1

Introduction: The Cultural Significance of Speed

Sociological observations in the mouths of princes are events rare enough to attract notice. So when Charles, Prince of Wales, heir apparent to the British throne, spoke on the BBC of the need for, 'a gentler, calmer approach to life in a world which has become frenetic' he was widely reported. '[T]he aim seems to be to go ever faster, but', mused Charles, 'I often wonder, how much faster can we all go?'[1]

This is a commonplace observation of people at a certain stage in the life course and so might be passed over as simply wistful retrospection; as the tendency for people to experience the world they live in as swifter paced, more pressured, than that of their youth, or of the world described to them by their parents. *'Où sont les neiges d'antan?'* The Prince's remarks are, of course, subjective and impressionistic and, no doubt, in part nostalgic – for as Richard Sennett wisely says, 'what sensitive soul isn't?'. But there is more to it. Charles is known for statements on a range of issues, from organic farming to architecture, which express a rather complicated – and by no means platitudinous – shade of cultural conservatism. His comments on the pace of life, then, inevitably constitute an intervention in cultural politics. They give the imprimatur to a current of thought that not only regrets the demise of a world we have lost, but wants to change the one we have.

This is a current of thought that has been present in modern industrial societies since their inception, and which gained perhaps its strongest organized form, in the shape of the 'slow movement', around the turn of the present century. But in all this time it has been a minority position. Though many people routinely complain about the pace of life, and though some try to organize against it, this has never, thus far, translated into a positive social philosophy potent enough to displace speed from its central position in the cultural imagination. Acceleration rather than deceleration has been the constant leitmotiv of cultural modernity.

This book explores the different ways in which speed has preoccupied the cultural imagination of modern societies, and the way in which this imagination has shifted decisively in recent years. In doing this it takes seriously the claim implicit in Charles's intervention, that the sense of living 'a faster life' is not a sort of anthropological constant of generational succession, but a contingent state of affairs: a genuine and significant shift in temporality that occurs and accelerates specifically in modern societies.

Why should this be? Speed is not a phenomenon unnoticed in its cultural aspects before the coming of modernity, so why should modern societies be so deeply pervaded by its experience? Everywhere gestured towards, but seldom rigorously theorized, the connection between speed and cultural modernity deserves careful analysis. And we can begin with some conceptual clarification.

What is speed?

First of all, speed is fast. The English term 'speed' has a double meaning, denoting both a general calculable, *relative* rate of movement or incident – low through to high speed – and then, specifically, rapidity. This is interesting: one might even say that the concept of speed points towards its increase. From the perspective of cultural analysis, then, it is *rapid* speed, speed thought of as remarkable in its increase, that is the dominant meaning. This is not to say, of course, that things which happen slowly are devoid of interest – take for instance the concept of 'glacial time' that has been adopted to express the slow rate of change of traditional cultural attitudes and values. But it is without doubt the increase of speed that has set the cultural agenda of modernity. Indeed the recent interest in slower paced lifestyles that we are currently witnessing in the 'slow food' and 'slow cities' movements is understandable only within the broader definition of speed as fast.

The next issue to clarify is the connection of speed with physical movement. This gives us the most common, intuitive understanding of speed – swift running, fast cars – as well as the most elegant mathematical definition: SPEED = DISTANCE ÷ TIME. The relation to movement is clearly an important one, and it has its own distinct cultural implications for modernity – most notably in the application of mechanization to human mobility. However, for the purposes of cultural analysis, there is another useful definition which refers us not exclusively to movement, but to a rate of occurrence of events. When we speak of life getting faster, we are mostly thinking in terms of this broader definition. The experience of the 'speed of life' is of the rate at which things happen – or appear to happen – to us; the pace of change in our lives. 'Life getting faster' is therefore, most generally, the crowding of incident into our days and the demands this makes upon our resources of energy, time and the attribution of meaning.

Of course there are many ways in which speed as physical movement re-enters this broader definition. We may actually move our bodies faster – for example walk at a faster pace – in response to the feeling of having too much to do and not enough time in which to do it. Or the experience of the speed of mechanized transport, as it becomes integrated into our daily routines may contribute to the experience of an increasingly stressful pace of life. For example, routinely driving long distances between home and workplace generally involves the estimation of a journey time down to

a precise number of minutes, typically with little margin left for error. Unforeseen traffic delays, road works, obstruction from other drivers, or mechanical breakdowns may therefore produce disproportionate levels of stress for commuters as they imagine their schedules collapsing before the working day has even begun. To explain routine speeding, driving impatience and stress – or even the more extreme phenomenon of 'road rage' – we probably have to look beyond the immediate contexts of driver psychology and the human–machine interface and appreciate how these have become structurally integrated with a modern 'high speed' lifestyle.

Speed as physical movement, then, frequently interweaves with speed as rate of incident. However the latter has some analytic precedence. We can, of course, experience time pressure, haste, hurry and rush – all of these essentially cultural-phenomenological rather than physical descriptions – without ever stirring from our office desk . And what we might call 'sedentary speed' becomes increasingly significant when we try to account for the integration of media technologies into our everyday lives. So to understand the culture of modern speed in its broadest terms we need to approach it as a context in which, in various modes, events crowd into our daily lives. Some of these modes involve increasing physical mobility, but others might be better understood as an increase in the rate of 'delivery' of experience.

A third fundamental set of issues has to do with how cultural speed is *regarded*. An increasing pace of life has both its critics and its enthusiasts, but it is rarely regarded neutrally. Speed is always a matter of cultural value. But, like much else in modern societies, the attribution of value here is not a straightforward issue. Speed exhibits different aspects, it offers both pleasures and pains, exhilarations and stresses, emancipation and domination. And frequently these aspects appear to us so intertwined that it seems impossible, as individuals, to say whether an increasing pace of life is, in essence, a good or a bad thing. It is rather something to be shrugged at as, 'just the way life is today', or to be addressed in the market-derived social calculus of upsides and downsides.

This ambiguity over the value of speed is felt in the language we use to describe it. In English at least, there is a rich array of meanings, nuances, connotations and derived expressions attaching to the terminology of speed which seems to reflect our mixed feelings towards it.

On the one hand, there is a good deal of terminological evidence of cultural disapproval, or at least suspicion, of the life lived at too rapid a pace. A fast talker may be quick witted, but is suspected of deceitful intent – probably trying to pull a fast one; almost certainly out to make a fast buck. Similarly, work done at speed – a quick fix – is suspected of shoddiness and marked down compared to a methodical 'slow but sure' approach. To indulge in a 'quickie' – whether in terms of alcohol or sex – speaks of yielding to desires and temptations which one might feel shifty about admitting to publicly.

However this disapproval doesn't always amount to a direct rejection of the value of speed. If Aesop's tortoise enjoys moral approval it is, ultimately, because he won the race: it is the hare's overconfidence and subsequent indolence, rather than its innate dynamism that is disapproved of. 'More haste less speed', in a similar way, warns against a certain type of ill-considered and counterproductive disposal of energy and effort rather than attacking the goal of speed itself.

Indeed, on the other hand, there is a wealth of positive associations which reach back to the archaic meaning of speed as success or prosperity – as in 'God send you good speed' – and of 'quick' as meaning 'alive' – as in 'the quick and the dead'. This association with vitality and life energy is the one that has survived most into contemporary language. To be quick – quick witted, quick on the uptake – is to be lively, alert, intelligent. Such a person is liable to succeed in life – to have their career 'fast-tracked' and, perhaps, to end up living life in the fast lane. If we aspire to this sort of career success and prosperity we need to get up to speed with the latest developments in our field. Clearly the underlying cultural metaphor here is of life as a competition, as a race to achievement. We may, of course, disapprove of this sort of attitude to life, regarding it as part of the insidious ideology of western capitalist-consumerism, or more simply as a rather unreflective 'heads down' conformity to the modern rat-race. And, indeed, if this were all that was implied, a life lived at speed could scarcely be deemed a particularly rich or virtuous one. However, this would be to neglect the deeper existential associations – though frequently cashed, it has to be said, in the vulgar currency of material accumulation – of speed.

For example, to 'quicken' is also 'to give life or vigour, to rouse, to animate, to stimulate' (OED). In an archaic usage it is to kindle a flame, to make a fire burn brighter – in a sense, to bring light into the world. When the Virgin Mary 'quickened in her womb' she reached the stage in her mysterious pregnancy at which the first movements of the foetus – of a biological life which was to become a principle of spiritual life – could be felt. These associations are, to be sure, slightly remote from the contemporary discourse of speed, but they nonetheless point us towards a significant evaluative connection between speed, energy, dynamism, vitality and (pro)creativity.

There may be something rather particular to the Judeo-Christian tradition here. It is notable that sloth – 'laziness, reluctance to make an effort' – makes it into St Thomas Aquinas's list of the seven deadly sins, while there is no specific censure of impatience or impetuosity. (Although to be *quick tempered* gets dangerously close to the sin of anger and certainly does not imitate the forbearance of God who, viewing things *sub specie aeternitatis* is, of course, 'slow to anger'.)

Beyond these particularities, however, the association of speed with vigour and vitality seems to be quite general. Speed as a measure of physical prowess and sporting achievement has been common in most cultures. Running was originally the single event of the ancient Olympics.

But more significantly, to maintain a certain brisk pace to life itself, in the sense of making the most of the enigmatic finite gift of existence, or of actualizing our human potential – at least of not squandering it in brutish indolence – has been widely considered a virtue.

Whilst it may be unwise – hasty, even – to draw any strong lessons from these commonly expressed cultural values, they do point us towards two other important questions. One of these is the question of how values and attitudes towards speed may be changing, of how older implicit senses of the appropriate pace of life may be losing ground to new sensibilities and even associated senses of social virtue. This is something we shall consider later in the book. But, more immediately, there is the question of how these diverse, ambivalent and frequently contradictory common attitudes and values have been shaped into more or less coherent, if generally implicit, narratives in the complex cultural discourse of modernity.

Speed in the record of modernity

It has to be said here that these narratives have not been significantly shaped as the result of direct social or cultural-theoretical analysis. One of the most curious facts about speed is that, despite its being central to the cultural experience of modern societies, it is hardly ever directly and independently addressed in the major social scientific accounts of modernity. In the writings of the classical sociologists – witnesses to the most profound historical step change in both physical and social velocity that occurred during the nineteenth century – the phenomenon of speed crops up, at best, as an adjunct to other debates and issues.

In Durkheim, unless vaguely inferred as a constituent part of the division of labour characteristic of advanced societies, speed is entirely invisible. In Marx, there is a good deal more attention, most notably in the various discussions throughout *Capital* and in the *Grundrisse* of the importance of the speed of 'turnover time' for the realization of profit in the overall theory of the circulation of capital. Thus, for example, Marx writes in the *Grundrisse*:

> In as much as the circuits which capital travels in order to go from one of [its] forms into the other constitute sections of circulation, and these sections are travelled in specific *amounts of time* (even spatial distance reduces itself to time; the important thing e.g. is not the market's distance in space but the speed – the amount of time – by which it can be reached), by that much the velocity of circulation, the time in which it is accomplished, is a determinant of . . . how often capital can be realized in a given time. (1973: 538)

Marx develops these ideas on the next page in a famous passage which has come to represent more generally the inherently accelerating and globalizing tendencies of capitalism:

> Thus whilst capital must on the one side strive to tear down every spatial barrier to intercourse, i.e. to exchange, and to conquer the whole earth for its

market, it strives on the other side to annihilate this space with time, i.e. to reduce to a minimum the time spent in motion from one place to another. (1973: 539)

Clearly speed is important to Marx not only in terms of its place in theoretical political economy, but also in understanding developments in the order of modern spatiality (Harvey, 1999) and in the interpretation of the rise of new technologies – particularly communications and transportation systems. And, in a famous passage from *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels *imply* a context of *cultural* acceleration in their discussion of the turbulence and dynamism of the bourgeois era:

Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations...are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air. (1969: 52)

But in all of these cases the references are oblique and the experience of speed is noticed primarily as the backdrop to other dramas: the dynamic but contradictory nature of capitalist economic development and the class antagonisms that are inherent in this.

Of the classical sociologists it is Max Weber who gives us perhaps the most explicit reference to speed as a dimension of modern life in his discussion of the nature of bureaucratic organizations. In *Economy and Society* he compares the social relations of this 'ideal-type' organizational form with the characteristics of machinery:

The fully developed bureaucratic apparatus compares with other organizations exactly as does the machine with the non-mechanical modes of production. Precision, speed, unambiguity, knowledge of files, continuity, discretion, unity, strict subordination, reduction of friction and of material and personal costs – these are raised to the optimum point in the strictly bureaucratic administration. (Weber, 1978: 973)

Weber goes on to observe that in modern bureaucracies which have eliminated the particularism and the interpersonal conflict and compromise inherent in traditional organizations like collegiate bodies, 'official business is discharged precisely and with as much speed as possible' (1978: 974). And it scarcely matters that this was not in fact empirically correct: that, as Frank Parkin points out, 'Real bureaucracies, far from living up to Weber's model of 'precision, speed and unambiguity' are likely to be cumbersome, slow and full of muddle' (Parkin, 1982: 36). For whatever the epistemological status of the construct of the 'ideal type' (Parkin, 1982: 30f.; Morrison, 1995: 270f.), Weber's discussion of bureaucracies has a quite separate status as a reflexive constituent of the broad cultural imagination of modernity, in which, as we shall see, speed becomes deeply linked to ideas of reason, progress, order and regulation. Yet, just as in the case of Marx, Weber's reference to speed, though deeply significant in its associations, is merely incidental to his other concerns.

We might fairly say, then, that the great systematic social theorists took the increasing speed of their societies, if not quite for granted, at least as analytically inseparable from the social dynamics – industrial production, capitalism, individualism – and the social contexts – mass society, urbanism, rationalism, secularization – which they saw as constitutive of modernity. For interest in the actual social *experience* of speed in this stage of modernity we have to turn from systematic theorists to the 'sociological impressionism' (Frisby, 1991) of a theorist like Georg Simmel.

For example, the final chapter of Simmel's monumental *Philosophy of Money*, published in 1900, contains a number of significant references to the idea of a shift in the tempo and rhythm of modern societies and specifically a section on, 'The pace of life, its alterations and those of the money supply' (Simmel, 1978: 498–512 ff.). Here Simmel analyses various aspects of, 'the significance of money in determining the pace of life in a given period' arguing, overall, that an increase in the supply, rate of circulation and geographical concentration of money has not only economic but psychological consequences. A dynamic money economy adds to the 'restless flux' of modern existence, at the same time, 'enhancing the variety and richness of life' and producing, 'a constant sense of disorder and psychic shock' which can result in 'break downs, irritations and the compression of mental processes'. In one of his most vivid examples, of the life of the stock exchange, he writes:

> Its sanguine-choleric oscillations between optimism and pessimism, its nervous reaction to ponderable and imponderable matters, the swiftness with which every factor affecting the situation is grasped and forgotten again – all this represents an extreme acceleration in the pace of life, a feverish commotion and compression of its fluctuations, in which the specific influence of money on the course of psychological life becomes most clearly discernible. (Simmel, 1978: 506)

However even in Simmel's rich and penetrating essays on culture, speed appears only as an ancillary aspect of other phenomena which he treats in elaborate and dazzling detail. As with the analysis of money, so with the reference to speed in his analysis of modern fashion. Though the phenomenon of fashion involves, as a necessary aspect, 'its rapid and complete transitoriness', for Simmel its essence lies in the contradiction between this, and the fact that, 'each individual fashion...makes its appearance as though it wished to live forever' (Simmel, 1997a: 203). In a similar way, speed, as the increasing pace of modern life, appears in one of Simmel's most famous essays, not as the direct focus of analysis, but as the implied context for the intensity of mental stimulation involved in the shift from rural to urban existence: 'the rapid crowding up of changing images.... The unexpectedness of onrushing impressions' of metropolitan existence (Simmel, 1997b: 175).

With one or two notable exceptions, social and cultural theory throughout the twentieth century has not been significantly more interested in directly broaching the issue of acceleration. Alvin Toffler, whose popular text

Future Shock contains one of the rare explicit discussions of an increasing 'pace of life' could more or less accurately claim that, 'it has received no attention from either psychologists or sociologists' (Toffler, 1971: 42). Speed is scarcely mentioned in the Frankfurt School's critique of the legacy of the Enlightenment; it is virtually ignored by functionalists, structuralists and post-structuralists alike. Even in the existential-phenomenological tradition of Heidegger, Sartre or Merleau-Ponty, in which the crux of analysis of the human condition is its situation in relation to the ontological dimensions of time and space, the experience of speed, arguably the most dramatic nexus of these dimensions, is passed over. Perhaps even more strikingly, the vast corpus of representations of speed in the texts of popular culture has hardly any specific critical recognition in the broad discourse of cultural studies in either its Marxist or its post-modern inflexions. Finally, the analysis of globalization, that great preoccupation of the close of the twentieth century, though it dwells at the core of its theorization on the complex connectedness that issues from the social compression of time and space (Giddens, 1990; Robertson, 1992; Held et al., 1999; Castells, 1996; Tomlinson, 1999) nonetheless takes the speed of globalizing dynamics pretty much for granted.

There are, of course, some exceptions.[2] But, and this is my point, these do not, on any estimate, amount to a concerted confrontation by the main tendencies in twentieth-century social and cultural analysis with the issue of speed. The century, indeed, stands curiously framed, at its beginning and its end, by the two most significant critical encounters with speed, entirely contrasted in their response but twinned in their marginality from the mainstream. The Italian Futurists, and in particular, Marinetti, as we shall see in Chapter 3, establish a reckless, hyperbolic celebratory discourse of machine speed which, though it has its own legacy in the ensuing cultural imagination, deliberately sets itself at odds, both politically and intellectually, with the serious analytical trends of modernity. And at the century's close, Paul Virilio's coruscating critical essays on speed, power and violence, almost mirror images in their contrast with the braggadocio of Marinetti, are characterized by their idiosyncrasy. Though Virilio's name is, perhaps, the one most commonly invoked in relation to the culture of speed today, his work has, as he admits, developed in relative isolation. In an interview with Neils Brugger in 1991, Virilio said:

> I stand rather alone in insisting that speed is clearly the determining factor. In my capacity as a social analyst, I do not wish to deliver monologues, but to partake in a dialogue. For the past twenty-five years, my work has nevertheless been solitary. To say that speed is a determining factor in society requires proof, an effort that is starting to exhaust me. (Virilio, 2001b: 83)

However, the fact that the academic recording of cultural modernity has for the most part subsumed speed to other concerns, does not mean that there has been no serious encounter in the wider body of cultural texts which make up the record of modernity. On the contrary, speed is

powerfully inscribed, not just in the creative imagination of writers and artists of the modern period, but more significantly in the written and unwritten 'institutional narratives' that have given form, meaning and value to the modern experience. It is these broad cultural narratives that this book will explore.

The shape of the discussion

The book has a simple structure. Essentially I will try to tell three stories. Or, to be more precise, I will try to trace two established narratives of modern speed and to suggest the elements of a third, only recently emergent.

In the first story, (Chapter 2) speed is made to appear against the background of the most dominant institutionalized understanding of the meaning of modernity: as the conquest of nature by mechanism, the unproblematized belief in open-ended progress, the unstoppable advance and spread of the capitalist market economy and the fundamental shift in culture from an agrarian-rural to an industrial-urban context of experience. What is essential to this story is the way it seeks to *discipline* the inherently violent and unstable impulses of social and economic modernity – of which speed is the prime emblem – in a culture of rational regulation. This story, I will argue, has been the most successful one in shaping the cultural meaning of speed; and it is one that, despite a recent loss of confidence amongst intellectuals, continues to have considerable influence both in the public discourse of our political leaders, and in the common-sense understandings of many ordinary people.

But then in the second story (Chapter 3) speed is encountered as it escapes discipline and regulation. Here the focus is on the complicated and frequently dark association between the risks, dangers and implicit violence of speed and the – quintessentially modern – sensual-aesthetic experiences and pleasures it can afford. This is a discourse which embraces a range of transgressive and rebellious impulses chafing the smooth surface order of institutional modernity. And out of this is formed a narrative of speed which is 'unruly' both in its orientation and in its expression. Subversive and impetuous, conjoining hedonism with a peculiar sort of existential heroism, this discourse constantly teeters on the brink of collapse into violence and chaos.

Because of this constitutional instability, this second narrative has never displaced the first from its position of discursive dominance. However, though constantly threatened by absorption and incorporation, 'unruly speed' has for most of the twentieth century maintained a strong grip on the cultural imagination. And so the two stories have co-existed not exactly in symbiotic relationship, but on account of the complex appeal of speed across other fault lines in cultural modernity, for example those of the political left/right divide. Gramsci was an early admirer of the Futurists, despite their Fascist tendencies and Lenin enthusiastically embraced the 'scientific' speed-regulation of Taylorism.

In fact neither narrative finally triumphed, for both became overtaken by events, by the coming of a new condition which I go on to argue is re-configuring the modern culture of speed. The premise here – and indeed the central claim of this book – is that we can identify an emergent cultural principle of contemporary globalized and telemediated societies: what I shall call, exploiting all the ambiguity of the term, the principle of 'immediacy'.

The condition of immediacy is not smoothly continuous with the earlier modern culture of speed. In certain ways it grows out of the general acceleration of practices, processes and experience associated with the institutional and technological bases of modernity and interpreted, until around the last couple of decades, by the discourses of regulated and unruly speed. But there is a shift occurring. In significant ways, and particularly as a consequence of the ubiquitous influence of telemediation, immediacy alters the cultural terms of speed's impact, undermining some earlier presumptions and installing new commonplace realities. In the process, the emerging condition of immediacy produces new possibilities and problems which eclipse those of an earlier era of the culture of speed. The attempt to grasp the coming of immediacy and its implications for broader cultural sensibilities and values occupies most of the rest of the book. In Chapter 4 I sketch some indications of the condition of immediacy along with some contextual frameworks for understanding its emergence. And in Chapters 5 and 6 I explore the implication of immediacy in the contexts, respectively, of the increasing telemediation of everyday experience, and the changing forms of the commodification of culture.

In the final chapter, I return, briefly, to the issue with which this chapter began: the possibility of social and cultural deceleration. Here we will explore a little of the impulses and arguments of the contemporary 'slow movement', but we will be more concerned with broader questions of cultural value. Beside the obvious question of the practicality of slowing the pace of modernity, we will examine the more complicated one of whether general deceleration would be, overall, a good thing.

The small print

Qualifications and provisos tend to detract from the clarity of purpose that is aimed for in an Introduction. But the scope of the discussion and the generalizations involved in a book like this are so broad that I can't avoid issuing some brief circumscriptions at the outset. Although the discussion is most at home in the sociology of culture, the particular style of cultural analysis I favour is fairly interdisciplinary in its approach and eclectic as to both sources and examples. This always risks trespassing, in a way that may be annoying, on the territory of specialists with deeper understandings and knowledge of particular cases or of the intricacies of different theoretical approaches. But this is a risk which has to be taken in this mode of analysis and nothing much is to be gained by trying anxiously to hedge one's bets.

On the other hand, there are a few points which would probably benefit from a disclaimer at the outset, just so as to avoid misunderstanding.

The first is the question of the cultural-geographical scope of the discussion, which really maps on to the range of relevance of the idea of 'global modernity'. The cultural patterns, forces and experiences that I focus on, and take my examples from, are predominantly those of western 'developed' industrial economies. To the extent that these cultural trajectories have become, for good or ill, globalized ones, the discussion has relevance for the experiences of increasingly extensive urbanized, industrialized sectors of non-western societies. But what the discussion does not broach – simply because it is beyond our practical bounds – are the differences in the experience of speed and immediacy that may attach either to the inherent economic unevenness and inequality of capitalist globalization, or to the distinctive cultural contexts which may inflect modernity in ways not imagined in the western experience.

Secondly, the issue of technology. In several places the discussion of speed becomes involved in questions of the cultural reception of technologies, particularly, in Chapters 5 and 6, of new media technologies. These issues bring the discussion into contact with debates within the sociology of science and technology about the intrinsic nature of technological processes and artefacts and, particularly, about the interface between the social and the technological. These are debates which have been fiercely fought over in the last couple of decades (see, inter alia, Bijker and Law, 1992; Grint and Woolgar, 1997) and which are challenging for our understanding not only of the ontological status of technologies, but of wider issues of social causality and, in the case of the influential 'Actor Network Theory'(Callon, 1987; Latour, 1992), of the attribution of agency beyond the human world.

In the interests of clarity I have generally avoided becoming caught up in these, often abstruse, debates. And I have felt justified in doing so. This is because the focus of my discussion is not on the precise ways in which technologies impact on the social world, but upon the ways in which technologies, as the perceived 'vehicles' of an increasing cultural acceleration, have been received and interpreted within the broad narratives I describe: quite a different issue. However my discussion does not remain agnostic on all these points, particularly on the key one of 'technological determinism'. Where this issue presses hardest on the discussion – notably in Chapter 6 – I try to clarify my position in reference to some of these debates.

However, it is worthwhile saying here that overall I adopt a fairly conventional sociological attitude which can be summarized as follows. Technological determinism as the view that technologies have an independent causal (not to say, monocausal) role in the production of social forms, practices and relations seems obviously false. This is because technologies never appear other than as embedded within other contexts: chiefly the political-cultural and economic ones which surround their research and development and their conversion into technological 'products' (see Williams, 1983: 128ff.). However, neither does it seem plausible to

think, as those of a resolutely social-constructivist persuasion apparently do, that the novel *material* qualities possessed by new technologies – which are, after all, the key to their attraction – should be understood as *entirely* a function of social interpretation or as 'textually' constructed. This seems to me not only to push the general position of social constructivism to implausible lengths, it also engages extremely poorly with the lived experiences of ordinary people in their everyday interactions with technologies. It seems to me, on the contrary, that it is necessary, in order to avoid an equal and opposite mystification to that involved in technological determinism, to recognize that technologies as they appear as objects within the flow of cultural experience, possess independent inherent properties which define, to some extent, the possibilities and meanings of their use. Without such a recognition, it seems difficult to imagine either how cultural interpretations of technologies ever get off the ground, or – perhaps more important – how moral agency can ever be exercised in relation to their appropriate use.

Thirdly, a matter that can be dealt with more briefly, historical periodization. In understanding speed as a modern phenomenon I focus on the period of industrial modernity beginning around the turn of the nineteenth century and continuing, in certain aspects, into the world of today. Within this period I move pretty freely back and forth in my deployment of examples to trace the different cultural narratives of speed. I also suggest that our current condition of 'immediacy' in certain crucial ways marks a departure from an earlier era of 'mechanical speed'. Apart from obvious scruples as to the dating of examples, none of this is, nor is intended to be, historically rigorous, at least in respect of periodization. I do not, for example, engage with arguments about the precise periodization of modernity on different criteria, nor with the status of broad and loose temporal categories such as the 'epoch' or the 'era' (for a discussion, see Tomlinson, 1999: 33f.). I take refuge here in the general position that cultural change is never particularly susceptible to neat periodization anyway, since it always involves rather complicated shading and overlapping. More generally, although it employs historical perspective in interpreting culture, this is decidedly not a history of modern speed, but an attempt to understand, in perspective, its contemporary cultural significance.

Lastly, the use of examples from imaginative texts. In a few places, notably in Chapters 2 and 5, I make use of examples from novels, short stories, poems, films and, in one case, an opera. There are two reasons to do this: first, because non-factual texts are clearly significant parts of the cultural narratives of speed that I shall explore; and secondly, because imaginative writings and productions seem to me to be, amongst other things, often wonderfully refined historical stores of human experience. The novelist, poet, librettist or film director can often grasp the phenomenology of an event with a sharpness, clarity and resonance which makes the efforts of social and cultural analysts appear (as they indeed often are) clodhopping. And so I don't feel the need to justify the inclusion of such examples in

a broadly sociological account, nor to dwell on their epistemological status. But I do want to register the inadequacy of the way in which I, of necessity, employ these examples, 'turning them to account' in the service of the more prosaic discourse of academic argument. All that can be said in mitigation is that cultural analysts, however leaden their appropriations may be, clearly cannot afford to assume the 'data' of imaginative texts to be off limits – either as the specialist domain of textual criticism (which anyway is quite different in its aims and practices), or on account of scruples over compromising their integrity as works of art. The pragmatic answer to this may be just to accept the instrumental handling of these examples as cultural data, as something done in good faith, and then to read the novel or watch the movie.

There are no doubt other vulnerabilities in the analysis, and the keen-eyed reader will need, and get, no more prompting from me in identifying them. So now let's gather pace.

Notes

1 The context of the remark, made in a *Songs of Praise* religious broadcast on 11 September 2005, was a comparison of the relatively slower pace of life in the north as compared to the south of Britain. Stephen Bates: 'Charles tells high-speed Britain to learn from the north' *The Guardian* 12 Sept. 2005, p. 4.

2 The issue of speed is of course *implicit* in the social-theoretical treatment of time (Adam, 1990, 1998; Hassard, 1990) but it largely remains so, as it does in social-theoretical analysis of time–space compression (Giddens, 1984, 1990; Harvey, 1989). There are more explicit treatments in the critical literature on modern time organization, for example Rifkin (1987) and Eriksen (2001) and in cultural history, for example the seminal work of Kern (2003) (originally 1983) on the period spanning the end of the nineteenth century. And there is also an interesting genre of journalistic treatments, for example, Gleick (1999) and Kreitzman (1999). With such a wide potential interdisciplinary field, there are no doubt many others which I have failed to notice. But I don't aim at the encyclopaedic here. The point is to notice how overall, and in comparison with other pre-occupations in the condition of modernity, the social-scientific interest in speed has been remarkably sparse.