

## Portable Civilizations and Urban Assault Vehicles

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This paper will analyze the sports utility vehicle (SUV) and its rise in popularity. It will specifically focus on the American middle-class experience of the SUV, since this reveals an intersection between technology, personal identity and society. The paper proceeds as follows: First, there will be an outline of my theoretical framework that has been developed from parts of Joseph Pitt's philosophy of technology and C. S. Peirce's theory of signs, followed by the history of the SUV and its relations to personal identity. This will establish my guiding metaphors: "urban assault vehicle" and "portable civilization." The significance of these metaphors will become clear toward the conclusion of the paper when I explore how the transactions and transformations between the SUV and owner are both guided by and reconstructing society.

In his recent book on the philosophy of technology and in numerous articles, Joseph Pitt argues that technology should be defined as "humanity at work" (Pitt 1983; 1988; 2000). One strength of this very broad definition is that it allows us to see disparate things like governments and buildings as technologies. The automobile, generally, and the SUV, specifically, clearly qualify as technologies. Pitt has recently gone on to argue that human beings are also thoroughly technological; virtually every aspect of human beings are "works" in the same sense as automobiles, bombs and the Constitution (Pitt 1999). Because of the technological nature of human beings, we can speak as Foucault does of "technologies of the self." Following Foucault, there are technologies:

which permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality (Foucault 1997, 225).

Since human beings are thoroughly technological, their selves and identities will be also. Using this notion of technologies of the self, it is possible to avoid certain Cartesianisms that prevent the self from being discussed as *workable*. By bringing together technology and self in this notion and reading it through Pitt's definition of technology, it becomes clear that the self is a thing of this world that can be transformed.

Peirce's assertion that all thought consists of signs performs an interesting leveling operation that ensures the elimination of lingering Cartesianisms. Everything we transact with becomes a sign. In addition, if all thought consists of signs, then any thought of one's self will also be a sign. Peirce reaches this conclusion in "Some Consequences of Four Incapacities" when he states: "Thus my language is the sum total of myself" (Pierce 1934, §5.314). From this it follows that the self is the self sign.<sup>1</sup> This self sign is composed of the totality of signs that it uses. And within this totality, the body-as-sign is significant, since the body consists of various signs. The mind is composed of signs and is the "semiotic agents" or "Is" that interprets other signs.<sup>2</sup> All of these signs form the identity of the "individual."<sup>3</sup> Given this understanding of self, I will translate "technologies of the self" as operations to (re)orient aspects of the self.

Why is this significant? It follows from what has been established that our conception of the SUV is also a sign, or an assemblage of signs. When the SUV is "in use" it meshes with the self=sign. While this occurs on many different levels, the one that concerns us is that which relates to Peirce's symbols. Symbols are words or general signs to which existents conform, though symbols themselves have "no existence" (Pierce §2.292).<sup>4</sup> One significant aspect of symbols is that they change, shift, and mutate. Words take on new meanings. In the course of the SUV's use, the meaning of the "SUV" and the self=sign shift. This will become more clear through a brief analysis of the SUV's history.

This story begins in 1913 when Ford introduced the assembly line to industrial manufacturing, allowing for the mass production of automobiles. This development revolutionized life in America. Goods could now be

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<sup>1</sup> The notation of self sign is taken from Floyd Merrell. For more on his interpretation of these signs, see (Merrell 1997).

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that this "I" can never "see" itself directly. The "I" has no power of introspection. Instead, it can only view itself as a representamen in the next sign.

<sup>3</sup> This however sounds a bit too Cartesian. While I do not have sufficient space to defend this, let me stipulate that this understanding of the self sign seeks to avoid the mind/body split. In this account, the mind and body are both subsumed under the self sign. There is no "clean" line between mind and body for two reasons. First, they are (usually) unified in action; they operate as a unit. Second, the flow of meaning at the level of symbols blurs any firm demarcation between mind and body.

<sup>4</sup> A symbol has "real being" because "existents will conform to it." Yet, the symbol itself only exists through replication of it in the form of other signs, like writing or speech. The written word "pain" is not the same thing as the symbol in Peirce's account. For more on this see (Merrell, 1997) and (Pierce § 2.292-302).

produced at a lower price for a wider audience. Before mass production, the automobile served as a status symbol for only the upper class. With Fordism, virtually everyone enjoy automobility. But Fordism had a problem: All the Model Ts looked exactly the same. While many people could now get around, only the members of the upper class could express themselves through automobility. To compete with Ford, Alfred Sloan introduced a dramatically modified version of Fordism into General Motors operations by (1) introducing regular model changes and (2) diversified the market by aiming particular models at particular classes of consumers. With the rise of Sloan's model of marketing and production, the styling of the automobile became all-important and led to the more broad participation in the newly emerging self-imaging function of automobility.<sup>5</sup>

The first vehicles that laid the ground for the SUV began around World War II. While GM had introduced the Suburban in 1935, it principally functioned as a vehicle for commercial use. Like many panel trucks and station-wagons of the day, it was designed as an off-road vehicle. In 1938, the Army held a competition for a new reconnaissance vehicle. Willys-Overland submitted a design and their model went on to become what we know as the General Purpose Vehicle (GPV) or Jeep. These vehicles became a key part of the American war effort, something that the Jeep immediately became associated with and has never entirely been divorced from. After the war, Willys-Overland began to sell their surplus GPs on the market, eventually releasing a slightly modified GP called the CJ (for civilian Jeep). Although sales of the Jeep were never spectacular, it did slice out a stable part of the market, especially appealing to those who needed a vehicle with off-road capability. From 1985 through 1962 a few more specifically off-road vehicles entered the market. Nineteen sixty-three marked a small turning point the history of the automobile with the introduction og the Wagoneer. The Wagoneer attempted (and, arguably, succeeded) at reconciling style and comfort with utility. The Wagoneer stood out compared to the other off-road vehicles on the market in the 60s and 70s and opened the door for the stylized SUVs that appeared in the 1980s.

A few years after the introduction of the Wagoneer, several more vehicles were introduced, like the Ford Bronco, the Chevrolet Blazer and the GMC Jimmy. These vehicles were much more spartan than the Wagoneer. For example, only the driver's seat came standard on the Blazer and anything else typically had to be purchased as an extra. In addition, they were ugly in

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<sup>5</sup>This account follows (Flink, 1988) and (Gartman, 1994).

comparisson to the Wagoneer. But, since styling, one of the keys to Sloanism, was not in high demand, this was not considered a problem. In fact, for some owners, uglier was better, which was one of the selling points of the VW "Thing". A few more vehicles were introduced in the 1970s and the GM Suburban was restyled in order to target the growing SUV market. During this period, the term "SUV" begins to gain currency.<sup>6</sup>

Before tracing its final developmental history in the 1980s, let me briefly consider the relationship between the SUV and its owner's identity. There is evidence which suggests that the earliest forms of SUVs were used as a means to get into or navigate through nature. The surplus GPs and the early CJs were principally bought by farmers and ranchers. By the late 60s, with the introduction of the Bronco and the Blazer/Jimmy, many outdoors enthusiasts, including weekend warriors, owned SUVs. For some, they were a necessity for living in rural areas. For others, they were a second car used for weekend adventuring. But, for both of these groups, the SUV functioned within the broader context of a way of life: a means towards some larger purpose. So, the SUV was part of a larger transformation of the self.

In 1982, following the success of GM's series of smaller trucks, both Chevy and GMC introduced the "S" series, which were smaller, sportier versions of the Blazer and Jimmy. Both of these vehicles were much more style conscious than their larger predecessors. Automobile reviews from this period provided some evidence for this. For example, a reviewer for Popular Science notes: "there's no question that Blazer is the most refined of the current four-wheelers--almost to a fault: It may be *too pretty to take into the bush*. (emphasis added) But I'd still like to have it in my driveway" (Dunn and Keebler 1983, 26). A Motor Trend review of the Jimmy makes the following observation: "strangely, the cargo area is carpeted" (Frank 1983, 69). Following the lead of these restyled SUVs, Ford released a smaller version of the Bronco in 1983. Then in 1984 Jeep released a seriously redesigned version of the Cherokee. The Wagoneer retained almost the same design, until it ceased production in 1991.

Starting in 1984, there were continued increases in total sales volume and in the number of models available to consumers: almost every year a new model or two were introduced into the market. The market began to become

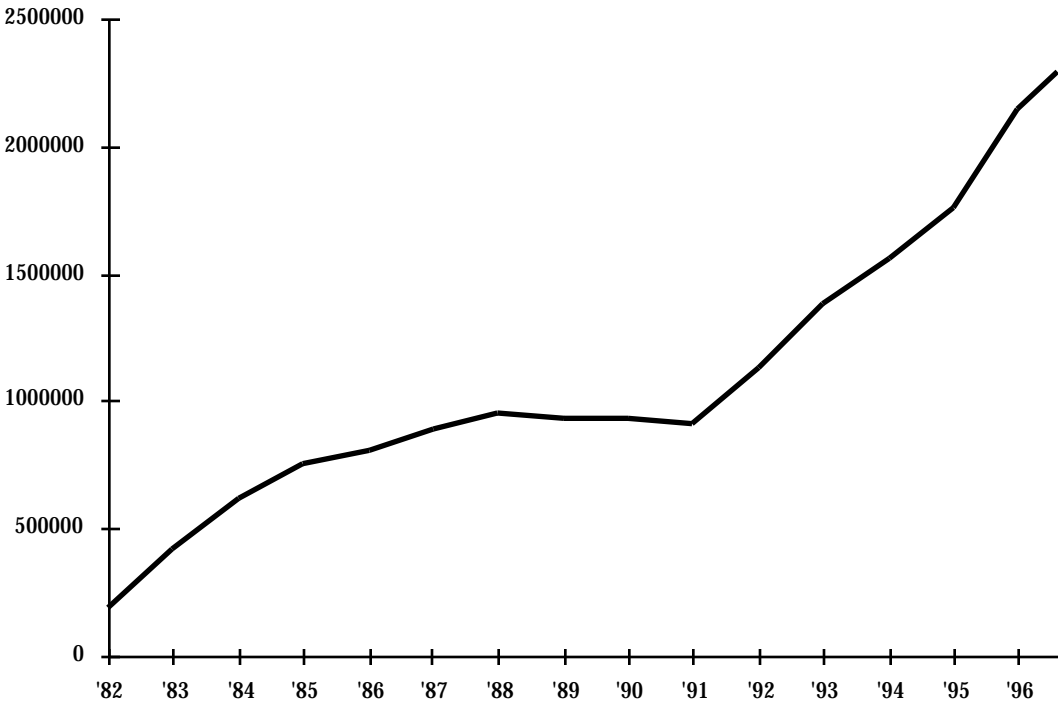
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<sup>6</sup>It should be noted that there was no clear term for these vehicles. In the popular magazines of the day, they are referred to as "utility vehicles," "four-wheel drive, off-road vehicles," "sports utility vehicles," "rugged" or "crucks."

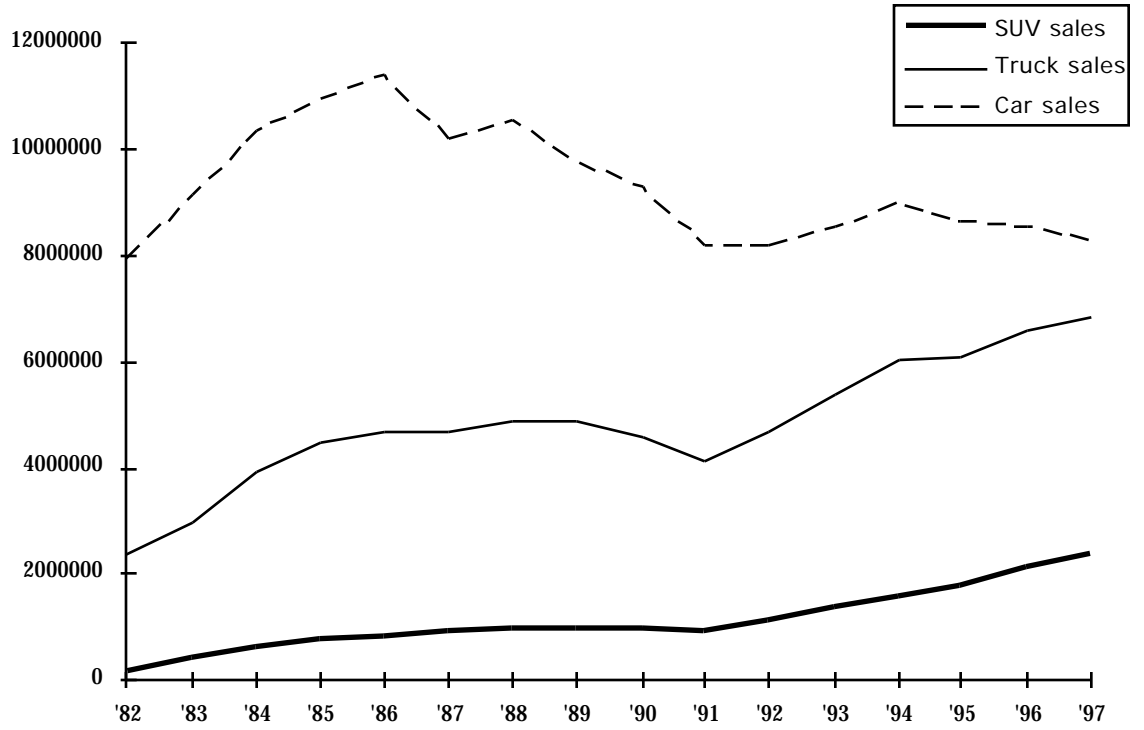
more segmentedz. Foreign SUVs, which tended to be more stylized than their domestic counter parts, emerged as well as mini-SUVs, like the Geo Tracker and the Suzuki Samurai. In 1986 the venerable CJ changed its name to the Wrangler.

In the early 90s three significant events occurred that impacted the SUV. First there was the introduction of the Ford Explorer. This SUV became popular immediately and has since carved out a sizable portion of the overall market. Part of its success relied on the stagnation of the Blazer/Jimmy: These vehicles had not be significantly restyled since their introduction and the Explorer looked more contemporary and friendly. The Explorer walked a fine line between the brutish stylings of the Bronco (original and II) and the classy look of the foreign SUVs. Second, in 1990 the Oldsmobile Bravada, a modified version of the Blazer/Jimmer, entered the SUV market as the first unquestionable luxury SUV (ISUV). Thus began the trend of slightly modifying successful models and marketing them through the automaker's luxury division. For example, Ford's Expedition became the base for Lincoln's Navigator, just as Isuzu's Trooper became Acura's SLX, and Toyota's Land Cruiser became the Lexus LX470. In 1997, ISUVs constituted only 7% of new sales, but more than a quarter of the available models. Finally, the last spectacle of the early 1990s was the Gulf War: As soon as the ground fighting broke out, the Hummer had 24-hour-a-day unpaid advertising. In the context of the Gulf War, the Hummer played a similar cultural role as the GP did in the context of World War II, in spite of the otherwise vast differences in these two periods of American history.

Instead of going into too many details relating to the changes in the market between 1992 and the present, the following will serve as a general description of the state of the industry in 1997. In 1981 there were 12 different models of SUVs. At the close of 1997 there were 38 different models of SUVs, at least 7 have been released since and more are still in the works, compared to only 12 in 1982. In addition, all of these new SUVs were more stylized than there older siblings. The rise of SUV sales is evidenced in the following two graphs.



**Figure 2.2: SUV sale from 1982 to 1997**  
(Derived from Ward's, 1984-1997 and Automotive News, 1998)



**Figure 2.3 Car, Truck and SUV sales from 1982 to 1997**  
(Derived from Ward's, 1984-1997 and Automotive News, 1998)

In this last phase of the history of the SUV the metaphors of “urban assault vehicle” and “portable civilization” arise in relation to it, capturing much of its contemporary cultural significance. These metaphors run through much of the advertising and other popular discourses relating to the SUV: The newer SUV is portrayed as *both* civilized and rugged, refined and aggressive, etc..

While the phrasing “urban assault vehicle” or “portable civilization” rarely actually occurs in the SUV literature, their meanings occur just below the surface throughout. “Portable civilization” is suggested by advertisement which continually refer to the “civilized” and “refined” nature of the latest SUVs and emphasize all of the creature comforts for which they provide like: outlets for laptops and cell-phones, noise damping, heated seats, etc.. While advertisers seek to highlight the “civilized nature” of the SUV, the militaristic side of these vehicles reveals itself in numerous places, such as when the SUV is pitted against the city in advertisements. The implication seems to be that the SUV is a mobile dwelling. “Urban assault vehicle,” a term used by many of the critics of the SUV, suggests the SUV’s relation to its military origin.

As observed in the case of the earliest SUV owners, the use of SUVs as technologies of the self was part of a larger structure, if such a relation existed. From the early 1990s to the present, use of the SUV has ganged substantially. “Portable civilization” and “urban assault vehicle” would make little sense before 1990. With the exception of the Wagoneer, none of the earlier SUVs were “civilized.” Also, since these vehicles were used mainly to travel from house and rural areas, they were rarely used in urban areas. So, “urban assault vehicle” would make little sense.

While these signs are relatively recent grafts on to the cultural conception of the SUV, they already reveal two important things:

- (1) how elements of the cultural conception of the SUV have been rearranged to form new symbols;
- (2) the nature of the transformative relationships between the SUV, its owners, and other sign systems.

With these two points in mind, let me provide a short genealogy of these signs.

While “urban assault vehicle” would make little sense to the pre-80s drivers, elements of this term were in existence. For example, the use of the GP in World War II forged a connection between the GP and the military, and militarism in general. For this reason, there was as early as the 1960s a



rhetoric that suggests the SUV was an ally with humanity in the war against nature. Similarly, during the Gulf War, these connections between the SUV and militarism were reinforced with the Hummer, which might be considered the *über-SUV*.

In addition, the notion of “portable civilization” has also been associated with the SUV for some time, albeit in two slightly different senses. In the early texts the SUV was represented as first playing a role in expanding the frontiers of “civilization,” though perhaps formulated more romantically, as opposed to an Enlightenment notion of progress. The Jeep Wagoneer introduced a different sense of portable civilization. For almost two decades it distinguished itself from other SUVs, because of its focus on comfort in addition to off-road capability. As early as 1966, Jeep had model changes like “a wider variety of interior colors and materials which harmonize with body finishes” (Anonymous 1965, 9). The Wagoneer led the way for many years in a civilized interior for the SUV. So, when Motor Trend stated that “strangely, the cargo area was carpeted,” it might not be quite so strange.

While elements of these signs existed within earlier cultural formations, their rise to prominence can only really be explained by looking at the social and economic conditions in which the SUV is embedded. The first step in explaining this sign formation is to point to a seemingly obvious fact: Since the ascendancy of Sloanism, automobility has been a prime technology of the self. Ford’s creation of mass production/consumption coupled with Sloan’s reconfiguration to make mass production/consumption feasible allowed American self-expression and self-transformation via the automobile.

But it was the *undoing* of Fordism and Sloanism in the 1970s that allowed “urban assault vehicles” and “portable civilizations” to come into being. From the 1970s through the present, Fordism has undergone a serious transformation into what David Harvey calls “flexible accumulation.” This restructuring involved moving away from economies of scale and towards economies of scope. The classic example of an economy of scale is the Model T; ever increasing production at a decreasing price. The goal is to flood the market with the same basic product. In an economy of scope, industry attempts to offer something for everyone. Economies of scope also involve “just-in-time” production. Instead of having a large amount of stock always ready, many industries produce just enough to fill demand (Harvey 1990, 141-72)

This has contributed to the destabilization of the middle class. The lose of secure job positions caused those who might have formerly taken themselves to be the bourgeoisie to look a lot more like the proletariat. Another factor contributing to the instability of the middle class was the decline and disappearance of the Soviet Block during the 80's and early 90's. When the "free market" and "democracy" began to be identified with the countries of the former Soviet Block, the US lost an external enemy – or other – against which it could define itself. Since 1989 there has been a rising tide of class antagonism between the upper and middle classes and the lower class. However, it was not until we awoke from the slumber of the Reagan years and realized how damaged the middle-class had become that attempts were made to "resurrect" some form of a "middle-class ethic." Examples of this abound: Witness the rise of gated communities; New efforts to eliminate or discipline the unruly or undesirables; And various attempts by both the right and the left to control language. The list goes on.

With the collapse of other symbols associated with the middle class, the SUV as "urban assault vehicle" and "portable civilization" seeks to fill this void. For the middle class, the SUV is interpreted culturally as strong and invincible, yet civilized. In the case of middle class alienation from the inner city, the SUV is an urban assault vehicle. The driver is transformed into a trooper, combating an increasingly dangerous world. This sense of security felt when driving the SUV continues on when not being driven. The SUV's symbols of strength, power, command and security become an important part of the self sign. As the world is perceived to be increasingly threatening, these symbols offer a way to safeguard the self sign. These symbols are a way of sealing off the self from ever multiplying threats. The SUV becomes an anesthetic for the danger, fragmentation, and danger of fragmentation the suburban-self fears. With the identification of enemies within our own borders, this vehicle has become a way of protecting members of the middle class from any threat to their lifestyle. As the middle class comes to see this country as an increasingly dangerous place, the SUV becomes a portable civilization, a way to stabilize the meaning of the suburban self=sign.<sup>7</sup>

Yet this analysis is not quite complete, since it has only been shown how these symbols have come to be. These signs of "urban assault vehicle"

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<sup>7</sup>One coincidence of the SUV boom is the name of the Mercedes SUV: the M-Class. In the Star Trek series, the crew was always in search of M-class planets, since these were pleasantly habitable. While I doubt when Mercedes was naming their SUV this entered their minds, it is amusing to think that owners can now take their M-Class planet with them.

and “portable civilization” also reflect back upon the larger sign systems from which they developed. While these transformations are only in their infancy, one can already see that the SUV, in conjunction with the other attempts to “reconstruct” a middle class ethic will continue to play an important part in identifying that which “urban assault vehicles” and “portable civilizations” are defined against.

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