

Slow is beautiful. Or is it? John Berger on riding a bike

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Experienced at once as an aspiration and a burden, speed is a much contested mark of modern lives which seems to have no place in visions of sustainable futures. Art critic John Berger has written thought-provoking passages about the thrills of riding a motor bike.

Slow mobilities such as cycling and walking often occupy a privileged place in visions of sustainable futures. Slow tourism, Cittaslow, Liveable cities, and the Transition Town movement presume that slowness is conducive to happier, healthier, more natural lives. Paraphrasing Ernst Schumacher one may say that, when imagining more sustainable futures, slow is beautiful. But is the experience of speed necessarily less 'natural' or appropriate, and could or should it still have a place in a sustainable future? And are people necessarily talking about the same thing when referring to speed? For example, could the act of riding a motorbike at high speed ultimately revolve around something other than speed?

In order to encourage reflection on the richness of meanings associated with speed, this entry introduces a few little known but highly suggestive texts by British art critic and Marxist intellectual John Berger on his experience of riding a bike. John Berger has long been a highly influential and polemical figure in British art criticism and at 88 seems to be as restless as ever. He is perhaps best known for *Ways of Seeing*, a short book that the BBC turned into a successful TV series seeking to democratize the experience of art. An enduring passion in his long life has been riding bikes, a theme that intermittently emerges across many of his writings.

A common thread linking these texts is a sense of communion of body, machine, road and landscape achieved when piloting a motorbike:

except for the protective gear you're wearing there's nothing between you and the rest of

exception are procedure gear you're wearing, direct heading between you and the rest of the world. The air and the wind press directly on you. You are in the space through which you are travelling.

Because you are on two wheels and not four, you are much closer to the ground. By closer I mean more intimate with... Bends produce another intimate effect. If you enter one properly, it holds you in its arms, just as a hill points you to the sky and a descent receives you... Every contour line on the map of the country you're driving through means your axis of balance has changed... This perception is visual but also tactile and rhythmic. Often your body knows quicker than your mind.

(*Keeping a Rendezvous*, 1992)

In his more recent book *Bento's Sketchbook* he refers to this embodied vision, its limits and an accompanying sense of anticipation:

For many years I've been fascinated by a certain parallel between the act of piloting a bike and the act of drawing. The parallel fascinates me because it may reveal a secret. About what? About displacement and vision. Looking brings closer...

You pilot a bike with your eyes, with your wrists and with the leaning of your body. Your eyes are the most importunate of the three. The bike follows and veers towards whatever they are fixed on. It pursues your gaze, not your ideas. No four-wheeled vehicle driver can imagine this...

If you look hard at an obstacle you want to avoid, there's a grave risk you'll hit it. Look calmly at a way around it and the bike will take that path.

(*Bento's Sketchbook* , 2011)

In the following quote he elaborates the sense of anticipation involved in this embodied experience:

In the company of a road one foresees after a while what it's going to do. One anticipates. It offers signs – which have nothing to do with the official international road signs. Signs expressive of its personality and intentions.

One enters a blind corner and one already knows how long or how short, sharp or gentle, it's going to be. One feels the road nervous when starting a steep climb. One feels it stretching on the straight...

At this point, riding has become a pas de deux. Rider and road are partners dancing. It can even happen that you fall in love. There's a promise involved that no third person can

explain. It's not the promise of the road's final destination, nor even the next mountain pass, the next river or next town. It is simply the promise of you and the road continuing to be together and of continually surprising and confirming one another.

(*'The road'* in *Motorcycle International*, February 1993)

From this sense of intimacy and anticipation emerges a sense of freedom:

The fastness that counts most is that between decision and consequence, between an action and its effect – changing direction, braking or accelerating. Other vehicles may in fact react as quickly or more quickly than a motorbike, but [they] are not as physically close to your body, and none of them leaves your body so exposed. From this comes the sensation that the bike is responding as immediately as one of your own limbs – yet without your own physical energy being tapped. And this effortless immediacy bestows a sense of freedom.

(*Keeping a Rendezvous*, 1992)

To end this entry, some reflections on bikes and poems:

Writing a poem is the opposite of riding a motor bike. Riding, you negotiate at high speed around every fact you meet..

Poems are helpless before the facts...

On a bike the rider weaves through, and poems head in the opposite direction. Yet shared sometimes between the two, as they pass, there is the same pity of it. And in that my love, the same love ...

(*'Road Directions'* in *Pages of the Wound: poems, drawings, photographs*, 1956-1996)