

THE FIXIE FIXATION

Introducing the bicycle craze that literally can't be stopped

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In David Koepp's 2012 bicycle messenger action-thriller *Premium Rush* (yes, apparently that is an actual genre), Joseph Gordon-Levitt's beleaguered hero Wilee deadpans this startling line through clenched teeth:

"I like to ride. Fixed gear. No brakes. Can't stop. Don't want to, either."

Well, pardon me, Mr. JGL, but I so do desire the ability to pause my single-track vehicle when I'm hurtling down the street towards oncoming traffic. It helps prevent certain undesirable afflictions, like, you know, death.

I only mention this because it has recently come to my attention that there exists a whole community of kinetic individuals who are very much against the idea of coming to a complete stop—or at least easily. As such, these forward-thinking (and moving) folk have devised a way to transform their early morning commutes and leisurely weekend joy rides into nonstop jaunts towards bodily harm.

Ladies and gentleman, I give you the "fixie."

A fixie, according to our reliable friends over at Wikipedia, is "a bicycle that has a drivetrain with no freewheel mechanism. A fixed-gear drivetrain has the drive sprocket threaded or bolted directly to the hub of the back wheel, so that the rider cannot stop pedaling. When the rear wheel turns, the pedals turn in the same direction. This allows a cyclist to apply a braking force with the legs and bodyweight, by resisting the rotation of the cranks. It also makes it possible to ride backwards, although learning to do so is much more difficult than riding forward.

"As a general rule, fixed-gear bicycles are single-speed. A derailleur cannot be fitted because the chain cannot have any slack. Most fixed-gear bicycles only have a front brake, and some have no brakes at all."

The appeal here, I believe, is that riding without a freewheel is *more organic* and allows the rider to become *better synced* with the road. I put emphasis on those phrases because they could be subbed out for the word "cooler" and the sentence would more or less read the same.

Perhaps I'm being stuffy, but this fixie fixation is what is commonly referred to as a trend. As is the case with all trends, people who adhere to them are trying to be *trendy* (yes, the aforementioned rule applies here too).

That's not hating—it simple semantics.

The fixie, of course, is nothing new. But they are newly fashionable, surging into mainstream counter culture (which in and of itself is a paradox, but that's the kind of topsy-turvy world we live in) over the last few years thanks to the aggressive tastes of urbanite hipsters—a newfangled offshoot of the yuppie that possess a mutating, trans-Atlantic melting pot of styles and behaviors.

Hipsters, essentially, are both the heralds and gatekeepers of popularity. They usher in new "it" items every so often and then stand guard over a taut velvet rope, deciding disdainfully who is and isn't allowed into their exclusive company.

And that brings us back to the fixie, which is the coolest thing on two wheels and a predominant and vital fixture of the current hipster ethos.

I, for one, don't get it, but I guess it isn't surprising that there exists a contingent of people relishing yet another chance to stand out from the crowd. The fixie is most certainly great coffee shop talk—I can picture bearded, slick-haired youths sipping espresso and lovingly describing the fluorescent paint job on their Cinelli MASH Histogram frame to the local barista as I type this.



It should be noted, for the sake of fairness, that I've always been a bit of a cycling pessimist. I crashed a lot as a kid (balance issues I think, or perhaps the sun was just always in my eyes), so the dream of ever winning the Tour de France, much less avoiding the neighbors' bramble bushes, died fairly young. And on the rare occasion I do saddle up on a Schwinn and take on the scenic forest preserves of southern Illinois, I ride slow and steady and coast whenever there's the slightest decline in terrain.

So no, I will not be joining this brakeless revolution. I don't have the mind or the mettle for it.

But if you're up for a challenge, go ahead and give a fixie a whirl. No freewheel. No brakes. No stopping. And a rare sneak peek behind the velvet rope.

Sounds terribly unappealing from my boring vantage point on two legs, but you're probably a braver (and "cooler") soul than I. ⚙️