'Soft pedal!' Slowing down societies by bike

A future bicycle system that could work as a viable alternative to the current dominant system of automobility, particularly in urban contexts, needs to innovate on several levels. There are, of course, the infrastructural, economic and legal realms where the overwhelming bias towards the needs of the automobile must be radically reconfigured. Creating more actual physical space for cycling as well as actively incentivising this practice over driving, through financial means and protective laws, are some of the priorities that are required if cycling is to become in the future a genuine response to the use of private car. More broadly, for such a bicycle system to take hold and be acknowledged as such, I argue: *a)* that the modal share for cycling must be bigger than that of driving; *b)* that there should be a diversity in class, race, gender, physical capabilities and age; *c)* that various journeys are made possible, ranging from commuting, to going to school, or shopping and *d)* that urban and transport planning prioritise cycling over driving.

In this paper I reflect upon what I describe as the experiential dimensions of a putative bicycle system, as they become apparent at three distinctive levels: in the lengthy and often painstaking building of one's sensory tolerances on the saddle, in the sociable mobile interactions engaged between cyclists who ride in various group formations, respectively in the practices of repairing, recycling and repurposing bicycles. In this presentation I aim to explore one these three dimensions of a bicycle system: the sensescapes. In doing so, I engage in an imaginative exercise to anticipate what future urban mobilities could actually look and feel like. Equally important, I analyse the role of a bicycle system in the prefiguration and articulation of utopian, better societies.

Disobedient sensescapes

'Running reds and killing peds' is one of the most famous clichés amongst bicycle messengers (Nyssa 2004), a category of cyclists for whom assuming risks as they cut through the clogged intersections of big cities is as much part of the rushing job they have as it is part of the thrill of fast riding in heavy traffic. When I cycle I also run red lights quite often, even though I cannot say I am that much of an 'adrenaline junkie' or suicidal. I am not blindly obeying the rules in question for several reasons that make much sense to me:

First, I always try to be in the first position when the lights turn green, for safety reasons: many accidents happen because cyclists are not seen by drivers turning left. If I get a head start, the hazardous situation is even more manageable as the chances to be overtaken by a careless driver get slimmer. *Second*, while cycling you set yourself into a rhythm where the body and the bicycle form a sensitive yet very fluid hybrid of muscles, tendons, cranks and chain that breaks easily at a stop. By running the traffic light I maintain a rhythm as well as a sense of equilibrium which is less relevant for other forms of mobility. *Third*, there may be a rainy day, I am already soaked and freezing, unlike the dry and pampered drivers who might not share the same urgency to get home as soon as possible. And *fourth*, I try to catch the eyes of the drivers and establish contact before throwing the front wheel ahead because I know that once they acknowledge my presence and intentions, I am safe to go. I have used this personal vignette because it is extremely evocative for a broader argument about how the mundane act of cycling is indeed perceived so differently through the body of its practitioners in comparison to other forms of urban mobility, particularly driving.

Beyond the mind–body dualism

Looking, hearing, the acute sensations of pain or the imperceptible ones of equilibrium, to which I refer in the above vignette and which constantly come to the fore to articulate my own cycling

sensescapes, cannot be easily separated from one another. Cycling is indeed an embodied mobility practice whereby one's entire inner sensorium is often called into play. This is why the particular *modus operandi* of the sight for cyclists, which I have just described, is, in fact, a contrivance. Such an artificial delimitation is part of an established cartesian tradition, that separates the body from the mind and, consequently, sensation from perception. This dualist ontology has been challenged by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1958), who describes the perception of the environment as something more than a mode of participation, he sees it as a mode of being through movement, a 'being-in-the-world', whereby the whole body is engaged in perception, rather than just a series of individual senses.

This phenomenological approach to corporeal mobilities in general, and to cycling in particular, denies the dominant role that vision and hearing are assumed to play in the act of perception. These two concede their supremacy, allowing for inner senses such as balance, kinaesthesia or thermoception to come to the fore and become equally, sometimes even more relevant for cyclists. By exploring these sensescapes through auto-ethnographic accounts of my everyday cycling, and by questioning the taken-for-granted assumptions about mind-body dualities, I propose alternative imaginations of urban mobilities, where movement is necessarily an embodied practice, engaging emotions which are understood as part of the reason rather than in conflict with it. There is an intrinsic image of a better future world articulated in this way in the embodied practice of cycling. The utopian world comes into existence as one activates her or his entire sensescapes, utopia becomes not the destination, but rather, as Levitas argues, a method of investigation, an ontological mode, allowing utopia 'not just to account for, but to speak to, the level of affect' (2013:177).

The efforts and pains of slowing down

Relatedly, the soaking and freezing sensations I have also mentioned at the beginning of this presentation, as well as all physical pain resulting from effort, reveal cycling sensescapes whose abundance reaches well beyond our everyday being in the world. 'Pain is the currency and language of ascent', describes Spinney (2006:727) his suffering on a bike as he climbs one of the most brutal ascents in France. Everyday cycling is far less demanding than Spinney's own experience, yet some bursts of even mild pain are unavoidable. They do not necessarily alter the field of perception in the same way described by Spinney, but the small effort generating them might still have physical side effects, ranging from heating the body, to sweating, to accelerated heartbeats and breathing, to increased amount of saliva in the mouth.

The experience of pain can involve both speeding up or slowing down: a brief twinge in the calf muscles can be the result of pushing the pedals hard and accelerating in order to overtake another cyclist or can alternatively involve slowing down when a hill must be overcome. The pain can even be felt retrospectively after a long or hard ride. In modernity pain has been nevertheless institutionalised and turned into a domain of expertise belonging almost exclusively to medicine, says Cook (2000), who notices a cultural fear of pain. An alternative perspective, one that reframes the meaning of pain, may be proposed instead: living with pain as part of one's becoming, learning its rules and warnings, even indulging in it are possible and they require an utopian exercise which questions both the nature and the culture of pain. Slowing down becomes then an effort, an accomplishment, as argues Vannini, for whom slow-as-affect becomes visible 'in the form of mobility practices and experiences that directly show the physical work, the struggle, and the fatigue of the movement' (2013:122). Enduring the pain as one cycles, as well as recovering from the sometimes mild, sometimes severe, pain of cycling involves a particular form of slowing down, one which rejects notions of instant gratification. A distinctive form of well-being is produced, one which is not likely to be *hedonic*. Because hedonic well-being presupposes that immediate preference satisfaction is achieved and pain, sweat or constant seek of equilibrium are bracketed. Instead, the well-being for cyclists is rather *eudaimonic*, rejecting happiness as a principal criterion

of well-being and insisting satisfaction lays in doing what is worth doing, in what is perceived as 'meaningful' or 'purposeful', as it is argued by Nordbakke and Schwanen (2014), and Ryan and Deci (2001).

Organic rhythms, slowing down as tactical

Finally, the rhythms of cycling, which are sustained precisely because I chose to run the aforementioned red lights, and which are disrupting the dominant mechanised rhythms of automobility, reflect in equal measure a slowing down in the pace of everyday mobilities. For Lefebvre (2004), rhythm is part of the production of everyday life. He indicates how urban rhythms are at the same time organic, lived, and endogenous and exterior, imposed, and mechanical. The exterior rhythm of rationalised time and space is antithetical to the lived and embodied rhythm of cycling.

How to understand then the different tonalities in the rhythm of urban mobilities when considered within the overarching argument of this presentation, one which tries to lay down the contours of a future bicycle system? Edensor thinks that in post-car futures 'it is likely that the virtues of slower mobile rhythms will come to be considered more seriously' (2013:169). At the same time, slower mobile rhythms will arguably make cycling more attractive even for those with less capable bodies. Less cars around means a more humane rhythm imprinted to everyday mobilities, bodies that can more readily align their tempo to circadian and seasonal rhythms of nature. The organic rhythms of cycling subvert once again the dominant discourse, represented by the mechanical rhythms of automobility. In their utopian project, these rhythms engage by all means a slowing down of everyday mobilities which can be understood, following De Certeau (1984), as a tactical move, an oppositional practice to the governing culture of speed.

Building sensory tolerances and the privilege of slow

The broader sensory landscape of cycling still has a negative impact on those with lower levels of tolerance: the less mediated experience of speed, equilibrium, temperature or pain too easily put off potential practitioners. Yet, re-working these senses is necessary *and* possible within a utopian bicycle system. Through the auto-ethnographic account that structures this presentation I have not only brought to the fore the way my senses are stimulated and how my rhythms are articulated. I have also reflected on how I have fought a resisting body, slowly and gradually building its sensory tolerance. As Richard Sennett notices, this is perhaps the only way to make your body truly feel alive: '[R]esistance is a fundamental and necessary experience for the human body: through feeling resistance, the body is roused to take note of the world in which it lives … The body comes to life when coping with difficulty' (1994:310).

Teaching the whole body to listen simultaneously to the cues in the environment, taking the time to re-skill this fragile body onto the more organic rhythms of mobilities, cultivating a more symbiotic relationship to one's pains in the muscles, they are all tactics of building effective sensory tolerances. In my thesis I make reference to some other strategies, which involve manifold bodily reactions, from sweating, to muscle aches, to sensations of cold or hot. Rather than dismissing them as unlawful or abnormal, I regard the *sensory tolerances* I have developed in time as something normal and indicative of future possibilities that a bicycle system lays ahead. I show how these tolerances are build through practice by reflecting on how my own cycling evolved, how I learnt to somehow discipline my senses and to control the fears and harness the joys of cycling. This exercise is part of an utopian exercise where I imagine how, in fact, the human body is still capable to reclaim some of the sensibilities it has lost, not long ago, in the car-coon of the automobile.

This process is very similar to what Bossy describes as taste education, which is one of the goal of

Slow Food movement: its members try 'to stimulate all five senses […] with this idea that in order to eat “good, clean and fair” food and appreciate it to its right value, one has to be educated to it' (2014:185). Both the building of sensory tolerances and taste education take time and require a radical reconsidering of what is fast and what is slow. This is why slowness must not be understood as an ideal type, as a quality, but always as something relational. It is an outcome, an accomplishment, argues Vannini: 'A relational approach to mobility constellations allows us to understand slow not as an essential quality but as a process, and therefore a verb: a pattern of practices, experiences, and representations focused on the objective of moving slower than a significant or generalized other' (2013:121).

The desire to build sensory tolerances amongst cyclists, as well as the taste education advocated by the proponents of the Slow Food movement, must nevertheless avoid the trap of becoming some sorts of blueprints through which judgements of what represent the 'good' and the 'bad' sensescapes, respectively tastes, are eventually passed on. '[B]y criticizing popular “tastes” for fast or processed foods as uninformed or false, alternative food movements can end up denying the biosocial mechanisms through which fast food actually comes to taste good to some people', write Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy (2010:2963) in relation to what can sometimes be a lack of ambivalence amongst Slow Food practitioners. Similarly, dismissing the low level or even the lack of sensory tolerances that occasional or non-cyclists experience often ignores how such tolerances are socially constructed, necessarily reflecting differences in terms of age, gender, race, physical abilities and so on. These intolerances must be considered as part of a broader fear of cycling which is socially, geographically and historically variable (Horton 2007) and which still represents the main reason why more people do not cycle more often (Horton and Jones 2015).

We must then also attend to the democratisation of the slowing down, so that it does not become a mere commodity amongst many others. Cresswell warns that slowness can become the privilege of the few, arguing that 'it is not always high velocities that are the valued ones. Consider the slow food and slow culture movements. How bourgeois can you get? Who has the time and space to be slow by choice?' (2010:23). While Kallis (2015) also shows that often and paradoxically, frugal and 'simple' life-styles have become signifiers of distinction, as they are first adopted by educated or artistic elites that can appreciate and afford them.

A new 'structure of feeling'

In conclusion, I argue in my thesis that cycling as slow mobility can be understood as an indication of a broader shift in our societies, towards de-growth. De-growth is a movement initiated by activists and scientists as an alternative to capitalist socio-economical relations, marking 'a rebirth of a radical environmentalism against the apolitical consensus of sustainable development' (Kallis and March 2015:360). The articulation of a utopian bicycle system, of which the project of building sensory tolerances is an essential part, affects a deeper change in the 'structure of feeling' (Williams 1977) in contemporary societies by contributing to discourses and practices of de-growth.

I have showed in this presentation that embodying the bicycle requires a slow process of enskilment whereby mind and body overcome their duality. I have also demonstrated that fragile bodies can be trained to appreciate the gentler and more organic rhythms of velomobilities. And I have indicated that learning to enmesh oneself in pain requires effort and struggle but also an interpretation of how well-being could be understood differently. They represent tactics of building effective sensory tolerances, but they also configure slowness as a particular active state of mind-body-ness, 'a practical disposition, an orientation to action' (Vannini 2013:116). They ultimately reflect a desire for what proponents of the de-growth movement call the quest for 'voluntary simplicity', indeed a new structure of feeling that requires that the said simple meanings and values 'are actively lived and felt' (Williams 1977:132).