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Those Bearded Men and Their Beautiful Machines. Remarks on Contemporary Cafe Racer Culture

ABSTRACT. The contemporary phenomenon of the cafe racer culture raises today many questions on the culturally defined identities and the nature of modern subcultures. This paper examines those issues by highlighting both, the most significant elements of the cafe racer subculture and by conceptualizing the cultural reality surrounding these groups of motorized people. As the place of the motorcycle in popular culture links this machine with masculinity a further inquiry is being made here in the construction of the male rider image.

KEYWORDS: cafe racer, scrambler, motorcycle, subculture, identity, popular culture, mods, rockers

It was supposed to be another quiet day on the morning of the Easter weekend in 1964 and nothing could prepare the inhabitants of Brighton on what was to come. Although they have heard rumors about groups of young people chasing each other on the streets of London, fighting and causing trouble and turmoil in Liverpool or clashing with the police in Manchester, they had never imagined that this would become a part of their own experience and in long term a part of the city's cultural landscape as well its collective memory in the coming decades. The 18th of May 1964 had become a symbolic date in Brighton's history.¹ This very morning the peaceful British coastal city witnessed the climax of a long lasting brawl between two iconic youth subcultures of the 1960's: the mods and the rockers.

Those two groups had a long history of fierce, sometimes very violent, conflict and couldn't differ more in the way they dressed, in their music taste and clothing, social background and last but not least the

¹ http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/may/18/newsid_2511000/2511245.stm [accessed: 01.03.2016].

vehicles they had used on every day basis. In that regard the mods vehicle of choice was of continental origin, mostly Italian made scooters with a Vespa or Lambretta label on their side. These scooters were equipped with additional head lamps, mascots, extra chromed rearview mirrors and clearly attracted public attention to their owners, especially when they rode together in groups of a dozen and more people. Rockers however sported usually British made motorcycles like Triumph, Royal Enfield or Norton, stripped of any extra elements which would only make an obstacle in achieving maximum speed during races organized spontaneously on public roads in England's main cities.

These machines were often to be found parked outside various cafe's (of which the "Ace Café" in London was the most notable) where their owners gathered, chatted and sipped their coffee or a pint—therefore the name "cafe racer" was quickly coined to describe this type of a sport motorcycle.² Cafe racers were not only proudly displayed but in the first place they had to serve a higher imperative i.e. speed. They were rebuilt and redesigned by the young people who purchased them in order to achieve maximum speed through minimum weight and manipulated engines, suspension and frame structure. Elements of no vital functionality to the motorbike were removed or refurbished in a more streamline shape to make the machine go faster. Each of these machines reflected also the character of their owner, his (in most cases) or hers (on some occasions) attitude towards life, their raw juvenile energy and certainly—rock and roll. The connection between certain music genres or artists and each of the subcultures defined them in the same way mods were distinguished by their green parka jackets covering fashionable slim fit suits, business shoes and small hats. Rockers pride and joy was the leather jacket with countless badges and pins accompanied by tall riding boots, open face helmets decorated often with a customized paintjob or a check board pattern, sometimes specific small leather hats with a clear military look (adopted later by gay culture in the United States). In music mods were usually fans of bands like "The Who", "The Yardbirds" or various ska music newcomer bands. Rockers preferred however Elvis Presley, Gene Vincent and Bo Diddley.

The mentioned subcultures shaped British public life and popular culture throughout the 1960's. They belong to the time period's entou-

² Another definition highlights the origins of the term as a mock description used by other bikers to ridicule the mostly teenage rockers who couldn't afford a "real bike".

rage just like the Beatles, Twiggy and Mini Cooper. They were as essential to the decade as the infamous “Swinging London”; in fact they were part of this phenomenon. The mods vs. rockers war had become a part of the contemporary British popular culture and is to be found through numerous references in movies, popular arts and literature. The 1979 movie “Quadrophenia” (starring among others Sting) had depicted this war in a romanticized view, with a large dose of cinematic fiction. Just like in the movie the differences between those two groups were settled through occasional fights or large scale battles, just like the Brighton riots in 1964.³ Nevertheless they both indeed varied deeply also in a more profound sense. As Christine Jacqueline Feldman states:

The mods dressed in a dapper attire and riding Vespas, believed they were truly *modern*—that they alone personified ‘the future’ and ‘change’. Originally they were mostly working-class youths who wanted out of their social ‘caste’. They also thought the Rockers—dressed in leather and riding motor-cycles—symbolized the past. Rockers embodied the uncouth ignorance and urban grit of working-class life that Mods wanted to escape (Feldman, 2009, p. 1).

The working class background of the mods is however not really true in a larger extent, as they had at their disposal more money than the rockers. Just the cost of a new Vespa scooter alone was out of reach of most British youths in that time, not to mention all the accessories that had to be bought to make the vehicle complete. Thus the class fundament of the described conflict might be regarded here as a significant part of not just this very historical example, but also it constitutes the definitions of many other modern subcultures, culturally defined peer groups, fandom or simply groups of people gathered around a particular contemporary cultural phenomenon.

Today’s subcultures had long been understood more through their distinctive features (form) rather than ideology and shared meanings (content). Fashion, music taste, art style’s and various semiotic codes shared by the members of a specific subculture are however making the shallow structure in this regard. What is important in understanding the place of such a group in a historical and local social context and tells us much more about the world view represented by the subculture’s mem-

³ Police estimated a number of around one thousand people involved in the events.

bers is placed in its deep structures and its entanglement in diverse dimensions of social life. These structures consist of ideas, linguistic metaphors, motivations, life goals, interests and symbolic acts of agency undertaken in order to communicate with each other within the group as well to say to the outside world: "we are here; acknowledge us because we are here to stay". Thus ideological fundamentals of subcultures should be considered through all the cultural relevance they are functioning as a social group on one hand, and on the other through meanings and signs created by that group and placed in a wider socio-cultural context. In effect, subcultures are constituted through their own dynamics of change, relations to other social groups and arts of communication. The discursive aspect of subcultures is highlighted in contemporary cultural studies as the very core of the phenomenon, as well it goes for culture in general.

We may recall here the existing research tradition and order of the study of subcultures and repeat after Ken Gelder, who states that this phenomenon is usually studied in at least 6 various approaches: as an antithesis to labor and work, as a social group defined in class terms, as located at one remove from property ownership (mostly in a territorial sense), as a group functioning outside the domestic sphere (as opposed to home and family), as equated to excess and exaggeration and as opposed to the banalities of mass cultural forms (Gelder, 2007, p. 3). These scientific optics of subcultures make the general theoretical framework for the study of most groups of that kind in the second half of the century. The distinctive features of each modern subculture are being put into a sphere of socio-cultural interactions with other groups, diverse social institutions, the law and the society in general. This causes often social conflict fueled by cultural decentralization against the mainstream. Subcultures are always a little bit off side the social norm and mass taste. The clash between worldviews, life styles and desires caused by such mechanism of cultural reversion and anti-structural contestation of main cultural currents and high culture seems to be inevitable. The approach towards culture based on the issue of conflict had been developed among the prominent representatives of cultural studies, like Stuart Hall for example.

Dick Hebdige says in that matter that "the meaning of subculture is always, then, in dispute, and style is the area in which opposing definitions clash with the most dramatic force" (Hebdige, 2002, p. 3). As we might see subcultures are being placed often in the field of conflict, con-

testation and protest. This is very true when we speak of 1960's and 1970's and the youth revolt linked with the hippie movement, punks or many other groups rejecting the social *status quo* of that time. It is not that accurate if we transfer the discussion into the context of up to date cultural movements. The ideological background of many of contemporary subcultures is highly discussable, and if we take ideology as a background for real and direct ideologically driven actions undertaken by their members, fore mostly in a political sense, the notion loses its momentum. In cases of some subcultures, like the today's hipsters for example, what is significant is the rejection of any ideology (especially related to politics) as a signifier of belonging. Of course in case of hipsters the term "subculture" also loses its former meaning as the movement is today a global phenomenon with no specific shape and boundaries. As everyone might become a hipster through ownership of a mustache, a pair of Ray Ban shades or skinny jeans the group's identity had undergone a massive transformation since the 1940's. It become more or less a media term and a stereotypical and simplified vision of a sentimentalized movement with no real objectives except a clearly distinguishable fashion statement. Thus in some aspect it emphasizes a distinctively modern and popular feature of many contemporary forms of youth identities: a *désintéressement* in and disillusion towards any ideology which requires real agency in challenging the existing socio-cultural *status quo*.

However an important question arises in the light of the above remarks—can we still connect today the phenomenon of subcultures with the idea of rebellion? The contestation by groups of youth of what is associated with the conservative order of their parent's world is to be translated as a protest of personal freedom against social constraints. This clash of young and old, dynamic and static, subjective and objectified identities is usually fading away when put into practice of subversive tactics within the consumer culture. In their book "The Rebel Sell. Why the Culture Can't Be Jammed" Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter make a clear statement in which they point out that even the most rebellious movements (like Adbusters in the area of new media for example) lose their teeth with passing time and fit into the consumer logic of the system they had previously fought against. As in 2003 Adbusters Media Foundation started to advertise and sell through their magazine a special line of "subversive" running shoes both authors say with a pessimistic tone to it: "After that day, it became obvious to everyone that cultural

rebellion [...] is not a threat to the system, it *is* the system" (Heat & Potter, 2006, p. 1).

The massive sell out of the juvenile rebellion and its marketing as an easily available consumer good becomes an object of interest shown by some authors who place their critique in a more broader cultural context and highlight more universal cultural mechanisms of unification. Stuart Hall for example, reflects upon subcultures as largely class defined groups and in the case of youth subcultures the term "directs us to the cultural aspect of youth" (Hall & Jefferson, 1977, p. 10). Hall's notion of culture is based upon the assumption that cultural reality is being produced through practices. The British scholar takes for granted that "culture, is the way, the forms, in which groups handle the raw material of their social and material existence" (Hall & Jefferson, 1977, p. 10). The entanglement of culture and social practice in the context of rebellion and protest shifts the discussion into the issue of cultural economy. This is not a surprise as Hall's theoretical background in cultural studies is mostly founded on the Marxist vision of a post-capitalist society. In his view the eroding value of work, social stratification and the social exclusion of certain groups is related to class based conflict, which in turn takes the shape of a culturally articulated contestation of the dominant (upper class for example) lifestyle by the youth subcultures. Being outside of the mainstream, an underdog among high society's posh everyday rituals, not fitting into the conservative norms is just a consequence of the discontent with the existing social conditions that emerged after the post-war change in the West.

Hall's view of subcultures links the phenomenon with the rise of the working class culture. The group's shift towards taking a central place in popular culture's structures is an effect of the historical fact that it "has constantly won space from the dominant culture" (Hall & Jefferson, 1977, p. 42). The growing field of cultural relevance to the issues of work and leisure, class differences, capital, underclass and many more let's us to assume that this process is a constant companion in the global cultural transformation we are all clearly part of today. This very transition from the striving for hegemony of an elitist, intellectual and also very socially limited (due education, economy, politics etc.) culture towards mass oriented, often more democratic, but also low level, simplistic and full of banality opposition of it, makes the basic framework of contemporary cultural dynamics. It is also worth noting at this point that the dichotomy of high vs. low culture loses nowadays its former meaning and

becomes more liquid and hard to define in sociological terms. What is significant however, is the process of legitimization of the working class taste in a global sense observed in the second half of the 20th century. Certainly contemporary pop-culture is not a simple translation of these working class aesthetics into modern middle class narratives, but still remains strongly bound with this social background in many ways. This kind of understanding of cultural transition into the hegemony of mass culture and its pop-cultural derivatives was prominent among most scholars dealing with the condition of the modern western cultural paradigm.

The erosion of the cultural ideology that stood behind the modern model of the late capitalist society had produced a wave of new social movements filling the identity gap with new content and by re-using and re-defining old values. New religious denominations and sects, far right and extreme left political organizations and parties or diverse groups of interest gathered around a particular socio-cultural issue sprung out and divided the field among themselves. New kind of subcultures, as an example of such movement, took therefore foothold in the Western society as an answer to many questions raised by the processes of deterioration of past socio-cultural structures. The decentralization of identity, the notion of an untamed individual self and its "natural" right to articulate that individuality influenced contemporary identity discourses in a similar extent as the issues of personality and unconsciousness were influenced by psychoanalysis at the beginning of the 20th century. Personal freedom, understood not just in a strictly political sense, became a desired good at the identity market and many subcultures in the West promised to deliver it in a much more direct way as the competition. The counterculture of the 1960's, punk movement of the 1970's or rave culture in the 1990's highlighted the liberating aspect of belonging through the rejection of spatial and temporal determination of boundaries set mostly through the conservative social order surrounding those subcultures. Just like LSD for the hippies, heroin for the punks and ecstasy for the ravers they needed an escape vehicle to get out of the normative circle.

As we might see in the 1969 cult movie "Easy Rider" counterculture's notion of escape, journey into the unknown and going dangerously fast is also linked to the motorcycle. This kind of transportation vehicle is per definition antibourgeois and rebellious. Pop-culture delivers us in that aspect a rich imaginarium of motorbike driven rebels; misfits fueled with gasoline and wind in their never ending striving for ultimate

freedom. Starting with the iconic character portrayed by Marlon Brando in "The Wild One", through James Dean, T. E. Lawrence up to Hunter S. Thompson (and recently even the Greek finance minister Yanis Varoufakis), pictures of men on motorbikes had stirred up collective imagination for a long time. Therefore the cultural construction of motorized men in modern terms brings us back to the issue of manifestations of masculinity in not just pop-cultural iconography but merely in the contemporary social reality. Social movements like subcultures present the motorcycle as a distinctive feature of social discontent or rejection of norms and values attributed to the dominant social habitus represented among others by car culture and its fetishization of four wheels.

The opposition between car and motorcycle is simultaneously a division between middle class lifestyle and living on the margin of the social order established by the class society. The phenomenon of motorcycle gangs like the Hells Angels in the United States, Boso-zoku riders in Japan or several organized groups in today's Germany and Scandinavia might serve here as an exaggerated example to support that claim. Their members come in most cases from a specific social background defined by social, economic and cultural marginalization, each specific for the country they function in. The division becomes even more profound if put into the gender discourse. Car owners are here perceived by motorcyclists as blue collar wealthy businessmen and attributed feminized and weak sexuality (whereas motorcyclists are "true men" working with their bare hands). On the other hand, bikers are perceived by car drivers as dangerous, unpredictable and suicidal as they do not obey to traffic rules, are commonly splitting lanes and discard the speed limit.

Nevertheless, the link established between the motorcycle and man is founded on the relation between the human component and the machine itself. This idea might be found in the Robert Pirsig's novel *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (1974). Pirsig characters build a close and intimate relation with their machines as they progress in self-knowledge and formulating philosophical questions on the nature of human condition. The motorcycle becomes thus a companion in this peregrinations of the human mind, as well in the more literary journey across America. What is striking at this point is the fact that a similar, but less philosophical in its nature, insight into the socio-cultural reality of the post-war American peripheries and country roads we might find in Jack Keruac's "On the Road" published two decades earlier. Both titles found certainly their way into the American canon of modern literature.

Both also had a deep impact, with a handful of other books, on the identity of young generations that shaped the cultural dynamics in the 1950's and 1970's. The main difference between those two cult novels lies not just in the depth of philosophical inquiries, but more in the mode of transportation. Keruac's narration is tied to the car, an old Cadillac running down the Route 66. Pirsig's novel is an affirmation of the motorcycle as a technological tool used for assistance in the search for what is transcendent, elusive and natural. As he insists that a motorcycle remains a much more direct tool for experiencing life he writes: "You see things vacationing on a motorcycle in a way that is completely different from any other. In a car you're always in a compartment, and because you're used to it you don't realize that through that car window everything you see is just more TV. You're a passive observer and it is all moving by you boringly in a frame" (Pirsig, 1984, p. 4).

The book examines also the social transformation occurring in the American society through the changing of place and role of technology in human life. In opposition to the views of technological determinists, like Neil Postman for example, Pirsig embraces technology as an art of modern meditation through the application of technological skills (like the maintenance of your own motorcycle) in decisive moments of our existence. Just like being able to repair your own equipment it is also important to appreciate the skills enabling us to solve problems as they appear and less to romanticize technology and the social change based upon it. Pirsig's philosophy is in that regard based on several foundations made by particular traditions of philosophical thought. The most significant of them is certainly the combination of early Greek traditions and the German philosophy and psychology of Gestalt. Through that step he creates a common denominator for not just his own view on dealing with philosophical questions of modernity, but also shapes the contemporary discourse on dehumanization through technology. Pirsig's stand differs in that matter from those shared by most notable authors and emphasizes the need for linking what is romantic with what is pragmatic. Therefore a motorcycle becomes a metaphor of a long lost values and abilities to cope with difficulties and obstacles that might occur in our pursuit for truth. In fact this kind of machine makes this search much more easier and paradoxically more truthful.

This very unusual view on motorcycles brings us to the basic question of contemporary place of these machines in modern culture in the sense of a global pattern of meaning in which the motorcycle takes

a central place not solely as a mean of transportation, but as something way more culturally significant. Another question that is raised by the issue of technology is to be found in the area of new forms of human identities and their dynamics shaped by the proliferation of certain technological advancements. In the light of the above the cafe racer recalled at the beginning of this text serves here as an excellent example of such a signifier. Today's focus on newest high tech is encountered not by the motorcycle per se, but the cafe racer in particular. We may ask thus what makes the modern cafe racer culture so distinguishable in the context of other cultural offers to be found within the reach of a contemporary consumer? Furthermore, what makes this approach towards motorcycles special and is it anything special at all? To deliver an answer to these questions we must look at this phenomenon through the emerging of a distinctively different approach towards culture in general. Although we may admit that popular, mass and consumer culture are now an integral part of a dominant global cultural system, it also comes to our mind that people more and more often differentiate, translate and transform their forms and field of participation in those systems and sometimes also creatively transform these patterns accordingly to their own experience and interests. Thus it is worth noting that the notion of glocalization is taking place of former one dimensional understanding of globalization in many areas of human agency, especially in a cultural sense.

The contemporary cafe racer culture is not stuck in the past, however it recalls the rockers vs. mods conflict as its specific foundation myth. Therefore the roots of this new global movement are to be found in the 1950's and 1960's. This is being reflected mostly in the material sphere, fashion trends and general cafe racer aesthetics shared by the owners of those bikes and reflected in the machine's construction philosophy. In fact, history is being here taken as a value for itself; it is being mythologized and romanticized in many various ways of expression. In that context, if the cafe racer culture would be a sort of religion its main deity would be made by the iconic Steve McQueen as a daredevil role model for many contemporary riders affiliated with this movement. Slogans such as "vintage" and "retro", used extensively among cafe racer aficionados, are bringing to the mind past charm of analogue cameras, denim jeans, worn leather jackets and boots, lumberjack shirts and bearded middle aged men living a simple life, often in harmonious symbiosis with the surrounding nature. Although the cafe racer was born in the city, its

modern counterpart prefers the great outdoors. In those cases a slightly different kind of motorcycle is needed—called the scrambler—which is able to withstand tough terrain and ride also on country roads, through fields and forest paths.

Nevertheless, getting out of the urban hustle, polluted streets of great cities, not taking part in the every day race with career obsessed downtown yuppies or just making something physical with your own hands—all this creates a certain code which should be, but doesn't have to, followed. The motorcycle becomes here not a vehicle of escape, but confrontation with everything what is unnatural, a technologically over-kill and unnecessary. Cafe racers bring us back to the basics in both, their design and the culturally defined ideology standing behind them. The issue of manual labor is in this example a key factor in understanding the fascination with the modern cafe racer. It might be considered as a base idea for getting into this culture for outsiders. The "built not bought" slogan expresses this attitude towards manual labor and the creative process very well. Building a motorcycle from scratch, bringing a 40-year old machine back into working delivers joy and satisfaction for the owner and constructor on the daily basis. Not just riding the motorcycle is important but also constantly improving it through endless customization. Even more, many of the cafe racer machines have a very personal history attached as they were previously owned by a parent or someone close to the current owner. Their restoration is simultaneously a technological endeavor and a psychological process of reconstruction of long lost ties with family members or a journey into discovering one's own personal qualities. This cannot be achieved by simply buying a brand new motorcycle from a local dealer, however more and more manufactures are joining the "new retro" bandwagon releasing factory new machines that simulate in their design the machines from the golden era of motorcycle technology, i.e. the 1970's. The capitalization of sentiments is a strongly emphasized element of current technological and design trends not only in relation to motorcycles, but also other goods as well. On the other hand the lack of modern electronics, mechanical operation mode and the ability to customize your machine by yourself is being presented as much more reliable as the more advanced technology offered these days on the market.

What has to be stressed out at this point is the fact that there is no universal nor single ideological framework within which a cafe racer motorcyclist has to move or accept. There is also no institutional struc-

ture which would include more riders than usually are being gathered in a regular motorcycle club. If such structures emerge they are mostly local. Despite this statement we might recall certain exceptions that highlight the phenomenon of rising popularity of the cafe racer culture in a more global dimension. As it was already mentioned the cafe racer culture originated in United Kingdom around places such as the Ace Cafe in London. This cafe, restaurant and garage in one is today visited mostly for its heritage. It is also an important meeting point in the topography of the cafe racer world. Various motor sport oriented events are being organized there by the owners and attract just as many motorized attendees as bystanders curious to watch a spectacle made of gasoline smell, shiny leatherjackets, chromed wheels and old fashioned rock and roll or boogie. Trips are being undertaken from various parts of the globe to end up in Ace Cafe. The effort behind those trips and adventures during those journeys are as much a reward as the destination. Of course there are also other places a cafe racer motorcyclist should visit (like the Madras Cafe in India for example), but the most prominent remains the one in London and still is a Mecca for those, who want to get a real feeling of the old motorcycle charm.

An another platform of consolidation is being created not by a certain place but rather a series of globally interconnected local events taking place in world's largest cities. The "Distinguished Gentlemen's Ride" is one of the most notable of such initiatives. It started all in Sydney, Australia back in 2012, when a Mark Hawwa, the founder of the event, got inspired by a photo of Don Draper, a character from the TV series "Mad Men", on a motorcycle wearing a classic suit. Hawwa's idea is now a global initiative to raise prostate cancer awareness and attracted in 2015 around 30,000 people in 400 cities.⁴ Nowadays the largest public rides of hundred and more machines that make this event are being organized in cities like New York, London, Paris, Sao Paulo and Lisbon. The growing popularity of this event goes hand in hand with a interest in cafe racers that fit the aesthetics of "a celebration of the art of being dapper and the style of classic custom motorcycles"; not to mention to "bring your finest manners, jaunty trimmed mustaches, silk vests, crisp shirts and tailored suits".⁵ On that level it seems that the question of style might be overtaking the base idea of a charity event bringing to-

⁴ <https://www.gentlemansride.com/about> [accessed: 15.04.2016].

⁵ *Ibidem*.

gether people representing various social classes and income, life attitudes and life style, cultural and ethnic origin, or age and sex. We may agree that to a certain point the whole phenomenon of cafe racer culture could be regarded through the criteria of vintage fashion returning today in a new updated manner. On the other hand, this initiative takes us to the issue of community in a globalized world, where traditional social structures seem rather to erode than prosper and are being replaced with pop-cultural iconography and shared or declined consumer preferences.

The feeling of being part of a larger group of people who share the same enthusiasm for a specific kind of motorcycles is not to be underestimated not just in the case of Distinguished Gentlemen's Ride, but also the whole cafe racer milieu. Although there's little in common among the riders in the sense of a institutional level or even a interpersonal one, it is clear that a symbolic masculine *Kameradschaft* is present. Certainly there's also a strong presence of women among riders and cafe racer owners, but the sport itself is still attracting mostly the male audience. According to the data of the United States Department of Transportation 90% of motorcyclists in the United States of America in 2009 were male.⁶ What could be surprising is the fact that a strong shift in age can be observed in recent years towards a persona of a more mature rider. As for the period between 1985 and 2003 the average age had moved from 27.1 years to 41. People over 50 years old who own a motorcycle in the United States are being estimated as 25% of all riders. Similar tendencies might be observed in other parts of the world as well. Therefore nowadays the picture of older bearded men riding vintage motorcycles pushes out of the fame the image of a immature, reckless teenage motorcyclist who despises to obey any traffic rules in order to go faster and faster. This global male community tends to uplift the existing public image of motorcyclists and the contemporary cafe racer culture plays a large a part in that shift.

How does this new image perform in the context of prevailing patterns of consumer culture? First of all today's cafe racers might slip out of the narrowly understood definition of subcultures as described by Hall or Hebdige. The class defined subculture might have been accurate in the case of the 1960's cafe racer's, but today it loses its credibility along the processes of economic growth in developed countries, prolif-

⁶ http://www.rita.dot.gov/bts/sites/rita.dot.gov.bts/files/publications/special_reports_and_issue_briefs/special_report/2009_05_14/html/entire.html [accessed: 15.04.2016].

eration of middle class social ambitions and the vanishing of class differences reduced only to the income level, class consciousness or art of work. The motorcycle or a scooter stopped to be the only vehicle a young person could afford. What we see today is a distinctive move from the motorcycle brands like Triumph, Ducati or Royal Enfield towards car brands like BMW, Lexus or Subaru. Thus the cafe racer is no longer an attribute of working class teenagers, who emulate the motor sport world as seen in the grand motorcycles races just like the Tourist Trophy on the Isle of Man. Paradoxically, the first cafe racer's were actually an emulation themselves in that matter and the current ones are an another take on that practice of building motorbikes, being "a current emulation of a former emulation". As described before manual labor seems to be today a rare opportunity to express oneself through creating something of value and substance. Building an own motorcycle and giving it a personal touch fills that need in a world where things get more and more ephemeral and virtual.

If we would like to consider the cafe racer culture as a subculture it would require a redefinition of the subculture term itself and placing it in the context of a more global cultural system. Motorbikes in general are vehicles which expose the owner directly to the elements like rain and wind. Cafe racers expose the rider to a cultural environment usually hidden beyond the iron cage of a car where the landscape is to be watched through the glass surface of a window. Meeting people on the road, braking down of the motorcycle and applying your own technical skills to bring it back working is a part of the modern cafe racer myth. Jean Baudrillard's critique of car obsessed American culture describes well that distinction. The French author presents his view on contemporary cultural condition through the notion of speed by saying that: "Speed creates pure objects. It is itself a pure object, since it cancels out the ground and territorial reference-points, since it runs ahead of time to annul time itself, since it moves more quickly than its own cause and obliterates the cause by outstripping it" (Baudrillard, 1989, p. 6). American culture is in the light of the above a drivers culture, fore mostly dominated by the car. Baudrillard notes at another point that: "driving is a spectacular form of amnesia. Everything is to be discovered, everything is to be obliterated" (Baudrillard, 1989, p. 9). This kind of motorized and speed focused culture embraces the cafe racer as a form of a technological reminder of what it was like to drive without safety belts and air bags. The thrill of speed and the immanent and very real danger

of being killed are becoming more and more an extinct species in a perfectly organized reality. The dialectical character and nature of technology is in this example highlighted through a specific cultural movement, which might be considered as a new form of a counter cultural rebellion. However this time, the opponent is not a traditional and conservative social system, but exactly its opposite—a social realm where everything goes and is already marketed as liberating the self and releasing it from any restrictions. Thus the cafe racer culture delivers today a promise of a world in which certain things stay the same despite the fact they the move on a motorcycle.

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WEB RESOURCES

- <https://www.gentlemansride.com/about>
- http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/may/18/newsid_2511000/2511245.stm
- http://www.rita.dot.gov/bts/sites/rita.dot.gov.bts/files/publications/special_reports_and_issue_briefs/special_report/2009_05_14/html/entire.html