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Towards ethical mobility behavior: the socio-ecological potentiality of *ambiance*-based mobility infrastructure design

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1 INTRODUCTION

In traditionally car-oriented cities, the bicycle has become a symbol of sustainable lifestyles. The strong symbolic investment in cycling today coincides with a reinvestment in cycling infrastructure. The latter provides an opportunity to re-examine the aesthetical potential of this infrastructure. What is the potential of cycling infrastructures to intensify and transform our relationship to the world and thus encourage ethical and sustainable mobility behaviour? Building on two thoughts about the political dimension of mobility infrastructure raised by the empirical analysis of mobility infrastructure recent evolution in Brussels-Capital Region, this paper is an attempt to better understand the socio-ecological potential of mobility infrastructure. I make the hypothesis that the rise of new symbolic investments in bicycle goes along with renewed aesthetical relationships and affective resonance to cycling infrastructure, underlain by paradoxical values of (1) modern emancipation (individualist) and (2) environmental consciousness (care and attention to the vulnerability of others, animal and vegetal species, and the self). My second hypothesis is that the second value can be nurtured by *ambiance*-based infrastructural design.

2 METHODS

This paper contributes to the recent “sensory and affective turn” in research on mobility infrastructure. It highlights the importance of aesthetic experience, linking bodily sensoriality and affectivity, in the ongoing evolution of mobility practices, identities, infrastructures, vehicles and bodies (Merriman 2016). The originality of this approach is to take seriously the pleasures, the sensitivity to the ambient quality, the affective investments in the object and the practice - drawing for that purpose on the theory of *ambiances* and atmospheres.

3 CASE STUDIES

Despite the almost general accessibility of the car network for cyclists, the development of preferential routes which should allow a pleasant experience of the urban environment is on the political agenda since the creation of the Brussels-Capital Region. Although the ambition to redevelop a cycle network in Brussels dates back to the early 1990s, the current pandemic has considerably accelerated its development through numerous “tactical” urban planning interventions. For twenty years, mobility infrastructure has increasingly accommodated diverse forms of slow mobility (bicycle, walk, roller, scooter, ...) that accelerates, diversifies and becomes pro-

gressively thought and constructed as real alternatives to car mobility. At the same time, intensifying the aesthetical experience of movement seems to also remain a priority in the development of slow mobility infrastructure networks (Pelgrims 2019).

4 CONCLUSION

The performed speed on a mobility infrastructure is defined by programmatic, regulatory, technical and discursive devices (such as speed limits, signs), but also by the materiality and quality of the atmosphere (the interaction between the building and the light, the sound ...) that invites the mobile actors to speed up or slow down (Pelgrims 2020). They make certain practices, certain attentional regimes, certain ways of being socially acceptable or not. In the Western space-time of automobility, the synchronisation of urban rhythms on the speed and metric of the car forces individuals to a kind of mechanisation of movement. Current infrastructural development tends to favour the utilitarian cyclist and thus reduces both the diversity of possible cycling practices (recreational, etc.) and the diversity of cyclists (exclusion of children, women, senior citizens, the disabled, etc.). The development of cycling as an alternative mode to the car thus neglects the potential of cycling practices and infrastructure to enable human fulfilment and a more ethical relationship to the environment.

Cycling infrastructures have nevertheless a key role in the development by mobile individuals of a “power of intensification and transformation of our relationship to the world” (Thibaud 2020) that responds to the crisis of resonance resulting of the social acceleration (Rosa 2019). This intensification is essential for the transition to sustainable lifestyles as the realisation of ethical behaviour can only arise from an appreciation of and affective attachment to the surrounding world. The resonance between the sensitive dimension of the practice of cycling infrastructures and the cultural representations of cycling triggers specific pleasures and displeasures which have a moral significance. They shape a new cycling “complex moral assemblage” (Scott 2020). It is therefore necessary to look at the relationship one develop and maintain with the cycling infrastructure as material objects: the feelings, emotions, affects, and desires that they arouse, the ways of being mobile and of perceiving one's environment that they invite. It is also necessary to investigate the images: the symbolic representations, discourses, social norms and values which, from the background, give meaning or "color" our perceptions of these infrastructures. From this perspective, cycling infrastructures are “transcendent materiality”: they are part of an assemblage of infrastructures, buildings, nature, signs (panels, signs, white lines, etc.), but also of beliefs, fears and affects, images, values (freedom, emancipation) and practices (functional and leisure mobility, self-expression, social distinction) (Pelgrims 2020). The resonance between infrastructure, environments, equipment and bodies - increased by *ambiance*-based infrastructure design - progressively associates to cycling infrastructure the value of “environmental consciousness” one could refer to as a care to the vulnerability of others, the self and animal and vegetal species. This emerging value replaces and slowly transforms the complex moral assemblages linked to cycling infrastructure and practices, revealing its potential for ethical mobility.

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