

## Folklore 320: Car Cultures

Winter term 2022 ~ Mondays & Wednesdays 12:00 - 13:20 in 300 Villard  
Professor Gordon Sayre  
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Office Hours: Mon 10 – 12; Wed 2 – 3  
Zoom ID: 937 159 1095

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

Car Cultures also examines some of 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 desires of drivers, and the infrastructure of modern society, have made us resistant to changing our transportation habits. 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 that 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 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:

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

### Course Modality:

This is an in-person course, and we will meet during scheduled class meeting times in 300 Villard. If you need additional flexibility UO encourages you to consider asynchronous WEB courses. I will accommodate illness and absences as described below. If you need accommodation related to a medical or other disability, you can set those up through AEC (<https://aec.uoregon.edu>).

### Communicating with Professor Sayre:

Canvas is the platform we will use for accessing assignments, submitting coursework, discussion posts, and some quizzes and exams. You can also send emails to me through canvas, although I recommend a direct email to [gsayre@uoregon.edu](mailto:gsayre@uoregon.edu) because I check that more regularly.

Please also be in touch to tell me how you are doing in the course. If you are having trouble with some aspect of it, I would like to strategize with you. I believe every student can succeed in this course, and I care about your success. I welcome students to office hours in 472 PLC (Mon 10 – 12; Wed 2 – 3 during winter 2022) to discuss this course, or for advising help for English or Folklore majors. As Director of Undergraduate Studies in English, I manage advising for the department. If you cannot meet at that time, email me to set up an appointment in the office or on zoom.

### All members of the class should expect to:

**Participate and Contribute:** Students are expected to participate by sharing ideas and contributing to the collective learning environment. This entails preparing, following instructions, and engaging respectfully and thoughtfully with others. Together, we will establish more specific participation guidelines and criteria for contributions in our first weeks of the term.

**Expect and Respect Diversity:** All classes at the University of Oregon welcome and respect diverse experiences, perspectives, and approaches. What is not welcome are behaviors or contributions that undermine, demean, or marginalize others based on race, ethnicity, gender, sex, age, sexual orientation, religion, ability, or socioeconomic status. We will value differences and communicate disagreements with respect. We may establish more specific guidelines and protocols to ensure inclusion and equity for all members of our learning community.

**Help Everyone Learn:** Our goal is to learn together by learning from one another, to work together and build on our

strengths. As we interact on campus during this public health crisis, we need to be patient with each other, identify ways we can assist others, and be open-minded to receiving help and feedback. Please don't hesitate to contact me to ask for assistance or offer suggestions that might help us learn better.

**Books** (available at the University Bookstore):

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

John DeWitt, *Cool Cars, High Art: The Rise of Kustom Kulture* (University of Mississippi Press, 2002)

Other Readings: Articles and book chapters posted on the Canvas coursesite, and listed in the schedule.

**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. Please schedule a meeting during weeks 5, 6 or 7 to discuss ideas for this 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 should be 5-10 minutes in length, depending upon whether you are collaborating with a classmate. The project report, due on March 18<sup>th</sup>, must include material not included in the presentation, such as research or survey results, or additional photo or video. 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.

**Academic Honesty:**

The University Student Conduct Code (available at [conduct.uoregon.edu](http://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, consult [researchguides.uoregon.edu/citing-plagiarism](http://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.

**Absences:**

This course is designed around lecture-discussion and classroom activities that cannot easily be replaced by remote or recorded learning materials. I will be taking attendance each day and 10% of the grade is comprised of attendance, apportioned across the 20 class meetings.

However, the health and well-being of ourselves, our classmates, and our families requires that we all be aware of symptoms of COVID or other communicable illnesses, and stay home when we are ill. Watch for signs and symptoms with a daily symptom self-check; wash your hands frequently or use hand sanitizer; and complete the UO COVID-19 [case and contact reporting form](#) if you test positive or are a close contact of someone who tests positive.

**Academic Disruption:**

In the event of a campus emergency that disrupts academic activities, course requirements, deadlines, and grading percentages are subject to change. Information about changes in this course will be communicated as soon as possible by email, and on Canvas. If we are not able to meet face-to-face, students should immediately log onto Canvas and read any announcements and/or access alternative assignments. Students are also expected to continue coursework as outlined in this syllabus or other instructions on Canvas. In the event that I have to quarantine, the course may be taught online during that time.

**Mandatory Reporter Status:**

*"I am a [designated reporter/student-directed employee]. For information about my reporting obligations as an employee, please see [Employee Reporting Obligations](#) on the Office of Investigations and Civil Rights Compliance (OICRC) website. Students experiencing any form of prohibited discrimination or harassment, including sex or gender-based violence, may seek information and resources at [safe.uoregon.edu](http://safe.uoregon.edu), [respect.uoregon.edu](http://respect.uoregon.edu), or [investigations.uoregon.edu](http://investigations.uoregon.edu) or contact the non-confidential Title IX office/Office of Civil Rights Compliance (541-346-3123), or Dean of Students offices (541-346-3216), or call the 24-7 hotline 541-346-SAFE for help. I am also a mandatory reporter of child abuse. Please find more information at [Mandatory Reporting of Child Abuse and Neglect](#)."*

**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, at 346-1155 or [uoac.uoregon.edu](http://uoac.uoregon.edu)

### Deadlines, Extensions, Incompletes:

Papers and other assignments are due the dates specified in this syllabus, by 11 pm on that day. You need to notify me if you have a situation that prevents completing an assignment on time.

### Assignments and Grades:

Cars in Society debate 1/5	2	
Cars in China worksheet 1/14		3
Car fieldwork homework, due 1/17		5 points
Essay of 1000-1500 words, due 2/04		20 points
Detroit 3 brands quiz 2/16	2	
Curbside Classic photo essay and discussion board due 2/17	4	
Proposal for Final project due 2/18		5 points
Pollution and safety quiz due 2/22		4
The SUV quiz 3/1	2	
Mid-term exam on Canvas 3/04		15 points
Worksheet on autonomous and electric vehicles 3/8		3
Final project presentation 3/9 to 3/18 as scheduled	10	
Final project report 3/18		15 points
Attendance through		10 points
TOTAL	100	

### Grading Scale

The UO requires all instructors to include a numerical scale such as this on the syllabus! However, because this course has many small assignments, as you see above, I emphasize the importance of completing all assignments, rather than earning a perfect grade on some and skipping others. As I calculate grades at the end of term I may create a curve that differs from this formula.

F <59.5	C- 69.6-73.5	B- 79.6-83.5	A- 89.6-93.5
D- 59.6-63.5	C 73.6-77.5	B 83.6-87.5	A 93.6-97.5
D 63.6-67.5	C+ 77.6-79.5	B+ 87.6-89.5	A+ 97.6-100+
D+ 67.6-69.5			

### Schedule of Assignments and Activities

#### Part One: The Car in Society and around the World: Theory and Fieldwork (weeks 1-3)

The first three weeks of the course will examine car cultures around the world, and introduce key concepts of “automobility,” “the car-driver hybrid” and other ideas that draw upon social theory as well as historical and folkloric approaches. We will see how strange and creative car behavior can be.

1/3 Introduction: We will ask ourselves, and one another: Do I control my car, or does it control me? Do I love my car, tolerate it, or feud with it? What does my car say about me? What can I learn about other people (or what do I wrongly assume about them) based upon the cars they drive?

Activity: A worksheet that asks you to reflect on how you judge people by their cars, or evaluate cars by the people who drive them. Also, two questions about the Ladd reading.

Reading: Brian Ladd, from *Autophobia: Love and Hate in the Automotive Age*, 1-12 (handout)

1/5 The Car and its Discontents: Have cars solved problems of modern society, or worsened them? Can we imagine ways to redesign society and land use so that we could live better without cars?

Activity: Debating the Car. Consult the file “Car Cultures Debate week one” and the position you have been assigned, and post on the discussion board contributions to the debate.

Reading: James A. Dunn, Jr. *Driving Forces: The Automobile, its Enemies, and the Politics of Mobility*, 1-22 [pdf]; Gordon M. Sayre, ‘Carbolization’: Cars, Carbon Emissions, and the Global Discipline of Automobility” in *Accelerating Ride to Global Crisis: Transportation and the Culture of Climate Change*, ed. Tatiana Prorokova-Konrad, West Virginia University Press, 2020.

1/10 Automobility and the “post-car” era: John Urry, a British sociologist, popularized the term “automobility,” and also the terms “lock-in,” “path-dependence,” and “tipping-point,” to which we will add “externalities.” We

will look at past predictions about the future of automobility, and consider whether current predictions about a “post-car era” will prove accurate.

Activity: Watch “Futurama” film from 1939 World’s Fair; and video on the car in the supermarket

Lecture slideshow: “Automobility in the Past and in the Future”

Readings: John Urry, “Inhabiting the Car” *The Sociological Review* (2006), 17-30; Excerpt from Peter Norton, *Autonorama: The Illusory Promise of High-Tech Driving* Island Books, 2021.

1/12 Automobility in China: In 2010 China surpassed the U.S. as the biggest car market in the world. Has China been trying to emulate automobility in the U.S., or is the phenomenon transnational? Do the Chinese see cars as an essential to modern consumer affluence? Does the Chinese effort to dominate the electric car market reflect a retreat from the American model, or a big bet on it?

Activity: Watch videos of China traffic and elevated bus; slideshow lecture by a former student in this class; respond to 3 of 7 questions on Cars in China worksheet.

Readings: Ted Conover, *The Routes of Man*, from the chapter “Capitalist Roaders” 223-235; Michael Dunne, “The Dark Horse: Will China win the Electric, Automated, Shared Mobility Race?” from *Three Revolutions: Steering Automated, Shared, and Electric Vehicles to a Better Future* ed. Daniel Sperling, pp. 167-187; “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

1/14 Cars in China worksheet due

1/17 NO CLASS: Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday

Fieldwork homework assignment due: An observation of some aspect of automotive behavior; it may involve driving, traffic, parking, or car enthusiasms.

1/19 Driving around the World: Automobility as created in the U.S. in the 20th century--suburbanization, expressways, pollution, congestion, segregation, sprawl--are 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 many 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. Cars also change remote and rural areas. We will read about cars in outback Australia, and watch videos about Pakistan and other places for a glimpse of how people rely upon cars and trucks even as roads are bad or non-existent.

Activity: Screen documentary about truck drivers in Pakistan, and watch another episode on youtube of the documentary series “Les Routes de l’Impossible” dubbed into English as “World’s Most Dangerous Roads”: Madagascar, Ladakh, Congo, Guinea, etc.

Readings: Diana Young, “The Life and Death of Cars: Private Vehicles on the Pitjantjatjara Lands, South Australia” in *Car Cultures*, ed. Daniel Miller (Berg, 2001), 35-57; Ted Conover, *The Routes of Man*, “Drive Soft, Life Get No Duplicate,” 263-278

## **Part Two: Automotive Enthusiasms as Vernacular Culture (weeks 4-5)**

In the middle part of the course, we study various car enthusiasms or automotive sub-cultures in the U.S. We have reading assignments on some of the many styles of car collecting and modifying. These may help you develop ideas for final projects, and to write up the proposal that is due on February 18<sup>th</sup>

1/24 The Automobile as Commodity and as Work of Art: Key terms here include “the humanity of the car,” “mass vs. popular culture,” and “functional artifact vs. textual artifact.”

Lecture slideshow: “Adorno and the Cadillacs: The Car as a Work of Art in Capitalist Culture”

Readings: Bernard Gendron, “Theodor Adorno meets the Cadillacs” from *Studies in Entertainment* ed. Tania Modleski (Indiana UP: 1986), 18-30; John DeWitt, *Cool Cars, High Art, The Rise of Kustom Kulture* chapter 2, “Making Art out of Cars,” 31-51

1/26 Hot Rods and Kustom Kulture: The hot rod and the custom (along with the collectible classic) are the three major aesthetics of car collecting in the US. The Hot Rod and Custom emerged in California before and after WWII. We will look at car customizing in terms of elite or high art and of popular or vernacular art, and explore various connections with class and ethnicity.

Lecture slideshow: “Hot Rod and Custom”

Activity: Discussion on how the aesthetics of hot rod and kustom compare to tuners, drifting, and JDM

Readings: DeWitt, *Cool Cars, High Art* chap. 1 “The Invention of Kustom Kulture”; Soo Ah Kwon: “Autoexoticizing:

WEEKS 5-7 schedule a meeting with Prof. Sayre, in office hours or on zoom

1/31 Lowriders: lecture slideshow "The Three Aesthetics of Car Enthusiasms"

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 has had a strong influence on pop music and ethnic identity far beyond California.

Activity: Watch documentaries, "Everything Comes from the Streets" and "Sunday Driver"

Reading/Screening: Michael Cutler Stone, "Bajito y Sauvecito: Low Riding and the 'Class' of Class" *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture* 9 (1990), 85-125 [pdf] *The Fast and the Furious*. If you have not already seen the first film in this Hollywood franchise series.

2/2 Cars, Trucks, Music and Gender: rock and roll hot rods, hip hop lowriders, country pick-ups.

Activity: Match pop songs artists to the cars of their fans; watch country music videos.

Readings: 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" pp. 115-124

2/4 **Essay due:** see the topics and rubrics on module #2

### **Part Three: History of the U.S. automobile industry, its designs, and regulatory issues (weeks 6-9)**

Around 1900 cars began to displace horses, trolleys, railroads, and bicycles to become a dominant mode of transportation. The Model T was the first mass-market success that brought automobility to rural areas and the middle classes. After WWII car designs were inspired by planes and rockets of the space age. In the 1970s the U.S. environmental movement grew in response to air pollution from automobiles, and regulation of emissions and fuel economy began. In 2008-09 the bankruptcies of Chrysler and General Motors affected hundreds of thousands of U.S. workers and investors, events that echoed those fifty years earlier in 1957-59, when sales of the Big Three automakers plunged 46%, consumer tastes turned against their flamboyant designs, and import brands first gained a share in the U.S. market.

2/7 The "Horseless Carriage" era & the Model T

Activity: youtube videos on "How to Drive a Model T"

Lecture slideshow: "Production and Consumption in U.S. Auto Industry"

Readings: *Auto Mania*, chapters 1-2 and part of 3, pp. 1-45; E. B. White's essay on the Model T in *The New Yorker* 1936

2/9 The "Classic" era of the 1920s and 30s: class and craft, Fordism and Sloanism

Lecture slideshow: "Fordism and Sloanism"

Activity: Detroit 3 brands quiz

Readings: *Auto Mania*, pp. 71-91

2/14 1950s styling: "The tale of the tailfin, and the edda of the Edsel"

Lecture slideshow: "The Aeronautic design motif in 1950s American cars"

Assignment: *Auto Mania*, pp. 99-109; David Gartman on the Edsel in *Auto Opium* [pdf]; Thomas Hine, *Populuxe*, chapter 5, "The New Shape of Motion" [pdf]

2/16 The Rise and Fall of the Detroit Three

Watch Edsel TV advertisements

Activity: worksheet or Canvas quiz on cars of 1950s

Readings: *Auto Mania*, ch. 7, "Disenchanted with Detroit"; Raymond Loewy, "Jukebox on Wheels" *The Atlantic*, April 1955; John Keats, *The Insolent Chariots* (1958) ch. 4 "Sounds like 'Dead Cell'"

2/18 **Final Project Proposal due**

2/21 Pollution, Safety, and Regulation of Cars

Activity: watch BBC documentary "Crash"; discuss how risk compensation and Smeed's law manifest in your own

driving behavior.

Assignment: *Auto Mania*, chapter 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]

2/22 Quiz on Pollution and Safety, on Canvas

2/23 Oil Shocks and CAFE standards

Lecture slideshow: "CAFÉ Standards and fuel economy"

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

2/28 The Sport Utility Vehicle: The SUV rose in popularity during the 1990s, and exploited loopholes in U.S. government fuel economy, safety, and emissions regulations. The fashion for SUVs reflected consumers' fantasies about nature, safety, leisure, and gender.

Activity: Watch SUV ads

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

3/1 Quiz on the SUV on Canvas

3/2 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.

Lecture Slideshow; Autonomous Vehicles

Assignment: "[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, 2017; Gordon M. Sayre, "The Humanity of the Car: Automobility, Agency, and Autonomy" *Cultural Critique* 107 (Spring 2020), 122-147. [pdf]

3/4 **Midterm Exam on key terms** (see the list on following page)

3/7 Shared, Autonomous and Electric 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.

Activity: watch excerpts of documentary film *Who Killed the Electric Car?*

Reading: "[Is the Self-Driving Car Un-American?](#)" by Robert Moor, *New York Magazine* Oct. 16, 2016  
The Urbanism Next website about Avs

3/8 Autonomous vehicles quiz/worksheet

3/9 Student presentations in classroom

3/? Additional optional meeting will be scheduled for more presentations

3/18 10:15 am Presentations during Final Exam period

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Folklore 320 : Car Cultures – Prof. Sayre

Key terms and Concepts of this course to study for papers, quizzes, and Mid-term exam

Sociology and Social Theory (see Urry, Sayre)

Automobility

The Humanity of the Car

Path-dependence or Lock-in

The 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, Tuner, Low Rider, Kustom, Collectible Classic

Manufacturing, Consumption and Marketing (see Nader, McCarthy)

Fordism and Sloanism

Vertical Integration

Capital-intensive and Labor-intensive

Consumerism

Communities of Consumption

Conspicuous Consumption

Emissions, Fuels, and Regulations (see McCarthy)

CAFE standards

Biofuels

VMT or vehicle miles traveled

Peak Oil and Peak Car hypotheses

“Carbolization”

Smeed’s Law

Risk Compensation