



Nothing but Concentration

“The glut of information generated by modern technology more largely threatens to make its receivers passive. Overload prompts disengagement. Seely Brown again makes a useful distinction in this regard between information and communication. An overwhelming volume of information, he suggests, is not an “innocent” problem; large amounts of raw data create a political fact: control becomes more centralized as volume increases. Whereas in communication, the volume of information decreases as people interact and interpret; editing and elimination are the procedures which decentralize communication.” [Richard Sennett¹]

According to Paul Virilio, because of the amount of information we have to decode, which hopelessly exceeds our capacity to comprehend, we no longer feel that we are in the “present moment”². It has become difficult to complete a thought process. The details of the world vanish in the flicker of speed.³ The greater the speed, the further away the horizon gets.

The “racing standstill”⁴ (the direct translation of the German title of Virilio’s *Speed and Politics*) means the increase of acceleration – the attainment of real time thanks to transmission technologies – and as a result a new powerlessness, a total regression. In order not to vegetate further as “hybrids of plants”, we introduce a kind of “slowness” by taking a critical look at the streams of data and information.

Which information do we receive? Of this, what is superfluous? How can organisation structures be changed? What mechanisms are effective and where can a screw be tightened up or a programme be used differently in order to be able to avoid this pervasive exhaustion in the future? We become observers of the world and attempt to develop an alternative to what Hartmut Rosa described as the “slippery slope phenomenon”⁵, where a person can never relax and never be content without anticipating loss or disadvantage as a result, and that this at the same time deprives us of control over our lives.

Global economic mechanisms have robbed us of almost any influence as “political subjects”. The illusion of self-optimisation is diametrically opposed to efforts to fulfil basic needs. The desire for stability, security, etc. is no longer met. Precarisation has expanded into many areas. The result is that we have lost that counterpart from which we should differentiate ourselves, which we should confront, in order to develop an idea of other ways of life in the first place. How are we going to go about doing it if this “other” no longer exists? What can we do if this counterpart now reveals itself as “global capital” – as Thomas Piketty⁶ argued with a view to the 21st century? Ulrike Herrmann calls for us to imagine a transformation process in order to design the image of a post-capitalist society.⁷

We need to put an end to primary orientation according to aspects of usability, exploitability, functionality, efficiency and utility as evaluation criteria in order to arrive in general terms at a clarification of our intended actions.

Paul Lafargue's description in the 19th century of "machine-men"⁸ and an abolition of capitalist forms of production are called to mind again: "capitalist morality" is "a pitiable copy of Christian morality, curses the flesh of the worker by a solemn ban; its ideal consists in reducing the needs of the producer (i.e. of the real producer) to the lowest minimum, to smother his pleasures and his passions, and to condemn him to play the part of a machine out of which work is exploited ad libitum, without rest and without thanks."⁹ Lafargue's opinion was guided by a concept of happiness that had been shaped in the pre-industrial era, together with a rejection of the notions of progress and growth. Lafargue also refers to Virgil, writing: "The ancient philosophers taught contempt of work, this derogation of the free man, the poets sang of idleness, that gift of the Gods: 'Melibaeus, a God, gave us this idleness', sings Virgil."¹⁰

When Byung-Chul Han speaks of today's "fatigue society"¹¹, he recommends an alternative to the *Vita activa*: the *Vita contemplativa*, in which the reflective element plays a key role, because it is the contemplative, and not the active, life that can make a person what they can be. In the public sphere of post-fact or alternative facts, what we need is a renunciation and restructuring. For Herbert Marcuse, an ideal representative of the unity of Eros and reason in the here and now is the imagination as it expresses itself in art, myth and utopia, and where it has preserved itself by keeping separate from social effectiveness. People make history: that is, we objectify and alienate ourselves in it. In this context, history – the pure work of the total activities of all people – would appear as an alien power, to such an extent that we no longer recognise the sense of our activities within objective total experience. "Power is formed every day through our actions," and yet not in the way that we believe we produce it, and transforms us into something we are not, something we didn't want to become. Nonetheless, humankind is chiefly characterised by the surpassing of a situation, of their situation – by what they manage to make of it, by what is made of it. Every social situation holds the approach to its overcoming.¹²

"Tiredness has a broad heart,"¹³ writes Maurice Blanchot. In our search for a space of action in which we have the possibility of doing something, of taking part in life, of shaping the world, there is this moment of quiet, of reflection and analysis. We make space – an in-between area – neither one nor the other, which allows purposelessness to come into its own. Now, by practising non-action, we create a space that already holds a future. Hence a negation of doing means only apparent inaction. Striving to achieve this kind of quality, all of this year's (non-)activities at *esc medien kunst labor* also represent an experiment, an opportunity, allow dreaming and encourage the "principle of hope" (Ernst Bloch), enabling the formulation of utopian strategies. Idleness becomes the goal: "We are busy that we may have leisure."¹⁴

Moving away from the "standstill", the stillness, towards the new, unfamiliar, which has to be formulated, sounded out. Actively and steadily, at a controlled pace, we shape transitions and journeys without a pre-set objective or lost homeland, entirely in line with Rosi Braidotti, according to whom post-humanist tendencies have been characterised in this way since the 1990s.

This immersive environment, where such countercultural speaking is possible, offers the potential to act as a fluid gesture where an immersant, who is constantly “in transit”, can break out of the gravitational pull of conventional narrative expectations and teleological forces. Here is the agency in the browser’s journey: the ability to choose to move in her own way.¹⁵

Here we stand and have the opportunity to change course. This is also the moment in which the utopian is inscribed in history.

In a talk for a symposium on the theme of the “Utopias and Apocalypses”, the philosopher Robert Pfaller explained: “In the case of utopias and apocalypses we can apply Spinoza’s more general observation about imagination: imagination is an idea, which says more about the present disposition of the human body than the nature of the external body. What we envision as distant solutions to problems in real life or imminent destructions of this life in fact say more about this life itself than about anything else.

However, it is not just what we can imagine that is indicative of ourselves but also, and especially, what we cannot imagine. Hence Slavoj Žižek recently remarked that during the 1970s western societies were still involved in a lively discussion around their future political form (capitalism? socialism? third way?), whereas since then they have only been weighing up different scenarios of ecological catastrophes against each other. Something similar can be identified with respect to the utopia of idleness: while earlier, hardworking generations had an objective for their trouble before their eyes in the image of liberated, content grandchildren, nowadays even the idea of doing nothing has become unbearable as we are seized by the panic of holding onto a job and private pension plans.

This situation results in a double challenge for both philosophy and art: on the one hand criticism – and not just of prevailing ideas, but also primarily of the prevailing absence of certain ideas; the exposure not only of dreams but chiefly of those supposedly “realistic” presumptions that seem to get by without any kind of idea. And on the other hand, foolish buffoonery or roguish sarcasm: assuming an impossible point of view; formulating an idea that is not only very unlikely but not even a beautiful dream.”

Nothing but Concentration – details of texts quoted:

- (1) Sennett, Richard: *The Culture of the New Capitalism*, Newhaven 2006, p. 172.
- (2) Virilio, Paul: *But the writer Octavio Paz said it before: 'you cannot live in the present moment, just as you cannot live in the future'*, in: http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2009/02/27/le-krach-actuel-represente-l-accident-integral-par-excellence_1108473_3232.html.
- (3) Virilio, Paul: *Aisthesis. Wahrnehmung heute oder Perspektiven einer anderen Ästhetik*, Leipzig 1990, p. 52. See also Virilio, Paul: *Negative Horizon: An Essay in Dromoscopy*. London 2005 and Virilio, Paul: *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*. New York 1991
- (4) see Virilio, Paul: *Speed and Politics: An Essay on Dromology*. New York 1977
- (5) see Rosa, Hartmut: *High-speed Society: Social Acceleration, Power, and Modernity*, Pennsylvania 2009
- (6) Piketty, Thomas: *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, Cambridge MA/London 2014, p. 83 ff.
- (7) Quoted from Herrmann, Ulrike: *Was kommt nach dem Kapitalismus?*, Podium discussion with Ulrike Herrmann, PD Dr. Ralf Ptak, Harald Bender. Facilitated by: Norbert Bernholt, Solidarische Ökonomie, 11.09.2016. See also Ulrike Herrmann: "Ausblick: Der Untergang des Kapitals", in: *Der Sieg des Kapitals*, Munich 2015, p. 239 ff.
- (8) see Lafargue, Paul, *The Right to be Lazy, being a Refutation of the Right to Work of 1848*, trans. Dr Harriet E. Lothrop, Cincinnati 1904. (first edition 1887).
- (9) Ibid.
- (10) Ibid.
- (11) Han, Byung-Chul: *Burnout society*, trans. Erik Butler, Stanford 2015, p. 16 f.
- (12) Sartre, Jean-Paul: *Marxismus und Existentialismus*, Reinbek, 1964, p. 72 f.
- (13) Quoted from Han, Byung-Chul: *Burnout society*, trans. Erik Butler, Stanford 2015, S. 30.
- (14) Aristotle: *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W. D. Ross, Chapter 7, Book X
- (15) See Guertin, Carolyn: "Queer Hybrids: Cosmopolitanism and Embodied Arts", in: *Hybrid: Living in Paradox. Ars Electronica 2005*. Gerfried Stocker and Christine Schöpf, eds. Osterfildern-Ruit 2005, pp. 166-169