



National College of Art & Design

Faculty of Design, Department of Industrial Design

LIFE INTO MATTER The American Automobile and Fifties Culture

by

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Submitted to the Faculty of History of Art and Design and Complementary Studies in candidacy for the degree of Bachelor of Design in Industrial Design, 1993.

10/10/10

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Paul O' Brien and Sean Allen for their useful hints and suggestions.

C O N T E N T S

List of plates	v
Preface	vi
1. Introduction - An historical outline	1
2. Kandy Kololed Tangerine Flake ...	5
3. Symbolism The Art of Representing	16
4. Tecnological pornography	26
5. Conclusion - What's in a dream?	37
Bibliography	41

LIST OF PLATES

1. Motorola Portable T.V set, 1956.
2. Sudebaker, 1953.
3. Chevrolet Corvette, 1953.
4. Buick Model 46R, 1958.
5. Le Sabre, Harley Earl's personal transport, 1951.
6. Chevrolet Nomad station wagon, 1953.
7. Ford Edsel Corsair, 1958.
8. Jaguar D type, 1957, winner of the Le Mans 24 hour race.
9. Subliminal symbolism of plenty, 1950s America favoured ostentatious voluptuousness.
10. Picabia, L'Enfant Carburateur, 1933.
11. Drive-in movie, one of the most provocative images of fifties America

P R E F A C E

...The balance between fiction and reality has changed significantly in the past decade. Increasingly their roles are reversed. We live in a world ruled by fictions of every kind - mass merchandising, the instant translation of science and technology into popular imagery, the increasing blurring and intermingling of identities within the realm of consumer goods. The pre-empting of any free or original imaginative response to the experience by the television screen...in the past we have always assumed that the external world around us has represented reality, however confusing or uncertain, and that the inner world of our minds, its dreams, hopes, ambitions, represented the realm of fantasy and the imagination. These roles too, it seems to me, have reversed. The most prudent and effective method of dealing with the world around us is to assume that it is a complete fiction - conversely, the one small node of reality left to us is inside our own heads. Freud's classic distinction between latent and manifest content of the dream, between the apparent and the real, now needs to be applied to the external world of so called reality.

(Ballard, 1973, p.8)



CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

"The automobile is an instrument against the very ideas of chores and inconveniences, regardless of their reality...To be splendid and irrational is of its nature."

(Ewen,1988, p.134)

"The automobile is the transformation of life into matter, a matter much more magical than life."

(Barthes,1973, p.86)



First Love of 20,000,000 Motorists!

Surveys indicate that there are more than 20,000,000 motorists in America who would rather own a Cadillac than any other motor car built in the land. This is doubtless the greatest endorsement ever given an automobile—if not the greatest ever received by any manufactured product. But we think you will agree when you have used our showrooms that it is an undeniably richly deserved. The 1954 Cadillac is supremely beautiful... its surfaces are graceful and luxurious almost beyond description... and when it comes to performance—well, this is by far the greatest "Standard of the World" ever built. If you are among the millions who hold Cadillac as your "first love," better step in and see us today. One look and one ride—and we think you will agree that this is the perfect year to make your motor car dreams come true!

YOUR CADILLAC DEALER



Tonight he was particularly uplifted he was driving his fast car. And it was none of your old fashioned "gasoline buggies." The engine bulked in front, under a proud hood over two feet long, and the steering column was not straight but rakishly tilted. The car was sporting and rather dangerous and the lights were powerful affairs fed by acetylene gas. Sam sped on with a feeling of powerful domination at a twelve dizzy miles an hour.

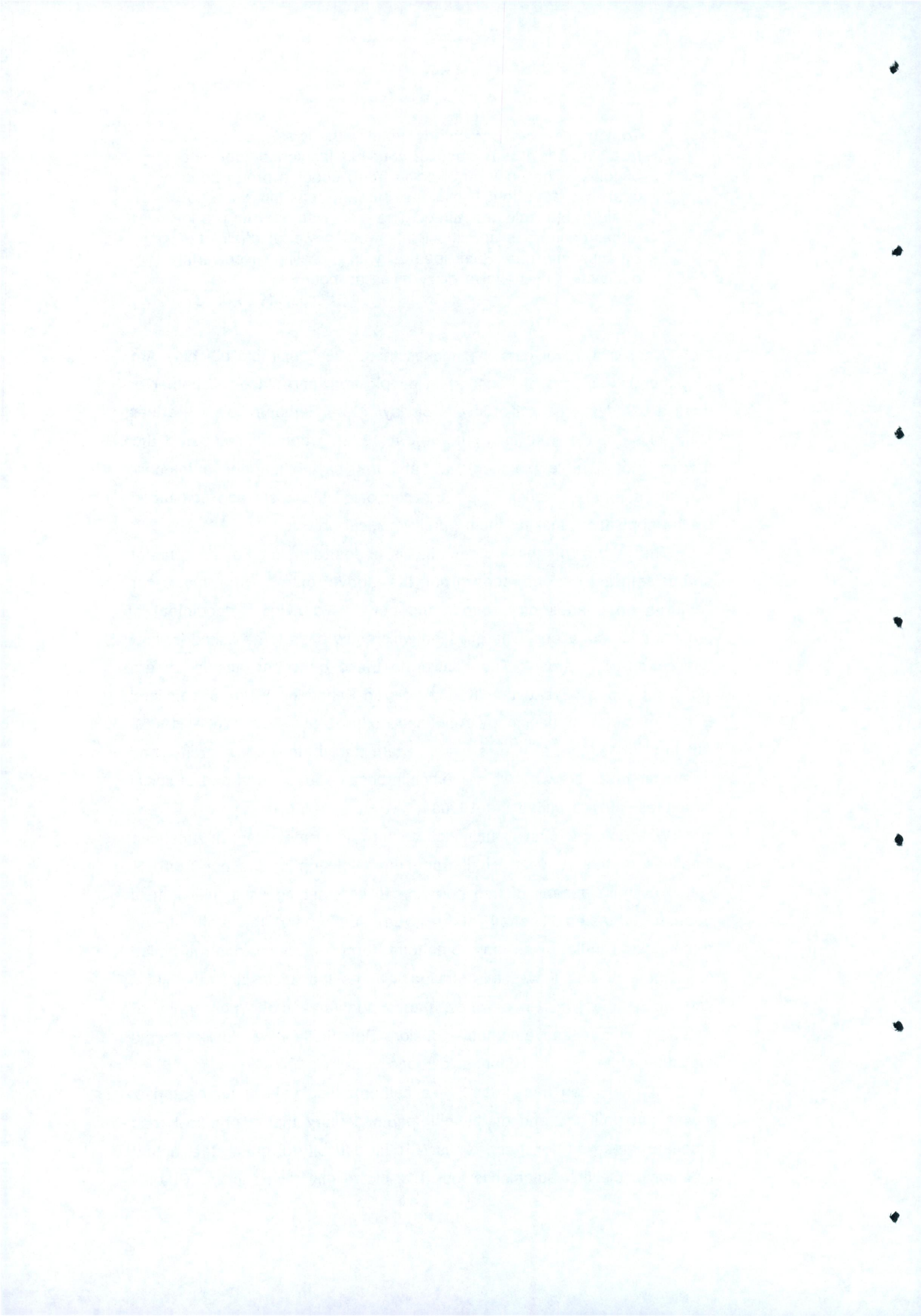
(Lewis, 1966, p 37)

What is it about cars that makes them such desirable objects? Are they merely a means of transporting people from one place to another or more a parody to the act of love? (Bayley, 1986) Perhaps Roland Barthes came close to the truth in *Mythologies* (1973), when he compared the modern motor-car to the medieval cathedral, saying that the automobile was the supreme creation of an era, conceived by artists and consumed by the population, making them purely magical objects.

The allure of the automobile is indestructible. For the motor enthusiast, as can be seen from the above extract, the motor-car conjures up images of freedom and power - a living embodiment of dreams and aspirations. The question which now begs to be asked is, how this curious link arose? The answer to these questions lies in an era which has been dubbed the "Kandy Kolored Tangerine Flake Streamlined Baby" of motorcar design by American culture critic Tom Wolfe (1965). An era when the sky was wide open and blue and scarcity had disappeared, an era when the automobile became an integral part of social structures, an era called the 1950s.

What follows is an examination of the role of motorcars in American lifestyles of the 1950s. I shall trace the evolution of the car from its status as mere means of transportation to its standing as a fulfilment of popular fantasies. I shall also argue that under the veil of the romanticised fifties was an ubiquitous form of social control called consumerism. And it was this striving towards the acquisition of objects and wealth that was, in essence, the foundation and the philosophy of American culture and automotive design. But, firstly, I would like to put the automobile into an historical perspective.

Although man has dreamt of a self-propelled vehicle for centuries, it was not until the end of the nineteenth century that a practical road machine emerged for general use. It is difficult to name the actual inventor of the first automobile, but it is known that men such as Charles



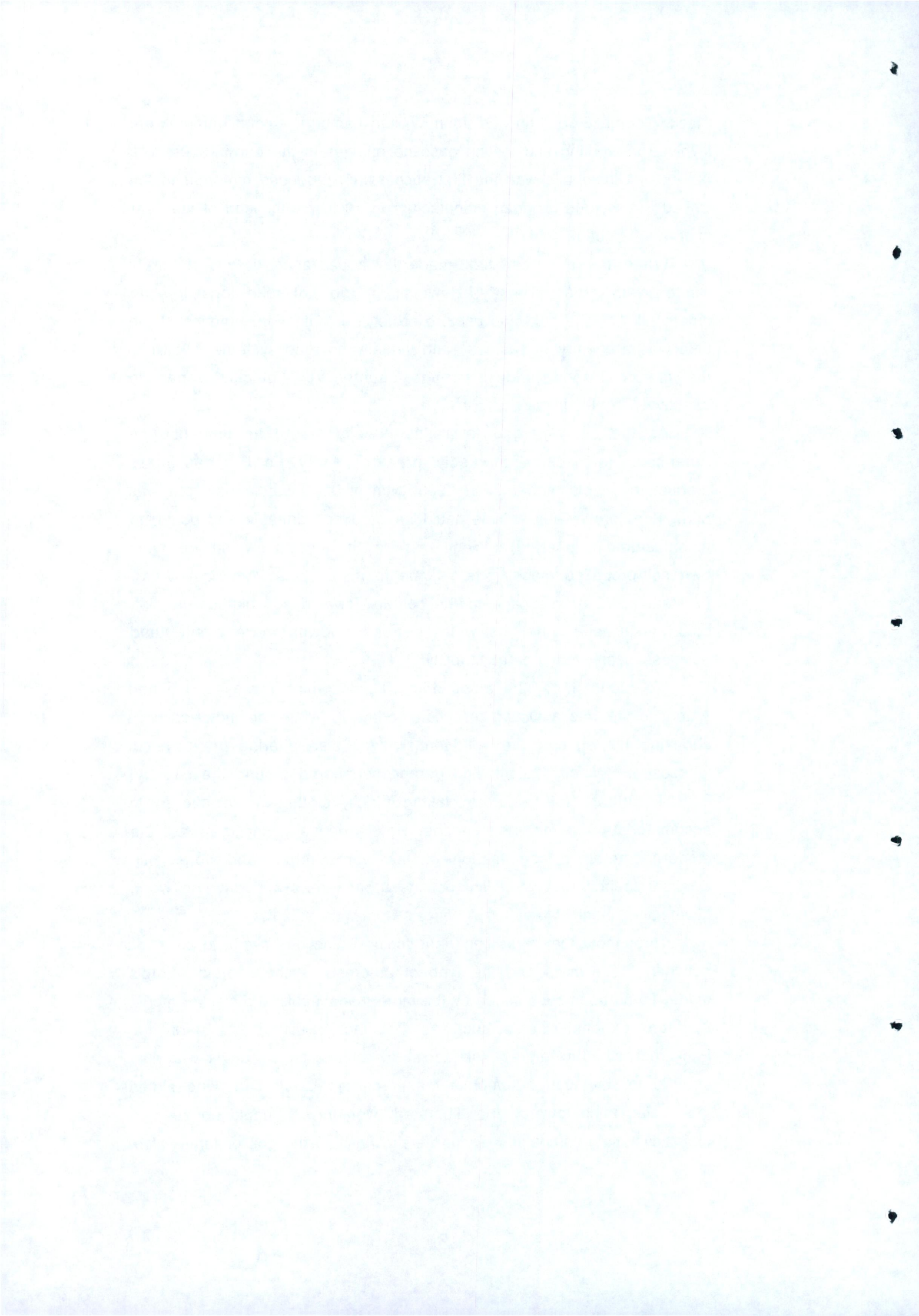
Black, George B. Selden and John William Lambert, among others, were involved in working and testing gasoline engines in the early 1900s. The American Oldsmobile was the first successfully-produced motorcar in the United States, and it began manufacture in 1901. By the end of the year over 425 had been sold.

When the motorcar first made its appearance it was naturally treated with great curiosity. However, it did not take long for the automobile to take hold and capture society's imagination. America at the time was a country of vastness and virtually no road systems, but when the motorcar took hold this huge country very quickly began to effectively shrink in size.

As the car emerged from this novelty stage, its influence on American life became markedly greater. Henry Ford began mass production on his model T, in 1908, with which a whole new era was born. Ford proved his vehicle could be produced cheaply and could be manufactured to operate efficiently. At last the joys of owning your very own self-propelled machine had come to middle-class America. Urban dwellers could now escape to the country for a day, isolated rural folk could visit each other as well as nearby towns more easily, and businesses enjoyed greater mobility.

More and more, the automobile was becoming a way of life and American life was adjusting to accommodate it. While the motor-car was shrinking the size of the continent, it was also altering the physical landscape. Service stations and garages appeared around the country. Socially, other changes were taking place, clothes were altered to accommodate the motorists' needs. Hotels began giving way to the modern "motel" a combination of the words motor and hotel; city dwellers found they could live outside urban areas and drive to work, having the effect of creating America's sprawling suburbs.

Throughout the 1920s important social distinctions began to be made between the owners and the type of automobiles they bought. Ford's model T had been superseded by the more manageable and sleeker model A. More expensive cars such as Cadillacs, Buicks, Chryslers and Packards helped to engrave this social divide. The female driver was also catered for by such automobile manufacturers as Jordan, who aimed their sales pitch towards the "liberated" woman who could be seen in their advertising campaigns driving her husband to the golf or tennis club.



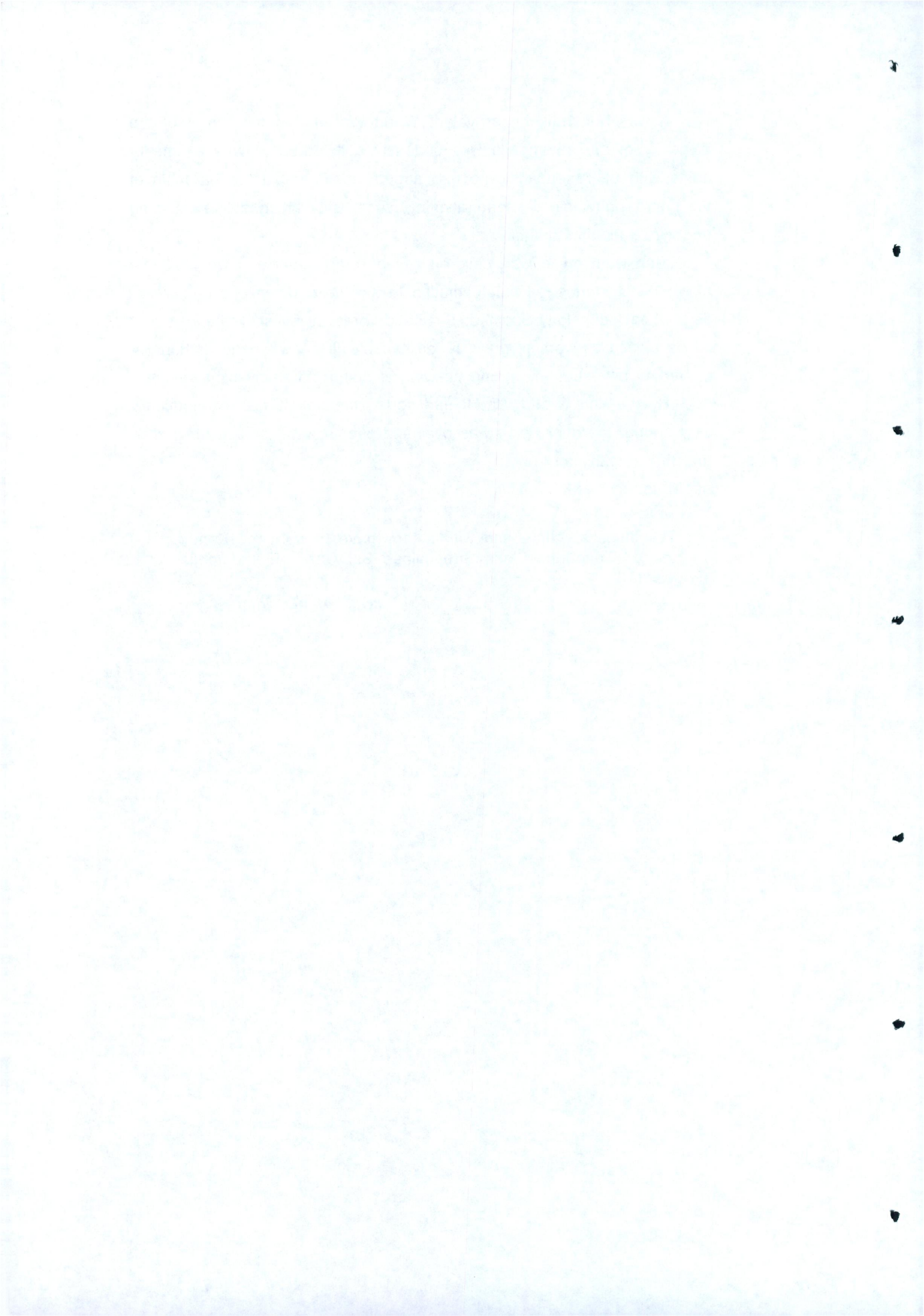
It was not until the arrival of World War II that the threat of the longevity of the automobile was seriously considered. It was a time of doing without. Americans who had already experienced the hardship of the depression took to sugar rationing, shoe rationing, gasoline rationing and tyre rationing dutifully.

Men went off to war, children saved scrap metal and women went to work in factories, all amalgamating to aid the defence effort. It was a time when technology boomed. Synthetic fibres, plastics synthetic rubber all developed as wartime grew. Nylon became the new wonder material it proved to be extremely strong as well as being extremely light-weight.

By the time World War II had ended the nation was economically very strong, the depression was over and people were looking forward to the fifties with fairy-tale aspirations:

"The fifties are here and with it they have brought the Kandy Kolored Tangerine Flake Streamlined Baby era of automobile design."

(Tom Wolfe, 1965, p.68).



CHAPTER 2

Kandy Kolored Tangerine Flake...

Long ago and far away, there was a carefree time in American history. It was the era of the malt shop, blue suede shoes, the drive-in movies and pony tails. It was a time when Rock and Roll was really Rock and Roll, when a house in the suburbs and a two car garage was the ultimate and cost 15,000 dollars. It was a time when everyone was young and Americans had a great love affair with the automobile. It was Camelot! It was the fabulous fifties!

(Dewaard,1982, p.16)





Emerging victorious from World War II, the American nation began to put itself back on its feet. Optimism was the spirit of the day. Dwight D Eisenhower succeeded Harry Truman as President. One of the greatest national projects during the Eisenhower era was the building of a vast network of interstate highways linking every state in the country. The nation was economically booming, a whole country had come through the hardship of the war and was now ready for the good life.

However, the memories of the forties were not easily forgotten. Not only had World War II devastated cities and economies all over the world, it also laid the foundation for a great international tension. The East-West division of Germany, the Soviet Union testing their first atomic bomb and the growing anti-communist movement within the U.S.A itself, all contributed to the growing malaise. America and Russia were never further apart. The threat of war between these two powers and the invasion of communism was a very real fear for many people at the time. The effect this had on American society is what could be described as "mass buying psychosis". Americans indulged themselves in the acquisition of consumer products ranging from cosmetics and fashion accessories to new "hi-tech" products. This type of consumer society came to symbolise Western values and with the looming threat of communism, not to partake fully in this consumer spending was often deemed unpatriotic and even subversive.

Here in America there is no difference between man and his economic fate. A man is made by his assets, income, position and prospects. The economic mask coincides completely with a man's inner character. Everyone is worth what he earns and earns what he is worth. He learns what he is through the vicissitudes of his economic existence.

(Adorno,1944, p.24)

Improvements in printing technology had the effect of increasing the number of magazines to carry the message of consumerism, in the form of full colour eye-catching advertisements. This, in effect, allowed for a rapid growth of consumerism. One of the most significant manifestations was the television set.



FIG. 1

The new portable T.V sets, such as this 1956 one, were compact but heavy. Nevertheless, they provided increased opportunities for constant television viewing.

By the end of the forties, it became apparent that television had arrived. Manufacturers who had been producing electronic items during the war went in to making television sets which at the time looked rather like cocktail cabinets. The scene was now set for what the public envisaged as a sci-fi future packed with excitement and fascination. By 1951, television networks had established themselves. By 1953, television had attracted the likes of Bob Hope, Groucho Marx and Lucille Ball among many others; and in their wake, the popularity of radio, which had been a way of life for twenty years, dwindled.

The television programmes of the early fifties were bland and of a nature that would be hard to recapture. What really sold television was its power as an advertiser. Companies who used television to sell their products enjoyed huge profits and recuperation. A new horror story was about to unfold - advertising overkill. The programmes themselves now looked more and more like devices which stopped the commercials from bumping to loudly together. Television exploitation was developing into a frenzy.

However, a great deal more was involved in television than mere advertising. It also played a considerable role in public relations. Millions of citizens became more politically aware through the medium of television, it provided the viewer with a window to the world beyond America. The biggest

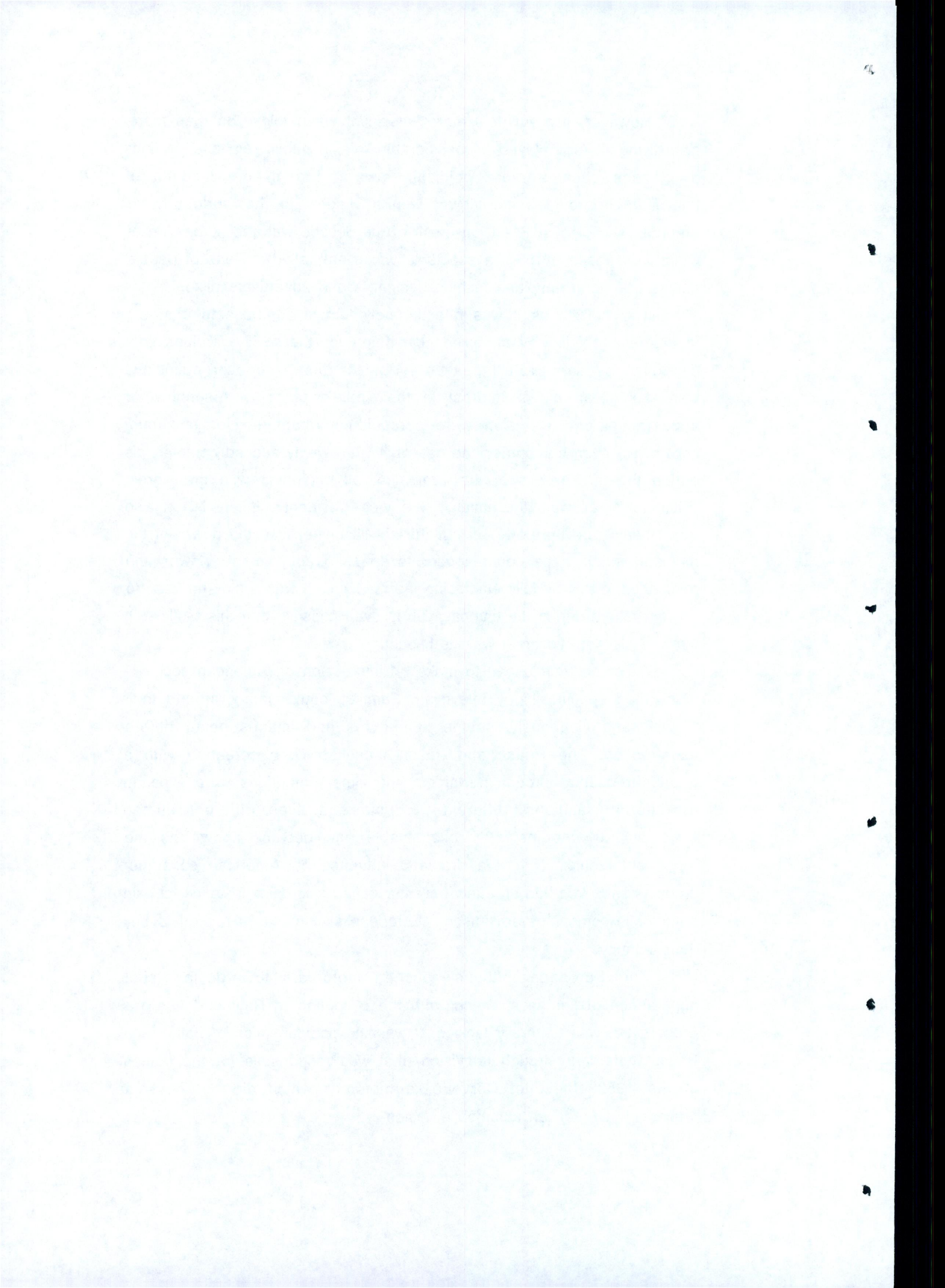


However, a great deal more was involved in television than mere advertising. It also played a considerable role in public relations. Millions of citizens became more politically aware through the medium of television, it provided the viewer with a window to the world beyond America. The biggest television event of the decade was the coronation of Queen Elizabeth in 1952, a spectacle which enthralled millions of people across the world, inspiring fashion designers and advertisers alike.

The "telly" as it was affectionately known as, became a strong medium for politics; Eisenhower's campaign for the 1952 elections was controlled by an advertising agency; for the first time ever politicians were taking an active interest in their public persona. Eisenhower's appearances on television were scrupulously managed for maximum impact. He even bombarded the networks with twenty second commercials during the final weeks of the campaign, all beginning with the words: "Eisenhower answers the nation." His Vice-President, Richard Nixon also relied heavily on the power of advertising. Nixon realised the power of the medium and how he could appear to speak directly to the viewer and responded to this by fully embracing the medium. It was a ploy he used to a great extent during the campaign. It is even possible that this tactic won him the election, so great was its impact.

Other cultures began to make an impression on American society - highlighted specifically by television. Families could gather around their "T.V's", and vicariously indulge in cultures and images never before experienced. The British and Italian lifestyles were screened with a greater frequency through newsreels and films. Americans were exposed to different fashions, different products and even different human behaviour. It was instantly recognisable and became known as the "continental chic." It had a dramatic influence on American consumer products and even had an effect on automobile design. For instance, certain automobile companies advertised "European styling" as a reason to buy their cars.

The European influence pushed motorcars towards a visual appearance of lightness, which, with the exception of Raymond Loewy's Studebaker, was generally lacking. It was the popularisation of Italian and British motorcars through television, that was responsible for the launch of the 1953 Chevrolet Corvette, a motorcar which did not have a precedent in American automobile design.



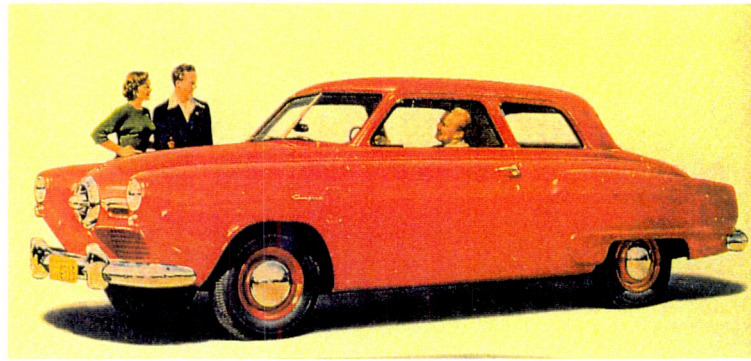


FIG. 2

Raymond Loewy's Studebaker avoided the excesses which characterised American car design.



FIG. 3

America's only post-war sports car and its first 'personal' car.

Alongside the design classics which emerged from this period appeared some ugly, overadorned motorcars. The 1958 Buick exemplifies this with its over-lavished chrome grill and swooping chromed tailfins.



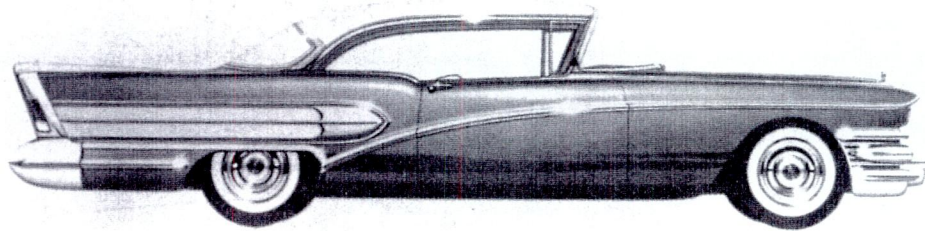


FIG. 4.

A side view of the Buick model 46R. for 1958. The ultimate in fins and chrome.

Under the "hood" of these monsters, however, some important engineering innovations were taking place. The Chrysler corporation was experimenting with a single new engine - a hemi V8 engine which, with the suitable modifications, was capable of 1,000hp. Chrysler were also paying more attention to the overall appearance of their motorcars. Under the direction of Virgil M. Exner, Chrysler evolved towards sleeker designs. Exner drew his inspiration from European influences and based his designs on a show car he first conceived in 1951. With these influences he came up with the 1957 Chrysler 300 - c. It was a clean, elegant car combining innovative engineering with an original design to produce an automobile with power, beauty and safety.

Chevrolet's Corvette was a lively sports-car but failed to deliver on the engineering considerations. Despite it utilising a six cylinder engine with good reserves of power, its transmission was difficult to handle. So in 1953, the company faded out the old engine and replaced it with the ground-breaking V8 4.4 litre model. It was designed by two engineers, Ed Cole and Harry Barr, and it proved to be a turning point in automotive engineering. It was much lighter than conventional engines and thus was capable of producing higher rpm. Chevrolet called it the "Power-pak" and



when the accelerator was pushed to the floor it produced a raw throaty, roar that raised the heartbeat of many an adolescent.

Another characteristic of the prosperous fifties was the birth of the youth culture phenomenon. They were no longer a group without rights, money and a culture of its own as it had been in previous ages. As Colin MacInnes, hero in *Absolute Beginners* succinctly put it:

...the trouble about Vernon, really, as I've said, is that he's one of the last of the generations that grew up before teenagers existed...In those days, it seems, you were just an overgrown boy, or an undergrown man, life didn't seem to cater for anything whatever else in between.

(MacInnes, 1959, p.47)

Instead these "overgrown boys" had mutated into young rebels with a cause - their absolute refusal to join the adult world. Holden Caulfield, a sixteen year old reject from an American private school, with a red hunting hat captured the imagination of readers in, *The Catcher In The Rye* written by J.D Salinger in 1952. It tells the story of a boy on his way home from the fourth school to expel him who discovers the hypocrisy of the world we live in. "Phoney", the word he uses to describe hypocrites included his headmaster, preachers with sincere voices and anyone who pretended to care if the football team won or lost. In fact he rejected the adult world in its entirety. His ambition was never to join it:

I thought what I'd do was, I'd pretend to be one of those deaf mutes. That way I wouldn't have to have any of those goddam stupid conversations with any grown-ups.

(Salinger, 1952, p.35)

It was a book which for the first time, expressed the disenchantment that many youths harboured but never really openly expressed. Suddenly, it was okay to voice these opinions. Early manifestations took the form of juvenile crime and delinquency. Violent gang warfare and vandalism were rampant on the public streets. The remarkable thing about this youthquake was that it was not limited to the confines of the United States. It had an almost international status. Soon parallel styles of revolt were evolving in Germany (*Halbstarken* - half strong), Sweden (*Skinnuttar* - leather jackets), France (*Blousons Noir* - blackshirts), Britain (*Teddyboys*) and even Russia (*Stilyagi*- style boys).

America was quick to wake up to the teenage explosion, but was sceptical towards it as a potentially lasting phenomenon. Very little attention was paid to the teenager during the forties and early fifties, but with the advent of Rock 'n' Roll, all that was to change:

One, two three o'clock, four o'clock rock! Five - six seven o'clock,
eight o'clock rock! Nine -ten - eleven o'clock, twelve o'clock rock!
We're gonna rock around the clock tonight!

(Haley, C.B.S, 1954)

These words first made their appearance in a film called *Blackboard Jungle* (1954) and were sung by a band called Bill Haley and the Comets who at the time were relatively unknown. It was with these words that the youthquake exploded. Haley and his Comets had a crude sound, but it vibrated with life and energy and shouted out contempt for middle-aged,(although ironically, Haley was well into his thirties) middle class America.

By May of 1955, *Rock Around The Clock* was a teenage anthem. Haley and his Comets shot to fame and fortune and the film (*Blackboard Jungle*) grossed a million dollars in America alone. It was a movie notorious for causing trouble where-ever it was shown. Seats were ripped out of aisles (they got in the way of dancing) and young people took to the streets in an orgy of vandalism. Consequently, many towns banned the picture.

Rock 'n' Roll had arrived. It swept away all formalities and repressions which clouded young Americans for so long. The teenage libido was unleashed and was voiced in a new dance form. This new dance rejected all the stiffness of traditional steps. Contact between partners was kept to a minimum. Boy and girl no longer looked at each other but danced in a detached, trance-like state.

Film was another medium which insured the longevity of this youth rebellion. *The Wild One*, starring Marlon Brando (1954) gave youth rebellion a phenomenon of style. The film was based on a true story from the forties, in which a maverick band of bikers turned a town upside down with vandalism and violence, came equipped with the line:

These guys are nameless, faceless fry - cooks and grease monkeys
all week, working dreary jobs they hate. They've got to break free
and be somebody, they've got to belong to something. They do
violent things because they've been held down for so long.

(Wild One, Fox, 1954)

The automobile did not escape from this "coolness" appeal. On a clear day in September 1955, James Dean's Porsche "Little Bastard" collided with Donald Turnipseed in the Californian desert. A hero was killed, and the motorcar became immortalised. A myth was born - the glamour of speed, linked with the eroticism of fast cars. Coca-Cola advertisements enforced this notion even further, depicting young couples sharing a coke in a gleaming two seater sports car - suggesting that speed, Coca-Cola and the intimacy of a two seater, went hand-in-hand with sexual intercourse. The motorcar came to be recognised as an instrument of freedom. Popular music enforced these myths even further with the car song:

"I got me a car and I got me some gas
Told everybody they could
kiss my ass."

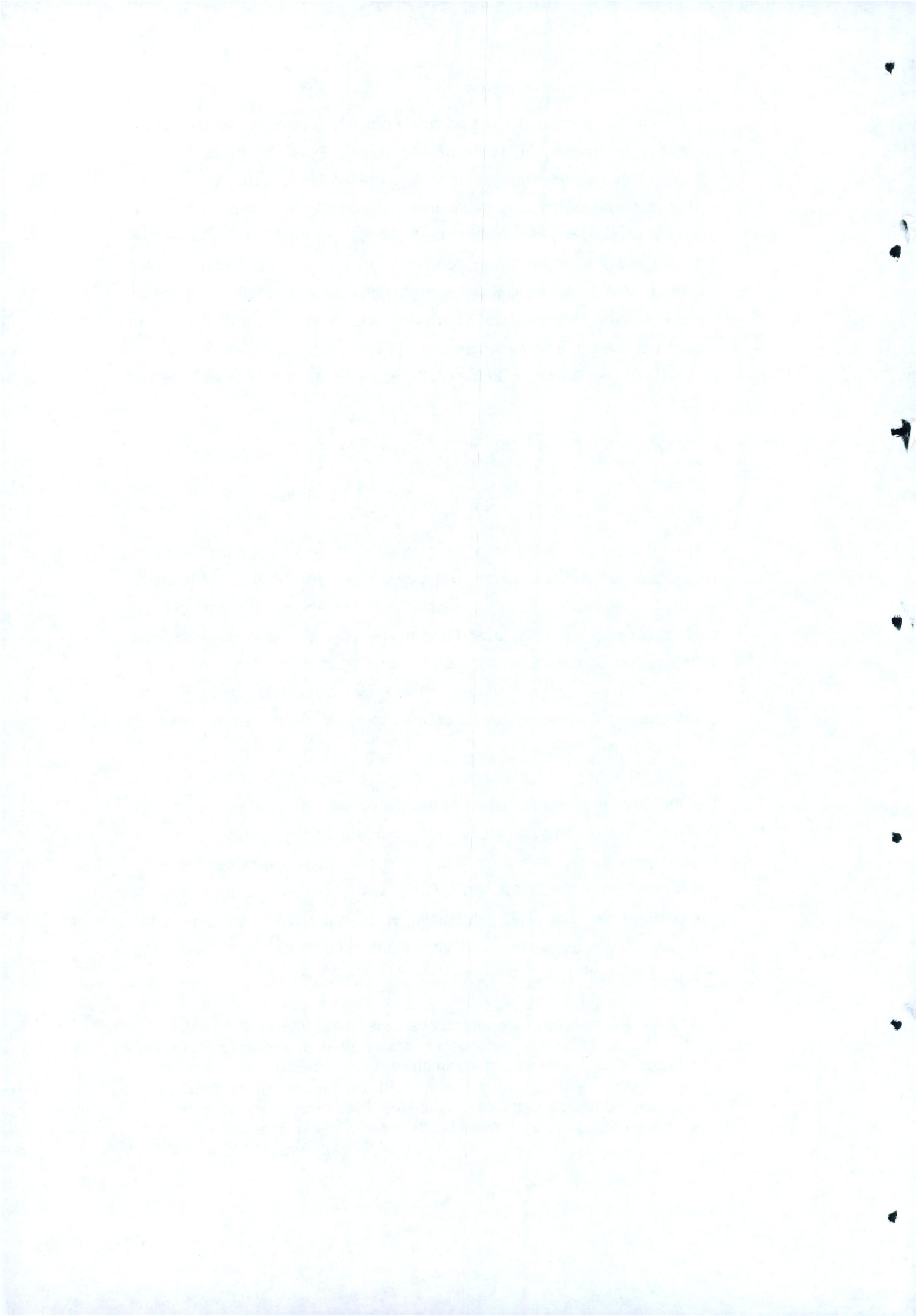
(Glen Frey, C.B.S, 1956)

Business men were not slow to wake up to the teenage phenomenon. By the end of the fifties it was estimated that each youth had, on average, 400 dollars to spend each year. Most of this money was spent on clothes, cars and music. By 1958, over 70% of the records sold in America were to teenagers. Cynical business men began to turn their attention to young children - the teenagers of tomorrow. They were ideal candidates for unquestioning advertising consumption, especially since they watched so much television.

What really sold the teenage myth was the ability of the media to sell the illusion of individuality. Youth culture wanted to stand apart from the adult world. This was achieved through music, fashion and film. Pseudo-individuality was rife: from the standardised "wild one" look to the exceptional film star who wore his jacket a certain way to demonstrate his originality. Individuality was, in reality, no more than the general public's acceptance of "accidental details" that are so willingly accepted as such that they become so. As Adorno wrote:

The defiant reserve or elegant appearance of the individual on show is mass-produced like Yale locks whose only difference can be measured by a fraction of millimetres. The peculiarity of the self is a monopoly commodity determined by society; it is falsely represented as natural...into which the lives and faces of every single person are transformed by the power of the generality.

(Adorno, 1954, p.154)



Manufacturers could not wait for childhood to be over, girls were bombarded with clothes and make-up and encouraged to mimic their mothers; even a pre-teen brassiere was introduced. This over-bearing marketing strategy laid immense pressure in the young to grow up. It had a sort of premature ageing effect - teenagers married younger, thus bringing forward the cycle of house purchase, then parenthood and so on... Despite this harsh reality, advertising agencies and the general public continued to bask in the glory of their youth culture:

All over the world people were in love with the life of the American teenager. It was so much freer than it was anywhere else. On Saturday nights the drive-in was the automobile meeting ground where car-loads of boys and girls would go to do anything from picking up each other to picking a fight.

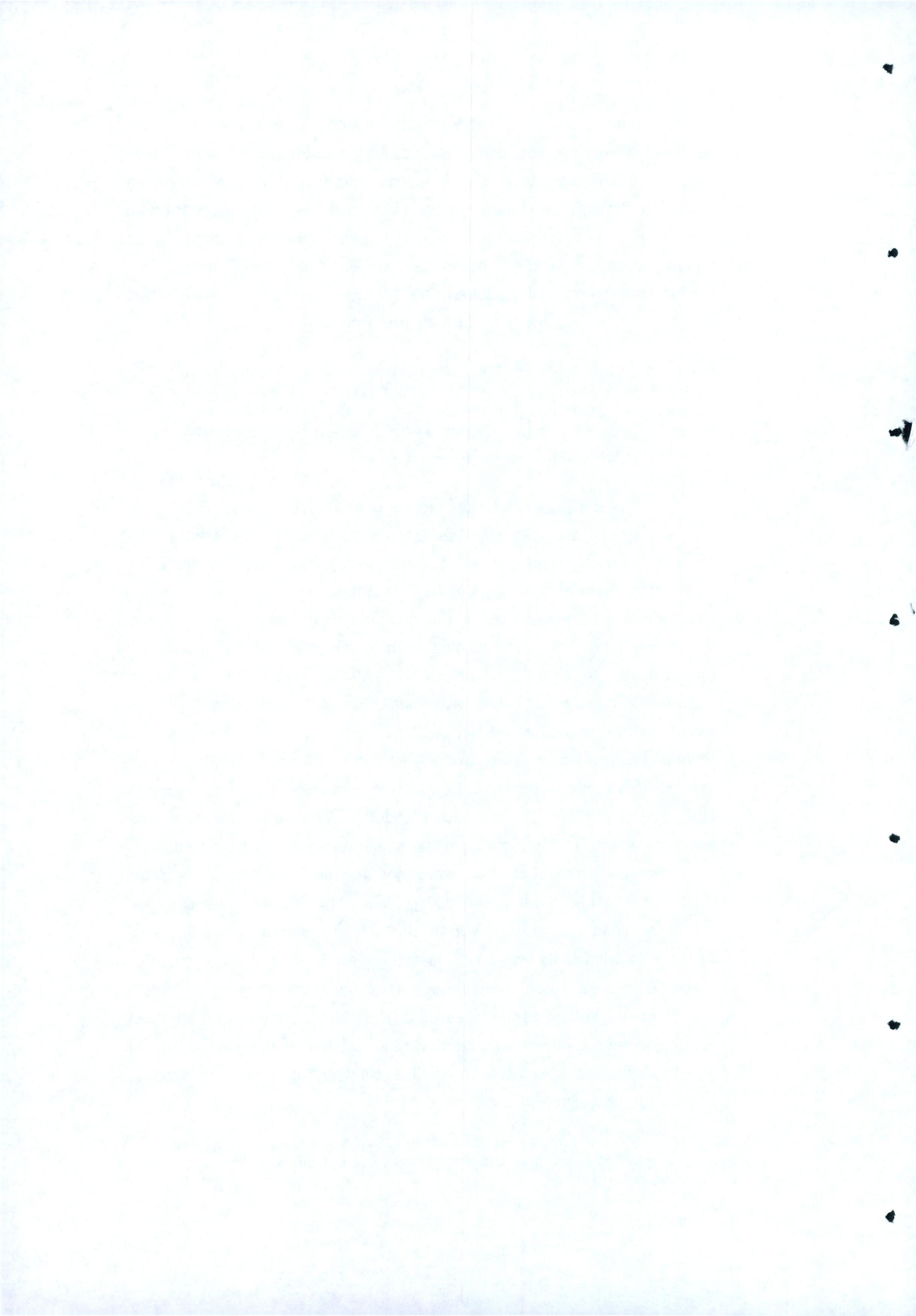
(Wolfe, 1965, p.18)

The cars which emerged out of all of this social change were like nothing that ever came off the assembly line since. As Ralph Nader put it in his book *Unsafe At Any Speed* (1965) "the stuff dreams were made of ... glowing with chrome and tailgates." In this prosperous era people refused to settle for a practical utilitarian vehicle. Luxury and speed was what Americans wanted in their cars and this was what they got. Equally important, however, was styling. No other period in automobile history has seen as much attention to body details and mouldings. It was a small wonder that this era produced so many classics - Raymond Loewy's Studebaker exemplifies this excellence (designed not by Loewy himself, but by Robert E. Bourke who was chief of the Loewy design studios at the time). Bourke had intended the design to be a special showroom piece, until the management saw it and put it into production.

However, these classics were not just fins and chrome - some important innovations were also taking place. The automatic transmission was developed and it proved to be a real benefit in traffic. The wraparound windshield also emerged and gave the driver a wider range of vision. Chrysler's automobiles in particular had evolved from inefficient "gas guzzlers" to high performance cars. The fifties seemed to be all about revamping the utilitarian car. Moreover, the utilitarian car seemed to be all about planned obsolescence, as the chief stylist in General Motors, Harley Earl, explained in 1955:

Our big job is to hasten obsolescence. In 1934 the average car ownership span was five years; now it is two - when it is one year we will have a perfect score.

(Ewen, 1988, p.245)



CHAPTER 3

The Art Of Representing

Symbolism: the act or process of representing an object or idea by a substitute object, sign or signal. In psychiatry, symbolism is of particular importance since it can serve as a defense mechanism of the ego as where unconscious (and forbidden) aggressive or sexual impulses come to expression through symbolic representation and thus are able to avoid censorship.

(Hensi and Cambell, 1970, p.134)





The fifties was an era dominated by aggressive advertising unfettered by consumer rights. Improvements in colour printing meant an increase in the popularity of magazines which carried the message of consumerism. Even more important was the impact of television. It became a major vehicle not only for advertising but it also influenced the popular arts and social behaviour.

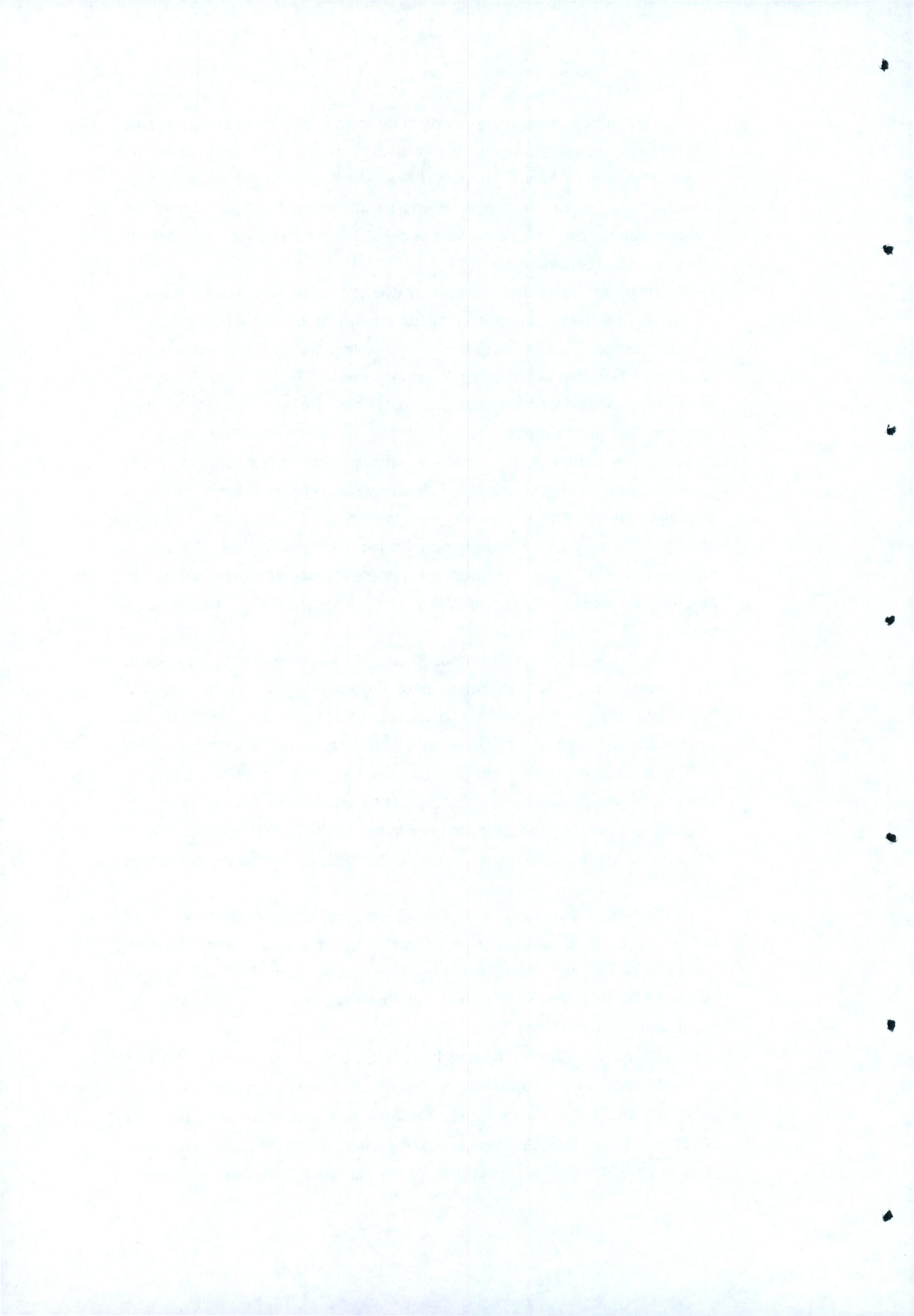
However, aggressive advertising was not a phenomenon born out of the fifties. One has to go back as far as the 1920s to discover its origin.

Advertising agencies began to broaden their field of action and undertake merchandising campaigns for growing companies. A central figure in this development was Earnest Elmo Calkins. It was he who foresaw that the success of advertising depended on the ability to construct an unbroken path between the product being sold and the consciousness of the consumer. Following this logic, Calkins created an agency that linked a diverse but inter-related range of "creative services", including product design packaging and graphic design. It was in this agency that Calkins coined the phrase "consumer engineering" to describe the notion of style as "the new business tool" to generate huge profits.

In these early days of industrialism, Calkins noted that the use of style was all too often forgotten as a profit-making factor. Let us not forget that this was the 1920s and as yet, no real machine aesthetic had emerged, rendering many consumer goods decorative but lacking substance. Calkins himself was very fond of modern art - "the new art" he called it; and he believed that it contained enormous powers of suggestion. He quickly seized the power of the artist to say things which could not be said in words. This simple action was, in effect, the birth of American commercial life.

The first merchandise to be affected by these make-overs were fashion goods and cosmetics. Products followed suit and then General Motors began to implement general design strategies in the production of automobiles. This led to the development of the GM "styling section" under the directorship of Harley Earl.

Ultimately, Calkin's approach was not one of combining efficiency and aesthetics. Styling, according to Calkins, would do away with the naive notion of efficiency. He declared that "this new influence on articles of barter and sale is largely used to make people dissatisfied with what they have of the old order, still good and useful, but lacking the newest touch."



By the end of the 1920s the stylisation was in full swing. It had influenced everything from consumer goods, packaging, retail establishments and advertisements. It also had an irreversible affect on the mass media. This turn of events was aptly summarised by Ewen:

There are no realities any more...there is only apparatus. Neither are there goods any more, but only advertisements...the most valuable article is the one most effectively lauded, the one the most capital has gone to advertise...we call all this Americanism.
(Ewen, 1988, p.47)

Style was rapidly becoming a science, and many corporations were investing vast sums of money into monitoring and analysing mass psychology. Companies went beyond making rational appeals to the consumer's desire for happiness; they delved into the human psyche and came up with a new business tool - psychoanalysis. Rather than verbal appeals, companies were exploiting a psychological strategy, it was dubbed symbolism.

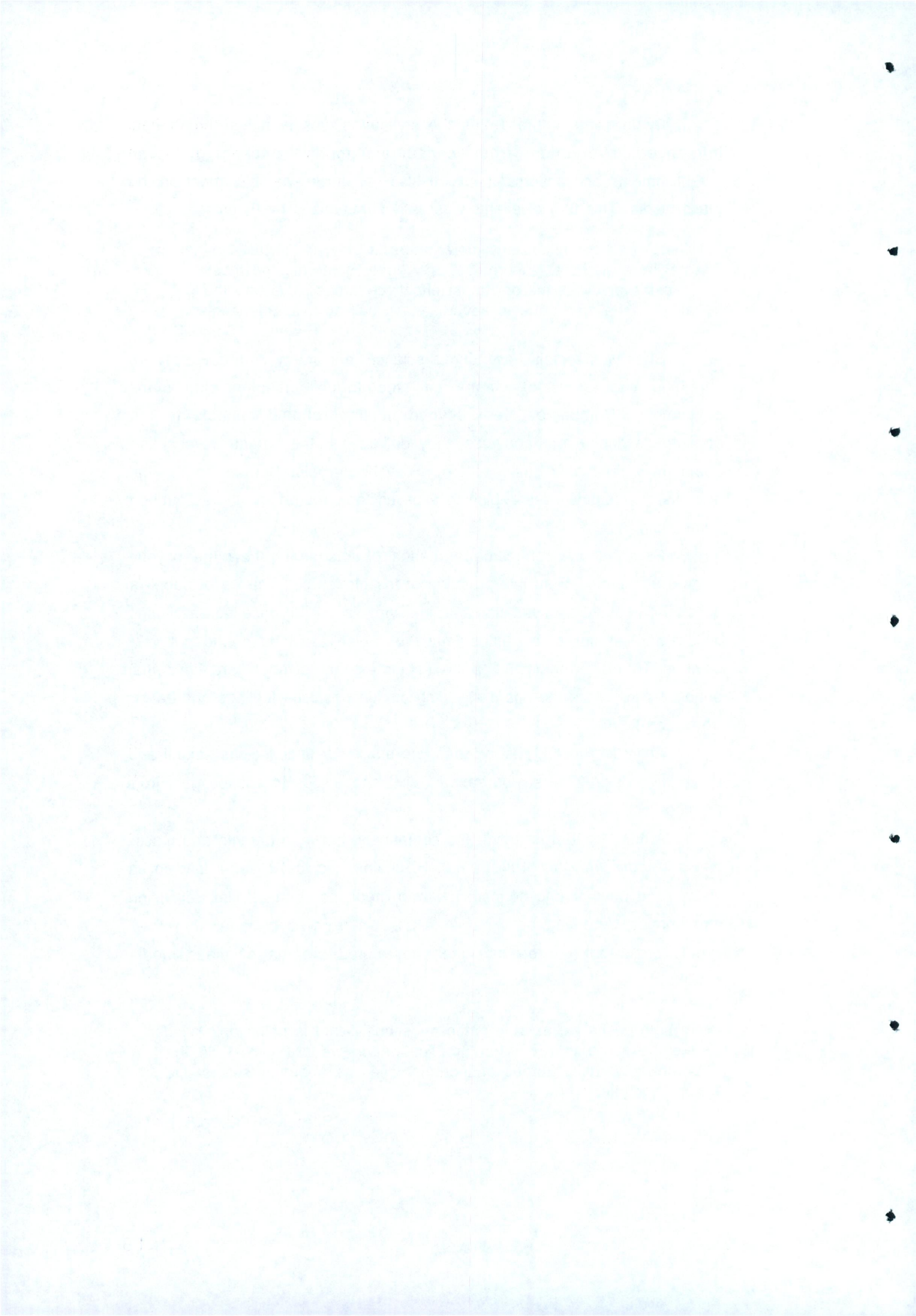
Psychoanalysis became a means of uncovering how the psyche worked and provided an interpretation of the hidden significance of people's actions. This is where symbols came in. Symbols can be described as things which stand in for other things, many of which are hidden and not very obvious. Stuart Ewen (1988, p.93) stipulates that symbols are keys that enable us to unlock the doors shielding our unconscious feelings and beliefs from scrutiny.

According to this theory, then, we mask our unconscious sexual and aggressive desires by symbolisation which enables us to escape guilt from the superego.

Arthur Asa Berger made the comparison between dreams and mass-media (*Media Analysis*, 1982, p.80). He maintained that dreams tend to be visual, and have strong connections with mediums such as film, television and comics. And just as dreams can be interpreted by analysing their symbolic content so too can the constructed dreams of mass media production.

In both cases we ask the same questions: What is going on? What disguises are there? What gratification do we get? What do the various symbolic heroes and heroines tell us about ourselves and our societies?

(Berger, 1982, p.81)

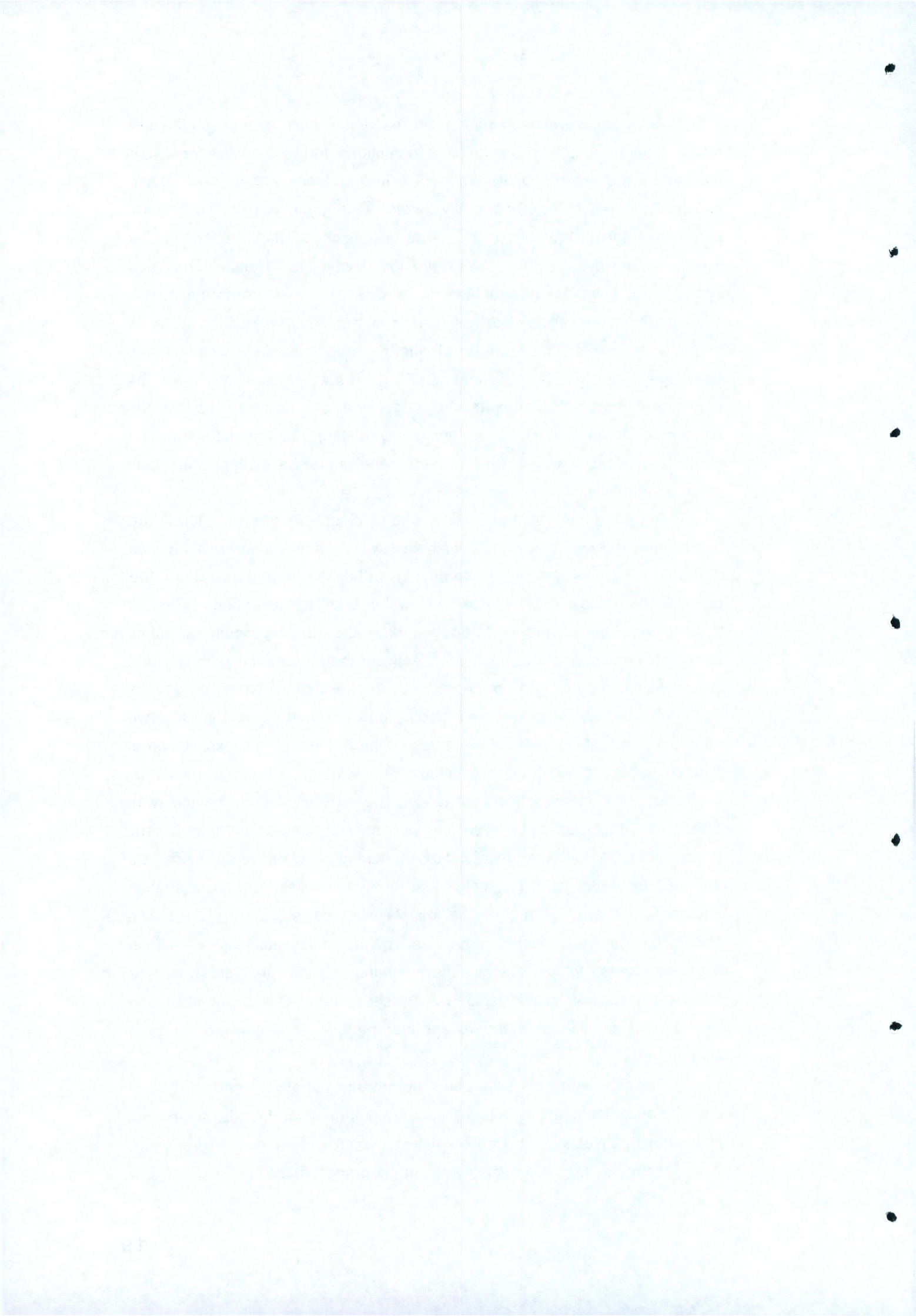


Advertising was becoming an essential part of the capitalistic fifties. Moreover, it was becoming a ubiquitous form of social control, in so far as it prevented people from leading free and independent lives. Haug, in *The Critique Of The Commodity Aesthetic*, argued that the commodity determines the individual's being takes. He believed that the commodity warps human instincts and their desire for satisfaction: "Human motivation appears to have been shackled to a drive towards conformism. He stipulated that the success of capitalistic commodity production lay in its capacity to exploit the notion of "help": help meaning creating and thoroughly exploiting a dependency. Firstly, new commodities make the necessary chores easier, with the effect that the chores become too difficult to do un-aided, without inevitably buying the commodities. The result is a situation where what is necessary cannot be distinguished from what is unnecessary:

People seem to have their unconscious bought off. They are conditioned daily to enjoy that which betrays them to celebrate their own defeat, in the enjoyment of identifying with their superiors. Even the genuine use-values, they receive carry within them a tremendous power of destruction. The private car, together with the running down of public transport, carves up towns no less effectively than saturation bombing and creates distances that can no longer be crossed without a car.

For this notion to work, advertising had to be strong enough to drive people to consume. How was this accomplished? Through the exploitation of a deep subconscious human weakness - alienation. The word alienation itself, suggests separation and distance. The term itself contains the word "alien" meaning a stranger in society who has no connections with others. It was an essential weapon of fifties marketing. Berger (*Media Analysis Techniques*, 1982, p.55) suggested that there was a link between alienation and consciousness. He argued that people who live in a state of alienation may suffer from a concept he describes as "false consciousness" - meaning a consciousness which takes the form of the ideology that controls their thinking. In addition to this false consciousness he believed that alienation was also unconscious to the extent that people were unaware of their alienation.

People who experienced alienation, whether conscious or unconscious, became increasingly separated from their friends, their work and even themselves. The media play a crucial role in this environment. They surround the consumer with momentary solace to distract the



individual from his or her misery. In effect, they stimulate a pseudo-desire which encourages the individual to crave more pleasure, all of which costs money. Thus, alienation is a useful concept in capitalistic environments. It creates miseries and anxieties with the intention of generating consumption. As Marx wrote on the effects of capitalism:

Every man speculates upon creating a new need in order to force him to new sacrifices, to place him in a new dependence, and to entice him into a new kind of pleasure and thereby into economic ruin. Everybody tries to establish over others an alien power in order to find there the satisfaction of his own egotistical need.

(Marx, 1977, p.68)

By the end of the 1930s, such approaches to emotion and desire had become an integral part of the style industry. Harold Van Doren, a major industrial designer of the period, noted that "design is fundamentally the art of using lines, forms, tones, colours and textures, to arouse an emotional reaction in the beholder." The very meaning of aesthetics was changing. Formerly, the study of art and beauty, now it was manipulative process in so far as it could provoke a response in the consumer.

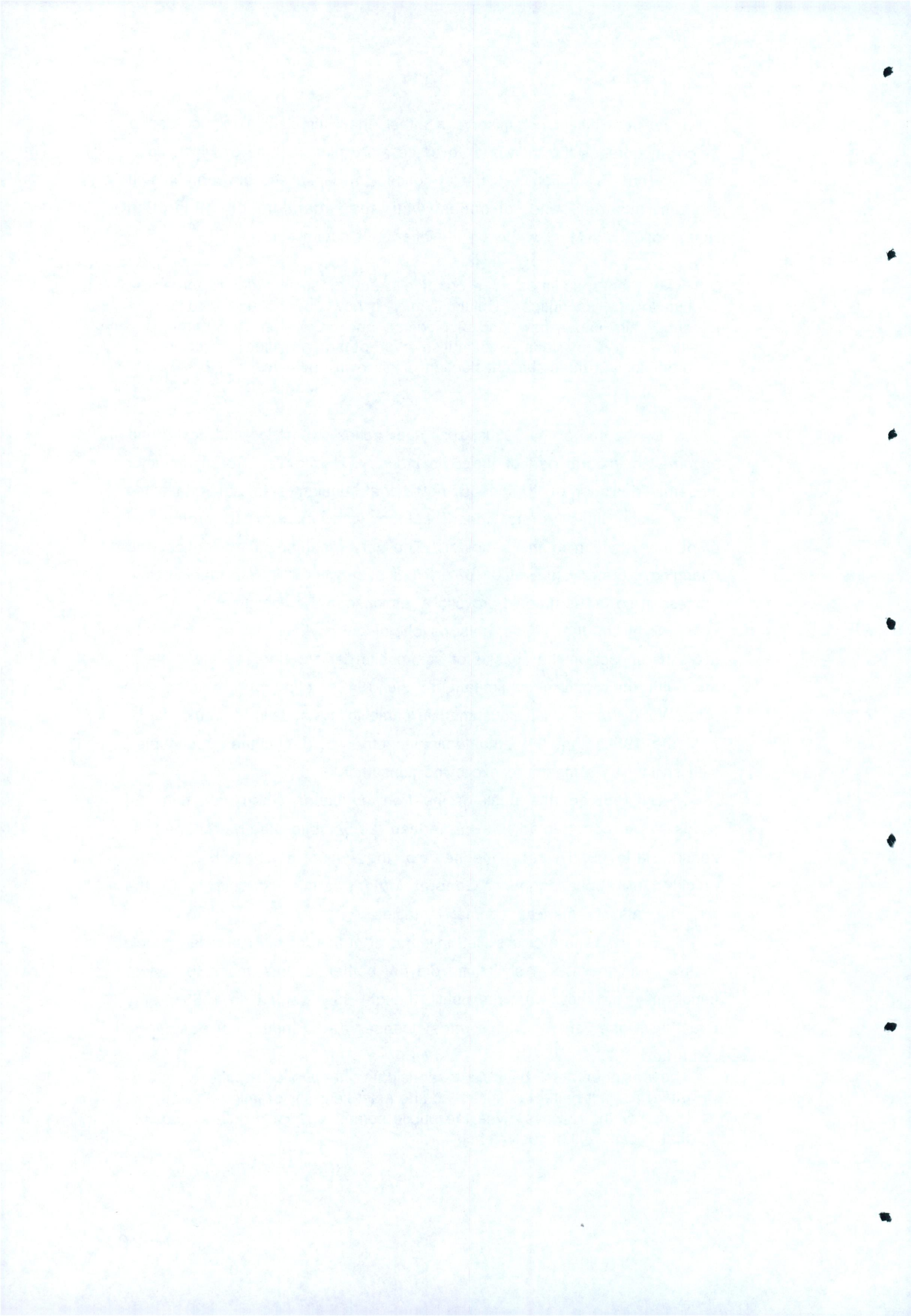
Even in the 1930s, this psychological styling strategy failed to make its impact on the chassis of automobile design. Cars were still black, and with their chromatic limitations, the 1940s rolled on, bringing with them World War II when consumerism came to a standstill. It would not be until the 1950s that the automobile industry would become preoccupied with styling, as a means to excite the consumer.

By 1955, at the peak of the freeway boom, when vast miles of roads were constructed, the American automobile finally reached its zenith. Harley Earl was at the heart of the symbolist automobile and he quickly set about adopting General Motor's crude chassis to fit the requirements of American popular fantasies.

Earl was more of a skilled inventor of needs for the American people than an engineer. As a stylist, he did not bother to draw much, but more importantly, he knew what the public thought they wanted. In 1953, Henry Dreyfuss, one of America's most conservative industrial designers, remarked:

The designer must be able to anticipate the public's desires, yet guard against being too far ahead...he must keep his creations paced in a way that always gives the public something just a little ahead that it can continuously reach for.

(Bayley, 1990, p.103)



This was Harley Earl's job: to continuously offer the consumer a visual newness, for which they would constantly strive. He created an innate dissatisfaction in the consumer, which led them into a tightening spiral of consumerism, and as a consequence seduced them in different ways year by year.

Contrary to the American concept of "good design" the European philosophy was concerned more with a healthy social system resulting in a happier life. Earl was concerned with a healthy economy. To Earl, the successful creation of a greater planned obsolescence was the greatest challenge to the practising designer. The advice he offered was : "You will never know what the industrial products of the future are going to be like, but the secret is to keep trying to find out" (Bayley, 1990., p.67)

Earl was obsessed with imagery and symbolism. He was fascinated by the process of symbolism and its relation to automobile design. Moreover, the source of this imagery and symbolism came from military aviation. Earl loved the "look" of planes. To him their aura conjured up images of speed and power.

General Motors owned an aircraft engine company, so Earl had a welcome invitation to view these powerful airplanes and study them close up. The aircraft which really excited him was Lockheed's new P-38, a pursuit plane with dramatic twin-tail booms. He quickly set about incorporating aircraft imagery onto the now somewhat antiquated chassis of General Motor's automobiles.

Earl's personal post-war dream car was called "Le Sabre" and appeared as a direct descendant of the F-86 jet which had taken his fancy. The car possessed an extraordinary amount of ducts, vents and nozzles most of which were for ornamentation, but more importantly, projected fantasies about speed and power.





FIG. 5. (Previous Page)

Harley Earl, seated in the Le Sabre he used as personal transport. The effect was a plane on the ground.

The symbols Earl used for his automobiles began on his dream cars and found their way onto General Motor's production lines. Out of this process came two of the most characteristic cars of the period - the Chevrolet Corvette, America's first sports car, and the Chevrolet Nomad, America's first station wagon. Each began as dream cars at Earl's Motoramas, a car festival he devised in 1952. In retrospect, these Motoramas were crucial to the evolution of the fifties motorcar iconography. They allowed Earl to use the automobile as a medium to express popular dreams and aspirations. Each year these Motoramas attracted over half a million people, who would come to gaze upon Earl's creations. In a sense, they were free opinion polls providing Earl with important feedback as to what to produce and develop. When his 1953 Chevrolet Corvette appeared it stole the show. Named after a military vessel, it was America's first personal motorcar:

If the young libido were expressed in terms of metal plastic and plating it would look like this. Despite its visual drama, the Corvette's crude engineering made it more suitable for the drive-in rather than for driving.

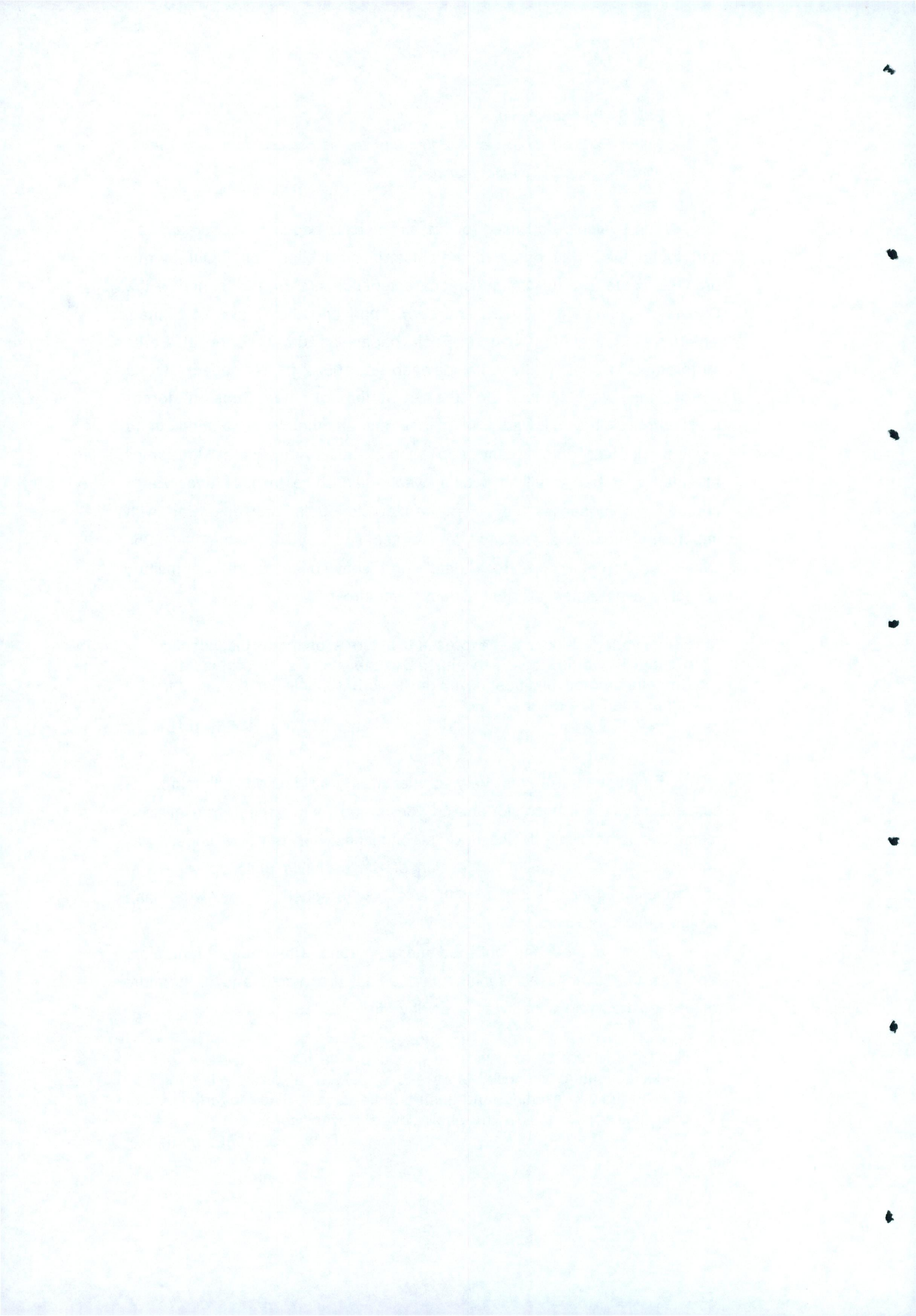
(Bayley, 1986, p.15)

Functionally it was very crude: its tyres lacked adhesion, its suspension made it uncomfortable to ride in and its two-speed transmission responded lethargically to the driver's commands, but its visual appeal was unmistakable- an exquisite expression of Earl's styling philosophy. "A ton of symbolism good enough to eat" was how Stephen Bayley, writer and design critic describes it.

It was curved and polished metal in tune with popular fantasies; fantasies that epitomised wealth, glamour, leisure, youth and furthermore an escape from the banality of everyday life:

Didn't it say that there was a very macho type man with a love of speed, adventure and risk? More subtly, didn't it also imply that he was attractive, exciting and just a little aloof? The advertisers loved this sort of thing - the public loved it even more.

(Dewaard, 1982, p.45)



Earl achieved an altogether different dream with his Chevrolet Nomad station wagon of 1953 - the young American happy family, aspiring towards a home in the country, with four kids and a big dog. It was the ideal second car and conjured up images of visits to the country and adorable kids being picked up from school by an ever-loving and caring mother.

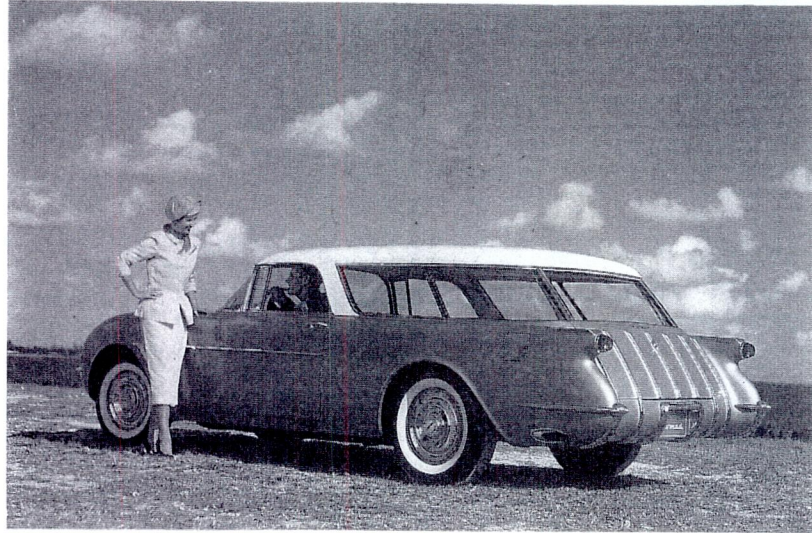


FIG. 6.
Nomad station wagon, with its ribbed and fluted rear.

However, it was a car not without setbacks. Earl was intent on adjusting the Nomad's proportions in his restless search for new and exciting forms.

My sense of proportion tells me that oblongs are more attractive than a square, just as a Ranch house is more attractive than a three storey flat roof house or a greyhound is more graceful than an English bulldog.

(Bayley, 1992, p.68)

With Earl's influence, General Motor's cars had already become longer and lower. They looked like giant metal blocks embellished with lots of chrome.

The Chevrolet Nomad, Earl's second dream car, had exposed a weakness in his conception. The car had a dull roof, a flat sheet of steel which did not complement the overall aesthetic. Earl's solution was to groove it - he incorporated fluted metal pressings on its roof, a technique which ever since has become an established part of motorcar design.



It was an exciting era in automobile design. There was an incredible appetite for novelty; even what might seem as outlandish now was greeted with open arms. The grille became an important part of the automobile's aura. It was the central feature of the car and was parallel to the "face", embodying the personality of the motorcar. Even to this day the grille is accepted as the true single identifying feature of the automobile - successfully employed by Mercedes and B.M.W whose ranges use a similar and distinctive grille treatment.

The interesting point about the grille of some of these automobiles was what they inherently symbolised. The Ford Edsel was a good illustration of this. It came to the attention of stylists that cars of the not too distant past used to have vertical air in-take grilles instead of the all too familiar horizontal units. A revelation and, more importantly, a new selling point (or so it seemed). Meticulous product-planning followed under a veil of secrecy, which resulted in the launch of the Ford Edsel in 1956. It was an unmitigated disaster. Unable to comprehend the reasons for the car's commercial failure, Ford's public relations team delved themselves into a market investigation, only to discover that many customers found the Edsel's grille offensive - bearing a strong resemblance to a woman's vagina. It was ironic, especially when Jaguar's D type's success was widely attributed by psychologists to its similarity to the male organ, with its aggressive stance and bulbous shape. In the law proceedings that followed one of the lawyers got straight to the point when he wrote to Ford's public relations staff that:

It was bad enough that Studebaker saw fit to design a car whose front reminds me of male testicles, but now you have gone that one better by designing a car with a front like a female vagina.

(Bayley, 1986, p.20)

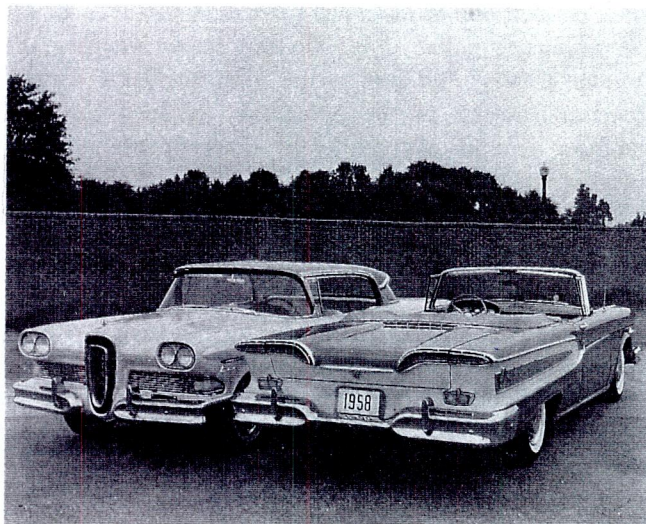




FIG. 7.

Edsel's vertical grille uncomfortably similar to a vagina.

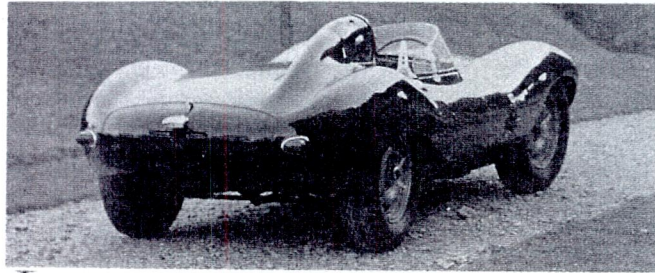


FIG. 8.

Jaguar 'D' types particular treatment of the radiator air intake provided critics with a substantial basis for critics to describe the Jaguar as a phallic symbol.

Automobile companies were waking up to a new revelation - the sexual potential of the motorcar. Undoubtedly, Harley Earl was one of the forerunners in the utilisation of this discovery. He was most definitely one of the first to grasp the romance of the automobile, and successfully mould it into titillating forms. Moreover, whether knowingly or otherwise, he managed to forge an irreversible bond between sex and the well wrought machine. Car design had grown-up, and for many shed the naivety that it never really possessed. These erotic nuances were best expressed in the pop music of the time:

Ridin' along in my automobile,
My baby beside me at the wheel,
I stole a kiss at the turn of a mile,
my curiosity runnin' wild - cruisin'
and playin' the radio - with no particular place to go

(Berry, No Particular Place to Go, 1966)



CHAPTER 4

Technological Pornography

As she brought my penis to life I looked down at her strong back, at the junction between the contours of her shoulders demarked by the straps of her brassiere and elaborately decorated instrument panel of this American car, between her thick buttock in my left hand and the pastel-shaded binnacles of the clock and speedometer. Encouraged by these dials, my ring finger moved towards her anus.

(Ballard, 1973, p.52)





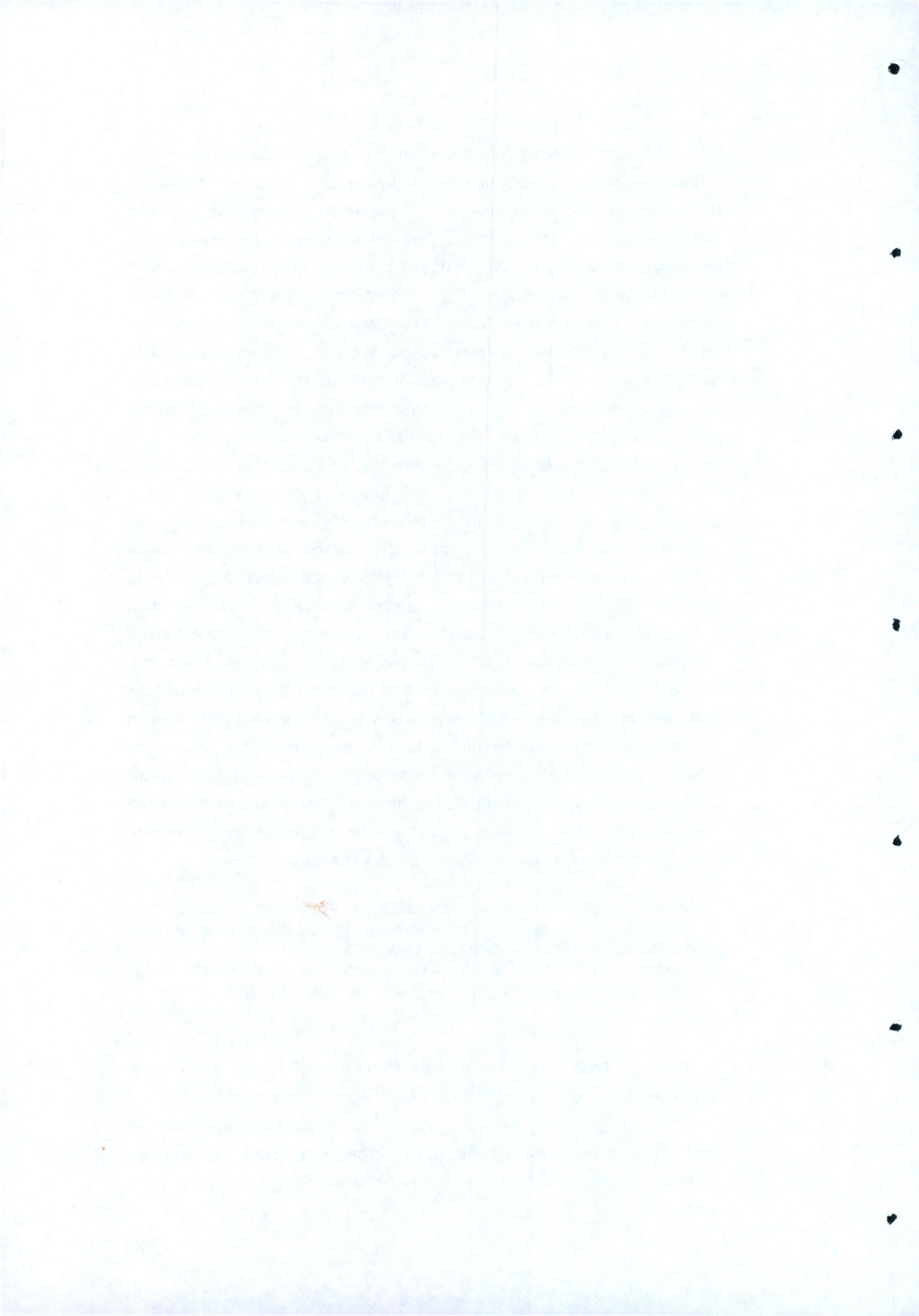
It is one of the great achievements of twentieth century marketing to have made the association between sex and consumer products. Throughout the 1950s, in one form or another, sex became a crucial marketing tool for manufacturers. Perfume companies, for example, in attempts to outbid one another employed the notion of sexual prowess with the "getting your man" theme. They invented provocative images in glossy magazines for bored women, to be meticulously scrutinised while under the attention of their ever-dutiful manicurists. Sex was being rediscovered in the 1950s, dusted off in the aftermath of the war. Moreover, it was being reinvented and employed to sell the most mundane of consumer products. Before I examine the relationship between sex and the automobile, it is necessary to put sexuality and its understanding into a fifties context.

However, in the midst of all this bold and daring advertising the fifties were generally not a permissive era. Old rules still stood firm. There was immense pressure (primarily a marketing ploy) to marry young and this went hand in hand with chastity. Hence, courting as a prelude to marriage began at an earlier age, as advertising men directed their attention to the teenagers of tomorrow. W. F Haug in *The Critique Of The Commodity Aesthetic* argued that courtship was strongly linked with the commodity. Commodities were a means of displaying your inner sexuality. Teenagers who go courting make themselves beautiful and desirable through the adornment of commodities in the form of jewellery, fabrics, scents and colours. Thus commodities borrowed their aesthetic language from human courtship, which in time leads to a reversal of the situation with people borrowing their aesthetic expression from the world commodity. This in effect alters the instinctive expression of the human:

Not only does this alter the possibilities of expressing the human instinctual structure, but the whole emphasis changes: power aesthetic stimulation, exchange-value and libido cling to one another like the folk in the tale of the Golden Goose - the means of expression undergo a rise in value - and they cost a fortune.

(Haug, 1971, p.19)

In the book *Lucky Jim*, a best-selling novel of 1954, the hero, Jim Dixon, never once gets to the point of making love to any of the girls he pursues. One girl throws him out of her bedroom when he enters inebriated and rather frisky. Another girl, after telling him about her loveless marriage, is amazed at his retort that she would have been better off if



she had not bothered to get married. "I couldn't do anything else, could I? " "Why not? " he asks. "Christ, haven't you been listening? I was in love ". This was the fifties mentality. Being in love meant one thing - marriage. Wedlock was the only answer to urgent physical needs.

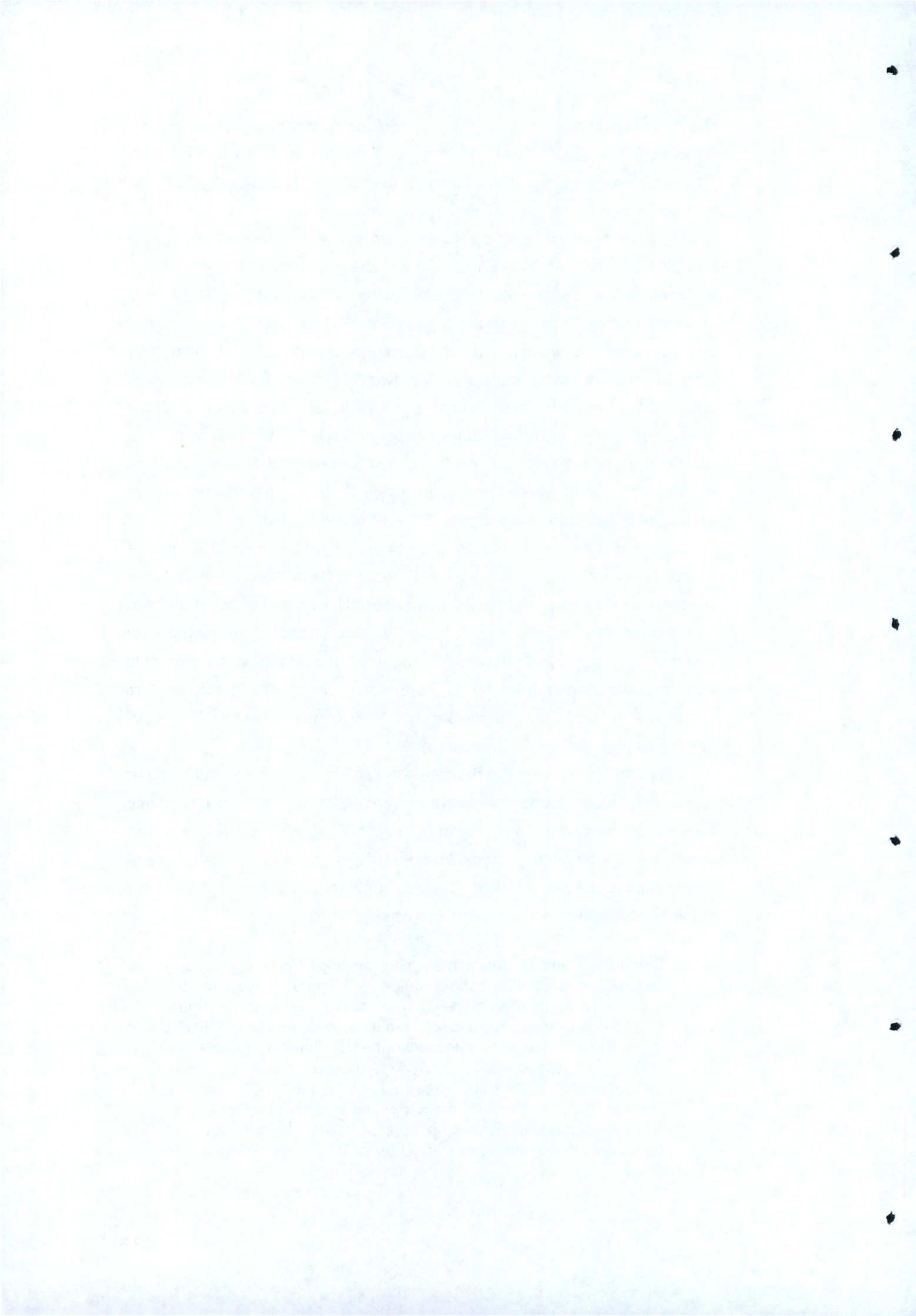
Let us not forget that the 1950s were in the aftermath of World War II, a period when men went off to fight a battle and women dutifully took up positions in industry as welders and plumbers alike. It was in effect sexual freedom; women shared the hardships on equal terms. But how long would this last? Now that women had achieved an independence would they ever want to return to being humble housewives? Surprisingly, they did return and with a fervour stronger than ever. Birth rates increased and the number of women in the workforce steadily dropped. The result was what has been dubbed the baby boom. The United States population increased by eight million in ten years. The marriage age dropped until almost 50% of American brides were marrying by the age of twenty five.

Why was this? Why were women so eager to give up their chance at greater equality? Mainly because the happy housewife myth was being promoted in the numerous popular magazines. The contented housewife was pictured smiling out from glossy pages surrounded by a plethora of domestic gadgets, and an ever loving husband standing by her side demonstrated "togetherness". As Peter Lewis succinctly put it in *The Fifties* (1978) "Suddenly the climate was imbued with a new puritan ethic, not the work ethic but the breeding ethic."

Woman who chose to abandon the security of their restrictive social roles, very often found themselves exposed to a harsh reality. They became a threatening force for men, who reviled them publicly as "she men". Many women who endeavoured to fight this regime often found themselves deserted by men. Consequently many women of this era cordially obliged when men enforced social law:

Democracy and feminism have now stripped the veil of courtly convention from the subordination of woman, revealing the sexual antagonisms formerly concealed by the "feminine mystique." Denied illusions of comity, men and woman find it more difficult than before to confront each other as friends and lovers, let alone equals. As male supremacy becomes ideologically untenable, incapable of justifying itself as protection, men assert their domination more directly, in fantasies and occasionally in acts of raw violence. Thus the treatment of women in movies, has shifted from reverence to rape.

(Lasch, 1980, p.67).



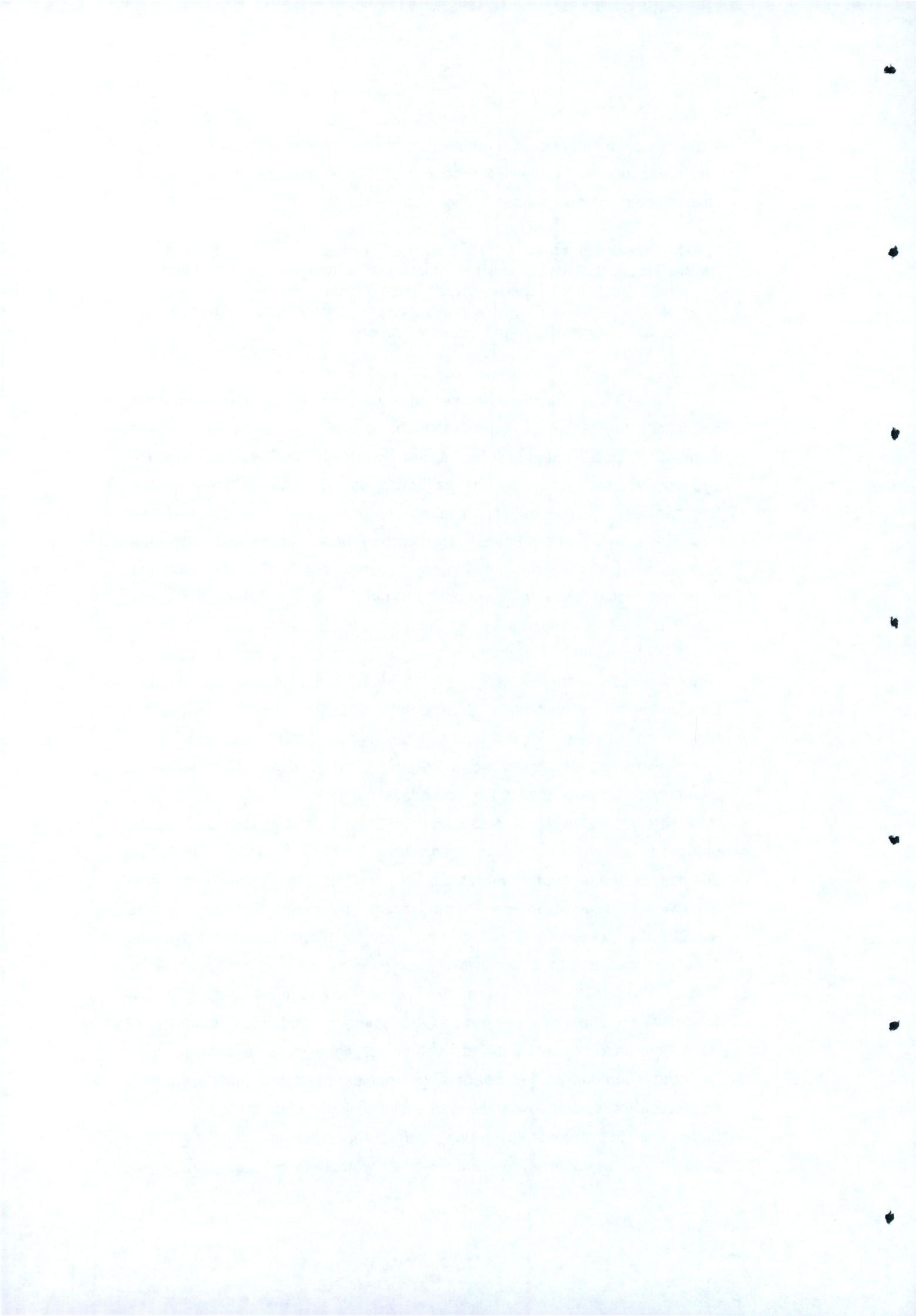
Popular literature reinforced this new philosophy with articles which encouraged women to drop out of the workforce and not to feel shame about their surrender to the equality battle:

The wondrous creature marries younger than ever, bears more babies and looks and acts far more feminine than the "emancipated girl of the twenties and thirties." If she makes an old fashioned choice, and lovingly tends a garden and a bumper crop of children, she rates louder Hosannas than ever before.

(Lewis, 1978, p.61)

Journalism like this, together with the medical experts of the time, normalised the notion of putting motherhood first. The theory of "maternal deprivation", documented in a best-selling book entitled *Child Care And The Growth Of Love* (1953) by doctors Bowlby and Spock, finally laid to rest this "woman's place" debate. The theory proclaimed that the first five years of a child's life were crucial in his/her development and, thus they were in need of constant mothering and care. If deprived of this attention, the child would grow up emotionally retarded. The evidence for these hypotheses was non-existent but it kept women sufficiently tied to the home. For who was a humble housewife to dare question psychological experts about the mental disorders of children? Subsequently, the Maternal Deprivation theory became a scapegoat for all maladjusted children and it had strong parallels with the masturbation myths of Victorian times.

Films and magazines presented a new kind of woman. She was busty, blonde with pouting lips and middle class aspirations. They were dubbed "sex kittens" and with their cantilevered brassieres and low cut dresses brought undue attention to the female breasts. Men swooned at the mere glimpse of these "wonderful assets". It was as though American men underwent a regression for maternal breast memories. Breasts became "sought after collector's items", so much so that Hugh Hefner in November 1953 launched a magazine called *Playboy* describing it as a "magazine for those who seek an alternative lifestyle with more play-pleasure orientations." The female form was becoming a marketable commodity. Coca-Cola used Jayne Mansfield's voluptuous figure as inspiration for their legendary contour bottle; cigarette companies used the female form to emphasise the sexual connotations of sucking nicotine into ones lungs. Then there was the automobile which, today, remains one of the greatest exponents of sexuality. Curvaceous women were draped across the bonnet



of the latest American dream machines; but more importantly, the metal panels themselves were hammered and pressed into suggestive orifices and curves, giving these machines erotic and feminine personalities of their own.

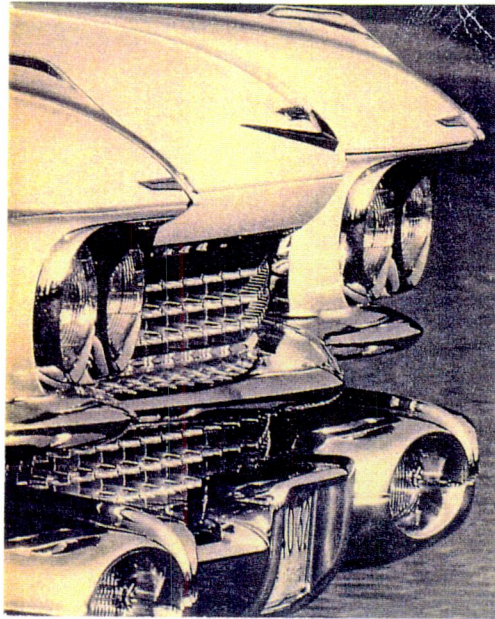


FIG. 9

Subliminal symbolism of plenty, 1950s America favoured ostentatious voluptuousness in its cars

In J.G Ballard's book *Crash* we see a curiously powerful expression of this notion. For Ballard, the motorcar is the marriage of reason and nightmare which, to him, is a theme which dominates the twentieth century: "Thermo-nuclear weapons systems and soft drink commercials coexist in an overlit realm ruled by advertising and pseudo-events, science and pornography." Ballard believed that sex and paranoia are the two great forces of this century: "Voyeurism, self-disgust, the infantile basis of our dreams and longings - these diseases of the psyche have now culminated in the most terrifying casualty of the century: the death of affect." (Ballard, 1973, p.8) The demise of emotion has now according to Ballard unlocked our real pleasures - pain and mutilation; the car crash being the perfect arena.



Crash is concerned not with an imaginary disaster but with "a pandemic cataclysm institutionalised in all industrial societies that kills hundreds of thousands of people each year and injures millions." (Ballard, 1973, p.7) Ballard explores car crashes in relation to pain and mutilation and suggests that their depiction is both erotic and sexually stimulating. It is a book, which forges a link between the automobile as technological pornography and the automobile as a total metaphor for man's life in society:

The crushed body of the sports car had turned her into a creature of free and perverse sexuality...Her crippled thighs and wasted calf muscles were models for fascinating perversities...The posture of her hands on the steering wheel and accelerator treadle, the unhealthy fingers pointing back towards her breasts, in some stylized masturbatory rite. Her strong face with its unmatching planes seemed to mimic the deformed panels of the car, almost as if she consciously realized that these twisted instrument binnacles provided a readily accessible anthology of depraved acts, the keys to an alternative sexuality.

(Ballard, 1973, p.79)

This notion of bonding human passions and machines was not an idea born out of the fifties. It goes back much further to debates about the "man-machine" that came to a head in the seventeenth century with Descartes, who claimed that animals bore a close resemblance to machines. He explored the mechanistic aspects of animal anatomy and put forward the notion that the bodily functions of animals were very close to the mechanical operations of machines. During the eighteenth century, La Mettrie, the French mechanist and materialist, explored this notion even further with a work entitled *The Man-Machine* (1747). In the twentieth century novel *Metropolis* by Thea Von Harbun which subsequently became a film directed by Fritz Lang in 1929 the somewhat ghastly erotic potential of machines is unleashed:

The technical superiority of the machine, by transforming mere efficiency into a human ideal, has set in motion a convergence between itself and man which tends, on the one hand, to lift the robot to a sort of subhuman role, and on the other to assimilate man to the machine not only in the biological sense or psycho-physiological sense, but also in relation to his values and conduct ...The obsessive leitmotiv...of human civilisation being threatened by a robot take over would seem thus to betray symbolically a widespread fear of automatization of life.

(Harbun, 1926, p.8)

The film *Metropolis* follows the life of Rotwang, a modern scientist with a somewhat demented manner and his attempts to create a "man-machine" i.e. a robot. The sexual dimension becomes apparent when the robot is presented as a seductive woman with an erotic figure. The result is two different forms - technology and sexuality riveted together.

The Futurists of the early 1900s were also keen explorers of the sexual potential of machines. To the painters and designers of this movement, the machine symbolised the modern world in all its complexity. One of the greatest advocates of this movement was Francis Picabia (1879-1953). Picabia was fascinated with machines, and by motorcars in particular. He had an almost physical relationship with them and was preoccupied with intricate body work and mechanical details. He was also a man with an intense interest in thought processes and states of mind; moreover he was obsessed with the notion of chance and accident. Picabia felt, that, through the use of machines and their inner working parts, he possessed the ability to break down and express the inner working parts of the human psyche.

He painted an internal combustion valve in gauche and ink in 1917 and called it *L'Enfant Carbeurator* and even to the untrained eye it was laden with sexual overtones - reciprocating valves and springs with

the ability to move in and out of metal housings; the male and the female components of sexual intercourse perhaps? Picabia well understood that the machine which makes things work was an apt metaphor for the workings or non-workings of the human mind.

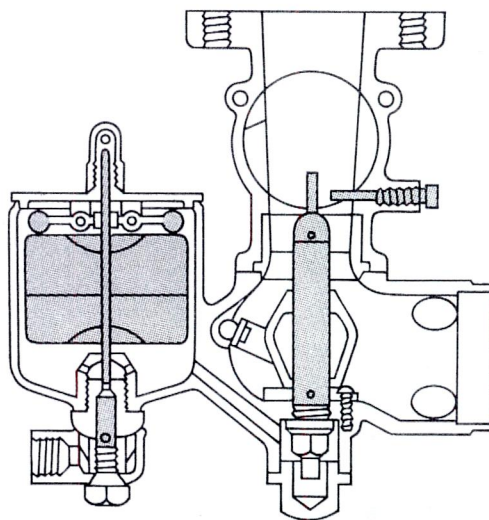




FIG. 10.

Dada artist Francis Picabia attached sexual significance to machine parts. By clever juxtapositions of image and word in his paintings Picabia created an erotic language out of illustrations from motorcar workshop manuals.

But how did this built-in sexual overtone manifest itself in the automobile designs of the 1950s? Very easily. In fact, Americans worshipped their cars. They were somewhat larger-than-life objects endowed with supernatural powers. No object embodied the unreality of the fifties so well as the automobiles manufactured during those years. In a time when practicality dominated most areas of fifties lifestyles (planned suburban communities, homogeneous dress code for men and general social conformity) the automobile's appeal held strong and was a symbol of individuality. These cars were intended as fantasies and sold as fantasies - sexual fantasies most of the time. Once inside the plush interiors of their dream machines, Americans could afford to forget about reality and sail through life as if it were one unending highway.

Planned obsolescence never worked so well. Almost every twelve months, new models were launched with very subtle alterations. Sometimes very little would have been changed, but it was sufficient to encourage people to change their cars every two or three years. These so-called "old" motorcars were far from worn out, and this was where the teenage market and the myths of "live fast die young" were born - myths that were deep-rooted in sexuality. The real dream cars of this era were Ford's lively Thunderbird and the Chevrolet Corvette. It was a dream come true for any spirited teenager, if he could get his hands on one of these machines. If you, perchance, succeeded in accomplishing this task then the world was at your feet. Girls would queue up to "go steady" and you would inherit an overnight "coolness".

Ford's Thunderbird, or the "T-bird" as it was more affectionately called, made its debut in 1955. It became an overnight success. The engine was capable of producing nearly 200hp. The first 1955 models sold over

16,000 copies and reached legendary status. Rock Stars sang about it, salesmen praised it and school kids wanted it. Chevrolet's Corvette was equally dashing. Almost anything that was a convertible, was a guarantee to seduce even the coyest female.

Buick brought out a limited edition sports convertible in 1953 decorated with chrome wire wheels. Only 1690 of them were produced and their price tag was set at an expensive \$5,000. Pontiac released their first V8 engine car in 1955, called the Strato-Streak. It was a lively motorcar, although somewhat conventional in design. Moreover, the engine ran on regular gas and was capable of 200hp from its four barrelled carburettor.

The young American became obsessed with the power of his automobile and worked on his machine day and night to "blow away" everybody at the dragstrip. A place where young men would race each other in a neck and neck battle over a short distance. It became a sort of mating ritual, the drag strip became an arena for masculinity; with a little tinkering and adjustments under the hood it was possible to generate enough power to leave your opponents in a trail of dust and the Prom Queen with a tingling in her loins.

The Chrysler Corporation, with its renowned hemi-head engine, became one of the favourites in the hot-rod pits. With minor modifications the engine (by varying the stroke and bore) could double its horsepower. Young men would eagerly climb under the hood of their Chrysler and work on the complicated task of modifying their "babies" until man and machine became in some ways the one entity. And the prize ? A machine they could wear to the drive-in on a Saturday night, a machine that would earn them the respect of their male companions and the inner thighs of many females.

Yet, how did this link between power under the "hood" and a girl's inner thighs come about ? Freud published an essay on *Infantile Sexuality* in 1905. It was written in the same volume as his essay on the *Erotic Potential of Mechanical Forms* and it discusses the effects motion has on a child:

We must also mention the production of sexual excitation by rhythmic mechanical agitation of the body...The existence of these pleasurable sensations...is confirmed by the fact that children are so fond of games of passive movement, such as being thrown up into the air, and insist on such games being incessantly repeated...The shaking produced by driving in carriages and later by railway travel exercises such a

fascinating effect upon older children that every boy...has at one time or other in his life wanted to be a train driver...It is a puzzling fact that boys take such an extra interest in things connected with railways and, at the time when the production of fantasies are at a peak (shortly before puberty), use those things as the nucleus of a symbolism that is peculiarly sexual. A compulsive link of this kind between railway travel and sexuality is clearly derived from the pleasurable sensation of movement...The combination of fright and mechanical agitation produces the severe hysteriform, traumatic neurosis...these influences become sources of sexual excitation.

According to Freud (*Infantile Sexuality*, 1977, p.58.), the mere act of driving a car was in itself sexual; it had a pleasurable effect on the nervous system. However, the motorcar of the 1950s was not all about speed. The shapes it carved out of sheet metal were equally important, so too was the space it encompassed. For this was a young man's love-nest where he would seduce his female companion. The bigger the car the more girls he could attract. A saloon car was necessary (with a spacious back seat) if he wished to perform more private acts.

Some one and a half million cars were owned by teenage drivers by 1958. This, in itself, had a knock on effect - the emergence of the drive-in phenomenon. Even today, the drive-in is one of the most evocative images of the fifties. It brought together the Hollywood stars of the big screen, the automobile, popcorn and, of course, sex. Drive-ins appeared in many different formats including the drive-in movie, the drive-in root beer stand and even drive-in funeral parlours. Gone were the days when the boy walked his girl to the movies. Instead they would pull up in a revamped Cadillac and with a flash of the lights or a honk of the horn would summon the waitress to their window and order the night's "munchies". The American writer Lisa Alther in her book *Kinflicks* describes the typical drive-in scenario:

Mixed with dialogue were the various sighs and moans and sucking sounds from the front seat and blasts from car horns throughout the parking area as in keeping with Hullsport High tradition, couples signalled that they had gone all the way.

(Bayley, 1986, p.60)

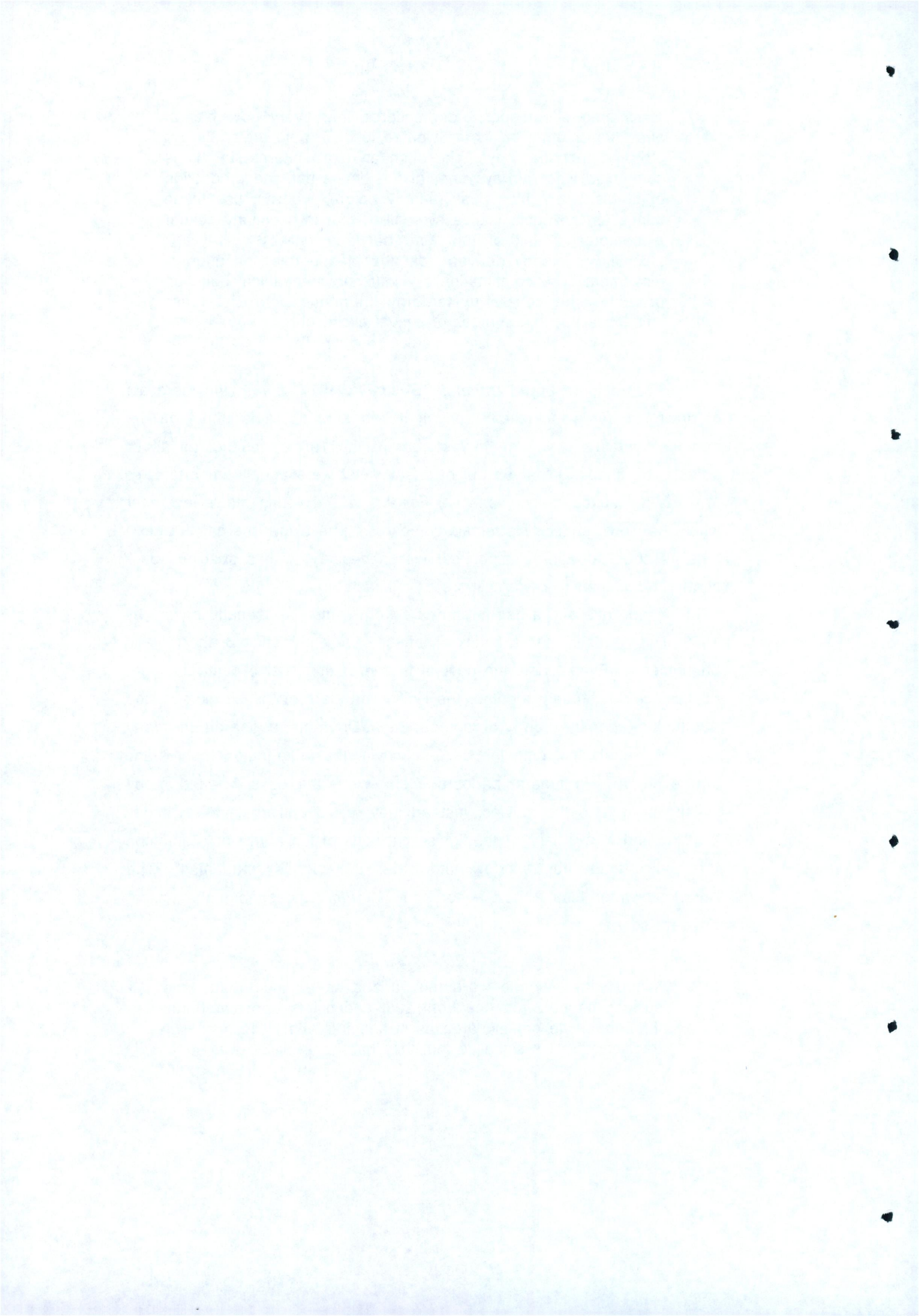




FIG. 11.

The drive-in movie, combining the magic ingredients of Hollywood, cars, popcorn, Coca-Cola and sex.

As Picabia had discovered some forty years earlier, the components of a car, as well as the whole structure, can be powerful sexual symbols. In this golden age, the automobile fulfilled many roles. It was a mating arena for the young, a liberating force in giving women a sexual independence, and an arousing experience for the virile young male.

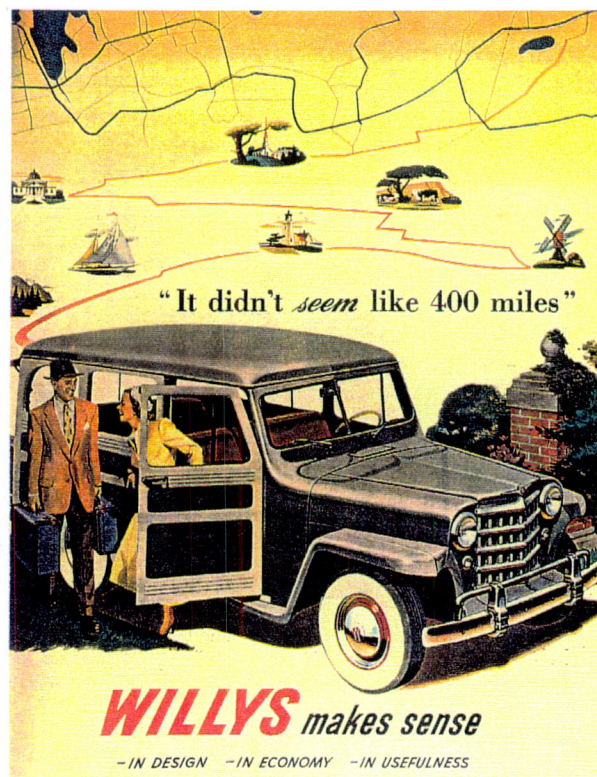
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

...What's in a dream?

In the exhibition halls, the car on show is explored with an intense, amorous studiousness: it is the great tactile phase of discovery, the moment when visual wonder is about to receive the reasoned assault of touch (for touch is the most demystifying of all senses, unlike sight, which is the most magical). The bodywork, the lines of union are touched, the upholstery palpated, the seats tried, the doors caressed, the cushions fondled; before the wheel, one pretends to drive with one's whole body. The object here is totally prostituted, appropriated: originating from the heaven of "Metropolis", the goddess is in a quarter of an hour mediatized, actualizing through this exorcism the very essence of petit-bourgeois advancement.

(Barthes, 1973, p.97)





In retrospect, it impossible not to see that the automobile of the fifties was a product of its time. The country was economically solvent, the automobile existed as a three-dimensional fantasy object. People were not concerned with a car's practicality. What interested them most was its value as both a power and status symbol. Cars were not essential for living, but more importantly they were essential for a new belief - conspicuous consumption. They took on a sort of fetishistic quality, endowed with spoke wheels, elaborate tail-fins, distinctive grilles, tensed wrap-around windshields and chrome highlights; they captured people's imagination everywhere. So much so, that each car took on a personality of its own, so that driving one seemed to tell much about the person who drove it. The most obvious manifestation of this was the teenage car revolution of the mid-50s:

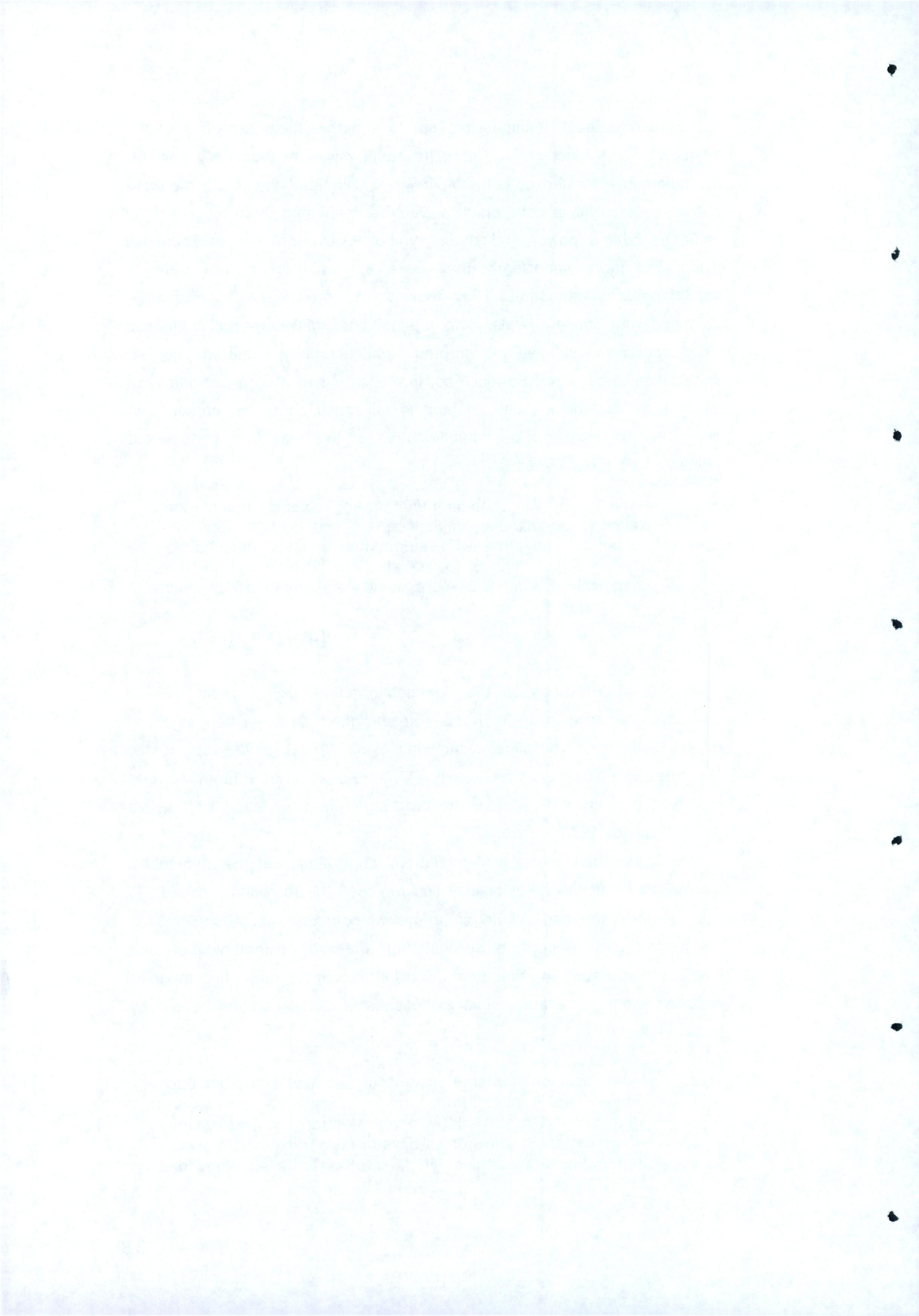
Never to be forgotten in their glowing colours and chrome. Never to be equalled in their speed and luxury. They were brilliantly innovative with automatic transmissions, torsion bars, powerful engines, power steering, power brakes and air conditioning. What was more, they were fun to drive - even easy to drive!

(Dewaard, 1982, p.6)

Harley Earl defined the automobile as an object to provoke a consumer response in the individual. He designed cars that begged to be driven. Every time you climbed into one of his "metal goddesses", it was like having a vacation from reality. "The release into a fantasy world promised by a fast car is like the promised release integral with active sex." (Bayley,1986, p.110.)

Adorno had an altogether different interpretation of the automobile. He believed that the automobile which replaced the railroads reduced the acquaintanceship made during journeys to contacts with hitchhikers. In effect, the automobile had an isolating effect by communication. An intellectual paradox it may seem, but at closer scrutiny the meaning becomes clear - the automobile establishes uniformity among people by isolating them:

Men travel on rubber tires in complete isolation from each other. The conversations in their vehicles are always identical and regulated by practical interests. Like visitors who meet on Sundays or holidays in restaurants whose menus and rooms are identical at different price levels, they find



that they have become increasingly similar with their isolation.

(Adorno, 1944, p.222)

Ballard put forward the notion that the automobile is the embodiment of science and technology as it multiplies around us and that it dictates the language that we speak and think. Either we use this language or we remain mute. (Ballard, 1973, p.80.)

American society of the 1950s was far from speechless. From the 1950s, the rise of the mass market and consumerism had an unprecedented impact on the way people perceived and behaved within the world. To a large extent, this barrage of images through television, magazines and in the everyday social environment had, for the most part, opened people's eyes to a wide variety of new possibilities and new ways of imagining. But just as these new possibilities had been raised, they had also been played upon, exploited and abused. This in the '50s was dubbed progress:

Much of consumerism seems to represent regress rather than progress for man in his long struggle to become a rational and self-guiding being.

(Packard, 1981, p.13)

The fifties culture industry perpetually cheated its consumers out of what it promised. The promises drew on the pleasures it endlessly prolonged which in themselves were illusory - perhaps all it actually confirmed was that an end would never be reached:

Large scale efforts are being made...to channel our unthinking habits, our purchasing habits, and our thought processes by the use of insights gleaned from psychiatry and social sciences.

(Packard, 1981, p.11)

The allure of this era is fascinating, it was a time when people were being shown what to do and how to do it, what to believe and how to believe it. Not necessarily by exhortation, but by a process of permeation throughout society of ways of doing things and seeing the world that were representative of the established order. "The essential point is that the ways of doing, thinking and acting of the dominant group became the society's 'common sense'." (Horne, 1986, p.53.)

People obeyed social order out of fear and hope. Fear emanating from the threat of job redundancy, which resulted in social demotion. Hope stemming from people's willingness to do what they were told in the anticipation of getting something out of it (even if it was only survival).

Not to partake in this society was in a sense a renunciation of life and all human needs. The less you went to the theatre, dance hall, and public house the more you saved. In effect, the less you were (meaning the less you expressed your own life) the more you had and the greater your alienation from the consumer world became.

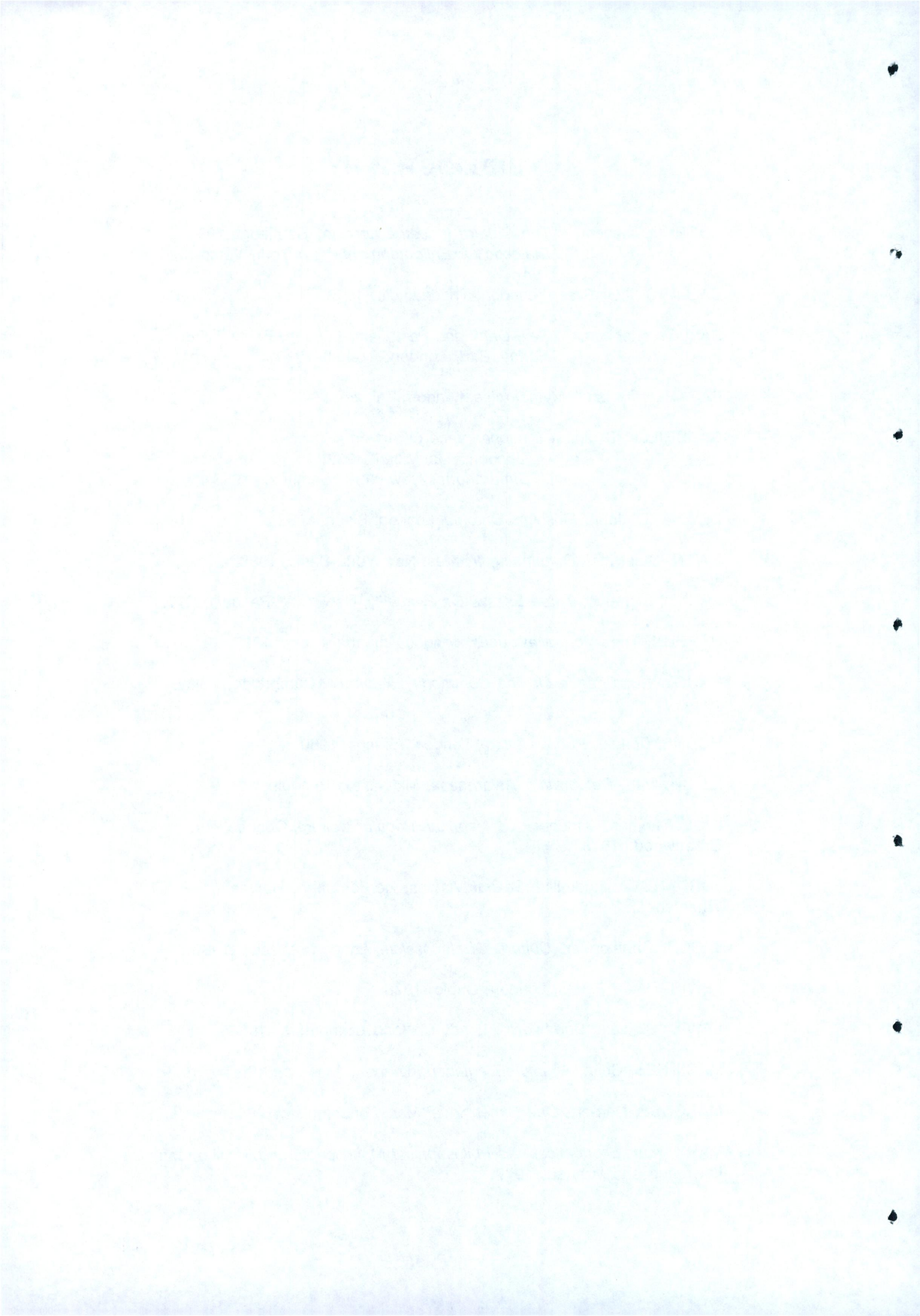
The fifties was gloriously naive in the sense that people's renunciation was by greater consumption. Consumerism had established an invincible hold over people. Demand for consumer goods was replaced by simple obedience: "Pleasure hardens into boredom because, if it is to remain pleasure, it must not demand any effort and therefore moves rigorously in the worn grooves of association." (Adorno, Horkheimer, 1944, p.137.)

The fifties automobile personifies this process. It symbolised an affluent society of free spending. It exemplified the alienation process in so far as it provided the consumer with momentary solace from the banality of everyday life; and in turn, it isolated them even more. It enhanced consumers' aspirations and tastes from status symbols to sexual display. In a magical sense, the '50s motorcar transcended the process that created it. Perhaps the greatest triumph of the car was that it compelled people to buy it even though they saw through the fantasies that it tried to sell them.

In this sense the fifties are no different from the '80s or the '90s for that matter. Only now we look back at the fabulous fifties, with a naive nostalgia for a golden age of wealth and excess, still wanting to believe that people led free, unrepressed and wholesome lives. This of course, was far from the truth.

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