

# On Men and Cars

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF GENDERED, RISKY AND DANGEROUS RELATIONS

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*A modified car on display at a car show. Photo by the author.*





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# 1

## **What's up with modified cars?**

If the car is understood to be as much a product of its particular cultural context as a force then it follows that, prior to an analysis of that larger cultural environment, we cannot presume as to what a car might be. (Miller 2001: 17)

For young men, the car, the motorcycle and other motor vehicles appear not only or even primarily as a macho tool. On the contrary, they constitute machines which can be used to measure, test or try one's (understanding of) masculinity. This also makes possible to redefine one's sense of masculinity. (Bjurström 1995: 234)

Our cars make more noise, they are more visible and we are more dedicated drivers than others. (Conny, a male modifier, about car modifiers)

This thesis is about the construction of gender among Swedish car modifiers. Car modifiers share an interest in redesigning their cars by rebuilding, replacing, upgrading and working on the car. The thesis explores the significance of the car in young and middle-aged car modifiers' lives. As will become clear, car modifiers develop a material and symbolic relationship with the motorcar in ways that far transcend its user value as a means of transportation (cf. Urry 2004). By exploring the world of car modification in a Swedish context, the thesis also addresses the construction of masculine identities in relation to cars. Just as clothes and dress can be a medium for exploring the ways in which people formulate their identity in material ways (cf. Attfield 2000: 254), car

modifiers construct their identity in relation to cars. I take my point of departure in a broad theoretical framework in which technology and gender are co-constructed, meaning that technology can never be considered neutral (Cockburn 1992, Faulkner 2001, Wajcman 2004, Lohan and Faulkner 2004). Cars are not neutral because they shape their users in various ways and cars are, by being modified, also shaped by their users and owners. By studying the ways in which car modifiers appropriate the motorcar in other ways than for transportation, and modify their cars into other designs than those originally given them, we can gain insights into how subjects are produced through objects. The ways in which this is done carry meanings of gendered and cultural significance (Bengry-Howell 2005: 151). Like other designed artefacts, cars are objects that not only express and reproduce, but may also challenge, gender stereotypes (Pettersson McIntyre 2010). Therefore, car modification and modified cars can be considered as integrated into the ways in which car modifiers “do” gender and gendered identities.

In order to study how gender and cars are related to each other, I turn to a specific male-dominated Swedish community of car users – primarily younger men who invest time, money and skills in rebuilding their cars. In public discourse, young men in cars are, I argue, considered to be risk-takers and potentially dangerous to other road users. A well-known Swedish motor journalist, Robert Collin, stresses that it is the young men who are the “real” “speed demons”; these are the men who kill themselves when speeding, foremost because they have not yet learned to know their place appropriately (Collin 2007). The young men in this study and their modified cars – with alloy wheels, lowered suspensions, upgraded stereos and noisy engines – would easily fit into this description. Their car modifications, however, as I elaborate throughout the following chapters, are also about making the car attractive, making it visible, evaluating, scrutinizing and making it desirable. As such, the modified car seems paradoxical in terms of gender – simultaneously a tool for masculine bravado and risk-taking and an object of care and desire. This area is thought-provoking because it makes one wonder why anyone would risk such a precious car by driving dangerously. What is their motivation to modify cars? What concepts of masculinity are produced in the relation

men and cars? Do men and cars form dangerous relations? If so, what do these relations look like?

There are many ways of naming a person who is invested in modified cars in Swedish vernacular; they could be called *car builders* [bilbyggare], or one could talk about *car enthusiasts*, *car customizers* or *hobby customizers*. I use an English translation that I find best captures the spirit of these subjects: *car modifiers*. This term is used by car modifiers in English-speaking contexts (cf. Bengry-Howell & Griffin 2007, Lumsden 2009a, 2009b), and is here used in a broad sense: it captures their interest in modifying cars and is predicated on nothing less than the veneration of the motorcar as a symbolic and material object (Bengry-Howell 2005: 155). These car modifiers make up a social category of car users who are symbolically associated with cars, perhaps more than other road users, for their close social interaction, self-representation and indeed excitement (Featherstone 2004). Usually, but not exclusively, modified *street cars*<sup>1</sup> [gatbil] are associated with a youthful style and younger generations of modifiers. This study engages primarily with those young and middle-aged men and women who *modify* and *style* (“style” as in car styling) *contemporary* European car models, often everyday cars from the 1990s onwards, though older cars and generations of car modifiers are also part of the study. Hence, the primary focus of the study is the genre of *car styling*, associated with the modification of contemporary cars.

One of the central themes of the thesis is that car modification plays an important role in the formation of modifiers’ gendered selves. This means that I understand car modification as both a material and a symbolic practice, which implies both practice and negotiations of car modifiers’ gendered selfhoods in the particular context where these codings, acts and practices are taking place. The project of selfhood is never complete: it is an ongoing process of “doing” selfhood, a process that in this particular context involves cars. Drawing on the book *Car Cultures* in which Daniel Miller argues for an understanding of the car as a cultural process and “a product of its particular cultural context as a force” (Miller 2001: 17), I do

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<sup>1</sup> A streetcar in American English means a tram. Street car is in this thesis used to designate modified everyday cars.

not consider the car to be something that is stable and fixed in meaning. Instead, I take the opportunity to problematise the car itself through gender analysis. As already mentioned, and as I will come back to throughout the following chapters, car modification is not only about modifiers re-shaping their cars in various ways; their cars also shape them and their perceptions of themselves. A car may make emotional impressions on a driver; a car communicates certain messages about its driver, often related to masculinity, class, sexuality and status.

However, what is of particular interest is how car modifiers challenge and question of what a car *is* by expanding the *possibilities* of cars. Car modifiers do not take cars' original design as final; just because it has been materialized in a specific way in the car factory, this does not mean that this is the way the car should look. What has once been materialized may also be modified and charged with new meaning. This way of modifying the already materialized is the point of departure for modifiers; it is by doing car modifications that the modifier comes into existence. Their arena of expression lies in between what has previously been done with cars and car designs, what is considered possible and impossible to do with cars and car designs (Pettersson McIntyre 2010). By pioneering cars into shapes that are out of the ordinary, car modifiers develop new fusions that both confirm and challenge acceptable boundaries of both cars and gender. Their dedication to cars, to care for cars, to modify cars and to develop cars means that modifiers are contributing to the material and symbolic (re-)construction of the nature of the car. Could this mean that to unsettle what a car is, by modifying it, new meanings of gender may be "built into" the car and gender may be performed in ways that challenge gender conventions, as in a risky relation? Or do car modifiers, despite opening up the car for new shapes and inscriptions, confirm traditional notions of heterosexual masculinity? Similar to the way in which gender orders and dominant ways of doing gender are changeable, car modification may manifest new and challenging modes of gender performance. This thesis contributes to understanding how cars may *reiterate* as well as *challenge* dominant notions of gender: in particular notions of masculinity and how masculinity is brought into existence through cars and car modification.



The fieldwork that has generated the material upon which this thesis is based involves the collection of data from multiple sources and engagement with research subjects, which in this case has taken place over a period in excess of three years. The main part of the fieldwork was carried out between March and November 2008. The material stems from fieldwork carried out at car shows, in cars and in garages. I have used a diverse range of empirical material gathered and created in different contexts, for example magazines, videos and interactions in web forums, as well as interviews and observations at car shows. Interviews are an important part of my research material. In total, fifty-three men and fourteen women between the ages of nineteen and sixty make up the informants. Ethnographic studies offer ways of learning about a world by being there, seeing, experiencing and hearing it, with the aim of understanding what everyday life is about in the setting under study. Modifiers have shared with me their ideas, experiences and thoughts about the process of modifying cars, using and driving them and the related social meanings associated with such cars. Analytically I am interested in what they reveal about the broader social issues that constitute them: selfhood and cars, social interaction and cars, cars and power, stratification, status and risk-taking. My goal is for this thesis to contribute to a deeper knowledge of how and why the car is so deeply embedded in gendered social life (cf. Conley and McLaren 2009, Böhm et al. 2006). Taken together, the study encompasses five interlinked gendered dimensions of the car and car modifier culture:

- firstly, *why* the research subjects turn to modifying cars;
- secondly, *how* this reshaping and styling of cars is (ideally) done;
- thirdly, *what* car modifiers produce in terms of cars and symbolic values;
- fourthly, the significance they ascribe to *showing* and *evaluating* their modified cars;
- fifthly, the significances associated with *driving* such cars.

Each of these particular gendered dimensions will be further elaborated in the empirical chapters that follow.

## On men and cars: risks and problems

When I talk about Men and Cars, as many other scholars have done before me, I focus on male-dominated and masculinity-connoting contexts (cf. Nilsson 2011, Nehls 2003, Mellström 2002, 2004, Andersson 2003, Fundberg 2003). A problem with such a focus is the risk of reinscribing masculinity as fixed and as the property of men, and by doing so, reproducing the connection between already-established ideas and norms about men and masculinity (Nilsson 2011). This study provides knowledge about how masculinity is reproduced through cultural and social processes. The advantage of such an approach is that it allows us to understand the reproduction of a gendered paradox: namely, despite the fact that women drive cars, modify cars and take risks, the relation between men and cars is often considered a “natural” connection (Polk 1998, Mellström 2004, Landström 2006, Redshaw 2008). The relationship between men, masculinity and cars is perhaps one of the most taken-for-granted gendered relations one can think of. As scholars working on gender and technology have argued before me, the symbolic link between men, masculinity and cars is a cultural phenomenon that is continuously (re-)produced in cultural meaning-making (Faulkner 2001, Mellström 2003a, 2003b, Wajcman 2004, Landström 2006). Wendy Faulkner (2001) argues that this symbolic association between masculinity and technology is interlinked with cultural images and representations of technology that also tend to converge with prevailing images of masculinity and power (cf. Balsamo 1996). This study contributes to such knowledge production by addressing men’s relationships with technology as both users and designers of cars. Hence, I wish to contribute towards explaining the tenacity of the equation between masculinity and technology while, by doing so, providing a basis for destabilising this equation (Faulkner 2001: 81).

Although the focus of my research is primarily on men and constructions of masculinity, I also discuss women in the context of car modification. I concur with Victoria Robinson (2008: 5) and others, who argue for the importance of including the voices of women in studies on men and masculinities. By doing so, I am able to interrogate male modifiers’ narratives and practices from an alternative standpoint. The interviews and time spent with women in car modification allowed me to investigate

women's experiences as participants in car modification as a traditionally male-defined cultural domain. Judith Halberstam (1998) suggests the concept of "female masculinity" to undermine the taken-for-granted association between maleness and masculinity as the "real thing". To consider the gender performances of both male and female modifiers through cars opens up the fruitful possibility of emphasising that masculinity is not only the property of male bodies, nor is femininity the property of female bodies. As will become evident, women also identify with typically masculine positions, such as the street racer and the modifier.

The concept of "dangerousness", Deborah Lupton (1999a: 91) argues, tended to be used in relation to problems of health and crime. In particular, "dangerous individuals" and "dangerous classes" were identified as possessing the inherent qualities of presenting danger not only to themselves, but also to others. Lupton notes a shift from dangerousness to risk, which indicates a move from individuality to the identification of background factors that helps experts to identify members of groups "at risk". The consequence of this shift in focus from "dangerousness" to "risk" is that external intervention is no longer linked only to that individual's own behaviour, but is also predicated on their membership of a specific "risk group" (Lupton 1999a: 94). In the context of traffic safety, young men in particular are addressed as "at risk" both for themselves and for others. This is exemplified in the following excerpt from the Swedish Transport Administration:

Many studies show that there is a dividing line between men and women in the perception of safety in traffic. Certainly, many women experience the thrill of speed, but often adjust their speed to avoid accidents. Men tend to overestimate their own driving ability and underestimate the risks in traffic. 92 percent of those convicted of insane driving (more than 36 percent above the speed limit) are men. Men use safety belts to a lesser extent than women. 90 percent of those convicted of drunk driving are men. The largest risk group in traffic is young men. In comparison to young women, young men killed eleven times as many pedestrians during the period 1994-2001. (Vägverket 2005, my translation)

In the report cited above from 2005, concerned with gender equality<sup>2</sup> within the transport sector by the Swedish Transport Administration, traffic accidents are framed as a gendered matter. The same authority holds that one of the most pressing precautions to decrease the overall number of traffic accidents concerns minimising speeding (8 out of 10 people convicted of speeding are men) (Trafikverket 2012). Public discourses surrounding traffic safety issues identify men's overrepresentation in traffic accidents and risk-taking in traffic, thus making it possible to articulate both the gendered and aged character of a particularly dangerous relation (cf. Balkmar 2007, 2009, 2010, 2011, Balkmar & Joelsson 2010). This intrigued me, especially since traffic violations occur in all age groups eligible for driving, but the concept of the reckless teenage driver (cf. Best 2006) has had consequences for how a dangerous driver is imagined and how the problems associated with this age category are remedied (Balkmar 2007, 2009). From the perspective of traffic safety statistics, the pairing of young men and cars seems to make up a particularly dangerous and problematic relation.

Young men and their cars as a typically risky relation is also something that other researchers on cars and gender have noted and explored. Sarah Redshaw (2008: 79) argues that young people are often seen as the rebels of the driving community. These are the drivers who are often focused on by the media alongside characteristics of personality such as aggression and propensity for risk-taking (Redshaw 2008: 79). Scholars working on

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<sup>2</sup> Research on traffic and transport has increasingly identified and tried to incorporate issues of gender equality in areas such as transport planning, transport use and transport needs and in analyses of traffic accidents and traffic deaths in Sweden (Vägverket 2005, Transgen 2007, Uteng and Cresswell 2008). At a policy level, in Sweden there has been a particular interest in developing transport guiding principles that are informed by a gender equity perspective. This particular policy raises concerns about how to understand, address and integrate gender equality in the transportation system (Polk 1998, 2001, Res Jämt 2005, Balkmar 2009). Gender equality here means that women and men, regardless of sex, should have the same possibilities to live in gender equal ways, also when it comes to the transport system: as beneficiaries, developers and maintainers of the same. It should be added that the Swedish state has often been seen as a woman-friendly state and a very strong sponsor of gender equality policies, promoted partly by state feminism (Hearn et al. 2012).

young car modifiers have discussed young drivers as being labelled as troublesome drivers (as gatherings of “hoons”, “boy racers” or “joy riders”) (Bengry-Howell 2005, Bengry-Howell and Griffin 2007, Hatton 2007, Lumsden 2009a, 2010, Graham and White 2007). The usage of the term “boy racer”, Andrew Bengry-Howell (2005: 72) argues, reflects its meaning in a wider cultural context, namely a type of young male motorist, who “drove recklessly and generally at high speeds”. This negative image of young drivers as dangerous is also reproduced in Swedish media representations. It is a form of representation that articulates gatherings of young drivers as being in the wrong place at the wrong time and using cars in the wrong kind of way.<sup>3</sup>

In commercial messages, the symbolic meaning of styled cars may be used to convey concepts of danger and risk. A couple of years ago the petrol company *Statoil* produced a commercial for their products with the help of young men in styled cars as part of a small town cruiser scene<sup>4</sup>. The commercial begins with a scene where the cars are being used to create smoke and screeching sounds by performing so-called burnouts. In these humorous commercials using styled cars and their drivers, a young man refrains from engaging in a street race with another young man for a particular reason; not because it is dangerous, but for the sake of economy. He says to the viewers: “no more aggressive driving” (“ingen mer aggressiv körning helt enkelt”) and drives at a slow pace away from the scene of the race. In this commercial, car-oriented masculinity familiar

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<sup>3</sup> By using the Google search engine, typing in search words like “buskörning”, “street racing” and “unga förare”, the hits I got from Swedish newspapers generated a similar picture reflecting (young) men and cars as a relation “at risk”. In reports on street racing on public roads it is particularly young people (read: men) who are referred to; their driving is associated with macho culture, play and a non-concern with their own and other people’s safety (Andåker 2008, Bergquist 2002, Stengård 2010, Uvhagen 2010, Ekman 2011, Spetsmark 2011, VK 2011). Gatherings of young men in cars may be associated with screeching tyres, roaring engines and high speeds (Nyheter p4 Jönköping 2011), their intentions may be presented as wanting to disturb others (Biamont, 2011a, 2011b). Explanatory value is put on the drivers’ young age, their alleged immaturity or the fact that they are new licence holders (Nyheter p4 Jönköping 2011). Their risk-taking is explained as a way of revolting as a young person (Spetsmark 2011), or as reflecting a growing egoism in society (Rundqvist 2007).

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yhbGgBwWBac>, accessed 28 March 2012.

from the movies (*American Graffiti* and *The Fast and the Furious* to name just two) is recognised, ridiculed and deconstructed; the reckless young male driver stereotype signifies an outdated and obsolete way of performing masculine driving, here associated not only with a culturally shared image of “the car nerd”, but also with backwardness and the rural. This would suggest that young men, their cars and their ways of driving are associated with risk-creating and problem-creating activities. It is my hope that my research can contribute to nuance and trouble these relations.

### Aim and research questions

The particular ethnographic approach to car modifiers that I have adopted entails seeking to expand qualitative knowledge about men's relations to cars. By approaching cars and car driving as a social and cultural practice, I utilise a cultural studies approach in order to contribute to a better understanding of the potentials and benefits that cars are supposed to fulfil in young and middle-aged modifiers' lives. I have already noted that the domain of cars is permeated by ideas about gender, and that cars are systematically associated with masculinity, among other intersections. These are all associations that do not survive by themselves. They are patterns that need to be repeated in order to survive and appear natural (Ottemo and Gårdfeldt 2009). Through their shared interests, car modifiers both produce and reproduce preferences and negotiations, ideas about what masculinity and technology such as cars mean. My aim with this study is to contribute to a deeper understanding of how gender, primarily masculinity, is interrelated with car-related identities, practices and material constructions.

I investigate this by studying car modification, that is, by utilising how modifiers modify, display and drive their cars, I want to examine how cars work as a means of communicating identity and belonging, and to consider how gender and cars are made meaningful within the context of cultural patterns that make certain associations more reasonable and natural than others. To realise this aim I study car modification in Sweden with reference to modifiers' shared interests, preferences, experiences and negotiations of car-related practices.

The following research questions have guided my work:

- Why do the research subjects modify cars and how do these meanings relate to their identities as car-owning subjects?
- How do modifiers acquire the inspiration and knowledge to modify cars, and how is car modification (ideally) done?
- How are different genres and styles of modifying cars gendered?
- How do modifiers show and evaluate their cars?
- How do modifiers construct and emotionally invest in risk-taking?

Although most of these research questions are posed in general and gender-neutral terms, I am interested in the ways in which gender, in particular the relation between men, masculinity and technology, is used, negotiated and reproduced within each of these dimensions of car modification. Together, the research questions frame the key social practices that configure car-related subjectivities and modified car culture(s) more broadly. Each of these research questions will be addressed in the empirical chapters that follow. Even though each question is designed to be answered largely in one of the empirical chapters, they do overlap and open up in various ways to other issues and links between them. I will address these links and overlaps throughout, not least in the final chapter.

People and modified cars, why is this important?

Why is gender in the context of car modifier culture an interesting and important research topic? How does it matter to gender studies? Already in the initial phase of this project I was interested in applying a feminist perspective to what I perceived as dangerous driving practices in traffic. This topic is well known in conventional research on traffic safety, yet under-researched in terms of knowledge about how men construct masculinity within the context of traffic<sup>5</sup>. By turning to car modifiers as the

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<sup>5</sup> Conventional research on traffic safety has considered gender mostly from perspectives of psychology and behaviourism, rather than its social and cultural dimensions (Summerton & Berner 2002, Redshaw 2008).

context for exploring how gender and cars are related, it has been my belief that I could challenge some preconceptions about men and cars in favour of more complex ways of understanding them. At the centre of this project are the voices of car modifiers themselves and my own observations from ethnographic fieldwork. Their talk about re-building cars, designs, speeding and competing with cars, and sometimes encountering the law and the police are part of their existence within Swedish car culture.

Cars in general have come to represent symbols of modernity, linking display, individualism, materiality and mobility in particular ways (Garvey 2001: 143). Car consumption is in itself part of late modern self-styling, perhaps even more today when customers can choose from a large range of car brands, car aesthetics and upgrades. A broader public recognises car modifiers through their visibility in cars, but also as those having the power and skills to bring worn-out cars back to life or having the ambition to manipulate ordinary-looking cars into unique eye catchers. Car modification is *influential* and is taken up as a significant cultural practice by young and middle-aged men and to some extent also by women. This ambition and culture to reshape, rebuild and modify cars has a transnational reach, perhaps most blatantly recognised by the multitude of US TV shows dedicated to car customising of various kinds. The MTV show *Pimp my Ride*<sup>6</sup>, and *American Hot Rod*<sup>7</sup> signify the unique purchase that “American” car styling culture has globally. In Sweden, these shows have their Swedish successors in *Classes bilstyling* and the show *Biltokig*, both reporting on the widespread popular interest to be found in Sweden and elsewhere in the automobile as both a hobby and a cult phenomenon.

Despite the intense interest in men and cars in the media and popular culture, the topic has, with some exceptions (Bjurström 1990, 1995, Rosengren 2000, O'Dell 2001, Vaaranen 2004, Bengry-Howell 2005,

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<sup>6</sup> *Pimp My Ride* is a TV show produced by MTV. In each episode a car in poor condition is restored and customised. (<http://www.pimpmyride.com/>)

<sup>7</sup> *American Hot Rod* is a reality TV show (originally aired between 2004-2008) that is about the crew at Boyd Coddington's car shop in La Habra, California USA and their struggles to build hot rods and custom vehicles under tight deadlines.



Landström 2006, Hatton 2007), largely escaped the attention of researchers. As argued by Daniel Miller (2001: 6), this is surprising, especially considering the amount of literature that has been produced on other forms of material culture. Scholars of male aesthetics have studied masculinity being performed through the figure of the Dandy and the “metrosexual man”, the latter signifying an urban heterosexual man, usually middle-class, with a preoccupation with appearance, aesthetics and consumption (Frisell-Ellburg 2008: 145). This form of masculinity is often associated with a “looked-at-ness” of men (Dyer 1982, Neale 1983), often associated with the feminization or homosexualising of heterosexual men (Coad 2008, Wickman 2011). Lately, such studies have also involved “ordinary” men’s fashion practices (Nordberg and Mörck 2007). Marie Nordberg and Magnus Mörck (2007) argue that it is usually those most visible and extraordinarily figures, embodied by body builders (Johansson 1998), subgroups (Hebdige 1979/2008), or dress (Jacobsson 1998), that have become the focus of study. My study also focuses on “extraordinary figures”, and by doing so, highlighting especially how *cars* become important artefacts through which men are being fashioned and associated with power (see also Nordberg and Mörck 2007: 121). Having said this, I view car modification as continuing from and part of car culture in general. I do not study car modifiers as independent from, or outside, the wider social, political and economic contexts. Car modification does not take place in a vacuum. The ways in which the participants in this study do things, talk and practise car modification also say something about what discourses and gendered ways of being are available in a wider context.

From a gender studies perspective, cars, car driving and identity-formation through cars are relevant since constructions of masculinity are closely tied to power, embodiment, movement, space and representation (Connell 2000, Whitehead 2002, Mellström 2002, 2004, Uteng and Cresswell 2008, Letherby and Reynolds 2009, Nordberg and Mörck 2007). Indeed, the association between men, masculinity, machines and cars has a long history and is nothing new (Scharff 1991). Both car travel and the ideas of freedom and movement associated with the car are thus persistently linked with a masculine domain and masculine identity (Transgen 2007, Uteng and Cresswell 2008). Even though the car is a technology that has strong social

and cultural alignments with men and masculinity, rather little research has *explicitly* engaged with these gendered processes in relation to cars (a few exceptions are Bjurström 1990, Polk 1998, Lupton 1999b, Eldh 2001, Mellström 2004, Redshaw 2008), and even fewer have engaged in the gendered process of modifying cars (Vaaranen 2004, Bengry-Howell 2005, Hatton 2007, Lumsden 2009a).

Even though there are strong symbolic and material connections between men, masculinity and technology this field has, apart from a few contributions (see for example Mellström 2002, 2003a, 2004, Nehls 2003), only been addressed to a limited extent in Swedish research on men and masculinities. This is surprising, for as Ulf Mellström (2003b: 253) notes, many men, especially in the “western” world, spend great parts of their everyday lives in relation to various forms of technology, not least cars. Therefore, as has been argued by mobility researchers Uteng and Cresswell (2008), and Letherby and Reynolds (2009), there is a need for further knowledge about how car cultures and car-related practices are gendered, including perceptions, imaginations, cultural understandings and emotions. It is, I find, important to research the role of cars in creating, sustaining or subverting particular performances of gender (in particular masculinity) and membership of the category of “men”. In this context, I am contributing to a critical discourse on the role of cars in constructions of gender, including the embodiment and materialities of men. Cars, I argue, should be respected as complex vehicles of pleasure, status, hierarchy and power as well as dangerous machines, potent enough to turn drivers into killers.

#### Previous research on men and cars

Car culture and its various forms has recently received more attention within criminology, cultural studies, sociology, geography and urban studies, respectively (Miller 2001, Corbett 2003, Redshaw 2008, Lumsden 2009a). Miller (2001) divides research on cars into anthropological,

sociological and historical approaches. As noted, there are few<sup>8</sup> studies which discuss men's associations with the car, in particular young men's consumption of the car, performative car-related practices, or how cars may be used as a medium for self-presentation and communication (Hatton 2007). In the following, I will try to give the reader some further background on the rather limited academic output that discusses men, masculinity, identity and car consumption.

There are studies that particularly analyse the iconic<sup>9</sup> status that specific segments and types of cars have reached in some of the Scandinavian countries. Viewed from an international perspective, the widespread interest in cars in Sweden is unusually extensive and inclusive in terms of the social position and age of its practitioners (Lamvik 1996, Rosengren 2000). Gunnar M. Lamvik's (1996), Erling Bjurström's (1990, 1995), Annette Rosengren's (2000) and Tom O'Dell's (1997, 2001) studies on Amcar enthusiasm brings to the fore the concrete practices through which transnational cultural influences are integrated into people's lives. Since the 1950s, together with motorcycle-based youth culture, the so-called "Raggare" (Greasers) have grown into a long-lived subculture in Sweden (Bjurström 1990). Besides the enthusiasm and nostalgia that now prospers around the Amcar, there are also more problematic sides to the car and greaser culture in Sweden that have caught scholarly attention. O'Dell discusses how, during the 1950s and 60s, moral panics formed in the media around young, mobile, rebellious working-class men – greasers [raggare] or cruisers – associating them with rampant drinking, sexual promiscuity, fighting and dangerous driving (O'Dell 2001). Importantly, the moral panics that O'Dell discusses constructed greasers as "dangerous" in ways that were partially different from contemporary young men who are into

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<sup>8</sup> There has, however, been some research undertaken in relation to young men and motorbikes. This includes Hebdige (1979/2008) on the scooter, Willis (1978) on motorcycle culture and Lagergren (1999) on Swedish motorcycle culture.

<sup>9</sup> By iconic I mean a car within a cultural formation that has great cultural significance, that is taken to signify something much more than itself. Cultural icons may be taken to stand for a lifestyle, a worldview or a range of ideas. In this sense, for the car modifier communities, cultural icons are imbued with well-known and respected collective meanings and may as such work as a common denominator for the community/ies (Åsberg 2005).

modified cars. When young men in cars are represented as “dangerous” in media representations and the like, this is for reasons other than the greasers of the 1950s and 60s: their “dangerousness” is not associated with drinking, fighting or sexual promiscuity, but primarily with dangerous driving as potentially harmful to themselves as well as others.

My study of contemporary car modification needs to be understood as interlinked with, and still prospering in relation to, a complex cultural heritage of Amcar enthusiasm in Sweden. These studies not only make evident the strong tradition of car enthusiasm in Sweden, but also point to the significance ascribed to craftsmanship among modifiers, and how distinctions related to car performance and car usage are interlinked with modifier identity (Bjurström 1990, O'Dell 2001, Rosengren 2000). In my research, however, one of the main differences from greasers is that the modifiers in this study to a great extent modify cars that the greaser culture did not identify with, namely European and Japanese cars. Previous research has informed me in understanding the continuities, variations, contributions and contradictions that the modifiers in this study need to consider.

While the links between younger men, masculinity and dangerous driving have received little attention from a sociocultural perspective in Sweden, these links have to some extent been studied in other contexts. The ways in which cars are a means for young men to construct masculine identities in ways that are associated with risk-taking have been discussed in studies from the UK, Australia and New Zealand, where the links between working class masculinity and participation in car culture via activities such as joyriding, car theft, road rage and “racer” culture have been studied (Campbell 1993, Leigh 1995, Walker, Butland and Connell 2000, Dawes 2002, Roberts and Indermaur 2005, Redshaw 2008). From the perspective of what users do with technology, Anne Sofie Laegran (2003) has investigated the role of cars in young Norwegian men's lives. From Finland, Heli Vaaranen's (2002, 2004) ethnographic account of the street-racing scene in Helsinki has provided a source of inspiration. In the UK, the so-called “boy racer” or car modification scene has been examined in several studies (Bengry-Howell 2005, Bengry-Howell and Griffin 2007, Hatton 2007, Lumsden 2009a, 2009b, 2010). Public performance engaged

in by “boy racers”, Lumsden (2010: 3) argues, can be seen as rituals through which they construct masculine identities. Car modification is understood as a way for young men to display their masculinity despite low-paid jobs or unemployment (Hatton 2007). On risk-taking, Vaaranen argues that it is the feeling of class-based inequality and lost opportunities that leads to risk-taking as a “thirst for balancing counterexperiences” (Vaaranen 2004: 92). I draw on these contributions but also reach other conclusions that in particular take the significance of the (fragile) car into consideration. My interest is not primarily in providing a detailed account of modifiers in attempts to show how social, familial and economic backgrounds are influential in the men’s creation of car-oriented masculinities and risk-taking. While both gender and vehicle are likely to play a role in the speed and manner in which cars are propelled, I turn to outline pleasure and the emotions associated with certain ways of driving as being significant. As indicated in the research questions, I am also interested in outlining modifiers’ conception of risk, including considering what would make them avoid taking risks.

Men, masculinity and cars have also been studied in terms of their symbolic associations and embodied reproduction. Mellström (2003a, 2003b, 2004) considers how emotions, intimacy and love of technology and machines constitute central dimensions in many men’s lives. It is suggested that men’s relationships with machines are not only a story about power, control and mastery, but also a story about pleasure and joy in artefacts. In fact, pleasure in handling, controlling and being with machines is central to the reproduction of gender orders, including hegemonic forms of masculinity. Pleasure has also been a central topic in Catharina Landström’s (2006) study of motoring magazines, discerned a particular “gendered economy of pleasure”. Within this emotional economy, men’s relationships with cars are built on pleasure and passion, while women are figured as rational and unable to attach emotionally to cars. She concludes that it is the emotional attachments between men and cars that reproduce the conception of cars as a masculine technology. In a project on gender, design and consumption, Magdalena Petersson McIntyre and others study how consumption may “drive” gender equality. Part of this project was, by using queer theory and post-structuralist theory, to study one of Volvo’s

concept cars, the YCC (Your Concept Car), designed by women for women drivers. This particular car, just like some of the modified cars I have studied, may be understood as both confirming and provoking definitions of technology and gender. The fact that the YCC was designed by women and for women exposed the apparently stable and taken-for-granted in car design, namely, that cars are made by men for men (Petersson McIntyre 2010: 16, 27). Together, these scholars provide me with tools for understanding the importance of considering technology's complex role in (re-)shaping gender, including its embodiments, homosocial relations and sexual connotations.

Cars and car use also relate to ecological risks that follow from automobility on a larger scale. To study what the car has become, what cars mean to people, is important for understanding the reproduction of the negative impact of automobility. During the 1990s, Swedish scholarship on automobility has explored the Janus-faced nature of the car: while attractive to the individual, the aggregated ownership and use of automobiles has been recognised as a major environmental, social and urban threat since the 1960s (Lundin 2011). The Swedish interdisciplinary project AUTUMN (The Automobile in the Human and Natural Environment) was motivated by the environmental problems caused by automobility. The AUTUMN project focused on the car as lifestyle and ideology, investigating the possibilities of reducing the negative impact of the car in the future (Hagman and Tengström 1991, Tengström 1997, Andréasson 1997, 2000, Hagman 1995, 1997, 1999, Öblad 1996). These contributions, along with other critiques of the reproduction of automobility as a damaging "regime" or "system" (Böhm et al. 2006, Urry 2004), provide grounds for a more general consideration of the reproduction of car culture(s). In Chapter Nine, I reflect upon the wider implications of the personalised, intimate and gendered relationships that are being forged between cars and their users relations in the wider context of automobility "at large".

### Swedish car culture(s)

In the previous section, I pointed to affinities between this thesis and a number of qualitative studies that have engaged with car culture in general

or with (younger) men and their cars in particular. I have also discussed previous research contributions of relevance to this study. In this section, I wish to provide the reader with some further background to Swedish car culture and to further deepen the context within which Swedish car modifiers live and work.

Swedish car culture has in many senses enjoyed relative prosperity from the 1950s onwards (Rosengren 2000: 208). While Norway took a more reluctant stance to the car, the Swedish state allegedly embraced the car as a “welcome relief” – “an instrument both of play and of necessity”, bringing the people of Sweden freedom through cars (Garvey 2001: 144, 145). The freedom propounded as characteristic of the car may have been a mark of wealth and class distinction in the past, but during the 1950s the car became a vehicle for the democratisation of its time. The car served as a symbol of the success of the Swedish social democratic state in bringing affluence and progress while retaining its commitment to egalitarianism and welfare (Garvey 2001: 144, 145, O’Dell 2001: 127). These understandings have come to symbolise progress and the triumph of technology over nature, and over the years this has been used to legitimise car-bound infrastructure.

Swedish car culture is perhaps best known internationally through the Volvo and Saab makes of car. Cars and nations have created close bonds with one another over the past century (Koshar 2004: 121). One of the cars that is perhaps most related to Sweden is the Volvo. According to Tom O’Dell, the branding of the Volvo symbolized a safe “people’s car”, which in the Swedish context is tightly interlinked with the Swedish Folkhem, the Social Democratic project and the welfare state. Thus, the Volvo is not just a “Swedish” car: it also symbolises history, cultural heritage, and Swedish roots (O’Dell 2001: 127, Tengblad 2011: 66). The Volvo car company and the Swedish state have been described as being in a symbiotic relationship, not least important for providing jobs and exporting cars (Tengblad 2011: 66). For a small country like Sweden, to have its own car brand(s) became associated with a strong symbolic value of Swedish national identity. Volvo became a co-producer of what is called the Swedish model, i.e. a harmonious society built on efficiency and social security guided by investments in quality, security, environment and working life (Tengblad

2011: 66). During the 1970s and 1980s, Volvos became popular to customise, and subsequently the domination of Amcars lost its grip over Swedish car customising culture (Rosengren 2000). The Volvo (as well as other European cars) was considered less expensive to modify compared to “American” cars and became a popular car to modify. This introduced a new era of more affordable car modification that exists alongside Amcar enthusiasm. The Volvo, more often than the Saab, is “the” brand for many modifiers in this study – around which their sociality is formed and through which they construct themselves as modifiers.

During the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, popular culture, in films, video games or online media, brought new fuel and influence to Swedish car customising culture through the formation of the genre<sup>10</sup> usually referred to as *car styling*. As for older generations of car enthusiasts, Hollywood movies are a vital source of inspiration, exemplary of the speedy transnational reach of trends in car modification. It is not *American Graffiti* that has influenced the informants in this study to modify their cars, but *The Fast and the Furious*<sup>11</sup> and its successors. The modified car sociality, their relations, networks and practices encompass both online and offline meeting arenas that contribute to its popularity. Online media technologies play a vital role in contemporary Swedish car modification, both in terms of providing the possibility of getting feedback on one's cars, and also in terms of acquiring for oneself a platform from which to interact with like-minded people. The largest Swedish web-based communities on car modification are *Garaget.org*<sup>12</sup>, *Zatzy.com*<sup>13</sup> and *gatbilar.se*<sup>14</sup>, which allow membership to

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<sup>10</sup> The concept of genre (“kind” or “sort” from the Latin) is the term used for a category or form of literature, like the genre of science fiction. However, the concept of genre has also been used beyond literature. Within cultural studies it has been taken to designate any specific form of cultural practices that may be “read” as social “text” (“text” here being used in the widest possible sense). The concept of genre is similar to the notion of gender in that it encompasses a form of sorting along lines of expectations and conventions about belonging (Åsberg 2005).

<sup>11</sup> *The Fast and the Furious* (2001) is an action-adventure movie about an undercover police officer (Brian O'Connor) who infiltrates the underworld subculture of Los Angeles street racers. The movie has since been followed by four sequels. *2 Fast 2 Furious* (2003), *The Fast and the Furious: Tokyo Drift* (2006), *Fast and Furious* (2009) and *Fast Five* (2011).

<sup>12</sup> 96 000 members in 2008, increased to 162 411 members by 2012-06-03.



anyone owning a car that is modified in any way. Just as modified car magazines provided (and still do provide) instructions on how to modify cars, so do these virtual communities allow for much specialised discussion and sharing of knowledge on specific cars or aspects of cars, especially in terms of detailed discussions about how to tune, style or modify the car. The rising number of memberships points to a steady popularity in car modification and online communities specialising in such car culture.

Another arena of importance for car modification is the car show. In the mid 1990s, there were only a handful of events where car enthusiasts met; by 2008, when I did most of my fieldwork, there were car-related shows every summer weekend all over Sweden, attracting those with specialised interests in cars. The modified car show is a form of public exhibition and meeting event that enables car modifiers to meet during the summer to socialise and enjoy their enthusiasm with other car owners. For the car modifier, the shows are a venue to expose one's build and to compete for trophies and other prizes for what they have achieved with their cars. Car nationalities, like Amcars, "Japcars" or "Swedish" Volvo cars forms one of the grounds for the establishment of different arenas of car enthusiasm, but they often overlap as car shows invite all sorts of cars and car nationalities to participate. Shows and events may be either locally organised or organised by event firms, car modification web forums, modified car magazines or by car clubs of different kinds. The motoring magazine *Bilsport* is one significant organiser of such events and has been so since the 1960s; there is also the *Street Cars Fest*, which began to organise car shows in 2003, and now sets up car show events all over Sweden.

### Structure of the thesis

According to Miller and Bjurström, whose words opened this thesis, the meanings of cars and what cars are able to represent are gendered, fluid and context-dependent. When viewed from the perspective of car modifiers, the car is part of a much more complex journey than merely travelling between two points. Cars in the hands of car modifiers are kept unstable and fluid,

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<sup>13</sup> 43 000 members in 2008, increased to 57 540 by 2012-06-03.

<sup>14</sup> 22 000 members in 2008, number of members no longer published on their website.

modified and re-inscribed with different shapes and meanings. I provide examples of cars that perhaps challenge readers' views of what a car is and what cars can come to represent, not least in terms of gender. Cars and gender are part of what the car modifier community negotiates, stabilises, but also (re)invents and reproduces amongst its members.

In the following chapter, *Theorising cars*, I turn to outline the frame of interpretation and analytical concepts that I utilise in order to analyse the material upon which this study is based. In Chapter Three, *An ethnographic study of gender and cars*, readers will be introduced to the ethnographic methods of interviewing and participant observation, including reflections upon the conduct of fieldwork amongst car modifiers and their cars.

In the fourth chapter, *Cars and distinction*, readers are introduced to the voices of modifiers and other informants, as the first empirical and analytical chapter of the study that seeks to shed light on the question of "why" modifiers take to car modification. In this chapter I argue that car modification is a way for car modifiers to constitute themselves as "unique" subjects and that "uniqueness" is part of the very motivation upon which car modification is constituted. I discuss modifiers' influences to meet this end in the context of transnational trends and what some modifiers refer to as "car fashion" – which in turn forces them to continue upgrading their cars in order to retain their status as interesting to fellow modifiers.

Chapter Five, *Crafting cars*, elaborates on the question of "how" car modification is done. In this chapter I particularly discuss modifiers' ways of constructing craftsmanship as significant for car modification and knowledge about how cars work as defining idealised ways of being a car modifier. Part of the discussion concerns how particular materials used for modifying cars may gender the "doing" of car modification in various ways. The chapter outlines the employment of dedication, challenge and stamina in the construction of modifier manhood. Here readers will be introduced to the situation of women in car modification and what "girl power" means in relation to modified cars.

In Chapter Six, *Cars, styles and clashes*, I move on to discuss and compare different forms of modified cars and the associated gendered imaginaries; I outline how cars can be gendered in totally different ways depending on their associations with particular capacities and abilities. Readers will become acquainted with the muscle car, the sleeper car, the clean car, the extreme car and the collectors car, all ingrained with their own specialities of performance, show and “extremeness”. Examples of where styles come to clash are exemplified and connected to the national identities of cars and modifiers.

Chapter Seven, *Cars on display*, turns to discuss the significance of the car show for car modifiers and what happens there. On the one hand, car shows are important meeting places for modifiers, but the car fair is also a place for competition. This in turn makes evaluation central to the show and the car modification scene more generally. In this chapter I outline how modifiers show and evaluate their achievements in cars. Here readers will discover why the so-called “trailer queen” is considered dangerous, and why some men would happily identify themselves as “polisher fags” despite the term’s ambivalent and sexist connotations. The chapter also considers why the “car show babe” is not always desirable at car shows.

Chapter Eight, *Cars are made to be driven*, examines how car modifiers construct themselves, their embodiment and their cars in relation to driving and risk-taking. This chapter brings together the significance of uniqueness, craftsmanship and display in the context of driving, risk-taking and emotions. Driving the modified car is discussed in relation to emotions of feeling empowered and making fragile. In this chapter the phenomenon of spontaneous street racing is discussed in the context of making hierarchy and as a way of building the modifier community.

The final chapter, *Conclusions*, presents the results of this study and discusses some of the consequences that these gendered, risky and dangerous relations have in the wider context of car cultures more generally.

*What's up with modified cars*

## 2

### Theorising cars

In this chapter I outline the theoretical frame of interpretation and the analytical concepts that are used in this study. The analytical concepts outlined below have been particularly useful to me analytically.

In the following, I first explain how I work with the concept of gender, followed by a section dedicated to outlining the relationship between gender and technology. In this vein, I map out how gender and technology also relate to sexuality. In the sections that follow, I discuss contemporary theories on men and masculinities, and my view on these concepts and analytical approaches. I then turn to outline another concept key to this thesis, namely the concept of the *cultural imaginary*, which describes the cultural apparatus around the ways in which car modifiers mirror and construct their sense of selfhood through cars. The “cultural imaginary” of car modifiers, a collective fantasy landscape of at least partly shared ideals, practices and images, tells us a lot about what it means to be a car modifier from a sociocultural perspective, as I deploy it here. By utilising the notion of the imaginary, I have a tool for reflecting upon how modifiers produce identity, status positions and stratification amongst themselves.

The latter sections of the chapter discuss various approaches to understanding cultures of the car in the sense of community-building. The last sections outline the analytical framework upon which I draw when analysing emotions, embodiment and risk-taking. Hence, the chapter deals with gender and technology, as both practice and product, and in particular as mutually co-produced in the context of car modification as a

community-forming, emotional and embodied setting related to car driving and risk.

### Gender as process

Gender, a much-debated notion, may be conceptualised as a culturally constructed power order that is related to ideas and notions of feminine and masculine (cf. Ambjörnsson 2004, Scott 1986, Hirdman 1988, Butler 1990, Åsberg 1998). As gendered categories, “man and woman are ‘filled’ with different meanings which vary depending on context, time and societal conditions” (Hirdman 2000: 225). The gender relations formed around cars are interpreted as a process where “women” and “men” are both physically and ideally shaped by a gender order. This gender order, problematic in terms of social justice and equality as well as in terms of describing any kind of natural order of the sexes, presupposes a binary and complementary relation between women and men. In a circular way, it further encompasses heterosexuality as its obligatory norm (Butler 1990, Rubin 1984). In car modification, notions of gender and heteronormativity are performed through the modifiers’ own ways of talking, displaying, building and driving cars. These repeated, highly material and bodily practices are incurably social practices that may or may not coincide with larger cultural notions of gender. It is therefore crucial to study how gender is constructed and reconstructed among the modifiers and in their ways of interacting with cars in order to understand the specificities of car modifier culture, and as a central part of the study.

I understand femininity and masculinity to be performative practices, as “doing”, and as stabilised and changed through repeated behaviours (Butler 1990, Connell 1995, Whitehead 2002). The point is to emphasise that individuals (subjects) do femininity and masculinity through practice – as a sociocultural process of doing gender (Lykke 2010: 88). Candace West and Don Zimmerman (1987), who in their version of doing gender theory emphasised that gender is not something we have or are, but a doing, have produced influential work on the theorising of gender as doing in human interaction. In their approach, they stress that gender is always done in communicative interaction, and that it is important for individuals to construct coherence in their gender performance in relation to others (West

and Zimmerman 1987: 126). This approach rejects the understanding of gender as simply a biological essence or psychological structure that causes certain behaviours or is expressed as someone's inner self (Lykke 2010: 88, 89, Nordberg 2005: 24). The very influential work of Judith Butler argues along similar lines that, rather than being grounded in biology, gender is the enacted, embodied effect of power relations (Butler 1993: 2). Any doing of femininity and masculinity reiterates and negotiates already-existing gender norms. Gender identity is a continuously enacted activity to achieve and embody what in specific contexts are considered desirable and taken-for-granted ways of being man or woman. This indicates the view that "men and women are active agents engaged in an ongoing process of creating and recreating gender identities as they take up different discourses of masculinity and/or femininity" (Pini 2005: 202)<sup>15</sup>.

It is with this in mind that I approach car modification and the men and women who apparently find cars highly meaningful and important in their lives. Accordingly, in order to be recognised as a car modifier proper, there are certain culturally significant practices that need to be performed and exhibited in order for the self and others to identify that someone as a modifier. For some of the men in this study, to modify their cars and compete with their cars at car shows or by racing their cars are also practices that contribute to the production of gender as a male car modifier. However, to be recognised as a male car modifier it is not enough to spend only a few moments in a garage, tinkering with cars. It is not enough to only once or twice get a bit of grease under one's fingernails. Gender, like the constant greasing of increasingly skilled hands, needs to be constantly reiterated in order to be convincing (cf. Ambjörnsson 2004: 13). With this processual approach to gender there also comes the possibility of understanding gender and technology as deeply related and intertwined.

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<sup>15</sup> Discourse is here understood as representing certain ways of speaking about and referring to the social world (Winther, Jørgensen and Phillips 1999: 13). With every discourse comes a set of subject positions – positions that subjects may take up and identify with (Davies and Harré 1990/2001, Winther, Jørgensen and Phillips 1999: 48). Therefore, identity stands for identification with a specific subject position within a discourse (Nilsson 2011). Attached to a subject position are certain expectations about speech, actions and ways of doing things – normative ways of embodying discourse.

Gender itself may be considered a technology, as in an ongoing social technology of establishing gender affiliation and self. Teresa de Lauretis (1987: ix) talks about “the technology of gender” as a way of understanding gender as construction and representation with material effects. Michel Foucault<sup>16</sup> talks about “technologies of the self” (Foucault 1988: 18), as the practices or techniques through which human beings constitute themselves, their self-understanding and individuation. Founded on an understanding of power as both productive and oppressive, but never just oppressive, the individual is brought into existence through both subjugating him/herself to, and becoming an agential subject through, the available structures of power and resistance (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983: 212). In the particular context of car modification, the act of manipulating and hence “resisting” the factory-made car can be understood as a way in which modifiers constitute themselves as car modifier subjects. As a technology of the self, this is a process of self-making by way of cars.

## Gender and technology

Technology may be conceived of as an intimate presence in our lives and it increasingly defines how we live and who we are (Wajcman 2004: 102). This understanding of technology, as highly ritualised and prosthetic ways of doing (ourselves with) things, translates rather easily into the

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<sup>16</sup> In feminist theory, Foucault’s approach has been both critiqued and embraced. His work on power is one area of importance, in which he elaborates on power as being not something only an emperor of some kind may “have”, but as something that is produced through social relations. This way of thinking about power as dispersed and discursively produced has been most useful for targeting essentialist understandings of sex and sexuality (Foucault 1978/1990). There are a number of key feminist concerns that are discussed at length by Foucault, for example, the body as a site of power, and power as central to the constitution of subjectivity. Foucault has been heavily criticised in feminist theory for not considering gender in relation to women’s sexuality or even women and men, or gender relations (Hearn and Parkin 1987: n7). Nevertheless, both Foucault and Butler argue that both sex and sexuality are discursive constructions in the sense of being effects of biopolitical power relations of modernity (Lykke 2010: 59). Judith Butler (1990) draws on Foucault in her work on compulsory heterosexuality (cf. Adrienne Rich) as the prime motor in the production of gender binaries.



sociocultural registers of power described by Foucault as “technologies of the self” (Dreyfus & Rabinow 1983, Foucault 1988).

Understood as a broad concept, technology includes not only artefacts but also the cultures and practices associated with those artefacts (Wajcman 2009). Technology is not seen as separate from society, but as part of the social fabric that holds society together. The car is an exemplary form of such technology, an artefact that has also changed society and what people may do and become. The concept of *automobility* identifies one of the most important socio-technical institutions – the car as ideologically “driven” formation – through which modernity is organised (Böhm et al. 2006, Urry 2004). As a consequence of this stance, when I discuss technology I do so in a way that goes beyond the commonly used understanding of technology as merely artefacts – in common vernacular “technology” often signals computers, cars and other technical gadgets. Instead I stress that cultures and practices both form and are being formed by technology. The gender as process approach outlined above in the context of technology implies that gender identities are shaped together with technology (cf. Haraway 1991). When technology saturates many people’s lives, it may also be considered as part of creating, sustaining or subverting performances of gender (Landström 2007, cf. Faulkner 2001, Mellström 2004, Wajcman 2004, Oudshoorn and Pinch 2005). This approach to gender and technology is productive in understanding how car modifiers produce gender through symbolically and materially modifying cars: cars and gender co-constitute one another.

The constructivist approach to gender and technology that has emerged within the field of feminist technology studies emphasises that both gender and technology are socially shaped and so potentially malleable (Wajcman 2004). It challenges both technological determinism and any presumed neutrality of technology (Faulkner 2001: 80). Studies on gender and technology, like this one, focus on users of technologies in everyday life (Cockburn and Ormrod 1993, Lie and Sørensen 1996). Like gender studies, social technology studies emphasise users as active participants in the re-making of technology and meaning. For example, Kline and Pinch (1996), in a study of the automobile in the rural USA, have shown how people used the car in ways not intended by the producers – modifying it, reinterpreting

its function and using it as a source of power within the frame of farming. By utilising the concept of “interpretative reflexivity” from Pinch and Bijker (1984), the authors reflect upon the process in which social groups make new usage and meanings out of designed technology. This thesis illustrates that interpretative flexibility is of vital concern for modifiers, who have turned the automobile to their own purposes of self-expression, in the form of car styling, and consequently have contributed to changing its technology as expressions of their creativity and identity (Genovese 2009: 24). From this point of view, and this is one of the central themes of this thesis, the car is open to various interpretive practices of modification by active participants as they develop and appropriate cars according to their own liking (cf. Laegran 2003: 93). This is usually done by repainting the car, adding body kits, smoothing, installing powerful stereos and tuning the engine, illustrating that the car as a common cultural commodity is in flux and occupies shifting positions for consumers.

In addition, a concept that I find further elaborates interpretative flexibility for understanding how “individuality”, or subjectivity and a sense of selfhood, is produced is Paul Willis’s notion of symbolic creativity – a concept that draws attention to the fact that commodities are actively appropriated in processes of identity construction. Willis’s concept adds the dimension of craft and the manipulation of things as key elements in an active process of purposeful image-making (Willis 1990: 84-89). In line with Willis, it is not far-fetched to argue that young car modifiers “provide compelling examples of how their consumption of mass-produced standard cars is transformed by their symbolic labour into the production of culturally ‘unique’ vehicles” (Bengry-Howell and Griffin 2007: 442). Car modification is, as noted, an inherently material and hands-on cultural practice, where the human body, tools and material objects engage together (Law 2001). Craftsmanship and the pride and achievements that have traditionally been associated with skilful manipulation of tools hold a particular historical significance for working-class men (Mellström 1999, 2004, Law 2001).

In order to utilise a concept that encompasses the symbolic, material and indeed truly practical dimensions of car modification, I will talk about it as a material-semiotic practice (Haraway 1997). Material-semiotics defines an

understanding worked out by Donna Haraway and, amongst others, scholars of the actor-network approach<sup>17</sup> (Law 2009, Åsberg et al. 2012), which maps out relationships that are simultaneously material and semiotic. The assumption of material-semiotics, as described by Åsberg, Hultman and Lee (2012), is in fact that there is always a contingent relation between materiality and meaning-making that makes any kind of modern division between technology and society, nature and culture problematic. To modify a car means to both manipulate and ply things materially and to do it for particular purposes, be they aesthetic ideals, or the car modifier community's idea of function. Simply put, car modification is simultaneously both a material and a meaning-making practice. The material-semiotic practices through which car modifiers transform standard cars into culturally unique vehicles is a way of indicating their cultural identities as car modifiers as well as their individuality among fellow car modifiers. This implies that modified cars carry certain messages, messages that need to become part of a process of collective interpretation (semiosis) in order to be understood as such, which in turn situates them within discourses and exchanges within interpretative communities. This point draws on the extended tradition of social semiotics<sup>18</sup> within cultural studies, and the argument that signs and cultural codes are dependent upon their social interpretation in order to be meaningful (Hodge and Kress 1988: 4). Car modifiers are producers of cars with built-in social meanings, which

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<sup>17</sup> The actor-network approach is an ontological view that emphasises each actor in a network of human and non-human actors. Each actor in a network influences how the network functions develop and come to stabilise. A car is an actor conjoined by an often stable network of human and non-human actors: from engine parts and gas stations to designers and engineers. If either of these components is disconnected from the network, the car stops working and the network becomes destabilised (Åsberg, Hultman and Lee 2012: 202).

<sup>18</sup> A useful summary of what is meant by social semiotics is provided by the journal of the same name: "Social semiotics is critical sign study which is aware of the specific and strategic ways in which signs are created, used and received in different domains. It is a form of enquiry applied to specific instances and problems" (<http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/carfax/10350330.html>) In the book *Social Semiotics* (1988) Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress outline how social semiotics takes the work of de Saussure further by situating signs within the domain of the social, social practices and discourse (Hodge and Kress 1988: 1).

means that they also rely on recipients who are able to “read”, understand and confirm their messages.

The relations between gender and technology have repeatedly been analysed as crucial to understanding gender relations and how power operates in privileging men and masculinity<sup>19</sup> (cf. Cockburn 1985, 1992, Faulkner 2001, Mellström 2002, Wajcman 2004). Traditionally, technology forefronts associations that are gendered along dualisms, such as those associating “hard” masculinity with skilled, heavy, dangerous, dirty, interesting, mobile machine processes; while femininity or “soft” masculinity are constructed along lines of gender dualisms more often associated with unskilled, light, less dangerous, clean, boring and immobile machinery within organisations (Hearn and Parkin 1987, 1995: 86, Wajcman 1991, Faulkner 2001). Hence, gender and technology may be studied as contributing to the (re-)production of gender hierarchies. Cars both reflect and reinstate culturally shared and widespread ideas about gender. As material and meaningful objects, they need to be understood as active parts of an ongoing creation of sociocultural values and gender patterns (Wajcman 2004, Latour 2005, cited in Petersson McIntyre 2010). Gender is an integral part of the social shaping of technology in many ways. Not only are the designers of technology gendered, but so are the knowledge, practices, symbolic images, styles of work and identity associated with technology (Faulkner 2001). Hence, gender is “built into” the design of technology in many – sometimes contradictory – ways.

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<sup>19</sup> The connection between gender and technology has been critically engaged with in feminist theorising for decades (Faulkner 2001). A central concern of this scholarship is an engagement with the process of technical change as integral to the renegotiation of gender power relations (Wajcman 2004). Since early on, and to this day, feminist writings on gender and technology have been concerned with women’s exclusion from technical skills and careers – a perspective that evolved into an analysis of the reproduction of the masculine character of technology itself, of fighting technological determinism and the exclusion of women (Wajcman 2004: 104). Wajcman (2009) argues that technology is still characterised by ingrained cultures of masculinity that tend to exclude women from arenas associated with technology – as associating technology with men and male-defined technology.

Car modifiers “build into” their material cars gendered meanings in ways that reveal the co-constitution of gender and technology. What this means is that the ways in which cars are being designed are not gender neutral. Not only is the practice of tinkering with cars gendered, but it is usually, although not exclusively, an activity that attracts men and is associated with men and masculinity. Their modified cars also “do gender” symbolically through their designs, and cars make available certain material capacities for “doing gender” – such as driving. This co-production of gender and cars is enacted as well as reproduced in an entanglement between car culture, embodiment, vehicle and community.

### Sexist or queer cars?

The connection between gender and technology identified above is also related to sexuality. Throughout my fieldwork I noticed that the processes of how gender and cars are co-formed were connected with certain ideals, conceptions and actions that were linked with sexuality, in particular a normative heterosexuality and heteronormative routines. The MTV show *Pimp My Ride* is perhaps an obvious example of the way in which cars and car modification speaks not only about gender, but also about heterosexist sexuality and desire – as in linking the figure of the pimp with cars. For example, at the first car show I visited, I found myself and other male visitors gazing not only at modified cars, but also at scantily dressed women posing in front of the cars. I learnt that certain ways of modifying cars could result in the modifier being called a “queer”, as in not successfully performing heterosexual masculinity as a car modifier. However, certain ways of caring for cars could also be called “fag”, which was associated with much more positive meanings. Cars could be called “hot” and be constructed as highly desirable objects by reference to certain materials and capacities of speed, competition and risk. This demonstrates that cars are gendered through their design. As noted by Penny Sparke (1995), designs are gender coded: historically, round forms, pastel shades and bright colours have more often been associated with femininity, while square, streamlined forms and darker colours are more likely to be culturally associated with masculinity. These are highly relevant insights

for this study to consider, especially when considering how modified cars are gender coded.

At the beginning of the thesis I flagged up my interest in highlighting ways of modifying cars that may challenge dominant notions of gender – perhaps one could call this interest a hunt for potentially “queer” cars. Queer theory is about questioning and making problematic that which is taken for granted as “natural” by invoking how it is *made* natural through cultural processes (Kulick 2005). Things appearing to be natural could be deconstructed with the help of queer theory in order to point out how things could be different and that certain ideas about the ways things are have been *made* so under specific circumstances (Petersson McIntyre 2010, Landström 2007). Modified cars are clear examples of cars being made, remade and shaped into new forms different from the ways in which they were originally designed. Like most cars, modified cars express gendered meanings. As stylised objects with different designs, materials and capacities, modified cars are performative, re-made by modifiers to communicate with their surroundings and to “express” the driver. Even though cars are traditionally associated with men and masculinity, styled cars may also be indicative of a “feminisation of masculinity” as in men taking up typically feminine expressions: display of the self, vanity and fashion (Jacobsson 1998, see also Edwards 2006, Nixon 1996, 1997). Therefore, car modification as a way of questioning what a car is may also be questioning notions of masculinity and femininity in cars and may generate what Mörck and Petersson McIntyre (2009: 60) call a “productive insecurity”.

Queer theory has been used in many ways and in relation to many different fields of inquiry, often discerning relations to heterosexuality as the normative way of being man or woman in the context of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 1994). This means that reiteration of heterosexual norms is a way of successfully performing gender. This reiteration reaffirms the logic of these norms and by being repeated also naturalises dichotomous gender as something “natural” and homosexuality as deviant. Heterosexuality is therefore important to consider as it produces two hierarchical and dichotomous categories and identity positions, hetero and homo (Nordberg 2005: 24, Dahl 2005). While this study is about how

gender and cars relate, I use queer theory as a tool for discussing modified cars that perform gender in ways that do not necessarily always confirm dominant notions of heterosexual masculinity.

## Men and masculinities

Masculinity is one of the most central analytical concepts in critical studies on men and masculinities, of which this study is a part. It is a concept that should not be read as implying uniformity, but as emphasising variety and fragmentation. Masculinity can take many different forms (Beynon 2002: 2). In this thesis, it is used both as an analytical tool and a descriptive concept, used foremost by me but also by the informants in this study (cf. Nordberg 2005: 32). However, masculinity is far from being a straightforward notion within the heterogeneous field of gender studies. There are many different approaches to masculinity, which is sometimes used as an indicator of psychological characteristics, sometimes to mean norms or value systems, and for this reason the concept has been criticised for being fuzzy and unclear (Hearn 1997, 2004, Garlick 2003, Nordberg 2005). In Swedish research on men and masculinities, Raewyn Connell's concept of "hegemonic masculinity" has been very influential. Connell's theory of gender enables us to differentiate between diverse performances of gender, including hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinities<sup>20</sup>. This concept outlines the presence of a historically changeable and reproduced ideal of masculinity, taken for granted through cultural consent (Connell

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<sup>20</sup> In the hierarchy of masculinities that Connell's theory maps out, there are four related positions to consider. One position is *hegemonic masculinity*, outlined above, which legitimises white, heterosexual, middle-class men's power – for example, the power elite in business, the military and government who successfully claim authority in any given society (Connell 1995/2006: 77, Nordberg 2005: 29). However, not many men actually meet the standards of normative definitions of masculinity. In fact, Connell notes (1995/2006: 79), the number of men who practice the hegemonic pattern in its entirety may be quite small. The majority of men who support these norms, she aligns with the position called *complicit masculinity*. At the very bottom of the hierarchy Connell places *subordinated masculinity*, embodied by those men who are associated with homosexuality and effeminate masculinity. Men who fall into the category *marginalised masculinity* do so in Connell's model due to class and ethnicity, but other social categories such as age are also important dimensions that produce hierarchical relations between men and masculinities.

1995/2006: 77). By invoking intersections of age, ethnicity, sexuality and class, Connell's theory maps out a number of masculinity formations as in masculinity in the plural.

The turn to variations of masculinities has been very influential in breaking up the category "man" and considering how other relations of power such as ethnicity, class, sexuality and age intersect with and produce different concepts of masculinity and gendered practices (Hearn 2004, Nordberg 2005: 33, Hearn et al. 2012). This means that, as has been critiqued and debated in gender studies, gender needs to be understood as intersecting with other social hierarchies in order to understand the formation of multiple identity positions (cf. de los Reyes et al. 2002, Lykke 2003, 2010). Even though it is a very important analytical tool, the concept of hegemonic masculinity has been subjected to many qualified critiques (Whetherell and Edley 1999, Hearn 2004, Howson 2006, Hearn et al. 2012). Hearn (2004) argues that one of the subtleties of the hegemonic may be its very elusiveness and the difficulty of reducing it to a set of fixed positions and practices. Marie Nordberg (2005) finds in the concept of masculinities a risk of pinpointing and fixing male individuals into specific "types" of masculinities.

Inspired by Nordberg and Hearn, I take masculinity to imply a series of possible expressions within the simultaneously generative and oppressive framework of the present gender order. However, I will make use of masculinity, not as a rigid ideal type, but as ways of doing manhood in intimate relationship to car modification and to sometimes risky ways of driving. I call this "modifier masculinity", which should not be taken as denoting something uniform and stable but as generative of diverse performances of car-modifier identity. I understand masculinity as what it means to be a man, and the qualities and characteristics attributed to "men" in a particular context at a particular time. I define masculinity as a number of accumulated and changeable imaginings, practices and positions that form the basis for masculine identities at a certain time and place (see Nordberg 2005: 34, Nilsson 1999: 35).

This definition also opens up the concept of masculinity as not only being performed by men. Since masculinity is not a product of biology but of



discourse, there is a possibility for individuals characterised as both men and women to practise and identify with both masculine and feminine positions (Nordberg 2005: 34, Halberstam 1998, Landström 2007). Judith Halberstam (1998) uses queer theory to undermine the more or less taken-for-granted connection between masculinity and the male body. She argues that ideal versions of masculinity can be and are produced by and across both male and female bodies. Similarly, in her study of feminist technology studies, Catharina Landström (2007) points to the danger of not critically examining how heteronormativity reproduces gender dichotomies in relation to technology; instead she argues for the importance of considering not only men's performance of masculinity but also how women may do masculinity. Bearing this in mind, masculinity and femininity are subject positions with which both men and women can identify through practice.

#### Modifier masculinity fashioned in the imaginary

One particular possibility for understanding the cultural production of masculinity is the significance of the imagined and imagining for a gendered identity. In culture studies the concept of *the imaginary* is used to characterise the fantasy images in which a culture mirrors itself, and which thereby come to act as points of reference for its identity-production (Bryld and Lykke 2000: 8). Masculinity theorist and cultural studies scholar, Graham Dawson, uses the notion of cultural imaginary<sup>21</sup> as a theory both for social relations and for an individual understanding of the self. He claims that “masculinities are lived out in the flesh, but fashioned in the imagination” (Dawson 1994: 1). In this thesis, I will be talking about the “car-modifier imaginary”, which gains importance as a shared frame of reference for the production of identity for car modifiers – what it means to be a car modifier. This means focusing on how modifiers understand themselves and what it means, for instance, to be a man in the context of car modification, how this in turn generates particular positions, identifications and embodied practices. What this latter point implies to the

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<sup>21</sup> The concept of “the imaginary” can also be found in Lacanian psychoanalysis and refers to the self-images of the child in its mirror stage. This is not what I am after here. I discuss the imaginary as being about images, iconic cars and idealised persons, not about people's individual psyches (Hearn and Melechi 1992).

community of car modifiers studied here, is that they may take up, resist or ignore the discourses and the subject positions that the modifier imaginary engenders, or make them their own.

Graham Dawson has studied myths of masculinity in the context of war and the fantasy ideal of the soldier hero in order to understand what gives shape, purpose and direction to British boys and men in post- or neo-imperial modernity. By so doing, he links together the contemporary cultural processes that shape “private” fantasies, and their linkages with the consumption of “public” images and imaginings of men and masculinity. According to Dawson, masculinity is constructed by creative cultural activity and is productive of idealised forms of gender – time-honoured stereotypes of gender that regulate social relations and facilitate identification (Dawson 1994: 22). Dawson identifies systems of discursive themes, images, motifs and culturally available narrative forms, which he calls cultural imaginaries (Dawson 1994: 48). Dawson outlines a theory of masculinity as both “imagined” – constructed by creative cultural activity – and materialised as structured forms with real effects in both men’s and women’s lives.

It is with such pivotal previous work in mind that the notion of the cultural imaginary becomes important for this study. The imaginary can, according to Dawson (1994: 49), be used as an analytical tool similar to discourse, since both share an emphasis on the production of meaning. Or, in the words of Scott Kiesling (2005), it can manifest as widely shared “background” assumptions about how the world works and what are considered to be ideal ways of being a (normal) man. Wetherell and Edley (1999) point to the usefulness of investigating “imaginary positions” in which men construct themselves as gendered beings in general, and as masculine in particular. It is through strategies of self-positioning that men adopt and constitute their concept of what it means to be a man<sup>22</sup>. This

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<sup>22</sup> One of the patterns they identify is “heroic positions”, men aligning themselves with conventional masculine ideals, such as being courageous, physically tough and having the ability to keep one’s cool. Other positions of importance, and far more common for the participants to associate themselves with, were “ordinary” positions. In their work, Wetherell and Edley (1999: 347) also identify rebellious positions – a pattern through

points to the importance of an elaborated account of social ideals that can act as both a source for invested identity and as an “Other” to position oneself against. I use the imaginary, and the subject positions it articulates, as a tool to specify and study how modifiers construct idealised and normative ways of being a car modifier and how modifiers negotiate such positions amongst themselves. The cultural imaginary of car modification encourages gender and cars to relate along certain patterns where certain associations and links seem more reasonable and natural than others. Analytically, I take an interest in what these links look like and how they relate to gender and technology. It is a concept that is not considered to be fixed or monolithic, which means there is also room for many (sometimes contested) ways of being a car modifier and “doing” modifier masculinity. It is this notion of seeing a dynamic and changeable relation between structure and agency that informs my analysis of car modifier masculinity.

### Cultures of the car

Cars are a means of gendered self-expression, a means of movement and of creating car-based communities. Culture, defined as meaning making practices in social life (Fornäs et al. 2002: 5-7), constitute here simply the way the modifiers understand themselves in relation to their car modifier practices. As material-symbolic communication, modifying cars needs to be understood as the sharing and communication of meanings between people – processes that constitute car modification culture and communities.

Part of the cultural work that cars have done and still do is to form social groupings, to attract men and facilitate various forms of collective identity formations by taking up a particular style. By *style*, as in the particular *car styling*, I infer the ways in which cars are being re-fashioned and used in public space as an intentional communication of *difference* and belonging

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which men position themselves in terms of their unconventionality and rejection of “macho masculinity”. These are all examples of procedures for self-positioning, and processes of identification can be understood as ongoing constructions of different forms of masculine positions.

to a certain “subcultural” community (Hebdige 1979/2008). In his study of the Italian Vespa motor-scooter, Hebdige analyses the lifespan of the scooter from being a mainstream mass cultural object in one context to a predominantly male subcultural icon in another (Hebdige 1988). Another example is how the American car travelled from a US context to be taken up as an artefact of rebellion by *raggare* in Sweden (O’Dell 2001).

The notion of subculture, as developed by researchers at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), usually denotes groups that distinguish themselves in a significant way from members of other social groups (Thornton 1997). The study of subcultures often consists of the study of symbolism attached to clothing, music, manners or artefacts by members of communities, and also the ways in which members of what is perceived as the dominant culture interpret these same symbols. A central theme in such studies is the idea of cultural formations as being typically in opposition to other, usually dominant, structures of oppression, which can be understood as collective responses to social change (Hebdige 1979/2008, Thornton 1997). Class is of central concern, as is youth, in this research tradition. The interest in car modification is traditionally associated with and manifested as working-class masculinity (cf. Vaaranen and Weilock 2002, Bengry-Howell and Griffin 2007, Rosengren 2000, O’Dell 2001, Bjurström 1990, 1995).

The term subculture has been both used and rejected by researchers on car cultures. In a study of street racing youth in Helsinki, Vaaranen and Wieloch (2002) argue that the lens through which the street-racing young men can best be understood is to emphasise their dangerous practices as sites of counter-hegemonic resistance to their social standing. By drawing on Willis (1977), they discuss the practices of motor-oriented youth as serving to both resist and reproduce class distinctions. Moorhouse (1991) uses subculture when specifying the particular culture formed around the hot-rod, with its own interests, values, vocabulary, rituals and magazines – identifying the customising and modifying of cars as a means of creative self-expression. Bjurström (1990) uses subcultural style when he outlines how greasers make hierarchical distinctions between the cars and car brands within their own subcultural domain, differences that also demarcate distinctions towards outsiders. In a similar vein, Lumsden

(2009a) uses subculture to denote the collective cultural practice of the “cruising scene” and the “boy racer” phenomenon in Aberdeen in Scotland. Hatton (2007) concludes that the members of the street car culture in Cornwall qualify as a subculture. In particular, what makes them a youth subculture it is their young age, maleness, working-class background, spectacular style and actions, their need to be regarded by others, their shared modes of dress, taste, music and body language, their risk-taking and display of resistance to perceived rules imposed by the dominant ruling classes.

The concept of subculture has been subjected to critique for reproducing the idea of groupings as tight, coherent and assumed to be stable rather than highlighting their creativity and autonomy in constructing (consumer) identities (Brownlie, Hewer and Treanor 2005, Hewer and Brownlie 2010, Bengry-Howell and Griffin 2007). In his study of car modifiers in the East Midlands, West Midlands and North Wales, Andrew Bengry-Howell (2005: 154) takes a critical stance towards the concept of subculture while arguing that it obscures within-group differences and ignores the processes through which motorcars come to be culturally produced as significant to individuals. In order to diversify cultures of motor vehicles, the notion “subculture of consumption” (Shouten and McAlexander 1995), have been used as a means of acknowledging creativity and autonomy in constructing fluid identities, while also remaining sensitive to variations in membership within a collective. In their study of conspicuous consumption among car cruisers, Brownlie, Hewer and Treanor (2005: 106) suggest that it may be better to understand subcultural activities as a social space which mediates “between desires for reassurance and belonging, and for distinctiveness and the ability to impress other members of the group”.

The participants in my study are diverse in terms of age, location and experience; they probe different meanings around risk-taking, and do not necessarily share each other’s taste in cars. Nonetheless, I understand car modification to be formed around shared practices or ideals regarding relevant skills, good taste and aesthetic preferences. That which distinguishes modifiers from car culture more widely, and the men and women who also like to tinker, care for and identify with their cars, is their particular sense of belonging to a greater community of car modification.

Car modifiers have many things in common within their interest in modified cars, including codes of conduct and ethics of care. Yet car modification should not be considered as coherent or uniform but as dynamic and plural in expression and creative of a sense of belonging. It is also feasible to argue that car modification is part of a much wider project where individuals have to engage in contradictory situations of “self-making” and making community as a way of taking responsibility for their own lives in late modernity. My perspective on class draws less on socioeconomic classifications and more on class as culturally, socially and emotionally expressed stratifications, constructed through active practice and social relations (Ambjörnsson 2004: 35). Class is part of modifiers’ discursively produced imaginary through which the research participants mirror and negotiate modifier identity and belonging.

This understanding of how culture produces belonging and community is in line with Benedict Anderson’s (1983/1991) understanding of the concept of nation. In contrast to the nation state, an actual bureaucratic apparatus of government, the idea of “the nation” provides a collective sense of belonging. It is, in Anderson’s famous words, an *imagined community*. Anderson’s concept provides a macro-level analysis of the processes by which nationalism arose and spread in early modern Europe. Anderson’s account focused on the imagined quality of the nation, an emphasis that reflected his broader concern with the emergence of a new way of experiencing community, based upon indirect (rather than face-to-face) social relationships (Anderson 1983/1991). This conceptualisation of belonging does not mean that it is unreal, or needs to be distinguished from “true” or un-imagined communities – it means that communities are socially produced and subject to change.

In this thesis, the notion of an “imagined community” is applied to the communal practices of car modifiers. Collectively, the participants in the car communities I have studied form an imagined and manifested community when they participate in car shows, interact in online forums and read about car modifiers and cars in motoring magazines. The participants in this community may or may not meet in person, but they still think of each other as a community, part of a collective identity, who share a particular interest, namely that of modifying cars (Anderson 1991:

6, Landström 2006: 39, Balkmar and Joelsson 2012). This investment in and belonging to a community is technologically generated and mediated through many networked technologies that make what goes on in the community available to modifiers. As newspapers made it possible for people to think about themselves and relate to others in new ways, so computer technologies and internet-based modified car forums have provided crucial arenas for this form of networked community. The importance played by online interactions in strengthening a sense of community is not straightforward, as will be discussed in subsequent chapters, as modified-car forums are both productive of inclusions and exclusions and of diversity and standardisations.

### Man body meets car<sup>23</sup>

In order to map out the gendered, risky and dangerous relations between men and cars, there is a need to define their various components and relations in terms of experiences and embodiment. With the help of feminist technology studies, I have already discussed the idea that gender and technology are co-constitutive. Cars and car driving are traditionally ascribed to the masculine, hence contributing to the creation of a masculine “power field” from which men may draw inspiration in constructing male identity and power (Mellström 1999, Eldh 2001, Lagergren 1998). The symbolic relation of men-masculinity-machines is, according to Ulf Mellström (2004), culturally significant and anthropomorphised through an intimate socialisation with all sorts of machines and technologies, sometimes from an early age. It remains to be elaborated as to how embodiment, experiences, individual identifications and pleasures can be understood as related to cars and risk-taking. To understand the gendered, risky and dangerous relations that take form between men and cars it is important to further elaborate upon how modifiers invest emotionally and socially in cars and car driving, including relations between human and non-human bodies.

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<sup>23</sup> I would like to acknowledge that this and the following section draw on collaborative work undertaken together with Tanja Joelsson, with whom I have written on men, machines, emotions and risk in a number of articles and papers (cf. Balkmar and Joelsson 2009, 2010, 2012).

Many researchers have noted the emotions and affects accrued in the interfaces between (hu)man and machine (Haraway 1991, Barad 2007; especially related to cars: Lupton 1999b, Sheller 2004, Bengry-Howell 2005, Landström 2006, Mellström 1999, 2003a, 2003b, 2004, Redshaw 2007, 2008). In order to understand the relations between gender, bodies and technologies of movement, feminist studies on science and technology is a natural place to begin. Donna Haraway introduced the cyborg in the late 1980s as a visionary feminist figuration: “a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature for fiction” (1991: 149). The cyborg figuration opens up a space where the boundaries between man-machine, animal-human, nature-culture and the physical-non-physical are confused and dissolved. The relation between humans and cars can be seen in the rise of discourses about hybrid subjectivities – such as “cyborgs”, “carsons”, “driver-car” – emphasised as ways of solving the splitting of the human-machine relation (Böhm et al. 2006: 12, 13, Lupton 1999b, Michael 2001, Dant 2004). The notion driver-car, developed by Tim Dant to empirically investigate the relationship between the car and human beings, suggests that the combination of car *and* driver is interpreted as forming a social being (Dant 2004: 61f). The point of combining the driver and car into the “assemblage” driver-car is both to make explicit its situatedness within the much broader sociotechnical network of automobility, and also to emphasise that neither driver nor car can perform without the other. A car-driver represents an accumulation of physical, financial and social resources that is controlled by an individual but operates in the public context of roads, traffic systems and taxes (Dant 2004: 76, fn 17). This entity is also generative of emotions and affect. When, for instance, modifiers like 24-year-old Lars talk about driving their modified cars at a dedicated race-track, the emotional and embodied dimension of car driving comes to the fore:

When racing *Kinnekulle ring*, one feels lap after lap is getting faster and faster and one becomes one with the car, it is like that. The body reacts positive to it, absolutely. It’s a feeling hard to describe, no argument there, it’s the same feeling that one gets in a spontaneous street race.



The intense emotional rewards that Lars talks about may be captured as a moment of what Wajcman (2004: 97) calls a “blending of self and machine”. Moreover, this describes emotions also associated with dangerous driving activities such as street racing – a risky relationship between gender, embodiment and the modification of cars and their function that I find so important for this thesis.

The late modern social construction of emotions tends to ascribe women and femininity as being emotional, and men as being unemotional (Whitehead 2002: 56, 156). However, men are often ascribed a particularly emotionalised relationship with cars and car driving (cf. Landström 2006). Emotions may be considered as being “felt” in the individual body, but they are also situated within a context where such emotions are made possible and meaningful, communicated and shared by a wider community (Featherstone 2004: 14, Hearn 2008: 185). Sheller (2004) suggests that the feelings cars may elicit are understood as not “located solely within a person, nor produced solely by the car as a moving object, but occur as a circulation of affects between (different) persons, (different) cars, and historically situated car cultures and geographies of automobility” (Sheller 2004: 227). I understand emotions in this sense as being personally embodied yet relationally generated phenomena. Apart from being felt in individual bodies, emotions can also be understood in terms of their production in the social realm of traffic and its particular cultural practices. The implications of this are that motor vehicle cultures encompass social, material and affective dimensions that need to be considered further. One of these, as already mentioned, is risk.

### Men and risk

There are many ways of understanding risk in the particular context of car driving. One way to understand risk-taking in cars and driving is that of social psychology. According to Sarah Redshaw (2008), this perspective addresses car drivers as wilful and reasoning, a perspective that she criticises for not emphasising the desiring driver who is a participant in the cultural and social practice of driving. As noted at the beginning of the thesis, risk is usually understood in negative terms. The counter-discourse

that also exists tells a different story about risk and cars (Lupton 1999a: 148).

Risky pursuits can be considered as both controllable and courting danger, as in the context of “extreme sports” (Robinson 2008). For example, a young man told me that he found speeding fun because “the thing is you can die and that’s what makes it fun!” This way of framing risk in positive ways is perhaps provocative, but nonetheless it is important to understand – including its social and emotional investments. Stephen Lyng (1990) describes the phenomenon of voluntary risk-taking as “edgework”. The point of risk-taking, Lyng argues, is that, for an increasing number of individuals in late modernity, taking risks has positive implications for their continuous well-being. In line with this approach to risk, an emphasis is placed on analysing the thrill involved in risk-taking, for example, the embodied experience of driving fast and engaging in street racing (cf. Lupton 1999a, 1999b, Sheller 2004, Redshaw 2008). In line with this approach to risk, I find it important to broaden the scope to include the social and cultural aspects of vehicle use, by also incorporating an emotion-material dimension (Balkmar & Joelsson 2010, 2012).

Mimi Sheller (2004) points towards the way in which the motion of the car “impresses” upon bodies in different ways, driving produces different “impressions” and dispositions towards the moving view, for example, the sensations as the car shifts speed, makes noise or takes curves. In such relations, a car may become a “co-agent”, in which its physical design may affect the driver as it makes him or her feel relaxed or godlike and powerful (Michael 2001). While risk-taking is not exclusive to men for creating masculinity, voluntary risk-taking in cars is usually reproduced as a masculine domain and it is male dominated (as noted in traffic statistics). Risk-taking, for Lupton (1999a, 1999b) and Lyng (1990, 2004), is about subjects transgressing everyday reality by taking risks. As noted by Robinson (2008) in her study of rock climbing as an extreme sport, voluntary risk-taking does not have to be considered extreme by its subjects. Even though rock climbers can be seen to be obvious risk-takers, the point is rather to minimise any risk involved; to be able to live to climb

there is a need to make it safe (Robinson 2008: 148, 149). It is with this understanding of risk that I take on car modification as driving culture.

By bringing articulations of emotions around speeding to the fore, this study moves beyond the confined realm of traffic or transport, and argues for an understanding in which the sociocultural character of the phenomenon is made visible (Balkmar and Joelsson 2010, 2012). This stance draws particularly on Sheller (2004), who argues that a marginalised issue in research on cars is how the emotional aspects of cars and car driving matter, so much so that “ethical forms of car consumption have been debated and implemented as if the intense feelings, passions and embodied experiences associated with automobility are not relevant” (2004: 222). Sheller’s call for a more in-depth understanding of mobile cultures’ attractiveness and persistence encourages me to further address the intense emotions, passions and embodied experiences that modifiers associate with their cars. By situating risk within the context of modified car culture, I am interested in what the modifiers in this study identify as a risk and how it relates to their subjectivity and well-being, including shifting meanings around risky phenomena and struggles over these meanings (see Lupton 1999a: 13-15, 29). Hence, a risk is not considered a static and objective phenomenon here. I understand risk to be constantly constructed and negotiated in the specific context of car modification. Having said this, it is time to move on to discuss how the material upon which this study is based has been generated.



### 3

## **An ethnographic study of gender and cars**

To study gender and cars and to seek answers to my research questions implies consequences, not only in terms of the choice of theoretical tools, but also in the way in which the data that forms the basis of the study is collected. An ethnographic approach, I find, is suitable to address the aim of the study. Ethnography implies that the researcher, for longer or shorter periods of time, participates in the lives of a group of people. By so doing, researchers gain the opportunity of observing what happens, interviewing, listening to what is said, posing questions and bringing together data to shed light on the issues that frame the research study. By employing interviewing, on-site studies and a multi-sited perspective, I have acquired knowledge about the ways in which the modifiers in this study interact in and around their cars, how they talk about cars and car modification and how they make meaning in relation to cars. At the same time, and with the support of the gender theoretical framework, I have analysed how constructions of gender, primarily forms of masculinity, intermesh with these practices and their self-understandings. In this chapter I outline how I have gathered and analysed the material upon which this study builds, including the choices I made during the research process. I also discuss my research position in relation to the field of study.

“The field” – web forums, car shows and tours

The present study took place at a number of car shows, driving events and car meets in mid and southern Sweden during 2006-2008. As an initial field of research, I browsed the web forums in order to establish contacts and to

follow discussions on car modification that took place online. For an initial pilot study, in 2007, I conducted interviews with “Amcar” enthusiasts at a car show called *The Power Big Meet*. This meet is an annual event held in the medium-sized Swedish town of Västerås. As “the biggest American car show”, visited by approximately 20 000 people every year, it is an outstanding car festival displaying thousands of American cars. During 2008, when I did most of the field studies, I visited car shows of various kinds, ranging from smaller street car meets that attracted 20 people to the annual *Bilsport Performance and Custom Motor Show* that attracts more than 75,000 visitors. In total, I visited 21 modified car-related events (see Appendix).

I chose car shows as the primary field of study because they are important meeting places for car enthusiasts and allow the opportunity to establish contacts, to conduct interviews and observe. These are venues where visitors may ask modifiers questions about their cars and ways of modifying them; it is expected that visitors and modifiers will interact. The car shows I have visited are both indoor events, held in exhibition halls, and outdoors events, held in car parks, outside car firms, in city centres or on suitable locations such as airfields. The majority are heavily commercialised events, attracting companies that provide after-sales products for cars: engines parts, tyres, polishing products, seats and steering wheels, to mention only a few. A smaller number of the shows visited are organised by Volvo clubs and attract mostly club members or wider networks of Volvo enthusiasts. These events were dedicated to meeting, driving and showing cars. In addition, the fieldwork was carried out at raceways and in garages.

Part of the fieldwork was a so-called car tour. The tour was a mixture of a social event for car modifiers and an opportunity to expose one’s car at four car shows along the way. The approximately 900 km of driving took me on a five-day cruise among 50 modified cars between a number of cities in mid Sweden. Tours are highly appreciated social activities taking place among car modifiers each summer. The attraction these mobile car tours hold for car modifiers lies in how they include driving, display of their cars at local car shows and community-building practices, over an intense period of time.

## The informants

In order to gain access as a participant in a tour in the first place, I established contact with car modifiers whom I knew were likely to take part in such a car tour. During summer 2008, several tours were planned. One was organised through a website and another by a modified car magazine. Both tours were to take place on the same dates. Therefore, in order to spread my chances of going on tour I approached two clusters of modifiers – one through Tove, a modifier involved in planning the tour organised by the website, and another through Lars, a more established modifier who played a significant role in a Volvo car club and who was taking part in the tour organised by the magazine.

One of the very first informants I approached for this study was Lars. I got to know about him and his modified car from his personal website. This particular site was very informative and was continuously updated with pictures and short films covering his modified-car project as it progressed. I learned from this website where I could see the car, what car shows he planned to frequent during the upcoming summer and that he planned to take part in the car tour. I asked him for an interview and presented myself as a PhD student in gender studies interested in car culture more generally and car styling in particular. Lars was at the time in his mid 20s, living in one of the largest cities in Sweden. He was also situated within a network of modifier friends who, like him, could be considered to be well-known among members of the car modifier community. After interviewing him in his home, I was invited to come and visit the driving activities of the Volvo car club he was a member of. Through Lars, I got to know his friends Daniel, Sonja, Johan, Ruben, Adam and David, all keen Volvo enthusiasts who, like Lars, also drove significantly modified Volvos and frequently visited and socialised at modified car shows. This group were all also in their mid 20s and came to make up my major group of informants. I joined them at car shows, both Volvo-specific and non-specific, and got to go with them on tour. Through participating in the events they frequented, I was able to establish additional contact with 19 men and seven women with different aspirations to style their cars.

I also found it important to try to interview and spend time with less well-established car modifiers. This is because I wanted to learn if their views on car modification differed in any significant ways from those of Lars's group. Via a web forum I got in contact with Tove, a 35-year-old networking car modifier and tour organiser living in a small town in mid Sweden. I contacted her because at the time she was one of the leading figures in organising a car tour, together with other members of an online modified car forum. She was also a member of a car club called *Girls Go Fast*, organising driving events for women only. The club is primarily based in Norway, where driving events were held. I did one in-depth interview with her, after which I was invited to meet with her and her friends at one car show and a car meet. Except for Tove, her friends were all male, consisting of 8-10 younger men from mid and southern Sweden who had got to know each other via an online car community. During this time I interviewed two of her male friends about their cars and the upcoming car tour they were planning for. However, I never felt that I was able to establish contact with this group in the same way as I did with Lars and his friends and subsequently came to focus on Lars and his group. I also felt that Tove tended to avoid me at the car shows we both frequented. I can only speculate as to whether being a man approaching Tove, a woman, was at all relevant to the level of trust between us. Unfortunately, during my fieldwork I did not have the opportunity to participate in any woman-only meets organised by the club *Girls Go Fast*. I did, however, interview two other female members of this woman-only car club.

This means that I learned about car modification primarily from male modifiers who were more or less well-established participants in the field. The difference between these two categories of participants outlined above mainly revolved around their "subcultural capital", i.e. their status as participants in car modification differed from one another (Thornton 1997). Unlike Tove and her male friends, Lars and some of his friends' cars were frequently represented in respected Swedish motoring magazines such as *gatbilar.se*, *Street Xtreme* and *Bilsport*. Some of this group were also engaged in organising car shows; they were occasionally engaged as judges at car shows, and every now and then they were also invited to display their cars at prestigious modified car shows internationally. Lars and his group,



as established, fairly well-known members of the car modification scene, can be seen to represent the mainstream in this sense. For example, they identified themselves as part of “us modifiers”, the “car hobby” or “the modified car culture” in generalised terms more readily than did less-established modifiers (cf. Bengry-Howell and Griffin 2007). This in turn makes it important to recognise that there are various sub-cultures in car modification that I have not been able to study. I would most likely get a different picture of car modification and gender if I were to follow a women-only group such as *Girls Go Fast*. I would, for example, be able to further explore masculinity without men – what Judith Halberstam (1998) calls female masculinity.

At the time of the study, most of the research participants were between 19 and 40 years old, some of them were older. The absolute majority were part of the Swedish majority population, that is, white ethnic Swedes. Most of them had jobs that can be categorised as working class or middle class, they worked as truck and delivery drivers (Robban, David, Ruben), as mechanics (Tommy), sales persons for car accessories (Sonja), in warehouses, (Eskil), food shops (Ture), or as cleaners (Tove). Some of them did engineering (Adam) or worked with communication for organisations (Lars) or with ICT (Daniel). Sonja and Daniel, who were a couple, had a child together, whom they sometimes brought with them to the car shows they visited.

My knowledge of car modification is limited in the sense that I did not have the chance to observe the research participants in their everyday life settings, such as work or life at home (apart from four in-depth interviews which took place in modifiers’ homes). Their everyday lives were, however, reflected upon in conversations and interviews, such as when talking about family, friendships and time dedicated to cars. Another limitation is that I have not been able to in any substantial way take part in the practice of modifying cars myself. Their modification was, however, made available to me at car shows, and through the rich material of images published online or shown to me by interviewees. In addition to the two categories of modifiers outlined above, I also spent time with three men, all in their mid 20s, Conny, Robban and Charlie, who at the time of the study shared a garage together. In their garage, I helped out and observed them

modifying their cars on two separate occasions. This means that I am basing my discussions on craftsmanship and modifications foremost on interviews about car modification rather than on direct observations of how the actual modifications were done.

To sum up, for reasons of access I have particularly focused on one well-established group, who can be referred to as “elite” participants in car styling. I have also, however, included in the study categories of informants who enjoy different kinds of cultural capital and cars. In order to obtain further perspectives on car modification and its variations and styles, I interviewed four editors of motoring magazines dedicated to modified cars. I also interviewed members of the Amcar community about their cars including their views on younger generations of car modifiers. This comparative approach proved to be important for understanding how styled cars are being gendered in different ways from the Amcar, as will be developed in Chapter 6.

## Ethnography

Ethnography is not just one approach, but is rather a fieldwork approach in which many different methods can be used. Ethnography is committed to first-hand experience and study of a particular cultural or social setting on the basis of participatory observation, interviews and textual representation, to mention just a few of the available methods (Atkinson 2007: 4, 5). Paul Willis (2000: xiii) argues for an ethnographic method that generates primary data about the social world by direct contact with social agents in the normal course and routine situations of their lives. The point is to try to understand something of how and why certain regularities take place. By observing, interviewing and interacting, the point is to inquire into the meanings and values they attach to particular activities and to connect them to wider life concerns and issues. Studies can be driven by research questions, inquiries into theoretical issues, or be more open-ended in their approach.

My approach was fairly open-ended. However, from the very beginning I was interested in the social construction of cars, gender and risk. I followed the approach that Lofland et al. (2006) suggest, namely that social

researchers should start “where they are” and use their own interests as a springboard for research. However, I have not gone into the world of modified cars based on my own experiences with or direct interest in cars. Believe it or not, my own detour into car modification goes through cycling and customised bikes. When I started out cycling to and from work in Stockholm, where I used to live, I often found myself upset by the way men drove their cars. I felt intimidated, put at risk, mistreated and disrespected. Traffic, the scene of encounters through which I swiftly, and sometimes riskily, pedalled my customised bike, brought my attention to my own as well as other road users’ risk-taking in a very direct and material way. The difference between cyclists and car drivers, however, resides in how the cyclist is bodily exposed as an unprotected road user to the material power of cars. Thus I wanted to learn more about dangerous driving and the various forms of relations that cars and gender entail. Car enthusiasts, I thought, shared my interest in travelling in style and risk-taking, but from the position of the driver. Perhaps, I wondered, they might also share my experiences of vulnerability? I took to exploring the world of car enthusiasts, that Featherstone (2004: 14) calls: “A world which offers the pleasures of common knowledge and distinctive classifications, which work with shared embodied habitus and membership, through car talk as much as car driving.”

Ethnographic studies have often involved the researcher travelling to specific places to explore cultural processes, for example, to follow members of particular organisations (Geertz 1973, Mellström 1995, Fundberg 2003, Ambjörnsson 2004, Nordberg 2005). However, the car modifiers in this study do not have a particular geographical centre where I could go and stay for some time in order to learn about their world. Car modification, as I have noted, needs to be considered as the locus of a broad range of interconnected localities, practices, texts and social phenomena. Ethnography has for some time pointed to the importance of moving beyond the particular in order to capture interconnected locations and contexts (Marcus 1998, Hannerz 2001: 11-14, Gemzoe 2004, Nordberg 2005). At a time when car modifiers and car modification can be seen in movies, TV series, online communities, in garages, car parks, car shows, car-related shops, in city centres, in motoring magazines and newspapers, it

is evident that car modification can be studied in many ways and in many localities. I came to study car modification primarily through participant observation at car shows and by interviewing car modifiers. I will discuss ethnography in more depth in later sections, after I have introduced my approach to the fieldwork.

### Participant observation

One of the methods that I used in this study is usually known as participant observation. This particular method refers to the process of establishing and sustaining a relationship with a human association in its natural setting in order to develop a deeper understanding of that association (Lofland et al. 2006: 17). I did most of the participatory and attendant observations at car shows between March and November 2008, which was the most intense time I spent with car modifiers. During this time, I took notes on the environments, dialogues and interactions surrounding the car modifiers I followed. I memorised courses of events in order to write down what I remembered of conversations and interactions as soon as I had the chance of doing so. At times, when engaging in interviews at car shows (or in people's homes), I used an audio recorder and/or a notebook.

This particular field presented me with problems that I had to deal with in order to gain access to the research participants. The fact that the car modifiers I study were not locally based but part of a "driven" community, was particularly challenging because groups and individuals were dispersed and only temporarily together face-to-face at car shows or driving events. Therefore, my fieldwork may be understood as "mobile ethnography" in the sense that it moves across both spatial and virtual dimensions (Büscher and Urry 2009). Monika Büscher and John Urry (2009: 103) note that ethnographers who study mobile subjects may face a key challenge in the multi-sited nature of the activities under study, including moving with participants in physical and virtual space. I have not, however, studied modifiers' movements per se, as in how they move through space-time. My key challenge has been the multi-sited nature of informants and my ability to "move with" key informants, and by so doing become tuned into the social organisation of their movements (Büscher and Urry 2009: 103). As noted above, I was particularly interested in following Lars and his friends,

and therefore I tried to go to the car shows and events they went to. In order to learn about their plans, apart from asking them, I followed their interactions online. In my research diary I noted how I kept track of the participants in this study.

*Today I have browsed the Volvo club website to get info on the upcoming club-meet at "Racer village" on the 5<sup>th</sup> of July. It seems as though they are having difficulties getting people to register for the event, only 7 have applied so far. Compared to the last meet there were a lot more. It is so far unclear whether the event will take place. I also noticed how much both "Noob" and "Stereo" were commenting and taking the initiative about various events. Noob wanted to go with other club members to the Street Cars Fest car show in Norrköping for example. It seems that he also plans to go to Gatbilar at Mantorp on the 29<sup>th</sup> of June. I will try to get an interview with him then by that time. I also read that Lars is going there on that date. So far I haven't heard from him about my request to come to the club event at "Raceway Hill", I think it is difficult to email people about these things, especially as I feel as though I am intruding on their space. (Research diary July 2008; Noob, Stereo, Racer village and Raceway Hill are invented names for anonymity)*

Since I could not count on meeting with the informants I had planned to meet, the uncertainty generated both frustration and ways of dealing with this uncertainty, namely by approaching several clusters of informants, as outlined above. Because of their mobile character, and the fact that they lived in different parts of Sweden and only congregated at car shows, being online<sup>24</sup> became a crucial part of my presence in the field, not only during

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<sup>24</sup> The excerpts from my research diary could easily be read as me following research subjects' whereabouts and planning in a very "Foucauldian" way: by using their own web-forums as surveillance technology in the pursuit of knowledge. There are ethical aspects to consider in relation to this strategy. The fact that I never explicitly asked for permission to be there could be considered an unethical way of doing research (Kozinets 2010). I do not think it is: the fact that these forums are open for anyone to take part in, even if not logged on, and the fact that I was known by the car modifiers I met to be following these discussions, meant that I never considered asking if anyone disagreed with me being there.

the initial phase, but throughout the whole season. Due to their mobility in cars, I, as a researcher, had to be spatially, virtually and socially mobile and flexible. I planned ahead, rented cars, went by train, cycled or went by foot to the events they were visiting. Because of this mobile character of the field, I sometimes found myself in what Mellström (1995) calls “an underdog” position and often had to re-adjust my plans according to my informants and their changes of plan. In order to become accepted by Lars’ group, I showed up where they met, and by doing so, I became part of their community by showing my interest. Slowly, I became, if not a member of, at least a visiting cousin to, what they called “their family”.

Usually, when researching car shows, I moved around in order to understand the practices of what was going on. I noted how the modifiers presented their cars to the audience, what was said, and how car modifiers interacted throughout the day. I also took part in washing and polishing cars, getting cars ready for shows, and in other ways helping out with managing cars. By “walking with” modifiers, I came to discuss their views on cars and car modification more generally. In asking questions and observing, I also learned about what it means and what it takes to be a modifier and what they found significant and important. My participation also situated me in relation to different roles; as visitor more generally, as interviewer of modifiers, as participant in car shows.

The advantages of participant observation are many. One is the opportunity to observe what is going on in a particular social context. It is especially apt for accessing an in-depth understanding of the everyday lives of its members and the feelings, reasons and justifications for their participation in car modification culture (Lumsden 2010: 5). The ability to use one’s eyes, hearing and body opens up an opportunity to access knowledge that is not accessible in the same way through transcribed interviews, motoring magazines or web forums. To observe, Ambjörnsson (2004: 39) argues, is to open up the possibility of accessing knowledge that is not easily spoken about, that may be hard to formulate or only accessible through the body. To listen to car modifiers’ talk, through which they depict successful ways of modifying cars and those who fail to do it “right”, provided important insights into the cultural patterns through which car modifiers construct gender and cars.

A significant aspect of access to the field of study was to get into the modifiers' cars. In order to also be able to observe and share the experience of riding in modified cars, it was my long-term goal to access and "ride along" (Laurier et al. 2008 cited in Büscher and Urry 2009: 105) with car modifiers. This, however, needs to be related to the specificity of the car as a form of "comfortable and effective private 'home' space" (Featherstone 2004: 14). Even though cars are openly displayed at car shows, after the show, the car was restored to the modifier's private space. By taking part in the car shows that Lars and his friends went to, I proved that I was trustworthy and could be made part of the group outside the public realm of the show. In gaining access to go with them in their cars I also crossed new boundaries – to go with them on the five-day-long car tour mentioned above. The advantage of going with them in their cars was that I got to experience the cars from inside: to feel the acceleration of these cars and to experience what it was like to drive a car that people noticed.

Accessing the cars also gave me the opportunity to observe and experience how the cultural practice of driving modified cars operated in a way which, within the context of study, also exceeded what I had learnt from interviews and observations. These experiences ranged from thrills in engaging in speeding events, to observing how the modifiers handled the cars as particularly fragile. On another occasion, I was offered the opportunity to go for a spin in a significantly tuned hot-rod, which was a way for the informant Janne to show me its capacities and let me "feel" in my flesh what he was talking about. For Janne, the significance of high-speed driving was associated with intense experiences; he screamed with joy when the engine performed to its maximum power, then turned to underscore just what it was that he was trying to convey about the power of his hot-rod. By going with him, speeding on a stretch of road he considered "safe", I became bodily aware of what he had talked about during the interview as being of great emotional value to him.

This in turn highlights other issues encountered during the fieldwork, namely the risks associated with being a passenger in speeding cars and the possibility of the ethnographer encouraging risk-taking (Lumsden 2009b: 505, Vaaranen 2004). During the fieldwork, I got into cars with people I only vaguely knew, who at times engaged in "playful" spontaneous street

racing with one another. I thereby put my own safety at risk in the pursuance of my research ideal of in-depth ethnography. Despite the risks they entailed for me as well as for others, I found these occasions valuable because they provided me with an understanding of the non-verbal practices being utilised in an active process of identity construction (Bengry-Howell 2005: 62). Furthermore, to go with car modifiers in their cars also provided me with insights into ways of driving that modifiers considered safe, as in driving that did not put their cars at risk.

## Interviews

I have used interviewing as a method of inquiry in several ways. During the initial stages of the project, I used interviews as a way of getting in touch with modifiers whom I hoped would be gatekeepers into the wider networks of modifiers. Interviews were a way of asking naïve and uninformed questions about car modification (which was usually patiently explained to me). The interviews were semi-structured, following certain themes constructed by me. Over time, my style of interviewing became more detailed and specific. I asked about certain phenomena I had observed while in the field, and I asked questions to confirm or develop my understanding of what car modification was about. Over time, I found that adding new informants simply did not add much to what I had already noted down in my research diary or learned through other interviewees. Hence, specific methods, interviews and observations contributed to my knowledge of the construction of gender in different ways, covering both verbal and non-verbal practices.

In total, 53 men and 14 women between the ages of 19 and 60 were interviewed for this study. Interviews were usually of an informal character, taking place at car shows, beside the modifier's car, while having lunch or while "hanging out". In many cases, these interviews generated updates and continuations as I often ran into the same modifiers throughout the season. They could be very short five-minute updates, but could also go on for an hour. Whenever I engaged in an interview, I first explained who I was and where I came from and that I was studying car modifiers for a doctoral thesis. I also informed participants that I would anonymise their contributions. Part of this interview data consists of recorded in-depth



interviews. I recorded in-depth interviews with Lars, Daniel and Sonja who made up part of my group of key informants. I also recorded in-depth interviews with Niclas and Stefan, both of whom are modifiers with significantly long experience of car styling (“long” in this context means 8-10 years). In addition, I conducted four recorded telephone interviews with editors of modified car magazines, ranging between 30 minutes to 1.5 hours. Part of my recorded data also consists of interviews with individuals, pairs or groups of men who are particularly into Amcars. In total, the recorded interviews encompass 16 men and 4 women. The interviews took between 20 minutes and 2.5 hours to complete. If recorded, they have been transcribed fully or thematically.

For reasons of integrity, I sometimes hesitated about asking for personal details such as name, age or occupation. Cars, car modifications and the like were the obvious themes of conversations at car shows even between men who had not previously met. To ask for personal details, such as work, age or class background, I felt, was to breach this informal rule of remaining anonymous while meeting as car enthusiasts. Even though modifiers’ class, age, work etc. could be important data, this meant that I did not routinely make it into part of my questions to ask about background details. Usually, I learnt about such details by being there, by listening in on their conversations where work, daily life and so on were talked about.

### In-car interviews

Cars offered a different way of interviewing compared to how I interviewed modifiers at car shows. Interviewing in cars can offer people the opportunity to talk more freely compared to other spaces for interviewing. In his study of the car and auto-mobility in social work, Harry Ferguson (2009) argues that the car offers a suitable space for the processing of personal troubles, emotions and key life changes. He goes on to argue that car design makes cars suitable for “deep therapeutic encounters” between social workers and their clients (Ferguson 2009: 276). Drawing on the work of Laurier et al. (2008), he outlines the uniqueness of the car space as the effects of being in motion and the distractions of engagements, the “pause-filled” reflective conversations this enables and how the seating arrangements organise body placement in ways that level

out power relations between the social worker and the service user. He outlines the car as a space of trust and intimacy (Ferguson 2009: 277). While the car space may offer informants the opportunity to talk more freely, however, there is no way of curtailing an interview with an excuse, invented or otherwise (Hearn 1982).

The in-car interviews (all with men, 7 in total) varied in these respects. With some informants with whom I had not previously spent much time, the interview situation felt somewhat tense and I had to constantly pose new questions in order not to let the silence make us uncomfortable. This can be further elaborated with reference to Schwalbe and Wolkomir (2001: 91), who argue that interviews with men can be discussed as a threat to the masculine self. Interview situations may be threatening inasmuch as, when a stranger sets the agenda, no matter how friendly and conversational, this is to give up a sense of control over how one's "public persona" can be performed (Schwalbe and Wolkomir 2001: 91). The intimate space of the car, I believe, added to such tension in some cases.

Indeed, as an interviewer in cars, the journey also offered scenic views and incidents that could be brought into the discussions to ease tensions: such as reflections on other people's driving or cars that passed around us. With others, for example with modifiers whom I had previously met on several occasions, the fact that we shared a car (sometimes over a number of days) allowed for both moments of silence and intense reflexive conversations about how to understand car modification as a cultural phenomenon. Interviewing in cars also implied a different seating grid compared to that which is usually the case while interviewing in someone's home or at car shows. Rather than sitting/standing face to face, the informant and interviewer sit side by side, or I as interviewer could be in the back seat of the car. To "ride along" allowed me to consider modifiers as drivers of their cars. To share a car allowed me to simultaneously perform interviews and to observe car driving as a site of practice among the modifiers.

### Ethnography: reality, reflexivity and selves

In a field study like this one, I have strived to be a participant in and a witness to the lives of others. I myself have been the primary medium

through which this research has been conducted, and this has methodological and epistemological implications that need to be reflected upon (cf. Lofland et al. 2006). The suspicion towards any claims of “objectivity” without reflexivity upon the position of the researcher have been a central concern within feminist theory on research for a long time (Smith 1987, Harding 1991, Haraway 1991). Drawing on a broad tradition within the field of feminist studies, such a production of knowledge claims needs to be understood as located. Such a stance emphasises a researcher’s gaze as limited; no researcher is free to be a distant observer. The researcher is in different ways also part of what is being researched. Accordingly, I understand my own social position, experiences and political motivation as influencing the analysis of this study. In the following I discuss how my work relates to feminist epistemology and what has been called the crisis of representation.

In literature on ethnography, the so-called crises of representation refer to critiques of the authoritative status of objective claims of representation and cultural reality. During the 1980s and 1990s, postmodernist critiques of traditional fieldwork rooted in the Chicago and Birmingham schools challenged the established ethnographic authority. This moment in time has been called the crises of legitimation and representation in ethnographic research (Atkinson and Coffey 1995). What had been established as canons of truth and method were challenged, and a central part of this was the critical examination of textual practices (Coffey 2002: 315, Atkinson 2007: 3). The general critique remains that, rather than mirroring the world, the ethnographer interprets, represents and constructs social reality. The consequences of this have been that issues of legitimacy, representation and praxis are always to be considered as interlinked with the ethnographer’s self.

Apart from the critique that the ethnographer does not represent but constructs reality there is also a challenge to the assumption that the researcher can be a speaker for the Other (Coffey 2002: 321). This critique is formed around the assumption that the researcher, privileged with the authority of representing those he/she writes about, also makes claims about “them” and positions her/himself as speaking for “them” (Coffey 2002, Wolf 1996, Visweswaran 1994, Skeggs 2002). Kamala Visweswaran

remarks that the feminist critique of ethnographic methods, such as observations and interviews, has argued that there is no equal way of representing the interviewee (Visweswaran 1994: 40). This critical attention has been paid to the process and products of qualitative research, which have called for a more self-conscious approach to writing and audience (Coffey 2002: 321). As a response to how to overcome the crises of representation, reflexivity turns light on the researcher's own process in order to clarify the conditions under which the research was put together, as I have tried to outline in this chapter. Feminist researchers have stressed that, as researchers, "we" do inhabit positions of power, but that these may shift and they are rarely easily known (Skeggs 2002: 369). As outlined by Coffey (2002), the reflexive self can be known through particular methodological techniques, for example by different forms of writing that bring the "I" in the research to the fore.

Ethnography is an interpretative process that is ongoing, both in the field and when writing up. While in the field I interpret what is going on, and I also interpret interpretations, that is, the research subjects' interpretations of car modification. I also interpret when analysing the collected material after returning from the field I interpret (Bjurström 2004). Ethnographic descriptions are interpretations, they are the researcher's experiences interpreted and translated into written text (Willis 2000). The material created in these interactions is what has been interpreted in the creation of this book (Samuelsson 2008: 40). This means that ethnography always encompasses the emotional, subjective and personal, that ethnographic fieldwork has a biographical dimension. My field notes, for example, upon which part of this research is based, are not final texts of how things were, but are open to re-reading and re-interpretation; they would have looked different if written by someone else. The utilisation of analytical concepts and theoretical perspectives for linking the results to the work of other scholars is part of the interpretative process. Interpretations and the structuring of one's material take the form of a structured book, like this one, through constant reflection, interpretative formulation and comparison with other scholars' work (Ehn and Lövgren 1996: 128). With this understanding of ethnographic work as always partial, what I hope to have captured, however, are partial "truths" about the ways in which gender is

constructed among car modifiers, while still maintaining a nuanced approach towards the multiple and contradictory voices emerging from the participants (Kehler and Green 2007: 179).

As noted, reflexivity sheds light on our own process in order to clarify the conditions under which the research was put together. As a researcher of car modification, I am not creating the research material alone; I have not studied car modifiers as “objects” but as participants. By taking part in their world, I have produced the research material upon which this book is based in interaction with the research subjects. However, by writing this book about “them”, I do also come to represent those who have been taking part in this study. Bjurström (2004: 93) notes a conflict here, between being empathic about other people’s lived culture, and seeing “through it”. For example, some aspects of car modification I could not be empathic about, and that is sexism. It is not uncommon that women are portrayed as objects at car shows, either as sales persons or as models to pose in front of the cars. Even though women sometimes became the objects of sexist jokes among the men I studied, I noted but did not object to their talk. Sexism, however, was something that I could make into a topic of reflexive discussions with both male and female informants, which in turn led to fruitful insights into the role of women in car modification. This example, however, also points to how I, as a pro-feminist man, may re-tell car modification in ways that the research participants might or might not agree with. For example, the excerpts from interviews and descriptions of what happened in the field are part of the style of writing ethnography, and may give the reader an imaginative idea of authenticity and presence, as if the interviewee rather than the researcher is telling the story (Ehn and Lövgren 1996: 142, Nordberg 2005: 41). However, it is still the researcher who has chosen the scenes of importance and the quotations that the line of argument is based upon.

### Men researching men

In this section I go on to reflect more specifically upon what it meant that I was part of the same gender category as most of the informants in this study. In gender research where men are being interviewed and observed, reflexive analyses of the meaning of the gender of the researcher have

generated much discussion (Hearn 1997, 2013, Nilsson 1999: 40, Nehls 2003: 29, 160, Nordberg 2005: 48, Pini 2005, Sandberg 2011: 89, Schwalbe and Wolkomir 2001, Egeberg Holmberg 2011). Barbara Pini (2005: 202) argues in favour of considering not only the gender of the researcher and the researched, but also the gendered context of the research environment as being of relevance. This is important, she argues, since some arenas may be more overtly gendered than others (Pini 2005: 212). In this study, there is in particular the context of technology and masculinity that stands out as being important to consider, which I will discuss below.

The implications of men studying men in masculine cultures can be considered in terms of access, since being a man or a woman promotes or makes difficult access to spaces of importance for the research (Nordberg 2005: 49). As a male researcher of car shows, I had no problems moving around and fitting in at car shows or during the car tour. As a white, Swedish, (pro)feminist, middle-class man working in academia, I could fairly easily fit in as part of the masculine-defined modifier culture – especially as a visitor to car shows. Those modifiers who belonged to the core group all displayed mannerisms, accents and modes of dress that did not differ much from my own. In relation to cars and car modification, however, I differed significantly from the modifiers I studied. For example, I have not tinkered with cars before, nor did I own a car, something that Karen Lumsden (2009b: 500) awarded great significance for being accepted by the cruisers she followed. Before initiating the fieldwork, I therefore tried to learn about cars through motoring magazines and websites. Despite these efforts, similarly to Mellström (1995: 24), I repeatedly found myself in situations where modifiers had to explain different technical matters about cars. This was, of course, important for gaining their views on their cars. But my lack of in-depth know-how about how cars work has affected the knowledge production in that I have not been able to fully grasp the accomplishments of certain modifications. I have, however, tried my best to understand the social implications of certain modifications, knowledges and skills.

Jeff Hearn (1997: 54, 2013) notes that for men to critically interview men is likely to be a contradictory process. It may involve being polite, respectful, and empathising with the interviewee, whilst also being critical

and even using authority in the interview. Indeed, as noted by Lohan (2000: 175), interviewing men implies performing multiple gender identities in the context of the interviews. By reflecting upon the interview situations and fieldwork encounters, I performed multiple gender identities during the interviews: moving between those of a respectful listener, a car enthusiast and a gender-conscious (pro)feminist man. Even though my position as “male outsider” could be considered to limit my knowledge of their cars, my research has also benefited from this position. For example, by asking about the emotions generated by power and speed, I urged modifiers to explain to me what I imagine they would not need to explain amongst themselves. As a distanced interviewer, I could generate what might be thought of as productive tensions, and even clashes, as I urged my informants to invest in imagining speeding, and explaining to me what this, as well as other matters such as horsepower and competition, meant to them (as I come back to in Chapter 8).

Generative clashes also emerged when at the beginning of the fieldwork I explicitly asked male informants to reflect upon the links between masculinity and cars. To ask about masculinity in some cases came across as a particularly strange question, as exemplified in the following excerpt.

Dag: The thing about cars and manliness, is there a very strong connection or what is it all about?

Christer: I don't think I feel that.

Bengt: It is nothing like that. Is there someone who said that?

Dag: I only ask, does it have something to do with it?

Christer: You've also got women who are into cars, it has to do with the interest, manliness...no.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Dag: Det här med bilar och manlighet, är det en väldigt stark koppling eller vad handlar det om?

Christer: jag tycker inte man känner det.

Bengt: Nä det är inget sånt, är det någon som sagt det?

Dag: jag frågar, har det något med varandra att göra?

Christer: du har ju tjejer som har bilar också, så det är med intresset, manligt det, nä.

In this excerpt I asked two men, 60 and 45 years of age, whom I had not previously met, to reflect upon how “manliness” and cars relate. My (leading) question did indeed come across as weird and unexpected in a way that made the interview situation somewhat tense. One way of understanding their response is to consider that much of what men do is not seen as “about gender” or gender relations at all, but perceived and felt as “normal” (Egeberg Holmgren and Hearn 2009: 404). I understand their response not simply as an expression of the male norm in car culture, but also as particularly related to a Swedish societal context that places a strong emphasis on gender equality. Gender equality has been politically advocated in Sweden since the 1970s, as part of broader feminist politics. The Swedish politics on gender equality have sought to facilitate men’s active involvement in efforts to increase gender equality, foremost by removing obstacles preventing men from engaging in household responsibilities and childrearing (Hearn et al. 2012: 3, Klinth 2002, Nordberg 2005). The pervasive discourse of gender equality in Sweden makes it very likely that many Swedish men will want to be associated with gender equality in how they present themselves (Sandberg 2011: 98).

My understanding of what happened is that, by explicitly asking about “cars and manliness”, I positioned my interviewees as representing stereotypical “macho” attitudes. Christer avoided making the connection between manliness and cars with reference to women sharing his interest. By doing so, he also established car enthusiasts as not reproducing a traditional gender order. This pattern of referring to the presence of women in car modification rather than reflecting upon links between cars and “manliness” was not an unusual response to this question. In other interviews, however, the question was able to generate reflexive responses on measurement between men in cars, only to be followed by a concluding remark that women also take part in car modification. Over time I chose not to explicitly raise the question about participants’ understandings of masculinity in the interviews. This was because I did not want to risk the research, since I found that the question seemed strange and ambivalent to some informants, and because I found it more fruitful to consider how modifiers constructed and related to gender and masculinity in everyday verbal and non-verbal practice.



## Analysis

The material this thesis draws on is collected from different sources: from participant observation, interviews, magazines, and webforum discussions. Together, these materials are understood as all contributing to the principles of any ethnographic fieldwork: in my case, to understand what car modification is about and what the central tenets of this activity may be. The materials gathered for the study are all related to the modifiers in the study, these are the motoring magazines, web forums and shows that the informants read, watch, take part in and communicate through. Together, they contribute to articulating modifiers' shared, dynamic and discursively produced cultural imaginary.

During the initial phase of the project I especially used websites and modified car forums to become acquainted with car modification in general and the social construction of cars, gender and risk in particular. During this phase of the project, I engaged with exploring written, visual and online media, such as web forums, YouTube video clips and motoring magazines. In total, 50 magazines were read and during the initial phase of the study nine of them were analysed in more depth. These are: *Bilsport* (no. 22, 2007 and no. 5, 6, 2008), *Street Xtreme*; (no. 12, 2007 and no. 3, 4, 2008) and *gatbilar.se* (no. 6, 2007 and no. 1, 2, 2008). *Bilsport* is the biggest motoring magazine in Sweden for car enthusiasts of all ages, *gatbilar.se* is dedicated to a younger audience and car styling in particular, *Street Xtreme* was (it has since been closed down) more international in terms of the cars covered, dedicated to cover trends and new products.

As a first analytical step, I read the motoring magazines to determine what signifies "the natural order of things", i.e. the ways in which car modification was made sense of in such material (cf. Landström 2006). In these readings I especially paid attention to the relations between car and modifier, remaining sensitive to nuances and contradictions in the material. I particularly noted themes of importance, such as the importance of "doing one's own thing", time, carefulness and craftsmanship. I also noted how desirable links were established with a car based on its particular powers, materials and performance. To read representations of car modification in this way, articulated through various online and printed media, provided

me with a rather broad, yet unspecific, picture of what car modification is all about. During the fieldwork I asked about these aspects of car modification in order to provide a more nuanced picture, in particular to understand the forms of tensions and negotiations that took place in the context of modifying.

After the fieldwork, I first focused on the recorded in-depth interviews with my key informants. Based on the in-depth interviews, I outlined thematic transcripts along four broad themes: building cars, using cars, socio-spatial implications, and male dominance/women car modifiers. Under each of these headlines, subthemes were grouped together that were related to the overall theme. By comparing and cross-referencing with the other interviews, field notes and motoring magazines, the following themes came to outline five key social practices in car modification that also follow in the empirical chapters: personifying, making, styling, showing and driving. In each of these dimensions I considered the gendered relations between men, masculinity and technology, including cultural tensions and constructions of identity and status positions. This outline allowed me to use the interviews, media representations and observations from the fieldwork to illustrate how gender is interrelated in car-related identities, practices and constructions.

One of the central questions that stood out in this material was how car modders construct and communicate an image of themselves as being “unique” as car-owning subjects. This question, of becoming unique through modifying cars, became the ground for the first empirical chapters. Beginning with outlining apparently simple questions such as *why* people take up car modification in the first place, I moved on to discuss *how* they do it and *what* forms of cars are being constructed. I subsequently moved on to outline how cars are shown, evaluated and used for driving.

Writing and re-writing was a key practice in the analytical process. Writing and analysing means to distance oneself from one’s fieldwork and what was experienced there. During this process I re-read motoring magazines, re-listened to interviews and consulted my field notes to energize the analytical work. The analysis of the material on which this book is based has gone through two general analysis phases: one before my “90 percent

seminar” (also called “final seminar”), and one after the seminar and a six month parental leave break. The six month break, and the following writing up on half time (with parental leave half time), contributed to a much longer distance in time from the material and the fieldwork. This distance can also be understood in emotional terms; while writing up, I have felt more distanced and less emotionally attached to the field, as I have no longer been as immersed in it as I was earlier. When I interpret my field notes, re-listen to interviews and look at pictures from the fieldwork, however, I recall memories, feelings and thoughts of the event, sometimes even smells and sounds.

Academic language contributes to a focus on specific phenomena in time and place, while writing itself encompasses the arrangement of an illusion of linearity and order – a distancing from the messiness of everyday life. The fact that I have not written this text in my mother tongue also complicates this matter in that I am also grappling with distances between the language I am using, and of my informants, and what I am trying to communicate to readers<sup>26</sup>. As Laurel Richardson (2000: 923) puts it, the “worded world” never accurately or precisely captures the studied world, “yet we persist in trying”.

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Having outlined the methodological framework and theoretical tools used in this study, I now close the first section of this book and move on to the next. I now outline the five empirical chapters that broadly answer and link to the five research questions introduced in the introductory chapter. In Chapter 4, I address the general “drive” to modify cars. In Chapter 5, the aim is to shed light on and to discuss in more depth how car modification is done by discussing the importance that craftsmanship has for the construction of modifier identity. Chapter 6 maps out five cases of modified cars and, by doing so, discuss how different genres and styles of

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<sup>26</sup> All interviews were conducted in Swedish and translated into English. Some field notes were written in English, others in Swedish. The interview excerpts and field note descriptions that appear in the thesis are translated by me; Swedish quotes from recorded interviews appear as footnotes throughout the thesis.

modified cars are gendered. Chapter 7 moves on to outline how modified cars are shown and evaluated at car shows. And in Chapter 8, which is the last of the empirical chapters, I situate the modified car in the context of driving, risk-taking and emotions. In the concluding chapter, the results of the study are summarised and the conclusions that can be drawn from the present study are presented.

## 4

### Cars and distinction

In this chapter, I seek to broadly answer the first of five research questions introduced in the first chapter: *why* do the research subjects modify cars and how do these meanings relate to their identities as car-owning subjects? I outline what the modifiers in this study referred to as at the core of their car enthusiasm, namely, their desire to express themselves, their identity, through the practice of modifying cars. The chapter seeks to shed light on how the modifiers in this study constitute meaning through their modified cars and how these meanings relate to their identities as car-owning subjects. The chapter also deals with the question of how modifiers acquire the inspiration and skill to modify cars and, in doing so, it also begins to outline the wider cultural practices of car modification. That is, I will here initiate my cartography of the signifying and identity-enforcing practices that make up Swedish car modifier culture. This is not to be understood as an essentialised culture, not even necessarily a Swedish phenomenon *per se*, but an imagined community. Much as Benedict Anderson famously theorised the nation (Anderson 1983/1991), the car modifiers discussed here are held together by shared practices or ideals regarding relevant skills, good taste and aesthetic preferences, all of which are inflected by the intersecting discourses of national belonging, gender and class.

In order to scrutinise these questions and how they express and construct identity, the process I refer to here as one of personification, I will use the notion of “creating uniqueness” as my analytical tool in a vein inspired by a passage taken from Andrew Bengry-Howell (2005: 168), where he writes about car modification as *a cultural production of uniqueness*. The

individual need to express uniqueness is thus understood here as a collective phenomenon and something that is not just present, but *done and made* in the setting of various social practices. Thus, this production of uniqueness, or “personification” as modifiers sometimes call it, is understood as always entangled with, and co-constituted by, a larger cultural imaginary of car modifiers. Utilising the ideal of “uniqueness” in this way enables me to study how cars are constituted in ways that make them significant to car modifiers, and how the car itself is constituted as part of car modifiers’ production of their individual sense of self. In this vein, I explore car modification as a process of meaning-making that uses cars as an object of self-extension, as in extending what a human body can mean and do (Dant 2004, Redshaw 2008). By modifying cars, car modifiers configure the motorcar as a meaningful materialisation of their personality.

In the first part of the chapter I let my key informants Lars, Tove and Niclas articulate the significance they see in cars and the practice of manipulating car materials in particular. Following this, I turn to car modification as a highly visual form of car-based practice, as in how the cars perform as expressions of personal and social aspects of identity. I then move on to situate the “Swedishness” of these particular car modifying practices in a wider web of transnational influences and trends. This particular section seeks to establish car modification as *the production of individual uniqueness* that also needs to take into consideration the transnational, context through which it emerges. I then turn to discuss the implications of online modified car web forums, particularly in relation to cars as key add-ons in the production of selfhood through ideals of individuality and uniqueness.

### Meeting up with Lars

As noted in my research diary, it is the third of March 2008. I am on my way to meet Lars for the first time. On my way to the interview, I reflect upon how reluctant he was to say where we were to meet. Via e-mail, he instructed me to go to a school in a suburb of Stockholm and I am to call him from there. When I get to the suburb it is dark and rainy. I first stroll around the school to locate a good spot to wait. I am just about to call him

as instructed when I see two men, one younger and one older, approaching me. Could one of them be him? I have only seen a photo of him posted on his website, a young-looking man, arms crossed, wearing a baseball cap and a serious face. First we pass each other, then the three of us turn around and the younger asks if I am Dag.

I learn that the older man is Lars's father, just over sixty years old and retired for three years. Both Lars and his father appear to me to be polite and friendly; I find Lars to be very "professional" and serious about how he presents himself and talks about his project. He seems keen to teach me about his world. I think to myself that it is probably a bonus to come across as serious about one's car project in order to attract sponsors to invest time and money in the car. So far Lars has five sponsors. The one who invests the most is the tuning company, which has rebuilt the engine in a way that Lars claims has never been done before on this particular model. A professional painter sponsors the car with an extravagant paint job. Other companies sponsor the tyres and polish products. I will be one of very few people who get to see his modified car, which in a month's time will be shown at Sweden's most high-status show for modified cars, the *Bilsport Performance & Custom Motor Show* (also called *Elmia*), a trend-setting car show held over Easter each year, a tradition that opens the modified car season. Lars explains that "this is the reason I needed to be so secretive about where to meet." He later tells me that he also did a significant web search in order to find out who I am and who I work with. As I understand it, it was not the fact that I was a doctoral student in gender studies that was problematic, but whether I was a potential thief. These kinds of modified cars are equipped with expensive upgrades, and are therefore attractive to thieves. There are also other reasons for being secretive about who is allowed to see the car. Lars says: "Each time I use the car prior to *Elmia*, there is a risk that someone will take a picture of the car and post it on some of the major modified car websites, then the element of surprise would be ruined." I find myself flattered by the fact that I am now one of the chosen few who are allowed to see the car he is so protective about.

We approach a semi-attached house and after immediately turning right we face a row of garages. Once the garage door is opened, Lars's father takes hold of a hand-lamp for me to see the car better. As the light hits the car

Lars immediately apologises for the tiny bit of dirt that is left on the front of the car. I am not able to locate the “dirt”, but Lars nevertheless explains that earlier today they collected the car from one of his sponsors who had done some last-minute alterations on it. They have not yet had the opportunity to clean it properly afterwards. I think to myself that this reminds me of how women tend to apologise for their homes by reference to their being unclean; does the car represent their “home” as an object to be kept tidy and representative in a similarly significant way? Lars guides me through the modifications done to the car. I see a grey Volvo, it looks significantly lower than regular cars, and is equipped with shiny polished rims and has a wing on the back. The interior of the car is still under construction; one of the seats is missing. The original seats are being replaced by the kind used in rally cars, also the steering wheel has been replaced by a proper rally wheel, covered with suede for an improved grip.

The paintwork outlines grey smoky flames as if the car were smoking or shooting through the air at great speed. The roof is painted black. The bonnet has a motif painting displaying Hollywood movie stars and cars grouped together, just like a poster for a movie. It has numbers painted on the side, which makes me think of racing, as if the car were about to participate in a race. It also has spoilers mounted on the sides, front and rear and I find that this further enhances its associations with a typical racing car. Its design “makes people look”, as Lars puts it, and he adds: “this particular car is the only one of its kind in Sweden, probably in the whole world.” Clearly, uniqueness is a matter of great concern for Lars. This is the way in which the car is considered to be “at risk” of being publicly exposed before its designated show day while it is not yet ready to represent Lars and his skills as a car modifier, but of course also in the very design of the car and the effort put into making it stand out as a unique object.

The meeting with Lars introduces several aspects of self-making by way of cars that need to be considered further. One is that of online forums. Even though car modification to a great extent revolves around a claim to visibility, when and how such visibility is to occur seems not to be entirely under the control of the individual car modifier. I will have reason to come back to the implications of online communities later in this chapter. To be



invited to display one's car at *Elmia*, as Lars has been, is indicative of a selection process and that only some modifiers' material-semiotic practice is considered interesting enough to display at a trend-setting car show like *Elmia*, while others do not qualify for admission. This in turn outlines a hierarchical relation between modified cars and the ability to identify and negotiate trends in car modification as being of importance. In Lars's case, he also has sponsors contributing to the development of this particular design, even making the alterations on his car for him, which in turn points to the commercial aspect of car modification and "creating uniqueness". I will come back to this distinction, between building with one's own hands and having someone else doing the work for you, in the next chapter. In this chapter, I will discuss how uniqueness by way of cars is achieved in the context of trends and modifiers' efforts to stand out from the crowd.

Like no-one else

It is said that (Western) car modification began on the dry salt lakes of southern California in the late 1930s, where young, working-class men took to racing cheap Model T Fords stripped of unnecessary weight such as fenders and the like. This history of modification began with the mass production of cars from Henry Ford's groundbreaking assembly line, which made cars widely available to the "common man" (Genovese 2009: 25). In one sense, these stories of past car modifiers provides me with a kind of testimonial, at least in part, to the dimensions of cultural resistance (against the aesthetic ideals of industrialisation – one model fits all, and the "buying" of a finished product) inherent in the practices of car modification. In several senses of the word, they refuse to just *buy* the finished product. They re-negotiate the concept of the factory-made car as the end product.

However, as noted by Warren Susman (1984, cited in Genovese 2009: 25), Ford did not realise that "the common man did not want to feel common." For decades, cars have been important sites of cultural production, self-representation and socialising (Best 2006: 161), especially for men. To appropriate the car in expressive ways, such as to be seen "driving in style", points to values in cars other than purely utilitarian purposes (O'Dell 2001). Löfgren and Bohlin (1995) note that, for young men today,

looks are as important as for young women. The body is considered to be a project that can be shaped and reshaped, being shown and judged, and deemed to state one's capacity for self discipline and thereby character and personality (Löfgren and Bohlin 1995: 18). Of importance to car modifiers is not necessarily the look of the human body, but of the car body. However, as explored in this book, and in some ways similar to the late-modern idea of the plasticity of the human body, the car body can be reshaped and renewed. It may be shown off, and evaluated according to a cultural sub-set of standards different from the large-scale aesthetics of dominant notions of ideal functionality and beauty. Indeed, the car may well take on the function of expressing selfhood, indicating the owner's capacity for self-discipline and individuality, character and personality.

With this in mind, when I interviewed and spent time with car modifiers I specifically asked why they found it interesting to modify cars. The answers I got all had one thing in common, namely that cars provided a way of standing out from the crowd. Cars enable their selfhood. By subjecting themselves to the scrutiny of peer car modifiers and their shared sense of what constitutes individual expression, they become (car modifier) subjects. Richard, a 28-year-old modifier who had been working on his Renault for three years at the time of the study, said that he started out by mounting a body kit, repainting the car and installing a stereo; after this, he said, "I couldn't stop." When I ask why, he says: "to not be part of the ordinary, to make something special out of an ordinary car." William, a 25-year-old modifier into Saabs, claimed that he wanted a car "that is visible to people." Conny, a modifier who also likes Saabs, talked about investing money and effort in re-styling his Saab as "it's the car I parade in, which makes the looks of it important since I am interested in cars" – implicitly it is a key part of his identity, of how he sees himself and thus also wants to be seen. Or, as Volvo enthusiasts Anna and her boyfriend Lenny put it, "car styling is about exchanging parts and doing things to the car that nobody else does." The following descriptive excerpt from my own research diary, with musings after having attended a car show, illustrates not just the gendered dimensions of these practices but also how cars are a means of creating car modifier identity through the kind of car cultural "uniqueness" that grants individuality-by-proxy to the car owner:

*It is a Saturday at the end of August and I am at the Street Cars Fest Car Show in Stockholm. In front of me is a stage with a table holding trophies. Around me sit mostly young and middle-aged men, we are watching cars being publicly judged by a speaker and jury. Behind the scenes is a long line of styled cars and their owners, waiting for their turn to go on stage. A Mitsubishi Eclipse (a Japanese sports compact car) is up next. The speaker, a middle-aged man known from a TV motor show, moves around the car in circles and announces to the audience the brand, model and modifications done. As he moves, he talks to us in the audience, keeping us notified on the details worth knowing about. Every now and then he hands over the microphone to the owner in order for him to clarify or elaborate something. The owner of the Eclipse is asked to explain his choice of car. He says he “loves sports cars” and that he has spent 1500 hours sandpapering the shape of the spoiler kit into a personal shape. By now I have heard quite a few car modifiers asserting their “uniqueness” in various ways, this time it is made by referring to the hand-made body kit. During the day I hear all sorts of reasons why a particular modified car can be called unique. One reason is the choice of brand: “Why a Corolla?” the speaker asked a young man about his choice of car. “Because only a few people would style such a car,” the modifier responds. “Right answer,” the speaker confirms. A man I talk to jokes about the thing with being “unique” by saying his car looks almost as though it is not modified at all (while a lot of work doubtlessly has been put into it), which in turn makes it “unique” since all the other cars are modified in much more significant ways. (Research diary August 2008)*

In these musings from my research diary, I note several ways of distinguishing cars as “unique”: based on craftsmanship, choice of car brand and the methods selected to do the modifications. One of the most common ways to distinguish a modified car from one that is not modified is through its characteristic “body kit”. Body kits are used to customise the appearance of a car. Depending on what kind of kit is being used, the car may assume different appearances and looks. Some kits may smooth the lines of the car, while others accentuate the low clearance and “aggressive” look of a racing car. Another means of modification is to increase the performance of a car by fine-tuning the electronic control unit in order to

give the engine more power. This is usually done by fine-tuning the ignition-timing advance. However, to be able to fully enhance the horsepower and torque of the car, there are a number of tuning kits available on the market that increase the engine flows. These examples of *tuning and performance* are, together with *styling*, two broad themes in car modification. *Tuning and performance* primarily aim to improve the performance and/or function of the car, while *styling* is primarily related to the enhancement of the look of the car.

### Recognition and visibility by way of cars

Tove, a 35-year-old modifier whom I got to interview in her home, drives a styled Volkswagen, a car that is equipped with not only a body kit, but also a massive stereo and neon lights underneath the chassis. The exterior design is perhaps most notable in the dark, as it has a fluorescent tape that forms the VW logo in large letters on each side of the car. Unfortunately, as we meet during the day in the small town where she lives, the daylight prevents her from showing me the gleaming effects the car is able to produce in the dark. When I ask about her interest in styling, she responds after a sip of coffee that her brother was into car styling and her father was into racing, which made her interested in cars herself. “I have always loved speed, so first thing when I got my driver’s license was to get the baddest car I could find.” Then, she says, came the desire for “a different car, a car that no-one else has and to show it’s actually possible to make something out of it.” The cars she buys, she styles in terms of style and sound in order to achieve a nicer look. This is a process that implies continuously considering new upgrades and to keep coming up with ideas for improvements. When the car she now owns was first sold, it was not just an “ordinary” car, as Tove puts it, but an “old man’s car”. When I ask what an old man’s car is, she responds: “an original Vento [a VW model] is truly an old man’s car, a Mercedes is really an old man’s car you know. [...] Take a Vento original for example, how boring does it look?” The challenge, according to Tove, is to make such an old man’s car “hot”: “It is actually possible to make these cars hot, there are products for this. You can make a good-looking car even though it’s an old man’s car.”

The significance of old age also stands out in other modifiers' talk about "ordinary" cars, pointing to the fact that the notion of an "old man's car" is an established way of delineating an uninteresting car. Eskil, who drives a Mercedes, did not refrain from buying the car of his dreams, even though he considered it to be an "old man's car". Therefore, he told me, he considered it a "challenge" to modify this particular car. In relation to the boring, and hence ordinary, things about an old man's car, the challenge was to modify it in order to make it represent a youthful style, which involved finding suitable parts for upgrading it. Swedish providers of after-sales products are considered by many informants to be too common for acquiring the desired unique style. This in turn makes online shopping an important practice. To consume parts from different parts of the world, via E-bay and online after-sales providers, the modifiers may engage in conspicuous consumption as their way to uniqueness. Even though car modification is an inherently practical activity, which is realised through the material process of changing and altering parts and sections of the car, it is also a process that encompasses consumption. Or, as Tove noted, "there are products for this."

The term "conspicuous consumption" was coined by Thorstein Veblen to denote the upper-class spending of money on luxury goods to publicly display their economic power. The conspicuous consumer may, by doing so, attain or maintain a given social status (Veblen 2010: 391). The consumption that modifiers perform can be understood as conspicuous in the sense that it seeks primarily to enhance *the look* and *mechanics* of the already-functioning car. Bengry-Howell and Griffin (2007) argue that such radical transformations of the car both challenge and reinforce dominant consumption practices. On the one hand, the act of *modifying* a car challenges dominant discourses of car-consumption, on the other, modifiers' desire for a unique car, achieved by purchasing expensive equipment and accessories, reinforces dominant consumption practices. As such, Bengry-Howell and Griffin (2007) note, car modifiers' consumption practices are both unconventional and conventional, and they are to be perceived as both active consumers and producers of cultural commodities.

Tove's older brother, who put in sports chairs, a racing steering wheel and decals to make it assume a sportier look, made the first modifications to the

car: “The simple stuff that is not so expensive, but still makes the car look nicer.” Tove then bought the car from her brother and is now planning upgrades for yet a third version of her car.

Tove: There are ideas to install a turbo for more horsepower, and to be able to drive it on a race track properly. I want vertical doors on it, I want to change the body kit to get a slightly more angry look compared to what it has today and angel eyes to make it look somewhat more angry. I want more, now it is like, you know, it has to be altered, to prove it’s actually possible to make these cars really hot.<sup>27</sup>

In this excerpt, Tove outlines a specific style that draws on aesthetics of danger and attitude. The products she refers to, the “angel eyes”, are specific headlights that when lit up produce a pair of halos. These lights are found on the BMW 5 series and have no further utility than to generate an appealing and aggressive look. In this excerpt, the angel eyes and the body kit she refers to anthropomorphise the car into performing the “angry look” she desires. Analytically, I find that her styling transgresses gender conventions that cars for women should be cute and appealing (Mörck and Petersson McIntyre 2009: 62, Landström 2006: 46). The performance upgrades and “angry look” she refers to is achieved by consuming products that redefine and masculinise her appearance and abilities as a driver. So far, however, the upgrades are only ideas – now she needs to save up the funds for it.

For many of the modifiers in this study, car modification is costly both in terms of time and money. Usually, modifiers upgrade their cars bit by bit when they have the funds for it. Others work double shifts to afford a specific car, or the specific look that they have in mind for their car. Victor, for example, in order to afford his current sports car, paintwork and upgrades, had taken a job on the side as well as his full-time job as a fire

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<sup>27</sup> Det finns idéer att sätta i en turbo i den för mer hästkrafter för att kunna föra ut den på bana ordentligt, jag vill ha lambdörrar på den så de falls upp, jag vill byta hela stylingskitet så den får en lite mer angry look än vad den har idag, angel-eyesen gör att den får en att den ser lite arg ut, jag vill ha lite mer, nu är det lite som, nå det måste bytas, visa att det går faktiskt att göra värsta grejerna med de här bilarna.

fighter. Niclas, who is now a well-established and sponsored modifier, said that for his first projects he borrowed well over 10 000 euros in order to finance the modifications he wanted to perform. Jerry, a tour participant, told me he bought his car for about 450 euros, and has invested more than 18 000 euros-worth of upgrades. Martin and his girlfriend used insurance money to buy a brand new car for 30 000 euros, then decided they wanted to upgrade the car with tribal paintings, multimedia kit and air suspension, for which they had to pay a further 24 000 euros. Johan, who has won several prizes for his modified car, says he has invested 50 000 euros in his car altogether.

What is significant in the way in which Tove and other modifiers talk about their investments as being worth making is their talk about standard cars as uninteresting. As argued by Andrew Bengry-Howell (2005: 117), the practice of modifying repositions the car modifier from being a standard car owner into the possessor of a highly conspicuous artefact. Car styling can be understood as a rejection of the notion that the car manufacturers in question can produce a desirable car that will meet their demands (Bengry-Howell 2005). Instead, car modifiers set themselves to take standard cars as the foundation for a modification project in order to improve their looks or performance in different ways. As noted by Paul Hewer and Douglas Brownlie (2007: 110), car modifiers express a “passion and restlessness in seeing things differently.” That is, a capacity to see the potential for material-semiotic enhancements to standard cars.

Niclas, for example, said that he particularly likes the design of Japanese sports cars and that he immediately “saw the potential to make it look nicer.” Lars outlines his current project as about “enhancing” the already-existing designs in his Volvo, “only to give it a bit more edge.” Tove said that car modification is about taking a standard car and making it “hot”. The interpretative flexibility of the automobile makes possible self-expression, demonstrating their creativity and identity (Genovese 2009: 24). The designs that manufacturers have inscribed into the cars are thereby considered to be laid open to the creative work of car modification. Like many devotees of certain styles, car modification is fuelled by a desire to stand out from the crowd.

Tove: It's a kick, you know, this way you know that you've achieved something. Who would turn around for a SAAB, no-one does, go for something rare and you have lots of people [...]. It's a way of showing that when you've spent the money, because it is costly, as people turn around you've got something in return, and this is when you've succeeded. This is what you want; you want to succeed in what you do. You don't set out modifying a car, you do it partly for yourself but you also want people to notice what you've done to the car. So, you also strive for other people's attention.<sup>28</sup>

Tove talks about the kick she gets when people notice her car. She associates being seen in a conspicuous car with becoming interesting, even to people she did not previously know; to get people's attention confirms that her work has paid off in the way she hoped for. Diane Barthel (1992: 138) draws on Georg Simmel (1978) when she argues that goods for appearance can be used not only as extensions of ourselves but also to extend our power. In the case of cars, they communicate our sense of self to others, but they give that sense back to us again. Tove associates driving and being seen in a "head turner" car with a heightened feeling, knowing she has managed to "turn heads". To be seen in her modified car materialises her as special. The ability to "turn heads" in Tove's account is only possible for unusual-looking cars – in her case a car modified to connote power, performance and masculinity.

### Car modification as normal

In the previous section, I outlined how modifiers organise the relationships between themselves and onlookers as interlinked through the modified car: as a car that needs onlookers, spectators and peer-assessors, in order to communicate and establish its significance. I also noted that car

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<sup>28</sup> ja det är ju en kick alltså, då vet du ju att du har gjort någonting, vem vänder sig om efter en Saab det är ingen som, utan kom med nåt udda så har du ju ett shå med folk där [...]. Då visar du ju att när du väl lagt ner det här pengamässigt, för det kostar ju, då har du ju fått ut något för folk vänder sig efter bilen, då har du lyckats. Det är ju det du vill, du vill ju lyckas med det du gör. Du börjar ju inte styla en bil, egentligen för att, man gör ju dels för sig själv men du vill ju att folk ska se den vad du har gjort. Så man strävar ju även efter andras uppmärksamhet.



modification encompasses costly practices of consumption, for instance the expensive upgrades that are needed in order to communicate difference and to become visible, public and thus culturally established as such. When I interviewed Lars, he also found the attention that the modified car generates important, and he elaborated on this desire for public visibility in a more general context of car consumption:

Dag: Is it important, the thing with attention, you mentioned earlier driving the car along *Essingeleden* [a busy highway that runs through Stockholm], that the car attracts attention?

Lars: Yes, certainly, it would be false to say it isn't so. It's a way of, like, not to be in the centre, but to become visible, absolutely. But this reflects how cars of today have become so much more than just modes of transport, this is evident also for car companies and all the additions there are to personalise the car when you buy it new from VW or Volvo or wherever it may be. You may already make personal choices from the factory. [...] Like, this is my car, I want my car to look this way. [...] This [to modify cars] is nothing strange, it's just an extension of this, I mean, there are people who like branded clothes as a way of personalising themselves, this is just another way.<sup>29</sup>

Lars first acknowledges the visual appearance of his car and how the car makes him visible to other road users. He also points out that cars are not only used by car modifiers but by car consumers in general for self-expression. What is significant in this excerpt is that, by doing so, he equates the way in which car modifiers appropriate the car as a central part of their cultural production of “uniqueness” and visibility with the way cars

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<sup>29</sup> Dag: Är det viktigt det där med uppmärksamheten kring bilen, du sa någonting om Essingeleden, att det drar på sig blickar?

Lars: det tycker jag verkligen, oja, det vore falskt att säga att det inte är så, alltså det är ett sätt att, inte hamna i centrum, men att synas, absolut. Men bilen idag har väl blivit så himla mycket mer än bara transportmedel, det märks ju hos bilföretagen också hur mycket tillvalsmöjligheter på just, personifiera bilen, redan när du köper den ny från VW eller från Volvo eller varifrån det nu är. Direkt så kan du göra så mycket personliga val. [...] Jag har min bil, jag vill att min bil ser ut på det här viset [...] Det är inget konstigt, det är bara en förlängning av det, så att, jag menar, det finns de som tycker att märkeskläder är ett sätt att personifiera sig själv med – det här är ett annat sätt.

have come to be consumed by mainstream car consumers. In Lars's talk, the way in which cars embody a claim to difference and visibility is not only kept within the cultural domain of car modification, but these cultural practices are also understood as part of mainstream car consumption. By pointing out the similarities between car modifiers' interest in gaining visibility and patterns he observes in contemporary car consumption, he constructs car modification as a common and "normal" practice. This is noteworthy, especially when considering that studies of subcultures used to find difference as a form of *resistance* towards the mainstream as a motivating drive (Hebdige 1979). In Lars's talk, he aligns modifiers with the mainstream car consumer, and by so doing, constitutes car modifying as nothing "strange", but part of a much more general, widespread and normal practice that aims to strive for people's attention.

In juxtaposing Lars and Tove's way of conceptualising car modification as a process of meaning-making through hard work and costly effort, two different perspectives on the cultural production of "uniqueness" emerge. Tove ascribes the symbolic power of the modified car to "turn heads" as important for how car modifiers materialise, indeed embody, their claim to difference and uniqueness. In her account, it is only a *modified* car, produced through the manifest practices of modification according to car modifiers' aesthetic ideals, that enables such uniqueness. In her way of reasoning, the standardised, mass-produced car reduces the basis for self-expression through car consumption. That is, she argues that the standard car makes up the very point of departure for their work to pursue their individual uniqueness by way of their car. However, by emphasising the fact that contemporary car consumption already offers the ability to consume "unique" cars directly from the factory, Lars situates modification practices for the sake of pursuing a claim to one's "unique" car-self outside the work that modifiers do. In other words, and as the cultural industry around these products markets cars to most of us, you do not need to be a car modifier to personify yourself through cars. This line of reasoning follows an astute interpretation of car marketing as most of us encounter it, for instance, in televised commercials. This is to say that what car modifiers do is no longer their exclusive cultural practice; in fact, car

modification as “a claim to uniqueness” is already part of the standard car market.

While Tove’s “norm-critical” and equally astute account disqualifies standard car owners from legitimately claiming the position of being unique, Lars’s account claims that there is such a possibility to consume cultural uniqueness through buying a significant car. In many ways they are both right; while Tove inhabits a position of critique towards standards and ready-made commercial claims of unique individuality through the purchase of a non-altered car model. This distinction between what is consumed, and what car modifiers themselves do to their cars in order to make them culturally significant, thus only seems to be contradictory. In fact, it is a matter of nuance. Their analysis just takes off from different starting points. By invoking the same discourse of uniqueness, Tove may position herself as being different from, and/or critical of, the mainstream, and critical of modernity’s proliferation of procedures for the standardisation of everyday life, while Lars identifies himself and modifiers in general as being normal in the sense of sharing in the widespread drive for individuality amongst people at large – regardless of the means (commercial or not).

The specific practices of making a statement may in Tove’s case be considered a way of associating herself with an active subject position within the male-defined realm of technology. By desiring a more “angry look” for her car, she may enable it to speak for her in a different way. By styling the car into a particularly hard-looking variant, it may come to exert the message of a driver as powerful, armoured and emotionally impenetrable, a position associated with men and masculinity (cf. Bordo 1999: 186). The modified car is not only associated with an “angry look”, as outlined above, but also with the “tinkering pleasure” of cars that is most often taken as part of what it means to be a man (Mellström 2004: 370). In fact, Tove breaches both gendered norms that women would desire cars that are cute and appealing and stereotypical notions that the relation between femininity and technology is non-existent.

The way in which Lars talks about becoming visible as “nothing strange” does call for some further consideration. In my data there are also other

examples of male modifiers who talk about their car enthusiasm with reference to other people's consumption. During the interview with Stefan, a modifier who had been upgrading his Volvo for the previous eight years at the time of the study, he equated his desire to keep investing in his Volvo with reference to other people's consumption: "it's just like having expensive golf clubs, or a painting or a summer house or something like that." Benny, also a Volvo enthusiast, rationalised his costly hobby with reference to never going out drinking in order to invest all his money into upgrading the car instead. It is as though Stefan and Benny felt the need to explain why they keep investing significant sums of money into enhancing the beauty and appearance of their perfectly well-functioning cars. As an interviewer, perhaps I came to question as irrational what among modifiers themselves is considered perfectly normal, namely the pleasure of investing substantial sums of money, time and labour in creating a car that looks the way the owner wants it to (cf. Lagergren 1998: 78). The upgraded design makes concessions to the driver's vanity as the styled car is modified to make a considerable visual impact. Along these lines, the aesthetic dimensions of car styling – its links with beauty, making attractive and surface value – could perhaps even be considered as associated with womanly performances, i.e. a feminine expression of making oneself desirable in the hetero-complementary matrix (Ambjörnsson 2004, Ottemo and Gårdfeldt 2009). Based on these accounts, it seems that men who are into car styling feel a need to underline the normality of their consumption.

### Limited editions

*We are sitting in a restaurant on the very last day of the tour. All the tour participants have had lunch and Ruben, Johan, David and I come to talk about next year's cars. I sit next to Ruben and Johan, they are friends and used to help each other out in order to perform modifications on each other's cars. This year, they have left Ruben's car at home. Instead, they have both gone in Johan's car, the car that has been more recently modified. His own car, Ruben explains, "does not pick up trophies like it used to." As I understand him, this means the car does not win any prizes at car shows. He talks about how he has been trying to sell the car for some time now, but has not been able to attract the kind of money he thinks it is worth. "It's hard to get*

*any money back on a styled car, the money doesn't stay in the car." The car works great, the engine is fine, the problem is, he says, "I'm tired of it and I want a fresh car." Last time it was updated was three years ago. Therefore, the car will have to be totally rebuilt for next season. He explains the look of the car for the others. "It should be the same Volvo model as my current edition 'Superstar' is built on since it's a good car to style." He wants a different style. "It should be racier looking, with saffron colour, matt-black roof, rear and bonnet." He asks the others for advice about the matt colours, "how does one treat these kinds of colours?" David says that it can be painted with gloss like every other colour, but it is not possible to polish matt surfaces. Johan suggests to Ruben that he should get the car in two colours instead, this way he only needs to alter one of the colours in order to make the car appear as new. (Research diary July 2008)*

In the description from when I and the modifiers were "on tour", I and a number of modifiers are discussing upgrades and the next car project. Ruben talks about his next car project. He uses words like "fresh" and says that he is tired of his current car and seeks feedback for his plans for a new car and the way he imagines it will look. Words like "fresh", "new" and "tired of it" construct his styled car as dated and belonging to the past. This does not have anything to do with its functionality, the engine is fine and he still thinks the model fits his ideas about a suitable car to modify. The problem, it seems, is that it has been "seen" by the community and is no longer able to win trophies. His "Superstar" edition is therefore in urgent need of improvement to remain desirable to the community. The suggestion he receives is a practical one. By utilising a two-tone colour scheme, Ruben is advised to employ easier and more cost-efficient ways of altering the car to acquire the "new" look he desires. Part of what it means to be a modifier is to consider one's car through the eyes of others. Judging from this conversation among peers, it is only by constantly updating and modifying one's car that a modifier remains interesting in the eyes of fellow modifiers.

The implications of the temporality of styled cars are reflected in the ways in which cars are being named. Cars can be named in many different ways: "Race car\_carbon\_edit", "Limited Edition", "Second edition",

"*Genuine*", or the name of the modifier, followed by "*edition*". The usage of the word "edition" by modifiers indicates its current shape as unique in a similar vein to marketing incentives for various products like DVDs, books, or the like by naming them *limited*, *collectors'* or *special* editions. In a similar way to how such products, by adding something extra, become associated with the unique, the way modified cars are upgraded into new editions reflects their commercial status as only temporarily stable designs. When I asked Steve, a middle-aged man who has been tinkering with cars since the 1970s, about these naming practices, we come to talk about his "chill edition" car. This is the second incarnation of the Renault car he has modified, and he says "you name cars just like you name boats, like, this is my style."

This specific practice, specific to car modifier culture's imaginary, of naming cars into personalised editions, is indicative of a deliberate deconstruction of the branded identities of standard cars. Researchers of consumption and car modification have noted the significance of removing the accoutrements of brand recognition for personalising cars. Douglas Brownlie et al. (2005), recognise so-called "debadging" as a way in which modifiers can express their individual creativity, autonomy and affiliation with other car modifiers. Bengry-Howell and Griffin (2007: 450) note that debadging is a way for modifiers to create a "decommodified" car. By removing the brand, modifiers are able to symbolically produce their car as a *tabula rasa* of sorts for them to express themselves through the modifications they produce.

While debadging is also practised by the modifiers in this study, my material indicates in contrast that specific brands are of great importance in modifiers' choice of cars to modify. In this chapter, I have noted how the branded identities of standard cars could be indicative of particularly challenging and rare (Toyota Corolla) projects to be cultivated by modifiers into their own unique designs. To take on a brand and model that is considered among car modifiers to be challenging to modify, that is, with few after-sales products available, may help to further enhance the uniqueness of the modified car. This indicates that the brand and the production of uniqueness are in fact deeply intertwined, modifiers actively utilise and expand the (im)possibilities of car brands in their striving to

produce their own uniqueness. Rather than “debadging” his Volvo, Lars said he wanted to enhance “that which is Volvo” by giving the car more edge. For Lars, to give the Volvo more edge meant to tune the engine and to enhance its racy look. Stefan, whose Volvo will be more carefully introduced in Chapter Six, said he had taken his car “one step further than Volvo dared to do”, that is to say, he had done what in his view was needed in order to make the Volvo *perfect*. Hence, rather than viewing their cars as *tabula rasa*, these modifiers considered themselves to be taking part in, and cultivating, the design process, carrying on from where the Volvo designers had left the car when it was introduced onto the market.

Volvo also mattered in terms of how they viewed their own family history. Both Lars and his friend Daniel said they were raised in, or “born into”, what they refer to as a “Volvo family”, a family that preferred Volvos over other makes. This is also a term that pops up now and then in motoring magazines; to be raised in a Volvo family implies a form of “non-choice” in terms of car consumption (cf. *Bilsport* no. 16, 2005: 29). Perhaps this is an example of the form of hybridised relations between human and car that Mimi Sheller (2004: 232) discusses as a form of “kinship” between humans and cars, as when cars become members of families. Through the figure of the “Volvo family”, the brand and the family are being linked together as a natural connection. Drawing on feminist analyses by Haraway (1997) and Franklin et al. (2000), Sheller (2004: 232) outlines the contours of the kinship between the “humanised car” and the “automobilised person”. As members of a Volvo family, and by taking over from where Volvo left off, modifiers show their affiliation with both family and brand, while also making it possible to configure their own, truly *limited edition*, of the Volvo car.

Car fashion and its swift changes: “You've got one year, max”

In the previous sections, I have discussed car styling in the context of temporality and editions. In this section, I move on to discuss trends and what will be referred to as car fashion. Niclas, as a pioneer of the Swedish car styling scene, elaborates this point by reflecting upon the trend among modifiers to install vertical doors (doors that open from the front, vertically) in their cars:

It was the movies [*The Fast and the Furious*] that did it; it was like turning the page. You know, when I presented my car with vertical doors, the second year in 2004, I think it was, almost every goddamn car had vertical doors. It's like fashion, sort of, it should be vertical doors or else you're nobody. And now, when I built [name of car], like the last three years, it was totally out. If you have vertical doors, you're in prehistoric times goddamn, "that went out a long time ago." [...] This is why it's hard to build a styling car today; I say you've got one year, max. That is if you're not presenting some really crazy ideas.<sup>30</sup>

In this excerpt, Niclas talks about how everybody wants to have the same kinds of details on their cars to be fashionable. The significant point in this excerpt is the meaning he ascribes to details, and how the wrong kinds of detail make the car a failure. This, in turn, makes a modifier's peak time very short. Consider how Tove, above, outlined vertical doors as highly desirable for her upgraded car and how Niclas here considered the same doors to have gone "out a long time ago". This in turn points to the fact that taste preferences do not have to be shared by all modifiers, quite the contrary; preferences about certain details may also provoke the community.

Through their discursive effects in connecting them with what is currently in or out, details are able to ascribe or reduce the status of their bearers (cf. Norberg and Mörck 2007). As in the case of vertical doors, details seemed able to structure hierarchies among modifiers as important signifiers of status. The focus on details also allows modifiers to deconstruct the modified car into its specific parts, reducing it into its very details, and to relate this to what are constructed through current trends as being in or out.

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<sup>30</sup> Niclas: det är filmerna alla gånger, det var som att vända på en hand. Alltså när jag kom med min [namn på bil] med lambodörrar, andra året där 2004 tror jag det blir, då hade nästan varenda jävla bil lambodörrar. Det är mode liksom, nu ska det vara lambo annars är du ingenting. Och nu när jag byggde [name of car] då, de tre senaste åren, totalt ute. Har du lambodörrar, då lever du i forntiden för faan, det var ute för länge sen. Så därför är det ju, det är ju också svårt att bygga en stylingbil idag, jag säger max ett år. Sen är det ute. Om du inte har några riktigt galna idéer då.



The association between car styling and shifts in trends positions the cultural production of uniqueness as a significantly unstable process. Brownlie et al. (2005: 105) quote Georg Simmel when they argue “works of art may easily be destroyed in their uniqueness the moment they are reproduced (...) (and) cannot exist in great numbers without losing their essential nature.” In order to legitimately claim a position as unique, Bengry-Howell (2005) argues, the car modifier needs to keep modifying the car in order to maintain his or her symbolic edge in relation to other modifiers. Such an “edge” is not necessarily related to function, as discussed, but to how “fresh” a car becomes in the context of other modified cars. This process of instability and status, however, does not apply to all cars. Niclas continues:

Take an old Amcar for example, that’s timeless. An Amcar is still an Amcar, you may build on it for years and years and it doesn’t die. There is no fashion going on there, but here it is.<sup>31</sup>

Here, Niclas makes a clear distinction between Amcars as non-fashion and styled cars as about fashion. In making this distinction, he also distinguishes certain men’s interest in cars as being about fashion, while other men’s interest is timeless. This calls for a deeper investigation of men’s fashion.

According to Tim Edwards (2006: 109), men’s fashion is something of a contradiction in terms; men are not fashionable, women are. Such an assertion is formed around industrial capitalism and situates women as the *consumers* of products and men as the *producers*. In this dichotomy, masculinity is established as more authentic than femininity by its very distancing from the delusive surface of femininity (Nordberg and Mörck 2007: 126). Clearly, car modifiers are both producers and consumers of car fashion as they consume the products needed to modify and fix up their unique street cars. In Niclas’s account, he did not talk about clothes and colognes, as has been assigned the “new man’s” way of shopping, but car

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<sup>31</sup> Ta en gammal jänkebil, det är tidlöst. En jänkebil är en jänkebil, det kan du bygga på i flera år, det dör inte. Det är inget mode där utan, men det här är mode.

modification as about fashion. The question is: how can one understand what it would mean for technological artefacts to become “fashion”?

Andreas Ottemo and Lars Gårdfelt (2009: 78) have inquired how technology, masculinity and desire are interlinked in the context of representations of technological gadgets like mobile phones and the like. In their view, technology that is associated with fashion marks a borderline and ambivalent technology in relation to what is made desirable technology for men. They argue that gender ambivalence occurs when a gadget is turned into fashion, as opposed to technology. A mobile phone regarded as “fashionable”, for example, is, according to their argument, merited for its aesthetic attractiveness and femininity rather than its functionality and masculinity. Technological products that are deemed to be subject to fashion may therefore come to lose their status as masculine technology and simply become feminine “fashion” apparel. The attractiveness of the artefact to men is thereby made significantly weaker when it is named as fashion. The way Niclas configures Amcar enthusiasts as being located outside the realm of fashion is significant for such a division between fashion and technology; it is a discursive practice that configures users of Amcars as authentic modifiers. The styled car assumes a position as fashion in relation to the classic Amcar, in this relation the styled car becomes associated with trendiness, while the Amcar come to stand for reliability, a “real car” and masculinity.

Along these lines, as *fashion*, the styled contemporary car could be viewed as outlining a gender-ambivalent position for men who are into car styling. Ambivalent since styled cars can become associated with inauthentic, superficial and potentially feminised technology. Car styling does, however, offer something that Amcars do not. Steve, a middle-aged car modifier who had previously been into Amcars, said he had lately got into styling of contemporary cars for a specific rationale. The reason he moved on to customise contemporary cars was due to the fact that American cars “entail a lot less work, you may restore them to their original shape but Amcars never allow room for creativity in the same way that contemporary euro-cars do.” Hence, the “a-fashionability” of the Amcar segment for Steve represents a restriction on creativity in a way that contemporary cars do not. With the move to contemporary European cars, he may live out his

creativity in a way he did not find possible in the more conservative Amcar segment. After all, car styling as about change and trendiness is the kind of material-semiotic culture that the modifiers in this study use as their means of creative self-expression. In the next section, I move on to situate these aspirations to uniqueness within a wider context of transnational trends in car modification (i.e. as cultural practices that take place across national borders), including some of its gendered meanings.

### Negotiating transnational trends in car styles

In order to understand car modification and trends in the particular context of contemporary Sweden, one has to consider what Tom O'Dell calls the "interstice of the national, the transnational and the local" (O'Dell 1997: 113). Rudy Koshar (2004), who has written about car shows in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, concludes that, historically, cars, car manufacturers and technology have for a long time been caught up in a transatlantic web of technological cross-fertilisation and competition. Writers at the time found cars to be in a state of enormous flux and transformation. Today, because of online modified car communities and rapid cultural exchanges, these transformations and cross-fertilisations include not only several continents and their specific car cultures, but also important sources of inspiration for car modifiers in Sweden. As already noted, the so-called Amcar enthusiasm brings to the fore the concrete practices through which transnational cultural influences are integrated into people's lives in Sweden. However, this chapter will proceed by discussing the influences and trends from other car cultures that are to various degrees implemented in Swedish car styling, manipulated to express car modifier subjectivities – and even represent Swedishness.

Throughout my fieldwork, I have taken the opportunity to interview a number of editors of motoring magazines to get their views on trends, sources of inspiration and how modified car culture(s) has developed over the years. One of these editors, Jenny, is speaking as the representative of a magazine that is particularly dedicated to what she refers to as the younger generation on the Swedish street car scene. Jenny says the following about car modifiers' sources of inspiration:

Jenny: The USA has been leading throughout the years, it is the SEMA<sup>32</sup> show in Las Vegas in November that is the greatest trendsetter. Then there is the drifting culture that came four or five years ago, which makes Japan productive of many trends and this has caught on really big. Today, the importing of Japanese cars has grown in a way never seen before, but if I would mention only one, then it's the USA. That's where you get the biggest, worst and craziest cars, and it's like that still, especially regarding looks and designs. In terms of drifting, that is engines, effect, performance, it's definitely Japan. But, in terms of shaping how the car may look, like to widen the car and add on weird spoiler wings or bathtubs, or other things they may come up with, it's clearly the USA.<sup>33</sup>

Jenny traces two different streams of trends: one of US heritage and one that originates from Japanese car culture. These countries are influential in different ways; US trends are associated with modifications of the car's exterior and a wild style, while Japanese trends are primarily associated with performance and a specific way of driving the car, called drifting<sup>34</sup>. "Drifting" refers to a motorsport and a driving technique where the driver intentionally over-steers, causing loss of traction and smoke from the rear wheels through turns, while maintaining vehicle control. Modern drifting as a sport started out as a racing technique popular in Japan. Hollywood embraced the drifting culture in the movie called *The Fast and the Furious*:

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<sup>32</sup> The SEMA Show is considered to be one of the premier automotive specialty products trade events in the world.

<sup>33</sup> USA har väl varit ledande egentligen i alla år, och då är det ju Sema show i Las Vegas som är i november som är den största trendsettern. Sen när driftingkulturen kom för fyra eller fem år sedan är det väl nu så var det givetvis japan satte ju väldigt många trender då och har ju växt otroligt mycket. Det har importerats japanska bilar som aldrig förr de senaste åren, men ska man nämna en så är det USA helt klart. Där är det störst värst och galnast, på nåt sätt fortfarande, vad det gäller ombyggnationer av själva utseendet, japan har ju varit mycket drifting alltså motor, effekt, prestanda. Men vad gäller hur bilen ser ut och hur man kan forma den och bredda den och sätta konstiga vingar och bygga badkar och allt vad det nu är de hittar på då är det helt klart USA.

<sup>34</sup> With Japanese trends came new iconic cars to modify, like the Mitsubishi Evo, Toyota Supra and Nissan Skyline, the last two cars of which are especially suitable for "drifting".

*Tokyo Drift*, which is based solely on drifting and high-performance sports cars.<sup>35</sup>

The fact that Japanese sports cars have been appropriated by younger generations of car modifiers is significant from a gender perspective. In a Swedish context, cars of Asian origin are sometimes called “rice boilers”, an uncomfortably racist term that refers to poor quality and performance. This is a rather old stereotype that goes back to the 1960s when Japanese motor manufacturers first began to sell their cars in the European market. The notion of a “rice boiler” may be taken to imply a feminised car that is equated with food or a kitchen aid, linking Japanese and Asian cars with domesticity and the sphere of women as opposed to that of men, masculinity and the public. In English vernacular the notion of a “ricer car” is sometimes used in a related, yet different, way of denouncing styled cars (not necessarily of Asian make) as superficial and lacking in power. In this discourse, masculinity and authenticity are constituted through denouncing the feminine superficiality of the “ricer”.

This form of positioning its driver as a “ricer” draws on discourses that situate the Asian man as sexually inferior and feminised. David Eng (2001) has studied images of Asian American men. He argues that “the feminization of the Asian American male in the U.S. cultural imaginary typically results in his figuration as feminized, emasculated, or homosexualized” (Eng 2001: 16, cited in Andreassen 2012: 141). Just as the “rice car” emerges through racial and gendered discourses as superficial and lacking in power, the Asian man has during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries been situated as sexually inferior to white Western men. It is therefore striking to note that Japanese cars, through the trend of drifting, power and performance, have for younger generations of car modifiers come to represent highly-sought-after tuning and performance cars to import and to identify themselves with. In terms of power and performance, as I will come back to in subsequent chapters, it is rather the US way of styling that is considered lacking.

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<sup>35</sup> As well as movies, there are also video games that play a role in influencing car modifiers into specific ways of driving and styling their cars. For example, the series of racing video games called *Need for Speed*.

Jenny described the US style as being oriented towards looks and design rather than performance. This so-called “extreme” show-car style is associated with a Californian style and the US TV show *Pimp my Ride*. This TV show represents a playful style in car modification. By installing videogames, multiple LCD screens or even “bathtubs” in the car, the extremeness of the style is in this sense most clear in the way in which it breaks away from what is considered ordinary in cars, including links with tuning and performance. These two trends exemplify a tension in the genre *car styling* between performance-related and display-oriented style. I will come back to this at more length in Chapter Six. Here, it suffices to say that in order to come up with a design of one’s own, to aspire to the position of uniqueness, these trends are of crucial importance to negotiate in order to find one’s expression as a car modifier.

The interconnectedness of various car cultures offers important elements that car modifiers can utilise to construct their own uniqueness by taking up trends, details and ideas from other car cultures. By exploring via online communities what is shown at influential motor shows in Japan, the USA and Germany, modifiers may find direction for their own car projects. During his interview, Lars explained how he had worked out what would eventually become “the” trend for the prestigious *Elmia* car show in Sweden, at which he was to display his car. In order to do this, first of all he established what last year’s trend was, namely, the colour white. “Everything should be white.” He also considered what trends had been established at the *Essen Motor Show* (the biggest styling and tuning auto-show in Europe), which took place in Germany just before Christmas 2007. The cars displayed there had utilised and developed the original designs rather than significantly altering them. Following these insights, Lars’s car was modified following the guideline of “enhancing what is Volvo”.

Lars: The paint theme of the car, I’ve always wanted a lower line for the car, painting the bonnet, roof and back in black I’ve seen people in the USA do and I found it to be really nice looking. The rest of the theme for the car we worked out together with Håkan, the guy who motif-painted the car. We had a feeling that the theme for 2008 would be “paint” and this was later acknowledged when *BilSport* announced that the theme for *Elmia* would be paint. It was like “we were right”,

we kind of guessed the move from “white to motif”, and it proved to be spot on. That’s pure luck, it builds on fingertip sensitivity, but anyway, the theme could have been matt black or matt colours, in that case we would have been totally wrong. On the other hand, you build your car for your own sake primarily. Not for the sake of following trends<sup>36</sup>.

By taking inspiration from modifiers in other parts of the world like the USA and from international car shows, Lars outlines how he came up with the guiding idea for the car. With a mix of luck and sensitivity, he and Håkan calculated what they imagined would become the upcoming season’s trend – a shift from “white” to “paint”. This meant a shift to motif-painted cars, an area which was Håkan’s speciality. Their predictions could also have failed and been “totally wrong”, which outlines the element of risk inherent in uncertainties and flows of trends. The excerpt also outlines a commercial ambivalence as Lars is keen to point out that he is not a follower of trends but builds for his own sake – as a personal choice. What this exemplifies, of course, is that becoming unique and trend-setting in the context of car modification is both about being subject to contextual conditions such as trends and acting upon them. Modifiers do not simply follow trends, they are simultaneously negotiating and innovating their own incarnations of them. In this case, it was Lars and Håkan’s “fingertip sensitivity”, which they developed by teaming up their ambitions and competences, that came to develop what in a Swedish context would represent the new and trendy during the 2008 summer season car shows.

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<sup>36</sup> Tema lack och såna saker, jag har alltid velat ha en lägre linje på bilen, att göra huv, tak och baklucka svart har jag sett folk i USA göra och tyckt att det var riktigt snyggt. Resten av temat kring bilen jobbade vi fram tillsammans med Håkan lackeraren som motivlackat bilen. Vi hade en känsla att temat för året 2008 kommer att vara paint, och det fick vi bekräftat när Bilsport gick ut och sa temat för Elmia är paint och då var det såhär ”vi hade rätt”, vi gissade det att ”från vitt till motiv” och det visade sig att det var en fullträff. Det är ren tur, det bygger på fingertopskänsla, i alla fall, temat kunde varit mattsvart eller matta färger och då hade vi varit helt fel ute. Å andra sidan, man ska ju bygga sin bil för sin egen skull primärt. Inte för att följa trenderna.

## Modifiers against the grain

In this section I outline the implications that modified car forums have for constructions of cars and modifier selfhoods. The power that car modifiers themselves ascribe to online interactions points to how web forums, especially through practices of sharing practical car know-how, discussing and posting images of cars, need to be considered as a significant part of the fashioning of modified cars and modifier selfhoods (see also Hewer and Brownlie 2007: 112). Forums are tools by which car modifiers negotiate, shape and normalise what is representative of their style. Like other communities formed around technology, car modification is characterised by a sharing of images, tips, knowledge and discussions, including visualisations and descriptions about how to perform various technical modifications (Nilsson 2011, cf. Kendall 2002). Kenneth, the editor of a Swedish motoring magazine, explains more in an interview over the phone.

Kenneth: The internet is so incredibly huge for those who are into car modification, it really affects the ways you build your car. That's where you'll see what kinds of cars people like, and learn how to build the car in order to make others like it. Only a few dare to go against the grain, there are a few that do so, but they really get to take a lot of dissing because of it<sup>37</sup>.

In this excerpt, Kenneth talks about the significance of online communities in influencing car modification. What is significant is that he outlines what goes on in such forums as being about both supporting and slating one another's projects according to certain style norms. Supporting, as in learning what other modifiers have done with their cars and what people like in terms of style. Those who go against the dominant ideal of taste, rebelling against the dominant view of what should be considered good taste, may be targeted for doing so. Kenneth again:

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<sup>37</sup> Internet är så otroligt stort för de som håller på med den här hobbyn, det påverkar verkligen hur man bygger, där ser man ju också vad tycker folk om för bilar, hur ska jag bygga bilen för att andra ska tycka att den är snygg. Det är ganska få som vågar gå emot strömmen, det finns några stycken som gör det och de får verkligen mycket skit för det.



Some build their cars as they see fit, and without them knowing it, they have to bear a lot of dissing in the forums. [...] Anything that in any way diverges in style will eventually end up on one or other of the major web-forums, subsequently creating a lot of talk<sup>38</sup>.

Following what Kenneth says, modified car forums not only afford a space for individual modifiers to show others their ongoing projects, members may also show cars as conversation starters – as examples of cars that are not yet known to the wider community. According to Kenneth, anything diverting, in a positive or negative way, may eventually be made available for online talk. Hence, car forums afford modifiers the ability to gain control over their own self-making by way of cars, but they also induce a sense of lack of control over how builds may be perceived by the community. Even though car modification to a great extent revolves around a claim for visibility, when and how such visibility occurs may not be under the control of the individual modifier. In fact, whenever the modified car is being used in a public space, as noted by Lars at the beginning of this chapter, it is potentially laid open to both photographic and assessing gazes and thereby to online comments. Therefore, the modified car forum may be read as both productive of innovative, “unique” car designs, but also as restricting how cars are being shaped, as in standardising a certain look or style. Online communities intensify inclusion into a shared community, but they are also productive of various forms of exclusion and domination. Read in this dual way, modified car forums can be understood as sites where car modifiers are simultaneously the surveyor and the surveyed, where the modifier self is looking at him or herself through the implied gaze of others.

Modified car forums provide the opportunity of making available to others one’s project and asking for other modifiers’ opinions. Much space in forums is devoted to “building threads”, where the modifiers in turn publish updates, images as well as text, about the cars being modified. Drawing on Bo Nilsson (2011), who has studied audiophiles’ interactions

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<sup>38</sup> Vissa bygger som de själva vill men så utan att de vet om det så får de hur mycket skit som helst på nätet. [...] är det något som sticker ut så hamnar det alltid på något av de stora bilforumen på nätet, och det blir jättemycket snack.

in online communities, it is possible to argue that the (embodied) skills of modifying technological artifacts are being put on display. The private space of the garage is here put online and made publicly available for others to see and take part in. Car modification is not only an embodied, “silent” skill but also a form of knowledge that is shared in social interaction (Nilsson 2011: 76). Skills, taste and knowledge in and of cars are shared, recognised and evaluated online by different members of the modified car community. What goes on in garages is also made publicly available for comment and evaluation and, by doing so, makes the project of “personifying” oneself through one’s car highly collective.

At a car show in Stockholm, I got the chance to interview Stefan about his views on what goes on in the forums. According to him, online communities sometimes have too much influence on the way individual modifiers rebuild their cars.

Stefan: There are those who use the *garaget.org* [online community] to post images of their car or parts of their car and post three options for others to tick [laughter], as in letting the others decide what he should do with his car. Should I paint it yellow, red or blue, should I go with these rims, should I, should I, a lot of questions, sort of. It all ends up like the Eurovision Song Contest, like when the audience does the voting.<sup>39</sup>

Stefan talks about the online community and how he has noticed car modifiers who post images of their ongoing projects and ask others to decide how to proceed. What is significant in this passage is how Stefan makes a laughing stock out of their indecisiveness and the fact that they cannot make up their own minds. The reference to the Eurovision Song Contest further ridicules and emasculates indecisive modifiers, especially if we consider that this form of music contest is associated with family

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<sup>39</sup> Stefan: ja, sen finns det de som använder garaget till att lägga ut en bild på sin bil eller en del av bilen och ställer tre kryssfrågor i stort sett (skratt) och låter de andra bestämma hur han ska göra med sin bil, ska jag lacka den gul, röd eller blå, ska jag ha sådana fälgar, ska jag ha ska jag ha massa frågor liksom. Men då blir det ju som du vet melodifestivalen då blir det ju publiken som röstar.

entertainment and the figure of the gay pop-hit enthusiast [schlagerbög]. Voting is then associated with the practice of gay men and women to decide amongst themselves who is the best to entertain, an activity that situates the contestants as wishing to please an audience rather than their own desires. What seems to be at stake is the highly valued idea that modifiers build their cars for their own sake first and foremost, that car modification is about doing one's own thing. A modifier who does not manage to decide what to do is clearly failing to utilise the car to represent his "extended self".

In the following excerpt, Stefan and I discuss a car that has come to constitute its owner as particularly self reliant and independent among modifiers. This particular car is styled in a way that modifiers talk about as dividing the Volvo community into those who find it appealing and those who find it appalling.

Dag: Isn't there, sort of, an anxiety about what may work or not, how broad you may go, how crazily you may do it? Like Adam's car.

Stefan: But, he stands by what he does, some people may ask about door handles and little things like that, if he [Adam] would post his car there would be like 50/50 making war against each other. That car is very spectacular and breaks the pattern.

Dag: A car that divides the Volvo community?

Stefan: Sort of, sort of, some people don't like the way of building away the smooth lines that Volvo built into the car, it's very round in the rear, round like this. So, if you mount sharp edges as he's done, that breaks off quite a bit.

Dag: I like what he's done with the car.

Stefan: Yeah, it's his thing; there's no one else who's done it.

Dag: No, I guess not.

Stefan: And that's a goal too, I guess.<sup>40</sup>

In this excerpt, Stefan and I talk about a modifier who has broken with the general pattern of modifying certain models of Volvo. There are several things going on in this excerpt that associate car modification with masculinity: one is that of breaking with norms of style and taste, another relates to the importance of standing by what one has done – to do one's own thing and by doing so achieve the kind of car that no one else has got. In Chapter Six I will come back to discuss an example of what may happen when modifiers break with the general conception of style. Here it suffices to say that to breach style conventions is ok as long as one does not breach the ideal of "doing one's own thing". The particular way in which the modifications are done in this particular example bears witness to a masculine car modifier who is independent and self sufficient. Rather than taking advice from others, to do one's own thing means to possibly upset other modifiers, even to force the Volvo community to renegotiate their style conventions. It is not far-fetched to argue that modifying against the grain in this particular case re-establishes the powerful and normalised relationship between masculinity and technology as being about control and independence (Wajcman 2004, Mellström 2004). Not to settle for repeating trends and other modifiers' material-semiotic practices, but to move beyond this point, is what makes car modification a truly masculine achievement. Inherent in this idealised construction is the link with

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<sup>40</sup> Dag: men det är väl ändå en viss ängslighet kring vad som kan funka, hur brett kan man göra, hur galet kan man göra? Som Adams bil.

Stefan: men han står ju för vad han gör, men en del kan ju fråga om dörrhantag och såna här småsaker, skulle han lägga ut den skulle det bli 50/50 såhär kriga mot varandra. Den där är ju väldigt spektakulär och bryter ju lite av mönstret också,

Dag: delar den upp volvoläget?

Stefan: litegranna, litegranna, en del gillar ju inte att man på en sån model som volvo byggde som har mjuka linjer, den är väldigt rund i rumpan, rund i såhär. Så sätter han på raka plåtar som han har gjort det bryter ju en del då.

Dag: jag gillar ju att han har gjort det.

Stefan: ja, det är ju hans grej, det finns ju ingen annan som har gjort det.

Dag: näe verkligen.

Stefan: och det är väl ett mål också.

competition, in this case, to come up with the next big thing in car modification.

“It's in the soul, you know”

The associations with fashion or the involvement of online communities as “style police” do not make car styling any less important or “real”, as the following section shows. In his interview, Niclas talked about *The Fast and the Furious* as a significant source of inspiration. The styled cars in the movie appealed to him, and he says that he saw the potential to make them look even better. During the interview, he mimics the sound of a VCR to illustrate how he used to play specific parts of the movie over and over again in order to learn exactly what kinds of modifications had been done to the particular car in question.

Niclas: I wanted to build a copy as far as I could, but you put your personal imprint into the build as well. That's why I have such difficulty selling them; it's in the soul, you know [...] it's hard to sell for one's own sake I mean. [...] It's really personal; I care for the cars more than I care for myself. It's like that, if you think about it, it's totally sick.<sup>41</sup>

Niclas talks in this excerpt about his ambition to “copy” a car from the *Fast and the Furious*. What is significant here is that, by *copying* the look of a particularly well-known car like a movie car, he may risk being accused of being a “copycat”, someone who has appropriated the symbolic capital of someone else's material-semiotic practices (Bengry-Howell 2005: 124). Seemingly, that would go against the highly esteemed ideal of uniqueness, and the revered currency of having an original take on a car in this context. As a copycat, he would be blatantly failing to do his own thing. Copying, however, does not necessarily disqualify him from legitimately claiming the position of being unique, just as gender, in the established vernacular of

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<sup>41</sup> Men jag ville bygga en kopia så mycket som möjligt, sen sätter man ju sin personliga prägel på det också. Det är därför det är svårt att sälja dem, det sitter ju i själen det där. [...] det är svårt att sälja för en själv menar jag. [...] Det är jättepersonligt, jag vårdar ju mina bilar mer än vad jag vårdar mig själv. Det är ju så, det är helt sjukt alltså, om man tänker efter.

feminist theorist Judith Butler, is a repetition of stylised acts that also allows for re-articulations. This configures the material-semiotic practices of car modification as always implicating a certain “personal imprint” through the building process.

Furthermore, Niclas’s emotional investment in his cars also moves beyond the mere practice of copying. The fact that Niclas claims to care for the cars more than himself points to how intertwined and attached car modifiers may become with their cars through the process of rebuilding them. In fact, the way in which Niclas constitutes his relationship with his modified car as being more important than himself, tends to blur the boundaries between human and car. In this identification with the car as though his well-being depends on it, a blending of self and machine comes to the fore (Wajcman 2004: 97, Haraway 1991). Hence, not only are car modifiers’ claims to uniqueness materially embodied through the modified car, in the relation between modifier and car outlined here, but the well-being of both owner and car are conjoined. The modified car is not only a signifier of one’s personality, but is even by some modifiers considered a part of their souls.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have explored how the men and women in this study make meaning and matter out of the material-semiotic practice of modifying cars. This chapter contributes to the aim of the study, that is, to explore how gender and cars are interrelated, by analysing one of the key practices of car modification, namely the practice of personifying, and thereby making oneself unique, through cars. This practice, of making themselves unique through cars, is the most obvious distinction between modifiers and car consumers in general. The difference remains, not in the way car modifiers and standard car owners may care for, be careful of, and seek to maintain and service their cars but, as I will continue to map out in the following chapters, and as I have already touched upon, the difference remains in how car modification produces a much more fixed and intimate relationship between owner and car (see also Bengry-Howell and Griffin 2010: 375). Car modifiers take a standard car as only the starting point for an ongoing process of reshaping the car, while car consumers in general usually leave it in its original shape. As *Mods and Greasers* (Hebdige 1988,

Bjurström 1995) have been before them, car modifiers are not passive consumers of cars but active producers. For the participants in this study, car styling is a way of “doing their own thing”, and by successfully doing so communicating independence and self-reliance as gendered subjects.

Utilising the ideal of “uniqueness”, in this chapter I have shown how cars are constituted in ways that make them significant to car modifiers, and how the car itself is constituted as part of car modifiers’ production of their individual identity construction. In this sense, car modification is conditioned by the post-traditional state, which sociologists like Ziehe (1982/2003) and Giddens (1991) argue forces us to become “seekers” in order to find out what we believe in and what to make into our life project (Sernhede 2006: 13). Car modification, as situated in transnational networks of influences and trends, may in this sense be regarded as an example of what Franklin et al. (2000: 7) refer to as the effect of “the global” in making worlds, bodies and selves, with an impact at the local level. The Hollywood movie industry’s image of cool cars and fast rides provided “dream cars” to lust after for many informants in this study. Car modification offers a way of exploring this uncertainty by utilising cars and consumption to stylise an identity through subscribing to masculine symbols of speed, freedom and risk. The expressions of style that car modifiers create utilise *the ordinary*, *the old* and *the boring* in standard cars as material for their self-making as youthful and unique subjects. This is, however, a self-construction that is inherently frail and contradictory: it is dependent upon the ability to identify and negotiate shifts in transnational trends, it is dependent upon subjecting themselves to the scrutiny of peer car modifiers, and it is ambivalent in relation to car styling per se, as associated with fashion. On the one hand, car styling as fashion outlines a productive gender ambivalence that associates men with trendiness, surface, making attractive and femininity. On the other hand, the competitiveness inherent in the achievement of managing transnational trends and coming up with a new and, for Sweden, unique car design, strengthens its links with masculinity. The competitiveness is constructed around masculine values such as decisiveness, to go against the grain and to be self-reliant.

As this chapter has shown, women are by no means absent from the settings mapped out here as car modifiers' territory. They are just as active as car modifiers as some of their male family members or spouses. As I hope to argue further, the fact that this is not an exclusively male domain – which might come as a surprise to some readers – but a setting for variously embodied and engendered car enthusiasts, does not, however, mean that gender or gender bias is an irrelevant category of analysis. Indeed, gender – as it coincides with (sometimes to inclusive, sometimes to exclusive effects of) other social categories – makes up an extensive part of what the modifiers are negotiating and even (culturally) modifying in their efforts to re-make individual cars. As has also been noted by Karen Lumsden (2009a, 2009b) in the UK context, a growing number of women now participate in this male-dominated culture and are as passionate about their cars as the males. Women are taking part in car modification as car producers themselves. The ways in which connections are reproduced between masculinity and technology tend to keep reproducing car modification as being “for men”; one reason for this is the links established between masculinity and craftsmanship, and this will be the topic of the next chapter.



## 5

**Crafting cars**

In this second of the empirical chapters, I engage with exploring the construction of gender in relation to how car modification is done. This chapter links to and broadly answers the research question: *How* do modifiers acquire the inspiration and knowledge to modify cars, and how is car modification (ideally) done? In considering the significance of craftsmanship in contemporary car modification, I develop the argument about self-making and uniqueness begun in the previous chapter. While outlining the significance of craftsmanship, I aim to make visible the contours of a particular position constructed by the modifier imaginary as an idealised and refined version of masculinity, a purified ideal for car modifiers to identify themselves with. In this chapter, readers will find a mix of interviews and motoring magazine representations of car modification as the basis for outlining it as a heroic project.

The following section juxtaposes craftsmanship with consumption, after which the meanings of time, dedication, stamina and Swedishness are considered as vital features in the construction of car modifiers. Subsequently, I move on to discuss car modification in relation to gendered materials, leisure time and sponsors. In the last section, I outline the position of women modifiers in this male-dominated world.

**Car modification, craft and modifier masculinity**

In the previous chapter, I noted how car styling was associated with consumption, fashion and swift changes in trends. I also noted that modifiers emphasised car modification as being about “doing one’s own

thing” and, by successfully doing so, communicating independence and self-reliance as gendered subjects. This dimension of self-making by way of cars is further developed in this chapter in the context of craftsmanship. When I asked Jenny, the editor of a modified car magazine dedicated to contemporary street cars, to elaborate on car modification, she said that the availability and consumption of so-called after-sales products have made car styling much more easily accessible to younger generations of car modifiers compared to how the situation was for older generations of car enthusiasts. However, according to Jenny, with increased popularity and accessibility there has followed a counter-reaction in a (re-)turn to craftsmanship.

Dag: Is there more status to having made things yourself?

Jenny: Absolutely, that is the greatest, to have done it all by yourself and preferable also to design your own body kit or spoiler wing or something like that, that gives more status compared to someone who buys a ready-made package for 40 000 SEK and mounts it on the car. Absolutely. Or someone who leaves it with a firm to do it for them. That’s rather self-evident too, like you have put your own signature on the car.

Dag: Not just having picked the stuff?

Jenny: No exactly, it’s my hands and my craft so to speak [...].<sup>42</sup>

Jenny distinguishes between designing and doing the work oneself from buying ready-made parts. The difference between craftsmanship and the ready-made is hierarchically related, whereas the easily accessible consumer commodities like pre-made body kits are associated with less

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42 Dag: är det bättre status att ha gjort allt själv?

Jenny: absolut, det är det största, att ha gjort allt själv och helst att ha egendesignat ett kjolpaket eller vinge eller någonting sådant, det är absolut högre status än att man köper ett färdigt paket för 40 000 och bara skruvar på, eller lämnar det till någon firma som gör allting. Och det säger sig självt också, att då är det min signatur på den här bilen.

Dag: inte bara att jag har valt grejerna?

Jenny: näe precis, det är mina händer mitt hantverk på nåt sätt [...].

value, while doing it with one's own hands is related to high status, originality and the ability to put your own signature on the rebuilt car.

The emphasis on craftsmanship in car modification is related to the pleasure in finding one's way through a difficult moment of modification. In other studies of car modifiers in Sweden, the modern hi-tech car with its inbuilt electronics has been considered "impossible" for laypersons to understand and modify (Rosengren 2000). This unavailability to technological intervention, Rosengren argues, would make modern cars less attractive to younger people to modify. However, the modifiers in this study have taken car modification beyond this point. When I interviewed Daniel about his current stereo project, he assured me it was well worth it to take up a "do-it-yourself" attitude even though it is difficult:

Daniel: The thing that made it extra fun with this car was that it is so goddamn complicated with an integrated sound system. All the parts are integrated with one another, which means that if you take out the display for the CD player, the car won't start. This is because it's a closed fibre optic circuit throughout the whole car, which is also linked with the engine information system. And if the engine info system won't work, then you can't start the car. So, you know, that was quite a challenge just to make it work, that was one of the things I thought was fun with this kind of car, it's difficult, and nobody else has done it before, and it's something else compared to simply buying the stuff and mounting it and then it's done. Here you need to become a PhD in what you do and learn how to solve the problems that occur.<sup>43</sup>

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43 Daniel: Det som gjorde att jag tyckte att det var extra roligt med den bilen det är att det är så jäkla komplicerat med ljudsystemet som sitter i. Allting är integrerat, plockar du bort displayen till cd spelaren då kan du inte starta bilen, det är sluten krets med fiberoptik genom hela bilen som går med bland annat motorinformationssystemet, och funkar inte motorinformationen så går det inte att starta bilen. Så att... de, det var en utmaning... bara att få till det liksom, så det tyckte väl jag var en av de grejerna som var roligt med den bilmodellen, det är svårt, det är ingen som har gjort det tidigare, det är inte liksom bara att köpa grejerna och montera så är det klart, utan du måste hela tiden doktorera i allting och se hur gör man nu då hur ska vi lösa det här problemet.

Daniel talks about how he finds it enjoyable to learn about the difficult electronics within which he has managed to successfully install a sound system of his liking. In so doing, he had to overcome several practical problems that are related to the standard car design. Pleasure is invested in being “the first one” to take on this challenge, and that doing it himself was considered much more rewarding than taking the easy option and simply buying parts that would work from the start.

A related way of interpreting the value of a particularly challenging project is as a ritual and rite of passage. Much as my own PhD project is a typical academic rite of passage, Daniel is associating his car project with a rite of passage by talking about becoming a PhD through the car. It is only after conquering the challenging car that he may constitute himself as being “the first”, and thereby unique. This competitive element in car styling adds to the masculinisation of car modification and indeed also to making the modifier unique. Technical skills form a part of what it means to be a competent man, someone who finds his way around problems rather than being intimidated by them. In this sense, “true” masculinity is formed around embodied, practical and multi-skilled abilities, as also noted in several other studies on men and technology (Lohand and Faulkner 2004, Mellström 2004: 375). This is also in line with Rosengren’s (2000: 44) observations, namely that a central discourse in the lives of modifiers is to see the car as a challenge that you take on in order to see if you can figure it out. Not only is the modifier constituted as someone who willingly goes that extra mile in the pursuit of the stereo system of his preference, the fact that contemporary car technology causes him problems in fulfilling his will allows him to successfully perform modifier masculinity.

In studies on technology and masculinity, there are two forms of masculinity in particular that tend to be emphasised. Judy Wajcman (1991: 143, 144) outlines one based on physical toughness and mechanical skills associated foremost with an expressive form of working-class masculinity. The other is based on the professional, calculating rationality of technical specialists associated with the “ruling-class men” within organisations and social institutions. These are separated by class, but also share a fundamental component in the ability to master and control both technology and nature. Both forms of masculinity conceptualise a way in

which men imagine and construct identity in relation to machines and technology (Mellström 2003: 151). On the basis of Wajcman's typology, Mellström (1999, 2002) outlines a masculinity based on the man-machine relationship and mechanical skills in the context of cars. With newer models of cars, however, the mechanics becomes more technologically complicated, as exemplified above. Modification of contemporary cars seems to encompass technical difficulties that require a combination of the two variants of masculinity that Wajcman (1991) speaks of: a theoretical, engineering kind of knowledge, and a more embodied, craft-oriented approach (cf. Nilsson 2011). In order to figure out how to utilise their skills in craftsmanship in the first place, modifiers of contemporary cars need both mechanical skills and technical, "engineering" knowledge. It seems to be simply not possible to map out any clear distinctions between various technological masculinities in a way that would emphasise either knowledge of mechanics, or calculating rationality of technical expertise (Mellström 2003, in Nilsson 2011: 76). Furthermore, considering how aesthetic skills are of significant importance in car styling, it seems plausible to talk about the combination of several different abilities in car modification related to craftsmanship, design and engineering.

### A special kind of person

Car modification timescales revolve around a yearly seasonal cycle: a pre-season (winter, spring); a peak season when car shows are frequent (summer); and a post-season when new projects are being planned for and built (autumn, winter). While summertime brings the opportunity of going to car shows, winter is the time for going back to the garage to engage in the practice of making one's inspirations and fantasies into car shapes and designs. In this section I move on to outline how motoring magazines and interviewees construct car modifiers as a special kind of person. The following example from *Bilsport* elaborates the construction of dedication in relation to time.

Wanted: the month of January! Last seen shortly after New Year.  
Signs of notice: 31 days that passed too fast! Got to work. Faster.  
More effectively! Here are some of the car builders of this country  
who, after having checked (and double checked) their calendars, have

come to realise their diaries actually do not lie. In order to get a gritty performance car ready for this year's season, each and every one of them is likely to have allocated all their spare time to the garage.<sup>44</sup> (*BilSport* no. 4, 2008, p. 52)

This passage mimics the way in which car modifiers hunt vanished time, and how lack of time urges them to work around the clock to be able to meet the deadline for the first show event of the season. I find that this passage says something about the cultural production of time, namely, in constructing modifiers as busy. The passage addresses readers as participants in an "imagined community" (Anderson 1991), who are constructed as sharing not only a particular interest in modified cars, but also the experience of modifying cars under similar conditions. Lack of time, in turn, constructs car modifiers as heroically hard-working subjects, who do not hesitate to allocate all their spare time to the garage in order to produce a gritty performance car.

Dedication is discussed in magazines on car modification in a way that situates car modifiers as a special kind of people. In representations of modified car projects, of which hardships and innovative solutions are part, explanatory value as to why car modifiers would subject themselves to these kind of challenges is allocated to their human bodies in general, and their brains in particular. I read in *BilSport* magazine about car modifiers' "crazy ideas" (*BilSport* no. 17, 2008: 32), how they are "slightly mad" (*BilSport* no. 8, 2008), or being struck by a "sickness" (*BilSport* no. 23, 2008: 39). Car modifiers are represented as a group of people who would agree that "a gastric stomach ulcer is no real excuse" for not making the deadline for the upcoming car show (*BilSport* no. 1-2, 2005: 34). They would find their engagement with cars to be derived from some form of "disorder", "[b]e it a broken DNA-ladder or a faultily assembled gene"

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<sup>44</sup> Efterlyses: januari månad! Sågs senast en kort stund efter nyår. Kännetecken: 31 dagar som passerat alldeles för snabbt! Måste jobba. Fortare. Snabbare. Mer effektivt! Här är några av landes alla bilbyggare som (efter att ha kontrollerat och dubbelkontrollerat) nu insett att almanackan faktiskt inte ljuger. Var och en av dem lär ha schemalagt all sin lediga tid i garaget, för att få klart var sin grym prestandabil inför årets säsong. (*BilSport* nr 4, 2008, p. 52)

(*Bilsport* no. 8, 2011: 28). With these examples in mind it seems as though the cultural imaginary of car modification constructs its participants as being somewhat “out of the ordinary”, where the willingness to go through hardships makes up a central part of the construction of the figure of the idealised modifier. This construction draws on an element of “otherness” and bodily malfunction as being of explanatory value. In using terms like “broken” and “crazy”, they allude to the position of mental illness; they simply cannot help or be accountable for their actions. Discourses of a malfunctioning body or brain not only provide an important part of the constitution of car modifiers as “special”, but may also provide a sense of community through their shared experiences and ways of understanding themselves.

The article “Monster-Cadet on workers’ salary”, [Monster-Kadett på knegarlön], (*Bilsport* no. 17, 2008: 4-5), together with “Great achievement in minimal shed” [Stordåd I minimalt plåtskjul] (*Bilsport* no. 8, 2011: 60) further elaborates upon how class intersects in the celebration of modifiers’ abilities to create something stunning out of simple means. Typical working-class sources of respect and dignity, according to Willis (1977) and Collinson and Hearn (1996), are found in stamina, craftsmanship and being “handy” (Lagergren 1998: 82). The latter article is about an 18-year-old BMW modifier who managed to rebuild his car in what is referred to as “a shed” with a floor area of only 10 square metres and a student allowance to use while having to work in minus 17 degrees and biting wind. The emphasis is on knowledge and dedication rather than economic means. The editor Sixten said about the importance that modifiers ascribe to building the car oneself: “anyone can buy a cool car just by pawning the house, sure, but not anyone can build it.” Even though these representations of car modification reproduce traditionally masculine values and hence “masculinise” car modification, this is not to say that female modifiers are disqualified from being elevated as great achievers in the male-defined world of cars. In my readings of motoring magazines, I have noted that it is not uncommon to come across reports about female modifiers as struggling just as determinedly with their cars as men. The following passage taken from the motoring magazine *Bilsport* develops this particular aspect:

It should be noted that Sylvia is keen to do all the work on the car herself. Friends are good and, sure, some of them have helped out along the road, but evidently, you can only get the best control over the end result through your own work.<sup>45</sup> (Bilsport no. 1-2, 2009: 30)

The fact that it is a woman who is the subject of control is important; in the motoring magazines I studied, women are also presented as hard-working modifiers (though in a clear minority) just like the men. The message I get from these magazines is that it is only through one's own work that one may reach the end result in a satisfactory way. To modify cars is, accordingly, not about inherent traits but about showing dedication to the idea of fulfilling one's own ideas about what constitutes the perfect car. As the last example points out, to become a celebrated car modifier is not exclusively for men, women can also be made the subjects of such a project. I will return to this discussion later in this chapter.

### Typically Swedish

Being handy and skilled in craftsmanship also forms a strong element in how modifier selfhoods are constructed as Swedish. Janne, a dedicated hot-rod enthusiast, said that:

Swedish motor enthusiasts are among the most knowledgeable in the whole world, we have got an amazingly broad knowledge.<sup>46</sup>

This idea about Swedish car enthusiasts, in this case Amcar enthusiasts, as knowledgeable was also repeated by Lars, who said that Swedish modifiers are known internationally for their skills as craftsmen. He referred to Swedish mechanics being hired in California, USA, to work for firms specialising in car modification. The editor Malte noted that the meaning of craftsmanship is "typically Swedish". He finds class to be of explanatory value when he says:

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<sup>45</sup> Det bör tilläggas att Sylva är noga med att genomföra allt jobb på bilen själv. Kompisar är bra, och visst har några hjälpt till under resans gång, men bäst kontroll å slutresultatet får man givetvis genom eget arbete.

<sup>46</sup> Svenska motorentusiaster påstår jag är de mest kunniga i hela världen och vi har ett otroligt brett kunnande.



This is a working-class hobby in the end, to be able to get something really stunning going with very slender means, that is really the biggest there is in a way.<sup>47</sup>

To construct something stunning with slender means also links modification to the form of rationality and reserve that Jonas Frykman (1989: 43, cited in O'Dell 2001) calls stereotypical "Swedishness". In his study of motorcyclists, Lars Lagergren (1998: 82) also identifies handiness with machines as being particularly accentuated in Sweden (and England), as compared to, for example, the USA. This image also emerges when Malte compares Swedish car modifiers with those in the USA. He tells me that in a US context it would be considered totally fine to buy a ready-made modified car, while in Sweden, there is "the who-do-you-think-you-are" attitude that would imply you would be called "a goddamn bighead" if you did. In the Swedish cultural imaginary, there is this informal norm called "jantelag" ("who-do-you-think-you-are" syndrome). According to the "jantelag", you should not believe you are more special than the other members of a community. This informal "law" is said to have held together village communities in historical times, localities where everybody knew everything about everybody (see also Daun 1984). Hence, in contrast to US car enthusiasts, the way in which Swedish modifiers would ideally acquire their "unique" car is by modifying it themselves. Anything else would be bragging, self-indulgent and self-absorbed. Craftsmanship in this context can make the display-oriented and conspicuous car something other than bragging, it has to be *earned* through hard and skilled workmanship.

To conclude, to build the car oneself forms a central part of the car modifier imaginary, an imaginary that links together the history of car modification with discourses of proud working-class masculinity and Swedishness, constructing an idealised modifier subject who does not back down from fulfilling his (or her) dream even though the conditions may be harsh. Taken together, these constructions outline an idealised masculinity,

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<sup>47</sup> Som i grunden det här är ju en arbetarklasshobby, att med enkla medel få till någonting häftigt, det är ju liksom det tyngsta på något sätt.

formed around meanings of craftsmanship and a do-it-yourself cultural ideal. It is, however, a position and practice *marked* as masculine that is not exclusive to men (cf. Nilsson 2011: 76). It is not so unusual to read about female modifiers in motoring magazines who are celebrated for their dedication and hard work. In this section I have outlined the links between car modification, craftsmanship and masculinity, links that are recognised through their associations with challenge, dedication and struggle. In the next section I turn to outline how such masculine ideals are underlined, as in both strengthened and undermined, with certain materials used for modifying cars. I will therefore discuss three forms of materials of significance: sheet metal, plastics and carbon fibre and how they relate to craftsmanship, status and gender.

### Gendered materials

I will begin this section on materials used for modifying cars by referring to an article in *Bilsport Magazine* (no. 3, 2009: 40-42), in which a young man's first car is being described. The headline reads: "Impressive sheet metal craftsmanship" [Imponerande plåthantverk] and is followed by the text: "In order to understand what is unique about 18-year-old Patrik Nilsson's VW Corrado one needs nothing more than a magnet. It will attach to large parts of the car body. This young man from Vallåkra made his debut in car modification using classic sheet metal work, eye measure and stubbornness." In this introduction it is made clear both that sheet metal is a classic way of modifying cars and that it is a demanding material to work with. It is also established that his car does not immediately reveal the workmanship invested, for particular reasons:

Rule number one in order to stand out from the rest: surprise! That's particularly applicable in the car styling hobby. Everyone wants to be unique, but build roughly on the same kind of concept: a body kit, a wing in plastic and lowered suspension and a nice set of alloy rims. At first sight, Patrik Nilsson's completely modified Corrado falls into that mould. Sure, the headlights from Opel Astra do steal part of the attention. Apart from that, much of Patrik's unique work passes without being noticed by an untrained eye. That which looks just like any other broadening kit is in fact in large part produced in sheet

metal by the developer himself. [...] An ambitious first car project like this one is quite rare. Today, sheet metal is an art-form that is almost dying. Unfortunately!<sup>48</sup> (*Bilsport* no. 3, 2009: 40, 42)

In this article, a young modifier's first build is celebrated by association with a classic way of modifying cars. This is unexpected, and hence established as "unique", for a man of his age. The styling expected from an 18-year-old would use plastic parts, a way of styling that is constructed here as mainstream, lacking ambition and predictable. This article is representative of a dichotomous relationship between sheet metal and plastics. Plastic is a material that is much less associated with status and craftsmanship than metal work. Plastics could even be used for degrading styled cars, as illustrated in the following excerpt from *Bilsport* (no. 10, 2008: 23): "Someone blamed the car for being a plastic rocket. Nothing could be more wrong. Sure, glass fibre and hardener have been part of the work, but the main part of the car body has demanded an English wheel, a welding set and enormous care."

The notion of the *plastic rocket* is a signpost for the illusionary nature of styled cars and their "plastic" and superficial designs. In this oxymoron, "plastic" is situated as being in conflict with its performance as a "rocket". The notion of the *plastic rocket* is well-established and sometimes used by the modifiers of styled cars themselves. The distinction between plastics and sheet metal often outlines a generational stratification amongst modifiers – as noted, plastics are considered to be the younger generation's material for modifying their cars. While sheet metal demands specific equipment and skills in welding and shaping, working with plastic is considered less demanding. When 28 year old Richard showed me his car, for example, he was keen to point out how much work there was in making

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<sup>48</sup> Regel nummer ett för att sticka ut från mängden: överraska! Det gäller i allra högsta grad inom stylinghobbyn. Alla vill vara unika, men bygger på ungefär samma recept: kjolpaket och vinge i plast samt sänkning och snygga fälgar. Vid en snabb anblick faller Patrik Nilssons helt ombyggda Corrado in i den mallen. Visst stjal strålkastarna uppmärksamhet. Men annars passerar mycket av Patriks unika arbete helt förbi ett otränat öga. Det som ser ut som vilket breddningspaket som helst är nämligen till stora delar framtaget i plåt av byggherren själv. [...] Fullt så här seriösa brukar sällan ett första bilprojekt bli. Och idag är plåtarbete närmast en utdöende konst. Tyvärr!

the plastic pieces fit together. And in order to make them fit, they need to be reshaped over and over again. “Plastic work is not judged properly at car shows, but this is where the most work is done,” he says. Niclas, who has utilised this technique for many years, said that styling with plastics<sup>49</sup> is something anyone can learn. In fact, to work with plastics demands materials that only cost a few hundred SEK, all that is needed is “time and patience”. The down-side, however, is that body kits made out of plastics break easily. To sum up, while sheet metal draws on masculine working-class traditions and labour-intensive workmanship, plastic body kits are associated with fragility and being a less demanding material to work with. Such interpretations are, however, debated within the car modifier community, with for example differences between modifiers of different generations.

Penny Sparke (1995: 201) argues that the history of plastic originates in the world of simulation, “and their chameleon-like ability to adopt either a traditional or modern aesthetic”, simulating more expensive, craft based materials. The new plastics of the 50s offered colorful tableware that was both cheap and at the same time capable of simulating more expensive and craft based materials such as wood, china, leather, alabaster and jet. Plastics lack craft tools, Sparke argues, and can therefore contain no essential “truth” (Sparke 1995: 201). In car modification, the canonical and traditional material to work with is various forms of metal. As noted, plastic is considered easily accessible and not as demanding to work with as sheet metal. This in turn positions plastics as essentially “dishonest” and without real value, as indicated in the notion of the *plastic rocket* and the fact that the most important tool to use is sandpaper. Plastics have been associated with femininity and things that belong to the home, such as leisure products, as contrasted to “real” stuff made out of “real” materials. This in turn contributes to making the styled car ambivalent in terms of gender. It may be modified and made to look hard and speedy, sometimes

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<sup>49</sup> For those who wish to make their own body kits, the material to work with is glass fibre. Glass fibre allows modifiers to make up their own body kits and thereby unique designs. These shapes are built from scratch, applied to shapes made of Styrofoam or foam sealant. Others continue building on body kits but reshape them into new forms. In order to achieve the desired shapes, many hours of sandpapering are required.

with easily accessible, ready-made “bolt on” plastic body kits, sometimes with “uniquely” hand-crafted kits, but the fact that they are made out of plastic may also deny them the status of being the “real thing”.

Compared to plastics and sheet metal, carbon fibre stands out as a material that is particularly desirable in car modification. In her study of motoring magazines, Landström (2006: 40) notes that carbon fibre figures as a “sensual material”, a material that is both “sexual and technical”. Hence, carbon fibre seems to offer something more than the inauthenticity of the plastics referred to above. Compared to fragile plastics, carbon fibre is associated with being both strong and light, which in turn makes it especially suitable for speedy sports cars. However, it is a kind of material that is desirable not only for its links with competition and racing, but also for being a difficult and challenging material to work with. It demands expert knowledge. In *Street Xtreme* (no. 6, 2008: 6-11) there is an article that illustrates this point particularly well. The material is constructed as both “outrageously expensive” (175 euros per square metre) and “completely hopeless” to work with. On top of that, “It also itches like hell.” The side-effects of working with carbon fibre are that it stays in the body; small particles of the material find their way into the skin. The builder who was interviewed for the article says: “It’s revolting, one gets disgusting yellow pimples. My wife hates me for them!” On the front cover of the magazine the modifier in question leans against his sporty car and the text underneath says: “Paul represents – the coolest Cooper in Sweden.” Carbon fibre’s nature as a particularly challenging material establishes it as masculine in an even stronger sense than was the case with the more classical sheet metal outlined above. This is not only due to its links with the world of advanced and professional racing, but seems also be related to its ability to outline a risky relation between material and modifier. Despite the fact that carbon fibre is significantly more expensive than other materials, and hence hard to afford for the average modifiers in this study, it is still – or perhaps because of this – considered well worth the struggle.

To have gone that extra mile to attain the car of one’s imagination may be interpreted as emotionally rewarding; you are more likely to enjoy a car that has taken some effort to complete rather than an unchallenging project. The analysis of the different materials and their different gender coding,

however, emphasises how workmanship, materiality and status are conjoined. Following Sparke (1995), to labour with plastic would mean to risk having one's work associated with simulation and the inauthentic. As indicated in the notion of the *plastic rocket* and the sensuality of carbon fibre, the materials associated with modified cars are not gender neutral but part of an ongoing negotiation of meaning and matter. It does not seem too farfetched to argue that the different techniques used in modifying cars may be mapped out along well-known feminine and masculine dualisms, where carbon fibre and sheet metal are associated with masculinity through their associations with craftsmanship, quality, risk and specific know-how about machines. The gender ambivalence of plastic designs lies not only in their availability on the commercial market, but also in terms of knowledge – they do not demand the “right” kind of specialist craftsmanship. Plastics are also considered fragile, which further pushes the plastic design towards femininity and hence risks weakening its links with masculinity. With this in mind, the very plasticity of the *plastic rocket* will demand further elaboration in the following chapters.

### Car modification and everyday life

A central aspect of the car modifier imaginary is time. Car modifiers keep track of the amount of time invested in a car. On Niclas's homepage, for example, it is possible to see how long he has spent building each of his cars – between 200 and 900 hours. At car shows, speakers may ask how many hours the car took to complete, in motoring magazines the amount of time invested in the car speaks of dedication and carefulness – it is far from unusual to read about projects taking years and years of hard work. The car styling cycle, as outlined above, revolves around yearly cycles. However, the modifiers in this study, at least for Lars, Niclas and Richard who build cars that are considered to be “top-level” in Sweden, have to consider whether it is worth the time to take part in yet another season of car modification. Lars, for example, told me that since he got involved in car modification, “all” his leisure time has to do with cars. “Today it is like so, it definitely has become so, all of my waking time when not working goes to cars, almost.” When I ask Niclas about the amount of time he invests in his car projects, he does not hesitate to call car modification a “lifestyle”:

“that is what it is, it’s not a hobby anymore, I live from this, I have no spare time really.”

Feminist scholarship has pointed out links and dependencies between public worlds of work – including how “free time” is gendered. Stephen Whitehead (2002: 141) notes that leisure time remains an area of human activity that is prescribed through dominant gender norms. He argues that if free time is understood as a form of capital, women often have less of it, have reduced access to it and are less able to negotiate their actions within it (Whitehead 2002, Hearn 1992). The pub, sport or other leisure activities is an arena wherein males have historically sought, and been given, masculine validation (Whitehead 2002: 145). Time to do sports, modify cars, or go to car shows for that matter, may even be made possible through patriarchal relations and the gender order (see also Sheller 2008: 259). This is, however, not the only picture that is relevant; modifiers may also work together with their partners, and adjust their hours in the garage to when their partners are not at home. Nor is it unusual to hear about successful male modifiers taking a break from modifying (as in taking a year off) to be able to spend time with their family. Car modification, as outlined above, is constructed as particularly demanding and inherently gendered as a masculine project for the greater cause, namely, the competition at the car show. Niclas explains how he thinks about time and dedication:

We put everything into this, everything. People usually don’t see this and I can understand that it’s hard to grasp, I buy that. Like former girlfriends, like, when the relationship is new you say you’ve got so little time, “I’m cool with that, that’s cool,” but “I’m in the garage a lot,” “I’m cool with that, it’s cool” [they say], then you get dumped anyway. It’s just that you can’t really give it up, like, now I’ve got sponsors, Elmia has always been my goal for when the car should be ready, the car needs to be ready by then. I’ll walk through fire and water, it’s in my contract, it will be ready by then.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Niclas: allting lägger vi ner, allting. Det är det folk inte förstår riktigt, jag kan förstå att det är svårt att förstå det, det köper jag. Som gamla flickvänner de har sagt när man inlett ett förhållande att jag har så lite tid, ’det är lugnt det är lugnt’, men jag är mycket i ett garage, ’det är lugnt det är lugnt’, sen blir man dumpad på grund av det. Det är ju

In this excerpt, car modification is outlined as an exclusively male practice and dedication to cars as a commitment that women do not seem to be able to understand. Car modification becomes an exclusively male practice and interest in a way that outlines car modification as truly strong commitment – nothing else matters. Niclas’s position of being totally dedicated to the car project and his sponsors builds on the possibility of adopting the male template of uninterrupted work that is associated with particular male work cultures (Wajcman 2004: 113). His dedication seems to build on the idea that female partners should be flexible and support his cause, while his own flexibility is directed towards the interests of sponsors and competition at car shows. However, this is not something that all of my informants would agree with. Richard is 28 years old and lives together with his girlfriend in a small town in southern Sweden. When I asked him how he manages to get his private life to fit together with his dedication to car modification, he laughs at my question and says:

When she’s at home I’m at home too, but the rest of the time I spend in the garage. Otherwise I’ll be kicked out!<sup>51</sup>

In order to make the relationships with both his partner and car work out, he allocates his time with the car to when she is not at home. The amount of time he spends on modifying is significant. Together with a friend, the time invested in the car amounted to about 600 hours during the winter of 2007/2008; he has spent 2 000 hours (or more than 83 days and nights) modifying this particular car. For modifiers like Richard and Niclas, to spend time in garages may even become their way of socialising. Niclas says:

Sure, I’ve got friends who help out so, [...] we’re a gang, this is my way of spending time with my friends. If they come round, I’m, like, “grab a piece of sandpaper goddammit, have a seat and polish, talk

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också det att nu kan jag inte skita i det heller, i och med att nu har jag sponsorer då ju, Elmia har alltid vart mitt mål då ska det vara klar, den ska bara vara klar. Jag ska gå igenom eld och vatten, det står i mitt kontrakt, det ska vara klart då.

<sup>51</sup> När hon är hemma så är jag hemma också, men resten av tiden så är jag i garaget. Annars så blir jag bli utsparkad!



and have a cosy time.” And they learn how to do it, so this is a way of hanging out together.<sup>52</sup>

Niclas talks about how his social life involves a network of friends who come round and are involved in the sociality formed around his interest. People may move in and out of projects as laypersons helping out in the garage. By enrolling them in the project, teaching them how to take part in it, rebuilding cars is turned into a collective social practice that takes place in the garage.

In his book *The Craftsman*, Richard Sennett (2009: 53) writes that during the Middle Ages craftsmen slept, ate and raised their children in the places where they worked. The workshop was the craftsman’s home. The workshop, he notes, was small in scale, which made it easy to see the romantic appeal of the workshop home. Perhaps a farfetched comparison, but from the way in which Niclas talks about his garage and the sociality he finds there, it does seem more like a home than a garage. This is where he socialises and works, this is where he allocates his time off work. In a similar way, the borders between home and garage become blurred in other informants’ accounts of their garages. When I visited Conny, Robban and Charlie in their shared garage, Conny said to me that the garage “is just like a family, there’s always someone around.” Clearly, life in the garage involves more than modifying cars – it is a place for dwelling and making (homosocial) community.

### Modifying cars with sponsors

In the previous section I outlined aspects that had to do with time and social relations in the context of car modification. In this section, I move on to elaborate upon how craftsmanship relates to sponsorship. To become sponsored is a form of recognition that is ascribed high status and the acknowledgment of being part of an “elite” group of modifiers. Sponsoring

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<sup>52</sup> Niclas: visst jag har ju kompisar som hjälper till och så, [...] vi var ju ett gäng, det är mitt sätt att umgås med mina kompisar. Om de kommer hit ta ett slippapper för helvete, sitt och slipa och prata och mysa lite. Och de lär ju sig, så det är ett sätt att umgås.

successful modifiers has evolved as a way of marketing after-sales car products, products to be consumed to enhance the car's performance or look. Attracting sponsors to finance, or in other ways contribute to, a car project is something only very few car modifiers succeed in. The statistic that is often repeated is that not more than ten percent of the participants on the scene are sponsored. Sponsorship is considered a token of someone's hard work and dedication to modified cars, it is a way of becoming someone. In order to become sponsored you need to present yourself as an interesting representative for the modified car firms and their products in the first place. In short, to become sponsored one needs to build a car that receives coverage in motoring magazines and which allows the modifier to be invited to prestigious car shows.

Sponsorship deals may vary from discounts to full financial sponsorship, ranging from car polish and multimedia products to expensive tuning parts, paintwork or even cars. One car may have up to ten different sponsors, specialised in different parts of the car. Even though sponsorship is a token of someone's success as a car modifier, it is far from uncommon to hear car modifiers reflect upon sponsorship deals as paradoxical. On the one hand, sponsorship makes it possible to pursue costly and extraordinary car builds; on the other, sponsored modifiers' own time, money and car become tied up with the firms as their representatives at car shows. In some cases, sponsorship may in fact turn out to be rather a bad deal for the car modifier, especially when considering the time and money it takes for them to go to car shows (for example, paying for a hotel, petrol and food) in order to fulfil the agreement to represent the brand.

Even though sponsorship is a token of success, it may also encompass a potential loss of credibility. I sometimes heard non-sponsored modifiers claiming that sponsored modifiers are "spoiled", that their "unlimited" access to styling products meant unequal opportunities for competition at cars shows. Building cars with sponsors may also undermine a modifier's links with craftsmanship. For example, during a lunch-break with the Volvo club, Lars's car came up in the conversation. Johan said to the others about Lars's car: "it's a shame really, that he doesn't build his car himself." I was first a bit puzzled by this "dissing" of Lars, especially considering his success in winning prizes at a number of car shows and driving events. I

understand that it has to do with the fact that his sponsors have done most of the complex engine modifications on the car, not Lars himself. The emphasised connection between craftsmanship and masculinity is here significantly undermined by the fact that Lars did not *make* his own success by the work of his own hands. Even though sponsorship implies that a modifier has worked his way up to a position that makes him into a role model and inspiration for fellow car modifiers, this “idealised” position is also a precarious one in terms of authenticity as a genuine car modifier.

These issues of authenticity are also part of rumours spread online. In the following excerpt, Niclas reflects upon a rumour that he did not build the cars that made him famous himself, but left them with his sponsors to do the work for him:

I think it’s hilarious the stuff people write about me, they know absolutely nothing about what they’re talking about! Although lately, people tend to defend me more and more as they see film clips and pictures showing how we build [the cars]. Over the last three years I think I’ve become more respected compared to when I started out modding. It’s really a drag, I don’t want to boost myself; I really don’t want to do that. But, if they don’t believe me, what more is there I can do? I keep pictures as proof, I even keep apprentices.<sup>53</sup>

Niclas talks about having to relate to other people’s writings about his work in modified car forums. The emphasised ideal of building with one’s own hands may be used both to boost a car modifier, but also, as in Lars’s and Niclas’s case, to question someone’s success. Images of the building process may be used to show one’s project to others, simultaneously “proving” and showing to the car community *who* has done the modifications, not just *what* has been done to the car. Just as cameras and images act as “witnesses” to the building process, the ability of “bearing

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<sup>53</sup> Jag tycker det är otroligt det folk skriver om mig, de har ingen aning om vad de pratar om! Men nu på senare år så har folk försvarat mig mer och mer för de ser ju filmer och bilder att jag bygger liksom. Så de senaste tre åren tror jag att man blivit mer respekterad än när man började. Det är skittråkigt att behöva, jag vill inte hävda mig, jag vill inte det. Men om de inte tror på mig vad kan jag göra åt det? Jag har mina bildbevis, ja och lärlingarna då.

witness” to what happened during the building process is also something ascribed to his apprentices. Over time Niclas’s strategy seems to have borne fruit, by using technologies such as cameras, web pages and forums, he claims to have shifted the way he is perceived by the car community. In order to counter rumours emerging out of web forum interactions, he has been able to show potential antagonists that he *does* rebuild his cars himself, despite being sponsored. The important links between car-builder and building-car are visually displayed and “proved” to the online community and, thus, his alignment with the figure of the craftsman is no longer questioned.

### Women in car modification

During my fieldwork I have noted that female car modifiers are much more visible *as car modifiers* than I had initially expected. Cars have traditionally been the domain of men. Writing about US car culture, Virginia Scharff (1991) notes that, since its creation, the discourse on the automobile has positioned women differently compared to men in relation to cars. For example, women were not seen as being capable, either physically or emotionally, of driving the gasoline-powered car as they were of driving less dangerous, electric vehicles. In ethnographic studies in Sweden, car enthusiasm has been analysed along the lines of being male dominated, culturally masculine and homosocial (Bjurström 1995, Rosengren 2000, Eldh 2001, Mellström 2004). In line with how gender is embedded in car technology, the world of cars, as an ingrained culture of masculinity, has traditionally ascribed men a monopoly over passionate relationships to cars. Women who are present in car culture may be viewed as peripheral participants, and the marginal roles occupied by those present include girlfriends of the men or passengers in their cars (O’Dell 2001, Bengry-Howell and Griffin 2007, Lumsden 2010).

In her study of car enthusiasts in Sweden, Annette Rosengren (2000) argues that car modification remains a male-dominated hobby because of the need for technological knowledge and skills. Traditionally, it is the associations with dirt, a long learning process and male homosociality that have prevented women from accessing male-dominated arenas in working life (Faulkner 2001, Wajcman 2004). Women’s marginalisation from

technically defined domains has made it difficult for them to acquire the practical knowledge necessary to develop both expertise and physical engagement with technological objects such as cars (Wajcman 2004: 115). As discussed above, the availability of after-sales products for aesthetically enhancing cars seems to have made car modification more widely accessible and available for the formation of (late) modern self-hoods and visibility in public life. Furthermore, online communities also contribute to making car modification accessible as *doing* for anyone interested in styling cars. During the late 1990s, when Rosengren did her study, the number of women enthusiasts was still very small, even though their enthusiasm was considered positive by the male modifiers she interviewed (Rosengren 2000: 190). The present study confirms this pattern; however, the fact that women modifiers claim access to this cultural space as *car modifiers* implies that, by so doing, women are challenging the male hegemony that has been, and still is, prevalent in the world of car enthusiasm. This in turn calls for a deeper investigation if women car modifiers are to be able to make legitimate claims to the position of car modifier.

When I asked Tove about being a woman car modifier among men, she responded in the following way:

We are much more the kind of girls who take part in what goes on in the garage and perhaps do something as well, that way we can show that we actually do exist. Before, we were much more hidden, like being the pretty girls in the nice-looking cars or the girl who sits next to the guy in the nice-looking car. Sort of being his mascot. [...] Now it's the other way around, we drive our cars and the guy is seated next to us. He isn't touching the car.<sup>54</sup>

Tove outlines a position for female car modifiers as active participants. While female modifiers used to be less visible, it is by establishing an

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<sup>54</sup> Vi mer de här tjejerna som är med ute i garaget och kanske gör någonting, man visar på det sättet att vi finns faktiskt också. Man har varit så undangömd förut, vi är typ 'vackra flickor som kör fina bilar' eller 'tjejen som sitter bredvid killen i den fina bilen'. Är hans maskot. [...] nu är det tvärtom, nu är det vi som kör våra bilar med killen bredvid. Han pillar inte på den bilen.

exclusive relationship with the car (“he isn’t touching the car”) that the female modifier finds her space to roam in car culture. In her own car, modified by her, she drives *her* guy next to her. By doing so, she also manages to flip upside down the patriarchal seating grid of the car and display her visibility and independence in public space.

The editor Jenny confirms that women are more active as car modifiers now compared to how it used to be. Young women are no longer just participating as girlfriends but also as modifiers themselves. When I ask if women are expected to contribute with something specifically “feminine” as modifiers, she responds:

No, I don’t think so. I believe many of the boys into car modification think this is rather fun. There are those who don’t seem to think that you’ve made [the car] yourself, as if you’ve left it with someone else [to build], not believing it’s the girl who’s done as much by herself as she actually has. I think most guys are pretty impressed by them competing on the same terms; then there are those events with specific classes for girls, but I’m little bit against that because I don’t think there should be a difference at all. Because we’ve got the same prerequisites for it. Then there’s the concept of a “girl’s car”, that’s everywhere, you see it in car ads, driven by a girl, it should be lilac or pink in that case, but there are lots of guys painting their cars in those colours.<sup>55</sup>

In this excerpt Jenny notes three things: one is that women in car modification are present as car modifiers, which she notes as being

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<sup>55</sup> Jenny: Nej det tror jag inte, jag tror att många av killarna som också bygger tycker att det är väldigt roligt, sen finns det de givetvis som tycker att det där har du inte gjort själv utan det har du bara lämnat bort som inte kan tro på att den här tjejen har gjort så mycket själv som hon faktiskt har gjort. Men jag tror att de allra flesta killar tycker att det är rätt så imponerande och jag tror att de tävlar på samma villkor och det har väl jag också känt, vissa evenemang så har det varit att man har speciella tjejklasser men jag är lite emot det där för jag tycker inte att man behöver dra någon skillnad på det överhuvudtaget egentligen. För att vi har ju precis samma förutsättningar egentligen. Jag tror att de blir ganska så bra emottagna. Sen finns det ju begreppet tjejbil, det finns ju överallt det ser man ju ibland i bilannonser att det står tjejkörd, det skulle väl vara en lila eller rosa bil i så fall men det finns ju väldigt många killar som också har lackat sina bilar i de färgerna.

different from the situation in the past. However, men are suspicious towards women modifiers as not being able to build their own cars. Secondly, she notes that there is no such thing as a typical “girl’s car”. In fact, the colours associated with femininity can also be taken up by men – outlining car styling as “unisex” and hence a style not bound up with traditional gender conventions. Thirdly, she is ambivalent about specific classes for girls to compete in. These three points, conjoined, argue that women in car modification are still considered as “other” in the context of modification and competition, but not necessarily in terms of style.

As I understand Jenny, while women and men may desire the same kind of look in a car, it is the links with craftsmanship and competition that seem to be reproducing car modification as a masculine domain – hence reproducing the exclusion of women from the category of “real” modifiers. She also notes the invention of specific classes for women to compete in as problematic in terms of how women modifiers may compete at car shows. At some of the car shows I visited there was a particular *Girl Power* class available for female modifiers to compete in (they may still choose to compete in other classes). *Girl Power* was a specific class for cars built or owned by a woman. In this way, *girl power* could be made into a particular scene in car modding dedicated to women. Feminist critiques of the concept of *girl power*, which was utilised by a number of pop bands during the 1990s, is interlinked with ideals such as a self-reliant attitude among girls and young women, manifested in ambition, assertiveness and individualism. The establishment of a *girl power* scene could be understood as a way of empowering female car modifiers to partake in a male-dominated scene. However, by utilising feminist critiques of the concept, it would also need to be understood as sexualising women in car modification (Taft 2004: 69), and ultimately keeping women modifiers in their own scene so as not to interfere with the men.

Apart from the problematic initiatives to make car shows more “inclusive” for female modifiers, there are also other indicators of change and measures to include women more actively that point in other directions. Jenny said that the company she represents has taken the stance of including at least one female car modifier in each issue of the magazine. However, she admits, it is not always practically possible to fulfil this

ambition since there are so few active women compared to men. Still, with this intention, she hopes the magazine may be able to broaden its scope and also influence more women to take up car modification as their hobby. This ambition to boost the numbers of female car modifiers or to inspire women to take up car modification is also the aim of the Norwegian car-club *Girls Go Fast*. The club was inaugurated in Norway in 2006 and at the time of this study it also had a Swedish affiliation; in 2009 the club was said to have over 1000 members, organising meets and driving events for women. Veronica, a member and car modifier in her mid 20s, says the following about the club:

It's a space where women should feel they don't have to be scrutinised by the boys, this is why "women only" meets are so important. It's a much more inclusive community among women, and this is important for girls to cross the threshold to compete against the boys.<sup>56</sup>

Veronica talks about the women-only car meets as important for making women car modifiers more self-confident in the male-dominated world of cars. The idea is to help women participate in car modification on their own terms. She frames it in a mode of competition, where women car modifiers need to believe in themselves more in order to face the boys. The full interview, from which only an excerpt is taken, points in a direction of change through the active training of women car enthusiasts to fully engage with their cars, not only in terms of driving, but also by tinkering with the car, and by doing so coming to build up a strong community amongst women car enthusiasts.

Considering what Tove, Jenny and Veronica told me, it now seems possible to formulate an account of the ways in which women make claims to the position of car modifier. One is that female car modifiers/enthusiasts have intervened in, and are now part of, the male-defined culture of car modification as modifiers. By doing so, they challenge the male privilege

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<sup>56</sup> Det är en plats där tjejer inte ska behöva känna att de blir utvärderade av killarna, därför är träffar för bara kvinnor verkligen viktiga. Det blir en mycket mer inkluderande sammanhållning mellan tjejer också, och det är viktigt för att få tjejer att börja våga tävla mot killarna.



of making cultural claims utilising the car's power of symbolic visibility and speed for their performative displays. Secondly, the emphasis that women find cars pleasurable challenges the male-defined body as being the only body that finds pleasure in driving and manipulating cars. These interventional practices of female car modifiers/enthusiasts challenge what has traditionally been reproduced as the very foundations of the male homosocial bonds formed around cars.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have outlined how car modification is done. The discussion has contributed to the aim of the study by outlining the contours of a heroic position marked as masculine that the modifier imaginary constructs by idealising craftsmanship. The study has affirmed what other scholars of modified cars have noted, namely the importance that modifiers ascribe to the handmade (Rosengren 2000, Mellström 2002). In this relationship, the car represents a particularly challenging project for the modifier to engage with and, by doing so, to perform masculine gender. This is a purified ideal that distinguishes car modifiers as a “special kind” of men – men of the right stuff. The particular figure that is constructed takes form through intersecting imaginaries of Swedishness, class, masculinity and what are perceived as particularly challenging projects. This figure bears the characteristics of a form of manhood that is built on the virtues of independence and endurance to fulfil what one believes in despite being subjected to harsh conditions. It is in these discursive landscapes of hardship and challenge that masculine heroes are born. As a pervasive symbol of car modifier manhood, the hard working modifier is a shared way of referring to what it means to be a car modifier. However, as a form of idealised – even hegemonic – position, only very few modifiers are able to fully embody what it demands (Connell 1995). In practice, far from all car modifiers do all the modifications themselves. In fact, it is a far more common practice to pool competences in order to help each other out; some car modifiers modify their cars as a group, where one of them is the actual owner or where friends take part and help out whenever they are needed. In a highly commercialised market, it is also common to let specialists take care of the things one cannot do oneself. This is an important note to make

because it nuances the myth of the heroic car modifier who spends all his spare time alone in the garage constantly working on fulfilling his car dream.

The emphasis on the handmade may be interpreted in many ways. One is as a response to commercialism. To build with one's own hands, or with the help of friends, could be a way of "mocking" the modern division of labour and mass production of consumer goods. The mockery lies in not having to buy what one can make oneself, as a sense of recollection of a world less modern, less consumerist and more masculine (Cross 2008: 89). It is also a discursive construct that invokes imaginaries about what car modification was about in the past, as a way of invoking how the "personal and unique" may be more genuinely inscribed onto the car body by building it with one's own hands. In contrast to the hand-made, the common practice of rebuilding cars by using mainly after-sales products is relegated to the realm of the mainstream, the easily accessible and what everyone can do. Things built by hand, in their association with demands for patience, independence and carefulness, are taken to be signifiers of a much more genuine and personal way of generating selfhood through modifying cars than using easily accessible after-sales products. To rebuild with one's own hands also signifies the ability to stay in control of materialising one's ideas.

Throughout this chapter I have indicated the ways in which modifiers construct and negotiate hierarchies among themselves based on how cars are being modified. The car modifier hero outlined in this chapter can be used as a context to interpret the meanings that modifiers exchange in order to generate a hierarchy amongst themselves. Certain ways of modifying are given higher status than others. Hierarchies may, for example, be formed through emphasising or questioning modifiers' dedication to craftsmanship: one example is how craftsmanship may be used as a resource in talk that is derogatory towards someone who is part of the scene. Considered as a form of capital, craftsmanship may not only ascribe to a car modifier the position of being an outstanding modifier, it may also be used to deny someone such a position or even to take it away. I have also noted the significance of materials in the construction of status. The implications of the kind of material that is being used are linked with status, tradition and gendered

constructions of what kinds of materials are defined as authentic. The analysis has shown that materials associated with easy accessibility and commercial value are ascribed lesser status than those associated with struggle and challenge.

I have outlined several examples of how female car modifiers, by taking up the practice of modifying cars, resist the ongoing reproduction of the male-defined modifier as more “real” than the female-defined. Throughout, I have continuously cited the voices of both male and female car modifiers and, by doing so, I have made it difficult to argue that female car modifiers appropriate the modified car in a significantly *different* way from male car modifiers. The analysis suggests that the existence of a female subject position in car modification points to a lessened difference between men and women in the context of car modification. This does not mean, as also pointed out by Nordberg and Mörck (2007: 124), that the gender structure privileging men is being undermined. Men are still constructed as authentic car modifiers in a way that women modifiers are not.



## 6

### **Cars, styles and clashes**

This chapter seeks to analyse how different styles of modified cars are gendered. Cars are gendered in significant ways in their very design and how they are considered capable of action (Redshaw 2008: 36). As a researcher into how gender is constructed among car modifiers, I find it hard not to notice the significance that modifiers ascribe to different cars and the meanings of car power. I am particularly interested in outlining how distinctions following appearance and performance relate to gender. More particularly, I am interested in understanding the gendered construction of some cars as “real”, while others are constructed as less “real”.

In this chapter, I discuss five cases of modified cars: the muscle car, the sleeper, the clean car, the extreme show car and the collector’s car. As the different names given to these particular cars suggest, they may be regarded as different genres and styles of modification, each of which comes with its own specificities and capacities. A genre characterises a repeated style of producing something in such a way that it is recognised as such by a beholder (Åsberg 2005: 28). Genre is a framework of conventions, expectations and possibilities. As a set of conventions, a genre can be traced through the ways in which stories are being told and illustrated, for example as in the difference between a western and a soap opera (Gledhill 1997/2001: 351). Genres can also be used in the context of cars and car modification to refer to different ways of building that follow certain conventions that make them recognisable as belonging to certain genres. The muscle car, for example, belongs to the genre of Amcars. The

clean car, the extreme show car and the collector's car belong to the car styling genre. The sleeper is considered by modifiers to be a concept, as in a way of modifying any kind of car.

As discursively constructed, genres and their variations into different styles of modification also encompass different subject positions – positions that subjects may take up and identify with as modifiers of cars. This will become evident as some cars are considered to be national symbols and indicative of traditions in car building, while others are associated with specific capacities, such as youthful power, conspicuous visibility or virile performance. Clearly, these are all genres that are inflected by conventions of gender. In order to decipher how they are gendered, each of these cases is analysed by considering their relations to performance and appearance. Guided by these questions I may show more clearly – which also means reducing complexity by making generalisations – how gender is constructed in the context of modified cars.

What is a “real” car?

*It is a warm summer evening and the participants in the car tour are displaying their cars at a show in Karlstad. The show is located on the outskirts of the city in an industrial area that houses firms specialising in cars. All the cars on the tour are lined up in long rows. There is one car that stands out at the show, a “local” Amcar parked outside one of the car shops. Leaning against this car is a group of middle-aged men, chatting and drinking coffee. The men are all tanned, one of them has a rose tattooed on his arm. He wears the trademark clothes of a greaser: waistcoat, t-shirt and jeans. I approach them to ask about the car they have next to them. The owner of the Amcar, the man with the rose tattoo, explains that it is a street racing car of US origin dedicated to high-performance driving, a muscle car. It has “Detroit components straight through,” as he puts it. This particular night, however, the car is being used for display purposes. On the bonnet there are polish products lined up for display and purchase. As I go on to ask about the street racing scene in Karlstad, every now and then our conversation is drowned out by the sound of a revving engine. It is not unusual for tour participants to be asked to display their engines to visitors. The owner of the Amcar comments on these*

*displays of car power in a humorous, yet patronising, way: “yeah yeah, don’t push it too much, you may burst,” and grins at the others. When I ask them what they think of the styled cars, at first they compete with one another to humorously “diss” the cars. One of them called them “rolling radios”, the man next to him said “sewing machines” and the man with the rose tattoo claimed they were “too plastic”. After a while though, one of the men changed the tone of their conversation by adding that after all, “it’s good they’re keeping it up.” After some debate among themselves, they reach the conclusion that what really matters is “car enthusiasm itself”, not what kinds of cars people are into. (Research diary July 2008)*

I have introduced this chapter with a description from my research diary. It is my intention to give an example of gendered hierarchies produced through the car. In the situation described above, a group of men in their fifties patronise younger generations of car enthusiasts by joking about their “lack” of power, sound and performance. The indulgent and patronising tone underlines their own car enthusiasm as being more valid and authentic than that of younger generations. It is an example of a form of masculine homosociality built around the idea that things were better in the past (Andersson 2003: 181), when cars were still “real” cars. Together, they seem to be forming a homosocial “we” around their enthusiasm for Amcars. The younger generation’s cars, in turn, are first established as inferior, associated with femininity, domestic space and superficiality. In the situation described, technology is first used to destabilise and separate generations of car modifiers; then at a later point technology is used to conjoin and overlap generational gaps – as the homosocial glue needed to establish a unified community (Roper 1996). It is with this particular example in mind, where cars are being separated and hierarchically arranged based on performance and appearance, that I set out to explore the different car genres. I begin with the most iconic car of them all, namely, the muscle car.

### The muscle car

The muscle car was introduced onto the US auto market during the 1960s as a smaller car with a powerful engine. Its market was the young. The oil

crisis during the 1970s forced US automobile manufacturers to reconsider this strategy, and indeed the instalment of less potent motors during the 1970s is commonly viewed as having “killed” the muscle car. Contradictorily enough, as the oil-dependent West is facing the “oil peak”, the gas-guzzling muscle car reissues of the new millennium are depicted as “faster than ever before” as horsepower is “the number one priority” (Berg 2005/2007). This genre is facing a revival – reintroduced as upgraded incarnations of the past. Contemporary car modifier culture has embraced the muscle car as a popular car to re-shape, tune and personalise in style (*Street Xtreme* no. 12, 2007: 62-65). As legendary cars, the cultural imaginary forms a strong element in the construction of the muscle car as more masculine, stronger, faster, more potent and louder than most contemporary cars. This kind of car-appeal is significant for the ways in which the Hollywood movie industry produces both iconic cars and iconic male heroes. One of the most famous is perhaps the action man “king of cool”, Steve McQueen, and the muscle car the Ford Mustang. The 1968 movie *Bullitt* is known for one of the longest car chases in film history, nine intense minutes of tyre-screaming car chase through the hilly streets of San Francisco. In the movie imaginary, the muscle car and Steve McQueen’s<sup>57</sup> “cool” heterosexual masculinity<sup>58</sup> make up a figuration for the audience to identify with even beyond the movie theatre. The 2008 *Bullit* Mustang commercial urges potential consumers to “get into the chase”, thus referring directly to the performance, masculinity and excitement generated in the *Bullit* movie.

The muscle car makes explicit the way in which certain meanings are being associated with particular makes of car in constructing a “real” car, here particularly the traditions of US car making and its role as a symbol of “America”, or the United States of America as the imaginary “home of the free”. In *The Fast and the Furious* movie and its sequels, which are so important to the modifiers in this study, several iconic muscle cars were presented. These particular cars are constructed as especially powerful

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<sup>57</sup> Lightning McQueen is the name of a children’s Disney figure, a living race car competing with others cars in a fictitious setting.

<sup>58</sup> In 2006, the advertisement for Absolute Vodka showed Steve McQueen alighting from a cab, with the tagline “The Absolute Man”.



examples of “American muscles”. For example, one of them alludes to the particular emotional value associated with the movie’s hero, Dominic Toretto. In the first movie, “Dom” drives his deceased father’s black 1970 Dodge Charger, a 900 horsepower car that he at first didn’t dare to drive, because it “scares the shit out of [him]”. The message I get is that this car, associated with his deceased father, represents the patriarchal power associated with the father-figure. Like fathers, iconic cars demand the respect of younger generations; it is cars like these that may test if the son is “man” enough to match what the father was once capable of.

The modifiers in this study also feel that the muscle car represents a particularly powerful car, a car that requires certain abilities of its driver. In the following extract from my research diary, Robert and I talk about the muscle car.

*Robert is rather thin-haired, 34 years of age, wearing a white t-shirt underneath his waistcoat, and the shirt has rolled up sleeves. He looks me straight in the eyes as he speaks, and I find he is easy to talk to. I ask what is “the thing” with American cars such as muscle cars, and he responds that it’s the shape, the power, the noise, the sound. Altogether, something to “bite on”, but, he adds, “with power comes responsibility.” Most American cars from this period are four to eight times bigger than most contemporary cars, he says. There is a lot of energy in these cars; therefore it is a specific kind of vehicle to drive and to bring to a halt. It is a tremendous experience to drive a muscle car, he says, the roar and the feeling that it is not really controllable. “It’s also a huge responsibility to drive them.” In the relation between driver and car there “is a lot of power going in both directions.” (Research diary, July 2007)*

Robert argues that there “is a lot of power going in both directions”, outlining a two-way communication between driver and car. As in *The Fast and the Furious*, the potency of the car demands a responsible driver, a driver who is “mature enough to handle its power,” as Robert puts it. With car-power comes responsibility, a lot of horsepower demands both self-control and control over the “unruly” machine.

This construction of the muscle car as demanding mature users can be traced to how the car is interlinked with other masculine symbols. Bjurström (1995: 220) notes that the car has traditionally been constructed as masculine by being associated with symbols like the horse. He argues that in modern society the car came to take over the symbolic weave associated with the horse, such as power, potency, mobility and speed (Bjurström 1995). The car's associations with movement also open up possibilities for animism (associations with the world of animals) and anthropomorphism (humanised machines). As I will go on to argue, nature plays a central role in the construction of the muscle car as a significantly powerful machine. Wendy Hollway (1996: 31) writes that technology and masculinity derive their status from each other in a process of mutuality, which in turn depends on the female "other". This particular "other", which stands as the antithesis of masculinity and technology, is a defensively gendered opposition based on the masculine need for mastery over nature (Hollway 1996: 31). In such an imaginary, nature stands for something that needs to be controlled. This in turn does not have to imply that nature is objectified and thereby feminised. Rather, as I argue below, it may also be constructed as particularly powerful and intimidating to men, which in turn may masculinise drivers by association with risk-taking and adventure.

When reading motoring magazines, it is not uncommon to come across representations of muscle cars as *lethal* animals. In an article entitled "A Poisonous Snake with a Deadly Bite" (*Street Xtreme* no. 3, 2008: 28), the car no longer consists of metal and glass, but is a predatory animal with untamed potential and agency of its own – which is "calling for a race". In other magazines, muscle cars are represented as challenging: where the "mean 57-front peeked out from the garage in a suitably challenging way" (*Bilsport* no. 1-2, 2005: 80), and a Corvette is "strong as a bear" (*Bilsport* no. 19, 2008: 16). Together, these images evoke a relation between physical strength, raw power and brute force that positions their drivers in relation to a cultural construction of the wild animal. It breathes a fascination with the wild forces of nature in how the untamed "beast" has been brought back into modernity to seduce and arouse. Hence, ideas about nature are a central part of the construction of the car as a particularly lively being. As an icon of modern industrialisation, the car somewhat

paradoxically becomes the locus of enlivened and spirited animal energy. In these representations, the muscle car is repeatedly reinstated as a car to be respected for the unknown powers lurking beneath the bonnet. It is a category of car that does things: it signifies “get out of the way” [“ur spår”], demanding fellow road users to stay clear as the muscle car forces its way forward (*Street Xtreme* no. 3, 2008: 8-9). This discursive construction, within which car modifier masculinity is shaped, relies on an animal-machine hybridity that transforms cars into agents of action. Along these lines of thought, the muscle car seems to transgress, in a Harawayan way, any clear-cut division between machine-human and machine-animal.

The animalisation of the muscle car reproduces cars as a masculine power-field. In the energising space between culture and nature, the car may be turned into a hybrid “being”, constituted through many interacting forces belonging to nature, culture, technology and gender. In these constructions, the car is ascribed the ability to do things, as in having a temper of its own and needing to be respected. When the car becomes animalised, it also to some extent ceases to be a product of culture; instead it becomes raw nature and untamed power. The animalised car is thereby rendered capable of masculinising its drivers. Similar to the intrepid hunter or the explorer (constituted by the proverbial “right stuff”), the imagined driver is ascribed maturity and a willingness to engage with the untamed powers of nature. This in turn builds on a contradictory construction of nature. Nature may be both tamed and controlled, as well as representing unleashed and uncontrolled power. The muscle car clearly ruptures the divide between living organisms and dead artefacts, cars are animalised machines, both metaphorically and materially. On the one hand, there is a paradox in the way in which cars need to be made into “nature” in order to become a recourse of masculinity. On the other, the making of cars into “nature” plays a vital role in reproducing masculinity and power, not to mention in establishing desirable links with risk and danger. Masculinity presupposes this making of cars into “nature”, even though cars are something inherently social.

## The sleeper car

The term *sleeper* may be used in many different ways. A sleeper may refer to a song or a book that gains unexpected success or recognition some time after the original publication. Sleeper is also a word for “spy” in English. A sleeper is a spy who hasn’t been activated yet. They are in place in the target society, playing a role but not actively spying, just waiting until needed. In relation to cars, the term “sleeper” may be used to describe almost any vehicle that appears unfinished, is ordinary-looking or is built simply to perform fast accelerations. The British term for “sleeper car” is “Q-car”, as in Q-ships – heavily-armed merchant ships with concealed weaponry (used during First and Second World Wars). These ships were designed to lure submarines into making surface attacks, thereby making it possible to open fire on them (Beyer 1999, McMullen 2001).

Robert, with whom I discussed the significance of muscle cars, depicts his next car project as very much a “raw object” compared to his current car. Armed with the knowledge of how to modify cars, his next venture will need a more powerful engine, and a more bold sound compared to his current one. What he wants is a sleeper car.

Robert: the car looks very tame and quiet but with so much more potential than it had at the beginning.

Dag: Then, why is this important?

Robert: Ah well, it’s because it’s sensational and dramatic. When the car doesn’t look like anything much, then, it just lets rip big-time.

Dag: So, does this have to do with, you see before you these traffic light scenes?

Robert: Yes, sure it's about that, you measure yourself against others all the time. Wherever you turn in society you assess, so sure, it clearly is about measuring<sup>59</sup>.

In this excerpt, Robert emphasises the sleeper concept as the element of surprise. It is also significant that the idea of everyday "measuring" and competition forms a central theme in meaning-making around the sleeper genre. While the muscle car is designed in ways that immediately reveal its power due to its looks and sheer size, the sleeper car has an exterior look that differs little from standard cars, but internally it is modified to perform at a higher level. Because the sleeper car looks tame but "acts" as a street racer car, it makes available an anonymous position from which to stand tall and strike back in situations of competition and measurement. It is a car that ensures its driver will get the last word and can thereby control the situation. In the following excerpt, the editor Sixten describes how he perceives the sleeper:

Sixten: One should not believe what one sees. If I drive my old Volvo station wagon and there's this someone who just bought a new sports car, you know, really tough and everybody is looking and turning around, and you go up beside him and he gets outrun by this old Volvo, that's a victory in itself. It's like that, I guess, as having to do with status, I suppose. The Volvo's got more status since the other car may have cost like half a million, 'long nose to him'. It's about not being able to buy yourself status, that's it, I guess, in many situations today you can.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Robert: Att bilen ser väldigt tam och lugn ut men har en potential som är mycket mer än vad den var från början.

Dag: varför är det viktigt då?

Robert: a det ska ju va för att, det är ju uppseendeväckande. När det kommer någonting som inte ser mycket ut för världen sen brakar det till bara så ere... så äre jättemycket.

Dag: ja, har det att göra med, man ser ju framför sig såna här rödljusscener liksom...

Robert: ja, jo visst är det ju det, man mäter sig ju det är ju hela tiden. Var du än vänder dig i samhället så mäter man sig så visst är det klart mätning det är det ju helt klart.

<sup>60</sup> Man ska helt enkelt inte tro vad det är man ser, om jag kommer med min gamla kombi Volvo och så kommer det upp en som precis har köpt sin nya sportbil sådär som är jättetuff och alla tittar och vrider huvudet, och så glider man upp bredvid och så blir han

In connecting class with the ways in which masculinity and technology are configured, the sleeper links together craftsmanship, class and masculinity. The reserved disposition of the sleeper car makes it possible to use it in a way that positions the driver as controlling what might be perceived as the obvious status relationship between the wealthy and “average Joes”. The car modifier and his car form a technologically enhanced “joker” that exposes the perceived-to-be-affluent sports car driver as lacking what it takes to be a man in the realm of traffic. The sleeper punishes anyone who underestimates its unassuming “greyness” by turning things upside down, by undermining the status acquired by economic means, be it only for a short period of time. Malte elaborates upon the experience of pleasure derived from the sleeper:

Malte: There are several aspects to it, one is the technological aspect, to succeed technologically, you get to think for yourself, sort of, and maybe build an engine and gearbox that on top of that works perfectly, that’s an incredible kick in itself. If the car as a whole works well and looks good equals another kick, on top of that, if it outruns a significantly more expensive car then that equals yet another kick, the total of this equals a quite extraordinary experience. You’ve accomplished a dream, sort of, and that equals, sort of, a rush. It gets pretty philosophical in the end.<sup>61</sup>

In the excerpt above, several important intersections of masculinity, emotions and technology are highlighted. Malte outlines a number of interlinked ways in which gender is performed through cars. One is that of

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frånkörd av den här gamla Volvon, det är ju en seger i sig. Så det är väl... med status att göra antar jag, den Volvon har ju mer status då än den här bilen som kostar kanske en halv miljon, lång näsa åt han liksom. Att du kan inte köpa dig statusen helt enkelt, det är väl det, vilket man kan i många typer av sammanhang så kan man ju köpa sig status.

<sup>61</sup> Malte: Det finns flera aspekter, dels den tekniska, att lyckas tekniskt, dessutom att man kan tänka lite själv då, kanske bygga en motor och en växellåda som funkar klockrent då, det är ju en otrolig kick bara det, sen om bilen dessutom funkar bra som helhet och att den ser bra ut är en annan kick och kör man dessutom ifrån betydligt dyrare bilar så är det ytterligare en sådan här kick så totalt sett så blir det en ganska häftig upplevelse, man har ju fått genomföra sin dröm där på nåt sätt, det är ett rus på nåt sätt. Det blir väldigt filosofiskt i slutändan...

craftsmanship and knowledge about cars, to make things work the way one intends them to; another form of masculine performance is related to aesthetics, as in how the modifier may shape the car to express the driver in certain ways. Yet another important attribute of masculinity is related to driving and being able to pride oneself on the ability to dominate other powerful cars. In this particular case, control refers to the process of constructing and building the car, as well as to driving the car at great speeds. In the example, the calculating rationality of technical expertise and craftsmanship adds up to a profoundly embodied and emotional relation between men, technologies of movement and risk-taking in public space (Balkmar & Joelsson 2012: 42). As an extended self, the sleeper car aids in temporarily stirring up class-based hierarchies between men, including the rewarding rushes of being able to protect one's honour.

The associations with class point to how the sleeper car enables measurement among men across different class positions. To temporarily be able to outrun the affluent is associated with emotions related to humiliation and insults that is based on a form of "technological honour". Technological honour is different from other forms of honour; it is not about protecting the honour of family, nor is it about controlling female sexuality. Nor is it simply an idealisation of the duelling of historic times where men were expected to respond violently to any challenge their name, reputation or authority (Gallant 2007: 274). It is a form of honour that is interlinked with technological know-how, class-based craftsmanship and the ability of having accomplished something with one's own hands as a more honest way of inhabiting car powers than acquiring power through consumption. The unassuming-looking sleeper car surprises and discredits such attempts to gain status in public. By putting in its place the status of a privileged ability to consume, the sleeper exposes and discredits such a pose as a failure of masculine technological display.

### The clean car

*Clean* in this sense has little to do with cleaning or the car being dirty. In contrast to the muscle car and the sleeper, so-called *clean* styling implicates neither Amcars nor necessarily high-performance cars, but rather an aesthetics of tweaked originality. What is significant about this particular

way of styling is that the original car designs are subtly enhanced and smoothed out rather than being dramatically changed. This is exemplified by the following description:

*I am at the Street Cars Fest in Stockholm. Cars are being publicly evaluated by a speaker and judges. As the judges circle around the car and make notes, the speaker interviews the owner/modifier about it. Up next is a sleek and speedy looking blue Volvo V70. I am at first surprised to see this car on stage; the car doesn't look modified at all. This particular model is fairly common to see at car shows and the speaker looks slightly bored by this fact, "another discreetly styled V70?" he asks rhetorically. The idea, the owner says, is to modify the car in a way that doesn't immediately reveal what has been done to it. He seems to find this particularly amusing – he says "one has to look one extra time to figure it out," and winks at the speaker. (Research diary August 2008)*

One could be misled into believing that the clean car doesn't belong at a show dedicated to modified cars. This method of styling may produce cars that are ordinary looking, but may still be significantly altered. Clean cars may puzzle onlookers. Owners of clean cars have told me they enjoy the moment of disbelief from onlookers. The question: "you say the car is modified, but what has actually been done to it?" ascribes to the owner the possibility of embodying an idealised masculine position associated with being skilful and knowledgeable in technical details and matching particular models and details together. Just as the power of the sleeper concept is characterised by its surprise effect, the clean car may force onlookers to look one extra time to figure out what has been done to it. Because of the subtle, smooth and streamlined<sup>62</sup> styling, onlookers may be forced to disbelieve what they see and doubt their knowledge of cars.

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<sup>62</sup> The emphasis on the streamlined form makes this a style of modification that can be traced back to the 1930s and avant-garde Art Deco modern style. Sparke (1995: 127) notes that such streamlining displayed a high level of gender ambivalence since these apparently seamless and organically-shaped objects simultaneously evoked "a masculine world of advanced technology and aesthetic minimalism and a feminine one of symbolism, sensuousness and fantasy."



In Roland Barthes' classic reading of the aerodynamic futuristic body design of the 1955 Citroën DS, I find resemblances to the clean style:

It is well known that smoothness is always an attribute of perfection because its opposite reveals a technical and typically human operation of assembling: Christ's robe was seamless, just as airships of science-fiction are made of unbroken metal. (Barthes 1957/2010: 399)

Just as the Citroën was read by Barthes as exciting less for its substance than for the junction of its components, the clean style emerges as perfect design. In contemporary car modification its subtle display creates associations not only with sophisticated sleek design, but with masculinity, competition and speed. It is important to note that the sophisticated and discreet clean style of contemporary car modification emphasises the "necessary" elements of car styling – a car crafted to improve its driving performance – which in turn associates it with masculinity. Furthermore, the clean style and its associations with sports car designs and competitiveness are comparable with already-existing cultural scripts in which relations between men, masculinity, technology and the desire for speed are continuously consolidated. Compared to the "rawness" of the muscle car, the clean car design displays other messages. In the words of Barthes, "[s]peed here is expressed by less aggressive, less athletic signs, as if it was evolving from a primitive to a classical form." The "extreme" show car, to which I now turn, is the style that most deliberately breaks with such a classic form.

### The extreme car

In their book *To the Extreme*, Robert Rinehart and Synthia Sydnor (2003) argue that extreme is a label that can be used to convey extraordinary, radical and unusual properties to nearly any product or activity. Extreme is linked to health food, soft drinks, fashion and makeup, sports, sex, music and cars, to mention just a few. The Swedish modified car magazine *Street Xtreme*, as a local example, uses extreme to represent the ultimate in cars, be it in terms of performance or of show. The most obvious distinction among modifiers' various ways of styling their cars is that between clean styling and so-called extreme styling. The clean style derives its meaning

from being contrasted with the extreme show style, an explicit and in-your-face, eye-catching way of styling. In order to make a car clean, parts are usually removed rather than being added, as in extreme styling. Extreme styling turns the car into a rolling, bass pumping discothèque, playfully combined with all sorts of in-car entertainment gadgets, like diode lamps and video games, topped with extraordinary paintwork. Relieved of the taken-for-granted “truths” of ordinary cars, these particular cars are ascribed the capacity to surprise and expand people’s horizons about what a car is or has come to represent. These *show cars* make “average Joes” drop their jaws.

As a style associated with the popular MTV reality show *Pimp My Ride*, cars undergo radical transformations. Amy Best (2008: 159) captures the look of extreme styled cars when she writes: “[w]ith sleek seventeen-inch chrome rims, low-profile BMG tires, a new sunroof, \$6,000 vertical doors, and a robotic wing [...], the car’s interior has been outfitted with custom-tailored purple racing seats and an interior to match the car’s new exterior, an updated dashboard and controls, a ten-inch flip-down monitor, a Play Station II, the new ‘bazooka fake nitrous oxide woofer boxes,’ a six-disc CD changer.” I could go on. It is a concept particularly associated with a US car (sub)culture where more is more, rather than is the approach often associated with “Swedish” aesthetics – less is more.

Among Swedish car modifiers, the extreme style is a much-debated topic. Many of the informants in this study express ambivalent feelings about this style. Car modifiers who are critical of this particular style argue that the basic value of the car has been lost in modification. The editor Kenneth explains:

Some people throw as much as they can into the car, loads of video screens, and loads of airbrushing in different colours and patterns and, you know, it shocks people but many who are car modifiers

themselves think they should quit doing it, it's just too much, the cars become like Christmas trees.<sup>63</sup>

In this excerpt, Kenneth outlines the extreme show style as involving “too much” in the way of colour, electronics and appearance. There are significant differences between the excess of power that is reproduced in the other examples of cars outlined above. While the former exemplify an excess of speed, motor power and performance, extreme styling exemplifies an excess of entertainment. The cars are designed to amaze, the car's interior is equipped with a Play Station, Soda Stream machine and, if not massage chairs, at least an overload of LCD displays mounted in the chairs, boot and doors. Amy Best (2008: 161) notes that this points to the fact that a car's interior also says something about the importance of cars – in this case as a social space. These ways of significantly altering the interior implies making cars into living rooms, into lived spaces – not necessarily street machines made for racing. Here, Kenneth outlines a problem:

They bolt on lots of stuff that doesn't have any function at all; in fact it makes the car slower and turns it into a car that is in principle useless. There is a general perception that people [modifiers] think the car should be drivable. In order to modify it, the intention should be to improve it in some way.<sup>64</sup>

In this quote, Kenneth maps out the problematic aspects of extreme styling as relating to norms of function and usefulness. That is, a norm that defines car modification as improving the driving capacity of the car. As a pioneer modifier of extravagant extreme styling, Niclas's way of modifying cars has led to mixed reactions from the modifier community.

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<sup>63</sup> Vissa slänger ju in så mycket de kan i bilen, massor av video skärmar och airbrush i olika färger och mönster och det där chockar ju folk i allmänhet men många som är bilbyggare själva tycker de ska lägga av med det där, det är bara för mycket, bilarna blir som julgranar.

<sup>64</sup> De hänger ju dit en massa saker som inte har någon funktion och som gör att bilen blir långsammare och som gör att bilen blir i princip obrukbar. Det som är allmänt rådande är väl att folk tycker att bilarna ska gå att köra med och att man ska bygga om dem för att de ska bli bättre på något sätt.

You gain as many friends as enemies unfortunately [from the way you build cars]. There are people out there who really seem to hate me, I've even received death threats in the past.<sup>65</sup>

Niclas said to me that he has received threats in person and over the phone from men who dislikes his cars; he also claims to have had pictures of him posted on Internet "gay sites". The alleged posting of Niclas's picture on gay sites needs to be related to the abundance of insults from someone who wishes to establish his way of styling as relating to non-heterosexuality, as opposed to heterosexual desire and its associations with hardness, activity and independence (Connell 1995). In a gender order that is basically upheld as complementary, where femininity and masculinity are constituted as each other's opposites and as mutually exclusive but complementary categories, the aesthetic dimension of cars would be viewed as feminine while potency would be categorised as masculine. Extreme styling could be considered as too overly concerned with appearance and could therefore significantly undermine attempts to connect masculinity and technology. The extreme styling, made to flash and gleam, generates associations with feminine-coded aesthetics of commercialism and surface, rather than brute masculine performance. This form of feminised styling may be exemplified by its power to shift the modifiers associated with such cars from the position of heterosexual man to that of the homosexual "other" (Landström 2009: 80).

Seemingly, this is not a failure in technological gadgets; the extreme show car is full of electronics, but not necessarily the right ones. These gadgets, simply put, do the "wrong" things (cf. Ottemo and Gårdfelt 2009). The extreme style therefore seems able to split the community's foundations of masculine identification with powerful cars, as in styling that is in a way too display oriented as opposed to performance oriented. This tension between display and performance is debated among car modifiers online, a tension that concerns styled cars in general. Kenneth says the following

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<sup>65</sup> Man får ju lika mycket vänner som ovänner, tyvärr. Det finns folk som hatar mig rent ut sagt, jag har ju blivit mordhotad förr i tiden.

about what may happen if someone posts images of cars to online web forums that have the look, but lack the power:

Lately there's considerable hatred towards people who only do styling, they get to face some serious bullying. If you present your car on the web without having tuned it, only styled it, then people will pick on you for sure. This car doesn't perform as well as it looks, it's nothing but eye candy and plastics!<sup>66</sup>

Despite this mistrust (even hate) of cars that do not match looks with performance, however, most of the modifiers I got to spend time with did not drive particularly tuned cars. To be able to style a car that looks good and is also matched up with performance should be considered an ideal way of styling rather than a widespread practice. The severely tuned engine to match the fast and speedy look of the styled cars was for many informants not financially achievable. Car modifiers could in fact still be very successful with cars that were only modestly tuned. This may not pass without the possibility of being questioned for it, as noted by Kenneth above. The fact that Niclas claims he has received threats emphasises that car modifiers' lives may be deeply affected by the way in which they modify their cars and the cars that they present to the community. Those modifiers associated with this particular style, those who have taken extreme styling as their way to claim "uniqueness", have to face contradictory messages: on the one hand, it is a style that is highly appreciated at car shows for its entertainment value, yet on the other it is problematic for reasons of its gender radicalism.

### The collector's car

Clearly, cars are not endowed with single meanings; they speak to people with a plethora of messages (O'Dell 1997: 116). In the case outlined here, two different ways of seeing and modifying a Volvo car will be analysed. During my fieldwork, I noticed there was one model of Volvo in particular

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<sup>66</sup> Det har blivit ett väldigt brett hat mot folk som bara stylar då får man utstå världens mobbing. Läger man ut bilen på nätet utan att ha trimmat den, bara styling, då vet man att folk kommer börja att hacka på dig. Bilen går inte så bra som den ser ut, det är bara ögongodis och plast!

that Volvo modifiers tended to be above all passionate about. This special model was considered to be the top of the line that Volvo had ever produced – the so-called “Refined” Volvo (Volvo R). This sports line was, for some enthusiasts, “sacred”. They come in their own special colours; the typical faded yellow (so-called T-gul) and the “laser blue” (so called T-blå) are the most common one’s. These top-of-the-line Volvo sports cars are not only painted in specific colour schemes, but equipped with greater engine capacity, luxurious interior designs, specific rim designs and spoiler kits that make them special in relation to other Volvos. Altogether they make up “the best” that Volvo has ever built.

Benny and Stefan are both keen Volvo R enthusiasts. When I interview them they are sharing a showcase at an indoor car show. In the showcase, their Volvos, blue and yellow respectively, are being joined in a formation where their cars come to signify the colours of the Swedish flag, a way of using cars to manifest Swedishness and cultural roots that I have also seen at other car shows. As symbols of the very best of Swedish car culture, the blue and yellow Volvos are lined up side by side at Volvo-dedicated car shows, making the cars themselves the very tools for constructing the car show as a particularly Swedish space. Their cars are only very modestly altered. The general perception among car modders like Benny and Stefan is that they are to be kept as close to the “original” as possible. Their cars attest to the clean style outlined above, discreet and sophisticated alterations to the engine, interior design and upgraded parts.

During the eight years in which Stefan has been working on his car, his aim has been to continue the process of refinement to reach perfection. Rather than doing the modifying himself, which is the idealised way of gaining status as a modifier, he calls himself a designer and feels that it is his job to carefully choose who will be the best craftsmen for the job. “I’ve chosen carefully, there shouldn’t be any mistakes.” Perfection is materialised and secured only through professional craftsmanship, not through his own hobby-mechanic hands. For him, it is not the ambition that counts but the results. Ideally, the car should pass as factory-made – as having been professionally made by Volvo. In his book *The Craftsman*, Richard Sennett (2009: 258) notes that getting things into perfect shape can mean removing the traces and evidence of a work in progress. It is when the evidence is

eliminated that the object appears pristine. “Perfection of this cleaned-up sort is a static condition; the object does not hint at the narrative of its making” (Sennett 2009: 258). In Stefan’s case, the professionally refined car should leave no trace of amateurism, he said it should be styled in the way in which he wished Volvo could have done it if they had not been constrained by cost limitations.

There are ways of modifying these iconic cars that have come to be recounted as exceptional, as in the story of a young man who modified his Volvo R in an incomparable way. I heard this story at a Volvo meet, his modification was used as an example of car styling gone bad. However, it is far from uncommon to modify cars as he did, by putting a big scoop on the bonnet and modifying the exterior design by putting a body kit on the car and painting flames along the side. On top of all that, he had installed a massive stereo. Hence, the car seemed to qualify as representing many modifiers’ dream car; it had the stereo, the look and the engine. The problem was the choice of car. Leif, a 45 year old Volvo R owner, explains to me that by adding spoilers, body kit and motif paint, the original shape of the car has been completely lost. In fact, he treated this iconic car, the symbol of Swedishness and the very best of Volvo, just like *any* car. Leif concludes: “He raped the car if I may say that, so he did not receive a prize.”

Later that summer, when I came to meet with the modifier in question and look more closely at his styled Volvo R, I got the chance to ask him about what had happened. He explained to me that he had wanted such a Volvo for a long time. He used to practise for his driver’s license in his dad’s Volvo R, and had come to enjoy it to such an extent that he wanted one for himself. But, he also wanted to personalise the car by rebuilding it in the way that he had. As a response to the criticism he had received for the way he had modified it, he said: “it was only members of [name of club] who complained, they’re all old now and won’t be part of the scene much longer.” He thereby aligned himself with the “new” generation of car modifiers who seek other ways of expressing themselves through cars, in this case, taking their inspiration from the US styling associated with *Pimp My Ride* and *The Fast and the Furious* movies. Hence, he legitimises his way of refashioning his Volvo R and himself as being “ok” within the

renewed Volvo community. Depending on how one looks at a car, what one sees in cars and the values one invests in them, a particular modified car can become a signifier of being either “raped” or “refined”.

### National icons

By following the arguments raised above, ideas relating to cultural heritage and nationality come across as particularly important for understanding the cultural work that cars may do in the shaping and gendering of modifier selfhoods. The muscle car, for example, assumes certain powerful capacities from imaginaries of “America” and from being constructed as situated in-between nature and culture. The Volvo R concept utilises the dichotomy between Swedish/American in a way that seems to be quite the other way around: here “American impulses”, as Tom O’Dell (1997: 144) calls them, are constructed as a threat to a car that is taken to embody Swedish identity and cultural roots.

According to O’Dell, consumption is one of the most dominant features of Americanisation. The large-finned Amcars of the 1950s, together with chewing gum and rock and roll music “were all attacked as signs of the decline of Swedish culture and society” (O’Dell 1997: 28). The point O’Dell (1997: 28) is making is that, throughout Swedish history, Americanisation has been equated with mass consumption, superficiality and cultural imperialism. In fact, he argues that, historically, Americanisation has come to be understood in a Swedish context as an uprooting force, a destroyer of traditional, national sentiments and cultural heritage (O’Dell 1997: 35). Along this line of thinking, the styling of the Volvo takes on new meaning. Viewed as an act of Americanisation, the “raped” car may be interpreted in terms of homogenising something that is particular and specific – an act of obscuring that which is understood as a particularly Swedish tailored car design.

Writing on the topic of the *Automobile and National Identity*, Tim Edensor argues that cars signify national identity as familiar, iconic manufactured objects that emerge out of “historic systems of production and expertise” (Edensor 2004: 102). The Volvo R seems like a typical example of an iconic vehicle that lends itself to being analysed along the lines of



sustaining national identity. This line of thought points to the way in which cars are products of their cultural contexts, and how specific cars may, in a similar vein to the US muscle car, come to “belong” to certain nations (Koshar 2004: 122). The Volvo R may therefore be read as significant in a process whereby a sense of national identity is made part of the modified car, as a material object that is replete with cultural values and meanings, as a signifier of national economic virility and modernity (Edensor 2004: 103). Hence, the iconisation of the R model brings car modification into conversation with ideas about Swedishness and cultural pride. Modifiers’ use of the Volvo R builds on an imagined relation between Volvo designers and themselves as trustees of cultural heritage. This was perhaps most significantly displayed at the car show referred to above, where the showcase theme of yellow and blue framed the cars as significant to a truly “Swedish” setting. It is also reflected in the understanding of the car as being “raped”. The Volvo R in this sense comes to embody Swedishness and nationhood in a similar way as women’s bodies may come to be raped as symbols of the nation during times of war (cf. Edwards 2007). The disrespectful modification of the iconic car extends the car body in such a way that it becomes a matter of having severely breached something that is taken to represent Swedish cultural roots.

The anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966) argues that every cultural context is structured around a differentiation between certain categories, a division between that which is familiar to the community and that which is considered to be foreign. This division encompasses a number of distinctions, one of which is the distinction between what is considered pure and impure. While purity is usually considered to be a category of its own, demarcated and isolated from what is considered alien, the impure appears as much more fluid, messy, ambiguous and incomprehensible. Fanny Ambjörnsson (2004: 151) refers to Douglas (1966) to argue that the form of danger that the impure seems to invoke against a particular society may be referred back to its uncontrolled boundlessness. In a similar manner, the “foreign”, “US” way of styling comes to represent something uncontrolled, boundless and threatening to the cultural uniqueness of the “pure” Volvo R. The example of “rape” makes me think of a dangerous and intimidating “other”, here being identified as a particularly vulgar way

of modifying cars. Along such lines of argument, the Volvo R comes to embody Swedish identity and taste values, invaded and under threat.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed different genres of modified cars in general and certain methods of styling in particular. The chapter has contributed to the aim of the study by identifying and analysing relations between performance and appearance, a dualism that is related to both gender and sexuality. The analysis suggests that for the muscle car, the sleeper and the clean car, performance is built into the appearance of the car – they work towards the same goal – namely, to assure the car’s performance. It is this end that motivates its design and the choice of technological equipment. From this perspective, car modification also comes to reproduce a traditional gender order that reinstates men and masculinity as being about domination, measurement and competition. However, not all of the exemplified cars materialise in this way. In terms of extreme styling, the appearance does not necessarily work towards increased performance of power and speed. The extreme car divorces aesthetics from performance – it shocks its audiences by other means than the car’s power.

As implied in the invective *plastic rocket*, this particular style of modification marks its queer potentiality. Queer, since it fails to reproduce taken-for-granted links between men, masculinity and power. By celebrating the superficial, the extravagant, the aesthetics of speed rather than the capacity for speed, taken-for-granted values of what a car should be capable of and what it should represent are exposed and undermined. By representing other possibilities in cars, this US-inspired style of modifying clearly stretches gendered conventions and expectations about function and what a car should be used for. Its capacities are not constructed around themes such as masculine armour, measurement and speediness in traffic, but around themes of entertainment, vulgarity and show. And it is perhaps for this reason that it has evoked such strong reactions among some members of the Swedish modified car community. Viewed as foreign and superficial, extreme styling has come to represent inauthentic and vulgar ways of modifying cars compared to the Swedish self-image. Viewed as inspiration, however, modifiers take inspiration from this style for their

own explorations of car modification, cultural production and self-representation. It is with the productive insecurity of the “extreme” show car in mind that I now turn to explore what happens at the car show – the very cat-walk for styled cars.



## 7

**Cars on display**

While the previous chapter described and compared certain genres and methods of modifying cars, this chapter turns to analyse how modifiers construct gender by showing and evaluating their cars at shows. Car shows have a long history, and are commonly attended by automobile manufacturers presenting their latest models to the public. At this particular sub-genre of the car show, individuals or companies specialising in car modification, not the major car companies, present and compete with their cars. Many of the shows I visited during my fieldwork are open to anyone owning a modified car to take part in. For example, during 2008 *Street Cars Fest* organised car shows in approximately 20 cities around Sweden. The other major organiser, *Bilspport* magazine, also invites modifiers to take part in events organised all over Sweden. The show assumes the form of a folk fest, an occasion to catch up with friends and perhaps display one's car for the first time. As social spaces, shows are temporary events that make up important sites for car modifiers to gather and recognise themselves as unified communities (Andersson 1983/1991). In this chapter, I will thus continue my cartography of the signifying and identity-enforcing practices that make up Swedish car modifier culture by focusing on the car show and what happens there.

In the following sections, I first discuss the significance that modifiers ascribe to the sociality of the car show and the show as a setting for competition. Secondly, I address the processes by which display cars are evaluated. Thirdly, I discuss the ways in which car modifiers make their cars attractive by showing them in particular ways. In the last sections I

deal with the importance that car modifiers ascribe to using and caring for their cars. Finally I discuss why the so-called “car show babe” causes modifiers trouble.

### To meet at the car show

Car modification is paradoxical in the sense that it demands commitment and hard work without leading to economic benefits. Not even Niclas, who is one of the most well-known people in Swedish car modification, made any money on his cars (at least, so he said). In order to afford to go to shows, he said he sometimes had to ask sponsors to pay for his hotel, petrol and food. Only the very high-prestige<sup>67</sup> car shows, such as *Bilsport Performance and Custom Motor Show* paid for expenses (but only to a certain limit). Similar to models in the fashion industry, who sometimes work for free in order to create contacts (Frisell-Elmberg 2008), car modifiers display their cars for free. This is paradoxical considering that modifiers are contributing to and making possible the car shows as commercial sites – without benefitting economically. To take part in the modified car scene was not associated with financial reward, quite the contrary; going to car shows was associated by the modifiers with costs. The rewards were of a social kind, about status and about being confirmed by the community. Cars shows were described as what makes all the striving and hard work in the winter garages worth it; shows are the time to enjoy the fruits of the hard work invested and to meet with like-minded car aficionados.

As a collective cultural practice, the show can be understood as a scene that provides a forum for modified car enthusiasts to meet and socialise, and to display their modified vehicles before an appreciative audience (Bengry-Howell & Griffin 2007: 440). Benny, for example, talks about the show as a venue for meeting new people and catching up with friends, “to get to meet people as crazy as I am.” Lars said about his interest in cars, that it

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<sup>67</sup> Approximately 1000-1200 modifiers apply each year to participate in the *Bilsport Performance and Custom Motor Show*, and 800 vehicles are displayed. Some come from Sweden, but there are also vehicles from other countries presented. To be chosen to take part in the more prestigious shows is of great significance because it means a certain confirmation that one’s car is truly something. It is also a way to increase one’s chances of sponsorship and visibility in motoring magazines.

wasn't cars per se that were most important: "in my world the car is only an excuse for being sociable, the social is more important than the car." Niclas reflects upon the social aspects of car modification in the following way: "I've made a great number of new friends who are into cars so you've created a total new network of friends from going to car shows." Clemens, a 48-year-old Volvo modifier, explains: "You want to show what you've got." Clearly, to be part of the modified car community offers these men a social community and a sense of belonging.

To meet face-to-face and interact is repeatedly emphasised as being at the core of car modifier culture; this is when its members establish contacts and develop their friendships and solidarity amongst themselves. The socialising at car shows and various forms of car meets must be understood as part of car modifier masculinity. To be sociable is part of how car modifiers imagine themselves, as indicated in the following description, where I approach a group of men by explaining that I am taking part in the show in order find interviewees for my study:

*One of the men responds quickly that motor people are easy to talk to, "You won't be facing any problems with that." The man next to him illustrates this point by raising his arms, "If you're up here you need to come down here in order to become part, if not now, then you will sooner or later." He goes on to note that "the one with the money to buy all the gritty stuff will eventually come down too." (Research diary, July 2008)*

In this description, the men I am about to interview outline car modifiers in general as easy-going and socially extrovert, as long as one is on equal terms. Anyone who thinks he is superior to another will have to "come down here". This talk indicates fraternal relations, as in those of a "brotherhood", a homosocial space where the shared interest in cars levels out class differences between its participants (Lagergren 1998: 78). Judging by the participants at the club events I have visited and the fact that women also take part in car shows as both visitors and modifiers, the reality is more complicated than this image would suggest. In this sense, rather than speaking of a brotherhood, I prefer to speak about "socialhood" as formed around the cars and among the men and women who take part in these car

shows (cf. Andersson 2003: 184). Women are part of these relations, as organisers, partners and sometimes as modifiers themselves, but not necessarily on the same terms as men – namely as those whose craftsmanship is being desired, evaluated and rewarded at the car show.

### Sociality and competition

Even though the social aspects of belonging to a particular community are ascribed great value, the show is also a scene for competition and stratification among its members. The competitive side of the car show is something that car modifiers have different ways of relating to, ways that reveal a cultural tension between the community-building social element and the competitive and stratifying element in modified car culture. Modifiers have different ways of relating to this tension, as exemplified below.

*Benny points to a shelf in the display case full of prizes behind his and Stefan's Volvos. These are their collected prizes, received over the years of participating in car shows all over Sweden. I counted over 40 prizes altogether. Benny says: "to win a prize is fun, but it's not the reason why I go, to receive a prize is a confirmation I'm doing it right." Prizes and the aspect of competition are not as important, according to Benny, as the social aspect. "I used to say it's like going fishing, sometimes you're lucky, which is fun, but most important is the experience and this is what matters." He joked about it, rolled his eyes and added: "here I don't even know what prizes there are to be won," as if to make sure I understand that he is not taking part in the show only for the sake of competition. (Research diary, November, 2008)*

In this description, the modifier and I engage in a conversation about the importance of prizes. Benny shows that prizes are important and significant for his social position within the community by presenting them at the show, while also downplaying their importance for him as a car modifier through the way he talks about them. It is far from unusual to tone down the competitiveness of the car fair as exemplified above. Despite the fact that Benny and his friend have over the years been awarded more than 40 prizes in total, he still downplays their significance. I first took this to be



false modesty, but soon realised that this approach of constructing prizes and trophies as “add-ons” may be interpreted as a way of reassuring others that it is the community that really matters, not individual success. Still, considering the fact that the prizes are displayed in proximity to the cars signifies that they have already been awarded, elevated and legitimised in positions of status as modifiers – positions that allow a more modest stance towards the significance of prizes.

Far from all modifiers view the community’s prizes as add-ons, as Benny does. For some modifiers, prizes and awards were their very “drive” to keep performing the best they could. Adam, a 31-year-old engineer and car modifier of contemporary Volvos, finds receiving trophies to be his primary drive for taking part in car shows. “Well, it’s a social thing too.” This way of articulating the sociality of car modification as being less important than prizes is less common in my material, with some modifiers claiming to be representative of what most modifiers “really” think. After all, investing money and effort in styling a car is not only about making new friends, but also about the opportunity of winning prizes. The opportunity to be sociable is ascribed a specific purpose by Adam; social skills may create opportunities around the car: “one has to be able to talk, to be open to other people and get in contact with people.” Contacts and being sociable are, according to Adam, a ticket to get invitations to car shows and opportunities to expose one’s car more widely. Sociability and being “outgoing”, as he puts it, are in this case related to the opportunity to exhibit one’s car, to gain further visibility and over time create oneself as “someone” on the car modifier scene.

### To be people-focused

In previous chapters I have discussed how modifiers find a heroic figure in the craftsman. It is an idealised position that, because of how time-consuming car modification can be, may be interpreted as a form of “machine-focused” ideal (Faulkner 2001). Wendy Faulkner uses these approaches to technology to map out how the masculinity-technology association builds on highly gendered dichotomies. Being either “machine-focused” or “people-focused” builds on the distinction between feminine expressiveness and masculine instrumentalism. One example of such a

“machine-focused” character would be the computer hacker – the nerd image of computer hackers – as the only model for intimacy with computers, while being incapable of human intimacy (Turkle 1988, cited in Faulkner 2001: 85). Wajcman (1991: 141, 142) refers to Turkle when she argues that men’s desire of being in an intimate relationship with the computer could be interpreted as a refuge from the more complex relationships that characterise social life. Even though these distinctions should, in my view, be considered as gendered stereotypes, they may still aid in my analysis of the importance of sociability to car modifiers. In the following excerpt from Stefan, a particular critique of being “machine-focused” emerges.

Stefan: [...] certain guys, yeah it is usually guys, they personify, their identity is the car.

Dag: Yes, that I find interesting.

Stefan: Yes, interesting, but partly also frightening. My thought on this is that you meet and take part in activities, thereby you also move around and take part, you know, be open. Many are very narrow, they have big blinkers on. Into the garage, weld, weld and go about with the car, they never go to the theatre, they never go, incredibly narrow, they are “the real car modifiers” who spend all their winter time [in the garage] and miss out on everything else. Now, what I mean is, they stand like this [puts his hand on the car], what I lay my hand on is the self, it is the self so bloody much. This means, if you move over here for a while, [takes a step away from the car and pitches his voice high] “ooh, I’m so small, I’m nothing, I don’t really dare this, there’s nobody talking to me,” you know. That’s frightening to me. This is [points to his car and boosts up his body], “whoff, I’ve been building this since February, the whole winter,” “ooh, I’m so big and strong,” you know, “this is me”. They don’t move away from the goddamn car [...], they don’t move from it because then they’re only little Pelle from Katrineholm [a small town in Sweden], sort of.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Stefan: [...] en del killar, ja det är mest killar, de personifierar sig, deras identitet är bilen.

In this excerpt, Stefan illustrates and talks about the “real” modifiers, those who craft their cars and devote all their time to their cars. He does this in a critical vein, emphasising how deeply invested their identities have become in their cars, an investment that has made them socially limited. In order to be sociable, according to Stefan’s account, one also has to be able to distance oneself from the car one has built. In Stefan’s talk, the “machine-oriented” “real modifiers” are too strongly identified with their cars. In fact, by the way in which he uses his body to show how the cars work as their bodily extensions, he ridicules their achievement as a failure of self-reliance. In his account, sociality with other fair goers (I imagine) is outlined as threatening to these men, and without their cars to bear witness to their importance and greatness they are reduced from a man to a little boy. Apparently, it is within the social realm of the car show that their way of relating to technology may be revealed as extreme, too much and failing in self-reliance and independence. While, in some respects, to be obsessive about one’s car project can, as outlined in Chapter 5, indicate masculine performances that are truly idealised among modifiers, in the social realm of the car show, lack of social skills in this particular context reveals their insecurity as men. As noted above, being “outgoing” is also of importance for create oneself as “someone” on the car modifier scene.

### Evaluating the display car

To display one’s car at a show means to subject one’s choices, craftsmanship and taste preferences to the scrutiny of the modified car

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Dag: ja det är det jag tycker är intressant

Stefan: ja intressant, det är också delvis skrämmande. För att min tanke är ju att man ska umgås träffas se aktiviteterna att man kan flytta sig omkring och vara med och öppna såhär, många är ju väldigt smala, de har stora skygglappar på sig de som bygger bilar. In i garaget, svetsa svetsa mecka, de går aldrig på teater, de går aldrig, otroligt smala, de där riktiga bilbyggarna som ligger hela vintern och missar allt annat. Jo vad jag menar är, de står såhär, [visar med en hand på bilen], det här som jag lägger handen på det är jaget, det är jaget så inåt helvete. Så att, gå du hitbort och ställer dig, [går upp i falsett] ooh, jag är så liten jag är ingenting, jag vågar inte det där, det är ingen som pratar med mig liksom. Det är skrämmande tycker jag. Det här, [sträcker upp överkroppen] woff, jag har byggt i februari hela vintern oh vad jag är stor och stark liksom, det här är jag. De går inte ifrån den här jäkla bilen. [...] De går inte därifrån för att då är de bara lilla Pelle från Katrineholm liksom.

community. Participating in the show is an opportunity for modifiers to receive feedback on their cars. This is important not only for acknowledgement, but also to learn what might need to be improved on the car. Modified cars are usually evaluated in three ways: one is by visitors to the show who vote for the best cars (the “people’s choice” awards), another category of evaluators is the dedicated jury, usually, but not exclusively, a group of respected male car modifiers who select which of the cars at the show should be awarded a prize. The third category of evaluators are speakers at car shows. These three categories of evaluators make up different positions of managing status at the car show. At bigger shows it is usually a jury that decides upon the distribution of prizes. At smaller shows, it is rather the audience that selects the winners by voting. Shows may vary in what is awarded, but tend to divide the awards into brands and/or specialist areas, such as: best paint, engine, in-car entertainment/interior, car body, polish and chassis/breaks, which are usually the sections of the cars that are being judged. The aspects being evaluated are skills, fine craftsmanship and achievements in innovative design. Attention is paid to the ways in which modifiers are utilising their own skills in craftsmanship and whether the parts of the car fit well together (called “finish”), thus hasty work, carelessness and stock parts are ascribed less value.

To receive the “people’s choice” prize is highly valued among modifiers; however, when visitors are doing the voting, it is also associated with a certain ambivalence. It is common knowledge among car modders that local cars shown to their “home audience” more often receive the people’s choice award. When I asked Jerker, a Volvo enthusiast, about which is valued most, the people’s choice or the jury’s vote, he answered:

The jury, no doubt; the people’s choice is most often friends voting for friends. A couple of years ago, in a joking way, a totally “crap car” was voted as winner by the people’s choice, and that was more like a joke. A guy who owned a saffron-coloured Volvo used to win a lot with it, when he sold it, it didn’t win anything at all. Like, you vote for friends more than the car. This other time, a car came in third place in

the people's choice, but the jury ranked it number 47. That pretty much demonstrates the range!<sup>69</sup>

This excerpt makes it clear that the modified car does not represent an objective value. Instead, it indicates that the car, style and owner may be valued in totally different ways depending on who is doing the assessing. The vote for a "crap car" to win the people's choice award establishes the audience as unreliable, even making the award into a practical joke. It illustrates that the people's choice awards represent something ambivalent compared to the perceived objectivity that car modders usually ascribe to the jury.

Juries may work in different ways. One way, as exemplified in several of the previous chapters, is to invite car modifiers to display their cars at a dedicated scene where the jury and a speaker evaluate the car in front of an audience. Another way is when jury members walk around among the cars at the show to decide upon the winning cars. Winners are announced during the prize ceremony at the end of the day. According to Lars, who himself sometimes works as a judge at car shows, the ethical aspects of judging someone's work become problematic.

When we judge a car, things become a bit strange, like, here is a guy or a girl who put all his/her money and loads of time into building the kind of car he/she really wants, and our job is to find out what's wrong with it; we have to be careful with that.<sup>70</sup>

The dilemma that Lars points out rests with the role of the jury when they rank cars on the basis of how they are built, which in turn involves

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<sup>69</sup> Helt klart jury, när det är peoples choice är det ofta kompisar som röstar fram kompisar. För några år sedan var det ett riktigt skåp som vann people's choice, det var mer på skämt. En kille med en saffransfärgad Volvo vann en massa med sin bil sålde den, och då vann den inget alls, det är mer kompis som man röstar på än bil. En annan gång kom en bil 3:a i people's choice, men blev 47:a i jurybedömningen. Det visar på spännvidden!

<sup>70</sup> Alltså när man bedömer bilar så blir det ju lite konstigt, vi har en kille eller tjej som lagt ner kanske alla sina pengar och hur mycket tid som helst på att bygga den bilen som de verkligen vill ha, vårt jobb är att börja leta fel på den där bilen och det får man vara lite försiktig med.

emotional sensitivity that will suit the situation at hand. According to Lars, the following guidelines should apply to juries:

We can't say "this was nice or ugly-looking," if so, we're making a subjective evaluation of someone's car. We need to consider, is this well made? That's what counts, and that's what we as car modifiers aim for.<sup>71</sup>

In this excerpt, Lars talks about judges as ideally being objective evaluators of quality. Juries are the ones who should embody objectivity. What counts, or at least what should count, is how "well made" the car is, not how it looks. In a similar vein, Adam told me that the best comment he had ever received was from a guy who said he did not like one thing about the car, but could see "the enormous amount of work done and the fact that it was well built." As I interpret Adam and Lars, modifiers may disagree about aesthetics, but not about what counts as awardable in a modified car, namely craftsmanship. This task, as I understand it, requires not only established know-how in car modification, but also the ability to objectively decipher what counts as quality workmanship.

One way of reflecting upon this ability to objectively see the value of the car is by considering Donna Haraway's (1991: 194) argument that "what will count as rational accounts of the world are struggles over *how* to see." The ways of seeing outlined in the example above mirror the "structuring of seeing" in car modification (cf. Sandell 2010: 29), a structuring that is based on the idea that members of juries represent knowledgeable experts who can be trusted to decipher who is the best car modifier. The guiding principles of evaluation, outlined by Lars, build on a gendered separation between aesthetic values and craftsmanship. Constructed on the idea that it is actually possible to temporarily exclude looks, taste and personal preferences, the ability to objectively evaluate a car is made possible. This construction seems to draw on ideas of masculinity as being about rational

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<sup>71</sup> Vi kan ju inte gå in och säga att "det här var snyggt eller fult", då gör vi en subjektiv bedömning av någons bil, vi måste se var det här välgjort? Det är det som räknas och det är det vi som bygger eftersträvar då.

instrumentality and a desire to be in control (Kerfoot and Knights 1996: 80), in this particular case, over what should *count* in car modification.

Ideally, subjective taste preferences should be excluded from the evaluation process. Instead the evaluating gaze, embodied by members of juries, should be able to temporarily disregard values such as beauty, attractiveness and surface, that which is often associated with femininity (Ambjörnsson 2004, 2011). By doing so, members of modified car juries are ascribed the ability to *see* what the average enthusiast or show visitor may or may not – namely the true value of workmanship. These jury members are hence required to distance themselves emotionally from the cars they are to evaluate. Landström (2006) argues that men’s relationships with cars are built on pleasure and passion, while women are figured as rational and unable to attach emotionally to cars. If this is the case, then jury members should ideally be able to take the position that tends to be ascribed to women in the “gendered economy of pleasure” – as rational and unemotional evaluators of cars.

### Handling being evaluated

To be evaluated in a way that they felt was respectful of their invested effort was, for obvious reasons, truly important to the modifiers. From their point of view, the evaluation concerned their invested sweat, time, money and pride. However, whether the evaluation of the cars had been fair or not was a hotly debated topic amongst the modifiers. The general concern with the evaluation processes revolved around whether the judges, because of lack of time, subjective taste preferences, favouritism or because they judged cars in vague terms, had not scrutinised the cars in a desirable way. As an example, Pento said “they only spent like 20 seconds max judging my car,” criticising their hasty work. Stefan complained that the judges at one of the most prestigious Volvo shows in Sweden completely missed judging his car. Lars said: “If I had made the car in metal they would have adored me.” He called the jury “typical sheet metal guys”, only caring about cars modified in metal and looking down on plastic body kits.

Modifiers can use online forums to analyse their situation and discuss what needs to be done to improve it. Some of the better-established modifiers in

this study worked together with the companies organising the shows in order to create a specific form that would improve the judging process. The idea was to create a particular form for the jury to fill in and leave with the modifier in order to make the evaluation process more transparent. In my material, I also have examples of modifiers having acted like unions, planning and executing a boycott of car shows they did not find to be taking their complaints into consideration. As the outcome of these discussions, modifiers have suggested several improvements: more categories to fit new trends in car modification; only experienced judges who are specialised in their respective areas; the usage of protocols where the owner/builder of the car can see what and how the car has been evaluated and what needs to be improved; and joint collaborations between car modifiers and the major show organisers. They call for transparency and justice in an evaluation process to which they attach great value and significance.

The evaluations that take place at the car show can be met with different reactions by the modifiers. The importance of being evaluated by peers can be illustrated by a quote from Benny, who said: “if no one comes forth and checks out the car, I must have done something wrong.” To win a prize is, according to Benny, “a recognition that you’re doing it right.” To not be able to attract onlookers to one’s car implies that one’s work is regarded as uninteresting, as not belonging to the car show. Other modifiers even express negative feedback as being better than no feedback at all. Pento said about being complained to: “I don’t give a shit about what people say about the car, it doesn’t matter if someone approaches just to say they dislike it.” If so, “at least they’ve made the effort to express an opinion.” In this account it is rather the ability to make an impression – of any kind – that is used to express confidence as a car modifier. A negative reaction is better than no reaction at all. At the end of this ongoing evaluation of modifiers’ workmanship, the final line of defence is always the self and one’s personal choice. As has been outlined in previous chapters, car modification is strongly emphasised as a personal project of self-fulfilment. Benny emphasises individual choice when he argues: “the reason why I modify cars is for my own sake.” To say that car modification is for oneself first and foremost may be interpreted as a way of negotiating and



emotionally protecting oneself from being discussed, evaluated, commented upon, critiqued, even to be left un-noticed, by the community. As long as the car is pleasing according to the modifier, it is also possible to resist and make the critique harmless.

### The making of attractive display cars

Car shows vary in what they offer their visitors, but usually they have something to offer in terms of emotional sensations. As events, car shows may rupture the flow of everyday life by presenting a particular flow of activities so as to produce a different realm (Ristilammi 2000). As a visitor to a number of such shows, I have experienced all forms of entertainment: Spitfire air shows, spectacular cars and trucks manoeuvred in thrilling ways, even military tanks used as part of the entertainment. In this way, the car show genre does seem to be explicitly aimed at men, the entertainment appealing to that which is considered masculine in contemporary Western culture with regard to machines, risk and action. However, it is also noteworthy that car shows differ from one another. Some shows may lack any additional entertainment other than the cars. Car shows may also be framed as family get-togethers, offering specific attractions for kids like merry-go-rounds, swings and so on. Indoor shows allow for different ways of displaying cars than do outdoor shows. In the exhibition halls, cars are displayed in their own fantasy worlds. As objects of desire, car shows display car utopias – the cars of dreams. Complex, built-up environments are used to enhance the cars in various forms of showcases.

Tom O'Dell (1997) discusses the car show as specifically being important for making car enthusiasm respectable in Sweden. In his study of the Amcar and how it became a symbol of rebellious youth raggare (see Chapter 1), O'Dell argues that the indoor car fair, with its trophies, mirrors and small fences, aided those Amcar enthusiasts who wanted to differentiate themselves from the raggare. By turning car modification and car restoration into a work of art, the car fair aided in their wish for respectability by differentiating themselves and their enthusiasm from the dangerous raggare. However, by making the Amcar into a display car and a symbol of fine workmanship, the shows also divorced the cars from the streets and their street history. The fair, O'Dell argues, makes the car into a

fully controlled work of art, which turns it into a pacified object to simply attest to its owner's/creator's fine craftsmanship (O'Dell 1997: 152). The display cars, he argues, are not even intended to be used, but are taken to the show on a trailer. In the following, I draw on O'Dell's argument about the display car as pacified object to further explore how gender is produced when cars are put on display. My material indicates that the display car, rather than being viewed as a pacified object, is explicitly *made* active and attractive in close intermingling with the spatial arrangements of the car show.

Car shows are noisy. It is hard not to be affected by the blasting sounds that styled cars make. No matter whether the show is held at a closed-down airfield, at a shopping mall car park or in an indoor exhibition hall, there are simply no silent spaces to find. One might think of car shows as places where engines would roar. However, usually the sound of the car fairs for street cars goes unts-unts-unts rather than wrrom-wrom-wrom. The lack of motor sound is translated into sound from stereos; horsepower can be said to be translated into sound volume power. The in-car-entertainment (ICE, audio/visual entertainment systems) is indeed highly valued on the modified car owners' scene and made part of the entertainment of the car show. The capacities of these cars make accessible to the visitor to the show an intensely physical experience that is "immediate and direct, tactile and sensory" (Boden and Williams 2002: 495). The peaks and values of high volume bring the car show into a dynamic noisy space as the modifiers display their capacity to play loud. The music played ranges from hard rock to deep bass dance mixes – both genres brings out the *bass* of the hi-fi systems installed in the cars. These music-based embodied experiences are made part of the sound-scape of the car show.

Some of the cars are displayed as though they were on the go, the stereo pumping, their headlights blinking in imitation of being on their way somewhere. Even though the show cars are parked and stationary, the dimension of speed is projected into them through painted flames and the added spoiler wings – an impression of speed that is also stressed by the ramps, mirrors and lamps used on the set.



*Left: modified street cars on display at a car show. Right: part of a clothing company showcase, photos by the author.*

Display cars may be divorced from the streets, but urban elements can be used for display purposes, and indeed also for the gendering, of display cars. The examples provided here are not to be understood as representative of all indoor car shows, they are illustrative only of certain ways of displaying cars. As an example, sections of the car show may be staged with graffiti and the floor covered with bits of newspaper (left, above), imitating the look of imaginary dangerous, criminal and violent everyday life associated with urban space straight out of “street life” in Los Angeles (right, above). As cultural display, the world appears in the form of replicas of an imagined elsewhere, in this case urban Los Angeles is brought from “there” to here (Dicks 2003: 11). A motor-related clothing company enhances their brand by using a US police car, dead bodies and shotguns – taken from the genre of “cop movies”. In genre theory, a particular genre category refers to the way films or TV series can be grouped together in term of their similarity in plots, settings, themes, stereotypes and settings. Genres help in guiding the audience to know what is going on, what to expect when viewing, for example, a police series (Gledhill 1997/2001: 355). In this particular case, the company displays cars by association with the genre of police series and, by doing so, situates the cars within its particular context of violence, masculinity, danger, urban settings and car chases.



Pictures illustrating modified cars on display, photos by the author.

In the pictures above, two modified 4x4 vehicles are displayed in different ways. In the picture on the left, the car's beauty is enhanced by the use of a mirror of water. Any access to the car is effectively fenced off by the water, here functioning as a moat. While other cars at the show may be displayed with their doors open, inviting visitors to look inside, this 4x4 is sealed off as a way of protecting what may be interpreted as its chastity. The car is clearly put on display, it does not play music, and it is fenced off, illuminated and pacified to be desired by the visitors at the show. The styled 4x4 exemplifies in a very significant way how styling not only visually enhances a vehicle, but also alters its field of application. Its chromed rims and body kit, its paintwork and tinted windows seem to effectively make it incompatible with "the great outdoors" so often advertised as the natural habitat of 4x4s (McLean 2009). In this particular incarnation, the typically masculine appeal associated with the 4x4 and the great outdoors is turned into a vehicle for show and urban display<sup>72</sup>.

In the picture on the right, another 4x4 truck is displayed to make a different impression. In this scene, a great SUV *Hummer* is seemingly crushing two Volvos. Smoke is occasionally let out from underneath the *Hummer* and lamps in blue and green add to the illusion of the destructive capacity of the vehicle. The monstrous car looks unstoppable, yet is stationary and staged in dramatic scenery. This particular scene seems to

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<sup>72</sup> According to one newspaper report, statistics in the UK show that only 12 percent of 4x4 owners actually go "off road", while 40 percent never leave the city (Macfarlane 2005, McLean 2009: 59).

draw on the genre of so-called monster truck shows, where modified pickup trucks with significantly enlarged wheels compete. The trucks crush smaller vehicles as part of the show, which is also part of this installation. Here, the *Hummer* SUV, a car that in earlier incarnations was first used by the US army and later produced for civilian use, demonstrates its monstrous capacity for destruction as it, perhaps shockingly for some visitors, crushes two Volvos with ease. While the references to monster trucks refer to demolition and action as entertainment and show, there are also more problematic messages being conveyed by this display.

The 4x4 car, such as the SUV, has been analysed in terms of its expressiveness of an increased rugged individualism (Campbell 2005: 957). In an analysis of SUV advertisements, Fiona McLean (2009) notes a particular theme as that of the Urban Jungle. This theme can aid in shedding more light on this scene from the car show. McLean argues that in the commercial messages formed around SUVs, the city figures as a particularly unfriendly and uncivilised environment. The SUV is depicted as aiding the imagined consumer to escape the hostility of everyday interactions with other drivers. Similar to the scene at the car show, SUVs are portrayed as urban assault vehicles that emphasise issues of security and defence. In these ads, connotations of traffic as nerve-racking, hostile and a battlefield through which one has to fight, are used to suggest that the SUV can provide control, safety and comfort for its driver. Similar to the theme of the Urban Jungle, the scene repeats discourses based on the assumption of a culture of aggression and conflict, where each driver has to be more intimidating and menacing than the next in order to dominate and control the external environment and those in it (McLean 2009: 68). In the showcase, aggression and potency repeat dominance as a sign of “true” masculinity (Connell 1995: 45).

Clearly, the car show discussed here displays cars in ways that make them more than pacified objects attesting to their owners’ skills in workmanship. The car show does gender in many ways. Despite the fact that no engines are ever turned on, and that the cars at the show are placed in frozen poses as though they were carefully being parked, they are stylised performances of gender. In the representations of cars outlined here, the car show represents a playful blurring of boundaries between masculine and

feminine, home and away, movie fantasies and reality, the legal and the illegal, the outdoor and indoor, chastity and aggression. The car show may arrange cars in highly masculinised forms of display – as in aggressively crushing other cars getting in their way – inviting the audience to imagine for a moment what it must be like to fully utilise the power of cars. Cars are staged to exaggerate and enhance elements of danger and action, even moving cars just to reinstate them into other car cultures’ urban landscapes in ways that designate them as actors in movies or the like. The show also makes it possible to remove cars from danger in order to place them in perfectly protected indoor spaces to enhance their beauty, danger and desirability. With this note on how the car show produces desirable cars, it is time to move on to the outdoor show and the sound of engines.

### Evaluating horsepower

At outdoor car fairs, part of the entertainment of the show is to test cars in terms of how much horsepower they amount to. In this form of evaluation, particular machines are used. These machines are called dynamometers, and are used in the development and refinement of engine technology. What happens at the “dyno” (dynamometer), is that the car that is to be tested is run up on a ramp the size of a car. The technicians then mount the wheels onto rollers in order to let them spin freely (hence, it is also called a “rolling road”). The car engine is subsequently hooked up to a computer. One of the technicians then accelerates each gear to its peak while the computer registers how the engine performs. This is a noisy and powerful experience that includes risky elements; the car is actually running at full power, mounted onto the rolling road surrounded by the audience, who are standing only a few metres away. It usually attracts lots of people, mostly men, and is an intense and noisy experience that measures, amongst other parameters, the horsepower of the car.

The first time I ever saw a dyno was at a car show organised by one of the major online modified car communities and a company selling aftermarket products for car styling. The show was held at the car park of the company in a small town outside Stockholm. Hosting the show was the presenter Classe, famous from a Swedish TV show called ‘*Classes bilstyling*’, and his sidekick Elvis. Together they moved around the car park, interviewing

modifiers and announcing events. Every now and then, they announced and commented upon what was happening in the corner where the dynamometer was located. Elvis, who himself specialises in car stereos, announced the dynamometer in the following way: “This is so fucking masculine, measuring engine power must be among the most masculine things you can do besides car stereo!” Classe turned to the crowd to announce that there were more cars on their way in to “show their manhood”! During a test, the noise from the engine drowns every attempt to speak, there is a certain tension in the air, as in a mutual understanding that what we are taking part in is a serious matter. Those to be measured are showing their “manhood” and seriousness is emphasised through attracting the crowds to the scene of the action.

*From where I am standing I see a Volvo car slowly approaching through the crowd. Classe and Elvis seem very excited and take the opportunity to invite everyone at the show over to the test centre. “This car cannot be missed!” The Volvo driver moves the car gently into place, the two men who are in charge of the dyno mount the rear wheels securely, then measure the size of the rims and type the data into the computer. The pressure in the tyres is checked and a huge fan is placed in front of the car to simulate the cooling effect that the wind from normal driving would have. The older of the two men supervises the computer and the younger sits in the car, taking the keyboard with him in order to type in more data as the test proceeds. The noise from the engine being tested makes many onlookers cover their ears while others take photos or film the event. Each gear is accelerated to its maximum power. “Oh, that car really has got power, is it really possible, 683 horsepower!”, Elvis shouts into the microphone and urges the audience to applaud the performance. I understand that a sensation just occurred in front of us; a rather ordinary-looking Volvo car has achieved 683 horsepower. It is named a “cruel sleeper” [grym sleeper] by a man standing next to me. However, there is more to come. A blue Mustang V8 muscle car is about to enter the stage. Classe and Elvis make it into a “fight” between the Volvo and Ford Mustang. “It may not be fair, considering this is a V8 coming up!” Classe describes the sound of the so-called muscle car as a “somewhat more manly sound” than the Volvo’s. After having been evaluated by the dyno and test crew, it proves that the Mustang*

*performs “only” 550 horsepower, which is less than expected. The unassuming Volvo is applauded for winning the “fight”. (Research diary May 2008)*

The dyno not only offers an occasion to evaluate the owner’s investment in tuning or to learn in great detail how the engine performs. The machine also merges competition and entertainment into a gendered technological drama. The dyno and the speakers create competitive situations by dramatising the cars, by referring to engine capacity and sound, ascribing them capacities and situating them as challenger and challenged. The speakers make the engine test into a wrestling match between the two cars. In the world of car modification, the dyno is a machine that is trusted by modifiers to make an exact measurement. There is no uncertainty as with juries about what grounds they may use to evaluate cars and craftsmanship, this is considered an correct measurement. In the dramatisation outlined in the description, the dyno is even ascribed the capacity of flipping the “natural” order of things: as when an ordinary-looking Volvo may “win” over an iconic muscle car like the Ford Mustang.

The way in which horsepower is so explicitly linked to masculinity makes the associations between men, masculinity and powerful car seem natural. The verbal and non-verbal practice establishes the cars as desirable by reference to their “manly sound”, “muscles” and their relation in a competitive “fight”. This in turn establishes the cars as confirming masculine ideals between the men at the car show and the cars (cf. Ottemo and Gårdfelt 2009: 73). The particular drama that was created around the evaluation of the Swedish Volvo and the American muscle car also reflects how a commercial interest is created around products. This particular show was organised by a company that sells the very products that are needed to make a car capable of “winning” over the muscle car. In this respect, the scene comes to bear witness to the power of Swedish men’s craftsmanship and abilities in constructing magnificent machines.

#### Driving as distinction: The trailer queen

A key tool for studying how car modifiers’ self images are constructed is by considering their constructions of “the other”. Jesper Fundberg (2003:



184), who has studied the construction of masculinity in the context of youth football, argues that a key to the boys' self image was to be found through listening and looking for what "others" they talked about. He found three such others, "the queer", the "biddy" and the "immigrant", all of which worked as important categories that the young footballers used in constructing their identity. This self-making through de-identification first and foremost expresses what they are not, hence, indirectly, who they are – that is, white, heterosexual, middle-class boys. Among car modifiers, the notion of the "fag" also figures, inscribed with its own particular meanings, as exemplified in the next section. Here I turn to discuss an "other" named the "trailer queen". The trailer queen can be understood as a form of watch guard that modifiers do not want to be associated with (Fundberg 2003, Nordberg 2005).

The trailer queen signifies a modifier who has lost their car in the process of styling it. Lars exemplifies what is meant by "losing the car" by referring to an occasion at a car show when the winning car could not be driven on stage under its own power but needed to be pushed there. The car was just "a lot of disconnected parts". Despite the fact that this particular car received a prize, Lars is critical of it for reasons of functionality: it didn't work. As outlined above, the specialisation of specific sections, aspects and details of cars actually makes it possible to build an award-winning car that cannot be driven. In spite of not having its parts connected, a car may still present magnificent paintwork, an outstanding finish or even an award-winning engine. Lars is critical of this contradiction when he says: "as a car modifier, you don't want to trailer the car places." Lars goes on to outline the characteristic relation of modifiers to display cars that are not used for driving. "They're called trailer queens or trailer whores; if there are too many of them at a show, it's a hoe show."

To trailer a display car is a way of protecting it from the risks associated with using it on public roads. Cars that look flawless and do not show any signs of use, however, risk being labelled trailer queens, implying a lack of use as a "real" car. By being named a "queen", the car can be depreciated for being feminine and lacking a clear function. Having nothing but good looks, the lack of function makes it fail as desirable technology. The owner of the car is constructed as being so preoccupied with the status and

appearance of the car that he has become too protective of it and neglects the joy of driving it. The notion of the trailer queen indicates a tension in the relations between men and cars. In fact, to fail to drive one's own car implies being over-protective, feminine and "other". The word "queen" also refers to an effeminate gay man, and gay men who transgress masculinity and assumptions about "appropriate" male bodies by impersonating traditional femininity as drag queens (Davison 2007: 43) One way in which modifiers evaluate whether a car is a trailer queen or not is related to marks on the car body. In an online discussion on the quality of the display cars at the prestigious *Bilspport Performance and Custom Car Show*, one of its contributors writes:

There is a difference between poor finish and damage. A bumper that does not fit perfectly is directly disturbing. It's no problem if an S14 [a Nissan sports car] has chip marks from having hit curbs at Mantorp raceway while driving it, or for having poor rear tyres for that matter, I see this as positive. This happens when you use the car. To build a car that looks good may be difficult, but building one that looks good, drives well and is one that you also dare to use, that equals respect!<sup>73</sup> (Garaget.org)

This writer respects not only the way in which a car fits the ideal of having been built by hand, but his respect is equally invested in the risk-taking involved in using such a car. Damage of the "right kind", that typically arises from car usage under action-dense situations, is turned into a signifier of "tough" and "real" driving. Driving creates a set of surfaces defined by use, not design. Accordingly, marks in the paint or on the car's bumpers serve as a form of testimonial of manhood, of someone who dares to use and put at risk his modified car. With the right marks, the modified display car no longer signifies only the body surface, but a car body in action.

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<sup>73</sup> Det är skillnad på dålig finish och skador. En kofångare som inte passar perfekt är direkt störande. Att en S14 har stenskott, märken efter curbsen från en Mantorpkörning och dåligt mönster på bakdäcken ser jag som positivt. Då används bilen. Att bygga en bil som ser bra ut kanske är svårt, men att bygga en som ser bra ut, går bra och man dessutom vågar använda, det är respekt! Garaget.org

I find more examples of the significance of marks on the car body in *gatbilar.se* (no. 1, 2006: 33). In this particular article, stone chips are equated with "war injuries", as though, while being used, the display car is in battle with the small stones that most cars are exposed to when in use. The text that illustrates an image of the modified car in motion follows:

Stone chipped paint? It doesn't matter, thinks Mr Fun, since he will drive the car many miles this summer. He calls them war injuries.<sup>74</sup>  
(*gatbilar.se* no. 1 2006: 33).

The fact that minor marks can be referred to as injuries says something about how modifiers may see their cars. In this representation, the display car used for driving is deemed fragile, so fragile that small stones become imaginary threats and signifiers of "war". Injuries of war could range from losing a leg, to burn injuries or psychological trauma. For car modifiers, in a humorous vein, the small stones hitting the car body are represented here as forms of "war injuries". War has traditionally been a proving ground where men battle with one another over ideals of masculinity like strength and courage (Rasmusson 2007: 597). In the context referred to here, who the war is being fought against is less clear. The war that modifiers fight seems to be ongoing, as in a war against the car being slowly ruined by everyday use. The injuries caused by this "war" are nevertheless a telling example of the construction of a daring driver. The organisation of marks outlined here is gendered in the sense that they may symbolically align the modifier into the feminised coward of the trailer queen or the daring masculine driver. It is by driving that this gendered tension is set straight. It is, however, not by performing daredevil bravado, but through everyday use: for shopping, picking up children from day-care and other mundane everyday duties. Despite the fact that the display car is "out of the ordinary" and is sometimes considered an extreme car, the most mundane practices of everyday life confirm the car as authentic – as functional and useful, not just a pretty car.

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<sup>74</sup> Stenskott i lacken? Det gör inget tycker Mr Fun som låter bilen gå många mil den här sommaren. Han kallar det för krigsskador.

## Evaluating car care: The polisher fag

Cleaning is a practice that in our shared cultural imaginary is commonly (but not exclusively) associated with femininity and something that women do, in their own houses but also professionally as cleaners of other places. In contrast, the kind of washing and polishing discussed here is associated with a male-defined expert position. Taking care of cars by washing and mending them is a widespread male practice (Polk 1998, Mellström 1999, 2002). In his study of truck drivers, Eddy Nehls (2003: 76) notes how important a well-kept truck is for the drivers' identity. To polish, care for and decorate is, according to Nehls, a traditional expression of "femininity". However, these activities can be interpreted as a male-defined interest in organising, structuring and arranging (Nehls 2003). According to scholars like Mary Douglas (1966: 2), "dirt is essentially disorder" and, by removing dirt, order is restored. Drawing on Douglas's argument, there is no such thing as "absolute dirt", what is to be counted as dirt exists in the eye of the beholder. To study how modifiers construct what is to be perceived as dirt can therefore be a way of understanding how car modifiers understand themselves and how one should be as a car modifier. In the following excerpt, norms about dirt are established:

*It is time for Lars's car to be evaluated by the judges. First the judges talk to Lars for 5 minutes, asking him questions, making comment and cracking jokes in a friendly manner. After bending down to the ground, carefully scrutinising the rims, one judge puts his fingers through the gaps in the rims to reach the brake discs. He looks back at Lars as he points to his dirty fingertips in a similar way as one may do when finding dust on a door frame in a home. "Aha!" Lars responds by laughing and explains that the water was out, "as you are well aware." Lars seems unsure whether he will accept this explanation. After some friendly small talk, the judges move on to the next car. (Research diary, May 2008)*

In this excerpt, car modifier culture is at work: norms concerning cleaning are established, values are expressed and practices of evaluation are undertaken. The description of the judge who bends down to put his fingers through the rims to check if Lars has cleaned inside them establishes

tidiness as a norm at the car show. The judge may have made it sound like a joke, perhaps to take the edge off what could be understood as an overstatement, but this needs to be related to the fact that washing the inside of the rims is not considered exaggerated, it is to be careful. A car, when being shown, should be properly cleaned and any traces of use should have been removed. Hence, this is a different kind of dirt than that discussed in the previous section; dirt that can be removed should be removed from the display car. To have not cleaned the inner sides of the rims marked a border that indicated the car wasn't properly cleaned.

Cleaning cars is made into an expert skill by modifiers, which can be rewarded when executed well. Most car shows award a special prize for "best polish". Jerker is a Volvo modifier in his 40s who takes washing and polishing his car very seriously. Here he has found a niche at the show, not in costly modifications of engines or large spoiler wings, but in keeping the paintwork of his car in excellent condition. He aims for the best polish prize and he may win trophies for an extremely well-kept, but only slightly modified car. The existence of such a category as best polish award associates polishing with the position of an expert, a specialist in the art of achieving an exceptional finish and control of the car body. The following incident exemplifies this:

*On stage at Mantorp Park a car is being inspected by a group of jury members. The speaker, the well-known presenter of the TV show "Motorjournalen", is professional and gentle in his talk about the cars, yet he seems to find one thing particularly disturbing. He says that a recurring source of annoyance during the day has been that the modifiers who have presented their cars have not sufficiently cleaned them before showing them to the judges. Therefore, he argues, we need to take a few minutes to explain to the audience the importance of presenting the car to the judges in a way that makes the most of it. "No CDs or stuff should be left in the car, not in the boot or inside the car". He goes on to instruct the audience that buckets and other materials used for cleaning the car should be taken out before the car is shown to the judges. Everything that does not belong in the car should be removed before it is taken on stage. He turns to one of the jury members for some further advice about how to enhance the appearance of the car as it is to be presented to the jury. This member*

*is introduced by the speaker as a “polisher fag” [putsbö] and he asks him to share with the audience a story about what would happen if he drove his own modified car in the rain. The “polisher fag” responds without hesitation, “I would spend at least two days cleaning it in order to make it flawless again.” The members of the audience around me do not seem surprised by this statement, instead he is applauded accordingly. (Research diary August 2008)*

Taking polishing so seriously can be made fun of by other modifiers, as being exaggerated and vain. Despite this, the polisher fag<sup>75</sup> is a position for men to identify with. Recognised as someone who takes pride in polishing his car, I have men in my material who call themselves polisher fags. I have never heard a female modifier talking about herself as a polisher fag, hence the notion “fag” in the context of car care is an exclusively male-defined position. It is based on an abusive way of outlining affection for car care, but denotes something positive in this particular context. The implication of the polisher as a “fag” should not be understood as being unmanly/gay, in this context “fag” refers more to a form of marginal, “nerd” masculinity (Nilsson 2011). As a nerd, the polisher fag is pivoting on the edge of being an exaggerated man. It is a notion that denotes an obsession with care – to care dearly for one’s car. In this aspect of care, as in car care, the commitment is also to reproduce the shared identity of what it means to be a car modifier – namely to strive to bring out the most of the beauty of cars. Even though the washing of cars is similar to many other forms of washing and caring about objects where women are doing the cleaning, the polisher fag outlines washing as a man’s job requiring expert knowledge.

### The ambivalent “car show babe”

*At the bottom end of the indoor show area, cars are being rolled up, shields set up, lights are flashing and young men in caps are queuing*

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<sup>75</sup> Fag is also used online, for example in the online discussion and image board 4chan. A “moralfag” is a label attached to a 4chan user who disagrees with the moral direction of a post, often used as a derogatory term. “Oldfag” is a user who understands the customs of the community after spending years on the site, “newfag” refers to either new or ignorant of customs of the community (Olsen 2012: 479).

*up. It is time for the “live” photo shoot for the upcoming Street Cars Fest calendar. A car, rebuilt by a woman, is being placed in position between the photo shields, the car’s headlights pointing in the direction of the audience. In front of the car there is a woman, not the modifier herself, but a model dressed in sexy underwear and high heels. The male photographer directs her into position. Leaning against the car, click, her hands on her hips, click, her chest sticking forward, click. During the shoot, she is constantly looking into the camera lens of the photographer in front of her. Both the car and the model are surrounded by silent, fully-dressed young men with zooming cameras. Suddenly the session is halted; she is instructed to pose on her knees in front of the car. The lights and camera gazes are at this moment directed at her, positioning her as the centre of attention in a way that makes the modified car behind her seemingly redundant. (Research diary, November 2008)*

It is symptomatic that it is not the modifier herself who is to strike “sexy” poses in front of her car, but a semi-clothed model. If the photo shoot had been for a motoring magazine, the modifier herself would most likely be leaning confidently against her car, looking with assurance at the imagined reader while dressed in her everyday clothing. This way of creating excitement by “sexing up” the cars is not uncommon at car shows but not as ubiquitous as one might expect. It occurred at four of the shows I attended, one organized by *BilSPORT* magazine, one by the Norwegian magazine *Gatebil* and two organized by *Street Cars Fest*. Young women can audition via the show’s website to become a “Street Cars Fest girl”, marketed as a stepping-stone for a modelling career.

Women’s bodies have historically played an important role as sexualised actors who present and sell cars to imagined heterosexual male buyers (cf. Walsh 2009: 12). Best (2008) notes that only brief glimpses of female participants in car cultures exist. Usually women are only visible as objects whose bodies are inspected as closely as the body of the car would be. The presence of scantily-dressed women “affirm[s] a heterosexual world of masculine competition and bravado; their existence helps to refine their opposite, the subjects of this world, young men, as men” (Best 2006: 58). At the car show, the female form adds an erotic charge to the show and the

cars displayed on the premises. When I talked to modifiers about the car show girl, two lines of argument were articulated: a liberal take which emphasises individual choice, and a more negotiating view. Tove said about scantily-dressed women at car shows that she also wanted “male babes” for female visitors to look at. What she does it to claim heterosexual “justice” in which gendered bodies are to be exposed and desired at the show. When I talked to Stefan about the “car show babe”, he said the following about the matter:

It’s an old concept and is hard to change, it’s part of the culture and it should be this way. But, it’s also a way of becoming visible. If you have girls [in the pictures of one’s car] at garaget.org you immediately get more traffic on your page. [Name of friend] uploaded two pictures with girls in them and the pictures were immediately boosted to a top-ranking position, “every single one clicked on these,” which is not that odd, everyone likes to look at nice-looking girls.<sup>76</sup>

Drawing on what Stefan says, the semi-dressed female body signifies car culture in the way it has always been. The heterosexual modifier man is here invoked as norm by Stefan as he argues that “girl beside car” images will by default attract viewers. To look at and enjoy female bodies is part of what it means to be a male car modifier and to be part of an imagined car modifier community. Apart from being “an old concept” and constructed as part of car culture that is hard to change, in female bodies Stefan finds a way to gain visibility in online web forums. Just as car manufacturers do, car modifiers may use scantily-dressed women to market their car projects. A scantily-dressed woman becomes a tool for car modifiers to market themselves as interesting to online audiences. When his friend posted pictures of a “girl beside car”, in an instant his car became one of the most viewed in the forum.

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<sup>76</sup> Det är ett gammalt koncept som är svårt att förändra, det är kultur och ska vara det. Men sen är det ju ett sätt att bli synlig på också. Den som har tjejer med på garaget.org får genast en massa mera klick på sin sida. (namn) la upp två bilder med tjejer på och kom direkt upp i toppen, ”varenda jävel klickade” och det är inte så konstigt, man gillar ju att kolla på snygga tjejer.



In contrast to how women's bodies may become a viewing pleasure for imagined heterosexual male audiences, scantily-dressed women may also be constructed as out of place and problematic. At one of the *Street Cars Fest* shows, the car show that seems most keen on retaining female nudity as part of their sales pitch, I joined Stefan while he presented his car to a jury that assessed it in front of an audience.

*Stefan is asked by the speaker to explain to the audience the general idea behind the car, while a woman in her mid 20s dressed in a skirt and bra holds the back door of the car open. The speaker seems upset about this fact. "I am so fed up with sex objectification in this business, put on more clothes next time," he says and asks why Stefan would "need a scantily-clad woman to make his car more interesting?" (Research diary August 2008)*

The questioning of the need for the "car show babe" makes female nudity into a problem, an ambivalent body that becomes out of place when presented together with a car that is being evaluated. She becomes "out of place" in a particularly problematic way, as the speaker criticises her for not being properly dressed, and by asking her to put on more clothes in fact makes her even more naked in front of the audience. This is done by a man who repeats gender equality discourse by referring to himself as being tired of "sex objectification", but simultaneously makes the situation into her responsibility.

Stefan is being criticised for using women's forms to divert attention away from the car that is being evaluated. The critique of scantily-dressed women as "out of place" is, however, rarely made into an explicit question of gender equality or explicitly turned into a critique of male sexism, but is framed as a question of the fair judgement of cars. What this would suggest is that the presence of scantily-dressed women is not necessarily being questioned primarily as a problem of gender equality, but as a problem for the highly sought-after objectivity with which cars should be evaluated. Accordingly, a desirable car body should be evaluated on its own terms – the addition of female bodies could even be considered a way of cheating. When coming so close to the core business of the car show, the rewarding of men's skills, craftsmanship and cars, she becomes other and out of place.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have analysed how modifiers construct gender through showing and evaluating their cars at shows. For modifiers, the show means many things and I have discussed it as an arena for socialising and for showing and evaluating their work among like-minded enthusiasts. Sociality is formed around the possibility of being among like-minded people where the enthusiasm for cars is already established as common ground. Even though both men and women take part in car shows, the shows display cars to bear witness first and foremost to men's dedication, innovativeness, skills and carefulness. To show one's work in front of an appreciative and scrutinising audience is likewise necessary to accumulate key markers of masculine status.

The chapter has outlined several different groups of evaluators who are important for establishing status positions within the community: these are the fair-goers themselves, members of juries, presenters of car shows and in some cases even machines and their crew (like that of the dynamometer). Evaluation of cars is structured along lines of expertise and the ability to see and establish winners in a way that is perceived as objective and fair. Objectivity is constructed around the ability to *see through* the surface value of the car, that is, the aesthetical style of a modified car, and by doing so, be able to evaluate how well-crafted the car is. This construction outlines a hierarchical relation not only between visitors and members of juries, but also between aesthetics and craftsmanship. A gendered pattern is established, based on masculinity and craftsmanship as associated with neutrality, authenticity and longevity of the car, as opposed to its aesthetic values, which are more gender-ambivalent and associated with subjective taste values, car fashion and change. In this sense, the car show can be seen as enacting and reproducing traditional gender conventions (cf. Petersson McIntyre 2011). This construction of objective evaluation was, however, considered unstable and in need of negotiation and reassurance that it will work by those subjected to evaluation. Modifiers therefore engaged in outlining ways of improving the evaluation process and, by doing so, also acted upon the forces that they subject themselves to in order to become car modifier subjects.

As this chapter has gone on to argue, to simply display one's car as representing one's skills as a modifier was not the only aspect of evaluation that was important. Equally important was to establish the display car as a car. Gender was constructed through ascribing great value to the everyday usage of cars, as in the way in which everyday usage confirms that their modified, enhanced and beautiful cars still belong to the category of ordinary but *real* cars: cars that are used for driving. In the process of modification, its status as a vehicle for transportation becomes fussy and unclear, according to some modifiers even "lost". The figure of the feminised trailer queen and the notion of "war injuries" on car bodies outline how the modifier imaginary constructs everyday usage as being of great importance for grounding their enhanced cars as honest and real behind all the glossy colour-schemes, paintwork, diode lamps and spoiler kits. Driving inscribes the car with its biography and testimonies of use. Driving is absolutely the practice that confirms its owner as masculine, considering the stubborn connection between mobility and masculinity (Bjurström 1995: 234, Uteng and Cresswell 2008, Letherby and Reynolds 2009). In this sense, the everyday becomes of crucial importance in establishing the beautiful display car as still being more than just a display object, namely, a "real" car for "real" driving and "real" men.



## 8

### **Cars are made to be driven**

This chapter is about driving, emotions and risk-taking in cars. It links to and broadly answers the fifth of my research questions: How do modifiers construct and emotionally invest in risk-taking? Here I continue to elaborate on the tension between usage and risk outlined in the last chapter. The title of the chapter is a quote from *Bilsport Magazine* (no. 17: 34) and reflects this productive tension. In the quote it was stated that “cars are made to be driven.” While this seems like an obvious statement, it needs to be interpreted in the context of modified street cars as both for display/show and for driving/streets. As such, and as I come back to in this chapter, there is a potential tension between these contexts of car use. Martin put this particular dilemma like this: “Cars are made to be used, no matter if they are styled cars and cost a fortune.” Later on in this chapter I explore this tension in the context of driving and street racing. While the appearance of styled cars would suggest aggressive and competitive ways of driving (see Redshaw 2008: 79), this chapter will question such generalisations by also considering how the modifiers in this study create meaning around their cars as fragile and important to them.

The first part of the chapter focuses on the ways in which car modifiers articulate their cars as empowering to them, and how this relates to risk-taking. In the latter part of the chapter I outline how car modifiers articulate their cars more in terms of vulnerability.

## Places and non-places to race

It does not seem farfetched to argue that car modifiers are a community of car users who are particularly associated with an interest in speed. During the initial phase of my fieldwork, I had an ambition to study street racing in more detail. I wanted to understand what racing illegally was about and how it linked with masculinity, community, thrills and illegality. Lars had vividly described the scene in Stockholm as being “like in *The Fast and the Furious*”, pointing to its popularity by stating “there may be 400 cars out there on a Saturday night.” In the interview with Malte, one of the editors interviewed for this study, he called the Stockholm street racing scene “the most extreme street race in the world.” “Extreme” in this context refers to the power of the cars used in the competitions on public roads, which could be 1000 horsepower drag racing cars, cars intended to be driven on dedicated race tracks rather than on public roads. At one point, I managed to get in contact with members of the Stockholm street racing scene but, unfortunately, our email contact died out after a while.

Because my own experience of street racing and risk-taking in cars is limited, the data I draw on regarding street racing and what modifiers refer to as “spontaneous street racing” is generated through interviews, online web forums and the like. I have not myself been to an illegal street race, but I have talked to modifiers about their racing experiences. In these conversations, there was one way in particular of legitimising street racing that was reproduced and repeated: namely, an alleged lack of legal places to race. Lars rhetorically asked, “is it really so hard to provide a strip in Stockholm?” Tove, who at the time of the study lived near a race track, also found explanatory value in the lack of access to legal spaces. “There are no places to race really, all race tracks cost money to use, that’s why you get illegal races.” According to all the editors of the motoring magazines I interviewed, the alleged lack of legal places to race explains illegal street racing. Sixten, for example, claimed that the Stockholm municipality “dug their own grave” when they closed down the only legal raceway available in the Stockholm region. The implications of this action were, Sixten continues, that the racers were “forced” to go on the streets because “neither politicians nor the police can stop this culture just by closing down their tracks.” He says:

The biggest problem is all the preconceptions about what it's about, maybe people look at *The Fast and the Furious* and get the impression that you race among young children sitting on swings and playing soccer in the streets, but this is not the case.<sup>77</sup>

Sixten finds the perception among people in general that street racing is more dangerous than it is, to be problematic. To refer to street racing as fairly safe is common, generally by arguing that the races are held in places where people usually are not present at the time of racing, for example: industrial areas, temporarily closed roads, less frequented roads etc. In relation to this, it could be mentioned that there are certain places that are deemed especially problematic for speeding, namely in front of schools, or in residential areas where there are greater risks of injuring unprotected road users. While blame for street racing may be put on municipalities for neglecting to provide legal race tracks, Tove elaborates the ups and downs of illegal racing:

Above all it gives you a kick because it's so goddamn illegal, you know, challenging the police like that and knowing they'll be coming soon, and you know like, swoosh, all the cars are gone. It's sort of like in *The Fast and the Furious*, it says swoosh and all the cars go in all directions and the police are sort of occupied [laughs], so it's about the excitement, you seek that excitement<sup>78</sup>.

In this quote, Tove invokes *The Fast and the Furious* movie in order to explain to me what illegal races are like. She talks about street racing as thrillingly illegal, a concept that I have heard many modifiers use to help explain why street racing takes place. Even though illegal racing is articulated as something that gives her a "kick", it is not an ideal situation.

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<sup>77</sup> Det största problemet är alla förutfattade meningar om vad det är egentligen, och kanske om man då tittar på *Fast and the Furious* att man kan få för sig att man kör de där tävlingarna bland småbarn som gungar och spelar boll på gatorna, men så är det ju inte.

<sup>78</sup> Tove: det är, det ger en kick framförallt därför att det är så jävla olagligt, liksom utmana polisen nåt grymt och bara veta att snart kommer de och så bara swoosh, så är alla bilar borta. Det är typ som *Fast and the Furious* det säger bara swoosh så åker alla åt alla håll och polisen har lite att göra he he, så att det är väl spänningen att man söker spänningen.

“The downside is”, she argues, “there’s always something that happens when there’s a race, around here they want this off the streets, to race on tracks instead.” While the excitement of illegal racing is associated with certain thrills, it is also associated with risk. However, renting a racetrack is not an option for Tove and her friends, since the costs would be too high. What these examples all point to is the way in which street racing is constructed as an entitlement to have places to race, either because of an alleged lack of interest from municipalities to take seriously racers’ claims for a place to race, or due to a wish to feel the thrills of risk and illegality.

While the argument so far has been that there are no legal places to race, it is not unusual for car clubs to rent deserted airfields for racing. I have visited these on several occasions when Lars’s and Daniel’s car club has rented tracks or airfields for their members to try out their cars for a day. Motoring magazines also organise legal racing at racetracks all over Sweden. These initiatives are all indicative of modifiers’ and related interests’ quest to establish their interest in speed as a legitimate enthusiasm. In Malmö, Sweden’s third largest city, there is a dedicated racetrack (Meca Raceway) that is open every Wednesday for anyone who pays for a licence to go and race their cars. When I visited Meca Raceway, I talked to the crew members especially about the impact of the track. Maud, one of the women organising the paperwork, claims that the initiative at Meca has been a success. “Since it was built, almost one hundred percent of Malmö street racing has vanished.” This statement is in line with what is often argued about Meca Raceway, namely that the legal track has almost wiped out illegal racing in the Malmö region (SVT 2008). However, during our talk, I learned from Maud that there is more to it than that. There is one group of racers in particular whom they have a hard time attracting to the track, namely younger drivers of street cars.

*Maud: We never reach these racers; they’re not interested in racing in the organised way that’s offered at Meca. They’re much more organised through forums, such as Zatzy [webforum]. There’s a huge difference in racing at Meca compared to an illegal race. In the latter you get no timekeeper, no security people and the audience stands along with the cars, which is really dangerous. (Research diary July 2008)*



This excerpt would suggest that the drivers who still race illegally do so for the sake of the thrill and the illegal flavour that Tove talked about above. However, the young racers that Maud refers to are drivers of “styled cars with diodes and lamps, spoilers and paint,” which in turn makes them quite different from the dedicated drag racing cars that usually frequent Meca Raceway. In Maud’s words, “they don’t want to see how slow they are.” As I understand her, the problem is that styled cars, when used on the drag racing strip, become out of place. This in turn points to the possibility that it is not only the alleged lack of legal places to race that may form a part of explaining street racing. It is also relevant to consider the specificity of the cars that are being used for racing. Torgny is a Volvo car modifier who lives in Malmö. Torgny, who originally believed that Meca Raceway would become the legal racetrack he longed for, argued that the municipality had “betrayed” drivers of styled street cars. The betrayal lies in the fact that the strip became a place for semi-professional racers rather than what he calls “ordinary” racers.

*Torgny: It’s not a place where you can go to run against a friend and see who is best and simply try out your stuff. It’s a betrayal since it’s not ok to come down there with a normal car and just find drag racing cars, you don’t want to run a conventional car against one of those.*  
(Research diary August 2008)

Even though Meca Raceway is formally open to anyone to go and race their car, following Torgny’s argument, it is in practice not a place for everyone. Styled cars, which are usually comparatively fast when used on public roads, become “slow” when raced against dedicated drag racing cars. Therefore, even though there is a dedicated legal racetrack available in Malmö, as I interpret Torgny’s response, drivers who are into car styling do not want to race at Meca so as not to lose face. It is not farfetched to argue that car modifiers into styled cars would rather race among themselves in places they find suitable, in order to be able to construct their cars as “fast”. Cars constructed as “out of place” are turned into a reason why modifiers may engage in illegal racing. The dedicated place for “safe” speeding is rejected in favour of less safe alternatives.

Illegal racing is articulated in a contradictory vein by modifiers, both as safe enough and dangerous, as an unwanted yet thrilling practice. Racing is considered unstoppable for two reasons in particular: a bodily urge and for reasons of recognition. In Torgny's words, all he and his friends need is a bit of tarmac "where we can blow off steam." This particularly gendered "drive" repeats discourses that construct men's nature as having a greater need to pursue their natural desires than women's nature (Redshaw 2008: 82, 103). The repeated statement that street racing cannot be stopped supports the idea that racers (as an imagined male figure) share this "need" to "blow off steam" by racing cars. The second reason that is repeated by the modifiers has to do with their sport being considered less valuable than, for example, football or hockey. Racers want recognition for what they do, and somewhere to race. Sixten, one of the editors I interviewed, talked about politicians as "not being on our side", all the municipality money goes to hockey and skiing. The position of being the unrecognised ones can therefore be understood as both restricting and enabling, in the lack of legal places to race there is always an illegal way of claiming one's right to (feel the) speed. While the alleged lack of legal places to race is part of the production of a promotional discourse that public territory can therefore be used for racing, the next section focuses on the community-building aspect of a shared interest in speeding.

### Speeding; connecting people<sup>79</sup>

Since I did not myself get to visit any illegal street races, I have utilised other means of understanding what risk-taking and racing illegally on public roads is all about. One way of finding stories about speeding and risk-taking in cars is to review online motor communities. The internet hosts numerous websites offering space to post film clips and share memories and experiences of (dangerous) car driving on public roads. In this section, I will use online material to present and discuss some of the

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<sup>79</sup> This section draws on Balkmar & Joelsson 2012.

stories members of the Zatzy web community shared among themselves on the topic: “what is your best spontaneous street race?”<sup>80</sup>

We drive a kilometre or so before I decide to see if he really wants to “race”, this is because he seemed keen and was mocking me a bit. I stepped on it and went for it. He didn’t want to be much worse and did the same. He followed from 110 to 170, but after that he got so completely beaten he must have cried a river. By 230 km/h he was so far behind he ended the race and I drove on home happy and satisfied. Poor guy didn’t know what he took part in. Hee-hee. (*www.zatzy.com*)

This excerpt pinpoints traditional aspects of how masculinity is constructed in relation to movement, space, presentation and domination (Connell 2000, Whitehead 2002). Speeding is presented as being about dominating other drivers and regulating the relations between men. The pleasure of speeding is thus related to competition, male rivalry and the emotions of honour and humiliation. This kind of car duelling for kicks and respect points to how speeding is perceived as a social phenomenon; performed in relation to other drivers and audiences located inside or outside the car (including online audiences). Speeding encompasses emotions related to the honour of winning a race and the humiliation of losing, and they may also confirm a commitment to the ideals prevalent in a community of drivers who are “up for racing”. The shared interests in traditional masculine activities, such as measuring, competition and risk-taking are part of forming a homosocial arena between men.

Following this line of argument, racing is not only about making hierarchy, but is also about nurturing a shared interest in speeding. Talk about speeding makes up an important part of community-building and the creation of group identities. The following writer expresses his disappointment when he missed out on an opportunity for a post-race chat with his competitor when “I pulled over at a parking lot by the roadside but the guy in the Golf just went on =( “ (*www.zatzy.com*). Hence, something

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<sup>80</sup> Zatzy racing community has 58 000 members (August 2012) and claims to be the biggest non-brand-specific community for “speed freaks” in northern Europe (*www.zatzy.com*). The first comment posted in this particular thread was made in 2003 and the last at the beginning of 2008. Translations by the author.

that, in traffic safety discourse, would count as a crime involving public danger is in the online community's speed talk framed as a friendly interaction between like-minded drivers. There is a particular way of addressing the act of initiating a race, namely to ask someone to "dance". The positive connotations of social activities such as dancing and having a good time together downplay the aggressive competitiveness implied in racing in favour of friendly socialising. Indeed, such a re-framing of violent road practices makes dangerous driving into a rather normal and fairly safe practice, hence pushing any close calls and the "whoopses" to the margins of the discourse of speeding. Negotiating risks as "innocent fun" (Redshaw 2007: 136, 138), or as a way of *doing danger safely* are central to what constitutes speeding as a masculine and highly controlled endeavour:

I go on to ca 240 km/h, but calm down as the roads were rather narrow and I wanted to get home alive. But, damn, it was fun...  
([www.zatzy.com](http://www.zatzy.com))

It went fast, but of course not fast in an unnecessary or risky way. Just right for it to be real fun. ([www.zatzy.com](http://www.zatzy.com))

Dangerous driving entails emotions that are seemingly deterministic of this driver's actions. Controlling the car is something other than self-control. To "calm down" implies to come to one's senses in the play between control and loss of control, exploring the boundaries of disorder and order (Miller 2004, Lyng 1990, 2004). Nevertheless, the associated thrills and being able to handle the risks involved form the emotional experiences of speeding. Readers of the stories in the Zatzzy web community are imagined to know – having experienced it in the flesh – what it means to drive fast and dangerously.

Well, it's hard to picture these kinds of experiences in writing; they have to be experienced for real. ([www.zatzy.com](http://www.zatzy.com))

Knowing how it feels to speed is made into a valuable resource for the community in the construction and reconstruction of masculine identity – here particularly linked with the performance of risk. The myths, ideologies and discourses of masculinity at play afford the male subjects the

opportunity to emotionally invest in street racing and its live-life-to-the-max myth. The refusal to be constrained by regulations – be it traffic regulations, fear of death or serious injury – positions the speeder as an expert in knowing how to *do danger safely*.

Judging from how speeding and competitions in cars on public roads are constructed by members of the Zatzy web community, the intense emotionality of speeding experiences forms a crucial part of creating a community. The need to speed is not refrained from but made into a skill to master and control for fun's sake. By implication, the narratives around speed(ing) implicate shared assumptions about how men are assumed to act, drive and feel. The position of the speeder outlined here builds on associations with freedom, adventure and agency. This means that speeding for fun's sake not only normalises violent road practices, but pastes together a loosely formed community of speeders. As a form of edgework, the risk and danger of speeding relates to actively seeking out the possibility of death but, perhaps more likely, of keeping the risk of death away, as in controlling risk (Lyng 1990, 2004, Robinson 2008).

This analysis suggests that the driver subjects deal with the dual dimensions of the power offered by motor vehicles (its pleasurable and violent sides) in a way that constructs the subjects as *fun-seeking drivers* in control of what they do (Balkmar & Joelsson 2010). The position of the fun-seeking driver is implicitly contrasted against the more passive position of law-obeying driver: driving that in dominant discourse is associated with everyday commuting boredom and with being part of the flow of traffic (see Redshaw 2008: 63). Lupton (1999a: 153) notes that the pleasures of risk-taking may inhere in the ways that risk-takers find a communal spirit with other like-minded individuals. Judging from this thread, it is only when like-minded ambitions meet that racing emotions may flourish. It is in these temporary encounters of dancing and “speed dating” that real driving may be performed and experienced through the heightened feelings it produces (cf. Balkmar 2011: 62, 62). What is more, while an emphasis on the intense emotions and embodied experiences are fore-grounded by the contributors to the thread, the violent and violating effects of driving dangerously are pushed to the margins of the online talk about risk-taking in cars. The online community who share their speeding memories together

do this by positioning themselves as not only in control of their risk-taking, but implicitly as drivers who are entitled to treat the flow of fellow car drivers as an anonymous backdrop against which their risk-taking may be contrasted and reduced to “fun”.

### Drive-by hierarchisation

While the above section outlined online race-talk as being about nurturing a sense of community, in this section I move on to discuss three examples that reflect street racing as being about social stratification among drivers. In this particular case, intersections of age, class, craftsmanship and car power will be considered. Speeding and competing through street racing on public roads may be understood along the lines of performing car driving on the “edge”, an illegal, motorised form of duelling for kicks and respect. To prove oneself skilled enough to remain in control of highly risky and dangerous situations is a serious game for some men (and women) and a way to use cars for measuring, testing and trying out one’s understanding of masculinity (Bjurström 1995: 237). Janne, who shared with me a memory of engaging in spontaneous street racing, further articulates the aspect of measurement and power.

At Mårtenstorget there were a couple of Volvo greasers hanging out, two young guys around the age of 25 in a Volvo T5 passed by us, there were four of us in the car – two were rather big and heavy. Anyway, between Mejeriet and Tetra Pack, the other guy pulls out in the other lane and goes for it. I knew I shouldn’t have been so immature as to follow, but I did anyway, we raced at 130 km/hour on a road allowing 50 km/h. We won just about, his front wheels were at my rear wheels when we quit, he then took a right turn. It was fun to show who was in charge!<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Vid Mårtenstorget i Lund stod ett gäng Volvroraggare, en Volvo T5 med två unga killar i 25 åldern körde om oss, vi var 4 i bilen varav två ganska stora och tunga. I alla fall, mellan Mejeriet och Tetrapack lägger han sig i ytterfilen och drar. Jag känner först att jag inte ska vara så omogen att jag hänger på, men jag hängde på i alla fall, vi körde 130 på 50 väg. Vi vann precis, hans framhjul var vid mina bakhjul när vi la av, han svängde av därefter. Det var kul att visa var skåpet ska stå!

This excerpt illustrates how Janne gets a pleasurable kick out of the encounter with the other driver-car. He refers to his passengers as “rather big and heavy”, hence implying that his car was heavier and slower than it could have been. Even though the conditions were not ideal for Janne, he succeeded in outrunning the Volvo T5 (a T5 is known as a powerful, turbo-charged car). Janne’s car talk points to the embodied emotional experience afforded by the car-human relation in a way that also addresses its inherent ambivalence. It is with a certain ambivalence that he engages in a pursuit after the Volvo car, but he nevertheless legitimises this practice by referring to the fact that he was challenged and therefore needed to face up to it. In this case, an aged and gendered hierarchy among men in cars is set straight; the younger generation is put in place by the older. In other examples of spontaneous street racing, the implications of class are more explicit than those of age.

Lars: Often when you’re driving side by side [a spontaneous races happens], therefore, it’s a little trickier on highways because, now this may sound a bit egoistic to say, but... spontaneous races most often occur when I pass a BMW for example. I will not say anything about the kind of people who drive BMWs, but when I overtake a BMW, he can’t stand to be overtaken by a Volvo and that’s how it starts.

Dag: OK, so it has to do with cars and status?

Lars: Yes, exactly, it’s a desire to boost yourself that’s expressed through the car, sort of. Then, if I overtake, the BMW usually does something provocative such as overtaking too close, driving close in front and things like that, and then you’re at it, sort of.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Lars: Då är det ofta när man ligger jämsides, alltså, det där då är det lite krångligare för där är det oftast så, nu låter det här lite ego att säga, men... spontanrejs på motorvägar uppstår oftast när man, när jag kör om en BMW till exempel, jag ska inte säga något om klientelet som sitter i BMWn, men när jag kör om en BMW han tål inte att bli omkörd av en Volvo och det är så det börjar.

Dag: ok, så det har att göra med bilstatus?

Lars: ja, precis, det är ett hävdningsbegär som får sitt utlopp genom bilen liksom. Sen så, om jag kör om så gör den något provokativt ofta då, kör om nära, lägger sig nära framför och såna där saker då är man ju igång liksom.

In this excerpt, an antagonistic relationship between brand identities is outlined. Lars talks about the social meaning of brands in the context of driving in general and overtaking in particular. As the driver of a Volvo, [which is a very common car in Swedish car culture but also a signifier of the working/middle classes and the ordinary], he describes drivers of more significant brands as unwilling to let him pass them. It is telling that overtaking another car driver is not simply about movement (one car travels faster than another car), but is constructed as an act of domination, based on social stratification related to brand symbolism. In this excerpt, it seems as though the car brands of Volvo and BMW, while being driven in specific ways, are constructed as *productive* of the risk-taking that follows. The car indicates not only the social position of the driver, but a specific make communicates who is expected to be the faster one (BMW) and who would be the slower (Volvo) of the drivers. The significance of speed that is ingrained in brands suggests that the competitive situation derives energy in the intersections of brand identity, social status and masculinity. Janne elaborates this point in relation to his modified car:

Janne: It's all about showing that "my car is faster than your car". It's about slugging from an inferior position and showing that my car, which I have built myself, can beat your BMW, Audi or Mercedes, or whatever brand it may be. That's absolutely fabulous!<sup>83</sup>

The excerpt acknowledges a "kick" that has been mentioned in previous chapters, namely, the kick of being able to compete by using something built with one's own hands. To outrun the prestige driver-car is taken as proof of one's own capacity and value. The emotional investments the drivers have in racing one another points to the capacity of creating affective contexts that are materialised in particular types of vehicles (Sheller 2004: 229). Olle Hagman (1994) argues that the symbolic value of the car manages to tell the surroundings who one is, what one wants and what one is doing. The language of automobiles is, however, diffuse and open to interpretation. In his study of car commercials, Hagman (1994: 17)

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<sup>83</sup> Allt handlar o matt visa att "min bil är snabbare än din bil". Det handlar om att slå från underläge och visa att min bil som jag byggt själv kan slå din BMW, Audi eller Mercedes eller vad för märke det nu är. Det är helt sagolikt!



outlines what brands are “supposed” to say about their owners. A *Mercedes* is supposed to say that its owner values comfort and quality, and that he, which is implicit, can pay for it. A *BMW* supposedly says that the driver is ready to put down a few thousand extra to enjoy the sense of driving. For modifiers like Janne, the car “acts” as an extension of their socio-economic identity, and may be used to empower the modifier to “slug” from a perceived inferior position for the sake of respect. To simply buy and own a powerful car may be conceived of as a failure within this community. Using a modified car to outrun the more expensive brands encompasses a reformulation of working-class masculinity as a more “authentic” way of embodying masculinity compared to middle- and upper-class masculinity (cf. Vaaranen & Wieloch 2002, Vaaranen 2004). In this class-conscious street racing, modified cars play a central role in ascribing pleasure and boosting car modifiers’ sense of value and status.

While the discussion so far has established status and hierarchy as revolving around knowledge, craftsmanship and brand identities, the next example outlines the particular skills of the driver as being significant. Here Tove explains what it is like to race her styled car, a car that is not particularly powerful.

Tove: I invite to race because I’ve only got 90 horsepower under the bonnet, and I can still make things happen with it because I can drive the car in a way that proves that the capacity is not underneath the bonnet but behind the wheel. I’ve beaten a couple of cars with it, it’s not so hard!<sup>84</sup>

In this excerpt, Tove begins by saying she is racing “because” she has a less powerful car. Instead of emphasising the importance of huge amounts of horsepower, as is implicit in the examples above, Tove argues that what really matters is the capacity of the driver and knowing her car (“I can still make things happen with it”). In contrast to the significance ascribed to large amounts of horsepower, in this case, the “wow-factor” is the

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<sup>84</sup> Jag bjuder upp till race för att jag bara har 90 hästkrafter under huven men ändå kan köra bilen och då visar man att kapaciteten sitter inte under huven utan den finns bakom ratten. Jag har tagit några bilar med den där det är inte så svårt!

significant lack of power. The interview with Tove did not elaborate upon the meanings of her being a woman outrunning other men (which is implicit). I can only speculate that the modified car provides a specific space within which female car modifiers may take up and practice a typically masculine-defined position of being a racer. The female car modifier is technologically sustained with one of the ultimate markers of masculinity, a car that looks like a fast sports car. The example is compelling since she makes a point of driving a significantly weaker car than most contemporary cars. Considering how styled cars may be called *plastic rockets*, *rolling radios*, and less *real* cars, by emphasising the lack of horsepower the alleged “weakness” of the styled car is turned into a resource to emphasise her driving skills. While the examples of spontaneous street racing outlined above all revolved around boosting masculinity through emphasising the power of cars, this last example, by invoking the importance of “using what one has got”, flips the importance of powerful engines upside down. What is important is not necessarily what is under the bonnet, but the way in which one drives.

#### “Living” through the car

If the above sections articulated street racing as being about social stratification, this section turns to focus more specifically on how modifiers may articulate the “feel” and “pleasure” of the car in relation to risk-taking (see also Balkmar & Joelsson 2010, 2012). Human bodies may physically respond to the ways in which cars “impress” themselves upon their bodies, be it “the whoosh of effortless acceleration” or when the driver experiences becoming “one” with the car (Sheller 2004: 228). Such automobile pleasures may be related to specific situations of driving or in driving a particular car. Consider how the tour participant Tim formulates his experiences of driving his new Audi.

Every millimetre of the car is thought through, it communicates totally with the driver. Every single gear gives the exact amount of torque in a way that’s really amazing. It’s totally unbelievable; every part of the

car you touch feels absolutely right. When you've experienced this car, once you've started driving it, you simply do not want to stop.<sup>85</sup>

This excerpt describes the embodied relationship of how the car should feel in order to “feel just right”. The car’s responsiveness and touch makes the interviewee talk about it as being “absolutely right”, suggesting the conjoining of human and machine bodies (cf. Sheller 2004: 225). Tim formulates a harmonic communication between driver, touch and machine powers. The car is not “other” to him, it is fully responsive to the driver, responding to his touch and will. Together, the car forms an extension of the driver and its power becomes his power (Barthel 1992: 144). The car’s driver appeal is outlined with the help of an emotional register where the car is depicted as responsive, unbelievable and seductive (Landström 2006). This emotionally laden discourse is in turn materialised in the lived experience of many men – and an increasing number of women – of what it is like to get in a car, “give it gas” and drive (Balkmar & Joelsson 2010). Janne, finds his modified 1938 Ford hot-rod especially pleasurable to drive. The embodied relation between him and his car comes to the fore in the following excerpt.

It needs to be felt in the soul, I have a very close relationship to car driving, it's like this is me, and this is what I stand for. [...] To drive the rod to work, I find each second, each kilometre and metre I drive pleasurable.<sup>86</sup>

For him there is a strong sense of attraction in the design and experience of driving the car. As he describes for me what it is like to drive this car, he finds pure pleasure. However, this pleasurable aspect of cars also has a risky side – vintage cars lack modern safety technology. One of the implications of driving such an old car is that, in the case of a head-on

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<sup>85</sup> Varje millimeter är genomtänkt, den kommunicerar helt och hållet mot föraren. Varenda växel man varvar ur är helt fantastisk. Helt otroligt, varje grej man tar i känns helt rätt, att uppleva att köra den är som att man inte vill sluta köra den när man väl börjat.

<sup>86</sup> Det måste kännas i själen, jag har ett mycket nära förhållande till bilkörning, det här är jag, det står jag för. [...] Att köra till jobbet med rodden, jag njuter av varje sekund, varje kilometer och meter jag kör.

collision, the steering pole would not break, as would be the case in contemporary cars; it would likely injure his body. "I will simply not become much older," as Janne puts it. "I know the risks and I live with them, after all, engines, cars and motorcycles are my life."<sup>87</sup> This point underlines that the fact of the modified car not necessarily being a very safe car can also be considered part of the style. Janne's car is a vintage Ford, and the car it is built on lacked modern safety equipment. This point is also relevant for contemporary styled cars. Replacing chairs and the steering wheel with sportier versions is a common upgrade in the styling of contemporary cars. Since sportier versions are not equipped with airbags, as most contemporary cars are, the replacement of original parts for the sake of style implies losing important safety equipment. By upgrading the car according to style conventions, modifiers in fact make it less safe to use. Despite these risks, or perhaps because of them, Janne depicts the car as pleasurable:

You know, these powers have so many positive things to give me that I see the small risk that I would kill myself, I see that as, well not as nonexistent of course. If I was about to quit my favourite hobby because I could die, then I might as well stop using the streets for walking, a brick might come flying at me. In some ways I've learned to believe in fate, if it's my turn so be it.<sup>88</sup>

For Janne, the pleasure of driving his vintage car compensates for the risks involved in using it. Despite the fact that the car makes him more vulnerable to injury than contemporary cars, he claims to be throwing himself upon the mercy of fate for the sake of enjoying driving it. In relinquishing any sense of control over what could possibly cause his death, his vintage hot-rod car, which he enjoys driving so much, does not appear to be such a great risk to drive compared to all the other things that

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<sup>87</sup> Jag vet om det och jag lever med den risken, motorer och bilar och motorcyklar det är ju mitt liv.

<sup>88</sup> Alltså de krafterna har så oerhört mycket positive grejjer och ge mig så att den lilla risken att jag skulle köra ihjäl mig, ser jag som, a jag ser den inte som obefintlig såklart. Om jag ska lägga av med min favorithobby för att jag kan dö, då kan jag ju lika gärna skita i att gå på gatan här, det kan ju komma en tegelsten flygande. På nåt sätt har jag ju lärt mig att tro på ödet, är det min tur så är det.

might cause his death. This point is also raised by one of the rock climbers in Robinson's (2008: 150) study, who argued that climbing, if you know what you are doing, could be considered less dangerous than "walking down a street in London." Other informants in Robinson's study considered the everyday activity of riding a motorcycle to be more risky than the pursuit of rock climbing, which they rationalised with reference to being familiar with the dangerous aspects of the sport (Robinson 2008: 150). For Janne, the risks involved in driving this particular car were related to control in a similar way. As we continue to talk about risks, Janne jokes about the risks of driving the car by saying: "I don't use this car for crashing." With this joke, he also establishes himself as being in control of the car and as able to avoid dangerous situations.

#### The immortal Highlander<sup>89</sup>

Janne's car is not a typical display car. He has painted it himself in matt black, giving it a "raw" look. "The good thing with matt black paint is that you don't have to be too cautious about it." What is specific about this modified car is the engine. The car is tuned, thereby considerably faster than is usually the case with vintage cars. He has installed a so-called Nitrous Oxide System (NOZ) in his customised Ford, allowing the engine to burn more fuel and air, thus resulting in more powerful combustion. According to him, the NOZ system adds that little bit extra to the driving experience, not least the capacity to surprise other road users that he interacts with. In this example of how human-car pleasures can be articulated – how cars may form a part of our embodiment and sense of being – his excitement spills over into the interview situation. For the first time during the interview he suddenly stands up and raises both hands in the air, excitedly talking about the movie *Highlander*<sup>90</sup>, mimicking the hero of the movie, reaching for the sky in order to receive extraterrestrial divine power.

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<sup>89</sup> This section draws on Balkmar & Joelsson 2010.

<sup>90</sup> *Highlander* is a 1986 fantasy action film that depicts the climax of an ages-old battle between immortal warriors. The story goes back to the Scottish Highlands of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

*Yes, that's how it feels, like reaching for the sky and receiving the force, when you push the nitrous oxide switch it's like you get it all from heaven. (Research diary, March 2008)*

His car may look like a vintage car, but it performs like a powerful racing car. His way of talking about it shows that the machine is not simply modified by its owner; rather, it is part of his embodiment and embodied experiences. The language of speed and power can be hard to share with someone like me, who does not “know” what speeding in a powerful car feels like. The interview situation urges Janne to use metaphors to explain to me what it is like, drawing on a truly masculine and powerful figure – the highlander Man. He invokes this car-enhanced male body to make me understand, showing it with his facial expression, his hands in the air, and by standing up. The speed-based practices that Janne talks about invoke the motorcar’s capacity to extend the self and what the body can feel and perform. As argued by Bengry-Howell (2005: 149), speed enables car modifiers to actively produce their cars as sites of corporeal significance, as environments in which to experiment with particular states of being. In Janne’s case, the car is appropriated as a means of producing intense forms of arousal, as when for a moment he feels empowered as an immortal Scottish swordsman.

These powerful experiences of “here and now” are part of the emotional highs that may be produced in the encounter between the driving body and the car. The car-talk articulates a communicative car body where cars do pleasurable things with the driver in ways that concur with Deborah Lupton’s argument that “there is a strong element of eroticism inherent in the power offered by the car and drivers’ belief that they can take charge over this power and manipulate it for their own ends” (1999b: 60). Redshaw (2007: 121) argues that emotions of driving and risk are closely linked to masculinity as the car assists in embodying aspects of western culture based on “individualism and getting ahead”, an aggressive means of achieving mobility at the expense of others. Hence, it seems plausible to argue, at least on a symbolic level, that to master and control cars at high speeds (in adverse conditions) makes up crucial dimensions in the everyday constructions of masculinity in relation to cars, risk-taking and driving

(Bjurström 1995, Mellström 2004, Balkmar & Joelsson 2010). The above analysis has shown how cars are first and foremost empowering and aiding the informant to establish himself as a risk-taker and pleasure seeker. The car was even established as potentially harmful to the interviewee (and indeed others who may come in his way), simultaneously offering a heightened pleasure which in turn made the risk worthwhile. Paradoxically, for Janne it was the powerful feelings of risk-taking that made the risk of dying the very “fuel” for living.

### The fragile car: vulnerability

So far, I have outlined car modifiers’ talk about risk as being about driving pleasures and a desire for speed. I have noted that modified cars play a central role both in generating pleasure and as tools for boosting and embodying masculinity. In fact, the above analysis shares similarities with Sarah Redshaw’s (2008: 18) description of what are considered “authentic” driving experiences, namely those belonging to car enthusiasts, and those who cherish the experience of speed and controlling it. Redshaw (2008) means that driving cultures related to gender and age are in fact strongly defended and maintained in Western car cultures. In order to emphasise its dangerous effects, she especially critiques what she calls *combustion masculinity*: “the dominant standard of driving where the aggressive and competitive demonstration and exercise of car handling skill is given prominence over caution” (Redshaw 2008: 80). Drawing on her critique, it seems particularly important to also bring attention to driving that encompasses practices of caution, as this could articulate other forms of gender performances than those associated with more dangerous ways of driving. While the above discussion would suggest that combustion masculinity is a dominant way of performing driving for car modifiers, the fragility of the modified car also brings out other forms of gender performances that need to be discussed. In this and the following sections I therefore turn to consider how modifiers articulate the modified car as fragile and in need of protection and care.

It is not unusual to describe the relationship between men and their cars as a love affair (Sachs 1992, Sandqvist 1997, Lupton 1999b, Mellström 2002, Landström 2006). Landström (2006) notes that part of what reproduces the

cultural production of the car as a masculine technology is the gendered pleasure culture that ties men together and in relation to which women are constructed as opposites. Mellström (2002: 474) outlines how one of his informants finds in his Corvette Stingray “a love affair”, a fulfillment of a dream nourished and nurtured over many years. Machines such as cars and trucks may be anthropomorphised into sensitive beings, sexed as beautiful but cranky women (Mellström 1999, 2002). Sheller (2004: 224, 228) argues that in societies of automobility, drivers feel through the car and with the car, experiencing passions that feed into certain kinds of love for the car or joy in driving. Hatton (2007) also notes a paradox of “doing gender” amongst the young men in her study as they cared for their cars. This was particularly evident in the modification process: while the labour invested allowed them to demonstrate working-class masculinity, and by doing so, to enhance their cars with the type of accessories which spoke to their onlookers of maleness, risk, power, challenge and competition, they talked about their cars as “he”. During the “nurturing process”, when the car was cleaned and polished, caressing the bodywork, the car was a “she”.

Against this background, it is surprising how few studies have noted the ways in which car enthusiasts make the loss or potential loss of their loved machines into a significant event. The emotional attachment to cars has most often been theorised through ideas of how technology may empower its users. This study has shown that, in the empowering car, there are built-in fragile and vulnerable dimensions to consider. While men’s relations with their cars are clearly emotional, they also speak of intimacy and dependence. While the car may elicit a range of powerful and empowering emotions through speeding and controlling it, as exemplified above, the handcrafted and therefore more or less irreplaceable car is also cared for in ways that elicit different attachments than those attained through dangerous driving. As the following example illustrates, to drive may also be about renouncing control and becoming vulnerable.

### Car care

Benny, who has owned his Volvo R collector’s car for many years now, treats it as particularly fragile by being very restrictive in terms of whom he allows to drive it. Apart from himself, he says that only two people have



ever driven it. One is his friend Stefan, who also owns a Volvo R, and the other person is his wife. She has so far only driven it once. According to Benny, she never drives it because “she doesn’t dare to drive it.”

*It’s not like we’ve talked about her not driving it; it’s just that she knows how much time I put in polishing the car and keeping it in good shape [...] There’s always a certain risk associated with driving a fine car such as this one. [...] If this would happen, at least it’s me who’s driving it. (Research diary, November 2008)*

The way he handles the fragility of the collector’s car is to always be the one behind the wheel. This does not necessarily mean that he controls the car in terms of not subjecting it to risks, but as the sole driver he is the one to blame if something should happen to it. To drive the car is a risk per se, therefore, the limited time that it is being used should be his time with the car and no one else’s. Viewed from one perspective, this attitude towards his wife not driving his car can be seen as paternalistic. From another perspective, it could be seen as indicative of his taking responsibility for the car. In either case, fragility is handled by excluding women and including only one fellow modifier friend in driving the car, someone who would know how to value and care for it in the same way as he does.

Modified street cars are usually only used during the summer season. During the winter month modifiers usually drive their everyday cars (bruksbil). Bringing out his modified car each spring is something that Niclas says makes him really happy. He talks about the first ride of the year in terms of getting to know his car all over again.

Niclas: Each year I’m really nervous about driving the car, it takes a couple of days for me to get warmed up you know, having driven it, [...] I’m equally nervous the first time I’m going to drive it.

Dag: What is it you’re so nervous about?

Niclas: It's a feeling in the body, "shit, it's a long time since I've driven this one," do I really dare to drive it, it's like that each year, it's an amazing feeling in the body.<sup>91</sup>

Niclas describes his feelings about driving the car as nervousness and as an amazing feeling. Such "automotive emotions", seem paradoxical, as being about feelings of both excitement and nervousness. In this articulation, the car becomes frail, yet thrilling to drive. Niclas said that he considers his cars to be his "babies", and this in turn outlines an emotional connection that associates the car with human qualities and emotional attachments. The use of metaphors that draw on human analogies strengthens the intimate relationship between the modifier and his car (cf. Mellström 2003a: 155). Indeed, to call a machine one's "baby" is nothing new, as shown by Brian Easlea (1983) in his book *Fathering the Unthinkable* about the engineers of the first atomic bomb, who were to give birth to their "baby" with great care and attention (cited in Mellström 2003a: 150, 151). Men's close relationships with machines have been discussed as an important outlet for their emotional needs (Mellström 1999, 2003a, b). To sell one of his cars, for example, is a particularly emotionally difficult experience, according to Niclas.

I sold the, (name of the car) and that was the worst thing I've ever done. Whew, it was horrible, like signing a marriage settlement [sic] with the guy who bought it. He came in every day. It was sold 110 percent faultless; I even repainted the front because of some chip as I remember it. If I sell a car, there can be no goddamn flaws. It was a pizza baker who bought it, like, that's the worst kind. He used it for picking up chicks and he was 18 and he drove it during the winter, every day he came down to my garage. [...] He didn't know how to wash the car, on one occasion he had washed it using Svinto. There

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<sup>91</sup> Niclas: varje år är jag så grymt nervös för att köra den, sen går det några dagar då så är jag varm i kläderna då va, sen när jag kört den där, [...] jag är alltid lika nervös första gången jag ska köra den.

Dag: men vad är det du är nervös för då?

Niclas: Det är en känsla i kroppen, skit, vad länge sedan det var jag körde denna, vågar jag verkligen köra den, så är det varje år. Härlig känsla i kroppen.

was some dirt on the roof and he came down and said “I can’t get the dirt off.” I almost cried, there were scratches all over the roof. I asked him what the hell he had done and he was like “Svinto”, I said “Svinto!?”, “What are you telling me?” Shit, I almost started crying [...] He literary did not know anything about cars and he wore the car down as he drove it, hitting curbs, I saw it get more and more worn down. He never washed it, drove it during the winter. That taught me a lesson, never to sell a car to someone who doesn’t know cars; it should be cared for with love.<sup>92</sup>

In this rather long excerpt, Niclas talks about the significance of caring for the modified car. He constructs a distinction between those who know about cars as “better” owners, and those who don’t, in this case exemplified by the image of the “pizza baker”, who uses the car in the wrong kind of uncaring way. This figure is associated with being too young, having the wrong ethnic background (non-Swedish), using the car for the wrong reasons (picking up girls) and being unskilled with cars. The new owner’s lack of capability with cars makes the previous owner suffer with the car. If this excerpt may represent what Sheller (2004: 228) talks about as “feeling with the car”, in the next excerpt Niclas elaborates about his first car in a vein that further outlines the emotional interconnection between a modifier and his car.

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<sup>92</sup> Jag sålde (namn på bil) och det var det värsta jag gjort. Usch det var hemskt, det var som att skriva på ett äktenskapsförord med den där snubben som köpte den, han kom varje dag. Och den sålde jag 110 procent felfri, jag lackade till och med om fronten på den för att det var något stenskott kom jag ihåg. Om jag säljer en bil då ska det faan inte vara några skavanker. Det var en pizzabagare som köpte den jäkeln, tjena, det är ju värsta sorten. Han raggade brudar och han var 18 år och körde med den på vintern och kom ner varenda dag i mitt garage [...] han visste inte hur man tvättade bilen, han tvättade bilen med svinto, det var något skit på hans tak och så kom han ner då ’jag får inte dän skiten’, jag nästan grät, det var repor på hela taket, jag bara ’va faan har du gjort’, han bara, ’svinto’, jag bara ’svinto!?’ vad säger du!? A shit, jag började nästan gråta. [...] Han kunde ingenting om bilar och han körde sönder, körde mot trottoarkanter, så jag såg ju den förfalla mer och mer, tvättade aldrig, körde med den på vintern. Då fick jag mig en läxa, jag vill aldrig sälja en bil till någon som inte kan någonting, den skall vårdas med kärlek.

That car meant everything to me, I really loved that car [...] I lent it to a friend, and what happens? He wrecks it, you know, I cried for several days, I really did cry. That goddamn car was my everything. Anyway, we're still friends. It's because of him that I am who I am today. If he hadn't wrecked it, I would probably still have kept that goddamn car.<sup>93</sup>

While Niclas talks about his first cars in a very emotional way, he also points out to me how this loss brought something positive with it. It may have been emotionally distressing that the car was crashed, but the crash made him move on to the next phase of his career as a car modifier. In retrospect, the car he claimed to have loved was not much compared to the kinds of cars he builds today. Over time, the loss has become an asset. While this section has elaborated on the fact that losing a precious car is both emotionally troubling and something modifiers have to consider when driving their cars, the next section further explores the implications of modifiers' attachment to their cars in the context of driving.

### Downplayed racing abilities

Cars may communicate all sorts of messages through the ways in which they are branded and loaded with communicative potential. Redshaw (2008: 25) notes that the ways in which cars are framed in advertising and on the roads inform people's relations to different car types. Certain brands are built and promoted as mean, aggressive cars that have to be driven accordingly: "[a]ggressive power and speed have been 'baked into' it" (Redshaw 2008: 25). These meanings are built into the cars from the factory floor on to the roads, in the car owners' garages and via the framing of the car through the media (Redshaw 2008: 25). Modified cars, judging by the way they look and sound, encompass some of the most compelling elements of power in automobile systems, namely the capacity for speed.

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<sup>93</sup> Den var ju mitt allt den där bilen, faan jag älskade ju den där bilen, [...] jag lånade ut bilen till en kompis, vad händer? Jo, kvaddad. Alltså, jag grät i flera dar, jag grät verkligen. Den var ju mitt allt den där jävla bilen. Men i alla fall, vi är inte ovänner idag. Det är på grund av han som jag är den jag är den jag är idag. Om inte han hade sabbat den hade jag haft kvar den jäveln.

Through being materially and symbolically turned into a racing car lookalike, modified street cars have built into them the capacity to convey certain messages about the driving ambitions of their owners. Niclas commented in the following way about what he thought styled cars communicated to people: “People in general tend to see these cars and think ‘goddamn, look at the speed of that car, he must drive like an idiot.’” He went on to argue against this image. “It’s an image people have, but just because you have a nice-looking car you don’t have to drive like an idiot.” In the following excerpt, the specificity of the car becomes important to the way in which it is being driven.

Niclas: I used to drive the shit out of cars before I began to modify them. [...] This is something you’ve built, you don’t want to ruin it, and you don’t want to drive into the ditch with the damn car. <sup>94</sup>

Niclas talks about a “before and after” mode of driving his modified car. As I understand what he is saying, before he modifies the car he may use it for driving fast and to race. However, after he has modified the car, he articulates his driving in a vein of carefulness. Hence, for the modifier, having rebuilt the car seems to have implications for the way in which it is driven. Niclas again: “In fact, you’re scared stiff about getting it chipped by a stone, do you see?” This aspect of the styled car as a fragile vehicle that is driven with care is also expressed by Dennis, a member of the Volvo car club. He confirms what Niclas said above, when saying that no one “puts the pedal to the metal” in these cars, “if you do then you may put the car in the ditch and lose all the work you’ve done.” Once the car has been modified, it has not only been given a new and perhaps meaner and more aggressive look, it may also have become particularly fragile (as also discussed in Chapter 7). This, in turn, seems to make modifiers to reconsider risk-taking driving practices and makes the relation between modifier and car potentially safer. Benny, for example, told me about his

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<sup>94</sup> Jag brukar köra skiten ur bilarna innan jag bygger om dem [...] Det här är ju någonting du har byggt och du vill inte förstöra den, du vill ju inte sätta biljäveln i ett dike.

Volvo R and how other drivers “want to measure their car against you when you are out driving.”

*At red lights there are many, mostly young guys, who want to race, they know it's a powerful car and want to test you. [...] Many Volvo 240 guys try to challenge you by revving their engines, but I don't care. (Research diary, November 2008)*

In this quote, Benny talks about being challenged to a street race by younger men in less expensive Volvo cars. His hesitation to engage in street racing is not a matter of lack of performance. The car is upgraded from its original 230 horsepower to 330, which makes it a significantly powerful street car. However, despite the upgrade and the potential capacity to drive fast, he claims to hesitate before using the car for racing. “It’s too much for a styled car to be driven hard.” Despite this potential to be “driven hard”, that is, to be driven fast, Benny says he refrains from high-speed pursuits for the sake of the car.

While Benny said he did not “care” about those who wish to race him, Niclas has developed a different strategy. When I asked him if he ever gets challenged to a spontaneous street race, he responded, “it happens all the time.” While Niclas had already explained to me that he did not want to ruin his modified car by driving recklessly, I was surprised to hear him say that he occasionally does engage in spontaneous street racing.

I don't know if I think about this the wrong way, but I usually outrun them once, to show what it's capable of, then if they go past me again, to some extent I'm like “goddamn”, because I have got a competitive personality, but, I go past him only once, drive like mad and show what the car is capable of. Then I drive legally the rest of the way. I don't race back and forth, only once! That's it, you know, then you've got the confirmation that this is how fast the car is. They may be sore that I don't continue to race, but, to do it once I think you should.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Jag vet inte om jag tänker fel eller inte men, jag kör ifrån dom en gång, visa vad den går för, sen att de kör om mig, lite så har man ju, ja vafaan, man är ju tävlingsmänniska, men jag kör om han en gång, visar vad den går för kör som faan, sen ligger jag lagligt

In this excerpt, Niclas outlines a code of conduct for street racing, namely: to show the speediness of his car only once. While acknowledging that the other driver may be “sore” when he only races once, he diverges from what is expected of him, namely to race “back and forth”. The excerpt points to an expectation that he, as the driver of a racy-looking car, should also be willing to commit himself to risk-taking. To outrun the other driver once may be interpreted as simultaneously being about showing what his car is capable of, and by doing so, demonstrating his commitment to meeting the expectations of (other) men’s desire to race.

From the argument above, it seems that the attachments modifiers may develop towards their cars may produce different driving styles. In previous sections I have noted that they found it truly pleasurable and empowering to compete and engage in risk-taking with their modified cars. In this section, I have provided examples where the aggressive power and speed of their cars is also being negotiated and outlined in contradictory ways. This study confirms Redshaw’s (2008: 45) findings that the car itself, and the particular messages that are built into it, may be a coercive factor influencing how it is driven. However, what stands out in the discussion so far is how the investments of money and time in the styled cars also encourage modifiers to negotiate their driving identities and to refrain from practising some of the behaviours that are expected of them. Niclas, for example, said he preferred to call himself more of a “cruiser type” than a racer. He exemplified what he meant by cruiser type by outlining an ideal evening in one of his modified cars. “I like to take a friend for a ride, to go for an ice-cream and just talk, that’s the best there is.” This statement articulates how the modified car is utilised in many different ways, not simply for speed and competition, but as an intimate space for socialising. In this intimate car-space friends may talk, socialise and catch up with one another in ways that Harry Ferguson (2009) argues is exemplary for the car. Ferguson (2009: 277) conceptualised the car as a “fluid container” “for the processing of personal troubles, emotion and key life changes.”

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hela vägen. Jag rejsar inte fram och tillbaks, utan en gång, thats it liksom du har fått din bekräftelse såhär fort går den. Sen kan de bli sura för att jag inte fortsätter rejsa med dem, men en gång tycker jag man ska göra det.

## The rolling car show

In this last part of the last empirical chapter, I will take the opportunity to reflect upon the risk/fragility dimension in the context of the car tour. The modifiers described the tour as a “rolling car show”: a way of taking their cars to the people rather than the other way around. As noted in Chapter 3, tours are highly appreciated social activities taking place among car modifiers each summer. Tours offers driving and community-building practices. Steve, who had been involved in organising tours in previous years, said the idea was to take their cars to audiences who would not come to car shows – a way of reaching new viewers. During the five-day tour, the days were dedicated to driving to the next city where the cars were to participate in a car show during the evening. The tour made it apparent to me how the modifiers shift between powerful and vulnerable positions as they show their cars, shifts that are bound up with movement, place and the construction of the modified car as both empowering and making fragile.

Apparently, there were a lot of things going on during the tour, of which I will only take up two aspects, namely the significance of cruising and displaying cars in front of audiences. Every evening of the tour, there was a joint cruise to the show area in the city we were visiting that day. As a cultural scene, the cruise plays a central part in how car modifiers manifest themselves as car modifiers and how they make claims to public space (Bjurström 1990). Cruising can be considered a way of “marking territory”, or as a car-amplified way of occupying space and putting one’s mark upon it (cf. Laegran 2003: 99). Amy Best (2006: 77), who has researched the cruising scene of San Jose in California, USA, argues that the cruise may be conceived of as a parade of excess, “the pleasure of transgressing boundaries of social life, the chance to play with identities in a setting where the possibilities to craft alternative selves seem endless.” In the following description of what happened during a cruise in a city called Gävle, on the third day of the tour, the modifiers have just had dinner at their hotel and are about to jointly parade around the city centre, with the final destination being the city square. The square is where the evening car show will be held.



*At a few minutes past 7 pm, a particular noise of engines and music was to be heard in downtown Gävle. In a few minutes' time the quiet street had been transformed into a bass-pumping showcase as a long row of playfully rebuilds moved through the streets. The noise from the brief displays of fast acceleration, the style of their cars and the formation combined to form a message to onlookers that there is a spectacle coming to town. Some of the male participants had dressed up in funny-looking clothes and hairpieces, plastic bottoms and breasts; others played their stereos as loud as the windows in their cars allowed. The many road bumps forced the lowered cars to pass over them slowly, only to perform a fast acceleration just a moment later to catch up with the cars in front. The noisy exhausts of the cars and the bass-booming stereos blasted out a very powerful sound-track to their automobility. The people of Gävle, who had sat down to enjoy a beer in the summery evening, looked rather stunned by the caravan of youthfully styled cars passing in front of them. The rolling car show was in town. (Research diary July 2008)*

The cruise through the city of Gävle enabled the modifiers to control social spaces and to situate themselves in a position from which to be admired. When cruising, they are the “stars of the evening”, as Eskil put it. Niclas emphasised what an incredible feeling it was to see all the people watching, “such a maxed-up feeling”. The spectacle of the cruise consolidates their group identity as they temporarily take up and dominate the city’s space by controlling their audience and forcing them to notice, look and consider their presence. The cars and the tour managed to temporarily define the town space and make it into their own. If the cruise is, as suggested, a way of controlling audiences, making them acknowledge their cars and forcing them to look, the car show in Gävle city square made the modifiers consider how audiences may also control them and their cars. One potential threat to their cars was the police.

When I talked to modifiers about their cars and risk-taking, it was not necessarily their risk-taking as drivers that came up in the conversations, but the risk of being fined for illegal modifications. Lars spoke for car modifiers as a group when he claimed that this is why they “fear” the police, not for the way they drive but for the “vehicle as such”. The

modifications that it is permitted to make to a car are regulated by the car's certificate; this means that changing lights, rims, tinting the windows etc. needs to be done using both approved parts and approved dimensions. A car that is approved for 17" or 18" wheels may not be modified to be equipped with 23" wheels. If so, the car is in theory no longer street legal. The risk this entails is to be fined for executing illegal modifications on their cars. It is against this background the police becomes a potential threat to modifiers. At car shows, it is common practice to specify in great detail the modifications executed on the car. Attached to the car are lists of the upgrades undertaken. The car show at the Gävle town square was no exception; all the cars had specified exactly what kinds of modifications had been made, which in turn meant a significant risk of being fined by the police.

*A certain buzz started among the modifiers as two police officers were seen walking around among the cars. The modifiers I am talking to seem nervous and try to see what is going on. From where I stand I see two police officers mingling among the cars, one of them seems particularly interested in engines and frequently stops to have a look at the cars with their bonnets open. The modifiers around them seemed worried by their presence. Martin, a modifier who has had serious quarrels with the Swedish vehicle inspection company a number of times, said: "Let them come, I have my certificate in order, I even want them to inspect my car." The modifiers around us clustered together in groups, eyes directed towards the policemen to discover their next move. Peter, one of the older modifiers approaches them to ask if they are looking for anything in particular. He did it in a very nice way, smiling at them and politely asking them to convey their thoughts about their cars. The policeman with the taste for engines said that he found them "very attractive". When they left us, Peter said that they were not after the cars, only drunk people. (Research diary, July 2008)*

It was far from unusual for modifiers to talk about the police fining them for illegal modifications. Some cities even have a reputation for being risky areas for drivers of modified cars. Stories flourished about local police officers who had a reputation for being too earnest. During the tour I heard

modifiers sharing anecdotes about worst-case scenarios, where people have been fined several times during a single evening. During the tour, this “risk” of being fined by the police was also ever-present – but it was also played with.

Daytime activities were not only dedicated to driving to the next city and the next car show, but to socialising. The participants had therefore been divided into four teams who were to execute a number of missions and pranks along the route. Each of the modifiers was to collect as many points for their team as they could, and the winners would be awarded a prize on the last evening of the tour. The missions required the participants to do all sorts of things, from convincing tourists to dance with them, to attracting media attention to one’s car or fitting as many people in a car as possible. At the top of the list of missions was to ask a police officer to test-drive one’s car.

Paula, one of the few female modifiers who participated in the tour, managed to halt a police car outside Gävle and convince them to drive her car. Luckily for Paula, these police officers were not interested in scrutinising the legality of the car, which was severely modified. Instead of fining her, one of them responded: “This is the first time we’ve been pulled over by someone; usually it’s the other way around!” To halt the police in the way that Paula did involved both a risk and an adventure as the tour allowed for flipping the order of things upside down. The event carried carnivalesque features, not least in how it implied a double-edged effect of being both affirmative and subversive of taken-for-granted “truths” of law and order. Car modifiers may pull *the police* over rather than the other way around. Key to the carnivalesque disruption of normality was the way in which it only temporarily suspended the dominant order. After all, nothing was really changed by the fact that car modifiers stopped a police car. Nevertheless, the fact that these car modifiers “tricked” the police into not fining them came to make up the perfect prank, a good laugh to share with fellow tour participants. It is also indicative of the way in which constructions of risk are not necessarily related to risky driving, but again, to mundane usage.

To conclude, the cruise empowers modifiers through its associations with fame, stardom and ego-boosting experiences. This visibility also encompasses certain threats to their position as modifiers, threats that come from the police, and their capacity of taking the very means of their temporary stardom away from them.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed car modifiers' understandings of risk, including some of its emotive dimensions. While modifiers' emotions about their cars are indicative of men's emotionality towards machines in general, it is important to reflect upon what is actually valued and "felt" so strongly about and what the potential consequences of this might be. Their modified cars elicit a range of emotions, from the pleasures of driving them, to be seen driving their unique cars and the feeling of power when proving capable of outrunning someone in a spontaneous street race. The car modifier imaginary, first and foremost in the ways in which speeding and other risky driving practices are articulated as "fun", draws on dominant associations with heterosexual masculinity in a way that feeds and validates violent or potentially violating practices of men (and some women) in motor vehicles. With the emphasis on fun, control and car modifiers as "fun-seeking drivers", the aspects of risk are marginalised while these practices confirm men as "masculine beings" in control of what they do (see Whitehead 2002: 38). From this perspective, it could be argued that men and cars make up a particularly dangerous relation. Rather than avoiding risk, the point is to seek it out for sake of pleasure. Through this lens, risky pursuits in cars emerge as controllable and courting of danger, as in the context of "extreme sports" (Robinson 2008, Redshaw 2007). However, as noted in this chapter, the "built in" fragility of their cars may also to some extent discourage dangerous road practices for the sake of the safety of the car.

To point out the fragility of the car is not to reduce its power or its potentially violating materiality, it is to point out that fragility may be a fruitful way to further understand how risk-taking, including hesitation about taking risks, works. As with most cars, speed(ing) is latent in the design and construction of the car (see Michael 2001). This potentiality

makes the ability to control the vehicle important. Redshaw (2008: 130) argues that constructions of control are “often related to the glorified ability to control the car and less often self-control.” When the car was articulated as particularly fragile, the element of control was rather directed towards the self to refrain from risk-taking for the sake of the safety of the car. Modifiers’ conceptions of risk, as outlined in this chapter, suggest an emotional and primarily vehicle-centred construction of risk. In these constructions, the well-being of other road users was rarely mentioned.

However, the risk-taking could also be understood as an image problem. The work of car clubs, Meca Raceway, motoring magazines and municipalities that offer “alternatives” to street racing is indicative of initiatives to nurture a car-oriented masculinity in line with traffic safety discourse. Lars and his friend Daniel, for example, both made a point of always driving within the speed limit. They wanted to “prove” that modifiers were not dangerous drivers. In online communities, Lars and others have argued for racing to be done on dedicated racetracks, not on public roads. There are also examples of modifiers active on the scene who have taken the initiative to change what they perceive as a problematic image of themselves by emphasising their achievements in cars rather than the perceived negative image of modifiers as dangerous drivers. For example, modifiers who are part of the Swedish car modifier “elite” took the initiative to present their cars outside a children’s hospital. *Bilsport* magazine (no. 24: 17) wrote a short piece about the event and one of the organisers said: “We wanted to make a contribution for the kids at the hospital, and at the same time show others that car enthusiasts are not louts.” Initiatives like these would suggest that car modifiers, by emphasising their craftsmanship and displaying their cars’ capacity for entertainment in non-driving situations, are seeking to produce a different image than that of risk-takers.

This tendency of distancing themselves from the image of the dangerous driver is also noted in previous studies of Swedish car enthusiasts. Rosengren (2000) argues that *Bilsport* magazine, by using the categories of “youth car enthusiasm”, “Amcar enthusiasts” and “street cars” marked a distinction between respectable car enthusiasts with their well-kept cars and the problematic raggare, with their worn-down cars and rampant lifestyle.

Respectability was constructed around the well-kept car, “real guys who really care about the cars and look after them,” as compared to the raggare, who “only drive around and make a lot of noise” (Rosengren 2000: 76). This distinction is also noted by Bengry-Howell (2005: 155), who argues that modifiers construct their respectability through emphasising their status as enthusiasts by taking care of their cars. The others, the “boy racers” were deemed to be problematic and uncaring of both their cars and others. These initiatives are indicative of the ongoing negotiations within a culture that might seem to be rather homogeneous, but which in fact is constantly being negotiated.

## 9

## Conclusions

Andrew O'Hagan (2009) argues in his essay, *A Car of One's Own: Chariots of Desire*, that "Virginia Woolf was almost right: all one really needs is a car of one's own, the funds to keep it on the road and the will to encounter oneself within." Many people in Western consumer cultures seem quite attached to their private cars, especially because cars are seen to be saying something about those who drive them (Redshaw 2008). Cars are infused with visual messages about power, age, sex, race, social class and lifestyle. This is part of what car manufacturers build into the car through design and style to express consumer dreams, desires and aspirations (Wajcman 1991: 134). The particular relation with cars I have engaged with in this study comes with its own local accent. Throughout this thesis I have followed Swedish car modifiers' attempts to become "unique" subjects through making their own versions of the car – *cars of their own*. I have discussed modifiers' attempts to make cars into their extended selves, one of many ways in which men, and to an increasing extent women, in late modernity may construct gender identities in the context of technology. The will to engage with cars runs deep for modifiers. Cars are not only their means of self expression and identity constructions, they are also a means of community-building, and making possible competition and risk-taking.

I set out to contribute to a deeper understanding of how constructions of gender, primarily masculinity, are interrelated with car-related identities, practices and material constructions amongst car modifiers. The overall research object has been to investigate how these enthusiasts modify,

display and drive their cars. I have examined how cars work as a means of communicating identity and belonging, and considered how gender and cars are made meaningful within the context of cultural patterns that make certain associations more reasonable and natural than others. This study shows that gendered individuals and cars co-constitute one another in many different ways. I have argued that the car modifier imaginary reproduces dominant notions of masculinity in re-establishing links between craftsmanship, competition, speed and risk. I have also noted that, through its play with colours, shapes and ornaments, heterosexual masculinity about domination and power becomes unstable. It is also around these dimensions that much negotiation of masculinity, style, technology, power and authenticity revolved amongst the, mostly male, modifiers. It is notable, however, that car modification should not be considered as simply a male bastion; women also lay claim to this cultural space and to what have traditionally been considered “boys’ toys”. The fact that women organise themselves, modify their own cars and compete with men for trophies may point in the direction of less rigid gender barriers even within this traditionally male-dominated culture.

In this concluding chapter, I first outline car modification as self-making, including its links with trends and craftsmanship. The gender ambivalence associated with certain genres and styles of cars is thereafter the focus of attention. The latter sections of the chapter outline the importance of showing and driving cars, and the final part discusses the results of this study and some of the consequences that these gendered, risky and dangerous relations have in the wider context of car cultures more generally.

### Cars as extended selves

One of the questions that motivated this thesis is why the research subjects turn to modify cars in the first place and how car modification matters to them as car-owning subjects. Car modification is a practice that emphasises in a very particular way one of the strengths of motor vehicles such as cars, namely their ability to reinforce individuality and masculinity while also acknowledging membership in a community. As an inherently material, emotional and meaning-making practice, the modification that the



modifiers engaged in involved several forms of identity work in relation to their cars: both self-making and making community. Many modifiers confess that what they want is an unusual-looking vehicle. In the mass motoring of today, with many cars looking similar to one another, the styled and enhanced car makes the owner visible by distancing him or her from everyone else (see also Rosengren 2000: 210). Or, as Conny said about car styling, “it’s the car I parade in, this makes the looks of it important since I am interested in cars.” One of the most common ways to distinguish a modified car from one that is not modified is through its characteristic body kit and other upgrades. In a consumer-oriented car modifier culture, body kits are often used to accentuate the low clearance and aggressive look of a racing car.

Modifiers considered their car modification to be a practice that aimed to assert their uniqueness and, by doing so, as Hewer and Brownlie (2007: 110) suggest, also creating sociability, community and a sense of belonging. The modifiers constructed communities around their shared interest that expressed a postmodern mode of sociality based on the idea of doing one’s own thing, whilst doing it with like-minded others (cf. Holt 2002). With its strong links to masculinity, car modification offers powerful ways of *crafting oneself* as both unique and visible. This brings to the forefront the way in which modifiers’ agency and visibility are achieved through their cars. Through modifying the car, the modifier not only (re-)makes the car, the modified car also does something for the modifier, namely, it performs the task of “turning heads” and connotes power, performance, masculinity, speed and risk.

Car modification concerns a production of individual uniqueness that also needs to take into consideration the transnational context through which it materialises. I have argued that fashion and trends played an important role as a drive in the formation of car modifiers’ selfhoods. As part of an interconnected web of local car cultures, modifiers located in Sweden produced their own unique extended selves and local diversity in conversation with car cultures from around the world (see also Franklin et al. 2000: 3). The modifiers managed to make spectacular cars that repeated, modified and indeed also commented upon, styles that had developed out of modified car scenes in Japan, the USA and the rest of Europe. In the

world of cars, men may indulge themselves in the latest trends and fashions; cars were their way of caring for their appearance and their tools for presenting themselves as special. Swedish motoring magazines provide their readers with the latest trends in style from various places around the world. For example, the readers of *Street Xtreme* (no. 12, 2007) may follow trend-spotting at Boost Mobile Hot Import Night in Los Angeles. It is stated that “[t]alk about trends is as natural in the world of cars as in the clothing industry. Similar to the way in which Swedish designers become inspired by what is shown on the catwalk in Milano, the upcoming next big thing is to be found elsewhere.” Car modifiers do not necessarily single themselves out through a collective style in clothing, hairstyle or colours worn, but through the looks of their cars.

The way in which modifiers cared for their cars, invested time and energy and took pleasure in negotiating trends and style norms makes it explicit that cars need to be considered as a domain for the performance of fashionable masculinity – and cars as fashioning men.

Car styling carries its own line of beauty products, be it body kits, upgrades, lowering kits or polishing products, all related to cars and their owners’ appearance and style. Modifiers smoothed out their cars by carefully choosing which particular body kit should be mounted to the car and the specific upgrades that would suit their unique look. They called their upgrades “face lifts”, talked about “massaged” car bodies and used the derogatory notion of bad paintwork with reference to “orange peel skin”. These references to (women’s) bodies and the beauty industry not only establish links with fashion and trends, but can also be understood as mirroring their view of car bodies as being in a state of decay. Their re-designed cars were like mayflies, soon to be replaced with new ones of more importance, which in turn shows the fragility and instability of the display power of the car, and in the longer term also risking their own importance and status within the modifier community. The volatile looks of the modified display cars will become outmoded at some point, just as any hype does in fashion more generally. This did not have to mean that the car was worn out in terms of its mechanical construction, only that it had been seen by the community and lost its seductive spark. This required modifiers to continue to upgrade their cars in order to maintain their symbolic edge in

relation to other modifiers. Trends and fashions in car modification created the space for competition and challenges, which is an important aspect of how cars may constitute the making of masculinity. After all, car styling is about change and trendiness and it is the kind of material-semiotic culture that the modifiers in this study used as their means of creative self-expression. The fact that trends and car fashion are so important for their self-expression also points out its inherent fragility: what's hot today may be out tomorrow.

The importance of trends and fashion amongst modifiers may be considered in relation to wider changes in masculinities (Edwards 2006). In terms of visual and commercial culture, masculinity is now more a matter of how men *look* rather than what they *do*. From such a perspective, masculinity is seen to be increasingly constituted through matters of style, self-presentation and consumption as opposed to more traditional models that centred on work and production (Edwards 2006: 111). For modifiers and their sense of identity, cars are not simply about looks and style, it is also of crucial importance that their racy appearance is *made* by themselves. Even though commercialism has made contemporary car modification more widely accessible in terms of a wide variety of after-sales products available for styling purposes, as a traditional working-class hobby, car modification nonetheless rests strongly on the ability to *do* cars with one's own hands.

Part of this study has revolved around the importance of craftsmanship for the construction of car modifier identities. As a strong ideal, perhaps even *the* most important practice, craftsmanship stood out as a way of reproducing car modification as a working-class masculine cultural domain. The interest in cars, as also noted by other scholars (cf. Rosengren 2000: 209, Mellström 2004), is linked to a need to be challenged, to construct with one's own hands and to feel the satisfaction of knowledge and mechanical skill. I have argued that craftsmanship is a purified ideal that distinguishes car modifiers as a special kind of dedicated car enthusiast. To build the car oneself forms a central part of the car modifier imaginary, an imaginary that links together proud working-class masculinity and Swedishness, constructing an idealised modifier subject who does not back down from fulfilling his (or her) dream even though the

conditions may be harsh. As discussed in Chapter 5, it was through the ideal of craftsmanship that modifiers evaluated their authenticity as modifiers.

Despite this strong identification, car modification can also be done in quite different ways, by many hands or even left with professional firms to do the actual work. Even well-established modifiers who competed with their cars at shows took up car modification in ways that did not entail modifying with their own hands. Some modifiers managed to attract sponsors to build their cars. Stefan, for example, identified himself as primarily a car designer; Lars identified himself as a car modifier and entrepreneur. Both of them modified cars by attracting professional craftsmen to sponsor them by doing the work on their cars, and to motivate companies to invest workmanship and time in their cars. As project managers for their cars, they engaged in business-like contracts with professional firms, which is a quite different way of modifying than to learn and employ the relevant skills oneself. In fact, by letting others work on the cars, Stefan and Lars distanced themselves from the emphasised, embodied hands-on practice and the position of the craftsman. Sponsored modifiers could find themselves in a situation where, despite being successful, they were also criticised for not being “real” modifiers.

This points to the fact that modifier practices and positions are not static. Hence, there was room for many ways of being a car modifier and “doing” modifier masculinity. The idealisation of dexterity and the “do-it-yourself” approach nevertheless *anchored* modifier identity as traditional working-class masculinity. Status and uniqueness followed the degree of one’s own workmanship invested in modifying the car, the more challenging the more status. To rely on one’s own ideas and hands represented the more authentic way of fulfilling, and indeed also mastering, one’s dream car in a heavily commercialised culture. Craftsmanship made the display-oriented and trendy car something more than simply a reflection of its owner’s desire to be noticed. The fact that the car had been actively *made* by its owner also configured the attention the car managed to attract as being *well-earned* through hard and skilled workmanship.

## Car styling as provocative

The Swedish car styling scene is said to have begun some 35 years ago in a town called Vallåkra in southern Sweden when a group of men began to tune and modify their Volvo cars. Their choice of contemporary Swedish cars has in retrospect been described as a “rebellious act” that created a new trend in Sweden (Bilsport special no. 1, 2007). Their rebelliousness was established by their decision to modify Volvos rather than the American automobile that has evoked a particularly strong interest and created a subculture in Sweden. The modifiers in this study continue to nurture this interest in rebuilding contemporary cars, but with their own sources of inspiration and ways of modifying their cars. In Sweden, those pioneering modifiers, who became trendsetters for the car styling scene in the early 2000s, draw heavily on the Hollywood dream factory and movies such as *The Fast and the Furious*, inspiring them to build their own versions of movie cars. The other side of the coin is, however, that with this boost came ideals and ways of modifying cars that of necessity did not comply with the traditions of previous generations of car modifiers. Instead they were questioned in two ways, first regarding the already-mentioned craftsmanship traditions and second in terms of car power.

The modifiers who took inspiration from *The Fast and the Furious* did not necessarily know how to tune the high-tech engines of their contemporary cars, nor could they afford costly engine upgrades, even though they might want to. They modified their cars using plastics instead of harder materials, and they often used multimedia and other after-sales products as part of their style. Plastics have been associated with femininity and things that belong to the home, such as leisure products, as contrasted with “real” stuff made out of “real” materials (see Chapter 5). The history of plastic describes the material as originating in the world of simulation, having an ability to adopt either a traditional or modern aesthetic, which in turn situated plastics as essentially “dishonest” and without real value (Sparke 1995: 201). This, in turn, seems to have built into their cars a certain gender ambivalence, namely that the commercial, plastic, after-sales products made car modification easily accessible and not as challenging as before, and that the look of the car became more important than the engine power. The materials used for modifying the car in turn made the modifier less

skilled as a craftsman – and hence less masculine. The cars may be modified and made to look hard and speedy, but the fact that they are made out of plastic may nevertheless deny them the status of being the real thing. The expression *plastic rocket*, which could be used as a derogatory term for styled cars in general, indicates its potential failure as a truly powerful car – even suggesting a dishonest car. By celebrating the aesthetics of speed rather than necessarily the capacity for speed, the plastic rocket comes to express gender in ways that challenge dominant approaches to interpreting men and cars. It is therefore possible to read the styling genre as generating associations with feminine-coded aesthetics of commercialism and superficiality, rather than brute masculine performance. Car styling, as emphasised in the expression plastic rocket, can therefore be said to trouble car modifier masculinity.

I have argued that, for modified cars to reproduce masculinity, relations between performance and appearance have to work towards the same goal – namely, to ensure the car's performance (see Chapter 6). The animalised muscle car, for example, is rendered capable of masculinising its drivers through reference to its untamed powers. The sleeper concept, “a wolf in sheep's clothing”, makes available an anonymous position from which to stand tall and strike back in situations of competition and measurement. In addition, the sporty-looking clean style, with its subtle display, also creates associations not only with sophisticated sleek design, but with masculinity, competition and speed. These styles of modification and their capacities for domination and competition all encompass positions for subjects to take up and identify with that strengthen links with virile performance and heterosexual masculinity. The plastic rocket, both loved and despised, is much more ambivalent on this point. This is not to say that a plastic rocket may not be driven dangerously, or that it could not be used as a racing machine, or that it would be less powerful than most other contemporary cars. Rather, it is to underline the importance that modifiers ascribe to the symmetry between looks, materials and power. The fact that car styling came to boost the Swedish car modification scene nevertheless points to the fact that the modifiers themselves have come to embrace style, despite the built-in gendered and risky relations that I have described.

## To show and to be evaluated

The car modifiers invested much time and effort in showing and evaluating each other's cars. Showing could be done in a number of arenas, such as online forums, at car shows or on the streets. To share one's car project with the community not only put cars on display, but made the production of individual uniqueness into a highly collective project. By posting images and updates, modifiers enable other members of the community to take part, comment upon and learn from each other's projects. Cars can be graded and evaluated amongst themselves as good or bad examples of styling. Hence, the car is not only considered to be a project that can be shaped and reshaped but, by being shown and judged, cars are also deemed to prove one's capacity as a car modifier and craftsman. The dominant view among my informants was that online forums were associated with community and friendship, but also with a competitive atmosphere formed around different tastes in cars. Anything diverging, in a positive or negative way, may eventually be made available for online discussions. Hence, forums were not only a place for discussing and consuming modified cars in general, but must also be considered an important arena where its participants regulated and shaped the acceptable ways in which the motorcar can be configured as a meaningful materialisation of their extended selves.

Car shows are arenas for showing and consuming cars and for meeting with like-minded car enthusiasts. They are venues where the hard work that modifiers have invested in their cars is scrutinised in the flesh and where modifiers compete with their cars. It is, however, the general conception among modifiers that the primary reason for attending is to meet, not to compete. Still, the trends and fashions outlined above, together with the strong emphasis on craftsmanship, created an opportunity for competition – as in the challenge of coming up with the next trophy winner that will manage to amaze the modified car community.

The evaluation process of car shows was, compared to the online evaluations, formalised and organised around the idea of objectivity, embodied by the members of juries. Their expert knowledge of craftsmanship would ideally grant a fair evaluation of the modified cars.

Preferably, these experts should be able to disregard subjective taste preferences, beauty, attractiveness and the surface of the car in order to see its “true” value, namely the workmanship invested in it. I have argued that this construction creates a hierarchical and gendered pattern where masculinity and craftsmanship are associated with neutrality, as opposed to trendy and aesthetic values, which are more gender-ambivalent and associated with subjective taste values and change. In this sense, the car show can be seen as enacting and reproducing traditional gender conventions based on the separation and celebration of masculine-defined craftsmanship from the commercial and aesthetic values of cars.

Gender was also constructed around the mundane practice of driving the display car. Modifiers evaluated each other’s cars in relation to their use for driving, as opposed to using them only for display purposes. The expression trailer queen signifies a modifier who has lost the car in the process of styling it. This is a modifier who is considered too careful about his display car, in a way that makes him refrain from using it for driving. For those modifiers who competed with their cars at shows, apart from the display of craftsmanship, the mundane practice of driving was absolutely what confirmed the cars and owners of the display cars in their masculinity. Despite their delicate designs, fragile materiality and the hours of work invested, the most mundane practices of everyday life confirm the car as authentic – as functional and useful, not just a pretty object. In addition, enhanced and modified display cars were considered to *belong* on the streets and to be driven, as opposed to simply being put on display within the safe realm of the car show. If the display car was not driven, even the most celebrated craftsman and the most prized car risked becoming degraded and feminised as a trailer queen by the modifiers (as discussed in Chapter 7). A car that was only for show was seen as having lost its core value as a car, namely as a means of transport. It is in the performance of driving and risking the car that modifiers make their masculinity *real*.

### Driving is daring

Part of this study has been devoted to understanding how modifiers construct and emotionally invest in risk-taking. The constructions of masculinity in driving were interlinked with the use and mastery of cars.



This in turn outlined the profoundly embodied and emotional relations between men, technologies of movement and risk-taking. Informants gave accounts of speeding pleasures as emotionally rewarding, when doing hierarchy amongst drivers through challenging each other to race in the streets, even though they knew they were putting themselves and others at risk. The powerful emotions derived from their interaction with cars are highly important for the modifiers' self-esteem and joy, not least in the context of class, challenge and risk-taking in traffic. In the context of competition and risk-taking, masculinity is performed through the ability to control risk, their vehicle and other drivers. The emotional "kicks" and challenges produced in the encounters between cars and other drivers legitimated the dangers created. The analysis suggests that the driver subjects deal with the dual dimensions of the power offered by motor vehicles (its pleasurable and violent sides) in a way that constructs the subjects as able to *do danger safely*, as being in control of what they do (see Chapter 8).

However, the modifiers' construction of risk and emotion also provided other accounts of risk-taking in cars, especially in their relations to the "built-in" fragility of the modified car. Risk-taking is here understood in the larger context of car modification, where driving may risk the process of modifying the car, including the time, money, skills and emotions invested in shaping it. To risk the car means to jeopardise one's social life, commitments to sponsors and the ability to compete at car shows. Some modifiers declared a before and after mode in how they drove their cars. Niclas, for example, said he drove recklessly before he modified a particular car, but said he refrained from risk-taking after it was modified. By doing so, he also identified himself as being more of a "cruiser type" than a risk taker. The personalised, and therefore irreplaceable, car, as I have argued, can also be productive of counter-discourses on dangerous, risky and "hard" masculinity. As noted in Chapter 8, driving cars that connote speed and sportiness invites a particular sociality formed around spontaneous street racing. Through communicating that they are "up for it", drivers engage in risky driving activities related to brand identity, class, masculinity and challenge. Even though the particular aggressive look of modified cars would suggest that this influences the likelihood that it will

also be driven accordingly (cf. Redshaw 2008), this study has shown that modifiers negotiate and refrain from risk-taking even though other drivers may strongly encourage them to “go for it” and show off their car’s power. For drivers of display cars used for competing at car shows, however, driving per se was already a risky business.

This in turn seems to indicate a tension between two forms of doing competitive modifier masculinity: one produced in the streets and another at cars shows. Lars and other owners of award-winning display cars could explicitly disengage themselves from street racing and masculine bravado in cars. Other studies on car modifiers (i.e. Vaaranen and Wieloch 2002) have found that speed and speeding are said to be given more respect within the group. Accidents provide racers with fascination or even respect. My material points in other directions; the “elite” modifiers find other ways of competing for status and a sense of self-worth – namely at the car show. For them, to drive the display car on an everyday basis was associated with status – as in a form of mundane daring driving that was associated with the risk of damaging the car – a form of car care that may also produce safer road practices.

### Gendered, risky and dangerous relations

The ways in which modifiers appropriate their cars as identity projects draw heavily on the associations of automobility as risky and dangerous. Danger and risk are central parts of styling, and the car has actively been made to look more aggressive than ordinary cars. As I have argued, modified cars may be used in a number of ways, their drivers may exercise agency by actualising the car in many versions: for show, for speeding, for cruising and for driving particularly safely (see also Michael 2001). It is, however, how an alleged lack of power emerges as a significant gendered threat that stands out in the analysis.

When I interviewed Niclas about his career as a modifier, it was not street racing or driving dangerously that he talked about as risky, it was his way of styling that was considered “wrong” and effeminate. This is not the first time in history that cars have come to challenge gender (see Sparke 2003: 212). David Gartman (2004: 175) argues that even during the 1920s a

diffusion of cars with style and beauty became a gendered threat in the United States and Britain. It was feared that automobiles were becoming feminised, as concerns about appearance and fashion began to outweigh considerations of engineering function and efficiency; they were not cars for “real” working-class men. In terms of my informants, the threat of the feminisation of the styled car has been met by a counter reaction. Cars should preferably be able to perform to match their looks, an ideal way of modifying cars that to large extent emerges out of the critique of the superficial plastic rocket. This concern is addressed by Lars when he says that his lead motif is “functional styling”, or as it is put in motoring magazines: “above all, it is not only for show!” (*Bilsport* no. 22, 2007: 29). To reconstruct the car as functional means to masculinise its owner by reinstating him into a position of real power as opposed to mere looks.

The gender-coding of cars has already changed a number of times throughout history (see Mörck and Petersson McIntyre 2009). While the appeal of automobiles has historically been associated with masculinity through associations with wild, untameable animals, power and technical precision, it seems particularly important to critically consider such gendered reproductions. This is perhaps even more important today when the electric car and other energy-efficient forms of cars are considered to be the only possible answer to maintaining the kind of freedom and autonomy that has been claimed to characterise the automobile. Bearing in mind that the electric car was considered especially suitable for women a century ago, contemporary gender ideologies need to change. For this to happen, the strong connections between masculinity and car power would need to be seriously questioned and undermined – what seems to be needed from an environmental perspective is more plastic rockets and fewer muscle cars. However, as I have shown in this research, men’s relations with their (powerful) cars can only be described as close, passionate and loving.

The issue of power, to be able to back up one’s looks with strength, goes deep not only in constructions of modifier masculinities, power also matters greatly in “Western” car cultures more generally. Even though cars today have sufficient power for most purposes, manufacturers consistently advertise more power and acceleration, more performance and higher top speeds (Redshaw 2008: 35). Such an emphasis on power, and indeed the

*driving pleasure* that seems to go with it, may promote a more “active” and “rowdy” form of driving, which would be dangerous both in terms of the environment and road safety (Hagman 2010: 27). On the basis of this research, the strong emphasis on emotions, horsepower and risk stand out as important elements in the construction of gender identities and emotional attachment to cars. Modifiers very explicitly bring out the elements of danger, speed and risk when they materially re-construct cars as their “toys” for speed(ing). By doing so, their style also breaks away from the way in which cars have become viewed as undergoing a transformation – from being a racing toy for the rich, to an everyday necessity. However, no matter how much of a necessity the car has become, it has never ceased to be a toy (Hagman 2010: 25). From this perspective, despite their sporty-looking cars, it seem risky to consider car modifiers as fundamentally different driver subjects from the “normal” drivers they so dearly wish to differentiate themselves from. It seems that modifiers are simply enjoying the ambivalence of speed and car power inherent in an automobility-centred culture more generally. That is, as I have argued together with Tanja Joelsson (2012: 49), a culture where power and speed(ing) are frequently glorified and valued, closely interlinked with gendered conceptions of technology, design and vehicle use.

## Contributions

In the first chapter I proposed reasons why the area of men and modified cars is of interest for gender studies in general and the field of men and masculinities in particular. Finally, I now emphasise three main contributions: on Swedish gender studies, on the project of the self in late modernity, and on gender, automobility and emotion.

In Sweden, most research on men and masculinities has concerned, among other issues, fatherhood, men and masculinities in history, men and working life, men’s violence against women and children, men’s sexuality, men and sports and men and technology (cf. Johansson & Kousmanen 2003, Hearn et al. 2012). Only rarely have scholars taken an interest in the strong social and cultural alignment between men, masculinity and cars (see Chapter 1). Little research has explicitly engaged with gendered

processes in relation to cars from a socio-cultural perspective in Sweden. This study contributes to making this “gap” less significant.

In a general way, this study has contributed to gender studies and studies on men and masculinities in particular by exploring the gendered significance of the motorcar in the context of young and middle-aged modifiers’ lives. Studying the ways in which car modifiers appropriate the motorcar in other ways than for transportation, and modify their cars into other designs than their original, has contributed qualitative knowledge of how gendered subjects are produced through mundane technological artefacts such as cars. By engaging with car styling, this study has affirmed and nuanced men’s interest in design, aesthetics and style as an ongoing gendered negotiation related to power, craftsmanship and aesthetics.

By making connections between gender, automobility and emotion, this book also makes a contribution to mobility studies. How people move and how they relate to technologies of movement are gendered issues that contribute to the production, reproduction and contestation of gender itself, including gendered power hierarchies (as argued by Uteng and Cresswell 2008: 2). Drawing on the sociology of emotions in the context of car driving and risk-taking, this study affirms the importance of further considering the intense feelings, passions and embodied experiences associated with automobility (for theoretical contributions in this area see Balkmar & Joelsson 2010).

### Future research

This study suggests several questions for further research. One is related to the reproduction of car dependency. In order to understand why cars develop such a profound attraction, there is a need to further address the close emotional connection, socialisation and investment that many men and women develop in relation to their cars. There seems to be a need for more qualitative studies on what people actually do with their cars and what they come to mean to people.

Future research on car cultures and identity is needed, further investigating the cultural landscape of the car and seeking a deeper understanding of its profound social value. As noted in Chapter 3, there are various “sub-

cultures” in car modification that could provide insights into what the car has become in various contexts of use. Such contexts could be, for example, gay and lesbian car clubs (such as the Lambda Car Club International in a US context), car clubs that bring together religion and car enthusiasm (Attitude motorclub.com in Sweden), or dedicated car clubs for women only, such as Girls Go Fast, discussed in Chapter 5. Such studies would call for intersectional analyses in order to understand meaning-making around cars and may contribute to challenging the “naturalisation” of the bond between (heterosexual) men and cars.

Other areas of future research might be studies that investigate the experience of traffic in the context of gender, age, risk and technology. On the basis of this research, it seems that so-called *spontaneous* risk-taking in traffic needs further scholarly attention. In particular, I am thinking about the voices in this study that outline spontaneous street racing as enjoyable, violent and competitive ways in which technological masculinity is played out in public space. In these relations of drivers, cars and traffic, there seems to be much more need for critical qualitative research to be done. This highly political – in its fatality – yet simultaneously pleasurable and gendered dimension of everyday car driving would need to engage in exploring the tightness and intimacy of drivers’ relationships with cars in the context of traffic interaction.

### A dangerous love

The emotional and passionate attachment to the car that the modifiers gave voice to in this study needs to be understood as an effect of much wider social and cultural factors. This particular “need” that some people (men as well as women) feel to declare themselves both socially and individually through cars is a result of social and cultural factors that are widely shared (see also Redshaw 2008). Cars are clearly so much more than simply a means of transport, which is also part of reproducing the problem of car dependency more generally (see also Dahl 2011 for discussion on Swedish men’s reasoning on sustainable travel in relation to cars). The reproduction of individualised mobilities such as the car is problematic if we wish to become less car-dependent societies: societies where cars are either shared through carpools or the like, or significantly reduced in favour of public

transport rather than private transportation. I believe the modifiers have taught me a lesson about the hardships that will become more and more urgent, for traffic safety and for environmental reasons, namely to give up the idea of cars as toys for pleasure and as resources for declaring gendered individuality. Indeed, love for the, or even an, automobile is a most gendered, dangerous and risky feeling.





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## Appendix: Ethnography

Event	Name	Site	Y/D
Indoor / outdoor Shows	Street Cars Fest	Stockholm/virtual <sup>96</sup>	Oct 2006
	Street Cars Fest	Stockholm/virtual	May 2008
	Street Cars Fest	Stockholm/virtual	Aug 2008
	Street Cars Fest Finals	Stockholm/virtual	Nov 2008
	Bilsport Performance/custom show	Jönköping/virtual	March 2008
	Vingåkersträffen	Vingåker/virtual	May 2008
	The Power Big Meet	Västerås/virtual	July 2007
	Vallåkra	Helsingborg/virtual	Aug 2008
Volvo related	Lunda club-meet	Uppsala/virtual	May 2008
	Volvo-meet	Ånnaboda	June 2008
	Västerviksträffen	Västervik	July 2008
	Kinnekulle ring	Kinnekulle/virtual	July 2008
Informal meets	Meet of the month	Norrköping/virtual	May 2008
	Våla Street Car Meet	Helsingborg/virtual	June 2008
Driving/show events	EDPS (En dag på strippen)	Strängnäs/virtual	June 2008
	Gatebil	Mantorp Park/ Linköping/virtual	June 2008
	Meca raceway	Malmö	July 2008
	Gatbilar.se tour	Jönköping, Karlstad, Borlänge, Falun, Gävle, Östhammar, Stockholm/virtual	July 2008
	Action Meet	Mantorp Park/ Linköping/virtual	Aug 2008
Other	Movie Preview <i>Brittovan</i>	Debaser/ Stockholm	June 08
	Rumble in the Jungle	Kungsör	June 08

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<sup>96</sup> “Virtual” indicates that the events host either specific event websites, or, as is the case with informal meets, the events are announced through the major motoring forums. In a broad sense, “virtual” is here taken to signify that I have followed virtual interactions taking place prior to and after the events.