TEORIE VĚDY
/ THEORY OF SCIENCE

THREE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONS
OF HISTORIC MOBILITY

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Abstract

The paper argues that serious museal restoration and exhibition of technological objects is competing with private collecting and company museums which have better access to funding. The social construction of artefacts as historic sources and as historic communication media is not exclusive and is seriously challenged by other public approaches to the history of technology.

Keywords: *technology museum; historic objects; social construction of technology; mobility cultures; industrial culture*

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There is no such object as a "classic vehicle", a "historic car" or an "old-timer" in itself. It is defined by many inclusions and limitations, certainly not only by age. To bestow a vehicle the dignifying label "historic" depends on many assumptions. And it is a process done in specific contexts. What is considered a "wreck", an "original", a "reproduction" or a "good restoration", depends on the purpose, on the occasion, on the place displayed, to name just a few. And all of this defined by the user or, more specifically, on relevant user groups. In short, historic or classic vehicles are "social constructions" in the sense of the SCOT approach [Bijker 1990].

In my paper I will attempt to look into these. I will try to assess how these three social constructions influence or determine the handling of and dealing with the actual artefacts, and I will ask how all this influences the work of museum curators. I have selected historic vehicles not just because it is my special field of interest, but because artefacts of past mobility cultures are more than other technical or industrial artefacts in the public focus, and they are more than others the centre of emotions and affections of a broader public. Objects of mobility cultures have a special cultural power which many other technical artefacts lack.

I argue that there are mainly three social constructions what a historic vehicle actually is, what its desired features are, and what is to be done with it. This involves decisions of selection, restoration and presentation. These three forms of usage are:

1. mobility objects in collections and presentations of historic museums, owned mainly by public bodies / authorities, and cared for by public curators;

2. mobility objects in collections and presentations of company museums or company affiliated museums, owned by them, and exhibited by persons connected in any way with the company;

3. mobility objects collected, used, cared for and owned by private persons.

All three groups claim, of course, interest in historic mobility, but in general this interest can be split up into different spheres. Historic vehicles can be

1. historic sources as well as tools for exhibitions for museum based history of technology
2. tools for brand identity of companies and thus, in the end, for selling cars
3. means of private display and thus of social distinction for private collectors

The three uses employ historic vehicles as objects of professional, ie curatorial, interest; as tools of corporate identity and marketing; and as objects of affection, curiosity, social display and much more. I argue that these fields form "relevant user groups" in the sense of SCOT.

Certainly the largest group are private users [Brandl 1999]. There is a world-wide (and growing) "scene" of collectors, circles and clubs, organized rallyes and drives, restoration firms, a host of publications ranging from specialized home-made circulations to glossy collectors magazines, and much more. For these individuals, historic cars which are used in everyday contexts have several values, for instance they can become a materialized opposition against certain features of modern cars and a reaction against unwelcome demands of mass traffic. By using an older car (and demonstrating doing so) a re-living of better days of car culture seems possible. In this artefact a harking back to a less regulated, less boring, less crowded road mobility is condensed. But at the same time a strong social statement is made. Using a classic vehicle is using and handling of a plaintively more dignified and object with more character than any modern car could have – even if an expensive luxury make [Möser 1991].

The social capital potential of classic cars is considerable, and even more so when the users become a part of the network of car clubs, meetings, rallies and social functions closely linked with their use. This is forming not only a relevant user group, but creates highly stratified social networks and webs of distinction.

Another "relevant user group" are company museums or those close to companies or those supported by them by different means. Here historic vehicles have yet another social construction. Cars in general do transcend a claimed "primary function" of utility transport by different cultural strategies [Möser 2005]. Historic vehicles have a still more reduced primary function. Their evident secondary functions are attractive not only for users, i.e. "bottom up", but also "top down", for car manufacturers, by serving as means of company identity. Thus they are tools for giving dignity by history to car companies. They help to construct the cultural aura and aesthetic corona which are essential and ever more important elements of modern car culture and car marketing. Therefore they are auxiliary but nonetheless relevant instruments for selling products by culture. By this they fit into the aesthetic and cultural construction of cars which is the main feature of car marketing by culture today.

The appeal of historic vehicles for private owners – which constitutes and leads their interest and their curiosity when visiting museums, too – is manifold: There is the passion of collecting; the joy of owning old vehicles, and of displaying vehicles publicly, and to establish a personal relationship [Blom 2004]. This is in sharp contrast to the attitude of curators of historic museums which are generally professional historians [Cutcliffe, Lubar]. They are expected of dispassionate dealing with public property and to regard them as historic sources, and they are supposed to use them as teaching tools and for the purpose to "communicate via objects" when displaying them in their exhibitions. Any personal attraction which may by felt by curators would be regarded as obscene by professional co-historians.

Similarities and differences

But I am aware that in reality these distinctions are much more blurred. Apart from the fact that attraction to their objects certainly is an issue for curators, too, there are several points. *Firstly*: Since the institution "museum" and the accompanying term are not protected by law, "museum" can include different things. Mainly, there are mobility objects in 'serious' museums which perceive themselves as social "remembrance machines" [Pircher 1990], and those in private collections used by enthusiastic amateurs, and those in company museums [Fitzgerald 1996]. The latter two quantitatively clearly dominate quantitatively the musealization of historic mobility. For non-expert visitors it is not clear at all which museum approach they are savouring after having paid their entrance fee.

Then, *secondly*, there are contacts and interferences between the three social constructions of classic vehicles. For instance, historic or company museums get vehicles on loan from private owners, or cars owned by companies are loaned to public museums. Further, vehicles with good original substance can be taken out of a museum collection, handed over to individuals and "restored" by them.

The picture is still more muddled, *thirdly*, since public historic museums often do not adhere strictly to the clear ethics respecting artefacts as sources. The dealing with mobility objects in 'serious' museums (as opposed to private collections by enthusiastic amateurs and as well as of company museums) presents no clear-cut picture.

Further, all three user groups establish limits of interest. By this I refer to concepts which artefacts are deemed of worth to include into their collection, thus expanding or limiting the "historicity" or "classicity" of vehicles and their dignity or worth. Some professional curators tend to exclude groups of artefacts as too young or too technologically progressed. They may doubt that there is "classic" GRP dinghy worth to be collected.

But in general historians do not put strict limits. Their selection criteria generally aim at significance, as opposed to "beauty" or "rareness".

For historians there are (or should be) no banal objects – to paraphrase Siegfried Giedeons famous verdict [Giedion 1982: 31] – but for private or company collectors there often are. In some cases private collectors exclude rigidly vehicles they regard as boring or not rare enough, or too young. For instance, for a historian of mobility the Renault 16 of 1967 should be most significant, introducing the concept of a 5-door hatchback with flexible interior into the conceptual design mainstream. But apart from specialists private collectors are reluctant to bestow their affection to this type or to similar apparently staid "middle of the road" vehicles. Those responsible for company museums are apt to exclude or devalue vehicles which do not fit into the image the brand tries to project, or which may hint at earlier company operations which are to be played down – for instance those artefacts connected with unpleasant involvements into war.

On a higher level of abstraction, there are still common features of historic vehicles in all three social constructions: These artefacts become social tools. They become vehicles in a metaphoric sense, transporting meanings which are transcending their "objectness". They can be manifestations for social and economic history, for company traditions and values, for personality enhancement or aesthetic attraction, for improving social standing. Thus in all three social constructions they are situated in a complex web of meanings and symbolic projections. Historic vehicles are encoded in very different ways and contexts, and different auras are attributed to them. This makes it sometimes difficult to distinguish – and obviously there is no clear-cut single significance. Of course, this holds true for many artefacts of the past which are part of everyday life. The "social life of things" [Appadurai 1986: 3–63] of the past in today's usage and user contexts always has different and overlapping levels of social signals. To deal with the main differences, I would like to look into two

main fields, the different approaches towards restoration within the three social constructions, and the structure and function of mobility artefacts

Approaches towards restoration

Back to private classics: To achieve the social function of car-related distinction, they have to conform to certain criteria. For instance, they must not show "shabbiness". They have to be more or less corrosion free and 'groomed' in order to conform to norms of presentability similar to more modern vehicles, adding maybe a touch of historic luxury not achievable in modern cars.

Moreover, they have to be as trouble-free as possible. Many owners of classic vehicles expect a similar level of reliability, comfort and ease of usage. Many modifications are motivated by the attempt to assimilate historic vehicles to everyday driving without overtly sacrificing the aura of history which provides the coveted added distinction qualities. What owners strive at is on one hand a participation at the inherent dignity of history, and on the other hand the retaining of straightforward practical usage. All this points to the need of heavy rebuilding. There seems to be no reconciliation without sacrifice.

Obviously, to fulfil the task of reliable usability, privately owned as well as company owned vehicles have to conform to what is termed "restauration standards", meaning that they do not show undignified signs of their age, and that their technological features are as faultless as possible. Obvious mechanical troubles are dangerous for the reputation of the makers and thus counterproductive for their function as tools for corporate identity. Therefore, they have to look and to perform 'as new'. Both user groups, private and company owners, thus share a common restoration goal: as far as possible sleekness, smooth aesthetics without technical bother. To achieve this, private persons and company museums allow themselves a host of technical operations to the vehicles they own.

Historic museums would not subscribe to many of these aims and operations. From the 1980s, a set of accepted practices of dealing with technological artefacts has been formulated by museum conservators. This "Restaurierungsethik" (ethics of restoration) evokes and adapts principles of restoration in general which have evolved for historic artefacts and works of art, transferring them to technological and industrial objects. This ethics aims at preserving original substance, traces of manufacture and use. It includes reversibility of measures, documentation, making explicit any changes. Thus, "industrial cultural artefacts" ("industrielles Kulturgut") joins a pre-established code of practice. There have been attempts to specify practices for specific mobility objects, for instance the Barcelona charter for watercraft. In general, museum based historians of technology reason that there would be no principal ethic difference of handling a renaissance painting and a 1920s motorcycle.

On the other hand, "originality" is an issue in the popular, non-historic classic vehicle culture, too. But mostly it is not the above code of practice which is referred to, but a wider one. This allows, for instance, the usage of material which closely resembles original material – seat fabrics have to have the correct texture and patterning. By striving for "originality" often an activity is aimed at which tries to achieve a close resemblance to an earlier situation [Broelmann 1999: 35–42]. This sanctions practices which amount to reproduction. Thus, for instance, the colour of a metal coating has to be as close as possible to a – mostly quite fictious- "factory new" state. But the actual coating itself is, of course, a "renewal" – a historic fake, a museum curator would say. But this derising description is not shared widely.

An aside: Of course, a car restored recently according to those popular criteria, having been reconstructed / rebuilt to a "better than new" state, is a source for historians as well – but a source for quite other things than for historic car culture. It can be significant for aspects of the significance of "oldtimers" in the present social makeup, for the participation of social

groups of users at the dignity of historic artefacts, and for a new way of acquiring distinction within a highly stratified and extraordinarily differentiated car culture where these vehicles can become part of the quite elaborate matrix of social "fine distinction" by cars which I have mentioned. Seen in this perspective, modifications and "improper" restorations eschewed by historians become quite significant – but for today's care culture.

After the pattern of the three social constructions of historic car became established, and after old cars were collected by social history museums, some museum curators felt the need to state their unique point. To establish a differing position somewhat provocatively, the museum specific means (or medium) would have to be employed. There is an interesting case: The Mannheim museum staged an exhibition called "Restaurieren heißt nicht wieder neu machen" ("To restore does nor mean to renew") which had a certain provocative effect. The reason was that there was a car from 1927 displayed (a Mercedes 12/55) which the restorers worked on in the exhibition itself, in front of the visitors, not unlike a Gothic sculpture: repairing surface dents according to criteria of reversibility by wax technique, retouching gently, doing research on the thickness and material of coatings, assessing the properties of metal alloys. The procedures and the results after demonstrating these methods provoked heated discussions: Many visitors did not regard the results as a "proper" restoration of a historic car. These discussions soon moved to the specifics of vehicles, and why one tends to expect their restoration as something quite apart from the restoration of, say, sacral objects of pre-industrial periods.

The other side, equally provoking to "the other side", is represented by cars in a state "better than new", for instance a German luxury car from the 1920s redone with stainless steel screws, chromed radiator instead of nickel-plated, synthetic fibre interior of bold colours, and everything replaced and redone what is technical possible, preserving only a fraction of original substance. What may be regarded as a desirable quality resto-

ration among collectors, and which is probably highly regarded and applauded by spectators, is renounced by museum restorers. Their criticism includes losing any original substance, muddling original features and materiel with replaced anachronistic elements, creating an object which can be regarded as a fake in historic dressing. One has not to turn to the various Concours d'elegance of classic cars, or the thriving historic racing scene to see that there is a thoroughly different attitude towards "restoration" at work than practised in historic museums.

Structure and function of technical artefacts

It has been asked whether there is no difference between a Renaissance painting and a 1920s motorcycle. But of course there is – a painting does not move, cannot 'be run', does not 'function in a mechanical sense. Vehicles, like many other industrial objects, or even more so, are characterized by more than just structure. They perform mechanical functions. To differentiate between structure and function seems to me a crucial issue since this is at the bottom of the specifics of historic industrial artefacts.

It could easily be argued that it is rather desirable to concentrate on the mechanical function of vehicles and other industrial artefacts which, after all, is their raison d'etre, their specific surely more than being a static display in an exhibition context. To keep them going, to drive them, thus can become quite valuable in historic terms. There are good reasons for keeping cars in working order, despite pressure of restorers for keeping them out of use for fear of loss of historic substance. Generally, a serious museum approach tends to act more tenderly when dealing with the mechanical function of historic objects. Likewise, it tends to accuse other types of using of heedless or even mindless usage, unaware of potential substance sacrifices, for example after breakdowns.

But driving old vehicles, even dabbling mechanically with them, or running their engines can give historians valuable and otherwise

hardly obtainable insights into realms of historic mobility culture and in historic skills of operation which would not be accessible by other means. In my opinion, in order to research man-machine relationships, one has to go deeply into actual usage of vehicles. This is, or at least should be, a core of mobility history as opposed to transport history. In the case of historic watercraft, in the Charta of Barcelona an attempt was made to balance between the convenience and safety modifications which obviously are necessary to maintain these objects functional in an dangerous environment, and the respect for historic substance and its conservation. This charta aims at privately owned as well as public owned ships and boats.

But generally, even within "serious" historical museums there is a principal rift regarding the extent of putting mobility artefacts to use (or to function). Simplified, one could say that this rift often separates restoration staff from exhibition staff and the self-styled "attorneys of the object", as restorers in museums oten termed themselves, from probing and curious mobility historians interested in mechanical functions and interactions of artefacts with users and in the phenomena of a history of "machine sensibilities" [Möser 2009].

Historic vehicles as media in museums

Thus, it seems to me that even for "serious" historic museums the issue of the employment of artefacts is not clear-cut. Firstly, if seen not only as historical sources but as tools of transporting meaning and as media, the makers of exhibitions require different things from objects like cars in exhibitions than restorers. If restored according to strict restoration ethics, certain things cannot conveyed by cars when they have been restored that way. For instance, the cultural attraction of a shining, well-groomed car from 1910, necessitating a presentation in nearly new state is close to impossible to show when adhering to a restoration program which respects

such an automobile as a historical source for the attraction of automobilism of 1910.

In many cases, there would be obvious shortcomings of a vehicle which has been restored according to a tight standard as a communication tool in an exhibition. Again, there is a choice which is in its extreme form mutually exclusive: a vehicle as a historic source in a collection and as a material medium in an exhibition. This dilemma is even more evident in a museum which wants more than only showing beautiful, or powerful, or even technologically significant vehicles: The more an exhibition attempts to communicate past mobility cultures and the social history of automobility, the more a car has to be a "sign", and the less it is allowed to "be itself". If it is a medium for teaching visitors, then a pure restoration may be not medially functional.

We all know that there are many ways museum curators attempt to solve this conundrum. If cars in "proper" restored states are not able to convey the meaning according to a curator's wishes, then, it is said, other museum media may either supplement the artefact or take its functional place, or other artefacts may serve the purpose of transporting the intended information. For instance, if we cannot show the attraction of cars for European upper classes before 1914, one can use illustrations or written sources. Thus, manifest shortcomings of historic vehicles which are kept and restored according to "museum standards", when used as media of conveying meaning do elicit responses which have become conventional: Artefacts have to be contextualized with other museum media. This which is often taken for granted I would like to term "rhetorics of contextualisation". But the technological museum's medial specificity – indeed, perhaps, its only peculiar feature – is the using of original objects [Scholze 2004], other media having to be in a mainly auxiliary role. The accepted rhetorics of contextualization appear to me an evasion of the problem of object information, a way out which often seems too simple [Serries 2007].

Another, second problem: The rigorous museums ethics approach is a relatively recent development, probably dating to the social reconstructionist revival of technology museums in the 1980s [Kavanagh 1996, Hudson 1987]. Before, even serious technology museums had a much less scrupulous approach. For example, the Deutsches Museum in Munich did extensive reconstruction work on their Wright Flyer [Füßl 2003: 32–23]. Another example is the first submarine of the German Imperial navy. According to the curator Jobst Broelmann, the museum artefact, after its early acquisition by the museum, was "collaged" from dismantled parts, involving extensive reconstruction, rebuilding and reproduction of missing elements. A similar case can be stated at the experimental submarine "Brandtaucher" which was rebuilt after its near-destruction in an air raid in the 1960s, to be exhibited in the Dresden Militärgeschichtliche Museum. Examples of cars restored and displayed in "serious" historical museums could be given freely. As a consequence, all museums have make to do – in various degrees – with artefacts which simply do not comply with their own recently developed standards.

Would it be possible, then, to state that not even historical museums adhere to their own ethics and to their seemingly clear-cut rules? Is the social construction of mobility artefacts as historic sources a chimera – or is this an abstract programme only, never properly fulfilled in museum practice? Have both other social constructions of historic vehicles more power to define and "format" public expectations and exhibition practice?

Another, third problem: There is a certain pressure on historical museums regarding the display of mobility machines. Cars, motorbikes and planes belong to the potentially most attractive artefacts in museums and enjoy a high degree of public interest and affection. Visitors therefore expect certain aesthetics and thus a certain state of "restoration". They sometimes are disappointed or even angry if this is not done according to their expectations, if for instance a luxury car shows signs of heavy use, of "tinkering" or old rebuilds. A question I will not go into could be: have

visitors "learned" or acquired these expectations by museum visits, or is there a deeper longing for near-perfect historic cars?

This visitor's or public pressure is sometimes anticipated by museums – more precisely: those in museums concerned with the marketing and the public effect of their "product". In consequence, heads of museums which in some cases may be less concerned with historical sources and restoration ethics than with numbers of visitors and the public appearance are often reluctant to display cars whose appearance is not perfect according to public expectations.

The power to define

There is the question not only of ethics but of controlling and regulating the possible range of handling historic artefacts. It is an issue who will dominate or monopolize the definition what a historic car is and what is allowed to do with it. Is there a common view, a shared perspective, or an authority or an accepted power? Obviously, there is not. Museums, as we have seen, are not able to impose their "museum ethics" on non-museums usages, and they have by no means a homogeneous practical standard themselves.

The Fiva rules for historic automobiles, on the other hand, which have evolved from the group of private users, are quite strict, but they do not have to be enforced. These rules indicate "authentic" vehicles ("originally produced, unaltered, and with little deterioration") and "original" vehicles ("as used but never restored to original specification with a continuous history"). The rest is divided into restored, rebuilt, and replicated vehicles with different stages of "un-authenticity" accordingly.

If these criteria would be applied generally, there would be, for instance no "authentic" or "original" Benz Motorwagen before, say, 1890, not even a restored one. The artefacts thus labelled are in fact rebuilt or replicated without exception. This sounds a harsh verdict but is in accor-

dance with the Fiva rules. But then, such an "authentic" vehicle would hardly confirm to the demands of private owners, and its state would not be welcome in a company museum. The reason is that it would look there to "grubby" or "decayed" to convey the desired effect. "Authenticity" therefore, is not something aimed at in two of the three social constructions. Museums have by no means a dominance of definition what state historic cars should have. Historians are most certainly a "relevant user group" but not the only one, and not the dominant one.

Some consequences

Is there a way out, a way to reconcile the different material and social constructions of historic mobility objects? My own experiences are with a large group of private collectors gathering monthly at the Landesmuseum Mannheim for 15 years, called the "Oldtimer-Stammtisch" (oldtimer circle). We all aimed at a "peaceful co-existence". I tried to bridge the gap somehow, and wanted to ease the mutual criticism between the different social constructions and historic vehicle cultures. I tried to educate participants of the "Oldtimer-Stammtisch", to initiate debates. As a result, I see some symptoms of change, for instance the trend that among private collectors "unrestored" objects are becoming more valued and coveted, and there seems to be the beginning of some distrust towards heavily and unhesitatingly "rebuilt" or reproduced cars or motorbikes.

On the other hand, there is a common aim: to strengthen the social acceptance of the value of a technical and industrial culture, and a strong conviction of the intrinsic value of technical artefacts, of their compatibility with other, culturally probably more highly valued artefacts. A common interest lays in trying to establish and defend the historicity of technological culture in a mainstream culture where – despite many claims to the contrary – historic technology is still not taken seriously in terms of "culture" proper. Within a wider culture of technology car

culture is often looked at vulgar by intellectuals. Common lobbying would thus be appropriate.

But in general, I tend to be not too optimistic. When answering the question, which social construction has won, I would reply: not the "serious" historic museums. I would like to emphasize that the integration of historic vehicles into the attraction culture of today's owning and driving has to be taken into account seriously. In a extremely high developed and ever more stratified car culture the social role of owning and driving classic cars is important and probably will become more so. The range of social constructions and functions is too wide to be reconciled between the three positions. And a stagnating and under-funded approach to historic mobility culture in public museums is opposed to a thriving private collector's scene and a most remarkable boom in company museums where dozens of millions of Euros have been invested in Germany alone in the past decade [Gutzmann 2001: 123–129].

Another cause for pessimism is the attitude of curators themselves. There seems to be some reluctance to react to recent developments – for instance, the "Youngtimer"- phenomenon. In the last years a quite extensive "scene" of younger enthusiasts has developed around cars from the 1970s and 1980s, integrating these vehicles into a pattern of music, meetings, fan publications and websites. This "car generation" is still not in the focus of serious historians; the avant-garde of historic reconstruction in this case is in the hands of young enthusiasts. If mobility historians are as slow to widen their thematic scope as they used to be, they never will catch up with the broadening and changing public interest in historic mobility culture – an interest they have nearly no means to influence decisively.

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