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Bicycle Machines

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> "If you let it go too far it would be the end of everything. You would have bicycles wanting votes and they would get seats on the County Council and make the roads far worse than they are for their own ulterior motivation. But against that and on the other hand, a good bicycle is a great companion, there is a great charm about it." (Flann O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*)

"Is it about a bicycle?" This is the central question of the two policemen in Flann O'Brien's novel *The Third Policeman*. In this novel the representatives of the state apparatus mainly have to deal with bicycles, with the theft of bicycles or of bicycle bells, air pumps, dynamos and lights. Horns, rims, saddles, racing pedals, three-speed gearshifts, cycle clips and similar extras are the components of a refined and extensive discourse, from which there is no escape. Police virtuosity even extends all the way to stealing bicycles themselves, in order to solve the crime. They are all the more annoyed, when the answer to the question is no.

If it *is* about a bicycle, however, the matter comes into full bloom. At first the bicycle appears to be quite a simple technical machine. With some interest and some insights into the science of

mechanics, a person could easily grasp how it works. In his novel, however, written in 1940 and published in 1967, Flann O'Brien sketches an overwhelmingly fluid relationship between the bicycle and the human being. In the parish of the *Third Policeman* atomic theory is at work, a strange theory that deals with the mutual exchange, the flowing of atoms, the particles of matter; and this means not only the flowing *within* precisely delimited bodies and identities, but rather the unbounded flow *between* bodies that touch or come close to one another, that merge into one another in neighboring zones. This flowing is found, for instance, between the feet of a walker and the open road, between the horse and its rider, between the smith's hammer and an iron bar. Conjunctions, connections, couplings, transitions, concatenations.

The astonishing point of this elaborate invention: the more time a person spends on their bicycle, the more their personality mingles with the personality of the bicycle. This has specific consequences, especially for the modes of movement and the phenomena accompanying them: humans who always move along walls, walk as continuously as possible, never sit down, and prop themselves up with their arms and lean against a wall when they stop, completely shifting their weight to the tip of an elbow or propping themselves up with one foot on the curb. In the worst case, if they move too slowly or stop in the middle of the street, they fall face forward and have to be helped up or pushed along. Consequently, in *The Third Policeman* there are more or less precise calculations in relation to the question of to which percent this composite and moving assemblage, this machine, is now a bicycle and to which percent it is a human being – this percentage calculation is naturally worst for the postman. It appears, however, that the guardians of law and order charged with this matter never quite get their task under control, never illuminate the whole picture, are never able to bring

the flowing machinery entirely into the comprehensive spotlight of administration; and indeed there are bicycles with a high human portion, which obviously develop emotionality and sexuality, and occasionally food inexplicably disappears when they are near.

In Claude Faraldo's film *Themroc* (1972), orgiastically fleeing in all directions, there is a small scene, in which the machine human/bicycle falls over for a completely different reason: not because its human portion is vanishing, but because a complementary social component that it depends on is withdrawn. Social dependency and subjection permeate the first part of the film, which starts with a representation of the stereotype of a fordist working day. Even life outside work, getting ready to go to work every morning and the way to work, correspond to the logic of the conveyor belt: the factory, the job, the way there are divided up into small portions in a time grid and standardized. Even before breakfast the recurrent perspective of the kitchen clock, both a technical and a social machine, follows the striated time of the factory. Deviance only develops in the absolute interior of the isolated private imagination, such as the desire for his young sister, with whom the main figure Themroc, played by Michel Piccoli, still lives in their mother's small flat.

In the second scene the protagonist turns into the street with his bicycle from the back courtyard of his dilapidated housing estate. He does not merge haphazardly and randomly into the traffic then. As a fixed part of his way to work, exactly timed and made more precise through repetition, when he turns into the street he meets his colleague, who merges into the traffic with his bicycle at exactly the same moment from the opposite courtyard on the other side. Then both ride down the long straight street shoulder on shoulder mutually supporting one another as *one* machine.

Sociality in fordism implies the simultaneity of social subjection and solidarity as mutual dependency. Masses streaming into the Metro, uniformity and repetition, the punch-clock, the omnipresent dispositive of discipline and surveillance that constitutes the subjects as cogs in the fordist social machine, inventing and interlocking many small machines at the same time. In *Themroc*, for instance, this is evident in the synchronicity of the anteroom supervisor's pencil sharpening machine and the secretary's manicure machine. And yet small differences flare up here and there. Themroc does not leave it at the omnipotence of the dispositive. The first larger outburst, the transformation in the toilet, the infectious roar, the turn to sexual liberation: what was already hinted at in the small deviant allusions at the beginning of the film proliferates in its course into a wild flight from the fordist constraints into an anarchic sphere.

Themroc is an agent of transition, the glimmering of a life that escapes the fordist regime. In this transition he invents new weapons. Instead of throwing a wooden shoe into the gears, his form of sabotage consists of fleeing from the factory. He flees, and in fleeing he changes the order of the factory changing room and that of public transportation by disrupting the schedule of the Metro walking on the tracks. Power, power relations and power conditions prove to be ubiquitous, but Themroc's resistance is primal and productive. Fleeing from the setting of the factory, he invents an entirely new terrain. Interruptions, ruptures, refractions, fragmentations. In the midst of the fordist dispositive Piccoli draws a new dispositive, walling up the door to his room, tearing down the outside wall with a sledgehammer, tossing the furniture into the courtyard and beginning a wild new life.

The roaring, the smashing and the animalistic groaning – there is not a single word in a familiar language in the film – prove to be

infectious. The attacks from the state apparatus seeking to reestablish order with manifold and yet simplistic means (persuasion, threats of the use of weapons, laughing gas, walling up) are repelled in laughter. In this setting, finally two of the policemen are roasted on a spit and eaten. And while Themroc/ Piccoli attempts to live a different life inside his dwelling opened up to the outside and in new, free relationships, the next morning his colleague outside on the street experiences the withdrawal of the complementary social component: accustomed to the daily ritual of mutually supporting and being supported, as he turns into the street from the courtyard he overlooks the new situation – and abruptly falls over with his bicycle. This machine of social subjection, the synchrony of dependency and solidarity, no longer exists. The next morning the colleague has mounted training wheels on his bicycle.

In 1946 Luigi Bartolini published his novel *Ladri di Biciclette*. Shortly thereafter Vittorio de Sica transformed the material into a classic of Italian neo-realism, played by amateur actors, shot directly in the streets of Rome. *Bicycle Thieves* was released as a film in 1948. Bartolini had originally agreed to the filming, but then vehemently protested against de Sica's radical treatment. Although the script also varies the subject of the book in some places, the crucial turn from the book to the film emerges in the turn of the subject position: whereas the first-person narrator of the book, a bourgeois poet, who masterfully, distantly and moralizingly examines the psychology, philosophy and economy of the thieves of Rome as an autonomous artist-subject, the worker Antonio, protagonist of the neo-realist film, is "subject" in the contrary sense: he is *subjected* and exposed to the coercions of rough everyday life. For the hero of the book, the bicycle theft is his

reason to begin a calm, planned, almost luxurious search; tracking down the bicycle or the thief and even the theft itself are staged as a gracious sport, even as art. For the anti-hero of the film, it is completely different: for him this turns into a manic, panicked movement, haphazard and driven, dependent on contingency and fortune-telling. Whereas the cycle of theft and re-aquisition in the anarchic geography of Rome moves the poet in the book to own two bicycles for security, Antonio, the protagonist in the film, is only able to keep his hands on his bicycle for a brief period of time: in the beginning of the film narration, in the midst of the unemployment and bitter poverty of the immediate post-war era, he gets a job hanging up posters, but only under the condition that he has a bicycle. His young family's bedsheets are brought to the pawn shop to redeem his old bicycle.

Antonio's bicycle is stolen on his very first day at work, while he is struggling on a ladder to hang up the first poster. It is not a solitary thief, but an assemblage of several components operating in a perfectly coordinated division of labor that first of all meticulously checks out the territory. An inconspicously dressed man casually places himself next to the bicycle, then another, younger man with a "German cap" waits for the right moment and quickly rides away with the bicycle. The first man pretends not to have noticed the theft and gets in Antonio's way seemingly accidentally, and finally a third man swings himself onto the car that Antonio has jumped onto for the chase and takes it in the wrong direction. Antonio doesn't stand a chance against this coordinated swarm of bicycle thieves. When he returns to the scene of the crime, all the possible witnesses have wandered off.

When Antonio attempts to win the police to recover his bicycle, a first policeman takes up the case, but then declines again immediately; the matter has been recorded, the victim should look

for his bicycle himself. Even more so than the book, the film is devoted to the search for the bicycle that begins at this point, winding through the city from the black market at Piazza Vittorio to desperation at the Porta Portese, where the bicycle thieves return their loot into circulation in incredible amounts and a never-ending stream of newly pilfered material. If they think a bicycle will be too easily recognized, they take it apart, reducing it to all its single parts if necessary, and then they sell these individually – bells, brakes, saddles, pumps, pedals, dynamos, headlights, tires, etc. Antonio and his friends accordingly divide their attention, scanning the scenery: one looks at the frames, another at the tires, another at the bells and pumps. With the manifold strategies of disguise, however, such as switching single parts or repainting the bikes, the special characteristics of the bicycle are made to disappear, the identity of the bicycle can no longer be established. A second policeman quickly fetched to the scene does not appear to be particularly interested in solving the case either. In Bartolini's book there are even policemen among the peddlers at the black market, and the businesses of the official bicycle dealers are equally integrated in the network of bicycle thieves.

Alongside and below the both manic and unsuccessful search for the bicycle, the film also develops a study of the social machine of its thieves. At the Porta Portese Antonio suddenly sees the young thief who rode his bicycle away, but then he loses him again. When he discovers him a second time, he is able to pursue him and catch him in the street where his family lives. At the same time, he becomes acquainted with the social machine as an incomprehensible crowd. Half the neighborhood is in solidarity with the boy suffering an epileptic seizure, the policeman that is called in and searches the boy's flat persuades Antonio not to press

charges. The social machine of the bicycle thieves becomes completely unbounded, its outlines diffuse, inside and outside no longer distinguishable. In consequence, in his desparation in the end, Antonio himself decides to become a bicycle thief – unsuccessfully, as he is caught at his first attempt.

The status of the worker-subject in the film, entirely subjected to economic conditions, sheds just as little light on the machinic setting of the bicycle thieves as the fictive sovereignty of the bourgeois poet-subject from the book. Even reading the very different fortunes of the protagonists in the narration from the original and from the film together does not really help us here. The two sides of the subject, which are so differently staged in the book and the film as either sovereign or subjected, this two-sided dispositive of social subjection is not sufficient to grasp the swarming machine of the bicycle thieves. Even a concept of the subject that dispenses with the dichotomy of sovereignty and subjection, even the complementary construction of the two poles only leads to a limited understanding of machinic modes of subjectivation. What is obviously involved here – in the swarm-shaped sociality of the bicycle thieves and the black markets – is a much more diffused form that does not first constitute subjects as a state apparatus through counting, measuring, striating, and then ensures their comprehensive social subjection and dependency. What seems to be at work here is an opaque form of *machinic enslavement* that is hard to grasp, inducing invention and cooperation without a visible hierarchy, without perceptible subjection, which is even capable of overcoding state apparatuses and feeding them into the dispositive of the machine.

The assemblage of the bicycle thieves also more clearly reveals the ambivalences of all three bicycle machines: the looming danger that bicycles would want to vote and claim a seat on the County

Council, the integration of Themroc's rebellion – that is not shown in the film, but which we know has been accomplished since the 1970s – into difference capitalism, finally the machine of the bicycle thieves as mafiosi, perhaps even faschistoid micropolitics: these are the negative poles of a shimmering and alternating ambivalence of the machine. Yet against that and on the other hand, there is a great charm about it.