



PANICSVILLE: PAUL VIRILIO AND THE ESTHETIC OF DISASTER

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ABSTRACT This article is a synoptic review of the recent work of Paul Virilio, conducted through the book, *City of Panic*. I point to the problems with the increasingly apocalyptic content and tone of Virilio's work on modernity by referring to recent social science research on the city that makes it possible to construct a somewhat more hesitant account, not least, or so I argue, because hesitant accounts are closer to the way the world is.

We're here to go. That's what we're here for. We're here to go... (Burroughs 1990)

Remorse, predictably, was the form taken by her distress, the merciless whipping that is self-condemnation, as if in times as bizarre as these there were a right way and a wrong way that would have been clear to somebody else, as if in confronting such predicaments the hand of stupidity is ever far from guiding anyone. (Roth 2004: 340)

“Just talk, talk, talk with you in’it. Yeah, you got the home, the education, the fucking past what weren’t full of abuse ... and now you want me all tied up in explanations. That’s what people like you wan’t in’it... But you can’t. I haven’t had it that simple. Why should you get to put reasons on it when I’ve fucking lived it, and still can’t.” (Masters 2005: 38)

INTRODUCTION



I have what I think is a pretty good test of whether a person is a social scientist or not: do they eavesdrop on a fairly regular basis on other people’s conversations on trains and planes, on buses, in the street, and so on? If they don’t, I suspect that they really want to be a philosopher or an architect – or both. The difference is crucial for me. One kind of work (mainly) involves trying to figure out what other people are thinking as they are doing. The other (mainly) involves thinking. They are not the same.

Paul Virilio is probably best described as a philosopher-architect who has some things to say about city and society. If he eavesdropped on conversations, I think it unlikely that he would write the way he does. Make no mistake, this is not to say that Virilio doesn’t come up with interesting thoughts but for evidence he mainly seems to use other books and newspaper articles. In his writings at least, he is not up against people but against the idea of people.

This wouldn’t matter so much – he is hardly the first philosopher to offer synoptic readings of Western society on the basis of not too much in the way of evidence, after all – but Virilio keeps wanting to speak in the name of a putative humanity, and he seems pretty sure that he knows what that humanity is. I, on the other hand, am not so sure. As Burroughs put it, I think “we’re here to go” in the sense that I am not sure what the nature of human or thinking is or might be meant to be: our technologically- enhanced ways of life are already barely tethered to an ancestral realm but I am not at all sure that that is necessarily a concern. After all,

human thought and reason emerges from a nest in which biological brains and bodies, acting in concert with nonbiological props and tools, build, benefit from and then rebuild an endless

succession of designer environments. In each such setting, our brains and bodies couple to new tools, yielding new extended thinking systems. (Clark 2003: 197)

Now there are some awful, awful things going on in the world as a result of the evolution of some of these technologically enhanced environments, to be sure. Only a lunatic would want to deny that. And it may be that whatever humanity is will eventually do itself in through one means or another. The list of candidates is a long one: precipitate global warming, a generalized ecological crisis, a gene-spliced pandemic, a runaway particle experiment, self-assembling nano-machines running amok, and so on. And that's before we get on to warfare – or asteroids. In other words, Virilio's jeremiads about the future in the present, of which *City of Panic* is just the latest in a long line, have found their time. They have become part of a prevailing post-September 11th social mood of doomsaying (Geertz 2005). Indeed, on some counts, they are not extreme enough (Diamond 2004; Posner 2004; Rees 2004). Virilio is being outflanked.

But Virilio's relentless negativism about the future in the present does not seem to me to constitute an answer. Indeed, one might argue that it is likely to lead to despair, surely the ultimate political sin. Certainly, his brand of doomsaying seems to me to be profoundly out of kilter with prevalent tendencies on the left that are moving toward putting far more emphasis on constructing a politics of hope than before, both as the emotional ingredient that the left should be offering above all, and as a way of occupying a future that is too often reserved for the retrograde forces that have brought us to this pass.

PANIC URBANISM

I am sure that it is already clear that I find Virilio's work frustrating. Nowhere is this more the case than when it comes to his work on the city, for Virilio describes himself as an urbanist and he has the credentials to prove it: he has been a professor of architecture, after all. But, in his work on cities, we find both the best and worst of Virilio, as *City of Panic* shows all too well. True, there are some genuine insights but they are wrapped up in a hyperbolic apparatus that sometimes makes it very difficult to locate them and is unlikely to win many over who do not already subscribe to Virilio's vision of an all-but-terminal modernity.

So what is Virilio's vision of the city? The first thing that comes to mind is its resolute modernism. Virilio's city is a city of the swoosh of speed through a landscape of verticals and horizontals, of towers writing on (or indeed taking off into) the sky and of the featureless planes of endless suburbs, stirred by cataclysm and catastrophe, a landscape of perpetual accident. Sometimes it seems to me a bit like the view from *The Daily Planet* of a Metropolis-like comic-strip city: all it needs is some superheroes to finish the picture off. Then,

Virilio's city is a phenomenology of despair: inhabited by populations that are drugged by emotion, can no longer see reality, are led astray by speed and information, have become mere pawns in the logistics of perception. They sit and watch the world go by. But, finally, Virilio's city has nowhere left to go. It's reached the edge of urban evolution. The city is now collapsing in on itself; its population is becoming incarcerated in an infosphere from which there is no escape.

Well, it's certainly a way of looking at things, and one with a long and honorable pedigree: let's face it, it's not often that you read social theorists who want to present garlands to the world. But I don't think it even vaguely holds up to serious scrutiny as an account of how the modern world is. If Virilio ever read much in the way of serious social science research, which is, after all, flooding in from all quarters of the globe, he would surely have to backtrack. Almost everything he says about the modern city would have to be seriously qualified or reconstructed or just plain retracted. Take information technology to begin with. Here detailed studies show that Virilio's idea that we are moving into a machinic age needs qualification, to put it but mildly. Thus, prompted by the growth of sociology of science, actor-network theory, material culture studies, and so on, there has been a systematic rethinking of what human might mean as a tool-using entity. The general conclusion is well summarized by Clark (2003: 198):

Some fear . . . a loathsome "post-human" future. They predict a kind of technologically incubated mind-rot, leading to loss of identity, loss of control, overload, dependence, invasion of privacy, isolation, and the ultimate rejection of the body. And we *do* need to be cautious, for to recognise the deeply transformative nature of our biotechnological unions is at once to see that not all such unions will be for the better. But if I am right – if it is our basic *human* nature to annex, exploit, and incorporate nonbiological stuff deep into our mental profiles – then the question is not whether we go that route, but in what ways we actively sculpt and shape it. By seeing ourselves as we truly are, we increase the chances that our future biotechnological unions will be good ones.

Thus, there is a veritable legion of careful empirical studies of information technology that very often show the polar opposite of what Virilio would have us believe. Instead of taking on the cyberbole of firms and marketing agencies, researchers have gone out and looked at what people do with information technology and what information technology does with them and, surprise, surprise, there is a divergence. Just as one example, a common rule in this literature is "the more virtual the more real" (Woolgar 2002), that is, the introduction of new "virtual" technologies can actually stimulate more of the corresponding "real" activity.

Then take speed. I have shown in numerous papers, as have many commentators now, that any serious historical analysis of the impact of increasing speed on society demonstrates that its impact is much more variegated than Virilio credits, and does not add up to any particular tendency (such as that sad old chestnut, the “time-space compression” story). I, like many other commentators, have demonstrated this over and over again, pretty well to distraction – and largely to no avail it has to be said. The idea that increasing speed somehow has causality is an urban myth so deeply engrained in Western individuals’ idea of themselves and how they are that it is probably not dislodgeable – but that doesn’t mean that philosophers have to power it up.

Then, last of all, take the impact of emotion on democratic politics. No one can deny that there are serious problems with the emotional content and thrust of current politics, which have been nurtured by concerted media campaigns, and most especially the construction of a state of fear (Altheide 2002; Bourke 2005; Robin 2005). But it is important to be careful. Emotion has always figured in politics and it is a crucial part of political thinking: it cannot be caricatured as likely to diminish a full consideration of an intended action or as likely to provoke action without thought (Marcus 2002). So there is nothing necessarily wrong in its appearance in the media: indeed, from the earliest days of print political media, emotion has been a routine means by which the press has plied its trade. More to the point it could and in fact has been argued that emotion is a vital part of political citizenship and communication, not some awful canker. Indeed, it is possible to argue that an able citizen is likely to be an emotional citizen. Though it is, in fact, a problematic distinction, we can argue with both Hume and Smith that whilst reason can give birth to understanding, passion gives rise to action. “Democratic politics cannot be solely a space of calm deliberation. It must also be a sensational space, one that attracts and engages spectators. Only by doing so can it create the conditions for new possibilities” (ibid.: 148).

Most frustratingly, each one of these three areas is currently the object of attention of the liveliest of left politics. Thus, real thought is going into taking modern materialities seriously, thought that has led to a burgeoning literature that questions what we might mean by terms like “material,” “life,” and “thought” (cf Fraser, Kember, and Lury 2005; Miller 2005), and which is already influencing the politics of a whole series of domains, from environmental activism to animal rights. Then, considerable thought is also being given to the fragmentary nature of globalization and how it consists of a whole series of speeds that in turn lead to quite different notions of political networks (cf Ong and Collier 2004; Thrift 2005b; Tsing 2005). And, finally, as I have already mentioned, the politics of affect have become an important element of forward-thinking left politics: it is not acceptable to cede the realm of emotion, itself a

powerful form of thinking, to the right (Thrift 2004; Wilson 2004; Probyn 2005).

So, why if so much of Virilio often seems misguided does he have such a following? I think there is an ironic reason for this: Virilio's books are themselves a part of the set up of the media age he so often decries, for they increasingly read to me as nothing so much as newspaper columns, philosophically inclined newspaper columns to be sure, but newspaper columns all the same. We increasingly live in the age of the column and the op-ed piece, and Virilio's books often read as extended versions of that particular genre. Indeed, I think *City of Panic* functions better and is much more understandable if thought of as a collected series of columns, rather than as a book.

Columnists have great advantages for editors: they cost less than running long investigations or a string of overseas correspondents (Marr 2004); they fill all the space around the advertising; they save the editor from having to think what else might be there. They have similar advantages for columnists: "many columnists do not have to go out and interview people, or check facts, or do anything much beyond spinning out an idle thought or a pet prejudice, and pressing the 'send' key, followed by a monthly invoice" (ibid.: 367). Unfair? Of course. But remember two things: First, there are some great columns and columnists. Second, columns often act best when they function as momentary warnings that make us stop and think through the emotive power of their language and their consequent ability to convey the kernel of an argument. In other words, seen as a set of columns, *City of Panic* has a life that it is otherwise missing.

CITIES

The really frustrating thing, of course, is that Virilio *has* had some interesting things to say about cities. His work on a phenomenology of movement is important and might be thought to be among the precursors of all the work in this vein now taking place on cities (cf Amin and Thrift 2002). His work on the city as, in part at least, a product of war, similarly can be considered a worthy ancestor of all the important work on cities and war that is now arising (Graham 2004). His work on modern forms of perception again seems to me to have been one of the key precursors of a good deal of telling work, especially on forms of technological perception, and his notion of a logistics of images is surely a fertile one. But each time he goes round the park, he exaggerates and this exaggeration is not just of the "well, this is an illustration of a general trend and should not be expected to play out equally everywhere," or of the "well, take this as a warning of how things could become," or of the "well, it won't come to pass exactly like this but near to it" variety. It is systematic. And such systematic exaggeration is of more than mild concern. First, it shows a fundamental misunderstanding of how cities and societies work, which is as generators of difference as much as of similarity. Modern cities throw all kinds of lives into contrast in

variegated ways and demand a cultural literacy that is a source of hope as well as friction, a means of learning how to live plurality and conviviality (Gilroy 2004). Second, it consigns the political to “resistance” against machines or whatever other looming presence is to be held responsible for the woes of the world when there is a lot that can be done always. The forces lined up against the left are certainly not inconsequential but nor are they insuperable (Amin and Thrift 2005). One of the things that is needed to fill the left’s political arsenal is a sense of hope. One of my worries about Virilio is that his work can be read as if no hope exists. Third, it ignores specificity except as an illustration of something more general. But specificity is now regarded as crucial by many theorists, not just as an ethnographic undertow to urban life but as something that has value in its own right, a point to which I will return.

Worst of all, Virilio’s work on cities, at least on the evidence of this book, has stopped progressing. Yet his work could still be a veritable inspiration if more was made out of some of the issues that it raises. Let me take just two examples.

The first is Virilio’s modernist sense of urban space. Modernism has been around for so long that it has now become a folk model of how cities are, one which continually bubbles up in new ways in the culture. It therefore needs working with and developing, rather than dismissing (cf Barley 2001). As just one example, Virilio’s work on the city from the air could have been developed much more fully in ways that would have been wonderful in showing some of the paradoxes of the logistics of aerial images, to whose power we have in large part become inured. For example, Vanderbilt (2005) shows just what a wonderful boost to imagination being able to see cities from the air was and just how banal that imagination now is as aerial images have become routinely available in books (see, for example, Getmapping 2004) and on the Internet. These images need recuperating: their wonder needs bringing out again (see Dicum 2004). So do their emancipatory as well as carceral possibilities. Thus, in the middle of a security obsessed United States, Vanderbilt is able to show the degree to which aerial remote sensing is a double-edged sword; he and a colleague pinpoint a probable new government bunker in Washington, DC, just by using images from the Internet: “things the Soviets would have paid dearly for are a mouse click away” (Vanderbilt 2005: 35).

The second example is catastrophe itself. It has become increasingly clear that cities are actually extraordinarily resilient: they routinely bounce back from accident and disaster (Thrift 2005a). They are not the playthings of forces beyond their control but can have active agency through the institutional performances that they are able to mobilize, the mundane loops of maintenance and repair, and the reactions of networks of citizens, though these all have interesting and instructive cultural variations (Vale and Campanella 2005). Even the new information technology – which might be thought of as in

a distributed state of siege from viruses and the like – turns out to be surprisingly robust. The lesson can be generalized to most urban networks, which might be thought to be more vulnerable because so many of them rely on each other: after September 11th, for example, most critical networks in New York had enough redundancy built in to them to be able to recover quickly and with a minimum of fuss (Mitchell and Townsend 2005).

The overall point I want to make is that modern cities may not be in a twilight zone at all. They may be rather more efficacious than Virilio seems to consider, including under the most stressful conditions imaginable. They foster new imaginations and powers that cannot all be counted as bad. I want to take this point up again in conclusion.

CONCLUSIONS

By coincidence, at about the same time that I was reading *City of Panic*, I was also reading Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America*, a novel that is the equal of Virilio: equally speculative, equally urban, equally concerned with war and terror, equally vexed by the impact of emotion on democracy. But here is an author who eavesdrops, who listens to what people are saying – their gait and gesture as well as their speech – and who never sees cities as formless agglomerations. This is, in part, to be sure, because the fact of Jewishness so obviously dictates geography in the book, from the fastness of Newark, to the Jewish families cast out into the desert of rural middle America, to the sense of danger that comes from straying outside a particular familiar urban space. But it is Roth who also understands that lights that go out can come on again because of simple decency, which though it may be washed by a certain nostalgia, also understands damaged lives and why they are sometimes redeemed – through sheer cussedness, through negotiating misunderstandings, through raw emotion – in ways which are irreducibly complex and cannot be read off from some grand analysis. So, for example, the Italian family that comes to stay in the apartment below (forced on the protagonist's family as a part of a "racial integration" policy) includes an old grandmother who hates Jews – and a father who defends them, with a gun if needs be. And the cast of Jews includes the resister turned layabout, the sincere collaborator, the seeker after celebrity, the enthusiast, the tougher-than-tough businessman, the flawed but ultimately big-hearted demagog, the gangster, the timorous and the scared, and the downright stubborn, all of them claiming the right to be American.

In other words, it is just not possible to read specificity off from theoretical positions: specificity speaks for itself and it speaks in many and varied ways that do not add back up to those positions but have their own power. I am reminded of the famous piece of badinage between Mark Tapley and Martin Chuzzlewit about how to paint an American Eagle (peculiarly relevant in these times, it has to

be said): “I should want to draw it like a Bat for its short-sightedness; like a Bantam, for its bragging; like a Magpie, for its honesty; like a Peacock, for its vanity; like a Ostrich, for its putting its head in the mud, and thinking nobody sees it. . . And like a Phoenix for its power of springing up from the ashes of its faults and vices and soaring up anew into the sky!” (Dickens 1951: 638).

Roth’s book seems to me to signal a more general task too; that is, to bring writers like Virilio back to everyday life in all its everydayness. I am always struck by how little Virilio ultimately has to say about that – a few reminiscences aside – and yet it seems to me to point to a pressing task: how to connect social theory, with its often imperious gaze, back to the lives of people in all their messiness. The other book I have been reading in parallel with *City of Panic* and *The Plot Against America* has been Alexander Masters’ *Stuart*, the story of one homeless man whose chaotic life and personality is almost impossible to capture in print – though Masters has a pretty good try. *Stuart* was a particular challenge to write about, precisely because his life lacked any conventional structure, seemed to fall down the cracks.

Now, I do not think that philosophy or synoptic social theory has to transform suddenly into a vast social tract or some kind of ethnography – as if it could. But the gap is currently so wide between the cogitations of most philosophers and everyday life, especially the everyday life of societies which, in Wacquant’s (1996) telling phrase, suffer from “advanced marginality” and which routinely trigger all kinds of much more directly carceral mechanisms than the flow of images – from ghettos to welfare retrenchment to prisons (Wacquant 2000) – that I do end up wondering if it is possible to find some means of proceeding that might be able to capture the presence of all the people who fall out of theoretical diagnostics (as Bourdieu [1999] might be thought to have attempted in *The Weight of the World*). I say this in part because it is well known that Virilio works with homeless people and yet I am struck by how little theirs and many marginal others’ imprint seems to be felt in a book that is, after all, on the modern city. This is not, I should hasten to add, a plea for philosophical thinkers to get socially relevant or to theorize everyday life – there’s plenty of that going on already. Rather, it is for them to bring people like *Stuart* into their thoughts as more than examples. One might argue that, in part at least, the future relies on being able to forge a new rapprochement between theory and practice, one that will not only produce all kinds of chaotic pleasures but might also be productive of genuine political advance, even if the times are as dark as Virilio paints them.

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