PEBBLE BEACH CONCOURS D’ELEGANCE



Yesterday **The Revs Program** was at Pebble Beach Concours d’Elegance – one of the greatest car shows in the world [Link]

Some of our students attended the show as judges to award

The Revs Prize for the most historically significant car in the show – a 1963 Porsche 901 prototype belonging to Don and Diane Meluzio of York Pennsylvania



It was a great day and an enlightening privilege to contribute to what is now part of automotive history and culture.

I have been reporting on the class and project since the spring [Link] [Link].

Topic – the question of the historical significance of the automobile – a key component of our contemporary culture.

Project – which car matters most in history? – design and implement a set of criteria according to which may be assessed the historical significance of particular cars.

Purpose – to raise awareness of the automobile's historical presence and the many ways that the car has made a difference to life today (what we can technically call its *agency*). To connect history with design and the presence of an artifact such as a car.

The variety of quite extraordinary cars at an event like Pebble Beach Concours is wide indeed. This year a 1912 Rolls Royce and a 1940 Tatra caught my eye, a 1906 steam car, some impressive Lincolns, and a fine showing of Porsche 911s and Aston Martins in their 50th and 100th anniversary year.

Which of all the cars on the lawn at Pebble Beach is the most significant? What

categories and measures of (historical) value are to be applied? There's bound to be disagreement. Any judgement of historical significance is going to be a compromise, at best a negotiation. The class researched principles as well as a sample of cars at this year's Concours, developed a voting system, and established a short list (after some impressive statistical processing). 18 of the Stanford class brought the short list to the show (not everyone of the class of 30 could come) for final evaluation and a decision in the presence of the cars themselves, owners too.

It was being in the presence of the cars and owners that proved to be decisive.

This might seem counter intuitive. The cars had been researched and all manner of historical factors assessed (relation to engineering innovation, association with people and events, relationship to styling and design, and much more). Nevertheless I argued towards the end of the class that historical significance is a matter of advocacy rather than independent value related to some kind of definable significances. **Historical significance is all about making a case** – that, for example, this car is more important than that [Link]. Making history is, in this sense, a matter of *rhetoric*. Stringing together an argument of stories, facts, features, connections, observations. And, as in all rhetoric, this might be done better or worse. This was exactly our experience yesterday.

Evert Louwman was quite lyrical, charming and persuasive about his 1910 Benz 22/80 Prinz Heinrich Renn Wagen. The physical presence of other cars seemed much less than what we had anticipated – less of a relationship in the car itself to what might make it matter in history. We had to stop and reassess. Because it really mattered how the car connected, in its physical features present before us, with the shape of the past.

Don Meluzio told us the story behind his Porsche 901 prototype – that the company had denied ever making it, until someone who had been in the factory shop in 1963 confirmed, when prompted, that it had indeed been the radical, and forgotten, experiment in the design of the most iconic of modern sports cars. And the story was embodied there in the car itself – the modified body parts, the rewelded fuel tank filler pipe – what in anthropology we would call *bricolage*, work-arounds and making-do, a true prototype of mix and match, that an idea might be realized and confronted in physical form. There in the car itself were moments of inspiration

and trial.

History is encountered most intimately in small things forgotten

It is in the encounter with what may well to be taken to be insignificant details of everyday life that history comes alive. Patina, yes indeed, the wear of life itself, but also the overlooked mark of an event or modification.

Life in the details – this could be a motto of the community of car enthusiasts! ("Do tell me more about the spark plugs of the 1937 Mercedes-Benz W125")

For a gallery of images from the week of car events on the Monterey peninsula see my website at – archaeographer.com [Link]

From the "dawn patrol" (watching the cars arrive in the Pacific mist at 6.00 am) to the award of the prize at 4.30 pm –

[portfolio_slideshow id=5751]



The Stanford team

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