

Dreams of Cars on an Island

Youth, cars and cultural values in the Faroe Islands

Dreymar um bilar á oyggjum

Ungdómur, bilar og mentanarlig virði í Føroyum

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Abstract

This article, based on a research project on youth and car cultures in the Faroe Islands, describes and analyses the meaning, value and symbol given to cars and driving among young people today. The article focuses on leisure, social interaction and cultural identity in order to understand and define the position and role of the car among young people. The risk behaviour and attitude of drivers is investigated with these questions in mind: How do young people interpret their own risk behaviour? How do young people communicate experiences and information concerning the safety and danger of driving? The article aims to give a fresh view on a field that has been characterized by strong prejudiced societal condemnation of young people's attitudes and behaviour.

Útrak

Hesin tekstur, ið hevur støði í granskingarverkætlan um ungdóm og bilmentan í Føroyum, lýsir og greinir meiningar, virði og symbol, ið ung geva bilum og bilkoyring í dag. Teksturinn hyggur serliga at frítíðini, sosiala samskiptinum og mentanarliga samleikanum við tí fyri eyga at skilja og allýsa støðuna og leiklutin, ið bilurin hevur millum ung. Risiko-atferðin og hugburðurin hjá bilførarum verða kannað við hesum spurningum í huga: Hvussu tulka ung sjálv sína risiko-atferð? Hvussu samskipta ung sínar royndir og sína vitan viðvíkjandi trygd og vanda í bilkoyring? Málið við tekstinum er at geva

eina nýggja mynd av einum evni, ið hevur verið eyðkent av sterkari samfelagsligari fordøming av hugburði og atferð ungdómsins.

Introduction

There is a peculiar relationship between youth and cars. Young people themselves consider car driving as praxis tailored to youth cultures. The car symbolizes the vivaciousness and hedonism in their lifestyles. The private car is the vehicle to success in social endeavours among peers. Without access to a car many young people feel detached from popular social networks in their local community. The car is the key to free, funny and sensual lifestyles. But freedom involves danger. Car driving is hence also a question of risk calculation and crucial decision-making on the roads. Risk behaviour is part of the style of many young men, blamed for being devils on wheels in the media. This article takes a closer look at the so-called 'car cultures' of young people in the Faroe Islands. It takes the reader on a trip with these introductory statements as a roadmap. The article discusses youth, cars

and cultural values in the Faroe Islands today from an interpretive anthropological approach.

As an island community the Faroes are normally associated with boats and sea routes (Joensen, 1982). For centuries water was – in every meaning of the word – the main component of life. So why write about young people's dreams of cars on small dots of land in the vast Atlantic Ocean? Because the car is indispensable in contemporary Faroese culture – for work, family-life, leisure, etc. Motor vehicles infiltrate every societal sphere, especially those involving young people. The car is the means and end of projects. Cars, says a French philosopher, are the aesthetic cathedrals of the 20th and 21st centuries (Heddelin, 1991). Symbolic car worshipping takes place around the globalized world; even small peripheral archipelagos give homage to the transnational 'car cult'. There are more than 20.000 registered motor vehicles in the Faroe Islands, the home of 49.000 inhabitants (Akstovan, 2009).

The Faroe Islands, a latemodern society in the North-western corner of Europe, witnessed relatively high numbers of serious accidents on the roads through the 1980s and 1990s (Sigvardsen and Kragesteen, 2003). Fortunately, the negative statistical pattern has changed during the last years, making the national Road Safety Council's (*Ráðið fyri Ferðslutrygd*) preventive information campaign look successful. The purpose of the council's promoted 'zero-vision' project is a future where no one is killed or seriously wounded in car accidents (op cit). This may be Utopia, but the visionary plan changes the discourse on safe and unsafe

behaviour on the roads of the Faroe Islands. Today people are in general consciously aware of modern road traffic dangers. The 'car culture' of young people is also changing; new values and symbols are being introduced to the youth cultures (Gaini, 2009). Especially, young men, aged 18-30, are considered hard to advice and educate regarding safe driving.

Methods

In June 2009, I published a report – commissioned by the Road Safety Council – on young people, traffic behaviour and road safety in the Faroe Islands. This recent anthropological research venture (2006-2008) provides this article's prime data. The report is based on qualitative semi-structured interviews and questionnaires involving around 100 people in total during 2006-07. Most informants are aged 16-30 and residents of Torshavn. The informants have different social, cultural, religious and family backgrounds, but all of them are students or former students of upper secondary schools of the Faroe Islands. One out of three informants was undertaking higher education at departments of the University of the Faroe Islands – including the Nursery School and Teachers College – at the time of the interview. Even though most informants are students in Torshavn, many have a background from distant towns and villages.

The informants are not singled out because they have first-hand car accident experience; they represent a cross section of contemporary Faroese youths with different viewpoints and attitudes towards driving. The informants present youth images of the curious rituals and ceremonies, customs and

values that characterize car cultures of the Faroe Islands. Another important origin of this article's data is readers' letters and news articles printed in Faroese newspapers during the last decade. Most of this written material gives factual documentation of tragic road accidents in the Faroe Islands. This article does not give a thorough analysis of the meaning and value of cars in the youth cultures and everyday lives, rather, it investigates some facets in a complex and ambiguous relation – the relation between young people and motor vehicles.

The Faroese youth research tradition is young and quantitatively limited (Gaini, 2008). No study of the meaning of motor vehicles in youth cultures has been conducted before my above mentioned project 2006-08. It is therefore difficult, almost impossible, to give a reliable historical overview of car cultures of the Faroe Islands. The unfortunate shortage of social data from the Faroe Islands makes most new research enterprises pioneering. Texts are therefore more pragmatically explanatory and discursive than comparatively analytical and theoretically definitive. The holistic approach given uncovers general trends in the Faroe Islands anno 2009, albeit without the ambition of establishing a paradigmatic core reference text for future research within youth studies.

Theoretical framework

The text is theoretically anchored in the work of Ulrich Beck, who concentrates on the risk and risk society concepts (Denney, 2005). The aim is not to examine Beck's risk society theory, but to use 'risk' as an analytical tool and conceptual approach to a complex cultural field in contemporary

Faroese society. Risk is a relational concept knit into specific social contexts. The understanding of risk, its value and consequences, depends on the knowledge and identity of the interpreter. Risk for whom? Risk considered necessary? Risk considered rewarding? Risk signalling total freedom? Risk and security, relevant subjects in post-9/11 political discourse, are always related to the notions of freedom and self-determination (op cit). It has for generations been common sense to claim, that risk behaviour is the brand of the youth. The 'live fast die young' cliché romanticizes high risk in modern youth lifestyles.

As observed in the field, young people in the Faroe Islands discuss the local car cultures with direct or indirect references to risk behaviour. The cultural models that young people have internalized through education and social interaction shape their understanding and interpretation of risk behaviour. High risk behaviour, considered destructive and irresponsible, is usually rooted in cultural and social models hard to change. In debates and research on AIDS, it is often pointed out how difficult it is to change some groups of young people regarding their sexual behaviour and attitudes. Oppositional subcultures might even take risks in order to contest mainstream society's moral 'panics'. In other words, the risk behaviour functions as a symbolic defensive weapon that has a boomerang effect – you put your own health and welfare at risk.

The text also attempts to clarify the difficult shift from tradition to (late) modernity in the Faroe Islands through the windscreen of the car. The image in the

windscreen changes all the time when driving through the majestic landscape of the islands; fast unexpected movements also characterize the Faroese culture of the era of globalization (Gaini, 2008). The car culture of the 1960s or 1970s is not the same as the car culture of the 1980s or 1990s. The car has got a new meaning, status and function for young drivers and their passengers. Global mainstream media has a deep impact on everyday life of Faroe Islanders *anno* 2009; boys and girls navigate between local and global, traditional and modern, in their personal identity construction endeavours. Different car cultures clash, because youth groups propagate incompatible values – e.g. in the interpretation of risk and safety on the roads (Gaini, 2006).

Risk society is, according to the British sociologist Anthony Giddens (1999: 3), a society “increasingly preoccupied with the future (and also with safety), which generates the notion of risk”. Ulrich Beck, a German sociologist, focuses mainly on the insecurities that, he claims, modernization itself has introduced (Beck, 1992). Risks, according to Beck and other social scientists, are distributed unevenly in the population of a society. This implies a social stratification where relative security – lack of risk – is a limited sought after capital (op cit). The main determinant in risk calculation is knowledge: reliable knowledge about the foreseeable consequences of action. Risk taking is not necessarily something negative. Risk is also an integral component of any fresh creative venture in modern societies – in culture, politics and economy. Young people, I repeat, are champions of courageous risk taking.

All risk, according to anthropologist Mary Douglas (1982), is socially constructed and risk knowledge depends on belief systems and moral positions. Douglas argues that individuals never strictly and exclusively act as atomized rational cost-benefit calculators, avoiding any risk of private interests, because human beings are not able to handle all the information concerning risk and safety in logical rational manners. Much of what we say is planned is coincidence (Mlodinow, 2009). Individuals often act as unintentional fools whose motivation is spontaneous. In other words, risk is, says Douglas (1982), a culturally relative phenomenon. The discourse on risk has changed through time and context. Today it is highly associated with something unwanted – insecurity – and threatening. In a risk society many people are permanently “scared” of life and looking for “safe places”. Young people on the roads, taking risks, are under pressure because of modern society’s thirst for controlled security (Denney, 2005).

Presentation and discussion

Passport to freedom

Today it is difficult to live in the Faroes without a driver’s licence. Most teenagers, considering it a crucial investment, get their driver’s licence for cars before reaching the age of 20. Some passionate car-lovers even calculate the process in detail in order to have the sought after licence in the pocket for their eighteenth birthday. These youths don’t want to wait *one* single day extra, before being able to test the driver’s freedom on the roads. The individual’s economic, social and psychological preparations start many years before he is legally permitted to

drive a car. Many boys from the lower classes work hard to save money for their first private car, which is also, preferably, accessible the very day they get the licence (Gaini, 2009). The perfect birthday celebration for children reaching the age of majority includes the key to 'freedom' incarnated in a metal car key.

The driver's licence gives access to cars that give access to lifestyles, networks and youth groups. The dream of cars is also a dream of popularity among peers, high social status in society and, not least, force of attraction towards potential worshippers and lovers. For those who don't drive themselves but still want to be recognized in local car cultures, it is important to have friends and acquaintances with 'fancy' cars in order to compensate for personal shortcomings. Indeed, many young people who are frequent passengers of cruising cars don't own a car or even a licence to drive. Many young men driving dark streets at night have underage girls on the car's backseats. Especially, in villages and towns outside the capital area, young people spend many hours in cars that have many functions – e.g. as mobile leisure club, café, disco, bedroom, etc. (op cit).

Cars represent mobility, a sweet movement that makes the driver feel that he floats above the landscape without any limitations. Young people associate the car with a broader horizon, opening the eyes to new ideas, styles and networks. For many young people in the Faroe Islands, notably in small non-urban communities, the car symbolizes a free private space out of their parents' control. Young men and women who live in their parents' houses, often because of the

limited range of rooms and apartments for rent in the community, value cars as free 'rooms' replacing the house they don't have (Gaini, 2008). The car functions in other words as a safety valve for structural societal problems, e.g. the housing shortage in a traditional society turned (late) modern. Another special condition making it easy to seduce people into the international car cult is the rainy and windy weather of the basaltic islands in the Atlantic Ocean.

Trip to adult life

A drive can be an adventurous trip that young people bring to their adult life. Psychologists have for years investigated the behaviour and feelings of drivers when they are on the road (Best, 2006; Mogensen, 2002). The risk taking youth is relevant in these studies. Cars are also connected to women and sexuality. Men talk about their cars as if they were attractive women that they dominate. When men discuss car races that they have taken part in, it is often a metaphorical story of sexual intercourse. The car is a masculine object that men use in order to get in contact with women, but the car is also a cultural capital leading to high rank among peers. This is a simplified image of reality as many young modern women reject cars as symbols of masculinity.

Cars often function as a link between boys and girls. Many love stories start on a drive. For many years already Faroese youths have had drives as a favourite leisure time activity. Niels Frid, a Danish journalist, wrote already in the early 1980s:

"Okay, what we are doing now, it is important in Faroese culture, among young people, and it is what we call 'to

drive a car trip'. It is a way to get social communication. You drive back and forth, and you do it many many times, let's say almost every night. And you say hello to people you know. People who are 'interesting', let's say girls, walk down the streets. Then they wave their hand to you, and you stop the car, and then they come into the car..." (in Fock, 1984)

This special drive, 'to drive a car trip', is something every Faroese youth is familiar with. The drive implies something quite similar to when people go to a party, a night club or somewhere else, where people gather informally (Best, 2006). One goal is indeed to meet people that you haven't met before.

The car can also represent an escape from boredom in daily life. It is nicer to be together in the car than to be bored alone at home. The car is often the arena where stories are told, rumours are spread and plans for the coming weekend are made. The car is actually the framework for a variety of social activities among young people. The chronic thirst for liberty that young people try to quench has the car as main drinking cup. Behind the wheel boys and girls can decide where and when to go. Especially in small 'empty' villages young people feel socially isolated without access to a car (Gaini, 2009). They need, from time to time, to escape to find the parties that people go to, to have secret meetings with young people from neighbouring villages at night. Today, people, with the help of cars, expect to find the open gateway to all modern lifestyles, whether they live in the centre or periphery of society.

Modern culture and media

The car is a 'natural' part of Faroese culture nowadays. Since the last decades of the 20th century motoring has influenced all aspects of life in the modern world (Dennis and Urry, 2009). Contemporary cultural interpretations of gender differences are also directed by the societal weight of motor vehicles. The driver's licence is the passport needed to enter adult society. Car ownership is, especially among men, the ultimate childhood dream that will bring other future dreams to fruition; visions of new (social, cultural and sexual) relations, new experiences and new wisdom (Ingmarsson, 2004). The speed, danger and fantasy associated to cars are part of the dreams of boys (Wollen and Kerr, 2002). Like a wild animal the car has to be tamed by its master. The ferocious nature and (horse) power of the car, making it provocative, is mastered by young proud car-owners.

Movies full of speed and action, with the path-breaking 'Fast and Furious' movies as the lads' favourite, as well as new sophisticated computer games, are instructing the youth in senseless driving missions. The lad's car manifests a spectacular show on the road, displaying four prized qualities: speed, potency, elegance and wildness (Gaini, 2009). This macabre dance on wheels, involving life-threatening risks, is part of the notorious car culture of some youth groups in the Faroe Islands. Risk taking on the roads is, among many youths, a reflective intentional action, expressing reckless attitudes, cultural resistance and emotional thrill. The hazardous atmosphere, with planned life-gambling, can also be linked to popular media's glamorous representation of death

and destruction on the roads (Wollen and Kerr, 2002). Since film star James Dean's fatal crash in 1955, the car accident has ironically been a symbol of fresh youthfulness.

Driving has its unavoidable victims – many of them inexperienced boys and girls – that pay a high price for the 'freedom' that young people in general associate to the motor vehicle. The behaviour a driver displays on the roads normally reflects his personality, values and perspectives. The risk taking driver is often also considered socially menacing in other contexts. Persons suffering emotional imbalance, often relatively marginalized socially, are overrepresented among hazardous drivers (Mogensen, 2002). People under strong pressure in their daily lives – at work, at home or among friends – also belong to the 'risk group' not taking earnest responsibility in traffic. Positively, on the other hand, driving can unleash hidden uncontrollable feelings that otherwise would never come to light.

"Put simply: while driving in our cars, we have the freedom, power and anonymity with which to express extreme and violent emotions we may suppress in the rest of our lives" (Wollen and Kerr, 2002)

Centre and periphery

The car culture discourse of Faroese youth is characterized by the stereotyped dichotomy capital–village or centre–periphery that defines styles and trends in driving. Village youths, considered more traditional and provincial than Torshavn's 'city-dwellers', can easily be recognized by their cars. That is what my young informants say, even though I regard it as a rather subjective construction

of village youth seldom fitting to empirical observations. Let us say that most youths and cars are positioned somewhere between the extreme poles of capital and village. The village youth, in the discourse, is always driving with open windows and loud music. The driver doesn't care if it rains or snows. No storm cancels the repetitive night rides between villages. Also, village youth always fix their cars. Whenever they have time off, young men disappear into oily garages and transform into amateur car mechanics with a handyman's pragmatic intelligence (Gaini, 2008)

The village youths – who actually exist in the capital as well as in remote fishing communities – are extravagant as handy-men, because the grand *metamorphosis* of his poor vehicle never ends. Some details are always missing in the punctual make-it-cooler project. The aesthetic chirurgic operation that cars undergo in order to get higher value among youths is a complex subcultural process not to be analyzed thoroughly in this text. The creative car owner's aim is normally to improve his rank in the group, hence also to get easier access to admiring women. The peculiar masculine identity of these drivers, often associated with provincial lifestyles, connects the boy's capacities symbolically to the sign of the car (Mogensen, 2002). The sound, shape and colours of the car signal sexual capacities. The car is, in this respect, a prolonged part of the driver's personal identity.

Among the most devoted car lovers the vehicle becomes a fetish that, like ornaments, follows the master in any mission at any time (Vaaranen, 2004). The car, like the horse of a cowboy, is the shade that never

leaves the man. The car gives life content and meaning and cannot easily be substituted by any other interest. This monomaniac character is rare but survives in enclaves of late-modern Faroese society. The Atlantic cowboy, proud of his macho style and working class (fishing) background, had his heyday in the 1970s and 1980s. He was the weekend playboy and action-seeker with strong bonds to traditional family-based village communities (Gaini, 2006). The cowboy is today contested by several new types of men with much more ambiguous and urban masculine values. The Atlantic cowboy was very close to the stereotyped village youth pole in the previously mentioned capital–village continuum.

The village youth stereotype, according to a 26-year-old female informant, is the boy who comes to Torshavn in a car that has a lowered chassis, 4000W subwoofers, 17 inches sport rims and preferably many lights on all sides. The driver wears slippers, a white cotton T-shirt and a brown or black leather jacket. But, says the informant, today the capital is full of villagers, so the difference is not obvious anymore. Today cars identified with Atlantic cowboys – e.g. Opel Mantra and Toyota Corolla in the 1980s – are considered rather farcical. The new trend is to have expensive luxury cars – BMW always a hit among young boys showing muscles – that exhibit economic wealth more than anything else (Gaini, 2009). The owners of these vehicles are seldom amateur mechanics with dirty garages. They are not very young and they wear black shoes fitting to sterile offices in Torshavn. Women are also active car drivers with interest in motors and wheels, a shift from the strongly male domi-

nated era of the cowboys (Dennis and Urry, 2009).

Lifestyle and values

Cars are used as leisure playthings. The youngest drivers, aged about 18-23, often have free access to their parents' car in evenings and weekends. Faroese youths are, compared to contemporaries in many neighbouring countries, relatively independent and unrestricted in their relation to parents and other seniors in the family. This explains the large amount of young people driving in the streets at night. Driver's license holders are privileged to amuse themselves with cars without noteworthy caution from veteran drivers. The car functions as a mobile bar and discothèque without a dance floor. The driver tries, in fierce competition with driving comrades, to gather friends and attractive admirers into his car for a journey through the mountainous landscape after sunset.

The car is a sex symbol in modern media. Actually, it has been a symbol of seduction from the very beginning (Best, 2006). The car has – in movies, music, arts etc. – signified the fulfilment of man's erotic desires. It is a social stage where comedies and tragedies are played, but it is also a practical tool that makes everyday life more flexible, mobile and adventurous. You never know where the car takes you. At night, when others are sleeping or in the nightclub's neon lights, who is driving the car? Are the drivers boring outsiders without a social network? Or are they exactly the opposite? These questions have no simple answers. Young people driving alone without any fixed destination are trying to avoid boring family

life on tiring evenings. While driving around, they listen to music, chat on the telephone, write text messages and keep an eye on the movements in the environment. They are in fact quite busy.

It is a delicate job to try to illustrate the relationship between personality, cultural identity and lifestyle on the one hand, and traffic behaviour on the other. The sociological theory on drivers in danger is not easily uncovered. The wild child may drive in an exemplary manner while the quiet well-mannered boy may turn into a crazy speed hog when driving. What is well documented scientifically is that strong emotions, anger, trauma and depression can influence driving abilities negatively (Mogensen, 2002). Fatal misjudgements in traffic may start with a rage from the early morning. The driver may act like a person under the influence of alcohol even if he has not consumed any alcohol or drug. Young men can be relatively unsafe drivers because of lack of experience, but they can also be very trustworthy because their senses function well and they think and respond impressively fast.

On the endless road

Motoring has greatly influenced contemporary youth cultures around the globe. The car symbolizes a sweet freedom to move away from geographical, social and kinship limitations in everyday life. The car realizes some of the dreams of boys and girls, feeling locked up and under parental surveillance in urban and village communities (Wollen and Kerr, 2002). A resolute driver, never getting tired of circular car rides with his pals, was the rock star Elvis Presley. His juvenile

Memphis rides have no doubt directed many acclaimed rock hits.

“Throughout his life, his [Elvis’] favourite nontoxic form of recreation was racing through the streets of Memphis with his buddies in the wee hours of the morning, and unlike most celebrities, he scoffed at the idea of chauffeurs. Driving was simply too important” (Wollen and Kerr, 2002)

Many grown-ups are nostalgically longing back to youthful years with joyful night rides without any terminus. The car evokes the memory of past pleasures together with friends and curious strangers. The filmmaker George Lucas says about the American Graffiti (1973).

“That was my life. I spent four years driving around the main street of Modesto, chasing girls. It was the mating ritual of my times, before it disappeared and everybody got into psychedelia and drugs” (in Wollen and Kerr, 2002)

Modern man is homeless, or rather, he has a homeless mind, says Berger (Berger *et al.* 1974). The car is a good instrument in the search in vain for the imagined home, but it is also somehow a home in itself. The car, in a modern perspective, furnishes a vacuum in existence. The car hence signifies a shelter in a floating incomprehensible world. The Beat generation novelist Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957), describing his impulsive trip through bleak USA together with friends, has influenced generations of American youths. In the novel the car is the poor man’s property, not the affluent American’s luxury.

Also, most road movies involve marginalized characters without bright future prospects. The Faroese road movie *Bye Bye Blue Bird* (1999) is interesting, as it represents two girls on the edge from manifold angles: between childhood and adulthood, between local and global community, between tradition and (late) modernity. The sky-blue Ford Taunus, transporting the girls through the islands, couples these contrasting dimensions.

"My idea of a piece of sculpture is a road. That is, a road doesn't reveal itself at any particular point or from any particular point. Roads appear and disappear. We either have to travel on them or beside them. But we don't have a single point of view for a road at all, except a moving one, moving along it" (Carl Andre in Moran, 2009)

Accidents and tragedies

Most young people in the Faroe Islands have had direct or indirect experiences of severe traffic accidents. Girls and boys, if not themselves victims, have friends or relatives that have been involved in accidents on the roads. The Faroe Islands, a transparent small-scale society with traditional kinship relations, are jokingly regarded as 'one big family'. Anyway, this is more than just a comic statement. When the mortal accident occurs, the worst horror for the bereaved, the whole village or town is in mourning (Gaini, 2009). The loss of a son or a daughter is affecting the whole society, because the Faroe Islands are sensitive and unarmed in relation to many kinds of disasters. In past centuries whole village communities could

vanish when a local boat disappeared in stormy waters. The Faroe Islands have been a natural risk society from the beginning.

Young people chat about the accidents, about the victims and about infamous risky drivers that are still riding. They tell stories, give advice and warnings, as well as boast of personal death-defying episodes on the roads. Some details are subject to exaggeration in dramatic chronicles that often portray the car crash as the result of heroic behaviour. A 15-year-old female informant told me a shocking story:

"Once we drove in a car through the tunnel to Leirvík [village]. We were 5 persons in the car; two boys and three girls. We drove at about 190 km/h until we came to the curve in the tunnel; then the driver said with only one finger on the wheel: – if I now lose control, then it is just splash and tomorrow the death notices will be read on the radio"

Many of the tragic accidents that have killed boys and girls through the years happened in the early hours of the day when young people are on their way back home from parties and night clubs. Drivers are often very tired, affected by mixed feelings and distracted by their chatty friends on the backseat. The normally easy drive to the home village turns out to be a painful challenge with many pitfalls. Driving with breakneck speed when intoxicated is a suicidal act that has resulted in carnage on mountain roads (Gaini, 2009). The deadly collisions shake society's fabric and traumatize friends and relatives. Some of the close friends of the deceased continue, unaffected, their risk

behaviour with high speed and races on deserted road stretches. Nothing, it seems, can stop their game of death. Some boys even, implicitly, consider their dead comrades as car cult martyrs.

Street racing

Young people talk a lot about street races, but few have participated in them. Faroese street races are secret informal ventures without any clear organization. The street-racing youth doesn't represent an elaborate youth culture even if a limited group of young men form the hard core of the street-racing milieu. These men have similar values as street-racing youths from other North European countries. Finnish youth subcultures have strong street-racing traditions, says the sociologist Heli Vaaranen (2004).

"The street-racing youths used their cultural performance to create nighttime counter-experiences for their daytime experiences of lost opportunities. This counter-experience became 'a room of his own', it defined a street racer's masculine identity, and it functioned as a coping strategy to fight exclusion"

In Finland, Vaaranen unveils, the street-racing youths are in general marginalized working-class boys and girls that don't have many success stories from everyday life. The night-time show puts the otherwise marginalized man in the centre, makes him the hero with high status among peers. Faroese street-racing youths are not very different from other young drivers, but they are indeed risk takers that don't take road safety seriously. The street-racing youths are

usually young men from village working-class homes with a conservative interpretation of masculine values. Some of them are the sons of car loving Atlantic cowboys from the 1980s and 1990s. Usually the race, taking place far from residential areas at night, has two participating cars manned with the drivers only. Other persons control the race's start and finishing lines as well as the potential presence of police or other unwelcomed vehicles.

Reputed car-racing road stretches are, my informants tell me, most often long, wide and straight. But it is important to regularly change location in order to avoid the attention of the police. Besides, it would be boring routine, say some experienced informants, to use the same piece of road again and again. The racing youth's high spot are weekend nights when many races take place. Frequently, the races start accidentally, after the boys, gathered around their cars, have been engaged in boasting about power, fearlessness and women. Suddenly the rivaling pals have to rush to an appointed road for the risky street battle to begin. Another situation that can lead to impulsive street races is when a group of young people, driving in a couple of cars, is heading for a village or town in order to participate in social activities. All of a sudden two or three drivers, wanting to pilot the convoy, speed up and start a 'fast and furious' game.

Drivers that participate in spontaneous races often show egocentric behaviour, ignoring the terror their frightened backseat 'hostages' are subjected to. To give the passive passengers in risk taking drivers' cars the courage to say "stop!" is one of the main challenges in traffic accident prevention

work among young people (Gaini, 2009). To break the silence and verbally confront the mindless driver when feeling danger is very hard for a teenager that wants to be cool and popular among friends. The latent social pressure inside the car, affecting the passengers as well as the directing driver, can result in fatally wrong decisions taken in silence (Mogensen, 2002). The driver doesn't want to look nervous and anxious when his friends have their eye on him. The car culture of young men at risk has its own values and rituals that are incongruent with mainstream middle-class values.

Identity and risk behaviour

During the last years motorbikes in large numbers have been imported to the Faroe Islands, giving street-races a new meaning. The new interest in heavy motorbikes reflects new youth cultural trends that involve even more hazardous driving than during the Atlantic cowboys' heyday era. The motorbike races in the underwater tunnel to the town of Klaksvik, mentioned by several informants, are especially hair-raising.

"The North Islands tunnel: they keep watch on both ends of the tunnel. Then they enter to check if any car is in the tunnel. If no one is there two cars start a race from one end to the other. They record the race on mobile phone video cameras and think it is very funny"

The last years the street-racing youth has lost respect and value among most other youth groups that consider their lifestyle irrational, harmful and primitive (Gaini 2006). A boy says that today only "villagers, the 'cool' boys

and fishermen" do street-racing. Anyway, it is not simply a question of taking risks and being immature as a driver, because many street-racing youths are self-educated motor specialists with an obsessive car fascination. Some of them are also, even if considered crazy devils on wheels, technically very good drivers with vigilant senses. Let's say they just happen to violate traffic legislation. But several fatal crashes, involving these young drivers, attest that they are not invulnerable, something they unfortunately often imagine themselves to be. Maybe you are a brilliant driver now, a Faroese driving school teacher tells his young naïve students, but remember that the other drivers are reckless fools on the roads.

Security didn't come to the mind of Faroese drivers before a lot of young blood had been spilled on the roads (Sigvardsen and Kragestein, 2003). The first generations of fishermen converted to car drivers were awarded the license before they knew the difference between the accelerator and break. Everyone, old or young, wanted to be part of the drivers' happy fraternity. The local newspapers had weekly stories about people driving into rivers and canyons, even into the deep sea from harbours as well as unlikely crashes on narrow village paths. Very few people used the seatbelt, which was simply considered an aesthetic decoration. Even small children travelled without any security belt. The shift from small oar boats to ultra-modern motor vehicles is a bloody tale with a very long ripening period. The security question, risk minimization, was completely missing when most needed.

Youth car cultures can be described as reflections of young people's need to create

new meanings and styles. Young people are determined to take their own decisions regarding direction, rapidity and destination in life's manifold challenges (Best 2006). Young people desire to form new cultural constructions by combining well-known things in new ways. The car is regarded as a key to success in this latemodern society mission (Dennis and Urry, 2009). The problem arises when someone tries to legitimize his capacities, cultural status and social capital through car driving. Such persons normally hold a relatively marginalized position in society. Young speed hogs often act in a delirium of untamed emotions. These drivers feel joy and frenzied enthusiasm when riding the roads. Nothing can stop them. Also the risky high speed drive can be a provocative counter-cultural message to the adult generations (Best, 2006).

Bad boys and marginalization

Social marginalization is closely linked to behaviour in traffic. It is not coincidental that some young people end in traffic incidents, again and again, while other young drivers take no risks and are very anonymous on the roads. Kevin Mogensen (2002), a Danish researcher, says:

"Youths with risk-identity, risk-youths and risk-drivers are typically youths that don't have any other place where they can explore their identity without the feeling of being disliked and marginalized. Risk-youths can have problems to adapt to institutional contexts – family, school, education and working-places – that demand the youth to act in reflexive and individualistic styles"

Latemodern society, according to Mogensen who writes about Danish male drivers, puts new stifling demands on young men with strong masculine identities. The new 'freedom' propagated by preachers of latemodernity feels like a heavy burden on these. The car comes to their rescue in this dilemma.

"The big freedom that apparently gives the individual the chance to be exactly the one he wants to is frightening. It is favourably substituted in situations with much smaller pressure and simpler demands. The car is in one way the youth's last free resort. Here there are uncomplicated rules of game and social relations that you yourself choose to relate to. In cars youths can, for a while, escape from and suspend society's and time's forced on freedom; they can be free...from freedom"

Another interesting observation that I made during my fieldwork among young drivers is the way life and death are portrayed by the boys and girls. Many drivers that almost got killed in traffic accidents are Christians with a strong belief in God as their saviour. The survival is therefore often described as a miracle with extraordinary coincidences. Life after the 'doomsday' crash is often considered a message from God that gives the driver a second change to 'improve' lifestyle and moral values. In a very fatalistic fashion some drivers describe tragic events as a prophetic drama orchestrated by divine powers. In other cases the shocking crash is illustrated as the awakening hour when a lost boy found God. The crash symbolizes the shift from a miserable existence to a life as passio-

nate believer. The car is hence the agent that leads to revelation.

Many young road victims, seriously disabled and traumatized, are surprisingly positive when discussing their past as notorious risky drivers. Some are even proud of their wild life on the edge before the final collision smashed their fragile bodies. Some young fearless men that lost close friends in accidents even proclaim that nothing will change these boys' attitudes and behaviour on the roads (Gaini, 2009). Like a deep instinct, they say, the driver will do the same again and again as long as he is able to steer this diabolic machine. The rush felt when speeding up the car is thrilling, making rapidity an addiction difficult to cut. The power of the car sets the maximum line that the boy tries to reach in suicidal driving orgies. If the car was not the global car cult's holy cow many people would strongly claim that not everyone is an acceptable driver; they would say that not everyone has the right to drive a car (op cit).

Death and survival on the roads

In 1999 a deadly car accident happened on the island of Suðuroy. Only one out of four boys in the car survived the crash. The surviving boy tells the story of car driving with friends in an article:

"Tey used to drive madly, Fróði admits. Tey gave everything that the car could manage. Sometimes, when no one was around, the speed was around 200 km/h. He stopped with this after the accident [1999], and now he is more careful when driving. 'We did not, as you often hear, drive to boast. It was not like that. It is

maybe like going to the amusement park Tivoli. It is to experience a rush. The difference is that in Tivoli you are passive. There you just sit in the roller coaster and cannot do anything. When you drive fast, you steer it yourself. You trust yourself, the adrenalin is pumping, and it is exciting', he explains. [...] That one of them could die was not on their mind, even if people had warned them" (the journal LÍT, 2000)

Two years later yet another dreadful accident – this time on Eysturoy – extinguished three young lives. Early in the morning a brand-new Ford Mondeo loaded with 5 passengers aged 17-22 was found completely ruined beside the road. Such accidents shake the whole Faroese society. The unspeakable trauma echoed throughout the local community that the victims belonged to was hard to overcome for many years. The societal vacuum that fatal car accidents create influences many people in many ways. A man in wheel-chair tells his sad story as an unfortunate driver in a newspaper article.

"19th December 1988. I will never forget that day. I wish it was just a normal day that was soon forgotten – but it is definitely not easy when you are left with the consequences of this day. It was the day when my life turned 180 degrees. That day I did the most stupid thing I ever done, and I will never forgive myself for this, but that does not help me in any way [...] I don't remember the accident itself, because I was unconscious without any memory for several days [...] My message to young people is: think twice before entering the car when intoxicated, don't do it, take a

taxi. Don't let a small drive take your lives. I don't want others to end up like me just because of stupidity. I could have escaped all this if I had not searched for the car key that Sunday night before Christmas in 1988. Finally I want to say that I am happy to live when I think about how close I was to losing my life."

The dream of cars underlying most young people's struggle to get the driver's license is a dream of freedom, amusement and stimulation; it is also a dream of reaching new cultural and social horizons. The tragedies on the roads, regularly in the media's searchlight, don't break the dreams of all young people. Even victims of accidents caused by reckless drivers preserve the illusion of cars as harmless irreplaceable instruments of life in latemodern society.

"Almost four weeks have gone since 18-year-old John Sigurd Danielsen [JS] from Strendur was injured in an accident where the driver lost control of the car, which looped. JS suffered severe head injuries, without consciousness for two days, was urgently sent to Denmark [...] We had been bowling in Leirvík, two friends and me. That is the last thing I remember before the crash. The next thing I remember is when two days later, I wake up in Denmark, says JS. He can therefore not tell us how he experienced the accident itself [...] He was sent to Denmark and was lying in a respirator for two days. After 17 days in Denmark, he could be sent home to the Faroe Islands last Friday. He has been in hospital in Torshavn since that, but according to plans he will get out

of hospital today [...] He tells that he had started to attend a driving school when the accident happened. In four months JS's finger will be normal again, and he will continue his lessons to obtain a driver's license" (Dam, 2007)

This teenager, who could easily have lost his life in a crash, looks very much forward to going back to the driving school to get introductory skills in the art of driving. The dream of cars has not been substituted by other future dreams. The relationship between youth and cars is elastic; it can move from intimate to relatively distant, but it is seldom clearly cut off. Like a boomerang the car, for most Faroese boys and girls, comes back when you try to get rid of it (Gaini, 2009). But young heretics contesting contemporary society's car culture hegemony are gaining ground – reflected in the Atlantic cowboys' fading power among young men – at a time when cultural currents are amalgamated and reconstructed in the postmodern maelstrom of youth identities.

Analysis and conclusions

The art of driving involves different levels of risk taking by individuals with different risk behaviour patterns. The driver's observable driving style unveils many elements of risk, but other elements are not recognized before the 'unexpected' accident is a fact... The risk factor is hence never under full control through advanced risk management (Marshall and Picou, 2008). It takes many years to become a good and safe driver. Experienced drivers can forecast many dangerous situations in traffic in order to avoid the potential accident, but they are not prophets

without weaknesses. The problem is that human beings will always run into hazardous scenarios because of the impact of sentiments, irrational meditation and dreamlike imagination on our interaction and behaviour.

On a cultural level it is interesting to present the generational divide regarding the meaning and value of risk behaviour. Young people have through centuries been blamed for immoral risky lifestyles of all kinds (Best, 2006). They are condemned as irresponsible, egocentric hedonists with little respect of the rules and order of society. Periods of moral panics – with fear and anger towards youth generations accused of anarchistic attitudes and destructive social behaviour – are inherent components of modern society. Cohen says, “A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests” (in Boethius, 1995: 41). The panic sometimes develops into hysterical emotional campaigns against non-conformist minorities in society.

Some young men and women, labelled lost ‘outsiders’ by mainstream middle-class youths, feel discriminated and stigmatized in their everyday lives (Vaaranen, 2004). This youth group doesn’t get cultural recognition by the society and sticks to its own subcultural values and styles – e.g. the street-racing youth and other risk-taking drivers. The drivers taking severe risks on the roads are often in a multifarious mission of resistance towards the power holders of society. The researcher Boethius (1995: 49) says:

“Children and youth often feel (as do women) dependent, suppressed and bound.

They therefore tend (at least in the middle class) to challenge and provoke the older generation – the generation that possesses social, political, pedagogical and economic power...”

The meaning of cars in youth car cultures is usually very far from the formal authorities’ negative images of young drivers – especially young working-class men (Best, 2006). The car is much more than a speedy vehicle that young individuals abuse in self-centred leisure activities. The so-called TWOC youth in USA illustrates the complex ever-changing youth–cars–culture relation.

“In her book Goliath, Campbell (1993) discusses the TWOCers whose behaviour caused such media fury for a few years in the 1980s/1990s. The TWOCing was ‘taking cars without the owner’s consent’. Campbell writes of one group of young men on a particular estate who used such cars to demonstrate their driving skills to their admiring peers. From 10 at night they transformed what was otherwise thought of as the square near the shopping centre into an arena of dramatic performance. Outrageous speeds, handbrake turns, sudden stops, and dramatic exits. After 10 at night this space belonged to them; everyone else kept well clear. [...] After 10 this was young men’s territory” (Massey, 1998: 128)

The car is part of a territorial struggle where young people normally are the weak part that has to accept unattractive border areas far from the prestigious centres of society. The strategic segregation process separating

non-conformist youths from the rest is often linked to political risk discourses. The risky youth is, implicitly, not supposed to have much contact with the risk-free groups in society because of a 'risk fencing' policy. The ideational suppression of youth with risk behaviour is today more elaborate than ever before. Risk was a natural part of everyday life on the rocky islands when natural forces in the form of wind, rain, fog and stormy waters had to be faced from the age of 14. The concept of risk itself was ambiguous and beyond human judgement.

The free untamed mind, characterizing many youngsters, was praised, not suppressed, in traditional society. There was no strict separation between work and leisure, duties and privileges. Even the analytic distinction between youth and adults was uncommon in premodern society. Young and old worked closely together and were hence in friendly social interaction that secured the smooth reproduction of cultural values from generation to generation. The reckless young driver that spreads horror and panic in his home community is seldom accompanied by elder passengers. The boy is probably not even talking to his elders about his high speed car driving.

This text has put young men in focus, but young women take part in all the car cultures in the Faroe Islands. There might be less focus on women as drivers in the public discourse and media in general, but the fact is that women are very active participants in most cruising and racing missions. They are still a minority among the hard core drivers with high risk behaviour, but they are no longer excluded from the traditional

masculine sphere of society. The Atlantic cowboys of the 1970s and 1980s lived in a society characterized by deep gender divisions regarding young people's leisure, lifestyle and identities. There has been a shift in society since the 1990s. Today young women with a deep interest in motor vehicles and engines feel free to act like the lads on the roads.

Nobody can become totally risk-free. The so-called 'risk society' is characterized by the 'democratization' of risk, which implies the spreading of unwanted risk to all social and cultural layers of society, even if the wealthy classes indeed invest huge amounts of money in order to improve security and reduce risk in their own neighbourhoods (Beck, 1992; 1998; 2008). Young people – especially young men – are often considered the most dangerous participants in car traffic in modern societies. It might be a statistically correct statement, but the ironic side effect of the public warning against young male drivers is the desperation and aggressiveness of the outsiders that take risks on the roads. The rough prejudices against young drivers, labelling a whole generation as senseless road users, are largely unfair and ineffective. The car cultures reflect youth cultures that reflect general currents in contemporary culture. It is in other words a larger construction involving adults as well as young people.

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