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## Virilio, the ‘Infra’ Urban and the Logic of Big Data

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### Abstract

Drawing on the connection between Paul Virilio and Georges Perec, this essay argues that there is an historical transition in Virilio’s thought, in which his desire to recuperate the urban everyday using a combination of observational methods including photography and writing is overtaken by the growing role of the ‘vision machine’ in submitting urban space to new forms of surveillance and control. These conditions, which have further intensified as cities and urban social life have been remade by the growth of digital infrastructure, pose new questions concerning the role of everyday life as a possible site of ‘resistance’, and highlight the urgent need for a critical stance to the growing operational role of data in social life.

### Keywords

Virilio, Perec, urban space, vision machine, data, everyday life

In 2015, I spent a week with my family in Paris staying near Place Saint-Sulpice. It brought to mind George Perec’s small book *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris* (*Tentative d’épuisement d’un lieu parisien*) written in October 1974. In it, Perec took on the task of describing the myriad particular details that make up the urban landscape of Saint-Sulpice – everyday routines involving passers-by, clothing, objects, taxis, birds, buildings, tourists in buses, the weather, etc. – in writing. In some respects, Perec’s enterprise resembled the experimental approach of earlier *nouveau roman* authors such as Alain Robbe-Grillet who, in books such as *The Erasers* (1951), notoriously laboured to write scenes in ‘photographic’ detail. However, unlike Robbe-Grillet’s more formalist concerns, Perec’s project was explicitly rooted in a desire to represent urban life in a new way.

What's this got to do with Paul Virilio? Virilio not only sympathized with Perce's project, but commissioned the Saint-Sulpice text and even makes a brief appearance in it (a renowned denizen of Paris, he passed through Saint-Sulpice on the second of the three days Perce was carrying out his observations).<sup>1</sup> At the time, both Virilio and Perce were involved in the journal *Cause Commune* which brought together various collaborators with an interest in the 'infra'. This concept was understood more in terms of Henri Lefebvre's emphasis on the ordinary – and therefore largely unperceived – fabric of everyday urban life than the 'infra' ('infra-mince' or 'infra-thin') invented earlier by Marcel Duchamp. Perce's piece was published in *Cause Commune* in 1975, where he introduced it by stating that he set out to describe "that which is generally not taken notice of, that which is not noticed, that which has no importance; what happens when nothing happens other than the weather, people, cars and clouds" (reprinted in Perce, 2010: 3). Perhaps unsurprisingly, Virilio was later moved to equate Perce's observational approach with the machinic gaze of a camera.

So, he [Perce] attempted to record everything, as would a surveillance camera: to record the ordinary, the banal, the habitual. That is, the signs of an event to which we may not have paid any attention, that we may not even have perceived (Walker and Virilio, 2001: 16).

Later in 2015, I was at an event in Shanghai where French academic Christian Licoppe discussed a 'thought experiment' he had recently undertaken. In it, he imagined Perce repeating his Saint-Sulpice project, but this time in the context of contemporary media including a mobile phone and locative social media platform FourSquare. It's a thoughtful piece, which concludes that the 21<sup>st</sup> century Perce would not be able to remain within the conceit of the 'neutral observer' that he still seemed loosely able to claim in 1974.<sup>2</sup> There is some substance to Licoppe's argument, but – perhaps because it focuses so heavily on the new forms of media-enabled agency that have become available to the contemporary urban inhabitant – I feel it misses something vital about changes in the relation between media, the urban environment and everyday life in the present. If this 'miss' is thrown into stark relief by Virilio's work on media, it also helps to register a certain transition in his thought: the desire to recuperate the unnoticed everyday is overtaken by growing concern about the excessive oversight that media technologies set in train.

\* \* \* \*

Media are regularly present in Virilio's writing. Sometimes media appear merely as the source of 'matters of fact', such as the newspaper reports that Virilio often cites as indicators of deeper social processes. Here his approach is very much in keeping with that of Conan-Doyle's famous 19<sup>th</sup> century fictional detective, Sherlock Holmes, who scanned the daily newspaper in order to register and penetrate urban complexity. The news media reveals society but only indirectly – it requires expert knowledge and interpretation to decipher the links between seemingly fragmentary events and to discern the deeper logic linking them<sup>3</sup>. News reports are *symptomatic* in the sense that Freud was beginning to give to the term when Conan-Doyle wrote his stories; Virilio frequently adopts a similar pose of social *analyst* who reads media reports as symptoms of social trends.

However, media are also regularly present in Virilio's writing as explicit 'matters of concern', albeit rarely as a singular or central concern. Rather, different media such as photography, cinema, radio, television, video, webcams, computers – and Virilio wrote about all these and more – belong to the broader technological transformation of human life, which he measures in terms of changes to lived environment and urban habitat, to human perception and experience, and, finally, to human understanding of our place in the universe.

Virilio is justly celebrated for creating some of the most memorable metaphors for modern media, particularly television, which is variously figured as the third window, museum of accidents, the last vehicle, and so on. (He even suggests to Sylvère Lotringer that he didn't produce theory but images!) However, what is most lasting for me is his analysis of trajectories, and his capacity to link their operation across different domains. This is clear in his various writings on the impact of media on politics and political life. In *War and Cinema* (Virilio, 1989), he argued that radio and cinema had not only enabled the creation of new forms of propaganda in the traditional sense of 'mis-information', but he aptly characterized 20<sup>th</sup> century dictators such as Hitler and Stalin as 'directors', identifying the systematic mobilization of media resources in the service of affective 'star' power as a key issue for modern politics well in advance of the contemporary surge of interest in the relation between celebrity and politics. By the late 1990s, Virilio (2001) was arguing that contemporary media infrastructure

meant information scarcity was being replaced by information excess, bringing into play new strategies of deception: the art of hiding by flow or flood. With even greater originality, he also argued that capacity to ‘fictionalize’ with realism and at scale was itself being overtaken by the capacity for *realtime* inventions and interventions. While he acknowledged practices such as the serial photography used in wartime reconnaissance as antecedents of this new informational logistics, he was adamant that live television represented a critical threshold. Virilio was one of the first to recognize that screens as much as planes could be hijacked by ‘terrorist’ groups. His analysis of the 1993 World Trade Centre bombing remains a precocious account of the strategy later adopted in the 2001 attacks, right down to the delay between the first and second plane strikes to ensure that the ‘whole world’ would indeed be watching (Virilio, 2000: 19).

While 9/11 was arguably the last major media event of the broadcast television era, the general logic of exposure that Virilio identified remains operative in the networked present. As I write this piece, a mass murderer has live streamed his attacks on two mosques in Christchurch on Facebook. The distributed network of the ‘world wide web’ means that it is no longer necessary to exploit each television broadcaster’s desire for compelling content in order to gain access to global screens: instead, those instigating attacks can themselves become media producers with potential to reach millions of screens ‘live’.

At the most fundamental level, Virilio argued that the *speed* of realtime media was fatally undermining the *time* of democracy. As the time required for debate and deliberation was overtaken by demand for instantaneous response, Virilio suggested that “parliamentary geopolitics suddenly gives way to a *chronopolitics* of instantaneity” resulting in a “a *ludic* democracy for infantilized tele-citizens” (Virilio, 2002: 30). “Telecracy” replaces democracy as “the triumph of audience ratings over universal suffrage” (Virilio, 2002: 30).

\* \* \* \*

In Virilio’s writing, the dominant normative image of media – as provider of information, as space for collective debate about matters of shared concern (public sphere), as a set of institutions that provide a check on the formal organs and operation

of power (fourth estate), and so on – is subject to a different gaze. Television is not, as sociologist Joshua Meyrowitz (1985: 323) once argued, (potentially) “the closest thing the earth has witnessed to participatory democracy on an enormous scale”. Instead, it is presented as a radical form of non-communication; a technology of *sedentarization*, even domestic *incarceration*. The totalizing nature of Virilio’s critique is well-known and is undoubtedly part of the attraction and power of his writing. Rarely does he seek to present a nuanced understanding of the trajectories he identifies, or to speculate on the conditions under which different agendas and ends might emerge. In his most revealing interview, he argues: “Only critique is possible right now, precisely because we no longer have the power to stem these tendencies” (Virilio and Lotringer, 2002: 161-2).

This loss of power is directly calibrated to Virilio’s understanding of the historical *displacement* of human perception and properly human social relations by technological speed. Electronic media not only eviscerate the time of politics, but that of architecture and the city, exhausting the very dimensionality of the natural environment and even the cosmos. Like Heidegger, Virilio sees modern media as symptomatic of the ‘death of God’, albeit in a complex way. By assuming attributes of divinity, such as all-seeingness and the ability to transcend space-time limits, modern media underpin the profound loss of human sense of place in the world, as well as the demise of religion as a form of knowledge capable of properly *situating* human life (Virilio, 2001: 22). In a rare and all-too brief moment in which he ponders alternatives, Virilio (1993: 80) asks: “Will we rediscover the religious bond, and so re-establish sociability? Are there new, as yet unimaginable bonds?”. However, he offers no hint as to what these ‘unimaginable’ bonds might be, nor how the task of re-establishing sociality might begin.

Because of his tendency to fall back onto an older concept and rather problematic humanism – as undisputed centre of experience, as space of authenticity and the body – I think there are limits to the capacity of Virilio’s critique to speak to the contradictory nature of contemporary experience – in particular to the complex ways that experiences of ‘mediation’ and embodied immediacy are now interlaced (see McQuire, 2016). This is what makes his sponsorship of Perce’s project, and especially his later comments, so intriguing. His sympathy with Perce’s ambition to develop a

methodology for taking note of all that passes unnoticed in everyday life is not in itself remarkable. It is in keeping with Virilio's life-long identification with, and concern for, marginalised populations such as the homeless and refugees. However, his later comparison of Perec's undertaking to the gaze of a camera – and more particularly to a surveillance camera – is striking. 'Surveillance camera' does not simply evoke the observer-narrator figured as anthropomorphized camera who famously begins Christopher Isherwood's Berlin stories. In the lectures Virilio gave in 1994, later collected as *The Vision Machine*, he argued that the deeper logic of the surveillance camera does not simply concern the threshold of automated image production. This had already been crossed once the first photographs began to generate visual information that no longer needed to be registered by a human eye, or its presumed correlate of consciousness, in order to carry the socially-accepted stamp of 'eye-witness' evidence. Rather, what he calls the 'vision machine' arrives when the image is no longer made by a 'photographer' *nor addressed to a human observer*. Neither *operator* nor *witness*, the human has become incidental to the machinic image. Colossal image databases like Google Street View are one exemplar of this development, while the adoption of face recognition systems to routinely control mass access to urban resources (such as ticketing for long distance train travel in Beijing and Shanghai) is another.<sup>4</sup> Trust in the image becomes contingent on trust in the algorithm, throwing the conditions of witnessing and the status of testimony into a new confusion.

Let's assume that, in 1974, Virilio still saw some potential for political agency and intervention in urban space through a project such as Perec's, with its deliberately 'exhaustive' observation of everyday life. What then moves him to equate it to a surveillance camera in 2001? At least by the time *The Vision Machine* was published – and arguably much earlier – camera-like observation no longer seemed to him to offer any possibility for the 'redemption' of everyday life, as Siegfried Kracauer once put it. For Virilio, the 'kino-eye' so celebrated by Dziga Vertov – and by more recent avant-gardists including Virilio's contemporary Jean-Luc Godard who, with Jean-Pierre Gorin and others, operated as *Groupe Dziga Vertov* from 1968-1972 – is no longer an opening for human liberation but presages the destruction of properly human being.

Is his later description of Perec's project less a matter of a new understanding of the camera than a reevaluation of the potential for everyday life to provide a source of, or

resource for, alternative action? Writing in 1968, Lefebvre (1996: 129) could claim that the everyday – the ordinary, the 'infra' – constituted a limit to the action of capital: 'The use (use value) of places, monuments, differences, escape the demands of exchange, of exchange value'. Here the everyday is cast as a site not only of routine (the banal and the quotidian) but of resistance. It is a space in which uncommodified practices could be enacted and enjoyed; a reserve of authenticity lingering within the overpowering commodity logic of capital. While Perce's understanding in 1974 seems to conform to Lefebvre's analysis, Jonathan Crary has argued that the contemporary 'everyday' has become an increasingly uncertain ground for the elaboration of counter-practices:

Even though at various points in history, the everyday has been the terrain from which forms of opposition and resistance may have come [...] now there are numerous pressures for individuals to reimagine and refigure themselves as the dematerialized commodities and social connections in which they are immersed so extensively. Reification has proceeded to the point where the individual has to invent a self-understanding that optimizes or facilitates their participation in digital milieus or speeds (2013: 69-70).

Crary's exemplar is the combination of voluntary self-exposure and involuntary datamining normalized by contemporary social media platforms. This is precisely the trajectory that Licoppe 'misses' in the thought-experiment described earlier: the extent to which the agency and involvement in urban life offered by locative media platforms such as FourSquare is implicated in extending an economy of intensive data capture across urban space. As personal communication and interactions that were once considered 'intimate' are routinely used as data for other purposes such as marketing, new feedback loops are created which intensify the pressure on individuals to perform particular identity routines. The tendency is equally clear in the current operationalization of various forms of urban media infrastructure in 'smart' cities around the world, in which all kinds of sensors, including surveillance cameras, gather data about movement, appearance, behaviours, and transactions. The scale and depth of these developments go well beyond the 1980s surveillance camera culture that



Virilio (1994) analysed in *The Vision Machine*, and necessarily change how we think about ‘ordinary’ use of urban space.

These developments confirm the prescience of Virilio’s analysis, if not his prescription for contestation only through critique. While there is certainly danger in romanticising the everyday, there is even greater danger in assuming that all capacity for changing current operations and orientations has disappeared under the weight of digital infrastructure. If today, ‘media’ are undoubtedly part of our problem (assuming there is just one!), how might we begin to re-engineer this complex milieu? In thinking about this question, the relation between Perceval observing everyday urban life and the extent to which his project – at least as he and Virilio saw it in 1974 – was overtaken by the kind of omnipresent urban surveillance that Virilio later describes as the vision machine intrigues me. How should we differentiate Perceval’s program of detailed observation of all that goes unnoticed or may not even have been perceived from the *inhuman* observation of the vision machine which is *radically* inhuman precisely in its claim to notice *everything*? What happens to the space of the ‘infra’ in such a milieu? (Andy Warhol’s project for a TV program based on everyday comings and goings filmed by surveillance cameras in apartment building foyers was another contemporary expression of the perceived potential for a new register of camera-based observation: unlike Perceval, Warhol famously disclaims his own subjectivity, baldly stating ‘I want to be a machine’).<sup>5</sup>

The founding conceit of ‘big data’ is that gathering enough data will allow new, previously unperceived patterns to be discerned. Today, this melds with one of the founding fantasies of modern urban life, which has been the dream of ‘reading’ the true complexity of city life. Instructively, the medium to achieve this fulsome reading has been progressively relocated from writing to photography to cinema to the computer (linking the AI in William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* to contemporary vendor-driven smart city agendas). While there is certainly an element of truth to the idea that new data will lead to new understandings – not least because humans can be defined partly in terms of aptitude for discerning patterns and *making sense* from all kinds of phenomena – there are significant problems with such a setting, not least because the claim has become a way of authorizing data capture at a scale and sweep previously unimagined.

Today, as Virilio's vision machine morphs into ever-more integrated systems such as China's 'social credit' system, in which all kinds of actions and interactions are observed and tallied into a single 'score', we can observe a certain culmination of Simmel's observation that the quintessential process of modernization is the transformation of quality into number. This begs the question of how we might dispute such an orientation. One starting point is to continue to insist – against the overweening claims of data acolytes such as *Wired* editor Chris Anderson – on the limits of 'data' and the fantasies of total observation that accompany contemporary big data scenarios. Perec's attempt at 'exhaustive' observation was founded on the acknowledgement of its own impossibility. One rationale for this is the assumption that there is 'infinite' data. Another, as Derrida reminds us, is the more radical recognition that there is in fact no fixed and normative centre – of perspective, of interpretation, of knowing – on which all claims of totalising observation are based. Insisting on the contingency of big data may yet allow us to learn to use the 'infra' of the incipient urban database *otherwise*.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Virilio appears in an entry titled *19<sup>th</sup> October 1974: Time 2pm. Location: Tabac Saint-Sulpice*. "Passage of Paul Virilio; he's going to see *The Lousy Gatsby* at the Bonaparte" (Perec, 2010: 33). The Saint-Sulpice project followed work Perec had previously undertaken involving observation conducted across 12 different sites in Paris. It differed from this earlier work inasmuch as it involved intensive observation over 3 consecutive days rather than a series of visits separated in time.
- <sup>2</sup> It's important to stress this *looseness*: Perec's claim of systematic recording was partly ironic, and his slender text is leavened with regular flashes of humour and moments of self-reflexivity concerning the impossibility of his undertaking.
- <sup>3</sup> As Walter Benjamin – himself an avid reader of detective stories – recognized, detective fiction, the newspaper and the modern city form a particularly complex *mise-en-abyme*. Early detective fiction, including stories by Eugene Sue and Conan-Doyle were themselves serialised in newspapers and periodicals, while David Frisby (1994: 100) notes, "Contemporary reports about crime in newspapers were one of [the detective] genre's closest relatives".
- <sup>4</sup> Of course, humans can and do look at Street View images. But the primary purpose of their collection – which is undertaken by increasingly automated vehicle-cameras – is to provide a data stream for producing Google Maps (see McQuire, 2019).
- <sup>5</sup> In a 1969 interview, Warhol explained: "In New York, apartments have a channel five which allows you to watch anybody who enters the front door. That will be my show: people walking past the camera. We'll call it *Nothing Special*" (quoted in Carroll, 1969: 140).

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