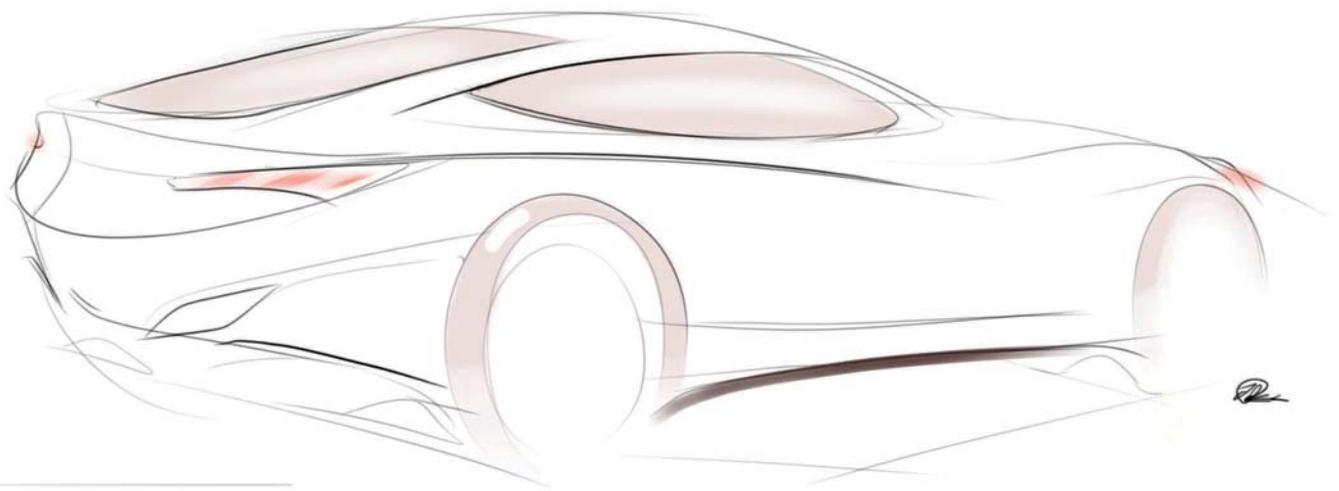


John's Worldly Ramblings / 4.30



Cars

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Because the stupid cocks at Gentile Automotive Group don't know what the fuck they're doing, I got to drive around in a 2009 Hyundai Elantra for ten days. This started as a review of that car, but it has turned into something very different. Before I get to that, here are a few observations of the Elantra.

What a piece of shit.

I'd call the four cylinder engine, as the big car reviewers would, *unrefined*. It's very noisy while accelerating, although it has a fairly smooth ride, even at interstate speeds. Still, because it's a rental, I have enjoyed redlining the fuck out of the engine, which is a little too easy to do. Like in my real car, it's pretty tough to redline: it's got a sweet V6.

In some ways, the Elantra looks like an animal about to pounce with its hindquarters raised in the air slightly. This wouldn't be so bad except that it's not an animal: it's a car. Also, it could be excusable if the car were faster and sportier. It's not. Also, it could be excusable if the car were sleek-looking. It's not. So, the styling is such that it makes me feel like I'm looking at an upward angle when I look out the back window in an ugly, not sporty, non-animal car.

But, still...I drove it like I stole it.

At some point in my driving the car to its limits (I did everything but mount curbs, and my anger toward the dealership didn't lessen my road rage), I couldn't help but notice the rear windshield started making this horrendous rattling noise. When I went to turn it back in at the dealer, I thought for sure I'd get busted when the rent-a-car place got it back, but all was fine. The dealer paid for the rental and I just had to pay for the gas.

The next day when I got a call from the guy I rented it from, I first off didn't realize who I was talking to. Then when I did figure it out, I thought he'd say, "The rear windshield fell out..." But he called to thank me and all that nice jazz.

Then when I got a call from the rent-a-car's call center a couple days after that, I was sure I'd been busted, but she just wanted me to rate the service of my local rent-a-car branch and to make sure I'd choose them in the future.

Okay, enough about that. On to the real Rambling.

Who owns who... or is it "whom?" *Whom* owns who? That doesn't sound right. Anyway, I've always found cross-branded, twinned or badge engineered cars interesting. You know... the same car sold by more than one company. At one point the Neon was sold as a Dodge, Chrysler *and* Plymouth. It's very common for a car company that owns multiple makes to badge engineer across its brands. Sometimes the car is practically identical as in the Neon case. More frequently, the differences are in options. The Ford Edge is essentially the same as the more luxurious Lincoln MKX; the Toyota Camry is a less luxurious Lexus ES; the Infinity QX has much in common with the Nissan Armada.

There are a couple reasons for this. The oldest is what's known as brand loyalty. Apparently there are folks out there who will only buy a Chevy. They'll buy a Chevy Tahoe, but not a GMC Yukon, even though they're the same. Whatever.

A little more complicated are the inter-brand badge engineered cars like the Ford Escape and Mazda Tribute, the Ford Fiesta and Mazda2, the Toyota Matrix and the now discontinued Pontiac Vibe, the Hyundai Accent and Kia Rio. In the case of the Ford/Mazda relationship Ford actually owned a sizeable part of Mazda, but Toyota and Pontiac never owned each other. What's the deal there?

Well, Toyota and GM have been partnered up for over twenty years and the Matrix/Vibe was not the first collaboration between the two companies. There are a lot of reasons for competing car companies to work together: they share technology, split the cost of everything from research and development to design to production costs (the two cars can be built in the same plant on the same line by the same workers), gain market share with a vehicle style outside the norm of what they normally offer. The only thing you have to understand is that if it wasn't profitable, they wouldn't be doing it.

The auto industry is no different than others in that consolidation has been the key method used to grow their business.

Here's a list of who owns who for car brands available in America (up-to-date as of April 2011).



ACURA Acura is owned by Honda.



Audi is owned by Volkswagen, and VW is 50.74% owned by Porsche. Volkswagen and Porsche will merge this year.



BMW also owns Mini and Rolls Royce.



Buick is owned by General Motors (GM).



Cadillac is owned by GM.



Chevrolet is owned by GM.



CHRYSLER **Chrysler** also owns Dodge, Jeep and Ram and is owned by United Auto Workers Voluntary Employee Beneficiary Association (59.2%), Fiat (Italian company) (30% with plans to increase to 50%), the US Government (8.6%), and the Government of Canada (2.2%). Daimler AG (German company) purchased half of Chrysler in 1998 and sold most of their holdings in 2007 before selling the rest of its shares in 2009.



Dodge is a Chrysler brand owned by United Auto Workers Voluntary Employee Beneficiary Association (59.2%), Fiat (30%), the US Government (8.6%), and the Government of Canada (2.2%).



Fiat also owns Alfa Romeo, Ferrari, Lancia, Maserati and has a 30% stake in Chrysler (Dodge, Jeep and Ram) with plans to increase their ownership to 50%. I include Fiat in this list of car brands sold in America because Fiat is reintroducing their cars to America, starting with the Fiat 500. Thanks to their part-ownership of Chrysler, they have distribution and showrooms already set up.



Ford also owns Lincoln and 3% of Mazda. Ford used to own Jaguar (1989-2008), Aston Martin (1991-2006), Volvo (1999-2010) and Range Rover (2000-2008). In addition, the Mercury brand was discontinued (1938-2010). Ford once owned a larger, controlling share of Mazda (33.9%).



General Motors owns Buick, Cadillac, Chevrolet, and GMC. GM also owns a controlling interest in Daewoo, as well as Opel and Vauxhall in Europe and Holden in Australia. Recently, GM sold Saab (1989-2010) and discontinued these brands: Pontiac (1926-2010), Hummer (1992-2010), Saturn (1985-2010) and Oldsmobile (1897-2004). Daewoo is in the process of being fully absorbed into GM and will no longer be a brand.



GMC is owned by GM.



HONDA Honda also owns Acura.



HYUNDAI Hyundai also owns 39% of Kia.



INFINITI Infiniti is owned by Nissan which is partly owned by Renault (French company) (44.3%) and Daimler AG (3.9%).



Jaguar is owned by Tata Motors (Indian company). It used to be a Ford brand.

Jeep

Jeep is a Chrysler brand owned by United Auto Workers Voluntary Employee Beneficiary Association (59.2%), Fiat (30%), the US Government (8.6%), and the Government of Canada (2.2%).



Kia is partly owned by Hyundai (39%).



Land Rover is owned by Tata Motors. It used to be a Ford brand.



Lexus is owned by Toyota.



L I N C O L N Lincoln is owned by Ford.



Mazda is partly owned by Ford (3% - down from a high of 33.9%).



Mercedes-Benz **Mercedes-Benz** is owned by Daimler AG.



Mini is owned by BMW.



Mitsubishi is its own company but over the years it has partnered with various car companies.



Nissan also owns Infinity but is partly owned by Renault (44.3%) and Daimler AG (3.9%).



PORSCHE Porsche owns 50.74% of Volkswagen. Volkswagen and Porsche will merge this year.

PRIUS

Prius is owned by Toyota. Prius will soon be a separate brand with additional models.



RAM

Ram is a Chrysler brand owned by United Auto Workers Voluntary Employee Beneficiary Association (59.2%), Fiat (30%), the US Government (8.6%), and the Government of Canada (2.2%). Ram trucks were spun off from Dodge into their own brand in 2009.



Saab is owned by Spyker Cars (Dutch company). It used to be a GM brand.



Scion is owned by Toyota.



Smart is owned by Daimler AG.



Subaru is partly owned by Toyota (16.5%).



Suzuki is its own company but over the years it has partnered with various car companies.



Toyota owns Lexus, Scion, Prius, Daihatsu, Hino Motors, 16.5% of Subaru's parent company and 5.9% of Isuzu.



Volkswagen owns Audi, Bentley, Bugatti, Lamborghini, SEAT and Škoda. Porsche owns 50.74% of VW. Volkswagen and Porsche are merging this year.



Volvo is owned by Geely (Chinese company). It used to be a Ford brand.

I know I omitted a few brands that are available in the US like Tesla, Fisker, Maybach, Lotus, and Coda, as well as other boutique and/or ultra-luxury and/or ultra-sports and/or electric car companies, but they're so rare I stand by the omissions.

I've been thinking about what kind of car to get for a while now, especially since I've been having so many issues with my current car. At first I thought I'd get a smaller SUV, or at least something with all-wheel drive, but then I started thinking about how much it hurt to spend \$72 filling up my tank a couple years ago and \$64 just last week. Fuel efficiency is a good thing. Besides, how frequently would a larger vehicle come in handy? For me, not very often. And all-wheel drive? Why would I want to make it easier to get to work in snow?

My car takes premium gas which is generally twenty cents more per gallon than regular, and while that works out to only about three dollars more for each full tank of premium, lately it's been sticking in my craw, especially since my car's fuel efficiency has dropped over the past couple years (it's common for cars to become less fuel efficient after several years). I vow to stay away from cars that require premium gas.

So, what do I want? A car. I'm considering sedans as well as coupes, and I'm receptive to hatchbacks. I saw an article that discussed the unwillingness Americans have toward owning hatchbacks. I get it – usually they're awkward-looking, but there are some hatchback models that look pretty nice.

I'd like to keep the price around \$25,000... \$20,000 would be better.

I'd love to own a car from one of the luxury car makers, but there are a few problems: almost all models take premium gas (although American luxury brands do it on regular). It used to be if you put regular gas in a car that specified premium, you'd get pinging, banging and eventual engine damage. That's not a problem anymore, but you do get reduced gas mileage and performance. Not only do luxury cars cost more (as does the gas), but so do insurance and repairs. These factors eliminate Acura, Audi, BMW, Infinity, Jaguar, Land Rover, Lexus, Mercedes-Benz, Porsche and Saab (a couple of these aren't specifically luxury brands, but they're priced like them).

GM has taken enough of my tax money, so there's no way I'd purchase a Buick, Cadillac, Chevrolet or GMC. Besides, the vehicles GM sells are pretty awful (I'm looking at you Aveo and Impala). The Volt is the oddest-looking car and the thing that is most

annoying about it is that GM was touting it for so long they changed the body styling by the time it made it to production. They didn't just show it off at car shows, but I saw it on commercials. They'd have a Chevy commercial and would say at the end, "...and coming in 2010, the Chevrolet Volt," and they'd show a very sleek car that actually became the new Camaro. And all this is happening fifteen years *after* their first viable electric car: the EV1. I would have bet that Buick wouldn't have made it through GM's bankruptcy.



Fiat 500

The same thing about my tax money goes for Chrysler, Dodge, Jeep and Ram, but I also have a personal hatred for Chrysler. I used to work in accounts receivable and the now-closed Chrysler engine plant in Kenosha was a customer. Getting Chrysler to pay its bills was a nightmare: not getting them to pay their bills on time... just getting them to pay the bills. They wouldn't get quotes; they'd just order stuff and then would literally guess at the price. If the price on our invoice didn't match what they guessed, they'd refuse payment. Then the buyer would have to be tracked down to change the price on their end and our invoice would have to be resubmitted. Chances were the prices would still be off and the process would start over. Chrysler once sent auditors to review *our* internal paperwork. If we did not allow the auditors access, Chrysler threatened to take their business elsewhere. For an entire year Chrysler told us they were taking a 5% deduction on all invoices and if we didn't like it, they'd take their business elsewhere. The Chrysler employees I interacted with had an air of entitlement. I could almost forgive Chrysler for its sins of the past but for the shameful behavior of everyone at Chrysler. So, when I see a Chrysler on the road I have the same reaction I have toward Taco Bell: disgust. I wished for the closing of Chrysler. The new Chrysler 200 is just a slightly remodeled Sebring, and it's so ugly that those neat commercials with the Eminem beats and gruff-voiceovers don't even show the car. The two-tone grill it has looks really stupid on the road. Now Fiat owns them, so I wouldn't buy a Fiat either.

At least Ford didn't go into bankruptcy and their cars are actually improving in quality, but I know too many people who have had Ford troubles for me to seriously consider buying a Ford or Lincoln. Still, the new Focus is pretty nice on paper and I've liked

the Fusion for a long time. It seems to me Ford is way more focused on their truck and SUV lines (you would be too if you sold 34 million F-series pickups).

My first car was a Honda, a Civic, and I'd buy Honda again... even though I think most of their styling is bland. I'd get a Civic or Accord coupe. I abhor the look of the CR-V, and I can't stand how many of them are out there.



Hyundai Veloster

I could see buying a Hyundai. A lot of people are still down on Hyundais (and Kias) because when they were just starting to sell their cars in America, the quality wasn't very good, much like the Hondas and Toyotas of thirty years ago. But they've come a long way over the past

five years. I'm hoping my car makes it through the spring without need for more repairs because Hyundai starts selling a new model called the Veloster (hatchback) in the summer and I'm interested in test driving it. It has one door on the driver's side and two on the passenger side – granted, it's a bit weird, but it's not too shabby. The new Elantra is actually pretty nice, too: a big improvement (visually) over the previous model I drove for ten days.



Kia Optima

I like Kia more and more. The new Optima is money. They took one of the most boring cars out there and made it look cool and aggressive. They also give you the option of a turbocharged 4-banger under the hood with horsepower most V6 sedans don't have (and on regular gas! Take that, Nissan Juke). The small Forte Koup is sleek, simple and attractive. It's what the Civic coupe *should* look like.

Mazdas are kinda nice. The Mazda3 (comes in a hatchback version) or Mazda6 would be the models I'd most consider. I have to give credit because Mazda is the only car company with a production car that uses a rotary, or Wankel, engine: the RX-8. I have a buddy with an RX-8 and he loves it. He says it's the closest you can get to a motorcycle experience in a car. The RX-8's redline in 9000rpm (just about the highest you can get in a production car) and the engine whines a bit like a motorcycle.

I like the Mini Countryman, the larger, 4-door, almost-an-SUV model, but it takes premium gas and Minis are expensive to repair.

Mitsubishi: Pass.



Nissan Altima (coupe)

the hell is that?" After a minute, I was digging it all over again. It has a bit of an Infinity look from the back and a totally unique profile and head-on view.

Prii, the new official name for more than one Prius, are very popular. The concept and execution are very good, but I won't get any hybrid (at least not for a while) because, currently, you gotta get many of your repairs done at a dealer. I want to be as free from dealer repairs as I can.



Scion tC

I currently have a Nissan Altima and I do really like it despite the issues with it over the past year. I plan to test drive an Altima coupe. Altimas come in four- and six-cylinders and happily, the six-cylinder Altima no longer requires premium. I was seriously considering the Juke, but I'm afraid it takes premium gas. I saw one on the road today and was like, "What

I'm considering the new Scion tC. Scion has a very good reputation for their quality. Also, I don't mind the xB. I wouldn't buy one, but I don't think it looks bad, and it's certainly an improvement over the earlier versions.

No way in hell I'd ever buy a Smart. Here are the good things about a Smart: good gas mileage, easy to park, small turning circle. That's it. The three-cylinder, 70-hp engine takes premium gas, by the way.

Some people think Subarus are lesbian cars, but I know reefer addicts also like them. The interesting thing about Subaru is all their cars come with all-wheel drive standard, however this prevents them from getting spectacular gas mileage. You have to admit Subaru has a style that they don't deviate from: all their cars look very similar. The new Impreza coming later this year maintains the Subaru corporate styling while

streamlining it into something a bit cooler (though not nearly as cool as the concept it came from) and they've seriously kicked up the mpg.

Suzuki: Pass.

The thing keeping me from really considering a Toyota is that they're so plain. They don't even make a coupe anymore. The Camry is fine. Their SUVs are nicely styled but pricey. Highlanders, 4Runners, Corollas and Camrys (maybe there are other models, too) all have what I call headlight nipples. Their headlights have nubs that stick out past the profile of the car. They look like nipples.



Volkswagen Golf

Volkswagen is the only company that makes diesel passenger cars (well, BMW actually makes a couple models, Audi [still VW] has two, Mercedes has three [also domestic heavy-duty pickups are available with diesel engines], but VWs have committed to diesel like no other [in America] and their models are affordable). I like the Golf (hatchback) more every

time I see it. It comes with a diesel and it gets gas mileage better than many hybrids. Word is the 2012 Beetle will also be available with a diesel engine. Of course, the problems with diesels are only a small percentage of gas stations have diesel pumps (the closest gas station with a diesel pump to my house is almost 4 miles away, meanwhile, there are 10 gas stations within a mile of my house), the price for fuel is often higher than premium (however when gas gets as high as it currently is, diesel prices don't rise on pace, and the mpg ratings for the diesel Golf are 50% higher than the regular gas Golf), and the sticker price for a diesel car is a few thousand more than its gasoline sibling. Other diesel issues (problems starting in extreme cold, dirty exhaust, etc.) are in the past. Fun fact: 40% of cars sold in Europe are diesel.

I'd pass on a Volvo. They're uncommon enough to be expensive to fix. Half their models have five cylinder engines that are fairly unique, unique means money.

So, I'm trying to keep myself in a holding pattern before I start test driving because once you start, they don't leave you alone. I asked for suggestions on Facebook for what kind of car I should get and the Batmobile and Porsche Cayenne were named. I think the Batmobile takes premium gas though.

My favorite car ever is the AC Cobra, or Shelby Cobra:



My least favorite car ever is the 2000's-era Chevy Monte Carlo:



John