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Getting Attached to a Classic Mustang Use, Maintenance and the Burden of Authenticity

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Abstract

This paper investigates the relationships consumers cultivate with mass-market commodities while caring for their authenticity. Drawing on a six-year ethnography of classic Mustang owners communities in France, Switzerland and Belgium, the authors show that, far from being a symbolic value only, or a resource into which people can “invest” in a mechanism of social distinction, authenticity can also appear as a burden that weighs constantly on the relationship between people and things. Indeed, throughout their uses and maintenance, the material integrity of classic Mustangs is of great concern for their owners, who apprehend every breakdown or maintenance intervention as threats that could jeopardize their car's authenticity. For the sake of security, comfort or health, because new regulations come up, or because some original parts are not available anymore, classic Mustangs owners compose with heterogeneous elements, constantly reshaping both their cars and their concerns for authenticity. The authors draw on Hennion's notion of “attachement” to describe the intimate relationship that grows through these arrangements. The notion particularly helps to grasp the ambivalence of the bonds between people and things: while they get more and more attached to their classic Mustang, owners are getting more and more worried. Moreover, throughout this growing relationship and the recurrent material interventions it draws on, the car does not remain passive. It progressively reveals itself, sometimes surprising its owner. Therefore, not only is authenticity “in the making” in this process, the contours of the thing itself evolve, as well as the knowledge of its owner.

Keywords

maintenance • attachment • authenticity • classic cars

Margaux bought a classic Mustang in 2014. The car meant a lot to her. As she explains:

I was looking for a 64-65 Mustang, the flash of my childhood. And I found it. When I bought it, it was red, and the interior white and red. It was beautiful, right, but it wasn't what I wanted at all. Its VIN¹ said it was originally blue, and I said, "let's put it back in its original colour". The true 1964 Mustang blue. Because I want a purist Mustang². (Interview with Margaux, July 2017)

In March 2021, though, Margaux, who is generally quite discreet on social networks, wrote a post entitled "Margaux, worried" in the French Facebook group "Mustangs anciennes":

Hello friends, I am sending out an SOS, I need help. I'm looking for someone who could come to my house (north of Isère) to tell me if my Mustang (1964) is OK or not and what I should do. I don't like the noise it makes, it doesn't run well and vibrates a lot. I'm afraid to take it out of the garage, to drive it, to maybe make a problem worse. Every time I go to professional mechanics, they tell me, everything is fine (and I'm tired of being taken for an idiot: it's not true, I am as capable as other owners to understand things). The engine is a 289ci changed in 2018, 4V carburettor. Thanks for your help. (Margaux's post on a French Facebook group, March 2021)

Her post received numerous replies. Some of them, suggesting that her problem was due to the "original" carburettor Margaux had installed when she had to replace the engine of her car. It was probably too old. She would possibly have to buy a new one. A replica, just as her engine. Margaux was concerned, she didn't want to replace that specific piece, which she considered to be "the heart" of her car. Eventually someone suggested another way: she could have the carburettor "remanufactured" in the US. When it comes back, it will be "the original one, but brand new".

This temporal shortcut shows Margaux's relationship with her car in a slightly unusual light. Some might see it as a symptom of the contradictions typical of the life of supposedly authentic consumer objects. Some might also seize on this testimony to denounce the phoniness of the "original" character of the carburettor, and to question Margaux's claim to own a purist Mustang. These attitudes are shared by a large body of research work that has studied the relationship of modern consumers to "commoditized" authenticity, a quality mostly apprehended as a symbolic value. But Margaux's story opens the way to another analysis. As long as we take her words seriously, we understand that not only she does care for the originality of certain components, but she is also deeply concerned about these material aspects of her car's authenticity. Authenticity worries her. It forces her to face dilemmas, to make difficult choices. Meanwhile, as the provisory ending of this short story suggests, she can also compose with her car's authenticity and find ways to preserve it in a form that suits her.

In this paper, we propose to investigate this facet of consumer goods authenticity. Instead of taking a normative stance on the matter, we adopt an "agnostic" approach (Brumann, 2014) that allows us to consider how consumers sometimes deal with authenticity mostly as a concern. Something that can be enjoyed, but also something that consumers have to take care of, something that needs to be preserved, even cultivated throughout the relationship they develop with objects. This concern is all the more important, we argue, as the

¹ Vehicle Identification Number: number stamped on the Door Data Plate and on the frame which gives a series of information on the original configuration. Nowadays, this number can be easily decoded through dedicated websites.

² All quotes have been translated from French by the authors.

authenticity of consumption objects is challenged by many situations of use, especially everyday maintenance and repair (Gregson et al, 2009). Classic cars offer a particularly rich illustration of this matter. As every regular car, probably even more, they need to be frequently serviced, maintained and repaired. Some pieces have to be fixed, some components need to be replaced. Each of these operations jeopardizes the cars' authenticity. This is what the story of Margaux's carburettor illustrates. Most of all, this is what she and most of her comrades owners have been through since they have been driving their car.

But what does worrying about authenticity mean exactly? How do these concerns translate into consumers concrete practices? What do they teach us, more generally, about the material relationships that consumers hold with certain objects? And what do they reveal about authenticity itself? To answer these questions, we draw on a six-year ethnographic inquiry among classic Mustangs owners, which is detailed in the next section. We then situate our approach in relation to research that has studied consumers' relationship to authenticity in mass markets. We show that, instead of questioning authenticity as a socially constructed value only, investigating the "worries" it raises allows us to discover the subtle material interventions through which consumers maintain and nurture the authenticity of objects. Authenticity, from this standpoint, appears to be a fragile quality whose possible disintegration weighs constantly on the personal relationship the owners hold with their cars. We draw on Hennion's notion of "attachment" (Gomart and Hennion, 1999; Hennion, 2017) to explore this relationship both as a form of intimate connection and as a set of repetitive constraints. In the following sections, we then expose three main results. First, we highlight the recurring nature of the issues that concern for authenticity raises in the daily life of classic Mustangs owners. Second, we show that, while dealing with these repetitive problems, owners do not simply face binary dilemmas that would force them to choose between options that would either stick to authenticity or break from it. Rather, they adjust their own expectations, they compose with material, financial, legal possibilities. This is through these various accommodations that authenticity is taken care of and cultivated. Finally, we describe the inquiries into which the owners sometimes engage in this process. The cultivation of authenticity may indeed lead to surprises and discoveries. Far from being transparent knowable artifacts, cars prove to be complex objects which may have lived numerous, sometimes agitated lives, about which some aspects remain mysterious. Taking care of classic Mustangs authenticity also means getting to know them.

Materials and methods

We draw on an investigation involving a variety of materials. Owner of a classic Mustang herself, and thus benefiting from the status of an insider, Cornelia Hummel, one of the co-authors, mixed observational participation and auto-ethnography between 2014 and 2019, mainly in France, Switzerland and Belgium. She published a non-academic book on Mustang amateurs in collaboration with a professional photographer (Hummel and Desaleux, 2018). A member of the "Mustang club de France", she attended several regional car shows and five big national car shows (bringing together up to 800 Mustangs and their owners). She also took part in numerous convivial meetings and touring activities with the regional section of the club. This regular attendance was completed by participating in discussions on an online forum (Mustangv8.com) and three French-speaking Facebook groups dedicated to classic Mustangs. Digital participant observations were particularly focused on the "technical threads" and "biographical threads" in which the owners narrate

the life of their car. These threads relate the story of the car-owner couples from the purchase, with posts about the maintenance and the use of the car, or technical questions addressed to the other forum members. In parallel, she conducted semi-structured interviews between 2017 and 2020 with 25 classic and modern Mustangs owners, men and women, aged 25-72, living in France, Switzerland and Belgium.

Such fieldwork in the long run helped her to forge ties with car owners over several years, and to collect a dense and heterogeneous material documented in a field diary, which was transcribed, coded and subjected to content analysis. Interviews, online forum discussions and informal conversations at meetings and tourings were opportunities to gather stories about “cars’ history” (accounts of purchase, work carried out, servicing, and adventures behind the wheel), mixing technical discussions with more personal, sometimes intimate, exchanges about the bond between the car and its owner.

Once her inquiry was closed and her book published, Cornelia went on a research stay to the Center of sociology of innovation in Paris and met with the two other authors of this paper (Jérôme Denis and David Pontille). She proposed that they all dig together into her empirical material, and further explore the relationships between the Mustangs and their owners. This is during these collective work sessions that the ways owners dealt with their car’s authenticity progressively appeared as a promising analytical matter.

During our exploration of this extremely rich collection of empirical materials, several significant stories of car-owner couples gradually became more prominent than others. Among them, Margaux’s story³ proves to be particularly telling. She made some of the most interesting aspects of her relationship to authenticity particularly understandable and explicit. Neither expert in classic cars, nor collector of Mustangs, she is part of the large population of owners who acquire one classic Mustang after years of desire and hesitations. It is important to note that this is far from being an ordinary purchase. Numerous owners pointed out that their “desire” for a Mustang goes back to childhood, and that they waited decades before they could get one. As most classic cars owners (Nieuwenhuis, 2008), Margaux’s relatively modest incomes allow her to cherish her unique acquisition with more or less difficulty day after day. For these reasons, the story of Margaux constitutes the core of the empirical material described and discussed in this text, supplemented with other owners’ stories to highlight specific aspects. However, we do not consider her case as representative (whether significantly or statistically) of a larger group of classic car owners. Rather, we draw on her story as far as she helps us to understand with great detail how the concerns for authenticity can weigh on the relationship between a classic car and its owner, and participate in shaping the entangled becoming of people and things. Detailing Margaux’s story is also a way to point out that not all owners of classic Mustangs are men, far from it. There are many women among them in the three countries of our study, and they take an important place in the communities of owners. That said, in addition to numerous episodes of Margaux’s life with her car, and in order to highlight specific aspects, we will also draw on other fragments of stories extracted from our empirical material.

Authenticity and consumption goods: beyond symbolic value

The place and role that authenticity takes in mass consumption have mainly been discussed from a constructivist perspective. Adopting a critical stance against “essentialist” and

³ Margaux has been interviewed four times (2017-2021). She is also a member of the Mustang Club de France and Cornelia meets her 2-3 times per year since 2017.

“realist” postures that reduce authenticity to a series of stable and indisputable material features, a great deal of research work has indeed underlined the conventional and interpretative nature of the notion. Authenticity, in this perspective, is apprehended as a cultural value which can bear different significations, and on which people rely to enrich their consumption practices and give them new meanings. This process of cultural valuation has been investigated in various domains, from tourism (Cohen, 2004; Kim and Jamal, 2007; MacCannel, 1973; Wang, 1999), to craft businesses, cars (Leigh et al., 2006) or food (Paxson, 2013; Weiss, 2012). It has mainly been apprehended from two specific facets of “consumption”. On one side, research has explored how authenticity is staged as a specific quality (of a product or a brand) by producers, marketers, and advertisers (Cavanaugh and Shankar, 2014; Chibnik, 2008; Kemper, 2001). On the other side, authenticity has been studied from the standpoint of consumers, as something the latter build on in their relationships to commodities. These two “sides” of markets are treated as privileged sites to highlight the fact that authenticity is socially constructed. Notably inspired by the early works of Baudrillard (1994) and Bourdieu (1984), part of this research has fueled a criticism of modern capitalism, arguing that, in the context of mass consumption, the emphasis on authenticity is mostly a simulacrum that has nothing to do with the “real” qualities of products, and only serves to arbitrarily raise the commercial value of the latter and foster the dynamics of social distinction (Zukin, 2008).

Whether ostensibly critical or more nuanced, most of these works insist on what they consider as inherent incompatibility between authenticity and mass consumption. Because it is associated with the world of art, and with notions of uniqueness and originality, authenticity is at odds with the characteristics of industrially produced and widely distributed goods. Because it refers to a bygone past, a heritage, it is in contradiction with the hypermodernity that characterizes contemporary consumption. Because it insists on localness and situated singularity, it is at odds with the globalization of markets and consumption.

Adopting a less confrontational and normative approach, some research works have highlighted the reflexive and collective dimensions of authenticity, which can be the object of various interpretations and can affect different aspects of the consumer’s life in addition to products themselves, from experience to relationships and even self (Leigh et al, 2006; Wang, 1999). In her pivotal book, Outka (2009) has refined the critical perspective on the role of authenticity in mass consumption by relativizing the paradoxical character of the relationship between the two. Outka notably refuses to reduce authenticity to a “refuge” value that would allow a part of the middle class to escape the throes of the symbolic and commercial devaluation at work in the mass markets, while benefiting from their facilities. She shows in great detail that what she calls the “commodified authenticity” is less a symptom of attempts to deviate from modernity than the central cultural phenomenon of modernity itself.

The constructivist approaches that have developed in studies of mass consumption present many similarities with the field of critical heritage studies, which has also emerged in articulating a critique of essentialist postures. Since the publication of the Nara Document on Authenticity, following the 1994 conference of the same name, heritage conservation has indeed undergone an important transformation, which has seen a culturalist perspective prevail among both professionals and academics (Smith, 2006; Villers, 2004). The most virulent critics in this domain have shown that not only the principles that inform heritage conservation are always dependent on geographical, economic, cultural and political

contexts, but the very idea of authenticity, as it has become stabilized throughout the twentieth century, is itself an instrument of colonialist politics that do not always speak their names (Clifford, 1988).

Two aspects are striking about the critical constructivist approach of authenticity. First, the absence of material considerations. It is as if the critique of realist and essentialist postures necessarily involves a pure and simple withdrawal from concrete and mundane material issues in favour of an exclusively symbolic understanding of authenticity, which is reduced to a matter of signification only, and therefore of language (see for instance, Shankar and Cavanaugh, 2012). The second aspect lies in the systematically “positive” reading of authenticity such perspective conveys. Apprehended as a value, authenticity is also presented as a resource. Something in which people invest to nurture mechanisms of social distinction. Surprisingly, as a resource, authenticity appears to be quite accessible to people who want to benefit from it. As if one simply had to point toward it to add a layer of meaning, and value, to any kind of consumption good or practice. In these studies, authenticity is constructed, or “performed” without these operations seeming to raise any particular problems. Authenticity rarely represents a constraint, for instance, and is not something that is difficult to deal with. It does not raise any doubts. People do not proceed to any investigation that would help them to discover what authenticity is or should be.

Such twofold framing, which primarily turns authenticity into an immaterial symbolic resource, is partly due to the fact that, as mentioned above, only two very specific aspects of the life of “authentic” mass-produced objects are examined in this body of research work: marketing strategies on the one hand, and consumption practices on the other, which are themselves generally reduced to the act of purchase or immediate consumption. Yet, authenticity, and the issues it raises, change radically when this narrow focus is broadened, and the analysis of consumer goods and their uses is extended to a longer time frame, from the moment of their sometimes delicate acquisition (Kjellberg, 2017), to the recurrent maintenance and repair interventions that punctuate the life of a large number of ordinary objects (Gregson et al, 2009). In these mundane moments, and especially during maintenance operations that remain largely overlooked, authenticity is not so much a resource or an abstract value as a practical problem that involves a direct relationship with matter. From the point of view of daily maintenance and repair, authenticity is less a resource than a concern. Something that has to be taken care of, and that raises a series of very concrete problems that consumers have to deal with.

In this paper, we follow this line of research and investigate the way owners of classic Mustangs deal with authenticity as a matter of concern and of care. In so doing, we depart from critical constructivist approaches in two ways. First, we consider authenticity less as an available cultural value than as a quality that has to be materially cultivated, and enacted during maintenance interventions, through very concrete and mundane practices. In this regard, we notably build on the work of Jones and Yarrow, who have shown that, in heritage conservation, authenticity is never a mere symbolic or cultural resource that people can rely on, but a property which is always enacted, emerging through normative documents, discussions between different experts, and interactions with the material of the buildings themselves (Jones, 2010; Jones and Yarrow, 2013; Yarrow, 2019).

Second, we insist on the “negative” aspects of authenticity, that is to say, on how concerns for authenticity constraint consumers. If authenticity is something that owners of classic cars can enjoy and benefit from, obviously, the daily experience of the latter shows that it is also a burden, something that they worry about. Such worries do not occur because owners

fear that their car may prove unauthentic, but because every maintenance intervention, every repair operation, and every ride represent a threat to their car's integrity. These ordinary events put them in situations of choices and inquiries that go well beyond a simplistic definition of "consumption". They confront them with the need to transform certain aspects of their car and thus affect the authentic features they care about.

To explore this aspect of authenticity, we draw on the notion of "attachments" which Hennion has developed in wake of James' pragmatism (Gomart and Hennion, 1999; Hennion, 2017). The notion is particularly useful to investigate the material and personal dimensions of the "connection" between people and objects without reducing it to the dualisms symmetrically conveyed by technical determinism and interpretative flexibility. Inspired by Foucault's work on the productive power of coercion, Gomart and Hennion (1999) first discussed this idea of "attachments" through a provocative comparison of two forms of addiction: that experienced by drug addicts and that experienced by music lovers. Although seemingly unrelated, these two forms of "passion" can be understood, they show, as situations of "self-abandonment" in which the attribution of action between women, men and things is unsettled to the point of no longer mattering. Material constraints, which fluctuate between the use of conditioning devices and the emergence of unexpected emotions, reveal both "the generous side of things" (Gomart and Hennion, 1999: 221) and the constraining dimensions of the coexistence between people and the things they get attached to. Hennion then deployed the notion to various amateur practices as a way of highlighting both the ambivalence and the generative nature of these bonds. Taking seriously the fact that people are getting "attached" to their classic Mustangs as authentic cars is essential, we argue, to understand authenticity as a practical concern and a source of constraints rather than as a solely valuable symbolic resource.

Finally, following both the path of "enacted authenticity" and "attachments" will allow us to highlight another important aspect of the relationships between consumers and mass-consumption goods, namely the role of things "themselves" in the cultivation of their authenticity. May some of their parts resist, may they let certain of their material properties suddenly emerge during maintenance and repair interventions: classic Mustangs directly participate in their ever-emerging authenticity. In this process, they attach their owners as much as the latter are getting attached to them. In the following pages, we show that the relationship that grows between the cars and their owners through the practical concerns for authenticity bears witness to a common becoming along which some mutual attachments are weakened, some others are strengthened.

A recurring concern

The numerous and repetitive worries of classic Mustangs owners give a whole new perspective on the paradoxes of authenticity in a context of mass consumption which have been so often denounced by critical constructivist studies. It is indeed the antagonism between the need to preserve a form of authenticity on the one hand, and to take advantage of a consumption good on the other hand that the owners are confronted with. To put it simply, if their classic cars were "mere" museum artifacts, they could "simply" focus on the already immense problems that arise in art conservation (Domínguez Rubio, 2020). But their Mustangs are fully functioning cars. They bought them to drive them, not to stare at them standing still. As Tony explains very clearly, driving is for the classic Mustang an existential matter:

In “automobile”, there’s “mobile”. They have to drive. (...) The definition of a car is an object that must be moving. If you leave a car stationary, it doesn't make sense. It has to be run, it has to live. (Interview with Tony, April 2018)

The imperatives involved in driving are far from being purely symbolic and go beyond a “philosophical” position. Driving such vintage cars is indeed an essential condition to maintain them. Prolonged immobilization deteriorates the engine, and leaving one’s car in the garage to be turned into an inert museum piece is in fact jeopardizing its ability to ever get on the road again. This is something that the mechanic working on Cornelia’s car insisted on from the very beginning. When you don’t drive for several months, the fluids in the car don’t move and cause deposits. The engine oil, in particular, will deteriorate and change its consistency. Some of it will fall off, while a dry deposit will form on the upper parts. It is the same with gasoline. It evaporates in the engine, and stagnates in the tank. Small deposits (e.g. metal micro-fragments from the tank) fall to the bottom and reach the engine when the car is restarted, causing it to suffer damage.

Thus, far from experiencing an ontological incompatibility between authenticity and commodity, classic Mustangs owners deal on a daily basis with what they consider as the both sides of the same coin. This is less a matter of paradox as of very concrete practical tensions: not driving the car is absurd and causes deteriorations, but driving also multiplies the risks of damaging it. Indeed, if classic Mustangs are robust cars with basic mechanics, even rustic, without electronics, capable of driving even with a very deteriorated engine, they are, due to the years that have passed since they were first put on the road, particularly sensitive to various forms of deterioration. Living with, and driving a classic Mustang lead to a constant concern for its material vulnerability. During club meetings or car shows, car owners share stories about the crank of the window lifter that remains in the passenger’s hand who just wanted to reduce the airflow, the rear-view mirror that suddenly falls while driving on the highway in summertime, the windshield that cracks under the pressure of one too many pebbles – the sheer ordinary course of things. Then there are the more serious stories that narrate the breakage of a core element, the most dreaded being “throwing a rod” (a broken connecting rod is thrown through the engine and ruins it).

Breakdowns, and the repair operations that follow them, are the most striking occasions in which authenticity becomes a prominent issue. What is at stake here is mainly physical integrity. Each modification that is needed for the repair, and even more each time parts are to be replaced, bring out the risk for the car to turn into a less authentic classic Mustang, or worse, not a classic Mustang at all. What if the transformations go too far? What if repair does lead to the disintegration of the car’s authenticity? There are of course no simple and preselected solutions to these problems. We’ll show in the next section how such concerns are concretely dealt with, and how answers to these questions are found. Let’s focus for now on the simple fact that repair situations expose owners to far more complex choices than those faced by drivers of more ordinary cars. While the latter must mainly negotiate the rate of service and balance between the quality and affordability of the parts they need, owners of classic Mustangs are confronted with the scarcity of certain original spare parts, or even their complete disappearance. And each of the material interventions proposed by their mechanic requires them to make an ontological decision. As Margaux summarizes during her interview: “In fact, every time you break something, you question yourself, and sometimes you doubt”.

The fear of breakage and the magnitude of the decisions it confronts owners with, also weigh directly on the driving itself, which is anything but casual. Owners cultivate a *worried*

attention that speaks to the burden of the stresses involved in putting the integrity of their car at risk. They often mention, for instance, how they listen to the engine to know if everything is okay. As Margaux puts it: “It’s not just ‘I turn the key and it runs’. I’m listening to the engine, I’m listening to whether it’s purring well or not”. Attention is more generally paid to the general “behaviour” of the car, as owners have acquired over time a sensory knowledge of how their classic Mustangs behave on the road.

For the oldest cars, liquids (oil, coolant, brake fluid and power steering fluid when there is one), are also constantly checked, and manually, since the instruments allowing automatic control such as probes and dials are rudimentary and often considered unreliable. On some Mustangs, for example, there is no instrument indicating the state of oil pressure, and the available control light only comes on when the oil level is so critical that the car must be stopped immediately, or the engine will be damaged. As Tony humorously puts it, “it is the ‘too late!’ sign”.

These attentional behaviours offer a first view on the ambivalence of the attachments that tie owners to their classic Mustangs. Driving involves a corporeal relationship between the car and its driver in which the integrity of the former is inextricably endangered.

Symmetrically, it is through this privileged and intimate connection that the avoidance of an irremediable breakdown is at stake. Attachment unfurls in the subtle and repetitive sensory relationships through which the owner learns to listen to their car’s call for existence and durability. It is constantly nurtured by this unquiet driving, guided by a worried attention tuned on the automobile’s vulnerability. The “care of things” (Denis and Pontille, 2015) at play in this corporeal attention to fragility represents a real constraint, though. It may even prove problematic if sensorial expertise comes to nurture anxiety, and if attachment turns into paralysis. Jeremy’s case highlights this borderline point, where the most practical issues of driving come together, from the ontological dilemma experienced by classic Mustangs owners to its financial aspects:

When I take the Mustang, I have a knot in my stomach, and stress at every turn. I’m scared. This car is the most precious thing I have and with the financial setbacks I’ve had in recent months, if something goes wrong with it I won’t be able to fix it and I’ll only have my eyes to cry. It is no longer a pleasure, so I don’t drive anymore even though I bought it to drive; seeing it languishing in the garage for more than two weeks hurts my heart. That’s why I’m thinking very seriously about selling it. (Excerpt from a French online forum dedicated to classic Mustangs, Jeremy’s post on his Mustang thread, April 14, 2018)

Beyond breakdowns as such, the fact that the cars are actually used, i.e. driven, generates other occasions, or other reasons, for owners to challenge their concern for authenticity. Safety concerns, for example, raise specific issues. The classic Mustang has a low level of safety by contemporary standards (no seat belt or rudimentary lap belt, no ABS, etc.), and the possibility to enhance safety, for instance installing better driver and passenger protection devices, or more efficient braking systems, which would seem to be a moot point for another type of vehicle, forces owners to make delicate choices. This is also true about features that improve the driving experience more generally, such as the decoupling of taillights and turn signals, which is not present on all models and which some people decide to implement. What is at stake here is the balance between the car’s “driveability” and its necessary integrity. This is what experienced Margaux, whose tendonitis made it very difficult to drive her car.

And in April 2016 I had the power steering put in, because it was pretty hard to drive, and it was hurting me. I had tendonitis. When you drive for a long time – it's a special car, you need more attention – it's super tiring, so if on top of that physically you have pain.... My husband had to help me, he was a passenger and he was helping me, when I had to park, he was pulling with me to turn the wheels, with his arm. I was also losing reaction time in case of problems, while driving, so it was dangerous. Ah, I am so happy with the power steering, what a difference! (Interview with Margaux, July 2017)

Finally, various regulatory and material infrastructure sometimes undermine the ability of owners to ensure the integrity of certain aspects of their classic Mustangs, raising a lot of authenticity issues. In Europe, classic cars benefit from numerous legal exonerations in order to drive on regular roads. Interestingly, these exceptions are tightly connected to the cars' authenticity. Indeed, the European regulatory framework stipulates that "Vehicles of historical interest are supposed to conserve the heritage of the period during which they were constructed". To be considered as such, the car must be "historically preserved and maintained in its original state and has not undergone substantial changes in the technical characteristics of its main components" (EUR 2014/45 Directive). Thus, a collector car is allowed to be driven in the state it was in when it was first registered, usually with a limited annual mileage. The seat belt (absent, or only belly), the brakes, or the configuration of the front and rear lights are generally part of the common exemptions. Yet, other regulatory frameworks present direct threats for some classic Mustangs. Among them, many environmental regulations raise particularly sensitive issues. In France, for example, where vehicles display a sticker showing their pollution level, several cities have already banned cars with the highest levels, which include classic Mustangs. If these restrictions become widespread, most owners will have to make significant modifications to their cars to be allowed on the road. The mutations of physical transportation infrastructure may lead to the same kinds of problems. For instance, ethanol-blended gasoline is becoming more and more common in Europe, and this kind of gasoline is not really suitable for older engines. Another problem is the lead additive which has to be added manually to the modern unleaded gasoline: How long will this additive be available for purchase? The very conditions for the cars to remain "the same" while being technically able to circulate everywhere are becoming unreliable.

Authenticity is far from being a mere resource here, not even a symbolic one. It represents a permanent concern for owners who have to deal with the fragility of their cars, and a general instability that affects not only the object of their attention, which must be regularly transformed to be maintained and repaired, but also the infrastructure of their uses. But what does authenticity concretely consist of for owners? How do they manage to deal with the tensions we have highlighted? So far, for the sake of clarity of argument, we have stuck with a minimal definition, which boiled down to issues of integrity. Yet, authenticity is anything but a pre-established quality that could mechanically disappear altogether depending on the decisions that are made by the owners in each situation of doubt. As for heritage buildings, throughout the relationship between classic Mustangs and their owners, authenticity is "crafted" and "negotiated" (Jones, 2010; Jones and Yarrow, 2013). Authenticity is always in the making.

We will focus on this aspect more precisely in the next section. As a matter of concern, authenticity is also a "matter of care" (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017), which means it has to be cultivated, regularly rearranged, and re-enacted through actions that consist more in

“composing with” the situated, emergent things than in mechanical calculations between binary and predefined options.

Composing with classic cars

For most consumables (such as liquids, light bulbs, brake shoes or pads, ignition coils, air filters, wiper rubbers, spark plugs, tires, etc.), authenticity proves not to be an important concern, since both new companies, and historical ones provide compatible consumables for vehicles of all kinds of eras, for example the company Hella for light bulbs or Motul for oils. Some owners, though, look for original consumables that are still available as “NOS” (New Old Stock): original components that have been carefully stored for decades by professionals or amateurs. Most of these consumables are in the USA and quite difficult to identify, and to get, for European owners.

The concern is more pressing with wearing parts such as brake drums or brake discs, starters, water and fuel pumps, radiators, which inevitably reach the end of their life after a certain number of kilometres or years. For replacing these, each owner deals with various constraints, from financial means, to the availability of spare parts, or lack thereof... Reproduction pieces are nowadays easily accessible, notably through direct orders to companies in the USA or through intermediaries, with variable price ranges. However, there is growing criticism of the quality and origin of reproduction parts, which are often made in China with subcontractors and then transit through the USA. During classic Mustang meetings, it is not uncommon for an owner of a fully restored Mustang (with reproduction parts) to be gently teased: “Your Chinese Mustang is gorgeous!” The owner who is reluctant to use American or Asian reproduction parts can turn to remanufacturing: the part is sent to a specialized company in Europe or in the USA, then comes back, rebuilt. This possibility is generally more expensive and time consuming (finding the remanufacturing company for a given part and then shipping it, duration of the work and then reshipment). Yet, it represents a form of accommodation highly appreciated by most owners.

When the coil of Margaux’s Mustang got broken, she realized that the specificity of her engine required a special coil. She thus struggled with one of the doubts mentioned above: should she keep the original configuration for which it is difficult to find parts, or should she make a change that would make her life easier? Since there was no security or driveability requirement, Margaux chose a two-step solution. She ordered a reproduction coil from the USA as she needed the coil immediately, but also planned to have it remanufactured.

There are things I don’t want to change, because there is no reason to. For example, I don’t have an alternator, I have a generator (dynamo) and I had to change the coil last summer. It broke and I bought a new coil in the USA, which I was able to find thanks to the help of two people and I am happy with it. Several people told me “change for an alternator, so you’ll be quiet”, but I said no because in 1964 it’s a generator and I keep my generator! I kept the old coil, the original coil because I was told that it can be rebuilt here in the region. So I’m going to rebuild the original coil as well, so I have one in advance. I don’t want to denature. I’m also waiting for a new wire harness for generator-battery. It will be new, but like the old one.
(Interview with Margaux, December 2019)

According to their particular situation, each owner composes with authenticity with regard to various imperatives whenever a part breaks or needs to be replaced. Margaux installed the power steering on her car, kept her generator instead of changing for an alternator, but

also accepted to change the brakes when her mechanic said to her: “Braking assistance! The drum brakes don’t brake, they slow down, you need braking assistance, with your family in it, you should not take risks”. The mention of her children in the discussion was decisive: Margaux changed her drum brakes for assisted disc brakes.

In this kind of composition, the optional nature of the amenities that are implemented is considered crucial by car’s owners. Indeed, Mustangs have the particularity of having been highly customizable cars, and the list of options available for each model was impressive. The very first owners of the 1960s could order their Mustangs either as a basic model, or with options such as power steering, front disc brakes, assisted braking and air conditioning. The interior of the car was also optional, for example the addition of dials on the dashboard (rev counter), the colour and quality of the upholstery, the type of steering wheel. While it offered a comfortable choice for the then buyers, it is now thus valuable for contemporary owners as well. As Margaux puts it regarding both her new brake system and power steering: “[They were] optional at the time, so I still don’t denature anything”.

Another way to deal with authenticity is to undertake a revisable transformation, which allows to recover the initial configuration at any time. This is the option Tony took regarding the electronic ignition. Such modification has been debated for a few years in the classic Mustang community: The electronic ignition is reliable and stable, it regulates the engine which is beneficial to its longevity, but its replacement is a major departure from the original, as it eliminates elements of the ignition considered as “identity components”. Tony has put an electronic ignition but keeps his contact breaker points:

People know me for my fundamentalism, I am an aficionado of the origin. All my cars are almost full stock. When I say almost, it’s just little things like the electronic ignition, but I always have my contact breaker points in the glovebox. (Interview with Tony, April 2018)

Because modifications in legal and physical infrastructure appear as irrevocable and extremely hard to negotiate, they are also an essential element with which to compose. But since they may imply important changes, these compositions do not emerge out of the blue. Repair interventions on cars offer generally unplanned “opportunities” for owners to confront this kind of problem, and take a decision. This is only after a dramatic breakdown and the necessity to change the whole engine of her car that Margaux decided to anticipate the strengthening of environmental restrictions and install an engine that runs on unleaded gasoline.

I wanted the engine as close to the original as possible, but I was also reflecting about an unleaded variant. I’m someone who anticipates a lot, really a lot: for example, I chose a single-storey house, because I am already thinking about old age. We are in a period of traffic restriction in many cities, because the problem of pollution becomes important. And I said to myself, “since I just broke the engine and it’s not repairable, I’ll change it and maybe I can switch to unleaded”. I had heard about a possible adaptation of old engines for unlead, in special order. That way, if in the future there are restrictions on vehicles that still have engines requiring lead, I may have a chance to still have access to [the road], that others won’t have. (Interview with Margaux, December 2019)

Here again, for Margaux, the decision was not simply to make a modification “blindly”, but to find ways of accommodation that made this important transformation acceptable to her.

So I asked the garage to adapt a 1964 engine, but it's not possible, but for a 1965 engine it is. And as the 1965 engines started to be manufactured in September 1964 and mine is from July 1964, I am not too bad. And the price difference wasn't huge. The engine was made in special order in the USA, at an engine manufacturer. Visually you can't see anything, you can't see the adaptation. (Interview with Margaux, December 2019)

Accommodations are thus twofold. While upgrades are implemented and some components are replaced, modifying the material constitution of the car, the concern for authenticity is progressively reconfigured through various adjustments. Both the classic Mustang and its owner are transformed throughout this generative relationship. Interestingly, this mutual becoming does not go "forward" only. The biography of the car can also unfold "backwards", as aspects of her past come up throughout the accommodations.

Discovering the car

As the elements we have already pointed out suggest, composing with authenticity means for the owners to consider open possibilities, whose very terms are sometimes uncertain. In other words, far from being a "simple" matter of moral choices to be made among a set of clearly identified solutions, some of the material arrangements that are needed engage the owners into real inquiries, whose outcomes can be unforeseeable. Margaux, for example, has been trying for a long time to find out the mileage of her car, through numerous and varied detours.

What I do know is that from the beginning, the car has always been kept in a garage, out of the rain, as we saw when we took down the drip rails. It has been maintained by its owners. And I found the former American owner because when we dismantled the car, we found a certificate in the glove box flap. And then I did some research on the internet, and he hadn't moved. I wrote him a letter telling him that my name is Margaux and that I had his old car in my hands and that I would have liked him to tell me its story. I gave him my email address, he also had my postal address – I had even put a return envelope with my address. No answer. But the mail didn't come back either. I also went on Facebook, but found nothing. But yes, I would like to know the mileage. It must have gone around three times – when they restored the gearbox, they told me that it's probably three times. At least two for sure, it may be on its third rollover. (Interview with Margaux, July 2017)

These inquiries are important, not least because they may go beyond circumstantial arrangements with authenticity and result in findings — sometimes real discoveries — thanks to which the car is shown, and known, in a brand-new light. In particular, dismantling operations may reveal small objects or papers trapped under the floor carpet, behind the glove box, or in the ventilation system. Some owners find administrative documents relating to the car (for example an antique invoice), shopping lists that are 40 years old, keys, business cards, earrings... These clues enrich the biography of the car, its history. And these relics are often kept as memories, not of the owner, but of the car.

While some of these findings remain anecdotal, others have a greater impact. Clues can point to particularly problematic episodes in the life of the car. This is particularly the case with episodes concerning the engine block, a crucial part, and obviously the most expensive and delicate one to replace. When a part breaks inside the engine, it causes severe damage to the cylinder. Restoration of the block then consists of re-milling the cylinders (all the cylinders, not just the damaged one) so that the sides are once again

smooth and perfectly cylindrical. After this so-called “re-boring” operation, the width of the cylinders is slightly increased (0.02; 0.04; possibly 0.06). This operation can only be carried out two or three times in the life of an engine block, because then the space between the cylinders becomes too thin and the block may crack. The changes can be identified by the size of the pistons or, very rarely, by the rebored size which is stamped cold on the block before leaving the factory (re-bore following a first defective bore). However, these marks are invisible when buying a classic Mustang since, as with other vehicles, the engine is not dismantled.

Cornelia experienced a block restoration, even though she thought she was safe in that respect: the first owner, in 1970, kept the car for a few months and then sold it to the second owner who kept the car for 43 years, without any work on the engine. After having “thrown a rod”, her engine went for restoration. That’s when she found out that the block had already been rebored. It included a change that Ford had stamped directly, indicating that the first bore, in 1969, had not passed the factory quality control and that the block had been rebored before it was even released. The second reboring to be carried out at the time of the 2014 restoration has therefore put Cornelia’s engine block in a critical position. She must now take care not to damage the engine, at the risk of having to change the block altogether.

Whether promising or ominous, the discoveries we have mentioned so far reveal the biography of the car. They bear witness to a more or less rugged trajectory, sometimes touching, sometimes burdensome. In other situations, the folds of the car deliver elements that no longer merely refer to a series of events that have punctuated its life, but redraw the very contours of its origin. Margaux recounts the discoveries she and her mechanics stumbled upon when they decided to return her car to its original colour:

It was funny, when we were sanding, we came across all the colours: for example, it [the car] got Silver Blue, Caspian Blue, Silver Blue again and some kind of red. And it was less and less well done, red was the worst, in nail polish mode. (...) When disassembling, we found little bits of cloth between the windscreen and the sheet metal and when we sanded the sheet metal, there were light brown marks and they weren’t clear rust marks. We asked around: it probably had a vinyl roof when she came out of the factory. (Interview with Margaux, July 2017)

Margaux was convinced of the integrity of her Mustang until then. At the end of this almost archaeological excavation, she was faced with a completely unexpected choice. She had to deal with an element of the origin of her car that she had just discovered: “[The body shop] asked me if I wanted to go back to the vinyl roof and I said no, it keeps the water and everything, no”. But she wasn’t done with the discoveries. While restoring the body, Margaux also removed the two fender emblems (Mustang script) from her car, and noticed that they were not exactly the same length: one was 64.5 mm long, the other 65 mm long. She then asked around, and found an expert in the history of Ford Mustangs who explained to her that the “Mustang script” emblems were clues to the specificity of the year 1964 during which Ford released the first two Mustang models, a few months apart, these models being called 1964 ½ and 1965.

Margaux thus discovered fortuitously a piece of Ford Mustang history and a piece of her own classic Mustang history: one of the two emblems had been replaced in the course of time, for a reason that will remain mysterious (had the original emblem been damaged? Stolen?). And rather than looking for an emblem that would be consistent with her 1964 ½

model, she was fine to keep both emblems with their 0.5 mm. difference, as they are now part of her car's history.

As the twists and turns and revelations unfold, we can see that certain features of the original car are becoming clearer, while others are changing, sometimes dramatically. This dynamic of discoveries that punctuates the maintenance of the car resonates with what Yaneva (2008) has shown about a team of architects charged with renovating a historic building in Vienna. As the work progresses, the building never ceases to "surprise" the architects, she explains, echoing their own words. Taking these surprises seriously allows foregrounding the agency of the building, and of the car in our case, which, far from being passively submitted to human actions, fully participate in the process. Mustangs have their say throughout their maintenance.

Objects here act less as "moral agents" (Yarrow, 2019) that would only narrow down the range of alternatives, though, than as possible sources of opening and redirection. As Yaneva puts it, surprises are not simply "informative", but "disrupt the course of action" (p. 18). In our cases, we have seen that surprises reconfigure maintenance operations, and sometimes generate unforeseen choices or even new dilemmas that did not arise before the discovery. They also engage owners in investigations that are akin to those conducted by curators responsible for preserving "ethnographic" objects in order to reconstruct their properties (Cometti, 2016), or those of conservators who try to distinguish what is part of an artwork from what is an external trace, such as a stain, or the intervention of a previous, unscrupulous conservator (Kreplak, 2018; Domínguez Rubio, 2020). Rarely is a mark on the car's body or engine block sufficient on its own, let alone when it comes to learning unexpected things about the car's origin. Owners embark on real inquiries, sometimes enlisting new participants, using new instruments and documents, producing the conditions to make their Mustangs "speak" (Sanne, 2010).

Conclusion

In this paper, we investigated the relationship some consumers hold with mass-market commodities while caring for authenticity. We showed that, far from being a symbolic value only, or a resource into which people can "invest" in a mechanism of social distinction, authenticity can also appear as a burden that weighs constantly on the relationship. As the case of classic Mustangs demonstrates, throughout their uses, the cars are constantly transformed, especially during maintenance and repair interventions. Some parts are modified, others are mended or patched, some are replaced. Such material instability is of great concern for the owners, who apprehend them as threats that could jeopardize their car's authenticity. These worries are all the more significant as they are recurring. From regular trips to great journeys, to mundane maintenance and dramatic repairs: authenticity is a day-to-day concern. This result contrasts dramatically with most of the literature interested in "commoditized" authenticity, which insists on its cultural, conventional and discursive dimensions, and tends to neglect both its binding side for consumers, and its material implications. Taking care of the authenticity of a classic Mustang implies to concretely deal with the uncountable material components of the car, from its generator to its steering wheel, from the seat belt to the lights, from the paint to the ignition systems.

However, the burden of authenticity does not simply translate into binary moral choices only, that would force the owners to choose between clearly identified and stabilized options. Every maintenance and repair interventions, as well as other episodes of transformation, are

occasions of arrangements and adjustments. For the sake of security, comfort or health, because new regulations come up, or because parts may exist in various forms, more or less available, and more or less expensive, classic Mustangs owners constantly compose with different heterogeneous components, reshaping both their cars and their concerns for authenticity. This aspect directly resonates with the works of Jones and Yarrow on heritage conservation, who have demonstrated that the authenticity of heritage buildings is “negotiated” and “crafted” through collective operations that are inextricably discursive and material (Jones, 2010; Jones and Yarrow, 2013; Yarrow, 2019). While Jones and Yarrow insist on the heterogeneity of the perspectives that are gathered around the buildings, and on the tensions between expertises, the case of classic Mustangs invites us to highlight more individual and personal aspects of the concern for authenticity. Even though the owners participate in online discussions and meet regularly with some of their peers, even though they are advised by their mechanics, they are not confronted with stabilized “standpoints” among which they could simply make a choice. Each of their decisions takes a very personal touch, and cultivates their own version of authenticity as well as it nurtures their attachment to their car. Moreover, since these adjustments are made repeatedly, they drastically differ from the spectacular, and publicly debated, interventions on heritage buildings or artworks. Continuously re-enacted, through sometimes benign material operations, authenticity in the making takes part in the mundane dynamic of mass consumption (Dant, 2000; Gregson et al., 2009; Watson and Shove, 2008).

The notion of “attachment” is of great help to highlight some particular aspects of the intimate relationship that progressively grows between classic Mustang owners and their cars. As stated by Hennion (2017), thanks to its equivocality, the term allows us to grasp in a single gesture the “positive” and “negative” dimensions of what ties together people and things. Even though authenticity is a source of joy and pleasure for the owners, the fact that it generates constant worries is crucial to understand the entangled becoming of the classic Mustang and its owner. Moreover, attachments are always two-sided. Each part of the pair simultaneously attaches the other and is attached to/by it. Since it describes entities that are always both active and passive, the notion of attachment highlights how things themselves participate in the reciprocal relationship. Sometimes classic cars resist their owners, sometimes they oblige them. This is a crucial aspect of the ambivalence of care (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017) that the owners provide to their car. Things, as people, can be particularly demanding. An interesting feature of the relationships of classic Mustangs and their owners lies in their longevity. The attachments at play here grow over the years, as the car is transformed and its authenticity is adjusted. As our first mention of Margaux’s story suggests, sometimes the ties that bind people and things end up being so strong that they become unbearable. To such an extent that some owners feel “prisoners of their car”.

These growing ties progressively nurture the biography of both the car and its owner, including their past lives. One way for classic cars to act and react throughout the relationship indeed consists in providing unexpected clues about their origin, or hitherto unknown episodes of their lives. Such discoveries arise during the inquiries in which owners engage themselves while recomposing the contours of their car’s authenticity. We related this to Yaneva’s analysis of the “surprises” that architects encounter as they renovate a building (Yaneva, 2008). It is important to note, however, that the situations we investigated slightly differ from the one Yaneva studied. In her case, the surprises mainly represent deviations from what is anticipated, astonishment about the manufacturing methods, or about a building apprehended as a black box that happens to be more heterogeneous than expected. Surprises undermine (or sometimes facilitate) a stabilized renovation program, an

agenda for action. In this sense, the building is more or less “docile” to what one is trying to do with it. That’s not exactly what is at stake in the discoveries that owners of classic Mustangs and their mechanics engage in. While architects try to figure out how they’re going to intervene on the thing they’re renovating, owners sometimes end up asking ontological questions such as “What is that thing we’re taking care of? What is its history? What can we know about its original state, when it was first launched?”.

Each maintenance intervention is therefore both a test of integrity (the classic Mustang must not become something else) and an opportunity for the car to “makes itself knowable and lets itself being known” (Yaneva, 2008: 17). In this sense, driving and maintaining a classic Mustang, cultivating its authenticity day after day, and getting more and more attached to it also amounts to “getting to know” it, over and over again.

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