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Life-killing speed and the promise of never-never

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I remember a few years ago attending an IT conference presentation about all the wonderful gadgets that are already available and how they will affect our lives – from microchips under our skin that will carry all our medical information to intelligent e-fridges and pantries communicating with the local supermarket and ordering food or, even more scary, blocking our plastic cards from spending money on the occasional bag of salted chips because of our higher than usual blood pressure. The whole presentation, rich in multimedia, was a chronological tour de force of technological progress.

Behind me was an academic in his sixties, a bit of a greenie with a heart of a conservationist who, if I remember correctly, lived out in some remote part of the country where wildlife is more common than humans. As the presenter reached the crescendo of his performance, talking about the possibility in a few decades of having electrodes implanted in our eye nerves that would permit us to 'see' whatever we want to imagine, the academic behind me sighed in relief and whispered victoriously, 'I won't be alive'.

As I approach my 50s, I too tell myself this sentence. It crosses my mind quite often these days, in fact. As if the drastic environmental changes that will probably make most of Earth uninhabitable in the coming 'few decades', I am staring at another nightmare: the death of time. The death of 'time' for being human: for introspection, meditation, learning in depth, taking in the world before it goes (or we go). In other words, the death of everything we were promised to have in abundance as a result of this great 'IT revolution' that is robbing us of our soul, with our full contrivance – whether we know it or not, whether – knowing it – we like it or not. The death of choice by too much choice. The death of knowledge by information.

It's not that I have been like this all my life. I embraced the fountain pen at the age of seven and a year later the typewriter – and from there on no teacher could convert me into spending my time handwriting school assignments. As the electric Brother came in, out of the window flew the bulky Olympia, to rust in the shed. Pity, I didn't know it would become a collector's item. Then came the first electronic word-processor in the late 1980s, attached to a weighty hard drive of a few megabytes. I fully empathize with Edwards's (1996) words:

> 'My work as a writer was measured out in the palpable material of manuscripts-typed ink on paper, piled up piece by piece until the finished stack was tamped into a neat rectangle (this small act like a finalizing punctuation mark), put in an envelope, taken to the post office, and sent off like a small wrapped present to a magazine or publishing house…. The digital revolution has changed the nature of that evidence, and the sources of satisfaction. No more stacks of paper to be squared off with a gratifying thump. Now pages don't pile up, they scroll up and disappear. Files are no longer in plain sight on top of my desk (there to chide me

> for inattention); they are stored on my computer's hard disk. I still have a small pile of newspaper and magazine clips to be used as reference, but one of these days I'll buy a scanner so that these, too, will vanish from the analog world into the parallel digital universe. There are no envelopes to be sealed anymore, no ritual trips to the post office. All these homey signs of work done have been replaced by a small horizontal box on my monitor that slowly fills in from left to right as articles or chapters travel electronically from my computer to the computers of editors hundreds or thousands of miles away.'

And then the PC and the modem took me to a wider world in 1996, soon to be followed by my first laptop and wireless ADSL, a combination that made me a coffee-sipping café writer again. A writer in the backseat of the Volvo, on the train and the plane, the libraries, parks and natural reserves; the writer whose first question when booking a motel for a holiday stay is invariably, 'Do you guys have an Internet connection?' There was a time I seriously regretted that laptops were not water-proof and I couldn't take one with me into the bathtub.

From pen to electric typewriter, there was still time for handwriting, for engaging in drawing with a piece of charcoal, for practising calligraphy but it eroded in direct relation to the advancement of technology. It seemed that the faster my word processing capabilities became, the less time I had to engage in these activities. Why? Wasn't the promise on which all of them were sold, the promise of MORE time to do what one's heart desired? Of more leisure, more introspection, more time to spend in front of the open fire-place with a book?

What has happened instead may have to do with the Protestant work ethic of the bourgeoisie as much as it has with the time-saving technological gadgets, be they hard- or software. We feel guilty if we have too much time on our hands, fear being called lazy good-for-nothings or failures who don't know how to turn every minute into profit. It is not a purely Western disease; the Northern Muslim Africans I once worked with have a saying that 'an idle hand is impure'. As we can now do things faster, we do more and, by implication, work longer hours, instead of having more time to engage in pursuits of the mind or the soul. Not that these last two are taken seriously any longer, since the new technology has permitted neuroscientists and evolutionary anthropologists to say that we are nothing but genetically wired machines. Like computers, but better, which is really questionable – better at what? Maybe at wasting our lives working?

But we have to be. Society is pressuring us to 'not waste time', that is, to be more productive. We are sold all kinds of utterly useless software on the basis that it increases our productivity. Sadly, it doesn't. It crashes, it wipes out data, and it takes time to learn. I can draw a Donald Duck much faster by hand than with my ultra-new e-pen and tablet. But then, I am from the pre-historic 'manual age', the age where *kunst* mattered.

Apart from the incessant pressure to be more productive since we have all these productivity tools, is the fact that the Internet can be a time sink in a way that books can't. After all, if you pick up a book, you pick up 'a' book, and that is it. You read it, or you don't. But with the Internet options are limitless – visual and textual, group or solitary, educative or entertaining, interactive or proactive. Can someone tell me what it is that we cannot do on-line? THINK. I look with horror at how my partner, who was into IT long before the Internet arrived, flicks through virtual page after virtual page, apparently reading. How? Is anything being absorbed? Don't we need TIME (again and again) to think about what we are reading, shove it further into our already overflowing brains, making sure that it moves past the gates of the RAM and into the hard drive?

It was not always like this. The phrase 'gentleman of leisure' did not imply a dullard, but usually a well off noble engaged in learning pursuits – which were deemed pleasure, not

duty. In his elegantly thoughtful article, Mark Helprin presents us with a picture of a middle-class public servant on holiday in 1906 and compares it with that of a high-tech CEO in 2016. He proposes that:

> 'the vast difference between the two is attributable not to some inexplicable superiority of morals, custom, or culture, but rather to facts and physics, two things that, in judging our happiness, we tend to ignore in favor of an evaporative tangle of abstractions … we require a specific environment and a harmony in elements that relate to us and of which we are often unaware. A life lived with these understood, even if vaguely, will have the grace that a life lived unaware of them will not. When expanding one's powers, as we are in the midst of now doing by many orders of magnitude in the mastery of information, we must always be aware of our natural limitations, mortal requirements, and humane preferences.'

Maybe I could market this as an alternative lifestyle, one of 'productive idleness' where the products are incorporeal thoughts, meditations on the meaning of life? I am sure I can do that. All it takes is a good interactive Web site for the Internet-savvy, sick-at-heart, overworked would-be-time-savers. Because, as Helprin says, we did not have the TIME (again!) to develop protocols to deal with the digital revolution, and so we are being led by it and our untamed desires into excess, into believing that since machines enable us to do something, then we should absolutely do so.

I had embraced the Wild On-line World and the technologies that brought it. Hmmm, not correct. I did not embrace them, for my arms were busy running up and down the keyboard the way they never managed to do it on the piano. It was the technology that embraced me, hugged me to its huge bosom and crushed me, ingested me and is on the brink of spitting out the bones. No fireplaces for me – instead I freeze in winter sitting very still in my office, wearing 'finger-tipless' gloves, typing away at a translation, or an article, or even worse – playing Freecell as 'relaxation'.

The price I have paid is not limited to the few thousands every year spent on endless upgrading and catching up with gadgets. The price I paid are the bills for my acupuncturist and osteopath because of bad sitting posture, the increasing girth due to eating junk food while immovable except from the wrists down, the number of various spectacles I need to wear to see the difference between the screen and the end of the shopping lane at the supermarket, RSI which bars me from engaging in such simple things as cross-stitching or drawing. So what have I gained?

Access to endless on-line reading material but no time to read them; access to everyone in the world via e-mail, but somehow no time and no inclination to write to my mother who is electronically disconnected, and whose neatly written letters litter my desk and make me feel guilty; three digital cameras and a camcorder that have spawned thousands of very good shots and films, but no time to share them with others, no time for an exhibition, no time even to create my own Web site for them; two blogs that have been dead – officially – for over a year; a notebook full of 'work in progress' projects that have been in progress since 1995, including a book on the war in the Nuba Mountains (incidentally over), a manual on linguistics, a few books I need to translate, a PhD proposal, databases for my 5000 plus books and 2000 plus CDs, a tapestry of a Kama Sutra Indian painting, a digitization family history project, and 6000 square metres of land that need maintenance.

I have moved out of the city and into the countryside to avoid being rushed by the endless traffic – another of those great technological inventions that brought us all 'closer', creating a 'global village' of stressed-out corporate slaves in a mad rat-race where they are all losers. I

wanted to be back in touch with nature, following Hillis's (1998) advice that:

> 'Temporal disorientation is an unwanted side effect of modern life. We are dazzled by progress, rushed by events, and disconnected from the stable rhythms of time. Our technology has isolated us from the natural cycles (day, month, year) that once governed the pace of life.'

And yet I continue checking my e-mail every 10 minutes, checking the weather on-line, doing Internet banking, and spending an inordinate amount of time staring into the laptop's monitor, transfixed like a hypnotized chicken, awaiting some cyber-salvation. Maybe it will take a blackout, or a cyclone, to get me unhooked.

But shush! I am busy playing Freecell. And winning.

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