

Car crashes and dead end careers: Leisure pursuits of the Finnish subculture of the *kortteliralli* street racing

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Investigation into subcultures seems to be progressively vanishing from the landscape of cultural studies. Since the work of the Center of Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in Birmingham in the 1970s and 1980s, we have seen the dramatic rise of virtual communities as mediated through ever-expanding global lines of communication; in the field of social science, the practice of categorization has been increasingly criticized due to the influence of deconstructionism; and somewhere between history and social thought there has been the gradual disappearance of class as a social construct. For example, when considering the relationship between gender and age within the field of criminology, James Messerschmidt has replaced the notion of ‘class’ with ‘position in social structures’ in his 1993 analyses on masculinities and crime. And in 1996, authors Jan Pakulski and Malcolm Waters went so far as to proclaim *The Death of Class*. As a result, identity as a topic of study has been increasingly represented as fluid and contextual, unbound by geographical space, relation to production, or social standing.

This paper represents a revisit of the Birmingham approach to the study of subcultures in an investigation into the Finnish phenomenon of street racing; an underground practice of engineering, illegal racing of automobiles, and cruising on the streets of Helsinki. And true to the tradition of the CCCS, the subject is practiced as oppositional by young, working class males. To emphasize our revisit to the Birmingham approach, we use the notion of class, and define it by the criteria of education and occupational role. The Cruising Club boys spent 9 years in comprehensive school and 1 to 3 years

in vocational school, or, they joined the labor market directly after comprehensive school. They hold skilled and semi-skilled jobs in maintenance, industry, construction and transportation. This was generally the educational background of the street racing boys in Helsinki.

The analysis that follows grapples with similar epistemological questions as those explored by the CCCS. For example, influenced by the work of Raymond Williams, we explore the question of how culture serves as both a means of resistance and a tool of domination. Similarly, based on the investigations of E. P. Thompson, our analysis sheds light on the practice of *making* class. And in the end, we conclude that these subcultural members of street racing find themselves caught in the same struggles as the subcultural subjects of Birmingham research: their resistant practices are simultaneously resistant and subordinate.

Youth speeding in cars, cruising and driving motorbikes in groups can be found in most cities and towns of the Western world in different variations, fueled by the mass media that has brought together young people, cars and speed since the fifties. Owing to the work of the CCCS, the motor-oriented passions of youth became a subject of cultural studies in such research as Paul Willis' study of motorcycle boys in *Profane Culture* (1978). While the Finnish boys' street racing activities contain many of the universal elements noted in the works of Paul Willis (1977, 1978), Ikuya Sato (1991) and Simonetta Piccone Stella (1994), local cultural expressions and struggles persevere nevertheless.

Contemporary research on youth and identity tends to focus attention on the egalitarian effect of practices of consumption. For example, Thomas Ziehe noted in 1994 a shift towards the breaking of environmental barriers and subjective expectation in the lifestyles of the young. More specifically, it has been proposed that at the turn of the millennium, class would not determine the leisure practices of motor oriented youth in the Nordic countries. (see e.g., Lagergren 1998). And that today, freed from these barriers, any young man or woman could be making techno music, skateboarding, in-line skating, snow boarding or sky diving. It is our argument that for one Finnish, motor-oriented subculture – the Helsinki street racing boys – class still matters, and that the subjective horizon of expectation is determined by one's status in a particular social structure. (This was noted by Willis (1977) in his discussion of working class lads and their active recreation of the class condition of their parent culture.)

This paper begins with a brief discussion of the status of car cultures in Finland, which is followed by a description of street racing and its cultural expressions and the meanings associated with music, speed, and car

accidents. Our descriptive work is strongly influenced by Mitchell Duneier's 'diagnostic ethnography' (Duneier 1999, 340-343), used in his contemporary classic in urban anthropology, *Sidewalk*. Our article concludes by adopting a perspective similar to Willis (1977) with a discussion of how these practices serve to reproduce class distinctions, and what it means for today's youth.

Heli Vaaranen spent four to six hours every Friday and Saturday night on the streets of Helsinki, during the weekends of the fall, winter and spring of 1999-2000, with some or all of the eight Cruising Club boys, who were 20 to 24 years of age at the time. Each member was interviewed individually and in groups, with girlfriends and hangers-on present. Participant observation, however, was made the main research method after the rather unsuccessful interviews. A majority of the boys simply refused to talk to a recorder. They were uncomfortable talking, and were anxious to get on with their schedules, always on their way to 'help out' someone.

'Edgework,' i.e., field work that accentuates the sharing of the lived experience of the studied persons, is defined by several writers in Jeff Ferrell and Mark S. Hamm's collection of articles *Ethnography at the Edge* (1998). It describes field work that acknowledges personal risk but sees it as an opportunity to get inside the immediacy of crime or other studied experience through partial immersion in the situated logic and emotion. Inspired by 'edgework', the research was carried out both in the meeting places and inside the street racing cars, where Heli Vaaranen rode with the Cruising Club boys. During these nights the investigator came into contact with approximately fifty street racing youth as well as the eight Cruising Club boys.

Aside from high profile experiences within the immediacy of the street racing experience including crime and traffic misdemeanors, many nights were spent at gas stations, drinking bad coffee, wondering where the planned street races had been moved. The studied boys changed their plans frequently and often just drove from Helsinki to other cities and towns.

A field work diary was written about the experiences and discussions in cars, following the nights spent on the streets. The diary is based on notes written by hand during the participant observation, and on the observer's later recollections of events. Accordingly, the street racing boys' memories, told when drunk or sober, were collected in this diary. When examining the data the next day, many missing links and technical details were explained by exchanging cell phone calls and cell phone text messages with one of the Cruising Club boys, Nipe. The street where Heli Vaaranen lives, a nearby gas station and a parking lot in Helsinki were frequently used by street racers, which allowed the researcher an ongoing observation site. The above data

was then compared to Heli Vaaranen's earlier work on street racing in Southern Finland (1998), which consisted of hundreds of hours of urban field work and ethnographic data collected in 1996-1997.

The groupings of the *kortteliralli* street racing scene can be categorized based on the cultural expressions and the intensity of their involvement. For example, the 'Cruising Club boys' represent extremism, while car stealing 'joy-riders' express alienation and short term hedonism in their actions. The 'passers-by' drive about and drink to kill time, until they are of age to enter the desired restaurants. The street racing young women, often called 'Volvo girls', bring careful driving styles to the streets, and traditional home-values to the decoration of cars, as expressed by teddy bears, pillows and tidiness. Finally, there are the 'hangers-on,' young men who literally hang around the scene and may find other interests somewhere else at any time. Often these hangers-on direct their attention to the Amcar and Harley Davidson scenes, which are different from the street racing scene. While all these loose groupings have their specific cultural expressions, many common features can also be discerned in them.

Background to Finnish car enthusiasm

Finnish drivers have enjoyed success in motor sports since the fifties; successful drivers have since then become sources of pride in the small, motor sports-loving nation. Still today, Finnish sports stars and world rally champions, Ari Vatanen and Tommi Mäkinen, and in Formula 1 racing, Mika Häkkinen and Kimi Räikkönen, function as role models. The imitation of the legal rally has been the street racing scene, in which car-loving youths gather together on the street corner to compare their cars and driving skills. They circle the central areas of a town or a part of the city, and drive around. This social scene draws youth together from villages and towns as well as, in Helsinki, from different neighborhoods of the city. The street racing intensity, like any other leisure driving activity, is dependent on the price of gasoline and the state of the market economy. Yet the Cruising Club boys cut down their eating and ride in groups, sharing the costs of gasoline, rather than stay home. Street racing has kept its place as a popular activity despite the fact that other, more fashionable hobbies have come within the reach of technology-oriented youth. According to the street racers themselves, street racing is on the rise again in popularity at the turn of the millennium. It is even moving into the sophisticated center of the capital from smaller towns and from the less central parts of Helsinki. When we compared the street racing

experience of today's youth with the experiences of those who rode in the seventies, we noted a growing emphasis on speed and drinking in cars.¹

Many Finnish men transfer their affection for the car at an early phase to the next generation. Many street racing boys of the Cruising Club had childhood memories of spending Sundays in the garage with their fathers, opening up and fixing the engines of different machines. It is characteristic of the Finnish working class tradition that boys learn to drive at an early age. The Cruising Club boys' background revealed that their car-oriented fathers, often cab drivers and truck drivers, taught the boys to drive by the age of 6–8.

A cultural dream of mastering a machine can be recognized even in the ancient Carelian myths of Kalevala, in which it was a great machine, the 'Sampo,' that brought wealth and prosperity to the people. In Finland a father marks his fidelity to this cultural value when he teaches his boy to drive. For the child, learning to drive represents access to a material belonging that earlier was forbidden. At the same time, being able to drive represents status. Freedom is gained psychologically, symbolically and on a concrete level. These findings still stand from the days of Bloch and Niederhoffer (1958), although the theory was perhaps thought to be applied to youth at legal driving age. Still, a similar sense of privilege was expressed by 22 year old Miro, as he proudly memorized how he was permitted to regularly drive the family's car to the garage since he was five years old.

Besides the opportunity for early driving instruction, many urban Finnish boys have access to the countryside and its winding dirt roads. Due to the country's late industrialization and urbanization, today's Finns have ties to the countryside through summer cabins by lakesides, relatives' farms and friends' country houses. According to the street racing boys, most of them have spent their vacations in the countryside, practicing driving from these early years onwards.

At the legal age of 18, acquiring a drivers' license signifies the legal right to drive and to practice driving skills, even on city streets. The majority of Finnish boys who engage in street racing are eighteen years of age when they start. As a social event, every weekend and some nights during the week, these boys gather together on the street corner. After reaching the legal age to drive, Bloch and Niederhoffer's findings are applied in practice. Suddenly the boys can walk to a car sales lot and be taken seriously as customers. They can show off a pre-owned car, choose the route of the ride and the company they ride with. And they can take a girl for a date and drive some place to watch the city lights. The affection felt for cars unites these boys. Still, even stronger bonds are based on mutual history, due to the bitterly remembered

school years, and shared living conditions in the housing projects surrounding Helsinki.

Year after year a new generation of drivers' license holders enters the street racing scene to integrate into the symbolic language of this subculture. Young men want to find their social position among other young men, and they want to learn to act accordingly in male groups, as Lionel Tiger and Robin Fox suggested in 1972. The street race stands the test of time since the male-dominated environment offers a ready-made identity and a traditional, attractive lifestyle. Thomas Ziehe (1994) describes such a pursuit of a traditional lifestyle as 'identity conservatism,' limited in reflexivity.

Street racing – the underclass of the Finnish car culture

The car serves as the center for many boys' social activities. Within this scene, the car-loving youths hang about in cars, drinking beer most Friday and Saturday nights. Street racing means movement; the boys go for rides-around-the-block and rides-around-Southern-Finland, from town to town, looking for something exciting to occur. Needing this excitement, some of the boys arrange illegal races for larger groups of participants. For example, there is the 600 km Midnight Race from Helsinki to Oulu, where the record stands at 3 hours, 54 minutes, and the Cannonball Run from Helsinki to Jyväskylä and back, where the time elapsed does not count, but only who gets back to Helsinki first. Needless to say, the names of these races are acquired from the magic of Americana. Borrowing from Gunnar Lamvik (1996), even Nordic youths' relation to American mass culture represents a steady and unchanging, though one-sided, love affair.

Through its masculine practices that directly and openly squelch any homophobic fears, the Cruising Club garage provides a place to be together with other young men. Accordingly, the Cruising Club unite their collective capacities for the purpose of common interest: the cars and the reputation of the club. The boys exchange free, reciprocal services with one another, which results in almost professionally finished street racing cars, or teenage toys, as the boys call them. In these teenage toys, symbols of American sports cars mix with contemporary fashions, local curiosities and the universal paintings of jaguars and flames. The vehicles may be matte painted with black spray paint and have an intentionally made hole in the muffler to make more noise. Young car owners do not mind details like a loose bumper that attract the attention of the crowds in the streets. Fuzzy dice hanging from

the rear view mirror and tiger skin seat covers complete the interior of the street racing car. Through its crudeness, vulgarity and a signal of danger (not necessarily a danger caused by driving, but by the car falling apart) the street racing tradition resists other car cultures, and at the same time, other social strata within the weekend traffic scene in Finland.

Besides the resistant practices, there is a conformist one: the cultural expression of heavy drinking that unites all the car-loving youth. The Cruising Club boys spend their first one or two street racing years drinking frequently, as they want to manifest their identification with tough male groups and their traditions, on their way to adulthood. Accordingly, the drinking helps these young men to make acquaintances among strangers and young women, since many of them who suffer from suppressed emotions and unlearned social skills will not even try to talk with a girl when sober. Even the films of a Finnish film director Aki Kaurismäki (e.g., *Shadows in Paradise* 1986, *The Match Factory Girl* 1990, *Drifting Clouds* 1996) describe a Finnish wage worker as a victim of his difficulties in communication and his destructive drinking habits, love being his only savior.

When a street racing boy reaches his twenties, he limits his drinking to the pay day bottle once a month. By then, generally, he has goofed around enough, found a steady girlfriend and established his group of supporters within the male group. At this phase, his driving skills became a more important signifier of his identity.

Yet the street racing boy who is aware of his appeal to young women, confident in his driver's masculinity, and rich in social network as well as practical knowledge, feels that the future holds no specific interest for him. Poorly managed economy, lack of social skills outside one's own group, and often a misused youth make it even difficult to enter the desired legal racing scene. It is at this phase of street racing life that the boys realize their stagnant class position. The boys who earlier were pleased to have skipped school and have found well-paying jobs, now see others driving their fathers' cars and pursuing careers above their reach. As the street racing boys' occupational roles and wages are established on a level where their income never is enough to cover the costs of the cars, insurance and living, the psychological outcome is resistance, and awareness of differentiation. In this resistant relation to the 'other,' skillful driving serves to distinguish the working boys from middle class students, 'white caps'², and even 'sissies,' a term reserved for homosexuals and an identity category these boys desperately want to distance themselves from. Driving, as explained by 23 year old Lare, 'either makes you a man or a fag with a skirt on.'

Within the driving scene, a boy can achieve the recognition that elsewhere in society is denied him. Good driving, salesmanship, bargaining skills and technical abilities are appreciated. The knowledge of how to fine-tune the engine, and of, for example, how to acquire tires of high quality without paying the full price for them, function as socially desirable skills. Still, the skills of a young car enthusiast become truly appreciated not on the job, where he is bossed around, but during the hours after his work, when he exhibits his fast car, the decorated interiors and the music equipment. The lived experience of this inequality only stirs the conflict in between the boys' working hours' and after hours' identity.

Some central domains of meaning within the street racing culture

As a part of this project, the Cruising Club boys were given a camera to use with the instruction that they take pictures of whatever they want.³ As a result, the majority of the pictures are snapshots of car engines, of music equipment in their cars, of their male friends and of car accident sites, which we interpret as the central domains of meaning within the culture. These domains of meaning were also accentuated in the numerous conversations with the boys. The sections that follow describe these boys fascination with music, speed, and auto accidents.

Music

With loud talk and loud driving, aggressive body gestures and occasional loud singing of drinking songs, the young manifest their existence. Yet it is the technological devices that amplify this exhibitionism much like the noise discussed by Stella in 1994. For example, according to the Cruising Club boys, the engine should be as noisy as possible, and so should the loudspeakers. The boys play and collect records that maximize bass sounds and a dark, sensual rhythm. Through the music equipment that fills the trunk of the vehicle, the boys exhibit openly their private finances – the wages they earn, and the fines they pay for their actions in traffic. The fact that someone is saving up for a new car shows in his commercial activity: he sells his music equipment. The boys who can afford it will normally invest in maximal music equipment for their cars. They intentionally make their cars look modest on the outside, so that car thieves will not suspect the valuable equipment available in the vehicles.

Through maximum input in the music equipment, a young man can extend his performance in traffic, which can be seen, felt and heard many blocks away. Sub woofers multiply the bass sounds of the techno and Euro pop music that the boys listen to. The bass sounds are tuned to the highest level, and can be seen as a symbol of the tireless and everlasting sexual energy of the boys. As regards music equipment, it is not possible to overdo it: one boy had nine large loudspeakers and two sub woofers in his car, so large and space consuming that even the cartons of beer that did not fit in the trunk had to be placed on somebody's lap on the back seat. The boys tune the volume of the music so high that sometimes you can see the trunk of the car tremble. How much music equipment there is only depends on the imagination and finances of the young music-lover.

Within the street racing scene, there is a constant arms race-like competition around the music equipment, motivated through the boy's desire to out-do others, boys with less bass rhythm to offer. A boy can add to his appeal with material goods; both CDs and the means to play them loud. The value of the music equipment may well surpass the value of the car. Although one can add to his status in the street racing clubs through music equipment, it still is a status bought with money, and therefore easy to lose. It is not a lasting position that one can gain with driving skills or the ability to modify a car well with one's own hands.

Through noise, the boys draw all potential attention to themselves at night, since during the day, they are left unnoticed by the more privileged. Within the infrastructure of the city's daily routine, the boys are treated like air in office corridors, delivering packages, and in the streets, driving supplies to food stores. When Friday night comes, all the familiar faces at the workplace and others like them, who did not bother with the boys, can 'get' it in terms of a poorly slept night and an 'accidentally' vandalized car to go with it. This payback mentality can be sensed in the weekend traffic scenes of joy riding in the mother culture of America, as well as other resistant youth scenes of Europe, where subordinate youth grab their share of public attention.

Similarly in Finland, the street racing boys want their piece of the 'glory'. Flashy cars stir attention well, but given the circumstances, a hole in the muffler and loud music do it as well. At first it seems that powerful music excludes psychologically and socially anything but the present moment from thought or conversation inside the street racing cars. But on a closer look, the loudness of the music becomes meaningful as a tool of communication between the street and the sidewalk. Aside from waking up the neighborhood, there is a hidden sexual invitation to the young women. Timid young women do not look at passing cars, unless they automatically turn to look when the

music is unusually loud; in principle, they want to appear uninterested. Young women who want to go for rides look openly into the cars and at the drivers. They signal with their giggles and a sensual, aimless walk on the sidewalk and even on the street their willingness to make acquaintance. These active young women get the rides, but the timid ones interest the boys just the same. Just a glimpse of the face is enough for a boy to know whether to approach her, or at least to make a comment to the other fellows in the car, when 'checking out the chicks.' How pretty is the girl, how slim; is she new in town and is she going with anyone, are the questions that even the loudest music can not suppress in the minds of the boys, regardless of whether they have steady girlfriends at home.

Speed

A late night in September, 1999. Nipe, without asking me, decided to drive me through a special 'stage race' the Cruising Club boys name for the 'tunnel test' in downtown Helsinki. I was wondering what Nipe was doing when he stopped in the middle of a straight street in a deserted harbor area, and glanced sideways at me with a look that could be described as 'crazy'. He hit the gas pedal. The wheels ground and the car flew forward. My neck pulled backwards and I was glued to my seat. Nipe's Opel Ascona, an early 1980's model, is engineered to accelerate from 0 to 100 kilometers per hour in 6.9-7.2 seconds. Feeling the speed, I was first thrilled and then scared. I screamed, but it was not a scream I expected: it was an ugly howl of fear. The race proceeded from Hernesaari towards the center of Helsinki through the 200 meter long Uudenmaankatu tunnel. As the lights of the tunnel darted past me, pictures of princess Diana's death raced through my mind, and thoughts of injury in an accident, with images of those who would miss me in case of death. I tried to hold on to the seat and cried out a weak 'help!'. The tunnel curved slightly to the left, and then rose to the street level. Suddenly we were out in the open; I saw buildings and a dark blue starry sky. Nipe braked at the red light and turned to me with a triumphant smile: 'Did you pee in your pants?' I knew that many young women with street racing experience claimed that they felt an urge to go to the bathroom after the wildest speeding. I did not have this need, but I was out of breath and tried to collect myself. 'I'm O.K.,' I answered. 'I made 137 kilometers per hour there,' he added. 'The record is 140 kilometers.'

(Heli Vaaranen's field notes, September 1999)

Along with attracting the attention of outsiders and the opposite sex, street racing forms an arena in which to test one's driving skills with numerous spectators. The scene includes illegal stage races inside the city, like the experience described above, and impulsive car chases among the street

racing boys themselves from a gas station or one part of town to another. Most of the Cruising Club boys have been involved in six or seven accidents; most of them minor ones, but also accidents in which someone close to them has died. When asked about accidents, some of the boys mumbled, 'I would kill myself if I ended up in a wheelchair', others asked us not to talk about it since they would only feel bad talking about the actual outcome of accidents.

The engines in the boys' cars are not meant to be driven at high speeds for a long time, but are engineered primarily to accelerate quickly. Through having a fast engine the young driver is ready to take on a challenge from a stranger at a red light, and, for example, he is ready to escape a sudden conflict in traffic, to a nearby gas station. Successful speeding from a traffic light draws attention to the winner's tires, whether stolen or purchased, which most often are attached to the finest rims the young car owner can afford.

Among the different ways of speeding examined are racing from one traffic light to the next, and racing impulsively from the home garage to the gas station the Cruising Club boys frequent. There is racing against unknown competitors, which means testing one's driving skills against those of other speeders, spotted in traffic on highways or in the city. One signals willingness to race through starting to follow a speeding car, and through overtaking a vehicle and showing with hand gestures: Go on, let's go! Often the boys report of old guys – men over 35 – wanting to race them.

The boys speed alone when they practice driving skills on deserted country roads for hours on end. They speed in groups when they want to see who gets to the nearest town the fastest. Further, the boys speed to try to beat a record on a given distance, as for example, the distance from the rural town of Leppävirta to the town of Varkaus in Finland, the record being six minutes over a distance of 21 kilometers. According to the Cruising Club boys, the record has been made with a motorcycle. Still, the boys have tried to break it with a car. The last known, failed attempt was in 1996. Two died, a 21 year old boy and a 17 year old girl. Three other youth were injured in this accident. One of the passengers, a 20 year old girl, was not hurt. (Tuulilasi 9/96, 50-57).

Finally, there is fleeing from the police. According to the Helsinki police department (interview 11/2000), the most common causes for fleeing the police are possession of a stolen vehicle, possession of stolen goods, transport of groups for criminal activity and driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Car thieves themselves report similar motivations in a study made with prison inmates in Turku (Laitinen et. al., 1998). However, the Cruising Club boys flee the police to avoid being caught for speeding.

Speeding away from the police while driving without a license gives one a natural high:

It feels just great. Your heart bounces like hell. Then, when you get away from the cops to a hiding place where you know they can't find you...it is like a...like a woman giving birth. You just can't stop shaking (Heli Vaaranen's field notes. 18 year old Kale's description).

The young men aspire to creating a reputation that stimulates sexual relations with women, and respect-based bonding with men. Through success in illegal racing or through having been a brave and entertaining designated driver for the boys, a reputation can be gained. Young women are attracted to young men with a reputation, regardless if it is bad or good, and the boys spend time telling stories and repeating the legends of wild rides, thus supporting one another while the young women listen. In the Cruising Club, homosocial closeness finds its peak, as the boys share the stories of their fear and excitement.

Accidents

In the nineties, 13.7 Finnish young men and women per 100 000 inhabitants in the age group of 18–24 died in motor car accidents (Statistics Finland 1991–2000). A typical news item in a Monday morning paper reads: 'Four young men in a fatal crash; two died, two seriously injured'. When asked, the boys will comment on the accident: the fool did not know how to drive. The majority of car accidents involving young people follow the driver's loss of control at high speeds, as the car runs off the road on a straight or a slightly curving road. 'I lost control', is a common line the boys tell each other when talking about their numerous accidents.

With great interest, the boys photographed dead engines, broken-down cars, cars that had been subject to theft or vandalism, and cars that had been destroyed in accidents. Destruction fascinates the boys, since it is the result of a passionate driving force. On the other hand, 21 year old Kaide explained a series of pictures of a faultless 1970's Toyota by stating that you better take the pictures now, since you never know how long the car is going to look this neat. Within the street racing culture, an accident can be caused by a split second's mistake or rage. But, what has broken down can also be repaired, or at least some car parts can be used again. The boys find the combination of imagination, know-how, manual skills and the limits set only by technology and the inspection rules, most intriguing.

Accordingly, the Cruising Club boys invest practically all their spare time and money in the cars that make them proud and happy – until they get tired of the car, smash it accidentally or deliberately, collect the insurance and buy a new one to fix. The fonder the boys are of their cars, the more accidents they have. They run into trees and lampposts. Their cars collide with others in reverse, and they speed into ditches and rivers. Their modified cars take even slight accidents poorly, but many of the boys have come out of numerous accidents with only minor injuries. Many boys continue speeding even with a cast or a neck support after an accident: they can not resist the streets. Often, a driver's license is suspended by the police for a fortnight or a month for speeding, but it does not stop the driver from doing the same thing again.

The car enthusiasts witness numerous traffic accidents since they spend six to eight hours a weekend night in traffic. When arriving at the scene of an accident, they first call an ambulance and then some male friends to come and see. After the ambulance is gone, the group evaluates the brake marks on the asphalt (or note that there are none). They wonder what the driver did wrong. Was there a mistake, a race with another car, or was the driver just harassed by the intoxicated crowd in the car?

On a Friday night in November 1999, doing participant observation and riding around Helsinki with Nipe, I counted over ten cell phone calls he made or received during an hour. The calls concerned the traffic, the icy roads and the whereabouts of friends. The calls could be warnings about the police in unmarked cars, or an angry friend shouting: where are you? I lost you! During the calls Nipe drove slower. Normally he drove 20 to 30 km over the city speed limits. Later we met the other Cruising Club boys at McDonalds. They discussed an accident site, chewing their hamburgers and french fries laced with ketchup. 'Yeah, I saw some feet hanging there although the ambulance had already left,' Nipe said.

(Heli Vaaranen's field notes, November 1999).

Despite the long and icy winter in Finland, the summer months are statistically the more dangerous in terms of accidents. (Road Traffic Accidents 1999). Nipe explained this by describing how, during the winter, a car warns you that you are about to lose control. In the summertime there is no warning, but the car just flies off the road. And the sociability of the street racing culture; the alcohol, the cell phone use when driving, and even the loudness of music can be seen as security hazards.

Yet the sensuality and challenge of again acquiring a used car mesmerizes the boy, and overcomes the fright, sadness and financial loss caused by the accident. Very little remorse or reflection on accidents can be read in the boys talk. For example, in conversation Nipe brought up a street racing night that ended in Miro's favorite car being crashed. The boys were drinking in a restaurant outside of the city in the winter. The boys' designated driver let them down and started to drink too, and it was too cold to walk home.

When we crashed the Ascona we were five in the car, all drunk. I said I can drive, I can sober up better than you. But Miro said: No, it's my car, I drive. We just hit a parked car then. We covered the car up pretty good, cause he did not have a license.

(Heli Vaaranen's field notes. Nipe's story February 2000).

This was a casual incident for Nipe, but an emotional burden for Miro for a long time to come. He had developed a liking for the old car and had numerous plans as how to re-engineer it. The fact that the crashing of a valued car does not generally seem to distract the Cruising Club boys seems to be connected with the extended cultural appreciation of driving skills. Each crash teaches a lesson; driving experience and knowledge increase. An experienced driver has stories to tell and his word weighs heavily. Through minor car crashes and numerous car purchases, the young driver moves on to better and faster cars from their former, well insured vehicles. Still, as in Miro's case, the emotional burden of a young car owner grows, when, for example, a favorite car ends up damaged, but there is not enough motivation to start fixing it up all over again.

The boys who have had numerous accidents are legendary drivers, and the young women in the weekend gatherings go along and ride with them repeatedly. It does not seem to affect the boys' popularity whether their performance in traffic, like driving along the wrong lane when trying to get away from the police, has failed, or if the boys' actions have resulted in accidents and large scale rescue operations. Nevertheless, within the street racing culture, the experience and the bravery exhibited gain respect and recognition. In general, the Cruising Club boys have faith in themselves, believing that their driving skills will protect them. Still, they do think of losing control of their cars and getting hurt, of being in a car crash potentially caused by others. Almost all of the boys in the Cruising Club know someone who has had an accident causing them to no longer be among the living. The awareness of this slows down the boys' driving right after such an accident, but after a month they will, like Pade, be back to speeding again.

Out of my friends, at least nine have died in cars. The last one of them tried to flee from the police driving a stolen car. He drove and tried to hide from them. He drove a couple of hundred meters in a field. But then the car got stuck and he left the car and ran. They found him a couple of weeks later in a ditch. He had died in there. (Heli Vaaranen's field notes. Pade, 24 years).

A micro level class conflict within the subculture of weekend traffic

Due to their limited social capital and resistant practices many car-oriented positions as well as social positions of higher ranking are unobtainable for the street racing youth. These boys do not have the means to pursue membership in official racing clubs. The money or support needed for such a costly and time-consuming hobby has not been provided by the parents. This disadvantage is only reinforced later on in life as the boys still seem to lack the discipline and the money to join official racing clubs, when they could, in principle, afford their dream. Therefore racing takes place in public traffic, sometimes using pilfered gasoline, with cars that the young males own and cherish, but that they never will race legally.

The same disadvantage is reflected through differences between street racing boys and the main stream, i.e., middle class car enthusiasts, as well as the better off Drag Racers and Amcar devotees of the Helsinki street culture. For example, within the Amcar culture in Finland there is a specific style associated with 1950s music, oily jeans and leather jackets, often inherited from friends and male relatives. Other symbols include metal key chains and the style of letting both the hair and the beard grow. Finally, there is the romantic image of cruising (e.g., Lamvik 1994, 1996, O' Dell 1997), which does not require high speeds. But the boys of the Cruising Club do not even have the means to access this style. The effort and time spent on one single car, required by an Amcar devotee, are out of the question for a jolly street racing fellow, who may own and sell four to five cars a year. In contrast, in the street racing scene, no collective style in clothing, hairdo or the colors the young men wear can be observed. Sweat pants, white sports socks and modest leather shoes, accompanied by a light cotton jacket and a baseball cap, appear as a statement in favor of the car, not the driver. This practice of refusal (see Hebdige, 1979) by the street racing boys, as expressed through the presentation of their selves through attire, serves to further distance the boys from mainstream society.

Dictated by their limited financial resources and motivated by their love of speed, the Cruising Club boys and other street racing boys favor 1970's and early 1980's model cars, with a rear wheel drive. The most typical street racing car makes are Toyota Corolla, Opel Ascona, Opel Kadett and Ford Escort. Even aged BMWs are popular. Used car parts for these vehicles are easily accessible. These cars with a rear wheel drive skid powerfully both on a dirt road and on icy or snowy asphalt, which the boys enjoy and practice mastering. Cars from early periods are easy and relatively inexpensive to modify, repair and fine-tune with affordable tools, even in modest circumstances. The general attitude between this car culture and that of drag racing is, from the street racing boys' side, admiration, and from the drag racers', belittlement. Unlike the mostly unorganized races of the Cruising Club, the drag racers tend to arrange illegal drag-racing competitions in the middle of a highway. These young men are well organized with walkie-talkies and clocks, even police tape and false signs to block the traffic for a few minutes, as the drag race proceeds in short intervals in different sections of the city's highways. The street racing boys can only dream of this kind of organization, and excitement.

A Cruising Night, an event for American cars, takes place in Helsinki every first Friday of the month during the summer. The Cruising Club joins the American car cruising event in Helsinki on foot. The boys once tried to join the parade of neatly finished American cars with worn out looking Japanese cars, but the public shouted 'Japs, Japs' and threw stones at the cars. The Cruising Club boys do not represent any ideal image that could be expressed as success in Rally Racing for example, a clear definition of a higher ranking style, in a finely finished and well modified car. Instead, the street racing boys choose to vulgarize and to manifest a humorous mockery of what they do not have. For example, in Kallu's car the chrome letters of TAUNUS, in the back of the trunk, are reset as ANUS, and followed by the chromed symbols of 6 L (needless to say, the motor is not a six liter motor). Adding to this cosmetic engineering, Kallu has covered over the Ford sticker with a Ferrari sticker.

Discussion: Class still matters

While the subculture of street racing provides excitement for young men looking for companionship and outlets for their energies, what cannot be ignored is how it functions to reproduce the inequality based on relations to production. Most of the boys studied have a working class background, their parents holding jobs in maintenance, construction or transport. From early

school years on, a counter school culture has directed the boys towards a blue collar way of life. As Paul Willis (1977: 178) points out, the counter school culture actually achieves for education one of its main, if unrecognized objectives – directing a proportion of working class kids towards skilled, semi skilled and unskilled manual work. According to the Cruising Club boys, studying is only for geniuses. This may be exemplified through their refusal to read the menu in English at restaurants (otherwise a rather normal procedure in Helsinki). Similarly, they often decline to make trips to foreign countries in order to purchase a desired car part. Their counter school culture, which in these examples manifests itself in strong nationalistic sentiments, seems to be an attitude reproduced and supported in everyday interactions by the boys themselves.

Further, their counter school culture is economically determining in a society that traditionally has favored waged labor over entrepreneurship. According to the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor 2000, Finnish initiative for establishing small businesses is among the lowest in the western world. There is no American dream of having your own car repair shop, and obtaining gradual prosperity through hard work. Some of the less educated may opt out of seeking financial success in professional careers and into delinquent practices (see e.g., Moffitt 1993). Such delinquent practices, like traffic violations, serve as indicators of status (based on reputation and toughness) among members of the street racing culture (see e.g., Emler & Reicher 1995, 104-105). These are practices that legitimate society does not acknowledge. Through purchasing a car, fixing and wrecking it and purchasing a new car again (you can actually buy a fixable car for a pack of cigarettes), the boys work their way up an imaginary career in imaginary motor sports, which only postpones their acknowledgement of not having other, more beneficial careers or goals to work for. In the end, many boys end up as professional drivers, their vehicles being trucks and delivery vans.

Within the boys' life world, efforts toward social mobility give way to symbolic practices that only reinforce their class positions. Even Albert Cohen (1955) noticed a similar characteristic in the gangs he studied. Outside of their garage, the Cruising Club boys read comic books and play video games and slot machines at gas stations. They drink coffee, smoke a pack of Marlboros a day and tell stories to each other when they are not driving or drinking beer somewhere.

Similar to the subcultural practices of Willis working class lads (1977), the leisure pursuits of the Cruising Club boys seem to recreate the class condition of the parent culture. This represents what Willis refers to as 'partial penetration' in the sense that while the pursuit of noise, speed and

driving temporarily liberates Finnish working class boys from conventional achievement, these practices do not serve to realize the possibility of real upward mobility.

For the youth of the street racing subculture, who are doubly disempowered in their positions as adolescents and working class, speed, noise and accidents are things that they feel they can control. Their cars and their friends represent a radical freedom. According to Ziehe (1994), once radicalism has been chosen as a lifestyle, it demands that people surpass themselves in an everyday test of courage. But, in the end, the fascination with this 'test' only leads the lives of these boys towards two possible outcomes: death by car accident or dead end jobs.

Thomas Ziehe (1994) notes further that recipients of the welfare state entitlements cannot escape questions of meaning and style in their own lives. He goes on to say that welfare state security has not been able to guarantee a 'good life' or a surplus of a 'world view' for its youth. Likewise, we suspect that the street-racing boys' tools of resistance were rendered impotent when placed against cultural and social uncertainties that expand far beyond definitions of style. But the street racing boys' car culture functions to create a social community and provide an avenue for learning skills. Through first exchanging free and reciprocal services in advanced car engineering, and then entering the cars into an underground market, the boys make up for what is missing in their living standards. This micro-level collective action becomes a significant product of labor that makes the representational elements of their symbolic practices meaningful. These life-lasting, combined forces for the common and individual good, available to every loyal member of the street racing scene, do suggest after all, a 'good life' with a sense of belonging and a social community.

Notes

¹ This observation comes from Heli Vaaranen's memory work that is based on personal experience of street racing in 1977-1978, and on interviews with adults with a car-oriented background.

² A white cap is a symbol of academia, and available to secondary school graduates. As a part of a tradition, Finnish graduates and university students wear these white caps in the yearly first of May festivities, when they take to the streets and parks to celebrate the springtime.

³ The boys were asked not to take any more snapshots of the speedometer as they drive, since I did not want them to have an accident while taking photos for this research. In one of the photographs the speedometer read 230 km per hour.

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