

The Honey Trap

Love for the automobile and its consequences

Michael F. Wagner

Associate Professor in history, Dr. Phil. Michael F. Wagner at Department of Culture and Global Studies, Aalborg University. Current research field is the history of automobilism as a culture of mobility, leisure and consumption.

Abstract

A permanent love affair between man and his automobile has been going on for more than a century. A love affair based on the promise of independence and freedom incarnated by the car. The paradox of this affair is the increasing loss of freedom and independence caused by the fast growing number of automobiles on the roads every year and the inherent traffic congestion that follows. The article traces this erotic relationship between man and car from the beginning 1920ies to the latest climax in 2012 with the refusal of a congestion zone (betalingsring) in Copenhagen to relieve the traffic congestion in the commuter traffic. The emotional relationship between man and car has triumphed once again over the rational considerations in society. Everybody is still stuck for hours in traffic jams every day, sitting caught in this honey trap the drivers preserved their freedom and autonomy at all costs. Come hell or high water.

Keywords Automobilism; Leisure; Mass Consumption; Mobility; Freedom; Car Romanticism; Traffic Congestion

A couple of years ago an Israeli company named 'better place' launched a promotion campaign in cooperation with Renault to sell an electric car model named 'Fluence'. The campaign also promised the construction of a brand new nationwide distribution system of loading stations for recharging the battery in the car. The campaign ran full-page advertisements in the daily newspapers for a whole month. The explicit message was that with this new sustainable technology you could enjoy all the positive aspects of automobilism without creating and contributing any further to the vices and environmental threats inherent in the 'classic' automobile system such as energy consuming vehicles, traffic noise and polluting technology. In the feel good campaign for this new technology, the electric car 'Fluence' along with its new energy infrastructure were presented as a perfect remedy to gain a cleaner conscience and obtain a sustainable environment without losing any of the classical benefits from the old technology. The question then is what were the classical benefits of the car and how did they turn into the opposite representing a daily curse to the driver and a massive threat to the environment?

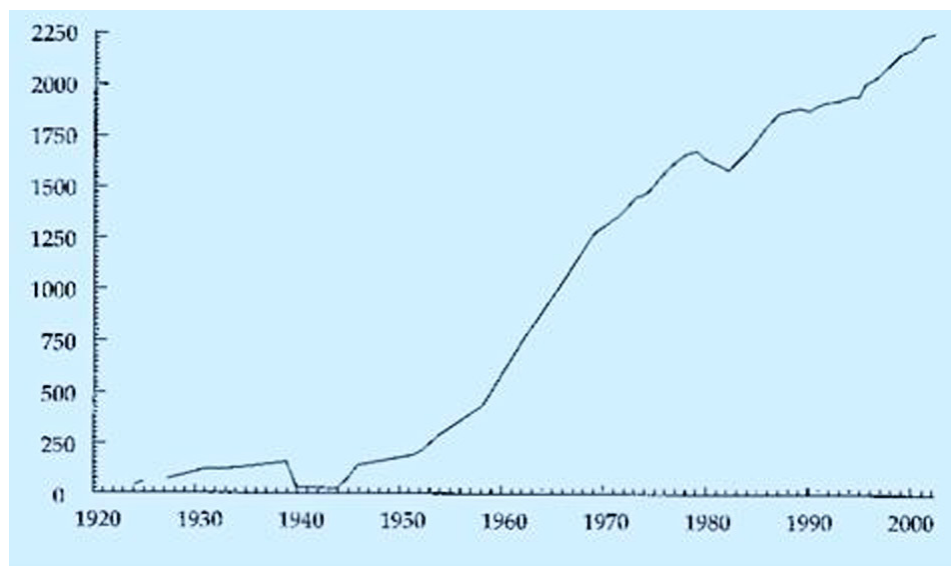
The answer to the first question is the promise of freedom, mobility, flexibility and individual transportation to the driver and the passengers, what could be termed automobilism as a value system.¹ In other words 'car-romanticism, a love for the freedom the automobile gives to you when you are driving around in it. Or as Groucho Marx stated so bluntly in a TV show "Merrily We roll Along" in 1961: "the Story of America's Love Affair with the Automobile". The TVshow was produced as one in a series by the chemical corporation DuPont to meet the growing body of critics of automobilism, as Americans offered excessive sacrifices to the automobile, in form of accident casualties, traffic congestion and urban destruc-

The campaign launched by better place didn't amount to much, less than 300 electric cars were sold to private owners during the campaign. As a consequence the company went bankrupt leaving the car owners on their own and with no system of recharging stations. (Politik- en, October 2012)



tion.² The corporation owned 23% of the shares in GM, and more than half the automobiles on American roads were products of General Motors. The TV show was an attempt to meet this criticism with more than rational arguments creating a new story of Americans special relationship to automobiles, to them they were the objects of eros, a chrome and steel Galathea. Since the 1970ies academic historians have accepted this story of the 'love affair' as a cultural fact. In other words the honey trap clapped.³

It was no coincidence that the heading of the advertisements in the 'Fluence' campaign said "I'd rather be Free... from old fashioned car technology. But I will not be without the good old fashioned joy of driving" referring to the continuation of the love affair by the car owner and to the clean conscience by using this new system of transportation. In both instances, it would benefit the user to consume this specific product. The Fluence campaign also promised 'free range' meaning unrestricted mobility for the electric car with a new logistic project, that would supply the car owner with recharged batteries all over the country, always within driving distance. It is this vision of romance and love for freedom as the classic virtues of automobilism that is the focus in this article.



Number (in thousands) of private automobiles in Denmark 1925-2000. (Michael F. Wagner: Transport and Mobility in Danish Historiography. P. Norton, et. al. eds.: Mobility in History, Vol. 4 2013, pp.115-128)

We find the same type of message of love for the freedom of the automobile as a direct import from American automobile culture, when we go back to the early stages in the history of Danish automobilism. In the beginning of the interwar period Ford Motor Company launched a large campaign in Denmark linking the Model T to tales of freedom, leisure and the good (middleclass) life out driving on Sundays during the summer season. Soon this romantic vision of freedom turned into a honey trap that lured thousands of families to purchase a new automobile every year. By the year 1939 there were 110.000 privately owned cars in Denmark, today the number is more than 2.2 million.⁴

It was from the outset expensive for the customer to put a lot of money in a car. Judging from the numerous advertisements in the automobile magazines promoting new cars in a pastoral leisure setting, this investment was to a certain extent based on a wish to drive for leisure and adventure rather than any practical, professional or commercial need for transportation. This implies that there must be a strong lust motive based on the romantic vision of unlimited freedom rather than rationality as a driving force in the development and expansion of the car culture.⁵

Farther on down the road expanding automobilism has come to represent massive and expensive problems to society. For decades' politicians, city and traffic planners has had to deal with massive problems of urban destruction, traffic pollution, accidents and congestion that follows the ever-increasing number of cars on the roads. Especially in the after war years when ownership of a car came to be seen as a democratic right the number of privately owned cars boomed and so did the problems related to it.

To this challenge stemming from immanent overload and congestion of the infrastructure blocking for the access to individual mobility came the question of supplying all these cars with energy and raw materials to keep them running. All this turned into a complex of serious political challenges with the oil crises in the 1970ies.⁶ On top of all these problems came the pollution of the environment, and lately massive CO2 emissions deriving from automobilism that is a substantial contribution to global heating. It was only the last two of these problems 'better place' and Renault offered a technological solution to, but in the end this initiative did not solve anything. Within a year after launching the campaign 'bet-



“Free and independent!” If you buy a Ford T this will make you free and independent, because now you can go anywhere you want to. That is the first message in this advertisement for individual mobility. This message goes for men as well as for women, but the second message is a special offer to the emancipated woman who wants more freedom and independence in mobility. (Ford Magasinet, May 1925)

ter place’ went bankrupt and the Danish company was dissolved.

What the car promises

Let us take a closer look at early Car-romanticism and the car promises of freedom and independence as they were presented to the public in a couple of advertisements from the Danish division of Ford Motor Company between 1923 and 1925. In a general perspective, the automobile represented a possibility for individual mobility and private transportation based on a personal choice. It also gave a higher social status to the owner of the car and it incarnated the dream of the good life of leisure, as I will demonstrate in the following analysis.⁷

In the early spring of 1925 Ford published an advertisement in the touring club FDMs magazine *Motor* and also in the company’s own magazine *Ford Nyt* featuring a chic young woman in an open landscape with a Ford T in the background. The heading of the advertisement simply states ‘Free and independent!’ This is the main message and it bears two different meanings, a general vision of freedom and independence promised by the ownership of a car and a more subtle message addressing female emancipation. In the text it is stated that: ‘The car should be easy, solid and with a low price and maintenance. It should be roomy so you are sitting freely and conveniently. The steering should be a simple and reliable construction, and steering should not demand any physical effort. A car that

combines all these properties, and must be said to be especially well suited for ladies, is the new Ford...’. This message of love for freedom also contained a vision of gendered automobility and female emancipation achieved by women driving a car. The same message is repeated in advertisements from Ford and other car producers again and again during the interwar period. Here women are not in any way portrayed as pin ups placed on the hood as eye catcher,

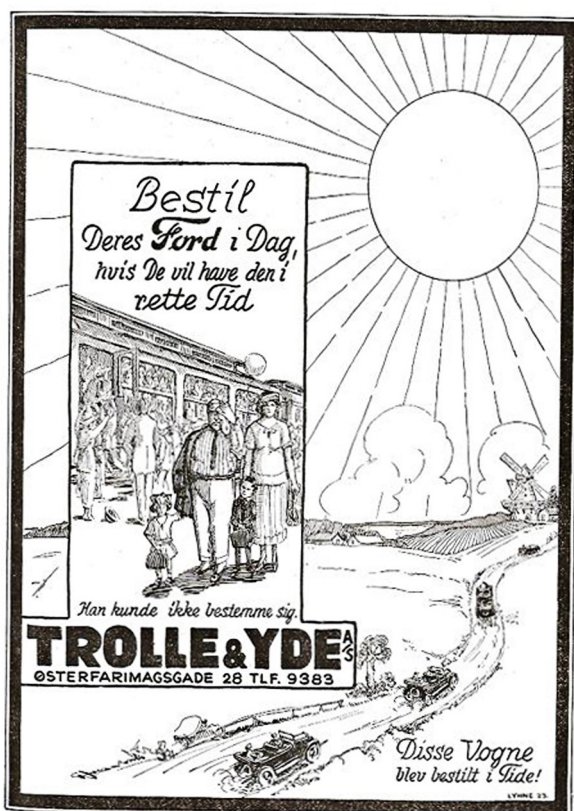
but are seriously considered competent drivers mastering and loving their machines at the same level as men.

In the wake of this appropriation of the car by Women thrived a new industry of driving schools formally teaching women the right manners to drive and how to behave in the traffic. Oddly enough, earlier on driving schools had never seemed to be a necessity to the male driver, soon it was mandatory to all new drivers. Till then there was no driver's license and no formal teaching, male drivers had simply learned to drive the natural way - learning by doing so to speak.

Two years earlier during the winter 1923 one of Fords main dealers in Copenhagen Trolle & Yde launched a rather aggressive campaign urging customers to preorder a car *now* if they wanted to get out and drive around during the coming summer in a car of their own. Presumably, the production of cars at the assembly line in the factory in Copenhagen could no longer meet the increasing demand from the many new customers who (maybe) wanted to buy a Ford T.

In May 1923 Trolle & Yde published an advertisement where the message love of freedom covers three different layers. An inserted picture in the main frame shows us a middle class family ready to leave for the countryside. Portrayed in the summer heat standing sweaty on the train platform in front of a steaming train already crammed with passengers, there was a message above them saying: 'Order your Ford today, if you want to have it in timely manner'; and at the feet of this family lies the conclusion: 'He could not decide (to order in time)'. Consequently, as victims of this indecision the family was forced to leave by train if they wanted to go anywhere. It is a general assumption in car romanticism, that the train system is the antithesis to personal freedom and individual mobility, here it was manifest.

The main frame of the advertisement shows a typical Danish rural landscape in the summertime



If you order your Ford today, you will be able to visit the national historic icon Dybbøl Mill without having the inconvenience of going there by train. You will be free as the bird in a Ford model T Touring. (Motor, May 1923)

with a small road leading up to a windmill on top of a hill and with some farmhouses and a small fjord in the background. There are four cars (Ford Touring) racing towards the mill celebrating individual freedom of mobility and the laconic message below the picture reads 'These cars were ordered in time'.

The third layer has a more subtle message of freedom concerning the foremost symbol of the nation's struggle for survival, freedom and independence. The four drivers are on a pilgrimage to the national romantic symbol Dybbøl Mølle. The mill is situated very close to the largest Danish fortress Dybbøl Skanse where the decisive battle stood in the 2. Sleswick War against Prussia and Austria in April 1864. The Prussian artillery used to aim at the mill when they bombarded the fortifications. During the heavy bombardment, the mill fell to pieces, but there was a saying that as long as the mill was running the fortress was invincible. After the fortress was defeated, the mill turned into a national icon symbolizing the struggle for freedom against the Germans. After the capitulation and a humiliating international peace conference Denmark had to abstain the two duchies Sleswick and Holsteen to Prussia and were struggling to survive as a nation. The northern part of Sleswick returned to Danish sovereignty after a popular referendum only three years earlier in 1920. So featuring this historic location of the outmost national importance in an advertisement for a car was indeed a very strong icon of freedom and love for the nation.⁸

The car as a barrier to freedom and individual mobility

Car romanticism had its golden time during the cold war period. Especially in the sixties as the number of cars steadily rose from almost 400.000 in 1960 to 1.060.000 in 1970. This development turned automobilism into a democratic mass-movement of consumers chasing after the good life with love of freedom in a car. At the same time as the number of cars on the Danish roads exploded suburbia expanded with more than 500.000 new single family houses built in the outskirts of the larger cities during the sixties. This reallocation of housing areas changed the traditional urban structure and created massive congestion of the traffic systems not only in the weekends and in the summer high season but also in everyday commuting. A curse and a barrier to personal freedom and mobility car drivers have been suffering from ever since.

In an advertisement for the German Ford Taunus from 1963 car romanticism is clearly demonstrated. The car was described as ‘the flying carpet from Ford’ implying that it could overcome all kind of obstacles in the easiest manner – ‘everything speaks for Taunus’. The picture shows the new car in a pastoral setting with a middle-class family of four out on a camping trip in the woods. On top of the picture the heading said ‘To a desired vacation belongs a desired car...’. The text is very enlightening in the sense of freedom speaking of ‘racing out in the world’ and ‘putting up your tent wherever you want to’ and ‘blowing on formalities and just enjoy life and freedom’. But car romanticism was a far cry from the harsh realities out on the German autobahn queuing, sweating and bored sick being stuck in the congested European summer traffic.

‘Everything speaks for TAUNUS – the flying carpet from FORD’. Advertisement from May 1963. (Motor, May 1963)



- alt taler for TAUNUS

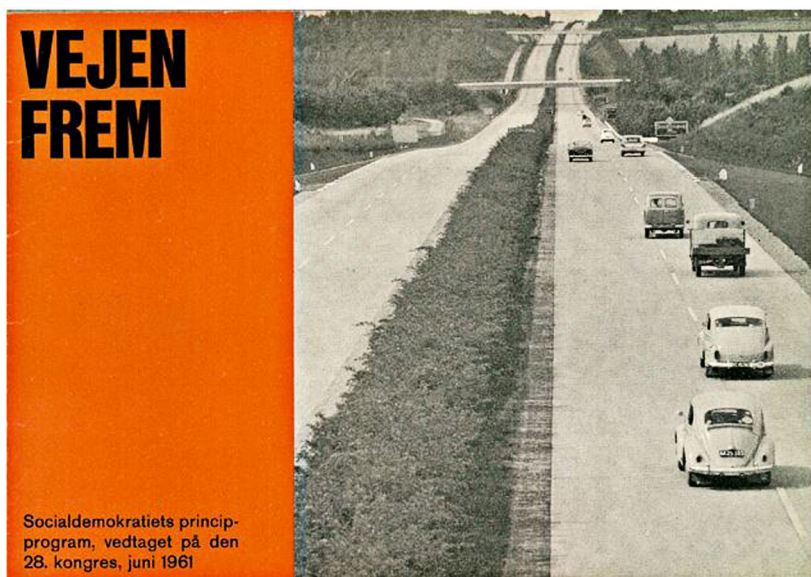
Tænk Dem at kunne kaste hverdagen af Dem, suse ud i verden og opslå Deres teltpæle netop der, hvor der er allerdejlignst - blæse på formaliteterne og bare nyde livet og friheden. I Deres nye komfortable Taunus Combi er der masser af plads til det hele - både børn og bagage. Det er simpelthen den vogn, De altid har ønsket Dem.

Lad os lige i farten nævne teleskop-afjedringen, rummeligheden, den indre luksus og det besnærende ydre... for slet ikke at tale om den kraftige 67 HK motor, hvis imponerende acceleration gør Dem overlegen i trafikken. Tal med Deres Ford-forhandler allerede i dag om en prøvetur i Taunus Combi.



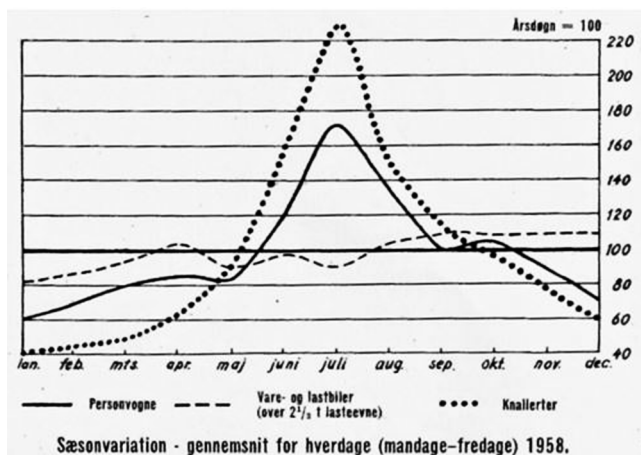
- det flyvende tæppe fra **FORD**

This message of freedom and independence appears in numerous advertisements for new cars during the Cold War period. The last economic restrictions on import of automobiles were finally lifted in 1957, while at the same time the working class prospered and increasing numbers of wage-earners were finally able to buy a second hand or a small car of their own. This called for a democratization of automobilism. The Social Democratic Party turned the acquisition of consumer durables such as the single-family house and a private car into a central part of the 1961 Program of Principles with the very telling title 'The Road Ahead'. The front page depicts a pastoral scene of automobilism with a few lonely cars on the freeway all going in the same direction and absolutely no congestion, but this was a far cry from the harsh realities of seasonal traffic jams in the traffic. Only three months later the Du Pont Show of the Week would feature Grouch Marx in an aggressive attempt to revive Americas Love Affair with the Automobile, completely ignoring the massive public criticism of automobilism and the enormous problems it created in America.



The Social Democratic Program of Principles 'The Road Ahead' marked a strategic shift from the planned economy of the Welfare State to a Welfare Society based on productivism and consumerism. Consumer Durables as the single-family house and the private car became important icons of this new policy.

In a nationwide traffic count conducted by the Ministry of Traffic in 1958 the seasonal variations in the mobility pattern became apparent. Car drivers more than doubled their activities on weekdays (Monday-Friday) during the summer high season in the months



Seasonal variations – average for weekdays (Monday-Friday) 1958. Private cars are the unbroken line, trucks and Lorries the punctured line, mopeds are the dotted line. (The Traffic Directorate, Ministry of Traffic, 1958)

June, July and August (unbroken line) while the commercial traffic remained more or less stable during all seasons (punctured line). The dotted line shows us activities from mopeds where the variations are extreme over the seasons, but this is probably for natural and climatically reasons.



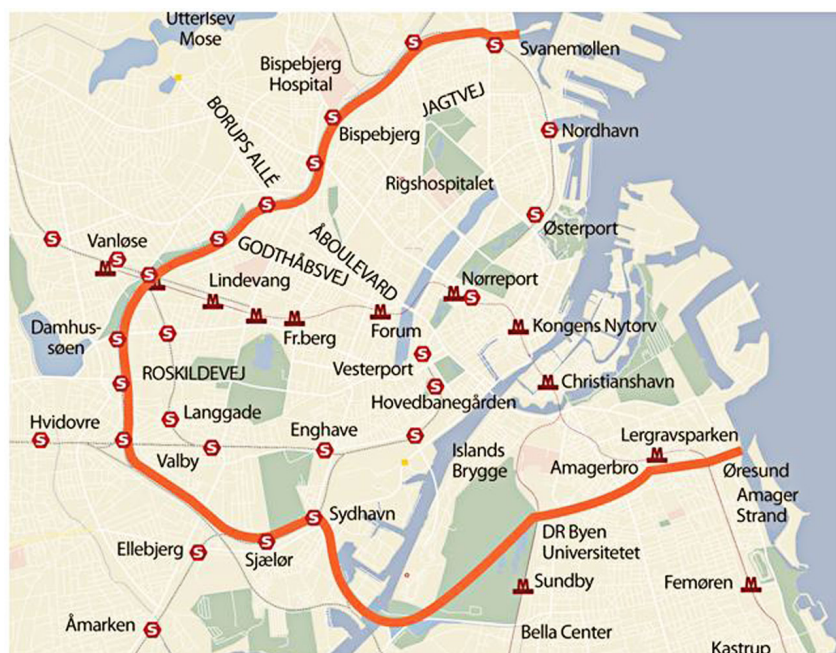
The Easter and Christmas traffic represented other challenges to the traffic planners and politicians. Here it is the Easter traffic leaving Copenhagen in 1963. Nobody is going in the other direction. (Traffikministeriet: Hundrede års trafik, 1900-2000. Copenhagen, 2000)

The weekend traffic represented another major problem for the traffic planners as an increasing number of citizens bought a second home in the countryside or at the seaside for recreational purposes. This created an enormous stream of cars all going in one and same direction. By the beginning of the weekend everybody drove out of the city and into the countryside. On Sunday afternoon all the cars returned and drove into the city creating massive congestion in the traffic system. The politicians were less willing to try to solve these

leisure traffic problems by implementing very expensive new road systems. However, this is not the point here. The point is that the race for the good life took on such massive dimensions, that the car as ultimate symbol of freedom and individual mobility turned into the opposite by the vast numbers of cars blocking the way for each other. The Honey Trap had clapped.

The Honey Trap claps again

During the election campaign for parliament in September 2011 the social-liberal government, who won the election, promised the voters to do something decisive to solve the massive traffic problems in Copenhagen plagued by traffic congestion and massive queues in and out of the city every day. It was estimated by the Ministry of Traffic that in 2010 more than 130.000 hours were wasted every day sitting in a car waiting for things to clear up. On a yearly basis, this meant 29 million wasted hours in the traffic going in and out of Copenhagen. Moneywise this was a waste of 8 1/2 billion Danish kroner. The radical solution to this enormous problem was



The controversial Congestion Charge Zone in Copenhagen fell as victim of car-romanticism 22. February 2012.

to create a Congestion Charge Zone like the one London has had since 2003. In the beginning there was not very much discussion, but when the plans were outlined in further detail there was a massive public uproar, where everybody seemed to be protesting against this project with the creation of a system that would impede or at least restrict the driver's personal freedom and individual mobility to go anywhere in the beloved car.

After a very heated public debate on this 'payment ring' where literally nobody dared to stand up and defend the plans for a Congestion Charge Zone the whole project was scrapped by the Government out of fear for the electorate. This may have been a democratic decision made out of respect or fear for the public opinion. However, this was certainly not a very wise decision. The free and independent car owners living on a romantic dream of freedom and mobility in the city of Copenhagen are still trapped in the congested every day traffic and wasting 29 billion hours or more every year. The love affair with the automobile is still going strong, and the Honey Trap clapped once more.

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<http://www.sonderborg.dk/kultur/attraktioner/dybboel-moelle/>

Notes

- 1 "Die Technik wurde genutzt zur Verstärkung kultureller Werte, insbesondere Individualität (verstanden als räumliche Flexibilität, zeitliche Autonomie und soziale Unabhängigkeit) und Mobilität, die in ein neues Wertmuster zusammenflossen, das ich *Automobilismus* nennen möchte". Günter Burkart: Individuelle Mobilität und soziale Integration. Zur Sociologie des Automobilismus. *Soziale Welt*, 45 Jahrg. H.2 1994, pp 216-241, (220).
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