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The Arts of the Motorcycle: Biology, Culture, and Aesthetics in Technological Choice

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ESSAY REVIEW

The Arts of the Motorcycle

Biology, Culture, and Aesthetics in Technological Choice

STEVEN L. THOMPSON

Anyone trying to understand the role of the motorcycle in society today routinely encounters one variant or another of a line used by some Harley-Davidson fanatics to explain why they love their bikes: “If you have to ask, you won’t get it.” Though this is meant to be a conversation-stopper, to anybody serious about researching the many cultural dimensions of motorcycling it’s a sign of beliefs and emotions underlying technological choices that are almost religious in their intensity—and hence tantalizing hints of human truths-in-hiding. The task for the researcher thus becomes getting to and then understanding what’s behind those beliefs, which are so often dressed as fashions and obscured by passions.

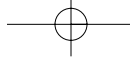
The passions that drive technological choices obviously involve aesthetics, and some thirty years ago, Cyril Stanley Smith proposed that we should incorporate an understanding of aesthetics at what he called the “structural” level in technohistorical research. “Everything complicated must have had a history,” Smith wrote, and in his essay “On Art, Invention, and Technology” he laid out the many reasons why “neither art nor history can be understood without paying attention to the role of technology; and technology cannot be understood without history and art.”¹ In the context of studying motorcyclists and their machines’ roles in history, I have concluded that the most productive approach to understanding the technolog-

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1. Cyril Stanley Smith, “On Art, Invention, and Technology,” in *A Search for Structure: Selected Essays on Science, Art, and History* (Cambridge, Mass.: 1970, reprint 1981), 327, 331.





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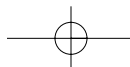
ical choices people have made with motorcycles begins with a Smithian analysis of their roles as “art.”

I use “art” here in quotation marks not to suggest that motorcycles might be a sort of faux art but because, as I’ll try to show later, the word actually should encompass much more about what we do for “artistic” pleasure with, to, and because of motorcycles than we usually realize. In the essay noted above, Smith pointed out how many fundamental technological processes and products were created specifically for aesthetic pleasure and appropriated after their discovery or invention by innovators seeking so-called practical applications in everything from metallurgy (“begun with the making of necklace beads”) to rotary mechanical motion (“first used in the drilling and shaping of necklace beads”). He suggested that historians who wanted to understand technology in history needed to understand the “relation between real structure and properties” in the complex structures created by human behavior, just as “the messier sciences such as old-fashioned biology or my own metallurgy have been concerned with complex structures.” Smith was particularly intrigued by the then-recent development of what he called “new methods capable of revealing the whole structure at all levels” to physical scientists, methods that, he believed, had the benefit of “thereby incidentally opening a new level of funeous record for study by historians.” (“Funeous” was Smith’s term for the “internal structural features” that arise from the history of “everything complicated,” and which “provide a specific record of it.” He named these “structural details of memory . . . after the unfortunate character in Borges’s story ‘Funes the Memorious’ who remembered everything”).²

My own efforts to understand motorcycling have shown me the value of the conclusions Smith reached about relating “funeous” and “afuneous” details by means of careful structural studies of the “real structures” involved. With motorcycling, the most important “real structures” are the riders—human beings—and their machines, which both must be analyzed not simply as what they are or seem to be “in culture” but as what they are as structures, one biological and the other mechanical. The bike and rider together make up a kind of “complex structure” that is assembled first and foremost at what the human-factors profession calls the “Man-Machine Interface,” or MMI, even before the cultural constructs are built around, for, and because of the bike-rider combination. Focusing analytical attention on the MMI and what it does when the bike’s wheels roll is how I’ve come to believe that aesthetics—“art”—is at the heart of the matter of motorcycling behavior, at least at the individual level.

Thinking about motorcycling in this Smithian way requires one to seek “structural” knowledge from the biological sciences, including psychobiology, as well as from sociocultural and technological disciplines. Despite the

2. Ibid., 328.



many controversies that still swirl about how much of human behavior is attributable to genetics (and thus about human nature itself), the evidence generated by bioscientists since the 1960s persuades me that we are much more genetically “hard-wired” for certain behaviors than has been widely believed. Especially for the understanding of how people make technological choices, the findings and hypotheses of such researchers as Marvin Zuckerman and his colleagues at the University of Delaware regarding the causes of “sensation-seeking” cannot be ignored.³

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But understanding motorcycling also demands a knowledge of what people have built, what they’ve bought, and what they’ve done to and with their machines, and this sort of understanding has heretofore largely been the province of nonacademic historians writing popular histories for motorcyclists themselves, usually built around specific types or makes (“marques”) of motorcycles. However, three recent developments have changed the picture. The first is the phenomenal rise of worldwide interest in old bikes. Itself linked to other, similarly backward-looking, sociotechnological trends in the developed world,⁴ it has led many old-bike hobbyists to seek more depth in their understanding of their collectibles and of the eras in which they were built and sold than is usually found in enthusiast historiography. It’s been my experience that this search for information (a hunger for knowledge for purposes other than its intragroup operational leverage⁵) is itself an artifact of the second important recent development

3. See, e.g., Marvin Zuckerman, *Behavioral Expressions and Biosocial Bases of Sensation Seeking* (New York, 1994).

4. Examples include the continuing interest among Japanese audiophiles (mostly male) in 1950s and early 1960s American hi-fi technology and widespread interest among American men in old cars, old airplanes, old firearms, old photographic equipment, and old (mechanical) timepieces, echoed in some instances by similar European trends. Conventional assessments of these and related phenomena cite some version of Alvin Toffler’s *Future Shock* as the background cause for which this ostensibly nostalgia-based activity is the effect, and some believe that the key is the accessibility, in the fiddling-with-it sense, of almost any pre-Digital Age hardware.

5. Status competition in contemporary male-dominated enthusiast groups such as old-bike clubs, for example, almost always involves more than just owning the biggest or best collection, as wealthy new collectors quickly discover. The ziggurats of status in such groups often feature at their peaks elder craftsmen such as restorers, tuners, or racers who are known to have been deeply involved with the group’s favored marque or type of machine when the now-old bikes were new, while the “rich guys” find themselves relegated to perches far down the pyramid, often to their visible frustration. Tribal knowledge-keepers sometimes attain very high status when they too are known to have been involved “since the beginning,” or at least for a long time. Thus a new enthusiast finds that the paths to status in the group demand the acquisition of insider knowledge, expressed most effectively in personal restoration skills, less effectively in riding skills, but always including verbal recitation of lore at group gatherings. With the passage of time, the required knowledge-base for high status has expanded, and because enthusiast historians have traditionally supplied only certain kinds of information (limited not by the educations, interests, and skills of the enthusiast-writers but primarily by publishers’ assump-

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FIG. 1 The spiral ramps of the Guggenheim Museum. (Photo courtesy of Ellen Labenski.)

in motorcycling, namely, changes in the demographics of motorcycle riders around the world. The market for motorcycles and motorcycle-related products has evolved as a result of these demographic trends, which in the developed nations include a significant increase in female ownership and primary ridership of motorcycles. Both these developments have altered the popular view of motorcycling, a process dramatically accelerated when, in the late 1980s, some high-profile Hollywood stars and other celebrities began to ride motorcycles conspicuously.⁶

The most striking recent evidence for this change in the perception and status of motorcycling was the 1998 exhibition *The Art of the Motorcycle*, at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, which put powered two-wheelers and their riders where they had never been before: not at the curb but inside, on the spiral ramps Frank Lloyd Wright designed to heighten his building's visitors' enjoyment of the artwork displayed on its curving walls (fig. 1). Even before the exhibition opened to the public some

tions about the market), the enthusiasts themselves have begun to require more than machine-based, sport-based, or heroic historiography.

6. The use of motorcycles as image-builders by celebrities is nothing new; what is new is the scale of their use and its societal reception.

were complaining about motorcycles on Wright's ramps. The critic Hilton Kramer called it "a bald-faced ploy to bring in money and whatever attendance might come rolling in on motorcycles."⁷

Perhaps in part because of the controversy, *The Art of the Motorcycle*, which from 26 June to 20 September 1998 displayed some hundred-odd motorcycles as objets d'art as well as "icons" and "metaphors" for the twentieth century, did bigger box-office than any previous exhibition at the museum; according to Guggenheim public affairs representative Kathryn Chevraux the show attracted 301,037 visitors, with the largest attendance, 7,740, coming on Saturday, 19 September. Whatever else these attendance figures mean, they lend some credence to the claim made in the preface to the exhibit catalog by Thomas Krens, director of the Guggenheim Foundation, that "*The Art of the Motorcycle* signals the beginning of the transformation of the cultural superstructure" (p. 18). Even by New York standards it was a major event, and on the September Saturday when I visited the place was jammed. No wonder that, in the words of my architect-motorcyclist friend Harlan W. Hadley, whom I'd invited to join me to help in evaluating the architectural aspects of the exhibition (and especially the work of his former colleague, Frank Gehry, who designed the installation), the exhibition had "put pants on America's bikers."⁸ Since many American motorcyclists have long felt themselves to be a misunderstood and generally disesteemed minority, to have their machines elevated to the status of Art in this bastion of the Elite Establishment could only make many smile.

But could it make the case for bikes-as-art? If so, how, and why? An exhibit such as *The Art of the Motorcycle* is ineluctably an argument built on a set of claims about the interpretation of arrays of objects, and I was particularly interested in the ways in which the claims for this exhibition were presented, both in the Guggenheim and on the road—some seventy of the bikes formed the core of a traveling exhibition, whose first stop was Chicago's Field Museum of Natural History. Because of the significantly different settings and scope of the original and traveling exhibitions, I visited both the Guggenheim and the Field.⁹ I focused my attention on the

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7. *Wall Street Journal*, 22 May 1998, quoted in the exhibition catalog, *The Art of the Motorcycle*, ed. Thomas R. Krens (New York, 1998), 18. All page numbers in the text of this essay refer to this publication.

8. Hadley worked with Gehry in 1983 on the California Museum of Science and Industry's Aerospace Museum.

9. The exhibit remained at the Field Museum from 7 November 1998 to 20 March 1999; it is slated to appear at the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao from 22 November 1999 through 23 April 2000, and at other venues yet to be announced. In the spirit of full disclosure, I should add that I visited these exhibits as one who is anything but dispassionate about the core argument for bikes-as-art. As editor-at-large for *Cycle World* in 1991, I used the forum of my monthly column to record how, nearly a quarter-century earlier at the University of California, Berkeley, Philip Makanna's exhibit of racing and custom motorcycles in the Cal student union had sharply focused my own understanding of

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FIG. 2 Motorcycles on display in *The Art of the Motorcycle*. (Photo courtesy of Ellen Labenski.)

interpretations presented by the curators and on the apparatus they marshaled to make their cases. That apparatus comprised many elements, of which the exhibit itself was intended to be the centerpiece, supported by printed materials and “cultural events” including lectures, films, discussion, and other public programs. Because few museum-goers could hope to attend every event, I concentrated on the exhibit and the primary printed work, the catalog, also titled *The Art of the Motorcycle*.¹⁰

motorcycles in this context; see “Makanna’s Message,” *Cycle World*, September 1991, 10. At least partly because of Makanna’s exhibit I’d also long since decided that automobiles too could be art, and as executive editor of *Car and Driver* in 1977 I grouped a batch of Humphrey Sutton’s photographs of the new 1978 cars from Detroit together in a feature I titled “Rolling Sculpture,” adding a blurb in which I unknowingly (not having read his work then) echoed Cyril Stanley Smith’s view of technology: “When taste and technology collide, Everyman’s art is born”; see “New Cars ’78: Rolling Sculpture,” *Car and Driver*, October 1977, 53.

10. It should go without saying that this mode of experiencing the exhibit was completely unlike that enjoyed by most visitors, for whom the bikes themselves, rather than the apparatus of argument, were the objects of attention.

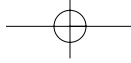


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FIG. 3 The entry hall of the exhibition. (Photo courtesy of Ellen Labenski.)

The exhibit presented most of the bikes as isolated objects on individual white platforms, clear acrylic chocks and wire stays keeping them upright, with most platforms angled out from the walls of the spiral ramps (fig. 2). A brief label identifying the machine and providing a few specifications and, sometimes, reasons for including it in the exhibition was most commonly found on the floor in front of each bike. In addition to these identification labels, blocks of large-type text on the walls introduced the eight eras into which the bikes were slotted according to their year of manufacture, and in the curved, glass-covered cabinets built into the railings on the ramps across from the elevators on each level a selection of motorcycle-related artifacts, ranging from clothing to posters, was displayed. Gehry added highly polished panels of stainless steel to the inner facings of the ramps, the panels forming a sort of shining path that began at the entry hall, where a 1998 MV Agusta F4 and an 1868 Michaux-Perreux Steam Velocipede stood on horizontal expanses of the same material (fig. 3). Side galleries, backstopped by immense photos of Arnold Schwarzenegger and Marlon Brando (from *The Terminator* and *The Wild One*, respectively) contained more bikes displayed together on large platforms, the undulating surfaces of which, painted black and white, seem to have been intended to convey a sense of movement.

The interaction of the building's architecture and the bike-platform spacing imparted a palpable sense of dynamism to the exhibit, as people



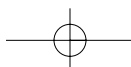
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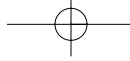
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were forced to move up or down the ramps in channels between the bikes and the ramp-railings, creating eddies in the stream of visitors around almost every machine. After we'd been up and down the ramps once, Harlan Hadley pointed out how much better this presentation of the bikes as sculpture worked than the last exhibit of more traditional sculptural art he had seen here; by angling most of the platforms out from the curving walls, he noted, the designers allowed the onlookers to see much more of the artifacts, thereby coming closer to fulfilling the sculptural ideal of "art in the round." Since, Hadley added, it was his understanding that Wright had intended the spiral design to eliminate the problems he thought were inevitable in any "box" design of a gallery for flat art, and since Wright was an admirer of the motor vehicle as worthy of display and study in itself, Hadley considered the exhibition design both functionally superior and true to Wright's vision for his building—in short, in purely architectural and exhibit-design terms, a signal success.

And the idea behind all this? What of *The Art of the Motorcycle*? Had the curators convinced the unconvinced that these machines deserved to be regarded as capital-A Art? Since I did only a few interviews and no rigorous sampling, I came away with opinions based almost entirely on my observations and those of my colleague. In the five hours we spent in the Guggenheim, however, it became clear from snippets of overheard conversation that many onlookers were responding to the bikes primarily as they would have had they encountered the machines outside the museum—as motorcycles, in other words, of varying degrees of importance to them because of purely personal experiences. The discussions we overheard in the clumps of visitors around the bikes seemed to be of two main types, depending on whether the group was comprised of motorcyclists or nonriders. If the former, the most common "argument" was about the merits—or lack thereof—of the particular motorcycles chosen by the curators, not about whether the machines were objets d'art. (Not, perhaps, because they did not believe the bikes were or could be art, but because it was simply a given that they were.) Among those who seemed to be nonriders, the discussions were both much more muted (nobody in these circumstances likes to be thought clueless, after all) and more obviously centered on figuring out why any given bike was so important that it had earned a place in the spotlight in this cathedral of what Tom Wolfe once called Cultureburg. Though the text labels did identify the machines, they did not present much evidence in support of the claims being made by each bike's presence in the exhibition.

This absence of explanation and historical context in situ was puzzling. The Guggenheim was charging a considerable fee to make the case that these things were and should be appreciated as Art, and yet left the machines mostly alone on their platforms as the evidence for it. Had the curators decided that any attempt to use a text-based explanatory approach to mak-



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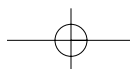
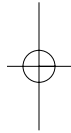
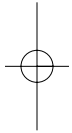
ing the case bike by bike would warp the onlookers' appreciation, maybe skewing their attention to the "wrong" aspects of the machines? Whatever the explanation, the result was, even in the Guggenheim, much more like a motorcycle show in uncommonly nice surroundings than an art show, and mostly because of what was not in evidence on the ramps or the rooms.

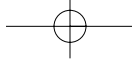
There are several reasons for this, I think, and Krens's preface to the huge (432-page) exhibit catalog provides a clue to what might be the most important one, namely, that "the cultural experience of *The Art of the Motorcycle* is the sum of its parts: the historical evolution presented by the machines themselves, the notions of thematic transformation and reflection in the installation; the documentation and contextualization of the objects in the catalog and the impressions of the contributing authors; and, the representation of motorcycles in media and in discussion" (p. 18). In other words, if you—like me—just walked in cold to the exhibition, paid your fee, did not buy the expensive (\$75 hardback, \$45 paper) catalog, did not attend any of the lectures, discussions, or films, you'd be encountering these bikes without most of the apparatus designed to convince you to perceive them as culturally significant beyond their roles as machines built to satisfy their makers' original goals, whether those were to test new technology, win races, amuse themselves, or appeal to a market successfully enough to make money. For motorcyclists, and possibly for most of those who share a generally positive view of motorcycles though they may not themselves own or ride them, that might well suffice as an argument, not least because of the venue in which it was made: this was the Guggenheim, after all, the thinking might go, and these guys must know what they're doing. If they say that the BMW R1200C is Art—well, who can gainsay them? This is what Krens presumably means to imply when he writes that the exhibition is staged "with a certain level of authority," not only because of the "sheer numbers of motorcycles" involved but, more important, because of where and by whom they are exhibited. And he is right: The significance of this in the context of the exhibition's claims shouldn't be ignored.

Neither, however, should all that which the exhibition omitted in the context of the arts—plural—of the motorcycle be ignored. As presented on their platforms, the motorcycles were shackled and silent, as if their visual qualities were their primary *raison d'être*. The way any motorcycle looks is of course essential to its sales success, but the bike's styling is only a part of its appeal "package," for two enormously important reasons.

The first is that the motorcycle standing alone and immobile is missing its most crucial component: the rider. Every street motorcyclist at one time or another glances into a plate glass window on a storefront to check out how he or she looks on the bike. This matter of "lookin' good" on any given bike is why street riders pay so much attention to (and so much money for) the "right" riding gear, and why that gear changes according to the kind of bike they're riding. Among fashion-conscious riders, sport bikes "require" a

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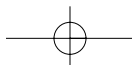
certain ensemble, as do cruisers, touring bikes, and dual-purpose (now called “dual sport”) bikes, and the complexification of our consumer culture since World War II has resulted in seemingly endless additional subtleties of dress inside each major category for those who care (and they are legion). Racers are now and always have been equally attuned to the need for the right gear, not only for protection (although there have been times when eschewing protection has been de rigueur for racers) but for social and commercial reasons. Both aesthetically and functionally, no motorcycle is complete without its rider.

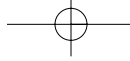
The second, and in Smithian terms most important, reason why the look of a motorcycle is only a piece of its true aesthetic importance lies in what they do to and for us once their engines are started and they begin to move. What follows once the kickstand is folded up and the Man-Machine Interface is feeding sensory data to the rider and the rider is responding with control inputs is an array of effects for the rider almost entirely unmediated by culture, conferred willy-nilly by the natures of the rider’s and the motorcycle’s Smithian “real structures.”

For those whose genetic inheritance includes a predisposition to translate certain somatosensory stimuli as enjoyable rather than unpleasant or frightening, a motorcycle in motion provides pleasures unavailable by any other means, pleasures that must be understood as aesthetic in every human sense for us to understand why riding a motorcycle seems so instantly to addict some and to repel others.¹¹ This is immediately comprehensible even without a full exploration of the scientific evidence, when we think of how some people shun roller coasters while others crave them, how some love to fly aerobatic aircraft while others dread even the gentle five-degree nose-up attitude of the biggest jetliners on takeoff, and even why some “can’t dance” while others revel in everything from waltzes to hip-hop.

The sensory stimuli that the MMI in motion creates involve each of the five human senses, the visual interacting inextricably with the others as any motorcycle ride becomes a dance of its own. Only in this kind of dancing, the vibrational and the vestibular stimuli come not from an orchestra or our own singing and coordinated limb movement on a dance floor but from the sounds generated by the machine itself and its passage through the air and over the ground. The vestibular stimuli any dancer seeks in his or her movements occur on a bike during the longitudinal acceleration resulting from speeding up or slowing down, but most powerfully while leaning the bike from the vertical plane in cornering. And a motorcycle ride affords other pleasures akin to those experienced by a dancer, as both hands and feet work

11. A good description of how somatosensory data are translated, distributed, and processed by the brain and body can be found in Candace B. Pert, *Molecules of Emotion: Why You Feel the Way You Feel* (New York, 1997), esp. chap. 7, “The Biochemicals of Emotion: A Continued Lecture,” and chap. 9, “The Psychosomatic Network: A Concluding Lecture.”



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the throttle, clutch, brakes, and gearshift in synchronized—indeed, given the demands of a motorcycle’s engineering, choreographed—movement.

In large (maybe overwhelming) measure, the affection any motorcycle rider feels for any machine derives from the aggregated pleasures the machine provides when the engine “comes to life” and the bike and rider are in motion. And even when the bike is moving slowly or stopped, when its engine is running the motorcycle is potentially a wind instrument,¹² since by “tuning” the engine note to suit his or her own (primarily biologically mediated, I would argue) tastes the rider can make it “sing” a song by working the throttle. The raw pleasure delivered by an engine tuned to suit its owner is literally indescribable, but it is evident every time someone rides a bike and blips the throttle more than is necessary. Some people imagine this to be a purely social signal—“Hey! Look at me!”—and while it can often have such meanings, one only need listen to the sound of a highly tuned four-cylinder sport bike moaning through the night to grasp some of what the rider feels in “twisting the wick” of the bike. It might be a sort of inchoate music he or she is making with the engine, but it must be understood as music to appreciate its effect on the rider.

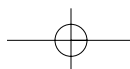
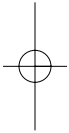
Likewise, the visual pleasures afforded by riding involve the rider in the ultimate “interactive” experiences, the ones that evolution built our brains and bodies to enjoy above all others. Examples of how important are the behavioral preferences conferred by our evolution can be found even in such unexpected places as the visual displays used in advanced “virtual cockpits” for military pilots. More than a decade ago, under contract with the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency and the United States Army to develop a display that would allow the pilot of a proposed single-pilot, light-attack helicopter to fly and fight in all weather and at night (which usually demands two crewmembers), Thomas A. Furness of the Armstrong Laboratory at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base discovered that the most effective means of indicating airspeed to the pilot was to show it not with a number or a gauge but as a set of “telephone poles” on the peripheries of the display; as speed increased the poles appeared to flash by more quickly until, at some preset, software-selectable speed, they changed color to warn the pilot via his peripheral vision that he was approaching the aircraft’s limits.

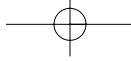
As Furness told me in 1986, explaining the research, the models for the “telephone poles” came from our own landscapes and, most importantly, from our evolution, which is thought by most paleoanthropologists to have involved the development of many of our most important biological structures in an arboreal environment.¹³ Is it any wonder, then, that many a

12. A point I’ve argued elsewhere; see “From the Kirkka to the Kerker,” *Cycle World*, January 1987, 7.

13. Conversation with the author, 5 August 1986, Wright-Patterson AFB; see also Steve Thompson, “The Big Picture,” *Air & Space/Smithsonian*, April/May 1987, 75–83.

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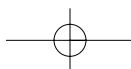
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motorcyclist loves to “swing through the curves” on a tree-lined road when our evolutionary ancestors succeeded in the species-survival contest so well by swinging through the vertical world of the forest and running through the vertical and horizontal world below? Unenclosed by the confining cage that is a car or truck, the motorcyclist encounters, engages, and survives the world using the entire array of psychobiological structures—including intelligence—that allowed *Homo sapiens* to adapt to any environment, but to be most at home with the experiences native to the arboreal world. Those include, perforce, everything from a fondness for greenery to a taste for the sort of physical movements necessary in life in the middle story of the ancient forests, where our bipedalism is now thought by some to have begun and where, we might well conclude, the branches and vines whose dimensions helped shape our hand-geometry proliferated. Should we be surprised, then, that the descendants of those who used and almost certainly enjoyed brachiation and every other form of arboreal movement retain a preference for handlebars of a certain dimension and feel, attached to vehicles that provide many of the same kinds of somatosensory experiences our species once found only far above the ground?

It's hardly surprising that *The Art of the Motorcycle* does not include more than passing references to the dynamic aspects of motorcycling, of course, since they defy accurate replication, at least in any form realistically obtainable for museum use. Still, the curatorial decision to ignore, save for textual allusion and occasional pictorial depiction, the differing dynamic qualities of the machines led, I think, to an unfortunate skewing of the emphasis in the displays of the bikes. Inevitably, perhaps, presenting them as immobile objects on platforms overstressed their surficial visual aspects, thereby minimizing the many other aesthetically rewarding activities they both embody and enable.¹⁴ But apart from their startling shapes and bold colors, absent direct, onboard experience of the somatosensory stimuli so central to motorcycling, what can there be about any motorcycle to elevate it to culturally transformational art for those who have never ridden one? Cultural associations alone are left; and when the associations are positive and aspirational, the objects may indeed be aesthetically pleasing, maybe even be Art. But for those nonriders whose associations with motorcycles have been negative, how can what many perceive as the sociopathic facets of motorcycling be explained in the context of the exhibition's claims? Bikes as rolling sculpture? Nobody, as anyone hostile both to bikes and their celebratory portrayal in this exhibition might easily point out, ever rode a Rodin to a gang rape.

14. Historians of technology have long understood the significance of “making and fixing” as rewarding aesthetic activities in themselves. One of the primary reasons, I think, for the persistence of the motorcycle is that it allows aesthetically rewarding art and craft activity at any level, from designing and building an entire machine to merely bolting on accessories or affixing decals, for people with a very wide range of skills and talents.



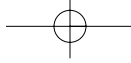
These are not trivial questions. But they are nowhere explicitly addressed. Krens's preface to the catalog is the most focused attempt to make the case for displaying these bikes at the Guggenheim. "It seems obvious," he writes, "that an exhibition like *The Art of the Motorcycle* challenges the *conventional* [emphasis in original] notion of the art museum by exploiting the significantly broader framework. If the institution's original mission is interpreted as a mandate to present paintings and drawings, then motorcycles have no place on the Guggenheim's ramp. But the contemporary museum is no longer simply a sanctuary for sacred objects." Museologists and exhibit designers will find little radically new here or in the ensuing paragraphs explaining how and why Krens came to be persuaded that a motorcycle exhibit made sense. Whether his words can convince those who do not share the view that the art museum should play "a leadership role, both as interlocutor and participant," as a result of "evolving demands on its capacity for cultural mediation and education from an increasingly sophisticated audience," inevitably depends on basic questions about what art museums—indeed, any museums—are "for."

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When Krens writes, for example, that "What is new [since the establishment of the Guggenheim Museum] is the widespread feeling that the environment has changed, that the traditional models for cultural mediation are no longer adequate, and that new, infinitely complex cultural forms and institutions are in the process of formation," he seems to reflect a viewpoint formed almost entirely around the values so deliciously lampooned by Tom Wolfe in his 1974 book, *The Painted Word*. These were the values dear to the Left in academia, especially in lit-crit and art-history circles, values we can glimpse through Krens's claim that "It [the new museum] must recognize, for example, the significance and validity of new generations of creative artists whose work, ideas, and visual language have been shaped by MTV, rap music, the Internet, and contemporary critical theory as well as traditional art history."

Whether or not his preface convinces any reader that bikes belong on Wright's ramps, Krens accurately prefigures the themes and tones of the essays and commentaries on the historical development of motorcycling that follow: in the aggregate these offer a capital-C Cultural exploration of the moto-world, in pursuit of Krens's vision of the museum as "interlocutor and participant" (maybe even as one of those "infinitely complex new forms and institutions" itself). Some examples will serve to illustrate.

Mark C. Taylor and José Márquez's "Cycles of Paradox" presents a survey of motorcycling, albeit one that favors style over substance. Their opening paragraph typifies the text: "The motorcyclist encounters the road as a writer encounters the page. There is no proper approach, no correct path, no true line. The page is never blank but is always littered with tracks and debris left by those who have gone before. Lines cross and crisscross to create intersections without warning signs. The road twists and turns, banks



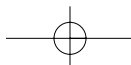
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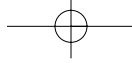
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and slopes, becomes straight and narrows down, develops a new surface, throws up gravel, sand, oil, water. To ride is to write and to write is to read and rewrite a text that has already been written" (p. 32).

Ted Polhemus's essay, "The Art of the Motorcycle: Outlaws, Animals, and Sex Machines," ostensibly explains where, why, when, and how "outlaw" bikers came to be such powerfully "iconographic" motorcyclists. Like much of the commentary in the catalog, Polhemus's piece is conventionally 1960s radical in its contempt for "the apparently sunny days of Eisenhower's prosperous postwar America" with its "ever-constricting funnel of conformity." He argues that "The gradual triumph of desire over disdain for the outlaw biker can be seen in high fashion's embrace of the black leather motorcycle jacket . . . and even in the fact that the Guggenheim Museum has chosen to present a major exhibition." Polhemus's aim is to "focus on this transformation . . . by examining how three important films—*The Wild One*, *Easy Rider*, and *Rumble Fish*—portrayed the outlaw motorcyclist" (p. 53). The fundamental thread of his argument is that the outlaw biker became an attractive figure because he embodied "wild and free" behavior, highly "individual," crucially in the postwar American middle class, of whose fashions Polhemus writes: "Has there ever, in all of human history, been a less exciting male appearance than that which became the standard, shapeless, sexless, nondescript uniform of the middle-class man in the decades following World War II?" His use of the word "sexless" is the clue to his next set of claims, that the outlaw biker's look was adopted because the biker was erotic in myth, reflecting an unbridled animality that appealed to many stuck in what Polhemus and his ilk considered gray-flannel-suit conformity.

There is more, much more, in this vein, and should a reader begin this catalog as a book to be read sequentially he or she could quickly form a pretty clear idea that those selected to write the essays view motorcycles as dangerous fetish-objects mainly attractive to outlaws, outlaw-wannabes, and riders driven to ride by fear, sex, style, and film makers. Motorcycles are portrayed as appealing to our dull, conformist sensibilities because they allow, maybe even engender, wild, lawless behavior. The final essay, by Melissa Holbrook Pierson, in part echoes these themes. In what by now even the least cinematically obsessed reader will have recognized as the prevailing mode of the catalog, she begins with a reference to a movie: Jean Cocteau's *Orpheus*, in which "the black-clad, helmeted emissaries of Death ride motorcycles." What follows, however, shows that Pierson's own riding and acquaintance with regular-Joe riders provides insights for the nonrider that cool the overheated rhetoric of what goes before. "People who ride are not fundamentally masochistic or gripped by a death wish; one doesn't get much more normal, really." "Rather," she writes, "although motorcyclists may not know it, they are seeking 'eustress,' the scientific term for that pleasurable stress found in the mastery of risky sports." Here and elsewhere



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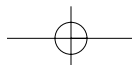
Pierson makes it clear that she knows something of the biological basis of motorcycling behavior. Still, she concludes with a reference to *Orpheus*: “In the end, there is nothing else to know but that motorcycles’ joys are inseparable from their treacheries. Cocteau knew this, and so the viewers of *Orpheus* in the dark room know this: When the motorcycles appear, someone is bound to be gone soon. But the cause merely exists in loose proximity to the effect, so that it may not be a cause at all. The perfume is faint, barely a suggestion. And the movie, all about death, is a joy to watch” (p. 95).

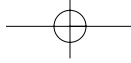
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One omission from these culture-centered essays deserves particular mention. The motorcycle was and still is an essential mode of transportation for millions of people around the world. In 1997 there were some 126,508,878 powered “two-wheelers in use” around the world, and of those some 45,111,470 were being ridden in Taiwan, Thailand, and India (which alone accounted for more than twenty-three million machines).¹⁵ While these countries do have motorcycle cultures in which the motorcycling fashions and fads in the United States and Europe are reflected, the primary use for motorcycles in them and many other countries is as basic transportation. Given their significance to those who rely on them as such, that this crucial role of the motorcycle did not appear as the theme of at least one of the essays is difficult to understand, just as it is puzzling that the rich diversity (beyond the outlaw bikers and crotch-rocket cowboys) of contemporary Western motorcycle culture merits only brief and occasional attention. That omission, at least, is remedied to a degree in the catalog’s second section, which consists of historical overviews of eight “eras” in motorcycle history and a series of short commentaries that accompany black-and-white and color photographs of the bikes intended for exhibition.

In general, the conceptual approaches to history and historiography signaled by Krens’s preface also guide the choices of events and personalities highlighted in the overview narratives, as well as their tone. For example, in “Inventing the Motorcycle: 1868–1919,” Vanessa Rocco observes of the nineteenth century that it was “notable for its preoccupation with time, space, and the notion of invention itself,” a preoccupation that gave us among other things the locomotive, demanding a railroad that “isolated us further from a spatial relationship to the landscape” (p. 98). The notion of technology as alienating, isolating force is a commonplace in certain academic circles, of course, but I was surprised by its presence here. Architecture, sculpture, and painting all, Rocco notes, “turned to dynamism as a compelling subject matter at the dawn of the next century.” As an example she offers the Eiffel Tower, which “succeeds in making a radical, absolute equation between architecture and technology . . . precisely the sum of its engineering; there is no aesthetic embellishment other than the

15. Honda Motor Company, *1998 World Motorcycle Facts and Figures* (Tokyo: 1999), 72, 73.





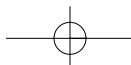
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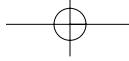
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lively, graphic quality of the industrial materials of which it is composed. Over the past century, the tower has remained a symbol of the dawn of the worship of technology and of the dominance of the dynamic urban center” (p. 100). The zeitgeist Rocco presents is anything but radical in academia, but I wondered how it would be read by someone for whom “the worship of technology” is not a common catch-phrase for the societal effects of consumer capitalism—someone, perhaps, who loves to ride, fiddle with, and talk about his or her Harley or Honda but “worships” only in the more profound, religious sense. To be fair, having to compress both motorcycle-related signification and general history into such tiny capsules is a difficult task, so it was hard for me to read Rocco’s overview, or the others that follow, with anything but sympathy. Regardless of their viewpoints, it seems to me that their most glaring omission was the simplest: a straightforward explanation of why the era *was* an era, of its significance, and of what the name given to it in the exhibition and catalog meant. In most of the overviews, this sort of plain writing is, unfortunately, absent.

Happily, the same is not true of the commentaries on individual motorcycles, which are largely typical of the material one finds in marque histories published by the likes of Motorbooks International. In the context of some of the overblown prose elsewhere in the tome, the straightforward writing is like a breath of fresh air in a smoke-filled room. Likewise, Charles Falco’s thirty-page bibliography is a valuable asset. Falco’s introductory note claims that this listing “is estimated to contain approximately ninety percent of all relevant titles,” and it, along with the photos and commentaries, would be reason enough for many to buy *The Art of the Motorcycle*. The difference in style and tone between the essays, the overviews, and the commentaries makes it hard not to wonder if at some point in its conceptual process this single immense book was designed to be split into separate volumes, one comprising the essays, the other the historical overviews, commentaries, and photos. The reader-visitor would have been better off with such an arrangement, since the essay section could have been parked in the cloak room while the descriptive section could have been taken along as a reference.

Although the Field Museum also offered the catalog for sale, its version of the exhibition differed considerably from the Guggenheim’s, perhaps because there were fewer bikes in the traveling exhibit, perhaps because the Field Museum is a natural history museum rather than an art museum. I was most struck by the materials that the Field’s curatorial staff added to supplement those provided by the Guggenheim: a twelve-minute looped video of contemporary motorcyclists explaining why they ride, and more text labels. These helped explain the significance of the bikes on display. However, the absence of the dynamism conferred by the Guggenheim’s spiral ramps meant that the arrays of bikes chocked in place on curvilinear white platforms in the Field’s rectangular, high-ceilinged galleries lost a





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considerable amount of the presence and impact they had in the Guggenheim.

At both the Guggenheim and the Field *The Art of the Motorcycle* elicited obvious excitement from many who visited it. The shortcomings I found in the displays clearly did not bother most visitors, so Krens's claim that the exhibition has what boils down to significant historical leverage might not be hyperbolic. Even without substantial explicit argument for the idea of motorcycles as art, in other words, the exhibition of the bikes in the Guggenheim and other Cultureburg cathedrals might be all the proof most people need that the idea is "right."

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Whatever its drawbacks, the exhibition's use to historians of technology is significant, for at least three reasons. First, it provides those who wish to study the motorcycle and its cultures the means to examine an array of machines ("real structures") that would otherwise require immense effort to locate and examine. Second, it offers a new reason to revisit the role of aesthetics in technology. Third, I think it can only accelerate the extant trend among enthusiasts to seek historical writing beyond the generically banal.

The latter view is, admittedly, optimistic. But as every motorcyclist knows at some level of consciousness, riding a motorcycle is itself always an act of optimism, no matter what else it might seem to be. Culture-based claims notwithstanding, I remain convinced that such optimism is primarily the artifact of biology, the same biology that makes us build the motorcycles, their culture, and the history that flows therefrom. In that sense, perhaps a truly extraordinary act of optimism would be not to split the freeway lanes on a Ducati at 150 miles per hour, or to quit a job, buy a Harley, and hit the road, but to believe, following Cyril Stanley Smith's lead, that by focusing our analytical attention on the "real structures" that create it we can someday understand even that complex structure of contingency, chaos, and context that is our own history.

