**THE VISUAL CULTURE OF CYCLING**

It is a difficult job to put together a section on such a huge topic, a process disrupted by the CoViD pandemic. The result contains six essays. They are varied in approach, but it is interesting to see how they link. Their binding feature is surely that all represent the bicycle as an emblem of modernity. This is no surprise as, although it vies with the sewing machine in being the first modern ‘consumer durable’, its place in the public realm and its complicated relationship with gender made it an object of far more public and critical attention during the second half of the nineteenth century, the period in which Baudelaire’s concept of modernity was defined.

We start with a study of the machines themselves, their overtly technological aesthetic and their quite uncompromising black finish that lasted from the 1870s until the 1930s as the default for European machines, regardless of intended market. This was the period where ownership of a bicycle was a statement of conspicuous consumption available to an ever enlarging market. It could be said that the bicycle displayed a ‘machine aesthetic’ that made it not only a symbol of modernity, but also of modernism; yet, ironically, during the inter-war period, when modernism was truly established, bicycle makers adopted more decorative strategies of presenting machines to their markets.

On the other hand, almost the opposite seems to have happened when cycling was represented on objects within the home, such as ornaments and table-wares. Here the machines and the activity were represented using tried and tested historicist styles. Of course, while these might not look ‘modern’ in stylistic terms, they were certainly so in terms of a class of good. Factory-made in large numbers and freely available to the new middle classes with disposable income to spend on non-essentials representing what was usually little more than a pastime. Their successors continue to be sold in huge quantities to those who want to declare their personal interests in outdoor activities through the things they display at home or, possibly more importantly, to those who feel that such items would be appropriate gifts for those they know.

It seems appropriate to move from a study of the machines themselves, to the visual culture of their riders. Emma Hilborn provides us with a consideration of the way in which cycling clothing developed from its inception to the present, but largely focusing on the ‘dress problem’ faced by female cyclists in the late 19th century. Again, the very issue was one of modernity, how to retain personal and expected cultural values in a time of rapid change and widening opportunities? The topic is a common one in cycling history, but Hilborn comes at it from a refreshingly pragmatic angle based on the actual evidence, rather than the romantic one of ‘new womanhood’ that is repeated to this day - that somehow cycling was the catalyst for dress reform in which the end product was that it became acceptable for women to wear ‘bifurcated garments’. Rather, the greatest issue for many women cyclists was how to conduct the activity *without* having to change out of a long skirt and thus not seriously challenge their socially constructed femininity. The technological issues that presented the skirt wearer with a ‘dress problem’ were addressed by the first years of the 20th century and female cyclists almost entirely reverted to long skirts for another twenty years until hem-lines rose, rather than anything else.

We then move on to Nadine Besse’s analysis of ‘art posters’ issued by French cycle agencies in the 1890s. It is here that some of the myth that Hilborn addresses originates. Poster artists usually tried to capture the positive experience of cycling, rather than the cycle itself as a product, particularly in those posters that depicted female cyclists, often dressed in the most fashionable bifurcated garments (or sometimes no garments at all). The modernity of the cycling art poster is overt. The art poster’s very being relied on the structures of modernity, many advertised UK and US made products, relying upon the latest manufacturing, communication and distribution methods to reach a remote, anonymous market. The product itself was one of conspicuous consumption for little more than its owner’s pleasure. Firmly lodged in addressing the new urban middle classes, the art poster blurred the divisions between high and popular culture. Had he lived to see them, Baudelaire would probably have approved. However, art posters remain an excellent example of mythology being created round a product that would be more the stuff of Roland Barthes a century later, a mythology that remains alive and well and will probably continue to do so for as long as the art poster remain a desirable collectible.

If Besse explores a fruitful collaboration between art and cycling, Scotford Lawrence looks at the somewhat more problematic relationship cycling seems to have had with fine art. Here, it seems the cycle was at odds with 19th century fine art practice, often mired by the norms of the ‘academy’ and preconceptions of what was suitable subject matter for painting and sculpture. It was the overt rejection of the academy initiated by Courbet’s ‘realism’ that allowed artists like Lautrec to produce the art posters of the 1890s; but Lawrence points out that it is really not until the ‘avant garde’ of the early 20th century that cycling and fine art come together, often in quite conceptual ways, beginning with Duchamp’s ‘ready-mades’. However, by this time it was too late for cycling to develop a ‘genre’ that one would associate with, for instance, horses as a subject of formal depiction. Again, the way in which cycling seems almost naturally to ally itself with modernity and distance itself from those values that preceded it is notable. Had cycling become a subject for ‘academic’ artwork of the nineteenth century, rather than that of impressionism, one would almost be at a loss to explain why.

The relationship between cycling and art is brought right up to date with Hilary Norcliffe’s analysis of Ai Weiwei’s *Forever Bicycles*. This huge sculptural installation is posed at a moment when China is in the midst of mass motorisation in the context of the climate crisis and a general, if unfulfilled agreement amongst lading world nations to try to promote low energy and preferably human powered transport.

Finally, Bruce Bennett provides an overview of cycling and films. As Lawrence points out earlier, cycling quickly allied itself with photography in the velocipede era of the 1860s and the two remained closely interlinked. Indeed, by the 1890s magazines such as *Cycle and Camera* graced the shelves of railway bookstalls. Bennett points out cycling’s move to cinema was immediate on its public introduction by the Lumiere brothers and, since then, it has remained a part of both ‘popular’ and ‘art’ cinema, adapting to much cultural repositioning throughout the twentieth century and into the present.

Bennet’s essay points out just why cycling and film are so suited to one another. Photography tended to depict cyclists when stationary, posing with their machines in a studio, waiting for the starting gun on the track, with their trophies after a race. While the art poster usually attempted to capture movement, it too was in freeze frame; but the movie camera allowed that movement to depicted in all its excitement. Thereafter, film built narratives around the changing status of the machine that would be familiar to many, from the workhorse of the working man, to the freedom machine of children and indeed extra terrestrials.