THE LONE DRIVER

AN ELECTRONIC THROB comes across the screen. Through a blue-black, haze-shrouded city night wanders the solitary figure of a young blond man. He is handsome in a blank way, expressionless, almost robotic. The city is deserted.

In this science-fictional future, the man has left behind the present, society, the clutter of other people. Is he liberated? Troubled? The electronic pulse continues. Vapors hover in the street, catching the light. The man stalks through evacuated streets, seeking a sign of life. Suddenly he spins around, as if startled by a sound. Overhead looms a billboard depicting—what posthistoric icon of the age? The new Dodge. The sight fills him with awe.

The car slides off the billboard and out into the world. It has a life of its own—indeed, more life than his own. It pursues him, calls him, teases him; the car is the active agent. The two of them are alone in this vacated kingdom; he might be the last man in the world.

Now he turns and goes after the Dodge, which gives him the slip. He follows it down a narrow street, but it's gone. And then, with the abruptness of a jump cut, he finds himself in the driver's seat. His blankness fades; it is a satisfied go-getter who now turns to us and grins. Instantly, dystopia segues into utopia. Accepting the challenge of hypernew technology, the driver has earned his place in the proverbial new fast lane. The car then accelerates at *Star Wars*-like warp velocity and takes off into ethereal hyperspace. DODGE, says the closing logo, AN AMERICAN REVOLUTION.

BY TODD GITLIN

This commercial ran on the networks through 1984 and 1985, an unusually long time in the high-turnover world of the TV spot. Stylistically, it was not one of a kind. Ford, Chrysler, General Motors, Toyota, and Renault—to name only the major players—thumped out similar revved-up, high-tech, staccato barrages of images with a whoosh of crisp editing, as if the commercials themselves were being driven at four-on-the-floor, zero-to-sixty acceleration.

Typically, there are thirty or more splices, thirty or more distinct images, in a single thirty-second spot, succeeding each other like fragments glimpsed from an urban freeway, or indeed like shreds of programs that spin past today's television viewers as they "zap" across the spectrum of channels with the help of remote-control devices. The music was electronically synthesized, pulsating, thumping, thrusting. The cars swooped along diagonal lines in severely foreshortened per-
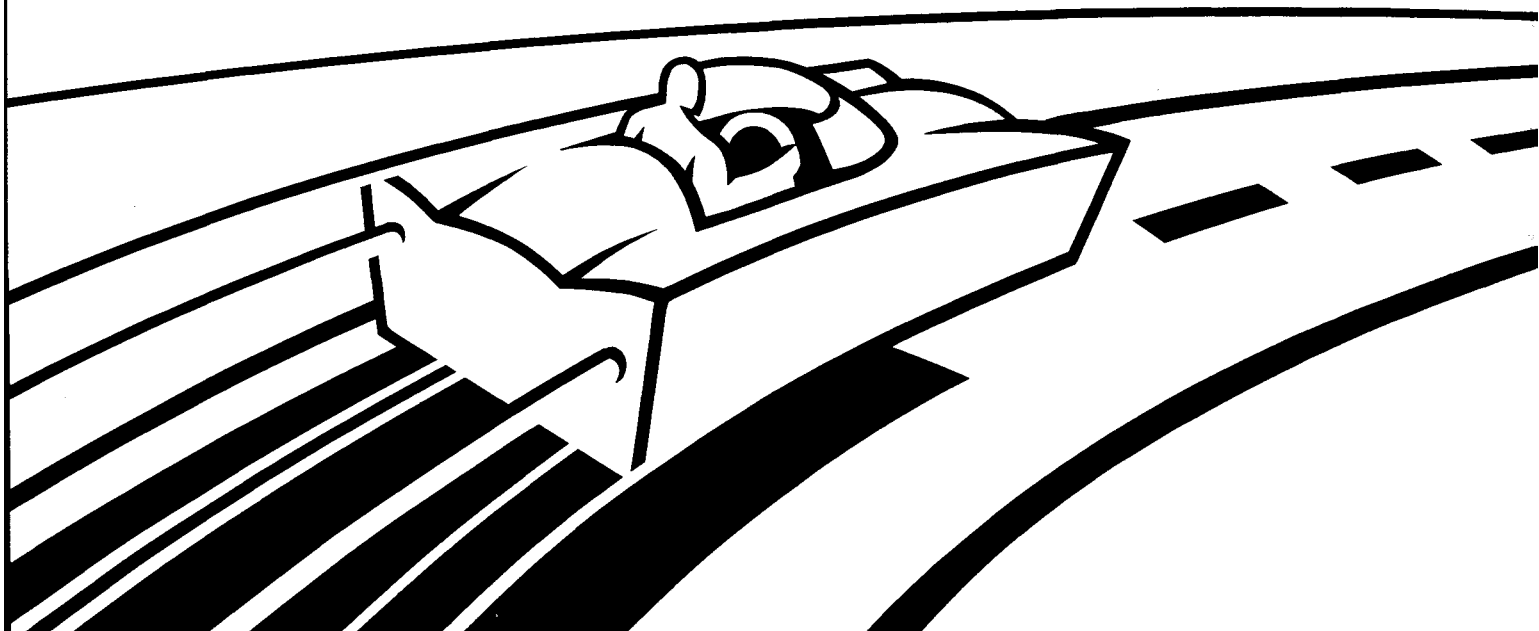
RIDES AGAIN

spectives. Glinting like gun barrels, they looked unapologetically metallic; sporting their high-gloss reflective paints, they unabashedly resembled surfaces as much as the rich tones of a generation ago simulated depths.

The car that was the point of the whole exercise wasn't slipping reassuringly out of the old-fashioned suburban driveway, or decorously proving its compatibility with a European chateau; rather, it was eerily dislocated, brashly declaring its otherness. It might be found swooping through unpopulated nature, showing its stuff, for example, on a snaky mountain road or through the Arctic tundra. In special cases, it traveled in packs over the desert: MERCEDES-BENZ WIDENS THE GAP.

In one of the few variations featuring a woman, the car glided up a building wall—transformed for the occasion into a mountain—to summon her from her closed-in apartment. Other cars succeeded in escaping the gravitational pull of earthly nature altogether and soared into the ultimate postnature: space. Thus, for example, THE '86 TOYOTAS ARE BLASTING OFF, rocketing into the starry heavens.

Such cars were at home anywhere.

MARK FISHER

Whether found in the mountains, in deserts, or on the beach, in space, in the future, or in combinations thereof, the supercar slid free of a car's normal settings. There was no traffic, no rush hour, no parking crunch. Wherever this car went was the fast lane, the driver unaccompanied, sleek, young, white, and usually male.

Computer-generated graphics and the electronic synthesizer make possible some of the commercials' state-of-the-art moves; indeed, a thick web of implicit cross-references binds together the computer testing of cars, the computers in the cars, and computer graphics, as if to say that the dazzling displays in the commercials rub off on the excellence of the cars.

But the potentials of new technology don't by themselves dictate the uses to which they are put. Copywriters write storyboards, directors direct, and company executives approve the results to a particular end: aligning their product with a going ideological trend. In the process of selling their product, they crystallize a pattern out of a soup of popular moods and predispositions.

The commercial image of the car cannot be understood, therefore, as simply an automatic reflex of the state of the technical art, or as an idiosyncratic sales stratagem. It is the end product of a complex set of marketing decisions and therefore, in part, a useful searchlight into larger patterns of meaning.

The way cars are presented is an amalgam of the way advertising agencies and their clients think, the way they think we think, and the way they want us to think about what a car is. The image of the car soaks up certain ideals in circulation at the moment, and squeezes a version of them back at us. It offers the incarnation of a popular ideal—or, rather, of the ideas of that ideal held by the marketers.

Thus, a commercial is, among other things, a tiny utopia. It conveys what we are supposed to think is the magic of things—things which, if we buy them, will work miraculous transformations in our lives: telephones that wire us into community, eyeliners that make us alluring, beer that consolidates our desire to be sociable, even American. The commercial hopes to piggyback the product's image onto the image of this transformation, and to leave a trace of the two yoked together within those folds of memory where it may eventually trigger a purchase.

Our high-tech car ad of the mid-1980s reveals something about the new-style man who has been pronounced fit to drive into the future. This fantastical paragon is a pilot who soars through things untouched and unimpeded. Not for him the viscosity of everyday life. He is man on the move, man ready to go anywhere, man whose mobility is literal as well as lateral, carrying him forward, onward, or upward, off the road, if need be, but always advancing.

The ideal man of the commercials embodies, in short, the master fantasy of the Reagan era: the fantasy of thrusting, self-sufficient man, cutting loose, free of gravity, free of attachments. Here is the contemporary reworking of one of the oldest American archetypes—the hunter, the trapper, the frontiersman *redux*, that mythic solitary reincarnated in the Nineteenth Century as the cowboy who gallops across the wide-open spaces, fused with his horse, responsible to no one and nothing but virtue, to save the day for weaker and more domestic folk.

Today's Lone Driver is a substantially updated figure, however: He looks out for *Numero Uno* and doesn't care who knows it; yet the frontier is closed, his range is bounded, and he inhabits a transformed world of large corporations. Commercial culture now helps him imagine a freedom he has forfeited in fact. What we are seeing on the small screen is the corporate employee trying to insinuate himself into the role of the official culture hero of the Reagan period—the entrepreneur, that Promethean embodiment of progress who answers the call of the market and creates something from nothing, enriching himself to everyone's good and at no one's expense.

The entrepreneur is, of course, more honored in Washington rhetoric than in real life. National economic policy rewards cozy deal-makers more than risk-takers. Today's young, upwardly mobile aspirants are being trained not to take risks but to minimize them; they go to school to become not entrepreneurs but managers and professionals whose career paths will be sheltered from both risk and failure in quite firmly established enterprises.

The high-tech image of the streamlined car finesses the discrepancy: It embodies the actual training our business and academic institutions are set up to reward, as well as the actual life of the professional-managerial class. Those who start as distracted robots can get promoted to the status of free men. Those whose identities are elusive can rise to power on the strength of their blank adaptability. Supermanager and his racketball partner, Superpro, step into nearby vehicles to emerge as streamlined go-getters.

Driving is the perfect representation for their way of life. Always on the go, they owe no loyalty to merely local, even terrestrial, connections. Cosmopolitans by upbringing and training, they uproot with relative ease when the company or the career track relocates them. Their ambitions are as unbounded, indeed celestial, as they are abstract; the earth and its well-trafficked roads are too mundane to hold them. At the wheel, on the road, they are wild and safe, free and contained all at once—this is the ideal bargain for which managers and top professionals strive, or settle.

The car itself is intrinsically a symbol for the simultaneous pleasures of freedom and containment. Today's commercials reproduce the world view of a manager who fancies himself, however inaccurately, in the driver's seat, mastering all the onrushing force technology can provide. This sort of image helps reconcile the manager to his actual dependency on the big institutions and the real movers and shakers.

Implicitly, then, one appeal of the new-style car commercial may be this: During the day, manage your way through the organization; occupy your niche; compete for status and power; take care of business. Feel lucky to have the chance. In return, you have the opportunity to test yourself and, if that is not enough, you will be rewarded with the wherewithal to break free—after hours, on weekends. Sit still and the Force will come to you, all turboed and ultradriven; then, in imagination, at least, you can cut loose—even peel off the road altogether and take off into another dimension, into a dream of unbridled freedom.

Our car commercial manages to reconcile the ideological uplift of the Reagan years with its more downbeat realities. Indeed, the tag AN AMERICAN REVOLUTION may remind us—may even be meant to remind us—of the Chrysler Corporation's Federally subsidized rags-back-to-riches story. Chrysler's tale, as retold in mythic proportions by Lee Iacocca and assimilated to the romance of his own career, thus becomes a double story of modern bootstrap success—a "revolution" for independence against monarchs (Iacocca versus Henry Ford, Chrysler versus the Japanese) rather than a tale of Government bailout.

So another appeal of the commercial is: Buy the car and you can have a piece of the comeback action; the purchase of the car is an emblem of promotion. The commercial is of a piece with the 2.5 million copies of *Iacocca* in print, with the book's astonishing full-year-plus at or near the top of *The New York Times*'s nonfiction bestseller list.

The successful executive has become a culture hero of such proportions that he even stars in a commercial which stands as a sort of footnote to the type we have been discussing. Ingenious copywriters have discovered how to frame that most collectivized form of transport, the commercial airliner, as a carrier for the contemporary range rider—in particular, for the business traveler who accounts for the bulk of air travel.

The corporate savior as folk hero—this man is so imposing, we're meant to think, it's as if he'll have the whole plane to him-

Looking Through the Screen

Entertainer, painkiller, vast waste-land, companion to the lonely, white noise, thief of time. . . . What is this thing, this network of social relations, called television?

The word, at roots, refers to seeing far. It does happen, at times, that television allows us to see far, bringing images of the unknown into the household, jarring our settled worlds, lifting curtains, letting fresh truths into otherwise closed rooms. Teenagers in the hinterlands discover rock-'n'-roll dancing on *American Bandstand*; black Americans unearth their *Roots*; West Germans confront at least a soap-opera version of the *Holocaust*.

But these are singular moments. For the most part, television lets us see only close-up, shows us only what the nation already presumes, focuses on what the culture already knows—or, more precisely, enables us to gaze upon something the appointed seers think we need or want to know. Television may do private service as a time-killer or baby-sitter, but for the society as a whole it is the principal circulator of the cultural mainstream.

Two-and-a-half decades after the chairman of the Federal Communications Commission called American television a "vast wasteland," one hesitates to resurrect a metaphor that instantly—deservedly—became a cliché. But perhaps this time the cliché won't function to spare us the necessity of thought; rather, it should clarify something that has been forgotten, or repressed, as television has made more promises, become more complicated and confusing. A wasteland that grows vaster and apparently more abundant by the year remains a wasteland.

Like some primordial swamp, the image-making appliance and its attendant industries spawn new forms—cable, VCRs, big screens, stereo sound. As new channels and new gadgets spin variations on old themes, the newspapers and trade journals fill with booster talk about "revolutions." But even as television becomes television-plus, it remains the national dream factory, bulletin board, fun-house mirror for distorted images of our national desires and fears—and yet none of the metaphors seems quite right, because finally television is not quite anything else. It is just television.

And therefore television bears special watching. It needs criticism and understanding which cut beneath annoyance or apologia. To be seen properly, it has to be seen as the place where force-fields intersect: economic imperatives, cultural traditions, political impositions. For television is not an apparatus invading us from without; its very technology, like other technologies, merges from a matrix of commercial interests, within a culture of privatized individuals.

Alexis de Tocqueville, that most observant Frenchman, would have found television familiar in many ways: American culture, he observed in the 1830s, already was given to comfortable, sensational, mass-produced amusements, "vehement and bold," "untutored and rude," aiming "to stir the passions more than to charm the taste." Television's spectacles have roots in centuries-old myths, just as they recycle and transform them. Television is a screen on which the absurdities and abominations of our politics and morals are displayed in living color.

Most people who watch television are amateur television
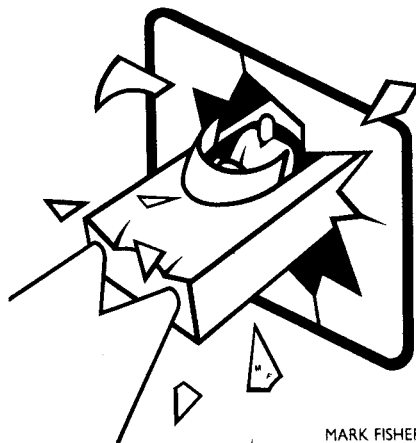
MARK FISHER

critics, but few devote much energy to thinking their way into and through the wasteland. To do so is supposed to be the business of scholars. And, indeed, scholars and critics have been inspecting the electronic media for half a century now. The scholarly literature on the mass media in America began in the 1930s by analyzing the content of radio programs, counting words and themes, aiming to flush out hidden messages, subtexts, and mythic meanings in a presumably scientific fashion. The premise, at first, was that the media operated "hypodermically," injecting propaganda into the unsuspecting social bloodstream.

But from the viewpoint of post-World War II social science, such suspicions amounted to primitive paranoia. Sociologists of the 1940s and 1950s, more impressed with the bloodstream's powers of resistance, began to stress the ways in which readers, listeners, and viewers play an active part in deflecting or distorting messages from the press, radio, and later television, in effect "rewriting" the "texts" passed down to them. Overcorrecting a hitherto oversimple thesis, these analysts ended up underplaying the unifying styles and ideological homogeneities of the contemporary media—the ways in which they have agreed, for instance, on the pieties of the consumer society and the good/bad polarities of the Cold War.

Each approach has its virtues. Yet neither has paid much attention to the stultifying *forms* of popular culture, to the ways in which mass-circulation styles train their audiences to see accordingly and discourage practitioners from making unconventional statements.

Moreover, neither has subjected the institutions of mass culture—the networks, studios, news rooms, board rooms, advertising agencies—to enough critical scrutiny. Television may fall into traditions and accumulate markets, but neither traditions nor markets automatically crank out the shows; institutions do that.

There have been other approaches to slippery television, too. Some scholars, bothered by the refusal of English departments to take television seriously, have tried to equip television with genre pedigrees. Pressed too far, this impulse slips into pure apologia, as if once a program is located within a tradition, it is automatically sanctified and even seen as the repository of "emancipatory" yearnings.

Against the belief that anything people watch is thereby in the public good—a belief these seekers after easy emancipation share with Ronald Reagan's FCC chairman—there are censorship campaigns: against television treatment of sex (usually from the Right) and violence (usually from the Left); both varieties of tunnel vision miss the way television reproduces larger ideologies, registers grander fantasies.

Meanwhile, the ever-lengthening miles of everyday television criticism—this show is bad, that one better—do not begin to address the relentless quality of television's presence in the nation's living rooms, or the ways in which it embodies the stratagems of broadcasting's proprietors. As long as television is among us, let us at least scrutinize it for what it reveals about our whole society, about the institutions where power is lodged, about the nature of life—including television-watching—in the late Twentieth Century.

—T.G.

self. The airline commercial has come a long way from the time when all it could sell were the few inches' length of the stewardesses' skirts or the many inches' distance between rows of seats. The CEO's maneuvers are so masterful, his self-assurance so sublime, that his transportation must be supreme to suit. The free-striding hero transfers his imprimatur to—what other airline?—*American.* Today, says the airline, every seat is potentially the driver's.

And yet there is pathos on top of irony in all these commercials' implicit claims that the Real Man gets to be Real only when he slides into the right driver's seat. For as Dodge's deserted city inadvertently (or brilliantly?) suggests, the car's pilot is all but helpless before his equipment. The blank expression he has displayed up to this point could be read as self-protective response to the anguish of his uprooted-ness. He manages a grin only at the moment when he finds himself—through no apparent action of his own—behind the wheel.

Once again, the promise of freedom conceals the fact of dependency. The point was even plainer in a slogan of a few years earlier: FORD PUTS YOU IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT. The dream of soaring to consumer heaven presupposes a too, too solid earth.

If television is going to give America's central tension its due, it needs the relative amplitude of the episode series. The car commercials match certain moods present in prime-time mayhem. Here the Lone Driver and the national ensemble can be blended into the elite team. The Lone Driver finds congenial company, breaks through the crust of claustrophobic society, and roars into overdrive action.

Obligatory car chases have a special look on *Miami Vice,* one of the most popular prime-time shoot-'em-ups of recent years; the low-slung camera multiplies the sense of vertigo and transcendence—again, the car-commercial look—as pursuer and pursued slide their way scenically through the city.

The rat-a-tat pacing, as in MTV and the pulsating car commercials, draws attention away from the narrative, such as it is, diverting it to the "look," which slides by as if on the other side of a tour-bus picture window. Place is backdrop for free-hanging sound and velocity, as in the high-tech car commercials.

In *Vice*'s Miami, the players are regularly composed into fashion tableaux, sequences of disconnected stills, as in the music videos which inspired the series, but in *Vice* more artfully arranged—strictly for their pastel colors, the spaces between them, the way they stand framed in an alleyway or deployed against a wall.

The hard-edged look echoes the fashion-magazine layouts which preceded both MTV and the pulsating car commercial,

all meant to "break through the clutter," as the advertisers say—the clutter being the profusion of images themselves, of billboards, commercials, and television shows, the unending cornucopia spilling its promises upon the national attention, the noise finally drowning out each of its poor components. *Vice*'s environments of artifice are intended to arrest the attention; self-consciousness is precisely the point.

The environment sings the songs and virtually speaks the lines. The songs themselves are thick with portent, suffusing the action with a blanket of import draped over the thin characterizations and holes in the plot. Like good fashion models, indeed like the high-tech cars in the commercials, Detectives Crockett and Tubbs seem to embody their surroundings; vacuous themselves, like manikins, they "wear" the show's self-consciously created look and sound. Color-coded like the walls, they exist for the sake of spatial arrangement. Artfully placed in a long shot on the beach, they are the crosshatch where sound waves meet.

Miami Vice and the high-tech car commercials share yet another feature to be found high and low throughout contemporary culture: their studied blankness of expression. Crockett, Tubbs, & Co. often stare past each other. Their bodies form part of an arrangement, like models and Japanese flowers. They don't have much to say to each other. They go for long periods without speaking; they play on muted strings.

Their boss, Lieutenant Castillo, in one way surpasses them, displaying a constant effort to clamp a mask over suppressed grief and rage as he passes down the higher-ups' stupid commands. He lugs private sorrow like a great dog behind him. Growling his few words with supreme reluctance, he also expresses his disdain for the alternatively wimpy, whimsical, and unfathomable law-enforcement bureaucracy by straining to discipline his facial muscles.

At least Castillo has a seething character to suppress. By contrast, Crockett and Tubbs seem devoid of biography; they are blank from the outset. For all three, though, feeling is revealed to be difficult and dangerous—as Crockett discovers when he lets himself fall for the *femme fatale*; one way or another, she is setting him up for the bad guy.

The safe thing is to stay cool, hang loose, be a pro, wear mirror shades, keep to the surfaces; surrender to the surroundings, indeed *become* them, as the Lone Driver becomes his car and its synthesized music. Given *Vice*'s portentous pulsations, in fact, private feeling is dwarfed and superfluous.

Blank expression and flat appearance come together in a common chord which resounds through contemporary culture like a great dead sound. Everything that exists meets the eye, and the trained eye—the voyeur's eye—refuses to blink.

But despite the I've-seen-it-all posture of Crockett, Tubbs, and the Lone Driver, there remains an enormous innocence in the all-American idea of the loner, the man with no name, the hard-bitten conqueror of feelings whose hard-won prowess costs him nothing. The idea of self-sufficiency as such carries a certain nobility. The sovereign I who stalks through the transcendental verse of Walt Whitman and the essays of Henry David Thoreau does not think he has the right to go anywhere and tell anyone where to get off; even the hard-boiled I of Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe or Ross Macdonald's Lew Archer honors the depth and power of social decencies and binding commitments. But the surfer of surfaces is a committed innocent, and his innocence makes him dangerous.

To insist on the obvious, Americans are not loners. We traffic with a world society that is more than an empty place into which we plunge, American Express cards in hand. The Pilgrims who came to these shores came to an inhabited land, not the vacant wilderness they had imagined. The "shining city upon a hill" of which John Winthrop wrote exists only in commerce with other cities upon other hills—not all of them shining, but all of them utterly real. The fantasy of innocent power contributed to the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese as well as 57,000 Americans in Vietnam—all mutely bearing witness to the impossibility of innocence and the intractable weight of the real world.

Yet the fantasy retains its extraordinary force. Consider how we witness the fantasy of ultimate, self-sufficient innocence in Ronald Reagan's "dream" of a Star Wars shield which presumably guarantees national security—although the same people who today call Star Wars "the only thing that offers any real hope to the world" have been telling us for forty years that nuclear deterrence was, itself, that hope.

Indeed, the little thirty-second utopia with which we began carries the same wishful premise as Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative: Whatever technology has rendered problematic (including human life itself), technology can save. If the city has become poisonous because of cars, get a car to escape it. If nuclear weapons threaten the prospects of life on earth, instead of rethinking the international system and the politics which has normalized the threat of Armageddon, spend hundreds of billions of dollars on dubious protection—making the world safe, in a sense, for nuclear bombs.

Like rocketing cars and sleek cops, Star Wars represents the triumph of absolute, abstract wishfulness. The fantasy of the technological fix, of unbridled power wrapped in a revamped innocence, represents a nation's lingering childhood. There must be a sliver of the child's mind which knows that childhood has to end. ∎