Fixamotosis – a fashionable or functional fixture?
Investigating the relations between body, technology and space

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Abstract
Recent geographical study has examined the body as a space of research and its interactions with forms of technology. Actor network theory, emotional and affective geographies, non-representational theories and studies of kinaesthetic embodiment have conceptualised the hybrid assemblages formed between bodies and technology, within which both forms of agency are entangled. Yet experiential geographies have often overlooked the kinaesthetic assemblages formed by the coming together of such hybrid actants. In mobility practice this is manifested in the content of the line between A→B, with body and bike producing embodied rhythms and kinaesthetic sensations through hybridity. This paper examines such experiential spaces produced by the kinaesthetic activity of fixed wheel riding, drawing together a range of discourses in an empirical context.

The investigation is driven by two central research questions:
(i) Why do people ride ‘fixies’ and what kind of experiential geographies are produced by such kinaesthetic assemblages?
(ii) How do the outcomes and consequences of this hybridised practice impact upon urban cycling in general?

Utilising Oxford as a site of study, the manufacturer Fellia producing ‘CREATE’ fixies will be employed as a case study of the commodification of technology, affective experience and identity. Prior to data collection, the origins of fixed wheel bikes and their growth from a marginal subculture to a widespread urban fashion will be accounted for. Acknowledging the limitations of conventional research methodologies, go-along interviews and video ethnography will be used to explore the hybrid actant within the creation of capitalist worlds, notably their inhabitation through both consumption and production. Running throughout this discussion is the theme of dialectical tensions, exemplified in the conflicting forces of the paces, performance and perceptions of riding fixed. Circularity and sphericality are also central to this research, as linear modes of urban transport are critiqued in view of sustainable forms, engaging kinaesthetic activity and representational networks.

Geographies of movement
Seemingly, simplicity is modernity. From a minimalistic Google homepage to post-modern architecture and interior design, the simple is the new modern. As Stendhal wrote ‘only great minds can afford a simple style’ (Oxford Student 6/5/10), indicating the resurgence of simplicity in a stylish and modern society. Yet is that the full picture? Simplicity is often shown in extrinsic qualities, masking an intrinsic complexity, for instance the minimal logo of the Google homepage acting as a gateway, to complex networks, databases and information within. Plato mused that ‘beauty of style and harmony and grace and good rhythm depend on simplicity’ (Oxford Student 6/5/10). With reference to cycling, the recent reinstatement of fixed wheel bikes in towns and cities, colloquially termed ‘fixies’, echoes such a viewpoint, given their purity, simplicity and style – merely ‘one bike, one gear’ (www.redbubble.com).

As August Kleinzahler poetically wrote, bicyclists are the ‘kinetic emblems of an enlightened state’ (2006:33 in Bergmann and Sager 2008:3). If indeed cyclists are ‘kinetic emblems’, fixies are symbolic of a modern techno-culture, the pinnacle of modern mobility, with an aesthetic purity, mechanical simplicity and urban style, making them the ultimate in urban cool. The fixed wheel bike is merely a single speed bicycle without the ability to
freewheel, where the pedals always move in motion when the bicycle is moving. However, a simple external frame and components provide only the foundation for subsequent experiential geographies, from living, feeling and creating meaningful spatial relations to the performance and rhythms of pedalling. Hence, the extrinsic simplicity is manifested in the fashionable nature of the fixie, yet its functional uses disclose the intrinsic complexities of riding fixed – a fashion versus function fixture is formed.

Movement surrounds us. People move, information moves, capital moves, knowledge and society move – ‘transportation is civilisation’ (Ezra Pound [1917] 1973:169 in Urry 2007:17). Yet, traffic rarely moves. The paradigm of urban mobility is in paradox, with cities equipped with infrastructure yet oversaturated with motorists. Whilst the mobilities literature is impressive (e.g. Cresswell 2006; Urry 2007; Adey 2010), the recent revolution by the New Mobilities Paradigm (Sheller and Urry 2006) demands a contemporary look at how, why and where people move, examining not only mobility, as a displacement or the ‘act of moving between locations’ (Cresswell 2006:2), but also ‘motility’, the potential for movement (Kaufmann 2002). Whilst the present global epoch is one characterised by movement, with both real and virtual transport and communication, geographies of movement in urban environments require further investigation. Mobility certainly does define society in the 21st Century, yet ‘the only cure for this [motor] disease is to rebuild the whole transport network on a new model’ (Mumford 1968:250) so perhaps the time has come for a ‘new model that makes the existing model obsolete’ (Buckminster Fuller in Conley and McLaren 2009:235).

The tension between cars and bicycles is stark; whilst the ‘unfettered auto city dream soon becomes a nightmare of traffic’ (Newman and Kenworthy 1999:59), as shown in London where the average speed for motorists is 11mph (Böhm et al. 2006), the ‘rationale for cycling in the city is speed and efficiency, as well as subsequent health and environmental benefits’ (Böhm et al. 2006:208). Never has this been as true with the fixie, a one geared bicycle of mechanical efficiency and functional speed, and yet studies are lacking on this bike. The virtues of cycling in the city have been and continue to be explored (e.g. Peters 2006; Böhm et al. 2006), however few have integrated social theory, mobilities and an understanding of technology and innovation to promote ‘travelling as a journey that is a goal in itself’ (Peters 2006:5). In order to employ the bike as an agent of change to solve so many intractable modern problems, we need to shift from ‘the acceleration pedal to the bicycle pedal’ (Lammers 1995:7 cited in Peters 2006:13).

Spaces of pure movement

Fixed gear bikes originated in the 1880s as track bikes. Used solely in velodromes, these bikes were designed for speed – lightweight with fixed hubs and no brakes – the principle was to incessantly move faster without stopping. The invention of a chain driver in the 1900s permitted bicycles to freewheel, leading to the development of geared bikes and further specialisations in bicycles genres. Yet throughout this time, messengers, particularly American couriers in New York, San Francisco, Boston and Chicago, continued to use fixies for mobility in gridlocked cities, given their simplicity and low maintenance. When riding 80 to 100 miles per day, a lightweight bicycle with the minimal amount of moving parts is ideal, given the wear and tear of city riding. Hence, since the 1950s, marginal subcultures of fixie riders existed in North America, yet the media today report that ‘the fixed has gone way beyond that [courier] subculture now’ (Guardian 06/09/06), to a global presence in Western cities, including London, Paris, Barcelona and Tokyo.

The technology of fixed wheel bikes is basic – the fact that the sprocket is screwed directly onto the hub limits the bicycle to a single gear, with constant motion in the pedals when the bike is moving. This simplicity is replicated in the purity of technology, experience and engagement, generating an emotion of nostalgia too in a world tending towards excess. The deterministic nature of riding, whereby effort expended correlates directly to results attained, suggests a hybridity between body and bike built on a causal relationship. Just as Urry suggests that automobility captures a double sense, ‘both of the humanist self as in the notion of autobiography, and of objects or machines that possess a capacity for movement, as in automatic and automaton’ (Urry 2004:26), creating a car-driver hybrid, perhaps true auto-mobility engages a body-bike hybrid, embodied by the fixies close communion between
rider and machine. Such hybridity cannot truly exist without the connection of an assemblage which is reciprocally enforced; hence the technology of fixed wheel bikes generates a space of purity. This is further emphasised through their aesthetic purity – straight lines and edges portraying a minimalistic style.

The fixed wheel bike provides an excellent platform for synthesising multiple discourses, as a kinaesthetic activity creating embodied and experiential spaces. The hybrid sensations of cycling, from a connection with the bicycle, people and place, to the freedom and autonomy of riding, require a deeper, nuanced analysis beyond simple statistics of cyclists. ‘The ‘immaterial’ embodied and sensory aspects of mobility’ (Spinney 2009:817) have long been left uncovered, given the focus of cycling research into why and how people move (e.g. Rietveld and Daniel 2004). The two veins of thought in the study of emotions in human geography, namely that of psychoanalytic, discursive notions of emotional experience (Davidson et al. 2005) and investigations of affective experience (McCormack 2003; Thrift 2004; Anderson 2006), pose the problem of how to understand, analyse and illustrate assemblages without foregrounding human agency. Investigating this space requires careful methodological insight, delving into the experiences and sensations of kinaesthetic actors.

Interestingly, McCormack (1999) focuses on the ontological purity bound up in such experiential geographies as a feature of hybrid assemblages of bodies and machines. Yet his study omits the significance of experiential geographies in the construction of such spaces. This research builds on such a focus, emphasising the role of emotional and embodied sensations produced in the kinaesthetic practice of riding fixed. As opposed to producing an ontological purity, spaces of pure movement acquire ontological status through their emergence. In the context of the body-bike hybrid, affectivity is interpolated in the assemblage of relations between actants, constructing, extending and mutating representations of techno-affective assemblages of riding fixed. Whilst non-representational theory (Thrift 2004; 2008) is demanding a new emphasis for geographical enquiry, away from the de-constructing of representations, towards the presentation of actions, this paper pays close attention to their role, as representations are the primary means by which experiential geographies are communicated across time and space.

Mobile methods

The deployment of non-representational methodologies, an assemblage understanding of hybridity from actor-network theory, and the roles of affect, embodiment and performativity in habitual practices, serve to investigate fixed wheel cycling in an academic yet pragmatic way. This tension highlights the theme of binaries and dualisms running throughout this research, given the nature of fixies and contemporary thought in human geography, founded on hybrid geographies (Whatmore 2002). The use of a case study approach (Yin 2003), gives a structure and framework to the research, reinforcing its iterative nature. The site of study was Oxford in Oxfordshire, England – selected for its existent cycling culture which sees 22,000 cyclists enter and leave the city per day (www.oxfordshire.gov.uk). The diversity and performance of cycling facilitates an in-depth study of the fixie subculture, observing the vibrancy of urban fashion at the encounter of local markets with global forces. Whilst the national average of commuting by bike is 3%, in Oxford 17% of people employ this mode, aiding access to fixie riders, who are particularly prevalent in the student culture, of which 30,000 study in the historic city (ibid). The employment of a cultural case study at the manufacturer level, namely Fellia, building Create fixies, was selected; a ‘London based bicycle company which works competitively, creatively and on an international level’ (www.createbikes.com). Given the urban dwelling of the fixie culture, Oxford is well in tune with the London scene, aided by its geographical proximity and the interaction of the local with the global. The manufacturer’s aim to make fixies more accessible and affordable is validated by the presence of Create fixies in Oxford, providing a case study linkup between their production and consumption, namely from technological space to bodily space.

In order to rigorously examine the effects of this practice on geographical circulation and mobility, the spatial expression of riding fixed demands methods with equal spatial sensitivity. Recent studies of kinaesthetic assemblages have taken note of the experiential dimensions of practiced and performed activities, moving the ‘emphasis from representation
and interpretation to practice and mobility’ (Hubbard et al. 2004:348), and acknowledging that the ‘body, in this sense, [has] to become much more physically present’ (Parr 1998:31-32). The practice of riding fixed reinforces the sense that ‘words expressing feelings, emotions, sentiments or certain mental and spiritual states will but touch the fringe of the inner responses which the shapes and rhythms of bodily action are capable of evoking’ (Laban 1960:62). The intense embodied facets to riding fixed demand a corporeal presence, whereby a ride-along method serves as one of many ‘experimental practices that amplify other sensory, bodily and affective registers’ (Whatmore 2006:607). By accompanying fixie riders in their context and realm of experience the nuances of a habitual activity, laden with micro-geographies of movement, are best engaged with (Jones 2010, p.c.). Observations of style, speed, riding position, mentality and attitude towards safety, laws and pedestrians framed the 15 minute or so ride-along. Csordas asked ‘...whether it is sufficient to attend to the body or whether one must in addition attend with the body, now understood as a tool for research (1999:149). In response to this supposition, the ‘ride along’ method (Spinney 2006; Brown 2007) has become a well-established tool in studies of geographies of movement.

The participatory use of video in a ride along produces rich data with regard to the geographical experience of space and urban mobility, particularly in the context of kinaesthetic embodiment. Without the use of video ethnography, the richness of data to be analysed would be reduced to the researcher’s memory, rather than promoting a mixed method approach of coding the non-verbal experiences of video with interview responses, in line with Whatmore’s model of ‘co-fabrication’ (2003:90). Just as Wacquant faced the challenge of how to depict a ‘practice that is so intensely corporeal, a culture that is thoroughly kinetic, a universe in which the most essential is transmitted, acquired, and deployed beneath language and consciousness’ (2004: xi), this research reflects popular culture which lives in the ‘age of the screen’ (Lorimer 2010:239), entangled in assemblages dedicated to the production, circulation and consumption of moving imagery (Thrift 2008). Videos of riding fixed are prevalent on film websites (e.g. YouTube), which visually demonstrate the subversive use of space (Cresswell 2006). Hence, the analysis of complex spatial episodes is facilitated by the meanings elicited in freeze framing ride along videos, exploring the value of the sensory, experiential and technological facets to this practice (Spinney 2009). Freeze frames also convey the patterns and themes arising in spaces of pure movement, communicated through the ‘photovoice’ (Berg 2007:150), which mimics the deeply visual experience of a fixie rider. The richness of such data indicated to the researcher the point of data saturation (Bowen 2008), deeming five Create riders to be sufficient for both a ride along and an in depth interview.

Whilst the conundrum of representation is faced, as ‘how does one give a word to a wordless movement without stifling the life of that movement?’ (McCormack 2002:470), the ‘recentring of the corporeal body as an affective vehicle through which we sense place and movement, and construct emotional geographies’ (Sheller and Unry 2006:216) validates the use of video ethnography. Indeed, the fixity of photography and written text are overcome in the ability of video to evoke movement and fluidity, even with freeze frames employed in analysis, denoting the highly mobile and physical demands of riding fixed. Additionally, the use of in depth interviews with the five Create riders provided another layer of qualitative depth, entwining video and language so as to disclose the ‘transient and momentary entanglements of bodies, technologies, senses, feelings, expressions and motions with particular places that constitute the performance of cycling practices’ (Brown and Spinney 2010:49 in Fincham et al.). The setup of the interview endeavoured to capture the tacit nature of knowledge of fixie riders, requiring a convivial tone and setting. Whilst the mixed method approach reflected the diverse corporeal economies of riding fixed, the in depth interview in particular facilitated a narrative of the sensory experiences of riding, with a semi-structured format, surrounding the themes of paces, performance and perceptions, creating a ‘space of thoughtfulness’ (Thrift 2003:114). Furthermore, 10 online survey questions were circulated in Oxford, allowing access to further fixie riders. Data saturation was surpassed with over 50 respondents, as answers became repetitive. Ultimately, a case study of Create riders in Oxford promoted a ‘deep and intimate familiarity’ (Lofland 1996:42) with the subject area, entangling the subjectivities of the researched and researcher, forming a space of betweenness (Katz 2003). Hence, if fixity is illusion and mobility truth (Adey 2010), spaces of pure movement endorse the latter, since ‘the body is in constant motion’ (Thrift 1996:8).
Cycling through spaces of pure movement

The overwhelming sense of the simple beauty, yet sheer complexities of riding fixed underpins the dialectic of fixamotosis. In this sense, the space of pure movement is paradoxical; indeed purity in connection with bike and communion with road, yet equally a myriad of facets constructing the value of fixies, from their basic technological framework to the intricate mixture of experiences and identities that characterise fixie riders. At the outset, this fixture is well illustrated by the Wordle below (Figure 1), revealing the individual significance of words used by the participants to describe their relation with their fixie, in a ‘beautiful word cloud’ (www.wordle.net) with a multiplicity of meanings.

Reflecting the fashionable yet functional fixture, the Wordle above sets the tone for this analysis – a nuanced account of a web of meanings constructed by fixie riders across Oxford. Wordles reveal the layers of meaning interwoven in texts, by adjusting the font of a word according to its frequency within a passage. Equally so, each word carries particular meaning to each participant, emphasising the positive value of subjectivity; from a fixie being just a ‘bike’ to something fun, stylish or practical.

Create rider #3 perceptively described their stripped down connection and engagement with their fixie.

'The fixie is a no nonsense bike, it's just simple and functional...like a bike which has been boiled down to just its basic components. This things is just slipstreamed down...it's so minimal'

The notions of purity clearly described by the rider emphasise the key attributes of riding fixed; it's simple but not simplistic. At first, this is expressed in the fashionable versus functional fixture, whereby the rider articulated that "the fixie is a platform for both cool looks and efficiency, I guess it's both stylish and practical". The stripped down nature is first implicated at the technological level, with only a single gear providing the driving mechanism. Rider #3 also admits the value of this simplicity, sharing that "it's a pure feeling, you know that there is less technology on the bike so all your power is coming from your legs...there are no unnecessary gears or rubber so I feel directly connected to the road...I have better control and can accelerate fast and zip past traffic or weave between buses". This nostalgia for 'no unnecessary gears or rubber' frames the first frenzy of fixie riders; that of raw and pure connection. Often manifested in a fixies outward appearance, this crude sense is displayed in metallic handlebars, with no room for handlebar tape or rubber for comfort, rather mere flesh on metal, as illustrated opposite (Figure 2). Note however, the presence of a front brake, reinforcing the tension between the fashionable and the functional, as the rider is evidently conscious of safety and legality.
Create rider #3 also identified the sense of engagement between bike and rider, reinforcing the space of pure movement, as the discursive distance between body and technology is reduced on the fixie. They drew on a parallel of learning to drive a car, saying, ‘riding a fixie over a normal freewheel bike is like moving from an automatic to a manual car, its challenging at first but rewarding afterwards, you have far better control...it’s hard to describe, but I get a raw, simple experience when I ride...nothing separates me and the road’.

The evidence for connection is clear, resting on the closeness of the body-bike relationship, whereby the engagement of the fixie with the road gives the rider confidence, stemming from better control, to execute seemingly risky manoeuvres. Naturally, this connection with bike extends to an engagement with the context or setting of riding. For rider #3 this meant a perpetual engagement with his surroundings, denoted by the quotation, ‘You can’t disconnect like on a freewheel bike...you’re perpetually engaged. Riding a fixie means I engage with the surroundings more... you can’t freewheel or coast so you are always responsible, you can’t get complacent’.

This direct engagement with the environment reinforces visual geographies, such that landscape is indeed ‘everything I see and sense when I am out of doors’ (Relph 1981:22). Yet to the fixie rider ‘everything’ seems a rather blanket term for the minutiae of detail that form their way of seeing. Rider #3 accentuated the sense of responsibility needed for riding fixed; a contest against complacency revealed by the micro-geographies of quick looks and checks to ensure awareness (Figure 3).

The communion with bike and road is consolidated by the silent hub of fixies, generating a virtually mute sonosphere, allowing for heightened engagement with the surroundings. Create rider #2 emphasised that ‘the silent hub of my fixie shows it’s a well tuned and well oiled bike with no drag. I know that everything I put down on the bike goes into the road. It’s this constant and direct transmission’. This aspect of the bike’s sonosphere is a mere microcosm of the visceral nature of riding fixed; an engagement so raw and unrefined that almost every element of its technology and technique allude to this purity. The tangible riding experience furthers this claim, as rider #4 expressed, ‘Control is the main attraction of fixies. Riding fixed gives me loads of control; I get feedback so I know what the bike is doing at all times... the feel for the bike you get through the pedals gives you control so you know exactly what is happening and where, making it a better riding style and [you] more aware...on a fixie you have a higher threshold of control...so I guess for others it looks like we’re mad but really we’re quite safe’.

Evidently, the result of technology removing the ability to freewheel, which has previously been noted for its ‘inflexibility as a tool’ (Spinney 2008:310), provides the Create riders interviewed with a heightened sense of control and confidence.

Spinney was certainly accurate in detailing the ‘nuanced process of hybridisation...where the bike and rider evolve together in the practice of movement’ (2008:315), but perhaps overlooked the threshold of control delivered by fixies in urban spaces. Elsewhere, this has been noted as a sense of Zen, as evoked by a New York messenger Wirtanen, ‘If you are an intelligent cyclist, it makes you far more aware...It’s a Zen thing. Once you get used to traffic, then you can float through the chaos’ (Singel 2005:n.p.)

This emphasis on road awareness echoes scholarship on the present value of human experience, stemming from Merleau-Ponty’s conception of the body subject (1973) as well as consolidating the unique identity of fixie riders through the bike’s demands for skill, strength and concentration. Paradoxically, this somewhat blurred identity is in fact played out
in a pure spatial practice, given the need for planning and anticipation. In this vein of thought, the skills and techniques exhibited by fixie riders are often enacted as a result of the bike’s technology, an expression of the complex hybrid assemblage. This understanding of connection frames the affective experience of ‘mystical moments’, an insight rider #4 shared ‘...about finding those spaces, those good moments, where you get the short term desire, pulling off the perfect trick or trackstand’.

The Create respondents shared unanimously the themes of continuity and fluidity endemic of riding fixed. Notions of ‘flowing and continuous movement’ (Spinney 2008:310) have already been hinted at, as well as the feelings of flow, defined as a ‘form of peak experience which is characterised by a high level of confidence and control’ (Brown and Spinney 2010:151 in Fincham et al.). This flow is equated ‘with a sense of being on “auto-pilot”, free and absorbed in the moment’ (Ford and Brown 2006:159), which has parallels with surfing, ‘communicating feelings of fluidity, gliding, being in the present, rhythmicity and unconsciousness of flow’ (Brown and Spinney 2010:139 in Fincham et al.). Rider #2 perceptively shared similar insights,

‘My confidence in the fixie lies in the speed of the fixie - in the city you feel like a fast pedestrian, you can access anything and anywhere the fastest. The control and understanding is what fixie riding is all about and why so many people want to ride one...you have to ride it to experience it’

The deeply kinaesthetic and embodied facets of riding fixed are revealed by this rider, clearly emphasising the purity of this hybridised practice, in both the deterministic nature of control and fluidity in movement of speed. However, as the rider hints, only riding will result in experiencing this belief; no matter the length or depth of textual or visual analysis, the performative nature is hard to represent, only practice discloses full meaning. Nonetheless, access to ‘anything and anywhere’ generates fluidity on a par with walking, at both a kinaesthetic level and in terms of urban accessibility. Perhaps even more convincing at the level of fluidity, is the practice of weaving, custom to the style of many fixies. Rider #2 attempted to put into words this sense of freedom and fluidity, recounting our ride down St.Giles in Oxford, a wide street facilitating overtaking and weaving. He noted that ‘the short handlebars give me control so I can just thrash it about and know that the fixie will cling on for me’, hinting at a technological peculiarity of the fixie, which translates directly into the functional ability to overtake cars and weave through gaps in traffic.

The in depth interviews uncovered the respondents’ total acclaim to the synergy of speeds experienced when riding fixed. Just as Ford and Brown likened the sense of flow to ‘being on “auto-pilot”’ (2006:159), Create rider #5 mentioned the deterministic feel of the fixie translating into everything blurring at pace, reminiscent of John Ruskin’s statement that ‘no changing of place at a hundred miles an hour will make us one whit stronger, happier or wiser...the really precious things are thoughts and sight, not pace’ (cited in Botton 2002:222). This challenge to modern day mobility captures some of the double sense of riding fixed; at once a practice characterised by its speed and efficiency in terms of urban transport, yet also deeply kinaesthetic and embodied, with a sense of fluidity and purity inculcated in its simplicity. Rider #5 shared just this thought, stating (Figure 4),

‘You don't have to heave to ride fast, you just keep on going, it's constant...at full speed everything blurs so I don't think about anything else other than just riding’

This dialectic echoes Brown and Spinney’s thoughts on the ‘unconsciousness of flow’ (2010:139 in Fincham et al.), whereby the actor is at once perceptive to the passing landscape, whilst also entirely captive to the practice undertaken. For the fixie rider, this is manifested in a duality of focus; both wholly on the bike and the cityscape.

This twofold engagement is further reinforced by the technique of riding fixed. As rider #3 articulated, ‘I don't like disengaging from the bike so trackstand at lights...that way I'm always moving and never off the pedals’. This manoeuvre entails rocking back and forth on the pedals so as to balance and not to have to put a foot on the ground. Reinforcing the
complexities of fixies, executing this movement can be ‘a difficult skill to master’ (Spinney 2008: vii) at first, yet appear simple and habitual once gained. The microcosm of trackstanding captured this double sense or synergy for many of the riders. Emphasising the technique of being poised at the lights, the shift from virtual standstill to exorbitant sprint reflects the flexible nature of the fixies technology, whilst also reinforcing the purely causal nature of riding; that leg power expended correlates directly to speed attained. Rider #2 expressed these nuances, saying that ‘at the lights I trackstand, I feel poised like I’m on a track’. Equally, rider #4 expressed the micro-geographies engaged in trackstanding,

‘I trackstand and build up pressure, then rock back on amber, so bham I’m away when it’s green and ragging it at full speed’

Fundamentally, the fluidity of riding returns to the connectedness between the body-bike hybrid. Even when trackstanding, the minute bodily gestures to maintain balance and poise, with the rider rocking back and forth on the pedals, result in movements of mere millimetres. As Spinney notes, the ‘prostheticised body’ (2006:712) is best demonstrated by ‘the intimate nature of the relationship between bike and rider...[through] the pedal’ (2006:719), a component of significance to rider #4. Indeed these micro-gestures animate the argument for non-representational methods, with minute adjustments characterising the style of riding, as shown below (Figure 5).

Circularity is also a key part of the fixie as a techno-kinaesthetic assemblage. With regard to transport modes, the seemingly linear journey from A to B has often produced discordant results. Cycling on the other hand is an intrinsically circular practice,

‘...at the heart of the bicycle is a circle. Numerous components, the shape and function of which consist of circles, come together to form the bicycle. Riding a bike is a cyclical exercise that activates the body’s circulatory systems’ (Perry 1995:3)

Paradoxically, however, fixie riders speak of picking a ‘line’ on the road, which speaks of more than lines of logic, according rather with Latour’s conception of ‘circulating reference’ (1999:40). Hybridising the lines and flows of movement, pure spaces of movement adhere to a linear-circular complex, whereby riding fixed is extrinsically linear, in terms of expression on the road, yet intrinsically circular, with spherical technologies and techniques. Spinney’s emphasis on the pedal as the cornerstone component fusing body and bike (2006:719) stems from Lefebvre’s notion of rhythmic embodiment, suggesting that ‘everywhere where there is interaction between a place, a time and an expenditure of energy, there is rhythm’ (2004:15). Fellia, the manufacturer of Create fixies, speak of this in terms of a ‘mystical connection’, observed as the ‘souplesse of the legs’ (Tom English, personal communication 17/5/10). The perpetual spinning of the pedal cranks, often at a cadence above other cyclists, marks fixie riders apart, as noted by Create rider #2: ‘the momentum of my legs means I pedal less due to residual work, so I can maintain my speed longer’. Alluding to the tempo of riding, the hybrid rhythms of body and bike are articulated by the fixie, denoted by rider #2 as the ‘momentum’ of legs and pedals. Merleau-Ponty suggests that we inhabit rhythm (1973), such that noncognitive rhythms allow us to inhabit and produce space, whereby the effortless spinning when riding fixed promotes the ‘melting of self into action’ (Le Breton 2000:3).

The dialectic between simple and hard, the pure and chaotic, seems to characterise the fixie. Rider #5 shared the simple, causal and deterministic relationship between body and bike: ‘I know that the effort I put in to my bike is what I feel in the speed, it’s directly proportional’. Whilst this causality supports the purity of the body-bike hybrid, that ‘the fixed
is a back to basics bike’ (rider #4), the pure aesthetics mask the complexities of technology and technique. As rider #4 otherwise puts it,

‘The whole leg thing is like the engine in a car, your legs pump like pistons setting the rhythm to your ride...it's funny; the fixie is simpler yet harder than any other bike’

For rider #4, your legs are like pistons, establishing the tempo, a certification of Spinney’s conclusion that ‘it is through rhythm that riding is inhabited’ (2006:718). However, in this space of pure movement, rhythm is not merely felt or alluded to; rather it translates directly into a style of riding which is more perceptible and aware than conventional modes of cycling. Through the inhabitation of rhythm, at a high cadence, fixies travel with speed, and yet as rider #5 suggests, ‘...because I ride faster, I anticipate and think ahead so I think I'm also safer’. This is echoed by both rider #2, stating that ‘riding fixed has definitely made me a better cyclist...I think. I look at people and predict their actions and the traffic but I don't take silly risks’, as well as rider #4: ‘you view things differently, like checking things out and looking at people's eyes...you're more perceptible’. Perhaps this fusion of technology and technique warrants superiority, expressed by rider #4 in that ‘riding a fixie confirms your confidence as a cyclist, you're in tune with the bike’, alluding to both the perceptibility of riding fixed and rhythmic associations.

Creating new spaces

Interestingly, the fixie make Create captures the dualistic notions of riding fixed. The individual meaning of the bike brand differed between the Create respondents, from that of creating or finding space in the city to creating a personalised, bespoke bike. Nonetheless, the word carried value in both senses, endorsing the words of Ligeti when he stated ‘I create neither for an audience nor for myself. I create for solutions’ (cited in Thrift 2008:447). This conception of creating is entangled in scale and motive, facilitating an analysis of fixies not just in romanticised senses but rather in reality, when the rubber truly hits the road. Primarily, the fixie respondents in Oxford noted the sheers functional and practical nature of riding fixed. As Create rider #1 stated bluntly, ‘after all, it's just a bike’. Even the manufacturer Fellia concede this point, whilst also romanticising about fashion and style, stating on another website,

‘At the end of the day a bicycle is designed to get you from A to B and from our experience a CREATE bike will help you do just that in style and without breaking the bank’ (www.fixedgearfrenzy.co.uk)

Rider #1 emphasised this functionality, confirming a ‘purely pragmatic relationship, I use it out of necessity 'cos of its responsiveness and practicality’. The 57 respondents to the online survey agreed unanimously, whereby ‘bike’ was prominent when asked how to sum up their relation with their fixie. Yet as previously explored, the fixie is more than ‘just a bike’. Create rider #3 spoke of the audacity attached with fixie riding, maintaining that ‘to me CREATE is also about boldly finding your own path and space in the city...picking different lines to other cyclists'. Riding down Broad Street, Oxford, this choice of different lines is apparent (Figure 6).

For the fixie rider, the approach to the city is much like that of a parkour expressionist, taking hold of space in ‘powerful forms of contestation by way of their embodied negotiation of urban spheres and environments’ (Adley 2010:125). This post-modern take on the city evokes futuristic films such as Bladerunner and the Matrix, whereby the city is viewed as a playground; a set of obstacles to overcome and spatial problems to solve. Whilst verticity may not be a characteristic movement of fixies, as it is in Parkour, the sense of ‘moving for play and creative engagements with cities and built architecture’ (Adley 2010:127) certainly parallels. Indeed, as Create rider #4 noted, the control he has of his fixie heightens his experience of space, giving agency to inanimate objects such as road markings (Figure 7).
JOHNS: Fixamotosis – a fashionable or functional fixture?  

The opportunistic behaviour of such a riding style evokes the thoughts of Alliez, musing that ‘to pose the problem is to invent and not only to dis-cover; it is to create, in the same movement, both the problem and its solution’ (cited in Thrift 2008:5). As rider #4 remarks, ‘for me the make CREATE is a bit wannabee, they want to create an image or let you create your own world with different shapes, movements, artwork’, clearly suggesting an innovative sense to the meaning of Create, exhibited in spatial terms.

This decisively individualistic approach to the city confirms Kuehne’s argument that we live in an age of ‘unfettered individualism and freedom’ (2009:45). Insofar as Apple Inc applied the prefix ‘i’ to their products and Kuehne mimics this with the ‘iWorld’, riding fixed could equally be the ‘iFixie’. The malleable nature of identity in the 21st Century is a case in point of Nietzsche’s philosophy of the ‘will to power’ (Kuehne 2009:59), including that over space, much like the ‘kind of corporeal subversive politics’ (Lewis 2000:65) describing extreme sports. Of the 57 fixie respondents, the survey noted that 83.3% of riders viewed their identity as individual. Furthermore, when asked to summarise their experience of riding fixed in one word, respondents gave answers with clear individual value. As the Wordle opposite depicts (Figure 8), each word is ascribed particular meaning by each rider, and interestingly ‘fun’ is noticeable, reinforcing the appeal of this spatial practice. The intensity of emotions and experiences listed draws strong parallels with other extreme sports, as rider #4 notes: ‘Fixie riding is like other extreme sports, it’s the speed...but you get the safety too’. This tension between speed and safety highlights the perpetual dualisms associated with riding fixed. Rider #2 suggests a similar train of thought, stating that ‘riding a fixie is like an extreme sport with practicality to it, it’s both useful but also fun and exhilarating’. Clearly the binary is a useful term in this context, proposing a seemingly simple dualism with undercurrents of complexity and nuance.

The legality of riding fixed is questionable, as another outcome of a continuous practice with direct consequences on both urban cycling in general and motorised traffic. As Brown and Spinney note with other forms of cycling, ‘the destination is usually unimportant...place is made and remade through grounded yet dynamic ‘feelings’ and seeings’ (2010:149 in Fincham et al.), a point which resonates with the fixie riders surveyed in Oxford. Just as rider #4 spoke about seeking those ‘mystical moments’ on a ride, the multiplicity of destinations enmeshed in the line from A to B emphasises the intrinsic value of mobility, in both a corporeal and mobile sense. Arguably space as well as place is ‘constituted through the sensory and affective sensations of doing as well as arriving’ (ibid.), placing great importance on the transient and momentary experiences of riding. Hence, the riding style adopted is often in practical terms about the ‘thrills and spills’ of cycling and thus politically subversive. This tension is well illustrated in the nature of the verbs used by Create rider #3 when describing his opportunistic behaviour:

‘when I ride through the city I feel like I’m flying or running through it, like a fast pedestrian I just zip through...it's a fun feeling. I have a stronger connection with the road and better control so I can blitz through lights and go faster than cars’
Clearly ‘flying’ and ‘running’ alongside ‘zip’ and ‘blitz’ linguistically convey the speed of travel. Whilst providing an argument regarding connection which induces control, the bold nature of the rider is underlined in the practice of illegal manoeuvres: ‘I can blitz through lights’.

This running of red lights was a theme expanded on in the general survey, whereby 46.2% of respondents claimed to ‘jump red lights’. Indeed, as the newspapers report, the growth in popularity of riding fixed and associated practices, such as alleycats, may ‘threaten to colour public opinion of the growing urban cyclist subculture’ (Observer 9/3/08). Similarly, a retort is gaining momentum, as a survey respondent noted: ‘I think we’ve already seen the first wave of the backlash in the Metropolitan Police’s decision to crack down on cyclists who jump red lights’. The police call this ‘the lemming effect – if one cyclist crosses on a red, others tend to follow’ (Guardian 16/4/10), indicating their intolerance of such behaviour. Yet the feeling of ‘total control over everything’ (Singel 2005) when riding fixed improves a rider’s anticipation, providing continuous movement so as to ‘float through the chaos’ (ibid.). Arguably, this was demonstrated by Create rider #2, running red lights when it was safe to do so, in accordance with his statement that ‘riding a fixie has teased out my dangerous side’ (Figure 9). Nonetheless, the rider notes, ‘I’m a safe fixie rider, with helmet, gloves, hi-vis, lights’ - clearly the dualistic notions of riding fixed persist.

The modern-techno culture does, however, display nostalgia for the retro. The rise of the vintage, in clothing, the arts, and cultural technologies, establishes a clear dialectic between the old and the new. This is well reflected in the fixie subculture; as a 21st Century craze, 57.9% of the respondents to the Oxford fixie survey stated having built or bought a fixie since 2009. Clearly, the yearning for the traditional in a modern society is a highly geographical subject, in which fixies contribute but a small part. Create rider #2 spoke in length of the individuality attached with riding fixed: ‘Riding fix is like the ‘new thing’ so you feel different and individual when riding your own unique bike’. Arguments for the distinctiveness of the fixie support this statement, illustrated by the case of rider #2. A modern, minimalist fixie adorned with a traditional, leather Brooks saddle indicates yet another fixie fashion frenzy, as displayed opposite (Figure 10). Such individuality is keeping in line with the motto of Create, as rider #3 noted: ‘I guess they called the bikes CREATE ‘cos they’re like a blank canvas for you to modify and individualise’. Indeed, the manufacturer’s shared their aim; ‘The vision is to allow people to ‘Create’ and customize their bike online before they buy’ (Michael Tarr, personal communication 10/7/10)

This notion of providing a ‘blank canvas’ to modify demonstrates yet another effort to reduce the discursive distance between body and bike; in this sense consumer and product. Yet once again, the tensions created resonate at two levels. Primarily, at the particular level, the gain of individual freedom is at the cost of a sense of collective politics, which may likely result in conflicting liberties, namely in the spatial expression of riding fixed and use of road space. Furthermore, the macro scale implications provide a conundrum for mass market production; by making fixies more ‘accessible and affordable’ (www.createbikes.com) customizations will be enacted at the consumer rather than producer level. Hence, a grassroots politics establishes, in line with the majority of fixie respondents riding personalised or personal built bikes; 54.4% in the Oxford survey.

The dialectic between the old and new, the traditional and modern, is reflected on a identity basis; that between the individual and collective. Seemingly, the conclusions of such examinations seem adequately condensed into the emotion of pride, as rider #2 exhorts: ‘I get loads of pride from riding my fixie, mainly cos it’s a different bike so lots of people look at it’. This individuality characterises riding fixed across the board, from the technologies and techniques involved to practices and performances enacted. A small microcosm of this
fashionable versus functional fixture is displayed by rider #1, using an indicating style which is quirky, but nonetheless purposeful (Figure 11). Illustrating, on a small scale, how fixies bridge the gap between style and practicality, this means of signalling a left turn may appear naive, yet similar instances exist throughout. The statement by rider #4 regarding his choice of bike colour reinforces this proposition.

‘My bike’s lime green so yeah it stands out and is visible, but it’s also pretty stylish... You get the two sides to fixies, their looks, which are stylish and visible, but then the whole speed aspect too, you’re aware so ride fast but safer’

Clearly, such a statement alludes to the existence of dualistic tensions at the heart of riding fixed. Yet the proud politics which ensues blurs the boundaries between such binaries, as exhibited by the identity of fixie riders. Whilst 66.7% of respondents confirmed the presence of a subculture, such quantitative statistics conceal significant nuances, namely that of individualism. Perhaps this dialectic is the trademark of this subculture; certainly the definition of ‘customs, practices, cultural preferences and lifestyles distinct from, but interconnected to, those widely held in mainstream culture’ (Mikula 2008:193) suits, yet more is at stake. As Hebdige argues, ‘subcultures...challenged mainstream society through style, rather than through explicitly ideological articulations’ (1979 in Mikula 2008:194). In the case of fixie riders, the ‘spatial acting out of place in order to manipulate and subvert ideological inscriptions’ (Adey 2010:125) suggests a more nuanced account. Nonetheless, style and fashion prevail, indicating distinctiveness clothed in individuality. Interestingly, this extends to their influences, whereby 82.9% of survey respondents claim to have no courier influence. This gauges the individuality of fixie riders, rarely displaying appreciation for the origins of fixies from couriers. As one participant noted, ‘My riding is not influenced by couriers, though I'm aware they were the first to use fixies and so inevitably an influence, if indirectly’. This awareness of an indirect influence was observed by only 4 of 57 respondents, emphasising this notion of the ‘Fixie’. Yet the fixies encounter with urban spaces is often subversive, born out of the deviant courier cultures of New York. Hence, a degree of imitation has trickled down through the chains and networks of emergence, engineering and experience, even if their original identity has been ‘lost in translation’: particularly as most messengers are accounted for as riding geared bikes (Kidder 2005). Nonetheless, research has on the whole ignored the consequences of this widespread trend, even if media has accounted for it as ‘Fixamotosis: fixies are a plague’ (http://thesearchmtb.wordpress.com/2008/11/20 accessed 15/4/10), demanding an up to date look at this cycling subculture.

Amusingly, such emotions of pride even display split loyalties, in the sense of a dualism. On the one hand immense pride is derived from the looks of a fixie, even when parked, whilst on the other, the rider feels proud when cycling. One survey respondent illustrated this tension, sharing his views on both (Figure 12).

‘I’d have to say [riding a fixie is] more for the looks than the practicality of it...I feel eyes on my back when I ride by and I often like to display it a little when locking it up - hang it on a fence or in the middle of the road’

The tendency to ‘hang it on a fence’ marks another fixie fashion, as visibility is also dualistic – locking it in a noticeable place will not only ensure plenty of looks and personal pride, but also security in case of attempted theft; the fashion versus function fixture is illuminated yet again. After all, as another respondent noted, the fixie is ‘theft proof (hysterical watching someone try to nick it and ride it off!)’. Not only is pride attained in parking, but also in riding. Create rider #4 echoed the idea of ‘eyes on my back’, saying ‘I get plenty of stares due to the unique look of
my bike, I love the pride’. In this sense, agency extends not only to space but also the inanimate object of the fixie, animated in the practice of riding.

Clearly the entanglement of perception and practice generates numerous tensions of interest, yet ultimately true agency is only acquired by technology, body and space through the practice of riding. As one survey respondent suggested, the fixie is ‘as much a part of my identity as clothing - I’m one with it when I’m on it, and it’s just an object when I’m off’. This reinforces the function of the bike, seemingly placing emphasis on functionality over fashion in the established fixture. The conclusion of the survey supports this thesis, whereby on a scale of riding from 0 (practical) – 10 (fashion), 3 was the most common number, indicating the purposeful nature of riding fixed. Nevertheless, the tension between fashion and function is hard to resolve, and meaningfully so. The importance of each is ascribed to each rider, creating a body-bike assemblage entangled with subjective significance. In this sense, distinctiveness is the common trait of the fixie subculture, in both performative practice and public perception, and as Henri Desgrange stated,

‘I still feel that variable gears are only for people over forty-five. Isn’t it better to triumph by the strength of your muscles than by the artifice of a derailleur? We are getting soft... As for me, give me a fixed gear!’ (L’équipe article of 1902)

For this reason, the sense of superiority is somewhat warranted, encapsulated in the remark of one participant: ‘I think fellow cyclists perceive me with envy; motorists with indifference if not disdain; pedestrians with awe’.

Conclusions

Evidently, the intrinsic qualities of riding fixed which have been investigated advocate the fact that extrinsic simplicity often masks inner complexity and nuances. Perhaps this is the crux of the mobility argument. At once a movement from A to B yet also a ‘more-than-representational’ (Lorimer 2005) displacement engaging motility and affect, mobility is more than it is first conceived to be. Indeed ‘there is more in the action than meets the eye’ (Evans-Pritchard 1956:231).

The relationality of mobility seems to underlie such a thesis. With regard to the perceptions, performances and paces of fixie riders, such relationalities exist at two levels. Primarily the nature of riding fixed, as explored, denotes a perpetual engagement with the environment, through the rhythms and cycles of pedalling as well as the experience of connection and communion with bike and road. This understanding stems from a hybridised viewpoint of subject and object in mobility, namely the body-bike hybrid. Unlike many other modes of urban transport, which feature a disengagement or distanciation from the environment, the fixie promotes a deeper engagement with the city, emphasising its attraction to a select audience of riders. Secondly, the nature of riding fixed at present generates a relational engagement with people. Despite notions of individuality and distinctiveness, fixie riders engage with others given their choice of mobile practice. As a subculture, they have a mutual connection with other fixie riders, generating a sense of camaraderie exposed in the analysis section. Furthermore, given their association with messengers, representations of their identity spark interest from other road users, from motorists to other cyclists. Even if such a depiction is undetectable by the public, the mere positioning of the rider and looks of the fixie attract attention, whether intended or not, creating perhaps more subtle relationalities between people and objects (Adey 2010).

This investigation has also explored new avenues of enquiry and methodological innovations for the study of mobilities. The use of video ethnography coupled with in-depth interviews and participant observation facilitated such a nuanced analysis of riding fixed. Furthermore, this research endorses a new focus for human geography and enquiries within the umbrella term of the New Mobilities Paradigm. The recent turn towards exploring habitual movements is in line with the focus of this paper on the daily activity of urban cycling. Accordingly, the micro-geographies of mobility must receive further attention in order to understand complexities of a mobile society. As evoked in this research, emphasising the particular and individual scale of action and affect, future enquiries must invest in a new localised scale of enquiry, correctly conceptualising the place of the individual within the
assemblage of their context. It is with this lens of enquiry that the embodied aspects of mobility will give credence to the significance and value of micro-gestures.

Finally, the value of a hybridised understanding of body and bike has been fundamental to this investigation. However, contemporary efforts to identify all binaries as crude (Whatmore 2002; Thrift 2004; 2006) must heed caution to the basic necessity of certain dualisms. Sophisticated understandings of the relations between nature and culture have endorsed a shift from binaries to hybrids or even tensions. Yet certain elementary binaries must remain in order to guard against the blurring of significant boundaries, such as that between humans and non-humans. Nevertheless, recent attempts to reconceptualise dualisms as dynamics is commendable and certainly a fruitful avenue for further enquiry, as has been noted in this paper with the value of dialectics.

As this paper comes to a close, we should bear in mind that spaces of pure movement perpetuate in the cyclical rhythms of fixies’ pedalling circles and wheel movements. As a dialectic between the linear and the circular, riding fixed has evoked numerous ways of ‘having a relation to, engaging with and understanding the world’ (Adey 2010: xviii) along both conventional lines of logic and circular constitutions of movement. Indeed, the perpetual tensions running throughout this investigation critique contemporary efforts to synthesise dualisms into new hybrid geographies. The conundrum continues; as we are in both the ‘epoch of space’ but also the ‘epoch of simultaneity, the epoch of near and far, of the side by side, of the dispersed’ (Foucault 1986:22). It is this understanding which frames the very paradoxes of riding fixed, indeed a functional versus fashionable fixture, yet so much more besides. The exact tensions between stasis and flux set the tone of post-modern sarcasm, since after all the fixed wheel bike is far from a static experience of the city; no, rather a fluid one – insofar as fluid versus static is complex versus simple.

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