

ON WHEELS

Highway cities

Speaking about smog-filled cities, it's interesting to note how they are being planned nowadays.

The key is not the needs of the people, but the needs of the car. Roads — not walkways — are central.

Part of this problem is the huge amount of public money spent on subsidizing highways and roadways while public transportation is expected to break even. Gasoline taxes and car taxes do not pay for the roads but bus tickets are expected to pay for the buses.

We see symbolized here not only a society in which technology reigns rather than people, but as well, a society in which the best treatment is reserved for the better-off.

The rich have their transportation system subsidized; the poor must pay their own way.

The rich may live on the outskirts of dirty cities but the poor are stuck within.

Pay later

But good old General Motors has at least made plans to ensure that the vast majority can buy one of their cars somehow.

The key for those whose savings aren't great enough are finance plans like G.M.A.C., General Motors Acceptance Corporation.

For those people who can't get bank loans — or don't realize they should try there first — these plans offer instant credit for car buying at such reasonable interest rates as 30 per cent.

Rumor has it that if you look hard you can borrow money for as little as 16 per cent a year. But you have to look pretty hard and you have to be able to offer security.

Oh well, the Joneses bought a new car so the Smiths will too. If nothing else, we live in an age marked by the super credit plan; they're almost as good a symbol as automobiles.

These plans, by the way, are by no means subconscious plots. The men who run the finance corporations are very well aware of what they are doing.

Madison Avenue

Eventually it would seem that nature would intervene and attempt to destroy the bastards at the automobile industries and maybe eventually she will; but for the moment man is preserving the upper hand through self-propaganda — advertising.

Should the thought ever occur to you that maybe you don't need a Cadillac, you need only open up any major magazine or turn to any TV channel to be reminded of why you do.

The U.S. automobile industry spends billions of dollars a year on advertising.

Since we know that the companies involved are one big happy family the apparent argument that this is done in the spirit of competition would seem to fall flat on its proverbial face.

A better explanation would appear to be that the car companies would like to make sure we really want to buy this year's Zommobile. Comparatively few individuals escape to the land of reasonable sanity and Volkswagen ownership.

Just in case you think wanting to buy this year's Zommobile is the natural state of mind, ask yourself why the U.S. advertising and automotive industry employs over 25 per cent of U.S. behavioral psychology graduates. Or read one of Vance Packard's books.

So there is the living symbol of our age.

An industry that is really an oligopoly (controlled by few) instead of the free market participant it pretends to be).

A product that is inferior because of alienated workers and profit-motivated shareholders.

A symbol that hasn't any real human value but is shored up by expensive advertising.

And hence a cost of resources that could really be spent on helping starving neighbours and freeing ourselves from toil.

The future

Interestingly, the automobile may also be a major symbol of a future we seem to be completely unaware of. A future of cybernetics.

Cybernetics is the term applied to the extremely complicated theory of computer control of computers.

Applied to the automobile industry what this will basically mean is that man will be taken off the production line and replaced by computer-controlled computers.

In one sense this will free man. Not only will he have increased leisure time but he will also have an increased number of alternatives opened to him.

During the first years of automobile construction one could order a made-to-order car. The mass production line has provided more people with cars but has eliminated this ability.

Cybernetics will return one's ability to request tailor-made products while preserving the capacity to do it in quantity.

Few examples exist today but the best one is an American trucking firm which has installed a fully-computerized system on its production line.

As a result, purchasers now have a maximum of over 240 thousand options open to them in ordering a production line truck.

But in this freedom, man may find chaos and slavery.

Another way of saying that man will have more leisure is to say he is going to be out of work. There simply won't be enough jobs to go around.

Yet he will be turning out enough products to go around. The problem will be finding a method of distribution.

One answer being debated in the United States today is the creation of a minimum annual wage.

Yet even if he can buy the produce goods, the man of today would be lost without work to do. We don't know how to spend many leisure hours and we are trained to psychologically need work.

The only possible solution here is going to be in changing our educational system to teach man how to deal with the new situation.

We are going to be forced to give up the idea that to get to heaven one must sweat on earth. And for most we are going to have to stop teaching that the way to succeed in life is to toil hard.

Looking around us today it would seem that chaos has a much better chance of claiming the future.

We must also learn how to control a world in which technology plays such a big part. Today too many people in the humanities are simply jeering at the engineer and too many of the people in technocratic studies are ignoring those studying the humanities.

If these two groups do not soon get together and try to understand each other's fields, we will soon plunge by default into a world ruled not by man but by machine — and that, engineers, will include the maintenance men.

Our hope, then, lies in understanding the symbol of our present times in order to master the symbols of our future.

