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Virilio: From Space to Time, From Reality to Image

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review of:

Paul Virilio (2001a) ***A Landscape of Events*****. Cambridge, MA: MIT.** (PB: pp. 120, £10.50, ISBN: 0-2627-2034-5)

Paul Virilio (2001b) ***Virilio Live: Selected Interviews*****, ed. John Armitage.** (PB: pp. 299, £20.99, ISBN: 0-7619-6860-1)

Paul Virilio (2002) ***Desert Screen: War at the Speed of Light*****. London: Continuum.** (PB: pp. 192, £12.99, ISBN: 0-8264-5822-X)

Introduction

After the second Iraq war, where high-technology weapons once again demonstrated their decisive role – in fact, much more so than the much-debated, yet still quite elusive 'weapons of mass-destruction' – it seems appropriate to review Virilio's book on the first gulf war, *Desert Screen*, which has only recently been translated into English. Virilio sees this war as a demonstration, not only of future warfare, but also of a future society characterised by extreme, even ultimate speed. And his book remains interesting reading to those who, for instance, still worry about the role of the media in this type of conflict: he offers an interesting answer to the question of what has happened to the ideal of a critical press.

Comprised of articles written during the crisis leading to the Gulf War in 1990, this book is also quite representative of his work, because he regards this event as a confirmation of the ideas of speed, technology, warfare, and society which he has been developing since the early nineties. The title refers to what Virilio regards as the third phase in the Gulf War, after the well-known first two phases: desert *shield* and desert *storm*. Readers with a growing appetite for Virilio's thinking may supplement *Desert Screen* with John Armitage's selection of interviews with Virilio, *Virilio Live*, which offers interesting discussions and a more 'dialogical' introduction to his ideas; and Virilio's own *A Landscape of Events*, a less focused selection of texts written between 1984 and 1996.

Virilio's work focuses on the role of, and interconnections between, technology, information technology, warfare, city architecture and politics. Each of these issues will require further elaboration, but first I shall attempt to present one of his main arguments, which ties together most of them and could perhaps illustrate his somewhat alternative and provoking approach.

Speed, Warfare, Architecture and Politics

A key concept in his work is *dromology*, which is derived from Greek – *dromas*: running, fast – and may be translated as the science of speed. For Virilio, the one and simple rule of technology development has been that of an ever-increasing speed; and this rule seems to define fundamental aspects of warfare and society. In short, the logic of speed has driven the development of warfare, which on its part has defined the architecture of cities, finally setting the conditions for political regimes.

To spell this thesis out, let us focus on the evolution of warfare, which can be characterized by three phases. The first and longest was based on *defence* and weapons of *obstruction*, designed to block attackers. In this phase, fortified cities could survive *sieges* for months (even years), and this created a space for political life, thus centred on a local, geographically defined unit. The phase of defence ended with the invention of artillery, weapons of *destruction*, against which walls could no longer offer protection. In the second phase, the war of siege was replaced by the *offensive* war of *movement* – and the medieval city lost its role as political centre, to be replaced by the nation state. Since then, however, technological development has brought warfare into the third phase: the combination of high-precision bombs and communication satellites (representing a fourth front) to guide them to their target has annihilated the advantage of movement. Arms of *interdiction* and *absolute speed* have rendered vulnerable the mechanised forces based on *relative* speed. And this development has brought new conditions for political regimes, reducing the role of the nation state, and of any form of political debate.

Allowing for some degree of simplicity, the causal relations implied by this line of argument may be depicted somewhat like this:

Speed/technology → military and warfare → architecture of cities → political regimes/structures

This argument – which is neatly summarised by Brügger and Petersen (1994) in their introduction to Virilio, *The War, the City, the Political* – clearly illustrates the more controversial aspects of Virilio's thinking. For one, the basic technological determinism may raise some critique, i.e. from those arguing the social construction of technology. Furthermore, the idea that society is fundamentally shaped by military considerations is also somewhat unique and incompatible with more common explanations. Finally, some might argue that only an architect would regard the architecture of cities as decisive for political life.

Yet, despite this reviewer's lack of comfort with the whole 'package' of his thinking, Virilio's work does offer many interesting and useful observations that may certainly inspire and influence further study in and between various fields.

Annihilation of Space and Geography

A central argument in Virilio's thinking is that due to the acceleration of technology, and the culmination of this acceleration in absolute speed, time has conquered space. Space no longer 'matters', because we can receive information from everywhere on the globe in real-time, delivered by communication technologies at the speed of light, and because we can, in principle, travel anywhere, if not quite at absolute speed, then at least in a very short time. Geographical distance is no longer an obstacle, as illustrated – according to Virilio – in the first Gulf War, where missiles were guided from a control centre in the US. A more civilian example is the option to travel, for example, to Japan in a matter of hours: due to the annihilation of distance, there will no longer be any 'exotic' places left on earth (Virilio, 2001b: 84).

It seems fair to assume that this latter example is not merely about a new sense of distance due to improved (faster) means of transportation; it also implies that *cultural* differences will diminish, that traditional cultures are no longer protected by geographical distance. This argument calls for a short comparison, in order to illustrate Virilio's perspective: one may want to draw a parallel to Marx's assertion that every place on earth would soon be subsumed, every ancient culture replaced by the ever-expanding logic of the market: "All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned" (*Communist Manifesto*).[1] Marx's argument, too, combines the *geographical* aspect of the unlimited spread of market economy, with the *cultural* aspect: the law of equivalence replacing traditional values and norms.

It would seem that they arrive at more or less the same conclusion – globalisation at the expense of local, traditional forms of life – yet offering quite different explanations: Where Virilio focuses on technology as a driving force behind globalisation, Marx emphasized economic laws. Or, as Armitage puts it: "where Marx wrote of the materialist conception of history, Virilio writes of the military conception of history", emphasizing that the latter is driven by technological development (Virilio, 2001b: 2). On one hand, this comparison invites a critique of Virilio's explanation as (even) more one-dimensional than the one offered by Marx: after all, the analysis of political economy is richer and less simplistic than clinging to the 'safe bet' of technological development (i.e. more speed). On the other, Virilio's critical perspective on technology may also be regarded as more complex than Marx's quite optimistic vision of technology – the means of production – as a potential driving force for the emancipation of Man.

And while we are at Marx's conception of technology, it seems appropriate to conclude this comparison by acknowledging that – despite the conflicting perspectives – the

1 Cited from Berman's translation (1982: 95).

contrast between Marx and Virilio is somewhat modified by the fact that Marx, too, attributed a fairly significant role to technology in the globalisation of economy: he saw the development of infrastructure as a basic requirement for market expansion; an argument that does bring him somewhat closer to Virilio's focus on speed and transmission.[2]

The Tyranny of Real-Time

According to Virilio, the above 'shrinking' of space brings us to 'the tyranny of real-time', which has severe implications for politics. Military and political decision makers alike are required to act on instantaneous information – act in real-time – which leaves no time for debate or analysis. Decisions must be made swiftly, and thus by a single person, such as the US president, rather than by some pluralist political body – there is no time for democratic control. "No politics is possible at the scale of the speed of light", Virilio says. "Politics depends upon having time for reflection. Today, we no longer have time to reflect, the things that we see have already happened. And it is necessary to react immediately. Is a real-time democracy possible? An authoritarian politics, yes. But what defines democracy is the sharing of power. When there is no time to share, what will be shared?" (Virilio, 2002: 43).

The role of the mass-media in the first Gulf War illustrated that 'the free press' could no longer challenge the authorities, as they, too, fell victims to 'the tyranny of real-time': the urge to bring up-to-date images made critical distance and analysis virtually impossible. Virilio speaks of the fusion of propaganda and journalism, as the logics of propaganda has changed from secrecy and silence (under-information and no information) to 'information overload' (without using that particular term). It is worth noticing that Virilio's argument is not a 'traditional' critique of ideology: the problem is not that information from the US military during the Gulf war was loaded with propaganda and ideology. Rather, Virilio emphasizes the problem that journalists were flooded with a massive stream of information, which they were unable to digest – again, there was no time for reflection and analysis.

Computer-based defence systems offer an even more drastic example of the 'end of politics' in decision-making: Virilio here refers to the attempts to design a computer program that would react automatically to a nuclear attack, because the possible observation of enemy missiles would not leave sufficient time for a human decision maker, let alone a larger, collective agent.

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2 Marx emphasized the extension of the market economy, subsuming all ancient cultures and values. Yet Marx obviously recognized the relevance of technology and infrastructure. So what is the decisive factor: the logics of market speeding up development of new technology; or technology as a precondition for the extension and fusion of markets? The whole comparison with Marx should be concluded by remarking that Virilio himself seems rather uninterested in Marx: "I am no Marxist, nor have I ever been one" (Virilio, 2001b) – thus neither is he a fierce anti-Marxist.

These defence systems are symptomatic of a tendency to automation – in warfare as in other aspects of life: people being replaced by machines.[3] Virilio keeps coming back to two examples from the Gulf War: at the beginning there are the missiles taking off, now to be guided only by a program locked on a given target; and, at the end, Iraqi soldiers surrender to a drone, an unmanned airplane.

These examples call for a few more words on the role of warfare in Virilio's thinking. On one hand, he seems to regard warfare as merely *illustrative* of the impact of new technology; that is, rather than having an actual effect on politics, military technology offers a clear example of the general consequences of technology. As he says in an interview with the Danish Niels Brügger: "war serves to illustrate the situation because this is where it is most obvious; it is my laboratory, nothing else" (Virilio, 2001b: 90). However, on the other hand, he also seems to maintain the more radical – and controversial – thesis that society is shaped by military logic, i.e. when he argues that "the technologies in the home are the direct inheritance of the rise of the tele-technologies of war (that is, of military intelligence)" (Virilio, 2002: 84), or when characterizing "post-industrial society as the military society" (Brügger and Petersen, 1994).

Information Technology: Image over Reality

Another crucial aspect of the above-mentioned real-time decision-making is that it is based on indirect perception: information is brought by IT – operating at *absolute* speed – rather than acquired by someone who is *present* at the event, which would be unmediated perception. Virilio argues that image has gained priority over reality. The stealth airplane illustrates this point, as its very design is explicitly defined by the image it creates on a radar screen. Referring to the instrument panel of American high-tech bombers, Virilio also argues that "'postmodern' war requires a split observation, an immediate perception (with one's own eyes) and a mediated perception (video or radar)" (2002: 54).

In his critique of the consequences of new technology Virilio – a former pupil of Merleau-Ponty – thus seems to imply a phenomenological ideal of direct or primary perception as a contrast to the images delivered by communication technology. This perspective deserves some further critical consideration in this review, as I find it rather central to his general approach. For a preliminary clarification of this discussion, however, it seems appropriate to distinguish between three different issues in relation to information technology: first, there is the general question of mediation as opposed to pure, immediate perception or experience; second, there is the question of the particular *form* of mediation, as Virilio focuses on *images* (still or living) rather than text – as, for example, in Pierce's semiotic terminology: *iconic* rather than *symbolic* signs (Fiske, 1990); and finally, there is the question of the *transmission* of these signs. I have

3 Again, Virilio's confidence in the potential of computer technology seems to echo the IT evangelists – it is difficult to see automation as the central tendency in the development of work.

already treated the third issue – the consequences of the ability to transfer signs at the speed of light – and I shall therefore focus now on the first two.

To some extent one may compare Virilio's critique of communication and mediation being insincere to perception, experience and truth to several other intellectual traditions. One example is the more conservative version of phenomenology of the 'back to basics' style: cherishing tacit knowledge and face-to-face (preferably non-verbal) communication. Another example is the – in its intentions – more progressive critique of ideology. In an interview with Virilio, Christiane Calut thus compares his arguments to Adorno's statement that "every step towards communication cheapens and falsifies the truth" (Virilio, 2001b: 124). Although such critique certainly is essential in Adorno's thinking, this reference can be misleading, if it is taken as an 'undialectical' ideal of presence and immediacy: for all his critique of rationality, Adorno did not scorn reason and discursive thinking in favour of tacit knowledge (Adorno, 1970, 1991). Although the issue here is not to defend Adorno, the point I am trying to make is that, if one is concerned about the general dialectics of mediation vs. perception/experience, little insight seems to be gained by making a detour via modern computer technology – or rather: Virilio's fashionable focus on new technology should not distract attention from the fact that this discussion is also carried out elsewhere, in relation to good, old-fashioned media such as language or writing. Furthermore, taking inspiration from Virilio requires that one is aware of the risk of launching a critique that clings to a pre-modern ideal of direct, unmediated perception – a danger inherent in Virilio's approach.

Besides feeding on the general discussion of mediation, Virilio also points to specific aspects of modern communications technology, to the particular *type* of mediation (or sign): the emphasis on *images* rather than words and concepts. While he also emphasizes the aspect of *transmission* enabling real-time images, his argument may be compared with the semiotic characteristic of images – photos in particular – as 'natural signs', void of meaning, because they *present* or *show* something rather than *re*present it. And this is even more characteristic of living images, where the 'having been there' (Barthes, 1980) – 'I've seen it with my own eyes' – of the photograph (offered by, for example, the newspaper) is replaced by the 'being there' – 'I'm watching it now' – offered by direct transmission of events on TV (or the Internet) (Ingemann, 1996).

It is worth emphasizing that in this argument, Virilio does not suggest that indirect perception is intoxicated by some suspicious cultural (potentially ideological) meaning, but rather that this form of perception annihilates reflection: the "hunger for direct news" marks the "tyranny of real-time" and the "end of the mediated era" (Virilio, 2002). One may spur a slight paradox here: on the one hand he is a phenomenologist longing for direct, un-mediated experience; on the other hand, he is a modernist – despite his reputation, he does *not* consider himself a postmodernist (Virilio, 2001b) – emphasizing the need for (time for) analysis and reflection. On one hand, 'tele-presence' is criticized as illusory, not being 'present' enough; on the other, real-time images are criticized for not leaving time (and distance) for reflection. I choose to welcome this paradox as 'dialects' rather than incoherence.

As already suggested, Virilio's critique of the 'tyranny of real-time' can be compared to the traditional conception of the photograph as a 'photographic' memory: it does not

depend on a cultural code, and it has not been (totally) shaped by the subjective creator, certainly not in the same sense as a painting. For instance, Benjamin (1991) argues that elements in the motive avoid the photographer's subjective filter applied during the production process. While some regard this more direct relation between the photographic 'sign' and the object it refers to as a guarantee for authenticity – Benjamin (1969) was rather optimistic in foreseeing the dissolution of a pre-modern *aura* due to modern technology – it also means that the image is unsuitable for reflection and analysis: for instance, Horkheimer and Adorno (1968) argue that in order to show/picture the world, the image reclines on *knowing* the world – its immediacy prevents analysis. Virilio's approach to modern media seems closer to this latter line of argument, emphasizing the 'irrational' character of the image rather than praising its authenticity.

Of course, several objections may be raised against the idea of the photograph as immediate and cultureless – an idea that has been criticized by semioticists and structuralists. Barthes' (1964) analysis of the 'rhetoric of the image' is an influential example, drawing attention to the connotative and ideological level of meaning in the image. And today the potential for digital manipulation seriously undermines the 'objective' status of the photograph in the media. How does this approach fit with Virilio's argument? On one hand, it supports his emphasis on the illusory and mediated character of what others more enthusiastically have called 'tele-presence'. On the other, it seems to differ from his argument about the immediate and overwhelming character of real-time news – according to Virilio, there is no time, *neither* for analysis on the 'receiver' side, *nor* for actual manipulation at the 'transmitting' side (and one should recall that Barthes chose to focus on advertisements, where images are carefully selected and designed). This argument thus again draws on Virilio's main argument about the significance of speed and transmission – an aspect that distinguishes his thinking from semiotic analyses focusing on the two issues discussed above: mediation in general, and the question of the *type* of mediation (or sign), the 'natural' signs offered by images.

The Fallibility of Reading the Future

It seems appropriate to close this review by returning once more to the issue of technology and warfare, which has resumed actuality with two recent hi-tech wars. It will also provide an opportunity to explain his method. Leaving aside the idea of society being shaped by military logic, one might question whether Virilio exaggerates the significance of technology in warfare, that is, whether he accepts at face value the picture presented by the proponents of televised high-precision missile systems. Without being an expert in military history, I seem to remember that those bombs were never quite as smart and precise as announced by military spokesmen. And it has also been argued that at least the more recent war in Afghanistan was not won from the air

but depended quite largely on ground personnel (at a mere 'relative speed'[4]). Furthermore, the example of automatic defence systems also seems to show that he echoes the optimistic arguments about the potential for Artificial Intelligence. He accepts that this degree of automatization – not only in warfare, but also as a general tendency – is a realistic vision, while the fact is that research in AI has failed to deliver for decades. (On other hand it *is* a relief that he does not simply argue that AI is impossible due to phenomenological insights).

Thus, while Virilio offers a critical antidote to the choir of IT evangelists, i.e. the idea of us all getting together in the global village (which he explicitly criticizes), he may be criticized for a similar tendency to attribute too much importance to the isolated factor of technology. And perhaps this critique could be extended to his method in general, that is, trying to read signs of the future in various contemporary events without resorting to any elaborate empirical study, picking out convenient examples without over-zealous attention to their actual representativity – a method Brügger and Petersen (1994) label 'archaeology of the future'. On the other hand, those may be exactly the conditions and risks involved in trying to grasp the future: the intention is to identify future tendencies rather than merely describe contemporary reality. Although the critique of his empirical 'method' should not be completely silenced, neither should critique silence the observations of an analytical and somewhat cynical 'visionary'.[5] I certainly find many of his ideas and arguments inspiring for further study, without having to subscribe to all of his theses.

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4 Afghanistan may provide an example to the contrary – it was won by the Northern Alliance supported by American air power, and the lengthy struggle to chase out the remaining Taliban and Al Quaeda warriors from Tora Bora illustrates that geography still matters.

5 One cannot simply criticize Virilio by confronting his theses with contemporary facts. And he may exaggerate tendencies in an attempt to expose the essential, corresponding to Adorno's argument that only the extremes are true.

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