Form and Function Follow Culture: Lowriders in America
Low n' Slow: Car Customization inside the Chicano Community

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“The car is a living and a dead being”
Daniel Miller, Car Culture

“The car is the closest thing we have created to being alive”
Jaguar TV commercial

The Humanity of the Car

Just as Daniel Miller explains, the existence and invention of the car have crucially defined the evolution and direction of the humanity in the last century. For some groups the car has become ‘the destructive symbol’ of human alienation and environmental obliteration. For others, cars are positive confirmations of the human ability to overcome their physical limitation of space and speed. Today, every major city has evolved or transformed itself around cars. Our freeways, garage parking, streets, and even our homes support and represent this landscape, reiterating that car indeed has a pervasive influence in human life. Cars are human-made objects, but we have elevated them from their level of common object to a level at which it literally becomes one of us.

The importance of cars as an expression of material culture lies not in their functionality and what people are able to do with them as a medium of transportation, but “in the degree to which it has become an integral part of the cultural environment within which we see ourselves as human[s]” (Miller, 2). The car has become an expression of power, status and identity. The cars are in themselves repositories of cognitive cultural knowledge [tau] to the point where cars have lost their relevance, as mere transportation devises to become sacred elements of our everyday life. As Geist and Nachbar note, “the automobile we own becomes a tangible representation of who we are, and who we want our friends and neighbors to believe we are” (25). Objects and people are interrelated; however they are frequently studied separately because they are seen as independent entities; but the reality is that today objects and people coexist simultaneously and in many cases the object and the person becomes almost one. Most studies forget the objects; in this case the car, has blended so intimately into the social structure that we take for granted their existence as well as our socialization with them. As Miller explains “[car’s] humanity lies above the degree to which so many of us are socialized [and] take them for granted, so that we think [about] our world through a sense of the self in which driving, roads and traffic are simply integral to who we are and what we presume to do each day” (3). In relation to cars, traditional material culture theory has tended to become limited. Weiner and Mauss’ appreciation of object’s alienability does not really justify adequately the multiple meanings that some objects have when they are placed inside a social context. One of the problems of seeing human and objects as separate entities is that it prevents us to see how some objects work simultaneously as bridges between the material and the immaterial world. Those hybrids-objects, for example cars, are materially speaking “objects” but they are culturally speaking above their material world, beyond mere objects. The problem of evaluating and situating the relationship between human and cars into the spectrum of material studies results in insurmountable repercussions because their value is estimated relative to the social context and their community status (Stotz 1993).
In less than one hundred years, Western and non-Western societies have adopted and transformed themselves around automobiles. The car has changed the way we approach space, and has introduced in our cities the need for implementing a structured coordinated system of North vs. South and streets vs. avenues to facilitate their performance. However, we cannot underestimate and exclude the active role and responsibility the humans have, after all cars are human creations. In this respect, Sachs (1984) and Wolf (1996) studies argued that the cars have actually not contributed significantly to our sense of mobility and after all these years, people are still performing similar activities as before cars invention. They even said that our experience with space is achieved primarily by our ability to walk and not drive a car. In addition, Miller said “at the same moment that the car increases mobility and renders [it] less problematic, it is likely to affect our sense of what distance has to offer and to threaten the mystique that arises precisely from the problem of its overcoming” (11). In other words, the car has interfered with our notion of distance, but not with our sense of mobility in the space. We may travel longer distances, but ultimately humans still perform the same tasks. This duality between beatification and/or demonization of the car explains our misunderstanding that cars and drivers work simultaneously in a symbiotic system.

Subcultures, Cars, and Car Cultures: Identity

Dick Hebdige defines subcultures as “noise interference (as opposed to sound) in the orderly sequence [of a specific mainstream culture] which leads from real events and phenomena to their own representation” (Hebdige 90). Based in his perception, it is important to understand that for a group to create noise, they must first interpret and internalize the original system. We use other people’s cultures as a point of reference about what we are and how we express our culture. For Hebdige, subcultures are “at least in part, [mutant] representations” or reinterpretations of the dominant culture (Hebdige 90). Subcultures re-appropriate or adopt objects not because what those objects represent in their subculture, but in the context of the dominant culture. Just as we explained before, the exchangeability of goods persist, in part, because objects maintain and perpetuate an ‘associated value.’ A value perception that exists because society creates a system that supports and perpetuates them. Subcultures are aware of this and by the process of reappropriation they gain that ‘associated value’ of the object. Reappropriation of an object occurs because that object represents something in both groups. As Mauss says, “objects are never completely separated from the men who exchange them.” (Mauss 25) In other words, it is
not enough to assume that the object affects our existence, they also possess us. Humans created material culture, but material culture “re-created” the humans.

Car subcultures are examples of extreme human fetishism for objects. In this case, an object does not just maintain its ‘social value’ but it is amplified by a subculture. By using Hebdige metaphor of subcultures as ‘sound interference’, we can understand the dynamics around cars. Since subcultures are fragments of noise, and noise are sounds that have been misplaced accordingly with an original ‘master piece’, subcultures must be interpreted as the social dynamics of reappropriation of ‘segments of noise’ that are ‘key-tones’ to create interference. In music, for example interference occurs when a valid sound or ‘key-tone’ is misplaced or relocated. Because cars are ‘key-tones’ in today western societies, it is easy and almost predictable that subcultures will ‘relocated’ them as part of their own ‘tone-notes’ in function to create noise. Subcultures work in a society as ‘narrows amplifiers’ of specific notes, and the material production (or reuse) of objects must be interpreted as vehicles to magnify the desired sounds or noises. In this case, the car is particularly desirable because it is an object that works both as icon and as a ‘pitch fork’ to define the tone of our modern society noise.

As Aaron Betsky explains referring to the concept of icons, “[they] are condensations of who we are… what makes something an icon is not just its usefulness but its ability to remain after use [as depositaries of social value]” (Betsky 27). Car reappropriation becomes valuable because society has given iconic value to them, and by the virtue of subcultures their social status of icons as a ‘pitch fork’ is perpetuated. It is important to understand the car reappropriation by subcultures is not arbitrary but works as a conspicuous process inside the dynamic of a social ideology. In other words, subcultures need the social acknowledgement of the dominant culture in function for creating their own support system. And as Kopytoff explains, the real value of the adoption of ‘foreign’ objects is not about the objects themselves or even the fact that they have been adopted, but more importantly, it is about understanding and defining what they represent. It is crucial to explore “the way [those objects] are culturally redefined and put to [re]use” (Kopytoff 45) especially when the process of appropriation occurs over an icon or a ‘sacred object,’ for example, a car as a symbol of modernization in the Western civilization. In this case, keeping the cultural value of those objects is desirable and enforced, but how?

What Is a Lowrider?

The term lowrider is used indistinctively to refer to the car, the subculture, and to the car owner, as clear evidence of its development from the oral tradition (Castro 142). The lowrider car’s roots can be traced back to the 1930s in the barrios (Mexican-American neighborhoods) of southern California and East Los Angeles. Today, lowriders are in every major city of the United States and overseas in Europe, Australia, Japan, and England. Despite the internationality of this phenomenon, lowriders carry a deep message about their ‘natural’ citizenship of being ‘born [and made] in the USA.’ Some of the newest and most enthusiastic lowrider fans are Japanese. One recent lowrider show in Tokyo, Japan, attracted more than 5,000 people. Today, unofficial statistics estimate more than 150,000 lowriders currently driving in the United States alone, (Cobo-Hanlon, par.5) and the numbers are growing.

Lowrider cars are “typically decorated with multicolor paint jobs, crushed velvet interiors, hydraulic suspension systems, chain steering wheels, and other features that are dependent on the owner’s ingenuity and ability to make a considerable investment in [their] car” (Tatum 172). For Michael Cutler Stone, a lowrider is “any automobile, van, pickup truck, motorcycle, or bicycle lowered to within inches of the road [when can be achieved by various methods]. It refers as well to any individual or club associated with the style and the ‘ride’ characterized as ‘low and slow, mean and clean’” (Stone 85) For Alicia Gaspar de Alba, (60) lowriding must be interpreted as a status symbol, as a symbol of community affirmation and identification (see Figure 1).
Mechanical as well as cosmetic transformations are all common features of the lowrider car. Lowrider customization can occur in four areas: the car’s form and structure, the mechanics or hydraulics, the body paint, and the upholstery. The owner can decide on any combination of these three, but at least one of them must be present (see Figure 2). The blend of all these elements defines the spectrum of the “low and slow.” Normally, switches inside the car control specific wheels, making it possible to move the car at will. Most lowrider shows also have hydraulic competitions. These devices not only lower the vehicles to the ground, but also allow the drivers to lift them above the wheels. Although jumping hydraulics is interpreted as the most representative feature in lowriders, just over one percent of all lowriders subscribed to Lowrider magazine in the United States have hydraulics installed in them.

Because of misinformation and misunderstanding of the ‘low n’ slow’ culture, lowriders have been identified exclusively and erroneously with *cholos* (Chicano youth gangs), but as Brenda Bright suggests, gang membership and car clubs do not necessarily go together and in many cases are antagonistic. Lowrider car clubs are seen as alternative mechanisms to urban gangs. On one hand, gangs are physically limited to the *barrio* (neighborhood) where “cohort and identity converge and must be protected.” On the other side, lowriders overcome those boundaries in a way that, “involves one with others from all over the city in both cooperative and competitive networks” (*Remappings: Los Angeles’ Low Riders* 60). In other words, lowriders do not just cross over the physical limitations of the gangs’ barrios, but instead expand their member possibilities to the entire lowrider community. Additionally, in most cases, people deeply engaged with the lowrider customization clubs are not typically involved with street gangs due to the high requirements of time expended on their cars.

![What is a lowrider?](image)
Customization as Identity

The creation of a lowrider involves money, time, dedication, and a lot of self-determination, especially with the low-income of many lowrider families. A car may take several years to be completed and frequently is passed from one generation to another, becoming a family tradition that evolves in time. Referring to their cars, lowriders say they are “a part of our culture.” This self-identity of the car becomes clearer: As Michael Stone affirms, the “Lowriding is a declaration of cultural pride, and historically resonant expression of contemporary Mexican American identity.” (4) By the customization of their cars, this subgroup confirms how social identities are reconstituted through time. (Thomas 11) Lowriders represent in themselves, the evolution, and constitution of an identity, by a mechanism of story telling using objects. According with Brenda Jo Bright, (1995, 109) the car is a ‘cultural [political] vehicle’ to express their historic uniqueness, “incorporating themes of the Chicano Movement through images of the Virgin of Guadalupe, Aztec mythology and Mexican Catholicism.” Those car murals, bring the past time into the present, and reconstruct the reality by the unreal. Confirming what Mauss says “histories of ancestors, title, or mythological events become an intimate part of the person’s present identity.” This identity is constructed by the Chicano historical experience of geographic displacement, cultural assimilation, subordination, discrimination, and mestizaje.

The car is for some club members their most precious possession, a material representation of “the histories or events rather the subjects.” (Thomas 26) It is by these circumstances that the cars “are not what they were made to be [vehicles of just transportation] but what they have become,” (26) a synthesis of the Chicano experience. Customized cars are not meant to be driven anymore, just as Rafael Flores, a lowrider suggests: “I don’t ride it much anymore. You don’t want to mess it up.” (Warth) Lowriders are unifying and separating their communities. By possessing a highly subjective customize car, lowrider owners differentiate themselves from the mainstream culture as well as from others lowriders and members of their own cultural background. The uniqueness of their cars works also to create a boundary that defines who the lowrider is, and who is not a part of his/her group. This collective-individuality is expressed in the Lowriders structure of the car clubs, as well as the many mechanisms created to preserve and differentiate them from others clubs.

In many cases, lowrider cars are seen as ‘in progress’ and the owners tend to never stop customizing their cars. As Rubio, a lowrider, mentions, “I won’t stop. I will come up with new ideas…” (Warth) The extreme attachment between the person and the car/machine is some kind of mutual symbiosis where the car is also evolving with its owner, confirming “continual process of societal self-creation through objectification” (Thomas 25). For instance, a complete customized lowrider car is generally not for sale, and those cars on the market are in the early stages of transformation. Even more, full-customized lowrider cars have less exchangeable value on the market than other custom cars, precisely because they are highly subjective. However, the exchangeable value of those lowrider cars, even after thousands of dollars and time expended in their transformations, are not based in the mainstream social and monetary agreement but rather, in the conviction that those cars are extensions of the owners and that through their cars they are perpetuating their culture. Again “the high value [of an object] does not visible reside in the exchange system itself” but in the collective approval of the large community. Because of those customizations the object is turning into a ‘rare’ object and is distancing itself from its ‘common’ status, consequently, its exchangeability is becoming limited and polarized (Koyt off 69.) In this case, car customization works as an object’s singularization, through pulling the car out of their exchangeability market and restricting their commoditization, the lowrider community separated and differentiated themselves from the mainstream community (see Figure 3).
Creating Order Inside the Chaos: Representation

Another aspect that needs to be clarified in relation with subcultures and their material production is the relationship between order and chaos. Since subcultures is seen as noise, in most of the cases they material production is interpreted as ‘violations’ of the traditional standards of beauty and taste, and consequently their existence is judged as inadequate and transgressional. In a society violations of the authorized codes through which social world is organized and experienced have considerable power to provoke and disturb. They are generally condemned, in

Mary Douglas’ words (1967), as ‘contrary to holiness’” (91). This appreciation can explain the natural ‘dislike’ experienced in many members of the mainstream culture in relation to subcultures productions. Lowriders are not the exception, and their provoking status is generally interpreted as disturbing and distressing, not because of the cars transformation but for what those transformations represent inside the social paradigm. People’s arguments on lowriders ‘wasting of material and energy,’ ‘poor taste,’ ‘abnormality’ or ‘unfunctionality’ are ultimately arguments based on cultural fear in front of Chicano reappropriation and because those transformations challenges the symbolic meaning and value that mainstream have in front of the automobile. Noise is not equivalent to disorder. Since subcultures are always testing their own existence, they are forced to create their own system of support and contrary to popular belief; they are extremely organized and structured in order to survive. Subgroups, like lowriders, are extremely rigid about the aesthetics and social rules that must be followed to participate in their activities. “In order [for subcultures to] communicate disorder, the appropriate language must first be selected, even if it is to be subverted [and] dismissed as chaos, it had first to ‘make sense’ as noise” (88). In this case order inside ‘chaos’ is a key element of subculture identity. In this case “chaos… is only possible because [subculture’s] style [is] so thoroughly ordered [that] chaos is cohered as [a]
meaningful whole [for unity]"

(113). This tendency can be clearly observed for example, in the extreme aesthetic canons followed inside the lowriders car clubs that allows coherence inside the chaotic display of symbols and images in the cars. An inaccurate observer may experience the sense of distraction and loss when attending a lowrider show, because the presence of multiple textures, treatments, motives, colors and materials. However, once the observer starts to critically differentiate the element that identifies the diverse characteristics of the cars, he/she will discover the existence of clear defined rules and norms in their production. Traditional lowriders car clubs are very decisive about the car model year, the motives, the color gamma used as well as the type of transformations performed on the car. Even youth lowrider car clubs are really critical about their clothing, music lyrics, membership and ethnic background displayed. Even language expressions, bilingualism and idiomatic symbolism are used to keep ‘strangers’ out of the elite groups. Those rules are essential tools used by this group to ‘make sense’, organize and differentiate them from the mainstream culture. By the extreme specialization of their production low riders and other subcultures survive the acculturative annihilation of the mass. (see Figure 4)

The process of expropriation and reappropriation of objects by subcultures cannot occur without the enervation or disparagement of the dominant culture. As has been mentioned before, every ‘interference’ noise’ is evaluated as transgressional and provocative disturbance. It is in this regard that mainstream culture creates mechanism of repression and regulation in the hope to avoid, slow down the process and/or eventually gain back the value associated with those objects. In the case of Lowriders, the institutionalization of local and states laws that abolish, prohibit or restrict lowriders cruising are clear examples of mainstream regulations in confrontation with other subcultures. By interpreting the low riders phenomenon as “cultureless valuable” or “meaningless exotica” (Barthes 97) and disassociating any social value within those practices, mainstream culture actually reacquire their goods by discouraging their existence.

However, when dominant cultures can not stop the ‘noise’ of subgroups’ interference, like in this case lowriders, the strategy and “the process of recuperation takes two [different] characteristic forms: 1. the conversion of sub cultural signs (dress, music, etc) into mass-produced objects (i.e., the commodity form); [and] 2. the “labeling’ and redefinition of deviant behavior by dominant groups—the police, the media, the judiciary (i.e., the ideological form)” (Hebdige 94). The second one of these two elements can be clearly identified on one hand by the police’s constant civilian monitoring and profiling of lowriders, lowrider shows and any car clubs activities. As well as the ‘label’ that link today lowriders with gangs and drug-relate crimes, even after years of historical separation between them and many testimonies that prove the opposite. The first one of these elements is more complex but by transforming the unique production of a subculture into a mass consumption commodity, main cultures are available to demystify and regain control over the exchangeability process of the objects.

Summary

Just as Nicolas Thomas said “Objects are not what they were made to be but what they have become” (Thomas 45) and lowriders are an exceptional example of that. In this case, Detroit mass-production cars are not enough to satisfy the need and scope of the Chicano community. A car, a medium for transformation has become a political and cultural statement for identity. From the resurrection of the ‘dead’-junk car to the glorification of the velvet and hydraulics customization, lowriders explore the dynamic of cultures and culture appropriation. The paradigm used in this study tries to organize the complexity of this phenomenon but does not give a definitive explanation or theory. However, during the research, several elements have been

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1 This process can be traced back to as early as 1959 when California introduced its vehicle code #24008, which prohibited lowrider cars from riding on the streets if any of its components, was lower that the bottom edge of the wheel rim. This type of law became the genesis of a well-organize process of restrictions and limitations the are affecting many states even today.
considered crucial in the interpretation of the lowrider phenomenon. First, lowriders as any other subcultures, surge spontaneously as part of the social dynamics of identity. Secondly, the selection of objects by subcultures is not random; they are selected because they are key-symbols of the main culture. In addition, car expropriation happens because objects maintain, during their exchange process, some of their social value. Consequently subcultures transform and manipulate objects to create their own idiosyncrasies and eventually reinforce their original meaning. Thirdly, the value associated within those objects requires the existence of a social reinforced system expressed by the dominant culture. Fourthly, by creating ‘commotion and noise’ subcultures have created a ‘language’ that tends to become strictly inflexible about their aesthetics rules. These rules are seen as essential elements to maintain their identity. And finally, social groups interact constantly by sub cultures regaining their goods, and subsequently the main culture creates mechanism of repression and control in an attempt to regulate the process of exchange. Without diminishing the social and cultural value associate with the lowrider phenomenon, it is important to understand the object as part of our material world as the ultimate repositories and reflections of the human condition. Lowrider value remains not in the ‘extraordinary’ condition of their cars but in the existence of the car itself.

In summary we can say that the lowriders appropriation of the American car is intrinsically attached with the social value associate with the car. This reappropriation must be interpreted as a mechanism of control and transgression, over the car’s iconic status. In this case, the car as a symbol of the American assimilation once customized, transforms itself into a new pictogram of the Chicano identity. “So a credible image of social cohesion can only be maintained through the appropriation and redefinition of resistance in terms of that image” (85) and what that image represents. In this case, “the car become more a means to resist alienation than a sign of alienation” (Miller 3) a medium for broadcasting their statements of individuality.
References


