

**AUTOPHOBIA: LOVE AND HATE IN THE AUTOMOTIVE AGE**

By Brian Ladd

University of Chicago Press, £15.50

**CARS**

By Stephen Bayley

Conran Octopus, £75

Review by James Woudhuysen

## CARS

FREEDOM  
STYLE  
SEX  
POWER  
MOTION  
COLOUR  
EVERYTHING

STEPHEN BAYLEY

In October 2008 Ferrari announced a collaboration with Microsoft. It would use Microsoft's High Performance Computing (HPC) software, a variant of Windows, to simulate wind resistance, as well as the flow of gases inside engines. HPC used to be employed to analyse astronomical data, or problems of defence. Now, representing one of the most powerful forms of IT, it has come to the beleaguered automotive sector, improving the time to market, and allowing real-time information to be gathered from vehicles on the road.

The two books reviewed here are worlds removed from engineering, and just as far removed from the automotive industry crisis in Detroit. In both cases a few more examples of the statistics quoted – about speeds, deaths on the roads, and prices –

would add vividness (the fact that Bayley opens by eschewing such details in favour of a study of the Car as Art doesn't take away from my point).

Ladd's *Autophobia* looks at the irascible opponents of the car over the ages. It's a social history of attitudes, whereas Bayley's work is a cultural history of design and designers. While Ladd has some useful, if grainy, photographs and some tremendous pre-war cartoons, *Cars* justifies its cover price with sensuous black-and-white photographs of Bayley's favourite motors, most of them taken by Tif Hunter.

In terms of erudition, Ladd has the edge. It's Ladd who gets General Motors president Charles Wilson right. In 1953 at a hearing to confirm that he would be Eisenhower's defense secretary, Wilson was asked whether there might be conflicts of interest ahead. He replied: 'I cannot conceive of one, because for years I thought what was good for our country was good for General Motors and vice versa. The difference does not exist'. Ladd points out that Wilson's words were, after that, 'consistently misremembered'. Bayley does that, saying that 'a US Secretary of Defense once said what was good for General Motors was good for America'.

I don't mind. I don't mind even that the subtitle to Bayley's introduction, in an attempt to establish a scholarly tone, quotes Karl Marx as writing, in 1848, 'nature builds no machines'. In fact, a moment's care would have been enough to find that Marx wrote this in his 1858 *Grundrisse*, during his somewhat less philosophical, and more mature period. Yet what Marx actually wrote and implied is in fact a bigger eulogy to cars

and car design than Bayley's truncation: 'Nature builds no machines, no locomotives, railways, electric telegraphs, self-acting mules etc. These are products of human industry; natural material transformed into organs of the human will over nature, or of human participation in nature. They are organs of the human brain, created by the human hand; the power of knowledge, objectified.'

Too right, especially about cars. Bayley's book is for car enthusiasts, and he is especially enthusiastic about his old idol, GM's Harley Earl, as well as about Flaminio Bertoni at Citroën (the Traction Avant, the 2CV, and the DS), and about Pininfarina. He's

**BAYLEY'S CARS JUSTIFIES ITS COVER PRICE WITH SENSUOUS PHOTOGRAPHS, BUT IN TERMS OF ERUDITION, LADD HAS THE EDGE**

good, too, about Earl's use of women designers – one had binoculars and a camera fitted to a padded compartment in her Buick. Bayley also successfully shows the links between Bertoni, an Italian sculptor and painter, and the surrealists of his day.

Ladd tries to be even-handed about the car's critics and its advocates, although his educated prejudices tend to make him favour critics. For him, improvements in vehicle and road design have made the road 'more forbidding than ever for those who venture on to it without a steel cocoon'. Nevertheless, Ladd scores a hit against today's Green car-sharers, revealing that it was Stalin's successor, Nikita



Khrushchev who first proposed the idea in a speech in 1960 (it was not well received).

Both books are the product of prodigious research, and deserve congratulations for that reason. Both, however, are too fond of the glib aside. We learn from Ladd that the post-war car 'was bound to be a target of critics troubled by the libido and aggression so openly on display'. While Bayley talks of 'the laws' of planned obsolescence. Despite his familiarity with Vance Packard's 1960's book, *The Waste Makers*, which pioneered the term, these are simply assumed.

The car, and in particular the motorisation of China and India, will be a central backdrop to the December 2009 Copenhagen negotiations on climate change. In their usual superficial style, Greens think they have made a discovery in reading the car as about male sexuality, and though they share that dubious proposition, these books at least reveal its lengthy history. For that, and for many other merits, they are recommended.