IDEAS IN MOTION

Cycling: Image and Imaginary in the Cultural Turn

Review Essay

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The mechanized mobility practices that came to dominate road use in the twentieth century—using cars, motorbikes, and bicycles—have been notable for the concurrent development of accompanying print literatures in the form of magazines and newspapers. The developmental history of each mode can be told through a number of distinct lenses, each revealing a part of the story of the mobility technology in use. In the context of a renaissance in cycling, there is an emergence of a new style of bicycle magazine that breaks the mould of previous journals.

In a period when the instantaneous digitized transmission of data becomes ubiquitous, dissemination and communication of ideas and information through text, sound and image becomes ever easier. Images multiply. Perhaps the very ease of access to an overwhelming amount of online data creates a context in which quality and non-disposable images and text become more obviously re-valued. Certainly in the world of cycling magazines there has been a quiet emergence of a new breed of journal in the last few years, where the periodical—once almost the epitome of transience—becomes a collectible item, designed not just to sit on the coffee table rather than the newsrack, but to be filed and revisited as a permanent souvenir. This essay reviews a selection of these magazines, reflecting different aspects of, and approaches to cycling and cycle mobility, yet sharing similar production values, layout and features.

Rouleur (see www.rouleur.cc) was the first of the titles to be launched, the initial edition published in May 2006. Perfect bound, printed on quality paper and some 80 pages long, only one page in six was devoted to advertising. Front and rear covers were formed from a single wrap-round image, interrupted only by the title on the front and an almost apologetically small issue number and price at the foot of the rear cover. Since the early issues it has moved from quarterly publication to bi-monthly and the price has risen from £9 to £10 per issue while expanding

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to 170+ pages. It still retains the same ratio of content to advertising and the majority of the advertising is designed to echo the high production quality, with emphasis on minimal text and a third of the advertising pages are grouped together at the start. Most significantly, however, Rouleur has consistently emphasized the portrayal of road cycling in a style more readily associated with high culture than with mass spectator sport. Artistically framed photographs dominate, textual narratives ponder meaning and significance: they philosophize as much as they describe.

The title is dedicated exclusively to bicycle road racing in its various formats. Articles feature riders, events, and manufacturers, together with more general reflections on road riding, whether professional or amateur. There are no news pages, no coverage of this year's tour, no product reviews. For example, an essay on the 2002 tour of Senegal comprises twenty pages of black-and-white photographs—a number full double-spread—alongside two pages of accompanying text. In the same issue (24), it sits alongside a memoir of the almost entirely unknown racer Bruno Busso who died in 1961, accompanied by photographs of diaries and family photograph albums. One picture of his bicycle, kept by his son, makes it into the story. Contributors are all nationally and frequently internationally recognized journalists and writers, sometimes ex-professional riders, together with sports photographers.

Although principally sold as subscription only, Rouleur is now also available through a network of cycle shops. It is clearly targeted at a particular audience of adult consumers aspiring to mix an enthusiasm for the road-racing bicycle with a degree of cultural sophistication. This is the same audience who make up an increasingly important market sector in the larger cycle trade, those for whom £1,000 represents an introductory price point for spending on a bicycle, those to be found riding the ever-increasing range of organized "sportive" events. The clearly middle-class target readership of Rouleur is also identifiable with the category depicted, sometimes derided, in journalism and in numerous blogs as MAMILs—Middle-Aged Men In Lycra. These are not usually those who have been riding (or racing) all their life, but have taken up road cycling as a leisure pursuit in adulthood. Yet what attracts them to cycling is the possibility of connection not only with the latest technology (for which the contemporary racing bicycle provides a showcase) but simultaneously with a past. Road cycling comes with its own packagable heritage of long-standing events and competitions, whether national tours or "Classics." Being run on public roads means that the same routes are open to any rider with imagination and determination, and increasingly marketed as significant tourist attractions in their own right (see for example www.crvv.be).

In the U.K. considerable effort has gone into creating distance between more traditional images of cycle sport as working-class activity and its

new desirability. It is no surprise that Rouleur originated alongside the Rapha boutique range of cycling clothing. The Rapha clothing range was created to develop "the best performing and most stylish cycling clothes and accessories in the world" (www.rapha.cc). Their fundamental image is summed up by a quotation from Tim Krabbe's 1978 novel The Rider, cited on their website.

> The greater the suffering, the greater the pleasure. That is nature's payback to riders for the homage they pay her by suffering. Velvet pillows, safari parks, sunglasses; people have become woolly mice. They still have bodies that can walk for five days and four nights through a desert of snow, without food, but they accept praise for having taken a one-hour bicycle ride. "Good for you." Instead of expressing their gratitude for the rain by getting wet, people walk around with umbrellas. Nature is an old lady with few friends these days, and those who wish to make use of her charms, she rewards passionately.

Road cycling becomes a means to provide the potential for glory by reconnecting with fundamental qualities. But implicit in this is the assumption of a prior disconnection, the Rapha/*Rouleur* consumer is one who is already disconnected with the realities of suffering. These are images and identities that are a long way from historical conventions of sport cycling. Indeed perhaps the most direct comparison of the interweaving of suffering and beauty comes in the evocation of Christian religious art.

This kind of obsession with style and image is not new to the world of cycle racing. To take an example from film, another medium with a long history of depicting cycling, Jørgen Leth's *Stjernerne og Vandbærerne* (Stars and Watercarriers, 1973) and *En forårsdag i helvede* (A Sunday in Hell, 1977) and Lois Malle's *Vive Le Tour* (1962) all celebrate the racing cyclist in almost mythic terms. The machine alone as artifact becomes an almost religious icon, the rider as flawed and often broken hero, particularly in *Vive Le Tour*, where the camera hones in on one rider, struggling alone, finally falling exhausted at the roadside and carried pieta-like into an ambulance. These mythic images are echoed not only in *Rouleur* itself, but the accompanying photographic books and portfolios sold through the journal's website.

Cycle sport has a complex interaction with more mundane and quotidian transport uses of the bicycle. Just as in understanding road transport it is impossible to disentangle the use of the bicycle from the use of other forms of road mobility, so too it is impossible to disentangle sporting from other uses of bicycles. While it is possible to tweak bicycle design almost infinitely to pursue a particular given goal, the inherent simplicity of the machine itself means that the bulk of the work done by any rider, whether off to the corner shop or leading the field in the Tour de France, is done in overcoming the air resistance created by the rider. This means that almost any sports bicycle can provide fundamentally the same

kinaesthetic experience. Cycle sport, like football, has a history of being not only a professional spectacle but something in which to participate, with even the simplest hillside becoming a distant echo of an alpine pass.

Privateer clearly owes much to *Rouleur*. It follows the same stylistic cues, layout, and distinctive 210mm x 260mm format with unadorned cover pictures and sells through the same website. Its subtitle, *Mountain Bike Syndrome*, however, reveals substantial differences in image and approach. Since its popularization in the 1980s, the mountain bike scene has been synonymous with innovation and irreverence. In terms of its own self-imagery through the 1980s and 1990s, mountain biking in the U.K. almost defined itself in opposition to and as antithesis of any form of cycling that had gone before—not rooted in heritage and tradition, not undertaken in clubs and organizations, constantly changing and experimenting with new equipment and design. Its influence can be seen in road racing's pursuit of technological refinement (and perhaps more importantly the increased sales and marketing opportunities this opens up for the industry). *Privateer*'s intended readership is described as "mountain bikers who already know the obvious; for riders who have paid their dues in sweat and dust and broken bone, and are irrevocably hooked."[1] Visibly glossier, sharper, with more focus on the machine and the artifact rather than the atmosphere, *Privateer* is clearly designed to capture the attention of those who have grown up with the off-road riding that has formed perhaps the only significant part of the bicycle renaissance in the U.K.

> If you've got mountain biking and it's got you, a deep emotional connection exists that is agony to even try and explain: a permanent bond with the trails, the sounds, the fear, the great outdoors, the beads of sweat, the coffee and cake, the beer—a bond between rider, bike and terrain that grips forever. You do not want to be told what to buy, how to ride or where to go. You much prefer to get closer to the spirit of the thing. We aim to remind readers why they got into mountain bikes in the first place and why they continue to love it.[2]

The photography is much more clearly framed around images of rider and machine, capturing action and surroundings, than the frequently calm and still quality of image found in *Rouleur*. More interest is given over to individual artifacts, the customized machines of particular high-profile riders. Only in its sixth issue it remains to be seen whether off-road riding can continue to support such an independent voice.

To a certain extent, U.K. mountain biking has had for ten years a quality bi-monthly magazine, attempting to be far more than simply a consumer-product drive title. Singletrack started and continues as an independently run venture and has pioneered much in the way of new opportunities for digital publishing. Containing roughly 30 percent advertising in its approximately 150 pages, Singletrack features the more expected product

reviews and tests alongside feature articles on events and classic rides and routes. Visually it is frequently characterized by images where landscape dominates, almost naturalizing the rider as part of the visual scenery—some articles taking the form of pure photo essays. It is in its digital presence (singletrackworld.com), however, that the most striking features appear. A single photograph on a print page layout, may, in digital form, be the access point to a larger portfolio of images. Similarly, advertisers have the opportunity to feature only a single product image and in digital form this will open access to a full product range by single mouse-click or screen touch. Alongside increased digital content, subscriber print copies also come without the cover bylines that newsstand copies utilize to attract browsers. Digital copy layouts are tailored to individual platforms, whether online, iPad, or android, for example. While not as much of an immediate visual statement as Privateer, Singletrack is unusual in its successful existence as a newsstand magazine which does make an attempt to provide a different image of off-road riding, one particularly grounded in a sense of place and belonging, factors emphasized by the strong online community of readers supported in its online forums. Where Rouleur's website is primarily a marketing opportunity, Singletrack's aims also to create community.

In the U.K., cycling remains a marginal means of mobility. As such it is also characterized by relatively entrenched subcultures and communities, rarely venturing beyond particular preferences in their leisure pursuits. In Germany, however, there has emerged a journal, parallel in style format and layout to Rouleur and Privateer but not confined to any particular bicycle subculture—Fahrstil: das radkulturmagazin (www.fahrstil-magazin.de). The links between the three titles are emphasized by mutual website sales, but Fahrstil is perhaps more self-consciously "creative" than the two British magazines. Each issue so far has been themed around a single term: handmade, time, dream, bought, power. These conceptual hangers allow the editors to compile loosely themed presentations in which layout and design are as equally valuable as the photographic and text content itself. The content draws from across the entire spectrum of cycling activity. Photographs of vintage bicycle parts sit alongside hyper-modern technology, a bicycling priest's meditation and woodland trails. This eclecticism reflects very much the inspiration of the editors. Gunnar Fehlau, for example, has typified his own attitudes, saying:

> To me all things in cycling are a kind of metaphor … I love all the bicycle types: the one you use depends on the flow. There is a mountain bike that is perfect for what we do here [an off-road event], but if you have another flow, a long distance to travel, you take a road bike; if you want speed you take a recumbent. If I want to ride with my brother I take a tandem.[3]

Fahrstil takes cycling almost as a means of philosophizing. It is designed to go beyond the introductory, almost to the point of exploring bicycle mobility as a fetish.

Bicycle mobility in all its forms is essentially kinesthetic. There is no mediation between the rider and the elements—gears make landscape more bearable but do not make hills and surfaces disappear, clothing makes weather conditions more bearable but does not shut them out entirely. Describing Leth's filming of cycle racing, Christiansen has said that they are "not just a presentation of a cycle race but a presentation of the *experience* of a cycle race."[4] Perhaps the same might be said of the task that these journals attempt: that they attempt not just to present cycling but the *experience* of cycling; to get under the skin.

Notes

1. Publisher's description http://www.rouleur.cc/privateer
2. http://www.rouleur.cc/privateer
3. Interview in Privateer no. 6 (2011): 114.
4. Ask Vest Christiansen, "The Re-enchantment of the World: The Relationship between Sport and Aesthetics Illustrated by Two Classic Cycling Films," Sport in History, 29, no. 1 (2009): 49–68, 53.

Author Biography

Peter Cox is a Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Chester. Prior to re-entering academia, Peter ran his own cycle business and was involved in a range of campaigning and community organizing projects. Since completing his doctoral thesis (2002) his research work has specialized in the area of social change and sustainable transport, especially the role of cycling and its importance for social justice. He is author of *Moving People: Sustainable Transport Development* (Zed Books, 2010) and was a founder member of the Cycling and Society Research Group, co-editing (with Dave Horton and Paul Rosen) *Cycling and Society* (Ashgate 2007) as an outcome of this group's work.