



# THE SPEED HANDBOOK

→ *Velocity, Pleasure, Modernism*

ENDA DUFFY

# *The Speed Handbook*



POST-CONTEMPORARY INTERVENTIONS

*Series Editors: Stanley Fish and Fredric Jameson*



# ***THE SPEED HANDBOOK***

*Velocity, Pleasure, Modernism*

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Enda Duffy

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS   DURHAM AND LONDON   2009

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Printed in the United States of

America on acid-free paper ☺

Designed by Amy Ruth Buchanan

Typeset in Monotype Fournier by

Tseng Information Systems, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-

Publication data appear on the last

printed page of this book.

*To Maurizia*

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## INTRODUCTION

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### *The Adrenaline Aesthetic: Speed as Culture*

I think that cars today are the equivalent of the great Gothic cathedrals.

—Roland Barthes, quoted in Modris Ekstein, *Rites of Spring*

La prothese organique est devenue une prothese de l'esprit.

—Christophe Tison, *L'Ere du vite*

Speed, claimed Aldous Huxley, is the only new pleasure invented by modernity. This book argues two propositions: first, that access to new speeds, whether on a roller-coaster, airplane, but especially with the automobile, has been the most empowering and excruciating new experience for people everywhere in twentieth-century modernity; and second, that this experience should be thought of as political.

First, two images. Both are British, that is, from the place where the dread of forgetting about the nation's past domination of so much of the world's space, in the British Empire, makes markers of the new order of space and speed stand out all the more. The first: from Piccadilly Circus, beginning of the twenty-first century. Lurid neon facade, awash in the logos of multinational cash: McDonalds, Sanyo, Sony, Carlsberg. These front what bills itself as the world's first virtual reality theme park. Within, intensive, half-finished construction—the raw materials of escalators and air vents exposed amid dust and plaster—seems aggressively apt: here the physical space is of no consequence, and Richard Rogers's techno-architectural logic of leaving pipes exposed, as in the Lloyd's tower, is fulfilled when the guts of the building's systems are simply left unfinished. Four escalators later, one stands in a windowless, multileveled, cacophonous, thoroughly disorienting space, every centimeter packed with video games,

virtual reality apparatuses, slot machines, and a bumper car carousel, with young, poor, multiethnic Londoners, all shifting gears, staring at screens, shouting, concentrating, screaming. The noise is searing: beyond the base notes of techno and house sound the beeping, whining, ringing, and pulsing of the banks of machines. Light is mostly the televisual vividness of flickering machines. For a pound coin, you get to sit on a pillion, hold a steering wheel, and imagine yourself in a grand prix race along a corniche road displayed on a screen. The pixel-printed road curves and swerves before you — frantically — your mudguard scratches the TV curb guard with a spray of TV sparks, you swerve to pass imaginary competitors, pensioners driving RVs at the legal speed limit, you careen around vast, steep corners, your pillion seat inclining at the rate of your imagined incline, your adrenaline rises and subsides, your hands sweat, joining the sweat of others who held this steering wheel before you, you face another curve, this one thousands of feet above a pixel-pointillist ocean — and you swerve toward the curb guard — your right headlight crashes against it, crumpling it — your car leaps backward against the rock face on the other side — your competitors are zooming up out of the horizon behind you, and your car leaps backward, front crushed, flips over, and you sigh — and the screen blanks pink and gives you a score: the game's over.

Now for the second image: Princess Diana's fatal crash. "The car was doing 196 kph — and the driver was drunk," the *Guardian* of London announced on the Monday after the horrific accident in the short-pillared underpass by the Seine at the Pont d'Alma in Paris.<sup>1</sup> The infamous paparazzi again and again snapped photos centimeters from the princess's face as (one rumor said) she waved her broken hand and spoke her last words: "Leave me alone." While all over the world the next morning people viewed TV images of the gruesomely crushed car, followed by lingering shots of the pillar that the car had hit, even the world's most exploitative media agreed almost at once not to publish those most telling photos of all, those (as near as was possible) of the crash itself. Media polemics focused on two issues: the fate of Britain's monarchy and the horrors of media intrusion into private lives, thus participating in what seemed close to a tacit collusion never to say the obvious thing, which was that this was a crash, a traffic accident. Diana was the "people's princess" precisely because, even if her status, wealth, and way of life were fabulously beyond those of ordinary people, she had nevertheless lost her life in a way that everyone stands a chance of losing it every day — in a car crash. Read in this way, her death marked the

confrontation of a figure whose glamour derived from the remnants of an archaic and feudal order thoroughly imbued with fantasy, and a characteristic, familiar modern event, wholly imbued with fear. In the reporting of the accident, royalty, the feudal fantasy element, could be faced and considered, but the fearful mundane quality of the car accident had to be held sacred—a last taboo of the fear of speed. In the weeks after the crash, the British Road Safety Association launched a new campaign: “We all drive a bit too fast sometimes. Slow down. Speed kills.”

### *The Adrenaline Aesthetic*

Remember the two claims: first, speed is the single new pleasure invented by modernity. Second, the experience of speed is political.

By speed, I simply mean the sensation you get when you drive at a speed you are not used to. As you think of how pervasive and central a phenomenon speed is in modern culture, you might dwell on countless examples like my opening ones. First, video games. These games, like the earliest films, subsist in large part as homage to the car chase. In the game where you are the out-of-control speeder, the screen is your car windscreen, you accelerate as the sparks fly, you hear the tear of your tires as you side-swipe slow drivers, you imagine the torque effect at the hairpin bends, you overtake runaway trains at two hundred miles per hour, and you crash in flames: game over. Consider the thin line from this cheap thrill to that of the celebrity car crash. In the case of Princess Di—or Princess Grace, or Isadora Duncan, or James Dean—it was as if the masses were moved that one so exalted could not escape such an ordinary fate. It is ordinary: about forty thousand people (as the “safety” articles point out) were killed in car crashes on U.S. roads alone each year since Diana died. The figure for Britain is around three thousand. “Slow down, speed kills.”

What is striking about these examples is that even though each is a simulation, a representation of real events, they all still have the power to make the heart race: each can excite or terrify. The video game car chase uses simulation to make a game: the crash that killed Diana exists for almost all of us as no more than a media spectacle, a representation of what occurred. Yet their power derives from their success at awakening our own memories of real experiences. The argument of this book is this: that a series of new human-scaled and immediately vastly popular technological inventions of the beginning of the twentieth century, centrally and most importantly the

motorcar, offered to masses of people that rarest of things: a wholly new experience, the experience of moving at what appeared to be great speeds, and the sensation of controlling that movement. This, literally, was the moment at which individual people were allowed to feel modernity in their bones: to feel its power as a physical sensation, through their sensing of speed. It's an amazing moment of breakthrough because they were *not* here being offered something itself quite rare but more comprehensible: a new kind of "cultural turn." Modestly, technology had trumped culture, offering not the *frisson* of new kinds of telling, but an actual new experience. This experience—of speed—could in the first instance be *felt*: it did not need to represent itself. Still, it could be represented, and such representations, as the record of experiences, make up the fragments of evidence considered in any study in the history of speed.

It was Aldous Huxley who made the claim, in the course of his brilliant occasional writing, that speed is the only new pleasure invented by modernity; but in doing so, he went further, implicitly reckoning speed to be modernity's only newly invented experience. It is a commonplace to assert that the pace of life has accelerated in the last hundred years, and to speculate that inventions in the realm of technology—the elevator, the escalator, the zipper, the moving pavement—have brought this about. When this phenomenon has been taken seriously, this has generally been read as an affront. This is the attitude that entered cultural theory with the pioneering sociologist Georg Simmel's famous early-twentieth-century discourse on the new urbanism, "Metropolis and Mental Life." Simmel's is essentially a moralistic approach: his enthusiasm for speed as a generator of alert intelligence is undercut by his fear that the populace counteracted overstimulation by shielding themselves with the "blase attitude." I propose to counter it with Huxley's notion of speed as pleasure, the only new pleasure. At the distance of a century, it must be possible at last to outline a grammar of this pleasure. The time has come to describe its thrills and excitements. We can annotate, too, the curious appetites speed promises to sate and the incitements through which it arouses them. We can delineate the fears that accompany the fulfillment of this as every desire. Above all, since we are delineating the embracing of a *new* pleasure, we have a rare opportunity to historicize a subjective sensation: to describe a key moment in what Fredric Jameson called for in *The Political Unconscious*, a history of the senses.<sup>2</sup>

Here I stake my claim. With some of the turn-of-the-century speed inventions, particularly the motorcar, the increased regime of speed in

modernity, which, with its time clocks, schedules, and Taylorist efficiencies, was becoming more and more onerous, was repackaged as a sensation and a pleasure to be put at the disposal of the individual consumer. Speed, which had been manifested as more intense and tighter social control, was rerouted into the excessive speed of individual pleasure. As machines designed to achieve this, cars and related technologies turned out to be thoroughly characteristic modernist artifacts: they too delivered defamiliarizing shocks, stunning their users with the shock of the new. Their shocks were, however, directly physical rather than intellectual or aesthetic. The machine shocks were visceral, and this made them immediately pleasurable, touching the body, potentially addictive. Insinuating themselves into everyday life unassumingly, as if by stealth, they were immediately, enthusiastically taken up. After all, as a counterpoint to much in modernist culture that was apparently new but turned out merely to offer variations on older themes, they offered the only truly new pleasure of modernity.

Of what did this pleasure consist? What do you feel when you are driving at, say, 120 or 140 miles per hour? (Today we need to increase the rate of speed incredibly to appreciate what those first drivers felt.) As with any pleasure, speed's thrill is polymorphous and resists being pinned down. Further, the ease with which one adapts to it makes appreciation of speed as a pleasure less likely, as this familiarity—except in the case where the pleasure is rehashed and retreaded as addiction—runs counter to desire. What we need to recapture is the excitement of those who drove the first cars or saw one raise the dust on a village street, for whom twenty-five miles an hour was intensely fast. For a brief moment, roughly the first quarter of the twentieth century, the thrill of velocity at any speed was vividly palpable. To those first granted the new experience of speed, the automobile appeared to enliven people by speeding them up. The automobile was the promise, through technology, of an experience lived at a new level of intensity. In offering the new sensation of hurtling through space at speed, it gave the car's driver a striking new level of personal power, both over the most minute manipulation of the new sensation and over its effect on others—most starkly, after the first car crash, the power of life or death.

It also made demands: that the individual rapidly improvise new powers of alertness and seeing, that she revise her established sense of space and distance, that she match her own response time, her sense of her self-control of her own energy, to the acceleration of the car. The conjunction of subject body and speed machine offered early inklings of cyborg subjectivity. It

granted the machine-close subject a newly intense rush of adrenaline. As drivers, people were expected to demonstrate levels of concentration and instantaneousness of reaction rarely demanded of them in the rest of their lives. They were given a sense of excitement, a thrill, which was unprecedented. And they had to experience, engage with, and overcome a fear—of losing control or causing an accident—which was new in its immediacy and sense of responsibility. It was with the polymorphous perversity of this new pleasure that cultural representations had to contend.

The car was modernist mobile architecture; it offered a new pleasure to the masses. With it, a major realignment of the economy of pleasure and pain, duty and desire, through which the modernist persona was imagined was bound to occur. In brief, what took place was a cultural, psychic, and medical reconceptualization of the human organism: it would henceforth be valorized for its capacity for energy. The vehicle as prosthesis takes over some of the powers of locomotion of the body, then demands of it new intensities of sensory perception. Terms from the fields of locomotion, engineering, and electricity—“drive,” “sparkle,” “stress,” “energy,” “dynamism”—become the currency through which to judge the body as a suitable unit in modernist life’s speeded-up traffic. Bodies came to be judged as speed machines, not only by Taylorist utilitarianism, which demanded that human bodies as motors be maximally efficient in every movement, but in the ways that people thought of their *own* well-being as energetic machines. In French, speed is *la vitesse*: with the advent of the new speed technologies, the very notion of life as the capacity for energetic movement, long the basis of scientific accounts for living organisms, took on a new valence. Human well-being was recast more vehemently as the capacity for active movement and the management of the organism’s energy.

All kinds of cultural forces rushed in to understand this cyborgization. First there was a resurgent nostalgia for the unprostheticized fast human body: the Olympic Games were revived in 1896, corresponding to the moment of the invention of the mass-producible motorcar. (In 1896 Karl Benz patented the first internal combustion flat engine; in the United States Ransom Olds began to build cars on a production line in 1902.) In medicine, adrenaline was isolated in 1900 by Jokichi Takamine and Keizo Uenaka, two Japanese scientists working in the United States, and was conceptualized at once in terms of human response time, velocity, and drive. The numerous high modernist literary treatments of anomie and boredom—almost invariably, of pedestrian *flâneurs*—may be read in part as laments

about the horrors of slowness and, by extension, as incitements to speed's prospect of vitality. Think of the almost unbearable languor of T. S. Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* ("Let us go then, you and I, . . .") or the dreary dawdlings continually being lamented in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, an account of the excruciating slowness of inefficient transport, as told by an engineer. More strikingly, the driver's need for new levels of visual alertness for seeing in motion, for enjoying a shock-punctuated gaze, was matched by a full-scale invention in the realm of representation—the moving image. As you might guess, from the start movies specialized in car chase scenes. These and many other developments can be recouped for the cultural critic as efforts to rethink and reeducate the newly prostheticized citizen enjoying—albeit anxiously—the new speed pleasure. To comprehend the totality of what was at stake here, however, we need to extend our field of vision beyond the adventures of the morphed subject to take in the social milieu in which these new speeds were not only invented but offered as a newly pleasurable experience, a kind of social gift, to individuals. We need, in short, a politics of speed. And because any new pleasure turns out to displace and cast into upheaval the possibilities of acknowledged, existing pleasures—including aesthetic pleasure—this politics of speed turns out to be closely bound up with the politics of representation itself.

Speed politics, in the first instance, was a politics of access: this newly intense experience was offered to citizens based on their ability to pay, on their gender, proximity to centers of production, consumption, and power. Next, it was a matter of national control. Everywhere speed came to be monitored and patrolled by governments as traffic police. New national regulatory systems, with driver's licenses, speed limits, traffic signs, and checkpoints, were rapidly set in place. Fundamentally, however, the narratives of access to speed and its control need to be thought of in terms of how the access to all resources and pleasures has been organized in modernity. Since the mid-nineteenth century the story of access has been told as the matter of consumption, the desire for and possession of commodities. The story of national control has been one of the state's control of its land space, its territory, and the flow of traffic—in goods, people, workers—thereupon. In both these realms, the rush to speed was profoundly disruptive.

First, consumption. Note that speed arrived as a gift to individuals at precisely the moment when commodity culture also took over: when a market economy saturated by commodities had become the governing fact

of everyday life in the West. Already by World War I it was clear that the automobile was the most characteristic and most desired commodity of all in this new age of mass consumerism. However—and crucially—the car, while offering itself as the ultimate fetish of the commodity age, went beyond the commodity form to embody something more: it offered not the mere pleasure of ownership but, more, the possibility of the new pleasure of the experience of speed. Note that in Marx's terms the commodity has been theorized as offering a spectral, illusory pleasure; its fetishistic power resides in its potency as a *misrepresentation* (but a representation, a spectacle nevertheless) of a real relation which it hides. The automobile as glamorous commodity offered all this, but as a technology, it offered more: the possibility of the *new* physical sensation—a pleasure possibility outside the realm of the illusory if spectacular fetish of the commodity. Enter into a prosthetic relation with the machine, it promised, and (for a price) experience a new pleasure. The implicit conception of nature, and of social order of authentic relations between people based on a natural order, on which Marx had built his theory of commodification was undermined radically at this moment when technology allowed people to feel modernity in their bones. This was a key moment in the history of the commodity—a history that has more ruptures and turns than have yet been theorized.

Second, consider how the arrival of the new speed experience transformed their sense of space—and how that matters as a political fact. Clearly, when one drove at new speed, distances were foreshortened and space condensed. Consider that the promise of speed pleasure appeared at the moment when the age of empire was at its height, but just when awareness was dawning that it would soon effectively be over. The new offer of speed as pleasure participated in this political and cultural turn to the extent that it exemplified a move away from projecting desire onto the faraway exotic locale, and onto personal effort and intensity experienced on one's own body. In the late Victorian period, the boy's adventure novels spawned with the rise of pulp fiction were likely to be imperial romances, as in the tales of H. Rider Haggard and Rudyard Kipling. By the twenties, the new heroes were more likely to be race car drivers or adventurers who endured massive hardship to break some record of endurance, rather than colonial explorers. Pleasure as heterotopic fantasy was being replaced by pleasure in the sensation of personal strenuousness. Territoriality mattered less than mobility, and speed was envisioned not only as pleasure but as a measure of extraordinary personal power.

I am not claiming that the new pleasure of speed somehow short-circuited or transcended either commodity fetishism or the dominant epistemic mind-set of the age of empire. *Au contraire*, it worked through both to effect a more intense colonization — an endocolonization<sup>3</sup> — of the subject-citizen's sensorium and body. In doing so, it radically altered the terms of both. The fetish of the commodity and the mirage of the heterotopic colony are, no doubt, related structurally: both are object worlds outside the viewer subject, and into which she supposedly longs to project herself — working to do so through the offers and variously theorized logics we call desire. Commodification and imperialism alike work on a logics of distance — the very sense of spatial distance that the new thrill of speed uses but operates to nullify. Nearly all accounts of modernist culture in one way or another speak of how modernist art works to show us that the object world as perceived by the subject is in fact illusory, a mirage, a simulation, an element of the “society of the spectacle.” The works do this, the accounts go, by shocking us, defamiliarizing our aesthetic sensibilities into the default mode of an epiphany. What these critical narratives still maintain, however, is the story of critical distance: that is, they assume that in the final instance modernist art demands a contemplative (and hence slowed-down) encounter. The new experience of speed as individual pleasure, however, refuses distance. This speed gives us pleasure as sensation, not as the contemplation made possible by critical distance. Thus, too, it does not need desire. What it needs — and what has not yet been given it — is what I am calling adrenaline aesthetics. This would be a new grammar of culture which overrides the imperatives of Western models of representation and aesthetic reception in modernity at least since Kant: a protocol which subsumes aesthetics under rationality by adhering to a model of critical distance and rational contemplation. Refusing this, adrenaline aesthetics works to delineate a pleasure that is effected first on the body and its sensorium.

How to explicitly show speed and its dramatic intensities, then, may have been a problem that much high modernist cultural production would tackle only tenuously, with suspicion. Popular culture, however — and especially new forms such as film — flooded in to pick up the slack. Attuned to people's everyday experiences, these forms signaled the thrills as well as the anxieties characteristic of the new speed culture. Sifting through the myriad signals from these forms about the nature of the speed experience, we can read the protocols by which elements of this experience came to be organized. We can outline a grammar of this pleasure. This in turn provides

a basis for examining its politics. This politics, conceived in the most comprehensive sense, begins with the idea that speed was modernism's greatest shock: the only one that, in altogether refusing critical distance, might refuse (even as it completely fulfills) the mirage offerings of the standard subject-other protocols of the Western post-Cartesian consciousness.<sup>4</sup> In particular, it may transform their twentieth-century popular equivalents, the well-groomed narratives of consumer desire (the subject's desire to own the commodity) and dreams of empire (the subject's desire to possess the exotic other space). If speed is modernity's only new pleasure, then speed-in-culture had modernism's greatest potential to be truly new. If modernist art was propelled into strangeness by a logistics of innovations, Pound's dictum to "make it new," then a newness that was visceral in turn offered a model and a spur for newness in the realm of culture.

If much modernism is about human movement — as in the figures of the ship in Conrad, the *flâneur* and *flâneuse* heroes and heroines of Joyce and Woolf, the ramp-ascending villa inhabitants of Le Corbusier, and the stair-descending nudes of Fernand Léger — and in the organization of this movement in traffic, and if the rate of this traffic is in its speed, then speed itself becomes the very narrative heft of much modernist artistic production. In this sense, much high modernist culture gave us speed without knowing it. Therefore, to formulate a totalizing politics of the new speed pleasure, we must attend both to the myriad details of speed thrills provided by the popular, and to the big-picture purlieu of high culture. In each high modernist experimental form, the death of distance is hidden in plain sight, and speed as a way of life, a way of living, and a way of being has come true. As speed took over the texts and images of modernism, it did not make them more strange but rather helped them clarify. To trace this clarification and to show how speed infiltrated modernism is the purpose of this book. I trace how an angst at the idea of static spaces and the nostalgia for home was fostered in early mass popular culture. I explore how people were incited to desire a new pleasure which they could not really have known of in advance, and how the already familiar mechanisms of consumer desire were harnessed in the service of advocating this novel experience. I consider how anxieties about the onslaught of new speeds were countered and dispelled, and how the very ways in which culture had taught people to imagine space as pleasurable were recast in favor of experiencing rapid movement. I describe how the new protocols of speed looking were developed and explored, as a key example of how a new sensory experience

was fostered, celebrated, and thrilled to. I delineate how fear of the crash, the accident, the end of speed, was exacerbated and repressed at once, in a nerve-wracking psychic conflict which served mostly to underline the realness of the speed experience and the gravity of its effects on the human body. Speed, as the only new pleasure of modernity, had its incitements, its rules, its practices, and its terrors improvised for it in a few years—the modernist moment.

To show how the infiltration of speed into modernist representations made simpler and more self-evident the energies which often we think of as having made modernist art strange and obscure, let us consider, as opening exhibits, three artworks of speed culture. One is proto-modernist, one the product of a new technology of representation, and one avowedly modernist: a painting, a photograph, and a lithograph. In these images, from 1860, 1908, and 1915, the viewer identifies with a subject who, ever more resolutely, is snatched by speed. In the first, the unseen subject experiences the speed passively, and the landscape, through transference as pathetic fallacy, is transformed to match her mood. In the second, an intense drama makes for gyrating dynamism as the subject wrestles with speed. In the third, the subject, half in joke, *is* speed. From proto-impressionism to an image produced by a technology of fast seeing to proto-surrealism, speed seeps into modernism and wipes the blur out of its art.

First, consider J. M. W. Turner's *Rain, Steam, and Speed: The Great Western Railway* (1844) (figure 1). In the early nineteenth century, the railway introduced unprecedented speeds, but it offered them to the vast majority of people as passive experience—as passengers borne along—and as spectacle. Luckily, we need not guess at the extraordinary sense of material instability and the prospect of the dissolution of matter altogether that was inspired, in its first viewers, by the train's speed: it is recorded majestically by Turner here. Showing speed through flux and blur presages many later experiments. Turner's stunning flux-imbued impressionism *avant la lettre* makes technology seem spectral and ominous. But speed's power is acknowledged as awe-inspiringly impressive: it literally vaporizes the landscape through which it cuts. Nature becomes diaphanous when speed out-natures it. This spectral, magically transformed landscape is effective as speed spectacle because in its vague comfort, it corresponds to the helplessness with which Victorians experienced this speed: passively, as passengers. This passivity, in turn, prompted them to fantasize about the roles of the train drivers, as in Emile Zola's novel about a murderous engine-



FIGURE 1. J. M. W. Turner, *Rain, Steam, and Speed: The Great Western Railway*, 1844. Reproduced by permission of the National Gallery, London.

man, *La bête humaine* (The Human Beast) of 1890, and to compulsively render their passivity before speed as spectacle, in new genres such as travel posters, the “decorated-shed” architecture of the grandiose new railway stations, from the Stazione Centrale in Milan to New York’s Grand Central, and paintings from those of Turner to Monet’s *Gare Saint Lazare* series of 1876–77. Once speed is offered as the spectacle of a locomotive, varieties of impressionism interpose themselves as the enabling form of the image. This vagueness is nevertheless an easeful blur, corresponding to a degree to the flashing landscape seen from the carriage window. This softening of visual focus offers an implicit assurance that although speed may radically alter the world around her, or at least her perception of it, it will not disturb the essentially static equilibrium of the viewer-subject as passenger herself.

Next, consider Jacques-Henri Lartigue’s photograph of a racing car driver at the wheel, titled *Nov. 9, Road from Nice to Peira-Cava*, taken in 1908

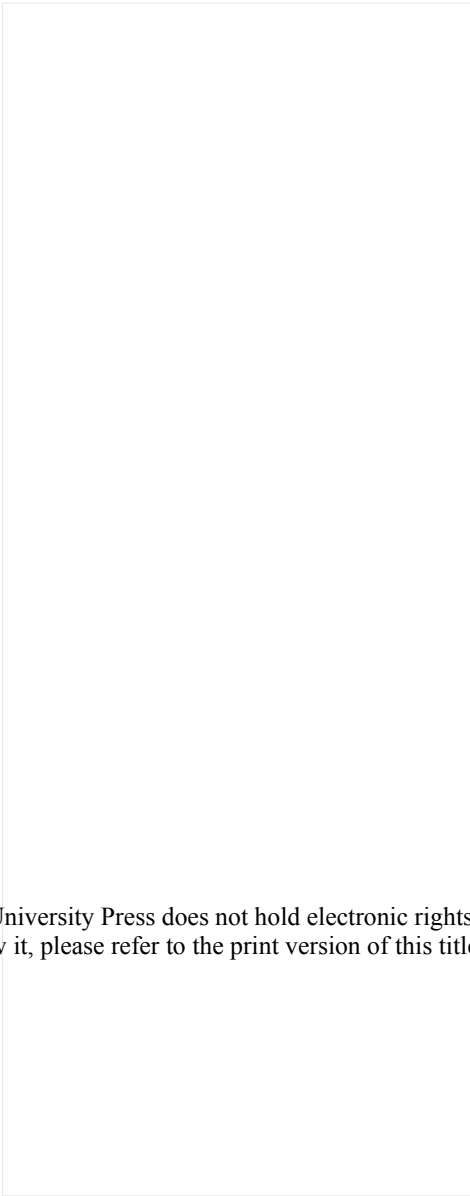
(figure 2). Whereas Turner evokes rail speed through a swirl of diaphanous cloud, in Lartigue's photo the sense of a whorl of swirling dust results from the inadequacy of the camera lens and shutter mechanism to capture completely the details of the speeding object; it is a technological inadequacy that the photographer paradoxically deploys to great effect. Turner's whole image evokes nebulousness; here, instead, as with many early photographs of movement, the pinpointed center is in focus, defining a point of concentration which makes the margin's grainy vagueness encircle a fixed center point. Turner's evocation of the passive speed experienced by a passenger found its visual counterpoint in the steam billowing from the locomotive's engine to merge with the clouds; Lartigue's image demands that the viewer identify with the racing driver, and feel with him, that the power point of his speed is in the engine in front of him in his car. The pleasure we take with him in his speed's intensity is undercut by the glint of his goggles, the flash of his eye. Look more: this eye's flash resonates as a glance of fear. We too fear that that near-panicked eye might not be able to capture the exact curve of that twisting road as readily as can the camera's technological eye. This image turns out to be fully concentrated, focused on the driver as a point of pleasure, desire and, fear, whereas Turner's is open, diffusely dreaming of speed as a utopian flight in the way dreamers before the Wright brothers did—as a means to merge with the clouds. Turner's perspective beckons to the heavens; Lartigue's lens turns downward toward the earth. The modernist reality Lartigue captures is earthier, and he shows lots of earth to represent speed. The lesson of its concentrated focus on the driver's eye is the same lesson of many images of cars since: the need for a new personal regimen of alertness, if only for the driver-speeder's management of fear.

So we come to the final exhibit, Francis Picabia's *Portrait of a Young American Woman in a State of Nudity*. It is a lithograph reproduced in the avant-garde journal 291 in July 1915 (figure 3). Here the fear has turned to laughter. The presumptive human subject is not struggling with speed, not prostheticized, but wholly technologized. With the nude morphed into a spark plug, floating upright in total blankness, not only has technology completely replaced the tenderness of the body, but all impressionist blur, whether of sky or earth, is erased when the sentient body is acknowledged as the spark plug which makes speed possible. By being the spark that enables speed and that will experience its energy, this subject can emerge from the blur that has up to now either suggested her passivity (as in Turner)



FIGURE 2. J.-H. Lartigue, *Nov. 9, Road from Nice to Peira-Cava*.  
Courtesy of Friends of J.-H. Lartigue, Paris.

or her anxious struggle (as in Lartigue). She is now wholly divorced from landscape, freed from any sense of a relation to space, place, and geography. This is why the white blankness of the background, emphasized by the thin line marking the frame, is key here. The accession to speed's energy renounces real time at the same moment as it sheds physical space: that is the meaning of the avowal of the capitalized "FOR-EVER." This image seems culled from a catalog: we are unremittingly in the world of consumer components, too, with the implication that the human body must pass through this state—that is, be commodified to access the spark of speed's energy. All this is a joke here on the Western tradition of the nude, of the separation of the technological and the human, on women's bodies, on Americans, on car parts—but a joke that is thoroughly profound. The artist has intuited a



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FIGURE 3. Francis Picabia, *Portrait of a Young American Woman in a State of Nudity*, 1915. Lithograph. Reproduced in the avant-garde journal *291*, nos. 5–6 (July–August 1915). Courtesy of the artist's estate.

supreme subjectivity for the speed moment, in which, in letting our bodies be technological components, we achieve the spark of speed as the power and pleasure of the self. Impressionist obscurity is overcome, and speed, in this high modernism (a modernism which forbids critical distance), is the evident secret of human subjectivity. Adrenaline aesthetics has worked itself out. The moment of modernist speed is announced.



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## *Speed Theory*

All revolution is movement, but all movement is not revolution.

— Paul Virilio, *Speed and Politics*

Consider speed. Specifically, imagine again the intense new thrill felt by those who at the dawn of the twentieth century drove a car fast for the first time. This is how Aldous Huxley describes it in his essay “Wanted, a New Pleasure” (1931):

Speed, it seems to me, provides the one genuinely modern pleasure. True, men have always enjoyed speed; but their enjoyment has been limited, until very recent times, by the capacities of the horse, whose maximum velocity is not much more than thirty miles per hour. Now thirty miles an hour on a horse feels very much faster than sixty miles an hour in a train or a hundred in an airplane. The train is too large and steady, the airplane too remote from stationary surroundings, to give their passengers a very intense sensation of speed. The automobile is sufficiently small and sufficiently near the ground to be able to compete, as an intoxicating speed-purveyor, with the galloping horse. The inebriating effects of speed are noticeable on horseback at about twenty miles an hour, in a car at about sixty. When the car has passed seventy-two, or thereabouts, one begins to feel an unprecedented sensation, a sensation which no man in the days of horses ever felt. It grows intenser with every increase in velocity. I myself have never traveled at much more than eighty miles an hour in a car; but those who drunk a stronger beverage of this strange intoxicant tell me that new marvels await anyone who has the opportunity of passing the hundred mark. . . . Two hundred miles an hour must be absolute torture.<sup>1</sup>

You can sense Huxley's quaking with doubt about his proposition even as he wrote it, but you sense too that he knew his idea was too brilliant and audacious to let drop. As he sees it, despite vast changes through the centuries, people's experience of pleasure has remained remarkably the same. To claim that, with the car, the technological advances that had been a hallmark of the industrial revolution had finally brought to individual human subjects a new pleasure that they could tangibly experience—that it would give each of them a thrill which had never before been felt—is to posit a fundamental and truly wondrous kind of revolution. It also begs a host of questions. Why did it happen now? Was it a pleasure that was rationed, and who had access to it? How is it connected to the effects of other technological advances that were such a feature of that historical moment: the bicycle, the phonograph, the telephone, the airplane, the movie camera, even mass electrification and electric light? How does it jibe with the shocking changes in art, literature, and, soon, film that burst on the scene at the same time, the diverse experiments we now call modernism? If people's pleasure was radically revised, how did this impact the old, familiar pleasures? Finally, was the pleasure policed, and how did it matter to communities and even nations as well as individuals? Which is to say, what exactly are the politics of this new pleasure? Speed, as pleasure and as politics, would shake things up; here we begin the exploration of how and why.

To think of speed as a pleasure is to think of it strategically. It forces us to think of speed sensationally, that is, how it feeds our sensations, our senses, working on our bodies to produce physical as well as psychic and psychological effects. Centrally, it makes us attend to the way speeding changes how we experience space. Speed in modernity has, most frequently, been thought of as a matter of conquering time: the regime of clock time, timetables, clocking in, schedules, being on time, meeting deadlines, going faster. This is the modern urban regimen described by Georg Simmel in "The Metropolis and Mental Life."<sup>2</sup> It is the aspect of speed that modernity forces on us; it is the part of speed that is onerous. It is the speed of modern stress that the Austrian novelist Elfriede Jelinek had in mind when she said of New York, "I'm just afraid that the speed and noise would make me mad as soon as I set foot on land."<sup>3</sup> When we think of the thrill of speed as pleasure, however, as, for example, in driving a car at a hundred miles per hour, then we think of traversing space more quickly. If speed's nastiness is about beating time, speed's pleasure seduces by recasting our relation to space. To understand the politics of speed, why it came to be

granted first to the rich and then to masses of people in the early twentieth century, how it was rationed and policed, how it was represented as a thrill to be desired, then we must theorize it as part of a revolutionary change in the ways in which space was reorganized in modernity, and in the ways in which people willingly embraced such changes. In terms of the history of the organization of the world's space, the salient fact in or around 1900 was that this was the moment of greatest expansion of the Western empires: the age of empire, in which a small group of Western nations ruled over vast swaths of territory and controlled the sea routes of the globe. At the same historical moment, the first cars were mass-produced: technological speed would first be offered as individual pleasure to masses of people in the West. The age of empire and the age of speed coincide; how to trace their relation?

Speed is not only a pleasure that has a politics; speed, it turns out, *is* politics: the expression of a new order of the organization of global space. My key proposition in this chapter is this: that masses of Westerners were granted access for the first time to the experience of speeds made possible by technology at the moment when empire was at its height, but more importantly, at that paradigm-shattering moment when it became clear that the whole world had at last been mapped and conquered, and that global space was finite. Until this time, in the age of empire as exploration, it had suited Western ideologies to encourage dreams of exotic “other” spaces, spaces to be enjoyed, mapped, and conquered. This had been the basis for a long-standing Western conception of space as a dualist entity, with the known home close at hand, and the exotic and potentially infinite space of exotic and threatening otherness far away. When the sources of such other-continent dreamscapes ran out, attention turned inward to the excitement of movement for its own sake: Western culture turned to speed. Fantasies of movement as adventure and exploration aimed at discovering uncharted lands were replaced by fantasies of the rate of movement for its own sake: fantasies of speed. The dream machine of the earlier travel had been the ship; of the new speed, the race car. Books like *Robinson Crusoe* had distilled the lies and dreams of the older ways of thinking about space; it remains to be seen what text or film will become the classic of the new. Speed, as the achievement of the technologies of Western modernity, was offered as personal sensation to individuals as a means to experience space in a new way, at the very moment when there was no more new world space left to organize. The new mass availability of speed as technology's tangible pleasure,

and the organization of the world's territory known as empire, are deeply related.

This, then, is a global context for speed's pleasure. We can theorize it not just as a novel phenomenon experienced by people everywhere in this century, but as a new experience attached to the dynamic realignment of global space in modernity. To read speed in these terms is to grasp technology as a deep form of ideology: not merely as a cause that had cultural effects but as a force that at this moment not only infiltrated people's consciousness and their unconscious but offered people a wholly new sensation. We can trace the connection between the developing grammar of this sensation and the shifts taking place at the same moment in the global reordering of space. First, however, I hope to prove this (on the face of it, unlikely) collusion between the state's culture of empire and the mass-culture phenomenon of the speeding car.

To understand the modernist collusion between politics and sensation, it is useful to consider some theoretical work in geography, cultural studies, and critical theory, on issues of place, space, and the importance of territory, from the "new geography" to theory's "spatial turn." This work shares an attention not just to space but to movement and to the rates of movement, that is, speed. Speed issues, even speeding automobiles, crop up at crux moments in key essays by the thinker who taught cultural studies how to read starred spaces, Michel Foucault; in the work of Henri Lefebvre, who pioneered the study of spaces in materialist critical theory; and in that of Fredric Jameson, who first combined these materialist and culturalist perspectives for English-speaking audiences. Recent writing in the field of architecture has also become obsessed with speed. Each of these theorists of the reorganizations of space in modernity theorizes flows, traffic, movement, and speed, often, as it were, without knowing it. It took the architect-theorist of speed in modernity, Paul Virilio, to point up the force of speed in the West's reorganization of space. Each, likewise, places the matter of empire at the heart of his discussion of spatial reorganization. We will turn first to the work of David Harvey, a follower most directly of Lefebvre, and the leader of the "new geography," to see how his explanation of the end of the "spatial fix" in late-empire politics and economics becomes a rationale for the turn to speed in Western culture. We will then go on to consider how the theorist's fascination with speed might be read: we will formulate some rules for speed reading.

*Speed Theory: Theory's "Spatial Turn" and Speed*

On July 4, 1907, the *Paris Herald* quoted an American spectator at a race in Trouville as saying, "No one who did not see the race can in the least imagine the ecstasy of exquisite sensation that permeates one's being when a machine flashed by at that frightful speed. . . . You realize the awful danger. You sympathize in the keenness of the delight."<sup>4</sup> Compare this for a moment with the shock provoked by the high art of the modernist period. Could the shock that was elicited by the best high modernist art be an analogy to the shock of the new technological speed? Not quite; the visceral shock of the speed experience and the aesthetic-intellectual account of an encounter with an artwork occupy different registers. Nevertheless, to take speed into account is to revamp debates about how high modernist art reacted to the apparently shocking, cacophonous, disorienting social forces of modernity. The shock tactics of modernist prose, poetry, music, and art have been read convincingly as an education in high capitalist stresses, by theorists such as the architect Manfredo Tafuri,<sup>5</sup> or as attempts to register or "map" the confusions of dislocated social forces, as Fredric Jameson suggests in an essay we will consider in a moment, "Cognitive Mapping."<sup>6</sup> Once speed has been taken into account, the modernist artwork can be read as a specific—if sometimes quaint, even cumbersome—version of an energy-manipulating technology itself.

Modernist literature, from Eliot's *Prufrock* to Joyce's *Ulysses*, Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, and Kafka's *The Trial*, as well as Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project*, returns obsessively to the figure of the city pedestrian, the *flâneur*, at the very moment when the car was taking over the city. (Robert Musil's modernist magnum opus, *The Man without Qualities*, opens with Viennese pedestrians as wittily blasé witnesses of a car crash.) In the years in question, only the Futurists were celebrating speed explicitly; here, while casting a cold eye on their bombast and politics, we will reread some other modernisms in the light of the speed-representing strategies they explicitly espoused. By making their heroes and heroines *flâneurs* in radically fragmented texts, Joyce, Woolf, and the rest came to terms in the early twentieth century with a new sense of urban space. By the end of the century, the theorists had caught up with them and were fascinated by shifts in the organization and perception of space as well. Focusing on speed as the basis for a modernist revolution in spatial perception, I want to carry forward the

project of developing a materialist theory of space already elaborated by critics of the postmodern moment, from Edward Soja and David Harvey to Fredric Jameson. These thinkers, retheorizing twentieth-century culture and social life in political terms, reassessed how obscurity, a defining attribute in the century's cultural productions, can be read in the light of the tectonic shifts and strategic trajectories of globally rampant capitalism. All focus on material space. Each also turns out to be preoccupied with movement and the rate of movement, speed.

Speed has had a fugitive, supremely fragmented existence among some of the crucial academic disciplines of the twentieth century. The stresses of speed and speed's repetitiveness have, at important moments, such as Freud's investigation of "shell shock" and war traumas after World War I, been crucial issues for psychoanalysis. The most important and advanced branches of theoretical physics in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have been concerned, respectively, with dynamics, as in the second law of thermodynamics, and energy, as in Einstein's theory of relativity. Speed has been an explicit concern of mechanical engineering, in solving problems of faster engines, and of the new science of traffic engineering, in the planning of efficient road traffic flows. The effects of speed vision have concerned the makers of camera machinery at least since Etienne-Jules Marey. Kinesis, or kinesthetics, has been the express area of study of dance and dance theory. Despite this dispersal, however, speed has entered the field of vision of cultural and materialist theorists only recently. Why has theory avoided kinesis, velocity, speed? Materialists have had a difficult time theorizing technological advances. They are tempted to see them as perverse undercutters of labor power: capitalist tools. Forces as nebulous as "speed" seem impossibly elusive for deterministic accounts of social progress, especially for materialist critics who value their rigorous engagement with history. Jameson staked out the long view and stressed an engagement with time rather than space as the prerequisite for materialist analysis with his imperative to "always historicize!"<sup>7</sup> Yet materialist critics of culture, including Jameson himself, have also subsumed questions of history into those of spatial organization and perception.

Contemporary critiques of spatial materiality are often "theories against the state"; haunted by the idea of the modern state, they are anxious about whether it should be thought of in ideological (that is, as "community") or in spatial (that is, as "territory") terms. Theory's spatial turn repays geography's and cultural studies' debt to anthropology and to sociology,

disciplines in which a search for culturally definable “places” in the morass of abstracted space is integral. Sociology influenced cultural studies through the importance of Gramsci’s and Althusser’s concepts of ideology, where the crucial ideology was that of the state—in Althusser’s terms, the original ideological state apparatus. The state may be an “imagined community,” but this community is held together by the belief that common identities are tied to a fixed territory, a demarcated space whose borders are controlled. With the state as a space upheld by an ideology of place, attention to space entered materialist theory through the back door of discussions of ideology. The resurgence of spatial theory in architecture, urban theory, the “new geography,” and materialist criticism generally is, however, I suggest, only secondarily concerned with space per se; centrally, it is concerned with velocities of movement—of goods, people, money, and power—that is, with speed. As postmodern materialist critics attempt to return a materialist basis to a critical theory that has, in the hands of post-Gramscians such as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, been drained of almost all its materiality and become almost wholly a theory of influences and the potential to counteract them, they appear to see at last that that crucial ideology of modernity, nationalism, is not merely an effect or an ideological mirage producing imagined communities but rather an ideology based by analogy on the well-known capitalist conceptions of ownership and possession, applied to the most basic of material entities, space itself. Just as the good capitalist measures her success in the possession of money, goods, and land, so too the state will act to possess, in the first instance, the land that validates it. This state ownership of the territory will in turn be taken advantage of by capital in search of possibilities for expansion and new profit. In contrast to, yet in conjunction with, this stasis of fixed territory on which nationalism depends, movement and speed become qualities of capitalism. For both capital and its critics, therefore, the issue is how to overcome the static space of the state and to take advantage of—or, in the critic’s case, to theorize—a dynamic global movement. Thinking space, materialist critics are doing nothing more than following the insight of Marx, who, in a famous phrase in *Capital*, described how capital desired to “annihilate space with time.”<sup>8</sup> This is the most concisely political definition of speed yet available.

The turn to space and its cartographies is not limited to the materialist strand of contemporary criticism, however; the chronotope, the slice of space with all its possibilities that one can imagine inserted like a wedge