

Folklore 320: Car Cultures

Fall term 2016: MW 10:00 – 11:20 in 116 Eslinger
Professor Gordon Sayre
Office: 472 PLC Ph. 346-1313

CRN 16973
gsayre@uoregon.edu
Office Hours: Tues. 11-12, Wed. 12-2

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 of the most pressing 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, because the habits and desires of American drivers, and the infrastructure of our society, have made us resistant to change, and have spread 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 is 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, tuners or rat rods, muscle cars or microbuses, advertisements or repair shops, parking lots or critical masses of cyclists. There is so much about our automotive behavior that is curious, mysterious, and revealing.

Learning Objectives for this course:

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

Books available at the University Bookstore:

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

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

John DeWitt, *Cool Cars, High Art: The Rise of Kustom Kulture* (U. of Mississippi P, 2002)

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 papers of 4 pages each, due 10/17 and 11/23	15 points each
Quizzes and participation (in-class and on Canvas)	15 points
Car fieldwork homework due 10/3	5 points
Lane Co. History Museum worksheet due 11/2	5 points
Curbside Classic assignment due 11/7	5 points
Proposal for Final project, due 10/26	5 points
Mid-term exam, 11/21	10 points
Class presentation of final projects 11/28 to 12/8	10 points
Final project, due 12/9	20 points
TOTAL	100

Final Project

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 intend to 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 Canvas 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.

Schedule of Class Meetings and Assignments:

Part One: The Car in Society and in Art: theory and fieldwork

the first three weeks of the course will look at car cultures around the world, and 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 the course.

9/26 Do I love my car, tolerate it, or feud with it? Do I control my car or does it control me? What does my car say about me? What can I learn about other people based upon the cars they drive?

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

9/28 "The car and its discontents": Have cars ameliorated the problems of modern society, or worsened them? Is it possible to imagine ways to redesign our society and landscape so that we could live better 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 Monday, Oct. 3rd: 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 in class for more ideas.

10/3 Automobility and the "post-car" era: John Urry uses concepts like "lock-in," "path-dependence," and "tipping-point," and we will add "externalities." Using Urry, Goodwin, and the chapter from *Two Billion Cars*, think about what will be most effective at solving problems caused by too many cars: 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? And, will self-driving or autonomous cars now under development solve the problems of automobility or worsen them?

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

10/5 Driving around the World: The consequences of building the U.S. around the automobile in the 20th century--suburbanization, expressways, pollution, congestion, segregation and sprawl--are quickly spreading to other parts of the world in the 21st century; to cities in China and India, as well as Lagos, Moscow, and Sao Paulo. It is happening at a faster pace than it did in the U.S., and those cities have fewer resources to mitigate the problems. We will read about cars in Africa and Australia, and watch videos about Pakistan for a glimpse of how people have incorporated cars and trucks into their lives.

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

Jojada Verrips and Birgit Meyer, "Kwaku's Car: The Struggles and Stories of a Ghanaian Long-Distance Taxi-Driver" in *Car Cultures*, 153-184 [pdf]

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

10/10 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? Do the Chinese 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]

Two recent stories about Beijing from *New York Times* [links]

10/12 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."

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

Part Two: Automotive Enthusiasms as Vernacular Culture

In the middle of the course we will study various car enthusiasms or automotive sub-cultures in the U.S. I've prepared reading assignments on some styles of car collecting and modifying. This will help you develop ideas for final projects, and write up the proposal that is due October 26th. Additional reading assignments may be added based on students' choice of research topics.

10/17 Hot Rods and Kustom Kulture: The hot rod and the custom are (along with the collectible classic) two of the three major aesthetics of car collecting. Both emerged in the around WW2 in the U.S., particularly in California. The readings also examine the relationships between teen culture, pop music, and cars, and look at car customizing in terms of elite or high art and as popular or vernacular art.

Assignment: DeWitt, *Cool Cars, High Art* chap. 1 "The Invention of Kustom Kulture"

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

first paper due: "Is the automobile a work of art or an industrial commodity?"

10/19 Lowriders: The lowrider aesthetic first developed among Chicanos in California in the 1960s, partly in response to the hot rod and the custom, which had been dominated by Anglos. In the 1980s and 1990s it began to be pursued also by African-Americans, and so has had a varied influence on pop music and ethnic identity, far beyond California.

Assignment:

The Fast and the Furious: If you have not seen it already, please screen it (at UO library)

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

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

10/24 Cars, Trucks, Music and Gender: rock and roll hot rods, hip hop lowriders, and country pick-ups. One of the two readings is by a UO Folklore program graduate.

Assignment: Jeannie Thomas, "Pick-up Trucks, Horses, Women, and Foreplay: The Fluidity of Folklore" *Western Folklore* 54:3 (1995), 213-228; *Cool Cars, High Art* "Back to the Future" 115-124

10/26 "Who Killed the Electric Car?" Driverless, Electric, and Fuel Cell vehicles as automotive enthusiasms: Our final meeting of Part II is devoted to electric and hybrid cars. Some use electric vehicles as a vehicle of protest against fossil fuel corporations and politicians, others put electric motors into conventional cars as a modification or for racing.

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

Final Project Proposal due

Part Three: This part of the course follows the history of the U.S. automobile industry and automobile design. Just over a century ago cars displaced horses, trolleys, railroads, and bicycles and became the dominant transport mode. In the early years nearly all car owners had to perform regular maintenance and trouble-shooting, but only in the 1940s and 50s did car modification become a popular leisure pastime. In the 1970s the U.S. environmental movement grew in response to air pollution from automobiles, and regulation of emissions and fuel economy began. If 2008-09 was the most tumultuous year ever for the U.S. car industry, when the bankruptcy of Chrysler and General Motors affected hundreds of thousands of U.S. workers and investors, it was not the first such crisis. 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.

10/31 The "Horseless Carriage" era & the Model T (visit to Lane County History 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>

11/2 The "classic" Era of the 1920s and 30s: class and craft, Fordism and Sloanism

Assignment: *Auto Mania* pp71-91

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

Worksheet on Model T and Lane History Museum due

11/7 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]
Auto Mania, pp99-109

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

11/9 The Rise and Fall of the Detroit Three

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

Keats, *The Insolent Chariots* 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 [pdf]

11/14 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

Add something about the Volkswagen TDI scandal this day or the next, & delete something else

11/16 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

Second paper due: "How can automobility change to reduce the threat of carbon emissions?"

11/21 Mid-term Exam

11/23 The Sport Utility Vehicle: The SUV rose in popularity during the 1990s, and exploited loopholes in U.S. government fuel economy and emissions regulations. The fashion for SUVs reflected consumers' fantasies about nature, safety, independence, and politics.

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]

[10/24 Thanksgiving]

11/28 Student Presentations

11/30 Student Presentations

12/8 Student presentations in Final Exam period, 10:15-12:15 Thursday, Dec. 8th.

12/9 by 5:00 pm Final Projects due