America’s extreme fascination with motor sports is undeniable. The fastest growing professional and spectator sport is NASCAR, whose races now dominate sports media in the Southeast, and increasingly in New England, the Upper Midwest, and the Pacific states. Despite the media attention this month about the BCS Collegiate Championship game between the undefeated USC Trojans and the Oklahoma Sooners in the Orange Bowl, and the greater hype directed to the Super Bowl in mid-winter, the most well attended sporting event during 2004, as in previous years, was not a football game. Not even the 100,000 people crowding to see a collegiate rivalry between Michigan and Ohio State, Tennessee and Auburn, or USC and UCLA rivaled the density of the crowd at the two most well attended sports events in America last year. Top on the list was the running of the Indianapolis 500 on Memorial Day weekend. And the penultimate sports crowd in 2004 was the first day of Indy time trials! Auto races won the attendance trophy.

What’s the lure toward these motor sports as well as rising fascination with the Monster Truck Jam and motocross, which has drawn the largest crowd for a sporting event in Los Angeles since New Year’s Day? Perhaps it’s the ability of folks to identify with the sports. We’ve all driven or ridden in vehicles that have maneuvered past slower cars, or we’ve been clogged in traffic jams and yearned for the ability to rise above the road and make our way more quickly to our destination. Yet there might some deeper, more mythical attraction to the sports whose speed and power intertwine with the threat of destruction, the risk of life itself.

With this mythic mode in mind, Jeremy Biles creatively reflects on the meaning—and the deep magnetism—of the Monster Truck Jam, while embedding his analysis in the ironic counterpoint of his own road trip to the Black Sabbath extravaganza. No ordinary machines, these monster trucks: More than overgrown, they sport tires nearly as large as Rhode Island; they superimpose monster traits (gargantuan jaws, terrifying teeth, and malevolent eyes) on their bodies; they emit roars that could haunt nightmares; and they call themselves by names whose sounds wreak fear of chaos, destruction, and death. These mechanized freaks have turned the creative innocence and hopes of Henry Ford into a Frankensteinian beast. Often the human story of inventions is similar; intended to improve the quality of life, created products metastasize and threaten life itself. The automobile, intended to be more controllable and cleaner than horses and buggies, now endangers the life of humans with its pollution, its power, and its consumption of resources and energy.

The Monster Jam itself, however, is more than the display of giant vehicles; it features their interaction, their dramatized conflict, their wrestle not only with each other but with the cosmic forces of life and order. Although the aesthetic of the Monster Jam has been slighted by high culture, as Biles notes, the stories that the trucks and their drivers enact so clearly are the mythic clashes that long have been the subject of great theater. Let me draw a parallel between the kind of staged conflict and destruction of the Monster Jam and the “faux fighting” of WWF-style wrestling spectacles. In his essay “The World of Wrestling,” Roland Barthes explores the meaning of contests between wrestlers whose names exemplify their character: Hulk, Hitman, Razor, Hacksaw, and the Undertaker. In the performed grappling, throwing, and pinning that occur in these wrestling
events, Barthes observes, what the public wants is the image of passion, not passion itself. There is no more a problem of truth in wrestling than in the theater. In both, what is expected is the intelligible representation of moral situations which are usually private. This emptying out of interiority to the benefit of exterior signs, this exhaustion of the content by the form, is the very principle of triumphant classical art.

Similarly, the Monster Jam features the exteriorization of the interior turmoil that many persons face in this industrialized, automated age. Biles perceptively observes that they frequently feel depersonalized by assembly lines, closed circuits, and simple traffic jams; and in their constraint, they protest and hope, yearning for a chance to transcend the clogs of cars that close them in on freeways or to mangle the very mechanisms of their entrapment. Drawn toward the power of destruction, Monster Jam fans paradoxically subject themselves to yet another traffic mess in the feeder ramps and parking lots to which their pilgrimages lead, and they frequently pause to gape again at accidents on freeways that they hope to see mimicked in the giant trucks extravaganza.

While Biles’s analysis of the mythic meaning and lure of the Monster Jam is astute, his recognition of the suffusion of capitalistic spirit throughout the event and its economic impact is also instructive. Since he had begun his essay with Durkheim’s distinction between the right sacred (identified often with holiness, purity, and nobility) and the left sacred (associated often with sinister powers, impurity, and danger), I had expected that Biles would turn in the end of his analysis to another renowned early 20th century Continental sociologist of religion, Max Weber, who so thoroughly aligned the spirit of capitalism with the rise of Protestantism. Indeed, Biles’s conclusion—that “the real winner of the Monster Jam’s competitive ritual is corporate America”—is both stark and profound, despite the lack of correlation with Weber. For Monster Jam itself generates profits for corporate sponsors, advertising agencies, and professional performers while, ironically, many fans experience the extravaganza of mayhem and destruction as a kind of protest against the belittlement that capitalism often engenders.