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The Formula 1 Race as a Phenomenon. Aspects of Masculinity and Modernity

Formula 1 and its great popularity in Finland

Formula 1 has attracted a great deal of interest in Finland among an increasing number of people. This is primarily explained by the success of the Finnish driver Mika Häkkinen.²³ Finland is also represented by another Formula 1 driver, Mika Salo, and a third, Kimi Räikkönen, has recently arrived on the scene. Formula 1 is a large, international car racing sport, but the overall number of drivers is nonetheless relatively small. Therefore it is quite remarkable that there are three Finnish men among them.

When I started a course in English, the teacher explained that we were all to give a presentation on a chosen subject, but he did not want to hear another one on F1 and Mika Häkkinen! This shows that there is not only an interest in watching F1 on TV, but also in exploring the subject and talking about and explaining facts about the sport. I also seem to discern a current debate on the meaningfulness versus the meaninglessness of Formula 1. I myself have found F1 fairly meaningless. But why is all this discussed? What values does the debate express? What opinions are there of Formula 1 and what do they tell us about today's society? My aim is to analyse Formula 1 as a modern/late-modern phenomenon; partly as a phenomenon as such and partly in terms of

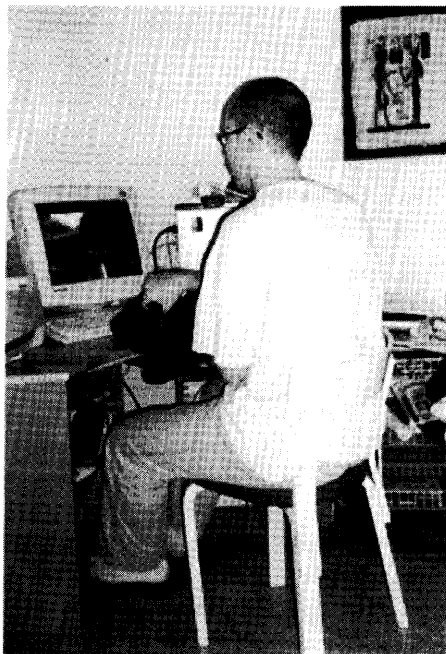
how the ordinary TV audience experiences and describes it. Today only men drive F1 cars, and therefore I think that Formula 1 might also reveal something about the current concept of masculinity.

Interviews with students

The material of this study consists of interviews with nine Swedish-speaking students in Åbo. The interviewees were born between 1972 and 1979. Three of them are studying at Polytechnic Sydväst and six at Åbo Akademi University. The fact that all my informants are students and of about the same age naturally typifies my material. This article should therefore be regarded as a study specifically of students' opinions of Formula 1.

My friends suggested suitable interviewees to me, whom I then contacted. I also personally know some of the interviewees quite well. I chose these particular persons, since I knew they had a lot to say about Formula 1. As F1 has gained such popularity in Finland, and as watching F1 is very widespread in the context I have chosen, this subject can be said to pertain to most persons in one way or another: everybody has an opinion on Formula 1. Therefore, I wanted to interview both persons who are interested in F1 and persons who are not. However, I permitted more space to those who are interested in

Playing computer games gives you a feeling what it is like to drive Formula 1. Photo: Ann-Helen Sund



the sport, since it is primarily this interest in F1 car racing that is the subject of my study. I had noticed that it is mostly men who are interested in Formula 1, and I therefore interviewed five men, as well as two women, who are interested in the sport, and two women who are not interested in F1. Of course, I could have included men in the latter category, but it was not, however, easy to find men uninterested in F1. Criticism can be raised against me for this choice. If men who are not interested in Formula 1 racing form such a marginal group, it would have been interesting to hear their opinion, too, especially as my article explores masculinity in this context.

The point of departure for my work was the notion that it is mostly men who watch Formula 1 (which is reflected in my choice of interviewees) and that F1 is usually seen as a masculine sport, which is what I wanted to explore.

My own position in relation to my subject is that I have not been interested in watching

Formula 1 races on TV. One can never totally disregard one's own opinion, but being aware of one's own stance helps to avoid being biased. On the other hand, I have not actually known very much about Formula 1. Being a sort of outsider perhaps makes it easier to "exoticise" the subject and to approach it objectively.

The interviewees and their relation to F1

As mentioned above, my interviewees fall into the two categories of those interested in and those uninterested in Formula 1. The interested ones can be further divided into those who have "always" been interested in F1, and those who have been uninterested to begin with, but later changed their opinion. Actually only one of my interviewees (a woman) falls into the latter category, but it is nevertheless a very interesting group: on what level does one have to rethink in order to be "converted"? Is this a case of crossing a border, and in that case, what border? Those interested in F1 can also be categorised into those whose motor racing interest is limited to Formula 1, and those who are interested in various kinds of motor racing sports. This difference might partly be explained by the Finnish F1 drivers' influence on the interest in their sport. As in many other contexts, the "real" fans have been there "from the start", before a phenomenon (e.g. F1, a band, a dressing style) has become too popular and easily accessible. The "real" fans disapprove of popular features that are regarded as superficial. F1 is very popular in Finland today and in this case this might mean that some people, to a certain extent, distance themselves from the huge interest surrounding Häkkinen or from the F1 sport as a whole. This is to simplify the matter, but in times when "everything stable evaporates" and people seek authenticity and originality in something, I think it does signify something. In addition, change is

needed for a phenomenon to stay interesting. For some, their interest has decreased when the one in focus, namely Häkkinen, has been on top for so long. He has proven to be an excellent driver and the hardest competition is experienced as being resolved. Finally, I want to point out that the discussion throughout the article is a discussion with the interviewees. I refer to individual informants only in direct quotations.

The concept of modernity as a tool for analysis

In the analysis of my material, interviews on F1, I have chosen to focus on a number of themes that to me seem essential for the understanding of F1 as a phenomenon, and what this phenomenon, both in itself and especially in terms of the habit of watching the races on TV, signify for the viewers. I have chosen to use modernity as my overall theoretical tool. The other two themes that I explore in more detail are masculinity as a social and cultural gender, and sport. These can be placed in the general theoretical framework of modernity. Since I base my study on interviews that primarily deal with “watching F1 races”, the medium of television as a narrator also forms an important element. TV presents F1 as a story, and I will attempt to explore what this story is about and what is experienced by the fans as being important in it.

In what ways is F1 a modern phenomenon? I have used certain characteristics of modernity presented by Magnus Berg in his book *Modernitet – som empiriskt fält, som teoretiskt redskap. Brottningar med begrepp* (“Modernity – as an empirical field, as a theoretical tool. Wrestling with concepts”). The overall figure of thought in modernity is rationalism; “claiming the right of reason to critically evaluate and discard unreflecting, self-evident knowledge that is legitimated by tradition”. Berg refers to

Peter L. Berger, an American sociologist, who distinguishes five tendencies in modernity: *abstraction, individualisation, liberation, secularisation and future-orientation*.

Thomas Ziehe, a German researcher on socialisation, talks about *late modernity*. He regards *demystification* as its most important feature, which can be studied in terms of three tendencies pertaining to “the subjective aspects of reality”. These are *reflexivity, possibility and individualisation*, which together result in a change of the individual’s *horizons of opportunities*. This means freedom for the individual, but also decreased security. This “doubleness” is an important criterion for late modernity. The lack of a stable base to stand on, of ultimate truths, creates a need to substitute this void with something else. In this “something else”, certain attitudes or “attempts at cultural orientation” can be discerned. The most common attitude is claimed to be *conventionalism*, a denial of late modernity and a wish to return to old truths. Other attitudes are *subjectifying*, “seeking security in the minimum of social relations and in oneself”, where emotions are supposed to create security; *ontologising*, which includes attempts at new forms of mysticism; seeking security in something original and authentic. This orientation attempt differs from conventionalism in that late modernity is not denied, but instead, a pre-modern security is consciously sought. The last category of orientation is *potentialising*: “artificially loading something with meaning” – what is sought is “intensity as protection against emptiness”. The object of intensification is the lack of an overall context in late modern society (Berg 1992, 185ff). In this essay, I will seek to explore how these modern or late modern themes fit my material and whether the attitudes towards late modernity presented above can be used to shed light on what the habit of watching F1 races on TV signifies for the viewers.

Masculinity and gender

Is F1 a masculine sport? All F1 drivers are men and most of the interviewees think that a majority of those interested in the sport, that is, the audience and the TV viewers, are men. All the informants also regarded F1 as a masculine sport, in that “traditional” male ideals and characteristics are expressed in it. However, not everybody thought that these ideals and characteristics are specifically male today. All informants were positively inclined to the idea that women will in future enter the sport as drivers.

In this context, I find it important to discuss masculinity and gender in more detail. In his article “Manlig myt och vanlig vardag - om manlighetens förvandling” (“Male myths and everyday life - on the transformation of masculinity”), Jonas Frykman explores how the masculine is constructed and filled with content. He thinks that today’s masculinity is threatened. The genders are being democratised and there are no preordained patterns any longer. This results in a variety of effects: partly a wish to return to the past, partly in men creating new identities that they themselves can verify. Frykman points out that the myths, the narratives about masculinity, must be such that men can believe in them and feel an affinity with them. The narratives and everyday conditions are linked to each other. Frykman says that the myths are crucial, since belief, empathy and emotion are at stake here. The myths create a symbolic family bond between men and express what men are and what they are not. The aim is to find a “natural masculine substance”, something genuine and original, and therefore the body has taken on such an important role in today’s narratives of masculinity. The primitive and the wild have also acquired positive connotations, since these are associated with authenticity, with a past where life was easier to grasp.

Frykman sees parallels between the previous and the present turn of the century. The period of the turn of the 19th and the 20th centuries entailed a break-up of traditional society: the world was unstable and this led to the construction of a new man. This man was self-confident, had a stable character and aimed at “new bold targets, simple definitions and genuine togetherness”. Frykman thinks that many similarities to our times can be discerned here. The difference is, however, that at the previous turn of the century, man stepped out of the private sphere while today he is trying to re-enter it. Today’s narratives on masculinity must show how this is to happen (Frykman 1994, 13ff).

Sports - motor sports

All interviewees watching Formula 1 think of it as a sport, while those interviewees who are not interested in F1 do not regard it as a sport. What is “sport” actually, what characterises a sport? I do not attempt to once and for all determine whether Formula 1 is a sport or not, but rather, I am trying to say something about what one does with a phenomenon by calling it a sport. What does sport signify?

By calling F1 a “sport”, the importance of human beings over machines is emphasized. Driving a racing car (successfully) requires the driver to be in good physical shape, with an ability to concentrate and with courage/foolhardiness, depending on the viewpoint. The fact that money (the car) is actually to quite a large extent crucial for gaining the desired results is something which is disliked by most informants. At the same time, the big money and the fast cars are two of the basic factors of the sport, contributing to its “extreme” character. Denying that F1 is a sport means claiming that everything is agreed on, that money is decisive. It is tantamount to degrading the entire Formula 1 ethos and taking all

meaning out of the sport: the competition, the drama, the excitement disappears, since the significance of the individual is diminished. Here, I make no difference between sports and motor sports, since they are so similar, both regarding their structure and what the viewers prioritise when watching them.

In his book *Mandighet og sport* ("Masculinity and sport"), Hans Bonde writes about the history of men involved in the early Danish sports movement of 1880–1920, i.e. the creation of modern sport, as his point of departure. Sport is not an isolated phenomenon in society, but one of the strongest and most basic rituals of modern society, where important norms and values are dramatised and expressed. However, sports are not only a reflection of society, but also an active cultural force. Bonde also thinks that the focus around the turn of the 20th century was on the significance of sports for male culture; an issue which is seldom addressed today, but which is, however, still relevant. Many norms survive in new forms: having a strong character and ambition are still seen as desirable features (Bonde 1991, 7ff). Frykman, too, claims that masculinity has always been created through a ritual causing of pain. Sport constitutes such a ritual, he writes (Frykman 1994, 14).

To sum up, it can be claimed that sport expresses certain male ideals and norms pertaining to masculinity in society, while sport also creates men as they take part in it. Viewers witness this as they watch sports on television.

Similar arguments can be applied when discussing sport and national feeling. In his book *Försvenskningen av Sverige* ("The Swedification of Sweden"), Billy Ehn claims that "sports have become one of the most emotional and expressive areas of the national". This is particularly obvious in sports broadcasts on TV, where the commentators use a special kind of

chauvinistic rhetoric. The sportsmen personify an abstract concept, that is, their native country. Sports have such a great impact because they appeal to the emotions. The viewers' fervour turn the national feeling into a purely physical experience for them: they feel excited, happy or disappointed. They feel that they belong to a nation, including everything which that entails in the forms of community and identity (Ehn 1993, 204ff).

The media of television as narrator

In this essay, I mainly base my analysis on narratives from watching Formula 1 on TV. However, the TV broadcasts are narratives which have already been edited, and the viewers are guided by professional narrators, the F1 commentators, who describe what is happening and why, and what is important. Some of my informants think that the TV commentator plays a very important part; others only find him disturbing, since they know enough about F1 to understand the action of the races. Most interviewees usually watch the Finnish F1 broadcasts, while a few of them prefer to watch the races on Swedish TV. What is interesting is that both groups present the same argument for their choice of channel: the expertise of the commentators. It is, however, pointed out that the Finnish commentator is very focussed on Mika Häkkinen and very enthusiastic when it comes to him and his successes or losses, to the point where he is verging on being notorious for this bias.

In her book *Nostalgi og sensasjoner* ("Nostalgia and sensations"), Torunn Selberg talks about the use of television in Norwegian everyday life, analysing, for example, news broadcasts. It has been claimed that the strategy of the television broadcast is to attempt to control reality, and herein lies its popularity. We can ask ourselves whether we actually learn

anything new, since the programmes follow as strict a routine as the watching of them. Selberg thinks that the news items are actually constituted of new editions of well-known versions (Selberg 1995, 274).

Watching F1 races is not an everyday activity: on the contrary, many say it might become boring if there were F1 races on every weekend. Today, races are broadcast every other weekend. But this does not, however, prevent there being a predictable routine to the programme: on the contrary. The F1 races and their preparation always follow the same pattern. The races cover three days, an "F1 weekend". On the first day, the cars are trimmed and adjusted, on the second, the drivers race for a starting position in the actual race, and – finally – on the third day the race itself takes place, which, of course, being the most important, attracts most viewers. The race also usually follows a special pattern. All of the interviewees agree that the start is the most important, or one of the most important and exciting parts of the race. That is followed by lap after lap on the course, depot stops, overtakings, possibly crashes. Sometimes a race can turn out to be boring, in cases where nothing *happens*. The broadcast is rounded off with the prize-giving ceremony and a press conference where the drivers analyse the race. The TV broadcast offers an overview of what is happening, an overview that would not be possible to achieve at the site of the race; but, on the other hand, something of the reality of the race is lost.

The TV broadcasts focus on the winners; those driving in the lead. Those who are less successful are mostly shown only if they crash.

Nowadays only the winners count, we want to see winners, we want to (and are able to) identify with winners. Win or get out is to be taken very literally. Those who are seen and heard in the media are

winners. Those who are invisible and marginalised – the large, grey mass – are not winners, but losers. (Klinkmann 2000)

I think the above quote suits Formula 1 very well and perhaps illustrate the significance of Mika Häkkinen, the Finnish winner, in the popularity of F1 in Finland.

Klinkmann refers to the Finnish culture researcher Jussi Orajärvi, who thinks that we have doubted ourselves in the sense that we see ourselves as being free from all big narratives except for capitalism. If this is the case, then perhaps our society is not, after all, that late-modern, at least not Formula 1, which in that case could form an offshoot to the narrative of capitalism, the objective of which is to win.

Driving in a laboratory

The car arrived at the same time as modernity, and it can be regarded as a step in the individualisation process, as a symbol of freedom. The car enabled a new kind of mobility. F1 races can be seen as driving a car under laboratory conditions, in a controlled, but still dangerous sphere. It is a kind of ritualisation and dramatisation of driving, which takes place on tracks specially made for the purpose – which fact in itself constitutes an abstraction of driving. Racetracks are required, since the technology has developed and the cars are increasingly fast. Thus, the way has been paved, literally, for the development of the technology, as was done when railways were built for trains and roads were asphalted for cars – but Formula 1 has taken this one step further. F1 has been created for an audience and the racetracks therefore offer a better overview of the races than, for example, driving on ordinary roads would do. The F1 races contain several components found also in the "real" world of cars: starting the engine, pumping petrol, changing tyres, overtaking, the occasional crash – simply moving forward. But all this

takes place at a much faster pace and everything is prepared and organised. An F1 race also has a clear beginning and a clear finish. Specific symbols mark these: the start is shown by lamps going out one after another, and when the first car reaches the finish, a black-and-white chequered flag is waved. A special sphere, with its special significances, is entered and exited.

Despite F1 driving being controlled, there is nevertheless a certain degree of disorder and risk: not everything is foreseeable, and if it were, a lot of the excitement of the race would be lost. The viewers try to understand what is happening and to bring order and coherence to the events displayed on the television screen. This requires some previous knowledge of the rules and actors, but the commentator is also important in his role as “explainer”. Part of the excitement lies in figuring out how everything is connected. Therefore, the events must not be too predictable. In fact, the unpredictable elements are experienced as the most interesting, as for example overtakings and crashes. Of course, crashes are not totally unexpected, either, but form an integral part of F1 races. They are, however, treated as exceptions, as they break the order and control which the F1 strives to maintain. This is comparable to what Torunn Selberg says about news broadcasts: even if they usually deal with injustices and catastrophes, they are still regarded as positive. Since the news items differ from what is considered normal, they confirm that normality (Selberg 1995, 266).

A phenomenon which sits on the boundary between the F1 laboratory and “normal” driving is the F1 race on the streets of Monte Carlo, Monaco. It is actually a relic, the only street racetrack left within Formula 1 racing. The racetrack does not fulfil today’s security requirements for an F1 track. The races are therefore slightly slower and the opportunities for overtaking are fewer than



Formula 1 competition in Nürburgring in Germany. Photo: in private possession

on the other tracks, which is why many think that it does not offer particularly interesting viewing. On the other hand, the Monte Carlo racetrack is the favourite of some, since the race is, in a sense, moved out into “reality” and thus more varied and “for real” than when driving around a field of grass, or a patch of wood. The abstraction is not so great here. In addition, Monaco has a certain sound to it, which resonates with the origins, traditions and character of Formula 1. The Monaco race is therefore highly prestigious.

Mika Häkkinen in Formula 1 – Finland in the world: contrasts

Within ethnology, sport has been compared to war. Nationalist sentiments are allowed in sport. Stereotypes of other countries or regions are used and also stereotypes of one’s own country are employed. Who are we, what are Finns like and what distinguishes us from others? Various national characteristics and values concerning positive and negative features are processed. Often the heroes of sports become moral exemplars. As a person comes to symbolise the fatherland, the basis for the patriotic feelings, the collective identity, becomes concrete and emotional. In sport, “the enemy” and one’s own country or region are seen as clear entities, which is important in order to have something to feel and fight for. One’s own country is contrasted with the other, and the

national is thus created (Ehn 1993, 213).

Formula 1 is an international, highly organised sport where a “team” usually consists of three components: the manufacturer of the car’s engine, the stable and the driver. These can all be of different nationalities. However, even if the teams can be very mixed, nationality is relatively important in explaining what kinds of units the teams make up. This thought process also entails a large amount of flexibility, particularly taking into account that many drivers change teams before a new season. There are two Formula 1 stables that are more successful than the rest and these are thus also the most visible ones.

These two big stables and their respective front figures, who, slightly simplified, are those who duel on the course, stand in sharp contrast to each other, at least when seen from a Finnish perspective. The English McLaren team have German Mercedes engines in their cars, and their leading driver, Mika Häkkinen, is Finnish. The McLaren cars are as grey “as the English weather”; they are also called “silver arrows”. McLaren has the image of being a “calm” stable, which is run with “German” preciseness; everything is controlled and carefully calculated. Mika Häkkinen, as a “quiet and calm, typical Finn” will suit the stable.

The other big stable is Italian Ferrari, which has a particularly strong profile since Ferrari is a combined stable and car manufacturer, also making ordinary cars. Ferrari is well-known for its expensive luxury cars. Ferrari’s colour in Formula 1 is red and their logotype a black, rearing horse against a yellow background. Associations can be developed from this: Ferrari is the temperamental, southern European F1 stable. Their main driver is German Michael Schumacher. But how does a German fit the image of the stable?

Well, he’s like a person who likes to brag

about how good he is, so that probably suits with Ferrari, although Ferrari would perhaps rather have a , for example an Italian driver and not a German one, but he’s a very self-confident person, so he fits with Ferrari (L 1428, female b. 1978).

Schumacher, Häkkinen’s prime competitor, is contrasted with Häkkinen, and certain values concerning positive and negative characteristics are displayed. Often, Schumacher is described as the self-confident, boastful and cheeky type, representing characteristics that are perhaps not that highly esteemed according to Finnish values. Häkkinen, on the other hand, is seen as humble and therefore likeable. But not all admire Häkkinen’s “personality” that much. Most informants agree that Häkkinen is a good driver, but many think that Schumacher’s character fits the sport and world of F1 better. I will discuss perceptions of the character of the sport further in the next chapter. Still, Häkkinen stands for Finnish success and it is not surprising that some think that another great Finnish success, that is, Nokia, should sponsor Häkkinen. Statistical surveys show that Häkkinen is currently the best known Finn in the world.

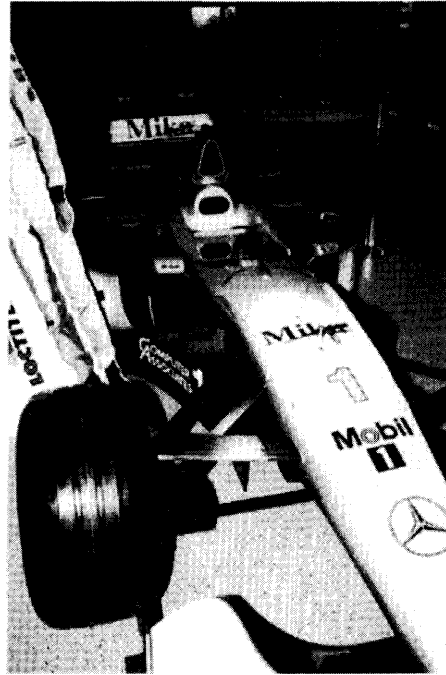
The F1 pilots in the royal class: prestige and respect

Prestige is a word that the interviewees often use when talking about Formula 1. Prestige in this context is perhaps explained by the fact that everything that is seen as prestigious in F1 is that which makes the sport serious and “real” and not just a game. The prestigious aspects are not to be underestimated, since they reflect what is regarded as valuable. Prestige and respect go hand in hand.

What then is regarded as so prestigious within the sport? The concept of “the royal class of motor sports” in itself reveals a great deal of this issue. Individualisation

is a strong tendency within F1. The drivers have successfully made their way up from the “lower” classes of motor sports and F1 is the culmination of their careers: there are no classes above it in the world of motor sports. The best drivers – *the winners*, the fastest cars – *high technology* and the biggest *money* bestow prestige upon the sport. All these aspects are regarded as prestigious in our society, and money is the means of wielding power. This is an area of contradictive emotions. The drivers must be skilful and in good physical shape; this is what makes Formula 1 a sport. According to sporting ideals, everybody should compete on equal terms in a sport. In F1, however, a stable can prioritise a successful driver above a less successful one. The latter is given an order to let the other driver overtake him. This is done because within F1 the winning stable gets money and thus an opportunity to develop their cars. This is why two stables have come to dominate the sport, which most viewers find makes the sport more boring. One of the interviewees compared the adjustment of technical details of the cars with doping. There is, nevertheless, a difference in that development of the cars is part of F1, while doping is common, although forbidden, in other sports.

The book *Idrottens själ* (“The soul of sports”) claims that sports are becoming alienated from the old ideals of amateurism, idealism, fair play, decency and a healthy lifestyle. Today, sports mainly provide a show: entertainment, not moral edification (Schoug 2000, 330). The interviewees also say that watching F1 is entertainment for them. Sports have also become increasingly commercialised, particularly on an international level. In the case of F1, however, advertisements have, according to the informants, “always” been there, and they claim that F1 has never stood for either amateurism, decency or a healthy lifestyle



The Formula 1 cars are constantly developed, both *Någonstans* under rubriken to be faster and safer. Can they still be called “cars”? Formula 1...”
Photo: John Hackman

(at least not in the minds of the informants). Rather, there is an opposite tendency: F1 has become a more “decent” sport in many respects, which can be seen in, for example, the advertisements. The F1 cars and the drivers’ overalls abound with adverts. The stables have various sponsors, usually large international companies. The most visible and noticeable sponsors are tobacco companies. Today, several countries where F1 races take place have banned advertising of tobacco products. Smoking does not currently have a positive reputation, but is rather associated with “losers” than “winners”. However, tobacco adverts are something of a tradition within F1, and, to put it more positively, in this context they can be said to represent a certain kind of dangerous living and risk-taking that are part of this sport and aspects which make it fascinating. Recently, however, companies in, for example, information technology and men’s top brand outfitters increasingly

advertise within F1. The IT companies symbolise expansion and success. When it comes to the clothes companies, the drivers also function as models. The sponsors provide them with clothes to wear during their "leisure" when they are "seen", and engage them in various advertising events. The fact that menswear has also become part of the F1 world, perhaps indicates that men have started to care more about their looks.

The prize ceremony is a tradition within Formula 1; a ritual always performed in the same way. Champagne bottles of a gigantic size, as with everything within F1, perhaps represent something of the luxury, glamour and prestige which is (traditionally) associated with F1. The prizes are usually awarded by a representative of those in power – for example the mayor – of the place where the race takes place, which also emphasizes the prestige of the sport. The world of Formula 1 entails material affluence, big money and contacts to the political and financial elite, and, in addition, the traditions of the sport create prestige. A stable that is not very successful, can still possess a certain prestige because of its long-standing tradition.

Of course there are old stables with long traditions and it's a pity that many of them have disappeared... and it's good that there are such old institutions in this world too, but McLaren and Ferrari also belong to these old, legendary stables, for example. (L 1435, male b. 1978)

Thirdly, there lies a certain prestige in what the F1 drivers do: they are entrusted with the fastest, most expensive cars. Within ethnology, it has been suggested that people must be sacrificed in order for technology to develop. Those sacrificed are young men. Thus, the activity of driving racing cars comes to resemble war, and in F1 this is perhaps particularly obvious.

Here, the F1 drivers could also be compared to war pilots, those most prestigious actors within the army. War pilots also form a small, select elite endowed with the dangerous task of controlling fast, expensive highly technological machines. They are sent by their country to fight against an enemy. The F1 pilots are "sent" by their stable. Both the pilots and the drivers communicate with a "tactician" via radio. In F1 the driver also sits in the "cockpit" and the drivers are called "pilots" in many languages. All F1 drivers today are men and most war pilots are also men. All the interviewees agreed that there will, in future, be female F1 drivers, which shows what we are striving for, that is, equality. However, some doubted whether the stables really dare employ women since so much money is at stake. This illustrates that a gender system basically is a prestige system (Bengtsson & Frykman 1988, 71).

Within Formula 1, the masculinity that was created around the turn of the century is very apparent: that is to say, in the form of a man who is successful in society by being controlled, self-confident and of firm character. As a driver, it is important to control one's nerves and oneself in order to be able to keep control of the car. Loss of nerve is something to be blamed for; it is a sign of not being a good driver. At the same time, F1 is an aggressive sport. Competition is hard and it is important to be pushy. The only thing that counts is winning, since the losers easily disappear into an anonymous mass. Calmness and aggression: therein probably lays one of the great paradoxes of Formula 1. This is also visible in the code of behaviour concerning the drivers' manners with each other *outside* the track. There, the drivers are not allowed to display any aggressive feelings.

...as I said, they risk their lives when driving, so being on bad terms with someone... they have the power to crash

with them in some way... like "o-oh, accident, I killed you". (L 1432, female b. 1979)

The prize-giving ceremony is perhaps one of the events where the duality of rival-colleague is most highly charged, as the first, second and third prize winners as supposed to celebrate their achievement together:

...and then they get a bottle of champagne each that they're supposed to open and then they spray it on each other, but somehow it feels quite forced since they are such rivals many times there and they can be really annoyed with each other since they've just competed on the course. (L 1428, female b. 1978)

F1 could perhaps be called an "aggressive gentlemanly sport". A concept associated with the ideals of a gentleman and which seems to be important here is *respect*. The drivers' aim is to be respected, both by other drivers and by the audience. This they strive for by proving that they are good drivers. Respect is something that one earns. Perhaps this can be linked to the above discussion on how sports create men and masculinity being a project of conquest.

Formula 1 on TV – variations, habits and togetherness

During the active season, F1 races are broadcast every other weekend. Each race is part of the World Championship and success in the individual races gives a certain number of points that are added. As this is the structure of the championship, most viewers find it important to watch every race, even if not all name F1 as their favourite sport. Most informants want to see the races in live broadcasts, and because of the time difference in the various racing places, this means that TV viewers must sometimes get up in the middle of the night

or early in the morning. A certain lifestyle, probably most typical for students, can be associated with the habits of watching F1:

... then they drive at such times that it's early Sunday morning, perhaps five or so, so then usually one's been to the pub all night for example, otherwise it'd be so hard to get up. (L 1437, male b. 1977)

Many find it nicer to watch the races together with other fans, since they can discuss and comment on the events of the race. In fact, often there is not that much discussion during the actual race, but the viewers share the experience of the race and emotions of excitement, joy or disappointment. The girls might find it a bit boring in cases where their (female) friends are not interested in watching races with them. The following are the thoughts of one female informant, who does not watch F1, of her boyfriend's and his friends' F1 habits:

... when it was clear that he (Häkkinen) lost, it was like, then they knew that there wouldn't be anything more like that... the last fun race with the lads would not happen then either, so they were probably a bit disappointed by that, too. (L 1434, female b. 1977)

On the other hand, some prefer watching the races alone, so that they can better concentrate on the race and what the commentator says. The commentator becomes a kind of "discussion partner". But the feeling of community pertaining to the interest in F1 can take on many forms. Since all my interviewees have said that F1 is a masculine sport, one could perhaps talk about an imagined male comradeship between the men watching F1 and the F1 drivers. Since the national interest in F1 is also great, it can also be claimed that F1 creates a national feeling of community.

This is sometimes very obvious in the TV broadcasts: when Finland has been successful through Häkkinen, the broadcasts have occasionally contained inserts from Häkkinen's home town where people are cheering and celebrating. Thus it is underlined how all Finns belong to the same community. In addition, the interest in F1 might be something that one shares with an otherwise unfamiliar person, a topic to discuss not only with Finns but also with other nationalities:

...I've been student tutor to these exchange students and there were Italians in my group, so they are of course fans of Ferrari and so on, but when they first came here there wasn't perhaps that much to talk about except to say "well this is Åbo and this is where we study and bla, bla – do you watch Formula by the way?". (L 1431, male b. 1977).

The image of man and woman within Formula 1

Women, cars and technology. The traditional perception of the relation between these is that women cannot handle cars and technology – an attitude that today has perhaps somewhat modified to the view that women, or most women, are not interested in technology and cars. However, the conclusion is the same: claiming that women in general are not interested in technology makes this appear as a personal choice, which can be associated with the trend of individualisation in modern society. But since this is a categorisation based on gender it is not, after all, a personal lack of interest but a gendered one. This, however, is perhaps changing. Two different advertisements for cars shown on television recently touch upon this; both played with the existing stereotype concerning women and cars. One of them parodied the image of a scantily dressed woman flouncing by a car in a car show.

The other showed a car driving very fast and daringly and at the end of the ad a female rally driver stepped out of the car. The objective of the advertisements is, of course, to promote a new car model and the message is underlined by discarding an old order. The following quote can be understood against the background that women and technology are traditionally seen as incompatible:

If one doesn't know anything about it it's usually boring... I suppose I had a bit of this silly attitude, had these prejudices of it all that "everybody's boyfriends just sit and watch it on Sundays and..." so I suppose I was just like everybody else... (L 1432, female b. 1979)

Starting watching F1 as a woman might thus be a way of breaking a tradition, which is what this informant had done.

Formula 1 is surrounded by an aura of money and fast cars, but also of beautiful women. Traditionally, woman in the F1 world has been of the "car show type", that is, a young, more or less scantily clad woman, also called "asphalt rose", who is there only as a "decoration". Her task is to emphasize the prestige of the sport and the masculinity of the drivers, as the contrast between man and woman is thus sharpened. The stables also willingly invite models to the races. Thus, two glamorous worlds meet: the world of models, dominated by femininity and the world of Formula 1, dominated by masculinity. This can easily be interpreted as an instance where the traditional dichotomies of female-passive and male-active are still valued. But, as mentioned above, the drivers have also started acting as models for various clothing companies. Looks have become more important for men, too. Below a quote from an interview with a woman who is not interested in F1. She answers the question whether a certain

kind of male ideal is discernible in F1 as follows:

No-o (laughter), no I don't think so, not if compared with like other sports, where the men usually are good-looking, have nice bodies that many perhaps watch in order to try to look like them in some way, but I don't think that Formula 1 drivers... they haven't really been that good-looking. (L 1438, female b. 1979)

Perhaps pressure by women also make men care more about the way they look, given that one thinks looking good is an ideal to strive for. One of the reasons for the change in men is the change in the situation of women. The traditional relation between men and women is therefore also changing and gender identity is subject to negotiation to a larger extent. Man has also become an object (Knutsen 1998, 52).

The women who most frequently appear on the TV screen during F1 broadcasts are the girlfriends and wives of the drivers. My informants find that they represent different roles. On the one hand, they can be seen as a new type of the decorous woman; they are there only "to be seen". On the other hand, they can be regarded as devoted supporters, which is to assign them a more active role. In any case, they represent the private sphere of the drivers and underline the drivers' status as spouses or boyfriends. There may be a conflict inherent in this, too. F1 has perhaps traditionally been something of a "bachelor sport", while the two presently most successful drivers both have a wife and children. If today's myths of masculinity are supposed to direct the men back into the private sphere, this is what might have happened within F1. Still, the drivers put their highly dangerous job first, which creates a conflict. Arild Knutsen, who has studied the construction of today's man in the tabloid press, says that being a father has become a new moral

project for men (Knutsen 1998, 50). Thus, the question is whether a man can be an F1 driver and parent at the same time. The interview with Mika Häkkinen in an F1 magazine on the web ends as follows:

Despite wife Eija waiting the couple's first child, Häkkinen responds to talk of retirement with a firm shake of the head. There is life in the old dog yet. He is an angry man, and the determination to avenge Schumacher's success this year will drive him on in 2001. (<http://www.atlasf1.com/2000/nov08/collings.html>)

Two ideals collide, and in this passage the "aggressive" F1 model for masculinity is given a positive charge and filled with vitality, even if the reporter first expresses some doubt. The clash of different male ideals is also problematic in society at large. In the Finland-Swedish newspaper *Vasabladet*, an article with the headline "New father roles are confusing" was published on 28 October 2000. In it, men's studies researcher Arto Tiihonen says that "men have ended up in a difficult situation where they are expected to be bachelors, have a relationship, make a career and be fathers at the same time". The problem is that all these male roles have different life values.

The fact that the lifestyle of F1 drivers seems to have changed is something that some of my male informants find regrettable. The drivers are now more "politically correct":

The old image of an F1 driver is this that he sits at a casino and throws away money like hell (laughter) and like being a playboy... well, as I said, it's a pity in a way that these don't exist any more, since they're so politically correct... and like Häkkinen now, Formula 1 is like his life, he's never like... no scandals, out partying and rampaging, in the 70's it was more

common that ... even during the Grand Prix weekends they were out partying on the Saturday night before the race... (L 1435, male b. 1978)

So F1 has not only become safer regarding the cars and the courses, but the drivers have also adapted a “safer” lifestyle. The risk-taking has been reduced. “In the old days” the sport was more extreme and therefore more “whole”, but now shifts from the “original” have taken place on many levels. If the drivers today are seen as being politically correct, the thought is that they were more rebellious earlier, that they challenged the established order and took risks. Thus, the un-ordered and wild is what is associated with the original and gets a positive quality, while today’s more “tame” drivers are seen as having a more ordered and “boring” life.

Formula 1 – a boy’s dream. Toy racetracks and computer games

Various toy cars and racetracks have been and still, to a large extent, are boys’ toys. Many boys dream of becoming racing drivers and perhaps they never stop dreaming? However, there is a difference between what is objectively realisable and an individual’s wishes. To actually become a racing driver is very difficult and, in the end, very few enter that career. Only a tiny elite get the opportunity to drive F1 cars. Playing F1 computer games provides a way of experiencing the feeling of driving an F1 car – and probably the closest most get to actually doing it. There seems to be something childish or perhaps boyish in playing these games. Most (male) interviewees reacted in an embarrassed/amused way when asked about this:

– Do you play these Formula games on the computer?

– No (laughter)

– Well, do your friends play?

–... yeah, I have some that do (laughter)

– Oh, do they have this complete kit with steering wheels and pedals and...

– Yes, they actually do, at least in high school there were some that did...but I don’t know, I don’t think that... well one can’t really know what they’ve got in their closets (laughter) (L 1430, male b. 1977)

F1 computer games with steering wheels and accelerator pedals can be regarded as toys. The interviewees have pointed out that F1 is something serious and real, or possibly a serious game, but never pure play. Perhaps play is not very highly valued and therefore it can be somewhat embarrassing to play as adult, something “to be hidden in the closet”. On the other hand, some of the interviewees did talk in quite a serious tone about the games. So, is it actually a game when they play F1 games on the computer, or something else?

The computer games are increasingly technologically advanced. In order for the experience of driving an F1 car to be as real as possible, it is important that the games are as realistic as possible and that all the details are up-to-date. For a maximal experience, one should have a kit with a steering wheel and accelerator and brake pedals. Views on whether it is a good or a bad thing that the games are difficult vary. Some think that the games are supposed to be difficult, since it is also difficult to drive Formula 1 in reality, whilst others do not have the patience to play if the game is too difficult. There are also varying views on whether more concentration is needed to play or to watch Formula 1:

Of course one has to be more concentrated when playing these games, since it is as easy to crash as if one was driving for real since they are so realistic these days. (L 1437, male b. 1977)

It is possible to engage strongly in the games, since they are so realistic, which is rather paradoxical. Driving a car on a computer is an example of the abstraction tendency that characterises modern society. But the purpose of it, that is, seeking experiences, is perhaps more typical of late modernity. Driving is lifted out of its context, but linked to reality by the games being made as realistic as possible, and by the players own knowledge of F1.

A step into “reality”

All my interviewees have a perception of what it would be like to see a race “in reality”. The overview of the events would be lost, but one would get a stronger audiovisual *experience* of the cars’ actual speed and not least of the atmosphere, which, to a large extent, cannot be conveyed by TV broadcasts. Thus, watching TV is a version of following F1 where the viewer perhaps has the strongest experience of being in control of the events. Witnessing a Formula 1 race on the spot is a totally different experience from watching it on TV. One informant gives a lively description of this experience:

... at least what I noticed was, well they are utterly skilled... it's the speed, the performance, like they never brake at all...it's like from 350 to 80 just like that... it's the noise, it's carnival, it's like the happening around it and there were like a hundred thousand, a hundred and fifty thousand people at the Nürburgring when I was there... everybody is happy and friends with each other. (L 1435, male b. 1978)

Another interviewee talks about her ideas about what an F1 race might be like:

At the same time perhaps I'd like to leave it being like “oh, imagine if one could, if one could...” instead of when one's seen it it's like “now I've seen it and well, what's

so extraordinary about it and one didn't see a thing and it seemed as if they drove really slowly” — it might get more linked with reality, but then again it's nice when it floats there on some unimaginable level. (L 1433, female b. 1979)

There is something late-modern in travelling to see an F1 race and not least in dreaming about going to see a race, to go into “reality”. There is a wish to be in the centre of events, to be part of a larger community and enter a reality that promises a penetrating, intense experience. It is something one can dream about, but at the same time fear that once actually being there it would not be that exciting, that the only feeling would be one of emptiness: “is this all?”; the dream would be shattered. This shows the duality in the individual's changing horizons of opportunity, which is a typical late-modern feature.

Excitement and/or meaninglessness

Formula 1 is not meaningless. It is filled with several meanings and values concerning, among other things, masculinity and femininity, national feeling, prestige, morality and order, which are not isolated concepts, but change with the society that surrounds them. I have tried to show how this dialogue about and negotiation of meaning takes place by focussing on how students watching Formula 1 on TV experience these changes. But how does Formula 1 become interesting and exciting to watch? It is, after all, simply cars driving around racetracks. The attitude to modernity called potentialising, making the late-modern lack of context intensive and exciting, is a possible explanation. However, it is rather *modernity being intensified* and not late-modernity. The modern belief in development and progress, and the capitalism dominating Formula 1 are perhaps not compatible with late-

modernity where “everything” can be questioned and changed. TV viewers reflect and take a stance on many issues pertaining to F1, and this attitude is often of a late-modern kind:

I'm a bit fascinated by this, that their fascination with speed and excitement... can be so huge and that they really, since of course they know that...any time might be their last. (L 1432, female b. 1979)

I find the above quote a good illustration of late-modern society's contradictory reaction to other people's total devotion to something. While seeing the meaninglessness in somebody risking their life for something like Formula 1, speed and excitement, one can also be fascinated by the fact that the drivers are so totally dedicated to what they believe in.

This essay was originally written in the autumn of 2000, and the situation in Formula 1 has changed since then. For example, Häkkinen no longer drives Formula 1.

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