Covid-19 as Glitch: A Provocation for Speculative Ethics?

In *Science and the Modern World*, the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (1985 [1925], 97) reflects on the changing temporalities of modern life. "In the past", he writes, "human life was lived in a bullock cart; in the future it will be lived in an aeroplane; and the change of speed amounts to a difference in quality". Whitehead was no technological determinist. Technological change is one part – albeit an important part – of the varied relational composition of the present, a present which also includes continually infolding and reconfigured pasts, and the inevitable continuities this implies. An effect of such reconfigurations is to transform the quality the world. Quality here is not simply understood as an intersubjective experience, but rather refers to the way in which the world is composed, involving interactions between entities that include but are not limited to the human.

It is in part the particular temporalities of contemporary life that amplifies the potential for glitching, as explored so richly in Shawn Bodden's (2021) piece. Sometimes this relates to the ways in which glitching can render the contemporary politics of time visible, as he shows by highlighting the activist work of the Hungarian Two-Tailed Dog Party or MKKP (*Magyar Kétfarkú Kutya Párt*). Their own rapid glitching and improving of decaying urban infrastructure acts to challenge the slowness, even the absence, of maintenance work by the Hungarian government. Sometimes glitching multiplies via the built-in potential for rapidity characteristic of so many of our techno-social infrastructures. The teacherbot glitches through the speed at which an automated process can multiply a techno-social intervention on social media: its spewing out of hundreds of tweets, and the resulting unanticipated transformation of the quality of the educational encounter, only succeeds because of the short time frame over which this occurs and because the problem could not be caught before it was 'too late'.

The sociologist Charles Perrow (who was rather more of a technological determinist than Whitehead) also noted the amplified potential for glitches or what he called 'normal accidents' to interfere with the operations of the modern world, given the latter's increasing dependency on 'tightly coupled systems' (Perrow, 1984). These tight couplings are the infrastructural reality of Whitehead's metaphorical life in an aeroplane. A world bound together by, for example, the global mobilities of people, goods and information, by data optimised supply chains, by precision engineered technologies, by automation. Infrastructures have a tendency, however, to only be rendered visible when they break down, as Susan Leigh Starr (1999) memorably noted, in many senses paralleling Perrow. And perhaps at no point in recent history has this been rendered more globally visible than by the unfolding of what I hope we can soon retrospectively refer to as the great Covid-19 pandemic of 2020. A microscopic virus, whose rapidity of transmission has been intensified by global systems of aeromobility by more than perhaps any other actor, has led to infrastructural breakdown and infrastructural visibility on a colossal and brutal scale. As death rates continue to climb, taken for granted activities – of travel, of socializing, of education, of childcare, of familial contact, of consumption – have been in many cases utterly disrupted, sometimes broken to the point of non-repair.

But is Covid-19 a glitch? In computing, terminological analogies are often drawn with biological viruses – the computer virus, most obviously, but also the accidentally created 'bug' (a synonym for glitch) that disrupts system processes, potentially by self-replicating. In this sense, an argument can be made that Covid-19 is a glitchy biological equivalent. The seriousness of the damage it can cause certain bodies does, though, makes the terminology feel awkward. However, Bodden (2021) suggests that we should consider glitches 'as sociomaterial encounters, rather than merely technical errors'. I would add that we should also not see glitches as merely biological errors. Covid-19

functions most glitch-like when it interrupts those usually taken for granted, tightly coupled socio-technical infrastructures I just mentioned.

If, in this sense, Covid-19 is a glitch, how then are we to assess the quality of the world that it continues to, and promises/threatens to, reconfigure? Bodden reclaims the glitch as a site not just for unwanted disruption but for – drawing on Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) – 'critical speculative thought', and also ultimately for generative social change. However, not only might any positive transformations that might ultimately result from the Covid-19 pandemic seem insignificant in the face of the sheer degree of destruction it has wrought to both lives and livelihoods, but also if speculating about what these might be are we falling into the trap of unwarranted optimism? Another sociologist, Karen Cerulo, building on influential earlier work, has argued that it was our collective culturally produced inability to envision the worst that played a significant role in the repeated failures by individuals and governments to anticipate and mitigate the damage that the Covid-19 virus could do (2008, 2020). This seems important to bear in mind in the face of hopes that the pandemic could, for example, lead to the longer term decarbonisation of the global economy (Philip and Rayward-Smith, 2020) or to social and economic benefits as a result of a work from home 'revolution' (Waters, 2020).

However, there is a crucial distinction between what Cerulo calls 'blind optimism' and critical speculative thought, or what Puig de la Bellacasa also terms 'speculative ethics'. Speculative ethics precisely avoids the linear extension of human-centred understandings of the present into an equally human-centred imagined or anticipated future. Engaging in practices of speculative ethics requires working to actively decentre our own role in our accounts of the relationship of the presents to the future. This is part of a commitment to "[look] out for those, humans and nonhumans, who have the most to lose under productionist based arrangements" (2017, p. 210), arrangements focused on the relentless extraction of value from the human and non-human world. Speculative ethics requires an engagement with the future which goes beyond largely empty aspirations to 'build back better' (a slogan embraced by actors as diverse as Joe Biden in his campaign to become US president, Boris Johnson's administration in the UK, the OECD, Greenpeace, and the New Economics Foundation (Biden for President, 2020; Build Back Better, 2020; Sharma, 2020), and instead to interrogate the very operative assumptions and practices about the aeroplane, us-centred age which led to us to this moment in the first place. Cerulo finds hope in the potential of global organisational agencies like the WHO. Undoubtedly, they are a vital part of a response to an unfolding virus such as Covid-19. However, we may equally wish to direct our collective critical capacities on the evident harm being done by not just tightly coupled systems but human centred systems in the ongoing reconstitution of the modern world. It seems reasonable to assume that Covid-19 as glitch is very unlikely, on its own, to prompt major shifts in our relationship to the world. But we can hope that it opens up new spaces for critical thought. If not, it is likely that the quality of our post-pandemic futures will be characterised more by continuity than change.

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