

The Sublime Splendour of Intimidation On the Outlaw Biker Aesthetics of Power

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Abstract

Terror, Edmund Burke argued, is the ‘common stock of everything that is sublime’, capable of producing delight when held at a certain distance. What puzzled Burke was the question of ‘how any species of delight can be derived from a cause so apparently contrary to it’. I suggest that we may look for an ethnographic answer to this question among the supporters, hang-arounds and diverse admirers of outlaw bikers, who take pleasure in being exposed, albeit at a safe distance, to the sublime splendour of the biker’s intimidation power. Grounded in ethnographic research among outlaw bikers in central Europe, analysis of popular visual culture and biker literature, the article argues that ‘sublime experience’ is one of the indispensable ingredients of the aesthetics of power of the outlaw bikers.

Keywords: sublime experience, terror, outlaw bikers, aesthetics of power

‘The streets of every city are thronged with men who would pay all the money they could put their hands on to be transformed – even for a day – into hairy, hard-fisted brutes who walk over cops, extort free drinks from terrified bartenders and thunder out of town on big motorcycles after raping the banker’s daughter. Even people who think the Angels should be put to sleep find it easy to identify with them’
(Thompson 2012: 261-262)

The iconic movie *Born Losers* (dir. Frank 1968) confronts us with a cliché, but nonetheless (or precisely because of it) an effective one – a spectacle of bikers terrorizing the population of a small beach town by the name of Big Rock. Unruly, wild, violent, disobedient, brutal, blood thirsty, psychopathic, delinquent, vulgar, and dirty, the Born to Lose Motorcycle Club storms the town, performing the usual biker mayhem. Riding on their roaring devilish Harleys, circling wildly around their terrified victims amidst clouds of dust and exhaust fumes, laughing and mocking them, enjoying the victims’ fear, the bikers perfectly perform their cast as social outcasts, revelling in their own social abjection. In the process the bikers reassure the townfolks of their morality and normality. They exaggerate; their performance is thoroughly excessive, as if acting with the following line in mind: ‘you thought we were bad, but we show you that we are far worse than you could have ever imagined!’ – here we must remark with Robert Pfaller that ‘most primitives, seen from the perspective of psychoanalysis, are objects of transference of their observers, meaning that they enact for the observers every primitivity they believe the observers would like to see’ (Pfaller 2011: 54). And so their rage and fury appears senseless, irrational, meaningless, excessive, and thus incomprehensible,

their potential to terrorize unimaginable; pure terror for the sake of terror; pure intimidation for the sake of intimidation; pure threat for the sake of threat, all without any goal, purpose or gain in mind. Just the here and now of terror. The famous scene in *The Wild One* (dir. Benedek 1953) captures this trope of the senselessness of the outlaw biker rebellion: Johnny (Marlon Brando), the president of an outlaw motorcycle club is asked ‘Hey Johnny, what are you rebelling against?’, he answers with a sneer, ‘Whadda you got?’. In a recent B-movie *Devil Riders* (dir. Higgins 2012) an outlaw biker remarks in a similar vein that ‘real men don’t need to know why, why is for weak men’. But the bikers’ power to terrorize and to intimidate arouses in the spectators not only fear, but also desire. Or more precisely, a secret wish to participate and feed off the barbarous and animalistic power of the bikers, to have the guts to break rules, or at least, to look as if one dared to transgress the ordinary townfolk moralities. At the beginning of *Born Losers*, a bunch of virginal teen girls in bikinis (another classical trope of excessive purity in opposition to excessive barbarity) observe the bikers storming the town from the top of their cabriolet, from a safe distance. Their conversation captures the ambiguity of fear and attraction they experience at the moment: ‘Don’t they just give you the creeps? I think they are kind of cute. I wonder if what you hear about them is really true. ... Oh, wouldn’t it be neat to meet them just for once?’ (dir. Frank 1968). Later in the movie, these girls decide to hang out with the bikers; the bikers immediately pursue the initiation of the poor little teens into becoming their ‘mamas’ (women shared by all club members), all of them consecutively raping them. While towards the end of the movie, it turns out that one of the girls was not raped, but instead took it as an opportunity to rebel against her mother ‘Oh come on dear, you don’t hate us! Oh yes, I do. It is those evil losers I don’t hate very much. ... I liked it, I liked it, I liked it! Because they are everything you hate!’, pointing to the liberating social role of the abject Other through whom one can transgress the middle class morality, even if temporarily – the other girls are profoundly traumatized as a result of the terror and rape they experienced: one is depicted as lying on a sofa, suckling her thumb and holding a teddy bear, unable to speak, the other moves around speechless, and fearful, unable to act and bring the bikers to justice. The stark aesthetic representation of their trauma is reminiscent of the recent cases of real trauma, of the ‘resignation syndrome’ among the refugee children in Sweden reported by the *New Yorker* (Aviv 2017) – there is certainly nothing sublime about experiencing real terror.

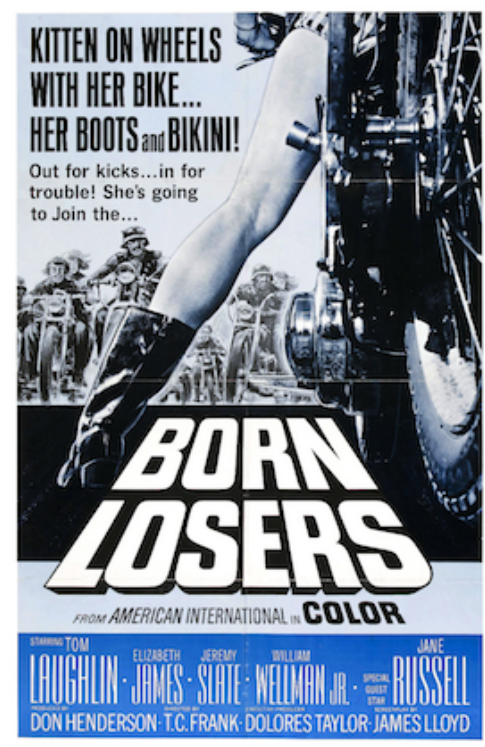


Figure 1. Movie poster for *Born Losers* (1968).

This cinematic vignette can help us start thinking through the question I wish to raise here, a question that does not directly pertain to the cinematic and to visual culture but one that cannot be thought without it – namely, *what kind of experience inspires the support for the real outlaw motorcycle clubs, such as the notorious Hells Angels MC, and mobilizes their affects?* In answering this question, I shall deliberately bracket diverse rational motivations, such as access to criminal markets or business and to support networks of solidarity, which I explore elsewhere. Instead, my aim here is to focus solely on the highly affective and intense experiences or else the ‘adrenalin kicks’, the supporters, hang-arounds and diverse admirers of the outlaw bikers describe and experience when in proximity of the real outlaws, for instance during ‘open house’ events, parties, and runs for which they are willing to travel far and wide. This question also opens into a larger inquiry into *the nature and aesthetics of power* of these clubs and their attraction. But before we proceed to interrogate these questions, let us return to *Born Losers* and the lessons we can take away from this movie.



Figure 2. A shot from the event ‘Ride with the Angels’ organized by the Hells Angels MC in Carinthia, Austria, July 2016, featuring the Austrian members of the Hells Angels MC, one moderating the motorcycle drag race, which has drawn supporters, friends and fans from Austria and abroad. Image credit: author.

No Sublime Experience without ‘Safe’ Distance

The difference between the way in which the teens experienced the bikers *at a distance* versus *up close* is possibly the most striking and crucial for our inquiry. The experience at a distance can be, following Edmund Burke’s classical definition of the sublime, labelled as a *sublime experience*. The experience up close on the other hand, is an experience of immediate terror, merely capable of inducing fear and pain in the victim, but incapable of producing the sublime. It is the former, the sublime experience, that will concern us here. I shall argue that this sublime experience is indispensable to the attraction some feel towards the outlaw bikers and as such it is also indispensable to their aesthetics of power and charisma. While the actual use of violence is necessary to establish one’s reputation, it is the aesthetics and street-wise performance of threat and intimidation that reproduces one’s power on the everyday basis rather than the actual use of violence. Threat and intimidation are not effective solely because they threaten, but rather because they attract and invite respect as much as admiration. Edmund Burke famously argued in his *Philosophical Inquiry into The Origins of Our Ideas of The Sublime and Beautiful* that terror is the ‘common stock of everything that is sublime’ (Burke 1914: 47). Or as Robert Pfaller puts it, ‘the fascinating sublime is such, which perceived in another light always displays a negative quality’ (Pfaller 2011: 17). In a similar vein, biker movies have relied on an ‘aesthetics of astonishment’ and ‘a spectacle of the sensational, the forbidden, and the monstrous’ (Osgerby 2003: 103), which appear from the safety of our couches so appealing. In other words, terror can be a source of a sublime experience only under the condition of us being able to keep it at a distance. As Burke remarks, ‘when danger or pain press too nearly, they are

incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are, delightful' (Burke 1914: 21), 'terror is a passion which always produces delight when it does not press too closely' (Burke 1914: 28). Terror, when kept at a safe distance, not directly threatening our self-preservation thus produces a sense of awe, astonishment, admiration, wonder, attraction and ultimately, pleasure and delight. The emphasis should be placed here on self-preservation, as it is precisely the fear of death, the potential of that which induces terror to destroy us that is also at the same time the source of our delight as we raise above this fear and attempt to incorporate the threatening Other within ourselves (Canguilhem 1962). It is clear that Burke offers here also a theory of a certain form of power – he remarks that he knows 'of nothing sublime, which is not some modification of power' (Burke 1914: 47). While the sublime has been traditionally linked to either spectacular nature, natural catastrophes, and recently to human inflicted catastrophes and sacralised traumatic events, such as the Holocaust, Hiroshima or September 11 (Ray 2009; Ray 2005), I argue that it can be considered more generally as an operating force inherent to certain, but not all, forms of power. It is precisely this form of power, which is reinforced and enhanced through the production of sublime experience that we shall attempt to uncover here. Burke also not only remarks that 'power is undoubtedly a capital source of the sublime' (Burke 1914: 54), but also argues that this form of power may appear seductive and attractive to the young or inexperienced: 'the power which arises from institution in kings and commanders, has the same connexion with terror. Sovereigns are frequently addressed with the title of dread majesty. And it may be observed, that young persons, little acquainted with the world, and who have not been used to approach men in power, are commonly struck with an awe which takes away the free use of their faculties' (Burke 1914: 50). One of the enthusiastic supporters of the Hells Angels, alas without an ambition to ever become a member, has once recounted a story from his childhood to me, when he witnessed a senseless beating up of an old man who refused to give offer fire (for a simple reason – he had none) to a bunch of local bikers playing the outlaws in a small town in Germany in the mid-70s. This event stuck in his mind, along with the feeling of thrill, which he called 'addictive' and since then he likes to watch, from a relatively safe distance and express his support by purchasing 'Support 81' merchandize.'



Figure 3. A member of Hells Angels taking care of the ‘Support 81’ sales stand during the event ‘Ride with the Angels’. Image credit: author.

Two crucial notions follow: (1) the sublime experience can take place only at a safe distance from the source of terror, and (2) the sublime can under certain conditions operate as a specific form of power, or rather an enhancement to power, that is wondrous, awe-inspiring, and that relies on the invisible and the unknown. Regarding the invisible and the unknown, it suffices to remind ourselves that the outlaw bikers, as we have seen earlier, are constructed as unintelligible, senseless, irrational, and consequently, as mysterious; not to mention their notorious secretiveness about their brotherhoods’ inner workings and business. Edmund Burke argued that ‘a great clearness helps but little towards affecting the passions, as it is in some sort an enemy to all enthusiasms whatsoever ... It is our ignorance of things that causes all our admiration, and chiefly excites our passions’ (Burke 1914: 44). As George Bataille once remarked along similar lines, ‘the most terrifying things are those that elude us’ (Bataille 1991: 15). On the other hand, we could also argue that while ignorance may certainly be more conducive to arousing our passions, knowledge does not have to necessarily be an obstacle either. Just consider how ideology works, and the sublime, as a mode of power, can indeed be understood as thoroughly ideological and; as Robert Pfaller brilliantly analysed in his book *On the Pleasure Principle in Culture* (Pfaller 2014), expanding on the theory of the psychoanalyst Octave Mannoni, we may know quite well, but still we act as if we did not know, and it is precisely here, in this cynical distancing, that extreme affective investment can emerge. In other words, knowledge has very limited power to unsettle ideology; to use the Althusserian point, ‘an ideological formation co-exists simultaneously with the science that breaks with it’ (Pfaller 2005: 110). It is precisely within this formula that cultural pleasure resides. In order for an ideology

to be effective, a certain cynical distance towards this ideology is necessary, a distance which makes us fall for it, a distance not unlike the one necessary for the sublime experience. Distance thus appears fundamental to an experience of pleasure, and in particular to the sublime experience. As a woman attending a biker party once remarked to me, ‘I know that they are just ordinary, normal guys behind all the tattoos and patched vests, there is really nothing special about them once you get to know them. But still, when you see them, there is a thrill, there is something; it is exciting to be around’².

This being said, before proceeding further we must establish certain crucial distinctions, especially since the sublime and its theory has become an ever-expansive and fashionable category, including anything from gothic, romantic, oceanic, urban, religious, military, artificial, moral, poetic to Marxist sublime and so on (Holmqvist and Pluciennik 2002). But another distinction is more pertinent

the sublime has been thought of at times as existing out there, within sublime the objects themselves, at others as a cognitive category, at times as an aesthetic category, at others as an experience, and at times as a discourse or even a form of writing. Without going into too much detail, let us posit a distinction crucial to our argument. Namely, the distinction between the *sublime experience*, *sublime discourse* or representation and the *talk about the sublime*, one proposed by Guy Sircello (Sircello 1993). Our object of study is the sublime experience, while what this text engages in is the talk about the sublime; the pop cultural representation of the outlaw bikers, as we know it from the B-movies or men’s adventure magazines from the 60s and 70s, would then fall under the label of sublime discourse, even if not as refined as that of Homer. While some would argue that watching horror movies or reading gothic novels can provide us with a sublime experience, I would argue that sublime experience is something that occurs only when faced with a real threat (from a position of a safe distance) and not a mediated one – it namely presupposes us feeling small and insignificant in face of the threat. However, in order for sublime experience to take place at all, imagination is indispensable, and there is no doubt that our imagination feeds of the sublime discourse and enhances the sublime experience (Cochrane 2012), thus being both its diluted version and its enhancer. Bourke himself remarked that the sublime finds its source in anything that excites the *ideas* of pain and terror. In this sense, the sublime experience has a similar structure to that of a threat. Namely, as Mladen Dolar notes: ‘the paradox is in the fact that the potentiality as such already works, it is actual while remaining a pure potentiality’ (Dolar 2004: 3). When faced with a real outlaw biker, it is rarely him that we feel directly threaten by, most often he is after all a nice chap, but we cannot remain uninfluenced by the biker movies, crime shows and media reports we have at one point or another consumed and that stuck in our minds. It is the imagination that amplifies the feeling of the threat, and that thus amplifies our sublime experience (Cochrane 2012). Or as Terrence des Pres put it, “the sublime is the drama or *agon* played out between the mind and that which terrifies it’ (Des Pres 1983: 142). It is only in this sense that the mediated discourse is capable of producing the sublime experience, by expanding our fantasy. The drawings from men’s adventure magazines testify precisely to this seductive power of threat just moments before it’s execution, i.e. prior to the moment when it ceases to be a threat. I have yet to encounter a drawing in men’s adventure magazines that depicts

the actual violent acts of torture described in the texts; instead every image carefully fixes the moment of horror exactly prior to the execution of the threat – a raised hand ready to slap, a knife approaching the neck of a virginal beauty, a horde of bikers riding in the direction of a desperate woman trying to escape and so on. It is precisely this intimidating moment of threat that provides the readers with pleasure.



Figure 4. *World of Men* cover, March 1968.

On the Fantasy of Savage Bikers as Sovereign ‘Sacred Monsters’

The threatening figure of the outlaw biker is a product of both fact and fiction – the factual accounts draw heavily on the fictional, while the real outlaw bikers themselves actively contribute, too, to the creation of the myth of their own bestiality, a myth that they effectively commodify and utilize in order to transnationally expand their brotherhoods and acquire new supporters. Already men’s adventure magazines from the 50s typically featured two types of stories: features and fiction (Pentagrelis 2016; Pentagrelis 2014; Pentagrelis 2015). Features were typically grounded in factual events, such as for instance the Hollister biker riot, the Hungarian uprising of 1956, the Nazi rule, the dictatorial rule of Juan Vicente Gómez in Venezuela and so on, but these ‘factual’ stories were always embellished with fictional elements, mythologizing the violence of the perpetrators. Stories about outlaw bikers, be they in serious media or on screen, very often emulate the logic of these features – including the stories the bikers themselves tell about themselves. In order to increase its authenticity and appeal, even the *Sons of Anarchy* (Sutter 2008-2014) TV series featured several real Hells Angels in support acts, and used David Labrava, a member of the iconic Oakland

Hells Angels as both an actor and advisor on the culture of the one percenters.

Outlaw motorcycle clubs as a subculture date back to post-WWII America, a time when the war veterans found themselves in search of brotherhood and adrenalin. After having supplied the war efforts, Harley Davidson, today the cult brand and icon of American design, began consciously tapping into the veteran market and seducing ordinary men and women into hobby riding (Stanfield 1992; Joans 2001). Following the war, more brotherhoods organized around riding motorcycles. But while many veterans and hobby riders have already then had their clubs with distinct logos, it was not until the heavily mythologized foundational event, the Hollister riot of 1947, that the outlaw bikers emerged in opposition to the so-called law-abiding hobby riders (Schubert 2012). In his influential texts on myth, Bronislaw Malinowski argued that myth legitimizes a particular social organization and that as such it is not ‘an idle tale, but a hard-worked active force’ (Malinowski 1948: 79); he also insisted that we have to focus on what myths *do* in life, how they legitimize rank of groups and individuals and define social boundaries and not merely at what they look like on paper. Moreover, myths are also productive of, or rather capable of amplifying the sublime experience through the imaginary they evoke. According to the outlaw bikers’ foundational myth, the contemporary global ‘clans’ of bikers share the same origin and wear a specific ‘1-percenter’ patch that signifies their belonging to the outlaw society of bikers and that displays their self-proclaimed status as ‘outlaws’, i.e. as those who defined themselves out of the mainstream society and instead established their own rules of conduct, their laws, by-laws, codes of honour as well as their own hierarchy. Outlaw motorcycle clubs provide people, often socially excluded by the majority society, alternative ways of acquiring status, power and enjoyment – thus offering a solution to their ‘status frustration’ (Cohen 1955). All existing outlaw motorcycle clubs irrespective of their animosities, ‘clan’ rivalries, or outright war share this foundational myth of origin of the outlaw bikers. As any myth of origin, also the myth endorsed by the outlaw bikers is a ‘feature’ with a founding event and place, namely, the infamous Hollister riot in 1947 on the Fourth July weekend during the Annual Gypsy Tour motorcycle rally organized by the American Motorcycle Association, during which thousands of bikers descended on the small town, a trope re-enacted across biker movies, as we have seen in the case of *Born Losers* (Frank 1968). As the bikers got progressively drunk, some became wilder than others, throwing bottles around and damaging property. The magazine LIFE blew the event out of proportion, even though eye-witnesses often described the event as ordinary (Schubert 2012); few years later the story was turned into the cult movie with Marlon Brando, *The Wild One* (dir. Benedek 1953) and further mythologized, turning the outlaw motorcyclists into a staple of the American popular culture (Austin et al. 2010). The outlaws themselves trace their beginnings not only to the events in Hollister but in particular to the alleged public statement of the American Motorcyclists Association (AMA) following these events, namely that the trouble was caused by the one per cent of the motorcyclists, who were deviant, whereas the ninety-nine per cent were law abiding citizens (Reynolds 2000). AMA claims to never have issued such an official statement, labelling it ‘apocryphal’ (Dulaney 2005). To invoke Malinowski again, ‘myth, taken as a whole, cannot be sober dispassionate history, since it is always made ad hoc to fulfil certain sociological function, to glorify a certain group, or to

justify an anomalous status' (Malinowski 1948: 102). This myth is however not just something that helped the outlaws to set themselves apart from the mainstream society, and to create a power mystique that was to become iconic, but it is also a 'feature story' that informs and shapes policies. For instance, the EUROPOL website constructs the outlaw bikers as a public threat by reproducing this feature. As Georges Bataille once remarked, 'it is crime's legendary aspects alone that have ordained the truth of crime' (Bataille 1991: 16). If we read the following words slowly with a lowered voice, we may be fooled into believing that this is a movie intro and not a part of report by the law enforcement agency of EU:

While most members of motorcycle clubs around the world are law abiding, a small percentage are not. Styling themselves 'outlaws' or 'one-percenters', they wear a patch on their jackets showing a 1% sign inside a diamond shape. This means that they belong to an outlaw motorcycle gang, such as the Hells Angels, Bandidos or Outlaws. Since 2005, there has been steady growth in the membership of such gangs worldwide. In Europe, the number of clubs has more than doubled. The main threat to public safety from outlaw motorcycle gangs stems from their propensity for extreme forms of violence. This includes the use of firearms and explosive devices such as grenades. In general, the use of intimidation and violence is intrinsic to the subculture of outlaw motorcycle gangs and serves to exert control over group members, rival gangs and others, such as victims of extortion.³

However, an ethnographic fieldwork among outlaw and the so-called law abiding bikers quickly reveals that this distinction is way too straightforward, and counterproductive when attempting to understand crime connected to the biker milieu. There are plenty of outlaw bikers who have never been charged with a criminal offense, and the reverse; the networks cut across the legal and the illegal, the illegal being typically always enabled and accompanied by the legal (Nordstrom 2008); there are significant differences between clubs, even of the same organization, across different localities; the most widespread crime in the biker milieu is also possibly not violent crime, but white-collar crime, tax evasion, money laundry and smuggling that cuts across the well-integrated networks of outlaws and 'citizens', but this would not make the headlines, and so on. It is the logic of 'feature stories' around spectacular violence that build reputations and bring legends and iconic public enemies into being.



Figure 5. Movie poster for *The Savage Seven* (dir. Rush 1968), a biker exploitation film, following the popular trope of biker savagery.

What is significant for us here is the way in which the outlaw bikers have been progressively cast as a *singularity*, or else, as a singular, carefully bounded, evil, radically set apart from the majority society of good citizens. The stories in men's adventure magazines are possibly the most explicit in the depiction of the outlaw bikers as singularly bloodthirsty, violent and incomprehensibly evil savages; it is also these stories from these magazines that have also served as scripts for biker exploitation and sexploitation B-movies. It is precisely this anti-realist construction of the bikers as a singularity, as incomprehensible evil, as barbarians and savages on wheels who do not fear death that also fuels the attraction towards them and reinforces their charisma. The problem with singularity is that it aestheticizes violence, terror and trauma, while systematically casting it as incomprehensible. John Sanbonmatsu, using the case of Holocaust, argued that the discourse of singularity 'obscures rather than reveals, the habits of thought and social structures that make' such 'practices inevitable' (Sanbonmatsu 2009: 102) and thus prevents us from taking a realist approach, as for instance that of Hannah Arendt's banality of evil, where violence can be better comprehended as residing in the everyday, in petty unimaginative actions of bureaucrats who have given up on critical thinking (Arendt 1965), or for instance in the approach of the German sociologist Harald Welzer, who analysed the stunning normality of the Nazi criminals focusing on the social and situational contexts that can turn even the most normal and ordinary of us into serial killers merely doing a job like any other (Welzer 2006). Such sobering

analysis not only goes in face of anti-realist accounts, but also does not lend itself to the feel-good spectacularization of the monstrous Other that not only provides us with a certain perverse pleasure but also relieves us from imagining of what we could have been capable of under certain circumstances. ‘Singularities are totems of such radical disjuncture that they open an impassable chasm between the Event and what we take to be life as such’ (Sanbonmatsu 2009: 104); this chasm between life as such and stories of incomprehensible evil as they appear in the men’s adventure magazines is constitutive of the production of the ‘evil bikers’ as a singularity. As Sanbonmatsu points out, ‘in invoking a particular aesthetic dimension in our encounter with past atrocities – a Kantian sublime – representations of singularity disadvantage forms of understanding and perceiving that might in fact offer us a more productive engagement’ (Sanbonmatsu 2009: 105). Sublime depictions and anti-realist discourses of singularity together reinforce the power mystique and charisma of groups such as the outlaw bikers. Moreover, in the process, as is visible above in case of EUROPOL, focus on singularity naturalizes everyday structures of violence as ordinary and uninteresting, e.g. labour exploitation, as they become overshadowed by the absolute evil that needs to be defeated at all cost, thus preventing an emergence of politics that would focus on structural changes and address the underlying issues driving people into joining such milieus. Or as Sanbonmatsu puts it, ‘to the extent that singularity is the *extraordinary*, we may unconsciously come to feel a kind of indifference toward, or even contempt for, the ordinary’ (Sanbonmatsu 2009: 110, emphasis in original). In this respect, politics that spectacularizes a certain violent group not only enhances the groups charisma, and with it also its power to attract new members, but also prevents any politics that would address structural issues and thus disempower such groups and diminish their attractiveness. A realist analysis is suppressed in the process in favour of sacralising an unpleasant group as a villainous singularity. One needs to ask – what and whose interests does this sacralisation serve, in particular when stemming from law enforcement agencies themselves that unabashedly reproduce the stories better served in pulp fiction?

The bikers are represented as extraordinary, which provides them with a sublime aura – they are beyond the law, beyond the everyday and the ordinary. Most importantly, they are imagined as transgressing the everyday household economy by not serving the reproduction of bare life, but instead appearing to act from a position of sovereignty over life, only confirmed by their violent senseless rage; they appear to the outsiders as subjects who enjoy as if there is no tomorrow, and as such they become the fantasmatic embodiment of an elusive *sovereignty* that many seek; they are imagined to kill just for the heck of it, to rape for the fun of it, to live as beasts *without* purpose or motive. As such, they are no longer human, but are instead turned into ‘sacred monsters’ (Bataille 1991). They are the wild men, the barbarians, the very ‘devices for distinguishing the civilised from a degenerate monstrous other’ (Devetak 2005: 632). This ascribed monstrosity separates them further from ‘us’, pushing them into the incomprehensible. They are monsters that unsettle our social norms, spread terror and fear, in the process troubling our understanding of what it means to be human (Wright 2013). As social object, they haunt us, they ‘can never be entirely banished or obliterated’, they always hover ‘at the edges of subject’s existence, threatening its unity and identity with

disruption and possible dissolution’ (Devetak 2005: 633). It is here, in the idea of the monster that we again stumble upon the sublime, the sublime that threatens to destroy us, that arouses feelings of self-negation. As Foucault noted, the ‘human monster’ is the limit, it ‘combines the impossible and the forbidden’ (Foucault 2003: 56). Monstrosity, barbarity and pure evil are tropes that have been repeated ad nauseam in men’s adventure magazines, as well as biker movies. A collection of the MAM’s cover art featuring biker gangs, *Barbarians on Bikes* (Deis and Doyle 2016) reveals these tropes at first sight, as do also movies such as *Werewolves on Wheels* (dir. Levesque 1971), *I Bought a Vampire Motorcycle* (Campbell 1990) or *Frankenstein Created Bikers* (dir. Bickert 2016).



Figure 6. Movie poster for *Werewolves on Wheels* (dir. Levesque 1971).

All these pop cultural productions can be said to follow the logic of the Gothic sublime; they are often patched together out of Burkean terrors (monsters, madmen, moans, sighs, roars, terror, tyranny etc.), much like ‘some unusually artless Gothic novels’ (Morris 1985: 301). Even here, ‘crime escalates into villainy; innocence is never merely virtuous but immaculate and virginal’ (Morris 1985: 302) like the girls that fall victim to the barbarians on bikes. The key notion here is excess, an excess of violence that is imbued with an appearance of sovereignty. One of the iconic movies that set the stage for those that followed was *The Wild Angels* (dir. Corman 1966), it not only exploited ‘the shock value of the outlaw biker’, but also staged ‘a mischievous pageant of excess’ (Osgerby 2003: 102) of senseless biker mayhem. Similar excess of violence fascinated Georges Batailles, who once wrote

of the appearance of the monstrous criminal as a sovereign in his *The Trial of Gilles de Rais*. There he remarks that:

We would misunderstand the monster whose violence will soon be unleashed if we did not notice in him this apparent insensitivity, this nonchalant indifference, which to begin with places him well above the feelings of the average man (...) The accumulation of blood, the violence of a wild animal! ... it links blood to the truth and violence to the sovereign monstrosity of Rais, whose grandeur tramples those who confront him, who now and then naively laughs at seeing the jolts and contortions of children, their throats cut (Bataille 1999: 37).

In the minds of the admirers the bikers become the very embodiment of the experience of freedom that proudly shits on the fear of death, they are the indifferent ones, the rebels without a cause. Bataille hints at the sublime appearance of the Gilles de Rais, the legendary ‘sacred monster’ as he calls him, who went down in history for killing small children and masturbating on their dead bodies, when he notes that: ‘Generally the grandeur and, above all, the monstrosity of our character is imposing. There is a sort of majesty in his ease, one that he keeps even during the tears of confession. There is in the evidence of monstrosity a sovereign grandeur which does not contradict the humility of the wretched man proclaiming the horror of crime’ (Bataille 1999: 73-74). Even today, serial killers fascinate and enjoy cult following, such as Charles Manson, the well-known serial killer, who has ‘enjoyed attention and commodification beyond any other criminal making him a useful example of the importance of mythical qualities over the gruesome ... also central to his brand is the cross and later, swastika, that he carved into his forehead. His willingness to evoke countercultural imagery has played a large part in his success as a rebellious brand’ (Denham 2016: 235). Not unlike Manson, the outlaw bikers too have become and even turned themselves into commodified countercultural symbols. They have built up their reputation for and been repetitively cast as *transgressive* – even the members themselves speak of a ‘life commitment to violations of decency’⁴. Any transgression requires something malign, which can be under certain circumstances transformed into something sublime and under certain light perceived as something great (Pfaller 2011). If there is any ‘cultural achievement’ to the men’s adventure magazines of the 50s and 60s, it is precisely their ability to transform the acts of the Nazis, dictators, rapists, biker gangs and so on into something sublime, which provides the reader with cultural and at times even erotic pleasure. As we have seen, this cultural pleasure often prevents a realist analysis of the spectacularized crimes; but that seems to be just the way pleasure works. But the bikers are not only not afraid to die, they also have something, namely an intense passion – for each other and for their ‘sacred patch’, their club logo protected by both trademark, intimidation and violence, for which they are willing not only to die, but also to kill (Kuldova 2016b). This is precisely the essence of libertinage of the likes of Marquis de Sade; namely, the ability to cultivate one’s passions to such a degree, that one is willing to be hanged for them (Lacan 1989).

The literature by bikers about bikers, too, indulges in the reproduction of the

seductive mythical nature of the subculture with its valorisation of barbarity set against that which is perceived as a scared mainstream society that calls for rules, regulations and security in an attempt to reproduce its bare life. The fearless barbarians on the contrary offer freedom under the motto: FTW! (fuck the world). Their indifference is iconic. Just consider the introduction to a book on biker myths by Bill Hayes: ‘It’s a secretive subculture with a spell of worldwide seduction. The few who can commit to it discover a fiery path toward a pure power and freedom that eludes virtually everyone else. That commitment, however, is anything but easy. It’s tough, macho, dangerous, mysterious and heavily loaded with anti-hero hedonism; it’s the perfect cryptic combination to hook imaginations ... it’s *not* modern and it’s *not* civilized ... it bleeds with myths, mysteries, rumours and lurid lore’ (Hayes 2016: loc. 144). Given this, as Hayes notes, these clubs never really have a problem of expanding and seducing new members and followers; ‘a decaying attrition has never been a danger in this lifestyle of hyper-attraction and attention’ (Hayes 2016: loc. 164). He even tries to show that the real is far worse than any imaginable fiction: ‘real one-percenters, outlaws, pioneers, outcasts, and some very legitimate loose cannons have led an existence that flattens fiction like roadkill’ (Hayes 2016: loc. 174).

The Sublime Experience of Self-Negation

In 2016, I visited the public book launch of *Jagd auf die Rocker* (Schelhorn and Heitmüller 2016), a book dealing with the criminalization of motorcycle clubs by media, police and politics co-edited by the Stuttgart Hells Angel Lutz Schelhorn, which took place in the Hells Angels clubhouse in Leipzig and was part of the Leipzig book fair. The event drew in a number of supporters, among them a young working class woman, an enthusiastic fan of biker erotica. Having read pretty much every available erotic novel featuring bikers and there are more than one would image, she came to see the real bikers for the first time in her life, using all money she had on travel from Berlin to Leipzig, not even having enough left to check into a hotel for the night. She observed the bikers from a distance, with her eyes wide open. Shortly after midnight, it became clear that the night won’t be as wild and long as she anticipated and me and my colleague tried to convince some of the Hells Angels to let her sleep over in the clubhouse, but all the beds were already taken. She stared at us talking to the mysterious men, and whispered: ‘I don’t think you should be talking to them’, as if they were there only to be gazed at from a distance. One of them did his best to find her a cheap lodging, called around and after half an hour found a place for 30EUR a night in the neighbourhood, but she could not afford even that, having only a return train ticket home, and would not let us pay either. She spent her night in the train station, waiting hours for her morning train. And yet, she described it as the most exciting trip of her life because she got to experience the thrill of being around, the memory of gazing at the men with strong tattooed arms with a mixture of fear and pleasure stuck in her mind. Even if the threat was more a virtue of her own imagination, it would not be possible without the embodied outlaw biker aesthetics – one has to look the part. People indeed do enjoy the aura of danger (Ray 2009). Even the outlaw bikers know that the power to intimidate and to threaten can be seductive, and even something that can be commodified and that people like to experience.

Once when I was in Berkeley, I set up a meeting with two of the Oakland Hells Angels; instead of showing up at two in the afternoon, they kept politely postponing about every hour until eventually showing up at ten in the evening. An old black car with matte varnish stopped at the red light on a crossroad where I was to meet them. Both of them got out of the car, walking stiff with their patched vests towards me. I smiled politely and stretched out my hand, but only a dark sneer came in return, followed by an order: ‘get in the car’. So I got in the car and we drove off, even though I was not sure where we were headed. Then they pulled at a Turkish diner and we spent several hours pleasantly chatting over some food. Towards the end of our conversation one of them suddenly asked me: ‘so, did you enjoy the experience?’ I was not sure what he meant, which showed on my face, so he elaborated: ‘the “get in the car” part?’. I nodded laughing; for some reason he felt like explaining, ‘that’s what people expect from us, *the experience*, after all, we are an iconic American brand, so we must live up to that’. One thing is for sure, the experience really does stick in one’s mind, even against one’s better knowledge, and it would not be possible without the biker mythology as much as the carefully cultivated intimidating looks of the Hells Angels. There is something to experiencing intimidation from a position of relative safety, staring in the face of the threat to self-preservation. As Terrence des Pres argued: ‘mind must do something which allows it to look upon its own possible destruction while at the same time being certain that its own self-preservation is assured...self-preservation in the face of terror is the strongest emotion the mind can entertain – and that this emotion generates the power of sublime moments’ (Des Pres 1983: 138-139). Here it becomes clear that when it comes to the sublime, the psychoanalytical structure of ‘I know quite well, but still’ is at play (Mannoni 2003; Pfaller 2014), it is precisely this structure that generates a mixture of fear and pleasure. As Klein has argued in his book *Cigarettes Are Sublime*, ‘if cigarettes were good for you, they would not be sublime’ (Klein 1993: 2), and one could add, if one did not *know* they were not good for you, they would not be sublime either. Erotic biker novels are revealing in this respect too, as they typically capitalize on the seductive power of the terrifying bikers. In a short erotic novel, with a fitting title *Ride Me Hard*, a sweet young waitress is both terribly attracted to and terribly scared by a big, strong, tattooed, and very intimidating biker, at one point she finds herself thinking ‘he is every bad decision I have ever made all rolled up into one terrifying package’ (Slade 2015: loc. 84-85). She knows quite well, but still she cannot resist the attraction she enjoys, one that repetitively threatens her self-preservation. The experience of the sublime almost always includes feelings of self-negation, ‘perceiving the object makes us feel reduced and overwhelmed’ (Cochrane 2012: 129). Self-negation refers to ‘a sense of being violently impacted upon and a sense of self-dislocation’ (Cochrane 2012: 128), ‘a sense of how physically insignificant, or utterly contingent we are in comparison to the object’ (Cochrane 2012: 130); it is precisely this sense of self-negation vis-à-vis the terrifying and yet seductive, sublime even, biker on which the erotic novels almost always capitalize. Indeed, it is also this feeling of utter insignificance, even of dissolution of the human image, which intimidation aims to inflict in its victims; it is nothing less than the imagined possibility of self-destruction that excites when faced with intimidation while knowing we are relatively safe, at a distance. But there is more to the idea of the outlaw biker and self-negation. We must not forget here that the bikers not only inflict the fear of

death in the spectators, but are also repetitively represented as self-destructive. In the aforementioned erotic novel, the biker at one point remarks when confronted with the fairly obvious even if ambiguous desire of the waitress to be not only taken by him, but destroyed by him: ‘Whatever you are running from? I am not a way out. I am a fucking self-destruct button’ ‘This is exactly what I want’, she responds (Slade 2015: loc. 352). There seems to be in every outlaw biker, at least the phantasmatic, something of the tragic ‘unbearable splendor’ of Antigone, as Lacan named the fascination her character has aroused over the centuries; ‘it is Antigone herself who fascinates us, Antigone in her *unbearable splendor*. She has a quality that both attracts us and startles us, in the sense of intimidates us; this terrible, self-willed victim disturbs us’ (Lacan 1992: 247) as she is headed for self-destruction. We could be tempted to approximate the sublime experience to a feeling of anxiety, in particular in its rendering by Søren Kierkegaard, who remarked that ‘anxiety is in fact a desire for what one fears, a sympathetic antipathy. Anxiety is an alien power that seizes the individual, and yet one cannot break free of it, and one does not want to – because one fears. But what one fears is what one desires’ (Kierkegaard 2013: 235). However, Kierkegaard also remarks that anxiety makes one powerless, unlike the sublime experience, which, as we shall see makes us both powerless and empowered at the same time by the virtue of identification with the sublime object which then leads to a transformation of the self.

Identification and Transformation

At the end of my night out with the Hells Angels in Berkeley, we were headed back to the car. Throughout my whole stay in Berkeley I never jaywalked, pretty much only because it is fined with around 200USD – a very foreign concept for someone coming from Norway, where streets can be crossed not only anywhere, but also on red light, provided no cars are coming. While I have found the rule fairly silly and mostly annoying, I sucked it up. Then I crossed the road from the restaurant straight to the car in between the two Angels with their intimidating looks, a silly little transgression indeed, but how wonderful all the same! I felt like a human again in this over-policed and overregulated space overfilled with constant prohibitions and manufactured threats; no longer serving the household economy infused in me a feeling of power and sovereignty; suddenly one walks a little bit taller, noticing that one unconsciously appropriates the very aesthetic and embodied attitude of the bikers. This is the same feeling that the supporters describe and crave; the proximity of the outlaw biker, who is known for not caring, is not only threatening, but also empowering. We are perfectly capable of holding contradictory notions and feelings at the same time and it seems that often our enjoyment stems precisely from this contradiction. The proximity to the outlaws not only belittles us, makes us feel vulnerable and small, but also paradoxically at the same time it empowers us; by imitating the (self-)destructive drives of the other, we feel empowered and alive. Tom Cochrane has rightly pointed out that ‘we imaginatively identify with the properties of the sublime object. The basic idea is that closely attending to properties of the sublime object encourages one to subtly take on the properties analogous to those perceived’ (Cochrane 2012: 140); ‘it is pleasurable to vicariously experience the qualities of power or magnitude’ (Cochrane 2012: 141).



Figure 7. Support 81 sales stand of the Vienna Hells Angels MC at the *Wildstyle and Tattoo Fair* in Vienna, April 2017. Image credit: author.

This is also what drives the sales of outlaw motorcycle clubs' support merchandise and accessories (Kuldova 2016b). Many outlaw motorcycle clubs worldwide (e.g. Outlaws MC, Bandidos MC, Gremium MC, Pagans MC etc.) have followed the organizational and commercial strategies of the iconic Hells Angels, who trademarked their 'death head' logo already in 1972, and consequently also a range of other logos, such as 'Support 81' (81 standing for HA in the alphabet), and many more, in order to not only protect their logos, reputation and power, but also to capitalize on the mythology, turning it into both an income for the club and a means of recruitment of new members and active supporters, willing to act on behalf and order of the club. Clothing, jewelry, patches, memorabilia, calendars and all sorts of other items are produced, designed and sold by the clubs at different biker events, but also tattoo conventions⁵; they capture the biker aesthetics and provide supporters not only with a feeling of imaginary, if not real, belonging to a transnational, powerful and feared group and thus with a sense of power. By purchasing such items these individuals wish to participate in the 'power mystique' (Cohen 1976) of the notorious clubs, to 'be a little bad' and to display their alliance, as one of my informants noted during an event organized by the Hells Angels, without taking it upon themselves to become committed members. Supporters like to observe from a certain distance, enjoying the thrill and the ambiguous feelings of being 'a pussy compared to those guys', while feeling 'like a man again'⁶. Another guy at the same event, dressed in a support 81 t-shirt suddenly decided to leave the party around ten in the evening; he pointed to a big Slovenian Hells Angel, and said: 'you see him, this guy is a bouncer, or so I heard, a violent guy, you piss him off, for no reason he will destroy you. I enjoy being around, it gives me a kick, but I know when to leave'. Most visitors who enjoy the

thrill at a safe distance followed his example and only a bunch of more loyal and organized supporters remained until the morning hours.



Figure 8. Members of an organized support group of the Hells Angels MC, helping out at an event. Unlike supporters who merely dress up in the clubs' merchandize, these are members of an organized group that shows a higher level of commitment offering support services. Image credit: author.

While the sublime experience of being exposed to the mythologized intimidating bikers can on its own make the supporters identify with them and in turn, even if often only temporarily, transform themselves – act more sovereign, feel powerful and so on, the logic of identification and transformation is enhanced by the use of symbols, by appropriating the aesthetics and by dressing and adorning oneself in things that have come in touch with the outlaw bikers. It is here that the logic of magic comes into play, facilitating further the identification with those who intimidate us, in order to acquire at least a fraction of their intimidating power, which can then be used to intimidate others. In 2011, when the German local football team SV Gremberg dressed up in t-shirts reading 'Red Army 81 Cologne', Leverkusen, its opponents, felt immediately intimidated and threatened⁷. At work here is sympathetic magic, or else imitative magic, identified already by James George Frazer (Frazer 1894), through imitation and consumption of objects that have come in touch with the Angels, the supporters take on certain desirable properties associated with the outlaw bikers, such as intimidation power, a sense of freedom and rebellion. The desire for outlaw biker support merchandize is parallel to the desire for so called 'murderabilia' (Denham 2016), or else, objects that belonged to or came in contact with famous, often serial, killers or even their bodily pieces, such as nails or hair. These objects are imagined to transmit the

spirit of the mythologized killer, who is turned into a brand-like creature, which can then be ‘magically’ appropriated by the collector, and incorporated into his self, often resulting in a perverse feeling of empowerment – a transformation from weakness to strength, from victimhood to heroism, from cowardice to bravery, from being average to having a tremendous sex-appeal, from being a sissy to being a man. Such identification and transformation has been the wet dream of advertisers and branding experts for decades now (Kuldova 2016a). In fact, most professionals in the branding world wish to create a brand as successful as Harley Davidson in creating a real transnational ‘brand community’ (worldwide Harley Davidson Owners Groups), and in encouraging passionate commitment of the buyers (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001; Schouten and McAlexander 1995). One could imagine that what Harley has and the others do not have is precisely the sublime experience that it offers, the machine itself, with its iconic potato-potato-potato roar, with the danger of biking to self-preservation, and with its inevitable connection to the outlaw bikers, can itself be thought of as a sublime object (Bourne 2006). And yet, no matter how much brands promise transformation through their products, theirs is rarely as effective as the one dependent on a sublime experience, on the transformation through a form of terror that threatens self-preservation. It is through the sublime experience that people often feel as if they are acquiring superior powers, by identifying with the source of their terror – this was the key strategy of Gothic novels where pacts with the devil were prevalent. The outlaw bikers as much as their Harleys can be in one way perceived as a source of terror that ‘provokes the dissolution or disappearance of human image’ only to then transform observer ‘into a participant through a psychic process of identification that, in turn, allows the beholder-participant to transcend terror by partaking of its power’ (Des Pres 1983: 145-146). That which in one light appears as self-destructing can in another appear as utterly sublime, and even as the most sovereign act. Erotic biker novels teach us this, if nothing else. But what they also show rather well, often on the case of shy young women desiring their own destruction by the potent and violent biker, is that the beholder identifies with terror to such a degree ‘that it seems his own idea’ (Des Pres 1983: 143); ‘terror has been incorporated and transcended by a very thoroughgoing dynamic of identification’ (Des Pres 1983: 144).



Figure 9. A tattoo artist at the *Wildstyle and Tattoo Fair* in Vienna, April 2017, dressed in Support 81 merchandize. Image credit: author.

Conclusion: Outlaw Biker Aesthetics of Power

Outlaw bikers do not only intimidate, but they also enchant (Lee 2011), it is this combination that is at the heart of their power, one that is reproduced not only through myths, ‘features’, cinematic and photographic footage, but also through material culture, through objects and commodities they themselves produce and that partake in the same aesthetics, through insignia, awards, memorabilia, logos, and designs that can be hanged on walls, worn on bodies, displayed on cars and motorcycles and so on. Without this vast material and visual culture, without the aesthetic, their power and reputation would be severely limited as it is grounded in an *idea* of terrifying aesthetic spectacles of excess, an idea that is dependent on the stimulation of fantasy, on the arousal of imagination. Even if aesthetic, this is not a rule by beauty, but a rule by sublime, by terror and intimidation that enchants. The outlaw bikers political culture that acquires them supporters is grounded in an ‘ideology of charisma’ (Murphy 1998: 564). This is hardly a form of power unknown to anthropologists. William P. Murphy for instance uncovered a very similar logic of the aesthetics of power relying on the sublime among the Mende in Sierra Leone. Even here, power is centered around ‘features’ that oscillate between fact and fiction, as much as around spectacular, secretive and extraordinary events. The outlaw motorcycle clubs rely on their ‘charismatic authority’ within a larger system regulated by legal authority (Weber 1985); this sets the bikers apart from the ordinary, into the realm of the superhuman, even if in this case, the monstrous rather than the divine. The reverence of the outlaws is further intensified by the mystique of invisibility and secretiveness – from the closed club meetings, closed events, secret deals, to their foot in the illegal businesses and crime, carefully kept under the honor code of silence, akin to

‘omertà’ of the Italian mafia, and not unlike the ‘political culture of hidden strategizing and an aesthetics of secrecy’ among Mende (Murphy 1998: 564). Even Edmund Burke suggested that invisibility enhances the power of the sublime, ‘those despotic governments, which are founded on the passions of men, and principally upon the passion of fear, keep their chief as much as may be from the public eye. The policy has been the same in many cases of religion. Almost all the heathen temples were dark. Even in the barbarous temples of the Americans at this day, they keep their idol in a dark part of the hut, which is consecrated to his worship’ (Burke 1914: 41). The allure of secrecy further intensifies the idea of the mystery surrounding these clubs on the margins of society; combined with the sublime experience, one they increasingly commodify and feed their supporters and admirers, fixing this experience through branded material objects that promise transformation and empowerment akin to the one felt when in the proximity of the outlaws, the power of the outlaws is enhanced. The aesthetics of power depends on the sublime and produces a ‘strategic order of wonder and surprise’ unlike the aesthetics of power dependent on the underlying notions of beauty, e.g. of the modern state and legal authority, which produces a ‘normative order of harmony and regularity’ (Murphy 1998: 574). The sublime aesthetics of power relies on the visibility of threat, on its periodic spectacular staging; this distinguishes it from the form of power embraced by the modern state (at least vis-à-vis its citizens) that pushes threat into invisibility, relying on disciplining its subjects, interpellating them through the law. There are diverse pragmatic reasons why people decide to actively support the outlaw motorcycle clubs, which deserve a separate treatment elsewhere, but what attracts many in the first place and rarely ceases to fascinate is the charisma of the bikers, their aesthetics of power – unlike the power and authority of the state, this form of power can be directly imitated, appropriated, and utilized in ambiguous projects of self-empowerment through transgression and exclusion of the self from the mainstream. The sublime splendor of intimidation drives the affects of the supporters, makes them act collectively and makes them commit, beyond reason, and against their better knowledge.



Figure 10. The sympathetic magic behind the logic of this Eighty-One energy drink is reminiscent, and indeed principally the same, as the one behind the Eucharist, i.e. taking in the blood of the Christ and incorporating the practitioner in the body of Jesus, thus feeling the resulting empowerment. Image credit: author.

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¹ From a conversation with a Hells Angels supporter in Leipzig, Germany, March 2016. '81' stands for the 'H' and 'A' in the alphabet and is a trademarked fashion and accessories label manufactured and sold by the Hells Angels club chapters across the world, each typically having their own design modifications, as well as often selling t-shirts to support brothers in prison, who need to raise funds for lawyers as well as popular support.

² From a conversation at the event Harley & Snow, Ridnaun, Italy, 11 March 2017.

³ <https://www.europol.europa.eu/crime-areas-and-trends/crime-areas/outlaw-motorcycle-gangs> (accessed on 2 February 2017)

⁴ From an interview with a prospect of the Hells Angels (8 April 2017).

⁵ The first physical Hells Angels store with support merchandize was opened in 2016, not without controversy.

⁶ From a conversation with a member of Harley Davidson Owners Group, at the event 'Ride with the Angels', 2 July 2016, Carinthia, Austria.

⁷ <http://www.express.de/koeln/sv-gremberg-kreisliga-mannschaft-wirbt-fuer-hells-angels-3643774> (accessed on 10 April 2016).