

Answer from Sebastian Trapp to a comment to the "speed"-text from Douglas Lummis

see Illich, Ivan; Rieger, Matthias; Trapp, Sebastian (1996): Speed? What Speed? New versions of the speeches given at the 'Speed'-Conference of the Netherlands-Design-Institute, Amsterdam, 8. Nov. 1996.

http://www.pudel-uni-bremen.de/subjects/space/Illich_rieger_trapp_speed.pdf

and

Lummis, Douglas (2003): Money and the Metronome.

http://www.pudel-uni-bremen.de/subjects/space/SpeedLummis_1.pdf

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Dear Mr. Lummis,

Matthias Rieger has sent me your text “Money and the Metronome” and I feel like I should comment a little bit on what you wrote. I have to admit that I was a little flattered when I learned that you had criticised our text on “Speed”, but I nevertheless have to answer a few of your rhetorical questions in the negative.

You ask: “Is it possible that when these authors concluded that before the seventeenth century Europe had no notion of “speed” meaning “to go fast”, they were being a bit hasty?” No, we were not. The problem that runs through your rebuttal of our argument is that we never said anything like that. We didn’t speak about “speed” meaning “to go fast”. What we did speak about is the possibility to divide space through time, something Galileo can be credited for. Of course Friedrich II could tell a fast falcon from a faster one. But the idea of km/h, kilometres per hour, didn’t occur to him.

This answers another question of yours: “But why is the metronome an example of speed? The metronome was not invented to make musicians play faster; surely its effect is to slow them down as often as to speed them up. The metronome was introduced to regularize the tempo of musical performance.” Correct. The effect of the metronome is a marvellous example for what the idea of mechanized, mathematical speed, which is homogenous by its very idea (the speed of the musicians may be qualified as an afterthought as *changes* of speed, but it remains an afterthought), the abstract idea of, in this case, beats per minute does to something that *convenit*, that fits. Musicians play for an audience. If the listeners are sad the artists are playing in a sad mood, if they attend a feast they will play happier, perhaps even orgiastic. Today we would say their music is slow or fast. But when you listen closely you realize that there is no such thing as the speed of their tune, they are constantly slowing down or speeding up.

The metronome, of course, can’t do that. So when you use this device for enacting a piece of music it nearly inevitably sounds rigid, dead. That’s why today metronomes are for beginners and why Beethoven was scandalized by the effects of this device. It is unimaginable to use one in a concert. The music fits to the occasion, to the people and their mood, the metronome doesn’t. Or, as you say, “The metronome expropriates that part of the music and places it under the regulation of a mechanical device.” But it not only expropriates *a part* of the music, it changes completely what music *is*.

What is more or less obvious in music can be seen in the vicious ballet of the hunting bird. As you quote: “In all this flying, curving and circling, the rousing and gaining altitude, the hesitating and swooping down, in all this, there simply is no place for our notion of speed.” It doesn’t matter whether the bird covers a lot of ground in a short time if only it is able to surprise its prey. The idea of the falcon as a speedy bird ignores the nature of its hunt. Friedrich II had no use for km/h.

Here you have in a nutshell the idea of “speed” that we were exploring and the change it brings about. Speed becomes something that is measured against a scale, an instrument, against abstract values. The movement of somebody, the *tempi* of the music musicians play to an audience are no longer in relation, they are measured. The time of proportionality, as Ivan Illich called it, is replaced by the time of extrinsic values.

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Of course an idea that revolutionary needs some time to sink in. In ordinary life it had no place until the technology that used the underlying logic became apparent and important in everyday life. The railroad is a telling example for this. When you read accounts of the first travellers using trains you see their shock, the horror of being transported homogenously through a homogenous space. Wolfgang Schivelbusch in “Die Geschichte der Eisenbahnreise” gives some interesting reports on that experience. But, as you know, we got used to it.

You write: “Industrial life placed the tempo of our lives under the regulation of the machine.” What we tried to say actually goes much deeper than that. We did not want to show that “the regulation of (our lives by) the machine” is against nature or something along that line. We argued that the very idea of a “tempo of our life” as we understand it is an idea that would have been utterly inaccessible to everybody before Galileo.

And this is why our talk in Amsterdam could actually surprise people. Today we are so much used to the idea of mechanical speed that for us it is next to impossible to think otherwise. I agree that music is a much more elucidating example for this than a bird. I just happen to like birds whereas Matthias beats the drum.

I thank you for the example of Benjamin Franklin, because it shows so clearly how far the idea of external values can go. You write: “For Franklin, “money” does not mean something desired out of greed, but something the accumulation of which is a measure of virtue.” Money is the epitome of an extrinsic value (for the problem of money I refer to Martin Burckhardt: *Metamorphosen von Raum und Zeit*). And here, for Franklin (who - as a man of the 18th century - lived well after Galileo) money becomes the *measure* for *virtue*.

Without the logic that underlies Galileo’s distance per time this would have been unthinkable. To make this visible our article asks “Speed? What Speed?” The idea of speed is not naturally given, it is historical. When we see this we can ask: What is the outcome of this mindset? In a society where speed seems to be everything we are blind for a circling bird of prey, deaf to the joy of a Freilach and too fast for the step of a pilgrim.

Best regards,

Sebastian Trapp