CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Openings and Retrospectives

SPEED: An Introduction

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Children go fast because they know how to glide in between.

—Gilles Deleuze

On every front, life is being mobilized. Connected and put in motion, activated and fast-forwarded, life is sped up in unprecedented ways. This Openings collection is premised on the conviction that the world is accelerating, and that anthropology needs to catch up. We do not make a claim for a faster anthropology, but rather for the crafting of concepts capable of creatively engaging with forces and intensities—technological, but also economic, political, and geological—that constitute and spoil the worlds we are attached to. We aim to open anthropological practice to temporalities that are immanent to both the congeal-

ment of life—for instance, of responsive capacities—and to potential deviations and overflows.

With few exceptions, social-science analyses focusing explicitly on speed remain relatively scarce. Anthropologists have often approached temporal notions, such as speed or rhythm, as static symbolic or cultural categories. By contrast, we aim for a timely probe into machinic, productive, pressurizing, and largely intangible energetics that operate within, across, and beyond specific social configurations and forms of life. It is our conviction that an anthropological engagement with speed can open new theoretical directions and empirical terrains. We seek to ask: How can anthropology engage with speed as a processual matter that permeates our theoretical and descriptive accounts of practices, processes, and realities? In what way would it allow us to study them otherwise?

Opening anthropological practice to speed raises the question of how speed is experienced. It entails exploring creative drives and vitalities, but also emergent forms of fragility and dispossession, of anxiety and suffocation. Fast-paced life comes with relentless involvements that, while not totally exhausting life, may be wearing it out and pushing it to the limit: on the verge of depression. We aim to raise the question of the *viability* of life at ever-growing velocities. Specifically, an anthropology of speed could be framed as an exploration, at once ethical, political, and ontological, of our collective (in)capacity to imagine a viable future. It seeks to probe into the effects of the widening gap between our sense of a threatening future to come—call it a pandemic outbreak, a financial breakdown, or the impending ecological catastrophe—and our capacity to imagine a viable way forward. In doing so, anthropology can provide conceptual and practical tools to tackle prevailing stupor and powerlessness.

For quite some time, social and technological acceleration have been associated with disorientation, disruption, and the negation of life.[1] Even a cursory scan of modern artistic, literary, and cultural history reveals countless accounts of the effects of speed on metropolitan existence, the compression of time and space, modes of industrial production, and the circulation of capital, ideas, information, people, and materials.[2] As Reinhart Koselleck (2004) has shown, a sense of acceleration has accompanied modern societies' relationship to the future and conditioned possibilities for action at least since the mid-eighteenth century. An anthropology of speed should thus not be considered as an attempt to isolate the present times as some sort of tipping point or radical break in which a historical continuum would culminate.

Inquiries into speed should not hesitate to excavate past, and even ancient, experiences and sensibilities whose resonance with the present can paradoxically help resist the temptation to naturalize experiences of acceleration as traumatic assaults on everyday life.[3] Inferring speed from prevailing social anxiety not only leads to a downplaying of other temporalities but, by reifying speed as pathological, also risks strengthening its numbing effect and narrowing the range of possible responses to a matter of therapeutic management—coping, preparing, securitizing, and so on. To epic, totalizing accounts of coming catastrophes, we prefer "the 'partial takes' and 'continuous weaving'" (Bordeleau 2015, 161) involved in the arts of narrating the rhythms of the world we are becoming with, to borrow a set of terms from the work of Donna Haraway.

While speed has been thought of as a symptom of ambient nihilism for some time, it nevertheless seems to us that, more than ever today, speed tends to crystallize into a "general *resentment* against the future" (Glezos 2011, 163). We propose that our collective inability to imagine a viable future remains inseparable from the irruption into our lifeworlds of what Peter Sloterdijk (2012) refers to as "the monstrous," namely, of a reality with which humans have a sort of complicity but which reveals itself as resisting appropriation. As was noted by Steven Shaviro (2015, 8–9), our sense of a future that has been cancelled speaks to the fact that we cannot apprehend the forces that make our lives precarious. We do not, for example, directly experience global warming, financial networks, or the technical operations that constitute the media environments to which we are immanent.

The articulation between human knowledge and the stubborn existence of things is, of course, nothing new to anthropological or philosophical inquiry. An anthropology of speed, however, is fascinated with the *accelerated* obsolescence of practices and techniques—of calculation, measurement, representation, and so forth—that once hampered the shock of a direct confrontation with a seemingly incommensurable reality. Modernist delusions of a total, anticipatory assimilation of the future have backfired: the more dogged our efforts at domesticating the beast, the more explicit its indifference to these desires and the more intense the summoning into action. Under such pressure, the future appears so close at hand that it is imaginable only as the continuity of a shallow, contracted present (Crary 2013, 41). As a result, modern hypersubjects, to borrow from Dominic Boyer and Timothy Morton (2016), are "perpetually out of sync." They have to let go of the security once provided by a time-consciousness taken to be "an accomplice of the time of the world" (Derrida 1998, 67). An anthropology of speed is thus

continually confronted with the most practical question: Are we opening ourselves to the future, or is the future opening us up?

Figure 1. Another end of the world is possible, Université Paris Ouest Nanterre. Photo courtesy of Audrey Bochaton.

In addressing such a question, we certainly share now widespread claims about the ontological indeterminacy, radical openness, and vitality of matter and things—not the least because they contest the temporal fixity of identity. The challenge, however, is to be able to think vitality *with* exertion, openness *with* enclosure, and indeterminacy *with* the antagonistic forces that effectively constitute our worlds.[4] Having not forgotten the work of Michel Foucault, we know well enough that the radical auto-affirmation of the vital can all too easily be mobilized by processes of closure and ordering of all kinds.

An anthropology of speed examines how the demands of an unknowable future-to-come contribute to grounding transformative action in a temporality of crisis (Roitman 2013): that is, not a critical moment or lapse that will pass, but a moment where the very groundings for action are in crisis. It is interested in the temporal logics at play in the stabilization of emergency into a permanent state of affairs, and in politics of minimal existence and care (Caduff 2015). We ask: How can different forms of speed temporalize futures and shape the present conditions of knowledge and life in certain ways and not others? But also: What is it that drives and *exceeds* the movements by which a particular kind of speed is stabilized into form?

Among the theoretical currents to have recently steered debates in this direction, accelerationism has been drawing remarkable attention. While accelerationism comes in many guises, its proponents share the notion that to recover a future canceled by political paralysis, we need to find a way out of ever more subsuming, violent, and destructive capitalist forces. And the way out, they propose, is "the way through" (Shaviro 2015, 2). They find inspiration in Friedrich Nietzsche, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and above all in Karl Marx's suggestion that capitalism could be overcome through an intensification of its contradictions. Hence, accelerationists call for the unleashing of latent productive forces and human potential—which a capitalist mode of production atrophies, constrains, and traps—by speeding things up. For accelerationists, a technology can exceed its original uses and be revamped as part of an experimental process of discovery toward postcapitalist emancipation (Williams and Srnicek 2013). To put it in a nutshell, they do not see speed as the enemy: rather, it is the paralysis produced by *capitalist* speed and its capture of everything indeterminate.

On the one hand, accelerationism opens a space for strategic thinking that raises the question of how technological systems—things like logistics networks, automation, and data analytics—can be repurposed to effectuate change. Following in their wake, refusing to embrace speed or seeking to live in a New Arcadia in the name of a self-sufficient, reconciled, or pacified humanity—to be protected against a catastrophe to come—are not viable options. In a way, then, accelerationists force us to give up a sense of security and to move out of a defensive posture that may *overactivate* the threats we face and block the future.

On the other hand, as Deborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2014) have noted, the accelerationist capacity to imagine a future is premised on the telos of an abstract (post)humanity to come. Apparently, all we would need to do is to build our way toward that which we are just not *yet* able to be. With accelerationists and their technological fixes, the grand narratives of progress and of Promethean mastery of the world have returned with a vengeance. Such a teleology of connectivity and speed can be seen as a (dubious) extension of Marx's famous anticipation, according to which the contradictions of capital could spur the annihilation of space by time. According to this thesis, primarily popularized by David Harvey (e.g., Harvey 2001), the reduction in the cost and time of the movement of commodities is a basic law or necessity of capital accumulation—and, indeed, of imperialism. The inner dialectic of overaccumulation, Harvey argues, constantly requires spatial fixes and temporal solutions to avoid economic crisis. Hence the contradiction: the speed-up of the circulation of capital

that drives to eliminate spatial barriers can only be sustained through physical and social infrastructures (transport and communication infrastructures, urbanization, etc.) that end up acting as a barrier to the process of capital accumulation by freezing productive forces into a fixed spatial form—leading to what Harvey (2007) refers to, after Joseph Schumpeter, as "creative destruction."

This notion of a self-negating acceleration is reminiscent of what this introduction has previously described as a speed-induced sense of inertia and a congealed, futureless present. However, without denying the importance of speed in the development of capitalist political economies, the contributors to this Openings collection contend that subsuming the creative power of speed—and indeed, of time—into such a lawlike historical movement offers very little in the way of reclaiming a sense of the future. If anything, it naturalizes speed by concealing the labor, infrastructures, and historical formations that produce the division between object and subject. It also risks foreclosing other modes of thinking, knowing, and doing economy (Roelvink, St. Martin, and Gibson-Graham 2015). We thus refuse to reduce speed to a process of real abstraction, or to a movement between opposites, toward their sublimation into something greater—an emancipated, revolutionary subjectivity, one fully present to itself. Speed is not linear. Neither is it relative to movement between preexisting points. By contrast, we are interested in how things begin to live and pick up speed in *the middle*, to borrow an image dear to Deleuze—that is, with relations of speed and slowness as they are existing always-in-between, creating their own milieu. Existing in the middle, however, should not be equated with being immune to worldly violences and complications: "Being in the middle of a line is the most uncomfortable position" (Deleuze and Parnet 2007, 39). Speed provides no easy escape from the relations of force that constitute order and make things work.

Our (in)capacity to imagine a viable future in the midst of ambient speed can also be approached in light of a recent anthropological interest in debates around the Anthropocene (see Howe and Pandian 2016), and the critical claims about modernist assumptions of anthropocentrism posing a threat to the interconnected webs that constitute our planetary living with other beings. The contributors to this collection certainly feel close to Isabelle Stengers's (2015) suggestion that, to offer a timely resistance to what she calls the "coming barbarism," we have to relearn the arts of paying attention and of hesitating. If we desert the "war that capitalism makes rule" (Stengers 2015, 23, 132, 24) it is only to repopulate the "devastated desert of our imagination" and explore "connections with new powers of acting, feeling, imagining, and thinking." Learning how to live

and think with the complications of the world is a condition of taking care of the possible that we aim to bring into existence as possibility. We have to find new ways of inhabiting speed.[5]

This might mean paying careful attention to the differential speeds marking our becoming with the other beings and things that make up our world. We agree with Cymene Howe (2016) that one condition being made explicit in contemporary debates around the Anthropocene is that we should learn (again) to tell time, and to "think in chrono-mashups with divergent scales: geological time married with temporal immediacies, crises, and catastrophes." Beyond geological time, high-speed digital time as a form of lived experience and sociality has started to receive much-deserved ethnographic attention (Boellstorff 2008; Boyer 2013). We also share Geoffrey Bowker's (2015) conviction that mapping the temporalities of infrastructure as ontology may take us beyond "the dead weight of progressivist historiography," and force us to recognize that infrastructures do "not inhabit human lifetimes." This also echoes recent calls to attend the deep temporalities of geological formations, minerals, and energy that sustain contemporary accelerations (Parikka 2015).[6] In other words, anthropology should not be satisfied with documenting cultural or historical variations in the experience of speed. It should also decenter the scope of its analysis to examine inhuman or more-than-human temporalities as complex objects of inquiry in their own rights, alongside their cultural and symbolic representations. How, we ask, can anthropological inquiry account for processes that operate in a time frame not reducible or subordinated to human experiential time?

A good illustration of the challenges raised by such a decentering is the rise of high-frequency trading (HFT) within the financial sector. Roughly put, HFT is a type of algorithmic trading characterized by the high speeds of its operations. In HFT, algorithms execute orders, identifying good deals and trends more than a million times faster than a human investor can blink. More often than not, HFT has hit the headlines with stories of catastrophic events, spectacular crashes and recoveries, which came to be known as "flash crashes." On May 6, 2010, to mention a famous example, the Dow Jones stock index lost about 9 percent ($862 billion) of its value within minutes, by far the fastest plunge ever witnessed. Again, the operations involved in flash crashes happen in tenths and hundredths of a second, well beyond human response time and the grasp of consciousness. Their sheer velocity and the abstraction needed for such high-speed operations indeed make these practices very difficult to grasp, easily seen as opaque and downright enigmatic for naked human perception.

Figure 2. The immobility of the server room. Photo by Torkild Retvedt.

High-speed algorithmic abstraction, however, is not as automated and spontaneous as it may appear. During the past few years, HFT has led to a speed war among traders, who have been investing tremendous amounts of money in technology and infrastructure. Vast data centers were built at strategic locations—for instance, across the street from the NASDAQ servers in Carteret, New Jersey—and tunnels were dug through the rock of the Allegheny Mountains to lay fiber-optic cable between New York and Chicago to shave a few milliseconds in transmission latency. In sharp contrast with fantasies of a singular, flat, immaterial, and frictionless financialization, attention to the rise of HFT makes explicit the importance of changing, coordinating, and tweaking material assemblages, together with their legal and institutional contingencies (Toscano 2013). In fact, HFT "gives the obdurate physical reality of space a renewed prominence, and a physical constraint—the speed of light—is of growing importance" (MacKenzie et al. 2012, 281).

Building from these reflections, an anthropology of speed opens up speed as a constitutive dimension of the fabric of things, of biological substance and its infrastructures and modes of production. It is not concerned with speed as a stable object of inquiry, but rather with how speed is enmeshed in and sustained by given material, political, technical, and socioeconomic temporal configurations. We fully acknowledge, however, that such a commitment raises thorny episte-

mological issues, which include but are not limited to: Does ethnography require casting off the ineffable character of speed, finding solace in the priority of empirically traceable movement(s)? Should ethnography allow itself to speculate about that to which it has no direct access? In other words: How can speed be represented, without turning it into a static object of inquiry?

NOTES

1. For a more optimistic approach, which challenges machinic power over life and insists that temporal demands are not inherent to technology but are the result of human schemes and desires, see Wajcman 2015.
2. We share John Tomlinson's (2007) suggestion that the experience of speed has been for the most part subsumed to other concerns and phenomena in cultural-theoretical analyses of modernity, in contrast with its central place in cultural imagination and in the work of artists and writers. There are, of course, some exceptions to that: notably, the Italian Futurists, some Marxist texts, parts of the work of Georg Simmel, Max Weber, and John Dewey, and the precursory work of Paul Virilio.
3. Scholarly concern with speed is not historically linear. As noted by Hartmut Rosa (2013, 300), the classical sociological analyses of modernity produced between 1880 and 1920 can be "reconstructed as *diagnoses of acceleration*." This aspect of societal development, however, was then "very much forgotten in the social scientific analysis" throughout the twentieth century. For a discussion of the unsuspected contemporaneity of elements of the past that can leap across time to illuminate the present, see William Mazzarella's (forthcoming) essay on what he calls the "mana moment" in anthropology.
4. Hence, ontological indeterminacy should not be equated with a version of the liberal motto according to which "everything is possible"—remember Nike's famous slogan, "Just do it." To borrow from Karen Barad's (2012, 12) musings on nothingness: "There are an infinite number of possibilities but not everything is possible."
5. For a similar argument in anthropology, see Anna Tsing's (2015, 24–25) praise of the importance of developing and protecting what she calls *the arts of noticing*—that is, the techniques of curiosity or play that make it possible to follow the becomings of things or to look closely and find their peculiarities—abandoning "progress rhythms to watch polyphonic assemblages." These, for Tsing, are the resourceful ways of making sense of what capitalist ruins and the conditions of precarity produced by rampant capitalism are not paying attention to.
6. An interesting case of the effects of such inhuman temporalities is the increasing concerns and mobilisations around so-called e-waste, whose polluting materials are getting out of control as an overflow not only of increasing digitalization but also of planned obsolescence.

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