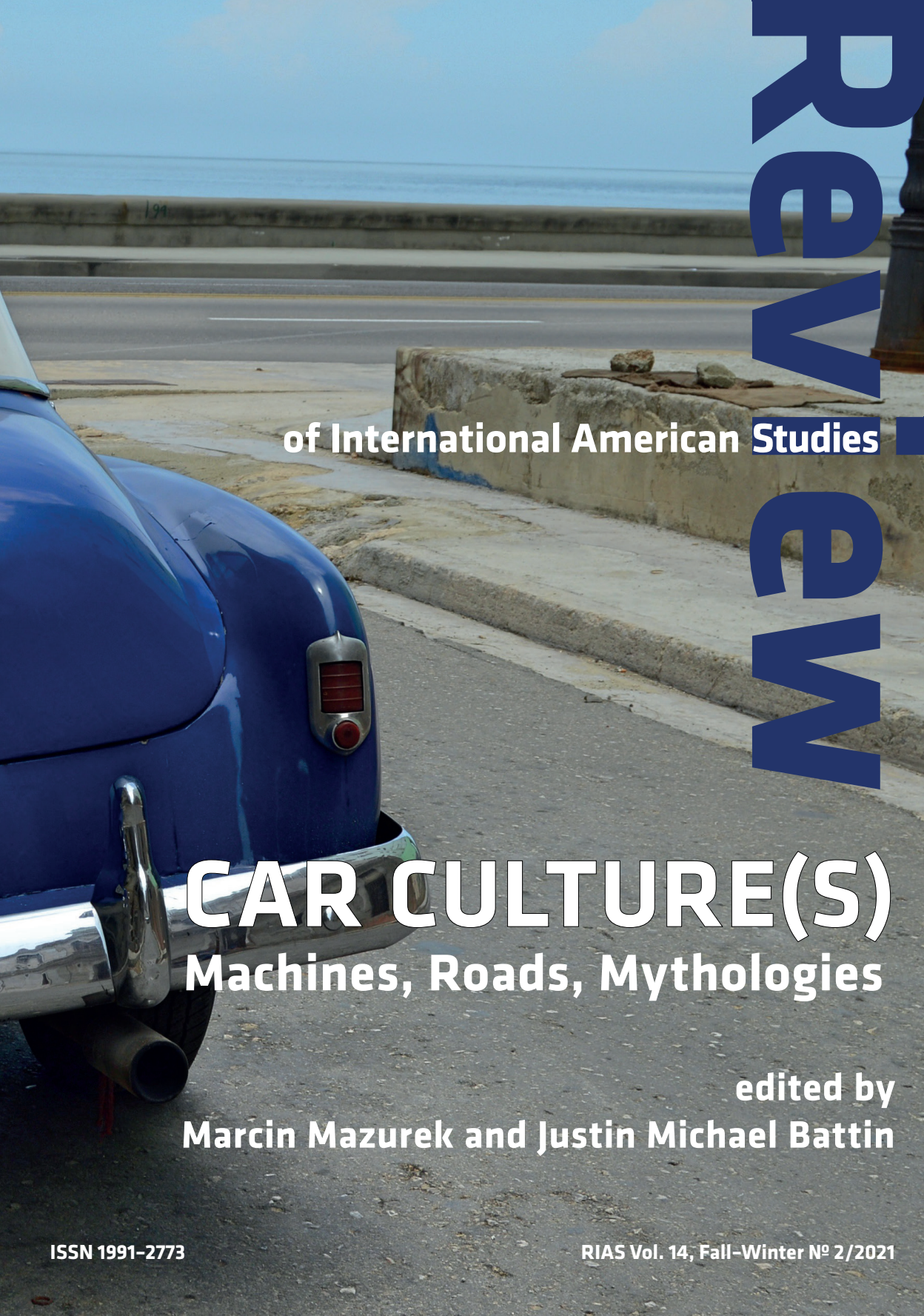

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CAR CULTURE(S)
Machines, Roads, Mythologies

edited by
Marcin Mazurek and Justin Michael Battin

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(S)CARS

Exploring America's Automotive Self

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The American Midwest. I am soaking wet, looking for a Walmart, and desperate. My footwear is ruined; the sole of my left shoe has come off in the rain, and now flaps pathetically with every step I take. I muster my courage and walk up to a friendly-looking passer-by, and, not daring (but very much tempted) to sneak under his umbrella, I ask where the nearest store where I could buy a pair of shoes might be.

"Ah, take the first left, and then straight. Five minutes."

"Thank you."

I do take the first left, and then walk straight. Five minutes. Evident absence of Walmart. Ten minutes. A Walmart billboard. Twenty five... Puddles larger than the Atlantic... still no Walmart. Why would the "nice man" lie through his teeth? And suddenly... there it is. Walmart. Of course.

It was me, stupid Paweł, an Eastern European rookie in America. Five minutes, indeed.

By car.

* * *

Beyond doubt, Grinnell College is one of the most prestigious liberal arts colleges in the United States, and so when the brilliant neurodiversity scholar, an excellent Melvillean, and acclaimed poet Ralph Savarese offered me a guest professorship there, I was as overjoyed as I was terrified. Above all, however, I was excited at the prospect of a long journey. The first four legs of it turned

out to be tiresome and boring, but easy: Katowice–Warsaw (a train ride). Warsaw–Heathrow (a flight). Heathrow–O'Hare (another flight). O'Hare–Des Moines (one more flight). The last 60 miles, albeit (theoretically) promising novelty of experience and therefore a far greater fun, could have proven far more difficult than the previous 6,000.

It *could have been so*, because Grinnell College—its excellence, well-deserved reputation, and friendliness notwithstanding—like many respectable institutions of higher education in the United States, is located in the middle of a very picturesque nowhere, the only artery connecting it to the world being the Interstate 80, which boldly crosses the fascinating endlessness of the Great Plains, greening with acres and acres of an awe-inspiring gamut of all the varieties of corn humankind has ever cultivated. Once in Des Moines, one quickly realizes that the AmTrak or Greyhound connections to Grinnell have long been discontinued due to the paucity of commuters ready to use public transportation. On arrival, one's options are limited to three: rent a car (and hope that your foreign credit card works), bum a ride (and hope that people will not be scared of your accent), or walk. Or, if you are really lucky, waiting in the lobby will be professor Savarese, who, feelingly, will have come to fetch you.

Of course, by car.

* * *

While in the Great Plains a car is a basic necessity, in other locations the very thought of owning one is strange. When you sing sea shanties, it is likely that the sailing clubs inviting you to give concerts in New York and its vicinities will offer you a lodging on board of a comfortable boat in the Kings Marina in Jamaica Bay. Accommodated at the far end of Brooklyn, however, a less experienced visitor to the City, a 'gringo,' whose concept of space is European, might be tempted to make his or her life easier. I have *experimentally* proven that one of the least intelligent ideas you may come up with attempting to cut the commuting time from the end of Flatbush Avenue to Western Manhattan is renting a car. If you are lucky (i.e. if it does not rain, if there is no roadwork, if there are no detours, accidents, or parades, if tunnels or bridges are all open), the 23 miles will take about 50 minutes to cover. But once you have arrived at your destination, a plethora of ominous signs,

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representing the whole of the legacy of Western and Eastern thought alike, will make you realize the gravity of your error.[1]

Fig. 1: Sunny Ripert, "Don't even think of parking here" (2010). Source: https://www.flickr.com/photos/sunfox/5085477774 (CC BY-SA 2.0).

Wherever you drive, you will face the somewhat deconstructivist imperative "Don't even THINK of parking here"[2]—staring at you from omnipresent signs and billboards. Not unlike *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, unauthorized vehicles are doomed to being "towed, crushed, and melted," "worked over with sledgehammer, flipped over by an angry mob, set on fire, and spray painted with rude slogans immediately after being used as a getaway car in an incredibly daring daylight robbery." You cannot but profoundly reflect upon your parking choices in terms of Werner Heisenberg's quantum mechanics when you learn that "the last car to trespass is still missing" and you cannot avoid thinking of the cruelty of obeseism and your own dietary habits when you encounter signs that read: "Don't even think of parking your big rear here," or "Parking for disabled persons, not for fat people. You should have a parking

1. All of the "No Parking" signs, whose contents are quoted in this article, actually exist. A simple Google search for images tagged as "no parking" AND "sign" AND "New York City" will bring up all of the material referenced in this section and much more.

2. —which is largely reminiscent of the words of the wise man from an Eastern parable, who offers the ruler of Baghdad a magic carpet which will only fly if the sultan refrains from thinking of a cow.

spot 3 miles away and be required to do jumping jacks all the way to the store ($1000 fine)." Ageism will rear its ugly head as well when you discover that the spot you find particularly attractive is "for nice old ladies only (Mean old lady parking in rear by dumpster)." Posthumanist reflection inevitably awakens when you learn that you are not allowed to park "[…] unless you are a turkey," or that parking space is reserved for: alpaca lovers only ("violators will be spit on"), beekeepers only ("violators will be stung"), butterfly lovers only ("all others must fly away"), Bigfoot only ("violators will be sasquatched"), and many, many other semi-human, non-human, or animal-relatied subjectivities.

Alternatively, local traffic hermeneuts of the elder generation, well read in Heidegger and Sartre, may ask you to "visualize yourself being towed," reminding you, at the same time, of the doctrine that "ignorance of law is no excuse." Expressed in a perhaps less elegant, but more efficient fashion as "stupidity is not a handicap," this concept presupposes a somewhat Darwinian idea of the survival of those, who develop intelligence in order to adapt best. Furthermore, your inclination towards a reflection upon the concepts of conjunction and alternative, especially in the context of the set theory, will skyrocket when you learn, for instance, that "People who park in front of [the] door are either blind, illiterate, ignorant f--ls; or residents of [the] house," or when you start wondering whether you really belong in the "Hippie parking only" zone, knowing that it is not you, but "all others" who "will be stoned." In this largely biblical context, soteriology (or Monty Python) comes to mind: you must beware that when you park illegally in a zone marked "Church parking only," violators "will be baptized," but if you are already dogmatically religious, the sign "Thou shalt not park here" will drive the point home anyway. If further argumentation is needed then signs proclaiming that "violators will be shot, survivors will be shot again," which message clearly reinforces the Calvinist idea of the inevitability of the doom for the unregenerate, may prove very convincing. If all that fails, expressionist poetic miniatures, such as "If you take my place I will break your face," might do the job.

Admittedly, not all of the New York City no-parking signs threaten you with fire and brimstone. You may also receive some friendly, educational advise. You may, for instance, learn that "Monkeys

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poop on windshields." Such valuable zoological knowledge is likely to cue your Cartesian reason to awaken, motivating you to seek a different spot. Yet, even more efficient are the signs positively laden with psychiatrically sound argumentation ("You gotta be nuts to be parking here"), or those transferring magic realism to social practice: "Customer parking only: all others will be toad."

Of course, occassionally, you are welcome to park. But when philosophy of friendship is exercised in parking areas, you are usually advised to consider the existential consequences of the choices you face. Knowing that although "It is not illegal to park here, […] you should be aware that [trucks] trying to get delivery access through the adjacent gates could seriously modify your car," or that, choosing a spot, you should "beware of a vociferous lady with a very short fuse," you realize that Newton's Third Law of Motion works in the spaces of aesthetics and social relations as well as in physics.

More often than not, however, the shamanist logic of the world threatens to be incontrovertible. Should you wish to test their patience, "the wrath of the Ancients will fall upon your head, your shoelaces will not stay tied, rabid squirrels will invade your home, food in your refrigerator will mysteriously spoil, your vehicle will start making that expensive knocking sound again and *no-one will talk to you at parties*. (You will also seriously piss off the b*tch who paid good money for the garage, and nobody wants that)."

After an hour of intensive learning, you arrive at the conclusion that your only choice is a fee-paying parking lot (about $75 per day) far away from your destination, and that irrespective of how far from the heart of Manhattan you are accommodated, you would rather shoot yourself in the knee than forgo the now magnetic allure of the public bus and subway in the future. Especially when all of your New York friends, whom you owe an honest explanation as to why you arrived late to band practice, roll on the floor laughing when you tell them that you came…

…by car.

* * *

My nerdobiographical humor aside, learning from (s)cars allowed me—and probably countless others—to not only acquire basic survival skills in the context of the norms of life in America, but also to appreciate the complexity of the American car culture,

which has proven instrumental in the shaping of the course of the US history of the last 150 years. Cars have built Detroit. Cars have been mobile homes to innumerable Joad families during the Great Depression. Cars have driven the Cheney-Rumsfeld oil wars. Even the typology of literary currents in America has proven to depend on a car-related incident. After all, literary historians would not have heard of the *Lost Generation* if not for the fact that Gertrude Stein was a driver.

Ernest Hemingway thus recalls the context, in which his friend and mentor allowed herself to reduce the war-time trauma of countless individuals to a single, offensive, label:

> It was when we had come back from Canada and were living in the rue Notre-Dame-des-Champs and Miss Stein and I were still good friends that Miss Stein made the remark about the lost generation. She had some ignition trouble with the old Model T Ford she then drove and the young man who worked in the garage and had served in the last year of the war had not been adept, or perhaps had not broken the priority of other vehicles, in repairing Miss Stein's Ford. Anyway he had not been *sérieux* and had been corrected severely by the *patron* of the garage after Miss Stein's protest. The *patron* had said to him, "You are all a *génération perdue*."
>
> "That's what you are. That's what you all are," Miss Stein said. "All of you young people who served in the war. You are a lost generation."
>
> "Really?" I said.
>
> "You are," she insisted. "You have no respect for anything. You drink yourselves to death...."
>
> "Was the young mechanic drunk?" I asked.
>
> "Of course not."
>
> "Have you ever seen me drunk?"
>
> "No. But your friends are drunk."
>
> "I've been drunk," I said. "But I don't come here drunk."
>
> "Of course not. I didn't say that."
>
> "The boy's *patron* was probably drunk by eleven o'clock in the morning," I said. "That's why he makes such lovely phrases."
>
> "Don't argue with me, Hemingway," Miss Stein said. "It does no good at all. You're all a lost generation, exactly as the garage keeper said." (Hemingway 2010:45–46).

"The hell with her lost-generation talk and all the dirty, easy labels"– the writer bursts out years later, reminiscing about the impact that the clash with Gertrude Stein had on him (Hemingway 2010:46). Unlike his mentor, who cuts him short when he attempts to draw

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her attention to the insensitivity of her comment, Hemingway, a former ambulance driver himself, empathizes with the hapless mechanic, whose war-time wounds, perhaps much like his own, would not heal. The paths of their common experience, masqueraded in the language of technical description, intersect in the cockpit of an ambulance:

> Later when I wrote my first novel I tried to balance Miss Stein's quotation from the garage keeper with one from Ecclesiastes. But that night walking home I thought about the boy in the garage and if he had ever been hauled in one of those vehicles when they were converted to ambulances. I remembered how they used to burn out their brakes going down the mountain roads with a full load of wounded and braking in low and finally using the reverse, and how the last ones were driven over the mountainside empty, so they could be replaced by big Fiats with a good H-shift and metal-to-metal brakes. I thought of Miss Stein and Sherwood Anderson and egotism and mental laziness versus discipline and I thought who is calling who a lost generation? (Hemingway 2010:46).

Although her original comment is off the mark, the formulation itself pinpoints the nature of the existential condition of Hemingway's generation very well: the Great War undoes the language, including the language of values, thereby eliminating guidelines that would organize people's navigation in the world before. The *Lost Generation* is *perdue* not because it is worthless, but because is has *lost its bearings* in a reality in which words like "honor," "love," "progress," "ethics," or "transcendence" lost their credibility in confrontation with the nature of the modern warfare.[3] Furthermore, the generation of parents who, remembering the Great War and the Great Depression, were content to heal their existential scars with material goods in which post-World War Two America abounded, gave rise to the generation of Holden Caulfields, Neal Cassadys, and other rebels–(allegedly) without a cause. Unable to engage their parents in a meaningful communication, and at a loss for words that

3. I dedicate much more space to the philosophical fundaments of the *Lost Generation* in a chapter titled "Zagubione pokolenia: Auschwitz, *Guernica* i wyczerpany język. Wokół powieści *Słońce też wschodzi* Ernesta Hemingwaya" [Lost Generations: Auschwitz, *Guernica*, and Exhausted Language. On Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*] (Jędrzejko 2017).

the prosperous Cold War America would understand, these 'rebels,' like James Dean and his iconic Jim Stark, would choose to live far too hard, drive far too fast, and often die far too young. It is some of these (s)cars that David Cronenberg brings back into light in his disconcerting 1996 film *Crash*, in which, in the face of the absurdity of life, he explores the psychoerotic allure of death.
By car.

* * *

If we agree that the car is a uniquely American symbol, we may choose to read America's turbulent history through the transformations of her automotive icons. Beginning with the Ford Model T, to Willys Jeep, to Chevy Bel Air, to Ford Fastback Mustang GT, to Chevy Corvette or, more recently, to the "safe" urban Hummer (one of the many military cars turned civilian) it is possible to trace the moments in history when fear yields to hubris, when hubris yields to humility, or when humility dissolves in the sheer pragmaticism of owning the wheels. One may *learn* America entering into an intimate relationship with her automotive self. One can *explore* America in four dimensions *by car*. And if we agree that modern American history has, by and large, been driven by, on, in, or in front of cars, we will also see how cars have become the vehicles of ethics, which could not be reduced to the simple fact that some carry provisions to those in need, others give individuals and groups a sense of self-esteem, and still others harbinger destruction. Ethics transform in the aftermath of major historical traumas. In America, the remaining trace of each such trauma is a (s)car.

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AMERICAR DREAMS
(An Introduction)

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Drive ten thousand miles across America and you will know more about the country than all the institutes of sociology and political science put together.

Jean Baudrillard, *America*

Even though Baudrillard's catchy piece of advice as for the most effective method of exploring America's landscapes (both real and imaginary) comes from his postmodernist travelogue limited to its titular country, it is probably difficult for anyone interested in contemporary car cultures not to extend Baudrillard's praise of the driving experience and perceive it in cognitive rather than transportation terms, not necessarily bounded by national borders. True, American driving culture and all its related contexts—its remarkable history, its contribution to social mobility, its spectacular cars, its mythologies, the list goes on and on—is not only the oldest one historically, but—given its ties with American life-styles, politics, social stratification and the overall consumerist mindset—also the most extreme one. From Henry Ford's Model T storming millions of American households at the beginning of the 20th century to Elon Musk's Tesla Roadster shot into space in the second decade of the following one, cars have shaped American horizons, both private and collective, like no other machine. In the process,

they have conquered most of the environments we inhabit or visit, leaving a permanent imprint on our lives, regardless of our relationships with or attitudes towards them. As Daniel Miller aptly summarised, "[w]e may not be enthralled to cars, but the relationship of much of humanity to the world became increasingly mediated in the course of the last century by a single machine—the car" (Miller 2001:1).

Miller makes an obvious point here, so familiar to all those who have ever explored, contemplated or enjoyed even a portion of their cognitive horizon through the windscreen: even though American automobility serves as a natural point of reference here, mediating our modes of being-in-the-world with the aid of a car is by no means an exclusively American phenomenon and not even a Western one. Regardless of whether their availability is a means of political control, like in the post-WWII Eastern Bloc countries, or whether they remain objects of consumerist desires in contemporary affluent societies, cars have successfully conquered our planet and ourselves, not least by facilitating social circulation and founding several industries, but first of all by both inspiring and feeding on our dreams of freedom, unrestricted travel and social promotion.

And it is precisely their relentless ubiquity combined with their formative influence on our collective and individual milieus alike that allows Miller to reveal what he refers to as "the evident humanity of the car" (Miller 2001:2). Miller proposes a perspective which "examines the car as a vehicle for class, oppression, racism and violence, all evident products of our humanity," adding that the car's "humanity lies not just in what people are able to achieve through it, nor yet in its role as a tool of destruction, but in the degree to which it has become an integral part of the cultural environment within which we see ourselves as human [...], a term that touches the specific and inalienable individuality of any particular person" (Miller 2001:2).

To Miller's notion of "inalienable individuality," we could add another context that contributes to cars' humanity and turns them into genuinely postmodernist machines, namely their ability to deconstruct most of the foundational binarities shaping our contemporary social horizons. In the public space of the road

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or street, no other machine seems capable of protecting our anonymity better than an inconspicuous Honda Accord or Nissan Altima,[1] or, on the contrary, of allowing for self-expression of our youthful energy and dynamic personality (or a mid-life crisis) than a Chevy Corvette convertible, thus locating us on the preferred side of the audience-stage, or private-public border.

Should we choose the latter option, possibilities only begin to multiply. Putting aside blatant examples of luxurious cars used as tokens of personal wealth and prosperity, American society's political preferences—consciously or not—fall neatly into visibly discernible patterns as demonstrated by the last presidential elections. According to *Forbes.com*, in the heavy-duty pickup truck segment, Republicans outnumbered Democrats by eight to one, whereas a Democrat was likely to be seen behind the wheel of a small or mid-sized hybrid or electric vehicle twice as often as a Republican (Howard 2020).

Does this mean that from the socio-semiotic point of view, cars have been promoted, and from the obvious indicators of wealth and lifestyle, they have been elevated into components of our political identity? Or perhaps they have gained a specific political identity on their own and soon for a prospective buyer will be described not solely in terms of their body types, powertrain details or engine capacity, but also as left- or right-wing ones? That day is probably yet to come, but one thing seems relatively certain today: the very fact that we have somehow allowed them to become part of the political debate and that they have secured a place at both ends of the political spectrum already means that the meanings we ascribe to them—and subsequently use as indications of our own agendas—are much more profound than we might think.

Naturally, the left-wing vs right-wing opposition as perceived through the prism of cars is by no means the only binarity at stake. Gender and race stereotypes are next (if not the first) in line. Even though cars, or automobility in general, has been traditionally treated as the domain of white masculinity where the battle of the sexes has been habitually won by men armed

1. See "Top 10 Most Popular Cars in America (2020)."

with the staple arsenal of speed, power, size, noise, skill and so on, it is easy to see that today the eponymous white masculine superiority has been significantly diluted if not pacified by the ongoing popularity of SUVs, especially the generally available mid-sized ones. Particularly in the context of gender stereotypes, SUVs seem to lead a double life. On the one hand—due to their higher ground clearance and four-wheel drive—they tempt men with the promise of exploration and domination over the natural environment, but on the other—due to their family estate-like boot space, numerous safety and comfort features and often seven seats, they connote family values and a general aura of domesticity and predictable family leisure.

This bridging of two prospective destinations, somehow combining external exploration with internal relaxation, and of the accompanying social and racial positions in one vehicle seems to have gone a step further, offering not so much 'a little bit of home outside of the house' but often a much more radical reversal of gender roles with men—white or otherwise—more and more often marginalized or removed from the picture altogether, a thing which has not gone unrepresented in, for instance, the discourse of popular advertising. The 2021 Ford Bronco Sport commercial features an all-(black)women outdoor expedition into the wild and remote American countryside, plainly unavailable for a non-SUV, whose opening mottos, as expressed by the African-American female off-roading hiker-bikers, are "They might think we don't. We do," "Think we won't? We will," and "Can't see us going there? Look harder."[2] A different commercial of the exact vehicle[3] features two women and a guy in another Bronco desperately trying to keep up with them and in the two--and-half-minute-long ad barely saying a word, while the women keep exchanging enthusiastic opinions about the Bronco's off-road capabilities, the blessings of its G.O.A.T (Goes Over Any Terrain) system, praise its horsepower output, and occasionally, although in a rather condescending manner, refer to the guy behind. In one go, three of white masculinity's classic stands—exploration, technicality and superiority over women—have been stormed and conquered

2. See "The 2021 Ford Bronco™ Sport: We Do | Ford."
3. See "The 2021 Ford Bronco™ Sport: Walkaround | Bronco Sport | Ford."

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by a group of active females, unafraid to go out there in a stereotypically masculine vehicle.

But the cars' ability to challenge and dismantle traditional oppositions does not stop at the doorstep of personal identity issues, even though to the political, racial and gender contexts we could add the social significance of automotive heritage, the role cars perform in forming sub-cultures, all manner of car-related sports often juxtaposed with pro-environmental issues, or their dabbling in various kinds of criminal and counter-criminal activities, to name but a few. All these have turned out to be indispensable components of American national identity, varied and diversified as it is, and yet sharing a number of common traits which turn a nation into a community. Built from childhood memories of family road trips, learning to drive in an empty parking lot, earning peer respect after a successful donut, despairing over the first fender-bender, repairing or customising one's first ride, or taking sides in heated disputes over the superiority of Richard Petty over Jeff Gordon, these automotive rites of passage cut across racial, class, religious, sexual or political differences creating a network of formative senses, at the same time unique and collective.

But that is not all. As objects in themselves, cars have been critically approached in numerous ways, not only those constrained to their personal/collective significance or everyday practical use, including the ensuing infrastructure, economic and environmental issues, and all the aspects which John Urry refers to as the "system of automobility." (Urry 2005: 25–39) They have also, if not in the first place given the subtitle of RIAS's current issue, inspired artistic works, representations and mythologies, creating an invisible infrastructure of meanings and emotions and, most importantly, further inspiring our contemplations of their more and more significant, though occasionally ambiguous, roles in our lives.

Nowhere have these roles been more spectacularly represented than in the world of art, notably the moving pictures. Hence it should come as little surprise that most of the papers gathered in this volume revolve around their depiction in films, television series, music and painting. Clearly, of all the above, cinema has turned out to be their most hospitable host offering cars their own movie genre—the road movie. But the favour did not remain unreturned;

cars' complex interactions with their drivers and their environments exceeded their roles of soulless machines carrying movie protagonists from point A to point B as they started to become legitimate partners in their drivers' or owners' exploits, elevating themselves to the status of proper characters or—pun intended—caracters.[4] True, not all memorable cars which (who?) marked their presence in America's cultural history—visual or otherwise—from James Dean's Porsche to JFK's Continental to Kowalski's Challenger to Ken Block's Fords, deserve that name, but, regardless of their significance for the stories they tell or participate in, they are all part of the vast space of America's semiotic heritage and as such contribute to and enrich that space's mythological potential.

However, to fully understand those visual narratives' myth-making significance a brief historical introduction appears necessary and this is where David Jones's article "America's Automobile: Affection or Obsession, Myth or Reality?" comes into play. Locating American car culture against the background of both social and political changes taking place in the 20th century, David Jones takes us for a journey not only across that culture's historical development but also across its makers, designers and, last but not least, customers partaking in the creation of its mythological foundations and constantly interpreting and re-interpreting the premises of the American Dream through the automotive lens.

That Dream, like most dreams, has its ups and downs, which are topically illustrated by the story of the Mercury brand in Skip McGoun's article "Crazy 'Bout a Mercury." Inspired by K.C. Douglas's "Mercury Boogie," the article offers an insight into the world of spectacular customisation, musical inspirations, and ruthless customer politics, sealed by the brand's tragic demise in 2011. But the story of Mercury is not to be forgotten. Like the story of Saab, it is a cautionary tale warning us about the machinations of corporate giants at the same time pointing to the fragility of less mainstream initiatives, which should be appreciated, if for no other reason, for their passion and originality, two traits so inspiring for all kinds of customisation projects, once again blurring the boundary between utility and art.

4. For a deeper analysis of the notion of "caracter" in car movies, see Mazurek (2020: 255–267).

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This boundary is further obscured, if not completely erased, in Ewa Wylężek-Targosz's "Car Painting in America," an article devoted to analyzing three of Edward Hopper's paintings, each featuring automotive motifs. Contrasting Walt Whitman's enthusiastic exultations of the existential possibilities released by hitting the open road and Henry Ford's bold promises of enabling each American family to "enjoy […] the blessing of hours of pleasure in God's great open spaces," with melancholic solitude radiating from Hopper's paintings, the article highlights the cars' silent presence in our relationships both with nature and one another, turning them into indispensable props of our experiential horizons, which—though often only partly present in our field of view—are nevertheless always there.

This subtle presence is juxtaposed with cars' identity-forming potential in Eric Starnes's "The Rebel Behind the Wheel," which explores various mythological paths in the *Dukes of Hazzard* TV series. Of those paths, one seems particularly important, namely the emergence of the Redneck Rebel, a modern-day cowboy figure who had traded his horse for a muscle car and epitomises a Southern anti-hero with all his (rather than her) staple features, including conservative American values as well as a rebellious attitude towards all forms of official authority (especially when they obstruct his moonshine running operations), a celebration of Southern individuality and, above all, the love of freedom and of 'doin' the right thing one's own way.'

Offering a contemporary insight into the road movie tradition is Sasha Gora's "Buddies, Lovers, and Detours," which analyses two films that, in the spirit of *Thelma & Louise* rather than *Easy Rider*, redefine the premises of the genre. Both *Queen & Slim* (2019) and *Unpregnant* (2020) challenge the idea of the road trip as a predominantly masculine adventure and place in their centre an African-American couple and two teenage girls, respectively. Though very different in terms of their plots, both movies dismantle the habitual affiliation of men with their machines and reclaim the road for those who, historically speaking, have been denied access to it, at least in terms of gender and racial stereotypes perpetuated by the movie industry.

But a closer look at the road movie genre will reveal that, in fact, it has never been preoccupied with white men and their machines only, as we learn from James J. Ward's "Existential Definition at the End of the American Road." Reaching into three classic movies of the 1970s, *Zabriskie Point* (1970), *Vanishing Point* (1971), and *The Gauntlet* (1977), the article exposes a number of much more profound contexts for which the road provides an intertextual outlet voicing dilemmas of the counter-cultural revolution, growing distrust towards institutional authority and existential desires for personal transformations. Through these concerns, the road unveils its true nature, so deeply ingrained in American culture, as the place of change, a peculiar testing field for political ideas and individual illusions alike, verifying them against the harsh realities of the utopian pursuits of ultimate truths.

Finally, by way of conclusion, in Tomek Burzyński's "Pandemic Automobility," we are returning to some of the original questions concerning the ongoing feedback loop between moving vehicles, social structures, and personal identities, this time from a sociological perspective. Approaching both the car and the social attitudes it evokes as an indicator of larger socio-economic operations, the article emphasises the dark side of American automobility, including health risks, environmental pollution, cruel economy and rampant consumerism. All these resulted in approaching the car as a source of problems rather than their solution, an attitude surprisingly reversed by the Covid-19 pandemic where the car is at least partly redeemed as a means of personal protection against the virus and facilitating social distancing without forcing its occupants to give up on their personal mobility.

Naturally, all the articles gathered in this volume—despite their diversity—do not cover or even discuss all the contexts in which we can locate the car, not least because of the limitations in publishing space. The real reason is that—as hopefully all the articles will demonstrate—the car is such an elusive and multi-layered object that grasping its universal and undisputable gist is hardly possible. As an object of material reality, technological complexity, aesthetic refinement, social mobility and personal phantasy, it may only be tamed by a partial definition, necessarily insufficient and selective. In fact, grasping its essence may only

be possible from a historical perspective, after its reign has come to an end and, who knows, perhaps not so distant in the future, when we will all be driven in (and by) sterile eco-friendly electric autonomous vehicles (of whom nobody makes movies any more) oblivious of the inexplicable magic of the open road, we will look back with regretful nostalgia and reminisce about the guilty pleasures of listening to the roar of a V8 or recall the pure sensation of chasing the vanishing points calling us from the ends of our horizons, both real and imaginary.

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AMERICA'S AUTOMOBILE:

Affection or Obsession, Myth or Reality?

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INTRODUCTION

Americans have displayed an affection for the automobile from its inception late in the 19th century, across the 20th century, currently entering the third decade of the 21st century. That is the thesis of this article, evidenced by constantly changing car production designs with upgraded performance specifications, together with automobile 'hype' on the silver screens of prewar movie theatres, in videos and advertising 'commercials' on postwar television, and on Internet monitors. Glossy magazine four-color photographs of cars prompted countless applications that gained value from 'drive up' motels, outdoor 'drive-in' theatres, fast food 'drive through' restaurants, even sprawling suburbs displaying 'bedroom' communities many miles away from urban centers where residents work. Most suburbs that emerged across the United States immediately following the Second World War were unreachable on foot. In America, public transportation is minimal in many regions. Places such as 'Levittown' offered returning military service personnel (veterans) an opportunity to own their own single-family detached home as an alternative to public housing, apartment-dwelling, or living with relatives. American suburbs owe their existence to the automobile (Manton 2012). This article will attempt to interface the fanciful with the practical aspects of motor vehicles, focusing on automobiles as they have evolved across periods of American history, burgeoning then shrinking

then growing again in size, horsepower, fuel consumption, cost structure, to meet changing characteristics of American consumer demand that remains rather constant in volume across economic cycles. Akin to the Liberty Bell at Philadelphia's Independence Hall, or New York Harbor's Statue of Liberty, or star-striped fictional 'Uncle Sam' as a cartoon caricature, the automobile has become an iconic symbol, actual or mythological, of what America is in spirit, of the practical freedom the country delivers to everyone within its borders.

From 1899 to 1999, the world of technology changed geometrically. It is continuing to change as we enter the third decade of the 21st century. Many of these changes have involved military or manufacturing technologies in which individuals participate as end-using consumers. Automobiles both inspire and reflect individual change itself: people drive automobiles themselves instead of merely riding on them as they do on airplanes, busses, or trains. So, when in movies or on television new cars are displayed, Americans consider this to reflect lifestyle changes for the population generally, as well as for themselves individually. Currently, the administration of US President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. is trying to change the hearts and minds of Americans by luring them away from cars and towards trains that are more economical and environmentally-friendly (Plumer & Popovich 2021). Time will tell if this planned change will be sustainable. If it will last, this can be only the result of a normative-re-educative approach; neither a power-coercive nor a rational-empirical approach is likely to work, to take strategies from Bennis, Benne & Chin (1985). Americans have not displayed concern for wasted gasoline or unnecessary carbon emissions. They do not reward politicians who try to tell them what to do.

Starting in the late 19th century, extending over the entire 20th century, and still going strong as the third decade of the 21st century begins, is America's affection for the automobile. Actually, one might say fixation or even obsession, because that affinity is so powerful that it embraces all segments of American society. Americans as a people are besotted by the automobile: cars unite them in a way ethnicity, politics, religion, even major league sports, have not done. This is evident from strong automobile sales charts

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that persist even during current cyclical economic recessions (unlike during the Great Depression when they slumped 75 percent), with dealership sales and profit margins maintained by 'captive lenders.' Examples of captive lenders include Ford Credit, Chrysler Capital, GM Financial Company, industrial lenders owned or controlled by automakers themselves (Charniga 2021). That Americans are mesmerized by the automobile is more evident from portrayals of the automobile in pictures, initially on the 'silver screen' in cinemas from silent films of the 1920s to 'talkies' of the 1930s, across wartime blackouts, on television from the 1950s, as well as in the sale of 'replicars' both capable of being driven on the highway and in miniature scale for children's play or adult collectors. America has changed its landscape because of the automobile: from the drive-up motel to drive-in cinema to drive-through fast food restaurants, then on to Interstate highways and eight-plus lane thruways ('freeways' in California) and wildlife crossings on bridges above or tunnels beneath highways from New Jersey to California, such as Colorado's Ecoduct (Vaičiulaitytė 2017). Some cars are timeless, such as Henry Ford's Model T. Others are iconic to specific generations: New York City mayor and songwriter James J. (Jimmy) Walker's c. 1930 Duesenberg 'J' (Wallechinsky & Wallace 1981) and Chicago mobster Al Capone's armored 1928 Cadillac Town Sedan, which was used to protect President Franklin Delano Roosevelt *en route* down Constitution Avenue from the White House to the Capitol Building on December 8th, 1941 to deliver his speech in which he asked Congress to declare war on Japan following its bombing of America's naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, together with naval and air assaults across Asia the day before. Most iconic of all, probably, is the 1961 Lincoln Continental limousine bearing Secret Service earmark 'SS-100-X' that carried President and Mrs. John F. Kennedy with Texas Governor and Mrs. John Connolly in Dallas on November 22nd, 1963. On that day and in that automobile, President Kennedy was assassinated, Governor Connolly was shot, and politics in America changed. When Connolly recovered, he left the Democratic Party, joined the Republican Party, and much of the South followed, making SS-100-X even more iconic.

In the early aftermath of World War II, General Motors engaged song writers Leo Corday and Leon Carr to script and compose "See the U.S.A. in Your Chevrolet, America is Asking You to Call; Drive Your Chevrolet in the U.S.A., America's the Greatest Land of All," thereby jumping on the post-war patriotic band wagon by urging a generation of new home owners to travel, selecting the GM Chevrolet as their family vehicle. This song became world famous as the theme song of *The Dinah Shore Show* on National Broadcasting Company (NBC), sponsored by Chevrolet division of General Motors from 1955 through the 1961 season. That song epitomizes the coupling of the American automobile with the United States as a country, together with American culture. As playwright Moss Hart reflected in his first Broadway play, *Once in a Lifetime*, quoted by David Kamp in "Rethinking the American Dream," "[t]he only credential the city asked was the boldness to dream" (2009). Boldness to dream captures at once New York City plus the contribution the American automobile made to cities across the United States, enabling ordinary people and even those challenged by immigrant status, language deficiency, or poverty to "See the U.S.A." even if their Chevrolet was a used model, aging, or not even a Chevrolet, but still running. Kamp went on in the same *Vanity Fair* piece to observe:

> Hart, like so many before and after him, was overcome by the power of the American Dream. As a people, we Americans are unique in having such a thing, a more or less Official National Dream. (There is no correspondingly stirring Canadian Dream or Slovakian Dream.) It is part of our charter—as articulated in the second sentence of the Declaration of Independence, in the famous bit about "certain unalienable Rights" that include "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness"—and it is what makes our country and our way of life attractive and magnetic to people in other lands. (2009)

An automobile provides an ordinary American with "Liberty" to travel in "pursuit of Happiness," core values from the *Declaration of Independence* (1776) as Kamp noted (2009).

It is more than that, however, in that the automobile and what Detroit automakers enlarged it to stand for became America itself. Across the 20th century, but actually from World War II onward, the automobile became the leading object of what may be called

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America's *mechanical* Manifest Destiny, to borrow that phrase coined by John L. O'Sullivan (1845; *accord*, Johannsen, 2004) as applied to the continental expansion of the United States, 1803–1853. Of all the machinery invented or put to use in the United States, from Cyrus McCormack's "Reaper" to Eli Whitney's "Cotton Gin," the automobile expressed historically and expresses contemporaneously the core values for which America stands in practice: Freedom to Travel, extended to everyone.

EXPORTED TO THE WORLD

Iconic cars include American automobiles driven in Europe and elsewhere beyond America's shores. An example is former Polish First Marshal and Prime Minister Józef Klemens Piłsudski's 1935 Cadillac Fleetwood Special 355D, currently on display just outside of the former residence of Marshal Piłsudski, Pałac Belwederski, in Warsaw. During its presentation by former Polish President Bronisław M. Komorowski in 2014, Professor Jan Tarczynski, a historian, noted that when the vehicle was unveiled initially just before Marshal Piłsudski's demise, Poland's leader of the *inter bellum* period quipped he had been "bought a coffin" because it was so heavily armored by standards of that time ("President Presents" 2014). Vehicles belonging to famous American Allies and adversaries alike have toured the United States: this author as a teenager sat in a ZIS-115 (110C) once belonging to Marshal of the Soviet Union Josif Stalin when it visited this author's hometown in the United States on tour. Sitting in that vehicle was an instructive experience, because it and most Soviet automobiles resembled American cars closely. This was the author's introduction to American intellectual property and technology infringement by foreign adversarial powers that is rampant currently. Against all this background, the humble Ford Model T, produced from 1 October 1908 to 26 May 1927, has been designated repeatedly as America's most important automobile ever (Finlay 2021; Snow 2014; Watts 2006).

LITERATURE REVIEW: AMERICAN MYTHOLOGY

To the earth's population living outside of the United States, and to foreign-born Americans, little is held to be more precious than the 'American Dream,' whether intact or shattered. Single

family home ownership is the key element of that dream, arguably the automobile comes in second. That is, unless the American Dream is shattered, as it is in some respects in "Reality Behind Absurdity: The Myth of American Dream" (Sua 2015), or in "Rethinking the American Dream" (Camp 2009). America's fascination with the automobile lingers on, however, even in the post-pandemic era when General Motors closed some of its factories on account of shortages of computer chip production without which new technologies cannot operate—gadgets deemed essential to some upper-crust 21st century automobiles including blind spot assistance, rear video camera, automated parking, lane keeping and lane tracking, and navigational assistance. Reality stands behind absurdity in America's dependence upon the motor vehicle. Unlike the single-family detached home, a car is a possession nearly every American can afford to buy if s/he wants it. An automobile is a partial fulfilment of the American Dream, where myth and reality juxtapose, and where for some the myth becomes the reality. As Barthes observed incisively, "myth is a system of communication, that it is a message. This allows one to perceive that myth cannot possibly be an object, a concept, or an idea; it is a mode of signification, a form" (1984: 1). To many Americans, an automobile is more than an object, "it is a mode of signification, a form" (1984: 1). It is at once an "American Dream" whether "reality behind absurdity" as contended (Sua 2015), or absurdity ahead of reality. Some have resolved to "rethink the American Dream" (Camp 2009), particularly as that aspiration evades capture in an economy afflicted by constant inflation, price-gauging, and plague; although home ownership and other facets of that American dream encounter shortfalls, the automobile stands firm in its capture and retention of its peculiar version of an American Dream in motion, on wheels, capable of propelling people forward and backwards, actually and metaphorically. An American automobile forms its own *metalanguage*, to borrow that term from Barthes (1984), because the automobile defines what many Americans want themselves to be or to become as they advance their own mythological imagery. Part of the thesis of this article has been addressed three and four decades back in books on *The American Automobile Culture* (Lewis & Goldstein 1983), *America Adopts the Automobile, 1895–1910*

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(Fink 1970), *The Car Culture* (Fink 1975), and *The Automobile Age* (Fink 1990), together with historical accounts of the automobile's emergence such as *Henry Ford and Grass-roots America* (Wik 1973), detailing how Henry Ford enabled America to change its mode of transportation from the horse and carriage to a horseless carriage. Both "the design and resurgence" of the American automobile are addressed well in discussion of *The Automobile Age* (Fink 1990, 377–403). Another book, *The Automobile in American History: A Reference Guide*, chronicles the American automobile across the history of the 20th century (Berger 2001), as does *The Great Book of American Cars* (Montgomery 2002), largely in pictorial format. Each of these books addresses the actual image of the American automobile as a machine. None of them focuses on the American automobile as a larger-than-life metaphor, as cars have inspired and facilitated realization of the American Dream for so many car owners of different generations. This is the purpose of the present article. As times have changed, so has the American automobile, burgeoning in size and speed, becoming a symbol of upward mobility.

AMERICAN AUTOMOBILE PERIOD DESIGNS

American automobiles have changed, sometimes reactively to technology and societal values, at other times, proactively, automobiles have changed America. Sometimes, the automobile has been linked to a decade or multiple decades, such as before 1920, during the 'Roaring Twenties,' the 1930s, Wartime period (1940s), the 1950s and/or 1960s, modernism and post-modernism. Automobile historiographers have linked the car's development to rising affluence in the post-World War I period, concern for wind resistance in 'streamlines' or rounded shapes of cars from the late 1930s, 'shine' from the bright colors of many 1950s cars reflecting emergence of a growing middle class of car buyers moving from the city to the suburb, 'rocket' motifs of some early to mid-1960s automobiles that displayed bursting tail lights, epitomized in the 1960 Cadillac design and metaphoric wording of "Rocket Oldsmobile" as if automobiles were propelled into space during America's competition with the Soviet Union once the latter launched Sputnik, its first satellite. Then, 'animal hunch' designs

from the 1970s that seemed to stress metaphorically an ability of a vehicle to leap forward rapidly then conserve energy at cruising speeds, akin to kangaroos, lions and tigers or other wild kingdom beasts typified in the higher rear, lower front end, designs of many cars of that vintage, including their model nomenclature designations such as Dodge "Ram" and Dodge "Charger," Mercury "Sable," Ford "Cougar" and "Mustang," Buick "Skylark," and Chevrolet "Impala." In total, at least 33 automobiles have been named after animals (Edwards 2013). In fact, also, of a list of 32 cars listed as having been the "most iconic movie cars" of all time, three-fourths (24) are American (Maio 2019), with almost all of the American vehicles being 'muscle' cars one way or another in terms of a powertrain sufficient to escalate their speed from zero to 60 miles per hour in a few seconds. Rather evidently, American car buyers veer toward automobiles that look and sound robust and powerful, often more robust or more powerful than they are, increasing mythology over reality.

ENTREPRENEURS AND INVENTORS

Most widely associated with the American automobile is Henry Ford, founder of the motor company that bears his name, chief engineer at Edison Illuminating Company (Detroit Edison) before he left on 15 August 1899 to manage his own company in building a "Quadracycle" using a carburetor (regulates air to petrol mixture to facilitate acceleration or deacceleration of a vehicle powered by a fuel-injection engine) Ford himself invented in 1898 ("Henry Ford Leaves Edison" 2009). In 1908, William Durant formed General Motors (GM), also in Detroit, Michigan, making that city America's car capitol. Ford and GM drew on emerging technology such as C.L. Horock's telescopic shock absorber (1901), Louis Renault's standard drum brake pads (1902), and eventually an electric starter invented in 1911 by Charles Franklin Kettering (Carey 2019). Arguably, the most innovative and long-lasting design was for Chrysler's 'Airflow' that emerged from 1934 to 1937, designed by Chrysler engineers Carl Breer, Fred Zeder, and Owen Ray Skelton (Stein 2009). 'Airflow' design was incorporated in many Chrysler cars such as DeSoto and Imperial, copied by Ford for its Lincoln Zephyr because of its wind-resistant aerodynamics, fully-enclosed interior,

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and technological superiority, giving renown to 'Chrysler engineering' as a popular phrase, although it suffered from sluggish sales because it was an automobile introduced decades ahead of its time ("The Chrysler Airflow" 2014).

In 1913, Ford commenced to use the world's first moving assembly line in the crafting of increasingly heavier and more complex automobiles (Ford & Crowther 2003). At that time, Ford produced the Model T car, offering the public a car "in any color, provided it is black!" During the same period, 'Billy' Durant purchased Buick (1904), used it to form GM (1908), then Olds Motor Works (also 1908) that became Oldsmobile, Cadillac (1909) and Oakland Motor Car (1909), destined to become Pontiac (McIntyre, 2021). When Durant was removed from GM, 1911–1915, he backed Louis Chevrolet's company, leveraged that to regain control of GM between 1916–1920. Consequently, under Durant's leadership, GM consolidated its control over five automobile brands ("William Durant Creates General Motors" 2020). GM purchased control of automobile parts manufacturing companies, one being United Motors of which Hyatt Roller Bearing Company was a division, headed by Alfred P. Sloan, Jr. When Durant was eased out of GM again in 1920, Sloan became its chief executive officer, holding that post for 33 years from 1920 to 1953 (Sloan & Sparkes 1941; Sloan, McDonald & Sloan 1964). Between 1920 and 1947, for over a quarter century, the head of research at GM was Charles Franklin Kettering, inventor of the essential electric starter, leaded gasoline, and freon coolant used in refrigerators and air conditioners, and founder of Daytona Engineering Laboratories Company (Delco). At E.I. Du Pont de Nemours (Dupont) before he joined GM in 1920, Kettering developed the first practical paints that enabled automobiles to have bright enameled surfaces, characteristic of expensive 1930s automobiles then of most American cars from the 1950s onward, so American cars became changeable at low cost. Amongst many quotations attributed to Kettering is a statement stressing importance of perseverance: "it doesn't matter if you try and try and try again, and fail. It does matter if you try and fail, and fail to try again" (Boyd 1957, 91). When Sloan funded creation of what was to become America's leading cancer research hospital in New York City, he turned to Kettering

to supervise installation of cutting-edge technology, as Kettering had done at General Motors, then that institution was named Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center (Weaver 1975).

In the 21st century, new automotive industry iconic names have emerged, namely Elon Musk as chairman and chief executive of Tesla, Inc., and Tesla's chief designer, Franz von Holtzhausen, who designed Tesla's four principal vehicles: S, 3, X and Y, brilliantly in each case. In fact, Tesla's Model Y remains on the drawing boards and in prototypes. An interesting question will be whether Tesla follows the Ford or the GM route in terms of make and model diversification if it continues to produce the world's most popular automobiles (Fosse 2019). Part of the answer to this question may depend upon the courses of action pursued by competitors such as Ford, GM, VW, others (Zakarin 2021), meaning the electric car market is becoming crowded, particularly with traditional fossil fuel automakers as they enter the market of electric and 'smart' automobile manufacturing, sometimes in partnership with high-tech Internet giants (Pyper 2019). Ford CEO Alan R. Mulally retired from Ford, the company he had turned-around to profitability, on 01 July 2012 (Hoffman 2012), joined the board of Alphabet, Inc. (Google) 15 days afterwards, reputedly to advise Google on use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in automobiles, including 'driverless cars' (Abuelsamid 2017; Albert 2020). Clearly, Detroit and Silicon Valley are concerned currently with cars and their 'effect,' much as American consumers always have been (Columbia 2021).

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

At least a part, and perhaps a huge part, of America's affection or obsession with the automobile is derived from the American automobile as a myth. Gaines (2001), drawing on 'glossematics' developed by Louis Trolle Hjelmslev and Hans Jørgen Uldall with others from the Copenhagen and Prague Linguistic 'Circles,' distinguished between 'form content' and 'expression content' (Nöth 1990; Badir 2000), as articulated in the following excerpt:

> Myth blends in with a message and denies its own existence through its apparent subordination to the content of the first and second order signifiers. When we become aware of myth, it shifts. We can look at an example of two moments that shift between watching a play

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and watching someone in the audience engaged in reading the play. The play constructs an internal narrative, but watching the reader shifts attention away from the story content to the form of play and its relationship to its audience. (Gaines, 2001)

Subsequent attention to the same emerged with Taverniers, 2008, then Badir, 2014 and Hébert, 2000. Television culture has been explored in the context of myth (Fiske 1987; Silverstone 1988). In this article, the point is that the automobile is akin to Gaines's play: it begins with story content, then takes on an additional meaning on screen or on television in the vehicle's relationship to its audience. This is the reason why automobile advertisements on television sell automobiles to the audience that watches those cars on TV. Also, it is the reason why automakers compete to include their latest models as props for the latest movies and television series. Automobiles depicted on the silver screen or on television inspire viewers to purchase automobiles in their effort, perhaps subliminally, to become clones of or at least similar to characters driving automobiles in movies or on videos they watch. What are the reasons why anyone purchases a particular automobile, from where does the 'hype' originate to make American automobiles seem larger than life? Is it affection or is it obsession that drives Americans toward cars? Such research questions should be addressed. This article takes guidance from myths and symbols derived from television culture, then applies them to automobile culture both as a 'play' in movies and on TV and in the vehicles American consumers purchase, following the movement from internal to external narrative, meaning movement from defining self to one's self then defining self to others.

INTERBELLUM COLLABORATION

American automaking oligarchs solicited and accepted accolades and money from Nazi Germany as that country rose geometrically across the 1930s to dominate Europe in the 1940s, before being crushed by Allied military in 1944 and 1945 as pointed out in 2005 by Henry Ashby Turner, Jr., Stillé Professor of History *Emeritus* at Yale University. Both Ford and GM traded mightily with the Nazi regime, leading some historiographers to conclude the rise of Hitlerism would have been slowed or derailed had not American automak-

ing giants collaborated to boost German technology. Henry Ford himself accepted Nazi Germany's highest recognition to a foreigner, the Grand Cross of the Supreme Order of the German Eagle in 1938 on his 75th birthday, 30 July 1938 ("*RareHistoricalPhotos*" 1938). Ford owned a small Michigan newspaper called *The Dearborn Independent* during the 1920s in which he published antisemitic articles reproduced widely across the burgeoning Nazi empire, such as "The International Jew, the World's Foremost Problem," republished by Nazi elite Theodor Fritsch in the 1930s (*Ibid.*). Hitler kept a life-size portrait of Henry Ford in his Munich office beside his desk, praising Ford as his 'inspiration,' accepting 35,000 Reishsmarks from Ford Europe on the occasion of Hitler's 50th birthday (Dobbs 1998). General Motors was little better under its longtime CEO Alfred P. Sloan, Jr., as Germany recognized by awarding a similar medal to James Mooney, GM Europe managing director, inscribed "for distinguished service to the Reich," that Mooney declined to return when criticized, arguing GM could not afford to jeopardize its USD 100 Million investment in GM Opel, Europe's largest automaker at the time (Dobbs 1998; Turner 2005). This highlights that United States automotive technology was held in the highest regard by Germany, long ranked as Europe's leading country in technology development. At the same time, it tarnished the reputations of America's leading automaking companies, owners and managers (Marriott 2006; Higham 1983).

TYPOLOGY OF AMERICAN AUTOMOBILE DESIGNS

American automobile literature identifies several epochs in the development of American cars stylistically and technologically: Antique Car Era (1893–1919), Vintage Car Era (1920–1945), Classic Car Era (1945–1972), then subsumed the Antique Era into a more encompassing Brass Car Era (1890–1919) and Electric Car Era (1890–1919) that currently must be renamed 'First Electric Era' to distinguish it from the 'Second Electric Car Era' that began with launching of Tesla's Model S on 22 June 2012 followed by marketing of Tesla's Models X, 3, and Y, each designed by American designer Franz von Holzhausen, with competitors such as Ford, General Motors, and Germany's Volkswagen in hot pursuit (Zakarin 2021).

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It is helpful analytically to begin with the 'antique' car era, if only to contrast that with the periods to follow. During the 'antique' car period, automobiles resembled horse-drawn carts and carriages, simple cars resembling carts, more sophisticated versions copying carriages or horse-drawn coaches, simply adding motors. Hence, a colloquial nickname for an early automobile, "horseless carriage." Parallel to a horse-drawn carriage, a horseless carriage was functional, intended for transportation instead of making any derivative statement. This type of car was powered mostly by gasoline, although some were powered by steam or battery-sourced electricity, dominated America's streets in the period leading up to and during World War I, transitioning to the Vintage era automobiles by 1920. With World War I behind Americans, a period of unbridled prosperity ensued during the 1920s (culminating with the stock market crash on October 29th, 1929), in contrast to a period of economic downturn leading to hardship in Europe. So 'vintage' period automobiles appeared more and more in America across the decade of the Roaring Twenties, that designation owing as much to noise made by increasingly more powerful automobiles as to the noise of music in dance halls that flourished during the same decade. In fact, as American disposable income burgeoned during the 1920s, more American consumers were able to purchase private automobiles. General Motors under the leadership of Alfred P. Sloan, Jr. is credited with innovating "planned obsolescence" driven by frequent (rapidly becoming annual) design changes. Vintage cars spanned the 1920s and 1930s, plus the war years through to 1946 when the post-war era ushered in the age of the American Classic automobile. Although arguably the prettiest and most powerful, Classic period American automobiles made the list of the worst American cars ever made in significant number (Hamilton 2020), often due to sub-par performance, sometimes on account of bizarre styling. An American car must meet expectations of the buying public even if on occasion, or even more frequently, those expectations prove to be unrealistically fanciful. Ford Motor Company's Model T propelled early 20th century Americans away from the horse and buggy and into what would become the modern age. It is difficult to say that subsequent automobile changes did anything

of the sort, besides making drivers happier. The "pursuit of Happiness" is an American ideal, as stated incisively by Kamp (2009). Beginning with Ford's Model T and continuing thereafter, it may be said that the American automobile made people happier. This would be true as cars evolved from being mere machines such as the Model T Ford to become works of art, statements about success, culminating with statements of excess such as with the Duesenberg. Be that as it may, whether modest, flamboyant, or gauche, American automobiles evoke their own personalities, more often than not reflecting showcase personalities of their owners. An automobile conveys what its owner desires to showcase to others. That may be accurate, frequently is overstated, sometimes is understated, a testament to an American driver's candor and sincerity, or lack thereof. In some respects, for many an American driver, the automobile displays the mechanical Manifest Destiny s/he desires to impart to onlookers, be that real, imaginary, or contrived to enlarge one's affluence by display of an inaccurate opulence. Much as the original Manifest Destiny of the United States was fictional in the minds of 19th century statesmen because it did not command popular support and wrought havoc on Native American indigenous people, the American automobile can be larger than life as it captures its driver's fantasy life more than it captures reality. Undoubtedly, the standard of the American Classic sports car was introduced in 1953 with GM's Corvette and Ford's Thunderbird (Carey 2019). Transitioning from the 'vintage' to the 'classic' periods were the 'woody' station wagons of different genres and cost structures, largely aimed at replacing the grand touring vehicles of the 1930s 'vintage' period with vehicles that afforded more room for growing postwar families (Notte 2021). By the 1970s, the station wagon market became subsumed into the Sports Utility Vehicle (SUV) and, more recently, into 'crossovers' that merged SUV with sedan designs, with Detroit automakers returning to functionality.

Both designs and technology changed each decade, such that 1920s vintage cars evidenced a transition from pure functionality to ascetic styling, with 1930s cars preferring ascetic styling or form over function, especially on more expensive makes and models. As some poignant examples, 1930s cars tended to display dual

Fig. 1. Ford Model T ranked as America's most important automobile. Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/de/Ford_Model_T_1909_Serial337_RSideFront_Lake_Mirror_Cassic_16Oct2010_%2814877235955%29.jpg (CC BY 2.0).

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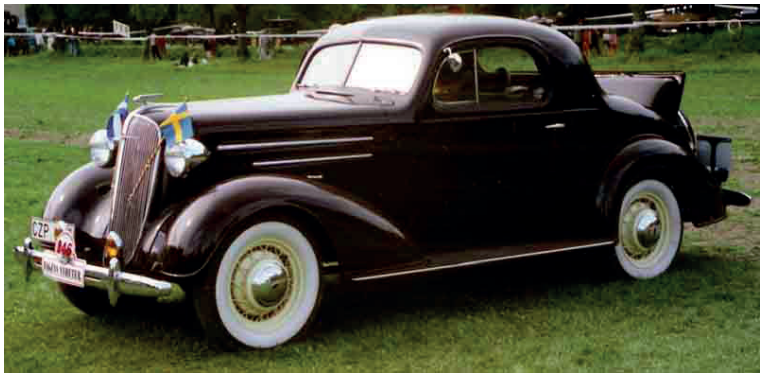

Fig. 2. 1936 Chevrolet Master Deluxe Series FD Sport Coupe. Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/f0/1936_Chevrolet_Master_De_Luxe_Sport_Coupe_CZP686.jpg (CC BY-SA 3.0).

side mounts, meaning a spare tire behind each front fender, left and right, just forward of its running boards or, alternatively, a single spare tire at rear above the bumper as on the 1936 Chevrolet Master Deluxe. On some 1920s and 1930s vintage touring cars, a trunk was mounted on or above the rear bumper into which to deposit suitcases or other personal property to take on a road trip. Beginning with late 1920s cars, continuing through the 1930s, vertical radiator grilles dominated the hood (bonnet) covering the engine, generally consisting of chrome designs, often with an automobile logo appearing on top of the grille. Most automobiles discontinued such ornaments with the 1940s, although European brands such as Rolls Royce and Mercedes continues to display respectively their "Statue of Ecstasy" and three-point star logo in the same location on many models, nowadays generally retractable for safety objectives, because in an accident, an ornament can penetrate the windshield, and security against theft (Shaw 2021).

During the 1940s, American automobiles changed again, much as they had in 1920, from the elongated touring cars of 1930s vintage to more compact, rounded, wind-resistant vehicles that ushered in the 'classic' car era that would survive the 1950s and 1960s, and even slightly longer. Beginning in 1937 but mainly from 1940, Ford introduced a more rounded styling on its Ford Standard and Deluxe models plus Lincoln Zephyr and Mercury ("Early Ford Store," n.d.; "1940 Ford Deluxe," n.d.), designed personally by Edsel Ford, only child of Henry and Clara Ford, with Ford's first chief designer, Eugene Turenne (Bob) Gregorie (Crippen 1985). Classic era American automobiles tended to use shades of color, including two-tone colors, as methods of differentiation, beginning in the 1950s, arguably culminating with the 1957 Plymouth Fury "torque flight" that used push buttons instead of a shifting gear. This automobile was used in the movie *Christine*, with that car portrayed as having a mind of its own. In appearance, this was a 'muscle car,' similar to the 1968 Mustang GT390 used in the movie *Bullitt* and the 1971 Pontiac LeMans used in the action film *The French Connection*. In technology, the Plymouth Belvedere used in *Christine* was an antecedent of the 1982 Pontiac TransAm supercar named "KITT" used in the television show *Knight Rider* a quarter century afterwards, displaying artificial intelligence enabling it

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Fig. 3: 1959 Plymouth Sport Fury. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plymouth_Fury#/media/File:1959_Plymouth_Sport_Fury_photo-13.JPG (CC0).

Fig. 4: 1961 Lincoln Continental of President John F. Kennedy. Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kennedy_Car_1961_Lincoln_Continental_(31609510632).jpg (CC BY 2.0).

Fig. 5: 1961 Lincoln Continental. Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1961_Lincoln_Continental_(20960224924).jpg (CC BY 2.0).

to maneuver driverless, talk to the character Michael Knight, recommend to him courses of action. Also, the *Christine* Plymouth was a precursor to the DeLorean Motor Company DMC12 used fancifully in the movie *Back to the Future*, where the car could transcend date and century as a time machine. Interestingly, nearly half a century afterwards, Chrysler Jeep is introducing the 2021 Gladiator Texas Trail, currently available in Texas only (Palmer 2021). This Gladiator is a reminder that many Americans continue to desire a 'muscle' automobile, as is the fact that the next *Fast and Furious* movie is scheduled to feature an all-electric 2021 Dodge Charger. Rather evidently, with the Internet viewed on a computer laptop in contrast to a television watched in the living room, American automobile consumers have come to develop a fixation on post-modern automobile technology in contrast to design by itself, desiring the same end result (powerful thrust) achieved with 'clean' and 'green' technology whenever possible. What the American consumer watches s/he continues to want to purchase. Thus, in the foreseeable future, it seems almost inescapable that American motorists will insist upon electric-powered vehicles providing them with the same, or even enhanced, 'muscle' as they grew accustomed to during the 'classic' car period. Next may be an electric *Christine* Plymouth or even an electric DeLorean time machine to take us forward into the past, fictionally, instead of *Back to the Future*.

Some American automobiles, notably during the Classic period, have made the list of most beautiful cars ever made. Understandably, that list included Aston Martin, Corvette Stingray, Ferrari, other competitor 'designer automobiles.' Also included on that list was the 1961 Lincoln Continental convertible and hardtop (no. 41) ("The Most Beautiful Cars Ever Made," 2021). This author owned a 1962 Lincoln Continental convertible (1961, 1962, 1963 were almost identical), exactly like (possibly one of the same) twin Lincoln Continental convertibles owned by both United States President John F. Kennedy and attorney general Robert F. Kennedy (Redfern 2020). Although still in mint condition, the author owned it when it was much older!

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TYPOLOGY OF AMERICAN CAR BUYERS

Five types of American car buyers can be identified, each with a watchword beginning with the letter "L," including: "Lust," "Love," "Luck with Luster," "Legacy," and "Legend." Each requires separate analysis although, to be sure, sometimes one overlaps another as in many typologies. By way of example, lust overlaps love generally, although the former tends to precede the latter in normal interaction. Also, legacy can become legendary, meaning that a legend is a legacy on a much grander, frequently longer-lasting, scale, *ceteris paribus*, as with examples such as the armored car mobster Al Capone had made that F.D.R. used, or the limousine in which J.F.K. rode when he was assassinated.

"Lust" is the motive behind some American automobile purchasers' decision: to impress someone, such as a girl or boy friend, similar significant others. Typical of car buying for this purpose were the muscle cars of the 1960s and 1970s, manufactured before the 'energy crisis' that forced American automakers to downsize models. Such were the cars that silver screen movies and television series were made of, ranging from the 1969 Dodge Charger, named "General Lee," used in the television series *The Dukes of Hazzard* (no. 1 on the "Most Popular Muscle Cars" list, n.d.) to the 1972 Ford Gran Torino (no. 10 thereon) used in the Clint Eastwood movie *Gran Torino* after which Ford named the automobile. Similar listings of Hollywood automobiles include an assortment of Chevy Chevelle SuperSport (SS), Dodge Charger, Oldsmobile 442, and Pontiac GTO vehicles (Oldham 2018). What the buyer of a Lust muscle vehicle wanted was power, an ability to increase speed from zero to 60 miles per hour in seconds. Ranking muscle cars in terms of how fast they went resulted in the 1966 Pontiac GTO Triple X winning the race as it appeared in the 2002 movie *XXX*, with the "General Lee" ranking only fourth, the 1971 Mustang Mach I used in the James Bond movie *Diamonds Are Forever* coming in sixth, with the 1967 Shelby Mustang GT 500 used in the 2002 movie *Gone in 60 Seconds* ranking only in ninth place (Bravins 2020). As pointed out in a recent article, it is difficult to pick a favorite among the range of typical muscle car contestants (E. Puckett 2021b) because, in the final analysis, they share more similarities than differences!

"Love" is a separate motive that may (or may not) overlap with "Lust": someone buys an automobile as a present for a significant other, usually a spouse or 'kept' person, ostensibly to show to the community the lifestyle to which the recipient has become accustomed. An example would be the expensive cars Kardashian family members give to each other as birthday presents (Thompson 2020). Celebrities in general are known to gift expensive cars to family members (Yagoda 2017). Sometimes this practice leads to questions, such as whether the gift really belongs to the donor who wants to shelter knowledge of it from business or professional stakeholders (Scherer 2018).

"Luck with Luster" is a third purpose underlying purchase of an automobile: to improve one's status in the mind of a business competitor, customer or supplier, for example, to document (or pretend) that one has reached success, be that one an individual or a company. In this fashion, the car buyer is hoping the automobile will bring the person or company "Luck with Luster" in the form of more business, such as by publicly touting the company's financial success (Zhang 2020). There is a down side to a firm's purchasing or leasing vehicles for its executive employees: risk of tarnishing brand with an accident, morale among employees lacking this perquisite, taxation (Fraser 1967; Hodges 2015). As an example, the American commercial printing industry (glossy magazines and catalogues) is very competitive, historically generating an eight percent (8%) profit margin at best, but in the 'vintage' and early 'classic' car periods suppliers of ink products were known to purchase or lease new Cadillacs each year or so for the client printing company CEO *and his wife*, meaning two luxury automobiles to a customer. This changed necessarily from 16 August 1954, when Congress added the "ordinary and necessary" qualification to 28 U.S.C. section 162, allowing only an individual or a company to deduct automobile expenses on vehicles they used themselves, and then only if the expense is "ordinary and necessary" ("Trade or business expenses"). Providing a stay-at-home spouse with a free car would be neither ordinary nor necessary to a business, nor would a supplier providing a free vehicle to a customer executive be necessary. That was great news for taxpayers, bad news for recipients of graft in business and many local automobile dealers.

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"Legacy" is a fourth objective underscoring automobile purchase: to leave behind a statement that reflects one's stature as a concierge of fine art in the form of the automobile. Among celebrities, actor Clint Eastwood (E. Puckett 2021a), comedians Tim Allen (Symes 2021b) and Jay Leno are examples of celebrity car owners (Leno owns 169) (Parker 2016), but more ordinary Americans may perform this role as well, such as retired Eastman Kodak employee Ron Jones from Tennessee whose 175 car collection went up for 'no reserve' auction in 2021 (J. Puckett 2021b).

"Legend" is another objective in buying an automobile, meaning to leave behind someone's vehicle to family or to an estate perhaps for the purpose of dedicating an automobile to one's own memory, such as former first lady of China Soong Meiling's 1980s Cadillac on display at the *Shilin* mansion park in Taipei, Taiwan ("Children visiting," n.d.) or Polish Marshal Józef Klemens Piłsudski's 1935 Cadillac on display at Warsaw's Pałac Belwederski ("President Presents," 2014).

THE AMERICAN AUTOMOBILE AS A MYTH

In addressing the American automobile as a myth, also as a symbol that is part of the proverbial American Dream, one must separate the car itself as a machine from its value to driver, passenger, onlooker, as well as cinematic or television viewer. As automobiles take on larger than life significance, some American cars changed the automotive industry forever (Sapienza 2019). Chronologically, this seems to have taken place from the early 1920s with the emergence of silent motion pictures, gained momentum in the 1930s with "talkie" movies followed by color cinematography, peaked in the aftermath of World War II during the 1950s as color paints decorated automobiles of nearly every make and model in every price category. Here we can only summarize the unfolding of this event by referring to selected examples of the American automobile portrayed on the silver screen, particularly, also on television, from the 1930s to the present time. If as contended here Hollywood and television became automobile influencers by drawing consumer interest to a car's external appearance, then sequentially the Internet should be credited with exerting a similar influence by drawing consumer influence

to vehicular technology, ranging from the electric car to standard or optional equipment (gadgets) available inside the automobile or under its hood. This author became aware of such a trend when on sabbatical in 2021 in the United States, where ordinary sports utility vehicles (SUVs) he rented nearly drove themselves, providing an ambiance when 'loaded up' comparable to foreign 'crossovers' such as Bentley Bentayga or Rolls Royce Cullinan costing nearly half a million dollars, superior to luxury sedans sold less than half a decade earlier. Standard packages include radar warnings of nearby obstacles ahead, behind, or alongside. In one sense, myth has become reality. Successful electric vehicles (EVs) tend to be larger than smaller. As a recent article documented with sales data stated, "if the US vehicle market has sent one message over the last decade, it's that Americans want large vehicles." The authors add that "[i]n 2016, analysts were shocked when the share of such automobiles—trucks, SUVs, and crossovers—surpassed 50% of the US auto market," although American truck owners have been over 90 percent male (Coren 2021). Before long, vehicles will be largely electric, such as the fully electric 2021 Ford Mustang Mach E available already but without an all-wheel drive option (Stern 2021). Once supply chain management of rare earth minerals required to make electric car batteries becomes solved with Asian suppliers that seems unlikely any time soon (Fingas 2021; Bryce 2019; Jamasmie 2019), the only real obstacle to dominance of EVs currently is that electric recharging stations have yet to be dispersed as frequently or reliably across American highways as gasoline filling stations (Redfern 2021).

CONCLUSION

Americans purchase specific automobiles for reasons sometimes evident, at other times subliminal, hidden even from themselves. Vehicles they purchase or lease tend to be intended to make a statement, either generally to the public, or to an individual significant other to whom the statement is being addressed, possibly to themselves. Automobiles in the United States transitioned from antique "horseless carriages" to 'vintage' then 'classic' versions that lured buyers with style, color, and power controlled by planned obsolescence the automakers required to inspire

consumers to repurchase a new automobile every several years or sooner. This optimized carmaker profits. Styles of the 'vintage' period followed cars used in movies, 'muscle' power of the 'classic' period copied robust cars seen in movies as well as on TV, all-electric vehicles of the post-modern period focus on 'gadget' technology, with 21st century buyers of American motor cars becoming more concerned with the technologies they offer to the driver inside the vehicle, including safety features, than to the vehicle's exterior appearance or appeal, so reminiscent of 1930s automobiles. Some facets of the American automobile have changed very little: namely, its mythology as a symbol of "the pursuit of Happiness," of upward status mobility, and of an actual ability to travel beyond one's home to places far and wide in pursuit of at least a version of the American Dream. Without much doubt, however, across the 20th century and two decades of the 21st century, the American automobile can be witnessed as being at least as much myth as reality, perhaps more so. Americans, whether drivers, passengers, or pedestrian onlookers, display an affection for cars that borders on obsession. Automobiles have become America's *mechanical* Manifest Destiny. Whether divinely inspired or not, that destiny lingers on in the myriad of ways many Americans regard their automobiles.

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CRAZY 'BOUT A MERCURY

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INTRODUCTION[1]

If I had my money, I'd tell you what I'd do.
I would go downtown and buy a Mercury or two.
I'm crazy 'bout a Mercury; yes I'm crazy 'bout a Mercury Ford.[2]
I'm gonna buy a Mercury and cruise up and down the road.
–K.C. Douglas and Robert Geddins[3]

What do we really purchase when we purchase an automobile? There are the obvious attributes such as performance and economy, which can be easily quantified, and styling and accessories, which cannot be measured but which can certainly be described. What we are also acquiring, however, is an amorphous but very real image, that is, the statement which the automobile makes about its owner to the public. And it is through the media of popular culture–newspapers, magazines, films, television, music, etc.–that such images are forged. Automobile companies try mightily through their marketing to manage the brand images of their products in the media, but the process is largely beyond their control. Popular culture is just that, the culture created by the population. Companies can exploit or perhaps even augment a pre-existing favorable image, but it is rarely within their power to reverse an unfavorable one or create one from scratch.

1. The author wishes to thank musician Scott Bachman for his insights regarding the recordings of "Mercury Blues."
2. Although most of the lyrics of the song are clear, the last word in this line is not. "Ford" is a likely guess.
3. These and subsequent lyrics were transcribed from the 1974 recording. There are few apparent differences in lyrics among the different recordings in 1948, 1952, 1960, and 1974, and the lyrics in the most recent are the easiest to understand.

Fig. 1. 1949 Mercury. Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1949_Mercury_(15792839729).jpg (CC BY 2.0).

Mercury is an automobile brand that had an auspicious post-WWII debut in popular culture. In 1948, K.C. Douglas recorded "Mercury Boogie" on a 10-inch 78-RPM, with its memorable line in the chorus "I'm crazy 'bout a Mercury." Five years later in 1953, George and Sam Barris transformed a 1951 Mercury Club Coupe into the Hirohata Merc, creating a classic of customization that has been described as "the most famous custom of all time" (Taylor 2006: 56). In fact, a 1985 commentator argued that "[a] small fleet of incredible Mercurys, customized in Los Angeles during the early 1950s, has forever identified the '49–'51 Mercury as *the* all-time custom" (reprinted in Ganahl 2005: 41, italics in original). Unfortunately for the Ford Motor Company, which manufactured the model, no subsequent composer was sufficiently crazy about any Mercury to write another song about one, and no subsequent Mercury designs, which were obviously Ford derivatives, provided memorable artistic inspiration. Despite these early appearances in popular culture, Mercury never did develop a distinctive image in the minds of consumers, and in 2011, 73 years after its birth, the nameplate disappeared forever from the automobile marketplace. Nonetheless "Mercury Boogie"—subsequently renamed "Mercury Blues"—has lived on in notable cover versions by blues musician Steve Miller (1976), slide guitarist David Lindley (1981), and country musician

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Alan Jackson (1993), and numerous groups around the world continue to perform their own variations today. Customizers not only base new creations on 1949–1951 Mercurys but also restore and even duplicate the original historic customizations. (Ganahl 2005; Taylor 2006) The bathtub Mercurys from that era make notable appearances in films whenever it is necessary to endow a character with an outlaw image.

Ford occasionally attempted to take advantage of Mercury's strong roots in popular culture formed in the make's earliest days, but the company's efforts were not notably successful. The Lincoln-Mercury Caravan of Stars 1963–1966[4] featured vehicle concepts created by factory designers executed by private customizers, but by then customization was a niche interest that did not stimulate interest in the brand (Taylor 2006). Later, the Jackson recording led to an attempt by the Ford Motor Company in 1996 to appropriate "Mercury Blues," licensing the song, changing "Mercury" to "Ford truck," and hiring Jackson as a pitchman in commercials featuring the revised lyrics. Despite Mercury's auspicious beginnings in media, it has had only a slight presence in music and film. Mercury's image never influenced the automobile market beyond the first few years, and it was unable to prevent the brand's demise.

4. The Ford division had a corresponding Custom Car Caravan that had been launched a year or so earlier.

Hey Mama, you look so fine
Ridin' around in that Mercury '59,[5]
Cause I'm crazy 'bout a Mercury; yes I'm crazy 'bout a Mercury Ford.
I'm gonna buy a Mercury and cruise up and down the road.

—K.C. Douglas and Robert Geddins

MERCURY BLUES

K.C. Douglas[6] was born on November 21, 1913 on a farm near Canaan, Mississippi southeast of Memphis, Tennessee, although later biographical material states that it was a farm in the vicinity of Sharon, Mississippi near Canton, northeast of Jackson. As Douglas is quoted in the liner notes on one of his albums: "[It was] about 25 miles north of Jackson right out in the country from Canton. The nearest town was a place called Sharon, that was about 4 or 5 miles from where I was born, and all it had was a post office and a general store." In 1934, at the age of 21, he left the farm for Canton, where he picked up the guitar and played with family members (cousin Walter Deans and uncles Smith Douglas and Joe Douglas) and other musicians (Clarence Collins, Theodore Harris, John Stovall, and R.D. "Peg Leg Sam/Pig" Norwood) (Evans, 1968). He later moved to Granada and Carthage, Mississippi, where he worked for the Pearl Valley Lumber Company and reputedly bought his first guitar in 1936, although that poses the question what he had been using since 1934. Around 1940 he began playing with Tommy Johnson on street corners in Jackson, Mississippi, but he also had to work on farms, in sawmills, on railroads, and in construction gangs throughout the delta to earn a living.

5. In the 1960 and 1974 recordings, it was "Mercury '59," and in the 1948 and 1952 recordings it was "Mercury '49." Since the 1949 Mercury appeared in showrooms on April 29, 1948, there would already have been folks ridin' around in a Mercury '49 when the song was written, recorded, and released in 1948. There is no indication that Ford played a role in Douglas's model year update. While the rhyme was preserved, it is unlikely that anyone looked "quite so fine" in the '59 as they did in the '49.

6. See Chris Strachwitz, "K.C. Douglas Interview," *Arhoolie.org*, https://arhoolie.org/k-c-douglas-interview. Accessed 01 Aug. 2021.

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Passing up an opportunity to travel with Tommy Johnson because of his excessive drinking, Douglas was recruited by the US government in 1945 to work in naval shipyards in the San Francisco Bay Area, participating in the familiar post-war migration from the rural south to the urban north. Landing first in Vallejo, he bought an electric guitar, and in 1947 he moved to Richmond, where he met Sidney Maiden, the harmonica player on "Mercury Boogie." The song's co-author, Bob Geddins, had also worked at the shipyard in Richmond when he arrived in the Bay Area from Los Angeles in 1943. Subsequently, Douglas was employed as an agricultural laborer, as a construction worker, and by the Berkeley Department of Public Works, performing around the region when he had a chance to do so. Early on, before rock musicians initiated a blues revival, there were not that many such opportunities, and at the time of a 1968 interview, his last performance had been three months before at "a white party in San Francisco" for $60. The frequency of gigs subsequently increased, but his career ended in 1975. Douglas fainted during a performance in Modesto, California and died of a heart attack in Berkeley on October 18th of that year, about a month short of his 62nd birthday.

Douglas was described as playing down-home country blues, and that is clearly the tone of his "Mercury Boogie"/"Mercury Blues."[7] Considering the lyrics, the narrator might have left the country to work in a factory or shipyard, as had K.C. Douglas, but the country never left him. The narrator does not sound too streetwise and also not too well off. The city women who drive around in a Mercury are only within the reach of the guys who own the Mercurys. If he had the money, he'd buy one himself, but he never will. And since he can only imagine having the money, he can only imagine having the Mercury and the women the Mercury could attract. Nonetheless, the song is still upbeat, and the Mercury is a pleasant dream. Notwithstanding the gal he loved having been stolen, these are not lyrics about the losses that

7. Country blues had little widespread appeal before the rock-and-roll-generated blues revival. Even blues afficionado David Evans dismissed the song in his 1968 K.C. Douglas interview: "It combines the old beat, which will appeal to nobody, commercially speaking, though I understand it is quite a good record from the collector's standpoint" (Evans 1968: 4).

often bring on the blues or even about longing; rather, they describe a daydream. The most likely reason that Douglas chose to feature Mercury in the song is simply that the '49 Mercury would have been receiving considerable publicity at the time and the phrase "crazy 'bout a Mercury" had the right number of syllables, the right pattern of accents, and a nice ring to it.

In the interview published in *Living Blues* in 1973, Douglas's response to a question about whether he still did "Mercury Boogie" was "every once in a while the guys keep on after me but I don't like to. I think somebody else has recorded since too. Some white kids, they recorded it" (Mazzolini 1973: 17). We do not know who the "white kids" might have been; there is no record of "Mercury Blues" having been recorded by anyone other than K.C. Douglas before 1973. The first cover on vinyl, by the Steve Miller Band, appeared on the album *Fly Like an Eagle*, recorded in 1975 and released in 1976. Since that band was based in San Francisco, it is possible that Douglas was not referring to a recording but to a live performance he had heard about. Miller's version is much different from Douglas's though, more swamp blues than country blues—in a minor key at a much slower tempo. The music and lyrics do not feel as if they belong together, Miller's version clearly not making the narrator sound "crazy 'bout a Mercury." Why, then, did Miller choose to cover the song and overlay his musical style on lyrics that did not fit? At the time, many rock musicians were *exploring* the blues roots of rock and roll, putting it charitably, or *exploiting* the blues roots of rock and roll, putting it cynically. And in this case, the result makes the latter more likely than the former. We cannot know whether Miller had stumbled on one of Douglas's recordings, heard or *heard of* one of Douglas's regional performances, or been alerted to Douglas and his work through an obituary such as Mazzolini's in *Living Blues* (1975), which only mentioned a single Douglas song—"Mercury Boogie." Regardless, from then on it is likely that musicians found Douglas via the far more popular Miller, which was what had happened with many other blues musicians and their songs.

In contrast, David Lindley's rockabilly lap-steel slide guitar version created a vivid sonic picture of the Mercury in the narrator's

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imagination. Not only is the Mercury now faster, but every stage of the drive is audible. The Mercury starts up, idles, and then roars off at high speed, exactly the larger-than-life automobile and experience that the narrator is dreaming about. It is arguably the finest musical portrait of automobility, communicating the automotive images powerfully even without the lyrics. The question, though, is why "Mercury Blues" was the song chosen for this treatment. Again, there is no definitive answer; maybe it was the customized bathtub Mercurys Lindley had seen in southern California. Finally in 1993, Alan Jackson returned "Mercury Blues" to where it began, even down to matching the timing of the quickest Douglas version. The pure country style is smoothed out and polished up for a wider audience, and quite possibly Jackson had an eye toward the promotional potential which was realized three years later.

THE HIROHATA MERC

Fig. 2. The Hirohata Merc. Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:NHRA_Museum.jpg (CC BY-SA 2.0).

Along with Fords, even the earliest pre-war 1938–1940 Mercurys were popular choices for customization, some accomplished before the war (the Westergard Mercury in 1940 [1940 model], the Ohanesian Mercury in 1943 [1940 model]) and some afterward

(the Mataranga Mercury in 1949 [1940 model]) (Taylor 2006). However, it was the post-war 1948–1951 Mercurys that became custom icons. It might have been their obsolete design elements—eschewed by General Motors, Ford, and Studebaker but embraced by Packard, Hudson, and Nash—that contributed to the bathtub Mercurys' attraction to customizers. As described in an essay by Harry Bentley Bradley "'49–'51 Merc Customs—a Styling Critique" in an unidentified custom car magazine:

> Virtually every line and shape was familiar to the Los Angeles custom shops that had been working with the '40–'48 Fords and Mercs for nearly a decade. Chopping the V-windshield was much easier than chopping GM's new curved designs. When chopped, the small windows and thick pillars had the familiar, sinister custom look. The long Mercury roof could be given the same flowing sweep into the rounded deck as the earlier cars had. A dechromed and lowered new Mercury back end also looked very much like the earlier customs. The low front fenders and tall hood were much preferred over Ford's higher boxy fender line and nearly flat hood. And, strangely, Mercury's add-on fender skirts seemed more "custom" than GM's flush skirts. (reprinted in Ganahl 2005: 41)

Although this does not explain why similar-looking Hudson and Nash models were far less frequently customized, it does make sense that post-war customizers chose Mercurys; they could apply styles and techniques which they had mastered and which had proven to be popular.[8] What is somewhat puzzling is a custom car revival in the 1970s that featured new bathtub Mercury customizations and restorations and clones of historic vehicles, including the Hirohata Merc. An obvious explanation is that when kids grow up and make money, they want to spend it on the unaffordable automobiles that they longed for when they were younger, an effect which Mustang, Camaro, and Challenger have been attempting to exploit. Folks who were teenagers in 1950 would have hit their 40s in 1975 and been facing mid-life crises that a customized Mercury might have assuaged.

A related phenomenon is that pre-war customization was an outgrowth of hot-rodding and shared its outlaw associations (DeWitt 2001; Taylor 2006). So, whenever it was necessary to sig-

8. Packards also had bathtub styling, but they were likely too expensive to be purchased for customization.

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nal that a character in a film was a loner outside polite society and thumbing their noses at convention, their driving a customized post-war Mercury sent a recognizable message. As DeWitt describes it:

> In *Cobra* (1986), Sylvester Stallone plays a contemporary cop who drives a chopped '50 Merc and talks like a refugee from a fifties hot rod movie. The car tells everyone that he is a maverick, a rebel, an individual with no connection to organization men like the Joe Fridays of the world, even if he does wear a badge. (DeWitt 2001: 118)

Bathtub Mercurys have indeed made especially memorable cinematic appearances. In 1955's *Rebel Without a Cause*, James Dean drove one that had been lowered, nosed (hood trim removed), and decked (trunk lid trim removed). In more recent films, Duane drove a '50 Mercury in 1971's *Last Picture Show*, and George Lucas put The Pharaohs gang in a customized '51 Mercury in 1973's *American Grafitti*. Tony Stark had a '49 Mercury in his collection in 2010's *Iron Man II*. Doc Hudson in Pixar's 2006 *Cars* correctly referenced the historic Fabulous Hudson Hornet, which while not a Mercury, looked enough like one to tap into Mercury's popular culture connotations, especially for those for whom all bathtubs looked alike.

Fig. 3. 2011 Mercury Grand Marquis. Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:2011_Mercury_Grand_Marquis_(6255947466).jpg (CC BY 2.0).

Ford officially announced the Mercury 8 at a press conference on October 24th, 1938, although production had begun over a month earlier on September 21st at the Richmond, California assembly plant (Gunnell 1994).[9] General Motors had completely covered the automobile market price spectrum from Chevrolet through Pontiac, Oldsmobile, Buick, and LaSalle to Cadillac, but Ford had a large gap between the $825 Ford Deluxe Station Wagon and the $1,295 Lincoln-Zephyr Three-Passenger Coupe. Mercury was created to fill it and compete with the Pontiacs, Oldsmobiles, and Buicks that were already in that market niche. Although the earliest Mercurys shared some mechanical components with Fords and Lincoln-Zephyrs, their external body panels were unique, and they had their own performance profiles.[10] From the very beginning, though, Ford faced the problem of how to position the Mercury with respect to its existing models: Was it a 'big Ford' or a 'baby Lincoln'? From an interview with designer Bob Gregoire:

> I think one of the most interesting things about the 1939 Mercury—the development of it—was the difficulty Mr. Edsel Ford seemed to have in grasping the idea of what this car was going to be. Oddly enough, he wasn't trying to step up far enough from the basic Ford. His whole concept was to tie it in with the Ford, and it was very difficult for me to get the point across—he was very touchy on the subject. In other words, to make this an effective [medium-priced] car, we thought that every effort should be made to dissuade the public that the Mercury was just a blown-up Ford which, of course, it really was. It suffered from that for a number of years. (Lamm and Lewis 2002: 9)

If Mercurys had been sold in their own dealerships, differentiation would have been less of a problem. But they were also in showrooms along with Fords, Lincolns, or both, inviting inevitable comparisons by customers and sales personnel alike. And it was also unclear which General Motors marque the Mercury

9. According to Lamm and Lewis (2002), production began at the Dearborn, Michigan assembly plant. Mercurys were announced and shown to Ford dealers on September 29th, and they were first shown to the public on November 4th.

10. The Mercury engine was a Ford "police" engine, one with a larger bore that had been available in law enforcement vehicles.

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was competing with. In spite of this congenital confusion, Mercurys sold well over the four model years from their launch in late 1938 through February 10th, 1942, when Ford terminated production of civilian vehicles and converted their plants to manufacturing for the military.

After WWII, Ford created a Lincoln-Mercury division, leaving no doubt that it intended to position Mercury closer to Lincoln than to Ford. And there were clear stylist differences. Unlike the more conservative Fords, Mercurys and Lincolns shared the distinctive and somewhat radical bathtub styling, an aircraft-based design concept created during the war that was also adopted by post-war Packards and Hudsons among others. It had taken a few years for all automobile companies to completely return to civilian production after the war, and it was not until April 22nd, 1948 that Lincoln introduced the first dramatically new postwar automobile (from among the "Big 3": General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler) as a 1949 model. The Mercury '49 followed one week later.[11] Naturally, there would have been considerable public interest in the new Lincolns and Mercurys, and it is likely to have been greater in Richmond, where K.C. Douglas was living and where Mercurys had been assembled.[12] It is not hard to imagine people in the spring of 1948 being crazy 'bout the coming Mercury, and it is not difficult to imagine people still today being crazy 'bout the Mercury '49. While the big, broad, bold bulk of the bathtubs did not turn out to be the wave of the future, however, it did have its admirers. The 1949–1951 Mercurys sold well, but at that time there was such a strong overhanging demand for automobiles that just about every model in those years sold well. In 1952, Mercury chose to move back into the mainstream with a design closer to those of General Motors, which was setting the trends in what people wanted their automobiles to look like in the early 1950s.

11. The landmark 1948 Cadillac with its nascent fins had been in showrooms since March, 1948, but beneath its dramatic surface was an essentially pre-war chassis.

12. It has not been possible to determine, though, whether or not Mercurys were assembled in the Richmond plant between WWII and the plant's closure in 1956.

Unfortunately for Mercury, during the last 60 years of its life between 1952 and its demise in 2011, its products more or less lingered in the background of the automobile market, at least from a stylistic standpoint. Although Mercury had some interesting designs in the 1950s and 1960s, it was never in the forefront. In January 1965, Lee Iacocca became the vice-president of Ford's car and truck group, and one of his first assignments was to initiate the effort to revive Mercury that culminated in the 1967 introduction of the Cougar and the Marquis. At the time, every Mercury model had a Ford counterpart that it quite closely resembled under the skin (the sheet metal) and often *inside* the skin as well. The Mercury Comet was a Falcon, and the Mercury itself was a Ford (Iacocca 1984). Iacocca did his best to create dramatic images with the vehicles' introductions to dealers and with their subsequent advertising campaigns, pushing as many popular culture buttons as he could imagine. The Marquis was unveiled by a massive release of balloons from the deck of a Caribbean cruise ship, and the Cougar drove off a WWII landing craft onto a St. Thomas beach accompanied by singer Vic Damone. Cougar print ads featured a live cougar photographed on a Lincoln-Mercury sign, and Marquis television ads promoted the car's smooth ride with Green Bay Packer quarterback Bart Starr being shaved by a barber while the car was in motion (Iacocca 1984).

Despite the marketing hoopla, occasional forays into racing, and the inclusion of unique captive imports in its line, Mercury never overcame the identity problem that had plagued it since its origin in the 1930s and established a distinctive image for itself. Football stars and wild animals notwithstanding, the Marquis was still a Mercury (which was still a Ford), and the Cougar was still a Mustang (which was still a Falcon). Similar to the problems faced by General Motors' Oldsmobile, Mercury never said much of anything about the person driving it to the general public.[13] It is not so much

13. General Motors produced its last Oldsmobile on April 29, 2004. And after failing to position Pontiac as a 'performance' brand, it too was discontinued on November 29, 2009 (Pontiac-branded imports destined for Canada were manufactured in South Korea by Daewoo for another month). Buick survived, but it was no longer marketed as an intermediate step up the financial ladder between Chevrolet and Cadillac. Rather, it became General Motors'

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of a surprise that following its brief notoriety in the late 1940s and early 1950s, a songwriter searching for an automobile with which to make a statement or an artist searching for an exciting design as a muse would never have settled on Mercury.

WHAT WENT WRONG?

> *The gal I love, I stole her from a friend.*
> *The fool got lucky stole her back again,*
> *Cause you know he had a Mercury; yeah you know he had a Mercury Ford.*
> *I'm gonna buy a Mercury and cruise up and down the road.*
> –K.C. Douglas and Robert Geddins

Fig. 4. Mercury Super Marauder. Quoted in: Vienna Auto Show 2018 blog (https://www.viennaautoshow2018.com/2018/05/06/mercury-super-marauder-1964-by-george-barris-with-a-wheelbase (Fair Use).

As has been described, Mercury had a popular culture presence in the form of a catchy song and outlaw customization that offered an opportunity for brand image development and exploitation, but it was not enough to save the name. The failure of "Mercury Boogie/Mercury Blues" to play any role in cementing an image of Mercury in popular culture is not very difficult to understand. At the time it was written, so-called "race-music" did not register on the popular music charts. Music performed by African-American

'upscale automobile with conservative styling' and Cadillac a somewhat more prestigious 'upscale automobile with progressive styling' (with hopefully a younger and wealthier customer base). La Salles had disappeared long before in October, 1939

musicians was assumed to appeal only to an African-American audience, a market which no company (i.e. record labels, radio stations, and advertisers) had any interest in tapping. Widespread interest in authentic blues as K.C. Douglas played did not emerge until musicians from the United Kingdom brought the songs back to the United States during the British Invasion and audiences sought out the original artists. Sadly, K.C. Douglas was not one of the more prolific or popular bluesmen. While he played local gigs in the late 1960s and early 1970s, he had no national recognition, and it was not until 1975 that his song was covered by the Steve Miller Band. If its revival had come from a more popular group with a catchier version that rose high on the singles charts—and if the mid-1970s Mercury Cougar XR-7 had not been suffering from a severe case of middle-age spread and shared the name Mercury with the bloated Grand Marquis—Mercury might have benefitted from the song. But it would have meant an extraordinary conjunction of unlikely events for that to have occurred.

Could Mercury have exploited its position as *the* all-time custom? The company tried with its Caravan of Stars in the mid-1960s, and George Barris, who built the 1964 Super Marauder, was very positive about the effort:

> Looking back at this one adventure in custom history, you can start to see that Detroit was actually paying close attention to what customizers and hot rodders were really doing. It wasn't just a matter of finding the hot trends in auto body ideas; it was as much about trying to understand the culture and to see how it could be used to create sales. I think Ford perceived that if you had the hot car these kids could buy at that age you could build ardent Ford fans who would continue buying Ford products for the rest of their lives. Today, that idea of using specialty vehicles to promote new vehicle sales is about as everyday as a Mustang convertible, but back then it was the cutting edge of youth marketing. If any of the first-hand accounts of attendees of these shows is worth repeating, this one sums them up: "So many people were crowded into the Custom Car Caravan display that it was hard to see what was on the stands!" (Barris and Fetherston 2002: 65–67)

The size of the crowds notwithstanding, Barris is likely biased in his assessment of the popularity of customized cars at the time.[14]

14. Considering the timing, it is likely that Lee Iacocca saw that the Custom Car Caravan was not turning attendance into sales and decided that

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As he inadvertently noted, the market wanted Mustangs, not futuristic versions of large two-door sedans. The Mercury Marauder was decidedly not a "sports roadster," as Barris described it. And the mid-1960s might not only have been too early to capture the middle-aged retro market described above, but the Super Marauder's science fiction styling would also not have been the vehicle to do it.

Mercury's failure leaves us with the question as to whether a company has significant ability to shape its image in popular culture or whether the process is out of its hands. Bentley and Cadillac were two makes that were able to exploit their popular culture images—one intentionally and the other fortuitously—that suggest what, with a little (or a *lot* of) luck, Mercury might—just *might*—have been able to do. Bentley's post-war tradition of model names had been the nondescript sequence R-Type, S-Type, and T-Type. Then in 1980 its new model was christened the Mulsanne after a straightaway at Le Mans, where Bentley had distinguished itself in the late 1920s. And two years later it installed a turbocharger, which did little to enhance the performance of a heavy sedan but which harked back to the famous "Blower" Bentley of that same era. Sales soared (McGoun 2020). Bentley had kept a meaningful presence in popular culture despite its owner, Rolls Royce, keeping it on life support but making very little effort for decades to revive it. To the surprise of General Motors, Cadillac, which no longer produced vehicles with the flamboyance of the '30s, '40s, and '50s which had attracted the attention of blues musicians among other notables (McGoun 2019), regained that cachet in the 1990s when rap musicians began to purchase Cadillac's very large SUV, the Escalade, and appropriately customize it. Cadillacs were no longer spotted only in Florida retirement communities, although the company still struggles to shake that dimension of its image.

The odds might not have been great, but if Mercury had had its own big, bold, and bad model that reflected its '49–'51 models, it might have had a positive impact on sales and kept Mercury alive—even if not overwhelmingly thriving. Interestingly, the redesign

exciting new models (albeit derivatives of Ford models that at least *looked* new and exciting) was a better strategy.

of the Chrysler 300 in 2011 did just that, reviving the chopped look of classic customs giving it an appearance that proved to be a hit with consumers. Popular cultural images do endow a vehicle with a certain magic. It might not have the power to steal gals—or guys—as it might have had once, but it can still add to the experience of cruisin' up and down the road.

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CAR PAINTING IN AMERICA

Edward Hopper's Visions of the Road

Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road,
Healthy, free, the world before me,
The long brown path before me leading wherever I choose.
–Walt Whitman

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Not many things render the horizon more American than the vast black ribbon of a road. After all, each country has its own metonymic symbol, be it Dutch windmills or Australian plateau. But once seen, they entail a specific set of associations. Being on the road is inextricably linked with the United States of America and the values that are commonly ascribed to its people; after all, the nation's founding document from 1776 praises independence as the superior merit. A car facilitates an ease of travel and, therefore, increases the sense of independence and liberty.

Perhaps such a bold link between a car and country's crucial principles seems all too radical, yet it would be difficult to question it as the theme of a road trip reverberates through the country's vast historical catalogue of movies, songs, literature, and visual arts. The abundance of inspiration may surprise when one couples it with a relatively short history of the country; however, even in its early years the American nation emphasized movement. Walt Whitman in his 1819 poetry collection *Leaves of Grass* addresses the nation: "O resistless restless race!" demonstrating that being 'on the go' has always been of paramount importance. A few decades

later, the American (Prussian born) painter John Gast produced one of the most recognizable allegories of the country's spirit–*American Progress*–that manifests state's expansion westward and celebrates the journey. The vastness of the land invites roads, carriages, trains, and eventually, cars. The ever-moving machines found its match in restless people who may treat life as a quest. One of the iconic lines in American literature is Kerouac's credo: "The road is life" (2019: 48), a statement illuminating how driving became an identity-forming experience.

Industrial development has certainly contributed to the betterment of the individual's life. The benefits of technological advancement allowed for the mass production of cars which resulted in a higher level of comfort of living and travelling. Such convenience while in transit was a novum and a trigger for exercising one's freedom. The producer of the first mass manufactured automobile, Henry Ford, promised:

> I will build a motor car for the great multitude. It will be large enough for the family, but small enough for the individual to run and care for. It will be constructed of the best materials, by the best men to be hired, after the simplest designs that modern engineering can devise. But it will be so low in price that no man making a good salary will be unable to own one–and enjoy with his family the blessing of hours of pleasure in God's great open spaces. (Ford 1922: 76)

Car owners depended neither on bus schedules nor bus routes which gave them liberty in designing their own destination; such an ability to choose one's own path (also *par excellence*) is a pivotal American value. Singularity and individualism are perfect concepts to exert for a private car owner. Moreover, thanks to a car, the transit between the public sphere and a private one has become imperceptible. One can pack their favorite belongings and set off on a journey while retaining a feeling of home. A person immersed in their vehicle transforms it from a nameless unit manufactured in a factory to a house on wheels, decorated with trinkets, stickers, and oftentimes littered with personal items. Campers and travel trailers constitute an even stronger example of a car 'domesticated' that offers a feeling of a settlement without the threat of constraint.

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Cars have irreversibly transformed the American lifestyle and, subsequently, American culture. The automobile industry ushered and spread social and spatial changes. The more accessible cars became, the more they were romanticized. It created a kind of a car folklore that entailed a dedicated infrastructure of motels, gas stations, parking lots, and drive-thrus that all found their reflections in various texts of culture, thus becoming a part of culture themselves. A nation formed in motion has ceaselessly expended its horizons and the ubiquity of car travels and their relentless popularity triggered nothing short of car mythology in the United States. A similar observation has been made by Roland Barthes, who connected human nature and its will to conquer with a vehicle that enables the conquest. In *Mythologies*, Barthes writes on a model of a Citroën, whose name in French is more than appropriate when discussing car mythologies, i.e., Déesse—a goddess. He claims:

> We are therefore dealing here with a humanized art, and it is possible that the Déesse marks a change in the mythology of cars. Until now, the ultimate in cars belonged rather to the bestiary of power; here it becomes at once more spiritual and more objectlike, and despite some concessions to neomania (such as the empty steering wheel), it is now more homely, more attuned to this sublimation of the utensil which one also finds in the design of contemporary household equipment. The dashboard looks more like the working surface of a modern kitchen than the control-room of a factory [...] the very discreteness of the nickel-work, all this signifies a kind of control exercised over motion, which is henceforth conceived as comfort rather than performance. (1991: 46)

Such mysterious, if not mystical qualities are equally present in the canvases of the American Master, Edward Hopper; therefore, the aim of this article is to analyze modernist representations of car culture as seen by the painter.

Edward Hopper is one of the major realist painters of the twentieth century America. He was intrigued by the ever-elusive human condition and, as an avid observer of his own milieu, was no stranger to reporting scenes from American life and meticulous portraits of people's behavior. As cars were part and parcel of reality, they became a subject matter for him as well. The works selected for discussion share a common denominator—they portray elements of car culture: *Gas* from 1940, *Jo in Wyoming* from 1946, and *Western Motel* from 1957. Hopper's paintings often depict lonely

people in transit outside of their domestic environment, as well as vast, empty spaces. His protagonists wait in a lobby, enter a hotel room, or a restaurant and evoke a sense of anticipation and a detachment from their surroundings. Another characteristic of Hopper's painting is a distinctiveness, made evident by a certain lack of details, that renders the works universal, similarly to myths.

The first painting to be discussed is *Gas* (1940), an oil on canvas with dimensions of 26 1/4 x 40 1/4" (66.7 x 102.2 cm); the work belongs to Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Fig. 1. Edward Hopper, *Gas* (1940). Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hopper-Gas-1940.png (CC0).

The painting demonstrates the artist's attraction to places suspended between one's point of departure and destination. It depicts a common sight in the 1950s in the United States—a lone man working at a gas station situated in a rural area. Upon closer examination, two parts of the painting can be noticed: there is a forest dominating the left side of the picture and it becomes dark, almost black, as it reaches the middle of the work to where the depicted road leads. The right portion features fewer tress and the space is occupied by two white buildings and a 'Mobilegas' signpost. The stillness of the trees set against the built establishment lends psychological depth to the painting; it could be read as an ambiguous portrayal of the country's ever-present conflict between nature and civilization.

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The stark contrast of energies between the two sides is enhanced by the peculiar portrayal and proportions of the captured elements. The forest is dense and with identical trees and it invites neither the man in the picture nor the audience. The signpost is as tall as the highest tree and the gas pumps reach the roof of the store and tower over the man. The latter, working in the middle of nowhere, is dressed in a shirt, a waistcoat, and a tie. Such panache is at odds with his surroundings but, also, pales in comparison to both—the mystery of the forest and the power and redness of the gas pumps. Hopper is considered to be an expert in creating light and its sources in his works. The light in this work is twofold—it comes from the settling sun and from the inside of what resembles a convenience store. The two kinds of light merged whereas the two worlds remain apart. The reduced number of objects in the painting makes it a synthesis of the American gas stations rather than a portrayal of a specific enterprise. The objects are familiar and prosaic but somewhat opaque and that aligns with what has been repeatedly said about Hopper's oeuvre: "The combination of arrangement, illumination, stillness, and bareness that he paints are seldom to be found in life, though the paintings are lifelike" (Anthony 1985: 174); it is the mimetic quality of the canvas that makes one search for the very reason for a gas station, i.e., the car. The lack of car at gas station creates tension: has a car just driven away? Has there ever been a car? The pristine conditions of the station and the crisp clothes of the man suggest rather a readiness for car's arrival than a rest after one. A curatorial research specialist Sarah Powers who is a guide at Virginia Museum of Fine Arts and offered private tours of the museum in 2019 when "Edward Hopper and the American Hotel" exhibition opened, says the following about the painter's works: "What kind of speaks loudest in Hopper sometimes are the absences—what's not in the painting" (Dalla and Adams 2020). The lack of car shows the manner in which the roads and the infrastructure, together with the people working there, is ever anticipating. It is noted that in the contemporary landscape, where the self-service gasoline stations, or "self-serves," are growing in popularity, the gas jockeys have become obsolete thus emphasizing the car's dominant position. Therefore, even though the painting does not depict a car,

the machine is an invisible agent dictating the pace of the narrative and, paradoxically, constitutes a kernel of the canvas.

Interestingly enough, *Gas*, as explained by Gail Levin, the painter's biographer, came to life during painter's holiday in 1940 which he spent, as he used to, in Truro, Massachusetts. Hopper and his wife Josephine had a summer house neighboring Cape Cod Bay and, as Levin stated, the artist used to go for long rides in his car and looked for inspiration in his environment (1995: 77). Hopper was fascinated with the development of automobile industry; he was a keen driver and understood that travelling changes one's state of mind. Together with Josephine, Hopper traveled across the States and many times stopped to capture a sight. In one such circumstance, the second analyzed work of art was created: *Jo in Wyoming,* from 1946, is a 50.8 x 35.43cm (20"x 14") watercolor presenting a still frame from one of the couple's road trips.

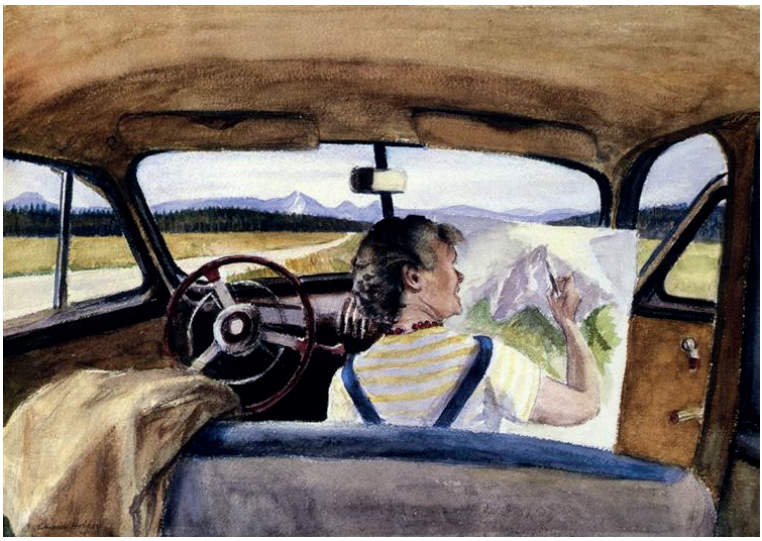

Fig. 2. Edward Hopper, *Jo in Wyoming* (1946). Source: https://www.wikiart.org/en/edward-hopper/jo-in-wyoming. © Edward Hopper (Fair Use).

The work shows Jo in the passenger's seat in their car painting a mountain range. The space is confined to the car interior and, although passenger's door is open, the car top overwhelms the viewer and flattens the perspective. The latter is a peculiar one: is the painter standing behind the vehicle with the trunk open? Or maybe he is on the back seat? Either way his position seems

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impossible to capture Jo in her artistic activity. The way she is working is also unique. She chooses to sit in a car, with the door ajar and lets the machine intervene with her art. The viewers do not even see the peak she is capturing; their experience of the outside, in this case, the mountain tops, is second-hand. What the audience can see is what the driver is exposed to: the road through the windshield. Because of this frame, the unlimited space before them is a subject to fragmentariness.

The couple is seemingly outside, as indeed, they are not *in* a building but, at the same time, they experience nature by proxy, as if the windshield was a screen onto which landscape is projected. When compared to *Gas,* from just a few years before *Jo in Wyoming*, a shift of focus is noticeable; the previous work showed a deep abyss separating the nature on the left and human culture on the right, and a car was not even in the painting. Here, however, the car is the focal point and is also the point of view imposed by the painter. It is the car that devours the canvas and the perspective. It is a man-made confinement of nature's unlimited space. Jo is connected to both: she is in the car but her subject matter is beyond it. She does not seem to be aware of being observed, and is immersed into a process that is fleeting, for the driver will soon take his seat and move on. The elusiveness of the road trip is not lost on the Hoppers. They both understood the pensive mood triggered by travelling. In a conversation with his biographer the painter admits that: "[t]o me the most important thing is the sense of going on. You know how beautiful things are when you're traveling" (Levin 1995: 166), further revealing his fascination with roads and their escapist character. A car not only improves the quality of life but also adorns it with possibilities. Jo, who at times was a self-proclaimed cartographer for their journeys, called the land "open country" (Levin 1998: 98). A similar description was given by Owen Wister, a writer recognized as the father of the western genre. He, in *The Virginian* (or *The Virginian: A Horseman of the Plains*), provides the following depiction of, surprisingly enough, Wyoming: "a land without end, a space across which Noah and Adam might come straight from Genesis. Into that space went wandering a road, over a hill and down out of sight, and up again smaller in the distance, and down once more, and up once more,

straining the eyes, and so away" (Wister); both Jo Hopper and Owen Wister share the myth of unique journey one makes through, in this particular case, Wyoming territory. Furthermore, Jo would often draw maps with her comments on them so the car trip was personalized: "From the lower left corner of this map, Jo drew a red line on the route leading from the highway, on South Truro Road, across the dunes to their home on its high ridge above the bay. She noted on the map the words, 'car tracks, home-made shortcut'" (Levin 1998: 98), making their outings align with the American attachment to individualism. The Hoppers' private encounter with the country is facilitated by their car, they observe their America from its inside. Such a strong relation to a vehicle was echoed in 1964 in a book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* by Marshall McLuhan. In the volume he defines technologies as extensions of a human being: "During the mechanical ages we had extended our bodies in space" (1996: 5) and, in so doing, McLuhan reinforces Barthes's take of the myth of velocity that he describes the following way: "mythology of speed as an experience, of space devoured, of intoxicating motion" (37).

The social and psychological implications and consequences of technology that has gradually become domesticated raised the fears of relishing it and becoming subservient to the machine. McLuhan was concerned that, by ascribing such importance and meaning onto technology, a human being risks becoming 'numbed.' Moreover, the writer claimed that the human body will form certain defensive mechanisms in response to the new stimuli that is offered by technological development or, as he labels it, "various pressures" (42). The scholar believed that technology is an extension of the human body (e.g., limbs), but also of the nervous system. All these advancements are regarded as threatening phenomena—in the chapter "The Gadget Lover," he compares each form of the body's extension to self-amputation. Such a radical standing lends a rather dire undertone to technological developments. McLuhan even goes further in his judgement for he writes: "Self-amputation forbids self-recognition" (43), which seems to ignore any beneficial aspect that machines, cars included, may have offered.

Both McLuhan and Barthes see the new role technology assumes in one's life and its undoubtedly paradoxical character: on the one hand,

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a car is a tangency point between the outside world and the inside, familiarized space. On the other hand, it separates its passengers suspending them in a fragmented reality of limbo. Driving in a car could be therefore seen as a truly overwhelming activity when read through McLuhan's take on mechanisms: "What makes a mechanism is the separation and extension of separate parts of our body as hand, arm, foot, in pen, hammer, wheel. And the mechanization of a task is done by segmentation of each part of an action in a series of uniform, repeatable, and movable parts" (218); the danger of such fragmentariness could be all together avoided by what Barthes likens to exorcism. Although Barthes speaks of a ship, the solution's functioning remains the same—it aims at eradicating the human desire to control the mechanism. He writes:

> In this mythology of seafaring, there is only one means to exorcize the possessive nature of the man on a ship; it is to eliminate the man and to leave the ship on its own. The ship then is no longer a box, a habitat, an object that is owned; it becomes a travelling eye, which comes close to the infinite; it constantly begets departures. (1991: 35)

An entirely different perspective is offered in the last of the selected paintings by Hopper. An oil on canvas from 1957 titled *Western Motel* is a depiction of a woman sitting on the motel bed, anticipating.[1] The room seems silent and motionless, with two rectangular windows permitting the entry of light. Everything in the room is organized, controlled, and geometric. The inside is filled with vertical and horizontal lines rendering the room bleak, if not hostile. The woman is looking at the viewer; the pensiveness of her stare and her tense posture accentuate the sense of some impending movement or event. She appears to be waiting: the luggage is packed, the room is devoid of personal objects, the bed is made, and a car is parked outside the window. The woman is alone but her gaze is directed at the viewer, inviting them in. She is oblivious to the landscape encompassing her location; she turns her back on it and for a good reason–there is nothing the scenery can offer, for it is plain and bleak. The road, on the other hand, tempts with meaningful possibilities as the destination is of secondary importance. Driving is a goal in itself as any route is a valuable

1. See the image at https://www.artrenewal.org/artworks/western-motel/edward-hopper/5486. Accessed 10 Dec. 2021.

encounter. In *Romance of the Road: The Literature of the American Highway*, Ronald Primeau writes that a car in the US "has always been more than just transportation: it is status, success, dreams, adventure, mystery and sex" (1996: 56), suggesting adventures that await one on the road.

Clearly, a motel is a place of passage and is strictly linked with cars. Roadside diners, hotels, and caravan parks are all creations that are complementary to car culture. America's greatest transport hub was formed just a year before the painting was created: the Dwight D. Eisenhower National System of Interstate and Defense Highways (Interstate Highway System) required (and still does) countless roadhouses, inns, motels, and gas stations. However, it was by no means the first such momentum in American infrastructure. Before the Interstate Highway System, the legendary "Mother Road" as John Steinbeck referred to Route 66 (1939) was driven by millions of people seeking a better life for themselves. The magnitude and popularity of the route paved the way for prosperous businesses along the road and a certain cult status of car travels for they ceased to be an activity for the chosen few: the US 66 allowed the small-town Americans to become connected to the main American highway and, in so doing, it promised an opportunity, liberty, and, in a way, equality. As the route made the journey across the country swifter and therefore more desired, it became a fixture within American culture. Songs, TV series, and movies portraying Route 66 are reminders of the road's paramount importance.

Few places are more inspiring to contemplate the ever-elusive *conditio humana* than such places of transience. The train of thoughts changes together with each new sight. Kerouac summarizes it thus: "Nothing behind me, everything ahead of me, as is ever so on the road" (2019: 49). And, even though the woman in Hopper's painting is static, the possibility of movement is vivid as the car is an *extension* of her body. The way Hopper painted it makes their bodies touch. It begs the question as to why he decided to unite them as the outside is vast and there is plenty of space to park the car. It builds tension between the woman and the vehicle as they head the same way. In lieu of the problematic division between the public and the private, Hopper resolves the conundrum by making the woman and the car, one.

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This trick also makes the journey easier as there are no conflicting voices of which Owen Wister wrote: "The spirit will go one road, and the thought another, and the body its own way sometimes;" the picture becomes a double symbol of mobility as it takes place in a motel, an epitome of being on one's way, and the car/woman is just one key turn away from moving forward. This movement is also triggered on two levels, the literal one as a car makes travelling possible, and a more abstract one, as it represents social progress (only four years before Hopper painted *Western Motel*, the first woman broke the sound barrier. Two years later, Rosa Parks sparked a national civil rights movement by protesting her relegation to the back of a city bus).

All three of Hopper's works offer freedom that is directed outward and experienced by means of automobility. This liberty however cannot take place without a particular, free state of mind. Even the painter himself recognizes the profound origins of one's journey: "the inner life of a human being is a vast and varied realm" (Lowry, 2013–2014) and a car is an excellent tool to transfer the inner existence into the vast realm of outside reality. The latter was at the time turned towards a new philosophy that had absolute freedom at its core—existentialism. When Jean-Paul Sartre, probably the most acknowledged proponent of existentialism, visited the United States of America for the first time in 1943, he was not met with the recognition and admiration he had thus far enjoyed in Europe. The initial reviews of the doctrine were questionable and the media had their doubts: "no matter how Jean-Paul Sartre tries to wriggle out of the accusation, his existentialism is a philosophy of despair" (Fulton 1999: 29), which may be a surprising interpretation as for the thinker it was a human being that constituted the center of the universe, removing the idea of God or any other superior force deeming it useless. For Sartre, each person was free to choose and needed to be aware of this empowerment. With time, however, his theories gained appreciation in the US and the interest in existentialism increased and, eventually, Sartre's thought was seen to have "demonstrated its relevance to American culture" (Cotkin 2003: 104). Even though Sartre and Hopper never met, their outlook on an individual and their place in the universe seem to overlap, especially

in their view that human existence could be perceived as a series of movements and motions. Both were keen observers of their surroundings and reviewed them in their respective fields. Hopper's artistic expression as well as Sartre's philosophy treat human being and their innermost self in relation to reality.

Thus, the echo of Sartre's existentialism can be found in Hopper's usage of a car that provides one with enhanced energy and power to move farther and further in one's existence. The individual agency achieved when driving resonates with one's will and desires that were key factors for the French philosopher. It is also not accidental that there is no interaction depicted in the paintings, each person is alone, inwardly focused. The only object with which they can interact is (or, could be, as *Gas* alludes) a car. Interestingly enough, Hopper's works could be summarized by Sartre's own perspective on art, of which he viewed: "as a creative activity in the service of freedom and control for a good life" (Fulton 1999: 256). The two sensed the meaning individualism, personal drives, and autonomy have in an era so thoroughly altered by technology.

Without a doubt, the United States has embraced the invention of the car and, as it entered all areas of one's life, it has become an icon that reflects national values. Initially, the purpose of a car was to make one's life more comfortable and efficient. With time, its significance has been enriched by visions of freedom and myths they have inspired. Cars have helped to reevaluate the questions of identity and one's roots and in so doing, they have become such a pivotal part of reality it reached a cult status and has been celebrated (and critiqued) in countless texts of culture. The emergence of the American nation stems from the Declaration of Independence, a document that emphasizes freedom and the right to pursue happiness; a car is indeed a carrier and facilitator of these values. The three paintings show that a car is an outward expression of one's inner mobility. Hopper, uses cars as protagonists of his works and grants them importance equal to people for his art is a reaction to dynamic changes that occur within a society and within an individual.

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THE REBEL BEHIND THE WHEEL

An Examination of the 'Redneck' Rebel Cultural Trope in *The Dukes of Hazzard*

> *Lose on the track, and you go home. Lose with a load of whiskey, and you go to jail.*
>
> –Junior Johnson,
> NASCAR champion and former moonshine runner[1]

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The car is a uniquely American symbol, as much as Coke (as in Coca-Cola), blue jeans and apple pie. The United States, with its wide-open spaces and fascinating places, was the country that most embraced the car, especially in the South and Midwest/West, which was mostly rural and spotted with small towns spread far apart. It was the car that first represented freedom, independence and a sense of having 'made it' to the top of American society. However, it was also the car that inspired authors to write about freedom of movement and freedom of choice, freedom of personality and, for some, freedom of conscience in a fierce enjoyment at rejecting the 'safe,' comfortable existence of the drudgery of the suburbs.[2] The freedom represented by the Redneck Rebels behind the wheel of the 1970s and early 1980s 'car movies' was not the nihilistic freedom of outlaw bikers of the late 1950s and early 1960s but the freedom-loving existence of adolescent youth, carefree good ol' boy humor and a constant reminder that there is a huge country in between the coasts and outside the major cities, areas that some derisively call 'flyover country.'

First, a major distinction must be drawn before proceeding to examine the heart of this subject, which is why the 'anti-

1. See Joyce (2014: 88).
2. See for example, Jack Kerouac's 1957 novel, *On the Road* (Kerouac 2019).

hero' Redneck rebellion of the 1970s that uses the car to rebel against the norms of conventional American society as presented by *The Dukes of Hazzard*, became so popular. What exactly is a 'Redneck'? According to Jeff Foxworthy of 'You might be a redneck if….' fame, it is a "glorious lack of sophistication."[3] In one of the few academic texts on the stereotypes of Redneck culture in the Southern United States:

> *Redneck* is a popular term frequently found in the Southern vernacular that first designated poor white farm workers […]. Recently, however, the label has taken on a more positive connotation in some circles, particularly among Southern blue-collar workers themselves, denoting honest, hard-working, working-class men. Female equivalents of this traditionally masculine categorization, have also surfaced—for example, *redneck women* and *women rednecks.* (Roebuck and Hinson 1982: v)

Or, to put it simply, "[f]or people outside the working-class Southern culture from which this image emerged, a 'redneck' was a threatening figure to be avoided. For those within the culture, the 'redneck' was not necessarily a pejorative term, but connotated being 'down to earth' in every respect—rough around the edges, to be sure, but decent, hard-working Christian people with strong moral values" (Coski 2005: 74). This distinction is illustrated by *The Dukes of Hazzard*. The main characters, cousins Bo, Luke and Daisy Duke, along with Uncle Jesse are easily identifiable as 'rednecks,' even though none of the actors that portrayed the Dukes were born in the South, although several of the supporting cast were born in the South.[4] However, they were definitely hard-working, fun-loving, and, in the case of Uncle Jesse, wise beyond their years. Furthermore, Daisy Duke was read-

3. The concert that the quote was taken from can be found on the DVD and Live versions of *Them Idiots Whirled Tour*. The concert featured Foxworthy, along with Bill Engvall and Larry the Cable Guy. It was filmed at the Consol Energy Center in Pittsburgh, PA in front of 11,000 people and directed by Ryan Polito. The DVD was released on Amazon.com on March 13, 2012. The quote in this paper was taken from the Live version.

4. 'Bo'—John Schneider was born in Mount Kisko, New York (although he spent his teenage years in upstate Georgia), 'Luke'- Tom Wopat was born in Lodi, Wisconsin, 'Daisy'—Catherine Bach was born in Cleveland, Ohio and 'Uncle Jesse'—Denver Pyle was born in Belthune, Colorado (Hofstede 1998: 28–39). Hofstede also includes biographies of the supporting cast as well.

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ily identifiable as the buxom exemplar of white Southern female beauty that could make men weak in the knees with just a glance. Secondly, as argued by Antony Harkins, in *Hillbilly: A Cultural History*, reveling in terms like "redneck" or "hick" was a matter of pride and signified a cultural pushback against various aspects of the civil rights movement. As Harkins states, "[a]lthough rarely described so explicitly, this development (the rise of 'redneck,' 'cracker,' and 'hillbilly' as signifiers of white racial pride) was part of a general counterreaction to the social upheavals of the Civil Rights movements, counterculture, and women's movement of the late 1960s and 1970s" (2004: 211).[5] Furthermore, it was an all-male rebellion, as the 'car culture' of the South and Midwest was a homo-social experience:

> The core of the good ole boy's world is with his buddies, the comfortable, hyperhearty, all-male camaraderie, joshing and drinking and regaling one another with tales of assorted, exaggerated prowess. Women are outsiders [...] What he really loves is his automobile. He overlooks his wife with her hair up in pink rollers, sagging into an upside-down question mark in her tight slacks. But he lavishes attention on his Mercury mistress, Easy Rider shocks, oversize slickers, dual exhaust. He exults in tinkering with that beautiful engine, lying cool beneath the open hood, ready to respond, quick and fiery to his touch. (Nystrom 2009: 94)

While perpetuating several anti-white and anti-Southern white stereotypes, the above quote does tap into the love that many men (not just white men) feel for their cars. However, as will be seen, it was in the South and the rural mid-West that most embraced the homosocial culture as described above. Admittedly, while the *Dukes of Hazzard* was multiracial in its cast (the sheriff in one of the adjoining counties was Black), the show itself was mostly popular in the South and the Midwest and mostly popular among whites. While being 'red around the neck' might be sneered at by the elites along the East and West coasts of the US, the 'redneck' and his car is impossible to escape when one looks at the movies from this era. Even the most popular film of 1977, *Star Wars* (later entitled *Episode IV: A New Hope*) was not immune

5. "Redneck" and "Rebel" are also popular terms in the underground white nationalist rock scene, with artists like Rebel Son, Redneck 28, Johnny Rebel and Racist Redneck Rebels (aka RRR), among others, populating the scene.

from influences of Rednecks it seems. As Chris Gore points out in the Forward to *Hick Flicks: The Rise and Fall of Redneck Cinema*, *Star Wars* from 1977:

> […] is often described as a space opera—a simple story of good versus evil. But at its core is the story of a farmboy [sic] who lives in the backwoods of the universe, torn from his home planet by a galactic war beyond his control. Sure, Luke Skywalker was not content with his simple moisture-farming life on the desert planet of Tatooine, but his adventures did allow him to pilot souped-up space hotrods, blow up plenty of cool stuff and even get to kiss his own sister. […]
>
> And the whole family affair got even more messy in *The Empire Strikes Back* when Luke found out that the main bad guy, Darth Vader, was his very own pa who walked out on the family to pursue the fortunes of galactic conquest. Things went from bad to worse when dad gave Luke a lightsaber whuppin,' leaving him one-handed. Yessir, Luke not only had to deal with nasty elements in the galaxy, but an abusive father to boot. Pa redeemed himself in *Return of the Jedi* when the emperor tried to beat up his son—that's when Vader made it clear that no one messes with his boy but him. I like to think that Luke Skywalker was cinema's first space hick. (von Doviak 2005: ii)

Admittedly, Luke Skywalker does not speak with a Southern accent; however, he does exhibit traits that play into the loveable 'Rebel behind the wheel' fighting for 'truth and justice' against an evil oppressor by riding around with his companions doing good deeds.

No other show seemed to be as much fun at expressing the fun of driving fast cars, running from corrupt cops and fighting the good fight than *The Dukes of Hazzard*. Airing from 1979–1986, *The Dukes of Hazzard* rode the tailcoat of the popularity of *The Smokey and the Bandit* but also, and more importantly, traced its roots back to the colonialization of the continent and showed that 'flyover country' could embrace shows out of Hollywood that mirrored their culture, as long as they could relate to the main characters and poke fun at themselves and the overall urban culture. The research questions that this article addresses are: (a) what are the influences and the roots of the *Dukes of Hazzard*? (b) Why was the show more popular in the South and the Midwest more than urban areas? Finally, (c) what role did the car, the General Lee, play in the show's popularity?

The mid-1970s to mid-1980s was a very vibrant cultural era in the United States. This period also saw the rise and subsequent

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fall of the classic 'car movie.' Movies such as *Mother, Jugs and Speed* (1976), *The Gumball Rally* (1976), the three *Smokey and the Bandit* movies (along with its four TV spinoffs and 3 sequels in the early 2000s) and countless B-movies such as *Eat My Dust!* (1976) and *Riding with Death* (1976), along with its spin-off on the NBC network, *Gemini Man* (1976), continuing into the 1980s with the TV show *The Dukes of Hazzard* (1979–1985), and even the cult classic *Knight Rider* (1982–1986) celebrated the 'Rebel behind the wheel'—an outlaw living by his own rules and fighting the 'good fight' for truth, justice and the American way, or, just to be left alone to do what he wants to do—drive fast and damn the consequences.

Admittedly, not all of the characters portrayed in these movies and series were Southern Rednecks. There are many exceptions to this rule, among them, most of the characters of the *Gumball Rally*, who were rich, bored bourgeois urbanites and the diverse cast of characters from the three *Cannonball Run* movies (1981, 1984 and 1989—*Speed Zone*), which range from buxom ladies to stuttering Rednecks to classic grifters (played by Dean Martin and Sammie Davis Jr.). Nevertheless, this article's main focus is on the Southern Redneck Rebel behind the wheel of a car, fighting against overwhelming odds to achieve his goal—to be left alone in a world that seems to envy his freedom and reviles him for his accent, attitudes and beliefs. However, the questions of why the car movie arose in the 1970s and, more specifically, why did the 'Redneck' audience enjoy the genre so much need to be addressed.

One of the most iconic 'car movies' and one of the influences of *The Dukes of Hazzard* did not arise in the 1970s but in 1958. *Thunder Road*, produced, written and starring Robert Mitchum portrayed the story of a moonshine runner, and eventually turned into one of the first 'car cult' dramas.[6] The movie set the standard for the 'moonshine epics' to come and eventually, *The Dukes of Hazzard*; indeed, the movie only missed a buxom 'Daisy Duke' character to have all the ingredients of *The Dukes of Hazzard*. The 'moon-

6. This is not the first article to examine *The Dukes*. The overwhelming majority of articles concern media culture in the United States, and the only article that examines similar topics is the project by Ted Blake at the University of Virginia's American Studies Program, entitled simply "*The Dukes of Hazzard*."

shine epics' provided everything that would be needed for movie audiences: "With car chases, criminality, and a built-in good-guy-versus bad-guy story line, moonshining was an irresistible subject for filmmakers" (Joyce 2014: 162–163). However, to see an anti-hero 'hick' on the big screen, played by a top star was something that was unusual and made Southerners and other 'hicks' proud to be 'rednecks.' In fact:

> *Thunder Road*'s enduring popularity no doubt owes less to the melodramatics and awkward chase scenes than to Mitchum's myth-making. In one fell swoop, the actor had brought together most of the elements that would comprise the good ol' boy iconography for decades to come: the anti-authoritarian poses and folksy lingo, the burly physicality and winking charm, the country-fried smarts and the hottest of hot cars (Luke Doolin's 1950 Ford coupe is a virtual proto-Batmobile, complete with smoke bombs, quick-release whiskey tank in the trunk and switch-operated jets that spurt oil in to the path of pursuing lawmen.) For the first time, the yokel was the coolest guy in the picture, and for rural audiences reared on the cornpone antics of Li'l Abner and Ma and Pa Kettle, that was something to cheer about. (von Doviak 2005: 19)

The end of *Thunder Road* also exemplifies the 'devil may care' attitude that mirrored the historical moonshine runners. As mentioned by Jamie Joyce in *Moonshine: A Cultural History of America's Infamous Liquor*, "audiences especially loved *Thunder Road's* epic ending: Mitchum as Lucas Doolin, barreling down a dark, winding road, cigarette dangling from his lips, federal agents on his tail. In the film's final moments, Doolin's car fishtails, his tires burst by spikes. He swerves, and the vehicle flips three times before crashing into an electrical transformer" (2014: 166). It was scenes like those described above that defined what the 'moonshine epic' was all about—'down to earth' antiheroes, fast cars, illegal activity and later, buxom ladies in the skimpiest of clothes. Whereas Mitchum repudiated the film years later, *Thunder Road* set the stage for other 'moonshine epics'—among them *Moonrunners*, starring Robert Mitchum's son, James Mitchum. Released in 1975, it was *Moonrunners* that would add the buxom girls in revealing clothing to the heady mix of moonshine 'tripping,' corrupt local officials, fast cars, chase scenes and crashes.

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While the stories of moonshine runners were very well known throughout the South, the 'moonshine runners' or 'trippers' as they were known, were mostly unknown outside the South. The 'devil may care' attitude of Bo and Luke Duke, as portrayed by John Schneider and Tom Wopat, was first shown by various moonshine runners, such as Lloyd Seay, a native of north Georgia in the 1930s:

> Seay was a whiskey tripper, well known in North Georgia for his skill behind the wheel and his ability to outrun authorities. His business made him a frequent traveler on the two-lane road between Dawsonville and Atlanta, where he delivered moonshine, sometimes twice a day, racking up more than 150 miles on a round-trip excursion. One day in 1939, Seay was pulled over for speeding. (It must be assumed that he'd unloaded a shipment of moonshine prior to the stop, because if there were whiskey in the car, he definitely would have applied his foot to the gas pedal instead of the brake). When the officer approached the vehicle, Seay tossed at him two $10 bills. "Hell, Lloyd, the fine ain't but 10 dollars," the officer supposedly said. To which Seay replied, "I know it, but I ain't gonna have time to stop next time. I'm payin' in advance." (89)

The above 'snappy' attitude is typical of the 'moonshine trippers' but is also a feature of how Hollywood portrayed the typical Southern redneck behind the wheel in the car movies and TV series of the 1970s and early 1980s, including Burt Reynold's character in *Smokey and the Bandit*, and his character, Robert "Gator" McClusky from the early 1970s movies *White Lightening* (1973) and, the sequel, *Gator* (1976), as well as Bo and Luke Duke. The same can be said of a NASCAR legend, Junior Johnson. A native of Ronda, North Carolina, Robert Glenn Johnson Jr. was born into a moonshine making family. Ronda is located in the heart of North Carolina's 'moonshine country,' Wilkes County. At one point in 1947, Wilkes County had so many moonshine trippers that, "the local racetrack invited them to come on out and drive in the hour and a half that passed between qualifying races and the main show" (101). For Johnson's part, he became so bored with farming that:

> [he] had dropped out of the eighth grade, and he turned to transporting moonshine for his dad. His runs were local, at first. But by the time Johnson was 16, he was venturing further from home, hauling whiskey 'all night long, every night' to bootleggers in Lexington, Greensboro, Salisbury, and Albemarle, among other places, some 50 to 100 miles away. The way he saw it, delivering moonshine was the same as delivering milk. [...] His car

was a 1940 Ford, modified to the hilt, with fat tires for stability, extra big rims, and springs to help handle the weight of the liquor. (100–101)

Johnson proved so capable behind the wheel that he was never caught hauling illegal liquor.

Speed was critical if you wanted to keep from getting caught. But a driver also needed courage and quick reflexes. On the roads that ran out of Wilkes County, Johnson perfected his moves. One came to be called the 'bootleg turn,' and it involved slowing the car down, dropping the gear into second, punching the brake, and spinning the car around in the opposite direction of those who were giving chase. (101)

He won his first race at Hickory Motor Speedway in 1957 and would later go on to be a rising star in NASCAR, along with training over 35 drivers before retiring and being inducted into the NASCAR Hall of Fame. It was drivers like Johnson and Seay, along with fictional characters from the 'moonshine epics' that would inspire *The Dukes of Hazzard* and prepare TV audiences for the fun-loving, high flying Duke boys.

Spawning several spinoffs and two feature-length movies, *The Dukes of Hazzard* showed the adventures of Bo and Luke Duke, two cousins on parole for running moonshine, as they battled against the corrupt law enforcement and county elites (Sheriff Rosco P. Coltrane and J.D. "Boss" Hogg). The Dukes wanted just to be left alone but the law/'the establishment' would not allow this, as they were constantly harassed by the above-mentioned antagonists. However, whether intentional or not, the show fit in well with President Ronald Reagan's 'conservative revolution' and a return to 'family values' after the tumultuous years of the counterculture and economic strife. After all, the show featured no killing but plenty of car crashes, no cursing but plenty of tense situations and colloquialisms—mostly from actor James Best (Sheriff Rosco P. Coltrane) and Sorrell Brooke (J.D. "Boss" Hogg)—a very underrated and unrecognized comedy team, and no graphic sex or discussions about sex, but it was sexy. Indeed, the show proved to be so popular that it spawned a new clothing style, modelled after the female lead's skimpy wardrobe, the 'daisy duke'—even though as pointed out by Anthony Harkins, author of *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon*, the 'cut-off' jeans

look of Daisy Duke had been around since the days of Daisy Mae in the *Lil' Abner* cartoons of the 1930s (2004: 213–214).

While the roots of the *The Dukes of Hazzard* (hereafter referred to simply as *The Dukes*) can be found in the local legends of the trippers of the South, the production of illegal whiskey on the frontier has a deep story in the history of the United States. Indeed, one of the first movements to challenge the authority of the new United States federal government was the frontier Whiskey Rebellion of 1791–1794, which saw mobs attack 'revenue' and 'whiskey' stamp agents who were trying to collect the tax. These 'revenue agents' were despised and physically assaulted as people on the frontier thought they were being unjustly singled out for persecution by an unfeeling, corrupt and 'elitist' group of distant bureaucrats.[7] It could also be argued that *The Dukes* plays into the rural/urban conflict that stretches back to the colonial era when the future American frontier was a violent and wild place, as illustrated by the Whiskey Rebellion. Indeed, *The Dukes* seemed to not only tap into America's fascination with the car but with fighting against a tyrannical and corrupt government—something that also traces its roots to the Regulator Movement of the frontier of Colonial-era North and South Carolina. Furthermore, Wilkes County, North Carolina and its adjacent counties of Alexander, Ashe, Caldwell and Watauga (along with a few others) were on the 'frontier' during the Regulator Movement and were among the last settled in North Carolina. Although the idea for making corn whiskey that was untaxed by the government (aka "moonshine" or "white lightening"), stretches back to the earliest days of the colonialization of the American frontier, the "running" or "tripping" of moonshine became popular in the earliest days of Prohibition.

The roots of TV series *The Dukes* can be traced back to Gy (pronounced "Guy") Waldron's 1975 moonshine movie *Moonrun-*

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7. For more information on the Whiskey Rebellion, see: Thomas P. Slaughter, *The Whiskey Rebellion: Frontier Epilogue to the American Revolution* (1988) and William Hogeland, *The Whiskey Rebellion: George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, and the Frontier Rebels Who Challenged America's Newfound Sovereignty* (2006). Also, more information on America's tradition of rural rebellion can be found in Catherine McNichol Stock, *Rural Radicals: Righteous Rage in the American Grain* (2017). *Rural Radicals* was first published in 1996.

ners, which was based on a family of moonshiners in the hills of Waldron's home state of Kentucky. In the South and Midwest, unlike the major cities on the coasts, the car was not only a status symbol but the major means of transport and a symbol of freedom. Since most people in the South and Midwest lived on isolated farms or in small towns that could not afford (or even needed) public transport, a car represented adulthood, freedom and responsibility. In the author's hometown of Hickory, North Carolina, the local racetrack, as much as the mall or high school played no small part in the social life of teenagers and male-bonding through a love of cars, driving fast and "hell-raising" (–speeding down dirt roads and trying to avoid the police).[8] In small towns across the South and Midwest, kids learned to drive early and learned how to drive on or in various surfaces–dirt roads, muddy fields, sand, through forests and on ice and in snow on treacherous, winding mountain roads.

The childhood experiences of Gy Waldron with the driving culture of the South would prove instrumental in his 1975 movie *Moonrunners* (inspired by the true experiences of moonshine tripper Jerry Rushing) and in *The Dukes*. He stated:

> They had a saying there-you drive the car during the week running whiskey, date the girl on Saturday night, and drive her to church on Sunday morning. You made your living in the car, you raced on weekends in the car, the first time you made love it was probably in the car. (Hofstede 1998: 14–15)

As can be seen, it was the South, more than anywhere else in the United States where kids learned the value of the car. Like Jerry Rushing, Waldron was born in Kentucky, where "boys

8. Hickory Motor Speedway–where demolition derbies and races were held every weekend from April through October was 3 miles from the author's home. In fact, the races could be heard on clear summer nights. The drive-in movie theater (where the author had his first 'date'), was a bit closer–only 2.5 miles away. The author never ran "shine" nor was "tripper" but did accompany his maternal grandfather to acquire moonshine and a distant neighbor made moonshine and hid his 'product' in the woods near the author's childhood home. In fact, it was his grandfather that taught him, on one of these 'runs,' how to drive at age 12 because his grandfather was too inebriated to drive home. Needless to say, the author's mother was not happy with her father! For those interested in more information, Hickory Motor Speedway's website is: https://hickorymotorspeedway.com/index1.php. Accessed 10 Aug. 2021.

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learned to drive tractors at the age of twelve and were racing across back roads in modified stock cars before their sixteenth birthdays" (14). Furthermore, it was Waldron's experiences that translated *The Dukes* into a TV series, but also kept the show on the air and created a large fan base in the South and Midwest because the fan base could identify with the characters.

> More than any other series in the history of television, *The Dukes of Hazzard* was a wake-up call to Hollywood that there were actually people living between New York and Los Angeles. Though it drew a respectable rating on both coasts, the series' most loyal and enthusiastic audience lived in small towns and rural communities throughout the South and Midwest. [...] And for those who still insist that the show had no redeeming qualities, I offer the following list of lessons taught by *The Dukes of Hazzard*: Respect your family; do your chores; fight for what's right; if you run a squad car into the lake, always look back to make sure everyone's all right [...]. (xii)

The rebelliousness of *The Dukes* had nothing to do with the nihilism of the 1950s 'Beat' movies, exemplified by Marlon Brando's character, Johnny Strabler, in *The Wild One* (1953), when asked "What are you rebelling against, Johnny?"—Strabler famously quips—"Whaddya got?"[9] Furthermore, it was not the antisocial, ultra-violent hedonism of the outlaw motorcycle gangs portrayed in various movies, nor the self-indulgent, bored rebellion of the jaded bourgeois urbanites in the movies *The Gumball Rally* (1975) or the various *Cannonball Run* movies of the 1980s (1981, 1984, 1989), nor did it contain the criminal angst of the various *Fast and Furious* movies of a later era (2001–present) or any of the other movies or TV series that revolved around cars.

The Dukes' rebellion is grounded in a 'conservative redneck' rebellion exemplified by belief in God, country, family and taking the high moral ground. As John Schneider, the actor who played Bo Duke opined, "as corny as *The Dukes* was, underneath all that was the most accurate depiction of the interdependence of rural people that has ever been on television. Our show was like a Norman Rockwell painting [...] that moved very fast!" (55). As can be seen by the various quotes above, *The Dukes*, far from being 'one long car chase,' culturally told a typical American story

9. *The Wild One*, Columbia Pictures, 1953.

of redemption and striving to do good and right by your family and community. Finally, *The Dukes* had a star that spoke the language of the American road, a 1969 bright orange Dodge Charger-the *General Lee*.

The backstory of the name, the *General Lee*, is that moonshine trippers named their cars for famous historical personages. Actually, this was common practice in the South and Midwest until fairly recently—naming one's car or, in particular, pick-up truck, was a rite of passage for many rural white young men. In particular, trippers would name their cars after historical figures, mostly from Southern history, and in particular, of Confederate heroes/generals or, sometimes, their just as famous horses. In the first draft of the first script, Gy Waldron wanted to call the car *Traveler*, after Confederate General Robert E. Lee's famous horse (at least famous throughout the pre-civil rights era South where General Lee and the Confederates were still revered). However, one writer suggested that audiences outside the South might not get the reference, so the name was changed to the *General Lee*. As Hollis mentions,

> and of course, most viewers considered the Dukes' car, a Dodge Charger painted bright orange and named the *General Lee*, as much a cast member as anyone else. No, the car had no funny lines, but it came close with its horn that played 'Dixie' as a sort of way of sticking its tongue out at the sheriff and Boss Hogg. (2008: 240).

And, by extension, it could be argued, the elitist culture of the coasts that vilified *The Dukes* as 'redneck culture.'

In conclusion, there can be very little argument that the heyday of the 'Redneck Rebel' behind the wheel ended with the last season of *The Dukes*. That does not mean that cars could not star in movies or television shows, as most recently, *Supernatural*'s 'Baby'—a black 1967 Chevy Impala can attest. However, the cheeky attitude that *The Dukes* had at 'sticking out its tongue' at the elitist culture and the antihero attitude as attested to in the various 'moonshine epics' had run its course by the mid-1980s.

The current criticism against all things Confederate and/or Rebel-related has seen the cancellation of *The Dukes* reruns on the TV Land network in 2015 because of the backlash concern-

ing the Confederate flag. However, it seems that the attitude that *The Dukes of Hazzard* presented and the mythos that it drew inspiration from will continue to influence the culture of the ever-dwindling and ever-vilified 'redneck culture' for years into the future.

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BUDDIES, LOVERS, AND DETOURS: AMERICA AND ITS ROAD MOVIES

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The American dream is a story about mobility. It is about leaving somewhere old for somewhere new and the many forks in the road along the way. Ever since Ford's Model T, this is a story about cars and nowhere is this more apparent, or louder, than in cinema. There are films with destinations and without, about journeys to visit or escape from family, about finding or losing oneself. Films about life and death on the open road. Films about America's past, present, and future.[1] Reflecting on cinematic journeys, this article discusses the road movie genre from the perspective of 2021, and how contemporary road narratives intersect with race and gender.[2] It does so by highlighting two American films—*Queen & Slim* (2019) and *Unpregnant* (2020)—and contextualizing them in the road movie genre at large.

Released one year apart, the posters for the two films preview a classic format: two people, one car. A single journey shared by two. Both films track drives across multiple states as a consequence of an accident. For *Queen & Slim*, the accident is a dead police

1. As the writer Michael Twitty points out, "the term 'United States' conveys politics but no dream" (2017: 7).

2. This article draws from my experience teaching "Head Out on the Highway: The Cultural History of the American Road Movie" at LMU Munich's Amerika-Institut (2019–2020). I am grateful to all of the students who contributed to making our discussions so rich, so lively, so thoughtful (and so fun), and to expanding my own perceptions of the genre. Also, many thanks to Rupali Naik for telling me about *Unpregnant*.

officer and for *Unpregnant* it is an unplanned pregnancy. And both spotlight characters who hit rough patches of road that launch them on unexpected journeys. In discussing these films in tandem, it is not my intention to compare or measure the representation of life and death and race and privilege in one film against the other. Instead, my hope is that a discussion of these two road movies will yield an analysis of this genre's current temperature. How are these contemporary takes on the road movie a sign of their times?

ROUGH ROAD

With her hair pulled back, a woman in a red buttoned-up dress stands on top of a Ford Crown Victoria Police Interceptor that is submerged in a flooded street. The water nearly swallows its tires, coming up just below the blue letters that announce: New Orleans POLICE. In the background are rows of houses with water up to their doors. The car is still but the water around it ripples. A man's voice asks: "What happened after New Orleans?"—a scene that opens the music video for Beyoncé's "Formation" (2016).[3] As Black studies scholar Omise'eke Tinsley describes, "images of water literally flood 'Formation'" (2018: 263). Images of racial injustice flood it too.

Directed by Melina Matsoukas, this rich visual collage jumps back and forth between choreographed and improvised dance scenes, joy rides and long braids hanging out of car windows, service at a Black church and a young boy—his hair hidden behind a hoodie—dancing in front of a wall of riot police.[4] As the song progresses, the police car sinks.[5] By its end, Hurricane Katrina's

3. The voice is Messy Mya (Anthony Barre), a New Orleans rapper, who was shot while leaving his girlfriend's baby shower in 2010.

4. When he stops dancing the officers raise their hands in the sequence of a wave and the camera captures the writing on the wall. "Stop shooting us," spray paint demands. This references the 2012 shooting of seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin and the hoodie as a symbol of racial profiling. See Tillis and Harris (2014).

5. The song and the music video were released as a surprise on February 6, 2016. The next day Beyoncé was one of the guests at Coldplay's Super Bowl 50 halftime show. Dressed in a black leather jacket-cum-bodysuit that recalled Michael Jackson's 1993 Super Bowl performance (and with her dancers dressed like Black Panthers), she performed "Formation" for the first time. This sparked heated debates, with some accusing her of spreading

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floodwaters have swallowed the car whole, first blanketing its roof and, finally, Beyoncé. The camera shifts from a side angle to an overhead view, exposing her face, eyes shut and mouth closed, as the water swallows everything.

Three years later, Matsoukas's feature directorial debut—*Queen & Slim*—returns to New Orleans. Released on November 27, 2019 by Universal Pictures, it features a screenplay by Lena Waithe and a story by Waithe together with James Frey. But before the protagonists make it to New Orleans, Queen (Jodie Turner-Smith) and Slim (Daniel Kaluuya) eat their way through an awkward Tinder date at a diner in Cleveland, Ohio.[6] The scene is dark—both inside and out—and the lights glow a shade of green that matches Edward Hopper's iconic 1942 painting *Nighthawks*. Despite the atmospheric lighting, the date is going nowhere. Their chemistry is as cold as the snow that later falls outside.

Back in the car—a white Honda Accord with the license plate "TRUSTGOD"—their chemistry continues to freeze. Slim drives and Queen gives directions, his phone in her hands. He grabs his phone back, swerving the car. Blue lights flood the back window; a white police officer pulls them over. The atmosphere turns tense. Queen, a criminal defense attorney, questions the officer: does he have a warrant? While he searches the trunk, Slim asks him to "please hurry up," breathing on his hands to stay warm. "What did you say?" roars the officer as he draws his gun. "I'm reaching for my cell phone," Queen announces as she jumps out of the car. The officer shoots her in the thigh, blood splattering across her white jeans. Slim tackles him; the two scuffle and roll. He loses hold of his gun, it falls, Slim grabs it. One shot and the officer is dead.

Like Fyodor Dostoyevsky's 1866 *Crime and Punishment*, a six-part novel where one part chronicles the crime and five the punishment, *Queen & Slim* is one shot and mostly run. Eleven minutes into the two-hour and twelve-minute film is the shot that transforms

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an anti-police message. Later, "Formation" won six MTV Video Music Awards and the Grammy for Best Music Video. Since then, it has become an anthem of sorts at demonstrations, including ones in support of the Black Lives Matter movement.

6. Their nicknames are never spoken out loud and their full names only revealed at the end: Angela Johnson and Ernest Hines.

the protagonists into outlaws. Outlaws but not criminals, since Slim acted in self-defense. "Let's go," Queen orders. "We can't just leave him here," he protests. "Yes, we can," she confirms. The camera looks through the Honda's back window—the blue lights continue to flash. An overhead shot zooms out as they drive away, the body bloodying the snow. They argue about what to do, where to go. Queen's uncle (Bookeem Woodbine) lives in New Orleans and owes her a favor. It's still dark when they start the over one-thousand-mile journey. Soulful R&B fills the car—smooth music that cannot soothe.[7] Queen asks Slim to turn it down.

Instead of north to south, *Unpregnant* moves east to west. And instead of a romantic drama, it is one part 'female buddy' road film and one part teen comedy. An unplanned event, like in *Queen & Slim*, sparks its journey. Directed by Rachel Lee Goldenberg and released by HBO Max on September 10, 2020, the film begins in a high school bathroom.[8] Seeking the privacy of a stall, seventeen-year-old Veronica Clarke (Haley Lu Richardson) waits for the result of her pregnancy test. Eyes closed, "you're fine," she coaches herself, only to open them to see the result is positive. Surprising her from above, Bailey Butler (Barbie Ferreira) peaks in, spotting the test. It is clear the two used to be close, but now they sit at different tables in the cafeteria: Veronica with the popular crowd and Bailey by herself. Disguising her panic, Veronica develops a plan. At home, she walks past the living room—where a drawing of the pope represents her parents' views on abortion—and up the stairs to her bedroom, where she calls a clinic for "research for an assignment." She learns that she cannot make an appointment without parental consent because she is under eighteen. She asks about the closest clinic. After consulting Uber about a ride from Columbia, Missouri, to Albuquerque, New Mexico, over 900 miles (the estimated cost is $2,572.00), Veronica asks Bailey to drive her.[9] She agrees. Veronica

7. Music is important in road movies, a lens this article unfortunately overlooks.

8. The film is an adaption of the young-adult novel of the same name by Jenni Hendricks and Ted Caplan.

9. *Unpregnant* was released in 2020 and that same year another film told a story of a young woman who had to travel from one state to another in order to access an abortion: *Never Rarely Sometimes Always*. In this film,

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is strict about the schedule; her parents think she is at a friend's house for the weekend studying and will be back Sunday night.

When they hit the road in a flashy blue Trans-Am with an eagle spreading its wings across the hood, Bailey, who is behind the wheel, cheers "Road trip!" *Queen & Slim*, in contrast, is a road movie without the road trip, which is to say without the cheer. Knowing that the explanation of 'self-defense' holds little sway in a courtroom after a Black civilian's bullet has killed a white police officer, their decision to run is a reflection of structural racism and inequality in the United States. It is only later that Queen and Slim learn that, two years earlier, this police officer had killed an unarmed Black man.

Trust, and not having it, is a red thread in *Unpregnant*. Veronica does not trust her parents to respect her decision, she does not trust her friends to share what she is going through, nor does she trust her boyfriend. But she trusts Bailey. Bailey also anticipates that the road is not a place where trust is easily found, and has anticipated the need for self-defense. Veronica finds a taser in the car and asks Bailey why she has it. "Veronica, we're two teenage girls going across the country in the middle of the night," she matter-of-factly responds. Later on, Veronica tells Bailey, "I'll get murdered if I travel alone," making it clear they have to stick together. Violence is a constant threat on the road. Cars expand the human body but they also harm it. The car can both be a means with which to escape, to run, but also a crime scene and a weapon.

CAR TROUBLES

A category of its own, the road movie overlaps with other genres—from westerns to thrillers—and charts stories of quests, discovery, or the coming-of-age.[10] An open road represents a spectrum of possibilities; it also represents choices to make. But is an open road a democratic one? Not all forks in the road are safe and a driver's sense of safety is in tune with their race, class, gender, and sexuality.

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the seventeen-year-old protagonist has a shorter journey; together with her cousin, she travels from Pennsylvania to New York City by bus.

10. Anne Hurault-Paupe points out that "genres are produced by the discourses which describe them" and reminds readers that when Bonnie and Clyde came out it was not considered a road movie (2014: 2).

The road movie genre has many paths: from solo trips to buddies or couples and from families to strangers sharing a car. In the United States, these films also showcase an American representation of space. Employing dynamic montage sequences that show cars from the driver, the road, the passenger's, as well as a bird's eye point of view, these shots make the audience feel like they are along for the ride. But mobility is equally social as it is physical. Cultural studies scholar David Laderman identifies the genre's "fundamental core impulse" as the "rebellion against conservative social norms" (2002: 1). Most road movies, he argues, embrace the journey as a means of cultural critique and the genre's core "is constituted more precisely by a tension between rebellion and conformity" (20). Together these films ask: who feels safe on the road and who can make the road their own?

Despite their differences, what unites *Queen & Slim* and *Unpregnant* is that they destabilize the genre's traditional protagonist: a white man. Barbara Klinger, a film studies scholar, identifies how the American road movie genre is rooted in the entanglement between expansionism, imperialism, and race. Taking *Easy Rider* as the quintessential example, she writes how it "allows us to grasp how the road film, in particular its generically obligatory journey through landscapes and territories, participates within broader creative and cultural efforts to define the nation" (1997: 181). Gender also plays a role. The highway represents "a masculine space of freedom and escape" and the home "feminized domesticity" (Schewe 2014: 39). Because of this binary distinction, queer theorist Elizabeth Schewe calls the car "a symbol of upward mobility and of masculine sexual potency" (41).

Taking an intersectional approach, Schewe draws from historian Cotton Seiler, who argues that "[t]hose who travel the public road without impediment are the implied citizens of what I call the 'republic of drivers'—a political imaginary of anonymity and autonomy that finds expression in the practices and landscapes of automobility" (1092). Paying attention to "a black highway consciousness" (1094) and prioritizing "Black road narratives" (1095), Seiler charts the car as both commodity and symbol. Historian Gretchen Sorin writes that during Jim Crow "the automobile held distinct importance and promise" and African Americans employed

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it as a weapon against segregation (2020: 9). Driving became a means with which to "claim the rights of citizenship and push the boundaries of racism" (48). As she explains: "For black people, mobility was always most highly prized because it was often and had historically been an impossibility" (11). Here, mobility refers to both geographical space as well as to socioeconomic status.

Because the car symbolizes "masculine autonomy" (Schewe 2014: 47) and driving can be interpreted "as an index of [...] participation in the 'American way of life'" (Seiler 2006: 1098), it matters who is driving, who is the passenger, and the dynamic between them. A classic road movie trope is a couple behind the wheel, usually one that clashes like oil and water at the film's beginning only to become inseparable by its end. Couples appear in two versions: romance and friendship (Laderman 2002: 7). *Queen & Slim* exemplifies the former and *Unpregnant* the latter. The protagonists in both films take turns behind the wheel. They are both drivers and passengers, but one in each film drives more: Slim and Bailey.

One movie often drives in another film's lane, meaning the genre is self-referential. *Queen & Slim* is in dialogue with the outlaw couple model—for which Laderman credits *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) with laying out the basic features—and *Unpregnant* follows the buddy quest model—blueprinted by *Easy Rider* (1969) (2002: 44). I later return to *Bonnie and Clyde*, but wish to first address another prototype from the American catalog: *Thelma & Louise* (1991). This film features a different type of outlaw: the accidental outlaw. *Unpregnant*'s script even compares itself to *Thelma & Louise*, but unlike it, does not blur the line between romance and friendship. As Lynda Hart, the late literary scholar, writes, "the semantic awkwardness that refers to the film as a 'female buddy' film points to the conceptual inability to think of the film in terms other than that of substitution" (1994: 436–437). She made this observation in 1994, which suggests that since then the label has shed some awkwardness. But in addition to representations of gender (a man and a woman on the road is a love story, but a man and a man or a woman and a woman is a story about friendship), *Thelma & Louise* hints at questions about sexuality that the film does

not dare answer. Hart reads the bar scene as an "implication of erotic desire between them" (442).[11] Addressing its lesbian subtext, she argues: "As they go on the road, the film seems pressured to reinforce their sexual identities" (440). Hart continues: "For these romantic/sexual encounters allay any potential anxiety about the women's desire for men" (440). This leads to the question: "Could we imagine black women in these roles, or women whose physical appearances signified lesbian?"[12] One can still ask this thirty years later. Bailey in *Unpregnant* comes out as queer, but the film never veers away from friendship territory.

HOPPING A RIDE

The third star of *Thelma & Louise* is their turquoise 1966 Ford Thunderbird, a car they drive off a cliff in the film's iconic ending.[13] Similarly, *Queen & Slim* also ends with a fatal police encounter. However, unlike *Thelma & Louise*, their final ride is in the backseat of someone else's car. Neither one is behind the wheel.

Unpregnant also ends with the characters as passengers. And both films feature a cast of cars. Cars, as well as clothing, are visual symbols of character transformation and plot development. As already mentioned, a white Honda Accord opens *Queen & Slim*. Shortly thereafter, the two steal a white and red Ford pick-up truck. When they arrive in New Orleans, a just-missed run-in with the police changes their plans. Slim makes an "executive decision" that they should escape to Cuba, but first they have to make it to Miami.[14] They burn the truck and Uncle Earl gives them a Pontiac Catalina that is turquoise, a color echoing *Thelma & Louise*. But Slim is skeptical about the Pontiac's ability to disguise them for the more than eight-hundred-mile drive. "That's the whole

11. The bar scene ends with the accidental murder that transforms Thelma and Louise into outlaws.

12. Tongue-in-cheek, *Smoke Signals* (1998) features two women driving backwards: Velma and Lucy (see Gilroy 2001).

13. As Hart describes, "Their deaths are thus rendered as virtual but unrepresentable" (1994: 430).

14. A never-reached final destination is a trope in many films, like *Badlands* (Saskatchewan), *Thelma & Louise* (Mexico), and *Boys Don't Cry* (Memphis). As Holly in *Badlands* expresses: "Little by little we approached the border. A magical land beyond the reach of the law."

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point," Queen assures him—the car will hide them in plain sight. Kashema Hutchinson (2019), an education studies scholar, reads this scene through Erik Nielson's argument that Black Americans, specifically rappers, "use cars for (in)visibility to evade the police." Reading Wu-Tang Clan's song "Redbull" as an example, Nielson, a literary scholar who focuses on rap lyrics, writes: "Here and elsewhere, the car becomes another example of the tension between seeking attention and trying to avoid it: It is large, colorful […] yet the driver and its occupants often remain unidentifiable" (1266). Returning to *Queen & Slim*, Hutchinson (2019) summarizes how "the white gaze was temporarily blinded by the turquoise Catalina," allowing them to cross state lines.

Along the way, the Catalina breaks down. After it has been repaired, they ask the mechanic's son to take their picture, with the car in the frame. The last car they drive is a Mercedes Benz station wagon—Slim starts it with a screwdriver when they escape the house of Uncle Earl's friend, which a SWAT team raided the night before. The station wagon brings them to a Florida man (Bertrand E. Boyd II) with a mouth full of gold, who drives them in his Cadillac to the plane to Cuba. They have almost made it, but for the first time in the film they are both in the backseat. As soon as they get out of the car and walk toward the plane, a flock of police cars rattles up behind them. Queen and Slim hold hands. She says she'll never let go. Her last words are a question: "Can I be your legacy?" "You already are," he answers. A nervous officer, a woman, shoots her. After a six-day nationwide manhunt, six days on the road, Queen is dead. Slim picks her up, her body spread like a cross against his. The police open fire. The cross of bodies collapses to the ground. The Florida man—the last person they met—turned them in, a character Hutchinson describes as having "internalized the American ideology of individualism—everyone for themselves in their pursuit of justice, liberty and happiness." Like *Thelma & Louise*, the movie ends with the protagonists' death. But unlike it, Queen and Slim did not choose death over being arrested by the police. They wanted to live but the last car they ride in is a black hearse.

In contrast, Veronica and Bailey's police run-in is not fatal. Somewhere in Texas, they stop to eat at a diner. Before they

sit down, Veronica attracts the attention of a group of guys. Ignoring them, her and Bailey place their orders. Waiting for their food, they notice a cluster of cops investigating their car in the parking lot. Bailey stiffens, confessing that she didn't ask permission to take her "mom's asshole boyfriend's car." Veronica realizes the car is stolen. One of the guys who scrambled for her attention causes a distraction while the police search for the driver. "America, the beautiful," he sings. Veronica and Bailey make a quick exit, but are now without a car.

The rest of their journey is a burst of dramatic fragments. A ride from the diner leads to another potential ride, one offered by a female race car driver. Veronica catches on to Bailey's enthusiasm. "Yes, I like girls," she confirms. But then a friendly couple pushing a stroller offers them a ride all the way to Albuquerque. The next morning, when they wake up not where they planned to be, they realize the couple had overheard Bailey's phone call with the clinic and is trying to prevent the abortion. Veronica and Bailey escape, stealing the couple's GMC Yukon, but are chased down by a "pregnancy clinic bus" only to reach a cliff. "Let's keep going," Bailey says. "What?" Veronica reacts. "I'm kidding. I'm not doing a Thelma and Louise. I'm not driving off a cliff," Bailey replies. They jump out of the SUV and, once again, are on foot. After a failed attempt to hop a train, Veronica yells at the world, cursing the fact that she has to drive 996 miles through three states only to become stranded because of her own's prohibitive laws. "Fuck you Missouri State Legislature," she howls. But then, at the closest bus stop, they notice a dusty sign for a limo service and pay its driver to take them the rest of the way. At this point, similar to both *Thelma & Louise* and *Queen & Slim*, Veronica's appearance has changed. A black band T-shirt replaces her soft cream and pastel long-sleeve. A baseball cap hides her blond hair.

Just as cars change throughout the journeys, clothes do too. And, like cars, clothing can hide or reveal. At Uncle Earl's, Queen and Slim raid the closets. He changes into a Bordeaux velour tracksuit, she into a tiger print mini dress with snakeskin boots. Their hair also changes: Slim has a shaved head and, without

her waist-length braids, Queen's hair is tapered, short, natural.[15] Queen and Slim live the rest of the journey in these clothes. They die in them too.

When Slim asks the mechanic's son to take their picture, Queen disapproves. "C'mon," he coaxes, "I want proof that we were here." Around this point, aided by the previous night when they risked their cover to go dancing, their dynamic begins to change. Their disagreements become flirtatious.[16] Back in the diner, the moment they met, when Slim asked Queen why she picked him, she replied that she liked his picture. "You have this sad look on your face," she confessed, "I felt sorry for you." He confesses his dad took his picture, that he does not need a lot of pictures because he knows what he looks like. "Pictures aren't just about vanity," she disagrees. "They're proof of your existence."

Veronica agrees. Throughout their trip, she posts pictures on social media. The first one frames the night sky with the caption "selfcare." Bailey asks why she is posting at all, to which she answers to keep up appearances, to wade off suspicion that her weekend is anything other than ordinary. This points to photography as a form of surveillance. For Veronica, posting images online is act of self-surveillance. She posts one thing, but lives another. The time on the road allows her to shed the social conventions of her everyday life. It grants her perspective and, typical of the genre, a new sense of self.

For Queen and Slim, video functions as a witness. They learn that the bodycam footage of the shooting has gone viral. The video is a witness to racialized oppression that raises questions regarding accountability. A review describes *Queen & Slim* as a "meditation on race relations and police brutality," for which Matsoukas drew inspiration from films like Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989)

15. For the importance of hair in the film see Allen (2019).

16. The day after the mechanic repairs the car, his city holds a demonstration in Queen and Slim's support. At the frontline his son Junior impulsively shoots a police officer (which the camera shows) and, in turn, is killed (which is mentioned but not shown). The protest scene alternates back and forth with a sex scene in the car that represents the bond Queen and Slim have forged from being together on the road. Also representing this shift, the film employs two voiceovers. For more about how voiceovers add texture to a film's narrative see McGettigan (2001).

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and the Mexican road movie *Y Tu Mamá También* (2001), but, above all, "YouTube videos of black people being pulled over by the police or encountering law enforcement and it not necessarily ending well" (Kelley 2019).

When Queen and Slim arrive in New Orleans, Uncle Earl has already seen the video. His first words of welcome are: "Well, if it isn't the Black Bonnie and Clyde." "I don't know what the news is saying," Queen retorts, "but whatever it is it's not true." The story's plot attracted Matsoukas to make this her first feature film. "It was provocative, it was political, it was an opportunity, I felt, to move the culture forward" (Kelley 2019). But she disagrees with describing the film as a Black *Bonnie and Clyde*:

> I think it's a really simplistic and diminishing way to talk about our film [...] I don't really agree with basing black films on any white archetype. [...] there's a huge difference in who Queen and Slim are. They're not criminals on the run, they're two very human people who have a shared experience that was not their choice. (Kelley 2019)

Matsoukas underlines that Queen and Slim are not criminals. Instead, they are accidental outlaws. They have to run because the law will not protect them.

Beyond Arthur Penn's 1967 title, Ian Leong, Mike Sell, and Kelly Thomas have defined a road movie subgenre: the Bonnie-and-Clyde film (1997: 72).[17] They argue that "the Bonnie-and-Clyde genre purposely fragments certain narrative conventions of classic Hollywood cinema but at the same time shares certain assumptions with popular notions of conservatism, namely that love is good and affluence is right" (71). Moreover, this genre "maps the intersection of capitalism and desire" (85). *Queen & Slim* maps neither. It is an accidental love story. As one review points out: "They flee rather than reporting the shooting as self-defense because they believe they have no other choice. [...] Whites are

17. *Bonnie and Clyde* opens with an unprecedented sexualized scene and closes with an unprecedented violent scene, representing the end of the Hayes code. It was one of the first features to extensively use squibs—explosive charges filled with stage blood—making it one of the first mainstream American films to depict graphic violence. See Peebles (2004).

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innocent until proven guilty: Blacks are guilty until proven innocent" (Sharp 2020: 298).

In her 2020 book *Driving While Black*, Sorin identifies the tension between the car's association with freedom and the restraints that govern driving through "a web of regulatory practices" that spans tests and licenses, speed limits and police stops (141–142). The contrast between an open road and its many rules. She discusses how driving continues to be "a potentially dangerous activity, especially when it comes to police traffic stops" for African Americans (19). The deaths of George Floyd and Daunte Wright, and so many others, tragically represent this. *Queen & Slim* contributes a fictionalized example to the urgent need for systemic change, just as the writing on the wall in Beyoncé's "Formation" insists. Referring to the likes of traffic stops, Sorin writes: "We should see these dismal events not simply as a legacy of slavery and racism but also as the continuation of restrictions on mobility that have been placed on African Americans from the start" (2020: 19). Although the American dream is about mobility, not all Americans have, or have had, the access to this right.

CONCLUSION

The ending of *Queen & Slim* is tragic. They never make it back home. Veronica and Bailey do (but only after calling their mothers who buy them plane tickets) and have rekindled their friendship along the way. As a genre, road movies depict detours, run-ins and near run-ins with the law, the symbolic and cultural capital of cars, the roadside diner as a liminal and, sometimes, democratic space, and the kindness and wrath of strangers. Driving is a blur of contradictions. It is a practice that both isolates and connects. It brings some people together and keeps others apart. "Cars are terrifying," author Adam Gopnik writes, "and cars are normality itself" (2015).

Sorin makes the crucial distinction that *Driving While Black* is not simply a story about African Americans. Instead, she uses that lens to tell a history that "broadens and deepens our understanding of the automobile's role in American life and history and encourages us to consider the context within which today's race relations developed" (2020: 21). I argue the same about *Queen & Slim*

and *Unpregnant*. Taken together, these films not only narrate the fictionalized stories of a racist encounter with a police officer that transforms two young African Americans into accidental outlaws—and then kills them—or how prohibitive regulations force a young woman to drive across three states to exercise her right to make her own decisions about her body. These films represent contemporary American life and the restraints some citizens continue to battle in efforts to feel at home on the road, to feel at home in America.

A film is able to take a culture's temperature, to portray a society at a particular moment. A film will never be completely representative, but it will offer a view on current debates, attitudes, and ongoing tensions. Both *Queen & Slim* and *Unpregnant* represent a period in American politics that has continued to shift to the right, as exemplified by, first, Donald Trump's presidency and, second, policies passed by state governments, such as Texas, to just about ban abortions. Together these two films represent a period in which the safety of Black Americans and the rights of women have continued to be compromised, but not unchallenged.

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EXISTENTIAL DEFINITION AT THE END OF THE AMERICAN ROAD

Zabriskie Point (1970), *Vanishing Point* (1971), *The Gauntlet* (1977)

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> *The mountains come first.... The traveler tries to go round the obstacle, to move at ground level, from plain to plain, from valley to valley. Sooner or later, he is obliged to travel through certain gorges and mountain passes of sinister repute, but he resorts to them as little as possible.*
>
> –Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (1972)

"[C]ertain gorges and mountain passes of sinister repute…" Could there be a better description of parts of the American landscape viewers see in three films that, each in its own way, landmarked the cinema of the 1970s? Michelangelo Antonioni's first (and last) foray into filmmaking in America, *Zabriskie Point* is remembered as an ambitious but incoherent failure, a visually impressive but superficial attempt to capture the California zeitgeist at the end of the 1960s just as it was about to crash and burn at the Altamont Music Festival. In contrast, Richard Sarafian's *Vanishing Point* soon achieved cult film status. As played by Barry Newman, the character of Kowalski—his first name is never used—remains the quintessential 1970s anti-hero, easily displacing such other claimants to the title as Gene Hackman's Jimmy Doyle in *The French Connection* (1971), Steve McQueen's Doc McCoy in *The Getaway* (1972), and Robert De Niro's Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver* (1976). *The Gauntlet*, directed by and starring Clint Eastwood, occupies a middle ground, allowing Eastwood to deviate from his formulaic "Dirty Harry" character while at the same time reprising the strong, stoic 'outsider' type on which he had

based his career since the 1960s. Unlike the "Dirty Harry" films, in *The Gauntlet* there are no criminals or psychopaths who have to be brought to justice; instead, the criminality resides in high places where, ultimately, retribution and revenge are exacted.

As a genre, the road movie is so well established in American filmography that it requires no lengthy explication here.[1] A growing academic and critical literature continues to accumulate, and new interventions appear on the screen with some regularity (Cohan and Hark 1997; Sargeant and Watson 1999; Laderman 2002; Borden 2012; Archer 2016; Alford 2018). At the same time, the concept has become so elastic that its origins in the Hollywood of the 1960s and 1970s—and especially among so-called 'independent' filmmakers—threaten to become obscured. Adapted to other geographic and cultural settings, even the essential characteristics of high-speed automobiles, rebellious or 'loner' protagonists, and downbeat if not disastrous endings seem to dissolve (Duarte and Corrigan 2018). Simultaneously, a different kind of road movie, entirely urban in its locations and claustrophobic rather than free-wheeling in its mood—yet still possessing the key elements of alienation and anti-social exclusion—has won critical acclaim and breathed new life into the all too often self-reflexive genre of post-noir and neo-noir filmmaking.[2] One recent essay has called into question whether the road movie, defined by movement, speed, and distance, remains a functional cinematic genre, or—indeed—if it ever was (Hurault-Paupe 2014).

My purpose in this essay is to discuss three films from the 'classic' era of the road movie, each of which made a distinctive contribution in defining the existential anti-hero in the cultural consciousness of the time. That two of the three are enmeshed in extra-diegetic circumstances surrounding their leading players only adds to their emblematic presence in what was arguably the most formative decade in American moviemaking (Biskind 1998; Godfrey 2018).

1. Significantly, the other place where the road movie quickly achieved an iconic presence was Australia, not only with George Miller's four (to date) *Mad Max* films but also with Wim Wenders's underappreciated *Until the End of the World* (1991). The topographical equivalencies, as well as the sociocultural affinities, are persuasive (see Melbye 2010: 199–122; Thomas 2021).

2. Examples include *Drive*, directed by Nicholas Refn (2011); *Nightcrawler*, directed by Dan Gilroy (2014); and *Baby Driver*, directed by Edgar Wright (2017).

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If the road movies of the 1970s carried the themes and tropes established by *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and *Easy Rider* (1969) to their aesthetic as well as logical conclusion, their importance to the construct of American cultural history in the twentieth century speaks for itself.[3] In particular, in their sympathetic exploitation of the almost limitless spatiality of the American Southwest, the three films discussed are artifacts of an era whose reproducibility today owes more to contemporary cinematic technology than to 'real-life' filmmaking. High-speed chases, the cult of the car (especially the muscle car), and the romantic allure of the open highway all seem to be vanishing in the rear-view mirror in the new age of self-driving vehicles, automated highways, and twenty-four-hour video surveillance of every intersection, tollbooth, and parking lot. Geography has been banished by cell phone technology, speed has succumbed to universal congestion, and the wide open spaces of the North American continent are being rendered impassable by climatological catastrophe.

"WHEN IT GETS DOWN TO IT YOU HAVE TO CHOOSE ONE SIDE OR THE OTHER"—MARK TO DARIA, IN *ZABRISKIE POINT*

Flush with the critical and commercial success of *Red Desert* (1964) and *Blow-Up* (1967), Michelangelo Antonioni was granted exceptional concessions by the MGM brass to make a film that would explore the political and social conflicts that were tearing America apart at the end of the 1960s—a $3 million budget which eventually doubled, extended location shooting in Death Valley, complete editorial control, and the casting of two unknowns as his lead characters. Initially conceived by Antonioni and his erstwhile screenwriter Sam Shepard to be an essay on the desolation of the American environment, the project became increasingly political in character as the director witnessed the clashes between police and protestors at the Democratic Convention in Chicago in August 1968 and then spent time with student radicals on uni-

3. Other examples are *Two-Lane Blacktop*, directed by Monte Hellman (1971) and *Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry*, directed by John Hough (1974). Period films in which car chases are highlighted but are not the primary focus—e.g., Peter Yates's *Bullit* (1968), William Friedkin's *The French Connection* (1971), and Sam Peckinpah's *The Getaway* (1972)—are excluded here.

versity campuses in Southern California. A protracted shooting sequence, from September 1968 through May 1969, together with Antonioni's meetings with representatives of the Black Panther Party, further attenuated the film's original focus. Police brutality, corporate greed, and racism were all layered in as the script went through a series of revisions, with the result that on its release most critics found it saturated with an ideologically-driven politics whose credibility was already eroded beyond repair (Pomerance 2011: 157–98; Behlil 2018: 149–64). Not surprisingly, Jean-Luc Godard had fallen into the same trap with *One Plus One/Sympathy for the Devil* (1968), where his attempt to reference black power politics came off as little better than a caricature. With box-office receipts under $1 million, *Zabriskie Point* was a serious disappointment to MGM. The major studios had already begun to lose interest in the youth rebellion of the late 1960s, which proved as short-lived as its critics had predicted. As the most militant segments of 'The Movement' turned to violence and terrorism, a film that appeared to celebrate wanton destruction—however codified in anti-capitalist and anti-consumerist terms—stood little chance of earning plaudits from mainstream audiences (Bodroghkozy 2002). Today, with its politics largely forgotten, Antonioni's 'American film' can be viewed through a different lens. Rejecting its reputation as an anachronistic curiosity, in 2006 Matthew Gandy observed that "[t]he Italian filmmaker's excoriating yet obtuse critique of American society has subsequently acquired something of a cult status in its guise as an existentialist desert drama rather than in its originally intended role as a countercultural representation of impending political and social revolution" (316).

To give Antonioni credit, the agit-prop session that opens *Zabriskie Point*, with a group of Black Panthers led by Kathleen Cleaver quarreling over the correct theoretical line with some SDS-type students, does as good a job in ten minutes of demolishing the self-referential and self-delusional politics of the late 1960s as Sam Green's and Bill Siegel's 2002 documentary *The Weather Underground* does in ninety minutes. Caught by the camera, we get one flash of Leninist conviction from Mark (Mark Frechette), a campus hanger-on who declares—as he stomps out of the meet-

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ing—"I'm willing to die. But not out of boredom."[4] After buying a pistol in a LA gun shop, Mark is inadvertently involved in a clash between black protestors and the police. Fearing that he may face charges when a policeman is shot, Mark steals a Cessna 210 twin-seater from an unguarded airport and takes off into the desert. His escape brings him into contact with Daria (Daria Halprin), a part-time secretary working for a high-end property development company who is driving from LA to Phoenix in a 1950s Buick sedan. Daria's boss (Rod Taylor) has a high-modernist house in the desert hills where she is expected to join him. Following an extended aerial flirtation that looks like a parody of the crop-duster chase in Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* (1959), Daria gives Mark a ride in pursuit of some gas.[5] More by chance than deliberation, they end up in Death Valley. A lengthy sequence of romantic play among the desert caves and ravines finally brings Mark and Daria to the film's titular location, the lowest spot in the continental US. What follows, as the two get down to serious lovemaking, is the film's most criticized, and frequently ridiculed, episode, a communal love-in with dozens of semi-naked young people, members of the experimental Open Theater group, twisting, turning, and embracing in the sand and dust until they literally fuse with the otherworldly landscape. Returning to reality, Mark and Daria go their separate ways. He flies back to LA and she resumes her drive to Arizona. Landing at the same airport where he had hijacked the plane, Mark is gunned down in the cockpit before he even has a chance to plead his case.

Through his exasperation with privileged college kids playing at being revolutionaries and his run-in with the police, Mark has been effectively depoliticized. His flight into the desert and his dal-

4. The Lenin reference is to the Bolshevik leader's rejoinder to the assertion made by a Menshevik spokesman at the First All-Russian Congress of Soviets in June 1917 that there was, at the moment, no revolutionary party prepared to take power; Lenin, "There is such a party!"

5. Before her encounter with Mark, Daria's stopover in a derelict desert town introduces an element of random menace into her otherwise semi-idyllic drive. For the practiced viewer, the gang of feral boys who surround and threaten her might recall the murder of the homosexual poet Sebastian in Joseph Mankiewicz's *Suddenly, Last Summer* (1959), from the Tennessee Williams one-act play of the same name.

liance with Daria have made him a generational outsider, even if he shared in Daria's vision of the group grope at Zabriskie Point.[6] Initially apolitical in the hippie mode, Daria is radicalized when she hears a news broadcast reporting Mark's death at the airport. Arriving at her boss's home and deflecting his attentions, she wanders through the antiseptic spaces—a combination of natural forms and sleek modernist architecture—until, without a word, she returns to the Buick and drives back into the desert. In the words of a recent essay, it is as though her abrupt departure is driven by some unspoken conviction, a realization that the "hypermodern luxury mansion" has already "absorbed the land of the desert architectonically" (Lie 2015: 274). Stopping the car and getting out, Daria turns back to witness a massive explosion that disintegrates the house and all its contents. Filmed using seventeen graduated camera locations, the explosion sequence, repeated over and over at always closer range, remains one of Antonioni's most celebrated cinematic achievements; even those most hostile to the film are willing to acknowledge the surreal beauty of the images. Like the love-in at Zabriskie Point, is the explosion of the hilltop mansion nothing more than Daria's fantasy? We have seen no evidence that Daria was carrying explosives in the Buick and taking the time to secrete them inside the house. In a revaluation of the film for the British Film Institute, cinema scholar Angelo Restivo concludes that one "does not imagine that Daria is driving off to join a terrorist cell" (95). But her radical alienation from the company for which she works and the lifestyle it markets so aggressively suggests just that. Is it that difficult to imagine Daria today as an eco-terrorist or as a masked streetfighter in an anarchist protest against the WTO and the IMF?[7]

6. Ironically, Mark Frechette's personal story in large part paralleled his character's trajectory in the film. A member of the Boston-based Manson-like cult around Mel Lyman when Antonioni cast him, Frechette made a couple of more films that went nowhere before getting himself arrested in a botched bank robbery. Sentenced to a several-year prison term, he was found dead in the exercise room in September 1975. The circumstances of his death remain murky (Tweedle 2010).

7. In an essay originally published in 2000, Fiona Villella wrote that Daria's suggestion of a smile at the end of the film functions as a confirmation of her political radicalization (Villella 2015).

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"I'M HEADING FOR FRISCO"—KOWALSKI TO THE HITCHHIKER, IN *VANISHING POINT* (UK VERSION)

Effectively dumped by its distributor Twentieth Century-Fox only to become an unexpected box-office hit especially on the drive-in circuit, *Vanishing Point* now has to carry a lot of theoretical weight. For example, in 2007 literature scholar John Beck wrote that the film "shed[s] critical light on contemporary issues concerning speed and technology, the imbrication of the individual in systems of militarization and surveillance, and the limits of resistance." "By following the logic of the road movie to its terminus," Beck continues, "[*Vanishing Point*] pushes into and beyond the affirmative tendencies of the genre in its conventional and counter-cultural modes, and in doing so probes the limits of American fictions of legitimate power" (36–37). Reading the film today presupposes a familiarity with the work of Paul Virilio and Jean Baudrillard—at a minimum—and predicates a lengthy discussion of the man-machine nexus, the hyper-aestheticization of speed and violence, and the relation of neurochemical stimulation and hypnagogic regression, i.e., flashbacks (see, e.g., Pascoe 2002; Zendy 2013). Whether director Richard Sarafian or screenwriter Guillermo Cabrera Infante, or for that matter Barry Newman himself, had any of this in mind when they were making the film is questionable. More likely they were remembering the first hundred-mile-an-hour trip Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty share in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957), delivering a Cadillac sedan from Denver to Chicago in record time and nearly wrecking it in the process (Kowalski's route is supposed to take him from Denver to San Francisco). Unlike fellow speed freak and world-class ladies' man Dean, however, Kowalski is the ultimate enigmatic loner; no rapturous disquisitions on the glories of the road from him, and he passes on the offer of sex from a naked blonde on a motorcycle. He is not given to the barely articulate efforts at self-explanation we know so well from Marlon Brando's Johnny Strabler in *The Wild One* (1953) and James Dean's Jim Stark in *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), nor does he reveal the occasional moment of insight that we get from Peter Fonda's Captain America character in *Easy Rider* (in marked contrast to the stupefaction exhibited by Dennis Hopper's stoner companion Billy). Kowalski gives away almost

nothing, save perhaps a sense of irony; as an existentialist icon he's closer to Camus than he is to Dostoyevsky. It is not clear, as Iain Borden observes in his discussion of *Vanishing Point*, that Kowalski even enjoys driving which, after all, is all that he does (114–115). While he outruns everyone who tracks or chases him, he is little more than a spectator on the disjointed scenes that flash by his window.[8]

With its elliptical structure—it begins with an ending that is later revealed to be false—*Vanishing Point* can seem to be one long amphetamine-fueled rush, intercut with a handful of flashbacks that tell us all we ever learn about Kowalski. Once a relative straight-arrow, a Vietnam vet, ex-policeman, and former motorcycle and stockcar racer, Kowalski lost it all when, ignoring his warnings, his girlfriend died in a surfing accident. His driving skills remain undiminished, although there is one quick flashback image of a wrecked race car that unsettles us because it suggests the shared carnage of man and machine that will conclude the film.[9] Some accounts of *Vanishing Point* refer to Kowalski's nihilistic addiction to speed, but that is only half right. He is addicted to speed, in both senses, but he does not lack a scale of values. Each time he outdrives a pursuing policeman, resulting in an off-road crash, he stops to be sure the victim emerges from the wreck. The same holds for a cocksure Jaguar XKE driver who overestimates his abilities when he challenges Kowalski to race. Under increasing pressure from the clock and the pursuing police, he can express genuine gratitude to the outsiders who help him, like Dean Jagger's desert-rat snake handler and the hippie motorcycle couple who enable him to slip yet another roadblock. Most importantly, in the longer UK-release version of the film, but unfortunately cut from its US equivalent, Kowalski shows that he can still crack a mellow smile

8. For example, his bemused attitude toward the Jesus-freak commune led by Mr. J. Hovah (Severn Darden), including the country-rock collective Delaney & Bonnie & Friends, who enjoyed a brief charge of celebrity thanks to their association with "Layla"-era Eric Clapton.

9. The accident image becomes even more uneasy if it anticipates the Elias Koteas character in David Cronenberg's *Crash* (1996)—from the novel by J.G. Ballard—for whom no car crash can be violent or erotic enough. While there is nothing erotic in Kolwalski's relationship with his Dodge Challenger, it is the only palpable connection he appears to have in the film's 'real' time.

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as he shares a midnight joint with Charlotte Rampling's mysterious hitchhiker—if that encounter in fact takes place.[10]

Kowalski works for a car delivery service in Denver. Dropping off a car on a Friday night he immediately requests another drive which the owner—against his better judgement—provides him. The car is a white Dodge Challenger Magnum R/T 400, one of the breed of muscle cars that returned a multi-barreled, four-on-the-floor riposte to Ralph Nader's 1965 exposé of the American automobile industry *Unsafe at Any Speed*.[11] While they responded to consumer pressures by producing a generation of uninspired, underpowered sedans and station wagons, America's automobile manufacturers were not about to give up the market segment for whom cubic inches and horsepower still mattered most. The result was a fleet of mid-sized vehicles stuffed with maximum horsepower engines—Dodge Chargers, Plymouth Barracudas, Pontiac GTOs, Oldsmobile 442s, and many more. The Dodge Challenger that Kowalski drives, with a 350hp V-8 and a 13.5 second quarter-mile time, is definitely on that list. Fueling up with a load of Benzedrine tablets from his local drug dealer, Kowalski wagers that he can get the Challenger to San Francisco by three o'clock the next day, roughly fifteen hours of non-stop driving time. If he wins the bet, the Benzedrine is free; if he does not, he pays double for the next round. By Saturday morning he has crossed into Utah and has picked up a police tail. As his rate of progress accelerates and the folly of trying to haul him down becomes apparent, the Utah police have to hand him over to their Nevada counterparts—although it is not clear why he is being chased in the first place. There is no warrant for a stolen car, and the most the police can throw at him are charges of dangerous driving and failing to heed a stop sign, both misdemeanors. "Maybe he killed someone," one cop speculates. At the same time Kowalski has acquired a kindred spirit, the blind hyperkinetic deejay Super Soul (Cleavon Little),

10. Omission of the sequence with Charlotte Rampling in the American release has been argued to alter the film's narrative, leaving it incomplete and its conclusion seemingly incomprehensible by any 'normal' logic (see Dixon 2014).
11. The choice and the specifications of the Dodge Challenger—at least five were used in making the film, in various states of tune and with modified frames and suspensions—have generated a sizeable literature of their own (see, e.g., Zazarine 1986).

who broadcasts from station KOW and follows his adopted hero's trajectory by eavesdropping on the police channel. From Super Soul's running commentary Kowalski learns crucial bits of information about the dragnet being cast around him; the disk jockey in turn believes he is communicating telepathically with the renegade driver, "the super driver of the golden west… the last beautiful free soul on this planet."

Critics have differed on Kowalski's decision to floor the accelerator and plow into the twin bulldozers that constitutes the film's spectacular conclusion. One interpretation sees it as his final, and inevitable, repudiation of a regime of regulation and surveillance—symbolized by the stop signs he ignores and the electronic trip wires by which the police monitor his movements—that has turned "the golden west" into a wasteland of mindless conformism and self-absorbed alienation. In *Zabriskie Point* Mark drives his pick-up truck through the industrial slums of East LA where everything around him points to a consumerist society that has run out of gas. In *Vanishing Point* Kowalski encounters the detritus of its no less exhausted alternative, the hippie-commune-drop out world that two years earlier had produced the Manson Family. The police who harass Kowalski with helicopters and roadblocks are a nuisance at worst, easily outwitted and almost as easily outdriven; they are not sociocultural adversaries. In fact, Kowalski is closer in ethos to the cops who pursue him than to the desert dwellers, religious fanatics, and potheads he meets each time he veers off the highway. Another reading of the film has it that Kowalski has literally reached the end of the road. With nothing left but cars, drugs, and a paycheck at the end of each run, he goes instead for the one last way out, aiming at the sun-filled aperture between the bulldozer blades just as he has jumped construction barriers, bridge washouts, and police roadblocks in one long Benzedrine rush—the superman outlaw gesture at a time when neither supermen nor outlaws any longer make much sense.

Viewing the film with the seven or eight minutes with Charlotte Rampling included allows an altogether different interpretation to Kowalski's final decision, one that director Richard Sarafian intended. Telling Kowalski, "I've been waiting for you a long time, oh how I've waited for you," Rampling's hitchhiker is the alle-

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gorical figure of death or at the least one of death's messengers. Any seasoned art house viewer would at once have recognized the allusion to the Maria Casarès character in Jean Cocteau's *Orphée* (1950), which with its black limousine and motorcycle-riding messengers is itself a kind of road movie. Already a favorite among cineastes for her previous films in England and Italy, especially Luchino Visconti's *The Damned* (1969), Rampling added an intellectual if not philosophical dimension to what otherwise would have seemed Kowalski's pointless cannonball run across the desert. In a 2009 interview Sarafian explained Rampling's function: "Symbolizing death and warning him that where we are now in our existence here is an absurd bind. I mean, we're all moving through this dimension at our own speed, some of us, like Kowalski, faster than the others, you know, on to another level. That's how I thought in terms of his ultimate so-called demise, and that in terms of him moving on and to another plane" (Kenny). In an interview twenty years earlier, Barry Newman attributed the same meaning to Kowalski's encounter with the Charlotte Rampling character: "She was the symbol of death. That was an interesting scene, because it really gave the film an allegorical lift and explains everything." "That's the allegorical thing in this film," Newman continued,"—that Kowalski was going to get through those bulldozers. He smiles as he rushes to his death at the end of *Vanishing Point* because he believes he will make it through the roadblock. Deep down, Kowalski may have believed he wasn't going to make it, but that's the basis of an existentialist film" (Zazarine 1986).

"AT LEAST SOMEONE WILL KNOW I TRIED"—BEN SHOCKLEY TO GUS MALLY, IN *THE GAUNTLET*

Enjoying neither cult film status nor the allure of a *film maudit*, *The Gauntlet* does not rank high in most accountings of Clint Eastwood's oeuvre (see, e.g., Kirschner 2018: 66–67). Nonetheless, it was recognized by the Museum of Modern Art in 2008 for its jazz-infused score and was included in the British Film Institute's retrospective on Eastwood's early directorial career in the same year (Vaux 2012: 131). Taking the familiar Western theme of a lawman bringing in a fugitive—in this case a witness—and updating it to the post-Vietnam,

post-Watergate era, Eastwood created an alternative to his 'Dirty Harry' character, no less prone to verbal violence and almost equally quick on the draw, but capable of recognizing when he is in over his head whether in relation to his adversaries or to the low-life prostitute he is escorting, who turns out to be anything but.[12] Ben Shockley, a washed-up and not-too-bright member of the Phoenix police department, is ordered to travel to Las Vegas to bring back "a nothing witness for a nothing trial" named Gus Mally. The witness in question turns out to be Augustina Mally (Sondra Locke), a foul-mouthed graduate of New York's prestigious Finch College who knows too much about the sexual peccadilloes of Shockley's boss, the Phoenix police commissioner (William Daniels). It takes some time for Shockley to realize that he and his witness are not expected to make back it to Phoenix, although a bomb-rigged car and a ferocious SWAT team assault on Mally's Las Vegas house, causing the structure to collapse in a bullet-riddled heap, slowly bring him to his senses.[13]

Rather than its set-piece pyrotechnics, which occur in the same sequence as sex acts in a porn film and with the same increasing intensity, most critics of *The Gauntlet* have focused on the personal dynamics between Eastwood's Shockley and Locke's Mally, complicated as they were by the actors' adulterous off-screen relationship (see, e.g., Alpert 1979). On the face of it, the growing attachment between a mob-connected hooker with a price on her head and a burned-out cop who, his guard let down, admits to having joined the police because "it seemed like an honest job," makes little sense. But in a reversal of his usual macho persona, Eastwood's slow-to-catch-on Shockley has to admire Mally's take-charge attitude, as well as her dexterity with a handgun and her readiness to endure the rapist advances of two bikers so that Shockley can free himself and regain control of their situation. In a surprising, for Eastwood, soft-focus motel room scene—although we saw something similar

12. Eastwood had already modernized the lawman/fugitive theme in 1968's *Coogan's Bluff*, directed by Don Siegel, where he pursues his quarry through the canyons of Manhattan.

13. In a 1984 interview Eastwood acknowledged that the shoot-out at Gus Mally's house was patterned on the 1974 police assault on the Los Angeles hideout of the Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA), responsible for the kidnapping of Patty Hearst, in which six people died (Wilson 2013: 88).

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in *Play Misty for Me* (1971)—the two share reveries of the life they would like to lead, "a piece of land near the Canyon," trees, horses, kids. And while it is Shockley who contrives the scheme by which he will complete his assignment, to deliver the witness alive to the Phoenix police headquarters, it is Mally who puts a bullet in the police commissioner who has set them up for execution in order to protect his position and his ties to the mob.

In the film's eponymous conclusion, Eastwood, back to his t-shirted, clenched-jaw self, retakes command. Hijacking a bus and reinforcing the driver's compartment with quarter inch-thick steel plates, Shockley and Mally make a slow-motion drive through the streets of Phoenix as half the city's police force pump 8,000 pistol, rifle, and shotgun shells into the vehicle. The cops apparently have no compunction in firing on one of their own, nor do any of them seem able to recognize that their massed firepower fails to impede the bus's progress to its destination. In the final frames, bloodied but vindicated, Shockley walks away, arm-in-arm with Mally, from the wrecked bus and the crowd of perplexed cops, presumably to find that place near the Canyon. But the one gesture of redefinition we look for however many times we see the film remains missing—Shockley removing his shield and tossing it on the ground. We would almost swear that he does it; yet he does not, at least not in this film. It would certainly appear that Shockley has reached the end of his existential road (Grossman 2017: 48–49). But Eastwood had more police dramas left in his belt; perhaps it was better to end this one on a note of ambiguity rather than resolution. As has been observed, moral complexity and ambiguous relationships between principled individuals and powerful institutions have characterized some of Eastwood's best work as a filmmaker (Allison 2003).

Even before *The Gauntlet* was released, Eastwood and Locke were living together in a common-law marriage—he divorced his wife of twenty-five years in 1978—during which the actress appeared in four more films with him and directed two films of her own. When the relationship cooled, and after two abortions Eastwood allegedly insisted on, Locke filed a $70 million palimony suit in 1989 claiming that she had put her career on hold to tend to the couple's domestic needs. The suit was settled out of court, with Locke receiving a three-year $1.5 million package to develop and direct films

for Warner Brothers. None of Locke's films materialized, and in 1995 she sued Eastwood a second time alleging that the Warner Brothers deal had been a fraud designed to kill the palimony suit. The case came to trial in 1996 in the full glare of scandal-driven publicity, with Eastwood again agreeing to settle rather than risk a jury verdict (McGilligan 2002: 444–465, 519–522). Ben Shockley may have thought he was through with law enforcement, but the law was definitely not through with him; at the University of California the litigation between Sondra Locke and Clint Eastwood is still being used to teach contract law (Knapp 2013; see also Sterritt 2014: 234–37).

CONCLUSION

In his study of the Mediterranean world over a long expanse of centuries, Fernand Braudel observed that the mountain ranges ringing the sea had first been—and long remained—the refuge of bandits, fugitives, and heretics (1972: 31–43). Descending into the lower altitudes could be dangerous, and eventually the inhabitants of those nether regions made their way into the once remote spaces that towered above them. In the three films considered here, mountains provide no refuge. In *Zabriskie Point*, Daria's arrival at the mountainside home of her employer provides the final confirmation of her alienation from the world it represents—and the world that has killed Mark. The guests who enjoy sitting poolside and sipping drinks are no less artificial than their surroundings, and their illusion of glamour and sophistication is equally plastic. They could easily have appeared in the billboard advertisements that Mark saw in the scrum of Los Angeles as he drove to the airport, and they seem altogether deserving of the obliteration they are about to experience. In *Vanishing Point* and *The Gauntlet*, the trajectory is just the opposite. For both Kowalski and Shockley, the flatlands, the skein of highways that cross the Southwest, are the arena in which they fight their gladiatorial battles, Kowalski with speed—both kinds—and resourcefulness, Shockley with grim determination and a welding torch. Kowalski's Dodge Challenger is the one constant in *Vanishing Point*; for all the beating it takes, it never fails when called upon to perform another law-of-physics defying stunt and—as any enthusiast

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of the film knows—its collision with the bulldozer blades is in fact enacted by a Chevrolet Camaro on a tow chain. Surprisingly, given the film's enthusiastic following, Kowalski's Challenger never developed the allure—and the commercial value—of the Mustang 390 GT Fastback that Steve McQueen drove in *Bullitt*. When the *Bullitt* Mustang resurfaced in 2018, it made the rounds of historic car shows and a year later prompted Ford to release a Special Bullitt edition of its current Mustang line. Absent Steve McQueen's star power and without the kind of high-speed car chase that defined *Bullitt*, *The French Connection*, and—another decade later—William Friedkin's *To Live and Die in L.A.* (1985), the Challenger languishes as something of an orphan next to the long run of Hemi-powered Dodge Chargers.

Ben Shockley's and Gus Mally's journey from Las Vegas to Phoenix, fraught as it is with betrayals and traps, employs multiple conveyances—a police car, a motorcycle, a train, and an armored bus. Only the last acquires an anthropomorphic identity when, having reached its destination at the Phoenix City Hall, it exhales a final gasp of exhaustion—the bullet-shredded tires finally give out—comparable to that of its driver, who is literally at the end of both his road and his rope. While they serve their respective purposes, neither Daria's tired Buick sedan—itself a kind of reference point to the downbeat small-town movies of the first post-World War II years—nor Shockley's and Mally's hijacked bus have any particular cinematic presence that would allow it to play the dominating role that Kowalski's Challenger does for the entire running time of *Vanishing Point*. If the template for the modern American road movie was established by *Easy Rider*, some kind of an apocalyptic conclusion should be expected to figure in the protagonists' arrival at—or failure to arrive at—their predicated destination. Certainly, this is the case in *Vanishing Point*, whether we interpret Kowalski's collision with the bulldozers as a moment of exhilarating liberation or, to quote one British reading of the film, an act of "suicidal resignation" (Ward 2012: 197). Kowalski's world, or at least as much of it as we are permitted to see, consists of all-night garages, drug deals, and an ever-receding horizon where nothing but more of the same awaits. The alternatives the desert presents him, the artifacts of the counterculture—blondes on motorcycles, mystical excess,

religious hysteria—are even less attractive. The same dead end confronts Mark in *Zabriskie Point*. Still on the run, fearing that he is implicated in the shooting of a cop during a campus demonstration and turned off from the hippie lifestyle he has sampled with Daria, Mark has no choice but to look for a way back into the hanger-on world of Southern California campuses, however boring he finds its politics. While we can code Mark as another victim of trigger-happy cops, Daria's transformation is more profound. No longer a dope-smoking office temp who may be having an affair with her boss, Daria's vision of the exploding desert mansion—even if a fantastic product of her imagination—betrays a complete repudiation of the lifestyle she has to this point at least minimally participated in, either tolerating or ignoring. Antonioni's dialectic tension between a predatory late capitalism, Los Angeles-style, and the counterculture ethos of anti-materialism and love-ins may be muddled at best or even, as has been argued, self-contradicting (Sieving 2016). But Daria's allegiances in the film's final frames are hardly confused. There is something apocalyptic about ramming a cross-country bus halfway up the steps of the Phoenix City Hall, even if the point is simply to deliver a "nothing witness for a nothing trial." Having survived a fusillade of anonymous police bullets that goes on for several city blocks, and then a close-range personalized attempt on his life, Ben Shockley appears to have achieved the equipoise he described in his motel room confessional to Gus Mally—an honest cop, doing the right thing, with a new girlfriend who has $5,000 in the bank; existential definition, redefined.

Whether conceived as a genre, a convention, or simply a staple of the drive-in circuit, the road movie depended on the diegetic and extra-diegetic sensations it delivered—the throb of a large-displacement V-8; the smell of gasoline, exhaust, and burning rubber; the oncoming rush of the open road and its equally evanescent recession in the rear-view mirror; endless possibility compressed into a single metal pedal when it was pushed to the floor. The American car culture of the 1960s and 1970s—of which the road movie was an emblematic component—has largely become a thing of the past. The muscle cars of the era continue to attract enthusiasts to car shows and draw impressive bids at Mecum auctions, and, as a kind of evolutionary descendant the *Fast and Furious* franchise, now ten

years in, shows no sign of exhausting itself. The market appetite for Camaros and Chargers and Mustangs remains healthy, however anachronistic these models might seem. But when everything in the theaters is played as archetype or stereotype, there is little opportunity for individual self-definition, whether existentialist or of any other kind. In fact, the metrics of filmmaking today prohibit the kind of studio risk-taking represented by *Zabriskie Point* or *Vanishing Point*. Even *Gran Torino* (2009), which made Clint Eastwood—as Walt Kowalski—the cantankerous owner of a 1972 5.7 liter Cobra Jet V-8-powered namesake vehicle, fails to fit the template of the road movie; there is, after all, no road in the film. With electric vehicles the wave of the present, with SUVs outselling sedans by multiple orders of magnitude, and with engine governors being emplaced in computerized control systems on an accelerating basis, car culture itself may already be a thing of the past (see, e.g., Stoner 2020; Haggerty 2021).

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PANDEMIC AUTOMOBILITY

Patterns of Crisis and Opportunity in the American Motor Culture

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INTRODUCTION

The car is not only a machine. It is a socially active non-human agent that binds social practices of individual and collective mobility with a pre-existent collection of values, discourses, and symbols that purport to legitimize socially prevalent ways of setting one's body in motion. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper, one may observe that the car is an agent of morphogenesis; that is, a vehicle of social change that facilitates transformations of cultural institutions, social structures, and systems of interpersonal relations:

> The automobile has changed the lifestyle of the average American more than any other 20th-century technological innovation, with the possible exception of television. The social and economic changes ushered in by the motor car have not only modified our daily routine but also altered the fundamental nature of personal relationships and the social institutions in which we interact. (Berger, 2001: 143)

The car is viewed as an agent of change, introducing movement, flexibility, and mobility to the otherwise immobile structures and sociality systems. Following Neil Postman, one could observe that the extensive use of motor technologies exerts a transformative effect on the system of American society. It changes the structure of human interest (the objects people are concerned with), the system of American culture (i.e., symbols and values that enable articulation and communication of ideas), nature

of community understood as an area of interaction, communication, and development of distinct concepts (Postman 1993). In other words, the car has become an embodiment of modern American civilization: "to speak, as people often do, of the impact of the automobile upon modern society makes little more sense, by now, than to speak of the impact of the bone structure on the human body" (Marx 1997: 981).

However, the impact of automobility on the social tissue is far from being a purely linear one. The invention of motor vehicles defined the mobile character of modern society. Nevertheless, as a principal product of industrial modernity, the car also took a significant role in the transformation of institutions, structures, and lifestyles of industrial civilization, facilitating the transition of industrial modernity into late modernity in which the essential inventions of industrialism, chief among which is the car, are put into question and criticized as dangerous by-products of excessive technological modernization (Burzyński 2020).

This article traces the recursive character of automobility from a perspective of cultural crises and traumas that accompany motor culture development in the USA. The American automobility system has been caught in the treadmill of ideological criticism that defined the current role of motor vehicles in forms of political activism and cultural criticism. The initial years of the Covid-19 pandemic seem to have brought restoration to the original character of motor culture with its defining features of individualism, freedom, opportunity achieved through mobility. The article focuses on the pre-vaccination period in the Covid-19 pandemic and refers to it in terms of social distancing technologies and practices conceived of as the most effective mechanisms of pandemic management prior to the era of mass vaccinations. In this sense, the outbreak is a collective trauma that quite unexpectedly restores the original meaning of the car as a vehicle of ontological security, bringing the physical and emotional integrity of human body back into action.

TRAUMAS OF AMERICAN AUTOMOBILITY

The discourses of trauma and vulnerability have become indicative of various attempts to make sense of revolutionary transformations of social systems in the twentieth century.

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The notions refer to an unnerving experience of defenselessness, out-of-placeness, anxiety, or confusion experienced in the wake of mass-scale processes whose sense and direction remain uncertain or contingent (Sztompka 2004; Furedi 2006). Collective traumas are disturbances of social order, motivating specific categories of people (typically marginalized minority communities) and entire institutions or organizations (e.g., the motor industry) to assume the discourse of being vulnerable as a default response to experienced contingencies and risks. Such was the case with the 1973 oil crisis and its impact on American automobility's social system. The oil embargo of 1973 affected the American automobility market, metamorphosing the country's automotive industry system and exposing its vulnerability to European and Japanese corporations. "Foreign automakers gained an even stronger foothold in the American market after the oil embargo of 1973, which sent gasoline prices soaring and placed a premium on the small, fuel-efficient cars that Japan and Germany had been producing for years" (Gartman 2004: 186). The American motor industry responded by introducing post-Fordist forms of lean management and prioritizing economic marketability over engineering ingenuity, which decreased the quality of the market offer. Instead of being a machine extension of the American dream, the car has merely become an economically optimized element in the network of considerations relating homeland corporations to international market fluctuations.

The first oil shock was a painful experience of converting the American dream of V8 automobility into a more humble European ideal of an economical car. More importantly, however, the crisis paved the way for an intensification of critical tendencies towards viewing the original paradigm of American automobility as a self-contradictory and environmentally perilous idea. The Motor Vehicle Air Pollution and Control Act (1966), which regulated the emission standards for motor vehicles, and the National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act (1966) defined new safety and sustainability standards for newly produced automobiles, disturbing the original understanding of steel and petrol automobility and introducing the first wave of environment-friendly solutions. Likewise, the Department of Transportation Act (1966) paved the way

for the further institutionalization of safety and sustainability regulations by founding the United States Department of Transportation with an aim to implement and coordinate policies that regulate the national transportation system towards the norms of economical use and environmental sustainability.

The ideals of mass automobility associated with the idea of Fordist production soon became obsolete, leaving the American society in anomie in the wake of critical evaluations of early industrial car cultures as a self-contradictory amalgam of consumption and environmental degradation, mobility and congestion, freedom, and dependence on other participants in traffic. "The roads of advanced capitalist countries become battlegrounds for limited space, where tensions flare in ugly incidents of road rage. When the culture promises drivers effortless speed and escape, any impediment becomes intolerable" (Gartman 2004: 192).

The traumatic significance of the crisis could be regarded in terms of an ideological shift, a movement from the narrative of progress to the discourse of crisis. Consequently, the development of automobility after the 1973 crisis was deprived of its original momentum, leading to the proliferation of risk-related considerations concerning economic sustainability and safety measures. An additional collection of economic risks was added by the shift in consumer demands towards post-Fordist automobility, which forced manufacturers to increase their market offer within a rigid spectrum of limitations dictated by oil prices, safety regulations, and sustainability measures. These transformations paved the way for an idea of post-automobility, a meta-narrative binding economic, environmental and socio-technological considerations under the umbrella perspective of criticizing early industrial motor cultures.

THE DOCTRINE OF POST-AUTOMOBILITY

The abovementioned changes lead to disillusionment with traditional automobility, paving the way for the idea of post-automobility, a discourse unnervingly focusing our attention on the downsides of motor cultures. More specifically, the idea of post-automobility stresses the reflexiveness of motor cultures; that is, the confrontation of technological innovations and consumer

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demand with contingencies and risks that cannot be bracketed off in the current system of science:

> But as automobility threatens its own foundations, it opens itself up to iterative processes of reflexivity, that is to say self-reference, self-awareness, self-monitoring, self-interpretation and self-criticism. From this reflexive cycle, the car arises anew, once more able to sustain its own (re)production—automobility as a never-ending spiral, fueled by its own contradictions. (Beckmann 2005: 83)

The doctrine of post-automobility is an all-pervading political ideology that responds to social, economic, and environmental problems caused by the very success of mass automobility. The car is both a blessing and a curse: it is a "solution to most Americans' transportation needs. However, its very success has generated serious problems—most notably, congestion, pollution, and energy inefficiency—that need to be addressed by public policy" (Dunn 1999: 40). The doctrine is risk-centric in a way that it focuses on how contingencies are politically used to indicate populations at risk (i.e., pedestrians, cyclists), and channel moral outrage against the groups of supposedly privileged perpetrators (i.e., motorists, petrol-heads, automotive industries).

John Urry, for instance, outlines a scenario that subsumes sustainable solutions in the field of energy consumption, environment-friendly materials, and massive de-individualization of car transportation (Urry 2004). Post-automobility scenarios offer a range of infrastructural solutions, fostering a symbiotic community of motorists, cyclists, and pedestrians who share urban and suburban spaces. When successfully combined, these inventions are in a position to exert a genuinely systemic change leading to the establishment of a 'post-car' society (Burzyński 2020). A new impetus to the doctrine of post-automobility was added with the implementation of the 'Society 5.0' strategy. Prized as a human-centric, super-smart society, the model involves the tight combination of physical space and cyberspace to produce a sustainable society in which people's needs are effectively satisfied by the intensification of online communication (e.g., in the form of distance learning or distance teaching, for instance) at the expense of traditional transportation. Needless to say, the Covid-19 pandemic is nowadays a major factor

fostering an accelerated implementation of solutions introduced by the pre-pandemic model of 'Society 5.0.'

THE DRIVING BODY

A sociological understanding of trauma typically focuses on structural and cultural aspects of the social crises. One can, therefore, refer to attitudes, ideologies, or legal regulations that define the traumatic sense of (post)automobility. However, one cannot forget that the notions of trauma, vulnerability, risk, or uncertainty carry an explicit emotional meaning, channeling our observations on the embodied emotional experiences. The methodological shift from inter-personal phenomena (e.g., language, ideologies, discourses, forms of legal regulation) to intra-personal experiences (e.g., drives and reflexes, emotions and feelings, temperament, illness, and disease) paves the way for our interest in embodied experiences and sensations as visceral elements of individual agency and subjectivity. "We have bodies, but we are also, in a specific sense, bodies; our embodiment is a requirement of our social identification so that it would be ludicrous to say "I have arrived and I have brought my body with me" (Turner 1996: 42). One's embodiment is thus a necessary precondition to understanding the individual's involvement in automobility practices as driven by emotional sensations, the person's medical condition, or his/her temperamental predispositions.

Therefore, one is encouraged to see the entire system of automobility in terms of emotions and entire emotional geographies (i.e., correlations of geographical locations with human emotions), rendering a corporeal sense to automobility. "Cars are above all machines that move people, but they do so in many senses of the word. Recent approaches to the phenomenology of car use have highlighted 'the driving body' as a set of social practices, embodied dispositions, and physical affordances" (Sheller 2004: 221). In this particular context, the driver is conceptualized as an emotional agent who is characterized by "particular aesthetic orientations and kinesthetic dispositions towards driving. Movement and being moved together produce the feelings of being in the car, for the car and with the car" (Sheller 2004: 222). Consequently, the motor vehicle is conceptualized in an overtly phenomenological

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manner, stressing the visceral character of driving as an activity that involves several cognitive, emotional, and kinesthetic sensations that contribute to the formation of a peculiar *Lebenswelt* of the driving body. Such a methodology has led to interpretations that bind cars, drivers, roads, and roadside locations under the common denominator of emotional geography showing the spatiality and temporality of emotions, especially in their relations to mobility (Davidson and Miligan 2004).

As opposed to the structural-cultural interpretation of trauma, which lays stress on the negative role of car cultures in the accumulation of such public goods as the natural environment, public and individual health, or social tissue of metropolitan areas, the emotional-sensational interpretation of trauma points to the role of automobility in forming and sustaining the driver's sense of ontological security. Defined as a person's basic system of psychic integrity establishing a "protective cocoon" of sense and security against external contingencies and insecurities, ontological security could be understood in terms of bracketing off risks and dangers of the outside world (Giddens 1991). In this way, ontological security is an emotional mechanism that helps to reinforce the integrity of one's self-identity by managing anxiety related to the presence of imminent or distant dangers:

> Emotional cultures and their ethics are deeply intertwined with material cultures and technologies. When cars become associated with feelings of protection, security and safety (as emphasized in advertising of the 'family car'), their use may provide parents with a sense of empowerment in the face of a generalized feeling of insecurity. Technologies of protection enable risk (and fear) to be managed by driving 'correctly' rather than by not driving. (Sheller 2004: 230)

Driving one's car becomes an instrument for managing anxiety, and the motor vehicle becomes the protective cocoon of ontological security in the literal meaning of the term. Understanding the role of individual motor vehicles and entire car cultures from a perspective of embodied emotions may be seen as a methodology to fully understand the situation of American automobility in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. The highly marketable promise of having one's existential insecurities bracketed off is a factor that seems to replace monetary and purely practical considerations.

This is especially typical of the increased demand in SUVs, cars that are more expensive and less practical when it comes to their everyday use. In this case, managing one's anxiety is converted into the sheer marketability of getting a car that is big enough to offer its driver a towering and comfortable vantage point, transforming insecurity into an illusion of authority and control.

COVID MOTORS, OR BRINGING THE ORIGINAL SENSE OF AUTOMOBILITY BACK

The Covid-19 pandemic is a major traumatic event of global scope. The breakout has already disrupted public and private healthcare systems, national economies, and labor markets, effectively undermining the affected populations' expectations concerning wellbeing, health, and future prosperity. Apart from the actual number of fatal cases, the pandemic has disintegrated the sense of ontological security as experienced by millions of people who live in affluent, well-organized, and therefore predictable, societies of the West. Given the ubiquity of horrific images available in the media, media representations alone are sufficient to make an impression that severe and imminent health risks are now impossible to be effectively bracketed off. When approached from an academic point of view, the pandemic has motivated a number of research projects oscillating around the conception of risk society, conflicts between public health and economic growth, loosening of social ties due to social distancing, and the migration of social, recreational and occupational activities to the cyberspace (Ward 2020).

Given the holistic impact of the Covid-19 on all spheres of social life, it is little wonder that the outbreak has also exerted a profound influence both on the socially acceptable patterns of using motor vehicles, as well as entire motor cultures. The trauma of Covid-19 has created structural conditions that emphasize the role of individual automobility in keeping a person's ontological security intact, thus highlighting the emotional character of driving (and passengering) and the significance of entire emotional geographies associated with our coping with the virus.

The pandemic seemed to have altered some tendencies associated with post-automobility, which before the event looked irreversible. For instance, the pandemic has revealed an increase in the number

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of motorists willing to perceive automobility in traditionally individualistic terms. According to the Capgemini global survey, as quoted by the *Detroit Free Press*, one can observe a growth of interest in individual car ownership among American costumers of less than 35 years of age, which indicates a reversal of post-automobility trends among younger people who were less likely to be interested in owning a car due to their preoccupation with digital technologies, and their interest in spending free time online, rather than by being engaged in automobility-related activities (Phelan 2020). Simultaneously, a majority of surveyed Americans admitted that they would be less likely to use public transportation in 2020. Interestingly, the tendency seems to be on the rise, as the respondents' increasing number expressed the lack of confidence in public transportation systems in the foreseeable future. The return to individualistic driving is even more observable in the case of carsharing facilities. The overwhelming majority of surveyed Americans are afraid to use raid-hailing and carsharing services: as many as three quarters of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with carshared vehicles' sanitary condition.

Images representing social distancing, masked crowds, drive-thru testing sites, and drive-thru vaccination clinics show a psychological context for the abovementioned preferences. Unnerving as they are, the images point to individual automobility as a social distancing mode and pandemic management. The car is becoming a machine of refuge, "a moving private-in-public space," as John Urry aptly calls the capacity of cars to transgress the traditional boundaries between private and public spaces (Urry 2006: 22).

> We might indeed re-conceptualize civil society as a civil society of quasiobjects, or 'car-drivers' and 'car-passengers.' It is not a civil society of separate human subjects who can be conceived of as autonomous from these all conquering machines. Such a hybrid of the car-driver is in normal circumstances unremarkable as it reproduces the socio-technical order. (Urry 2006: 24)

The hybrid of car-driver defines pandemic citizenship as it reconceptualizes mobility in essentially medical terms. Nowadays, owning cars is not a sign of environmental irresponsibility or ignorance. Likewise, it is not a sign of one's refusal to acknowledge the importance of public goods, public spaces, or the entire gospel

of civil society defined by communitarian values and mutual morality. Having a car is again a straightforward moral decision, but this time the choice could be valued as an act of public accountability. Owning a moving private-in-public space is a step towards the accumulation of public health as traveling by car facilities disease prevention through social distancing.

The outbreak has medicalized an idea of the car-driver, re-expressing it in overtly biomedical terminology and putting the very core of automobility into a network of hygiene and sanitation practices (Conrad 2007). As a human-machine hybrid, the car can now be viewed as a technological extinction of the human immune system whereby the bodywork becomes the outer protection of the human body itself. However, the quality of ontological security is not, as it were, enframed in the bodywork alone. The notion is rendered a new meaning in a more complex system of pandemic automobility in which the car is the central node of a network of healthcare technologies and services. The typically American invention of drive-thru sites and services (many a time ridiculed as a characteristic of the nation that compulsively sticks to automobility) constitutes a social-technological network that forms the emotional geography of confidence and security during the pandemic. Drive-thru vaccination clinics are believed to alter the overall trajectory of the Covid-19 outbreak as the majority of Americans perceive them as safer and more convenient (Smith 2021). "Such car-environments or non-places are neither urban nor rural, local nor cosmopolitan. They are sites of pure mobility within which car-drivers are *insulated* as they 'dwell-within-the-car.' They represent the victory of liquidity over inhabiting the 'urban'" (Urry 2006: 22, emphasis added). The victory of motor liquidity over the rigid density of urban spaces is, at the same time, the triumph of unrestricted mobility over the dense urban population, which by definition is a significant space of viral transmission.

IN PLACE OF CONCLUSIONS: THE EPIDEMIOLOGICAL TRANSITION OF AUTOMOBILITY

The trauma of pandemic has restored the original sense of automobility as practices that uphold one's sense of ontological security against the reality of ubiquitous health risks. Partially, this

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shift of perspective is determined by cultural-structural factors, chief among which is a disruption of well-entrenched modernization tendencies linking health-related considerations to economic development and the society's technological sophistication. Such is the case with the concept of epidemiological transition. The notion is concerned with a cause-and-effect relationship between socio-economic modernization (as measured by gross domestic product per capita, quality of welfare institutions, development of medical technologies) and general epidemiological tendencies. Coined by Abdel Omran (1971), epidemiological transition describes a shift from societies in which infectious and parasitic diseases are the primary source of health-related concerns to societies in which major sources of premature deaths and other health anxieties are attributed to the increasing prevalence of chronic and degenerative diseases (e.g., cancer, cardiovascular diseases, autoinflammatory diseases).

The doctrine of post-automobility is based on the assumption that traditional car cultures are co-responsible for the massive prevalence of chronic conditions associated with the outbreak of civilizational hazards. Following the grim logic of epidemiological transition, modernization is not a factor that fosters general wellbeing and public health: it merely motivates a change in the spectrum of experienced health concerns. As predicted by Mary Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky's (1982) seminal essay, hazards are selected and prioritized by the public according to their capacity to evoke moral outrage and cast blame. Although mobility is a primary factor of disease prevention as it increases the accessibility of medical professionals and reduces the estimated arrival time of medical intervention, the car became modernity's whipping boy as a material symbol of the destructive powers of industrialized capitalism. Likewise, automotive pollutants are seen as a form of industrial poisoning that most conspicuously justifies the need to reduce mass production volume in developed economies, including American society. To put it otherwise, the car is a major source of concern for developed societies that believe that mass-scale disease prevention is no longer an issue of mobility, but it depends on our capacity to eradicate health risk factors that reside in the very core of industrial civilization.

This situation changes with the Covid-19 pandemic. Of course, the outbreak does not seem to have reversed changes associated with epidemiological transition: prosperous populations still suffer more from non-communicable and chronic diseases, but Covid-19 attracts more substantial attention from the media, politicians, and the public due to the pandemic's sheer intensity and its devastating impact on the system of healthcare. Under the pandemic circumstances, when the prevention of communicable diseases has won the public's attention, the car is no longer the main culprit responsible for making our lives more miserable and shorter. When the public shifts attention from chronic to communicable diseases, the motor vehicle becomes a remedy, facilitating social distancing, individualization, and access to medical services. "Movement itself became a measure of hope; the road itself seemed to offer new possibilities, of work, adventure, romance. *The Grapes of Wrath* tells the story of hope and opportunity traveling along perhaps the most famous of roads, Route 66" (Urry 2006: 27). This is even more true during the pandemic: movement becomes a sign of security, liberation for spatial-temporal restraints, and legal regulations. Obviously, in this case, automobility is not only about physical movement as if one was trying to outrun the pandemic. Given the embodiment of motion, being in the run is also a matter of emotional and kinesthetic sensations, a sense of taking refuge from the immobile world of quarantine restrictions, hospital beds, and sanitary isolation. It evokes the uniquely American image of Route 66 and its emotional geography of hope and opportunity sought amidst the land of despair. This geography of hope and opportunity is now brought back and dispersed across the disease-stricken nation's streets and highways.

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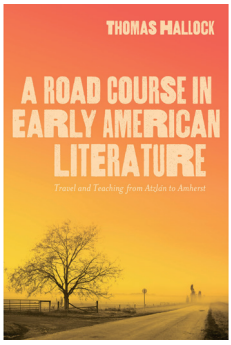
A ROAD COURSE IN EARLY AMERICAN LITERATURE: TRAVEL AND TEACHING FROM ATZLÁN TO AMHERST

by Thomas Hallock
(A Book Review)



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What if every book-length work of literary criticism were accompanied by a map? Not simply a map here or there detailing specific points and illustrating certain locations of relevance, but a map indicating the geographical scope of the book's contents? Such a map would immediately communicate a great deal of relevant context as the reader approaches the discussion. Few would deny the importance of historical contextualization in literary study, but the importance of geographical contextualization is only sometimes recognized, despite the recent 'spatial turn' across the humanities.

Thomas Hallock provides one such map as the frontispiece of *A Road Course in Early American Literature: Travel and Teaching from Atzlán to Amherst*, recently published by the University of Alabama Press. The book is written as a sequence of journeys, blending anecdotal experiences with intellectual concerns and moments of pedagogical inspiration and Hallock writes that the inspiration for his project comes from "a still-unpopular belief that narrative nonfiction [can] breathe life into scholarly discourse" (2021: 8). As part of an academic memoir, however, the map Hallock provides is as concerned with his personal travels as it is with the study of early American literature. Hallock writes that

he has "striven for coverage across geographic space (and yes, periods). But as early American literature follows no single thread," so, too, do the chapters of his book "adhere to only the loosest of chronologies" (2021: 19). For this reason, Hallock tells his readers "*Road Course* can be read in any number of ways. One may follow the chapters in order or skip around. Those who go straight through, I hope, will find the interlocking themes" (2021: 19). As the book is episodic in structure, roads and highways do not connect these essays—and only two are represented on his map by arrows designating travel between two points within the chapters themselves.

Despite its visual simplicity, then, Hallock's map contains a complex set of layers. Each chapter simultaneously corresponds to a place visited, his personal experiences there, as well as some consideration of an author or a literary work relevant to that place (or sometimes simply read or remembered in that setting). In all senses, however, the chapters in Hallock's book are essays—often more personal than they are strictly academic or pedagogical—they seek to understand and to make meaningful the connections between life and literature. They are endeavors to appreciate how his life has been shaped by his work as a professor and a scholar while simultaneously understanding how these experiences have been shaped by travel.

Hallock has accomplished much in his twenty-five years in the academy, with a number of scholarships and positions of distinction to his name. It is from this perspective that he contemplates his experiences and considers his growth and "slow evolution from graduate student to teacher" that now allows him to better "impart understanding of the text, putting the tools of close reading to work, though [his] pedagogy focuses increasingly on *how* we read rather than *what*" (2021: 19). These reflections range from a course on African American literature he gave as a Fulbright Specialist in Xi'an, China, reading Phillis Wheatley on a flight crossing the Arctic Circle (Chapter 5), to his time spent traveling with an NEH seminar in Mexico and the Southwest (Chapter 8). He looks back on teaching Susanna Rowson's *Sarah* for 'Just Teach One' (or 'JTO'), a classroom experiment in which "early Americanists assign a noncanonical or forgotten book, then blog about their classroom experiences" (Chapter 3, 2021: 57). Along

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the way, these memories are intermingled with personal anecdote and are always situated in place. When he recalls teaching Rowson's book, for example, the reader is simultaneously following Hallock's (mis)adventures in Eastern Pennsylvania while retracing the steps of the Walking Purchase of 1737. When he writes of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Anne Hutchinson, the reader travels with Hallock to his hometown in Westchester County, New York, along the Hutchinson River Parkway and to Split Rock, the site, according to legend, of Hutchinson's massacre in 1643 (Chapter 10).

At the same time, Hallock does not neglect the more mundane aspects of life of a professor and the reader nods in agreement at Hallock's frustration with academic bureaucracy, writing of how going to class—and returning to the literature itself—is what offers "a respite from the ugly abbreviations—from the SCHs and KPIs, ALCs and SLOs" (2021: 124). So too does the reader find Hallock cleaning his office on campus, sorting through old folders and filing cabinets and rediscovering notable papers and projects from past semesters (Chapter 11). One of the journeys depicted in the book is not his own, but that of a group of students who leave their sunny Florida campus during spring break to visit Nathaniel Hawthorne's snow-covered grave at Sleepy Hollow Cemetery in Concord, Massachusetts (Chapter 9). They have contributed to Hallock's own understanding of the "redemptive power of a road trip" (2021: 127), not only inspiring him by going above-and-beyond to complete a course project, but also by internalizing Hawthorne's "Custom-House" essay to better understand their own lives and place in the world. They have learned from the example of their professor, venturing out on their own experiential study of literature-in-place.

The importance of balancing the more adventurous parts of his narrative with the routine aspects of a professorship is, at times, highly effective. Teaching, scholarship, life—each one plays an equally important role in Hallock's construction of these chapters, as when we find him gazing out the window from his writing desk at home, contemplating the crows in his yard (Chapter 7). Titled "A Raven and Three Crows," that chapter exemplifies Hallock's process in this book. There, he considers John James Audubon, Herman Melville and William Bartram and—as one might suspect—Edgar Allan Poe. The chapter strays far from the birds of its title, however, as Hal-

lock's musings combat the tired idea that "[t]he American author should be a crank, abandoned by or even hostile to family" (2021: 98). Hallock avoids teaching Poe and thereby the essays of "breathy nonanalysis of the 'tortured genius'" (2021: 96) that students inevitably submit after reading him. What bothers Hallock most is that the insistence upon "[t]he myth of the solitary genius, visionary from the wilderness," because it "distances us from the collaboration found in almost any work of art" (2021: 99). A close reading of the available materials would suggest that no writer or artist—Audubon, Bartram, Melville, Poe, or anyone else—ever truly fits the mold of 'solitary genius' and the obvious implication is that the idea of the *professor* as 'solitary genius' also needs debunking, particularly within the humanities. The entirety of Hallock's book attests to that, as he is inspired not only by his students, but also by his family. Both his son and his wife are present as the book unfolds. Returning to the chapter's title, one realizes that one crow is missing, as Hallock writes that Melville "never wrote about ravens or crows" (2021: 98). Hallock's meditation concerns the "Mast-Head" chapter of *Moby-Dick* and does not really involve crows at all, only the "crow's nest" of a ship. It would seem that the third crow of the essay's title, then, appears at the very end, when his son (affectionately referred to as "the kid" throughout the book), draws a crow on Hallock's research folder with a Sharpie after seeing a reproduction of Audubon's "American Crow." It is poignant, especially within the larger context of the sometimes-difficult relationship he has with his son. So too does it present a clear affirmation of his project in *Road Course*—that his teaching and his research are never far-removed from his family life. Collaboration and insight come in many forms, in unpredictable ways and in unexpected places.

It should be clear, then, that *Road Course* is not to be mistaken for a road trip. It is, instead, a way of joining literature with travel to broaden one's perspective. In the context of early American literature, this often means visiting places that may or may not still exist. As such, one cannot follow the pages of Hallock's book as a guide to the landscape or the literature—but one can find inspiration in these pages to approach literary study and pedagogy from one's own experiences with literature-in-place. The book

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is actively written as a journey, as "[s]tories presumably press us into a deeper, more responsible engagement with place" (2021: xxvi). What interests Hallock is how the geography of North America is involved in both the creation of literary narratives as much as it is involved in shaping how those narratives are understood today, contributing to the myth of America, several centuries removed.

Given that Hallock's endeavor is based in that "still-unpopular belief" regarding the blending of narrative nonfiction and academic study, study, a future edition of the book might quiet those objections by appending some version of the bibliographic essay found on his website. Titled "Footnote Trails," it is where one finds "the scholarly backstory" deliberately removed from the essays that comprise the book ("Footnote Trails" 4). Consciously working in "the field of the essay, as opposed to the scholarly article," writes Hallock, "started as something as a whim but increasingly appeared to me as a conscious choice" ("Footnote Trails" 11). He had originally thought of himself as writing in the tradition of D.H. Lawrence's *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923) or William Carlos Williams's *In the American Grain* (1925), but abandons that model in favor of more contemporary guides ("Footnote Trails" 11).

Yet, one wishes that Hallock had channeled more of the energy and breadth found in Williams's book. Although he refers to the poet several times, the pages of *Road Course* make no mention of *In the American Grain*, which provides an evenly-balanced consideration of the English, the Spanish and the French presences in early America. At one point in his introduction Hallock asks, "How many US citizens can point to Manitoba or Chihuahua on a map?" (17). It is a fair question, but flipping back to Hallock's own frontispiece map, one sees only a partial outline of Mexico, an oversimplified Caribbean and only the faintest indication of Canada by gesturing toward the Maritimes and the Gaspésie. Within the context of the book itself, Mexico and the Southwest are given a chapter, but otherwise the book is primarily confined to the Eastern Seaboard with one excursion to the Pacific Northwest and a passing mention of the Dakotas. Canada is almost entirely absent and Mexico does not appear as a place so much as it does an object of textual study through Mesoamerican codices. It is one instance where Hallock's dedication to scholarly pursuits

would seem to impair his imaginative vision. Although Mexico City and the historic Tenochtitlán may dominate the political realities of Mexico both past and present, the reader never knows if Hallock traveled further in that county. The complexities of Mexico are wide and far-reaching and one wishes that the chapter's title, "Oro de Oaxaca," were in reference to the state in Southern Mexico and not to the brand of mezcal. In the end, although this chapter may contribute to broadening the academic scope and pedagogical approaches to early American literary study, it also illustrates just how limited the geographical scope of Hallock's book is.

In this sense, then, the frontispiece map does present a fair representation of the book—but it also points to missed opportunities of which Hallock is certainly aware. "In a survey of our national literature," he writes, "I suggest geography—rather than time—as an organizing frame" (2021: 10). If this is the case, his book can only provide the very loosest of frames. The study of early American literary and cultural history offers a glimpse into a period of time when Benedict Anderson's "logo-map" (2021: 16) of the US was not only an unstable idea, but also an impossible one. The subject matter itself indicates the ways in which the field might reconsider the geographical and historical context of its subject matter, repositioning it within a wider array of the available materials, but Hallock's book is still essentially bound by the "logo-map," however much the conception of the book strives to challenge it.

In fairness to Hallock, he never indicates whether he has traveled to, studied in, or written about the Mississippi River Valley, the Great Lakes, Upper and Lower Canada, the Caribbean, or the Spanish Main beyond Florida and his brief trip to Mexico City. If he has written about any of these or other places, essays in this vein and in those locations would enrich his *Road Course* immensely, primarily by considering the French colonial presence in early America, which was vast and is widely neglected in the teaching of early American literature. Hallock envisions teaching the American literature survey "as a base, from which we reflect back and forth upon a past that still has not passed" (2021: 19). At the same time, however, one senses that as much as he desires to expand the traditional scope of the course, he remains as geographically

constricted by it as any of the available anthologies that frustrate him and so many other professors who teach in the same field.

Nevertheless, Hallock cannot be expected to solve these entrenched limitations on his own and what his book offers is valuable: an honest and sincere reflection of the challenges of teaching and learning a subject matter as unwieldy geographically as it is historically. It was John Dewey who wrote, in *Democracy and Education* (1916), that geography and history are "two phases of the same living whole, since the life of men in association goes on in nature, not as an accidental setting, but as the material and medium of development" (1997: 218). Both geography and history "[bring] about the enlargement of the significance of a direct personal experience" (218). How does one come to a more unified understanding of the Americas as a continent of interconnected places and as a changing historical reality over time? Neither geography nor history—nor literature, for that matter—can be ends in themselves, but must be part of a larger educational framework. How can the connections among these areas of study be better understood? How can one best use personal experience to inform one's approach? Where does one begin? Hallock's *Road Course* offers one possible place to start.

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NOMADLAND: SURVIVING AMERICA IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

by Jessica Bruder
(A Book Review)

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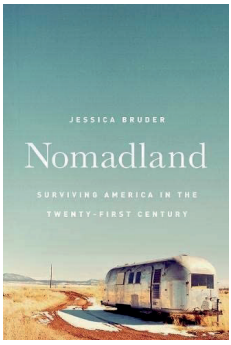

Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road,
Healthy, free, the world before me,
The long brown path before me leading wherever I choose.
–Walt Whitman

On April 21, 2021, the Dolby Theatre held the 93rd Academy Awards ceremony. The event, unusual as the whole 2020–2021 cycle, abounded with surprises. Indisputably, the biggest winner of the night was the film *Nomadland* directed by Chloé Zhao. The movie won three Oscars: for the Best Actor, the Best Director, and most importantly, the Best Picture. Chloé Zhao became the second woman ever to win the Academy Award for the Best Director and the first woman of color in history to receive it. During her acceptance speech, Chloé Zhao addressed the real-life nomads who inspired both her and Jessica Bruder, the author of the non-fiction book on which the film was based, to tell their story to the public. Thanking her heroes, Zhao emphasized the fact that they taught the writer and the director "the power of resilience and hope" and reminded them "what true kindness looks like" ("'Nomadland' Wins Best Picture | 93rd Oscars," 00:02:18–00:03:12).

Jessica Bruder published her book *Nomadland: Surviving America in the Twenty-First Century* in September of 2017. She introduces

the readers to the phenomenon of Americans whose lives changed radically in the aftermath of the Great Recession (2007–2009). Job loss, abnormal levels of the outstanding Social Security payments, or simply the ballooning housing costs which would outbalance their earnings—all force them out of their comfort zone which, up to then, they would take for granted. When the crisis hits, many of its victims move out of their houses and adopt a nomadic lifestyle. Vans, buses, and campers become their homes as they travel across the United States, seeking seasonal work and trying to make the most of their lives despite economic impediments, legal obstacles, and ever-present hardships. The central character of Bruder's story is Linda May, an awe-inspiring 64-year-old grandmother, whose trials and tribulations propel her dream of building a sustainable Earthship house. Today, Linda May lives on the road full-time, accompanied by her beloved cavalier spaniel, Coco. Yet, before the Recession forced her into her van, her *axis mundi* was the couch by the front door of the house that her family rented—a house, which she used to share with her daughter Audra, her son-in-law Collin, and their three teenage children. As a young woman, Linda had studied construction technology, later complementing her income as a cigarette girl at a casino and as a cocktail waitress. Although she had never been afraid of hard work, nor suffered from the lack of ambition, like many people in America, Linda spent her life living from one paycheck to another, unable to amass any significant savings for her retirement years. Her Social Security estimates for her retirement amounted to $500 a month, a sum making life at a decent level in the US today impossible. Although her needs had always been moderate, Linda would never have expected her retirement years to turn out to be miserable: the home was neither spacious enough nor comfortable for the number of people living in it, and, more importantly, the feeling of being confined to one place without any prospects for the improvement of the situation in any foreseeable future eventually overwhelmed her.

It is a well-known fact that maintaining a house in the United States involves high costs; it is, however, possible to reduce the amount of the monthly payments covering rent and utility bills if a person does not own any property. It is no wonder then

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that workamping became a viable alternative for the Americans hit by the Great Recession, even though, as the epigraph to this review suggests, the very idea of nomadic life in the West is much older. Apart from the traditional migratory cultures of many Indigenous Nations both in Europe and in the Americas, Western nomads have been around for centuries, co-existing with sedentary populations. Sometimes driven by the economy, sometimes by choice, they have become a visible presence all over America, exploring the country from one coast to another. They have been living on the road for generations. In a private message to Jessica Bruder, Don Wheeler, a character featuring in her book under a pseudonym, explains the phenomenon thus:

> Workampers are modern mobile travelers who take temporary jobs around the US in exchange for a free campsite—usually including power, water, and sewer connections—and perhaps a stipend. You may think that workamping is a modern phenomenon, but we come from a long, long tradition. We followed the Roman legions, sharpening swords and repairing armor. We roamed the new cities of America, fixing clocks and machines, repairing cookware, building stone walls for a penny a foot and all the hard cider we could drink. We followed the emigration west in our wagons with our tools and skills, sharpening knives, fixing anything that was broken, helping clear the land, roof the cabin, plow the fields and bring in the harvest for a meal and pocket money, then moving on to the next job. Our forebears are the tinkers.
>
> We have upgraded the tinker's wagon to a comfortable motor coach or fifth-wheel trailer. Mostly retired now, we have added to our repertoire the skills of a lifetime in business. We can help run your shop, handle the front or back of the house, drive your trucks and forklifts, pick and pack your goods for shipment, fix your machines, coddle your computers and networks, work your beet harvest, landscape your grounds or clean your bathrooms. We are the techno-tinkers. (Bruder 2018: 46–47)

Linda and her workamping companions portrayed in the book exemplify the above description. Modern techno-tinkers' automobiles vary from passenger cars equipped with fittings allowing their drivers to attach tents to the roofs, campervans, and trailers, to school buses transformed into cozy mobile homes, of which many are comfortable enough to spend a whole year in them. Since such vehicles are often fitted with heating systems, solar panels, and satellite dishes, many of the modern techno-nomads may serve their guests freshly ground coffee from their expresso machines, or even offer them room to spend the night on the couch in their

'living areas.' Yet, although such a description may sound enticing, one must not forget that the 'free life' of a contemporary nomad is far from 'living for free.' Apart from people like Linda, whose health and meager retirement still allows them to live a nomadic life, there are many who struggle to cover the costs of such an existence by seeking temporary jobs wherever and whenever an opportunity arises. Unsurprisingly, the capitalist world, recognizing the dominant economic trends, readily provides solutions, whose ethics, also unsurprisingly, is often questionable.

Jessica Bruder discloses a phenomenon whose scale few 'sedentary' Westerners today care to acknowledge. She opens her readers' eyes to the emergence of an enormous job market tailored specifically to generate profit from the situation which turned former owners or tenants of apartments or houses into contemporary nomads. This market is perhaps best epitomized by Amazon, being one of the companies to first recognize the value of the new niche. Having seen the results of the revision of the company policies accounting for the newly emergent social situation, the Amazon CEO, Jeff Bezos, sadly, was right to predict that "by the year 2020, one out of every four work campers in the United States will have worked for Amazon." Considering the horrific work conditions imposed by Amazon that Jessica Bruder describes in detail, a 'sedentary' Westerner cannot but wonder how it is possible for the company to not experience problems with recruiting new employees every year. Bruder spares no effort in sharing the opinions of Amazon ex-employees, who overtly speak of a shocking number of hours spent at work and of the shameless hourly rates offered by the company. With meticulous attention to detail, Bruder describes the Amazon Towns, which emerge in the vicinities of the Amazon logistics centers when workampers seeking jobs park their vehicles as close to their workplace as possible, and shares the practical hints that the seasonal inhabitants of the Amazon Towns would impart to those looking for such employment:

> Getting prepared both physically and mentally will be the key to you having a successful peak season at Amazon. We cannot stress enough the importance of arriving at Amazon physically prepared. If you've not exercised regularly, consult your physician about a conditioning program, then get active! Here's a low cost suggestion: Get out and walk! Walking is a great form of exercise. It doesn't cost anything and is easier

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> on the joints than other forms of exercise. Before setting out, warm up those muscles by stretching. Experts say that as we get older, the collagen structure in our bodies changes, reducing our flexibility and range of motion. (Bruder 2018: 98)

Internet fora abound with recommendations for those considering taking up the job at an Amazon warehouse. Some users advise others to break new shoes before wearing them to work, or buying a good hand care lotion to remedy damage caused by the prolonged use of protective gloves, or soothe cuts or abrasions. Others suggest that a positive attitude towards work should be kept up, remembering that working for Amazon is not a career but a seasonal job. Amazon Towns, in turn, advertise attractions located close to the warehouses, encouraging the workers to enjoy their free time between shifts, and thus putting on the mask of a benign, or even caring, employer, with the view to offsetting the image the company earned by its ruthless exploitation of those whose options are close to none.

Clearly, despite the size and the economic potential of Amazon, recruiting workampers to work for the corporation is of paramount significance; it is important enough for a special program—unambiguously called the CamperForce—to be implemented in order to warrant the influx of cheap labor. Bruder explains how the CamperForce, created especially with the modern nomads in mind, recruits workers during the peak business season—the season before Christmas—and how their work is organized in reality. The shifts, as the writer's interlocutors disclose, are usually ten hours long, and often even longer; the temperature in the warehouse oftentimes reaches as many as 90 degrees Fahrenheit. In this context, a detailed description of the tasks performed at work resembles a description of an Olympic level full-body workout: throughout the duration of the shift, the employee spends ten or more hours walking, stooping, squatting, climbing stairs and ladders, reaching for merchandise located on higher shelves, or carrying heavy loads; each worker is expected to be able to lift packages weighing up to fifty pounds. Why then, Bruder asks, does Amazon hire elderly candidates for the job that seems to be tailored for younger, more fit, individuals?

The responses vary. For instance, Joanne Johnson, a 57-year-old who missed only one scheduled workday after an accident at work, believes that "[i]t's because we're so dependable. We know that if you commit to something, you do your best to get that job done. We don't take days off unless we have to" (Bruder 2018: 59). Her employers at the CamperForce claim that "older workers bring a good work ethic" (Bruder 2018: 59) and, understanding the true meaning of work, they put their minds into it. The most obvious reason, however, is money:

> Amazon reaps federal tax credits—ranging from 25 to 40 percent of wages—for hiring disadvantaged workers in several categories, including aging recipients of Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and anyone on food stamps. Savvy CamperForce members know all about that incentive. "The Work Opportunity Tax Credit is the reason Amazon can take on such a slow, inefficient workforce," noted one itinerant worker on her blog, *Tales from the Rampage*. "Since they are getting us off government assistance for almost three months of the year, we are a tax deduction for them." (Bruder 2018: 59)

Even without any profound knowledge of the economic history of the United States it is possible to a identify a rather clear pattern of the recurrence of the modern-world nomadism in the West. Jessica Bruder reminds her readers that in the mid-1930s, when America was still in the grip of the Great Depression, house trailers were produced *en masse* because the producers discovered that mobile homes could serve far more serious purposes than solely that of an extravagant vacation. Not unlike during the Great Recession, also in the 1930s moving into a trailer would allow those in dire straits to cut costs of rent and householding expenses (Bruder 2018: 59). A *New York Times Magazine* columnist confirms it, stating that in 1936 "[the United States was] rapidly becoming a nation on wheels" (Miller 1936: N20). One year later, Konrad Bercovici reiterates this diagnosis in his *Harper's Magazine*, article claiming that campers represent "a new way of life which will eventually change our architecture, our morals, our laws, our industrial system, and our system of taxation" (Bercovici 1937: 621). Emphasizing the parallels between the socioeconomic transformations of the two periods of crisis, Bruder describes how Bob Wells, one of the most famous vandwellers, the owner

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of the website *CheapRVLiving.com*, communicated his moral vision of the situation to those most severely affected by the Great Recession of 2007–2009:

> After the financial meltdown of 2008, traffic to CheapRVLiving.com exploded. "I started getting emails almost daily from people who had lost their jobs, their savings were running out, and they were facing foreclosure on their home," he later wrote. Cast out of the middle class, these readers were trying to learn how to survive. Googling phrases such as "budget living" and "living in a car or van" brought them to Bob's website. And in a culture where economic misfortune was blamed largely on its victims, Bob offered them encouragement instead of opprobrium. "At one time there was a social contract that if you played by the rules (went to school, got a job, and worked hard) everything would be fine," he told readers. "That's no longer true today. You can do everything right, just the way society wants you to do it, and still end up broke, alone, and homeless." By moving into vans and other vehicles, he suggested, people could become conscientious objectors to the system that had failed them. They could be reborn into lives of freedom and adventure. (Bruder 2018: 74)

As if disregarding the most profound reasons for the rebirth of nomadism in America, in 2011 *The New York Times Magazine* published the article which proudly stated that "living in a van […] is now fashionable" (Spitznagel 2011: 9). The cold irony of such PR obviously borders on cruel cynicism: both periods of crisis demonstrate beyond doubt that it is only when a financial crisis of massive proportions hits the social groups whose annual income is below average that modern nomadism skyrockets. The scale of the phenomenon demonstrates that 'fashion' is the least important of all factors when the impermanence, instability, and dangers of the 'life on wheels' become the only alternative to bankruptcy and, ultimately, to homelessness. And though the Great Recession is now history, the latest global crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic is more than likely to produce a similar outcome (Spitznagel 2011: 9). The Covid-19 recession has run a number of industries to the ground, resulting in the loss of income for their employees. Without stable earnings, thousands lost their financial liquidity. Unable to pay their rent, and aware that the inhuman housing market will not be merciful, they come to realize yet again that sometimes the only right choice to make is to become *houseless*, rather than *homeless.* Meanwhile, during

the Covid-19 pandemic, Jeff Bezos's fortune skyrocketed to $24 billion (Evelyn 2020). Predictably, a new wave of the cynical PR heralding the return of the fashion of 'living in a van' will ensue. And some will, inevitably, believe that most of those who choose such a life light-heartedly 'take to the open road.'

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IN MEMORIAM MARIETTA MESSMER

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We at the International American Studies Association are heartbroken to be grieving the loss of one of the pillars of our community, Prof Dr Marietta Messmer (1966–2021).

After graduating with a Master of Arts in English and American Studies and Latin from the Catholic University of Eichstätt, Germany, Marietta earned a PhD in American Literature at York University, Toronto, Canada in 1997. Her research focussed on vulnerable migrants and the outsourcing of immigration regimes regionally and globally; to advance migration studies, in 2018 Dr Messmer co-founded the European Network for the Study of Minor Mobilities in the Americas. She also specialized in InterAmericanism, the multi-lingual literary studies of the hemisphere, a field which she advanced as managing editor of the peer-reviewed book series *Interamericana: Inter-American Literary History and Culture*, published by Peter Lang in Frankfurt and New York. This was only the most recent of a long list of authored, co-authored, and co-edited scholarly books by Dr Marietta Messmer.

With her leadership, Marietta shaped both InterAmerican Studies and American Studies in Europe and the world. In 2009 she co-founded the International Association for InterAmerican Studies, where she served as Executive Board Member and Treasurer until 2012. She was president

of the Netherlands American Studies Association between 2011–2014. She also held the position of a Board Member of the of the European Association of American Studies between 2009–2016, where she served as Chair of the Organizing Committee of the conference *America: Justice, Conflict, War* in the Hague, April 2014. She has been Vice President of our International American Studies Association since 2019.

The American Studies program at the University of Groningen describes Marietta as "the historical memory, administrative anchor, and all-around rules committee of the program." The International Association for InterAmerican Studies remember her as "not only an outstanding scholar but also a great team player who always had the big picture in mind and a good friend who accompanied us many years of the way." Her colleagues recall Dr Messmer as "combin[ing] efficiency and professionalism," exercising "gentle leadership [with] relentless optimism," "quietly inspiring," and having "the most infectious laugh." As her fellow officers at the International American Studies Association recall, it was typical of her selflessness that in 2017 she donated to our scholarly association the full honorarium for her plenary lecture at that year's IASA world congress. She would have been our next IASA president, and we keenly feel her loss.Our wonderful colleague Marietta leaves behind her brother Ralf Messmer. Marietta is also mourned by her academic families: the American Studies program at the University of Groningen, where she worked as Associate Professor since 2004; the Netherlands American Studies Association; the International Association for InterAmerican Studies; the Center for InterAmerican Studies at Bielefeld University; and our International American Studies Association. Marietta is fondly remembered by her many former students, who were trained and inspired by her intellectually.

If all rivers run to the sea, then Marietta, you reached the ocean before us. May you rest in peace.

May 30, 2021

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ABSTRACTS
AND NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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America's Automobile: Affection or Obsession, Myth or Reality?

Mythology plays an important part of the role of the American automobile, less so in terms of its primary function that is transportation, more so in terms of an ancillary purpose: its metaphorical significance to both owner or operator and the onlooking public. Across much of the 20th century and continuing now into the third decade of the 21st century, the American automobile has undergone many design changes that have buttressed its metaphorical significance: become streamlined, gained then lost then partially regained size together with a colorful exterior, and in the 21st century become focused on an array of interior gadgets, some cast into hibernation because of an electronic chip scarcity resulting from trade wars and the Covid-19 pandemic. Many Americans seem to have almost become besotted by automobiles, including their own and those driven by others, because in some respects the American automobile has come to define its driver. Automobiles in the United States that are visually appealing symbolize affluence, material success, preoccupation with speed, including the rapid pace of social change, as well as, at least arguably, a lesser regard for protecting the environment. On balance, in the mindset of many Americans, the automobile is larger than life, "a mode of signification, a form" in contrast to a mere machine. Change in automotive design has been heralded as the talisman of a new generation of drivers. However, what is cause and what is effect? American automobiles conflate myth and reality; that which is together with that which might be sometime temporal frustrations with the American Dream.

Keywords: American Dream, automobile, mechanical Manifest Destiny, mobility, muscle cars, wartime Nazi collaboration

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been at its Institute of The Americas and Europe, American Studies Center, since 2005, Faculty of Management since 2012, and Institute of International Relations from 2006 to 2016. He is a senior graduate faculty at Norwich University, the Military Academy of the State of Vermont, where he teaches Intercultural Management in the International System and has taught its capstone graduate course, Global Corporate Diplomacy, receiving its Distinguished Faculty Award in 2018. Professor Jones received the University of Warsaw Rector's Award in 2017 for his book, *Four Eagles and a Dragon: Successes and Failures of Quixotic Encirclement Strategies in Foreign Policy: An Analysis* (Bloomsbury 2016). From 2000–2005 he was faculty advisor to the Oxford Banking Forum at Oxford University. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Medicine (FRSM) and Royal Statistical Society (FRSS), and holder of patents including a U.S.P.T.O. utility patent, several design patents registered in the United States, Canada, European Community, and Republic of China (Taiwan).

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Crazy 'Bout a Mercury

When we purchase an automobile, we are also acquiring an amorphous but very real image, that is, the statement which the automobile makes about its owner to the public. Such images are forged in popular culture, and Mercury is an automobile brand that had an auspicious post-WWII popular culture debut. In 1948, K.C. Douglas recorded "Mercury Boogie" on a 10-inch 78-RPM, with its memorable line in the chorus "I'm crazy 'bout a Mercury." Five years later in 1953, George and Sam Barris transformed a 1951 Mercury Club Coupe into the Hirohata Merc, creating a classic of customization that has been described as "the most famous custom of all time" (Taylor 2006: 56). Ford occasionally attempted to take advantage of these strong roots in popular culture formed in the make's earliest days, but the company's efforts were not notably successful. In spite of Mercury's promising beginnings in media, it has had only a slight presence in music and film. Mercury's image never influenced the automobile market beyond the first few years, and it was unable to prevent the brand's 2011 demise.

Keywords: automobile, popular music, blues, brand image, popular culture

Before becoming a scholar of international business and finance and eventually automotive history, Skip McGoun earned his bachelor's degree in biology at the Illinois Institute of Technology, served as a supply officer in the US Navy, and worked in Alaska for a credit union. After earning his MBA at the University of Alaska–Anchorage and doctorate at Indiana University, he settled in at Bucknell University 34 years ago. His collaborations have led to summer teaching positions at the Uni-

versity of Ljubljana, Slovenia and the University of Donja Gorica, Montenegro, and he has made presentations at a number of other universities and international conferences. He also served as the Area Chair of Vehicle Culture for the Popular Culture Association.

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Car Painting in America: Edward Hopper's Visions of the Road

The article presents an analysis of three paintings by one of the greatest American realist painters, Edward Hopper. The three selected works share a common denominator: they all address the concept of a car and the influence it has on the nation's life—it has altered the way people traveled and expressed their identity. A car in Hopper's works serves a twofold function, it allows its drivers and passengers to experience the land more as they can travel wherever they desire but, on the other hand, it contributes to a separation from their environment as the journey involves fragmentariness and rootlessness.

Keywords: Edward Hopper, modernism, painting, American studies

Ewa Wylężek-Targosz, PhD, is a lecturer at the Institute of Literary Studies in the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Silesia, Katowice, Poland. Her main academic interests are carnival, modernism, art history, and cinema studies. In 2019 she was a guest lecturer at University of Eastern Finland. Currently, she teaches Introduction to American Film, North American Art History and Creative Writing, as well as Writing for the Media. She has recently published a book titled *Tropes of Tauromachy: Representations of Bullfighting in Selected Texts of Anglophone Literature* (University of Silesia Press). She is also a certified brewer (postgraduate course at University of Agriculture, Kraków, Poland).

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The Rebel Behind the Wheel: An Examination of the 'Redneck' Rebel Cultural Trope in *The Dukes of Hazzard*

The heyday of 'Redneck' cinema—the 1970s to early 1980s, saw the rise of the Redneck Rebel—a Southern or otherwise 'hick' anti-hero who rode around the countryside like a modern-day cowboy vanquishing evil. His 'horse' was his car—a beefed up/souped up muscle car that often became the star of the show and overshadowed the anti-hero himself. This article examines the Redneck Rebel through the lens of one American TV series—*The Dukes of Hazzard*. This popular 1980s TV series, along with its antecedents and contemporaries, underscore several important points that reinforce typical conservative American virtues: freedom, fighting the 'good fight,' an overt heterosexuality, a particular reveling in a sarcastic 'sticking out the tongue' at the overly sophisticated,

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overly arrogant, 'anti-American,' and well-heeled parts of American society.

Keywords: *The Dukes of Hazzard*, cars, television series, redneck culture

Eric Starnes, PhD, is a native of Catawba county, North Carolina. He holds a BA (1990) and an MA (1995) in Russian/East European History from Appalachian State University and a PhD (2018) in American Literature from the University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland. He has published several articles on American white nationalist fiction, the men's movement and men's adventure fiction. His current research interests include American white nationalist fiction, Nazi occultism in American pulp fiction, and conspiracy theories in American pulp fiction.

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Buddies, Lovers, and Detours: America and its Road Movies

Is an open road also a democratic one? Zooming in on two films—*Queen & Slim* (2019) and *Unpregnant* (2020)—this article discusses American road movie genre from the perspective of 2021, and how contemporary film narratives intersect with race and gender. One movie often drives in another film's lane, meaning the genre is self-referential. Unfolding in three parts, the article begins by introducing these two films and surveying how they contribute to the road movie genre. It then discusses cars and clothing as characters and concludes by considering surveillance and how these films, in tandem, take the temperature of contemporary American society.

Keywords: film, road movie, mobility, police brutality

A cultural historian and writer, L. Sasha Gora graduated in 2020 with a PhD (*summa cum laude*) in American Studies from Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich. She is currently a postdoctoral fellow at the Center for the Humanities and Social Change at Ca' Foscari University of Venice, and is working on her first book titled *Culinary Claims: A History of Indigenous Restaurants in Canada*.

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Existential Definition at the End of the American Road: *Zabriskie Point* (1970), *Vanishing Point* (1971), *The Gauntlet* (1977)

This article discusses three films that helped landmark American cinema in the 1970s. Although differing in inception and recep-

tion, all three belong loosely to the genre of the road movie and are linked by protagonists whose stances of rebellion and alienation were characteristic of the counterculture of the 1970s and by the broader theme of existential self-definition that still influences moviemaking today. A critical and commercial failure on its release in 1970, Michelangelo Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point* has been revalorized as an ambitious attempt to represent the political and cultural conflicts that seemed to be fracturing American society at the time. In contrast, Richard Sarafian's *Vanishing Point* soon overcame the disadvantage of studio disinterest and established itself as a cult favorite. Arguably the definitive anti-hero of 1970s cinema, the amphetamine-fueled renegade driver played by Barry Newman achieves iconic stature through an act of defiant self-destruction that still leaves viewers of the film stunned. Finally, Clint Eastwood's *The Gauntlet*, in which the actor-director breaks with his 'Dirty Harry' persona to depict a burned-out cop who redeems a ruined career, and enables himself a new start, not by making his own law but by enforcing the law on the books, and against all odds. In all three films, the still unspoiled landscape of the American Southwest, crisscrossed by its skein of highways, provides the tableau for escapist fantasies that may in fact be real, for high-speed chases and automotive acrobatics that defy the laws of physics, and for vignettes of an 'outsider' way of life that was already beginning to perish.

Keywords: road movie, existentialism, anti-hero, 1970s cinema, *Zabriskie Point*, *Vanishing Point*, *The Gauntlet*

James J. Ward is professor emeritus of history at Cedar Crest College in Allentown, Pennsylvania where he taught courses in German history, Russian history, urban history, and film and history. He has published articles and reviews in *The Journal of Contemporary History*, *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, *Central European History*, *Slavic Review*, *The Journal of Popular Culture*, *The Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television*, *The Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, and *Film & History*, among others. He has also contributed chapters to numerous scholarly anthologies in film studies. With Cynthia J. Miller, he co-edited *Urban Noir: New York and Los Angeles in Shadow and Light* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2017).

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Pandemic Automobility: Patterns of Crisis and Opportunity in the American Motor Culture

This article traces the recursive character of automobility from a perspective of cultural crises and traumas that accompany motor culture development in the USA. The American automobility system has been caught in the treadmill of ideological criticism that defined the current role of motor vehicles in forms of political activism and cultural

criticism. The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic is different as it seems to bring restoration to the original character of motor culture with its defining features of individualism, freedom, and opportunity achieved through mobility.

Keywords: automobility, Covid-19, medicalization, trauma, risk

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