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# **Cycling through dark space: apprehending landscape otherwise**

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**ABSTRACT:** By investigating the experience of night-cycling, this paper redresses the overwhelming focus in mobility studies on the apprehension of landscape by daylight. Drawing on Matt's cycling diary of his regular night rides through rural Bedfordshire, we explore the distinctive ways in which dark landscape is experienced. We discuss various effects: the shaping of perception by the beam of the head torch, an ongoing attunement to differing levels of light and dark, the affordances of the cycle and other equipment, enhanced awareness of the vital rhythms of landscape, and imaginaries stimulated by passage through darkness. We thereby aim to contribute to revaluing darkness.

**Cycling, darkness, light, apprehension, rhythm, affordances**

In this paper, we explore how landscape can be experienced by cycling through the dark. In so doing, we seek to elucidate the claim that the landscape constitutes 'the materialities and sensibilities with which we act and sense' (Rose and Wylie, 2006: 478). These qualities, as well as the forms of mobility through which they are apprehended, condition the visual as well as the non-visual sensing of landscape. Invariably, most discussions of landscape construe a daylight realm, not one that is dark or illuminated. By contrast, the materialities of the landscape discussed here include the gloom that spreads across it. Thus by looking at a specific experience of cycling at night, we offer an example of how the values and potentialities of darkness might be reappraised.

By conceiving all landscapes as vital, always in formation, sedentarist notions that landscape can be visually apprehended at a distance by a knowing, gazing subject can be refuted. The mobile experiences we discuss here reveal that visual perception goes well beyond the consumption of the objectified spectacle, or 'static pictorialism' (Merriman and Revill, 2008: 192), and indeed, greatly depend on the qualities of light (and dark) that suffuse the landscape. Besides foregrounding the distinctive visual experience of the nocturnal landscape while mobile, we exemplify the entanglement of sound and touch with the experience of looking (Degen, DeSilvey and Rose, 2008), and also focus upon the ways in which touching, smelling and hearing the landscape can become pre-eminent at particular moments, questioning the ocularcentrism in accounts of landscape. In addition, we highlight how such apprehensions are further shaped by mediating technologies, for cycling at night constitutes a mobile engagement with landscape mediated by bicycle, clothing and torch, things that extend and condition apprehension. Yet despite this focus on the more-than-representational agencies that solicit multiple affects and sensations, we also emphasise that landscapes are invariably experienced in historical and cultural contexts (van Dyke, 2013). Such encounters are also mediated by imaginaries, drawing attention to the deficiencies of non-representational arguments that focus solely on perception and sensation.

First, we discuss the theoretical contexts pertinent to our account - the specificities of cycling as a mobile practice, and the distinctive qualities of the nocturnal landscape - before outlining the autoethnographic approach we deploy. Following this, we focus on six interrelated aspects of these nocturnal journeys: seeing landscape with a beam of light, apprehending the varying levels of dark and light across space and time, being guided by key landmarks in the absence of much light, the non-visual sensing of cycle and clothing in the dark, the enhanced experience of the rhythms of the vital nocturnal landscape, and the cultural imaginaries stirred by dark travel.

### **Cycling and mobile experience**

As Ingold insists, our understanding of space 'undergoes continuous formation' as we move through it (2000: 230) – and in this sense, the cyclist moves with the landscape (Adey, 2010). Cycling does not afford the distanced

observation of a romantic gaze (Urry, 2002) since the cyclist continuously confronts an emerging landscape and must attend to the near at hand to ensure safe progress, unlike the rail or bus passenger, for instance, paying particular attention to road surfaces and obstacles that would be irrelevant for car drivers. Nonetheless, as we exemplify, a mobile sense of place can emerge by undertaking regular journeys through which landscapes become familiar (Edensor, 2003, 2011; Fallov et al. 2013). As Cresswell (2006) contends, studies of travel and mobility have often ignored the qualitative experience of journeys, though some accounts have coloured in particular experiences. For instance, Schivelbusch (1986) identifies the radical transformation provoked by train travel, as landscapes speed past in a blur (also see Bissell, 2009).

These examples indicate how there are multiple ways of performing and experiencing visuality while mobile. The mobile gaze is shaped by specific imperatives: in appraising scenic value, in marking progress during a sporting race, in professional scrutiny (Büscher, 2006), or while bird-watching (Hui, 2013). Moreover, much mobile visual experience is not comparable to the distanced, touristic visual objectification of passing scenery apprehended through the car or coach window discussed by Urry (2002), it is a far more multi-sensual process. Merriman points out, 'pedestrians, cyclists and motorcyclists... have very different embodied engagements with and experiences of inhabiting the spaces of streets and roads' (2009: 590). These mobile engagements reveal how,

The body senses as it moves, through kinaesthetic skill, merging sensory experience that informs one what the body is doing in space through the sensations of movement registered in joints, muscles, tendons and so on with intention and bodily memory... It combines with touch... sight, hearing, smell and other sensory impressions to perform the body's motion, as well as intense emotions (Büscher and Urry, 2011: 6)

In cycling, various practices follow diverse aims, are of varying durations, adopt different rhythms, express particular styles and fashions, utilize certain bikes and associated technologies, and pass through numerous kinds of space. Accordingly spatial and embodied experiences are very different for cycle messengers (Fincham, 2007; Spinney, 2007), uphill climbers (Spinney, 2006), rural and urban leisure seekers (Jones, 2005; 2012) and commuters (Jones, 2012). More generally though, as Jones contends, the 'affective intensity of that experience is very much greater for the cyclist because of the exposure to a much less managed and more varied sensescape' (2012: 651). Jungnickel and Aldred similarly consider that 'cyclists may be exposed to a broader sensory landscape' (2014: 246) than other mobile subjects and they assert that cycling can reawaken dormant senses and intensify sensory experience.

As mentioned above, and as Brown appositely remarks, 'various "prostheses" play a part in generating such differential mobility, differential tactics and strategies for negotiating passage through space, as well as differential

corporeal and affective experiences of it' (2012: 804). Thus travellers experience the landscape through distinctive technologies, from boots and clothing to mechanical vehicles. Such technologies foster particular sensory experiences whilst closing down others. For the cyclist, the bicycle can 'sensuously extend human capacities into and across the world... (and) ... provide various ways of framing impression' (Büscher and Urry, 2009: 102). The cycle-rider hybrid is produced and maintained through regular movement through space, 'crafted through the cultural practice of cycling' (Spinney, 2006: 717). According to Spinney, the bicycle is a crucial companion that facilitates effective training and meshes with the body to provide a familiar, practical know-how about moving through space, an intimate symbiosis (2006). Below, we investigate the distinctive entanglements between rider, cycle and other equipment that emerges while cycling through dark rural space.

Mobile practices also produce particular rhythms, including walking (Hornsey, 2010; Edensor, 2010), flying (DeLyser, 2010), dancing (Hensley, 2010), horse-riding (Evans and Franklin, 2010) and train travel (Jiron, 2010). Cycling is also a rhythmic practice. For effective progress at high speed, smooth rhythms are produced by efficient manoeuvres, fit bodies and cycle maintenance (Spinney, 2006). More specifically, Brown identifies the 'tempo, sequences of starting and stopping; and the cyclical repetitions of heartbeats, breathing, stepping and pedalling, their rituals, gestures and customs' that 'orients us to the social spaces in which desired mobile becomings are negotiated' (2012: 804). She expounds upon the 'rolling continuity' through which 'cycling is a fluid and often fragile accomplishment in which body, bike and the frictions of ground and air are actively enfolded in a dynamic assemblage that requires, for all but the most skilled riders, forward rolling motion' (807). A smooth and regular rhythmic flow that minimises discomfort and effort and allows relaxed apprehension of surrounding space facilitates pleasurable movement but is interspersed with the disruptive, arrhythmic effects of steep inclines, rough road surface, obstacles, hunger and fatigue. Below we consider how a cycling rhythm is experienced and managed in the dark, and contributes to the experience of the landscape.

### **The dark landscape**

This paper is concerned with investigating the experience of mobility while encountering the dark landscape through cycling. A consideration of how we see with the landscape while moving is likely to conjure up a scenario in which we behold a daylight expanse, shifting our gaze between the near, middle and far distance, picking out impediments, attractions and characteristic features while charting the way ahead. This chimes with the widespread implicit assumption that landscape equates to a daylight realm: as Jakle notes, 'landscape has been conceptualised primarily in terms of daytime use' (2001: vii). Accounts of landscape have overwhelmingly been construed in terms of its apprehension by daylight, neglecting the vital ways in which light and dark shape the ongoing experience of space. Accordingly, we seek to reappraise the qualities of the nocturnal rural landscape.

As nightfall arrives, the landscape takes on a host of distinctive qualities and is still distinctively perceived although widespread illumination has made the historically ubiquitous experience of deep darkness (Ekirch, 2005; Koslofsky, 2011) unfamiliar for most people in the West. After dark, much space is illuminated, providing distinctive forms of way-marking and a reduction in points of attention. Whereas the even distribution of daylight coerces the eye to continuously strive to distinguish the route from the surrounding landscape, by night, streetlights and illuminated signs foreground apprehension of the road or path - though levels of illumination widely vary.

As Morris explains, darkness is 'situated, partial and relational' (2011: 316) in its multiplicity, refuting assumptions that it constitutes a singular blackness. Unlike the equally shifting medley of daylight conditions, a multiplicity of shadows range from twilight to the deep gloom of almost total darkness, and journeys through the nocturnal landscape confront a shifting array of shades, perhaps punctuated by spots and flows of illumination, moonlight, stars and the emergence of dawn. Accordingly, when gloom descends, so does the capacity for visually perception, conditioned by the potentialities of the human eyes to perceive distinctions, routes and dangers, as varying levels of dark and light focus attention onto particular elements in the landscape, motivate or restrict movement, and shape affective responses to space.

As with discussions of landscape, accounts of mobile experience generally consider journeys that take place in daylight (though see Isenstadt, 2011; McQuire, 2008). Yet passage through varieties of electrically illuminated, dark and shadowy spaces conditions offer very different sensations. Many journeys through dark space require artificial light to follow the path and avoid danger (Edensor, 2013). Here, we pay particular attention to how the beam of the cycle headlamp offers distinctive ways of apprehending illuminated elements in the landscape while moving.

We also investigate how darkness offers scope for other senses to be mobilised in the perception of space. The diminution of vision diverts attention towards sounds, smells, textures and tactilities. A focus on the more than visual experience of nocturnal space might both intensify awareness of the distinctive ways of feeling the moving, cycling body in the dark and solicit a different, perhaps more acute, awareness of the vital qualities of a far from quiescent landscape. One way of conceiving of this vitality is to consider how it evokes multiple rhythms, following Lefebvre in recognising that '(E)verywhere where there is interaction between a place, a time, and an expenditure of energy, there is *rhythm*' (2004: 15). Accordingly, we can conceive the mobile rhythms of cycling identified above as occurring amidst a seething landscape of polyrhythms, part of a dynamic, changing ensemble of multiple '*bundles, bouquets, garlands* of rhythms' (Lefebvre 2004: 20). We explore below how awareness of both embodied cycling rhythms and the multiple rhythms of landscape might be conjured by darkness, expanding the range of sensory encounters with landscape in challenging the broader primacy of the visual and relegation of other senses in geographic enquiry.

In modern Western culture, darkness has typically been conceived as the negative antithesis of light, bringer of divine goodness and rationality, though there have always been alternative appraisals. Yet though most human activity continues to take place during the day, darkness is increasingly sought as a condition in which to experience mystery, enhanced non-visual sensations and the night sky (Edensor, 2014), veering away from assumptions that dark space primarily contains the deviant and the dangerous. Dark retreats, concerts and plays performed in the dark, art events (Morris, 2011) and dark restaurants (Edensor and Falconer, 2014) are increasingly popular. A retreat from illuminated landscapes is signified by the rise of the Dark Sky campaign (Edensor, 2013) and those who move 'off the grid' (Vannini and Taggart, 2013), groups who consider that the night has become disenchanting, and the power of darkness and the star-filled night sky reduced.

Despite this increasing appeal of darkness and our focus on the more-than-representational' (Lorimer, 2005), we do not want to neglect the fantasies that are entangled with the embodied experience of dark landscapes, for the aforementioned fearful and negative conceptions of darkness persist. Macpherson asserts that 'seeing involves movement, intention, memory, and imagination' (1049: 2009) and we show how ongoing attunements to dark landscape are accompanied by imaginaries that revolve around the uncanny, the ghostly and local legends.

## **Methods**

In this paper we focus upon the journeys carried out as part of Matt's training regime, where to keep fit and able to participate in competitive cycling, he undertakes rides of between 25 and 45 miles on at least three nights a week. These journeys take place in rural Bedfordshire, UK, in 2012 and 2013, and offer enlivening, varied encounters with dark landscape.

The 'mobilities turn' (Sheller and Urry, 2006) has provoked questions about how to explore diverse ways of moving through different kinds of space (Merriman, 2014). While symbolic and instrumental elements may be captured through reflexive interviews, the affective and sensual experiences of mobility which often 'exceed our capacities to...think about and represent them' (Adey, 2010: 142) are less easy to consider. Simpson (2014) has utilised video-elicitation and Laurier (2004) has recorded driving commuters on video. However, such techniques cannot record the sensations of moving through dark space. Accordingly, the methodology adopted here draws upon Matt's auto-ethnographic diaries to capture the immersive 'fleeting, multi-sensory, distributed, mobile and multiple, yet local, practical and ordered making of social and material realities' (Büscher and Urry, 2009: 102) of cycling. Diary entries were immediately written after completing rides to capture fresh, subjective experiences. We considered audio-recording an ongoing commentary of the journey but this option was discarded since it would have enforced reflexivity upon cycling in the moment.

Anderson identifies that the 'most obvious feature of autoethnography is that the researcher is a complete member in the social world under study' (2006:



379). Here, Matt has long been a participant in the world of competitive cycling and shares its competencies and practical know-how, and he cycles in order to stay in physical condition for racing. Anderson also points to the need for analytic reflexivity. In compiling diary entries, reflexivity is developed as Matt becomes attuned to the somatic and mental experiences of riding through the landscape. Such sensations are difficult to access and articulate and a reflexive autoethnography is key to obtaining empirical data honed through practice and consistent reflection via the diary. Though such recording is invariably messy (Denzin, 2006) and cannot aim for exactitude of expression (Merriman, 2014), we draw out consistencies that emerged and were subject to reflection to compile a thick, evocative description of successive cycling experiences over a year. The intention was to produce believable and coherent extracts that enable readers 'to enter the subjective world of the teller - to see the world from her or his point of view' (Plummer, 2001: 401). Here, the perspective is that of a fit, middle-aged, white, British male and therefore expresses a specific form of identity. Yet though invariably partial, these personal narratives are spliced with wider theories and concepts, so that besides testifying to individual experience, they might simultaneously express broader cultural experiences of mobility by focusing upon a specific mobile (sub)culture through which a rich array of complex 'practices are made distinct and meaningful by their temporally structured mobilities' (Hui, 2013: 904).

### **Cycling through rural Bedfordshire at night**

Matt has been cycling around Bedfordshire for 30 years, following regular routes of varying lengths and durations. As a means to keep fit and train for competitive races, cycling also constitutes a temporal break between work and home, and serves as a way to engage with the rural landscape. Matt's nightly journeys set forth from Bedford, 60 miles north of London, and are confined within a forty mile radius from the town. Matt has always lived in Bedford and his paternal family has been long established in the town and surrounding villages, making the landscape traversed on his evening travels deeply familiar. The Bedfordshire rural landscape is undulating; the town situated in a bowl bounded by the Greensand Ridge. To the south, steep hills run out of Lidlington, up to Ampthill, and include Hillfoot, Old Warden and the Shuttleworth estate. To the north, the road sharply inclines towards Kimbolton via Cleat and Sunderland hills.

### ***The beam and the mobile apprehension of dark space***

Modes of moving through dark space utilise distinct technologies to facilitate progress, and here we exemplify how the nocturnal landscape is visually apprehended in very different ways to that of the day. Isenstadt describes the transformative perceptual effects of the car headlight in producing 'a luminous space unprecedented in its ubiquitous mobility' through which 'drivers and passengers found themselves at the vertex of a luminous cavity moving through a mantle of dark' (2011: 213). This initially - and perhaps still occasionally - enthralling capacity to direct a moving vehicle rapidly transformed the mobile encounter with nocturnal space and heralded a new form of visuality whereby car drivers 'focused forward, repeatedly scanned a constantly shifting field of view to classify heterogeneous luminous signals in

terms of hindrance, continuance, or irrelevance' (ibid: 214). Though initially 'dim, awkward to install, liable to sway greatly, and easily extinguished' (ibid), the bicycle lamp has advanced technically to provide a secure, reliable device and like the car headlight, affords a distinctive technology for envisioning dark space while mobile.

Cycling at night necessitates illumination to light the road ahead and avoid serious injury while travelling at speed. Matt uses a headlamp of 300 lumen. The lamp provides a flat beam to illuminate the middle distance but is not bright enough to dazzle other road users. The beam is narrower and slightly dimmer than that produced by car headlights, and though brightly illuminating the foreground, fades after 10 metres. Matt prefers this to a lamp mounted on the handlebars since it permits him to look at the bicycle if it needs to be repaired, and can be directed at other road users to make them aware of his presence. The beam mediates his relationship with the passing landscape and shapes his gaze. If speed is rapid, attention must remain focused ahead, but when the pace slows, opportunities to glance and illuminate other parts of the landscape allows the gaze to divert from a primarily linear apprehension of space, a manoeuvre that car-drivers, with their fixed forward facing headlights, are unable to enact. Isenstadt discusses how car drivers might sense their headlights as 'an emanation from themselves, a motorized ocular extramission' (ibid: 214). This is amplified by the head torch as an embodied appendage that fosters a more intimate, responsive connection to nocturnal space.

During the daylight, human vision generally scans across a landscape: the eye 'does not look at things but roams *among* them, finding a way through rather than aiming for a fixed target' (Ingold, 2011: 132). In contrast, moving through dark landscape requires a concentrated visual focus on the light reflected ahead rather than across the manifold array of daylight, where the road appears as one feature amongst many. Even during the day, the cyclist may adopt an unwavering gaze on the road ahead during a focused, energetic spurt, eyes fixed on the road to minimize danger, as Spinney depicts in his account of his demanding ascent up Mont Ventoux (2006). Thus tunnel vision exists for cyclists during daylight, but is greatly intensified via the beam during nocturnal rides, as they move through the narrow tunnel of light that constitutes the conditions with which landscape is perceived.

The dark walls of hedgerows and trees frame the route and form a boundary to the fields beyond, undulating with the road. Yet these silhouettes are transformed when caught in a beam of light, highlighted against the black backcloth of darkness. Isenstadt (2011: 218) discusses how car headlights 'rendered forms in a novel fashion' exaggerating their shape and throwing long shadows that extended to join the surrounding darkness. Such objects, he continues, 'bloomed gradually into nocturnal form, then sharpened for an instant and, just as swiftly were gone'. The more focused beam cast by the cyclist's lamp and the slower speed at which things are perceived intensifies this appreciation of form. The shapely structures of trees, gates and sections of hedgerow are apprehended in a way they never can be by daylight when light is dispersed more evenly across space. Standing out against the

darkness, an enhanced sense of their shape, texture and individuality is fostered:

When I turn up the wooded lane near Steppingly, close up I see white silhouettes against dark backgrounds. Every leaf, twig and branch is visible, perhaps more so than the trunk. Further beyond the beam, there are just shapes – the nature of which can only be inferred.

Thus this confined vision also produces a keen awareness of darkness; the gloom that lies beyond the beam is made manifest:

I don't know what's out there beyond the short beam, whether behind or in front, from side to side. Out there is full of uncertainty, but my limited range of vision means I am constantly intrigued by what's beyond the beam: what's out there? It seems mysterious and unknown. I don't want to know how the landscape looks, I don't want to map the terrain.

This keen awareness of darkness possesses an affective charge for Matt, enhancing the experience of moving through nocturnal space. For despite the sense of uncertainty, even fear, of that which might emerge from the unseen, a brighter light would diminish the potency of darkness, weakening the sensual and imaginative engagements that we discuss below.

### ***Changing levels of light and dark***

In discussing visual perception, Lingis identifies the ways in which changing 'levels' of light, shaped by the depth of field and brightness, continuously play across space, extending 'an expanse in which things can be seen' and with which we continuously adjust (1998: 26). Thus, we may be drawn to a particular colour, patch of light or shade as shifting patterns of light and dark engender continuous (re)attunement. Accordingly, perceiving with the landscape involves different modes of looking within shifting fields of varying depth - gazing upon vistas, attending to obstacles, glazing over in distraction or scrutinising matters close at hand, as scenes unfold incessantly, as light levels change (Edensor, 2013). In distinction to the daylight realm, in the dark, lower, but still varying, levels of light produce different attunements. The different light-sensitive receptors on the retina, cones and rods, respond to different wavelengths of light and produce distinctive forms of vision. The rods operate in low levels of light and offer greater sensitivity to light, shape and movement but cannot readily discern colour.

At night then, levels of darkness shift and the landscape is composed of a changing array of shades from twilight to dead of night, and diverse forms of artificial and celestial illumination. Cycling from late evening reveals a surrounding medley of shades of grey and black that gradually devolves towards a more even blackness as night closes in, whereas levels of light at dusk provide muted colours and blurred shapes:

I love riding at dusk. Dusk heralds the descent into night and darkness, as gloom filters through the landscape, bestowing properties, not of

light or darkness but a world of shades and shapes, of greys, brown, orange and purple, a fluid time when detail drains away leaving abstract shapes and forms; old houses, distinctive trees, a large water tower, and churches become apparent through their roofs and spires

Weather and celestial conditions also shape the perception of dark landscape. Surroundings may be tintured with brightness when the cloud is low and the lights cast by towns are reflected to form an orange ceiling; and when the moon shines brightly, a silvery gauze covers the landscape. When the moon is not visible and urban skyglow fades, an inky blackness descends with which the boundaries of the body merge, limbs becoming invisible. Under such conditions, the beam provides almost the sole source of light, cutting a moving tunnel through the thick darkness. This confined sense of cycling through darkness is amplified in fog; the beam reflected in the particles of mist produces a wider aura of illumination where only the road a little way ahead can be seen. Adjacent street lights and house lights are blurred and together with the intensified smell of hearth fires as smoke lingers in the mist, and the muffling of sounds, space becomes suffused with alterity (Martin, 2011).

Levels of darkness also vary across seasons. Early winter nightfall shapes the temporal experience of darkness but so too does the thickness of vegetation during the summer months, for instance, while cycling through Woburn Park: 'I become aware of the shadows under the trees and cast by the large rhododendrons on either side. It feels very dark in here'. The moon also interacts with the weather to produce light effects that punctuate the gloom. Attlee discusses how moonlight changes 'colours and contours in its shape-shifting light' (2011: 5). After rainfall, country lanes shine in the beam, twisting and turning in front of the beam 'like a magnesium ribbon or silver path'. As Matt further details:

The River Ouse runs through the villages to the north west of Bedford: Harold, Felmersham and Radwell. When it bursts its banks, the road floods and pedestrian and cycle access to the villages is facilitated by elevated paths, or causeways. When the moon is bright it is spectacularly reflected in the water.

A cycle journey through the dark landscape flows through successive engagements with the multiple shades of gloom that lie outside the beam and variously distract and allure the mobile gaze.

### ***Landmarks in the dark landscape***

Within this medley of shadows, and in addition to the focusing properties of the beam, key points in the landscape provide a sense of orientation as vision concentrates upon different way markers than in the daylight. The darkness varies during the stages of the journey in accordance with the affordances of the land. High hedges, banks, and overhanging trees accentuate the sense of travelling through a tunnel of light but this dissipates when suddenly the landscape opens up as the road is unbounded by lofty vegetation and fields extend. Landmarks emerge and the lights of far away towns and villages glimmer in the distance, especially when the summits of bare hills are attained

and the shroud of darkness disperses. Under varying levels of darkness and in the absence of other sights, such landmarks mark the progress of the journey, orientate the cyclist and provide assurance:

At night the Sandy Heath transmitter, high on the Greensand Ridge, stands out: red lights evenly spaced on the mast, a single red light on top. Without thinking I often look for the transmitter. Riding to the north, east and south, it is a pole around which I wrap my rides. On the road to the Staughton's I see it to the east. Approaching Grafham Water I lose but regain sight of it as I approach Croxton. I draw close to it in Everton then move away as I return through Blunham and Great Barford to home. When I cycle a long way east of Bedford, the transmitter stands between me and the town, signalling the direction of home. Once I am the other side of it, I am nearly there.

The Cardington Hangers are distinctive landmarks. Massive structures designed to house airships, they stand to the south east of Bedford and can be seen across a flat plain. At dusk they stand side by side, rooted in the landscape, great hulks from another time.

These familiar fixtures mark time and distance, and become part of a mobile sense of place (Edensor, 2003), ameliorating the sometimes disorienting effects of the gloom with their comforting presence. They are accompanied by the familiar affordances encountered on the road: 'the bike wheel sized trench on the road from Blunham to Hatch', 'the disguised pot hole descending to Felmersham from Sharnbrook' and 'the gully at the Astwood end of the Blue House Road'.

Much of the landscape Matt cycles through is familiar when encountered in daylight, yet at night, many aspects of this same realm become strange. In the dark, most elements in the landscape are indistinguishable, foregrounding the unseen or vague that lies outside visual perception, that which must be subject to conjecture. Yet familiar landmarks still anchor passage through time and space. Visual apprehension also focuses on the sky and horizon, and on clusters of dark shadow and contrasting points of light, on the occasional silhouette of a tree, and shining road surfaces and patches of water. The changing levels of dark and light on the journey, and over seasonal and diurnal time, shapes visual perception, and are further conditioned by the technologies and mobilities adopted by the cycling body as we now detail.

### ***The affordances of the cycle, clothing and equipment on a journey through dark space***

Having discussed the distinctive forms of mobile vision experienced in the nocturnal rural landscape, in the next two sections we focus more on non-visual apprehension. The embodied experience of riding through dark space is reliant on the qualities of the bicycle, the state of the cycling body and the affordances of the landscape traversed. As mentioned, the cyclist is more open to apprehending motion and the sensory and affective qualities of space than other road users, for instance, in contradistinction to the insulated, cocooned body of the car-driver. Besides the deployment of the torch, the

cyclist also enrolls a bicycle, its attachments and clothing to facilitate movement through space and these technologies also provoke the experience of sensation, emotion, speed and rhythm.

Cycling is rarely subject to persistent reflexivity about speed, body and machine. Rather, as Game suggests, 'maintaining connection and rhythm doesn't work through the exercise of will power, but requires a mindfully embodied way of being' (2001: 8). Regular cycling cultivates a consistent attunement and reattunement to physical endeavour, the affordances of space and the qualities of light and dark that becomes largely habitual. Yet the capacity to reproduce comfortable mobility while riding in the dark relies upon the deployment of equipment and clothing. For Matt, the distinctive mechanical attributes and bodily comfort offered by the bicycle he chooses is crucial:

I rarely ride my carbon fibre bike in the dark. It's too skittish. It doesn't always behave itself. It's too light and when the surface is greasy, it feels unstable. Instead, I ride a steel Eddy Merckx Corsa, handmade in Belgium, an old friend on which I have cycled perhaps 20,000 miles. The bike is made of steel and is enduring. It has a taught yet springy property. It feels right, strong and durable, able to withstand the demands of riding in darkness. Its weight isn't of prime importance. Shape and fit are much more important. This bike fits like a hand in a glove, is stable, sure footed and reassuring.

The performance of cycling in the dark requires a bicycle that is more predictable and better suited to responding to contingencies ahead that cannot be as readily visually anticipated as they would be by daylight. Though Matt's carbon fibre bicycle affords greater speed and manoeuvrability, the capacities of the Merckx to provide greater stability on occasions when the road becomes uneven or slippery are crucial. This bicycle is more reliable in facilitating responses to the perceptual deceptions solicited by darkness, where the way ahead may be unclear, distances and dimensions difficult to assess, and gradients illusory. Yet besides this steadiness and dependability, the sensory qualities of the Merckx also contribute to Matt's preference for it during night cycling, for its affordances mesh with his body: 'the bike is as I like it at night - it's cold. The steel tubes are wonderfully cold to touch. They sooth my warm skin'. This underlines how the relationship between cyclist and cycle is not merely concerned with efficiency but also affords comfort and pleasurable sensations, engendering a physical and affective intimacy:

I've seen it glazed with ice, soaking wet, covered in mud. I love cleaning it. Gives me a strong sense of achievement, the muckier the better... When it was glazed with ice I got the family out of the house to look at it. A big sense of achievement, a signifier of the adverse conditions I had overcome

Clothing is also integral to the embodied, habitual experience of regular night cycling, providing suitable affordances for journeying through temperatures

generally colder than during the day. The choice of clothing must respond to the changing climatic and seasonal conditions:

My cycle clothing is old. I like it that way. The clothing keeps me at just the right temperature, neither hot nor cold. In the Autumn there's no more bib shorts and short sleeve jerseys. Leg warmers, and later, bib tights, jacket, overshoes and gloves. I don the gear for the occasion. I need my clothing to be reliable. I cannot afford to be cold.

Darkness conceals appearance and banishes concerns about the potentially judgemental impressions of onlookers, but of primary concern in the choice of old clothing is the reproduction of a feeling of comfort that maximises efficiency of movement and adds to the pleasing sensations of the ride.

As discussed above, cycling is an inherently rhythmic practice, shaped by the regular yet changing pace of pedaling and the turning wheels. The body needs to be fit to complete a circuit of 40 or 50 miles and this fitness contributes to maintaining a largely even, steady pace that produces the relaxing quality of the journey. Yet the rhythmic consistencies of cycling vary according to road conditions, obstacles, gradients, wind and rain, as well as the fitness of the rider. For instance, the capacities of the cycling body change over the life course, and this affects the progress of the journey, as Matt makes explicit:

I set off slowly. For me, this is a function of age. I used to set off at a rapid pace but now I let my body slowly unfold in the first 30 minutes of the ride and get into rhythm. I start to get into a rhythm after the first 15 minutes or after the first hill; whichever comes sooner.

In addition, changing rhythms typify the different phases of the journey, and the different conditions that emerge, as Matt further explicates:

After an hour I begin to feel lighter. I will climb much better from this point on in the ride. My feet also seem to shrink on a ride. I set out with my shoes done up normally. After about an hour I tighten the strap.

I try to always come in harder than I went out - to ride what is known as a 'negative split'. This helps my fitness, as I am putting pressure on the body when it's tired.

When it's cold and rainy my body feels vulnerable. I must keep going. I can't afford to stop and shiver. I have to be fit enough to keep going when the weather turns bad.

This latter quote underlines how in adverse conditions, a particular rhythm must be consciously pursued since as we argued earlier, citing Brown, cycling may be a 'precarious achievement'. The rhythms of particular routes also vary according the landmarks and features in the landscape:

To the north-west, the ride is intermittently punctuated by river bridges. To the south-west, it's far busier and much lighter at night as a result of the glow of Milton Keynes. To the north-west, there is a certain cadence of villages which recur every ten or fifteen miles, whereas to the north and east, there are far fewer villages and no rivers.

And rhythmic mobilities also vary due to the various imperatives and compulsions that riders experience across the competitive cycling year:

I am always relieved in the autumn that the racing season has ended. I ride in low gears and my pedal cadence is high. This is a rest time, one in which to regain suppleness, not to build strength. After Christmas, I begin to push myself harder. Larger gears, same pedal cadence if possible, therefore much faster. In spring and summer, I'm ready to compete. It's too late to change the body. All the hard work is done in the winter and early spring.

Whatever the time of the year though, the rhythms instantiated by journeying through a dark landscape possess particular affordances and affects, compounded by the peculiar intensity that solitude in the surrounding gloom engenders:

The rhythm of the bike and of the dark landscape is a curious and addictive thing. The pedals turn, I burrow through the darkness. I feel alone in the dark. Just me, the bike and the landscape.

### ***Sensing the vital landscape and its rhythms***

During travel by daylight, the multiple distractions of a more variegated landscape shift sensory attention towards the visual. As is apparent from the discussion of cycling rhythms above, moving through the dark when not insulated by the shell of a car, train or boat, opens the body up to sounds, smells, textures and tactilities, intensifying the non-visual sensations of mobility. As well as a reconfigured visual apprehension, a more concentrated focus on the pedalling legs, a sense of speed, and an accentuated awareness of sound attune the cycling body, as Matt explains:

At night everything is more intense. I feel as if I am going faster, an intense experience of the landscape produced by the beam. I don't see the landscape beyond the beam but I can feel it, rather like the presence of another. In the dark, rain enters my vision as silvery pelts; the handlebars a silhouette against the dark road below. I hear my own breathing, not labored. The well oiled chain smoothly turns over the cassette and chain rings. It rattles a little in the front mech if I stand on the pedals. The wind whistles through the straps of my helmet, when I go downhill.

An awareness of the immersive properties of cycling at night and its sensual impact upon the body foregrounds how darkness can re-enchant a sensory encounter with landscape. Moving along these dark rural lanes, the visual



ceases to be pre-eminent and other senses are enhanced and entangled with seeing, revealing the multi-sensual capacities of vision.

We now consider how these multi-sensory, mobile apprehensions in the dark inculcate an awareness of the vital, animated qualities of the landscape. In so doing, we move further away from the tendency to afford primacy to the visual apprehension of a passive landscape, for cycling as a mobile practice makes such an omniscient position impossible. The dark landscape - like the daylight or illuminated landscape - constitutes the conditions with which we perceive, but a visual inability to make much sense of colours, surfaces and forms, is supplanted by other emergent stimuli generated from a pulsing world-information that become entwined with sensing bodies.

These non-human intrusions can be apprehended visually as things suddenly burst into view, close at hand

I enter Woburn Park to the South West of Bedfordshire, the fields at either side of the road are filled with eyes, steaming breath and the silhouettes of antlers. One small deer is caught out by my silent, rapid approach. I detect a moment's indecision. Will it jump across the road in front of me? But it retreats into the field behind, as other deer back away as I ride up the hill.

As I descend into Kimbolton, eyes appear from the hedgerow at the side of the road. They look hesitant but enquiring, watching me as I approach. Then the fox scampers across the road in front

Riding out toward Swineshead, I climb toward Melchbourne. Little eyes appear all over the road. Then a series of grey lumps come into view – badgers all over the road. They don't seem frightened by my arrival.

Equally, the cyclist is more attuned to the sounds made by creatures, for as Jungnickel and Aldred attest, cycling 'has broader and more variable sonic registers' (2014: 238) than other forms of mobility, and this is exacerbated in the dark:

The noise of wild birds that have flocked to the flood waters is terrific. Travelling out of Keysoe a duck quacks, and a male tawny owl hoots in the distance.

Sometimes I just hear a rustling sound in the hedgerow. Coming out of Stevington, I round a bend. The hedgerow rustles and then I hear a plop. Was it a rat?

The landscape is far from quiescent at night. Besides that which lurks close at hand, the celestial energies above are evident in the passage of clouds, and beyond, the changing position of the moon and stars. The wind impedes or spurs progress and the rain adds shine to the surroundings as well as entering vision as shiny streaks and assailing the face. Though much activity is beyond human perception, a good deal can be sensed, revealing that the

cyclist is just one moving element in a pulsing setting of flows, energies and rhythms.

Attunement to the multisensual qualities of landscape after dark foregrounds a grasp of these vital rhythms. As Henri Lefebvre declares '(There is) nothing inert in the *world*', a contention he exemplifies with the seemingly quiescent garden that is suffused with the polyrhythms of 'trees, flowers, birds and insects' (2004: 17) and the forest, which 'moves in innumerable ways: the combined movements of the soil, the earth, the sun. Or the movements of the molecules and atoms that compose it' (20).

Other varied currents, rhythms and flows that course through the landscape vigorously contrast with the cadence of the moving cyclist. These can be generated by non-human agencies, such as the wind, gravity and the rain:

I ride over river bridges that span the Ouse. Under most bridges the water is fairly shallow. The river is quite noisy at the rapids under Bromham and Harold Bridges. Not the gentle flow of a deep velvety river. But of a fast flowing shallow river gurgling, bubbling, even foaming under the bridge.

Yet the mobile rhythms that criss-cross the landscape can also be created by human interventions that break the quieter rhythms of cycling and non-humans, and draw attention to faster forms of mobility that blaze against the gloom:

At Radwell, the different rhythms, speeds and cadences of the railway, the river and my bike ride are juxtaposed. The illuminated train, running along a high bank to the right, is a spectacle of motion as it thunders through the night towards the midlands and north, following the prescribed rhythm of the timetable

Riding in the dark to the south west of Bedfordshire. I ride under the M1 through a concrete tunnel then turn left on the little wooded back lane to Steppingley. The elevated M1 is busy, a bleached white of noise and speed, and I am struck by the different energy and rhythm that makes the dark woods that I subsequently cycle through feel remote, dark and silent.

Such mechanical rhythms would be visible and audible by day but the illuminated ribbons of movement and the heightened sense of sound intensify their stark contrast with the cyclist's tempo and other rhythms in the nocturnal rural landscape. Yet the opposite sensation is provoked by the distinction between the moving cyclist and the seemingly slower human rhythms signified by the lights from houses bypassed. This also incites a sense of isolation that emerges when travelling alone through the dark and viewing these lit windows, effects compounded by an imaginative reading of space, as the following diary entry suggests:

Cycling through villages, the lights are on. I smell wood and coal fires. My mind wanders. I imagine families round the hearth, cozy and safe. I remember my paternal grandparents' house, the comfort and security of being around the fire at Christmas. This memory makes me feel quite alone cycling through the dark, and a passing urge to get home to see my family.

This signifying force of houselights in rural space contrasts with the effects of the bright lighting of urban areas as the journey comes to an end. Here, the 'wash of street lighting' (Isenstadt, 2011: 219) diminishes the impact of the beam to cut through space and yet the contrasting ambience of the illuminated town can provide a thrilling counterpoint to prolonged passage through rural gloom:

Returning to Bedford, I make my way through the town. Cars come at me from all directions, adding to the bright lights of takeaways, nightclubs, nail parlours and gyms. In a low gear I meander through this area, which seems vibrant, teeming with life. Midland Road seems so gloriously human, something going on at all times.

### ***Imagining the dark***

Besides constituting a compendium of immersive and immanent embodied sensations, the flow of experience while moving through dark landscape frequently incorporates a host of fantasies, desires and fears. Unseen elements, unidentifiable sounds and particular features can incite a sudden awareness of the uncertain and hidden that lies beyond the beam:

Animals in the hedgerow, in woods and open fields; things that lie beyond the beam, that would come out of the black void left behind; the footpaths that might lead to desolate remote out of the way places... The woods at the top of Newton Blossomville Hill always catch me out. From wide open countryside to dark enclosed wood, then out again. Although I am tired from the ascent, I always seem to find the energy to accelerate through the wood before my imagination takes too great a hold

As this diary entry testifies, along with the extract above that evokes a sense of isolation when confronted with lit windows, the dark landscape is always also animated by imaginaries - generated by local legends and stories, media representations and memories. Dark, twisting lanes and woods are saturated with myth from children's literature, cinematic representations and media tales, and provocative sensations experienced during a night journey can stimulate and interweave with imaginaries. Macpherson recognizes that 'seeing involves movement, intention, memory, and imagination' (1049: 2009), elements which all shape attunement to dark space. Elsewhere, this is captured in Jones' account of a cycling commuter in Birmingham who articulates how evening journeys solicited 'the sensuous appeal of the enveloping darkness and the sense of connection this brought to memories of ... childhood' (2012: 654). Darkness is apt to lure one into a cultural storehouse of folk fears and sensationalist horror imagery, and Matt is no

exception in pursuing imaginative forays, particularly those stimulated by events that have taken place in the landscape through which he passes.

When I was about 17 I worked on a farm in this area. I was told a story about a pilot who was taking part in a flying display but lost control and flew into tree in one of the plantations. Somehow this grisly story haunts me when I ride round Old Warden.

Imaginative speculation is also instigated when Matt passes the ruined St Mary's Church, around 400 years old and abandoned in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the 1960s the church was supposedly the site of satanic rituals involving graffiti, the removal of bones from some graves and their scattering around the churchyard. The gravestones were subsequently placed around the edge of the church and face inwards:

There's little doubt it's an odd place. It stands out on the hill as I ride down the narrow lanes to Clophill through canopies of trees that become very dark. The stories of what went on in Clophill haven't lost much in the telling. Someone told me of the time he went up to look through the window and saw a weird light glowing from inside the church.

Those longstanding associations of the dark with the supernatural and the macabre are not easily excluded. Besides the sensual joys solicited, movement through the nocturnal rural landscape also exposes the cyclist to the imaginary, fantastic and phantasmagorical, foregrounding how the distinction between the non-representational and the representational aspects of encountering landscape are folded together in particular forms of mobile experience.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, by drawing on diary entries composed after Matt's journeys, we have explored how cycling in the dark is one of many mobile practices through which we might 'mobilise, animate, articulate or perform landscape' (Merriman and Revill, 2008: 193). We foreground how 'landscapes are woven into life, and lives are woven into the landscape, in a process that is continuous and never-ending' (Ingold, 2004: 333). Through forms of travel, a particularly mobile sense of place and landscape may be fostered.

We have suggested that most of the mobility literature compounds the broader neglect within the social sciences of illumination and darkness, in assuming that the default condition for forms of mobile travel is daylight. We have argued that the experience of travelling at night, through the darkness, offers a qualitatively different experience of landscape and mobility to that experienced during journeys by daylight. There can be none of the visual imperialism mobilized by the omniscient, knowing gaze of a sedentary onlooker, for cycling through the nocturnal rural landscape enhances aural, tactile and proprioceptive sensations, a sense of speed and strain, as well as reconfiguring visual perception. Thus by experiencing the landscape

otherwise after nightfall, habitual and unreflexive understandings can be defamiliarised, drawing attention to overlooked elements, qualities and sensations.

We have discussed how cycling, as a less insulated form of mobility, can access the visual qualities of the dark landscape in particularly felicitous ways. The beam of the head torch offers a highly distinctive way of moving swiftly through and apprehending dark space, providing a tunnel of light but also allowing the visual apprehension of the surrounding darkness and the elements within the landscape that can be illuminated against the gloom. Though typified by the diminution of colour, the night cyclist may become attuned to a variety of shifting levels of light and dark influenced by season, weather, celestial events and the time of day. Moreover, visible landmarks, horizons and silhouettes experientially reconfigure the nocturnal landscape. We have also shown that gloom intensifies sensory awareness of the vitality of the landscape, often in non-visual ways, by the non-human and human rhythms that pervade space, and elaborated upon how cycling materialities – the bicycle, equipment and clothing – are selected for their appropriateness for night cycling and provide further sensual engagements. Besides these powerful sensory intrusions, the representational infuses the experience of darkness, which cannot be disassociated from its entanglement with popular culture and local myth. To cycle through the night is also to be exposed to the fantastical and imaginative, chiming with Macfarlane's suggestion that in the dark, landforms 'exist as presences: inferred, less substantial but more powerful for it' (2005: 75).

The affects generated by the coalescence of dark, temperature, silence and closeness to others *penetrate* the body, enfolding it into the field (Brennan, 2004). Thus the cyclist's experience of dark space might best be conceived as an ongoing flow (Csíkszentmihályi, 1990), where the body's rhythms intersect and clash with those of the earth, sun and moon, the variable intensities and qualities of light, the affordances and features of the landscape and shifting moods, mindful thoughts and imaginaries that emerge during the course of the journey. Here we acknowledge that a plethora of unremarkable habits, unreflexive experiences and distractions are also included in this flow, and thus do not want to construe an over-animated subject, continuously attuned to a vibrant world (Merriman, 2014). Nevertheless, it is clear that these nocturnal journeys are also composed of fluctuating intensities of sensory, affective and imaginative experience. We submit that mobile immersion in dark space offers a defamiliarising experience that expands the affectual and sensual capacities of the body and enriches and enhances the encounter with landscape. As such we contend that these cycling practices provide one example, hopefully be succeeded by others, about how darkness might be revalued.

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