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Ever Faster, yet Thicker NOW

Douglas Rushkoff, *Present Shock. When Everything Happens Now*, Penguin Group, New York 2013, pp. 296

Embarking on a quest to describe our way of living in the time of late modernity, it seems essential to consider the rate at which our society is subjected to change. The dizzying pace of transformation goes hand in hand with an excess of information stimuli and the constant flow of news. Hardly any individual can make sense of it all, let alone absorb it. Year after year into the new millennium, we find that media, predominantly electronic ones, have become the new “natural” habitat of our species. Social thinkers such as Ulrich Beck, Zygmunt Bauman or Anthony Giddens, to name just a few, are trying their hardest to find a kind of algorithm that would help to decipher the rules of development of our risky, liquid, late modernity. One of the latest achievements in this field, an original and thought-provoking one, is *Present Shock. When Everything Happens Now* – a book by Douglas Rushkoff, PhD, a recognized American media theorist.

The author explores a very particular domain, seemingly familiar to everyone, and yet fundamentally vague and unsatisfactorily researched. At the heart of Mr. Rushkoff’s research is the paradigm of living in our hyper-modern present. The opening paragraph reads: “Our society has reoriented itself to the present moment. Everything is live, real time, and always on. It’s not a mere speeding up, however much our life style and technologies have accelerated the rate at which we attempt

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to do things. It's more of a diminishment of anything that isn't happening right now – and the onslaught of everything that supposedly is.” While the closing decades of the 20th c. were characterized by a futuristic approach, our present time stands out with its presentism – a shocking, in its intensity, orientation on the very present moment. Rushkoff alludes to a well-known book from the 1970s, *The Future Shock* by Alvin Toffler. Typical of that far-gone optimistic era, Toffler's book is a trustful and expectant study of what the development of technology, communication, and media can bring to our society. In *Present Shock*, Mr. Rushkoff proclaims: that advanced future has already arrived.

The shocking nature of the present manifests itself in almost every aspect of the Western life, reshaping our ways of participating in culture, business or politics, understanding the advances in science and the meaning of existence. Rushkoff's five-dimensional picture of this complicated present deserves a close scrutiny.

To get this plenitude in order, the author organizes the content into five groups, each one focusing on an idiosyncratic feature of our time, through which we experience the shock of the present. Apart from the first one, the narrative collapse, the names of these features are coinages demanding further explanation. To cast some light on the issue of the collapse of the narrative, Mr. Rushkoff refers to observations made by a world-renowned mythologist, Joseph Campbell, recent discoveries in neurology, and remarks by Aristotle or Ursula Le Guin. He also analyzes media functioning (firstly TV) and the world of computer games. A similarly wide spectrum of interdisciplinary argumentation is employed to explain the remaining four dimensions of our present. One may wonder at the abundance of examples of our present-moment fixation, and the ease with which Rushkoff conjures them – as if there were to be no future, as if there had been no past, as if Goethe's Faust's wish had come true: linger on fair moment! It is for a reason that Rushkoff commences his book with a chapter on the atrophy of narration – the effects of this may turn out to be the most dangerous. It would be hard not to feel anxious reading this quote by Ursula Le Guin: “The story [...] is one of the basic tools invented by the human mind, for the purpose of gaining understanding. There have been great societies that did not use the wheel, but there have been no societies that did not tell stories.”

The role of stories in explaining the surrounding world and helping to tame it was noticed already by Aristotle. The philosopher stated that when storytelling vanishes from a culture, it results in decadence. It is simply thanks to stories – written, told, and retold through generations – that cultures gained and preserved their identities, striving to understand their place in time and space.

Dr Rushkoff, a commentator on CNN and a contributor to *The Guardian*, watches various news channels extensively in search of the remnants of great narratives. He concludes that the news as we know it is conditioned by economy. One can observe this process (not only in the USA) on already story-less TV: each hour of a show is divided into several segments spliced by commercials and announcements of the coming episodes; those interludes often constitute more than a half of the show's running time.

Even the sheer contents of a show are not narrative. Popular multi-season series or reality shows take place as if beyond time. Usually their plot is far from cohesive and does not follow any narrative, or approach a conclusion; preferably, it is left open-ended. The material epitome of the “*now-ist pop culture*” is the omnipresent couch around which the characters of different sit-coms or *Big Brother*-type reality shows gravitate. The model of these programmes stretches back to the 1989 series *Cops*, and has evolved to be relatively free from a predetermined plot or rigid screenplay.

Until recently, narratives were constructed in TV news. Half a century ago, the main American networks – CBS, NBC, ABC – all had their own 15–20 minute evening news segment that enjoyed great authority because, non-ironically, it made the viewer believe that “that’s the way it is!”. However, already in the 1990s the CNN era began and the news became 24/7, “*Live, On, Realtime*”. The ocean of news is beyond comprehension in its entirety, but the key to understanding is to know what is going on right now.

Digiphrenia concerns the interconnection between digital media, technology, and the omnipresent, digitally measured time. Digiphrenia of the 21st century people is a specific, digital disorder of consciousness that makes us try to do everything at the same time and be present in more than one place at once. Thus, it redefines the concept of linear time, which is the cornerstone of the Western thought. Digiphrenia is critical of traditional, measurable, and linear time, i.e. the Greek *chronos*. The author emphasizes the difference between the analogue and the digital clock: “The analog clock imitated the circularity of the day, but digital timekeeping has no arms, no moving parts. It is numbers, stationary in time. It just is.” Whereas with the introduction of the mechanical clock in the Middle ages the speed of life somewhat increased and gained economic value (English words: *speed* and *punctual* derive from that period), the digital clock performed a different symbolic revolution – it halted the time in the present moment. Dr Rushkoff brings up other Greek terms for time, like *kairos* – proper moment, positively fulfilled time. Contemporary fixation on the moment bears only a superficial resemblance to *kairos*, since it does not connote any completion.

Time measuring throughout human history – beginning with seasonal cycles, then calendars, up until analogue and digital chronometers – expresses the process of human alienation. As makers of evolving culture, we separate our natural, biological cycles and seasons from the life measured by digital clocks. The power of the immobile electronic digit shatters our attention and splits consciousness. Only superficially does it allow us to be in more than one place at once, and our alleged multi-tasking skills actually make us incapable of concentrating on even one thing.

The idea behind overwinding (just like when winding up a watch, but a bit too much), expresses the need to squeeze in and mix up all the actions and events that by their very nature are lasting and time-consuming into the present moment. More than that, the “now” is expected to embrace even what has not happened yet, what is still to come. To picture that process Mr. Rushkoff points to the case of Black Friday sales and the time it starts. It is a phenomenon that undoubtedly has its counterparts anywhere in the Western consumer world. “While the earliest Black Friday used to begin Friday morning at 9 am, by the early 2000s they had moved up to 6 am or even 5 am, consumers lined up in the cold outside their favourite big-box stores on Thursday night”. Then, by 2011 “some of the most aggressive stores” decided to start it all at midnight, and next “all the way back to Thursday evening at 10 pm”. Both shoppers and employees complained because they had to leave their families during Thanksgiving dinner. “Black Friday,” concludes Rushkoff, “is just a more condensed version of the time shifting that characterizes our entire consumer economy and its current crisis.” The oft-quoted phrase “time is money” acquires a deeper meaning. With a surplus of money, you can buy compressed time or at least the illusion that an escape from our limited time-line is feasible.

As for fractalnoia, the fourth dimension of the present day temporal revolution, it is about our “now-ist” world being somewhat deviated from the usual course of time and of the cause-and-effect principle. Without time and the logic behind it, we are left with space – mental and virtual. Media and the Internet have become susceptible to fractalnoia, i.e. the craze of combining everything with everything, which may result in unpredictable effects. Conspiracy theories provide ultimate revelations about 9/11, HAARP, Asian tsunamis, the economic crisis, and UFO sightings. The lunacy of fractals, i.e. the repeating and mutually comprising patterns, disseminates wherever the sense of the flow of time diminishes.

The rush of the unending present moment, always chasing after still new impressions, must be tiresome. Apocalypso – the fifth and final feature of the now-ist culture, with a rather clear and alarming etymology – expresses exhaustion and longing for the ending of this feigned endless now. Nevertheless, the fatalist

character of Apocalypso has little to do with the prophecies or religion. It is more about some grave misgivings of the looming drama, an unprecedented global crisis. For such a finale are getting ready the Doomsday Preppers – a four-million people “army” comprising men, women, whole families, and neighbourhoods. Predominantly based in the US, they are preparing for “the end of the world as we know it.”

With tremendous amount of effort and considerable financial outlays, the Preppers are getting ready for the groundbreaking crisis – be it military, economic, or ecological, a natural disaster, a terrorist attack, etc. No matter which form it finally adapts, it will result in a collapse of social bonds and structures. Total anarchy and a Hobbesian war of all against all will ensue. Bunkers, vast food and water supplies, piles of weapons, and countless rounds of ammunition are supposed to help the Preppers survive the harshest period of the crisis. Terrifying, but arguably plausible scenarios.

Another end-time script for the near future concerns the dawn of post-human era and transcending biological limitations of our existence thanks to advances in IT. All this is implied in the notion of Singularity. When computers pass Turing’s test and begin thinking like human beings, technology will be in a position to map and virtualize human consciousness. Nanobots will fill our minds and sensory experience with virtual reality. Biological anchoring of human life will not be exclusive or necessary any longer. And then objective linear time will lose any significance once and for all. The past and the future will be replaced by *now*.

The rapid and profound changes that our culture is undergoing have naturally raised interest of other social theorists. More than a decade ago, James Gleick delivered a vivisectional analysis of these processes in *Faster. The Acceleration of Just About Everything*. Zygmunt Bauman outlined the constant vanishing of anything solid in his theory of “liquid modernity”, in which the consumer society expects to “take the wait out of want” to get instantaneous fulfilment.

The more and more wide-ranging *now* as discussed by Mr. Ruskoff concerns the emergence of new life strategies of individuals and whole societies. Every moment is to be filled up with not only work but also pleasure. “Study hard, party hard!” as British students say. In a way, Dr Rushkoff seems to be talking about a present-trap. When we are losing sight of the past and the future, the only way to break this stalemate is an Apocalypse-like transformation. But the author’s tone is not preachy. Thanks to a well-documented and convincing argumentation, a lively and engrossing style, he lets the readers draw their own conclusions.

The five-dimensional interpretation of the present culture drawn by Dr Rushkoff is far from being a closed one. As Peter Gabriel used to sing: “The only constant

I am sure of, is this accelerating rate of change.” Before (and if) any form of Singularity emerges (be it a nuclear or ecological end-time situation, or transcending our biological limitations), we are to live in what the late Ulrich Beck called “the risk society”, where risk is intrinsic and the future obscured. A risky, *noir* “Groundhog Day” of our own.