

PORTRAIT ORIENTATION

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Ritual Analysis of Cruising.

Cruising Elm Street has become a tradition of sorts among the youth in Manchester, New Hampshire. On any given night of the week and especially weekend nights, the entire length of this four-lane "main" street is jammed with cruisers. In layman's terms, cruising is the act of repeatedly driving up and down the length of Elm Street for the purpose of socializing.

Who are these people? Cruisers are usually high school students who are looking for something to do other than the customary movies and mall. Cruising in itself is not very entertaining. One cruises with a purpose: to "pick up" a member of the opposite sex, find a party, or simply to see and to be seen.

The type of car the cruiser drives is significant to this event. A cruiser will be popular if he/she drives an expensive sports car; not so if he/she drives a family car or the dreaded station wagon. A souped up car or truck with over-sized wheels is appropriate for males and suggests their strength and sexual prowess. On the other hand, such a vehicle is thought to defeminize a female and she would most likely be considered either masculine and undesirable or outspoken and promiscuous. Hence the symbolic meaning of cars, i.e. cars as representative of power, affluence, and sexuality, takes on exaggerated form when cruising.

Just as ~~sthere~~^{there} are norms and implicit rules that members of a society follow, there are informal yet specific codes of behavior that cruisers follow. Generally, one should sit facing forward and assume an air of indifference. This applies especially to females. Males, however, enjoy the option of being quite ostentatious about their interest in the opposite sex. This serves to reinforce traditional gender roles: males as aggressive, females as passive.

Blaring rock music and open windows (weather permitting) are a must for creating the proper image of sexuality, youth and rebellion. Open windows function to invite the interest or acquaintance of others. If a cruiser would rather avoid making a particular acquaintance, however, he/she needs only to roll up the window in order to convey his/her disinterest.

If a cruiser does, in fact, desire to meet another, he/she pulls his/her car alongside that of the person he/she is interested in. The cruiser then is careful to maintain the same speed as the other. He/she then establishes contact with the other by staring at him/her. This is important because in our society, prolonged eye contact, especially between strangers, is often intended and construed as sexual invitation. If the other party is interested, both cars are likely to pull over to the side of the road so that the people can meet. In some circles, however, this is not considered "cool" and the two parties simply converse (shout) through the windows. Topics of conversation usually include which parties are being held and where.

In addition to cruisers, however, there are people who

participate in this social event without cruising. These people pass the evening by standing on the side of the street in groups. They talk and watch the cruisers drive by. Many times these "watchers" attempt to meet a cruiser by flagging him/her down. Occasionally, a cruiser will pull over to meet/join them but this is not a common occurrence as these people are considered unpopular and "desperate." Thus there exists a social hierarchy with watchers at the bottom, cruisers with "uncool" cars in the middle, and cruisers with "cool" a.k.a. (sporty cars) at the top. Cruising thus reflects the class structure of dominant society.

Finally, as each cruiser completes a lap of Elm Street, he/she is to turn around in the prescribed place or risk being labelled amateurish or "uncool." There is only one proper place to turn around at each end of Elm Street. One leads through a bank parking lot and through a drive-up window and the other is a circular drive in front of a local business.

Both locations are convenient in that they allow for many cars to change directions in a short period of time. More importantly, however, both allow the three or four cars of cruisers to "check each other out" as they turn around. Changing directions at the proper place also positively identifies cruisers as cruisers and differentiates them from other drivers. This is important in that it creates a sense of unity among the cruisers.

Stripped of its complexities and curiosities, cruising is basically a courtship dance. It is a dance in that there are specific movements and behaviors that are central to the process.

For example, just as people dancing to a waltz must repeatedly step this way and that, cruisers, "dancing" via their cars, also perform specific repetitive steps (repeatedly driving up and down the same street, turning around in the prescribed places).

Cruising, like dancing, is a form of foreplay, a way of expressing one's sexual identity. Cruising is an optimal means through which adolescents are able to explore their newly-found sexuality. At the same time, cruising is done safely within the protective barrier of an automobile. Thus the ritual is kept impersonal and non-threatening. This enables cruisers to explore and express their sexual identity while satisfying their need for security.

Cruising is also a form of rebellion. Several years ago it was made illegal and police would arrest anyone who was found travelling on Elm Street more than three times per evening. This did not dissuade cruisers, however, and the police eventually gave up. More subtly though, it is an expression of rebellion in that it supports sexual promiscuity and rock and roll and upholds the ideal of freedom of youth while scorning adult authority. After all, does the very image of a teenager driving a car not suggest rebellion to the adult and freedom to the youth?

Inherent in cruising are also certain values that comply with the norms of dominant society. Cruising reinforces capitalism and conspicuous consumption because cars are used as status symbols and determine a cruiser's social position. Thus cruising also condones social and class hierarchies. In addition, cruising upholds the institution of patriarchy in that

cruisers play out traditional gender roles in the courtship ritual. For instance, males drive powerful cars and aggressively pursue passive females. Lastly, cruising celebrates heterosexuality. It is a ritual of and for heterosexuals, with its courtship dances and displays of male dominance and strength. There is no room for or tolerance of homosexual behavior in the cruising scene.

In sum, cruising is a ritual of courtship and rebellion. It also conforms to dominant societal values such as capitalism, patriarchy, heterosexuality, and social and economic stratification.