Stanford's Revs Program sponsors film series celebrating cars and car culture

A film series explores the dynamic relationship between the cinema and the profound social impact of the automobile during the 20th century.

BY ROBIN WANDER

No art medium seems as intertwined with the American automobile as film. This year the Revs Program at Stanford – an academic study of all things car – in collaboration with the Department of Art & Art History showcases cars and car culture in American cinema with Driven: A Car Culture Film Series.

The automobile is at the core of understanding America in the 20th and the 21st centuries and it has woven its way into all manner of the arts. Depictions of the beloved automobile crop up on campus at the Cantor Arts Center in Walker Evans' mid-century photographs of small-town Main Street and at the Thomas Welton Stanford Art Gallery in student Ben Eigelsow's rhythmic video triptych The Lonesome Foghorn Blows (2012).

"Cars appear as subjects in contemporary art – for example, in the crushed metal sculptures of John Chamberlain," said Cantor curator Hilarie Faberman. "Moreover, the lustrous paint jobs and fascination with new materials that informed car design especially in the 1960s had an influence on finish fetish artists of Los Angeles such as John McCracken and Ron Davis.

Film screenings are at 7:30 p.m. in Cubberley Auditorium. The remaining schedule: Two Lane Blacktop (Monte Hellman, 1971) on Feb. 9; American Graffiti (George Lucas, 1973) on March 7; Trafic (Jacques Tati, 1971) on April 12; Used Cars (Robert Zemeckis, 1980) on May 3; and Crash (David Cronenberg, 1996) on June 7. With the exception of Trafic, the films are shown on 35mm film.

The car culture film series was conceived by professors Nancy J. Troy and Pavle Levi in the Department of Art & Art History, David Fresko and Alexander Greenough, graduate students in the Department of Art & Art History focusing on film, were engaged to develop the series. "Our broadest goal with Driven was to bring the Revs Program in contact with the Department of Art & Art History, as well as Film Studies, in order to foster a greater awareness of the dynamic relationship between the cinema and the profound social impact of the automobile during the 20th century. Revs gave us free rein to select the films and schedule the series as we liked," they said.

This inaugural collaboration brings an automotive focus to the curriculum across disciplines on campus. Part of this collaboration is an undergraduate course on car culture that will be taught in the department in the spring term.

Fresko and Greenough described the challenge of planning the series. "There are so many great films whose iconic images are inseparable from that of the automobile. The cinema is an ideal art form with which to track the cars and car culture, whose function is movement itself. We chose to focus on postwar American films which had automobiles as their dramatic and thematic focal point."

All the films in the series are from the United States with the exception of Trafic, by Jacques Tati, from France. Cars and car culture are an inelible aspect of national identity in the United States during the 20th and 21st centuries. From the growing consumer culture, the "freedom on the open road" and teenage rites of passage, the car is an index of historical change that registers the shifting social mores of American society.

The series is intended to demonstrate how cars and car culture function differently in various films and to illustrate the diversity and depth of cars as historical and filmic phenomena. Again, Fresko and Greenough: "Cars can drive the plot, as in our first film of the series in January, Armored Car Robbery. Similarly, they can be the engines of drama in our upcoming screening of Two-Lane Blacktop. On the other hand, they're the sites and sources of pleasure and identity in American Graffiti, which emphasizes the cultures that emerge around cars. Films like Trafic and Used Cars satirize auto-mobility and auto-consumerism, respectively, while our final film Crash draws connections between automotive injury and sexuality, in a dark, grim indictment of contemporary infatuations with celebrity and technology."

The Revs Program at Stanford was founded to inspire a new trans-disciplinary field connecting the past, present and future of the automobile. The program fosters an intellectual community bridging the humanities and fine arts, social sciences, design, science and engineering, and the professions. The program focuses on the human experiences of designing, making, restoring, driving, being driven by, living with, admiring and dreaming of the automobile, as well as the automobile itself as machine, work of art and cultural symbol.

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