

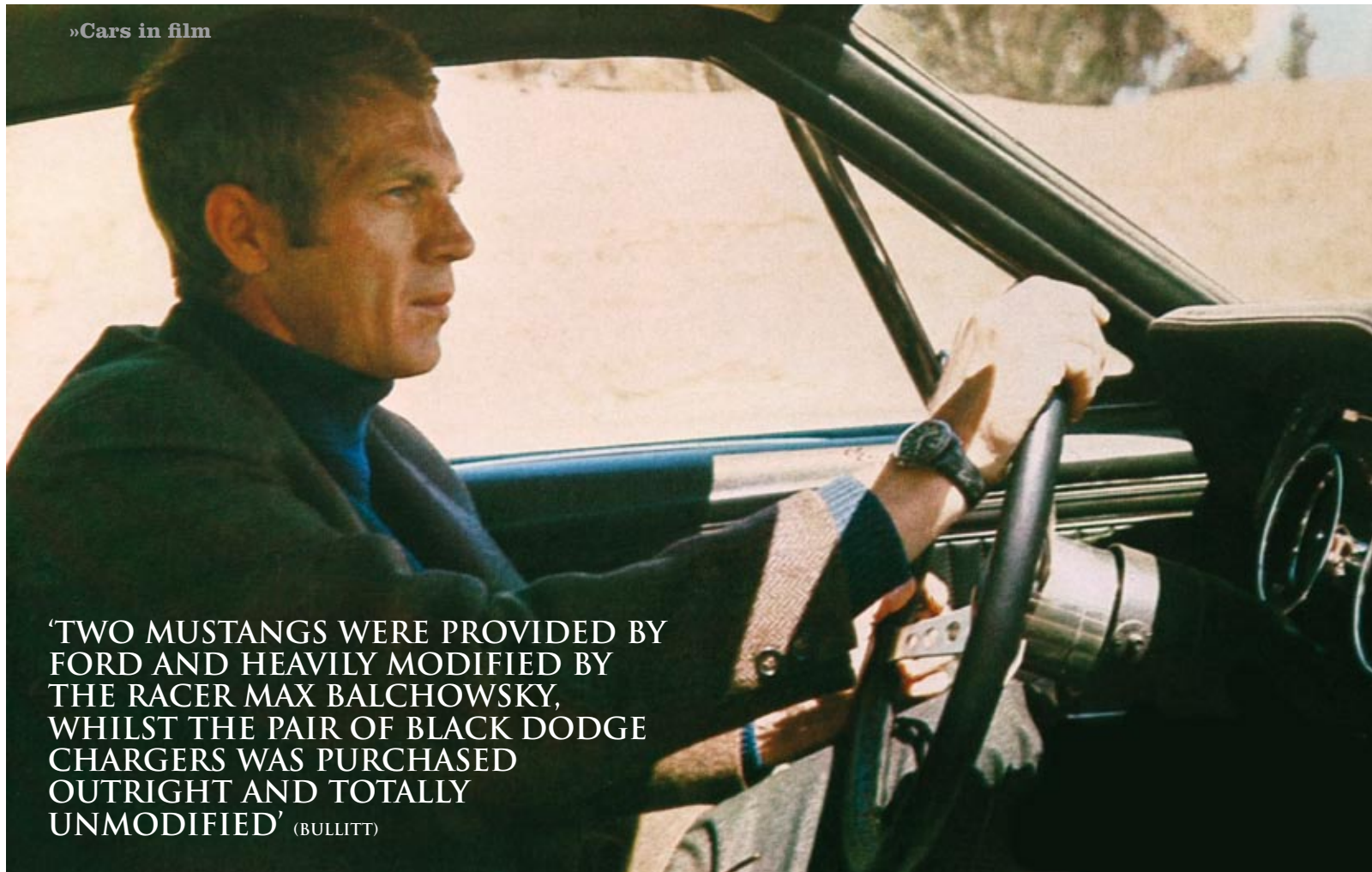


HEROES OF THE SILVER SCREEN

An interesting car or two can make a good film fantastic and a bad one watchable. *Octane* presents its totally biased and subjective guide to the best car movies ever

Words: Andrew Roberts Images: www.drivepast.com





'TWO MUSTANGS WERE PROVIDED BY FORD AND HEAVILY MODIFIED BY THE RACER MAX BALCHOWSKY, WHILST THE PAIR OF BLACK DODGE CHARGERS WAS PURCHASED OUTRIGHT AND TOTALLY UNMODIFIED' (BULLITT)

Bullitt (1968)

A taciturn but honest Det-Lt of the SFPD investigates the assassination of a key 'mob' witness and finds himself involved in a high-level cover-up.

Without Steve McQueen, Peter Yates and the Ford Mustang 350GT Fastback, *Bullitt* might have been a decent low-key *police* starring Frank Sinatra but, as history relates, it altered motoring cinema. Sad pedants may like to observe that the black Charger visibly misses the line of petrol pumps it was supposed to have hit prior to exploding in a fireball, that it also appears to have six hub-cabs and that the Mustang is fitted with a 16-speed gearbox and wing mirrors that vanish from shot to shot, but the chase in *Bullitt* is about pure fantasy covered by a veneer of realism.

Ford's 427 Fairlane may have been a faster car (Ford wished to promote a sportier on-screen image – hence the Mustang), McQueen may not have done as much driving as the PR would have us believe (much was done by Bud Ekins and Carey Loftin), but the combination of Yates' innovative wide-angle cinematography, a three-week shooting schedule for the nine-minute sequence, Bill Hickman's stuntwork and the soundtrack of engine noises at full spate makes the film one to remember.

Two Mustangs were provided by Ford and heavily modified by the racer Max Balchowsky, whilst the pair of black Dodge Chargers was purchased outright and totally unmodified, all four cars regularly travelling at over 110mph through San Francisco. Yes, we did notice that ubiquitous green VW Beetle, and no, we don't care.

Checkpoint (1956)

An honest and upright British racer (is there any other kind?) is forced by a parvenu cad to drive his Lagonda at breakneck speeds through Italy.

Checkpoint is quite possibly the only racing film to feature the Fairthorpe Atom, but despite its wooden acting and hysterically bad script – one that hinges on the villain's fiendish disguise of wearing goggles in the pits in order that no-one will recognise him – it does intercut authentic colour footage of Le Mans of 1956 with some of the most splendid cars of the decade.

Virtually every reel contains an automotive gem, from works Aston Martin DB3S and Maserati 1500 to MGAs, Mercedes-Benz 300SL Gullwings, Porsche 356 Speedsters and Lancia Aurelias – all driven to the manor born at a time when 160mph cars were raced on public roads lined with vast crowds. Meanwhile, Anthony Steel, the Brylcreemed and manly jawed leading man, drives a mysterious 'Warren-Ingrams', which was actually a heavily disguised Lagonda V12.

Aston Martin provided a great deal of assistance with the film and for all of *Checkpoint's* shortcomings as a drama, as a race film it is terrific, many of the shots being accomplished by a cameraman precariously mounted on the running board of a pre-war Rolls Royce. The Italian scenery is a treat, too.

The 'Warren-Ingrams' headed towards the drink in the final scene was a glassfibre mock-up and both Lagondas survive to this day. As for the Fairthorpe Atoms, they are the supposedly top-secret Italian racing prototypes that arch-fiend Stanley Baker is attempting to steal.



Left and below Christine, the '58 Plymouth Fury, meets her match; a tense moment in *Checkpoint*, 1956.



Christine (1983)

High school geek Arnie Cunningham buys a restoration project that, helpfully, rebuilds itself before bumping off anyone it happens to dislike.

An all-American high school student discovers that his 1958 Plymouth Fury is possessed by evil – an experience usually felt by Austin Allegro owners on the other side of the Atlantic.

Despite the fact that Stephen King's witty original story was originally (and inaccurately) about a four-door model, some 23 examples of the Plymouth Fury two-door were bought for the filming, together with some Savoy and Belvedere doppelgangers. It is believed that about 15 were destroyed during filming but at least three standard 'Christines', plus a fourth stunt car fitted with a rubber front end in order to run over a stuntman, survive in private hands.

The story itself should stand as a dire warning to the more fanatical members of the classic car movement, as our young hero devotes yet more and more time to his evil automotive mistress, losing his friends and his sanity in the process. Just visit any classic car show and you will see the same awful process taking place on certain club stands...



Left Arnie's girlfriend Leigh Cabot (Alexandra Paul) gets all choked up in *Christine*.

ALSO STARRING...

American Graffiti (1973)

Ignore those who carp at the appearance of a Jaguar S-type in '1962' – this is one of the finest evocations of a changing era, as the tail-end of the 1950s slowly fades away. Note for trivia junkies: Harrison Ford wears a hat because he refused to have a 1962 vintage haircut and this was his compromise.

The Car (1978)

'The Car is in the garage!' Sheriff James Brolin has to deal with the new arrival in town of a converted Lincoln Continental, apparently driven by Satan, that has the anti-social habit of ploughing into unsuspecting townsfolk – the sort who like to stand still in the middle of the road. Glorious rubbish.

Danger Diabolik (1968)

High-camp Italian adventure featuring a dubbed American leading man who favours an all-in-one black rubber stocking plus white and black E-type coupés for day and night use respectively. We're rather keen on the latter two items but might just give the first one a miss. The Morricone soundtrack is almost as stylish as the cars.

Duel (1971)

The young Steven Spielberg selected the 1950 Peterbilt (several were used but only one survives) for its crude and menacing appearance. Incidentally, Dennis Weaver's 1970 Plymouth Valiant was supposed to show his character's low corporate status but British viewers were still impressed by its radio and automatic gears.

Echappement Libre [Backfire] (1964)

A Triumph TR4 constructed of solid gold – surely unlikely to improve its handling. In this swinging French comedy, Jean-Paul Belmondo is an enterprising smuggler who transports his latest haul from France to Beirut in Canley-shaped form. Any connection between this picture and a certain 007 outing is purely coincidental...

Faster Pussycat! Kill! Kill! (1965)

An everyday story of three lesbian go-go dancers cruising the Mojave (in a Porsche 356, MGA and Triumph TR3 respectively), whose hobbies include challenging MGB Roadster drivers to a duel prior to murdering them. Happily, although Mr MGB did not survive – possibly as a consequence of his horrendous dress sense – the 356 did.

Ferris Bueller's Day Off (1986)

If you've ever wondered why the 'Ferrari 250GT California' appeared to sound like a Ford Mustang, there is a very good reason – it was indeed a glassfibre replica with a 5-litre V8 engine. The car is written off by being driven out of a first-floor garage window, to nobody's great regret.

Genevieve (1953)

Genevieve is 1950s British comedy at its most sophisticated – so let us hope for no Hugh Grant remake. A film from the days when AA men still saluted, when motorcycle cops rode Triumphs and when newsreel companies used pre-war Ford V8 'Woodies'. Both the Darracq of the title and its rival Spyker are happily still with us.





Above
Bentley 3 Litre was the eponymous Fast Lady, piloted here by the irascible James Robertson Justice.

The Fast Lady (1962)

Young accountant learns to drive in a pre-war Bentley and eventually foils a bank raid, winning the girl in the process.

As a typical British comedy circa 1962, all elements are present and correct – Austin A40 L-Driver cars, Wolseley 6/99 police car with clanging bell, MkVII Jaguar getaway car and James Robertson Justice shouting a lot – but what elevates *The Fast Lady* is the car of the title, a 1927 Bentley 3 Litre, TU 5987.

Bought by our hero Stanley Baxter for £500 in order to impress Morris Cooper driver Julie Christie, such a magnificent car causes Baxter to dream that he is competing at Silverstone, overtaking Graham Hill and Jim Clark, and generally impressing Raymond Baxter. Most of the on-screen driving was accomplished by the British stunt ace Jack Silk – who also had to don a blonde wig to double for Christie – and the streets of Beaconsfield also contain such machinery as Daimler Darts, a tempting array of Austin-Healey 100s and MGAs sold by Leslie Phillips's car dealer, plus Dellows at the hillclimbing sequence.

After filming was completed, the Bentley was offered to Phillips for £900, which the actor was obliged to turn down. The same car recently changed hands for a modest six-figure sum.



Left
Smooth-talking Leslie Phillips uses MGA to impress Julie Christie in *The Fast Lady*.



Grand Prix (1966)

Four F1 drivers compete in the 1966 racing season – a stiff-upper-lip Englishman, a world-weary Frenchman, a fiery young Italian and a tall, dark and handsome American. Guess who the winner will be in this Hollywood-made film...

Grand Prix is a film that endures after 40 years and will continue to appeal so long as viewers appreciate the finest of cars shot with the best in cinematography. It not only boasts a cast of the world's greatest drivers – Jimmy Clark, Graham Hill, Phil Hill, Jackie Stewart and John Surtees to name but a few – but it also follows the 1966 race calendar as far as was practicable. Director John Frankenheimer initially shot racing footage of Monaco prior to Spa, Goodwood, a return to Spa, Monaco and, finally, Italy.

Most of the 'F1' machines were actually F3s of various backgrounds – the white 'Yamura' cars were a fleet of ex-Jim Clark Lotus 33s (one of them the Paul Hawkins car from the 1965 Monaco) or BRMs purchased by MGM for the film, with their engine cowlings heavily disguised to avoid any resemblance to genuine Lotuses. *Grand Prix* also includes a sublime sequence where Garner visits Maranello and walks past several 330 P3 Sports.

Certainly the plot is that of a soap opera, but any film that used a GT40 and a 7.0-litre Shelby Cobra as camera cars – with Phil Hill as one of the drivers – cannot be missed. The GT40 was fitted with remote-controlled camera mounts and in *Grand Prix* the spectator can be in no doubt that it really is James Garner at the wheel of his disguised F3 car, with a heavy 70mm Arriflex camera fixed to the right-hand side.

'BILL TRAVERS & CO HEAD FOR THE ROAD RACE IN SICILY THAT IN NO WAY RESEMBLES CARS BEING DRIVEN ON THE WRONG SIDE OF THE ROAD IN SNOWDONIA' (THE GREEN HELMET)



The Green Helmet (1961)

A square-jawed and totally manly British racing driver teams with an American tyre magnate in order to win races.

Any film that boasts Sid James as an Australian F1 mechanic and Wales doubling for Sicily has to be worth watching but the plot is even better. After flipping his D-type at Le Mans, square-jawed Bill Travers forms his own race team with what looks suspiciously like a converted Lister-Jaguar and teams up with Jack Brabham to drive a Maserati 'Birdcage' at the Sebring 12 Hours. After many thrills, spills and incidents of tweed-jacketed types saying 'gosh' at every conceivable opportunity, Bill & Co head for the road race in a Sicily that in no way resembles cars being driven on the wrong side of the road in Snowdonia.

However, the black-and-white footage of very early E-types competing at Le Mans makes *The Green Helmet* eminently watchable, together with Sid's Johannesburg/Aussie accent and some pleasant continuity errors in the Sebring race sequence, with Greg Rafferty's Birdcage battling with Carlo Zaraga's standard production Corvette. *The Green Helmet* is also the first-ever film to feature a Gordon-Keeble. As for the Lister-Jaguar, it survives in a rebodied form.



Left and top
The Green Helmet has Sid James, Bill (Born Free) Travers and a fake-bodied Lister-Jaguar.

ALSO STARRING...

Goldfinger (1964)

The key moment is not the ejector seat, the bullet screen or even Desmond Llewellyn instructing 007 to 'Pay attention, Bond' – it is when the DB5 attacks a Ford Mustang *à la* Boadicea. And to think that at one point 007 was to be issued with a Corvette...

Gone in 60 Seconds (1974)

HB Halicki believed that actors 'were no good at portraying ordinary people' and that stuntmen 'were too dumb'. So he cast himself in the lead of a film that really can be described as automotive pornography – there was virtually no script, barring the wrecking of any car that Mr Halicki got his hands on.

Goodbye Pork Pie (1980)

In the second greatest Mini film in cinema history, two drop-outs driving a 'borrowed' Mini 1000 across New Zealand pursued by various police Holdens. One Mini is in the NZ Film Archive as a tribute to one of the best comedy road films ever shot.

Le Mans (1971)

Yes, it has Ferraris a-plenty, a goodly array of Porsches and, for those who like them, quite a few Peugeot 204s, but what else can you say about a film in which Jackie Ickx gives the best performance? However, for those of you who like Steve McQueen's acting of the taciturn/stoned variety, this is the film for you.

The Lively Set (1964)

A picture to be viewed on two levels, *The Lively Set* is both a ghastly all-American comedy and a picture that stars the infamous Chrysler Gas Turbine Car. *The Lively Set* also contains a fair amount of singing, but DVD technology means this can easily be avoided.

The Love Bug (1968)

Disney near the peak of its game – not overlong, well photographed, great music, appealing lead performances and fantastic stuntwork. The main 'Herbie' was a 1963 Beetle, with a team of stunt doubles, at least one of which boasted a Porsche 356 engine. One stunt Herbie is owned by the film's leading man, Dean Jones.

The Thomas Crown Affair (1968)

Famed for McQueen's Ferrari 275 GTS/4 Nart Spider, *The Thomas Crown Affair* also features a coachbuilt two-door Silver Shadow, plenty of beach buggy action plus Steve himself looking undeniably suave. A film so smooth that the lack of plot is hardly noticeable.

The Yellow Rolls-Royce (1964)

A rather leaden drama featuring more than one 1930 Phantom II Sedan de Ville – watch the changing position of the spare wheel – *The Yellow Rolls-Royce* should best be remembered for its first third, which involves Rex Harrison, and as an object lesson in paint finish – the cars were painted 20 times.





The Italian Job (1969)

Cockney (and Mockney) criminals use a trio of Austin Cooper S's to steal bullion from Turin, as if you didn't know.

Above

No computer-generated imagery here: stunts in *The Italian Job* were done for real.

Yes, a bullion-laden Cooper 1275S would be highly unlikely to out-run a well-driven police Alfa Romeo Giulia, but strip away the baggage of the film's cult following and you are left with a fascinating period piece. And let's face it, any film that can boast both Noel Coward and Benny Hill has unusual curiosity value.

The background vehicles include a Daimler DR450 limousine and a heavily dented Lancia Flaminia Coupé, and the female lead is sensibly dispensed with halfway through the narrative to make way for the heist sequence and three moments involving some very fine Italian cars.

The first is the Lamborghini Miura – actually a shell, painted bright orange and mounted on an accident-damaged Miura chassis, the second is a 1963 Lancia Appia cabriolet cunningly disguised as an Aston Martin DB4 convertible prior to being thrown over a cliff, and the third is the Fiat-supplied fleet of 2400 Dinos.

As for the Coopers, they were comparatively unmodified by L'Equipe Remy Julienne, who fitted three-point rollcages and removed the rear seats. According to several BLMC employees of the late 1960s, the factory did indeed prepare one special Cooper for the production, fitted with the engine and gearbox from the 1800 'Landcrab' in order for the Cooper to climb a flight of stairs. Cooper fans will be relieved to know that the three cars thrown out of the coach were disguised standard models, blasted out by pressure cannon.

Around 16 Coopers were used in the movie, plus 25 standard Minis, and of this number approximately six survived filming.

The Last Run (1971)

An American hit-man, retired with his BMW 503 drophead to Portugal, is summonsed for the all-too-familiar 'one last job'.

The 503 cabriolet, based on the chassis of the 502 'Baroque Angel' saloons, powered by BMW's 3.2-litre V8 and styled by Count Albrecht von Goetz, is one of the most elegant cars to carry the BMW badge. Here, a supposedly 'supercharged' 503 is piloted by retired hitman Harry Grimes (George C Scott) through the Iberian peninsular, pursued by Spanish-built Dodge Dart GTs and a white Jaguar XJ6 2.8.

Cynical readers will argue that all Harry has to do is simply wait for the Jaguar's inevitable holed piston but this would have deprived the viewers of a magnificent chase around mountain roads, with the 503 ploughing through various SEAT 124s and Renault 8s. Meanwhile the impressively sideburned villains attempt to ram a SEAT 1500L and manage to drive their XJ6 over a cliff in the process – proof that only a 4.2 engine model should be used on such an assignment.

As for the BMW, two 503s were used in the filming and, although one was destroyed at the end of shooting, the second car was bought by a British member of the stunt team and returned to London, where it apparently resides to this day. Since a mere 129 examples of the cabriolet were ever constructed, this comes as somewhat of a relief.



Left

Sadly, neither car nor anti-hero survive the end of *The Last Run*, the BMW expiring and Scott getting shot.

Below

Ronin is cherished for its amazing car chases, which feature a Citroën XM, Peugeot 406 and lots of Merc S-classes.

'BY USING BRITISH-SPEC MERCS, A CONCEALED STUNT DRIVER WAS ABLE TO PILOT THE CAR AT INCREDIBLE SPEEDS AND DE NIRO COULD SPIN THE WHEEL AS IF TO THE MANOR BORN' (RONIN)



Ronin (1998)

An ad-hoc team of mercenary specialists is hired by the mysterious Irishwoman 'Deirdre' to retrieve an important suitcase from a man who is about to sell it to the Russians.

The act of genius behind the chase scene in John Frankenheimer's heist drama can be summarised very briefly – right-hand-drive cars. By using British-spec S-class Mercedes-Benzes, a concealed stunt driver was able to pilot the car at incredible speeds and Robert De Niro in the passenger seat could spin a dummy wheel as if to the manor born whilst grimacing as only he knew how. One support player, Skipp Sudduth, requested to perform his own stunt driving and the director agreed but on the proviso that 'I don't want to see any brake lights.'

Frankenheimer was also a great fan of the 450SEL 6.9 – which did not prevent no fewer than 80 cars being destroyed but at least elevated what threatened to be a B-film into great entertainment. In any case, there are comparatively few films that can make a Peugeot 406 appear to be remotely interesting and any picture that employs 200 stuntmen and shoots its chase in real time without the input of CGI has to have merit.

One central reason why the pursuit works so well is not so much the volume of cars but the intricate editing, which shows that Frankenheimer has lost little of his touch since the heyday of *Grand Prix*.

HONOURABLE MENTIONS

The Billion Dollar Brain

(1967)
Michael Caine in his MkII Cortina GT saving the world from a mad American.



The Blue Lamp

(1950)
One of the finest location-filmed British police pursuits, and one in which the hero – PC Dixon – actually dies.

The Blues Brothers

(1980)
'We've got a full tank of gas, half a pack of cigarettes, it's dark and we're wearing sunglasses. Hit it!'



Brannigan

(1975)
John Wayne in a toupée driving a MkII Capri over Tower Bridge – now that's entertainment!

Chase a Crooked Shadow

(1957)
Excellent thriller, with a 1938 Lagonda Tourer being hurtled across a Spanish cliff-top road (top right).

The Day of The Jackal

(1973)
Edward Fox is the assassin who is also pretty handy at alfresco resprays of Alfa Romeos.

'JOHN WAYNE IN A TOUPÉE DRIVING A MKII CAPRI OVER TOWER BRIDGE – NOW THAT'S ENTERTAINMENT!'

The Devil's Hairpin

(1957)
Splendid race sequences, plus parrots. Honest. And it's hairpin as in circuit, not coiffure (above right).

The French Connection

(1971)
Far too good to be subjected to a remake, with a classic car chase that was shot in real traffic.



Hell Drivers

(1957)
Who says a Kew-built Dodge tipper cannot travel at 150mph (right)?

Il Sorpasso [The Easy Life]

(1962)
Classic Italian road comedy with Vittorio Gassman in an Aurelia Spider.



Johnny Dark

(1954)
Tony Curtis sporting an immaculate quiff and an equally immaculate XK120 (right).

Life at the Top

(1965)
Gripping drama that also boasts a 1964 Maserati Quattroporte by the end credits.

Un Homme et Une Femme [A Man and a Woman]

(1966)
...and a Ford GT40, and a Monte Carlo Rally Mustang driven through the night by Jean-Louis Trintignant. Very cool (right).



‘THE FRENCH COUNTRYSIDE HAS NEVER LOOKED MORE BEAUTIFUL, THE BACKGROUND CARS ARE OFTEN AS INTERESTING AS THE PRINCIPAL VEHICLES AND HARDLY ANYONE WEARS A BASEBALL CAP’ (TWO FOR THE ROAD)




Two For The Road (1967)

A British married couple in their 30s takes a road trip through France, revealing different stages of their past relationship – as demonstrated by their choices of cars.

This film has Audrey Hepburn in an MG TD, a Triumph Herald 1200 Convertible and a Mercedes-Benz 230SL (actually Hepburn’s own off-screen transport, which still survives), so do you really need any other reason for watching? Well, it does boast a pioneering approach to actors directing themselves, for Albert Finney and Hepburn operated the camera’s buttons for the scenes in the Pagoda.

More significantly, the film has Audrey Hepburn in a fetching array of outfits, a cream 1957 Ford County Squire, several Citroën DS19s, an Alfa Romeo Giulietta Sprint, a Renault Floride Cabriolet, a 1955 VW Type Two Microbus and a very early Citroën 2CV. And Audrey Hepburn in a fetching array of outfits.

More than that, it is a brilliant example of an intelligent road movie, as each car owned by Finney and Hepburn represents a different stage in their marriage. The French countryside has never looked more beautiful, the background cars are often as fascinating as the principal vehicles and hardly anyone wears a baseball cap. And it features Audrey Hepburn in a fetching array of costumes. 

» All the publicity material used in this feature was supplied by Paul Veysey of www.drivepast.com, which specialises in supplying only original movie posters, showcards and stills.

A book based on Paul’s collection will be published by Veloce next summer; type ‘movie’ into the search facility at www.veloce.co.uk to register for advance info.

HONOURABLE MENTIONS

The Man Who Haunted Himself (1970)

A film that boasts two Roger Moores – good Roger in a Rover P5B Saloon and fiendish Roger in a Lamborghini Islero.

The Mechanic (1972)

Charles Bronson in his best wig blows up Alfa 2600 Sprints and kills people.

Psychomania (1971)

An everyday tale of zombie Norton riders who terrorised Walton-on-Thames.

Red Line 7000 (1965)

More AC Cobras and, erm, MG 1100s in a confused racing flick by Howard (*Dawn Patrol*, *Scarface*) Hawks.

Robbery (1967)

Great police S-type and getaway Mk2 chase that led director Peter Yates to helm *Bullitt*.

The Running Man (1963)

Insurance scam plot and the only film to have a Lincoln Continental drophead chased by an Austin A55 Farina.

The Seven-Ups (1973)

This thriller about a bunch of hardcore NYPD cops is built around its car chase, which some rate as the best ever.

A Shot in The Dark (1964)

The best Clouseau film deserves the best of cars, in the form of a Radford Mini Cooper S De Ville.

Topkapi (1964)

Peter Ustinov plus white Lincoln Continental equals a well-deserved Oscar in this Istanbul-set crime caper.

Vanishing Point (1971)

Barry Newman drives a 1970 Dodge Challenger into a bulldozer, after meeting a naked girl on a motorcycle (below).

Weekend (1967)

Virtually every French car of the 1950s and '60s is destroyed in Marxist drama that might turn you into a rabid capitalist.

