M.Phil. in Modern and Contemporary Literature

Core 1: Texts and Contexts, 1830-1914: Week 6

‘Speed, Pleasure, and the Automobile’

‘The joys of motoring are more or less fictional’—Zelda Fitzgerald

‘The nearest approach to … a new drug … is the drug of speed. Speed, it seems to me, provides the one genuinely modern pleasure’—Aldous Huxley

In The Senses of Modernism (2002), Sara Danius identifies ‘a representational problem’ surrounding the subject of velocity in literature: how to convey an experience to which the medium of the printed word is stubbornly resistant? This seminar will address this tension, exploring the impact of speed on the sensorium and its discourses in the early twentieth century. Huxley’s description of speed as the closest thing to ‘a new drug’ had already been made literal – as Kathryn Hume points out, ‘amphetamine (“speed”) were first synthesized in the 1880s’ – but the language of speed also lent itself to growing anxieties about social mobility and morality (‘going fast’ or ‘going too far’). Associated both with unprecedented freedom and, before long, with mass culture and production, the car recalibrated notions of individuality and agency. The seminar will invite considerations of how the experience of speed - and especially auto-mobility - intersects with modernist explorations of subjectivity, sexuality and affect, as well as more broadly with the idea of ‘the modern’ itself.

Please read all of the core texts, prioritising Joyce and Wharton (the essays by Huxley, Marinetti, and Woolf are each very short). Use scholarly editions wherever possible.

Core Texts
James Joyce, ‘After the Race’ (1904), from Dubliners (1914)
Edith Wharton, The Custom of the Country (1913)

Alous Huxley, ‘Wanted, a new pleasure’ (1931), in Music at Night And Other Essays (Penguin, 1950), 162-8
Virginia Woolf, ‘Evening over Sussex: Reflections in a Motorcar’, The Death of the Moth and Other Essays (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1942), 7-11

Contexts (Primary)
Henry Adams, The Education of Henry Adams (1918)
F. Scott Fitzgerald, The Cruise of the Rolling Junk (1922)
Rudyard Kipling, The Muse Among the Motors (1904)
Maurice Maeterlinck, ‘In an Automobile’ (1904)
Octave Mirbeau, La 628-E 8 (1907)
Proust, ‘Impressions de route en automobile’ (1907)
Edith Wharton, A Motor-Flight Through France (1908)

---, *Henry Ford's Own Story* (1917)

**Further Reading**


---, *The Car Culture* (MIT Press, 1975)


Hume, Kathryn, ‘Narrative Speed in Contemporary Fiction’, *Narrative* 13, (2005), 105-124


Paes de Barros, Deborah, *Fast Cars and Bad Girls: Nomadic Subjects and Women’s Road Stories* (Lang, 2004)


Schnapp, Jeffrey, ‘Crash (Speed as Engine of Individuation)’, *Modernism/Modernity* 6 (1999)

Silk, Gerald, ed. *Automobile and Culture* (Abrams, 1984)


Trotter, David, *Literature in the First Media Age: Britain Between the Wars* (Harvard University Press, 2013)


---, *Speed and Politics: An Essay on Dromology*, trans. Mark Polizzotti (Semiotext(e), 1986)