

Speeding to the New Millennium

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"It seems reasonable at millennium's end that things and beings might fall (or rise) out of sight in the blink of an eye, that the wheel of fortune should accelerate to spin at a blinding speed."

Hillel Schwartz, *Century's End*

"[O]ne might suppose that the acceleration of modernity, of technology, events and media, of all exchanges—economic, political and sexual—has propelled us to 'escape velocity,' with the result that we have flown free of the referential sphere of the real and of history."

Jean Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End*

Is the action-packed film *Speed* in any possible way a *fin de millenaire/fin de siecle* film?

Let me talk about "vibe." These are the vibrations that we are currently emitting into our environment and which in turn are producing a *fin de siecle* atmosphere that is affecting us. The approach to the end of a millennium begins imperceptibly at the head of the runway, and then gradually we build up speed, enough speed to lift off, to jump clean from one millennium into another. As we get closer and closer to lift-off we envision ourselves hovering above a Miltonian "vast immeasurable abyss . . . dark, wasteful, wild."¹ And despite all our brave technological progress, a Third Economic Revolution promising a "restoration of our American dream," we find ourselves not on a well-charted main road to the new millennium but detoured, pathless. Despite Newt Gingrich's declaration that except for "a generation spent in the counterculture . . . things were on the right track," we are at this moment harboring a fear of being propelled toward our own destruction.²

The fear crosses class lines; it propels the wealthy toward only short term investment “play” interspersed with playing hard and fast with all the distractions money can buy. It propels the remaining eighty percent of the population toward nothing more than the horizon of the wealthy. Lives minus a teleological dimension are not into anything for the “long haul.” The “Contract With America” promise to “renew American civilization” links a golden but shadow-filled past with the present. But what we face—the new millennium—is in front of us, next stop or two down the road.

We are staring straight ahead then, hoping to link present with future. There’s the rub, especially for a short-term dedicated society that has been running down the road “burning daylight and never mind the consequences.” Spirit of renewal is countered by suspicion of disintegration. We are the transition team that will link this century, this millennium, with the next, carry the dream forward. But we are also a fractured society haunted by the fear that we have exhausted a future that was never ours to exhaust. The closer we come to the millennium the greater our sense of heading not into dream but into an abyss. And in the abyss we go faster and faster, while everybody has a take on what this “dark, wasteful, wild” is and how we can best reach “escape velocity.”³

When we reach fifty miles an hour, we can neither stop nor slow down. Nor can we get off. Otherwise we will blow up. Dennis Hopper has arranged this. He’s doing it for money. He wishes he had a great political cause or a great philosophical desperation but he doesn’t. A year later, in the film *Waterworld*, Hopper will have a destination—land. In fact it will be more than a destination for Hopper and his post-apocalyptic, waterbound followers. It will be their destiny. But here in *Speed*, he has no vision. He’s just rigged our bus so that once we reach fifty miles an hour we can’t go slower or stop or the bomb he’s affixed to the underside of the bus will go off. Shades of a *coming* apocalypse. It finally does go off at the movie’s end. And guess what? It mushrooms up to A-bomb proportions. Or almost. The bus hits a plane being fuelled and the conflagration is apocalyptic. The camera pans the faces of the rescued passengers behind the glass windows of the rescue vehicle. Their faces are contorted like the faces in Dante’s burning river. This could have been their end. Our end. The world’s end. The Soviet Union threat is gone but we now dis-

cover we are still hurtling toward doom, extinction, our own prodigiously labored annihilation. Not only the market has gone global, stretching out beyond a nationalism nurtured by our cold war mentality. Now our fears have globalized. We worry less about "making the world safe for democracy" than about technologically skewering the whole planet out of its "natural" sync. We are falling further and further behind in identifying, monitoring and therefore controlling what we concoct.

When the camera pans down to Sandra Bullock's foot on the gas pedal—as it does repeatedly, furtively almost—our first reaction is to get off the pedal, slow down, stop. But she can't. And it's our foot on the pedal. She's an innocent bystander, like us. Her license has been revoked for speeding so she's forced to take public transportation. She isn't in any way connected to the madness that connect Keanu Reeves and Dennis Hopper in their game of revenge. She's like us: we didn't put the planet in the mess it's in but it's our foot on the gas pedal nonetheless. We've all been caught speeding before. We've violated the natural speed of things with our synthetic, technicized order of things. Our internal clock and the planet's have been out of sync for a long time. Too long? Is the new millennium a fresh start, a fresh winding of the clock? Or, is it more what we fear it is: a painful reminder of what might have been, of a time when future time was hopeful and not already wearied, redundant, bearing more of what has already been packaged than what is new and inconceivable. The future is already a re-presentation, a re-play. In Baudrillard's view we have escaped the linear space of the Enlightenment and entered "our non-Euclidean *fin de siècle*" in which "the future no longer exists." "Are we condemned," Baudrillard wonders, "in the vain hope of not abiding in our present destruction . . . to the retrospective melancholia of living everything through again in order to correct it all, in order to elucidate it all . . . do we have to summon all past events to appear before us, to reinvestigate it all as though we were conducting a trial?"

We run history over again, Baudrillard suggests, "like a film played backwards."⁴ Recall in the film when the scene of passengers is taped for about a minute or so and that minute is looped so as to trick Dennis Hopper into thinking he is watching present action. The minute ends and then begins again. Everybody looks frightened, eyes glued to the road ahead as the bus exceeds the fifty miles an hour doom limit. The feel of what

the future is for us lies in this substitution of the tape loop for real life, dead time for living time, real, vibrant lives for taped simulacra. But unlike Dennis Hopper, who is deceived for a time, we are not deceived. We are both the perpetrators of the simulated reality and the partakers of it. The real millennium is not only anticipated, it is already co-opted, depleted, worn out. That there is thus nothing ahead but re-runs becomes itself our special twentieth century contribution to the vibe of *fin de siècle*. We have constructed a global life-world for ourselves in which time and the natural, seasonal world which so expresses itself—at least until Carson’s “silent spring”—has nothing to offer us. And we fear retaliation. Hell, we’re expecting it.

The film *Speed* allows some time to reflect, although it keeps the pressure on us. Time is running out. We can’t hold this speed forever. We’re bound to hit something, or our fuel will run out, or, most frighteningly, the conflagration will come even though we think we still have time. What are we to think about? Well, this is a popular film, a full dip into the pool of naive realism. It is not constructed to put us into this doomsday downer I am talking about. It is directed *against* allowing us time to think about what terrible nightmares fuel the film’s hold on us. We cannot have it any other way: we must be excited afresh in order to attend at all. Ironically, what generates our excitement is a subliminal dread of the course our endless simulations in the service of our always to be renewed excitements has put us on. I mean the road to ruin, brother.

The tensions are all here. Consider the inexplicable mania of Dennis Hopper, the mad bomber whose mania overflows his reasoning: “I’m just doing it for the money.” Unlike our present real-world Unabomber, Hopper doesn’t have a sixty-two page manifesto he wants to broadcast.⁵ Three and a half million dollars and not ideology motivates Hopper. Nonetheless, we’re more comfortable with Hopper’s motivation than with our Unabomber’s, in spite of the great lengths the Unabomber has taken to explain what he’s up to. The problem is the more he appeals to a common court of reason, the more aware we become of just how obligingly serviceable that court is. On the other hand, Hopper is a known commodity. He’s a sort of entrepreneur playing “hard ball” just a wee bit too hard. He’s in the arena to win, let the bodies fall where they may. Of course, he’s not competing in the free play of the market. Or is he? The law is there to protect what the winners have won, but it is also there to be tested

for holes, outflanked and outmaneuvered, stonewalled, slipped by, circumvented, legislated in *your* best interest, thrown up as an obfuscation in *your* best interests, detoured away from the regulation of how you do business and what profits you glean.

I am saying that Dennis Hopper is a "player" in this film and his disparagement of Keanu Reeves's intelligence ("Don't start growing a brain on me now" Hopper tells Reeves) clearly marks Reeves as a "loser." We are told by others that Reeves has "more guts than brains" and that his partner is the "brains of the two." We are heading at fifty miles an hour toward certain tragedy and the villain in the piece is us for in 1994 we have all attended to the global drive toward being a "winner." "We can all win again." The whole country can. We can compete and win. We can all get the three and a half million dollars. And guys like Keanu? Gordon Gecko in Oliver Stone's *Wall Street* puts it succinctly: "If you're not a player, you're a nobody. You're nothing." Following the money has put us on this doomed bus at the century's end. We may not reach the New Millennium. We're running out of fuel and Dennis Hopper's going too far. Nothing is valued but getting the money. That's was the '80s signature and this is the '90s. Have things really changed?

We circle the airport in the end, as we try to save ourselves, keep time going, keep everything from exploding. This is a sort of purgatory we are in, circling until we can . . . repent? If this word sounds totally out of place here it is only because our rush to the New Millennium has no eschatology, no contemplation of "last things." We are approaching in our minds neither hope of immediate redemption or, like David Koresh and his followers, a thousand year rule of Christ on earth. We're in this bus and we're sapped of teleology, of intent, hope, purpose, meaning, understanding, vision, values, or heart.

Heart? Follow Sandra Bullock, who is exuberant, fresh, vital. It's a Hollywood way out; a naive realist exit. But is there something more here? She is finally doomed but Keanu won't leave her. He faces her fate with her. And they survive. Is this just the reproductive urge, the biological drive that will get us to the New Millennium, get us safely out of this century and into the next? Surely, that foundational clash of Eros and Thanatos is played out in this film. But also surely we have Eros *and* Thanatos, and the Eros is almost subtextual, a footnote, a remote possibility. It is not hard to figure out that we take AIDS with us to the century finish line, that it has thrown us into a

rush to reconceive love and sexuality. *Amour* is no longer *toujours*; abstinence is advised. Even Hollywood can't do its sex scenes without feeling the shadow here.

All this film does is back away from where our desire will take us because that desire is not the heart's but the eye's—the world is nothing more than an endless display of products, resplendent colors, shapes, movements, spaces, surfaces. We construct the desires that construct us.

At one point in the film, the speeding bus faces a fifty foot gap, a portion of unfinished elevated highway. Can we jump it? Can we reach “escape velocity” and return to “the way things were”? There is applause everywhere when the bus flies across this empty space, this unexpected absence on the road we have been hurtling down. We may, in this postmodern world, have lost our sense of continuity and connection, of coherence and progress, but that only seemed to be the case. Here in this popular film *Speed* we are able to leap over the abyss. And—this is most important—we have not “flown free of the referential sphere of the real and of history.”⁶ Our century and the next are not incommensurable—we are not heading toward a nose dive into that emptiness but will rise phoenix-like onto the other side. We can take our presence and present into the future, into the New Millennium.

This is very upbeat—at the same time the film reveals us as already lost in that absence, that gap, that abyss it ironically shows us spanning. If we have been building bridges between ourselves and the world, ourselves and others, ourselves and the past and the future, this film fails to show us. Rather, it shows us speeding away from all the ways we have connected ourselves. I like to think we are speeding toward postmodern connections. But if the film were about that, the bus would not be forced to keep speeding but rather forced to stop and detour, detour every time it came to a new fork in the road.

Precisely the postmodern itinerary of *Speeding to the Millennium*. Let's begin with two scenes from opposite sides of the road: *Forrest Gump* and *Pulp Fiction*.

Notes

1. John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book VIII.
2. Maureen Dowd, “GO.P.'s Rising Star Pledges to Right Wrongs of the Left,” *New York Times* November 10, 1994, p. A1.

3. Talk of the "abyss" increases as we approach century and millennium end, links with postmodernity often being made. Gertrude Himmelfarb's *On Looking into the Abyss*, New York: Alfred Knopf, 1994, accuses the postmodern ethos of being the abyss creator of our time. Hers is an academic's indictment, but nonetheless she stands on the same sort of implacable foundation of reality and truth as do the Republicans in their *Contract With America* and *Restoring the Dream*. Gingrich's attack on the '60s counterculture is in effect his attack on postmodern roots. But all manner of events seem daily to be viewed as coming out of the abyss that looms closer and closer to us: the civil war in Rwanda (Joshua Hammer, "Deeper into the Abyss," *Newsweek* April 25, 1994); political struggle in Russia (James Sherr, "To the Abyss and Back," *National Review* Nov. 1, 1993); American economic decline (Robert Kuttner, "The Abyss: Does America Have a Parachute?" *The New Republic* Oct. 29, 1990); elections in Haiti ("Sliding Toward the Abyss," *Time* Sept. 24, 1990); the Gulf War (Lisa Beyer, "Pausing at the Rim of the Abyss," *Time* Sept. 10, 1990); Assisted suicides (John Garvey, "Extraordinary Means: Approaching the Abyss in Michigan," *Commonweal* August 10, 1990); national health care (Ronald Bronow, "A National Health Program: Abyss at the End of the Tunnel," *JAMA, Journal of the American Medical Association* May 9, 1990); post-cold war (Evan Thomas, "From Abyss to Brink" *Newsweek* Jan. 8, 1990); Latin American political struggle (Frank Smyth, "Salvadoran Abyss," *The Nation* Jan. 8, 1990). We are at century and millennium's end certainly not obsessed with renewing a dream. I think we're having nightmares.

4. Jean Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994, 10-11.

5. See the *Washington Post* supplement, "FC," "Industrial Society and Its Future," September 19, 1995, 8 pp. for the Unabomber's manifesto.

6. Baudrillard, p. 1.