

Modo Aesthetico

Investigating Gender and Sensory Experiences in Cycling

Claire Pelgrims, *claire.pelgrims@ulb.be*

Cycling & Society Symposium '*Negotiating limits: finding, creating and renegotiating space for cycling*', 3-4 September 2025

Two research projects

PDR FNRS 2021-2025

- Research team with N. Lapeyroux and S. Bourcier @ULB
- Brussels case study



MSCA-IF 2022-2023

- Individual fellowship @LVMT
- Grenoble, Lausanne, Montreuil & Strasbourg



Introduction
1. Modo aesthetico

- Fundamental dimension of mobility
- Methodological challenge
- Opportunity to deconstruct social inequalities

Dimension linking (1) sensory, embodied and situated experience, and (2) desires and emotional, passionate investments in objects and practices.



Methods
2. Aesthetic approach

At the body scale

- In-depth interview of informants, privileged witnesses of cyclists' equipment habits
- Mobile video-ethnography of gendered equipment choices and positioning on bicycles

- Lausanne : 10 interviews
- Grenoble : 6 interviews
- Montreuil : 5 interviews
- Strasbourg : 5+ interviews
- 1341 cyclists

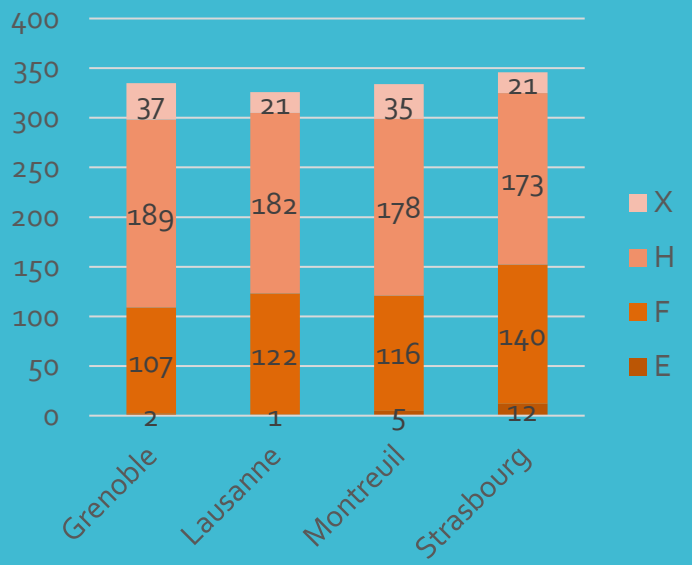
+ Brussels : 14 interviews
+ 1088 cyclists in Brussels (throughout the seasons)

Why observing objects rather than interviewing cyclists?
micro-practices linked to equipment rarely at the heart of a reflexive effort (automatism, unconscious gestures) + agency of objects (Monjaret 2014)

Mobile video-ethnography?

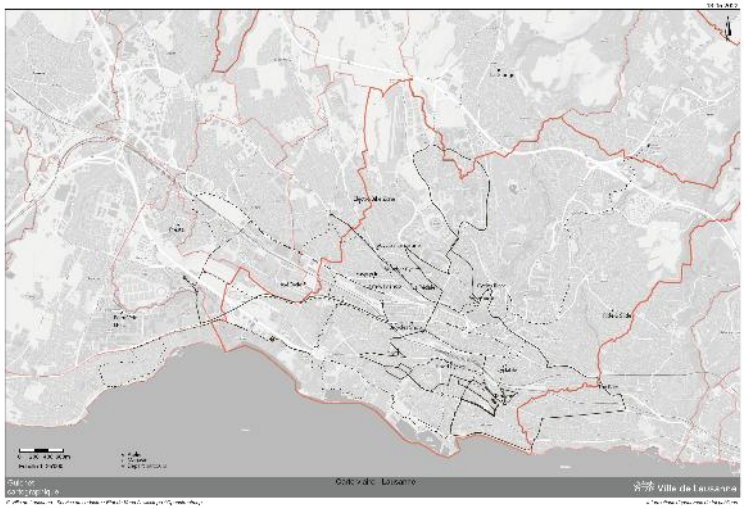
- Sociology of objects: (Houdart and Thiery 2011) letting the objects speak for themselves, what they say in terms of values, their place in mobility performance, etc.
- Mobile methods: studying practices 'in action', i.e. at the moment they occur, and understanding what cannot be understood in more static contexts (Brown & Spinney 2010)
- Visual methods: Pictures and video as ethnographic data (Smith & Dunkley 2021)
  - RESEARCHER / PARTICIPANTS RELATIONS participatory tool
  - OBJECT to better capture embodied and sensory dimension of recorded mobility practices
  - ANALYSIS to enable a detailed analysis of familiar, everyday practices by 'defamiliarising' them through multiple viewings
    - /!\ indicial picture (no meaning)

SENCyclo Situated statistics



- Video recordings of the itineraries (May 2022 – March 2023)
- Inductive analysis of blurred screenshot of 1341 cyclists
  - Selection of equipment-indicators < qualitative analysis
- Counting and "situated" statistical analysis by cities and presumed gender
  - (Calvignac, Canu and Cochoy 2021)
  - Strategic essentialism





Methods
2. Aesthetic approach

At the infrastructure scale

- Biographical and ride-along interviews with 13 Parisian daily cyclists



Ride-along interviews?

To testify *modo aesthetico* (Genard 2020) through **thick description** (Geertz 1973) of their intermeshed spatial practices, experiences and interpretations *in situ*:

- **dis|pleasures**,
- **spatial practices** (route choices, accessibility, awareness and engagement qualities)
- and **local social landscape** (safety, complex web of connections between people).

✓ A complex dispositif: on-board camera with cavalier mic (researcher), intercom system enabling audio recording
+ auto-ethnography → thick description





- Video recordings
- Thick descriptions

Results
3. Gender performance and equipment trajectories

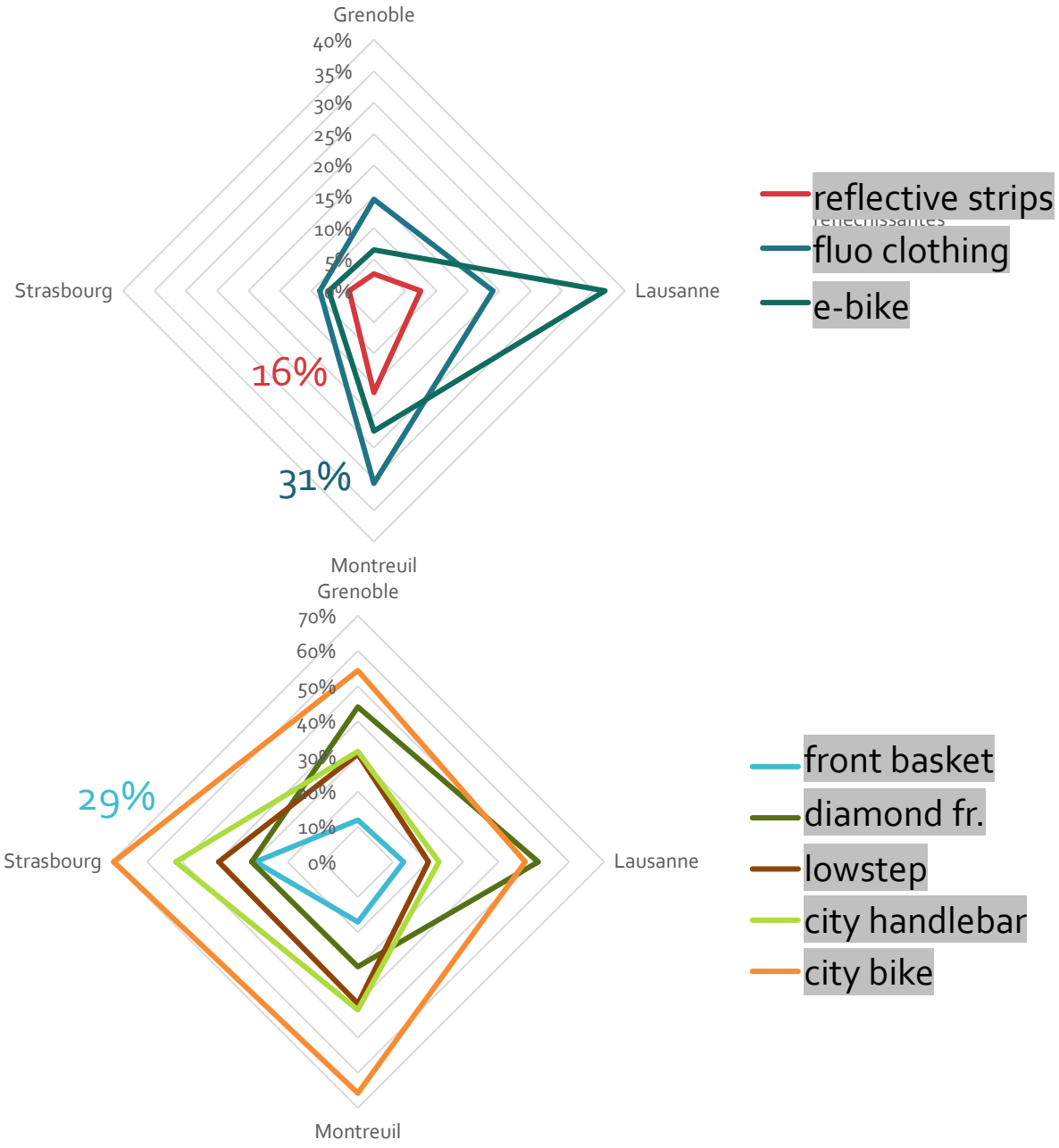
- Gender as a social construct (Bonham et al 2015).
- Gender performance, detached from the body
- Gender de|construction processes
- ➢ Femininity/masculinity are continually attached to and detached from vehicles, practices and infrastructures.

Bonham, Bacchi and Wanner. 2015. « Gender and cycling: gendering cycling subjects and forming bikes, practices and spaces as gendered objects ». In *Cycling Futures*, 179-202. Adelaide: University of Adelaide Press.

Cresswell and Uteng, eds. *Gendered Mobilities*. Routledge, 2008.



I. Objects inscribed in local material culture



- Equipment choices linked to the particularities of the context
- Scenes where the actors interact

Cramer's V indicator

a measure of association between two variables

n=1036

Calculation

- Cramer's V is calculated using the chi-squared statistic (χ^2) from a contingency table. The formula is:

$$\mathbf{V} = \sqrt{\frac{\chi^2}{N(k-1)}}$$

where:

- χ^2 is the chi-squared statistic.
- N is the total number of observations.
- k-1 is the freedom degree (number of columns-1).

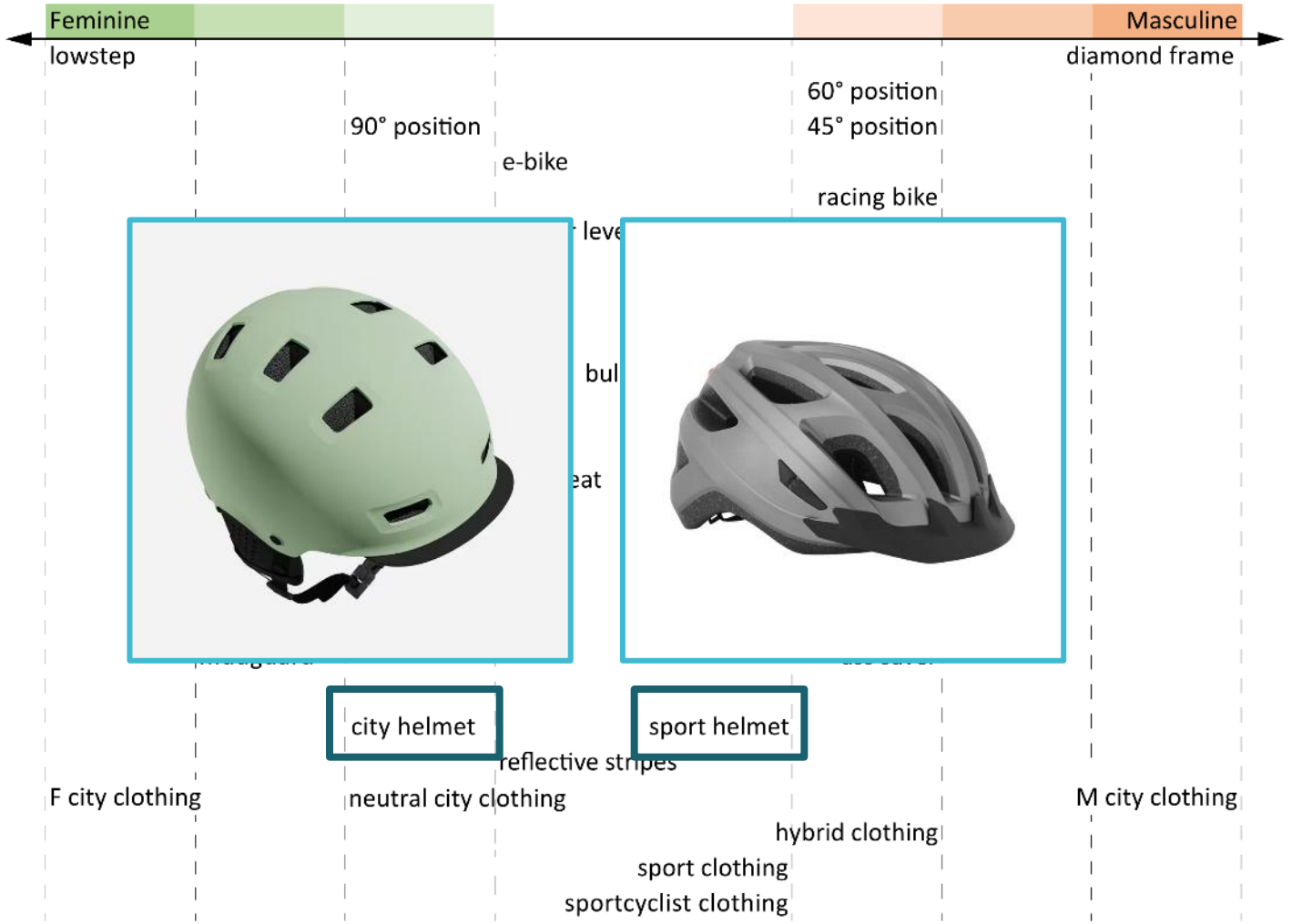
Interpretation

0 to 0.1	No association between the variables
0.1 to 0.2	Weak association
0.2 to 0.3	Moderate association
>0.3	Strong association
1	Perfect association

II. Equipment choices and positioning that remain predominantly gendered

Gender performance corresponding to the « accentuated feminity »

Gender performance corresponding to the male sportive cyclist



Cramer's V, n= 1207

Results
4. Aesthetic relations between gendered bodies, bicycles and infrastructure

Deconstructing 'vulnerability'

- Considering the causes of vulnerability and the levers for its deconstruction
  - Gender and family roles
  - The reworking of values through cycling practices
  - The pleasures associated with infrastructure



I. The pleasures associated with infrastructure



Pleasures derived from the playful nature of speed

Pleasures arising from the engagement qualities with the urban environment

(1) Primary importance of environment with less tension between road users.

- "**where there's less of a mental burden on the tension you have to lend to what's around you.**"

(2) The affective resonance with (iconic) open spaces.

- "Crossing the **Austerlitz bridge. So it's very nice and all that.**" "Yeah, **that's THE thing I miss about going to** [work1] **and not coming here anymore**. Yup. Not seeing the Seine anymore."

(3) Sensory and affective knowledge of the urban environment

- "**knowing the place, I was actually more attentive [...].** And, indeed, I think, it does help. **It's part of the fact that I was happy to go there by bike yesterday**. I knew that I was going to pass by some nice places, that I knew and that I was going to be able to see how Paris was going."

5. Methodological Challenges

Technical issues regarding recording equipment

- Framing / Sound recording
- Filming at night and when it rains
- Constraint of battery life
- Cost of purchase and devices complementarity

Ethical issues regarding the right to privacy

- Collection / Processing of recording from public spaces
- Communication of observations from the video

Time-consuming image processing and encoding (large file sizes)

- Difficulty finding the right IT software to encode images
- Iterative definition of visual indicators
  - Consistency of encoding if working in a team
  - ➢ Development of automated recognition software?





Methodological challenges

Importance of aesthetical experience

The dynamic of identity construction around cycling objects



Bonham, Bacchi and Wanner. 2015. « Gender and cycling: gendering cycling subjects and forming bikes, practices and spaces as gendered objects ». In *Cycling Futures*, 179-202. Adelaide: University of Adelaide Press.

Calvignac, Cédric, et al. 2021. *L'ordinaire Des Mobilités Douces. Un Siècle de Logistique Piétonne et Cycliste à Toulouse*. Toulouse: PUMidi.

Cresswell, Tim, and Tanu Priya **Uteng**, eds. 2008. *Gendered Mobilities*. Aldershot: Routledge.

Genard, Jean-Louis. 2020, "Une Sociologie des émotions 'Modo Aesthetico'?". *Raisons pratiques*, EHESS, 169-203.

Geertz, Clifford. 1973. The Interpretation of cultures; selected essays. Basic Books.

Ravensbergen, Léa, et al. 2020. 'Vélomobilities of Care in a Low-Cycling City'. *Transportation Research A* 134 (April):336–47.

Scott, Nicholas A. 2020. *Assembling Moral Mobilities*. Lincoln: Uni. of Nebraska Press.

Spinney, Justin. 2020. *Understanding urban cycling: exploring the relationship between mobility, sustainability and capital*. New York: Routledge.

Claire Pelgrims, *claire.pelgrims@ulb.be*
F.R.S. Fnrs Research Associate @ULB
Marie Skłodowska-Curie postdoctoral research alumna