

Nathaniel Carlsen  
Professor Touloumi  
Of Utopias  
17 March 2017

### Provo White Bicycle Plan

This picture was taken of John Lennon and Yoko Ono in 1969 at the Amsterdam Hilton Hotel as they were presented with a bicycle painted white by the anarchist group Provo during Lennon and Ono's 'Bed-in' protest of the Vietnam war. This white bicycle was part of a larger initiative to close down Amsterdam to cars and have all transportation be almost exclusively either through public transit or pedestrian/bicycle travel. When Amsterdam rejected this plan, Provo began to paint bikes white and leave them out for the public in violation of the law leading to several confrontations with the authorities.

The photograph features a white bicycle covered in flowers on a yellow and white bed in the foreground, with John Lennon and Yoko Ono located farther back on the bed looking at the bicycle. A dominant element of this photograph is the emphasis on the color white. The bicycle, bed sheets, pillows, and robes of both Lennon and Ono are all colored white. The common color between Lennon and Ono's robes and the bike serves to link them to the unusually colored bicycle in what could be easily interpreted as a signal of solidarity or support. This symbolic support flows not only from Lennon and Ono to Provo's White Bicycle Plan, but also from Provo to Lennon and Ono's anti-war protest. There are also other miscellaneous white objects around the bed such as white flowers, a white space-heater, the white window frame, transparent white curtains, and a silver-white cage. The combination of these white objects creates a partial uniformity of color allowing the bike to seem at home in this room.

Although there are many white objects, there is a difference in their illumination with three different levels of illumination prevalent throughout the image. The bike is lit the brightest, with the central frame and pedal of the bicycle glowing from a light more direct than is found in other parts of the room. The rest of the bed is also well illuminated although with less intensity while, in contrast, the surrounding parts of the room appear dark. This lighting of the bed, and more specifically of the bicycle, creates a clear focal point in the image, distinguishing the bed and its occupants from the rest of the room and, through the windows, from the world around them. This focal effect of the illumination, combined with the color white, helps highlight Provo's bicycle as a symbol of hope, purity, and peace especially considering Lennon and Ono's presence on the bed with the bicycle.

White is, however, not the only color present in the room. On the bicycle there are red and eggshell colored flowers with a red ribbon or sash. Under the bike lies an assortment of miscellaneous items of unknown identity. Finally there is a yellow blanket on the bed and two signs of the same shade of yellow on the windows reading "Hair Peace" and "Bed Peace." Although the signs were a part of the 'bed-in' and not specific to Provo's project, the bike lying on the yellow blanket and the shared color between the blanket and the signs link the bicycle and Provo to Lennon and Ono's campaign for peace in Vietnam.

This whole scene in the hotel room is set against the backdrop of the city of Amsterdam through the windows. The city is darker than all of the objects inside the room and extends out into the distance. The combination of the white and well lit room, the colorful flowers, the signs, and the visibly comfortable bed and clothing of Ono and Lennon create the impression that this hotel room is a peaceful and safe space in contrast to the dark city through the windows. The

white bicycles were usually placed in the city of Amsterdam itself and the bicycle's presence in the room links the room, its inhabitants, and their message to the city and the outside world that appear waiting for this message to be spread whether through the signs on the windows or the return of the bicycle to the city. The full effect of the lighting, colors, and inside/outside distinction is to unify Provo's bicycle project with Lennon and Ono's campaign for peace.

Provo's bicycle project is connected to campaigns for peace through these visual elements of the photograph similar to how Charles Henri de Saint-Simon believed that transportation connections were a critical part of society and a way to foster a more peaceful utopian world. In his *Sketch of a New Political System* Saint-Simon wrote that:

Drainage, land clearing, road building, the opening up of canals will be considered the most important part of this project [of the Chamber of *Invention*]. The roads and canals to be built should not be conceived only as a means of facilitating transport; their construction should be planned so as to make them as pleasant as possible for travellers.<sup>1</sup>

Saint-Simon believed that transportation was key to a successful utopian project and that transportation should not simply be based on utility, but should also be planned around making travel a pleasant experience. Provo's White Bicycle Plan mirrors this thinking by imagining an Amsterdam in which travel is based less on speed and volume and more on sustainability and the common pleasure derived from riding a bike. Additionally, the Saint-Simonians saw connections as a key tool for the creation of a more peaceful world as was evident in their involvement with the building of the Suez Canal. This utopian philosophy is also present in the Provo photograph in which the Bicycle plan is visually connected to the program for peace in Vietnam being

---

<sup>1</sup> Charles Henri de Saint-Simon, "Sketch of a New Political System," in *The Utopia Reader*, ed. Gregory Claeys and Lyman Tower Sargent (New York: NYU Press, 1999), 202-203.

advocated for by Lennon and Ono; an association of transportation method to peace that echoes the Saint-Simonian philosophy.

This connection, both direct in the image and symbolic in the use of color and light, between transportation method and political ideology, whether Provo's anarchism, or Lennon and Ono's anti-war philosophy, suggests an opening for further research. A bicycle is an item for an individual and exists as a method of transportation on a human, rather than a systemic, scale. This focus on the importance and value of the individual fits both with Provo's anarchist beliefs and with the anti-war movement. This image further evokes the philosophy of both Provo and Lennon through the bicycle's white color and illumination, making it a representation of peace, hope, and purity in a quasi-religious sense. Transportation projects have oftentimes served as representations of the political philosophies of their advocates and planners and usually these connections are made through visual elements of the projects. This connection between political beliefs and transportation system plans, especially alternative systems under analyzed in comparison to automobile transport, merits further investigation. How do the visual and functional compositions of these transportation plans mimic the philosophies of their designers? How can transportation systems serve as symbols for political movements and what visual tools are used to create this symbolic effect? These questions are largely answered by investigating alternative-transportation advocates, flushing out their underlying socio-political ideology, and then using visual analysis to search for the manifestation of their beliefs in their work. Ideology could also be extrapolated from the image or object itself. Throughout this research the symbolic and political functioning of alternative transportation systems should be compared to the functioning of more dominant systems, such as General Motor's Futurama, in order to show how

different types of utopian transportation systems function symbolically and politically in different ways.

#### Works Cited

De Saint-Simon, Charles Henri. "Sketch of a New Political System." In *The Utopia Reader*, edited by

Gregory Claeys and Lyman Tower Sargent, 202-206. New York: NYU Press, 1999.