Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Of the car and life …

Maurice Amiel · Wednesday, July 22nd, 2020

… as seen by Robert Frank, Willy Ronis, Henri Cartier-Bresson and Louis Faurer

These days of limited movement seem to favor a bit of nostalgia for what the car brought to ordinary people in terms of mobility and freedom of movement.

The hey days of unbridled auto-mobility started before the war and lasted to the sixties when off-road rest areas, resorts and vacation spots, dedicated to car users, affected the practices of squatting land next to one's car as shown in the feature image.

The following images by known photographers bear witness to the imagination of these practices from the college-student-on-the-make seeking a patch of grass to the auto-mobile teenagers running the city streets.

The mobile room

The feature image, reprised below, shows a typical scene of the fifties captured by Robert Frank in Ann Arbor Michigan, probably in a park setting favored by college students in search of a place to engage in some open-air intimacy.

the mobile room

The significant presence of the parked cars, one of them with an open door, so close to the people, can be summed up in the fact that such behavior would not be imagined *if the car did not have a place-making potential and were it not unconsciously considered as a mobile **private** room.*

The anonymous fishing-spot

In the post war Marshall plan years, when cars became accessible to the French middle class, the country roads allowed urban dwellers to drive to nearby river edges for a bit of fishing, leaving their cars (here the 4 HP Renault, rear engine mounted) parked by the dirt road as shown below.

The anonymity of the setting warranted the temporary fishing spot appropriation as captured by the French photographer Willy Ronis.

The anonymous fishing spot

Further away, the photograph seems to include a sport venue of sort with its own, less anonymous, parking lot!

The RV ancestor

To be more precise the ancestor to the variety of vans that include a tent extension, captured here by Cartier Bresson and as shown below, during the pre-war years of the *Blum government of France that had introduced paid vacation for all.*

The RV ancestor

It may be a still shot in one of the many films by Renoir, assisted by Cartier-Bresson, such as *La vie est à nous*, dealing with the *amazing improvisations ordinary people made in squatting road and river sides, with or without a car, seeking relief from hard work.*

The free run of the city …

… in dad's car was probably the preferred socializing Saturday night event during the mid-fifties, for teenagers of age to drive and affirm their presence noisily in a convertible as shown below: *girls on the front bench and behind the wheel, boys on the back bench as support group.*

the free run of the city

The photograph was taken by Louis Faurer, an associate of Robert Frank, whose fresh take on urban night photography uses the spit-shine high gloss of the car hood to reflect the jazzy city street lights as visual reinforcement of the young'uns antiques.

Discussion

If the reader remembers the popular pastime of guessing the brand name, model and year of make of passing cars and how to read their hood symbolic prow figure,

If he or she remembers getting all the cultural juice from seeing on the big screen an American full-size car driven in the narrow streets of a European town,

then he or she may agree that it will not be an easy thing to say good bye to the automobile and all that is stands for socially, practically and emotionally.

In fact, we should not underestimate the attachment to cars of western societies … witness the current post-pandemic “return-to-the-freedom-of-car-travelling” TV sales pitch, showing a single car driving into lush green hills or mountains, *evoking the thrill of being in a secure mobile private room … two generations after Frank documented the initial version of the phenomenon.*

Credit

The R. Frank and L. Faurer images were taken from:

Greenough, S.: *Robert Frank’s The Americans – looking in*, National Gallery of art, Washington / STEIDL, 2009

The H. Cartier-Bresson image was taken from:

Henri Cartier-Bresson: *Scrapbook*, Thames and Hudson, N.Y., 2007

This entry was posted on Wednesday, July 22nd, 2020 at 1:50 pm and is filed under Photography
You can follow any responses to this entry through the Comments (RSS) feed. You can skip to the end and leave a response. Pinging is currently not allowed.