



CAR FETISHIZATION IN HOLLYWOOD FILMS: A TRAGEDY OF THE COMMONS

Kate Button (Faculty Mentor: Disa Gambera)

Department of English

This project explores how the presentation of cars in Hollywood films and the fetishization of cars in films can contribute to a “tragedy of the commons” in terms of environmental degradation and psychological dependence. I will examine how five Hollywood films — *Drive*, *Baby Driver*, *Ford v Ferrari*, *Clueless*, and *La La Land* — represent cars as central to their protagonists’ identities. Given the central role Hollywood films have played in promoting car culture, I argue that these films reveal a psychological dependence on cars that is both destructive to one’s personal identity and to the natural world. The culture and identity of America relies on the car, but this dependence is problematic, toxic, and destructive. I combine Marxist theories of commodity fetishism with William Forster Lloyd’s theory of “the tragedy of the commons” to examine how the environmental degradation caused by cars is erased by these films’ fetishized depictions of automobile culture. My project has found that while Hollywood films largely fail to discuss the relationship of cars to the natural world, they do reveal a deep anxiety towards the car in male-led car films. However, in films with female protagonists, these characters are able to escape tragic ends by leading lives that become independent of cars. Hollywood movies of the past fetishized the car, but after a cultural revolution that acknowledged the impact of climate change, Hollywood could no longer fully endorse car culture.

The five Hollywood films I analyze show real ambivalence towards the car in their depiction of their male protagonists’ dependence on cars for their livelihoods and mental well-being. I assert that contemporary films are now more conscious of the tragedy of the commons that arises from car dependence and car-based identities. The uneasiness surrounding cars in these films suggests that Hollywood is aware of the problematic American relationship with the car, and it is problematic because of both environmental and psychological concerns.