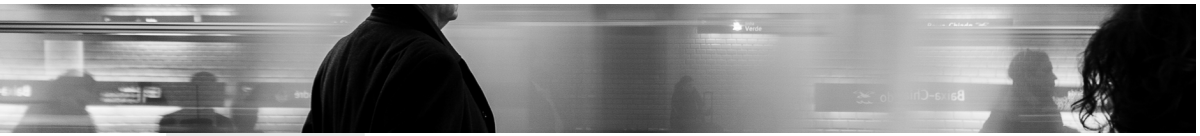
CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Openings and Retrospectives



INHABITING MEDIA: An Anthropology of Life in Digital Speed

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The eternal silence of these infinite spaces terrifies me.

—Blaise Pascal

By the grace of modern technology, the journalist Alexander Nazaryan (2013) writes in an essay on anxiety, we can fill some of those infinite spaces whose eternal silence once terrified Pascal "with the luminous procession of tweets and shares and updates." From his own existential anxiety, Nazaryan reports that he has found a digital solace, taken in hours scrolling through Facebook news feeds, watching YouTube videos of dachshund puppies, looking at places on Google Earth that he will never visit in person, and perusing recipes he will never cook. The stimulation of an always-on, connected existence, Nazaryan suggests, is not a mere distraction or capture of attention. The appeasing energies or soothing currents of digital seas, by contrast, provide him with shelter from the terror of the outside world, turning it into somewhere more bearable. Through excessive, repetitive exposure, Nazaryan immunizes himself against dreaded, inexorable death—"all of it inconsequential, all of it wonderful."

CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY, Vol. 32, Issue 1, pp. 21–27, ISSN 0886-7356, online ISSN 1548-1360. *DOI: 10.14506/ca32.1.03*

While the suggestion of a serene harmonization to the frenetic rhythms of networked time has become almost commonsensical, Nazaryan gets provocative when he candidly admits neglecting his wife and newborn baby in his longing for the comforting effect of brainless, compulsive browsing. As the most popular of the numerous reader comments on his essay suggests, the author should walk to a local playground, watch parents engaged with their devices, and then watch kids desperately trying to get their attention. He would get a sense of how depressing, and downright insane, his solace looks to an outside observer. In what sort of a bubble, commenters ask, is a man living who prefers the fraudulent safety of an illusory world to spending quality time, empty-handed, in the vicinity of the real?

Building on Nazaryan's dramatization of connected existence, this essay approaches digital speed not only in terms of mediality—speed as circulation and transmission—but also of habitability: speed as shock and habituation. My aim is to conceptually and practically explore the articulation of digital speed and of specific life forms. I understand digital speed as an intensive exposure *to*, and immersion *in* foreignness—in an otherness that is more than the otherness of another person, and that affects and constitutes oneself. To inhabit media, then, is to inhabit a margin of contingency and indeterminacy, which is not fully simultaneous or coincident with itself (Mackenzie 2002, 17). The viability of life in media should not be taken for granted. To inhabit media is to ceaselessly shake off excessive energy and implications. It implies cultivating shared spaces of non-indifference, and of relative opacity, in the midst of nonstop reporting, exposure, and irritation. Life in media thus constantly comes with immunitary responses and skillful mediations—be they semantic, normative, commercial, technical, or otherwise—that require anthropological attention.[1] As this essay will suggest, the distinction between life-nurturing and life-negating habitation is, here, as crucial as it is elusive. A key challenge in this regard is to critically diagnose the effects of speed on the degradation of waking life, while insisting on the recalcitrance of a foreignness that will not be contained and that keeps life moving in the first place. An anthropology of life at digital speed can be understood as a careful experimentation with untamed forces and protective supplements as they are engaged in processes of human- and world-becoming.

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In the 1980s, wrote the media theorist Marshall McLuhan (1980, 32) at the beginning of the decade, a general awareness would emerge that "perhaps man

was not intended to live at the speed of light." Adapting to an excessive speed of change, for McLuhan, isolates already fragmented individuals and drains vitality out of communities. The result is a prevailing state of insecurity and resentment, with anemic individuals exhausted by the demands of an overwhelming awareness *of* and involvement *in* a new information environment, which McLuhan referred to as an ecology. This notion of a vitality-denying involvement in an information environment can also be traced back to McLuhan's better-known, and generally more optimistic, thesis that casts all technologies as extensions of the body. For McLuhan (1994, 42–45), these extensions both accelerate the environment in which we live *and* protect us by "amputating" organs as a response to increased environmental pressure. What makes electronic media unique is that they increase the power and speed of the central nervous system itself. Hence, McLuhan diagnosed that when confronted with stress generated by technological acceleration and sensory overload, the central nervous system reacts with auto-amputation: "We turned turtle. The shell went inside, the organs outside. . .. But when an organ goes out (ablation), it goes numb" (McLuhan 1970, 42). Speed-induced stress thus leads to a numbing of perception, both at individual and collective levels—at once an effective protection against environmental pressure and a negation of life through self-enclosure.

McLuhan's concerns with the impact of electronic speed were soon taken to whole new levels by Paul Virilio's combative critique of accelerated modernity and its effects, which include the annihilation of space, the erasure of subjectivity, the rise of cybernetic social control, and an all-out war on human temporality. Virilio is particularly vehement vis-à-vis the effects of real-time interaction. The connected, interactive being, he suggests, is "doomed to inertia" by the devices that have replaced its "natural capacities for movement" (Virilio 1997, 16). By overstimulating the senses, speed immobilizes bodies into a state of "frenetic standstill" (Rosa 2013, 15). The empire of speed, Virilio suggests, can only lead to global foreclosure, confinement, and lockdown. While McLuhan considered the possibility of overcoming the numbing effect, Virilio is not so confident. For him, accelerating technologies are doomed, exhausted technologies.

Although I am sympathetic to McLuhan's and, to a lesser extent, Virilio's attempts at thinking the absorption of the shock of digital speed, both come with real limitations. Most importantly, both McLuhan's quasi-theological insistence on maintaining unity and Virilio's linear history of a war against subjectivity are premised on anthropocentric accounts of lived temporality. By contrast, thinkers as diverse as Jacques Derrida, Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour, Gilbert Simondon,

Peter Sloterdijk, and Bernard Stiegler have shown how humans and tools continually modify each other, and how technicity is from the onset constitutive of human temporality. "Technics," Stiegler (1998, 27) contends, "far from being merely in time, properly constitutes time." Such an originary technicity of time disqualifies all withdrawal to a natural, uncontaminated interiority to be protected against the assaults of technological speed. Quite the opposite, according to Derrida (1994, 177):

> To protect its life, to constitute itself as unique living ego, to relate, as the same, to itself, it is necessarily led to welcome the other within so many figures of death: differance of the technical apparatus, iterability, non-uniqueness, prosthesis, synthetic image.

Anthropological inquiry into digital speed, then, should not be too concerned with the acceleration of exchanges between self-sufficient entities or points. By contrast, when taking seriously the suggestion that the protection of life is contingent on welcoming the other within, the problem of speed can be framed in terms of energies that accentuate the "eccentricity of the self to itself" (Peters 1999, 29). Digital speed engenders an exposed self, radically open to and opened by the world. It destabilizes and provokes a crisis of meaning. At high enough speed, representation itself seems to lose its appearance of organic unity. In the words of Gilles Deleuze (1994, 42), representation rediscovers the infinite within itself. It "discovers within itself the limits of the organised; tumult, restlessness and passion underneath apparent calm. It rediscovers monstrosity."

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Monstrosity, as the introduction to this collection suggests, lies in an incommensurable foreignness that pervades everyday life in the most intimate way. And monstrosity demands to be endured. There is no stress-free exposure to a dissolved, unformed reality, even or perhaps especially at the highest of speeds.[2] Inhabited media are systematically given extension and relative duration. They are stratified. Mediations keep intervening, connecting, translating, reducing, simplifying, domesticating.[3] Media are medial *and* poietic forces that imprint a form on "the amorphous compulsion of Dionysian forces and the chaotic multiplicity of the individual" (Sloterdijk 1989, 81). High-speed calculation, for example, transforms the unknown, or infinite character of existence—with its affects and feelings, its forms of knowing and thinking—into a source for preemption and capitalization. In slowing down the instabilities of human collectives, however,

mediations may also contribute to assuring their viability. And yet there is always a remainder, a powerful absence, an opacity that undermines any possibility to think of mediation in terms of a reconciliation of subject and object, or of an appropriation of the foreign by the self.

An anthropology of speed complicates dreams of a convenient habitation—remember Nazaryan's solace—by drawing attention to contradictions, disjunctions, and overflows that compose life in media. It may, for instance, render visible the human and energetic cost required to endure life at digital speed. This cost includes, but is not restricted to, the raw materials and resources of the Earth that make technology happen, the exhausting efforts involved in suppressing the pull of electronic solicitation, or the bodily and psychosocial effects of staying on at all times—which themselves include hyperactivity, a narrowing of sensory responsiveness, and addiction to digital stimulation. Ethnographic inquiry can contribute to making explicit how digital speed is generated, and how its demands are channeled, managed, absorbed, or shaken off. In his ethnography of news-making in the digital era, for instance, Dominic Boyer (2013) has suggested that a dialectical oscillation between the praxiological and the mediological allows for a management of the chronological imperatives of digital time. Tom Boellstorff (2008, 102) has also shown how "Internet time" can also "lead to the form of deceleration experienced in virtual worlds as lag." In my own ethnographic work, I have suggested that global eHealth networks point toward new horizons of intelligibility within which human lives come to take shape as objects of knowledge and intervention (Duclos 2015). This remote engendering of the human is deeply enmeshed with living and technical systems, at the articulation of networking and clinical practice, modeling patterns, and chaotic forces. Specifically, I have shown how things like technical glitches, failures to communicate, boredom, wasted time, political passions, and absent users are not external to, but rather constitutive of network connectivity and speed (Duclos 2016). All in all, ethnographical inquiry can contribute to mapping a "rich seam of conjunctions" in which the speed of computation "meets with its ostensible outside" (Fuller 2008, 5). By bringing the background or outside of digital networks into the open, it is possible to give them back some volume—to bring them back down to Earth, we might say, in all its turbulence, splendor, and inadequacy.

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An anthropology of speed, as the introduction to this collection suggested, is concerned with the relationship between the prevailing resentment against the

future and the experience of a contracted, accelerated present. This certainly applies to Nazaryan's solace, in which nonstop reaction to digital stimulation encloses a perpetual, just-endurable present. Nazaryan inhabits a private bubble without walls, ubiquitously connected and yet actively insulated from the world. When, one might ask, does overexposure to the world turn into a *loss* of world?

To inhabit media is to inhabit uncertainty, together. It comes with a vulnerability that has to be nurtured in the face of the entirely-other. Life in media speaks to the constitutively exposed character of existence, and to immune reactions to it. The challenge, then, is to design spaces that are creative and yet provide a source of security for themselves. The challenge is to find a bit of breathing room, for instance via strategic demobilization or selective refusals to participate. The challenge is not to create oneself out of nothing, free from all constraints, but rather to "stray afield" of oneself, to use Michel Foucault's (1990, 8) phrase, by carefully experimenting with stress forces and pressures out which new life forms might emerge.

NOTES

Acknowledgments I thank Tomás Sánchez-Criado and Vinh-Kim Nguyen for their insightful comments. Thanks also to members of the Translating Vitalities collective, with special mention of William Mazzarella, Stacey Langwick, Sue Cochrane, Judy Farquhar, and Clare Twomey for rich discussions that have helped me craft this essay.

1. For related writings on space, media, and immunity, see the "magic words" glossed in Duclos et al. 2016.
2. It was Deleuze (1994, xviii), whose philosophy of pure difference is often associated with neoliberal, feel-good slogans of self-creation, who perhaps provided the most prescient warning in this regard: "There are certainly many dangers in invoking pure differences which have become independent of the negative and liberated from the identical. The greatest danger is that of lapsing into the representations of a beautiful soul: there are only reconcilable and federative differences, far removed from bloody struggles. The beautiful soul says: we are different, but not opposed."
3. This is something that anthropologists of science have known for quite some time. Remember Bruno Latour's (1999, 144) famous argument: while Louis Pasteur did not invent the lactic acid ferment, "the more work Pasteur does, the more independent the lactic acid ferment becomes. . .. The lactic acid ferment now exists as a discrete entity because it is articulated between so many others, in so many active and artificial settings."

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