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# Conterpoint to the « Eloge de la bicyclette »

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The question of multiple modes of transport, the future energy crisis, planetary overpopulation, growing saturation of road networks, ecological considerations and increasing awareness of our existence is leading us to rethink our modes of transport in urban life. In this context, cycling as a mode of transport has, in the last number of years become something of a vogue in most large French cities. This trend is encouraged by the emergence of rental companies. Lyon, Paris, Montpellier, Saint-Etienne and Toulouse are insofar as I am aware, cities which has seen this expansion thanks to competition between private companies. The trend started in Lyon in 2005 and the other cities soon followed. I was, in fact there at the time and was able to observe, in an informal way, the emergence of a new activity which was to develop on a large scale Vélo'V in Lyon, Vélib' in Paris, Vélô in

Toulouse, Vélo STAR in Rennes, « le vélo » in Marseille, Vélomag' in Montpellier, the companies JC Decaux or Clear Channel are two major contenders in terms of brand name creativity.<sup>1</sup> (Borgnat, 2009 ; Ravalet, 2008).

Furthermore, why does each city endeavour to apply a local identity to the practice of cycling, Marc Augé seized the opportunity in 2008 and launched a debate on what the bicycle inspires in him (Augé, 2008). His short text (87 pages) places the bicycle at the centre of an anthropology of the authentic in the sense that, according to him, the bike enables a return to the fundamental need<sup>2</sup> of the authentic. I would modestly wish to present another argument as a counter-point to that of Marc Augé, without in any way diminishing his thesis. According to the dictionary, one of the definitions of counterpoint is “a secondary motif which overlays something<sup>3</sup>”

### **Will the bike come to the rescue of the planet ?**

The practice of cycling lends itself well to current debate. We find, for example, this barely concealed ideology of using the bike as a

“weapon of agitation which aims to promote cycling as an alternative to polluting modes of transport <sup>4</sup>” (Garde, 2009). The bike appeals so much to the imagination that it is difficult to oppose such ambitions. And, if as Michel Serres claims, “the bike will last millions of years longer than the car” (Garde, 2009) <sup>5</sup>, it is because technically a bike doesn’t require any source of energy other than its user<sup>6</sup>. The debate regarding renewable energy sources is therefore at the centre of the emergence of, or return to the cycling. One of the reasons for its use is to serve as mode of transport to travel quicker – and cleaner - from one point to another. And its not just about leisure. The bike may be used in social conditions linked to work or to daily life.

One may need to go somewhere quickly, such as the workplace, the company which employs you, but it may also be linked to a tight schedule, in a manner the bike gives the false impression that one is superior to others in terms of time availability. Thus anyone can say that the bike is a means to be time-economical because cycling enables one to do more in the same time frame. Its also a means of preserving the planet because, on the face of it, no fossil fuel is

consumed except in the manufacture of the bike and its transport to the sales outlet.

In this respect, cycling reveals the anxieties of our modern times where man refuses the inevitable of end of the petrol age, while at the same time maintaining a degree of permanent activity. But all the same can one say that the bicycle will come to the planet's rescue?

#### **Reflections on the bicycle: a popular object inverted**

Marc Augé, who is of a different generation from me, illustrates his arguments with great moments in cycling, particularly the sporting challenges of the Tour de France. So permanently etched in the collective conscientious is such a popular event, that no executive in pre-retirement leaves<sup>7</sup> aside the question of clothing while he rides his bike at times of the day when another part of the world is going about its business in a very different dress code. From dark suit and sober tie we move on to Gore-Tex clothing in bright colours, we go from shiny moccasins to technical cycling shoes, etc. The theme has changed but the fact of a dress code remains

unchanged. According to the reflections of Marc Augé, should we not, like him, remark that these older cyclists consciously give themselves the illusion of staying young, and in this way they stay a little young. Cycling is now a leisure activity and this cycling fringe of the population will mix with others whose portrait I will now briefly illustrate.

The bike is first of all an affair of the poor. At least that's what emerges from a film such as the 2004 *Beijing bicycle* by Wang Xiaoshuai, or the even earlier *Le voleur de bicyclette* by Vittorio de Sica, which dates back to 1948. In the Chinese film we are confronted with the social ascent of a young Chinese man from a rural background who comes seeking work in Beijing. He gains employment as a bicycle courier, however, he has to buy the bicycle with his first pay-check. A dramatic moment arrives when his bicycle, the tool of his trade, is stolen. We should note that there are an estimated 500 million bicycles in China (Allaire 2007). "Essential for those on the most modest incomes", writes Marc Augé, before highlighting the fact that it represents a certain form of solitude and poverty. This is because since the second world war, the bike is a symbol of social aspiration and limited professional

advancement in comparison with the growth in popularity of the car or other motorised vehicles. Buying a bike in the 1950's was to entertain the possibility of acquiring a car in the short or medium term. It seems to me that in the 1970's the motorbike was more a source of evasion and of a dream realised that the bicycle could ever hope to be.<sup>8</sup> because bicycle journeys remain limited in space and in time. Furthermore, a certain level of fitness is required that any number of gears cannot compensate for.

And if Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir cycled around during the second world war (Beauvoir, 1963), their bikes were parked in the garage at the beginning of the "Trente Glorieuses" where everyone aspired to owning a car, to the extent that the bicycle is an annoying object of popular culture. It conveys an image of poverty, or if poverty has been overcome, an abandonment of social ascent – an image of the pettiness of the workers' lives. But where was the bike before the spectacular arrival of rental bikes reinforced with heavy advertising? The answer is Sunday cyclists, adolescents too young for scooters, those who were in need and to a certain extent today, bourgeois bohemian types.

### **Return to the three ages of the bike in France**

At the beginning of the 1990's Philippe Gaboriau published an important article on the social and cultural history of the bike in France (Gaboriau, 1991). According to him, the bike's history, which dates back to the very beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, may be divided into three segments based on how the bike was used and the associated cerebral representations. With time, the bike evolved to respond to new demands. Thus the first "bourgeois" age which corresponds to a period where the dominant culture was to seek to distinguish oneself, secondly there was a "second age", popular reversal when the working classes started to acquire an item that had finally become affordable. The third "ecological" age arrived at the turn of the 1970's when the environment started to become a world-wide concern. The bike which had been a symbol of power, then of speed, now became a symbol of slowness. Even if Philippe Gaboriau places these three periods on an historical axis, he specifies that the practical differences linked to these types of ownership may be juxtaposed. And this is the tenet of my argument



and which renders the subject-matter of this article somewhat delicate. This is because we can suppose that today, the three ages may be combined to form a social agglomerate which is important in order to establish appropriate associations with the state of society today.

### **A bike, bicycles : towards the gentrification of a social practice**

The attempt at transforming values is, to say the least, rich in information. Consequently it is interesting to ask questions regarding the emergence of the social phenomenon that is urban cycling. Because in parallel with the arrival of private rental networks, it has been observed that there is a return to cycling among a sector of the population that is difficult to evaluate. Given what has been said above, cycling is not a sport indulged in by all – it has been observed that it is restricted to certain social strata. For example, rental bikes are likely to be used by the more affluent members of society, in fact renting a bicycle requires a substantial deposit which limits its use to the better off, even though the latter notion remains relative. Nonetheless, a bike can only be rented with a credit card, and with a debit card only if the account is in credit.

Consequently, to a certain extent, the young jobless without credit cards, the unemployed and those on low incomes cannot avail of this mode of urban transport. To say that bicycle renting represents a sort of gentrification is not quite accurate, although to the best of my knowledge, there are no policies of providing totally free bicycle rental service.

As an example, the deposit costs 150 euros, regardless of the subscription chosen. Even if the first 30 minutes are free, the monthly subscription is 10 euros<sup>9</sup>, and 24 hours' access costs one euro.

The fact remains that many people use bikes, rented or otherwise, on a daily basis. Amongst these, we find young students who use the bike journeys over short distances, from their student room to college, to visit friends or simply to cycle around town. More often they own an old bike with an aged frame, hardly a covetable item because the bike stays in the street, chained with a lock to one of those innumerable security enclosures which are appearing on the pavements of our towns. Another cultural particularity is that the use of a bike is related to certain forms of social acceptance. Pascal Poched showed that in Africa, the bike was perceived negatively

because it was seen as a sign of poverty (Poched, 2002) – a kind of cultural obstacle. This is a lead worth exploring and it concerns cultural disparities in the practice of bike riding. The less young usually have more sophisticated bikes, and I'll turn to this later on. Children sometimes cycle to school, closely followed by an attentive mother or father, much like a mother duck and her ducklings.

Apart from rental bikes, which are modern banners of progress or from a belief in a new environmentalism, one remarks the arrival of ostentatious bicycles with English or Dutch brand names alongside more modest imported Chinese bicycles sold by large chains. Whereas an “obsolete” bicycle may be found for a few euros in a car boot sale, some city bikes can fetch between 1000 and 1500 euros, with the result that a bike can become a source of ostentation or distinction. Clearly such objects aren't left chained outside all day, no more than top-of-the-range racing bikes. Certainly expensive bicycles aren't left in public places on a daily basis; it would therefore be disdainful on my part to describe the state of all available bikes as a kind of vast reservoir of abandoned tools. At first sight the bikes are often poorly maintained, or even

wrecked. Traces of rust may be seen or some accessories may be broken. However, it must be recognised that in the interests of cost-savings, unscrupulous bicycle merchants supply bikes without lights or mud-guards. This gives a poor first impression and leads to a double perverse effect: On the one hand, acts of vandalism are frequent, such as robbing of saddles or wheels. Such bikes are abandoned there until they can be repaired, or sometimes even forever. This doesn't encourage that owner to maintain the cosmetic aspect of his bike, and consequently the fear of damage finishes by minimising maintenance to the functional parts. The other perverse effect is that this voluntary laissez-faire attitude in return leads to a certain indifference which results in early deterioration through negligence and lack of maintenance. Therefore a stroll around the town reveals a landscape of dilapidation, a sort of visual pollution which can somehow evoke a poeticism particular to large cities. So, how can the process of gentrification, find its place under these conditions?

### **The emergence of folding bicycles**

Apart from the traditional Dutch Batavus bicycle or the Gazelle of legendary solidity, equipped with a back-peddalling braking system, or gears included in the rear hub, a dynamo in the front hub and all comforts supplied, the urban bicycle should be capable of adapting to different requirements and to mixed journeys. Most bike journeys are short, covering a distance of a few kilometres. A team of researchers showed in a study on bike journeys in Lyon, that most involved distances of less than one Km (Ravalet, 2008) and even this short distance may be broken up into different segments if they are interrupted by periods on public transport such as the train, metro or bus.

“Traditional” folding models weigh about 20 Kg and pose no particular problem for train journeys, other than being sufficiently light to be carried (given that the cyclist may also be carrying a case or a bag). This is not the case for busses where only the folding versions are accepted or tolerated. For these reasons, reputable brands such as Brompton or Strida in England, or even Beixo, Dahon, Diana and Stella are now proposing a response to the demand for nomadic and mixed journeys.

[Figure 1]

The Brompton bike patented in May 1976 by Andrew William Ritchie, GB 1 580 048

The earliest models appeared around the time of the second world war. However, the recent increase in patents for folding bicycles would lead one to believe that in future years there will be a greater number of these items available. The folding bike is a solution for urban cyclists in that it is discreet both on public transport and in the office. They weigh between 8 and 13 Kg, the difference arising from the use of ultra-light alloys such as titanium. Those who only use the bike in an intermittent fashion cannot leave them in any particular place and must bring them wherever they go. For one of the many problems in France, contrary to the Netherlands, for example, is that there are few secure public places where bicycles may be left other than rental stations. The latter are often close to train stations and represent more lip service on the part of the politicians rather than a serious tackling of the problem. Put another way, urban politicians are still rather reticent in this area. Difficulty in accessing these bicycle parks in addition to immediate

proximity means that a large number of bikes are attached elsewhere, along railings or in places considered more safe. For example, the Saint Agne train station has a secure premises but the key must be obtained at a booth.

These difficulties are partially overcome by the inventiveness of the users, solutions that are realistic only if there aren't saturation levels of cyclists in the area. Having covered the bicycles let us now turn out attention to some everyday examples.

#### **The folding bike in daily use**

My observations on several mornings at the end of winter at the Saint Agne train station in Toulouse have provided information on some aspects of this practice. On the one hand, users of mixed modes of transport arrive on bicycles and chain them to a security barrier, to an advertising pillar or to a railing. Good sense would hope that expensive, top of the range bikes would not be left in this way – only old “bangers” that are no longer in danger of being stolen. The fear of returning in the evening to find the bicycle gone is always present, and this fear is enhanced by the lack of areas suited to parking bicycles during the day. Bicycle theft is not a rarity and it is not unusual to meet someone to whom this has happened.

However, some cyclists leave the train in a major hurry, rushing onto the next stage of their journey, whilst others take the time to adjust their helmet before taking to the road. Cyclists using top-end folding bikes which they take with them, taking care to fold the bike in one movement. The Strida model, which folds more readily, would appear to be preferred over the Brompton model in the sense that the latter cannot be completely folded, and one wheel remains on the ground. It therefore appears lighter, but once again it's a question of fashion and point of view because both sides have their defenders to the detriment of the other. There are even internet forums dedicated to one or the other brand. Each new user can therefore present his bike and become a member of a community, as has been the case for motorbikes or sports cars. The tool of transport therefore become a sign of identity.

[Figure 2]

The Strida bike produced by the MING CYCLE INDUSTRIAL Co LTD,  
patented in 2007 by Taishan Zhang, CN 201099324Y



### **The art of folding: above all a state of mind**

Whoever has the art of folding has a well defined attraction for the folding bike. A necessity for some, but an object of ostentation for others, the folding bike incorporates the same social stakes in the same way as a luxury car. Even though some English brands are cornering this small market sector, folding bikes dates much further back than the 1970's. Pierre-Jean Baptiste Astier patented a folding bicycle as early as may 1949, the idea being a portable bike which once folded was of small volume and reduced bulkiness. Hence the small wheels, and a reduced frame for periodic use. As the folding bike is intended to be folded and to be carried, it is intended more for periodic than regular use. Alexander Moulton patented a bike with two small wheels in November 1962. Even though this wasn't a folding model, it illustrated the possibility of small bikes for adults. Today these models are competitive, top of the range bicycles. Other inventors of course turned their attention to the question and the list includes a recent invention by the Russian Mihelic Miko who proposed a bike that folds thanks to a retractable fork, or a model proposed by a Korean inventor (whose name

remains a mystery) which is entirely foldable and is reminiscent of the Brompton bicycle.

Given the evolution in recent years, can one not expect further developments in terms of a compromise between the city bike and portability? This fact is remarkable not only because the bicycle has not been relegated to the ranks of antiques, but it is in constant evolution and new developments which have their roots in the ideology of sustainable development. The British brand Brompton has resisted the assaults of motorised vehicles for almost 30 years, and has managed to conquer enthusiasts who recognise one another via the brand but also via the common thread of using one's own energy to generate power. A veritable state of mind unites this community.

The complexity with which certain models fold further illustrate a certain mechanical mastery, a sort of technical masterpiece which has a real commercial advantage. Added to the difficulty of assembling the bike once it is unfolded is the increased cost of manufacture, given that given that the joints are more expensive and fragile, than a cambered tube, notably as regards the folding

mechanism of the transmission. Therefore the only brands that last are those that combine sturdiness, lightness and a certain snobbery.

For these reasons technical achievement don't always meet with the approval of social innovation. In as much as the amount of effort invested in this area demonstrates a continuing lively interest for mechanics, and this is reassuring in a world globalised by electronics which are impalpable and incomprehensible to the majority of people. There is no Pandora's box in a bike, which is without doubt part of its attraction. The "mechanical" aspect of the bike is certainly a component of the attraction which the bicycle instigates and maintains.

[Figure 3]

Here, it is possible to fold the rear part thanks to a double set of chains.

Patented in 2003 by Mihelic Miko for STUDIO MODERNA SA, EA 008234B1

At a global level, from the point of view of the large outlets, the market for folding bikes (which are therefore still available) provides considerable perspectives. It is not surprising that Asian inventors are well aware how to seize these opportunities. Given the effect of fashion trends, folding bikes have potentially tens of thousands of takers. The art of the folding bike is therefore a stake for tomorrow.

#### **From a physical to a social object**

If the bike is considered a social object, then it begs the question as to how to create distinctions, given that everyone appears to be engaging in the same activity. This distinction by object is necessary in order to confirm that different people don't all cycle for the same reasons and objectives. Furthermore, how can one justify cycling when one has the means to buy a car, even though it is not ecological and destructive of the environment?

Among the most fashionable models today, folding bikes have more distinctive marks. Their design places them in the category of objects designed to be expensive. Manufactured from ultra-light

materials, sometime equipped with disk brakes and a notched transmission belt made from kelvar, they incarnate good taste in bicycles for an essentially urban usage. The argument in favour of foldability is, in my eyes, false because users do not necessarily re-fold their bikes once they have been assembled. On the other hand they are folded of course before being loaded in the boot of the car. Let us not forget that the bike is only one of a number of complementary methods for the “home-to-work” journey. It should be further noted that the small wheels - 14 inches (35 cm) are reminiscent of children’s bikes and of the fashion for scooters in the 1990’s. The fun aspect certainly is a criterion in choosing this type of bike.

[Figure 4]

Patented in June 2007, CN 201065165Y

Different variants of this model are sold in England and is available through mail order catalogues for about 120 euros. It weighs 6 Kg and it folds entirely on itself. The question of handiness becomes interesting in relation to an object ridiculously close to a toy and

amusement. The essential idea would be to attract attention – the bike becomes a distinctive or ostentatious symbol, because I imagine that it is not aimed at everyone. The other message which folding bikes conveys is that it will only be used in conjunction with other systems of transport such as the train, bus or metro. This in turn suggests that the cyclist is principally a user of public transport and that the bike is only used to access areas not served by public transport. Hence, there are bikes that are designed for journeys not exceeding 500 m! This raises the question of the constraints of an item which will be carried more than used? On the other hand the ecological benefits remain to be measured

In the diverse methods in which urban cycling is practised, there exists another state of mind based on the dilapidation of large cities. We know that in a more or less short period of time, the bike will be divested of its components – saddle, front wheel, handlebars... it seems in fact that all components can be removed. It is curious to observe the increasing number of incomplete bikes on the paths, sorts of urban skeletons marking public space as though it were a large cemetery. This also poses the question of the relationship between the bike and the citizens of our cities. Why

vandalise these items? In response to these acts of depredation certain people have seen the possibility of developing a new concept. Originating in the US, the concept of the bike with a fixed sprocket seems to be coming back into town. It is contrary in all ways to the concept of the racing bike and other devices of electrical assistance, the paradox of which resides in the use of the “sustainable” argument, as though it represented an ecological principal<sup>10</sup>. No, the fixed-sprocket bicycle seems devoid of utensils and accessories, such as brakes, mud-guards, gear systems etc. Which is no big deal given that braking is obtained by the power of legs. In itself it is the environmentally friendly bike par excellence because there are no superfluous elements. This type of bike is the diametric opposite of bikes with gear systems or an electrically assisted motor. Here, on the contrary, the bracket is calculated once and for all according to the cyclist and its intended use. And this is what distinguishes the users in providing a preview of ethical behaviour vis à vis the environment.

### **Conspicuous by rudeness**

Another facet of difference may be identified in terms of behaviour towards other cyclists and to all users of public space. Because cycling is practised in the public space, it requires the maintaining of an image, anonymity and social distance. As Colette Pétonnet observed in relation to pedestrians, cycling demands the same need for anonymity in the public space (Pétonnet, 1987). To communicate with pedestrians, cyclists don't use their voices, but their bells to signal their arrival. Drrring, drrring said Mr Jourdain. But in the case of cycling, speaking is reserved for conflicts. I even once saw a cyclist armed with a strident siren and two beacons. "Move over!" shouted that prig.

.Cyclists and pedestrians move at different paces, the passage of the cyclist is brief, without being retained or committed to memory. He has barely passed us and he is already in the distance. Cyclists hoard the public space with no regard for the concept of sharing. Or has he the sense of an individual liberty that is incompatible with the social realities of the public space? Firstly, he reigns master on high thanks to his erect posture; while holding onto the handlebars he places himself 20-30 cm higher than the pedestrian and a lot higher



than a motorist. His vision extends further because he is ahead of pedestrians, and to some extent he is both here and already there. His sense of being ubiquitous makes him to some extent disdainful of pedestrians who are only here and will remain here longer. If the cyclist no longer knows how to speak, he knows how to harangue pedestrians who impeded his progress or who walk on the road. This is because he only respects the straight line, he ignores signposts, one-way streets, traffic lights and space reserved for pedestrians.

Bike journeys are very different from car journeys. The cyclist, high on his bike, haughty against the wind, in haste and braving the crowds, he hides behind his bell. This sort of social off-side is acquired at the cost of distance. We should realise that if the cyclist interacted with people he would forfeit his superior position, because there is no doubt but that the cyclist is the king of the public space. The institutions have given him their endorsement, and he commits various acts of incivility with impunity. Let us take an example: the Sunday stroll along the Canal du Midi. When the good weather as it often is in the Haute Garonne region in France, biking enthusiasts decide to cycle along the canal as far as

Castelnaudary more than 60 Km along the tow path. The bravest will go as far as the sea, a distance of some 300 Km of divided stages. However, most people only do a few kilometres as a family outing and as a result the tow path resounds with bell ringing and strings of invective if a pedestrian doesn't move aside quickly enough and consequently, this lovely track along the canal resembles a motorway for bicycles.

#### **The bike, oneself and others**

Of course I am not entirely serious in what I have said above, and it does happen on occasion that cyclists stop at red lights. It is not unknown for cyclists to be courteous to other cyclists or even to pedestrians. However, it would appear that undisciplined and uncivil behaviour predominate.

On the one hand, the use of the use of a bike as a means of light and rapid transport implies a rhythm that is incompatible with meandering, and using the bike could appear like an interruption in one's daily routine. The cyclist doesn't take in the urban

architecture nor the social plays of the street. Rather, they cycle as quickly as possible, sticking to their trajectory shouting insults at passers who they regard as being too slow. For, as Max Weber showed, in the end, rationality responds to the argument that each cyclist is conscious of others (notably those who stand up to him) and thus he acts as his sense of the rational dictates. (Weber, 1913). Nor do I share the enthusiasm of Marc Augé when he claims that the bike is potentially a method for socialising the streets. On the contrary, the speed of the bikes, the overtaking and the crossings contribute to social distancing. Contrary to motor-cyclists who form a community, cyclists rarely speak among themselves; they don't evaluate and compare the quality of one bike, the defects of another, except in the case of those belonging to a small fringe of people. They don't form groups. There are traces of the Brompton brand all over the internet, but it is unlikely that two owners of Brompton bikes will exchange views should they ever meet. Observation has shown that we find ourselves here at the same level as for car drivers – everyone remains in their private sphere because the bicycle is not associated with identity or socialising properties.

Marcel Mauss in his lecture notes, left considerable information on body techniques (Mauss, 1967)<sup>1</sup> We learn that our body language conveys much information on our way of thinking and being. Mauss helps us to understand that our way of cycling also conveys this information, for the posture adopted and the gestures are rich in social and cultural information. For example, in urban settings one might see some cyclists standing on the pedals in order to see further. Not everyone does this, it's mainly its young adult males in jeans and sportswear. On the other hand one can imagine a young woman wearing a coat and skirt sitting up straight, her only movement apart from pedalling is flexing her thumb to ring the bell. We might include in this category, well-dressed men in city clothes who aren't using the bike for its sporting virtues. .

As Marcel Mauss emphasises, the study of body language is carried out using photography or even cinema. This alone is a vast area beyond the scope of this article. However, during my observations, I was able to note some details which insidiously reveal certain social particularities. When stopping or setting off one has the time

to make observations of social membership. Sartorial attitude has the same objectives. Most of the time the clothes of urban cyclists don't differ from pedestrians. If we remove the bicycle clip, or today the fluorescent band of Velcro, some wear a security vest which others complete with a safety helmet, though the wearing of either is far from the norm. This is probably because these accessories complicate their storage, which is not the case of the Sunday cyclists. But here again, there may be large variations which prevent any sort of generalisation. Besides, would wearing a helmet not be indicative of a deadly sentiment ?

### **Oneself and one's bike**

It is not necessarily an easy thing to personalise a technical object. According to my observations it would seem that the great diversity of bicycles in the public space negates even the idea of personalisation by using decorations or accessories that give a personal note to the object. On the contrary, the bike a possession that seems to suffice in and of itself in this respect without the user

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<sup>1</sup> Marcel Mauss, *Manuel d'ethnographie*. Paris : Payot, 1967

being obliged to add a system of personal identification. Identity plates are rare on bicycles today, whereas in my childhood memories, every bike was equipped with a plate, sometime even embellished with a St Christopher medal, which gave the names and addresses of their owners. These plates were attached to the handlebars, under the saddle or in another visible place, and thus they constituted a sign of ownership and identity. They are a reminder of the taxes which were applicable on velocipedes from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century until the 1950's. This then begs the question as to how do people attest their ownership if not by using a lock and chain, which are essential if the bike is to be left unattended for even an instant.

I waited some time before addressing the question of the personal relationship I have with the bike, even though Marc Augé starts his book with the sentence: “one cannot write a eulogy to the bicycle without including one's own personal experience” Besides, he delves into his own memories to write to the bicycle as did Patrick Gaboriau in the “*Civilisation of the footpath*” (Gaboriau, 1995)

*« J'ai abandonné les trottoirs de longues années. Ne marchais plus, roulais. Allais chercher le pain, le journal et le mou pour le*

*chat, à vélo. Le vélo : j'en astiquais un à un les rayons qui cillaient au soleil, pinçais un morceau de boîte à fromage sur la fourche et le bois fragile butait sur les rayons, imitant le son d'une mobylette... Quand je m'aventurais sur le trottoir, les passants me servaient de quilles, je slalomais entre eux à toute berzingue ! Leurs quolibets m'encourageaient ! La grêle, la neige, le verglas, le crachin ne m'empêchaient pas de rouler. « Ça fouine », disait-on, je sortais... Les gants, le bonnet, et ça y allait, et ça y allait. »*

Hardly surprising then that after that Patrick Gaboirau's brother started researching the Tour de France (Gaboriau, 2000). For me, learning how to ride a bike was a great moment, a moment where I became aware of being alone and of having made a big step in life. It seems to me that we all preserve this specific moment in our memories, the moment of awareness of being alone when the protective arm of father or mother or an uncle is removed, attributing to you a level of confidence that you heretofore underestimated. This is about learning to be autonomous and capacities at high speed. Its an unforgettable

moment , but my memory refers to quite a different event once I address my first experience of a bicycle.

I was ten years old and for Christmas 1969 my parents gave me a small white bicycle with white tyres. It was second-hand and my father had no doubt spent quite a few hours cleaning and repainting it and changing the tyres, so that it looked liked new, except that the handlebars were a little spotted. This for me was of absolutely no importance, and I was the happiest boy in the neighbourhood until some of the bigger children came to see this fabulous present and loudly announced that the bike wasn't new because the handlebars were rusted. I realised at that point the importance of detail and that in their eyes, a present should be new and not second-hand. That episode saddened me so much that this event comes to me anytime I remember stories related to the bike. "The growing understanding of oneself which corresponds to learning to ride a bike leaves both unforgettable and unconscious traces" writes Marc Augé. As regards my anecdote, I can say the different forms of learning linked to the bike go above and beyond the different forms of



technical, functional or psychomotor learning. The associated social relationships also meander in my consciousness and shape motivations, tastes as well as manners of thinking and acting. That is maybe why I have a problem with second-hand bikes. Furthermore, I believe that the maintenance of a bicycle is an integral part of the link that one can establish with it. Hence the recurrent questioning in front of a such a dilapidated park.

**Where are the beautiful bikes and the happy people who own them ?**

Am I surprised to see bikes today in such a bad state? Is the bicycle not simply just another mode of transport? There is without doubt a reason for this, such as the idea camouflaging the quality of the bike behind visible wear and tear. But maintenance is part of respecting one's bike. So, where are the beautiful bikes, the expensive and sparkling bikes?

If particular attention is paid the bikes around, it is possible to observe that the bikes— if one should take the bike as a subject - reflect the socio-economic area in which they circulate . One of my

acquaintances told me he has three bikes – two for travelling between home and work. One of these she uses for the journey between her house and the train station and the other for the journey between the destination train station and her place of work. And then she has an expensive bike for Sunday. Indeed the pleasure of cycling could accompany the idea of a quality bike outside of work days, when cycling for pleasure. Either the quality bikes are only used on Sunday or else they are not adapted to the daily journeys to work.

In up-market suburbs we can see well-dressed ladies doing a tour of the neighbourhood on aluminium bicycles. Travelling at a stately pace, the bicycles glide along the roads or the pathways marking with their silent imprint the slow, sure rhythm of a world where everything is beautiful and marvellous. In these neighbourhoods, where one luxury boutique follows another and depict a harmonious society, the bicycle is the ambassador of happiness.

We are very far from poor neighbourhoods, from the world of physical labour, in a universe where physical exertion is only used for moving around.

I would like, as is claimed by Marc Augé if the bicycle were a vector of urban utopia, that represented a socialising tool at the heart of responsible citizenship. However, it is true that using the bike as a means of transport suggests a low level of freedom. Michele Serres doesn't disagree and in some ways there they are both right. But beyond fashions, it remains to be seen how relationships to the bike will be maintained, how business will outstrip free will, it is difficult to believe in a radical shift towards a radiant future. For the moment the bicycle remains a technical item at the centre of political, economic and civic states. Which of the three will steal the glory? I believe that the bike has not yet found its place in the public space nor in its relationship to the world. Is it a momentary or transitory item or indeed an object of the future?

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# Conterpoint to the « Eloge de la bicyclette »

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## **Abstract**

The arrival of private enterprises on urban the bike rental scene has seen a return to cycling. Since 2005, many large cities have equipped themselves with tools of ecological resonance in order to develop new energy policies. Despite this, there are relatively few citizens who adhere to this ideology in practice. Some observations have revealed a number of complex uses linked to professional activities and diverse journeys. As a counter-point to the publication by Marc Augé, this article is a reflection centred on the day-to-day, showing through a reflective approach, a social phenomenon in the making.

## Footnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Vélomag' in Montpellier is managed by the urban council

<sup>2</sup> The company JC Decaux reports a loss of 12% in 2010 by comparison with the previous year. Cf. Caroline Morisseau deciphers the prospects for JC Decaux's Vélib self-service rental bikes on April 2<sup>nd</sup> 2010 on BFM Radio, France.

<sup>3</sup> Le Nouveau Petit Robert (2010) Paris : Robert. Ed.

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>5</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>6</sup> The paradox will arise with the advent of electric bikes.

<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, this is the central theme of the film *Mammuth* by Gustave Kervern and Benoît Delépine, 2010.

<sup>9</sup> The cost is identical to the purchase of a public transport monthly subscription in the town for the under-25's

<sup>10</sup> On this point, Toulouse boasts of the creation of an entreprise for assembling electric bikes created in Finland. By 2011, these bikes will be assembled and sold in France for a price exceeding 2000 euros. What kind of ecology is this ? Cf. *La Dépêche du Midi* 20 May 2010.