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Days of Phuture Past:

Accelerationism in the Present Moment

Benjamin Noys (2013)

This growing isolation and self-containment, exhibited by the other members of the unit and from which only the buoyant Riggs seemed immune, reminded Kerans of the slackening metabolism and biological withdrawal of all animal forms about to undergo a major metamorphosis. Sometimes he wondered what zone of transit he himself was entering, sure that his own withdrawal was symptomatic not of a dormant schizophrenia, but of careful preparation for a radically new environment, with its own internal landscape and logic, where old categories of thought would merely be an encumbrance. (14)

J.G. Ballard, *The Drowned World*

Contemporary reflections or endorsements of accelerationism treat it as a site with the capacity to probe the forms of capital and knowledge that might bear repurposing to generate a non-capitalist future. Gean Moreno (2013), in his editorial for the e-flux issue on “accelerationist aesthetics,” argues that this aesthetics offers a capacity to negotiate between “innovative cartographic exercises” and “the drive to deliberately exacerbate nihilistic meltdowns.” The claim is that to accelerate, or to aesthetically explore or trace forces or forms of acceleration, can un-lock the present moment.

What we could call “classical accelerationism,” associated with the work of Nick Land (2013), involved the endorsement of capitalist time as a time of acceleration, in the form of expanding value and the absorption of all elements of life under an “inhuman” marketisation. This moment emerged from 70s theoretical currents, notably Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus* (1972), and in Land’s work it gained a kind of resonance and accelerative force that deliberately aimed at a para- or anti-academic energisation. The discourse of Land and the CCRU was not only vectored through theory, but also through cyberpunk fiction and the post-rave speed-up of Jungle and drum-and-bass: maximum intensification into acceleration until, in Land’s words (2013), “impending human extinction becomes accessible as a dance floor.” This was an experiential discourse, concerned not just with theorising acceleration and immanence, but with realizing them, in the present. It was a practical anti-humanism.

In Land’s theorization the deterritorialisation of capitalism that Deleuze and Guattari endorsed (at one point) had been realized in the future (2012, in fact!). The then present moment of the 90s was being infiltrated by cyber guerrillas from this realized absolute deterritorialization. We had traces of this future – drugs, sci-fi, Jungle, theory, biotech – that prefigured the meltdown to come: “as if,” in Land’s words, “a tendril of tomorrow were burrowing back.” (Land 2013) If we, living in 2013, should be sceptical, then we should note that Land’s “prediction” was *hyperstitional* – a kind of performative fiction, which creates the future it predicts. These fictions disrupt, according to Land, linear, chronological time with untameable forces of acceleration.

Contemporary accelerationism modulates this schema. It concludes that we have been robbed of our future by an inertial and crisis-ridden neoliberalism that has rescinded the dynamism of capitalism for the opaque mechanisms of speculative finance. What we don’t manufacture any more is the future. Instead we dwell in a generalised nostalgia, with even dance music, the signature aesthetic form of accelerationism, failing the accelerative/inventive test. In reply, the anastrophic temporality of accelerationism is one that goes back to the future. To be more precise, it goes back to select and accelerate the forces that might make the future again. It is this action of returning that makes accelerationism a nostalgia that poses itself against nostalgia. Against the flattened nostalgia of postmodernism we need, in this story, an active and interventionist accelerationism that can select, develop, and encourage forces that will break the static horizon of the present.

**The Inhuman Dance Floor**

The phenomenology of this second (or third) wave of accelerationism is still provided by dance music. Once, in this story, dance music provided an inventive form of musical accelerationism. In Mark Fisher’s characterization, “While 20th Century experimental culture was seized by a recombinatorial delirium, which made it feel as if newness was infinitely available, the 21st Century is oppressed by a crushing sense of finitude and exhaustion.” (Fisher 2013a) Whereas once, in the 1990s, there was a “hardcore continuum” (Reynolds 2013) that had guaranteed an experimental acceleration (from rave to jungle to early grime), today, as Alex Williams adopts Simon Reynolds diagnosis of “Retromania” (2011), that future has stalled in bad pastiche (Williams 2013). Our moment is a nostalgia for a future that was once promised (“Today is the Tomorrow you were Promised Yesterday,” in Victor Burgin’s phrase). Retromania is, in Alex Williams’s (2013) formulation, the “pop-cultural logic of late neoliberalism.”

The stasis of neo-liberalism, which concludes the only way into the future is more of the same, is mimicked by a plundering of the past to grab images and forms of acceleration that reappear as merely static moments. We live, in Alex Williams’s Ballardian coinage, a “*chronosickness*” (2013). Unable to accede to the future, or even a faith or belief in the future, we instead can only live out the *blockage* of our present moment.

This is evident in Mark Fisher’s recent discussion of juke / footwork – a form of Chicago ‘ghetto house’ at 155-165 bpm, with repetitive and often aggressive sampling (“Fuck Dat”). It would seem that footwork continues the hardcore continuum and instantiates another acceleration, which would dispute the accelerationist characterisation of the present moment as a moment of stasis. To rescue this diagnosis, Fisher argues that while jungle “was dark, but also wet, viscous, and enveloping,” footwork is “strangely desiccated” (2013b). This dessication indicates a lack of propulsive movement. The signature metaphysics of forces for accelerationism is a liquid one, in a strange echo of Luce Irigaray, but without her attention to gender. In contrast, the illiquid form of footwork traces its expression of and resistance to the present moment. Fisher explains: “in the bad infinity of the animated GIF, with its stuttering, frustrated temporality, its eerie sense of being caught in a time-trap.” (Fisher 2013b) If jungle was predictive of accelerative temporalities the footwork, according to Fisher, only captures the impasses of the present moment.

The answer of “classical accelerationism” to this dilemma was more acceleration through celebration of the *speed* of capitalism. When jungle embodied the “Landian imaginary” of “apocalyptic paranoid euphoria” this made possible a future (Williams 2013). The present moment rescinds that promise and so contemporary accelerationism no longer works on the “speed” of capitalism. Lacking what Alex Williams calls the “alienating temporality” (Williams 2013) of jungle, another form of time is required. To push beyond the merely iterative accelerationism of speed, which is simply “a simple brain-dead onrush” (Williams 2013), we are called to a new “universal field” of accelerative possibilities. This future is predicated, for Alex Williams (2013), in the engagement with “the forward-propelling energies embodied in the best of UK dance music, its posthuman ingenuity, alien sonic vocabulary, and its manipulation of affect and impersonal desire.” Again, the figurative possibilities of dance music are *the* aesthetic instantiation of accelerationism.

I leave to one side the nationalism of this agenda (seemingly an endemic feature of music writing in the UK, usually in regard to an inferiority complex in relation to US-music). The example of footwork I’ve just discussed points to a problem with this agenda: the lack of any instantiation of “acceleration” in the present moment. The “possibilities” that contemporary accelerationism promises to trace in a universal field slip, unpleasantly, into another form of retromania. This is another form of nostalgia, but a retooled nostalgia that castigates the present in the name of encrypted possibilities that remain largely invisible.

**High-Frequency Abstraction**

When the present moment is attended to by accelerationism it is predominantly, as we have seen, in the mode of inertia. The search for accelerative forces, when it does take place, tracks only to the most extreme contemporary moments of abstraction, notably high-frequency trading (HFT) and the algorithmic more generally (Srnicek and Williams; Wilkins & Drago; Parisi). HFT is, as Wilkins and Drago explain, “a subset of algorithmic trading which works at very low time horizons (100 milliseconds) and requires massive information processing capacities.” This technology, which operates below the horizon of human perception and close to the speed of light, seems the ultimate “inhuman” technology. Also, the algorithimic, as Luciana Parisi has explored in design and architecture, results in “generative” objects that “think” and “reproduce.” These instance echo the cyberpunk forms of nano-architecture which, according to a character in William Gibson’s *Idoru* (1996): “He knew their sheer brutality of scale from constructs, but virtuality had failed to convey the peculiarity of their apparent texture, a streamlined organicism.” (81)

The turn to these moments of extreme abstraction and inhumanity is an interesting one. The turn of contemporary art thinking has been to the object – which is taken to incarnate some non-human form or force of the concrete that is, somehow, resistant to the extraction of value. The anti-humanism of the object displaces on to the object all the dreams and desires for the concrete and excess. The life that seems drained from the subject is now found in the animism of vital objects, which proliferates a force of life that everywhere seems lacking. Contemporary accelerationisms are in proximity to this, with a turn to the non-human and machinic for vitality, but they differ in *embracing* the forces of abstraction. Contemporary capitalism may not offer much dynamism, but what it does, on this reading, lies in the most extreme fetishism of the abstract in the forms that are indifferent to the human or human labour. From financial instruments of mass-destruction to drones, this fetishisation of the abstract turns to those forces that seem closest to eliminating the moment of labour. In the jargon of the US-military, this is the “compression of the kill-chain.”

Once again speculative finance and military technology become the sites of fetishism and force. For example Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams probe HFT in exactly these terms:

Where humans remain too slow – too fleshy – to push beyond certain temporal, perceptual, and quantitative barriers, HFT systems surge past, generating the fine nanoscale structure of modern financial markets, too intricate for the naked mind to observe. (Srnicek and Williams)

While this might seem the usual enraptured tone, they don’t quite endorse HFT, which remains within capitalist iterative speed. We could add, as pointed out by Alberto Toscano, the issues surrounding the very material infrastructures of these forms of “acceleration.” It seems that the promise of “Escape Velocities” (Williams) or “Maximum Jailbreak” (Singleton) offered by contemporary accelerationists is not so easy to deliver and that the “too fleshy” human remains in question, if only as brake, interruption or moment of inertia.

**Epistemo-Technical**

While contemporary accelerationism obviously grasps something of the dreams and nightmares of the present moment, in a kind of sick fascination (appropriately), it hardly seems to really grasp the contradictions and forms of global capitalism and its various catastrophes – economic, social, political, and cultural. For all its rhetorical stance of hard-edged realism, reality slips away. In its place stands a nostalgia coupled to a futurism, with both linked by a metaphysics of liquid and plural forces. Contemporary accelerationism remains perched precariously in the present moment, between a valorised past and a receding future. This is disjunction *without* synthesis. It registers our *broken* relation to capitalist time, but only in the mystification we can reconnect to a superior force. My objection to accelerationism is not on the ground of absence, but on the promise of reconnection. To heal the broken present, stuck in an iterative temporality of the GIF, which accelerates in place, requires extraction of new forces that can break this stuttering into movement.

Missing the present moment is not simply a political fault, but also an epistemic fault of accelerationism. The aim is something like the dream of the data-analyst Colin Laney in Gibson’s *Idoru*, of finding ‘‘nodal points, info-faults that might be followed down to some other kind of truth, another mode of knowing, deep within gray shoals of information.” (39) This figure will remain a constant throughout Gibson’s fiction, a cartographic modelling of immersion and tracking, that is inherited by contemporary accelerationism.

The epistemic and political are, of course linked. Contemporary accelerationism can genuinely and does repeatedly, claim fidelity to an “accelerationist Marx,” or to accelerationist moments in Marx: *The Communist Manifesto*, the 1859 Preface, the articles on India, etc. This occludes a series of works by Marx and Marxists on questions of political and technical composition which threaten the core of accelerationism.

Raniero Panzieri, in his essay “Surplus value and planning: notes on the reading of Capital,” notes that:

Faced by capital’s interweaving of technology and power, the prospect of an alternative (working-class) use of machinery can clearly not be based on a pure and simple overturning of the relations of production (of property), where these are understood as a sheathing that is destined to fall away at a certain level of productive expansion simply because it has become too small. *The relations of production are within the productive forces*, and these have been ‘moulded’ by capital. It is this that enables capitalist development to perpetuate itself even after the expansion of the productive forces has attained its highest level. At this point the social regulation of the labour process immediately appears as a type of planning that is different from, or contraposed to, capitalist planning. (1976: 12)

Re-purposing, of the kind proposed by contemporary accelerationists, lacks both the sense of which subject will be undertaking this re-purposing and the problem of this “moulding” of the productive forces. It cannot produce an epistemic or political shift that would grasp this imbrication.

In his analysis of Olivetti Romano Alquati indicates the error of those who take production as detached from productive relations, whether on the left or right: “Since the technical equals development, the men of the techno-bureaucracy have no desire apart from its acceleration and organic flowing.” (2013) This, I think, would be a critical way to characterize certain claims made for accelerationism. The equation of the technical and development occludes the tensions of the composition of the “technical” as dead labour.

Alquati’s analysis stresses, contrary to images of factory-production as “compact” or enclosed, how the best figure of Olivetti’s strategy is the conveyor-belt:

The conveyor is the element in which the principal organizational functions of labour in time and space are incorporated, and here, where the work of valorisation in the strict sense is carried out by the assemblers, the conveyor (and above all the new assembly line) reveals itself as the organizing and coordinating element in its pure state, revealing precisely a specific, fundamental tendency in the development of mechanization. Within the strict ambit in which it operates, the pre-eminent organizational function of the conveyor is to level the various tempos and operations (which in the organization of the line are necessarily “diverse”) on the basis of the briefest possible tempo, by which its regular rhythm, repeatedly accelerated on a monthly basis, expresses a progressive and collective reduction in time.

This is a literal linkage of workers in the factory, but also a more metaphoric figure for dispersed workshop production and the connection to colonial sites of production, such as Olivetti’s production sites in South Africa. Political and technical composition here produces knowledge through the tracing of this displacement and this figure of linkage and movement, which also operates as a division. The moment of highest abstraction is not required, as much as the most crucial *form* of abstraction.

**De-Sheathing the Present Moment**

Contemporary accelerationism has not offered any comparable analysis of the composition of the present moment. In part, I think, this is because it tends to remain within the “sheathing” model of productive forces fettered by current productive relations. While disputing classical accelerationisms naïve faith in capitalist speed, the desire to extract or track nodes of acceleration from within the frozen flows remains. The aesthetic here is one that turns of hardening to instantiate and firm-up the liquidity of speed into acceleration. The difficulty is that when contemporary accelerationism attempts to depart from the de-sheathing model of extracting force from the productive forces, when it complicates this model, it seem that very little, or almost nothing, in the present moment instantiates accelerationism. For all its rhetorical stance of hard-edged realism, reality slips away. In its place stands a nostalgia coupled to a futurism, with both linked by a metaphysics of liquid and plural forces. Questions of composition are dissolved into forces have to be de-sheathed or extracted from the past or the future.

The result is an occlusion of the present moment. The impasses of the present, if we accept the characterization traced in the aesthetic of footwork, prevent any kickstarting of acceleration. Detached from the claims of iterative speed associated with capitalism, I’m left wondering what it is we are accelerating and who is doing the acceleration?

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