

The Emotional Experience of Class: Interpreting Working-Class Kids' Street Racing in Helsinki

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Background

The emotional experience of class builds on stunted ambition, stagnant class locations and feelings of injustice, lived through the Helsinki street racer's exclusion from access to competition in commercial culture.

- This exclusion of the working class is socially reproduced as an emotional experience even when official structures speak for the social equality of a Nordic, advanced welfare state.
- For young people, reproduction of the emotional experience of class takes place in the cultural performances such as in weekend excesses including street racing.
- In the street racing subculture, masculinity involves communication through manual skills and horsepower – the street racers build a social community with reciprocal relations and a sense of belonging.
- As the Helsinki street-racing boys feel incompetent to enter the challenges of the bigger world, they focus on their peers and their after-hours lives on the streets and at the car club.
- Street racers use their cultural performance to create a night-time counter-experience for their day-time experience of lost opportunities.
 1. This counter experience becomes a “room of his own,” defining one’s masculine identity. It functions as a coping strategy to fight exclusion.
 2. The “room of his own” owes to class solidarity.
 3. The street racers fight for respect but celebrate shared risk, craftsmanship, driving skill, and lack of interest toward education.
 4. In many of the cars, music functions as an erotic invitation to young women.
- With cars these youths can gather attention throughout the social spectrum of viewers of the scene and subculture members.
- Their style resists bourgeois ways of consumption.
 1. Their rough style is used to impress and to scare nerds and old people (men over 35).

Education vs. the Easy Life

The need for education is played down by the street racer's culture.

- The street racers work at low-skilled jobs – they say, “its only for the money.”

- They have no respect in their day-time lives, and so they count on each other and the racing scene to provide for their need of recognition.
 - These youths' battles for social recognition create a sense of failure, also in the eyes of their families.
 - This is not a failure from lack of intelligence.
 - These boys voluntarily go for the easy way.
 - They want a carefree youth with plenty of time for sex and lots of hanging around without worries of exams or parents' reactions.
 - Their relationship with their families involves trading some parental support in exchange for being available as drivers for drinking parents – it is often a loving relationship.
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Image

These boys strive for a reputation of rough bravado.

- This image clearly distinguishes them from other youths, such as the nerds.
- They take pride in a rough and beaten look that makes them look older, more mature and like “real men,” often disregarding state-subsidized dental and medical care to improve their battered look.
- They have a disregard for health, safety, and future aspirations.
 1. They literally live one day at a time, endlessly testing their courage and daring.
 2. They seem to speed their way to either dead-end jobs or death by car accident.
 3. They need money, and their fear of unemployment and loss of job benefits exceeds their fear of bodily harm.
- Ambition or wanting too much out of life seems to them to be an act of disloyalty to their group and class – they have given up the struggle.
- Their experience of class is an emotional experience of inequality and lost opportunities. Their constant search for counter-experiences pushes them further down the path of speeding tickets, car crashes, court appearances and trouble.
- Night-time victories on the streets do not lessen the boys' day time experience in society where they see themselves as being looked down upon for being young, uneducated and rough.

- Their class location, age, occupational role and gender are constantly run over by the economic and symbolic power of the dominant structures.
 1. Such dominant structures are the unemployment office, the boss, the manager, the poorly managed economy, a payment reminder, a crashed car, a broken lamppost, a cop, an angry girlfriend and a crying mother.
 2. Things are not under control. This social disempowerment makes their street performance a must in order to save their sanity and self-respect.
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The Night Image

At night, the street racers possess the symbolic capital of being real men, superior to any other social strata of the streets.

- Despite group solidarity of a car club, even these real men have to fight for their social order on the masculine ladder through driving.
 - It's a zero sum game – if one loses respect, someone else gains it.
 - The struggle for respect is also a collective one – “we are together, but alone” say the racers, underlining the collective task of “doing reputation” for the racing car club with their own risk.
 - In Finland, the media and the society define street-racers by their lack of economic worth and future prospects.
 1. At night the boys turn these categories upside down. They make economic security and education seem shameful, effeminate, and a threat to freedom.
 2. This conflict between day and night identities is a battlefield and an adventure. In this battlefield they risk being killed in action, yet freedom and youth are theirs.
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Babes

The car club boys strive to attract young women.

- Having a babe (girlfriend) is subordinate to the status of racing and car ownership, but is on a plane almost equal with respect.
 - Within the street-racing culture, the position of a woman is more traditional than elsewhere in a society proud of its gender equality.
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Conclusion

The Finnish education system has failed to impress on these boys why an effort to pursue education would be profitable.

- For these boys, the object of desire is immediate gratification – not from women but from cars and performance.
- The desire to cultivate their skills in male companionship and to test a car and oneself is built into their age, gender and orientation.

- Street racing is an embodiment of a masculine desire to control, to admire, to caress, to own, to challenge, to remodel, and to test oneself in a competition against other men in a race.
- The tragedy of the “room of his own” is that it closes all exits from the subculture.
 1. The emotional experience of class reinforces camaraderie and cultural performances but weakens the relation to the bigger world.
 2. Upward mobility is desired but not carried out, and that realization accelerates the boys’ journey toward self-destruction.