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Quest for Freedom: Intense Embodied Experiences of Motorcycling

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Abstract:	This paper provides an insight into the embodied and sensorial experiences of motorcycling through a series of vignettes. Through a phenomenologically inspired approach I attempt 'to bring the body back in' and explore how tests of experience can cultivate a sensuous self by sharpening awareness of all the senses and extending the mind-body self to interconnect with a motorcycle. Motorcycling requires a sharpening of senses, meticulous preparation and swift recovery following setbacks. There may be risks attached to pursue tests of experiences, but new adventures and unique experiences can cultivate joy, fulfilment, enhance confidence and resilience, and provide an opportunity to grow and expand one's sense of self.

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Abstract

This paper provides an insight into the embodied and sensorial experiences of motorcycling through a series of vignettes. Through a phenomenologically inspired approach I attempt 'to bring the body back in' and explore how tests of experience can cultivate a sensuous self by sharpening awareness of all the senses and extending the mind-body self to interconnect with a motorcycle. Motorcycling requires a sharpening of senses, meticulous preparation and swift recovery following setbacks. There may be risks attached to pursue tests of experiences, but new adventures and unique experiences can cultivate joy, fulfilment, enhance confidence and resilience, and provide an opportunity to grow and expand one's sense of self.

Quest for Freedom: Intense Embodied Experiences of Motorcycling

You look at where you're going and where you are and it never makes sense, but then you look back at where you've been and a pattern starts to emerge (Robert Pirsig, 1991).

I'm not a biker, but I do ride a motorcycle. I check the time; I'm careful not to leave late to avoid needing to rush. It's a bit warmer than most days, but I still choose the textile gear over my leather suit. As I slip each leg into my black motorbike textile trouser, I feel the brash, protective armour brush past my foot and rest around my knee; a subconscious reminder of the risks involved with going out for a ride. I put on my extra layers and zip up my heated jacket just in case I need the extra heat to keep me warm. The purple inner lining flashes past me as I pull on my textile jacket; the only coloured clue that I am a woman on a motorbike, otherwise I'm disguised all in black. I wonder if I get mistaken for a teenage boy most of the time due to my small frame. The weight of the jacket is noticeable, and I feel the rigidity of the protection wrap round my shoulders and elbows. I pull up my textile trousers and slide my boots on, feeling the jacket squeeze tightly against my stomach which disrupts my breath. I stand near the front door folding the boots as I pull the zip up neatly securing it with the velcro. I pull my balaclava over my head and tuck my hair away from my face. I pick up my helmet and pull it firmly over my head; it's a tight fit but it needs to be to feel safe. The cushions on the inside press against my cheeks and I secure the strap. I put my phone in my pocket, make sure my pocket is zipped shut, I pick up my gloves and keys and walk out the front door. I crouch down and unlock my bike, catching my breath again as my gear tightens against my body. I put the keys in the ignition and turn it to 'on' and hear the whirring of the machine getting ready to go. I hold each glove; I get a whiff of the musty smell of the new leather and push each hand into the newly purchased gloves. The black and white leather is

1
2
3 shiny and stiff; my sore hands are a reminder of wearing them in. My gear restricts my
4 movement as I climb onto the seat, placing both feet on the ground. I lift the bike upright,
5
6 kick the stand away and remain balanced. I press the start button; a few ticks and there's a
7
8 speedy fuel injected start. I feel the purr of the engine and rev it just to be sure we're both
9
10 ready. I lift my left foot, balancing the bike as I shift my weight, then I press the clutch with
11
12 my left hand, and push my foot down on the peg to engage first gear. I feel a slight jolt as the
13
14 gear is engaged. I squeeze the throttle with my right hand, slowly release the clutch with my
15
16 left hand and start moving forward. As I move, I lift my right leg and place it on the other
17
18 peg; now, I start becoming at one with the bike. I ride carefully away weaving round the
19
20 vehicles on the roads and change gear as smoothly as I can; an art I'm always working on to
21
22 feel how the bike works. I feel a slightly odd sensation of vulnerability as I remember I'm not
23
24 strapped to anything; both feelings of fear and liberation flow through me. I'm part of the
25
26 bike as we're speeding across the ground with the wind blowing against my body; feeling
27
28 closer to the elements. The feel of the crosswind gusts, the wet from the rain, the chills from
29
30 the cold mornings, the heat from the hot sun, and the smells from the fields are a reminder of
31
32 how close I feel to the elements. It feels like a relief to be out; I've been craving freedom and
33
34 I feel closer to it in this moment especially during a time of so many restrictions. I start to feel
35
36 the coldness through my hands and my legs, so I turn on my heated grips and my heated
37
38 jacket to avoid feelings of discomfort. I see a fellow motorcyclist coming the other way and
39
40 we both nod to each; the hidden codes that car drivers don't see which makes me feel part of
41
42 the motorcycling fellowship acknowledging each other's plucky spirit. I feel closer to
43
44 freedom, like a bird being let out of their cage. This is 'low flying', skimming across the
45
46 ground, a breathlessness, and a sense of soaring through the air. But there are risks that are
47
48 immediate and my mind and body are alert and responsive. I feel a sense of aliveness
49
50 charging through my veins.
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* * * *

Women comprise of a fast-growing population among motorcycle riders even though women have ridden motorcycle since they were invented. For example, The Van Buran sisters rode the Indian power Plus (1000cc) coast-to-coast across the US in 60 days in 1916 and became famous for their other cross-country riding. Steve McQueen (1930-1980) noted “One of the things that make motorcycling so great is because it never fails to give you a feeling of freedom and adventure”. Women, like men, who ride motorcycles often report feeling a sense of freedom, excitement, and empowerment (Thompson, 2011). As a woman who rides a motorcycle, I agree with sentiments in that riding a motorcycle is what we do, not who we are, and findings indicate that female motorcyclists manipulate several meaningful symbols in order to redefine what has largely been viewed as a ‘deviant identity’ (Thompson, 2011). Motorcycling, along with other sports, such as mountaineering, cliff diving and skydiving has been associated with a deviant personality type defined as a ‘sensation seeker’. Zuckerman (2007) defined sensation seeking as the need for “varied, novel, complex, and intense sensations and experiences, and the willingness to take physical, social, legal, and financial risks for the sake of such experiences” (p. 49). Thrill seekers are not necessarily motivated by danger, however, they are “driven to conquer new challenges and soak up every experience life has to offer” (Carter, 2019; Psychology Today, 2021, para 2). There may be risks attached to pursue those experiences, but new adventures and unique experiences can cultivate joy, fulfilment, enhance confidence and resilience, and provide an opportunity to grow and expand one’s sense of self.

1
2
3 There are many lessons we can learn from those who hold such qualities which can act as a
4 buffer against the stress of life (Psychology Today, 2021). The thrill or ‘adrenaline rush’
5
6 motorcyclists may experience from riding (Sato, 1988) can be understood through the
7
8 concept of ‘flow’. Flow is an optimal psychological state, which enables athletes to optimise
9
10 their potential and to perform at their personal best. This experience has been portrayed
11
12 across a whole spectrum of sports and physical activity participants, such as rock climbers
13
14 (Csikszentmihályi, 1975), American mountaineers (Mitchell 1983), Japanese motorcycle
15
16 gang members (Sato 1988), Canadian chess players (Puddephatt 2003), Dutch ballet dancers
17
18 (Aalten 2004), Skydiving and climbing (Hardie-Bick & Bonner, 2016) and distance runners
19
20 (Allen Collinson, 2003). As Csikszentmihályi (1997) delineates:

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25
26 These exceptional moments are what I have called *flow experiences*. The metaphor of
27
28 ‘flow’ is one that many people have used to describe the sense of effortless action
29
30 they feel in moments that stand out as the best in their lives. Athletes refer to it as
31
32 ‘being in the zone,’ religious mystics as being in ‘ecstasy,’ artists and musicians as
33
34 aesthetic rapture. Athletes, mystics, and artists do very different things when they
35
36 reach flow, yet their descriptions of the experience are remarkably similar (1997,
37
38 p.29).
39
40
41

42 This can also take the form of an adrenaline rush and undoubtedly denotes an intense sensory
43
44 experience. Jackson and Csikszentmihályi (1999) designated nine antecedents of flow, which
45
46 are termed: challenge-skills balance, action-awareness merging, clear goals, unambiguous
47
48 feedback, concentration on the task at hand, sense of control, loss of self-consciousness, time
49
50 transformation and autotelic experience. During these intense embodied moments is when the
51
52 body may *eu-appear*; where one can attend to her/his body as something positive and that this
53
54 attention need not result in discomfort or alienation (Leder, 1990).
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3 As such, through autoethnography, I respond to the call for more corporeal and ‘fleshy’
4 perspectives of positive embodied learning through the exploration of the sensuous body-self
5 in the artfulness of motorcycling. As such, through autoethnography, I respond to the call for
6 more corporeal and ‘fleshy’ perspectives of embodied learning through the exploration of the
7 sensuous body-self in the specialised skill of motorcycling.
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Autoethnography and the Phenomenology of the body

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18
19 To address a lack of autoethnographic research on motorcycling (Wiggen, 2019; Austin,
20 2010) and more specifically women’s motorcycling I take a phenomenologically inspired
21 approach. This approach requires the study of the lived body, attempting ‘to bring the body
22 back in’ (Allen-Collinson, 2009, p. 279) while recognising the interface for the body to
23 interact with nearby objects. To begin with the lived body is to understand the physiological
24 as always intertwined with, and an expression of, the body’s intentionality: the concept that
25 consciousness is always consciousness of something, and thus intentional – always directed
26 towards something (Leder, 2001; Merleau-Ponty, 2001). Merleau-Ponty (2001) focuses on
27 bodily intentionality – the body as an attitude directed towards an existing or potential task.
28 For him, intentionality, perception, and action are fundamentally intertwined. See Allen-
29 Collinson (2011) for examples of Merleau-Ponty’s existential approach and the concept of
30 intentionality. A negative conception of the body has often prevailed in Western philosophy
31 (Zeiler, 2010). As Leder notes, there are forms of dys-appearance as well as differentiating
32 between forms of eu-appearance where an individual can attend to her or his body as
33 something positive, reflectively and pre-reflectively without resulting in a sense of discomfort
34 or alienation (Leder, 1990; Zeiler, 2010). I refer to “intense embodiment” which describes
35 “periods of heightened awareness of corporeal existence” and “connotes a positively
36 heightened sense of corporeal ‘aliveness’, of the sense working at an intense level” (Allen-
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3 Collinson & Owton, 2014, p.247). In this sense, women's motorcycling experiences should
4
5 be understood in the context of the person's existential grasp of the world (Leder, 2001;
6
7 Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Commensurate with Merleau-Ponty's (1969) interpretation of the
8
9 merging of mind-body-world, and how one opens one's senses to the world, I reflect on the
10
11 interconnectedness of environment, motorcycle, and body. Whilst attempting to capture
12
13 something of the phenomenology of motorcycling, this is not an attempt to represent a
14
15 conclusive account of a woman's motorcycling experience but aims to express a sensuous
16
17 embodied being-in-the-world.
18
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23

The Research Project

24
25
26 I purchased my first motorcycle in May 2020 and since completing my full motorcycle
27
28 licence in August 2020, I maintained a detailed research log with an aim to become a woman
29
30 who rides a motorcycle and to participate on the track as a 'test of experience'. My first
31
32 motorcycle was a Kawasaki ER-5 (2002) and the next motorcycle I bought was a Honda
33
34 CB500F (2015) which is what I rode while keeping very detailed and critical field notes in
35
36 personal logs and reflective journals (Sparkes and Smith, 2014). As both the author and the
37
38 focus of the story, similarly to previous autoethnographies (Author 2015) at the intersection
39
40 of the person and the cultural (Ellis, 2009), lived, corporeal experiences of motorcycling are
41
42 portrayed through a series of vignettes.
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Mind-body-motorcycle interconnectedness

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51 As I feel myself flow through the air, my hand on the throttle squeezing it towards me,
52
53 picking up speed, feeling the air press against me harder as I gain speed. My lid protects me
54
55 from the air pressing too hard on my face and the wind making eyes water. I listen to the
56
57 sound of the engine growling, working hard, getting louder as the right time comes to change
58
59
60

1
2
3 gear, then I quickly close the throttle swiftly enough not to feel the motorcycle slow down as
4
5 I flick my toe up and click into the next gear. Listening acutely to the sound and feel indicates
6
7 I can squeeze the throttle and gain speed again. This is known as quick shifting manually (not
8
9 using the clutch). The connection between my hands, my feet, and the motorcycle, works best
10
11 when I'm not thinking, when I'm just *feeling* the way and am at one with my motorcycle.
12
13
14 Once I've reached top gear, there's a smoothness with the ride; I feel like I'm flying. I'm
15
16 completely alert but I'm in a trance of speed with endorphins raging through my body. There
17
18 are times when I need to be conscious of looking ahead and not following the road; I have to
19
20 make myself look for the vanishing point or else there's a risk I might fixate. If I slip a gear
21
22 with the brash revving noise; that's when I am suddenly reminded of the mechanical
23
24 workings of the motorcycle beneath me. The intruding machine emerges as a 'foreign thing'
25
26 and becomes as 'other' to the body-self.
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33 * * * *

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37
38 Pirsig writes about motorcycling:

39
40 In a car, you're always in a compartment, and because you're used to it you don't
41
42 realise that through that car window everything you see is just more TV. You're a
43
44 passive observer and it is moving by you boringly in a frame. On a cycle the frame is
45
46 gone. You're completely in contact with it all. You're in the scene, not just watching
47
48 it anymore, and the sense of presence is overwhelming (Pirsig, 1991).
49

50
51 Cole (2017) notes "riding is a total-body experience, which requires all our extremities and
52
53 mental faculties to work seamlessly with the machine". Cole (2017) refers to the concept of
54
55 peripersonal space which expands to include the area that the tool or machine permits us to
56
57 interact with: "The peripersonal space consists of a region immediately surrounding the body,
58
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60

1
2
3 characterised by a high degree of multisensory integration between visual, tactile and auditory
4 information, which differs from farther regions of space.” The peripersonal space, mainly based
5
6 on the integration of tactile and visual information coming from the body and the space
7
8 immediately around the body, constitutes a privileged interface for the body to interact with
9
10 nearby objects (Cardinali, Brozzoli, and Farne, 2009). In this sense, it is about becoming one
11
12 with our motorcycle and I reflect on Merleau-Ponty’s (2001) “portrayal of the intertwining of
13
14 body-and-world and how our bodies are fundamentally linked to the elemental world as a
15
16 central structure of our physical-cultural experiences” (Allen-Collinson et al., 2019, p.14).
17
18 Indeed, as noted by Allen-Collinson et al. (2019, p.10), “we must learn how to contend with all
19
20 its aspects and engage in weather work” in order to ride effectively, “and (as far as possible)
21
22 avoid incurring injury” or collision.
23
24
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29
30

31 Some argue that bodily sensations come before awareness in a body-space as a required
32
33 framework of location, differentiation and individuation (known as proprioception)
34
35 (O’Shaughnessy, 1995), however as Paterson argues, “Rather than discrete and separate,
36
37 these senses act in concert to help give us our embodied perceptions of space” (2009, p.736).
38
39 Proprioception can be described as our sense of balance, position, and muscular tension,
40
41 provided by receptors in muscles, joints, tendons, and the inner ear. These bodily (somatic)
42
43 senses inform our perception of ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, of inner and outer space (Paterson,
44
45 2009). “Rather than discrete and separate, these senses act in concert to help give us our
46
47 embodied perceptions of space” (Paterson, 2009, p.768). Through learning to ride a
48
49 motorcycle, one can develop an attuned awareness to the environment and an interconnected
50
51 attachment to the motorcycle while experiencing intense pleasurable feelings. Intense
52
53 feelings of pleasure means that one may not be able to attend to other things apart from the
54
55 bodily ‘here and now’ which may elicit feelings of flow.
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Quest for Excitement: The Superbike

“Right, I’ve put it in ‘rain’ mode so it’s not as lethal!” He says as he stands next to me showing me the controls on the BMW S1000RR. I’m sitting on a 200BHP machine that can launch me 0-100mph in about 5 seconds; that’s quite a daunting but exciting prospect! I balance myself on the machine, with my toes just touching the ground either side. I am crouched forward and hitch one foot up on the pegs; they’re higher than my pegs on my CB500F. My body being in such a different position makes me recognise I’m on a super bike as they tend to have higher pegs and lower handlebars for that racing position. It makes me feel ready for action. I start the engine and test the throttle; I feel the hyper intensity of the engine revving as I twist it. I feel the vibrations of the engine race through me. It excites me but I try and remain calm. Managing that arousal is part of the skill and means it’s either fun or stressful. I’m on an open road with good visibility to make sure I’m safe and have all my gear on as usual. I look carefully around and pull away from the side. I go steady and the motorcycle is surprisingly easy to ride. I feel a bit awkward as it’s not my usual position and it takes a while to adjust. Once I ride for a while, attention adjusts from my bodily awkwardness to the motorcycle and how the handling is. I start to feel part of the RR and my attention extends to anticipating what’s ahead of us.

When the first opportunity for a long straight arises, I open the throttle, but not too much. I feel the bite! The RR is immediately responsive, and speeds up faster than I can even think. There’s no thinking, there’s only responding. I feel the thunder of the wind and the engine through my lid, but that noise disappears into the background as I focus on the here and now. The next time, I keep the RR in a low gear and rip up to 8000rpm. As soon as I turn the throttle, I feel a sudden rush in my chest and a pull in my arms as we accelerate ahead like a

1
2
3 rocket. I'm totally breathless and feel such a rush and experience a thrilling feeling I've never
4
5 felt before on a motorcycle. I feel blood rushing to various parts of my body. I can't help but
6
7 laugh as I start slowing down and letting that moment sink in. I feel ecstatic and euphoric
8
9 from the rush. There's an excitement from the fear of risk but also the speed that I felt flow
10
11 through my body.
12

13
14 "Did you enjoy that?"

15
16 "Wow, that's like nothing I've felt!" I say smiling.

17
18 "I've never seen you like this!" He laughs.

19
20 My wide eyes are bright, happy and my body's triggered ready for action; there's a feeling of
21
22 being completely and utterly alive!
23

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28 * * * *

29
30
31
32
33 Both pleasure and pain can be experienced in a person's body and *eu*-appearance can take
34
35 place when someone, learning an activity gets it right, in this case riding a motorcycle. *Eu*-
36
37 appearance of the body implies pleasure, comfort, and harmony (Leder, 1990). The body can
38
39 *eu*-appear to the individual without this pleasure being secured with or through others. When
40
41 experiencing one's body in positive terms one can feel precision, the control and strength in
42
43 her or his movements, even if she or he may not explicitly reflect on this bodily feel in the
44
45 moment (Zeiler, 2010). This sense is different from where one might think so much about
46
47 how to ride that one cannot get into the zone or the flow, or where the body 'disappears'
48
49 from one's explicit attention when they know how to ride well (Zeiler, 2010). For example, I
50
51 may ride along a motorway and 'lose myself' in thought and forget where I've just ridden
52
53 because I wasn't *conscious* of the 'here and now'; I may or may not experience bodily
54
55 pleasure, but it is not *intentional*. In such a case, one has learnt the skill of motorcycling and
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1
2
3 has “incorporated” the skill of motorcycling into their body schemas; into their “systems of
4 sensory-motor abilities” (Zeiler, 2010, p.10). Zeiler (2010, p.10) suggests that, in the case of
5 dancers, “the skill has become a part of their bodily know-how”. Someone whose body *eu-*
6 appears while riding a motorcycle has not incorporated this skill in the way Merleau-Ponty
7 (1945) explains knowledge; without perceptual monitoring.
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17 The meaning of flow refers to the idea about circulating, moving, or running smoothly,
18 steadily, and easily with unbroken continuity, as in the manner characteristic of a fluid
19 (online dictionary). Csíkszentmihályi (1990) has studied the phenomenon extensively and
20 has also linked diverse reports (to mundane activities such as driving a car) under the general
21 umbrella term *flow*. Flow is “the state in which people are so involved in an activity that
22 nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even
23 at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it’ (2002, p.4). Csikszentmihalyi suggests that for
24 someone to fully enjoy high-risk pursuits, the level of danger must be proportionate to the
25 participants’ level of ability. Therefore, an individual should be presented with opportunities
26 for action, as well as clear, realistic goals and immediate feedback on performance (Hardie-
27 Bick & Bonner, 2016). Csikszentmihalyi (1990) suggests that we tend to be the most
28 engaged, and have the most enjoyment, when an activity’s challenges match our skills.
29 These experiences can be derived in the course of participating in an activity, such as high-
30 risk sports, such as sky diving, rock climbing or in this case, motorcycling. Notably, a
31 defining feature of this state is that of a profound subjective *loss of self-consciousness*
32 (Csíkszentmihályi, 1997) where the body might ‘dis-appear’ (Leder, 1990). Samudra (2008),
33 drawing upon phenomenology, defines this further by suggesting that such a state of flow,
34 which involves effective body-mind harmoniousness, is *hyperconscious* rather than
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3 *unconscious*. She draws on her own experiences as a martial artist. Samudra makes reference
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5 to Csíkszentmihályi, (1990) and argues that martial artists are expected to:

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8 act with lightning speed against opponents, without having to think or reason about
9
10 the best defensive or offensive moves to make. Those who can perform it well claim
11
12 that . . . the everyday experience of duality between mind and body is transformed
13
14 into a harmonious one-pointedness of mind (p.106, cited in Samudra, 2008, p.678).

15
16
17 Motorcycling requires similar qualities and a high level of self-control which is characterised
18
19 by an ability to make decisions about current behaviour based on considering the long-term
20
21 consequences of that behaviour (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990). When we experience flow,
22
23 “we liberate ourselves from societal pressures, we find more enjoyment in our daily lives, and
24
25 we gain better control over our minds” (Cole, 2017). Drawing on the work of
26
27 Csíkszentmihályi, if an activity is too easy then we get bored, but if the activity is too
28
29 difficult then we become overwhelmed and feel anxious (Cole, 2017). In between these two
30
31 states we can find optimal engagement, feelings of pleasure and enjoyment: flow. As a result,
32
33 Cole (2017) suggests an 80% rule of attention and engagement and cautions against 100%
34
35 capacity which could result in disaster. In this way, flow isn’t just an enjoyable state of being,
36
37 it is about learning to direct your attention, gain independence from exterior rewards, and
38
39 ultimately, living a happy and fulfilled life. As Cole (2017) notes, we should try and set
40
41 ourselves appropriate challenges because “riding motorcycles is fun, but it’s not just fun. It’s
42
43 thrilling, it’s consuming. It’s a meaningful challenge that helps us find meaning in life.”
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51 **Track Day**

52
53 I’ve arrived at my first track day. I’m riding on my Honda CB500F and there’s a buzz of fast
54
55 bikes circulating round the parking area. There’s a constant thunder of different engine
56
57 sounds with a continuous high pitch intense revving from the motorcycles zipping round the
58
59
60

1
2
3 track. The sun is burning down on my black leather suit and there's not much area with
4
5 shade. I recognise that I'm going to be doing "heat work" today to avoid getting dehydrated.
6
7
8
9

10 The first two groups go out before me: the intermediate, then the advanced group. It looks
11
12 busier than I thought it would be and they look like they're going round faster than I thought
13
14 too. As I watch the motorcycles zoom past me in a blur, I can feel a flutter in my chest start to
15
16 prepare my body for action. Before I know it, it's time to get kitted up and get in line with the
17
18 rest for our session. My leathers hug my body much tighter than my textiles. Since it's so hot
19
20 I have fewer clothes underneath though, just jeans, a vest and a T-shirt. Even that feels like
21
22 too many clothes in this heat - it must be over 25 degrees C. I zip up my one-piece leather
23
24 suit, pull my silk balaclava over my head, slip my helmet on and secure it under my chin; a
25
26 bit more tightly than usual. I pull my gloves on and start to feel the adrenaline starting to flow
27
28 through my body. I can feel my breath become slightly quicker as I climb onto my CB500F. I
29
30 feel nervous but focus my attention and actions on riding my motorcycle towards the pit. I
31
32 meet the other growling motorcycles lined up in the pit getting ready to go.
33
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40 Since it's my first track day and I arrived only for the afternoon, I get a sighting lap with one
41
42 of the instructors. A woman greets me, "you can follow that instructor in the yellow vest,
43
44 over to the right"

45
46 "Over to the right?" She nods and I ride over towards the yellow vest, but he rides off before
47
48 I get there, and another motorcyclist jumps in front of me. I assume I'm following both, but
49
50 they zoom off so fast I'm left behind. Suddenly, I feel thrown in a sea of speed with
51
52 motorcyclists speeding all around me. I struggle to focus on the yellow vest as it blends into
53
54 the distance amongst the other motorcyclists. I feel stressed but thrown into the deep end and
55
56 I can't do anything but go for it. I look desperately for signs of what lines I should be riding,
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3 what speed I should be going and my positioning on my motorcycle. I feel surrounded by
4 motorcycles, but then I'm left trailing behind. My body feels in shock and I keep seeking
5 control. I feel behind the pack, behind the motorcycle but I carry on as best as I can. I feel
6 slow as I'm lapped by other motorcycles. I'm aware of lots of other bodies around me riding
7 faster; they seem more confident than me. A couple whizz by me closely and a few times I
8 feel a rush and a sudden sweat as I hear them thunder past me. It all feels like a blur as I try
9 and balance speed with the throttle, turning round the corners and my body's positioning,
10 working my motorcycle along some sort of racing line. On about lap 5, I'm speeding down
11 the straight and lose focus for a second, I experience 'corner rush' and quickly brake as I feel
12 the motorcycle wobble erratically before turning into the bend; I stare at the grass ahead but
13 force myself to release the brake and throw it in, saving it - just a few breathless moments!

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31 I see the chequered flag before I know it and I ride off the track and park up. I sit on the
32 motorcycle for a minute, take a deep breath and let it all sink in. I pull my helmet off and feel
33 the hot air against my sweaty face. I feel in shock and demoralised by my performance. I can
34 feel it consumed in my deflated hunched body as I try and process what just happened. I feel
35 my right-hand throbbing as I release it from the throttle; it had tightened without with
36 realising and my arms ached from the tension. Riding round the track felt like it was all
37 throttle – *EEEEEEEEEEEEEE, EEEEEEEEEEE, eeeeeeeeEEEE, eeeeeeeeEEE!*

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49 I decide to sit the next one out – I had no idea it would be this exhausting, this fast, this busy
50 and stressful and wondered whether I should even go back on. Maybe this isn't for me. I find
51 some shade to recover from the heat and unzip my leather suit to let my upper body breath.
52 My t-shirt is wet through and I can feel my suit and armour glued to my legs from the sweat.
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60 After a good rest, some shade, a Fanta, and a magnum, I'm ready to try again. Sitting out of

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3 the next session was a good idea – I think about what to do differently. I know what to expect
4 this time and am reassured that the track will be quieter. There are very few women here, as
5 expected. I've noticed one in the advanced group who has been chatty, one young girl in the
6 intermediate and another woman in the novice group with me. We all acknowledge and
7 notice each other since we know we stand out. It feels like we choose colours differently and
8 carefully using the significance of pink to show or hide ourselves. Once we're on the track, I
9 don't notice who's who though.

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11
12 Despite feeling completely dejected after the first one, I recover quickly and want to try
13 again. On the final session of the day, I'm back on. I climb onto my motorcycle again with
14 my legs feeling like jelly. This time, they give me an "under instruction" yellow vest and I
15 follow an instructor, Pete, on his racer motorcycle. This time there are fewer motorcycles on
16 the track; the quietness means I can focus on Pete. I follow him closely and he keeps
17 checking behind to see if I'm there. I follow his line and immediately feel more confident.
18 Fewer distractions help my attention and I feel more centred. I feel less stressed than the last
19 time and my head feels clearer. The track feels wider, and I feel more in control of where I'm
20 going. I start to feel my flow and follow him; I copy him, his positioning on the track and on
21 his motorcycle. I start anticipating, feeling ahead of the bike, turning earlier before the
22 corners; a different type of turning than riding on the road. During most of the track, there are
23 moments when I start to feel it without thinking, just riding. It's when I come up to the
24 'hairpin'; this is when I start to think about what I need to do. My line of sight withdraws,
25 and my focus is more immediate. I find myself going wide and trying to avoid the grass.
26 Again, I must consciously avoid looking at the grass, so I don't ride onto it. Eventually, I do
27 manage a sharper turn on the hairpin and suddenly feel my foot brush the floor which
28 surprises me and draws my attention away from the track. The immediacy of the 'bus stop'

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3 corners bring my attention back to the track and I'm back in the flow again. Then there's
4
5 another moment where I experience a corner rush again. I brake harshly and a few
6
7 motorcycles pass me as I veer to the right on a left-hand corner and stare at the grass ahead of
8
9 me. I roll round to the left and continue the corner - another save!
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15 Despite these moments of disruption to my experience, I feel so much better going round the
16
17 track this time. I'm enjoying it and starting to *feel* my way as my instructor waves me past
18
19 him. I ride into the fast corner at 80mph, with a steady pace, steady position, and if I feel
20
21 myself drifting too far outside then I can control the throttle and my wheel to position myself
22
23 again. On one of the corners, I see a rider ahead of me who I think I can overtake. I keep
24
25 composed, I can feel the speed in my body through the motorcycle, I edge on the throttle and
26
27 set my vision ahead of him. I continue the corner and as I hit the straight, I increase my speed
28
29 even more and pass him to the left. I move ahead and position myself for the next corner
30
31 moving to the right and throwing myself and the motorcycle into the bend leaning as much as
32
33 I feel comfortable while changing down gears, reducing the throttle, and braking. It's a quick
34
35 corner, a left then right, so I ride and move to the right and as I feel myself coming out of the
36
37 bend I accelerate to the next corner and I'm away. That felt ecstatic, I felt competent, and I
38
39 was really enjoying the thrill and mastering the skill involved. When we stop after the
40
41 session, I pull in and the instructor comes over to give me some feedback about where to look
42
43 when I'm riding round the hairpin since he noticed I was riding wide each time.
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49 "I dunno where you're looking but I'm looking at the next corner"

50
51 "Yeah, I'm probably looking at the corner I'm in" I reply thinking back.

52
53 "Yeah, you need to look where you want to be not where you are" he advises. "But you
54
55 overtook a Speed Triple. I was looking at you, thinking, go on, go on... go for it and
56
57 yeaaaaaaaah you took him! Well done!"
58
59
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1
2
3 “Haha yeah, thanks!” I reply, buzzing with energy. I feel totally different to the last time.

4
5 “You look like you enjoyed this one... to be fair, you were riding alright *especially* for your
6
7 first time on a track!”

8
9
10 “Yeah, I reaaaally enjoyed this time!” I say with my eyes wide, adrenaline flowing through
11
12 me and a big grin on my face. “Thanks so much!”
13

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21 These vignettes provide an insight into the transition involved when transforming the body
22
23 with motorcycling gear (Murphy, 2016). This transformation prepares me for an embodied
24
25 experience of riding where my body movements are altered and restricted by the protective
26
27 clothing. These vignettes illuminate the multi-sensory and vigilant experience of riding on the
28
29 road negotiating the constantly unfolding environment as the bike and I become
30
31 intercorporeally enmeshed and attuned. As Murphy (2016) notes, to ensure vigilance the
32
33 motorcyclist must be attuned to the senses: reading movements in the traffic, listening to the
34
35 sounds of engines, and understanding our own levels of competency. A motorcyclist must
36
37 anticipate, be cool under pressure, be attuned to a constantly moving environment at speed,
38
39 and position the body-motorcycle such as riding a ‘racing line’ which positions a rider
40
41 effectively round a corner. On a track day, the sensorial experience intensifies as my attention
42
43 shifts to focusing on other motorcyclists which distracts me from my riding skills. I am
44
45 working at 100% where I feel intense emotions and at times, I feel overwhelmed. Once my
46
47 attention focuses on my riding as opposed to other riders, then my workload capacity is
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49 reduced, my riding improves, and I experience enjoyment and bodily pleasure from moments
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51 of being ‘in the zone’.
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3 Motorcycling is associated with the notion of edge and the fragility of the motorcycling body.
4
5 Lyng (1990, p.857) describes edgework as taking different forms: “life versus death,
6
7 consciousness versus unconsciousness, sanity versus insanity, and ordered sense of self and
8
9 environment, versus a disordered self and environment”. Making a mistake in motorcycling
10
11 at speed, ‘going over the edge’, has fatal consequences (Murphy, 2016). Extreme sports are
12
13 traditionally explored from a risk-taking perspective which often assumes that participants do
14
15 not experience fear or that people who engage in high risk sports are just adrenaline junkies
16
17 searching for their next thrill or adrenaline rush (Brymer and Schweitzer, 2013). Brymer and
18
19 Schweitzer (2013), however, argue that people who engage in extreme sports are not
20
21 irresponsible risk-takers with a death wish, but are highly trained individuals with a deep
22
23 knowledge of themselves, the activity, and the environment, who engage to have an
24
25 experience that is life-enhancing and life-changing. Extreme sport participants face intense
26
27 fears, accept that control of the future is not always possible and move through these fears to
28
29 participate fully in the action (Brymer and Schweitzer, 2013). Crust et al. (2019) found that it
30
31 was essential for skilled and experienced mountaineers to make choices to reduce risk and
32
33 enhance personal control. Csikzentmihalyi noted that “People who learn to control inner
34
35 experience will be able to determine the quality of their lives, which is as close as any of us
36
37 can come to being happy.” Motorcycling, like other high-risk sports, is not necessarily about
38
39 a ‘deviant identity’ but it requires a sharpening of senses, meticulous preparation, high work
40
41 rates, swift recovery following setbacks and thriving in challenging situations (Crust et al.,
42
43 2019). While there can be high risks involved in motorcycling, it is much more than seeking a
44
45 quick thrill. It is about a sense of belonging to a particular way of life, a sense of
46
47 accomplishment, a sense of challenge and testing your own skills that keep your mind-body
48
49 and your responses sharp; there is a sense of aliveness. Additionally, a motorcycle can be a
50
51 project which extends part of oneself; each motorcycle tells a story where emotional
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3 connections occur (Pirsig, 1991). Participation in such activities can facilitate more positive
4
5 psychological experiences and allow people to experience freedom and re-connect with
6
7 nature (Brymer and Schweitzer, 2013). This quest for freedom may be driven by the
8
9 controlled environment many of us find ourselves in and can be understood through the
10
11 notion of 'edgework' (Lyng, 1990). As Adams (1995) states "We have a profoundly
12
13 ambivalent attitude to risk - all the heroes you find are the risk-takers, then you turn around
14
15 and find the Health and Safety Executive looking over your shoulder making sure that you
16
17 are safe". Edgework is described as a temporary escape from social boundaries and the search
18
19 for mental/physical borderline experiences (Lyng, 1990) which can be experienced through
20
21 riding a motorcycle.
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29 As noted in previous autoethnographic accounts (Allen-Collinson & Owton, 2015; Owton,
30
31 2012; Owton, 2015), my newly forming sensuous self will never now be complete as I
32
33 continue to put my 'new me' to numerous 'tests of experience'. Through the intense
34
35 participation of a 'track day', I engaged my senses with an aim to cultivate a sensuous self by
36
37 sharpening awareness of *all* the senses and extending my mind-body self, interconnecting
38
39 with my motorcycle. Learning to ride a motorcycle which is perceived as high risk requires
40
41 perseverance and facing fears associated with self-transformation which involves an arduous
42
43 process of adaptation. These tests of experience I continue to engage in are characterised by
44
45 individual transformation, self-reinvention, and metaphorical rebirth (Frank, 1995) and
46
47 involve transcending gender roles, developing acute and sharp sensory attunement with mind-
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49 body-world.
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