

TECHNOLOGY AND CULTURE

Bodies in Motion: Evolution and Experience in Motorcycling.

By Steven L. Thompson. Duluth, Minn.: Aero Design & Mfg. Co., 2008.
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Motorcycles provide a primary means of inexpensive transport in many poor and middle-income countries today, just as they did in Europe and Japan a few decades ago. Though automobiles are now the main type of personal transport in the industrially developed world, motorcycles have not disappeared. On the contrary, motorcycle ownership has flourished in parallel with increases in disposable incomes. Steven Thompson's *Bodies in Motion* provides a unique perspective on the enduring appeal of two-wheeled powered mobility.

Not content to restate the usual clichés about the feeling of “freedom” engendered by motorcycle riding, Thompson delves into humankind's evolutionary past to uncover and explain the pleasures of motorcycling. His intriguing thesis is that our psyches still bear remnants of a prehuman arboreal past, and that the sensory experiences of motorcycle riding connect us with that ancestral memory.

Accompanying and reinforcing this connection with arboreal locomotion is the higher state of awareness that riding a motorcycle demands. As all riders know, remaining alert is essential for survival on roadways populated by drivers who are often oblivious to motorcycles sharing space with them. But more is involved than self-protection; to ride a motorcycle is to experience acceleration beyond the capabilities of most cars, to take curves without the unpleasant experience of being pushed sideways, and to exert control through subtle body movements.

The sense of enhanced control is heightened when engaged in racing. As seen by Thompson, a former competitor at the legendary Isle of Man TT (Tourist Trophy) race, the enjoyment of racing is not derived from adrenaline-soaked thrills; rather, the appeal stems from the total concentration that racing demands. And in keeping with one of the book's main perspectives, racing is depicted as an activity that puts the participant in a mental and physical state similar to the experience of hunters in prehistoric times.

Still in this evolutionary vein, Thompson delves into music and its origins, and how these relate to the enjoyment of motorcycling. Here, he invokes the evolutionary history of humankind by noting that music and proto-music were integral to the emergence of human society. For riders, a motorcycle's “music” is its exhaust note and the other auditory stimuli that accompany it. The concept of a motorcycle's sound being akin to music may not be evident to individuals who have had their eardrums assaulted by a motorcycle fitted with window-rattling straight pipes that lack mufflers; yet, without condoning this assault, Thompson makes it clear that the sound made by particular motorcycles is often a major source of their ap-

peal. Some motorcyclists are drawn to the thumping exhaust note of a single-cylinder engine, while others get their auditory pleasures from the high-pitched whine of a sport bike with its tachometer at red line, or from the syncopated basso profundo of a big V-twin.

Another key component of the sensory appeal of motorcycles, according to Thompson, is vibration. As with the kinds of sounds emanating from different types of motorcycles, the vibration produced by their engines is a reason that some motorcycles appeal to particular groups of motorcyclists while being shunned by others. To delve further into this subject, Thompson commissioned a study of the vibration produced by nine motorcycles with a variety of engine types: single-cylinder, vertical twin, opposed twin, V-twin, V-four, inline four, and inline six. The results are compiled in an appendix that presents a series of graphs depicting measurements of vibration at the handlebars, foot pegs, and seats of these motorcycles at idle, under acceleration, and at constant speed. Some graphs confirm long-held stereotypes regarding certain models of motorcycles and particular engine configurations, while others refute them. Beyond this, however, most readers will have only a hazy understanding of the graphs and wonder why nearly half the book is devoted to them, especially when Thompson notes that individuals differ markedly in their reactions to particular vibratory amplitudes and frequencies.

Evolutionary anthropologists are likely to feel a need for more evidence regarding the assertions about proto-human emotions and behavior, and will perhaps be skeptical of Thompson's invocation of fixed elements of human nature that have been passed down through the eons. Not all riders will be convinced by a chapter that delves into the personality types attracted to particular kinds of motorcycles. But dedicated motorcyclists will feel an emotional resonance to the book's central premise about bodies in motion. This is a refreshingly different approach to motorcycles and to the enduring enthusiasm of the men and women who ride them.

RUDI VOLTI

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Horse Trading in the Age of Cars: Men in the Marketplace.

By Steven M. Gelber. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008.
Pp. xii+224. \$50.

Most readers know from personal experience the reality documented by this book: automobiles are sold under a different ethical and economic dispensation relative to other products. Car buyers do not pay list price, cannot return their purchase if dissatisfied, and must haggle and even lie be-