

The sensescapes of cycling

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In an interview given on the 26th of August for the magazine *Rolling Stone*, Ralf Hütter, the lead singer of the electronic-music band Kraftwerk, described how cycling plays a major role in their creations:

We were inspired by recording breath and heartbeat and other sounds from bikes. The other thing with cycling is that when it's really going well, it's really silence. You just hear the wind. That's what gave the music its flow on this album. We know that from cyclists, when they listen to our music, they understand; they listen, and they understand how the music is composed. It's important when you move with your bicycle to listen to the environment, the surroundings, the wind and your own breath (Rolling Stone 2015).

In this presentation I show how the sensory scapes of cycling are substantially different from those afforded by the car, facilitating a much more rich and meaningful perception of the environment. The sensory scape surrounding the bicycle rider opens up her body not only to a more unmediated perception of the environment itself, but it makes possible the very articulation of political and cultural discourses about liberation, counter-culture, alternative and green(er) lifestyles or post-capitalist societies. I ultimately show that cycling sensescapes are essential to account for when designing policies and infrastructures, as they represent indispensable cues in developing what the Dutch architect Stefan Bendiks (2015) calls a 'bicycle minded thinking' that replaces the dominant 'car minded thinking' in planning and engineering.

[Link video](#)

The footage I just played is part of an autoethnography account, done by audio and video recording my commute from Aldgate, East London, where I currently live, to the British Library, where I spend most of the time working on my PhD thesis. This exercise is an attempt to elicit the vivid sensory activity produced as I cycle at rush hour in Central London, a notoriously highly stimulative environment. As scarce in details as such a real-time presentation of the work of senses on the move might be, studying this short footage offers nevertheless various insights about how senses operate, how they relate the self with the environment and how they finally orient us in the social world.

Senses and sociabilities

The French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty argued in 1945 that the visual perception is more than a mode of participation, it is a mode of being through movement. A phenomenological visual perception is then a 'gearing' to the world, an orientation of the whole body to the world through which it moves. By arguing that there is no vision without movement, Merleau-Ponty also establishes the primacy of the body in connecting the human to the world and shows that the whole body is engaged in perception, rather than a series of individual senses:

My body is the seat or rather the very actuality of the phenomenon of expression ... [It] is the fabric into which all objects are woven, and it is, at least in relation to the perceived world, the general instrument of my 'comprehension' (Merleau Ponty 2013 [1945]:235).

To think, then, of cycling as an embodied mobile performance, means to account for more than the visual experience of movement and to consider instead the necessity of an active body of the cyclist, of a body that puts itself continuously into motion as it moves. The cyclist's orientation to the world is done through her eyes as much as it is done through her hearing, smell, touch, through the pain in the muscles and joints as one pedals up a hill, through the imperceptible sense of balance, through the exhilarating sense of movement under her own propulsion.

Senses for de-growth

The topic of my PhD research is cycling sociabilities. I am researching the everyday interactions of cyclists, on the move, as well as when they are 'off the saddle', in an attempt to devise the elements that could build a socio-technical 'system of the bicycle', to replace the current dominant system of automobility. The senses play a central role in the way cyclists interact with other mobile subjects, as well as with their environment, when they move across the landscape.

One of the argument of my thesis is that the way in which the senses of cyclists operate reflect a more or less hidden desire for de-growth in our societies. The de-growth movement has been defined by Schneider et al. (2010) as 'an equitable downscaling of production and consumption that increases human wellbeing and enhances ecological conditions at the local and global level, in the short and long term' (2010:512). I argue here that this hardly acceptable proposition in our contemporary societies is the only solution in a world running out of resources at an alarming rate. Studying the sociabilities of cycling offers a number of opportunities to understand just how urban mobilities can contribute to this de-growth agenda. They range from an overall reduction of the speeds that we rely upon for our daily transportation, to a reduction of the distances we put between the places we live, work, learn, shop or simply socialize.

Cycling, utopianism and the reciprocity of senses

What is then the role played by the senses of cyclists in achieving this vision of de-growth? I argue that a reappraisal of their function leads to a radical reconsideration of what should be the desired speeds and distances within our cities.

In characterizing the system of automobility, John Urry (2000) observes how the function of the eye is being transformed with the car. According to Georg Simmel (1997), the eye is 'destined for a completely unique sociological achievement', allowing for 'the most direct and the purest interaction that exists' (cited in Frisby and Featherstone, 1997:111). Simmel shows that '[o]ne cannot take through the eyes without at the same time giving', which leads him to conclude that 'the most complete reciprocity in the entire sphere of human relationships is achieved here' (Frisby and Featherstone, 1997:112).

Urry shows how this reciprocity of the eye is changing with the advent of various technologies such as photographs, maps and screens which 'extend the visual sense [but] do not return the look to the viewer'. This unequal exchange of glances becomes even more significant in the case of the automobile, shows Urry:

Automobility precludes both of these achievements of the eye. Especially for the non-car-user roads are simply full of moving, dangerous iron cages. There is no reciprocity of the eye and no look is returned from the 'ghost in the machine'. Communities of people become anonymized flows of faceless ghostly machines. The iron cages conceal the expressiveness of the face and a road full of vehicles can never be possessed. There is no distance and mastery over the iron cage (Urry 2004:30).

This damaged reciprocity can be repaired nevertheless once we operate within a utopian paradigm

and consider the potential for de-growth in the speed of urban mobilities allowed by the bicycle. I argue that the types of 'publics' produced by a system of the bicycle don't rely on notions of trust, as Urry shows it is the case with the car drivers, but, on the contrary, the kind of 'publics' generated are functioning through visual negotiation, which is made again possible by the slow speed of the bicycle. While Urry's 'publics' of the automobility are described as 'mutual strangers (that) are able to follow such shared rules, communicate through common sets of visual and aural signals, and interact even without eye-contact' (2004:29), the 'publics' of the bicycle system can and indeed are looking constantly into each other's eyes and negotiate directions.

Car thinking and bike thinking

Both the concepts of de-growth and that of utopia, which I also use in this thesis, highlight the role played by the senses in advancing what Stefan Bendiks calls a 'bicycle minded thinking'. As a result, a system of the bicycle requires then no traffic signals and signs, whose absence would be inconceivable within a system of automobility. This proposition might be far from being palatable in contemporary urban areas, but decisions to make these signs and signals obsolete would finally mean getting from a 'car minded thinking' towards a 'bicycle thinking' when building our cities.

Some steps taken towards this direction are already visible in urban environments where the levels of cycling are high enough. Various initiatives that take into consideration the specificities of cycling senses can be found in some urban contexts, especially in countries with established cycling cultures such as Denmark or the Netherlands. For the remaining of this presentation I offer a non-exhaustive list of designs which are sensible to the senses of cyclists.

How to think 'bike'

One example is new regulations allowing cyclists to turn right (or left in Britain) at the red lights in countries such as the Netherlands, Belgium or France, or even to run the red lights altogether as it has been recently decided in Paris.

Green wave for cyclists

The Green Wave is a term designating coordinated traffic lights for cyclists that takes into account a specific sense which is extremely important for cyclists: kinesthesia. When riding at a constant speed of 20 km/h, they don't have to put a foot down when crossing intersections.

Foot stop

The sense of balance, also known as equilibrioception, is one that cyclists share with pedestrians, but which is quite irrelevant when driving a car. Design interventions such as this foot stop is an example of bicycle thinking.

Rain sensors for cyclists at traffic lights

Another initiative addresses the sense of temperature, or thermoception. For example, in the Dutch city of Groningen cyclists get the green traffic light more often when it is raining. With rain and temperatures below 10 degrees cyclists get the green traffic light two or three times more often than usual.

Conclusions

In this presentation I have showed that:

- 1) the bicycle and the cyclist form a temporary assemblage of human and technology that generates new potential, meaning and action in the bicycle. As for the cyclist herself, this assemblage generates a specific gearing to the world that is radically different from that afforded by the car. The senses of cyclist operate more openly in the environment simply because there is no similar mediation as with the exoskeleton that both protects and alienates the car driver.
- 2) the senses of cyclists inform, at a more general level, the necessary conditions for a system of the bicycle where 'bike thinking' replaces 'car thinking' both in discourses and practices. At a more specific level, an investigation of the senses contribute to dispelling common myths such as those of the 'reckless cyclist' or the 'self righteous cyclist'. They do so by showing how the perception of the environment informs the highly situated actions of cyclists.
- 3) the senses contribute to setting an utopian agenda of de-growth that is possible through cycling. Understanding how senses operate can certainly inform a reappraisal of the speed and distances necessary for the pursuit of our everyday urban mobilities.

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