

SLOW MOTION

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Talk of speed is the companion to the modern project. Ever growing speed seems to be characteristic of the modern life, at least our perspective on this life. There are many examples of the relation between the modern project and high speed. A perhaps limited but obvious example is to be found in the history of architecture and urbanism and the Italian futurists' affection for the high speed and the low viscosity of the city (Banham 1980). Another example from the history of architecture is the modernist architect's habit to put a fast car in front of their new buildings photographed to overcome the immobility of the house and its attachment to the place and ground. A superficial glance sees this striving for urban speed as an attitude of limited significance. But understood in relation to the development of the history of city planning, these attitudes and ideas are of great concrete importance and consequence.

However, it is well known, that the fixation on urban high speed has become a target for criticism, which argues for the opposite of high speed. The slow-food movement and the concept of slow cities are related phenomena that express resistance to modern speed and its leveling of culture. In the United States there is a movement of so-called downshifters, a kind of middle-class antitheses of the acquisitive yuppies of the 1980s. Downshifters believe that time is more important than money, so it is better to work less and be happy and fulfilled than to be well-paid for struggling with jobs that are stressful or unrewarding.

Speech about the meaning of the slow in opposi-

tion to modern rapid speed is of course not related only to culinary experiences or touristic appeals, nor is it restricted to our own time (Amin & Thrift 2002). It is not hard to find contemporary and historic examples of talk of the slow life, expressed as a form of criticism aimed at stress, snippetfication (*snuttifiering*) and fragmentation. In a slower existence we are supposed to be more human, calmer, wiser, authentic and perhaps more natural.

This discussion slips easily towards the problem of time. On the library shelf of books on personal development, one learns that the handling of time is crucial to the individual's development. How do we use time in the most efficient way? How do we handle everyday stress? Where do we find the refuge for our time (in all senses!), where we can slow down and find ease? In this sense slowness may appear as a strategic method of controlling one's life and pace of life.

On the other hand, in everyday life slow motion is often considered a problem. The decent exercise of public authority is seldom related to slowness. To be considered a slow thinker is seldom advantageous to a person's image. There can be no such thing as a slow stockbroker. In the IT-business, the companies compete through their ability to produce high speed. When searching for slowness (*långsamhet*) at Swedish Google it is presumably not a coincidence that the machine asks me if I am actually looking for profitability (*lönsamhet*). In the computer world, slowness is (in Swedish) a possible misspelling.

Slowness does not seem to belong to working life. Instead it is something to mark the transition to

leisure time. When the boundaries between working hours and leisure time appear to be more and more difficult to maintain, it seems that we find the differences between high and low speed at the boundary between weekdays and weekends, when time off is separated from working hours. In the talk of increased speed and the need for slowness we can discern an invocation as well as a diagnosis. When sun-bathing on the beach, strolling in the woods, relaxing in the summer cottage or driving the camper, we leave the watch behind to sense a feeling of being out of time or at least to get a notion of time passing a little bit slower, as it perhaps did in the past.

Thus slow motion appears as a cultural phenomenon in its own right; a phenomenon surrounded by speech, intentions and values. But as an ethnologist I am also interested in slow motions that are quiet and hard to discover, motions that are so slow that they hardly appear at all as motions, and instead seem to be solid or even invisible.

In some research performed a few years ago on the history of psychiatry between 1850 and 1970 (Jönsson 1998), I noticed that incarcerated patients, whose conditions seemed permanent and who repeated their behaviors day after day, quenched the interest of psychiatrists. The notes in the case records tended to be more and more sparse and monotonous. "Same as before", "condition unchanged", "status quo" were dutifully noted every six or twelve months. Facing the unchanged condition, the production of psychiatric knowledge was as silent and still as the condition of the patients appeared to be. Confronting this condition, the observer was blind. Only motion and resistance activated the machinery of observation and the apparatus of therapy. Slow motion in this sense and context might be considered as an action of resistance. To do nothing or to do something very slowly are well-known methods of resistance, especially in institutional contexts.

The stillness and quietness that surrounded the patient in permanent conditions gave me detailed information on the conditions of the production of psychiatric knowledge. The quietness stood in sharp contrast to the speech of change and scientific evo-

lution that characterized psychiatry and its identity and self-understanding.

I found signs and experiences of slowness not only in patient records. Time ticked differently in different spaces of the hospital. Where change was obvious, in the open wards of treatment and hope, time was straight, aimed at the certain goal of recovery, health and discharge. The place for illness, permanence or change in the wrong direction was the cell, the closed space for the singular inmate. In this room, closed not only for the inmate but also for the observer's gaze, no hope was in sight. Rather than being therapeutic, the function of the cell was to contain bodily secretions, untidiness, noise and the violence of the patient. In this room, time rather than moving straight forward, was cyclic if it was even noticeable. When recovery and change could not be envisioned, the psychiatric interest faded. In the cell psychiatric time slowed down or even stopped. Its stillness was a sharp contrast to the "open" wards of therapy and hope.

My point is that notions of time and motion are very much dependent on different perspectives and methods of examination and investigation. Psychiatry had its methods, which resulted in a certain kind of knowledge; methods with different sensibilities for motion and change on one hand, and for slowness and chronic condition on the other.

But how do we as ethnologists study slow motion or slow processes, especially slow motions that border on permanence? To what extent are we dependent on motion and change to record phenomena? Let me approach these questions through the system of concrete bunkers that once marked and defended the westerly and northerly limits of the Third Reich.

A walk on the beach of northern Jylland, Denmark, gives the visitor several examples of how time and space work together as a slow but intractable force. These bunkers were constructed by the engineer Fritz Todt (1891–1942) and form part of the Atlantic Wall with its approximately 15,000 bunkers. The aerostatic form of the bunkers not only let projectiles slip off its surface, but did the same for the gaze. The bunker was prematured as worn, and was smoothed to avoid all impact. While a regular

house is anchored and placed in the terrain by its foundation, the bunker was placed on the ground to allow limited movement when the earth is struck by projectiles (Virilio 1994: 37). The bunker floats on the ground. Because of this, many bunkers are tilted without any signs of serious damage. As Paul Virilio notices, these “steles” are the result of a world of fast moving objects (Virilio 1994: 39). But they are characterized by, if not immobility, very slow motion.

On the coast of Jylland, like other parts of the Atlantic northern coast, these concrete, streamlined lumps have moved at irregular speeds and directions towards the sea. Of course, the movement itself cannot be noted by the eye. The capsized objects themselves, their tilt and distorted position, give the observer not only an understanding of the idea behind this defensive architecture, but also a notion of slow motion that can only be discerned from the leaning, tilting and sloping.

The bunkers of the Atlantic Wall teach us to be aware of distortion, and show us that distortion and irregularities can be signs of motions that are discernable only through studies of long sequences and close readings of distortion itself. The defensive and almost stationary bunkers also emphasize the ways that fast and slow motion often come together hand in hand. The slow bunker had, as its opposite and enemy, missiles moving so fast that they could barely be seen in real time.

Long historical perspectives are one way to get hold of slow processes. Like a long film compressed to a few minutes, studies of the past allow us to identify and analyze slow processes. This is a well-known historical method. However, here I have also argued that by focusing on and searching for slowness, quietness and stillness we can find ways to explore cultural processes that at a first glance seem absent or invisible. What perspectives on the inmates were illustrated by case records which repeated expressions like “status quo”, “no change”, etc.? What information was to be derived from the quietness of the slow or non-existent motion of a “permanent” condition? By focusing on slowness and phenomena of permanence one could analyze elements that were of great significance to the inner life of the institution, the

foundations of the psychiatric production of knowledge, and the construction of patienthood.

My second example, the Atlantic Wall bunkers, makes a different point. The tilted bunkers of the beach express motions manifest for the eye only through deviance and irregularities. They show us that irregularities should not necessarily be seen as only anomalies but also as the result of long term slow motion. Together with close views and readings, the concentrated search for distortion and deviation, the concept of slow motion leads us to a sort of analytical technique which allows us to explore landscapes and contexts of stillness and silence.

A question for all researchers in the anthropological field is how we can find a multitude of points of observations, so that we can identify and construct scientific problems. Sometimes I feel that we have made ourselves dependent on the daily reports of mass media in the search for research problems with public relevance. We do have a well developed and trained seismographic instrument to discover the manifest processes of cultural significance. However, this positive ability ought to be combined more often with an eye or an ear that aims for slow processes that are not necessarily followed or surrounded by words but by serenity and silence, phenomena and processes that are not shaped by fast and/or clear manifest change but by their slow change and culturally reserved silence.

My quest for slow motion assumes that the world is not, in every respect, fast changing. On the contrary, I propose that quiet traditions, repetitions, and habits are still crucial – but more invisible – parts of society and of the everyday life of human beings.

References

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