

Folklore 320: Car Cultures

Fall term 2104: Tuesday and Thursday 10:00 – 11:20 in 204 Chapman

CRN 17255

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Office Hours: Tues. 9:00-10:00, Wed. 1:30-3:00

In this course we will learn about the history of the automotive industry, environmental issues arising from cars, and U.S. public policies on automotive safety, emissions, and fuels. This knowledge will be essential context for our study of car design and customizing as vernacular art traditions, a survey of some of the astonishing range of human behaviors and cultures with respect to cars and trucks.

Car Cultures takes a multi-disciplinary approach to one the most pressing social issues of our time: how can the world's people meet their transportation needs without depleting energy supplies, polluting the air and water, or ending up hopelessly jammed in traffic? These questions have no easy answers, not least because Americans' habits and desires, and the infrastructure of our society, have made us resistant to change, and are spreading to other parts of the world. As with many social issues in the U.S., automobiles arouse zealous critics and stubborn defenders. Our course cannot promise breakthrough solutions, but it begins from the premise that motorists' creativity and love of their cars can be part of a solution to the problems cars cause.

The major assignment for the course will be an interdisciplinary term project involving folklore or ethnographic fieldwork. Each student, or team of students, will select and research some aspect of car enthusiasm or automotive behavior, whether monster trucks or tuners or rat rods, muscle cars or minibuses, advertisements or repairmen, parking lots or critical masses of cyclists. There is so much about our automotive behavior that is curious, mysterious, or revealing.

Learning Objectives for this course

- understand social theory and humanistic research on automobility and car enthusiasms
- analyze environmental issues caused by cars, trucks, and traffic, and evaluate solutions
- learn about the history of the automobile industry, and its design, safety, and marketing
- engage in fieldwork and research toward a written project and presentation

Books available at the University Bookstore:

Tom McCarthy, *Auto Mania: Cars, Consumers and the Environment* (Yale UP, 2009)

John De Witt, *Cool Cars, High Art: The Rise of Kustom Culture* (U of Mississippi Press, 2002)

Daniel Sperling & Deborah Gordon: *Two Billion Cars: Driving Toward Sustainability* (Oxford UP, 2009)

Requirements:

Students are required to read all assignments (and view one film), to participate in class discussions and blackboard forums, and to complete the following assignments:

2 short papers of 4 pages each, due Oct. 16 th and Nov. 11 th	10 points each
Quizzes and participation (in-class and on blackboard)	20 points
Curbside Classic assignment due Oct. 28 th	10 points
Proposal for Final project, due Nov. 4 th	5 points
Class presentation of final projects Dec. 2, 4, 9 th	10 points
Final project, due December 11 th	35 points

The final project for the course can be designed to suit your skills and interests. It need not take the form of a written paper; it may be a photo essay, a website, or a series of audio or video interviews. Whatever form it takes, the project should involve both textual research and fieldwork. We will brainstorm in class to help develop topics, and, based on the topics that interest us most, may select additional readings for our meetings during the final week when students present their projects. I will schedule meetings with each of you during the first part of the course to discuss your ideas for a research and fieldwork project in automotive behavior, automotive sub-cultures, or the auto industry. Be creative and make a case for your project. The presentation of the project during the final two weeks of class will be 5-10 minutes in length, depending upon whether you are collaborating with a classmate, and I will provide feedback on how to revise or add to the project before the final due date.

Other Readings:

Articles and book chapters are posted on the blackboard coursesite, and listed in the schedule below. In addition, I recommend that you follow an auto-related blog or enthusiast site. As a start I recommend curbsideclassics.com, which was founded in Eugene, and is the model for the assignment to write up your own curbside classic. There are many many others.

Film Screenings:

The Fast and the Furious on Monday Nov. 17th at 7 pm in room 41, Knight Library

If you cannot make this meeting please watch the film on your own.

Schedule of Class Meetings and Assignments:

Part One: the first two weeks of the course will look at car cultures around the world, introduce the concepts of "automobility," "the humanity of the car," and other key ideas that suggest how to use social theory as well as historical, empirical and folkloristic approaches to develop research projects for our course.

Week One: Introduction

9/30 What does my car say about me? What do I know about other people based upon the cars they drive? Do I love my car, tolerate it, or feud with it? Do I control my car or does it control me?

Assignment: Brian Ladd, *Autophobia: Love and Hate in the Automotive Age*; 1-12 (read it in class)

10/2 "The car and its discontents" or "What is the future of the automobile?" Is it possible for us to imagine how to redesign our society and landscape so that we could live without cars?

Assignment: *Two Billion Cars*, chap. 1 "Surviving Two Billion Cars," 1-8

James A. Dunn, Jr. *Driving Forces: The Automobile, its Enemies, and the Politics of Mobility*, 1-22 [pdf]

Daniel Miller, "Driven Societies," introduction to *Car Cultures*, read 1-17 [pdf]

Homework for Tuesday, October 7th: observation of some aspect of automotive behavior; it may involve driving, traffic, parking, car enthusiasms, etc. This could be as simple as going to a parking lot and counting the number of domestic and foreign cars, of passenger cars and SUVs. We will brainstorm for ideas.

Weeks 2-3: The Car in Society and Art: theory and fieldwork.

10/7 Automobility and the 'post-car' era: John Urry uses concepts like "lock-in," "path-dependence," and "tipping-point," and we will add "externalities" as presented by

Miller. Using Urry, Miller and the chapter from *Two Billion Cars*, think about what will be most effective at solving the car crisis? incremental changes to incentives and policy such as CAFÉ standards, higher fuel taxes, and bicycle commuting? or transformative technological solutions such as electric cars or hydrogen fuel cells?

Assignment: John Urry, "Inhabiting the Car" *The Sociological Review* (2006), 17-30 [pdf]

Katherine Goodwin, "Reconstructing Automobility" *Global Environmental Politics* 10:4 (2010) 60-78

Two Billion Cars chapter 2, "Beyond the Gas Guzzler Monoculture," 13-45

homework assignment due

10/9 Driving around the World: The forces that reshaped the U.S. around the automobile in the 20th century; urbanization, hypermobility, expressways, pollution, traffic, and sprawl, are quickly spreading to other parts of the world in the 21st century, notably to cities in China, India, and elsewhere in Asia, as well as Lagos, Moscow, and Sao Paulo. It is happening at a faster pace than it did in the U.S., and these places have fewer resources to mitigate the problems. We will read about Africa and Australia to see how peoples in such cities and in remote regions have incorporated cars into their lives.

Assignment: Daniel Miller, "Driven Societies," introduction to *Car Cultures*, 17-33 [pdf]

Diana Young, "The Life and Death of Cars: Private Vehicles on the Pitjantjatjara Lands, South Australia" in *Car Cultures*, 35-57 [pdf]

Ted Conover, *The Routes of Man*, chapter on Lagos, Nigeria, "Drive Soft, Life Get no Duplicate," 263-278 [pdf]

10/14 Automobility in China: China has surpassed the U.S. as the biggest car market in the world. Is China specifically trying to emulate automobility in the U.S., or is the phenomenon transnational? Does the Chinese government see automobility as an essential part of modern consumer affluence? Can the Chinese learn from U.S. mistakes and successfully address the problems of pollution and congestion? How does the concept of the global commons and carbon emissions affect these questions?

Assignment: Ted Conover, *The Routes of Man*, from the chapter "Capitalist Roaders" 223-235 [pdf]

Two Billion Cars chap. 8, "Stimulating Chinese Innovation" 205-234

Peter Hessler, "Car Town: An upstart automaker targets the American market" *New Yorker* Sept. 26, 2005 [pdf]

"China's Driving Ambition" *Wall Street Journal*, Sept. 15, 2011 [link from blackboard]

10/16 The Automobile as Commodity and as Art: Key terms for today will be "the humanity of the car," "mass vs. popular culture," and "functional artifact vs. textual artifact." Let's try to look past the technological determinism that dominates *Two Billion Cars*, and is very strong in Urry as well. Let's stop thinking strictly in terms of markets, incentives, subsidies, and CO₂ and begin see the relationships, desires, and myths that make cars more than just appliances or commodities.

Assignment: Bernard Gendron, "Theodor Adorno meets the Cadillacs" in *Studies in Entertainment* ed. Tania Modleski (Indiana UP 1986), 18-30 [pdf]

DeWitt, *Cool Cars, High Art, The Rise of Kustom Kulture* chapter 2 "Making Art out of Cars," 31-51

Gene Balseby, "The Hot-Rod Culture" *American Quarterly* 2:4 (1950), 353-358.

first paper due: "Is the automobile a work of art or an industrial commodity?" or "How can automobility change to respond to the threat of carbon dioxide emissions?"

Part Two: The middle of the course is devoted to a history of the U.S. automobile industry and automobile design. 2008-09 was the most tumultuous year ever for the U.S. car industry; the bankruptcy of Chrysler and General Motors was affected hundreds of thousands of U.S. workers

and investors and posed a major challenge for the Obama administration's economic policies. These events echoed those fifty years earlier in 1957-59, when sales of the Big Three automakers dropped by 46%, consumer tastes turned against their flamboyant designs, and import brands such as Volkswagen gained a share in the U.S. market which has grown steadily ever since. *The Insolent Chariots* was a best-selling book of satire and cultural criticism, illustrated with marvelous cartoons, which lampooned the excesses of Detroit's tailfin era, as well as the shady practices of auto dealers. It is still timely today.

Weeks 4-5: The history of the U.S. automotive industry and design

10/21 The "Horseless Carriage" era & the Model T (visit to Lane County Historical Museum)
Assignment: *Auto Mania*, chapters 1-2 and part of 3, 1-45 (stop when topic shifts to Tetra Ethyl Lead in gasoline)

Julian Pettner and Nigel Turner, *Automania* (not the book by McCarthy) chapter 2, "The Acceptance of the Car" [pdf]

E. B. White's essay on the Model T from the *New Yorker* 1936, available at <http://www.wesjones.com/white1.htm>

10/23 The "classic" Era of the 1920s and 30s: class and craft, Fordism and Sloanism

Assignment: *Auto Mania* pp87-91 and 99-109

Emma Rothschild, *Paradise Lost*, chapter on "Fordism vs. Sloanism," 26-53 [pdf]

David Gartman, *Auto Opium: A Social History of American Automobile Design* chapter 3, 39-67 [pdf]

10/28 1950s styling: "The tale of the tailfin, and the edda of the Edsel"

Assignment: David Gartman on the Edsel in the book *Auto Opium* [pdf]

Keats, *The Insolent Chariots*, chap. 2, "Execrable Shapes"

Auto Mania, pp99-109

Thomas Hine, *Populuxe*, chapter 5, "The New Shape of Motion" [pdf]

curbside classic assignment due

10/30 The Rise and Fall of the Detroit Three

Assignment: *Auto Mania*, chapter 7, "Disenchanted with Detroit"

Keats, *The Insolent Chariots* chap. 3 "The Ad and the Id," chap. 4, "Sounds like 'Dead Cell'" [pdf]

Raymond Loewy, "Jukebox on Wheels" *The Atlantic*, April 1955 [pdf]

Ken Bensinger, "A vicious cycle in the used-car market" *Los Angeles Times* Oct 30, 2011

Week 6: Cars, externalities and regulation

11/4 Pollution, Safety, and Regulation

Assignment: *Auto Mania*, ch. 6, pp. 110-129 and chap. 8, 164-175

Ralph Nader, *Unsafe at Any Speed* chap. 1, "The Sporty Corvair, the 'One-Car Accident'" [pdf]

Two Billion Cars, chap. 3 "Toward a Greener Detroit" 47-77

proposal for final project due

11/6 Oil Shocks, CAFE standards, and Alternative Fuels

Assignment: *Auto Mania*, chapter 11, "Small was Beautiful" 207-230

Two Billion Cars, part of chap. 4 "In Search of Low Carbon Fuels" and chap. 5 "Aligning Big Oil with the Public Interest" 88-150

11/11 The Sport Utility Vehicle

Assignment: *Auto Mania*, chapter 12, "The Riddle of the Sport Utility Vehicle" 231-252

Shane Gunster, "You Belong Outside: Advertising, Nature and the SUV" *Ethics & the Environment*, 9, no. 2 (2004): 4-32 [pdf]

second paper due: a definition and discussion of a key concept we've used in class

Part Three: For the final four weeks we will study an array of automotive sub-cultures in Oregon and the U.S., or abroad. I've prepared reading assignments on some styles of car collecting and rodding, but special reading assignments for the last two weeks may be determined by the students' choice of research topics. Each student (or teams of two or three who may collaborate on a project) will do brief presentations, and I will comment with suggestions about how to develop the final project.

11/13 Hot Rods and Kustom Kulture

Assignment: DeWitt, *Cool Cars, High Art* chap. 1 "The Invention of Kustom Kulture," and chap. 4, "The Golden Age of Customs"

Tom Wolfe, "The Kandy Kolored, Tangerine-flaked Streamline Baby" [pdf] from book of same title

11/17 *The Fast and the Furious*: screening at 7 pm in Knigh Library room 41

11/18 Lowriders and discussion of *The Fast and the Furious*

Assignment: Mary C. Beltrán, "The New Hollywood Racelessness: Only the Fast, Furious, (and Multiracial) Will Survive" *Cinema Journal* 44:2 (Winter 2005) 50-67 [pdf]

Evan Watkins "'For the Time Being, Forever': Social Position and the Art of Automobile Maintenance" *Boundary2* 18:2 (1991), 150-165 [pdf]

Cool Cars, High Art chapter 3, "Blue Collar Modernism"; and

Michael Cutler Stone, "Bajito y Sauvecito: Low Riding and the 'Class' of Class" *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture* 9 (1990), 85-125 [pdf]

or

Brenda Jo Bright, "'Heart like a car': Hispano/Chicano Culture in Northern New Mexico" *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Nov., 1998), pp. 583-609 [pdf]

11/20 screening and discussion of "Who Killed the Electric Car"

Assignment: *Two Billion Cars* chap. 6 "The Motivated Consumer" pp. 150-178 and chap. 9 "Driving Toward Sustainability" 235-260

11/25 Cars and pop music: rock and roll hot rods, hip hop lowriders, and country pick-ups

Assignment: *Cool Cars, High Art* part of chap. 5, "Back to the Future" 115-124

Jeannie Thomas, "Pick-up Trucks, Horses, Women, and Foreplay: The Fluidity of Folklore" *Western Folklore* 54:3 (1995), 213-228.

12/2 Student Presentations

12/4 Student Presentations

12/9 More student presentations during the exam period, Tuesday at 8-10 am

12/11 by 5:00 pm Final Projects due