

BIKING LIKE A BOY

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Bravery in biking

Bikes come in all forms and shapes – bikes with uneven wheels, with even wheels, tricycles, reclining bikes, motorized bikes, mountain bikes, racing bikes and so on. These differences in design and material direct its user to use the bike in a certain way. In that sense, form and shape of the bike shape the biker. Design shapes his or her physical posture – only think of Tom Dumoulin's bent forward position on his specific aerodynamic time-trial bike – and it invites certain kinds of behaviour. For instance, as Wiebe Bijker has described so colourfully, riding the rather unpractical and even dangerous high-wheeled bike at the end of the 19th century invited young – or at least not too old – men to exhibit their physical abilities and their fearlessness. Indeed a bike is not only a practical vehicle that allows us to move efficiently from A to B and back again.

The bike, undeniably, incites behaviour that can be associated with machismo and perhaps even with some sort of courtship display. For instance, while making a 'wheelie' - pulling up the front wheel, balancing on the rear wheel - one can show one's skills, one's bravery, and one's power. Pulling the bike from a horizontal to a more vertical position – erecting it, as it were – is undoubtedly associated with masculine, or perhaps, boyish behaviour. Peter Sagan, the successful Slovakian professional road bicycle racer, is well-known for pulling up his front wheel occasionally to underline his supremacy. Even though female bike champions such as Marianne Vos or Anna van der Breggen, have shown that women are very capable of sweating it out in the same way as men, I don't suspect that they would ever celebrate their victories with a boyish wheelie. Bicycle racing might not be very 'lady-like', but making wheelies even for tough female racers is 'not done'.

I must confess, though, that I really enjoyed making wheelies when I was a young girl. It made me feel strong and sturdy. But this was before I came to understand that, from a certain age onwards, boys and girls are supposed to move, act and behave in a specific way; either masculine or feminine. Even though the socialization processes that steer socially desired behaviour start immediately after birth, in the first decade of their lives girls are still allowed to join into boyish activities. Once trapped in secondary school, playtime is over. After the age of 12, I never made a wheelie again, alas. But I did not entirely give up biking like a boy.

Gender is (not) about what's in your pants

Biking is gendered. Not all men or boys bike like a boy, but still we can speak of a masculine way of biking which is distinguished from a feminine way of biking. Whereas

girls and women are supposed to ride the bike in an elegant, upright, lady-like way, boys and men drive the bike in a plumper, unwieldy way; moving their entire body, having their knees wide apart, back and arms bended as if struggling with a strong head wind, and firmly pumping the pedals. I remember that I sometimes biked in this awkward way on purpose when I was 15 or 16 years old. I did this when I had to cycle home after a night out, alone along a rather deserted road in the countryside. If I appeared like a boy or man, instead of a 16 year old girl, in the backlighting of rare passing cars - so I thought - the risk of getting harassed by some drunk or miscreant would be much lower. At these moments, biking like a boy made me feel less vulnerable. As such, I experienced that it could be very functional and rewarding for a girl to act as a man, and thus to transgress given gender norms. Of course, this all happened long before I had ever heard of gender and gender norms. I just did this because I kind of intuitively knew that this was a smart thing to do, as if this was the way in which my world was naturally organized and ordered.

Much later I learned that gender is not just a natural thing. The way feminine behaviour is distinguished from masculine behaviour is not simply based upon biological difference but is rather a social construction. Gender, in other words, is not just about what's in your pants. Although, in the case of biking, one can imagine that what's in your pants cannot be played down - saddle-soreness, for one, surely manifests itself differently in men and women and I cannot suppress the thought that cycling must involve some sort of self-torture in men. But when we bracket off the possible differences in seat, the typical way of feminine or masculine bike riding cannot be reduced to either feminine or masculine anatomy. The fact that men tend to move their entire body, while women tend to move in a more restricted way, has nothing to do with differences in muscle power or other anatomical differences. Why then do men and women move in such different ways?

Biking techniques

The anthropologist Marcel Mauss (1872-1950) would say that the above described different ways of biking refer to different 'techniques' of the body. According to Mauss, techniques of the body involve all kinds of daily bodily activities, such as walking, giving birth, running, marching, swimming, digging, squatting, sleeping, biking and so on. Even though we might be inclined to think that these actions are 'natural', Mauss claims that they are based on habits which are shared in a certain society, and which are heavily dependent on education. These habits may change from society to society and even from generation to generation. My swimming education was different than that of my son, and therefore my 'natural' way of swimming differs from his. British soldiers in World War I, so Mauss observed, were not able to march in the French way. And whereas for some people squatting forms the basic technique of resting, for those who

are used to comfortable beds and chairs and who have thus acquired different resting techniques, it is a rather exhausting activity.

Techniques of the body certainly intersect with technology and technological devices. Mauss also observed that British soldiers were not very skillful in wielding French spades, and therefore had a hard time digging trenches. Their technique of digging was lousy because they were not habituated to the type of digging device. Biking techniques, certainly, also intersect with technology and design. The male bike's cross-bar, for instance, requires a certain technique of mounting: one leg has to be swung over seat and bar, a bit similar to mounting a horse. This, obviously, is not very practical when you wear a dress or skirt. But even if women do not wear a dress or skirt, mounting your bike as if it were a horse is not considered as a very feminine body technique.

In her famous essay *Throwing like a girl*, the philosopher Iris Marion Young (1949-2006) writes that even though not all women through a ball in a 'feminine' way, we can distinguish between a masculine and a feminine way or technique of throwing. This difference, again, has nothing to do with the difference between female or male biology. We talk about 'throwing like a girl' when a girl (or a boy) throws while only using her (or his) forearm. It is throwing without using your entire body – a throw without vitality and without self-assurance. Young claims that it is inherent to feminine body techniques that they are always inhibited, that women do not use the entire potential of their bodily agency. From a very young age, they have learned to not sit or stand straddle-legged, to sit with their legs crossed, and after the onset of breast development it becomes more and more common to cross one's arms in front of one's chest. Women, thus, tend to close off, even fence their own body. According to Young this closed body posture can be explained as a way of protecting oneself in a society which is thoroughly sexist.

Biking like a boy, then, is all about opening up one's body, moving as many parts of one's body as possible and as effective, realizing the full potential of bodily intentionality. The French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) criticizes the age-old philosophical view that all human behaviour and knowledge is rooted in rational thinking. He claims that the greater part of our actions is steered by a pre-conscious bodily experience of 'I can', and not by 'I think'. Young writes that women who tend to close off their bodies and who 'throw like a girl' experience rather an 'I cannot' than an 'I can'. Biking like a boy, by contrast, involves the celebration of the 'I can'. If we want to change our society into a less sexist one, emancipation programs and affirmative actions do not suffice. These are far too rational and cognitive tools. We have to start with the basics which are the body and body techniques. I propose, therefore, that from now onwards, all boys and girls, with or without dresses or skirts, learn to bike like a boy.

Suggestions for further reading

- Bijker, W.E. (1995). *Of Bicycles, bakelites, and bulbs: Toward a theory of sociotechnical change*. Cambridge, MA /London: MIT Press.
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- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1945). *Phenomenology of perception*. (Translation by Smith, C., 1962). London/New York: Routledge.
- Young, I. M. (1990). *Throwing like a girl and other essays in feminist philosophy and social theory*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.