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## CHAPTER 9

# Marxist Resistance at Bicycle Speed Screening the Critical Mass Movement

Lars Kristensen

*Activism today is no longer a case of putting bodies on the line; increasingly, it requires and involves bodies-with-cameras.*

—Constance Penley and Andrew Ross, quoted  
in Patricia R. Zimmerman, *States of Emergency*

Since the early 1990s, the Critical Mass movement has been associated with groups of bicyclists riding through inner cities in numerous countries. On every last Friday of the month, people on bicycles gather at a certain spot to collectively ride through the city, thus actively disrupting the traffic flow of motor vehicles. Not accurately described as a bicycle advocacy organization, Critical Mass is instead labelled a celebration of the bicycle (Blickstein and Hanson 2001: 352). In the words of Chris Carlsson, the editor of *Critical Mass: Bicycling's Defiant Celebration*: 'Critical Mass bicycle rides are no protest movement as we commonly imagine. Instead riders have gathered to celebrate their choice to bicycle, and in so doing have opened up a new kind of social and political space unprecedented in this era of atomization and commodification' (Carlsson 2002: 5–6).

These mass rides make visible, in a traditional minoritarian fashion, how the urban environment is constructed according to the circulation of capital and how private cars get preference over other forms of velocity. According to Tim Creswell, 'free and equal mobility is a deception' within urban transportation (quoted in Vivanco 2013: 14). Thus, Critical Mass rides highlight how the urban environment is hierarchical and thereby press for changes in how we move, for leisure or work, within the city. The campaigning aim of Critical Mass is to improve conditions for urban bicyclists. A key part in the rise of the movement has been its visual representation of mass bicycle rides, from its first appearance in Ted White's film, *The Return of the Scorcher* (1992), to an

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ever increasing amount of clips posted online, shot and produced by anonymous riders and spectators.

This chapter will examine both the Critical Mass movement and films related to this form of activism. It will consider the relationship between bike activism and Marxist activism and ideology, and ask the question whether the moving images of the Critical Mass movement are a form of activism or merely representations of activism. In order to explore these points, the chapter considers, firstly, the activism of rider and the activism of bicycles as eco-machines; secondly, it looks at the moving images themselves and the viewing practices that these images entail.

### **The Critical Mass Rider**

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Individuality has always been associated with the bicycle rider. All bicycle historians point to the benefit of being mobile and autonomous as the single vital component in the development of the bicycle (Boal 2002; Herlihy 2004). It was the craving for singularity that was the attraction of the bicycle; a singularity seen clearly in the way women used the bicycle to liberate themselves from the patriarchal structures of society. Once on your bicycle, you were autonomous (Herlihy 2004: 266). But it seems that this is reversed when riders ride together, forming a collective identity.

Mass bicycle rides began in 1992 in San Francisco. Under the name 'Community Clout', a group of bicyclists gathered to ride together through the city. These riders were like-minded people, who liked to socialize while riding their bicycles. This phenomenon was spontaneous and playful, but also driven by a desire to perform at a collective and political level. What bicycle riders discovered was that when they ride in large groups, automobiles – cars, trucks and busses – had to yield to the group of riders, a reversal of the status quo. In particular, in U.S. inner cities, bicycle riders must give way to motorized vehicles, and motorists often look upon these riders as freaks or outcasts, unfit for modern urban traffic. For brief moments, mass bicycle rides change this structure. However, reversing the traffic hierarchy can only happen through collective effort and it was only through the collective rides that the movement discovered its political dimensions. As Zack Furness states: '[W]hen a cyclist takes that same ride with a group of likeminded individuals – whether

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the ride is a celebration, or a protest against the oil industry – they transform the meaning and function of the bicycle inasmuch as they are able to communicate that message to one another, and hopefully, to people in the general public’ (Furness 2005: 403).

Ascertaining its political dynamics, the movement quickly grew and changed its name to Critical Mass. It was this dynamic, the taking over the direction of traffic, that the San Francisco riders seized upon. The riders acted on the assumption that if enough people ride bicycles together, such action would force a new direction of society and create a new flow. And, indeed, the movement has changed the direction of traffic in the sense that city planners are today taking the plight of bicyclists seriously. The view of urban bicycle riders has changed from freaks on wheels to daily commuters travelling from average suburban homes to average inner city jobs. Bicycle enthusiasm is nowadays less about embracing counter-culturists and alternative living, and more about making actual and sustainable change in how people get around. According to Luis A. Vivanco, the buzzword from city administrations is ‘live-ability’, which aims at limiting noise and pollution from congested roads and promoting alternatives that are ‘cost-effective and environmental-friendly’ (Vivanco 2013: xix). Middle- and upper-class professionals are at the high end of the priority list of city planners, and creating bicycle culture helps attract them. While this certainly makes the Critical Mass movement and its lobbying potential a one-issue type of protest, the riders might, however, see it differently. More likely they perceive themselves as part of a ‘nowtopia’, as described by Chris Carlsson (2008), where one’s labour is divided between bread jobs and meaningful activism. There is a clear distinction between labour and protest, between activist performing and performing work. Such attitude, which has kindled since the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, is, however, rejected by hardened Marxists, arguing that the effect of protest will be erased by the effect of work. However, Marxism has historically been unkind to such one-issue movements as Critical Mass, as well as to feminism, because these cultural rights issue are not based on class struggle. James O’Connor observed that ‘ecology and nature; the politics of the body, feminism, and the family; and urban movements and related topics are usually discussed in post-Marxist [rather than Marxist] terms’ (O’Connor 1988: 12). O’Connor argues that this should not be the case, since these issues are part of a capitalist production system and part of the overall condition that capi-

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talist production feeds on. Ecology, feminism or urban bicycle protest can thus be seen as activism that aims at disrupting the feeding mechanism, despite their post-Marxist tactics of being beyond class struggle. This is likely to be a feeling shared among Critical Mass riders; that class belonging is a nonissue. The dictum seems to be that ‘as long as you are riding a bicycle, you are one of us’, which excludes nobody expect those who cannot ride bicycles.

If this activist position of the bicycle rider is correct, then it also fixes the rider to a certain historical account of bicycle activism. For example, Zack Furness sees the Critical Mass rider as part of a continuation of the late-nineteenth century feminist bicycle riders’ movement and Dutch Situationists of the 1970s (Furness 2005). As these classical examples show, Critical Mass riders seek to obstruct the speed and progression of inner cities, which, according to the riders, have led to an inhospitable society and ecological devastation. Thus, the activism of a Critical Mass rider is best summed up as a movement that is hostile towards speed and acceleration of urban traffic, and it is here that the movement gains its revolutionary characteristics. As Paul Virilio writes in the first pages of *Speed and Politics* (1986: 3): ‘The revolution contingent attains its ideal form not in the place of production, but in the street, where for a moment it stops being a cog in the technical machine and itself becomes a motor (machine of attack), in other words a “producer of speed”’. It should be noted that the eco-machine is not the same as Virilio’s technical machine. In fact, the eco-machine is something opposite, which I will deal with next. For now it worth noting how the Critical Mass riders become, on the last Friday of each month, the ‘producer of speed’ and the motor that drives forward revolutionary changes. The bike activists bite into this concept and feed on the beliefs that by slowing down traffic, and thereby modernity and progress, the riders force a change in the socioeconomic structures that underpin capitalist society. However, if this accounts for the Marxist traits of the Critical Mass rides, then it still does not address the machine, the bicycle, on which the change is attained.

### **The Eco-Machine**

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The bicycle is the answer to all evils, as a bicycle activist tells anthropologist Luis Vivanco: ‘If I were running for office, here is what my campaign platform would be. Less crime. Better school performance. Reduced greenhouse gases.’

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Better looking communities. Friendlier neighborhoods. A more prosperous business district. And you know how I would be able to achieve these things? Bicycles.’ (Vivanco 2013: 6).

While we can detect a certain naivety, it is not uncommon for a one-issue movement to apply a single solution to a host of problems; a kind of utopian thinking, which touches ground with Romanticism and the ideal of a precapitalist world (Löwy, 2002: 122). On this account, the ecosocialists are struggling with classical Marxism. On the one hand, they reject capitalist, progressive consumer-driven production on the grounds that it exploits humans and nature, which leads to an uneven society, but, on the other, they must reject Marx’s and Engel’s ‘uncritical attitude towards those aspects of industrial civilization that have contributed to its destructive relationship to the environment’ (Löwy 2002: 123). One of the leading ecosocialists is Michael Löwy, and in his opinion this ideological clash leads to: ‘the great challenge for a renewal of Marxist thought at the threshold of the twenty-first century. It requires that Marxists undertake a deep critical revision of their traditional conception of “productive forces,” and that they break radically with the ideology of linear progress and with the technological and economic paradigm of modern industrial civilization’ (Löwy 2005: 16). Instead, we need to take a ‘detour’ through history in order to arrive at an ecosocialist future (Löwy 2002: 122). That said, the ‘greens’ and the ‘reds’ endure a difficult relationship, since as long as technical progress and growth does not exploit nature or humans, it will pass for the environmentalist. In the argumentation above from the bicycle activist, there should be no doubt about the seriousness of the utterance – the bicycle activists see their vehicles as the solution to all ills of society. Thus, in short, green values collide with Marxist perspectives, since green values are utopian, and maybe rightly so, but not correctly based on class struggle. As the founding member of the journal *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, James O’Connor, noticed in the late 1980s, ‘the struggles of “new social movements” over conditions of production are generally regarded in the self-defined post-Marxist universe as non-class issues or multi-class issues’ (O’Connor 1988: 37). This resembles the Critical Mass ethos of being a heterogeneous movement. For ecosocialists, the beyond-class struggle springs from the universal nature of environmental concerns; nature affects us all and this moves the struggle of reaching a global ecological balance beyond nation, identity and class. However, capital exports pollution to countries with

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low emission restrictions, which is in the global south, i.e. the countries with the lowest costs and with the lowest salaries (Löwy 2005: 22). Environmental problems 'are bigger problems from the standpoint of the poor, including the working poor, than for the salariat and the well-to-do' (O'Connor 1988: 37). O'Connor's point is that once ecosocialism accepts its class struggle perspective, green value cannot be classless or beyond class concepts: the 'issues pertaining to production conditions are class issues, even though they are also *more* than class issues' (O'Connor 1988: 37). Ecosocialism is precisely about class and exploitation – who gets polluted, who can afford to pollute and who are too poor to refuse the pollution of others.

The theoretical foundation of ecosocialism is located in drawing attention to the *conditions* of production, as well as the capitalist production in itself. For the ecological Marxist, the point of departure is the condition in which capitalist production takes place. In other words, the condition of capitalism extracts natural resource and human labour, and relies on transportation and communication. The key issue is: 'The contradiction between capitalist production relations and productive forces and conditions of production. Neither human laborpower nor external nature nor infrastructures including their space/time dimensions are produced capitalistically, although capital treats these conditions of production as if they are commodities or commodity capital' (O'Connor 1988a: 23). The fact that labour power and nature are not produced capitalistically, but treated as if they were so by capitalism, means that societies, communities or the masses must intervene in order to regulate capital, the condition of production. The ecosocialist must actively intervene in the dispute between capital and nature. Left on its own, capital would self-destruct in a cataclysm of irreversible progress or, as O'Connor (1988: 25) states, 'by impairing or destroying rather than reproducing its own conditions'. The condition of capitalist production is defined in terms of both its social and material dimensions, placing it outside commodities and capitalist consumption. Technical progress and economic growth is not the evil here, and this opens up for a pragmatic view of the machine in ecosocialism. It is in this regard that I want to look at the bicycle as an ecomachine that is beyond the extraction of the worker's blood, sweat and tyres.

Ecosocialism has a progressive view on machines and technology. It rejects the relativism of living species, that all species are equal, which is found in circles termed 'extreme', 'fundamentalist' or 'deep-ecology' (Löwy, 2005: 17).

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It seeks to move away from an ascetic Marxism, which, as Sean Sayers (2011: 164) notes, relies on a romantic relationship with nature. In the ecosocialist's opinion, technology, and thereby the machine, should help restore the environment. These machines: 'may or may not be functional for capital as a whole, individual capitals, in the short-or-long-run. The results would depend on other crisis prevention and resolution measures, their exact conjuncture, and the way in which they articulate with the crisis of nature broadly defined' (O'Connor 1988: 32). Whether or not this technology can serve capitalism is the tricky question that the ecosocialist must face, which resembles Marx's own concerns at the machine and its worker.

In *Grundrisse*, we find Marx's frequently quoted reflection on the machine, where he argues that the machine 'is itself the virtuoso, with a soul of its own [and] the worker's activity [when working at the machine] reduced to a mere abstraction of activity' (Marx 1971: 133). The machine accumulates capital through the negation of necessary human labour, but also forces a human to adjust to its speed; it forces man to become machine. The tool, on the other hand, is the appendix of man, as it is handheld and without a speed of its own; the activity of the worker animates the tool, which depends on the 'dexterity' of the worker's action (Marx 1971: 133). In other words, the tool is soulless and lacks the ability to dictate the speed of its user. We should not see Marx's injection of soul into the machine as a dystopian prediction of the world domination of the machine, but rather as an image of how we should interact with the machine (Kemple 1995: 27). As in ecosocialism, the bike activist's relationship with eco-machines is dual. On the one hand, the machines, and in particular cars, are seen as the cause of all problems, but on the other, machines might help clean the environment. If the eco-machine is reconsidered as a tool, though, it can be useful in eco-restoration, liberating humankind from enslavement. I will argue that the bicycles in the Critical Mass films are within the tool paradigm, which is supported by Ivan Illich's conceptualization where the bicycle is seen as a tool of conviviality, as an extension of man rather than man as a virtuoso machine (see Illich 1973). However, while the tools liberate the worker and the machine fixes capital to the machine (Marx 1971: 138), the bicycle has historically been viewed as a tool that affords liberty and independence as escape from social structures.

One way of detecting the tool connection, the leisure paradigm or 'free rider' perspective is to look at the context of the Critical Mass movement,

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which can be seen as the culmination of the popularity of the mountain bike. Every bicycle boom has its own specific context, where several ‘events’ and inventions concur (Vivanco 2013: 40–41), and in the Critical Mass movement one of these was the mass production of mountain bikes, which popularized the ability to go ‘off road’ in the pursuit of leisure (Rosen 2002: 3; Herlihy 2004: 9).<sup>1</sup> Developed in the early 1970s by hippies, the mountain bike broke with the concept of the ‘Rover safety bicycle’, the model that had been quintessential in making bicycles mainstream during the boom of the 1890s. Where the safety bicycle took the machine away from the ethnic- and class-segregated wheelmen clubs and into the hands of, foremost, women, and later workers, the mountain bike removed the ordinariness of bicycling and infused it with thrills, excitement and danger, the complete opposite of safety – just as on the highwheeler a century earlier, the rider ‘demonstrated qualities of control and mastery over one’s body and machine, endowing the rider with social distinction as progressive and modern’ (Vivanco 2013: 40). Mountain bikers, according to Paul Rosen, ‘situate themselves ... within the often-contradictory discourse of new environmental social movement and “wildness” ... on the one hand and with urban land and transportation on the other’ (Rosen 2002: 148). It is this contradiction that fits the concept of the eco-machine; eco-friendly, but without the negative productivism associated with classical Marxism.

The point is that when the bicycle switches from being conceptualized as a machine of transportation to being associated with wilderness, nature and escapism, the identity of the rider changes accordingly. Thus, Critical Mass riders are best categorized as ‘free-riders’ using the bicycle as a tool for activism. However, when these free-riders become a collective they reach eco-machine proportions. It is only here that they become producers of bicycle speed.

### **The Critical Mass Films**

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There are numerous moving images that can be attached to Critical Mass, and many of them bear a similarity to the early leftist filmmaking of the 1920s and 1930s, in which screened ‘protest and marches’ were the main theme (Thompson and Bordwell 2010: 281). That said, the framework presented here does not limit itself to include only those films that have ‘documentary value’, i.e. such films that feature talking heads or have a certain length of narration,

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since this would exclude a whole set of moving images of Critical Mass activism, which equally are meant to capture the rides, but without the established form of documentary cinema. Rather than focusing on a few established documentaries, this section hopes to indicate the diversity of moving images available; all of which aim at capturing the uniqueness of Critical Mass both in form and content.

Firstly, the space in which these films take place has to be addressed. It has been reported that Critical Mass events have been held in more than three hundred cities around the world (Madden 2003), but there are no exact figures for the spread of mass bicycle rides. What is clear, though, is that its claim to be a global phenomenon is somewhat suspicious, since it is chiefly post-industrial Western cities that attract the huge numbers of riders. Listing cities where major Critical Mass rides (more than one thousand riders) have taken place, Susan Blickstein and Susan Hanson write ‘that one hundred cities globally currently have or have had Critical Mass rides, including Chicago, New York, Seattle, Tucson, Sydney, Paris, London, Barcelona, Portland (Oregon), Johannesburg, Dublin, Zurich, Tokyo, Taipei and Hobart (Tasmania)’ (Blickstein and Hanson 2001: 352). Critical Mass rides have also been organized in other cities, like Mumbai, Cairo and Rio de Janeiro, but on a more modest scale. For example, in Cairo, no more than fifty bicyclists would participate, and events would be attached to organizations or clubs, such as the society of cardiologists or the Dutch embassy in Cairo. Evident from Blickstein and Hanson’s list is that bicycle cities, such as Amsterdam or Copenhagen, are not typical Critical Mass sites,<sup>2</sup> which suggests that the activism of Critical Mass works best in car-dominated societies where bicycling is seen as abnormal and traffic is regulated for motorized vehicles.<sup>3</sup> By default in city narratives, the films engage with urban features like the architecture and historicism of each particular city, such as famous monuments, squares and bridges, each signifying where the event takes place. As one U.S. Critical Mass rider says, ‘[Critical Mass] is local but it is a different kind of local. It is everywhere, *locally*’ (Culley 2002: 13). The city iconography is central to this everywhere-ness of the films.

The person filming can be a professional filmmaker or an ordinary participant of the ride. Where the former seeks to describe and contextualize Critical Mass, the latter aims to give an inside view of an actual ride or several rides. The films can also be from the point of view of a spectator of the ride, a news media source or an individual blogger, for whom the moving images

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function as evidence in a media discourse; they could also be just tourist shots of a particular city. The distribution of the moving images varies, just as the people shooting the event, but chiefly the films are spread through digital video-sharing channels or through designated video blogs, as well as through more specialized bicycle film festivals, which have screened well-known documentaries on Critical Mass. Self-retail of DVDs is also an option used to reach audiences. In particular, professional filmmakers are using this channel of distribution, since it maintains a source of formal income for the filmmaker while also making contact with specific viewers. Ted White, for example, has made two films, *The Return of the Scorcher* and *We Are Traffic!* (1999), claimed to be the official films of the movement, which he sells through his website.

This leads us to the content of the films, which can be themed from time to time, such as Halloween rides, nude rides or Earth Day rides. The majority of films, though, are just moving images of bicyclists riding through cities. Where a film attains more 'value' than others, for example by being screened at a film festival or being released through commercial channels, it is likely be on a specific topic, such as in the case of *Still We Ride* (Andrew Lynn, Elizabeth Press, Chris Ryan 2004). The film describes for the New York Police Department's clampdown on bicyclists in the days before a Republican convention, leading to the illegal mass arrest of Critical Mass riders and the impoundment of their bicycles. In *Still We Ride*, infringement of civil liberties, abuse of power, police manufactured evidence, surveillance and mass media blindness are at the core of the film's message of injustice towards not only bicyclists in general but Critical Mass in particular.

While Ted White's two films and *Still We Ride* are exceptions, the vast majority of the films are anonymously authored films posted online. In these films the story is mostly linear – the bicyclists riding from point A to point B, although it might not be explicit where A and B are located. There can be stories embedded in the narrative, such as focusing on one rider through the ride, an accident happening en route or a violation against minority rights. Many films will adhere to a narrative structure, starting with a departure point where riders gather, then following the ride through edited cuts, but ending with riders reaching their intended destination. Achieving the ride's goal can be emphasized through a celebration, with every bicyclist lifting their means of transport in the air in triumph, or through an informal dispersal of the riders. However, unedited stories are also posted, where we as spectators see only riders pass-

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**Figure 9.1.** Critical Mass Houston, United States. From YouTube, ‘Houston Critical Mass – July 2013’, uploaded by Abrahán Garza.

ing a static camera, thus not indicating a beginning and an end of the ride, but emphasizing the number of riders.

This technique underscores the size of the particular event – the more riders, the longer the film, and the longer the film, the greater the spectator’s impression of the event. Different films connote different aspects of bicycle activism, but equal for them all, the more people joining, the more velocity of the movement. Critical Mass riders, in such movements, or moments, become the proletarians, who in the words of Marx and Engels, ‘have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win’. Just as Sergei Eisenstein’s film *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) travelled the world physically in various editions and cuts, these moving images of Critical Mass rides has a chance to form mass movement of united bicyclists.

This leaves us with the style of filmmaking, in other words, the camera, editing and sound. Again, the variation is huge. The camera can be immobile, as with static tripod shooting as noted above. Other films use fixed cameras, but, rather than being at the roadside, these are fixed to the bicycle, forming long tracking shots of the ride.

Fixing the camera either onto the bicycle or the rider, e.g. onto the helmet, centres the narrative around one particular individual, thus framing the ride within this rider’s realm, capturing other co-activist riders – but not the film-



**Figure 9.2.** Critical Mass Hamburg, Germany. From YouTube, 'critical mass hamburg 24.06.2011', uploaded by Martin John.

ing the self (the 'selfie'). In films where the camera is handheld and therefore allows for images of the self, a more holistic event is created, as the camera can spin 360 degrees or change hands from one rider to another, creating multiple centres. While one-camera films are in the majority, more elaborate multi-camera films are available as well. In these, several riders film the event, or two cameras are fixed to one particular bicycle, e.g. one camera shooting backwards, the other forwards, and the footage is then edited into a single film.

In these films, the editing is linear and done with attempts of creating continuity in the films; however, when the editing is more loosely built, we get jump cuts, fast rhythmic editing or montage sequences, or even still images that almost deny the movement of the riders. In more elaborated film, the image has been colour toned or is in black and white. Lastly, the sound varies as well, but the sound, or the soundtrack, is also likely to be a key element dictating the filmmaking style, such as camera, editing and theme. This is because often prefabricated music is played with the moving images, so that the film, and thereby the ride, is cut according to the length of the piece of music, which can be from various genres. Different from traditional non-diegetic musical composition intended to mirror the emotions on screen, the music in these films is more in the direction of general popular taste, or, in other words,

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**Figure 9.3.** Critical Mass Cluj-Napoca (Kolozsvár), Romania. From Vimeo, 'Critical Mass March 2013 Cluj-Napoca/Kolozsvár', uploaded by Torok Tihamer.

the filmmakers' favourite tracks. That said, no less than a musical score of an epic science fiction film, the soundtrack is meant to create an affinity with the audience. When prefab music is not used, the soundtrack consists of camcorder sounds, mixing bicycle sounds with conversations and surrounding street sounds, if the films do not have a voiceover narrative. A signature of Critical Mass rides is, though, the sound of bicycle bells and whistles, creating a cacophony of noise that is meant to attract the city dwellers' attention.

If this sketchy outline of the films merely hints at the diversity presence, then it is wholly deliberate, because whether or not these films are deliberate activist films, they represent activism by screening Critical Mass events. I hold that since they screen Critical Mass events, they are per definition activist text. However, they are also marked by form and viewing context, which makes them closer to cinema of attraction than to traditional narrative cinema. In other words, they have what Joost Broeren (2009: 159–60) terms 'physical display'; that is films that centre on the display of physicality – a stunt, a trick or, in this case, a Critical Mass ride. My aim is not to 'read' these films as activist texts or to create an hierarchy among the texts according to which they are more or less activist, but to examine the intention of the filmmakers – the producers of the moving images. Already we have seen that the rider takes the position of the activist using the bicycle; thus, at leisure speed, the

rider slows the flow of traffic, highlighting a more sustainable alternative to city transportation. But if there is a causal link between the activism of the rider and the bicycle as means of leisure, can there be the same link between the films portraying activism and the audiences who view the films? To answer this question, we will need to look at authorial intent, as well as the audience's reaction, because intention does not matter, if the film leaves the audience indifferent.

### **Filmmaker's Intent and Viewing Practice**

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The art historian EH Gombrich has argued for a constructivist approach when interpreting artwork, i.e. that the intention of the artist should guide the reading of the work (Gaut 2010: 166). Talking about appreciating artworks in a museum, he writes:

*For most of the paintings and statues which are now lined up along the walls of our museums and galleries were not meant to be displayed as Art. They were made for a definite occasion and a definite purpose which were in the artist's mind when he made it. Those ideas, on the other hand, that we outsiders usually worry about, ideas about beauty and expression, are rarely mentioned by the artists. (Gombrich 2006: 28)*

First we notice the displacement of the artwork, which suggests that considering artwork out of its 'rightful' context should prompt us to read into the piece the ideas and concepts that the artist intended for it. In pronouncing 'the death of the author', Roland Barthes would of course reject such authorial intention in a text, but intent in an artwork resembles intent in activist texts, i.e. its meaning is to change the perception of the viewer. Secondly, and following from the first assertion, artists intend for expression in their work, an expression that we as viewers 'must' consider when interpreting the artwork. Likewise, viewing the Critical Mass films, we 'must' consider the intention of the filmmaker and the context in which they were meant to be screen. Once the intention of a Critical Mass film has been examined, it becomes easier to decide whether the activism presented in the films is passed on to the viewers.

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The concept of activism in the moving images of bicycles is centred on advocating minority rights. In this sense bicycle activism is similar to other forms of minorities in pursuit of political recognition, such as gay rights or institutionalized racism. Representation of these minorities through moving images has been vital for their recognition, socially as well as politically. In the post-Marxist critique, the right to political recognition (often gained through media representation) is accepted without alternation of the apparatus that presents the message. Critical Mass, whether at an actual rally or in a representation of that rally on screen, is about drawing attention to the violation of a bicycling minority. However, the bicycle activist also strongly believes that the act of riding a bicycle produces more utilitarian happiness and pleasure, not only through individual happiness but also through sustainable living and gentrification of city neighbourhoods (Vivanco 2013: xix). There are strong sentiments that bicycle politics will increase people's happiness. More pleasure and less pain comes from riding a bicycle, which is what Critical Mass rides advocate when celebrating bicycling; but is that the same for the films? If the Critical Mass filmmaker 'passes on' the pleasure of the bicycle through filmmaking, the intention is to produce pleasure and reduce pain.<sup>4</sup>

In Critical Mass films, rarely do we actually know who the 'producer' is, and often the film seems to have no obvious 'message' – it is just bicyclists riding by the camera. And finally, who is the intended receiver of the film's activist message – friends from the rally, other activists, city commuters or ardent motorists? Even if the intentionalism of the filmmaker is explicitly bicycle activism ('biketivism') and the message of the film is that bicycling is good for a sustainable future, there is no guarantee that the viewer will act on the message. Since the viewing practices of Critical Mass films take place online, there is no direct communication between audiences. This might be resolved through bicycle film festivals, which cater specifically to this community and already committed audiences. But, unless you are part of the images there is no inherent communitarian 'sharedness' pervading from screen to the viewer.

This is largely because of the limitations of the Internet and online viewing. The Internet 'has colonized and transformed everything in its path' (McChesney 2013: 3) to a degree where media content industries form an oligopoly of a few conglomerate companies. In this way the Internet is similar to mainstream Hollywood, which also feeds on the illusion of free market economics (Miller 2005: 182–93). Media empires acquire market shares that

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impede plurality and the views of minorities, since corporate business by definition would rather play safe than experiment in innovation. A key idea associated with the Internet – that everyone can be both producer and consumer, or the ‘prosumer’, and often both at the same time, in a marketplace where supply and demand of the moving image are perfectly balanced – conceals the economics that also limit the system (Zimmermann 2000: xv). The word ‘prosumer’ makes Toby Miller see red, rejecting it as a new phenomenology of labour. ‘It is’, writes Miller (2009: 435), ‘reoccupying and resignifying the space of corporate-driven divisions of labor in ways that cyberbarians have simply ignored’. But how does this corporate enterprise work in practice with Critical Mass films on the Internet?

Danny Birchall lists four distinct features of online documentaries (Birchall 2008: 278–83), and all four features are evident in the Critical Mass films online: Firstly, Birchall notes the way the Internet connects people with common interests across geographical borders, which is applicable to Critical Mass riders around the world, who can assess each other’s films and form communities in a way that was previously impossible due to physical distances. This is one of the reasons why Critical Mass has had the impact it has, being near global in its reach. However, the anonymity of the Internet and/or the remoteness that it thrives on remain a barrier between audiences. This is what the bicycle film festival avoids: actually manifesting a sharedness among viewers. Secondly, the Internet is ideal for political campaigning with moving images; films ‘that seek to change people’s mind or reinforce a viewpoint’ (Birchall 2008: 278). In Birchall’s account, there is little emphasis on changing viewers more broadly according to Marxist principles; rather, the argument reaches back at analogue film distribution and reaching the viewers physically at cine-clubs and provincial screens. This political and campaigning feature of online moving images shares similarities with PR agency strategies and corporate branding. Thus, the Critical Mass films add to the cine-scape of political campaigning by portraying activists on bicycles. We can safely claim that Critical Mass films are part of a larger campaign of promoting urban bicyclism.

Thirdly, Birchall identifies ‘dirty reality’ as a practice in online documentaries, a category where shocking images that were usually embedded within a moral or political context are now posted online as ‘the unedited reality’. On the Internet, this posting of raw violence can also be observed within Critical

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Mass films. The most popular clips, i.e. those which are viewed most, are in fact of Critical Mass rides where accidents occur during the filming, such as a car ramming through a Critical Mass ride or a policeman knocking down Critical Mass riders. These collisions, or dromological accidents, following Paul Virilio, with other vehicles or state authorities are also visual evidence used in court cases. Critical Mass' political campaign of making visual evidence is central to progressively push for a more humane, common bicycle culture. Finally, Birchall's list ends with the segment of 'the lives of others', where self-posting, or self-publishing, is open for others to see. As mentioned, the selfie is a standard image in the Critical Mass film, where the filmmaking self is recorded as a Critical Mass activist. Posting yourself for others to see is explicitly the intention of the filmmaker, arguing that 'I am doing it, and so should you (the viewer)'.

Whether audiences do this or not is the object of Alexandra Juhasz' examination of queer culture online (Juhasz 2008: 299–312). What she discovers is that although valuable material is accessed through online video site, the viewing practice fails to create communities of activism. Documentaries begin in the world and end in the room, and it is the latter that Juhasz is concerned with. Where the moving images explode in numbers online, they implode in other features, namely theoretical, political and historical awareness and discussion (Juhasz 2008: 310). This creates a contradiction: on the one hand, we can detect how the online Critical Mass film reaches its limits in promoting its campaign message – it simply leaves viewers removed from the specificity and motivating clarity of cause and community. However, on the other hand, and more in line with Birchall's account, Critical Mass films are intrinsic to the Critical Mass movement, which would not have grown so extensively had it not been for its digital moving images. Critical Mass would have remained local, and not 'local everywhere'. A big obstruction to creating awareness and discussion is the corporate context of the Internet, which, according to Juhasz, limits complexity and discourse. In turn, we are back at the need to apply a political economy in analysing moving images online: 'The ways capitalism works and does not work determine the role of the Internet might play in society. The profit motive, commercialism, public relations, marketing, and advertising – all defining features of contemporary corporate capitalism – are foundational to any assessment of how the Internet has developed and is likely to develop' (McChesney 2013: 13).

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The Internet as a capitalist system has shaped and formed its own practice of idealism and activism, which continuously manages to allow access while not threatening the economy that underpins the system. In other words, the intention of the online filmmaker is proving to be both difficult and easy to understand. It is easy to comprehend as a campaigning tool that has the ability to reach huge audiences, but it is more difficult to fathom the consequences of the ephemeral nature of the viewing practice, which leaves the viewer without the opportunity for discussion and without an analogue community.

## Conclusion

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In the introduction to this chapter, the question was asked whether the activism portrayed is transferred to the film and the viewer of the film. The argument present has been that, since we can classify Critical Mass events as containing Marxist activism, they become the motor of revolution; the films, which are associated with the movement, should therefore also be Marxist activist films. However, this was not the case. It seems that once the activism onscreen goes online, it can so easily evaporate in the process. Furthermore, there is the additional problem of the free-rider perspective in Critical Mass; that the bicycle is closely associated with rebel culture and daringness, which connects Critical Mass to joy riding. In this perspective, individuality is again infused into the bicycle, leaving the collective activist body in its wake. The free-rider and escapist bicyclist question the formation of ecosocialism as being based on class struggle. If the free-wheeling mountain bike rider becomes associated with the 'free rider', he defies the collective eco-machine. This pushes the discussion into the hands of the post-Marxists. In the words of James O'Connor:

*[P]ost-Marxism, influenced by the 'free rider problem' and problems of 'rational choice' and 'social choice' (all problems which presuppose bourgeois individualism), states or implies that struggles over production conditions are different than traditional wage, hours, and working conditions struggles because conditions of production are to a large degree 'commons,' clean air being an obvious example, urban space and educational facilities being somewhat less obvious ones. (O'Connor 1988: 36)*

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In the same way we can identify the online film viewing within ‘bourgeois individualism’, as it hides its corporate character while offering consumer ‘choice’, in that everything is available. It is the ability of the Critical Mass ride to be both an individual tool for activism and a collective eco-machine that can stop progressive productivism, which is also at the heart of the activist filming contradiction – namely, the contradiction between the collective onscreen with the loneliness of watching from home.

## Notes

1. In 1990 in Britain, for example, over half of all bicycles sold were mountain bikes (Rosen 2002: 133).
2. The bicycle culture is everyday-like in these cities, i.e. it is simply faster than getting around by car or public transport. Well over half of the trips made within these cities are made by bicycles.
3. This explains why post-Communist cities, such as Yekaterinburg, Budapest and Riga, feature as Critical Mass cities. Communism was, just like Western societies, marked by a drive for automobility. For example, the highest status symbol throughout the Eastern Bloc was to own a car.
4. I deliberately use the words pleasure over pain, as they are similar to the way utilitarians would argue. An action is morally correct if it produces more pleasure and less pain. This has its specific problems, which were highlighted by Bernard Williams (1973). Moral philosopher Peter Singer (2005) rejected Williams’ argument, saying that we can still reach a morally right decision that is ethical and beyond intuition.

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