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Book review

The Psychology of the Car Automobile Admiration, Attachment and Addiction, Stefan Gössling. Elsevier, Amsterdam, Netherlands (2017). (£87.00 (paperback)), ISBN: 978-0-12-811008-9

How much of our daily lives are influenced and co-constructed by the paradigm of automobility as originally conceptualised by Urry (2004). This is just one of the big questions that the author attempts to address within the book. Many readers of the Journal of Transport Geography will find this book interesting and provocative as it tends to open up many questions for further work and debate. The author's skillful framing of the exploration of cars and our relationships towards these artefacts and all their associated complex webs addresses many issues. By viewing the car and society through various facets such as car admiration, technical and cultural glamorization, and our attachment and subsequent addiction to automobiles Gössling rises to the challenge of achieving a more sustainable form of automobility.

The book is a joy to read and is organised in a rather linear and straightforward way opening in Chapters 1 and 2 with The Automotive System and the Psychology of the Car, which help ground the reader in the basics of automobility and transport behaviour. Perhaps surprising to some readers will be the very strong theme of influence via films (cars in movies) before the framing of social, evolutionary and clinical aspects of transport psychology.

Chapter 3 explores and explains Automobile Personalities and (Co) Identities which covers driver personalities and car personalities and then links these traits with various identities. Rich and varied examples include faces of cars, bumper stickers, car lyrics within popular music, cars in movies (and the roles they play), car advertising as well as the role of conceptual cars conceived by automakers. All of these visual clues serve to flesh out the co-identities developed with the driver-car complex. The chapter summarises the key eight additional 'possible' capabilities that the driver-car complex contributes to: speed, comfort & security, protection, entertainment, strength, work assistance, family & friends and space. Each of these topics along would probably merit an entire chapter but the author covers some of these and more ground in the next six chapters. Feelings, Emotions and the Car (Chapter 4) explore emotional functions, fears, anxieties and phobias linked to automobility. Again global examples of car advertising from various countries features heavily, along with some odd practices that many readers may not be familiar with – including hooning, posing, and coal rolling. Automobility, Gender and Sex (Chapter 5), Speed (Chapter 6), Rights, Authority, and the Police (Chapter 7), Community, Friends, Family (Chapter 8), Risk and Death (Chapter 9) round out this section of the book very comprehensively. Depending on your personal interests, at least one or more of these chapters will appeal and educate readers and as before invite further questioning.

The Clinical Psychology of the Car (Chapter 10), Barriers to Automobile Change (Chapter 11) and ultimately Sustainable Automobile Futures (Chapter 12) wrap together the end of the book. The clinical chapter includes wide ranging mental illnesses and their subsequent effects linked to transport behaviour – this section helps pull together the previous chapters and is particularly useful for those without previous training or background in psychology.

Some of the themes in the final chapter have been touched on elsewhere by the author (Gössling 2016). However this book sets them within the perspective of sustainability and future envisioning - the main message here is that car addiction is a deeply ingrained centrality of the current human condition. Despite incentives, rewards and even successful interventions the author is clear that the social normative framing of automobiles will continue to present challenge for society at large, transport policy makers and health systems whilst trying to move towards a more sustainable future. Many readers will find this book useful for their own work in transport geography; the author has cleverly framed themes and issues from within the domain of psychology without using an overly technical array of terminology. This book can help find new ways of looking at transport related issues and add value and deeper meaning to some well-established problems and is appropriate for all readers but could be an excellent additional textbook for particular undergraduate courses or modules.

References

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