

Movies: a Social Indicator of the Car Movement in the US

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1. Introduction

The automobile, since its invention, has had a tremendous impact upon the American Society. (Volti, 2004) Its primary impact has been a change in lifestyle associated with mobility as it relates to transportation. The automobile also has had some hidden impacts through the years, because it represents freedom, status, etc. In particular, to a young man or woman. Youth is a time for exploring independence and using the automobile as a tool in the maturation process. It is essential to understand the love affair of individuals with their first car or with a car, which holds the significance in one's life. (Redshaw, 2006) This adds a dimension of nostalgia as the individual becomes older.

Much of the impact of the automobile has been reflected in popular movies. (Vankin and Whalen, 2005; Weinbrenner, 2011) These films, in terms of trends have changed significantly to reflect preference and choice, of different generations. The nature of each cohort has different level of attachments to the automobile and that do create influence in their lives. Popular movies reflect the position of the automobile in each generation's lifestyle. There are many other influences that affect the lifestyle of each cohort, but the automobile has been one of the primary factors.

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As the movies are studied in relation to different generations, it is a very complex topic because of the external factors. (Frohart-Lana, 2012) The attraction of the automobile for each generation is not monolithic. There are a variety of different genres associated with the different types, styles, and uses of the automobile. (Ryan, 2013) Movies have to be understood in terms of these different genres. This does not suggest that there is not a general theme in relation to the automobile, but it does suggest that there are various subcultures that have to be thoroughly understood in relation to the general themes.

The automobile in this manuscript refers to cars, trucks, motorcycles, etc. This manuscript explored the general concept of motor vehicles. Another important factor is that the automobile is at a crossroads in time. (Frohart-Lana, 2012; Weinbrenner, 2011) Within the next two generations, automobiles will have a completely different position in society. The autonomous car, as it is developed along with the associated, electronics won't have the feeling as how an individual relates to his/her machine.

The individual will have to interface with the software that is being developed. There is no doubt that there will be a transition period where individuals want the control of the machine, but will have limited influence over its operation. This new technology will have to be integrated into society so that the individual has an appreciation of this new mode of transportation. Whether it is wholly accepted or not is a question for future exploration. It must be recognized that the old suppliers of technology will be supplanted with the new technologies and there will be a significant change in the production of the automobile. The new generations are tech savvy with their tablets, cell phones, etc. These new cars will fit into their lifestyle and have an impact just as the automobile has had with other generations.

The purpose of this manuscript is not to examine the impact of film upon the automobile enthusiast, but to chronicle the popular movies that have been made and to determine thematic trends. Popularity, in this context, is reviewing sources of literature that has published a list of favorite car movies. The greater the number of sources, where a movie has been identified, the more popular the movie is. It must also be recognized that some of the movies, especially of the early years, do not have a popularity score because they were made before there were any information sources that reviewed car movies.

In addition, to the car movies sources, the IMDb(Internet Movie Database) was used as a source to obtain a perspective about particular movies. This research source not only provides detailed information on each of the movies, but also provides a popularity score based upon individual reviews. These reviews are not representative of the general population, but the users of IMDb. These are individuals who watch many movies and are very critical. Each movie has a different sample size. The means are therefore only a rough indicator of popularity.

Popular movies have an appeal to general audiences: one audience responses to a good movie no matter the content and the other responses to the movie because of the content. (McDonald, 2013; Sheller, 2004) Many of the car movies have excellent content and they have a natural attraction based upon the different car genres. Once a movie has faded from popular view, there are individuals who will sustain its popularity because of a dedication and love to a particular genre. (Hey, 1976; Vankin and Whalen, 2005) These individuals watch movies over and over and it becomes part of their lifestyle.

It is a celebration of lifestyle that gives these movies longevity. This does not suggest that some individuals do not watch the movie because of its entertainment value. The generalist always enjoys a good movie but they do not build a lifestyle around these films. It is essential that information about movies be filtered by the generalist versus the car enthusiast. This is three progression stages of auto consciousness: promotion, idolization, and displeasure. (Hey, 1976) Car enthusiasts enjoy a good story that has positive entertainment value. It suggests that these movies elicit a different emotional impact because of the different experiences with cars.

Not all car enthusiasts use movies to stimulate their interest in different automobiles. Some are dedicated to the car movement just because the automobile represents memories in their life or elicit feelings from a different era. (Sheller, 2004; Vankin and Whalen, 2005) Those who are avid movie watchers, based upon their genre, have a different perspective and these movies are a socializing factor that brings a common bond. It develops a common understanding whether they is authentic or not. Authenticity is a very important issue in the movies, especially those that have socialization influence. (Weisel-Barth, 2014) If what is being portrayed on the screen is not authentic, the car enthusiast has lost a connection.

These relationships between the car enthusiast and the film are a bonding factor that increases the intensity of the experience. This intensity stimulates many different types of actions and behaviors that solidify a relationship with other car enthusiasts because they understand the nature of the passion of individuals of like perspective. (Loveland et al., 2010)

The purpose of this manuscript is to chronicle car movies and their popularity. By collecting movie reviewers' ratings on movie's popularity, the paper intends to identify thematic trends perceived by different cohort generations.

Methodology

Participants were suggested to review car movie sources before casting their vote for ranking. The car sources reviewed were: Duck Software, Hot Rod, Telegraph, Buzz Feed, Motor Geek forum, Speedway Media, Screen Junkies, Movie Fone, Answers.com, and Complex. In Table 1*, each film is listed to be with its title and year. The distributor of the film is listed along with whether there has been a criterion review of the movie. There is also listed the sources that have found this movie to be one of its top picks. The greater the number of sources that have this movie in the top list, the more important is its popularity to the car movement. All data was analyzed by three content experts on auto movies. Generalizations had to be made by two of the three experts to be incorporated into the paper. Subsequently, Several films were identified by the content experts and added to the list. These films were added because of their importance to the car movement.

In addition, the primary research site, IMDb that has a comprehensive review of each movie and lists its credits, as well as its rating from movie reviewers where the reviewer can find detailed information about the movie as used as another data point. The average score for each film, by random reviewers, was also reported. This gave a second data point and helps obtain perspective about each film. Then, mean scores were obtained from movie reviewer ratings. It must be noted that the range of rating numbers, in terms of sample, vary widely.

* Table 1 Contains extensive information and a lengthy table of 15 pages won't be printed in the journal. However, it will be available upon request. Please contact Dr. Yu Liu at yuliu@bgsu.edu.

Results

The first analysis was the overview of common themes. Some of the films are classics and others are icons. Classics, in this context, reflect a film that has longevity and appeal to the general public. Some of the films are icons, which reflect one particular cultural segment in time. Longevity is a good indicator of a timeless film. Classic and iconic films are not mutually exclusive. If there are follow-up stories to these types of films, they usually have a lower ranking than the original story.

American Graffiti and Greece are two films that represent classic and cultural movies. There are four other film types based upon movie components. Some of the important elements are the stars, the story, scenes, and the brand of car. Stars such as James Garner and Paul Walker are examples that made a film very popular. Movies like Grand Prix and Cars have stories that are very compelling. Scenes like in Bond and Bullet create a tremendous interest. Brands of cars in movies like Smokey and the Bandit (Trans Am) and Corvette Summer (Corvette) help make the film an icon.

It is recognized that each film has to be analyzed to get an understanding of its depth. Each film has a personality and it has to be analyzed to give an indication of its contribution. The identified themes are an important element to understanding the content. Various subcultures have developed around each of these themes. The classifications created are artificial. Each of the films exhibits multiple characteristics of the categories. Those films that had more than three or more reference points were identified as important. The films that had a review mean rating of seven or over out of 10 were used in combination with the reference points to identify movies as significant for discussion.

The following movies were identified based on two criteria: three references or more and an average mean rating of seven out of 10:

- American Graffiti
- Bullet
- Cars
- French Connection
- Grand Prix
- Italian Job (Both movies)
- Mad Max
- Rebel without a Cause

Roin
Two Lane blacktop
Vanishing Point

Example movies in the list that were cultural icons are: American Graffiti, Rebel without a Cause, and Mad Max. (Anonymous, 2009; Assenza, 1989) These are movies that have a cultural context. There were also films that had a strong car theme: Cars, Grand Prix, Two Lane Blacktop, and Vanishing Point. (Ryan, 2013) Movies that had strong stories with a car connection were: Bullet, French Connection, Italian Job and Roin. There were other themes of crime, rebellious action, comedy, and winning car races. (Vankin and Whalen, 2005) It must be remembered that these movies represent a significant point in time. They may be a reflection of a particular generation, but most of these movies are ones that have great residual value. They tend to transcend generations. These are the movies that have a strong emotional appeal. (Sheller, 2004) American Graffiti, Rebel without a Cause, and Mad Max have a certain appeal based upon independence and rebellion against the system. Grand Prix, Two Lane Blacktop, and Vanishing Point all have an appeal related to racing and speed with an emphasis upon competition and unrestricted speed. Bullet, French Connection, Italian job, and Roin have a relationship to crime and mystery with good car scenes that are related to chases. These movies may help to gain insight into themes of other films that have been identified in the Table 1.

Interestingly, two aberrations that are not in the list of movies are: Smokey and the Bandit and the Fast and Furious series. (Anonymous, 2009; Assenza, 1989) Smokey and the Bandit had an initial popularity but declined in recognition as the series were propagated. This is not true with the Fast and Furious series. Smokey and the Bandit did not change to reflect societal changes, but stayed with that rebellious theme related to cars and chase scenes with the police. The Fast and Furious series have changed their themes to reflect various societal topics and indeed have sustained a high degree of popularity. These types of changes are necessary in the stories to maintain its position with sequels.

Another interesting fact is those movies with documentary status or semi documentary status has high ratings, but they do not necessarily appear in the recommended movies. (Bernard, 2011) An example is the World's Fastest Indian and Senna.

These are movies that have historical base, but they have also been well done in telling of the stories. Some documentaries only have a narrow appeal to a specific audience, but the documentaries that tell an appealing story have a broader audience.

Movies with a mean seven or over rating out of 10, but had less than three recommendations were:

Blues Brothers/Icon
Boys of Bonnevillle/Documentary
Death Proof Crime/Action
Dirty Rotten Scoundrels/Comedy
Drive Crime/Action
Duel Crime/Action
Dust to Glory/Documentary
Easy Rider/Road Trip
Fastest/Documentary
Get Carter Crime/Action
Goldfinger-Bond/Action
Grease/Icon
Great Race Road Trip/Competition
High Society/Comedy
Iron Man/Icon
It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World/Comedy
Love the Beast/Documentary
NASCAR Imax/Documentary
NASCAR: The Ride of Their Lives/Documentary
On Any Sunday/Documentary
Planes, Trains, and Automobiles/Icon
Racing Dreams/Documentary
Road Warrior Crime/Action
Rush/Competition
Senna/Documentary
Speed/Documentary
Super Speedway/Documentary
Taxi Driver Crime/Action
Thelma and Louise/Road Trip
To Live and Die in L A Crime/Action
Truth in 24/Documentary
Truth in 24 II: Every Second Counts/Documentary
Vacation/Comedy

World's Fastest Indian/Documentary
Yank Tanks/Documentary

Some of the documentaries are authentic, but others are facsimiles. These are movies that are meant to tell a personal story of a particular facet of cars or the personal experience of an individual involved with cars. (Bernard, 2011; Weisel-Barth, 2014) It is essential to note that some of the documentaries are a small sample size in regard to the mean rating. Many of these are related to a subculture and generate much interest among a particular segment of the car movement. This is where dreams are often fulfilled. The quality of story is the key to reaching the general population with such films. The story is to be told in such a way that the emotional basis is well understood and can be related to by the audience. The audience has to have a very good understanding of the storyline and the emotions that are associated with the story. Many individuals in the general population cannot relate to a story strictly about automobiles.

The iconic movies are difficult to characterize their stories because these are relating directly to a specific audience in terms of their emotional appeal and the music. (PR Newswire, 2015) Many of these movies are tied to a particular generation, but they transcend time. This is the difficulty in trying to find common themes through these movies. It is extremely important to note that each of these movies have a different type of appeal, but a common thread seems to be their simplicity in terms of their ability to relate to a particular life circumstance that the audience understands through the various generations. This does not suggest that all generations are accepting of the movie, but are tolerant of its message. Different generations have iconic movies. The scenes in most of these icon movies have some relationship to cars, especially crashes, races, or cruising. Whether these movies stand the true test of time depends directly upon the amount of time that they are popular. If a movie reaches its golden anniversary, it is a classic. An iconic movie is one that is popular by generations and a classic is one that extends beyond and is truly a film for the ages.

The action films are based upon crime and/or adventure. Mystery and intrigue are part of their appeal. (Elana-Scheer, 2013) The action scenes range from the impossible high-tech adventures to crashes.

The scenes keep you on the edge of your seat to see the outcome. Creativity in the development of the action is an element that stimulates the ingenuity and resourcefulness of the scenes to mystify the viewer. It is extremely important that these action scenes be an integral part of the story. There is little doubt that the technology has improved for staging such scenes in recent years. The computer has added a whole new dimension. Iron Man is a good example of this new technology. It needs to be noted that much of this new technology is directly related to the attraction of a younger audience to the film. Many times these movies are seen as having little depth. Their story obviously has to be developed so that it has continuity from beginning to end and the story has a direct appeal to the audience. There is also a thread of rebellion. Many of these films have an obvious good and evil battle. Imagination is an important part of this genre. The question is what will happen next or what is possible?

Road trip films have an obvious connection to adventure. Many of these films are set in terms of conflict or competition. (Eyerman and Lofgren, 1995) These added dimensions give the film an additional appeal because it helps with the progression of the story toward a conclusion. The adventure is an extension of one's life. Many of the audience members can relate to the actions in the adventure, even though many of the scenes are unrealistic. These types of films are based upon expectations in relation to a journey with the quest. It's exploration and discovery in regard to excitement that relates to an escapade sometimes does not have a basis in reality.

The comedy movies represent a release of emotion over life situations that put individuals in compromising positions. (Model, 2015) These are life situations that are often ridiculous or will never happen. Many times people see themselves in similar situations that have happened in their life. These scenarios allow the individual to escape and really not think much about the depth of the story. The viewer's troubles are not near as bad as the ones they find on the screen. The closer the emotions on the screen to the real life experience of the viewer the greater the impact of the film.

Conclusions

Films about cars through the generations are reflective of the social trends and the position of the automobile in our society. These films reflect the love affair of a sub segment of the population and the importance of the automobile in their life. It goes beyond the uses of transportation.

It represents the individual's life and emotional attachments to the car, such as independence, romance, rebellious attitude, etc. The various storylines in the film give a sense of the perceptions of the audience and how they view life through the lens of the car. There obviously is a spectrum of responses and passions about the car. The spectrum runs from a casual experience to one that totally consumes the individual. At the end of the continuum where the individual is obsessed about the car, the influence over one's life is so pervasive. As a result, it may reshape one's lifestyle that affects the individual as well as the family.

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