

Uneven Accelerations

John Tomlinson, *The Culture of Speed: The Coming of Immediacy*. Thousand Oaks, CA and London: Sage, 2007. 192 pp. ISBN 9781412912037, \$39.95 pbk.

José van Dijck, *Mediated Memories in the Digital Age*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007. 256 pp. ISBN 0804756244, \$21.95.

Robert Hassan & Ronald E. Purser, *24/7: Time and Temporality in the Network Society*. Stanford, CA, Stanford Business Books, 2007. 304 pp. ISBN 0804751978, \$29.95.

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A sense of acceleration has been integral to the paradigmatic experiences of Western modernity at least since the mid-eighteenth century. It is not simply the case that things are not what they used to be, but that they seem to happen at a different pace, imbue us with a different reality and sense of time, and, importantly, represents new challenges in terms of how we navigate past, present, and the future we hurtle towards. Speed is thus in a sense old news, both as an experience and an object of study—even if the technologies involved are always new. Analysts have disagreed over the relative importance of particular cultural changes, the rise of capitalism, and technological developments in driving these uneven accelerations. Reinhardt Koselleck, for one, argues that they predate the 'technicisation of communication', while others, such as Wolfgang Schivelbusch and James W. Carey, emphasize the importance of 'new media'—initially the railroad and the telegraph. But few take issue with the core contention of social theorist Paul Virilio's pioneering 'dromological' work, that things are speeding up, a phenomenon

conceptualized in various general and abstract terms in the 1990s as 'time-space compression' (David Harvey), 'time-space distancing' (Anthony Giddens), or the advent of 'timeless time' (Manuel Castells) and explored by a growing literature of time studies.

The spread of new media and their publicly acknowledged potentials for a further speeding up of an already accelerated modernity has added further urgency to the question of speed and human reactions to it. Media technologies and communications seem to remain center stage when it comes to acceleration. This development is addressed in different ways in the books under review here: John Tomlinson's *The Culture of Speed* deals with changing cultural imaginations around speed, José van Dijck's *Mediated Memories in the Digital Age* analyzes new practices and objects used to create a sense of self in the past, present, and future, and Robert Hassan and Ronald E. Purser's edited anthology *24/7: Time and Temporality in the Network Society* scrutinizes experiences of time in the network society.

These more granular approaches are welcome. Powerful and compelling as it is, the discourse of acceleration should also be approached with care, lest it turns into a metanarrative that obscures more than it reveals. Yes, a lot of things take place at great speed, but there are also costs—the spread of new media has been accompanied by what Geert Lovink in his contribution to *24/7* calls the "*temps perdu*" of new media, offline commuting times are up and the social distribution—and presumable unevenness—of acceleration and deceleration is rarely investigated in detail. But if we are almost certainly *not* witnessing 'the acceleration of just about everything', what is up with speed then?

Cultures of Speed

Tomlinson provides one take on this question. *The Culture of Speed* is unapologetically a book

about books, and a clear and well-argued one at that. It deals with modern cultural imaginations around speed (mainly as they are articulated in academic, professional, and literary works), and with how these may be changing in the early twenty-first century.

In the first part of his book, Tomlinson identifies two co-existing and partly contradictory stories about 'machine-speed' in modernity. One deals with 'rational-progressive speed', and the other with 'unruly speed'. The emblematic figure of the former is the French urbanist and planner Le Corbusier with his visions of orderly progress. In the latter, the Italian Futurist and crypto-Fascist F.T. Marinetti looms large with his celebrations of creative destruction. In Tomlinson's account, the rational-progressive discourse cast speed as another example of man's technologically enhanced domination of nature, a basically utilitarian development driven in various versions of the account by different self-styled engines of historical progress. The story about unruly speed, in contrast, highlights the sensuous pleasures of hurtling along, revel in the inequalities of speed, and embrace Dionysian driving forces such as intoxication and a will to power as they are outlined by ideologues like Marinetti. In his discussion of the two accounts, Tomlinson rightly insists that any analysis of the cultural history of speed has to deal also with various articulations of the virtues of acceleration that more theoretical accounts such as Virilio's have often downplayed in favor of various refined critiques of its vices. This is an evenhandedness that is not always equally pronounced in academic treatments of speed that often seem to shade into implicit naturalism and more or less explicit narratives of decline from some point in time when things supposedly took place at a more orderly and humane pace. Tomlinson's account of the two cultures of speed is interesting and to the point, though it leaves the reader wanting a 'history from below' to supplement it with an understanding of how different classes of people—and not just different intellectuals—thought about and experienced speed in

the twentieth century. For many, the conveyor belt may have been a more paradigmatic technology of acceleration than various media for communication.

On the basis of his analysis of the two modern narratives, Tomlinson opens up the second half of his book, dedicated to an extended discussion of what he sees as a third and emergent way of understanding speed, centered on the notion of 'immediacy', and the means of mediation and delivery that enable it. Immediacy is a cultural principle that Tomlinson argues accompanies a novel technological basis where new media are increasingly replacing the industrial underpinnings of machine speed. While recognizing that it grows out of the existing accounts, Tomlinson suggests the idea of immediacy may be about to supplant the rational-progressive and unruly accounts we have inherited. In its most basic form, immediacy replace speed with proximity and instantaneity—things that where hitherto perhaps fast, but nonetheless still 'there' and 'then', are now cast as simply 'here' and 'now'. While the cultural imagination around the 'condition of immediacy' is yet to produce its Le Corbusier or Marinetti, one need but glance around to see its slogans everywhere. The idea seems attractive in business as in life, and is endlessly invoked in all the "right here, right nows", "just in times", and "anytime, anywheres" that the PR industry and the technorati can spew out.

Tomlinson's discussion of the discourse of immediacy points to an interesting paradox. The ideas of proximity and instantaneity in one sense represents, as he writes, "the redundancy or abolition of the middle term" (p. 91). With wireless Internet access, the right laptop, and the appropriate subscriptions, no pesky librarian or insufferably egoistical other reader is to prevent me from perusing the journal I desire at the time and place of my choosing. But of course, in this scenario, as in many others, Tomlinson notes "the media of communications ... are indispensable to any account of the condition of immediacy" (p. 95). So in fact, one set of middle terms seems

to have been not so much *abolished* as *replaced* by another set of increasingly ubiquitous middle terms—various forms of digital and networked forms of new media integral to acceleration and the occasional realization of promises of immediacy, especially in the area of information. Here, where he outlines the paradox of a discourse that simultaneously speaks of abolition and ubiquity, Tomlinson's analysis seems to reach the limit of what one can do through cultural history and discussions of social theory, and open up a space that calls for a different kind of inquiry into the more precise configuration and driving forces of this proliferation and the various relations between technological underpinnings, social practices, and cultural imaginations that they allow. Tomlinson's discussion of the cultures of speed, the imagination of immediacy and its technological underpinnings is interesting, but the question of whether immediacy is best understood as one of several competing accounts of speed, or, as Tomlinson often seems to suggest, a new and distinct 'condition' is yet to be determined, just as the relative distribution of the means of immediacy and subjective reactions to it needs to be scrutinized. The metanarratives of acceleration and immediacy are empirical facts, but not necessarily empirically accurate. The follow-up questions are then—when and where do people encounter accelerations, and how do they live with them?

Navigating an accelerated life

Some of the essays in *24/7* deal with variations of these questions and inquire into organizational, aesthetic, and organizational reactions to new timescapes, but José van Dijck's *Mediated Memories in the Digital Age* stands out for breaching much more particular questions of subjectivity and the appropriation of new technologies in mundane practices of remembering

that deal with navigating life under partly new conditions. Her work on 'mediated memories', defined as "the activities and objects we produce and appropriate by means of media technologies, for creating and re-creating a sense of past, present, and future of ourselves in relation to others" (p. 21) is multi-faceted and draws upon a range of sources in cognitive science, science and technology studies, and cultural studies. I will focus here mainly on the aspects that overlap with the problem of acceleration.

Mediated Memories invites us to scrutinize more closely contemporary practices of remembering through digital affordances like blogs, MP3s, photographs, and video recordings, the technological zones around which van Dijck structure her discussion and her examples. The book represents a genuinely interdisciplinary analysis, integrating a focus on nature (with elements taken from cognitive science), culture (elements from cultural studies), and technology (elements from science and technology studies and new media studies). The mixture provides a couple of conceptual starting points for van Dijck's analysis of memory as something simultaneously intensely personal and relational, namely that binaries like internal/external, media/memory, and the like, while potentially useful in the demarcation of academic fields, are unuseful as analytical tools in understanding how digitization change practices of remembrance, and hence should be avoided.

Van Dijck's insistence on the performative nature of technologically assisted memory finds a route between the natural, the cultural, and the technological that opens up for closer attention to the role of media objects in an everyday life populated by actual people, and not simply competing discourses or disagreements amongst prominent social theorists. Van Dijck's central thesis about mediated memories in the digital age is that the affordances of new technologies lend them to a much more performative, short-term, and immediately expressive

use than their analogue predecessors with their orientation towards storage (dare one call this an acceleration of memory-work?). The point is perhaps most forcefully illustrated with the example of digital photography. As van Dijck notes, both Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes in their respective seminal analyses concluded that the main function of practices of photography was remembrance. This is less clearly the case today where photographic images materialize immediately, ready to be easily sent and shared via cell phones and social software. This lends them a potentially different performative and social dimension. The particular practice of photo-sharing illustrates the paradox of Tomlinson's 'condition of immediacy'—while those involved may share instantaneously and feel proximate, this is only possible because of the many new intermediaries (small and increasingly mundane as they may be) that has come between them.

Another set of questions lurking at the margins of van Dijck's discussions of memory is of the acceleration and refinement of third-party use of digital technologies of remembrance, and the strategies of those who resist them—an adjacent discussion of surveillance that has of course been the subject of much interest over the years (ironically, new interdisciplinary fields sometimes seems to be almost as separate from each other as old mono-disciplinary fields). *Mediated Memories* does touch upon remembrance as a site for negotiation or struggle, in particular in the interesting chapter on digital film and video that deals with micro-practices of counter-memory where one family is trying to carve out a sanctuary in a world that interprets in a way they will not come to terms with—a reaction numerous activists, clandestine or legal, around the world can probably identify with. The central point to retain here, however, and one that need to be kept in mind in discussions of new media and acceleration, is the importance not only of discourse and technology, but of agency and struggle in everyday life.

The Many Accelerations

Discourse, technology, and struggle all pops up in the thirteen essays collected by Robert Hassan and Ronald E. Purser in *24/7: Time and Temporality in the Network Society*. The abundance of different angles and kinds of acceleration explored here begins to give one a sense of what a wide terrain it is that begs for analysis. The title could lead one to expect more sociological analysis *ala* Juliet Schor, Arlie Hochschild, or Robert Levine, but the book contains little of that. Instead, the contributors inquire into everything from particular algorithms and time-image cinema as used in *The Matrix*, over networked practices of online behavior, and to organizational practices under accelerated circumstances.

The editors' introduction defines the problem of the volume as 'our experience of time in the network society', though one quickly gets the sense that the sentence should be read in the plural all the way through, as 'experiences' and 'societies', since so little seems to be in common between the programmers, film producers, and managers dealt with in the different essays. Hassan and Purser reminds their readers of the conclusions reached by previous analysts of time, of Schor's 'time-squeeze', of Virilio's warnings of a incipient 'dictatorship of speed', affirms that our relationship to time is changing and merits analysis, and buttress the claim with references to the grand theorists of the 1990s and the 'new social morphology' that they announced. A reference to Barbara Adam's notion of 'timescapes' serves as one of the few unifying figure for the essays to come, so I will only touch upon a few that speaks directly to the different analysis of acceleration and new media discussed above.

Geert Lovink's interesting essay 'Indifference of the Networked Presence: On Time Management the Self' (already invoked above) is important here because he so explicitly warns against the "technoilliterate" grand social theorists mentioned above, writers he argues have

"locked themselves up in a general jargon of 1990s metaphors such as "cyberspace"" (p.162)—this is but one of the mythological terms he wants us to discard, or at least only treat as data, and not tools for analysis. Lovink's essay is mainly concerned with demonstrating how closer analysis to how people actually *use* new media, live online, etc challenge many of the established truisms of abstract analysis of the new wired configuration. One example is the notion of global standard time which various entities have tried to introduce as a standard online (one example Lovink has dealt with elsewhere is 'Swatch Time'), but which, Lovink argues, has never been as important in navigating the Internet as what he calls 'global time-awareness', the ability of each individual participant to accurately understand the circumstances of other participants. Lovink's analysis here suggests a much less homogenizing and oppressive online timescape than what one could fear, and a more complex account of time and speed than what the metanarratives of acceleration would suggest.

'The Clock-Time Paradox', Ida H.J. Sabelis' contribution to *24/7*, is another relevant essay in this context. As an organizational anthropologist, she explores the function of time as an organizing concept in global networks. Based on research amongst managers and academics, Sabelis shows how people cope with new and intensely demanding timescapes through their own use of the same technologies that help bring about the pressure they are under. In her cases, the Internet both help and hinder people in their daily work, providing simultaneously a structure of support and a set of time-consuming demands. Close and ambiguous analysis like this can be somewhat frustrating for those who want to pin down developments in overarching concepts or 'prove' or 'disprove' metanarratives of acceleration, but bring a unique perspective and set of insights to a field that, as Sabelis writes, "rarely [is] based on empirical findings and usually has an orientation towards the philosophical" (p. 258). Clearly, it will take more than case studies of

speed to scrutinize claims of general acceleration, and the growing body of time studies represents several steps in this direction.

Conclusion

Robert Hassan's own contribution to *24/7* is interesting not so much for its reiteration of claims that new technologies are utterly transforming the world, including the dominant timescapes, but more because he explicitly brings in a political dimension largely absent from most discussions in this area, including from the work of Tomlinson and van Dijck and most of the contributors to Hassan and Purser's volume. It is interesting to note here that the work done on time by the more politically interested social theorists William Scheuerman and Hartmut Rosa is almost ignored in the three books under review. Hassan adds a political dimension to his narrative of a decline from a time "in which humans were able to exert a measure of temporal control." (p. 38). I wonder who they were and whether the idea of a fall from grace is useful, but the introduction of the question of self-government is interesting. Scheuerman's work deals, amongst other things, with the fact that most political institutions and philosophies hark back to a time when a lot of things were slower. This is just one example of something Rosa incorporates into his social theory of acceleration, namely the idea that the speeding up is 'asynchronous'—a point worth bearing in mind.

For all the contributions of the books at hand and their forbears, it remains the case that there is much we simply do not know about such unevenness, especially if one is interested in issues of acceleration and ways of coping beyond the tech-savvy, gadget-equipped, and speed-addicted upper-middle class. In terms of its reality and its distribution, there seems to be a double unevenness of acceleration, one of acceleration itself, and one of who are involved, that bears

more inquiry, especially into concrete everyday socio-technological practices that may not only provide ever more examples of how everything is always getting faster, but also more complicated scenarios of acceleration accompanied by resistance and transformation.

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