And this is where my case study starts.

## 49.1 INDIVIDUAL MEMORIES, SHARED PAST, AND COLLECTIVE PRACTICES

‘Why do French people drive on the wrong side of the road?’ I was too young then to fully appreciate this excellent example of British humour, but thanks to the father of my correspondent, a mere 30 minutes after I first set foot in England, fifty years ago, I already knew that car driving was something different in Britain. A few years later, I abruptly experienced this difference the moment I drove my own car out of the Southampton ferry terminal. A narrow, winding road at twilight in pouring rain and *on the wrong side* of the road turned my long-awaited encounter with British traffic into a nightmare, even though my car was a *right-hand* drive, namely a 1947 MG TC. That was also when I realized my enthusiasm for old racing and sports cars had long since turned into a kind of neurotic endeavour. Peering through the watery windscreen of a nearly brake-less car known for its unpredictable steering, what could have told me where the road might be?

Such an anecdote would be trifling if it were not commonplace among car collectors, each of whom has dozens of similar stories about both material encounters with their beloved object and the ins and outs of their general relationship to ‘classic cars’—in this case those raced in the 1950s and 1960s, before the demands of aerodynamics radically modified the shape of sports cars. From an anthropological point of view, it is remarkable that this sort of *individual* relationship with an artefact is one of those physical and mental interactions with a piece of material culture that create, reproduce, and modify an ongoing network of *shared* practices, knowledge, and feelings among a series of individuals, in this case a *group* of amateurs. The mere mention of the desultory road-holding of a TC is enough to immediately unleash an almost infinite flurry of speech, images, and memories that *any* enthusiast (even someone you meet for the first time) would enjoy and fuel with his own piece of classic-car culture.

Indeed, whenever two or more classic-car aficionados come together, a single sentence may trigger a similar Wikipedia-like deluge of references to particular models, racing feats, pilots, circuits, technical peculiarities, or comparisons with the ‘old times’. Higgledy-piggledy they will allude to a renowned pilot’s greatest feat (‘Jim Clark’s Lotus 23 at the 1962 Nürburgring’); to an outstanding racer of the 1950s–60s (there are dozens of those); to the particular sound of an engine (the screaming of a BRM V16); or to some technical breakthrough (disk breaks on the 1953 Jaguar C-Type). But most digressions about classic cars would make sense for several hundreds of thousands of former little boys of the 1950s. In Wittgenstein’s words, these personal references to racing and sports cars of the past share a ‘family resemblance’ (Needham 1978; Wittgenstein 1953).

Besides memory-prompting phrases, many contemporary *practices*, ranging from model making to car maintenance in one’s own workshop or attending specialized events, trigger similar evocations and cross-references of bits and pieces of classic-car culture. It is noteworthy that these are collective activities; you miss most of the fun if you go to a race or show alone. Also striking is the solidity and durability of this mixture of memories with past and *present* material collective practices.

## 49.2 BOYS, DINKY TOYS, AND CAR CULTURE: WHEN CLASSIC CARS WERE JUST CARS

To get a idea of what cars, racing cars, and the road-going *Gran Turismo* (GT) car were in the boy's world of the 1950s, one must think back to a time when the two main technologies that occupy kids' leisure time today—TV and the Internet—did not exist, and portable radios and record players were scarce or still to come (see Schiffer 1991 for the US situation). There were 350,000 TV sets in France in 1956 (Antoine and Oulif 1962: 132). Boys played at being Robin Hood, Tintin, or any hero of the typically French (and Belgian) comic books. The middle-class and wealthy kids had electric trains and Dinky white-metal aircraft. But, most of all, boys possessed several (or dozens of) 1/43rd model cars (I will use 'Dinky Toys' as shorthand for a general category). I write 'boys' because this is what my own experience as a kid is about, and because I have observed (and counted) that those attending today's historic racing or car shows are over 90 per cent male. Women are as rare in classic car racing as they are in other kinds of circuit races. The important question of what was the equivalent of cars and toy cars for girls in the 1950s is pending.

Daily games with 'petites autos' were part of being a boy in an industrial world in which cars were becoming a key aspect of almost everyone's material culture: there were only 2.7 million cars in France in 1954, but these figures were to be multiplied by ten over the next fifty years. Cars were everywhere and were used to go from one place to another, but they were present also in adult conversations and daily newspapers. News about speeding machines was sometimes overwhelming, as in 1955: alongside the Le Mans disaster,<sup>1</sup> this was the year of the Citroën DS, but also that of the 'Caravelle' aircraft and of the World Speed Record of the 'BB' and 'CC' electric locomotives (both reached 331 km/h).

The large place given to car-related news was proof of sorts that automobiles were important things in this world. The biggest popular weekly *Paris-Match* (1.8 million copies a week in 1958) devoted several pages to automobile-related events: the new models of the upcoming 'Salon de l'Auto' (often visited by the whole family) and the annual race at Le Mans, but also the construction of motorways, the opening of new assembly lines, sport or cinema stars with their glowing Cadillacs, and of course the details of every possible mechanical breakthrough. In the weekly 'newsreels' at the cinema, too, racing cars were presented as an example of the ongoing innovations that ordinary cars would soon adopt, while each team also advertised for various makes of accessories (brakes, headlights, batteries, tires, oil, etc.). The boys' magazines had a special section devoted to automobiles and their technical aspects (Figure 49.1).

The weekly issues of these journals also featured the achievements of drivers and kids would pretend they were Fangio, Ascari, Berha, Moss, Hawthorn, or Collins. Few boys got *The Racing Car Explained* (Pomeroy 1963) or *The Racing Car Pocketbook*, by D. Jenkinson (1962), who was Sir Stirling Moss's passenger in the Mercedes that won the 1955 Mille Miglia, one of the greatest car-racing feats ever, but books by or about Fangio (Fangio and Giambertone 1961; Merlin 1959), Moss (Moss 1964) or Trintignant (Trintignant 1957) were among boys' regular reading.

<sup>1</sup> More than 80 people were killed in the main stand by the debris of a Mercedes.

**STARTER-ESSAI TR-4**



**LA VOITURE SPORT EN PERTE DE VITESSE ?**

**C'est la vie... On donne des leçons. On partage sa science, et un jour l'élève dépasse le maître ! La voiture de sport a désormais triomphé : va-t-elle mourir de sa victoire ?**

**Ils ont compris la différence entre « rouler » et « bien rouler ».**

Mon ami Yves était décidé d'engager sa TR-3 aux Coupes de Bruxelles, et les jours précédents, il s'entraînait ferme. Faisant rugir son moteur à 5000 tours tout en surveillant anxieusement sa pression d'huile, il tentait de réussir des virages que le châssis de sa voiture n'appréciait pas du tout. C'était spectaculaire ! Puis, par curiosité, il refit calmement le circuit au volant de la Fiat 2300 familiale (rouchettes, radio, confort et silence)... et ne fut pas peu surpris de voir son chrono sanctionner un boni de cinq secondes !

— C'est à te décourager d'acheter une autre voiture sport qu'une Ferrari ! fulmina-t-il.

— Eh ! oui, mon vieux... La voiture sport à bas prix risque de mourir à cause de son succès. Elle a révélé à un grand nombre d'automobilistes les joies du pilotage, et les constructeurs de voitures « bourgeoises » ne se le sont pas fait dire deux fois ! Disons-le franchement : un bon pilote au volant d'une 2300, d'une Mercedes 220 ou autres DS-19 montrera ses feux rouges à beaucoup de voitures dites de sport. Et si ces dernières ne se décident pas à faire des progrès déterminants, leur compte est bon. Reprendre de l'avance technique ou disparaître, tel est leur dilemme... C'est dans cet état d'esprit que je fis l'essai de la Triumph TR-4. Inutile de dire que je fus enclin à la sévérité, surtout si l'on considère le prix élevé de cette voiture !

**Que va faire Michelotti en Angleterre ?**

Entre une présentation à la Presse et la prise en main d'un modèle issu de la série, il y a une grande différence. Une différence qui peut émuousser quelques enthousiasmes ! Lorsque je rangé la TR-4 d'essai le long d'un trottoir, je me demandai ce que le styliste italien Michelotti avait perdu en Angleterre... Certes, le dessin est le style bourru de la TR-3 ! Que diable... l'Angleterre ne manque pas de bons dessinateurs ! Voyez la coupe des Jaguar XK « E », des Aston-Martin ou des Lotus Elite. Songez aussi aux déjà vieilles MG 1.600 ou Austin-Healey 3.000 ! Les constructeurs anglais ne doivent pas s'hypposier sur le continent... ils ont déjà trop souvent trahi leur tradition...



Le classique 4 cylindres en ligne de la Triumph est passé à une cylindrée de 2.138 cm<sup>3</sup>. Culoise classique à soupapes en tête verticales et culbuteurs. Admission et échappement de même côté. Alimentation par deux carburateurs SU. Vilebrequin sur trois paliers. Puissance SAE : 105 CV à 4.750 t./m. (soit environ 95 CV DIN).

FIGURE 49.1 The 'Starter' pages in the boys' magazine *Spirou* are fixed in the mind of hundreds of thousand of those who were boys in the 1950s. The dedicated website <<http://www.toutspirou.fr/Automobile/spirouet.htm>> lists all the cars drawn by the artist Jidehem (J-D-M) between 1950 and 1987 (reproduced with permission from Editions Dupuis)

### 49.3 CLASSIC CARS BECOME HISTORIC OBJECTS (1960–70S)

In the mid-1960s, motorsport was developing in France, and most magazines (the weekly *L'Auto-journal* and the monthlies *L'Automobile* and *L'Action automobile et touristique*) comprised information on car racing; but several monthly publications also appeared that were dedicated solely to sports cars and car racing (track and rally): *Moteurs*, *Sport-Auto*,

*Virage-Auto* (a Belgian journal), and then *Echappement*. Specialized bookshops in Paris sold copies of British magazines, notably *Motor Sport* (since 1924) and, from 1965, *Cars and Car Conversion*, full of DIY information and largely devoted to maintaining sports cars and improving their performances. *Road and Track* (founded in 1947 in New York State) gave a glimpse of racing in the US.

Most magazines dealing with cars in general contained an historical section on 'legends'; but as early as the mid-1960s, new publications began specializing in old cars only. Again, French amateurs could get their hands on copies of *Thoroughbred & Classic Cars* (later known as *Classic Cars*, in the UK), launched in Britain in 1973.

The late 1960s also marked the appearance of specialized books. Those books in English written by renowned drivers and journalists (John Bolster, Dennis Jenkinson, Wilson McComb, Doug Nye, Paul Skilleter, or Timothy Nicholson, all considered as world experts) were the main source of information about classic cars. In particular, extremely well-documented and -illustrated booklets were published, notably by Profile Publications in the 1960s and 1970s, for the sake of model-making.

Simultaneously, famed racing-cars arrived in ad hoc museums. In England, the Montagu Motor Museum, founded in 1952, became the National Motor Museum in 1968. In France, a Musée de l'Automobile opened right on the Le Mans circuit in 1961. In Paris, the Retromobile motor show, devoted exclusively to 'vintage and classic cars', was held for the first time in 1975 (and every year since).

## 49.4 MODELS OR THE REAL THING? CLASSIC CARS AND THEIR SUBSTITUTES

The 1/43rd models were not yet the affordable little jewels they have become with the help of 'chemically milled' small pieces (wire wheels) and later on of the technique of 'photo-etching'; but in the late 1960s and early '70s, dozens and then hundreds of models of different sports and racing cars were produced after a British maker (John Day) had the idea of selling white-metal kits. Thanks to the growing number of sources of information about cars, it was now possible to produce an accurate model of almost any 'important' car, past or present. Choosing a model, making it or merely 'improving' it by adding a tiny fire extinguisher or roll-bar gave the amateurs an indirect but material contact with dream(ed) cars. A model became a sort of concentrate of the knowledge, material practices, memories, and feelings at the heart of a baby-boomer's complex relationship with the racing cars of their youth. Collecting a classic car was another.

In the late 1960s, sports cars were supposed to attract girls, but they also epitomized several of the ideas or myths then associated with cars: speed, freedom, (supposed) male technological ability (Shackleford 1999). For those—still quite rich young bourgeois—who could not buy a recent Porsche, Maserati, or Ferrari, and not even the revolutionary Jaguar E-Type revealed in 1961, the less expensive sports cars of the day (e.g. Austin-Healey 3000, Alfa-Romeo GT, Lancia Fulvia, MGB, Triumph TR4) were substitutes of the unaffordable GT cars.



FIGURE 49.2 Where it all started: the September 1965 issue of *Sport-Auto* in which this test was published (Rosinski 1965) also comprised a visit to the Shelby-Cobra factory in Los Angeles and road tests comparing the MGB with the Triumph TR4. Another test of the TC was in *Champion* in 1969 by the Formula 1 driver Jean-Pierre Beltoise (1969) (SportAuto reproduced with permission from Mondadori France)

Without exception, all these ‘ordinary’ sports cars of the 1960s (and later 1970s) are now considered as ‘classics’, whatever their mechanical sophistication, rarity, or racing past.

Of course, a third- or fourth-hand road-going sports car produced in the tens of thousands differs from a racing car designed and assembled in order to maximize lightness, strength, endurance, durability, and speed. Yet, thanks to your classic-car knowledge, you knew that your particular model of ordinary sports car had effectively been raced at Le Mans. Or that it had had at least a famed racing career. Therefore, it *was* also a racing car and you had something in common with the great drivers. Anyway, a sound old Triumph TR, Porsche 356, or MGB cost at least double what I was given to buy a safe five-year-old Renault 8 (5,000 FF, i.e. £400 at the time) as my first car, but I had been dreaming of an MG TC since I first saw pictures of it as a teenager (Figure 49.2). I found one and I soon had the confirmation that driving a TC with the windshield folded flat on a small bumpy country road at 100 km/h is a sort of sport. At that speed, even a glance at the speedometer is hazardous because it is located in front of the passenger’s seat, which means you have to take your eyes off the road for a long second, during which time the car may decide to jump somewhere you do not want to go.



## 49.5 A NON-OBJECTIVE ACCOUNT OF A MENTAL AND PHYSICAL ENCOUNTER WITH A CLASSIC CAR

My old-school seasoned mechanic tried to improve the braking and, indeed, for years the car only veered *slightly* to one (unfortunately randomly changing) side of the road whenever I pushed hard on the pedal. As for the steering, he proposed replacing the original steering box with a Fiat one. ‘No way!’, I said for the sake of authenticity, and until my last kilometre with that car, I had to foresee its reactions in a series of more or less predictable situations: emergency braking, sneaking between a highway guardrail and a (too) long lorry, driving on the M4 Severn Bridge on a windy day. After a while, I got used to gently turning the steering wheel until I felt a resistance that proved the existence of a real mechanical link between my actions and the position of the car on the road. For more than a year I waited either for spare parts or for Monsieur Fernand to find time to look at my unconventional car. Actually, waiting month after month for some good news from the garage is a major feature of classic-car ownership and part of those individual practices that finally create a shared culture about particular cars.

France is a country where do-it-yourself is quite limited when it comes to cars. A few people do basic car servicing such as changing break-pads, spark-plugs, or motor oil, but it is my feeling that, in the UK, more complex mechanical operations or body-repair are much more common. For lack of space (I lived in a flat) and patience (I am hopelessly awkward with any tool), I limited my mechanical interventions to things I thought I could do—cleaning the brake drums, valve adjustment, carburettor synchronizing, etc. In truth, my personal involvement in the process was mainly finding spare parts from the UK. I knew by heart the ‘Workshop Manual’ and the specialist catalogues, so that obtaining spare parts for the brakes, water-pump, rev-counter, or exhaust pipe took less than a month. The radiator-shell proved to be a nightmare, for I first decided that I could have it repaired (welded, reshaped, and re-chromed) and tried all sorts of craftsmen (from jewellers to dentists and sheet-metal workers), all of which progressively destroyed the shell.

In addition to what was needed to get a safe and well-running TC, I decided to improve its appearance and bought two famous accessories by ‘Brooklands’: a steering wheel with four sets of spokes, and one ‘racing screen’. In order to make my car look even more like a vintage (of the 1930s) racer, I added leather straps to hold the bonnet closed. I tried to make a dashboard in brushed metal but something went wrong in my *chaîne opératoire* so that I ruined several metal sheets and gave up. The car looked right when I was confident enough to drive it across the Channel for a circuit to various mythical places.

## 49.6 OUT OF SOUTHAMPTON: A VISIT TO CLASSIC-CAR CULTURE PARADISE

Choosing a *British* classic sports car is meaningful in itself. According to amateurs’ shared representations, it meant that you like driving a convertible in the countryside with the top

down whatever the weather. It meant not looking concerned by the puddle of oil under the gear-box or engine seal. In the late 1960s, driving a classic in Britain also gave you some taste of an ambience unknown anywhere else, for in the 1950s and '60s, Great Britain had more champions, more racing-car makers, more world-famous racing teams, legendary circuits, racing schools, race formulas, magazines, than any other country. Saturday afternoon black-and-white TV programmes on saloon-car competitions were also unique, as were the BBC radio commentators, who gave an unforgettably vivid image of a Grand Prix. Needless to say, as much as using the other side of the road, the different 'roadscape' and motorways were something to which I had to seriously adapt my driving (Edensor 2004: 103; Merriman this volume).

The several MG specialist shops I visited were Ali Baba's caverns run by knowledgeable people who just recognized the exact bolt, screws, or tiny spring I was trying to describe in my approximate English. Historic racing had not yet developed into a business involving the annual organization of dozens of international competitions, but major classic racers of the 1950s already took part in competitions organized by the Historic Sports Car Club (since 1966). There were two Maserati 250F's, a Jaguar D-Type, ERA's, etc. (Figure 49.3) at the first race I saw (at Castle Comb, I think). Those cars I knew mainly as Dinky Toys were screaming for real around the tracks, and racing as fast as ever, thanks to more modern tires, brake pads, and oil. Access to the cars in the paddock was free and easy then and a mere notice 'Motor racing is dangerous' would keep you from getting too close to the track.

These memories of my first trip with the TC lack ethno-historic precision, but their very melange is precisely the point I want to make: the interest in classic cars is fed by inter-related *practices*—maintaining cars, going to races, shows, workshops, making models,



**FIGURE 49.3** Castle Comb in July 1970. Except for my Dinky Toys, it was the first time I saw a Maserati 250F (two, actually, one red and one blue). Top left are a Frazer-Nash and two BMWs. For an amateur, there is no doubt that the wheel arch and the wheel that appear between the two men are those of a Jaguar XK120 (photograph: Pierre Lemonnier)

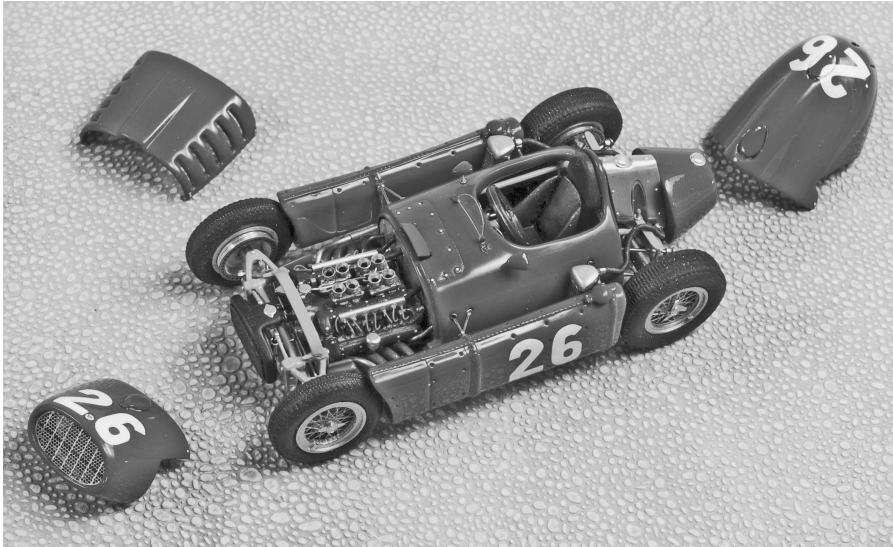
manipulating books and journals, etc.—that deal as much with material action as with abstract information (see Penrose, this volume). Shopping at Toulmin’s (near London), for instance, meant a convergence of memories, information, emotions, and desires relating as much to comics, newsreels, model making, reading of dozens of booklets, books, and articles about MGs, as visits to circuits or looking at hundreds of pictures, drawings, and cutaways (Chapman 2009). Similarly, a pair of Maserati 250F’s encountered on a circuit brings to the fan’s mind anything from pouring molten lead inside a Solido model (to improve its road (carpet) holding), to reading (one more time) an account of Fangio’s breaking the lap record ten times in one race at Nürburgring.

Also noteworthy is the involvement of four senses in the relations with classic cars. Sight, because there are so many details to look at and compare, notably with what one has previously seen in images or reproduced on a model. Hearing, in order to appreciate the squeal of the tyres or listen to the superb sound of a door or a bonnet closing. Touch is essential to appreciate the lightness of an aluminium panel. Smell has a lot to do with the fragrance of hot burnt castor oil and old leather seats. The fortunate amateur may even feel the infrasound emitted by big V8 engines at full throttle. Only taste is left out.

## 49.7 KNOWLEDGE, PRACTICES, AND EMOTIONS: THE MATERIAL MAKINGS OF SHARED REPRESENTATIONS

Today, enough boys of the 1950s have grown into wealthy adults, so that the interest in classic cars has evolved into a business. Historic racing has flourished, and there are over 900 classic-car shows a year in Great Britain alone. There are more and more classic-car sellers and numerous workshops maintain classics. Some fabricate ‘replicas’ of famed cars (also known as ‘recreations’ or ‘continuations’). There also exist companies that transport classics and others that build timber garages; photographers who offer studios adapted to cars; high-security private car-park storage for classics, etc. Model cars are offered by the thousands and, even at the 1/43rd scale, some attain a level of detail that would have been unimaginable two decades ago (Figure 49.4). Hundreds of websites are devoted to every imaginable topic. Magazines flourish and now treat new topics such as controversies (why is a 1954 C-type replica made in 1983 more authentic than some other ‘recreations?’) or the evolution of the classic-car market. ‘We test the classics that you can buy’ is a regular feature. Speculation is part of the game, and magazines carry magnificent advertisements for banks, auctions, or insurance companies. To paraphrase Miller (2000), classic-car magazines are ‘traps’ for the amateurs.

At the time of the trips to Britain I have described rather impressionistically, the amateur himself did most of the relational linking between different mutually reinforcing spheres of knowledge (including implicit knowledge) and practices, and magazines were the main physical means that gathered and potentially redistributed the various types of information fuelling a classic-car passion. Since the 1980s, the opportunities to share information and practices have increased considerably because, during any event related to classic cars



**FIGURE 49.4** The high precision of some models that are the size of a Dinky Toy (1/43rd) simply leaves the amateur breathless. This model of Alberto Ascari's 1955 Lancia D 50 immediately evokes the Italian champion's plunge into the waters of Monaco harbour during the 1955 Grand Prix (model and photograph reproduced with permission from Steve Barnett)

(races, shows, auctions), the same clubs, models, 'automobilia', paintings, spare parts, books, etc. are present.

The network of practices related to classic cars has thrived, yet the relational aspect of the passion for cars is still that of the 1970s. The 'seamless web' (Hughes 1986) of ideas, objects, and material practices that make up an amateur's relationship with cars and pilots is composed of the convergence of three types of relations: (1) between a material object (a classic car) and its complex and changing historical and contemporary context; (2) between an individual and his own memories and ongoing interactions with classic cars year after year; and (3) between those people (mainly men in this chapter) who build and maintain social relations connected with classic cars. For each actor (amateur), the mixture of mutually interlocking engagements with dream cars is unique, but every amateur refers to a similar amalgam of memories, representations, and practices.

In other words, very private (Graves-Brown 2009), even sometimes intimate practices are at the core of intertwined thoughts and material actions that are enough to delineate a particular social grouping: in this case, that comprised of those French men in their fifties and sixties that have experienced, and enjoyed, in their own life, most of what I have described above as material aspect of a passion for old cars. By doing and making things in relation to these artefacts, that is, partly without words, men build a common 'classic car culture', made of a shared mixture of thoughts that is central to diverse ongoing social groupings and manifestations (car clubs, workshops, races, exhibitions, model-making, collection, etc.).

Now, what is striking is that, with regard to the complex question of the making of a shared world with things through material interactions, the technologies that characterize 'supermodernity' (González-Ruibal 2008) modify neither the elements of classic car culture

nor the series of relations I have just exposed. They merely offer an endless possibility to elaborate them, notably thanks to websites. Looking at a model or photo already ignited a Wikipedia-like conversation decades before websites existed. Also, it appears that some objects—the models made from a kit lovingly assembled, the real old car you manage to restore, or the one you maintain—are more conducive than others to concentrating information and memories, and to generating an endless flood of images, emotions, and plans for the future.

These two remarks raise important theoretical issues, even though my chapter addresses only marginally questions in the sociology of ‘automobilities’ (Featherstone 2004), *technologie culturelle* of cars, and archaeology of the contemporary world. With respect to sociology, and regarding cars in general, my allusions to the labyrinth of relations between baby-boomers, cars, sellers, banks, insurance companies, sponsors of races and shows, magazines, and auction companies are in line with Baudrillard’s description of the mechanism of the *Consumer Society* (1998 [1970]). And sure enough, I have explored the car’s ‘capacity to empower, and to have a positive impact on sociality’ (Dant and Martin 2001: 149), but in a way that has not much to do with mobility.

In passing, nostalgia is only one ingredient of the shared mixture of contemporary practices, knowledge, and feelings converging to classic cars that I have described. What baby-boomers do while interacting with classic cars is much more than contemplating the passage of time (Burström 2009: 141), and more than a result of the ‘inertia of continuity’ (Graves-Brown 2009: 203). My point is not about how some thousands of men born in the late 1940s recall their boyhood. It is about the numerous manners in which they materially refer to a key artefact of that past—famous racing cars and their diverse substitutes—in a way that makes them engage immediately in particular kind of conversations and practices with whoever shares the same classic car culture.

Speaking of our exploration of the near past, the list of what this chapter does not deal with is long. I have not tried, for example, to link my ethno-history with automotive archaeology (e.g. Bailey et al. 2009; Burström 2009; Cotter 2005). However, although my main goal was not to answer the question ‘what does archaeology add to our understanding that you can’t get from the document?’ (Holtorf and Piccini 2009: 10), my chapter nevertheless alludes to practices that have almost faded away (a particular way of driving and maintaining cars, of choosing them, of replacing them in a network of thoughts and actions, etc.) and tries to complement studies on car culture that straddle ethnography and archaeology (Graves-Brown 1997; Miller 2001b; Moorhouse 1991; O’Dell 1997; Pillsbury 1974; Post 1994; Sachs 1984; Shackelford 1999; and the whole issue of *Theory, Culture & Society* devoted to ‘automobilities’ in 2004) by giving an idea of what a sports car was for a little boy, then teenager, when car production rocketed in Europe.

By contrast to studies on the archaeology of the recent past, my chapter is not about ruins, warfare, poverty, disasters, or reflection on modernity—e.g. the themes listed and illustrated in Harrison and Schofield apropos the archaeology of the contemporary past (2009: e.g. 189–90), but rather about fun and pieces of rather rich people’s material culture—at least today, because classic car have become unaffordable. It is about marginal practices and people, yet not about ‘subaltern identities and discourses’ (Buchli and Lucas 2001). Moreover, looking as an anthropologist at historic noisy and polluting cars collected by wealthy enthusiasts is not *only* a way to grasp disappearing practices that once were anchored in artefacts now in the process of becoming archaeological. Nor is it only a way

to glance at material interactions that paved the way to our contemporary usages of an artefact central to modernity. It is also, and first of all, a contribution to the anthropology of techniques and objects in general, highlighting the way people are prone to share a common world of ideas and practices in relation to material things.

Actually, the way in which my ‘autoanthropology’ complements other approaches to material culture of the recent past, including the archaeology of the contemporary, might reflect the kind of regularity—theoretical point, if I dare say—I want to stress. By mixing personal souvenirs, material *témoins*, and historical sources referring to various objects and practices relating to classic cars, I propose that, besides the exploration of ‘The “System” of Automobility’ (Urry 2004 quoted by Featherstone 2004: 2), that is itself embedded in a wider technical system (Lemonnier 1992: 4–11), we must also consider, on a reversed approach, how various domains of such a system of thoughts and material actions *converge* towards particular objects, particular cars, in a way that is at the core of the ‘production of shared representations’ (Godelier 2008).

As we have seen, the multiplicity, diversity, and time-depth of those physical actions related to the objects in question are crucial dimensions of their ability to bring people to act together. But if I now go back to the general question Latour and I asked about possible changes in the general relationship of human beings with artefacts in industrial societies, the case study of classic cars shows that objects and material actions may have a different status vis-à-vis non-verbal communication and the making of a shared world. In this respect, a 1954 Ferrari 375 Plus belonging to Ralph Lauren and admired at the Musée des Arts décoratifs in 2011 (exhibition ‘L’art de l’automobile’) has much in common with, say, a New Guinea garden fence or funerary drum (Lemonnier 2012). All these things—or rather, what people do and communicate because of them—put people together in a way words only could not achieve.

You may then observe a real piece of the True Cross, a mobile phone or iPod (Dant 2008) more or less do the same thing as an Anga sacred object or loved 1/43rd model, in the sharing of information, grouping people and making them do things together as social actors. Actually, this observation has fundamental theoretical consequences: it means that whatever we call ‘the sacred’ is based on relationships that do *not* differ from those of baby-boomers with iconic racing cars, and that we have to identify which artefacts have this role of ‘resonators’ (Lemonnier 2012). We need to understand in what respect the contemporary world modifies—or not—these relations that converge towards an object. One may think this brings us far from understanding late-modern material culture, but this is not the case: the Pentecostal pastor who baptized 21 of my New Guinea friends three months ago explained to the new believers that they ‘now had the mobile phone of Jesus in their body’.

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