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Feminized Automobility: Racing the Car as a Cultural and Technological Artifact

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Abstract

There are very few technologies that have so profoundly shaped society as the automobile has. However, what has been a liberating force for some has been an obstacle for others. Since its inception, the automobile has been imbued with masculine creation myths of mechanical strength and technological prowess that have restricted women from utilizing it to its full capacity. The gendered imbalances of the automobile become amplified when studying them not in their practical use but in sport. Auto racing has valued historically masculine characteristics that largely rely on the car as the source of their power. Having been frequently associated with nature, emotionality, and fragility, womanhood has been constructed as incompatible with a sport that relies so heavily on technology. This thesis aims to illustrate that the simultaneous sensationalization and systematic exclusion of women from the racing industry is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that is neither new nor close to ending. Old stereotypes of women as incompetent drivers have permeated the racing world and have strong ties to the early development of automotive technology. Everything from the electric starter and the automatic transmission has been construed as a "feminine" amendment to the automobile, thus serving to minimize utility and preserve the male identity as the holders of automotive expertise. Through interviews with past and present female racers at all levels I explore how the development of a technology is inseparable from its cultural context, and examine how social values regarding the use of technology manifest themselves in racing.

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at the starting line), but the Riker soon pulled ahead and won the race easily, finishing its five laps in about 15 minutes. The other electric car came in second, and a gas-powered Duryea took third. The Paris-Bordeaux-Paris race highlighted France's superiority in automotive technology at the time, and established Panhard et Levassor as a major force in the fledgling industry. Its success spurred the creation of the Automobile Club de France in order to foster the development of the motor vehicle and regulate future motor sports events. The social and technical system of the car constitutes an enormously complex hybrid, 'automobility', which I argue should be examined through six components, as manufactured object, individual consumption, machinic complex, quasi-private mobility, culture, and environmental resource-use. In the development of automobility as a distinct culture, north America has been seminally important in providing experiences, scenes and literature which have become icons of the car (see Eyerman and Löfgren 1995, on American road movies). The new highways were thus not only a measure of the culture's technological prowess but they were also fully integrated into the cultural economy.