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Paul Virilio and Media Theory: An Introduction

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Abstract

This short article introduces the special section, ‘Paul Virilio and Media Theory’.

Keywords

Paul Virilio, media theory

Neither an optimist nor a moralist, Paul Virilio – who died in September 2018 – achieved a “deft balance between melancholia and fascination” (Wark, 2018). Although accused by some of technological determinism, or even technophobia (Kellner, 1999), the point for him was rather “...to attempt to catch the status of contemporary, and particularly urban architecture within the disconcerting concert of advanced technologies (Virilio, 1991: 23). Although a theorist of the object *par excellence* “...for our moment of the virtual, the simulation and Integral Reality” (Bishop, this issue), he saw himself more as a producer of images (and metaphors) than of philosophy or theory as such (McQuire, this issue). His account of successive epochs stood apart from the major tendencies in historical analysis, just as his unique approach to the relations between media and war stood apart from the major tendencies in media analysis (Phillips, this issue). “...[B]eyond his epistemological, ethical, theological and mediological commitments,” Virilio is perhaps better thought of as a journalist, “...tracking symptoms of a widespread malaise...that increasingly permeates the technologically mediated organisation of human and wider planetary life” (Cubitt, this issue). Or perhaps he is better understood as a socially analytical detective in the vein

of Sherlock Holmes, examining the extent to which media reports of fragmentary events can be unpicked to penetrate urban complexity and treated as symptoms of wider social trends (McQuire, this issue).

Theorizing the city, war and speed, his conceptual, historical and ‘clinical’ gaze on the integral accidents and unusual incidents (Morrow and Shields, this issue) of each new media technology offered a critical, speculative and prescient diagnosis of the systemic problems of modernity. His critiques of media were less concerned with entertainment, consumption and audiences than with “...targeting, weaponization and, in Harun Farocki’s terms, the operational images of the military-entertainment complex” (Bishop and Parikka, 2018), and with unveiling the militarization of everyday life and the infrastructuralization of violence. His critiques of politics, meanwhile, demonstrated the surpassing of deliberation in the liberal public sphere by the process and imperatives of speed itself – the *speed* of realtime media rather than the *time* of democracy (McQuire, this issue) – leading to new forms of emotion-based rather than opinion-based politics, favouring instant responses over time reserved for reflection, and generating widespread fear and panic as ‘environmental’ emotions (Karatzogianni and Robinson, this issue).

To resist such trends, Virilio argued for awareness-raising – “revelation not revolution” (Virilio, 2012: 71) – and critical analysis – “only critique is possible right now” (Virilio and Lotringer, 2002: 161-2). Yet his own attempts to do so have been criticized for their totalizing logic. Instead:

...rather than assuming that everything is militarised in the same way; that surveillance is experienced univocally; or that everyone is moving faster, we need to ask instead: what/who gets to move, and what/who stays still? What/who is tele-present and what/who is invisibilised? What/who is subjected to the deadly panoptical tele-surveillance and what/who enjoys turning surveillance into a game of imagination? (Kuntsman, this issue).

In asking such questions, we may be led to challenge the presumptions of race- and gender-neutrality behind the militarization and acceleration Virilio exposes, and to reveal the extent to which they affect racialized and gendered populations disproportionately (Towns, this issue).

The essays presented here address these themes specifically and, more generally, Virilio's legacy for media theory. In this special section of *Media Theory*: **Scott McQuire** draws on the connection between Virilio and George Perec to discuss the effect of the growth of digital infrastructure on the surveillance of, and scope for resistance in, urban everyday life; **Adi Kuntsman** discusses the complex and unevenly distributed effects of the post-information bomb era and reconsiders the distinction between 'civilianized' and 'militarized'; **Armond R. Towns** considers race as an underexamined and overlooked element of Virilio's theory, reconceiving the 'pure war' of technological surveillance as 'dark pure war'; **Athina Karatzogianni and Andrew Robinson** reflect on the ways in which speed's impact is mediated by affect through their consideration of contemporary political phenomena in France, Britain, India and China; **Jim Morrow and Rob Shields** illustrate Virilio's method of clinical theoretical diagnosis through an examination of the German 'Atlantic Wall' fortifications, the Svalbard Global Seed Vault, household products that emit volatile organic compounds, and the global leisure tourism industry; **Ryan Bishop** explores the ramifications of three 'indeterminate objects' – glass, dust and the atomic bomb – on urban formations, mediated thought and subjectivity; **Sean Cubitt** traces the development of Virilio's ecological thought throughout his career to question the fundamental separation of human and natural that constitutes media and communication; and **John W.P Phillips** assesses Virilio's account of the contemporary city as a museum of disappearance and substitution.

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