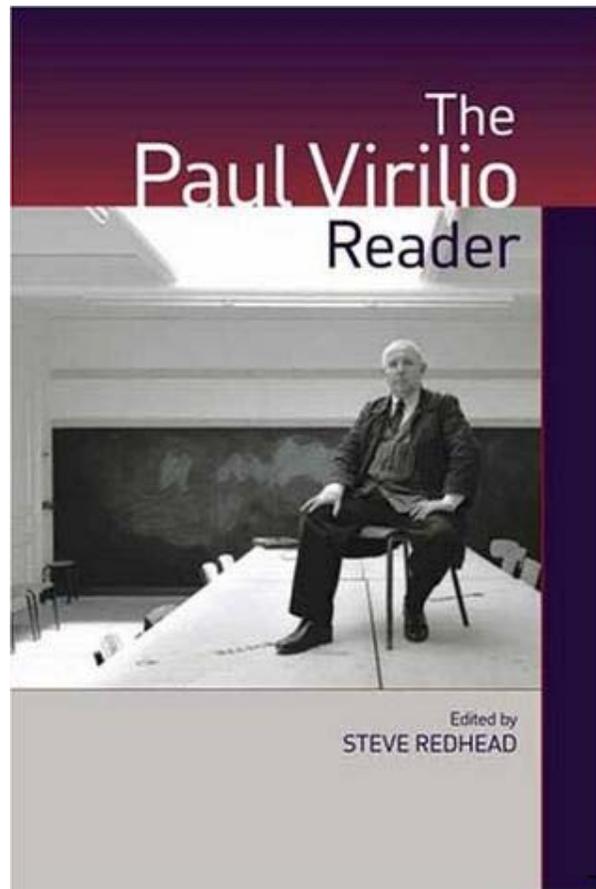


## Virtual Virilio

Saul Newman

Review of: *The Paul Virilio Reader*, ed., Steve Redhead. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004; and Steve Redhead, *Paul Virilio: Theorist for an Accelerated Culture*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004.



Paul Virilio is a man whose time has come... and, apparently, gone. At the end of his work, *Paul Virilio: Theorist for an Accelerated Culture*, Steve Redhead encourages us to 'forget Virilio', just as Baudrillard once exhorted us to forget Foucault. This would seem to be a strange way of concluding a study of a thinker who has always been associated with the contemporary condition, with the 'now'. Indeed, in Virilio's often disturbing assessment of our hyper-modernity, time itself is ever speeding up, displacing temporal space and destabilizing our grasp on reality to such an extent that we don't quite know where we are. Our interactions with the world around us have become totally virtualised for Virilio. Perhaps, then, we might have expected the continuation – even into virtual reality – of this cyberspace Socrates whose critique of

technology and its impact on our lives would lose none of its relevance. Technology, after all, isn't 'going anywhere' as they say. Why then must we forget Virilio? Has our accelerated culture left Virilio behind?

There is definitely something eccentric, and even anachronistic, about Virilio. The fascinating portrait painted by Redhead is of a somewhat backward looking, almost reactionary old codger who seems to be permanently ill-at-ease with the modern world, who rarely uses the internet or even watches television, and whose Catho-liberal humanism balks at the excesses of our technology saturated age. Virilio cuts an unlikely figure as a theorist of modern technology, as the high priest of speed. However, as Baudrillard said, when events speed up the thing to do is to slow down, to *take your time*<sup>1</sup> – otherwise you risk being swept up by them. Perhaps, then, Virilio, whose face is half turned towards the past, who, as he himself says, is still fighting the Second World War, is, paradoxically, best suited to radically analysing contemporary developments and future catastrophes. Perhaps it takes an ageing technophobe to really understand the impact that technology is having on our lives. Perhaps to really keep up with our accelerated culture, we need to take our time, to slow down. In any case, Virilio contends that we are all slowing down – becoming less mobile and more sedentary. As modern technology increasingly caters to our every whim, the object now seems to be for us to move as little as possible. The faster technology seems to advance, the slower we become. In fact, we might be coming to a complete halt – or worse, heading towards a universal collision, a generalised 'accident' of catastrophic proportions.

The accident is a central theme for Virilio: it is what haunts technological development - the hidden face or dark underside of progress that science would rather not acknowledge. The invention of the train, as Virilio says, was accompanied by the invention of the train wreck, with the car came the car crash, and so on. By the same logic, the astonishing developments in communications technologies – through which we are bombarded with instantaneous information and mediatised images of events happening in 'real time' – might be creating the potential for a new kind of accident, a 'total global accident'. In fact, the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the WTC - which Virilio seems to have predicted with uncanny and frightening accuracy in 1993 after the first WTC bombing<sup>2</sup> – might be a hint of things to come. This was a global media event that was staged more for its visual and symbolic impact than anything else: when it simultaneously appeared on millions of TV screens around the world, viewers had trouble separating the 'reality' of the event from the simulacrum of images which they momentarily mistook for a Hollywood action movie. This dislodging of reality – or to be more precise, this *duplication* of reality - is one of Virilio's chief concerns. The reality of the world around us is substituted by another 'reality', produced by mediatised images and information technology: we will soon have two realities, according to Virilio, actual and virtual – a sort of reality in 'stereo'.

These gloomy and somewhat hyperbolic prognostications are characteristic of Virilio's general critique of technology and its social, cultural, aesthetic, political, military and even sexual implications. In everything from 'smart houses' in which we mimic the immobility of the paraplegic, to 'smart

bombs' which robotically guide themselves to their target – there seems to be a loss of human intervention, a displacement of man by machine. Virilio envisions the future of mankind as a complete cocooning of the individual in a sort of technological box, where - dreading any sort of human interaction - he is passively overloaded with information and media images, and makes *virtual* love in cyberspace, with the aid of a 'data glove' that simulates the sensations of real bodily contact. We are condemned to a sort of masturbatory solitude in a technologically-assisted dystopia – something that is already immanent in the continual intrusion of technology into our daily lives. The last frontier, according to Virilio, will be the nanotech and biotech revolutions, where tiny robots will colonise the human body, effacing once and for all the division between man and machine.

These developments are not to be celebrated or fetishised, as some harbingers of the 'posthuman' cyber/cyborg age have a tendency to do. Here I agree with Virilio that there is nothing necessarily emancipating about the disappearance of man – there is nothing radical or liberating about the loss of reality (it depends on what replaces it). We should not be seduced by the false transgressions of 'cyberart', for instance, where body modification is nothing but self-mutilation – a cynical and perverse manipulation of the human body that only mimics the fragmentation and loss felt by the individual in the world of modern technology. Moreover, so called transgressive avant-garde art – including those displays of eviscerated flesh - are ultimately reactionary, participating in a theatre of cruelty that Virilio argues mirrors the violence committed by genocidal regimes. Virilio calls himself a 'critic of the art of technology', coolly appraising the aesthetic worth of avant-garde art, and revealing the deep and troubling complicity today between art, information technology, media circuits, and even violence. However, it is unfair to see this as a wholesale repudiation of modern technology: rather, like the conventional art critic, Virilio simply casts a sceptical eye over it. To really understand new technologies, one must stand back from them at a critical distance rather than unthinkingly revel in them.

Moreover, to accuse Virilio of conservatism here is misplaced: it is often political conservatives (neo-cons) like Francis Fukuyama, who trumpet the post-human era and who enthusiastically embrace new technology. Perhaps what the Left needs today is to develop a coherent critique of technology along the lines of Virilio's, examining the darker implications of new developments in communications and bio-technology - for instance, the facilitation of a sort of global surveillance system via satellite technology ('globalitarianism', as Virilio calls it). This 'overexposed' world, where we see everything, everywhere, as it happens, leaves *nowhere to hide*. With the so-called global 'war on terrorism' – which is really an internal war aimed at the regulation and control of populations under the pretext of 'security' – this global surveillance has been intensified. In any critical analysis of the state, these new networks of power and technology must be seriously taken account of.

What must also be questioned is our broader bio-culture, and the new paradigm of bio-politics/bio-power that was only very schematically explored by Foucault. For Foucault, this was a new kind of power that operated at the

level of life itself, in order to sustain it, interacting with it and thus extending its reach over it. The emphasis that is placed today on the biological dimension as the explanation for all behaviours and all aberrations, the mapping of the human genome, the expansion of DNA surveillance and testing, and the general prominence in our society of science and medical and technical knowledge, are symptoms of this new cultural, social and political preoccupation with life itself. But this is not a transcendent life, but merely life reduced to its biological or animal substratum – a life to be experimented on by scientists and bio-technicians, to be prodded and poked, and finally to be incarcerated within itself. Instead of the external colonisation of the age of empires, we now have, as Virilio says, *internal* colonisation – the encroachment of technologies on the individual and his body.

We get the feeling that Virilio is defending the possibilities of a transcendent life against this technologically determined biological existence. He calls for a new sort of ecology: one that seeks to preserve space and the human environment from the tyranny of ‘real time’ and the culture of technology. Left critical theory and poststructuralism should take this question of human ecology seriously. As Redhead correctly points out, Virilio is not a poststructuralist or postmodernist. His humanism sits rather uneasily with this. However, this does not mean that poststructural theory has nothing to gain from Virilio’s analyses.

Critics of Virilio might be inclined to see him as an essentialist: isn’t his call to preserve humanity and ‘reality’ against technological encroachment and virtualisation just another form of essentialism, another attribution of essential qualities to something that always already hybridised and prosthetic? Perhaps – but here I think Virilio’s comment that he is engaging in a critique of what he calls ‘technical essentialism’ is worth taking into account.<sup>3</sup> Technology, and science generally, today can be seen as itself a kind of essentialism – an ideology, or worse, a religion. It is what cannot be questioned in our society, and which has the status of absolute truth, absolute morality. There no longer seems to be a place today for those dissenting voices, like Foucault’s for instance, who questioned this absolute status of scientific knowledge. So it is the technical essentialists, or technical fundamentalists – those who believe absolutely in the benefits of technology and who are blind to its dangers – that Virilio is critical of. Virilio, in other words, refuses to uncritically accept this technological dogma. As he says, “It is necessary to be an atheist of technology.”<sup>4</sup> In doing so, he is merely unmasking its dangers, its dark side, because, he claims, *no one else is prepared to do it*. One is inclined to agree with him here – his critique of technology would be seen by most people as heretical.

What about the impact of technology on politics? What is the status of the political today, when what passes for politics is no more than a media spectacle (Berlusconi, who happens to be both Italian Prime Minister and a media baron – and the former because of the latter – is the most obvious symbol for this transformation)? What does politics mean today after the complete collapse of any meaningful ideological distinction between Left and Right, and where what has replaced it is a kind of sanitised, image driven, and opinion poll

obsessed orgy of mediocrity. The dominance of technocratic economic management and ‘expert opinion’ coincides with the shrinking of the democratic space. This loss of a genuine political dimension is something that greatly concerns Virilio. Modern communications and information technologies have meant a disengagement of the individual from the political realm: soon we might not even have to turn out to vote at elections at all - we will be freed from this burdensome task by voting over the internet (assuming we vote at all) never having to leave our homes. This, and the general virtualisation and mediatisation of politics – in which we are bombarded with empty political ‘sound bites’ and glossy advertisements – mean a loss of democracy itself (already democracy is really only a formality). Real democracy, for Virilio, is rooted in the agora, in the public space, in the town centre – it is a collective experience that depends on a tangible relation to a ‘place’, something which is no longer possible today in our virtualised, privatised universe that is governed by the ideology of the market and the fetishism of the image.

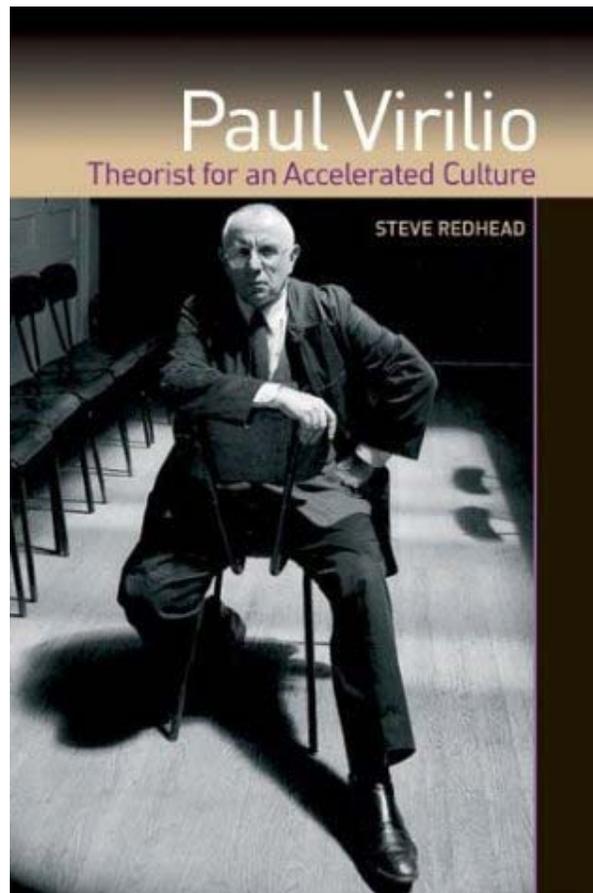
In fact, according to Virilio, liberal democracy and totalitarianism are no longer really all that different from one another – they both try to domesticate the accident, to stifle reality, albeit in different ways. Totalitarian regimes do this through repression and censorship, through not reporting tragedies; whereas in liberal democracies, this censorship occurs precisely through the *over-reporting* of tragedies and accidents, saturating us with reports of disasters, catastrophes, massacres etc, so that we become inured to them and no longer even notice them. So rather than underexposing us to the accident, democratic societies *overexpose us* – and yet the effect is exactly the same: we are entirely blinded to it.<sup>5</sup> Virilio calls for the creation of a ‘museum of accidents’ to testify to the ineradicability and inevitability of the accident, to allow us to witness what our contemporary obfuscations of technology, science and the media try to cover up. However, Virilio’s point is to warn us of the possibility of the universal catastrophe which these forces are helping to create.

So what are we to make of the world today? This is a world which has become all but virtualised; where the dominant belief systems are the nihilism of the market place, the obscurantism of science and technology, and a rampant neo-conservatism; where military power is brutally reasserted around the world (in the name of freedom, democracy and human rights); where new instantaneous communication technologies seem to only rend us further apart; and where the latest craze of Japanese robot-dogs, with which the owner is encouraged to develop a unique emotional bond, seems to be the model for interpersonal relationships of the future. This is the world that Virilio has been warning us about for decades, throughout all his fragmented and idiosyncratic writings on subjects as diverse as military power, optics, geo-politics, aesthetics, architecture, virtual reality, cybernetics, cinema, human cloning, and of course, speed. Virilio forces to confront the dangers of new technologies, but more so, our obsession with them.

Reading Virilio is at times frustrating: some of his arguments and concepts are vague and often not fleshed out or adequately explained. However, he is always fascinating and entertaining, if somewhat eccentric. One can’t always be sure whether to take him seriously – and certainly his style suggests a

certain mad whimsicality. But there is a serious and consistent theme that underlies his erratic critiques. He is engaged in a guerrilla war against the encroachments of technology, the tyranny of real time, and the continual displacement of humanity to the techno-biopolitical-military machine. His interventions are like hand grenades that he lobbs from his bunker: while Foucault saw his books as ‘little tool kits’, perhaps we can see Virilio’s writing as little incendiary bombs.

*The Paul Virilio Reader* is an eclectic collection of Virilio’s writings going back to the late 1950’s – from his early writings on ‘Bunker Archaeology’ to his later musings on the war in Kosovo and 9/1. Redhead has done a good job of gathering together many of the diverse and scattered fragments of Virilio’s work, much of which has only recently come out in English. Each of these fragments is accompanied by a brief introduction which outlines their context, their place in Virilio’s oeuvre. Redhead’s detailed and at times critical commentary on Virilio – *Paul Virilio: Theorist for an Accelerated Culture* – is the perfect supplement to the Reader, explaining many aspects of Virilio’s thinking and sketching the theoretical, political and historical context in which Virilio’s thinking has developed. It takes issue with Virilio on a number of points, particularly his lack of a coherent politico-theoretical position on the state, as well as the way that his religious views sometimes filter into his theoretical framework.



It is true that Virilio does not write and think in the way that most philosophers and political theorists do – he does not develop a consistent and sustained theoretical position. He is someone who mobilises architecture, aesthetics, military history, physics and politics in a trenchant critique of technology and real time. He combines ideas and concepts from many diverse fields and puts them together in a volatile mix – something that doesn't always neatly fit, but which is nevertheless totally unique and never dull. It is also true that Virilio defies labelling, as Redhead points out: he cannot be seen as a postmodernist, and his left wing politics sometimes sit rather uncomfortably with his Catholic leanings. Whatever he is though, no one could deny that he is one of the most original thinkers of our time, and Redhead's two books – which should be read together – serve as an excellent and well-overdue introduction of Virilio to the English-speaking world. Forget Virilio? Perhaps not.

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism*, Trans., Chris Turner, London: Verso, 2002, p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> See 'Delirious New York', *The Paul Virilio Reader*, ed., Steve Redhead. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004, pp. 192-195.

<sup>3</sup> See 'Interview with Virilio', James Der Derian. Trans., James Der Derian with Michael Degener and Lauren Osepchuk. ([http://proxy.arts.uci.edu/~nideffer/\\_SPEED\\_/1.4/articles/derderian.html](http://proxy.arts.uci.edu/~nideffer/_SPEED_/1.4/articles/derderian.html))

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> See Virilio, 'Museum of Accidents' in *The Paul Virilio Reader*, op. cit., pp. 256-262.