

The Ethics of Speed-Space

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WHY WOULD FAST ever be evil? In today's academic circles, this morality of movement seems to be readily projected on to our fallen digital world. If there's a lesson to be learned from Satan's tumble from heaven, his descent is not just a matter of speed but a function of gravity's force, the inevitability of motion. What we are really up against is inertia, the resistance of an object to any change in its speed and direction. One's inertia, after all, can be quite fast or rather slow.

I want to question the absolutist morality of slow good and fast evil. Indeed, the knee-jerk reaction of finding "fast evil" here and there confirms the moral superiority of clinging to slow good. Our complaints against fast culture, its consumerism, its trade, and its media are only so many defensive bulwarks around our own apathies. Ethics actually concern the geometry of "speed-space," Virilio's term that generally refers to the interdependence of both concepts.

The question then is not about relative quickness but about the territories that our motions and directions open up. Inertia favours the straight lines and circles of the drive. Moving in closed circuits reinforces and naturalizes our habits. The impoverished geometry of predictable motion

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arises most forcefully from mass production, whose orbits catch consumers up around the same celestial bodies.

To move beyond fast evil and slow good, we need to short-circuit the compulsive repetition of the drive by forging connections with faraway points and opening up pathways previously untraveled. Erratic changes in direction, sudden accelerations and de-accelerations may jolt us out of our comfortable movements. The unpredictable and contingent unfolding of such a speed-space makes and unmakes desires, exposing the complacent inertia of drives, creating new symbolic circuits and new rhizomes, maps to nowhere.

I want to mention briefly how the ethics of speed-space strikes all of us here close to home. I am speaking about the moral convenience that many of us assume toward the fast evil of digital communication—such as twitter, texting, blogging, and social networking. As English academics, we feed on cyber rants, which justify our scholarly drives around print media.

The patrilineal circuits of our work flow compulsively track through the familiar authority of the Big Slow Other, validated by tedious lectures, inert bibliographies, top-down associations, and glacial peer reviews. Our fields have narrowed around miniscule antiquarian topics, while our students stare mystified at how we have ever naturalized our esoteric compulsions to encircle the curious bulk of books, the beginning and end of our Herculean labours. Our claims about distraction really betray our fears over being derailed from the apathy of our traditional scholarly drives. We cannot tolerate the lightning flashes of the online virtualscape because its digital texts throw us off professional balance. The print works that we have control over—the same old canonical poem, the radical cultural studies document, or the little known historical tract—are those we have poured over a hundred times but our students have perused only once. Let us not step into a scholarly arena where our students are on the same level as we are. It is vital that we subject our students to our own boregasms in the name of slowing intellectual matters down to the glacial media pace of hieroglyphics and Rosetta Stones.

The experience of digital speed-space threatens our “print” imaginaries that tend toward the linear inertness of listless reading and listening, enshrining the protracted, interminable drone of a single voice from the lectern—the liturgical leftover from a forgotten Oxbridge religiosity. Deep down we are afraid of what will happen to our entrenched alliances, routines, beliefs, and identities, if we take an ethical swerve with our students beyond the morality of slow good and fast evil.