

What Does an Auto Race Mean?

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The Indianapolis 500 is a massive event. From the air, the track is a great gray oval, surrounded by hundreds of thousands of spectators; it seems a religious place, an area invested with great power. Closer to the ground, it is a spectacle of sense. The cars fly past like meteors, blinking through sight with their characteristic screams. The words emblazoning each car—GOODYEAR, VIAGRA—flash subliminally past eyes, ungrasped by consciousness. Over the motion of the track, over the hundreds of thousands, floats the disembodied voice of the public-address announcer, illustrating every turn, every rush, every crash.

These details hint at the power and intensity of the Indianapolis 500. The race is a great commune; the masses are witness to an event of terrifying speed and sound. There is indeed something mystical about the race, as there is about all sporting events watched by so many. Public gatherings of such size elevate athletes to the prominence of leaders and priests; at such sporting events there is the feeling that, as with press conferences and religious ceremonies, something important is happening. Where Indy surpasses most other sports (and most public gatherings of any type) is in the size of the audience, the non-visual nature of the race, the inhuman speed and power on display. These, as well as the unique potential for destruction, suffuse the proceedings with a certain gravity.

Paul Fussell was confronted with this gravity when he attended the Indianapolis 500. In his essay “Indy,” he grapples with it and other aspects of the race. He finds that Indy is reminiscent of the rodeo and bullfight, and he ultimately concludes that it is a ritual that invokes domination. The race asserts the dominance of man over the machine. Fussell calls it “a great Sunday morning proclamation of the dignity of man” that ministers “to the national spirit” (273, 274). What did he mean by that?

From his characterization of Indianapolis as having “something of pioneer individualism” and his emphasis on the ritual of human domination over the machine (and the horse and bull), it is clear that something of the fron-

tier is alive in Indianapolis (267). Indianapolis might represent a yearning to recover the feelings of dominance and primacy that were inherent in the frontier. The modern individual—by this I mean the individual living today—feels lost amid forces of government, capitalism, even globalization and terrorism. During the race, corporations are reduced to words on clothing and cars; by taming the machine, the drivers symbolically tame the corporation, soothing the audience of wage workers and salarymen. Indy is a confluence of forces seemingly beyond human control; the drivers conquer them anyway. At the very least, they become more important than the machines and the corporations. The individual drivers are the heart of the race.

But the maleness and whiteness emphasized in the race are disturbing. Fussell notes that “blacks are so rare among the spectators that you notice them specifically, and of course there are no black drivers, nor threat of any” (270). When he brings this up at a party, a woman tells him that “blacks abjured the race because...[they] couldn’t bear to sit in the sun” (270). Fussell also mentions that women were barred from the pits until 1970 and brings up the harassment of a female driver by male spectators (270). These ideas seem incongruous with Fussell’s assertion that Indy is a ritual for humanity, since so much of humanity seems excluded from it.

What may be more accurate is the comparison between Indy and America’s past. If Indy is a “proclamation of the dignity of man,” it is a deeply exclusionary one; it is closer to Manifest Destiny than secular humanism, and if it indeed ministers to the national spirit it must be the national spirit of yesteryear. The frontier represents dominance—but it is a dominance that is the legacy of white men. Could it be that the race is so white because most of humanity cannot relate to the American frontier? Located in the Midwest, Indianapolis recognizes its past—a past not all share (or at least, a past that not all interpret in the same way).

Of course, the frontier is really a “myth,” says William Cronon, in his essay “The Trouble With Wilderness.” He summarizes the frontier myth as follows: “Easterners and European immigrants, in moving to the wild, unsettled lands of the frontier, shed the trappings of civilization, rediscovered their primitive racial energies, reinvented direct democratic institutions, and thereby reinfused themselves with a vigor, an independence, and a creativity that were the source of American democracy and national character” (170). Ignored in the myth is the brutal fate of the indigenous people.

The frontier embodied anti-modernity. As Cronon writes:

The nostalgia for a passing frontier way of life inevitably implied ambivalence, if not downright hostility, toward modernity and all that it represented. If one saw the wild lands of the frontier as freer, truer, and more natural than other, more modern places, then one was also inclined to see the cities and factories of urban-industrial civilization as confining, false, and artificial. Owen Wister looked at transition [sic] that had followed “the horseman of the plains,” and did not like what he saw...In the eyes of writers who shared Wister’s distaste for modernity, civilization contaminated its inhabitants and absorbed them into the faceless, collective, contemptible life of the crowd. (171)

If the frontier represents rugged individualism, the modern is characterized by dependence—by “the faceless, collective, contemptible life of the crowd.” Fussell, confronted with a contradiction—does Indy celebrate technology and corporations or the conquering of them?—concludes that the Indianapolis 500 is a ritual of reassertion in a space where the individual feels his access to power denied. It is a ritual return to the frontier. It is a rebellion against modern powerlessness.

But could it also be, through its racial purity, a rebellion against modern equality?

Fussell unwittingly hints at the answer when he tells his reader, “You [may] come to understand that Indy has something more to do with Memorial Day than coincidence” (272). Memorial Day, it turns out, has something more to do with whiteness and cultural warfare than simple national pride, according to the scholar Cecilia O’Leary. O’Leary studies the years following the Civil War, a period when America was aching for the definition of a national character and in which contemporary patriotism was given shape.

The evolution of Memorial Day is illustrative. It was originally created to celebrate “those who sought to preserve the union, and not those who sought to destroy it”—pointedly leaving out the Confederate veterans. However, the meaning of the holiday changed as veterans from both sides of the war worked towards reunification. O’Leary writes that “a selective and reformed memory of the Civil War moved from pondering its causes to stressing common battlefield experiences” (23). Meanwhile, black southerners were peripheralized from political life after the defeat of Reconstruction, and the race question was set aside in the name of American reconciliation.

Memorial Day became a way of “weaving and blending the peoples of [America], obliterating differences” (26). But all that really meant was that the

old racist status quo still held sway. To illustrate, O’Leary invokes the commemoration, in 1912, of the fiftieth anniversary of Gettysburg:

Tents stretched for miles across meadows where only fifty years earlier 80,000 men from the Union Army fought ...against 75,000 Confederates. The battle signaled the end of the Confederacy and dealt a final death blow to slavery. Yet, speakers barely mentioned the role of slavery or the unfinished business of reconstructing race relations... There was no mistaking the influence of Confederate veterans in the revised memory of the Civil War. No longer a war of secession, orator after orator re-cast the war as a heroic struggle between brothers whose blood had strengthened and purified the nation. When President Wilson arrived on July 4th, he was flanked on one side by a Union veteran holding the Stars and Stripes and on the other by a Confederate veteran holding the South’s national flag.
(26)

By 1915, D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* had become one of the most popular films in the country. The film depicts the Ku Klux Klan as “valiant heroes who...[free] the South from the death grip of black anarchy” (26). At this point, American whites had completely closed ranks, and while the patriotism of Indy is not that of 1915, it is surely that of 1912.

There doesn’t seem to be any animosity against minorities among NASCAR drivers. “Virtually everyone tracking the sport ...claims it’s only a matter of time before minorities start contributing to the frenzy” (Graham). Mark Howell chalks up the lack of minority participation to the fact that “the best path to take [to become a driver] is being in a family already in the sport. It’s not like you can go out on the sandlot, develop a talent and start a racing career. It’s not a sport. It’s a lifestyle. That lends to the whiteness of the sport” (Graham). This is a credible explanation, but it doesn’t change the fact that a white audience member need not feel uneasy about his or her uninformed or racist commentary.

This is another escape from the modern: an escape from the walking-on-eggshells feeling—“political correctness”—that is so characteristic of late modernity. If Indianapolis is a place where a crash is called a “yellow light”—a euphemism which is not very good at obscuring the truth since many audience members can see the crash anyway—it is also a place where it can be matter-of-factly stated that blacks don’t like sitting in the sun. Indy is a place where white people can reconnect with a cultural heritage steeped in power that is only theirs. Indy is shaped to this day by the racially pure patriotism of 1912 and the frontier.

So then, does the Indianapolis 500 have any relevance to minorities? What about those whites who reject a past laden with exclusion?

In fact, the race does have relevance. The cultural heritage of Indy is not only representative of white hegemony. It also represents individualism and self-determination. The “mythic frontier individualist” inhabited a world where Indians and blacks were either regarded as the Other or as irrelevant, true, but he also inhabited one where he could escape the “debilitating effects” of “urban-industrial capitalism” (Cronon 171). That desire for escape is one that today lives in all people, since the world today is increasingly controlled by the enormous (and continually expanding) forces of global capitalism. To many, it seems that our beloved democratic institutions have fallen to these, and other behind-the-scenes forces.

The pervasive cynicism that swirls around today’s citizens is illustrative of the extent to which democratic institutions have lost the image of being democratic. People flock to alternative news outlets like the Independent Media Centers (www.indymedia.org). This particular site seems quintessential in its distrust; if this news outlet is “independent,” what does that say of mainstream media? How is IMC “independent,” according to their website? “No corporation owns Indymedia, no government manages the organization, no single donor finances the project. Indymedia is not the mouthpiece of any political party or organization” (Independent Media Center). A global network of citizen-reporters, IMC is active empowerment, an attempt to circumvent the reach of these larger forces in control. Its existence is a sign of both feelings of powerlessness and attempts by people to transcend them, to assert themselves.

It’s not exactly what we’re looking for, though it is close. What we are looking for, essentially, is an inclusionary ritual for human empowerment, an Indianapolis 500 that isn’t so white. The Independent Media Centers are too active to fit this criterion; their reporters actively seek to fight government and corporate hegemony. We aren’t looking for a movement that seeks to change the established order, but simply a ritual that—like Indy—reminds people—but not just certain kinds of people—that the individual has power.

An answer might lie in comedy, in social provocateurs like George Carlin and Chris Rock, in men and women who “tell it like it is,” who tell you they “prefer seeing things the way they are, not the way some people wish they were” (Carlin 161). The answer may lie in people who have the strength of belief behind their words. You can never be sure about politicians. Truth telling is a mythic frontier virtue; to always tell the truth was even a part of

Gene Autry's Cowboy Code of the 1950s. Do you know what else was in the Cowboy Code?

The cowboy is a patriot.

The comic, I hope I don't have to explain, is not. (Though in this case, we are talking about a specific type of comic, and perhaps, a specific type of patriotism.)

If patriotism defines the cowboy, one might say honesty defines the comic, even though comedy lacks objectivity. Comics say things that are controversial, offensive, and even racist as they lash out against a conformist society. Yet their audience rarely punishes them, for honesty seems a rare virtue and for its rarity is valued more than objectivity. The honest social comic has become the ideal of the leader, for he or she has no interest groups to appease. While politicians lie or obfuscate, weighing the different demands of donors, organizations, and constituents against their ability to keep them in office, comics speak their mind with no care for the consequences. Their audiences vicariously reject the game of cost-benefit analysis that is politics.

Now, there's a ritual. And rituals do have power. But often rituals breed inaction. Sitting in a spectator's chair amounts to a functional separation from "real" society, so the rituals encourage stasis. Indy, even as it celebrates human spirit, recognizes the power of forces beyond human control. Cronon writes, "Built into the frontier myth from its very beginning was the notion that [the frontier] was temporary and would pass away" (170). Indy might pay homage to the frontier, but it does so as a eulogy. And though comedians may bring up controversial issues, they are entertainers and not activists. Even if they conjure up images of the charismatic leader, business in Washington goes on as usual.

If any of this sounds like a challenge, keep in mind that it is a challenge not to be borne by the Indy driver or the comedian. This is a challenge for the *spectator*. This is not a condemnation of rituals, but a recognition of their limitations. Rituals, at least the ones we have discussed, have the paradoxical effect of maintaining belief and stifling action. All-white Indy perpetuates an idea of patriotism which is deeply exclusionary. But there is no lynching during the race. Comics express the idea that the world is controlled by dishonest forces. But nothing changes in Washington; the audience doesn't turn into activists. This is perhaps because the subtle nature in which these ideas are expressed taps perfectly into the subconscious nature of the desires of their audiences. If spectators at Indy and comedy shows consciously and strongly felt the ideas expressed by those events, they might be at Klan rallies and anti-globalization protests.

And no, I am not encouraging you to run out to your nearest Klan rally or anti-globalization protest, I am asking instead that you realize that feelings of powerlessness can never be stopped through the repetition of ritual. Some sort of greater reckoning of feelings and desires must be enacted. Indy is just as much (or more) about cars as it is about race; comedy is just as much (or more) about entertainment as it is about honesty. And so the question becomes: what are you about? And how should you act because of that? The Independent Media Centers have presented one answer; we would do well to seek another.

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