

AUTOGEDDON

An excerpt from the epic poem by

Heathcote Williams

from *Whole Earth Review*,

Fall 1987: 26-29.

1 **IN** 1885 Karl Benz constructed the first automobile.
2 It had three wheels, like an invalid car,
3 And ran on alcohol, like many drivers.
4 Since then about seventeen million people have been killed by them
5 In an undeclared war;
6 And the whole of the rest of the world is in danger of being run over
7 Due to squabbles about their oil.
8 If an alien was to hover a few hundred yards above the planet
9 It could be forgiven for thinking
10 That cars were the dominant life-form,
11 And that human beings were a kind of ambulatory fuel cell:
12 Injected when the car wished to move off,
13 And ejected when they were spent.
14 **NOT** one huckstering copy-writer—
15 And they're only a sheet of Letraset away
16 From badlands ballyhoo merchants spiking sugar with silver-sand
17 Or dying sparrows yellow and selling them as canaries—
18 Ever sees fit to mention that the automobile,
19 Even that moving Pantheon, the Rolls,
20 Doubles your heart-beat on entry,
21 And transforms your psychogalvanic skin response
22 To set the needles shivering on any lie detector.
23 From the moment you settle comfortably behind the wheel—
24 Your pelvis fondled by replica flesh panting with static—
25 It increases stress readings, poultices the ductless glands,
26 Slowly marinates the body of even the most 'experienced' driver with adreno-toxins,

27 Noisily generates a wide range of cardio-vascular pressures,
28 As well as doubling up as a dinky orgone-accumulator stimulating trash sexuality.
29 Tides of blood and water in the body
30 Are magi-mixed, as if there was a permanent full moon.
31 The car is a portable mistral
32 Whipping up sumps of duff ions,
33 And moving them along in a packet of pre-storm tension.

34 *'Oh we had such an awful journey,*
35 *I feel completely drained.*
36 *Now what did you want to talk to us about?*
37 *My concentration's utterly shot.*
38 *Why did we come?*

39 FURTHER SPECIFICATIONS:

40 The machine re-vamps the energy patterns of the driver,
41 Bearing only a scanty relation to the work put into it:
42 *'Whoops, did we do something then?*
43 *Couldn't have. We'd have felt it.*
44 Like television,
45 The peculiar rhythm of the car
46 Sucks the brain-waves into an artificial resonance—
47 A managed and manageable attention span
48 The TV of travel.

49 Every car's vibration
50 Magnifies an all-pervading impregnation of information-free sound-porn,
51 A universal base line, whatever the tune,
52 Transforming the brains of its audience into double-glazed mulch,
53 Their attention span whittled down to the length of a passing car.
54 The infra-sound,
55 Exuded by compressors in 'air-conditioned' (and air conditioning) models
56 Will deal with those who shruggingly claim to be unaffected,
57 As their cerebral pre-capillaries silently pop,
58 And turn into varicose veins.
59 Look out of any city window:
60 Cars will slice through your thoughts and take them away
61 For nothing.

62 Stand in any street
63 Bristling with painted piranhas
64 Playing the flatulent, whining muzak of stress,
65 And be forced to absorb their every wilful manoeuvre—
66 A mass-produced multiple sword of Damocles
67 Inexhaustibly hovers over every action.
68 Streets that were open universities,
69 Are now the open sewers of the car-cult.

70 But, if all this proves too overwhelming,
71 You have permission
72 To take it out on anyone you wish—
73 Including yourself—
74 With a relaxing impunity . . .

75 The Visitor follows up the court reports:
76 Hit someone over the head with a chrome fender and kill them—
77 Life.
78 Take the precaution of attaching the chrome fender to a car,
79 Hit someone over the head with it, and kill them—
80 Six months suspended. Licence briefly withheld.

81 *'I'm going to democratise the automobile,'* said Henry Ford,
82 *'And when I'm through everybody will be able to afford one,*
83 *And about everybody will have one . . .*

84 **THIS** is half-way house.
85 Half the world's paychecks are auto-related,
86 Half the world's resources are auto-devoted,
87 And half the world will be involved in an auto-accident
88 At some time during their life.

89 **INTERCONNECTING** roads, laid out like lattice-work,
90 Might sometimes strike a moderately subtle viewer
91 As a predatory web.
92 Skin-head architecture
93 Spawned by the dream of Autopia,
94 Edges in on no-man's land,
95 Like short-life gravestones.

96 From time to time,
97 On the outskirts of cities,
98 Wreckers' yards erect massive mausoleums of mouldering cars,

99 No longer worth requisitioning,
100 Picked fairly clean of their
inhabitants,
101 Like Parsee Towers of Silence.

102 OIL.

103 From the Sanskrit root *-il*, light,
illumination,
104 And *petr*, Peter, the rock.
105 Thus, petrol is – remarkably – light
from the rock.
106 Oil,
107 Which, if the Chinese geomantics
are right,
108 And this earth is a living organism
109 (And the atmosphere is obviously
its own breath),
110 Could be its digestive juices,
111 Its cerebro-spinal fluid –
112 Or even its bile –
113 And it may one day over-react
114 To being caricatured as a handy
Molotov cocktail,
115 Needled with two million bore-holes
116 By oil spivs.
117 Oil,
118 The liquefied,
119 If not spiritualised,
120 Transmutation of extinct lives:
121 Primordial kelp, crustacea,
foraminifera,
122 Plankton, unicellular diatoms,
marine protozoa . . .
123 The haemins and lipids of
dinosaurs
124 And unknown mammals from the
Jurassic –
125 Whose first extinction was clearly
not enough
126 For this consumer version of
ancestor worship.
127 Oil,
128 A secular sacrament
129 Whose price is regarded as essential
to keep as low as possible,
130 Perhaps to divert attention from its
true value,
131 And which, if the gurus of Exxon,
Texaco, BP and the ‘Seven Sisters’
are correct
132 Is most properly exploited
133 When as many people as possible
134 Are incinerating as much of it as
they can
135 For as trivial a reason as they can
find,
136 To keep a continuous carousel of
consumer offal on the move –
137 In an alfresco gas chamber.

138 **MORE** than twice the number in
the death-camps,
139 A hundred and thirty times the kill
at Hiroshima,
140 Eight times the count in Korea,
141 Two hundred and thirty Vietnams,
142 Eight thousand five hundred
Ulsters . . .
143 The Hundred Years War in a week;
144 The Crusades in under thirty
seconds.
145 A Black Death with bubonic rats on
wheels,
146 A quarter of a million ‘auto-
fatalities’ a year –
147 The humdrum holocaust –
148 The fast-food – junk-death – road-
show.
149 Take any accident ward
150 Trying to service a few de-stocked
slices
151 From the 250,000 a year
152 Wheeled in on stiff-scoops
153 To brain and body garages
154 By whistling ambulance men.
155 Lines of metal beds on castors –
156 A medical parking lot.
157 Sinuous tangles of drip-feeds
158 Fuel those who blended too
urgently with vehicles
159 And make the room almost
indistinguishable
160 From a cross-section of an
automobile’s wiring system.
161 Multiple pethidine booster shots to
jerk them into over-drive
162 Having turned their bodies into
cribbage-boards.
163 The unreported wounded, the
unreported dying
164 Vainly trying to kick their engines
over.
165 Screams of honking agony from
rows and rows of impatient, stacks
of meat.
166 An attendant mops up blood-slick
in the corridors twenty-four hours
a day
167 Watched by its donors
168 As they try to steer their minds back
into any available space
169 Where the ‘accident’ never
happened.
170 Exile on Maim Street.
171 **IN** a riot, or a revolution,
172 It’s curious that cars –
173 Anyone’s cars –

174 Are always the first to go.
175 Traffic control is, for most people,
176 Their most intimate, and direct,
177 Experience of government –
178 As well as being one of its most
seminal justifications:
179 ‘Look, you can’t do without some
form of organisation,
180 I mean, take something basic like
roads . . .
181 You couldn’t just have everyone
driving on whichever side of the
road they pleased.
182 Things would be chaos.’
183 But a vandal,
184 If he/she ever risked losing pace
185 By politicising themselves
186 Might feel
187 That since no one voted for the
car –
188 Rubbishing them requires no
referendum . . .
189 Besides which,
190 Slashing their tyres,
191 Pouring sugar into the tank,
192 Shoving potatoes up the exhaust –
193 So the wiring implodes and blows
off the manifold –
194 Sloshing brake-fluid onto the body-
work,
195 Topping up the oil with valve-
grinding paste,
196 Placing upturned plaster-nails
under stationary vehicles,
197 Turning cars over like wood-lice,
198 So that the petrol spills out onto the
road,
199 And they can be fired . . .
200 Might keep a few hunks of human
flesh
201 Throbbing with life for a little
longer
202 Rome went mad with lead
pollution.
203 It was Vandals who straightened
their pipes
204 But of course,
205 If you’re conceived in a car as many
are.
206 If you first fucked in a car as many
have.
207 If you go to work in a car,
208 And if you derive most of your
pleasure, food and sustenance via
cars,
209 You’re going to defend them to the
death.

