

## INTRODUCTION

*Gaelan Gilbert, San Diego State University*  
*Guest editor*

*T*his special volume of *LORE* presents the proceedings of the annual interdisciplinary Crisis Carnival Conference at San Diego State University, held on April 10<sup>th</sup>, 2009. This conference took as its title and rather open-ended guideline 'The Ecstasy of Speed,' which presupposes the widespread and various manifestations of a 'need for speed,' the cultural legitimacy of which in no way remains uncontested. Accordingly, whether as provocative academic papers or lively performances of creative poetry, from the opening early 'slowness' panel, to the three intervening 'acceleration' panels, to the concluding 'ecstatic' faculty panel, the presenters, from both domestic and international universities, gave sophisticated voice numerous to positive and negative interpretations of issues pertaining to 'speed'.

Some of the initial questions posed in the call for papers in order to stimulate critical investigations for the conference include, how does a

widespread increase in rate (a.k.a. speed) affect the experience of human existence? For the better – seeing as ‘life-quality’ rates are statistically on the rise – or for the worse – seeing as the world’s supposed shrinkage entails such effects as global warming and so-called public isolation? Moreover, does speed presuppose a movement ‘out-of’ one’s self, an ecstatic motion? If so, and if ecstasy in its Greek derivative sense (*ekstasis*) can be understood as being “beside oneself,” or *being-thrown* (even if such is self-motivated), then an ‘ecstasy of speed’ intensifies the rate of such a movement ‘out-of.’ It seems two avenues are thereby opened: this ecstasy can be characterized in regard to the individual (among other ways) either as a positive basis for voluntary action (a way of relating to the world) or as a negative rupture which founds the fragmentation of human identity and society. Which is predominant? Preferable?

Others include: does a contemporary obsession with rate of movement (a ‘need for speed’) intimate that utility and efficiency determine the manner of human relations with the world, rather than a criterion of worth which rejects the making of all things into objects for ready-made, disposable, and hasty human use? Also, ‘What becomes of locality when a hypermobility (especially among the economically elite) is valued above all? Or is such seemingly aleatory, non-teleological mobility a necessary aspect of modern existence?’ In a similar vein, ‘Does the increase in speed conceal the disappearance of a destination? If speed is becoming, toward what do we move?’

In anticipation of what follows, the work in this volume of LORE exemplifies the high caliber interdisciplinary research being done on the topic of speed and other related concepts pertaining to the collusion of space and time. As I noted above, some papers emphasized the negative nature of an economic and political increase in acceleration. Indeed, as one of the contributors to the volume boldly contends, “speed acts as the undercurrent that sustains our modern social structures.” Within the thematic context of ‘crisis’ as a predominant contemporary force which reifies ‘speed’ as an integral privilege possessed by those in power, this same author later argues that “[i]nstitutions and individuals alike have long ignored reflecting upon the limits necessary to encourage health, sustenance, relationality, and ultimately human flourishing.” In this sense, speed is characterized as a nega-

tive mode of (capitalist) being, particularly in relation to the current market 'crisis' and the federal government's very hastily implemented responses.

And yet acceleration can also seem a good thing. As another contributor notes within the context of the thematic explication of a scene from a contemporary sci-fi novel, "the act of traveling at the speed of light is used to symbolically reach escape velocity from these politically and economically deterministic forces. If these overweening forces dictate the arc of the linear timeline [...] then the act of traveling at light speed is what grants the explorers the ability to defy and transcend them and write their own unique, if tragic, narrative. It introduces a different type of temporal consciousness, a religious consciousness that privileges repositories of memory and sites of experience." Considering this positive evaluation of surpassing time through speed, the abbreviation of science-fiction into "sci-fi" in the last sentence, inasmuch as it served to accelerate the very act of reading, itself assisted in a defiant movement against lexically and syntactically "deterministic forces."

On the pertinent topic of speed-reading, another contributor discusses the authorial tactic of decelerating the reading process in the work of T.S. Eliot and Vladimir Nabokov. She eloquently maintains that "Eliot and Nabokov take on the task of devising new methods of interacting with the reader to supplant the speed-reading process and to re-engage the reader in the joys of textual manipulation. To do so, [they] integrate their own summaries, endnotes, and annotations that reiterate the theme or refer the reader back to the text at hand." This contributor's meta-critical study presupposes the growing contemporary inclination within humanities departments to rely ever more on the technological innovations which, since the 12<sup>th</sup> century invention of alphabetic indexing, have continually transformed the activity of textual analysis, and this arguably away from a devoted rigorousness for the sake of haste.

In regard to the signifying capacity of Nabokov's 'web of the world' for which the written text is a human-made analogue, she later suggests that "[t]his is what fiction provides us with, and what we are in danger of losing by getting swept up into the world of seeking concrete solutions and efficient ways of analyzing a text rather than interacting with it." As she notes in closing, and as the manifold proceedings from the 2009 Crisis Carnival

Conference contained in this volume intriguingly demonstrate, “we will never simply grasp a fragmented or multi-layered reality” but must “immerse ourselves in” it.

To do so when such a “multi-layered reality” is the complex and literally unstoppable phenomenon of acceleration is to merely go on existing, or so it often seems in this modern, secular age. Nonetheless, and considering the ‘state of things,’ perhaps taking the time for and in which to live – and read – together both convivially and yet patiently may be what the future not only requires, but demands. Are we up to the task? This question itself provides the provocative framework within which the following scholarly conversation has blossomed.