Normativity and Aesthetics

The Political Dimensions of Mobility Infrastructure

Abstract. *This article is a reflection on two levels of the 'political' in which the æsthetical dimensions of mobility infrastructure play a key role. Informed by the empirical analysis of mobility infrastructure recent evolution in Brussels-Capital Region, it highlights on one hand how, at the level of the 'infra-politics' of mobility, the sensory accelerating and decelerating* dispositifs *constrain the potential sensory-motor ways of being as much as regulatory and material ones. On the other hand, it reveals the potential of mobility infrastructure as sensitive environment to sustain, through the resonance between infrastructure, environment, vehicles and bodies, an increasing ambient sensibility that nourishes the political engagement of mobile actors toward a sustainable future.*

Claire PELGRIMS[1]

Introduction

This paper is an attempt to cross two thoughts about the political dimension of mobility infrastructure raised by the empirical analysis of its recent evolution in Brussels-Capital Region. With a background in the history and theory of urbanism, I draw on sociology, philosophy, and history of transport and mobility to better understand the dialectic of speed and slowness. In my research (Pelgrims, 2020c), I explore the spatial and material frictions and articulations between slow and fast mobilities in a transmodal and diachronic approach, from the metropolitan scale of transport and urban planning to the street construction details.

To analyze (1) material infrastructure that accommodates, through material, sensory, and regulatory *dispositifs*; (2) the fast and slow (æsthetical) practices, I consider the first as "sensitive environment" (Thibaud, 2015; Augoyard, 1995). This paper therefore contributes to the recent "sensory and affective turn" in research on mobility infrastructure. Moving away from the binary of mobility and mooring (Sheller and Urry, 2006), scholars have built on atmospheres and ambiances theories to better consider in their methodology the mobility infrastructure changing phenomenological and æsthetical dimensions (Lefebvre, 1992; Bennett, 2001; Sheller, 2004; Rosa, 2019; Pelgrims, 2020a). Infrastructure is indeed involved in constant social and material processes that P. Merriman (2016) defines as continuous "mobile infrastructuring." I conducted a content analysis of non-discursive documents from the municipal archives of Brussels and Ixelles on the meaning-loaded designs and practices of mobility infrastructure referred to in terms of fast and slow movements. I have been searching for these instantiations in original plans and master plans, vade mecum, architect's drawings, and in gray literature gathering discourses, narratives in newspapers, magazine articles, and photographs (Pelgrims, 2020c).

1. *Université libre de Bruxelles – LoUIsE, Belgium,* claire.pelgrims@ulb.be

In this article, I reflect on two levels of the "political" in which the æsthetical dimensions of mobility infrastructure play a key role. First, the dialectic between fast and slow mobilities provides new insight on, as S. Tonnelat puts it, the "infra-politics" of mobility (2016). I'll describe how the traffic calming dispositifs and the accelerating sensory dispositif on the sidewalks constrain the potential sensory-motor ways of being. The second section deals therefore with inclusivity and openness to the plurality of the world. Secondly, I'll consider politics in terms of civic engagement and democratic practices toward the sustainability transition. I'll discuss in the third section how the sensory dispositifs of mobility infrastructure can also enhance this political dimension of mobility.

Normativity Through Aesthetics

Through the lens of ambiance and atmosphere theories, infrastructure is not simply static contextual settings for action but rather immersive environments that are central to mobility experiences. Speed (one of the aspects of mobility flows) partly depends on the sensory "locomotor efficiency" of mobility infrastructure as space of movement. Indeed, urban planners build the city to be traveled at a certain (normalized) speed. They try to "guide, fluidify, synchronize, harmonize the rhythms of the city" (Pelgrims and Hausser, 2019, 1). This attempt manifests through programmatic, regulatory and discursive *dispositifs*. It appears in the materiality and ambient quality as well: in an articulation of sensitive acceleration and deceleration *dispositifs*, and of "ambiance factors." The interactions between build form and luminous, sound, and other physical signals – as "active potentiality" – give rise to perceptive orientations and specific motor behaviors: specific sensory-motor ways of being. They engage and disengage motor activity of passersby, invite deceleration or acceleration (Gibson, 1979; Thibaud, 1996; Chelkoff and Thibaud, 1992; Pelgrims, 2019). If the ambiance factors have mostly been examined in relation to pedestrian mobility, then a similar analysis can be made with other modes of mobility. The rhythm of the plot, of the facades, the height of the towers, and so on, are built to match specific metrics of mobility. They provoke specific fast or slow æsthetic experiences in the city (Pelgrims, 2020b): speeding in the urban roadscape, wandering in the commercial galleries from one display window to the other side…

In Brussels 'semi-pedestrian' roads as rue de l'Etuve (developed in the late 1970s and 1980s and that, since then, stand as references for the refurbishment of most central areas in Brussels) the sidewalks and the passable part of the road are at the same level or slightly raised by about five centimeters, separated only by a line made of blue stones that recalls the former pavement edge. In central areas of Brussels, the slowdown of fast mobility articulates legal instruments of speed limitations with these kinds of material 'devices'. Through an æsthetic treatment, they blur the legibility of the modal segregation defined in the traditional street profile and, then, make drivers intuitively decelerate. At the same time, the slowdown makes slow mobility more efficient, secured, comfortable, visible… and therefore faster (Pelgrims, 2018).

From Utopia to Ideology

In that sense, urban designs impose a rhythm, set the pace of mobility experience; they can also give rise to alternative experiences – depending on their adaptability and 'hospitality' to other practices. The political role of mobility infrastructure is better understood while referring to the concept of "social imaginaries" (Castoriadis, 1975; Berdoulay, Castro, and Gomès, 2001; Pelgrims, 2018). These visions of the world are subject to a double process of instantiation and actualization. While an imaginary becomes dominant–moving from "utopia" to "ideology" (Ricoeur, 1990), imaginary

'embodiments' are progressively normalized through the institution of logic and rules: a grammar. These grammars transpose and practically inscribe the imaginary in congruent sensory-motor ways of being and in the material world (Sénécal, 1992; Pelgrims, 2018 and 2019). In that sense, mobility infrastructure materializes and stabilizes mobility imaginaries. Yet, the "poetics" (Sansot, 1971; Gamba, 2011) of these accelerated or decelerated urban experiences in turn updates imaginaries. Moreover, they are strengthened or weakened in a pluralist context of competition with other ones – residual, emerging, critical – and constrained by existing materialities. They therefore evolve, creating, reinforcing and transforming the different articulation logic of imaginary embodiments in the city materiality.

Mobility infrastructure balances the needs to accommodate diversity (of movement, of sensory-motor ways of being) and to establish norms and rules (*polis*) aimed at enabling people to live together (Pattaroni, 2007). The issue is not therefore the existence of an order (norms) but its regimes of justification (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1991) – that is to say its political scope. The description of further material, regulatory and sensitive *dispositifs* making an acceleration or deceleration of mobility flows possible reveals forms of normativity that make certain practices, some attentional regimes, some ways of being… acceptable or not. For instance, the traffic calming *dispositifs* aim at minimizing or rendering invisible non-congruent objects (limitation of on-road parking…) and improper behaviors (Pelgrims, 2018). The deceleration of car mobility and the acceleration of active mobilities decrease the frictions between the relative mobility modes. They therefore meet an imperative of movement 'fluidization' that guarantees a slow but cessationless, frictionless, undisputed urban realm, opposing and excluding as much problematic immobility (beggar, youth group…) as speeding practices (pointed at as 'cowboy', uncivil…) (Pelgrims, 2018). Accelerating and decelerating *dispositifs* then reduce the plurality of ways of being, and the richness of public space.

Moreover, in the western automobilized time-space, the synchronization of urban rhythms to the automobile speed and metrics may also oppress and constrain individuals to movement mechanization which implies a decrease of what A. Bonnet calls the "presence variation" (2013, 3). This is defined as the variation rhythm of the "ambient sensibility" (Thibaud, 2020) deployed in æsthetical mobility experience in the environment.

The second section discusses how the sensory *dispositifs* of infrastructure can on the contrary enhance this 'ambient sensibility' which, I argue, is of great importance to propel mobile actors' political engagement.

Aesthetics Beyond Normativity

Considering the continuous social and material processes through which both mobility infrastructure and practices get caught up in changing affective, corporeal and æsthetic relations and atmospheres helps to consider another political dimension of mobility infrastructure.

Let's consider cycling infrastructure, for instance. According to the work of Dave Horton on green activists, "cycling is a conflictual practice of resistance to a predominantly and excessively motorized non-green culture" (2006, 52) as much as it demonstrates to others the viability of alternatives to the current society. Indeed, emerging cycling practices, objects and infrastructured spaces underlie a new social order, specific identities and new ways of living in an emerging citizenship (Aldred, 2010;

Horton, 2006). The latter sustains relations based on self-esteem, conviviality, ecology, liability (Van der Kloof, Bastiaanssen, and Martens, 2014; Bahrami and Rigal, 2017; Illich, 1973; Héran, 2014). The cycling citizenship also triggers specific pleasure and displeasure which have "moral" fruitage (Scott, 2020).

Pleasure remains one of the principal motivations across time and space for cycling (Rosen, Cox, and Horton, 2007). The æsthetical experience of cycling (pleasure, pre-reflexive experience of freedom) is now desirable. People now operate a transition to slow mobility because it offers individual, sportive, hedonistic and playful experience (Kaufmann et al., 2019). It articulates the hedonistic slow mobility favored in the context of cultural capitalism and the updated "poetic of speed" – first associated with modernist masculine automobilism (Mom, 2014; Flonneau, 2008) – to create new affective relation to motion and the urban environment. First, as the early and mid-20th century highways (Pelgrims, 2020a), cycling infrastructure renews the assimilation, on a pre-reflexive level, of individual mobility with personal freedom. This clearly appears in the 2017 Velo-city Conference theme on "the freedom of cycling." This assimilation feeds the narrative of cycling infrastructure as an essential element for a sustainable future. Second, the movement's "different qualities, temporalities, rhythms, materialities and affective resonances […] cut across and resonate through […] infrastructures, environments, vehicles and bodies." (Merriman, 2016, 86) This resonance may be increased by qualitative, landscaped infrastructure design. The infrastructure can intensify and value the sensitive, liberating experience of the environment (Bendiks et al., 2013) and draw attention to its specific æsthetic dimension, to the diversity of the crossed species, the quality of the atmosphere and weather… It helps people to develop, as J.-P. Thibaud puts it, an "ambient sensibility" – as "a power of intensification and transformation of our relationship to the world" (2020) – that addresses the crisis of resonance diagnosed by H. Rosa. Mobility infrastructure, that way, helps the cyclist's physical engagements (effortful motion) in the city. It turns progressively into both increasing environmental awareness (capacity to be affected by non-human) and sensitivity to ecological issues. Therefore, through the joyful attachment to the experienced world, it propels 'ethical' generosity to the others and to the environment and strengthen sustainable mobility.

References

Aldred, Rachel. 2010. "'On the Outside': Constructing Cycling Citizenship." *Social & Cultural Geography* 11, 1 (2010): 35–52.

Augoyard, Jean-François. "L'environnement Sensible et Les Ambiances Architecturales." *L'Espace Géographique* 24, 4 (1995): 302–18.

Bahrami, Farzaneh, and Alexandre Rigal. "Spaces of Effort, Exploration of an Experience of Mobility." *Applied Mobilities* 2, 1 (2017): 85–99.

Bennett, Jane. *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2001.

Berdoulay, Vincent, Iná Castro, and Paulo C. Da Costa Gomès. "L'espace public entre mythe, imaginaire et culture." *Cahiers de géographie du Québec* 45, 126 (2001): 413.

Boltanski, Luc, and Laurent Thévenot. *De la justification: les économies de la grandeur*. Paris: Gallimard, 2008 [1991].

Bonnet, Aurore. *Qualification des espaces publics urbains par les rythmes de marche : approche à travers la danse contemporaine*. Ph.D.thesis, Université de Grenoble, 2013.

Castoriadis, Cornelius. *L'institution imaginaire de la société*. Paris : Seuil, 1975.

Chelkoff, Grégoire, and Jean-Paul Thibaud. "L'espace public, modes sensibles : Le regard sur la ville." *Les Annales de la Recherche Urbaine* 57, 1 (1992): 7–16.

Flonneau, Mathieu. *Les cultures du volant: essai sur les mondes de l'automobilisme : XXe-XXIe siècles*. Paris: Autrement, 2008.

Gamba, Fiorenza. "Lire La Ville Quotidienne Entre Technique et Poétique." *Sociétés* 114 (April 2011): 119–27.

Gibson, James. *The Ecological Approach To Visual Perception*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979.

Héran, Frédéric. *Le retour de la bicyclette: une histoire des déplacements urbains en Europe, de 1817 à 2050*. Paris: La Découverte, 2014.

Horton, Dave. "Environmentalism and the Bicycle." *Environmental Politics* 15, 1 (2006): 41–58.

Illich, Ivan. *La Convivialité*. Paris: Points, 1973.

Kloof, Angela van der, Jeroen Bastiaanssen, and Karel Martens. "Bicycle Lessons, Activity Participation and Empowerment." *Case Studies on Transport Policy* 2, 2 (2014: 89–95.

Lefebvre, Henri. *Eléments de rythmanalyse: introduction à la connaissance des rythmes*. Paris: Syllepse, 1992.

Merriman, Peter. "Mobility Infrastructures: Modern Visions, Affective Environments and the Problem of Car Parking." *Mobilities* 11, 1 (2016): 83–98.

Mom, Gijs. *Atlantic Automobilism: The Emergence and Persistence of the Car, 1895-1940*. New York: Berghahn, 2014.

Pattaroni, Luca. "La Ville Plurielle : Quand Les Squatters Ébranlent l'ordre Urbain." In *Enjeux de La Sociologie Urbaine*, edited by Michel Bassand, Vincent Kaufmann, and D. Joye, 283–314. Lausanne: PPUR, 2007.

Pelgrims, Claire. "Aménager la lenteur. La dimension imaginaire de la piétonnisation du centre-ville bruxellois." *Espaces et societes* 175, 4 (2018): 143–62.

—. "Ambiance of Slowness. Brussels Commercial Gallery of the Latter Half of the 20th Century." *SHS Web of Conferences* 64 (2019): 03001. https://doi.org/10.1051/shsconf/20196403001

—. "Fetishising the Brussels Roadscape." *Journal of Transport History* 41, 1 (2020a): 89–115.

—. "Tension between Fast and Slow Mobilities. Examining the Infrastructuring Processes in Brussels (1950-2019) through the Lens of Social Imaginaries." *Transfers* 9, 3 (2020b): 1–21 (to be published).

—. *Entre vitesse et lenteur. Imaginaires en tension dans l'évolution des infrastructures de mobilité*. Ph.D.thesis, Université libre de Bruxelles, 2020c.

Pelgrims, Claire, and Armelle Hausser. "Les rythmes indisciplinés." *EspacesTemps.net [En ligne]* (May 2019). https://doi.org/10.26151/espacestemps.net-7kvk-yr76

Ricoeur, Paul. *Time and Narrative, Volume 3*. Translated by Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.

Rosa, Hartmut. *Resonance: A Sociology of the Relationship to the World*. Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2019.

Sansot, Pierre. *Poétique de la ville*. Paris: Klincksieck, 1971.

Scott, Nicholas A. *Assembling Moral Mobilities: Cycling, Cities, and the Common Good*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2020.

Sénécal, Gilles. "Aspects de l'imaginaire spatial : identité ou fin des territoires ?" *Annales de Géographie* 101, 563 (1992): 28–42.

Sheller, Mimi. "Automotive Emotions: Feeling the Car." *Theory, Culture & Society* 21, 4-5 (2004): 221–42.

Sheller, Mimi, and John Urry. "The New Mobilities Paradigm." *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 38, 2 (2006): 207–26.

Thibaud, Jean-Paul. "Mouvement et perception des ambiances souterraines." *Les Annales de la Recherche Urbaine* 71, 1 (1996): 145–52.

—. "The Backstage of Urban Ambiances: When Atmospheres Pervade Everyday Experience." *Emotion, Space and Society* 15 (May 2015): 39–46.

—. "The Hypothesis of Ambient Sensibility." Urban-related Sensoria Conference, June 11 2020.

Tonnelat, Stéphane. "Une infra-politique de la marche." In *Le génie de la marche : poétique, savoirs et politique des corps mobiles*, edited by Georges Amar, Mireille Apel-Muller, and Sabine Chardonnet-Darmaillacq, 120–31. Paris: Hermann, 2016.