Resistance in the Deceleration Lane

Velo-centrism, Slow Culture and Everyday Practice

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Introduction: Between Mercury and Jove

That [deceleration lane] allows you to decelerate to the proper speed, so as not to exit the freeway or interstate at an unsafe speed, which could result in a possible rollover of your vehicle.

Reed Berry, Highway Driving Safety

In a letter to John Hamilton Reynolds, John Keats wrote:

Now it is more noble to sit like Jove than to fly like Mercury – let us not therefore go hurrying about and collecting honey-bee like, buzzing here and there impatiently from a knowledge of what is to be arrived at; but let us open our leaves like a flower and be passive and receptive, budding patiently under the eye of Apollo and taking hints from every noble insect that favours us with a visit. Sap will be given us for Meat and dew for drink. I was led into these thoughts, my dear Reynolds, by the beauty of the morning operating on a sense of Idleness. I have not read any Books. The Morning said I was right. I had no Idea but of the Morning and the Thrush said I was right [...].¹

The year 1818, when Keats wrote this letter to his friend, was perhaps one of the last moments when the poet’s words of encouragement to be idle and passive might still have resonated with remains of the appreciation which Western culture had developed for idleness. The rise of the middle classes and their work ethos, coupled with the acceleration of everyday life brought on by the Industrial Revolution and technological progress, limited social acceptance for idleness and equated efficiency with quickness. Read in the context of the history of the culture of speed the above excerpt illustrates the co-existence of two speed-oriented perspectives: the Mercurial perspective of “hurrying” and “buzzing” is counterbalanced by the Jovian perspective which turns being “passive and receptive” into a desirable state, highly dependent on one’s ability to dwell in contemplation. Keats’ appreciation of the moment of retreat from a world of hurry was not intended to undermine or discredit active participation in its dynamic flows and movements but rather to emphasize a need to slow down in order to balance and regulate the rhythm of life, which by many people was seen as increasingly unbalanced and deregulated. This book, in its widest grasp, is about the relation between these two perspectives.

While it is true to say that the Mercurial principle has dominated modern experience and monopolized time management in affluent societies, the Jovian

aspect of the culture of speed has recently started to mark its presence in various spheres of life and generate a wide array of cultural texts and practices which are informed by a desire to rehabilitate slowness. A growing realization that speed has become “a bit of a troublesome servant that comes more often than it is called,” to quote Valéry Larbaud (who in 1930 in a manner most prophetic predicted that one day speed would become man’s “servant-mistress”), has resulted in an explosion of interest in the consequences of the development of technologies of speed and in the chance to confront them by reinventing one’s relation to time. Although Wendy Parkins is right to say that “living slowly as a form of rejecting the cultural orthodoxy of speed is not a recent phenomenon,” the popularity of the narratives of slow culture has never reached such a scale before; slow practices which are popular today have never been marked by such dynamics nor have they struck such a chord in so many different areas. Slow living has entered the consciousness of contemporary man as a postulate, a utopian dream and a more or less formalized practice.

The forms that the responses to fast life and its requirements take are diversified and although they are all embraced by one term, i.e. “slow living,” it has to be stressed that they are far from being homogenous in terms of motives, aspirations, practices and interests. The concept of cultural slowness is used throughout this book to theorize not only those practices and movements that are immediately associated with the idea of slowing down, such as the Slow Food or Slow Cities movements, but also to include practices which, although not performed under the banner of a “slow revolution,” valorize deceleration as a powerful cultural principle and acknowledge its potential to change the quality of both the individual and collective experience of living in an accelerated culture. The first case in point here is the so-called “copenhagization,” a large-scale urban project inspired by a desire to reclaim the space of the city that has been taken over by car culture. The second one is downshifting, which is underpinned by the belief that “less is more,” to use what might be seen as the motto of all practices which challenge a popular belief that happiness and satisfaction in consumer culture are determined by consumers’ spending powers. All the texts and practices of slow culture analyzed in this book under the rubric of the “slow” postulate, although in different ways and to varying degrees, the possibility of negotiating the speed contract, the signing of which modern culture has

construed as indispensable for success, efficiency and the good life. They are seen as narratives which aim at creating a certain vision of the world, provide their adherents with sets of meanings and points of reference and help them achieve “[p]ersonal integrity, as the achievement of an authentic self,” which, as Anthony Giddens claims, “comes from integrating life experiences within the narrative of self-development.”

Symptomatic of the growing realization of the cultural significance of deceleration in recent years is the publication of numerous works which provide a consistent mode of thinking through the phenomenon of slow living and help identify the areas and cultural practices affected by the discourse of slow culture. Two works deserve special mention for the role they have played in the systematization of theoretical reflections and critical perspectives concerning slowness: Wendy Parkins and Geoffrey Craig’s *Slow Living* (2006), which focuses primarily on organized social movements and their resistive potential, and a collection of essays edited by Nick Osbaldiston, entitled *Culture of the Slow. Social Deceleration in an Accelerated World* (2013), which takes the analysis of slow life far beyond organized movements and the moral and ethical motivations of their members. Drawing on the scholarship and research of Parkins, Craig, Osbaldiston and other cultural analysts and theorists of deceleration, the present study places critical emphasis on different aspects of the phenomenon in question. The version of slow culture which this book attempts to construct is placed within the parameters of cultural studies and their interest in the ways in which values, social norms and conventions are produces and represented in particular societies and communities, and in this respect it shares a critical perspective with Parkins, Craig and Osbaldiston. What makes it different, though, is that the book addresses slow living at two levels: that of macro and of micro analysis. In its macro-dimension it seeks to examine slowness in a broader context of the culture of speed and see them, following Jeffrey T. Schnapp’s postulate, not as “polar opposites,” but as “dual emanations of a single system within which speed is king.”

My interest lies first in how particular meanings got constructed around the concept of speed and achieved “the status of ‘commonsense’” and “a certain taken-for-granted quality” and, second, in placing the phenomena generated by

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a reactivated Jovian principle in the context of the historical evolution of the relation between man and speed. In its micro-analytical dimension the book explores the resistive and culture-forming potential of slowness on the basis of the analysis of particular texts and practices as well as their representations and the rhetoric they use. This allows me to approach the issues of resistance not only through the prism of the bipolarity of the mainstream (the dominating culture) and its outside (the spaces of resistance) but also in the context of negotiation and exchange between them. Another aspect of the analysis of slow living which the book undertakes is the rise of the mythology of slow life, which often aspires to create a holistic grand narrative which may provide an individual with stable ontological frameworks within which he can successfully reconstruct the trajectories of his own biography.

The phenomenon of slow living is not homogeneous and does not develop in the same ways in different geographic and cultural contexts. Japanese and Polish versions of slow life may stem from similar concerns, British and Hungarian models of slowing down may be motivated by similar goals, but due to different historical and cultural traditions and differing levels of affluence, slow movements adopt varied strategies and emphasize various aspects of deceleration. Although I believe that there is an interesting analytical potential in the study and comparison of various geographically inflected models of cultural deceleration, which might become a subject of further research, this book does not attempt to undertake such an analysis. Rather, its focus is on deceleration analyzed in the contexts of its origins, postulates and representations, which, regardless of their “regional” differences, permit one to see slowness as part of the history of the culture of acceleration and approach it from the perspective of continuity and change in man’s relation with speed.7

The book is largely concerned with comprehensive analysis of practices and representations of deceleration in everyday life because this is where slow living philosophy manifests itself most visibly. However, as Ben Highmore rightly observes, any consideration of everyday life should be informed by “an immediate

7 This study does not examine the relation between gender and the sense of time – for stylistic reasons I refer to the “slow man” – but an analysis of differences in the ways in which the experience of the fast and slow time is shaped by cultural constructions of gender may offer an interesting extension of the analytical scope of slow living research. See, for example, Stefan Klein, who says: “[u]nder seemingly identical external circumstances, women evidently feel a greater sense of time pressure because they are women.” Stefan Klein, The Secret Pulse of Time. Making Sense of Life’s Scarcest Commodity, trans. Shelley Frish (Frankfurt am Main: Da Capo Press, 2007), p. 207.
question: whose everyday life?”8 The focus here is thus on everyday cultural practices of a social group whose class identification and financial status are clearly identifiable. The phenomenon of slow living is the product of affluent Euro-American middle classes and their response to particular aspects of life, and as such needs to be examined with reference to class-specific orientations, their economic contexts and the access which the members of these classes have to technologies of consumption, production and communication. The fact that slow life is a class product, which reflects class anxieties and concerns and is marked by class-generated tensions and contradictions, should not obscure the fact that it is still a manifestation of a certain cultural condition shaped by the character of the middle-class confrontation with and participation in the culture of immediacy.

That a book about slowness should start with speed suggests the relational character of slowness and speed. Wendy Parkins claims that “the experience and value of slowness was historically derived from, and articulated through, notions of speed […] speed created slowness.”9 This mode of reconceptualization of fast and slow time and their mutual relation marks the methodological framework within which this study is placed. One of my broadest claims in this book is that any discussion of the rise and evolution of the slow man and the impact of deceleration on the present cultural moment needs to be embedded in an analysis of the ontological and epistemological conditions of the accelerated man and his understanding of the role speed plays in the construction of the everyday experience. Were it not for his rapid “maturation” and the dynamic expansion of the lifestyle which this process promoted, the slow man would never have become the important vehicle of cultural resistance he is now. It is only in relation to the culture of the fast that slowness displays its resistive and culture-forming potential. Psychologists Philip Zimbardo and John Boyd identify three elements that shape and determine one’s temporal experience, and they claim that “[y]our emotional state, personal time perspective, and the pace of life of the community in which you live all influence the way in which you experience time.”10 It is not too much to say that in order to understand alternative temporal realities created in order to escape from the pressures and limitations of dominating models of time experience, to understand their inner tensions, contradictions

and aspirations and to be able to locate them in a broad cultural panorama of contemporary society, the focus on the origins of “the pace of life of the community” seems to be an essential starting point. “Unless we understand how speed functions, what it adds and what it removes, we are deprived of the opportunity to retain slowness where it is necessary,” says Thomas Hylland Eriksen.

For methodological convenience, the book is divided into three parts. Part One consists of two chapters in which I bring together elements of the history of technological acceleration. In doing this I have noted the possibility of laying down the foundations for a distinction of the historical eras which I find critical for the construction of a theoretical frame within which I place the analysis of slow life. Filtered through the prism of changing attitudes towards speed, the history of acceleration presented in the first and second chapters is subject to periodization, which helps identify the stages in the history of conceptualizations of speed and its representations. An analysis of the development of transport and communication technologies and changes in the relation between man and speed through the ages leads to a classification of three categories of accelerated man and three epochs whose characters are marked by the role speed and acceleration play in the formations of social, cultural and political relations. Thus Chapter One concentrates on the age of the running start (17th and 18th centuries) and the age of acceleration (19th century), which became, respectively, the stages of the birth of the “fast” and “fast-forward” man. The chapter illustrates the ways in which the advance of new technologies of mobility and communication influenced the modern understanding of speed and gradual domestication and naturalization of speed in the experience of everyday life. In Chapter Two I look at the 20th century, which, as John Tomlinson claims, is marked by the principle of instantaneity and which I propose to approach as an example of streamlined culture. While the “fast” man was the product of the age of coaches and the “fast-forward” man that of the age of trains and cars, the mis-man – multifunctional, instantaneous and simultaneous man – is represented in this study as a human type which has monopolized everyday life at the turn of the 21st century. Its distinctiveness and dominance in the spheres of social, cultural and political life of high modernity, which Anthony Giddens sees as marked by “widespread scepticism about providential reason, coupled with the recognition that science and technology are double-edged,” has set the norms for cultural

practices and may be approached as a point of reference for further analysis of man's relation with speed. The analysis carried out in the first two chapters allows me to formulate the main assumptions of the velocentric perspective which I use throughout the book to reflect critically on the ways in which speeds, both high and low, and their representations affect the construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of meanings around particular cultural texts, images and practices and to register the centrality of speed in modern culture while accentuating its formative character.

The second part of the book, entitled “Slow Time and Alternative Hedonism,” brings a change of scale to the analysis and a shift of the analytical spotlight from the culture of the fast(er) to the culture of the slow(er). Chapter Three offers an overview of contemporary slow practices and theoretical approaches to slowness. Its aim is to show a variety of recent practices developing under the banner of the “slow revolution,” systematize contemporary critical examinations of deceleration, and identify the key areas of critical reflection and main markers of the culture of the slow. Because of the central position of a sense of pleasure in the discourse of slowness, Chapter Four is concerned primarily with pleasure as a socio-cultural construct which, when read from the velocentric perspective, exemplifies the role speed plays in the articulation of particular cultural meanings. When approached from the perspective of alternative hedonism, a concept worked out by Kate Soper, pleasure reveals its potential to initiate processes of dearticulation and rearticulation of cultural practices promoted by the mainstream culture of high speed. In the light of alternative hedonism, slow living may be read as a form of quest for these types of pleasure that have been repressed and marginalized by accelerated consumerism.

In the third part of the book, entitled “The Other Speed: Cultural Practices and Representations,” I examine the ways in which ideas of deceleration have permeated particular spheres of everyday life and the ways in which they have been represented. Chapter Five places deceleration in the context of space and interprets cultural ramifications and representations of slowing down both in private (home) and public (urban) spaces. The analysis of the latter from the perspective of deceleration allows me to extend the research area beyond the Slow Cities movement, an offshoot of the Slow Food movement, and to approach a new spatial consciousness brought to life under the influence of slow life philosophy as a manifestation of new territoriality, a term I use to refer to spatial practices that are informed by a desire to restore place as a repository of cultural meanings and to overcome the social and cultural effects of deterritorialization.

Chapter Six is concerned with slow travel and its representations in two texts: “A Slow Travel Manifesto” and the guidebook Slow London. While the analysis of
the manifesto allows me to examine the rhetoric typical of the narratives of slowness, the analysis of the slow guide helps identify components of the slow travel experience. A change of cognitive paradigm, which consists in the shift of the focal point from the visual to the multisensory, emerges as one of the main features of the discourse of slowness and chimes with the postulates put forward by Carlo Petrini, a founding father of the Slow Food movement, advanced to start a systematic defence of our senses endangered by the homogenization of “fast” taste, a product of globalized culture.

In the last chapter of the book I examine slowness in the context of popular culture and the popularity of the so-called “relocation products,” i.e. television programmes and self-help books, which cast the move from city to country as a panacea for the tensions, anxieties and nervousness of accelerated urban life. I argue in this chapter that a new literary phenomenon, which I propose to call slow lit, has emerged at the intersection of the culture of relocation and chick lit. Popular literature written in the conventions of chick lit about a new life in the country is indicative of a certain expansion of the narratives of slow living in the area of popular culture and of the vitality of slow ideas as well as of their marketing potential. Suspended between an urbanite’s dream and utopia, the representations of life change proposed by slow lit are read as a part of the process of romanticization and mythologization of slow living.

While the primary aim of this book is to explore the cultural and social dimensions of deceleration and their representations in the context of the cultural resistance they inspire, the perspective from which this is done is marked not so much by a desire to dethrone high speed, but rather to integrate the two realms of speed. The options we have do not need to be reduced to an either/or rhetoric, such as characterizes Mirko Zardini’s claim that “we are now faced with conflicting paths to salvation: to accelerate into an even-faster world, beyond the realm of physical movement, or a return to the speeds of the past.” Trouble himself by such a reductionist vision, Zardini revises this view and suggests a change of emphasis and reformulation of the proposed solution which signals a departure from the logic of the either/or choice. Zardini proposes a perspective which seems to be more practical and which stems from his reflections on “which models and which associations can break the tyranny of productivity upon speed.” The claim opens up a space for critical examination of a possibility to

connect and integrate what modernity has disconnected. In an age of flow, globalization and homogenization, fragmentation and mobility, slowness has been increasingly vested with the values that are associated with connection to people, places and environment, and represented as a connecting principle in a disconnected world.

While slowness has emerged as a strategy of contestation and resistance, in the course of time it has undergone various changes, the main one being its shift from the margin to the mainstream of cultural practices. Slow practices have installed themselves safely in the cultural landscape of high modernity and have grown to form a recognizable lifestyle option available to man; some phenomena, such as Slow Food and Slow Cities, have become consolidated institutionally and developed identities recognizable all over the world; the ideas of slow life have entered popular culture and initiated a rise of various products which feed on the international repute of slow. The phenomenon's embeddedness in contemporary culture allows us to identify those aspects of cultural deceleration which have withstood the test of time and have proved to have a lasting appeal for contemporary man; on the other hand, it invites one to register and examine tensions and contradictions that have started to appear within it and pose questions concerning both the future of slowness and the rise of a post-slow stage in the history of speed.