

Folklore 320: Car Cultures

Fall term 2017: MW 10:00 – 11:20 in 117 Fenton
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Office Hours: 9-10 Weds. & 12-2 Thurs.

In this course we study car collecting and customizing as vernacular art traditions, and survey of some of the astonishing range of human behaviors around cars and trucks. To better understand cars we also will learn of the history of the automotive industry, environmental issues arising from cars, and U.S. policy on automotive safety, emissions, and fuels. This course satisfied the Arts & Letters group for general education requirements.

Car Cultures thus 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 solutions to the problems cars cause.

The major assignment for the course is a 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 minibuses, 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 efforts
- 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, 2009)

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

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 others.

Academic Honesty:

The University Student Conduct Code (available at conduct.uoregon.edu) defines academic misconduct. For example, students should not give or receive unauthorized help on assignments or examinations without express permission from the instructor. All work submitted in this course must be your own and be written exclusively for this course. The use of sources (ideas, quotations, paraphrases) must be properly documented. For explanations of plagiarism and proper citation of sources, see the UO library's research guide at [researchguides.uoregon.edu/citing-plagiarism]. If there is any question about whether an act constitutes academic misconduct, it is the student's obligation to clarify the question with the

instructor before committing or attempting to commit the act. Please contact me with any questions you have about academic conduct.

Accessibility:

Please notify me at the beginning of the term if this course will create disability-related barriers to your participation, and if you have a documented disability and an accessibility plan designed through the Accessible Education Center. If you need assistance contact the center in 164 Oregon Hall for a consultation : aec.uoregon.edu

Retaining Copies of Coursework :

Please retain copies of the papers, quizzes, and exams you have completed after they are graded and returned to you. If a question arises concerning the points earned on an assignment, it is your responsibility to provide these copies as documentation.

Deadlines, Extensions, Incompletes :

Papers and other assignments are due on or before the dates specified in this syllabus. Extensions or incompletes will be given only in the event of documented emergencies. You must notify me as soon as possible if you have an emergency that prevents completing an assignment on time.

Electronic Equipment :

Please turn off your cellphones when you enter the classroom. Reading assignments should not be read on a smartphone, but you may consult copies on a laptop or tablet. I encourage note-taking, and it is difficult to take notes on the same device where you are reading the course assignments.

Requirements:

Students are required to attend class, participate in discussions and activities, and to read all assignments (and view one film). You may miss two class meetings without penalty, but if you miss three or more you should provide documentation of a medical issue or an emergency.

Assignments and Grades:

2 papers of 4 pages each, due 10/11 and 11/13	15 points each
Car fieldwork homework, due 10/2	5 points
Lane Co. History Museum worksheet due 10/30	5 points
Curbside Classic assignment due 11/6	5 points
Proposal for Final project, due 10/24	5 points
Mid-term exam, 11/15	10 points
Class presentation of final projects 11/27 to 12/8	10 points
Final project, due 12/9	15 points
Quizzes and participation (in-class and on Canvas)	15 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. I will schedule meetings with each of you during weeks 4 and 5 to discuss 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. The presentation itself does not fulfill the final project assignment.

Schedule of Class Meetings and Assignments:

Part One: The Car in Society and around the World: 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.

9/25 Introductions: 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)

9/27 “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]

Homework for Monday, Oct. 2nd: 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 more ideas in class.

10/2 Automobility and the “post-car” era: John Urry, the sociologist who popularized the term automobility used the concepts “lock-in,” “path-dependence,” and “tipping-point,” to which we will add “externalities.” Using Urry and the chapter from *Two Billion Cars*, think about what will be most effective at solving problems caused by too many cars. Which is more effective: 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 solve the problems of automobility, or worsen them?

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

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

Fieldwork homework assignment due

10/4 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, Sao Paolo, and others. This is happening at a faster pace than it did in the U.S., and these cities have fewer resources for mitigating 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], **OR**

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*, “Drive Soft, Life Get No Duplicate,” 263-278 [pdf]

10/9 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

"A City Choking on Cars Hopes Commuters will Return to Two Wheels" *NYTimes* 11/12/2015

"Want to Drive in Beijing? Good Luck in the License Plate Lottery" *NYTimes* 07/28/2016

Part Two: Automotive Enthusiasms as Vernacular Culture

In the middle of the course we study various car enthusiasms or automotive sub-cultures in the U.S. I've prepared reading assignments on some of the many styles of car collecting and modifying. This will help you develop ideas for final projects, and write up the proposal that is due October 24th.

10/11 The Automobile as commodity and as work of 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

first paper due: Topic: "how can you imagine the U.S. reducing its dependence upon cars? Could you live without a car in your life? What would be necessary for others to do so?"

10/16 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 U.S. in the WWII era, particularly in California. We also will examine 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 Flake Streamline Baby"

10/18 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)

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

10/23 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

10/24 **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 began to displace horses, trolleys, railroads, and bicycles, and to become the dominant mode of transportation. 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. 2008-09 was a 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. 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.

10/25 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)

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

10/30 The "classic" Era of the 1920s and 30s: class and craft, Fordism and Sloanism
Assignment: *Auto Mania* pp71-91

Worksheet on Model T and Lane History Museum due

11/1 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]

11/6 The Rise and Fall of the Detroit Three
Assignment: *Auto Mania*, chapter 7, "Disenchanted with Detroit"
Raymond Loewy, "Jukebox on Wheels" *The Atlantic*, April 1955 [pdf]
John Keats, *The Insolent Chariots* (1958) chapter 4 "Sounds like 'Dead Cell'" [pdf]
curbside classic assignment due

11/8 Pollution, Safety, and the Regulation of Cars
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

11/13 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?" or "How or when is a car a work of art, instead of an industrial product?"

11/15 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]

Mid-term Exam

11/20 Autonomous Vehicles: Computing, automotive, and ride-hailing companies are competing to introduce driverless or autonomous cars, which have the potential to change not only transportation habits but urban design and economic behavior.
Ken Bensinger, "A vicious cycle in the used-car market" *Los Angeles Times* Oct 30, 2011 [pdf]
["How Will Self-Driving Cars Change Cities?"](#) by Henry Grabar, *Slate* Oct. 26, 2016
["Three Revolutions in Urban Transportation"](#) by Institute for Transportation and Development, University of California, Davis, May 3, 2011
["Is the Self-Driving Car Un-American?"](#) by Robert Moor, *New York Magazine* Oct. 16, 2016

11/22 "Who Killed the Electric Car?" Driverless, Electric, and Fuel Cell vehicles as automotive enthusiasms: 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

[11/23 Thanksgiving]

11/27 Student Presentations

11/29 Student Presentations

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

12/10 by 5:00 pm Final Projects due

Sociology and Social Theory

Automobility

The Humanity of the Car

path-dependence or lock-in

car/driver hybrid

Externalities of Automobility

Civil Society of Automobility

Art and Aesthetics (see Gendron, Gartman, DeWitt)

Functional Artifact and Textual Artifact

Part Interchangeability

Pseudo-individualization

Culture Industry; Mass and Popular Culture

Aesthetics of Car Enthusiasm: Hot Rod, Low Rider, Kustom, Collectible Classic

Manufacturing, Consumption and Marketing (see Rothschild, Nader, McCarthy)

Fordism

Sloanism

Vertical Integration

Capital-intensive

Communities of Consumption

Conspicuous Consumption

Emissions and Fuels (see Sperling and Gordon, McCarthy)

CAFE standards

Biofuels

VMT or vehicle miles traveled

Peak Oil hypothesis
Global Commons
“Carbolization”

Safety and Regulation (see Nader, McCarthy)

Smeed’s Law

Risk Compensation

Consumerism