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The Museum of Light and the Epoch of Disappearance

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Abstract

The bleak announcement to Paul Virilio's *La vitesse de libération* [*Open Sky*, 1997] forecasts a final dawn: "one day the day will come when the day won't come" (1997: iii). The motif of the dawn in Virilio's writing brings his focus to bear on the phenomena of rapid transport and electronic transmission technologies as they come to reproduce and in principle to replace the spatial and temporal environment of bodies illuminated by solar optics. In this article, I raise a question concerning the experiential sphere of morality, consciousness and community in Virilio's explanation of an epoch increasingly dominated by these technologies. If Virilio is correct, we are in a transition towards the final epoch of humanity, governed by a quasi-theological media environment, and characterised by an experience of disappearance that was entirely novel to the twentieth century. The article assesses Virilio's account of the paradoxical emergence from the ruins of the urban architecture of a city characterised by the phenomena of disappearance and substitution: a city that functions as the museum of the phenomena it supplants.

Keywords

Dawn, disappearance, light, accident, time, transport, transmission, city

"This is the dawn of the third horizon," Virilio declares in a conversation with Sylvere Lotringer from 2002, to which Lotringer gives the title *Crepuscular Dawn*, a typically abrasive oxymoron symbolizing the beginning of the end of the day. The structure of the dawn as a phase of terminal transition dominates Virilio's sense of the existential situation in which we find ourselves: "The world has already experienced epochs of transition," he observes elsewhere, "and I believe that we're in the midst of another

one” (Armitage, 2001: 114). The prophetic urgency of moments like these, which occur more candidly in conversational contexts than they do in the books and articles, nonetheless reinforces the sense of historical perspective and projection that drive Virilio’s more focused studies. But, as Virilio explains, the dawn in relation to this third horizon—where dawn normally defines a passing phase in a temporal transition—describes how a more subliminal and yet progressively more dominant substratum of existence has displaced even *temporal transition*, in the speed of light immediacy of telecommunications.

This most recent dawn completes a series of “anthropological horizons of expectation” (2002: 177) that may be reconstructed critically when one identifies a continuity between the science and the culture of an epoch in terms of its moral expectations. An epoch is thus defined by the horizon of expectations that renders the sphere of social relations meaningful and relevant. The paradigmatic structure of such horizons in different ways characterises the theological life of the middle ages (in e.g., messianic or millenarian forms), yet it endures as a sometimes obscurely subterranean tendency beyond any historical closure in both avowedly secular and sternly fundamentalist environments. In the modern epoch, it takes three distinct forms. Virilio identifies the first as *revolutionary* (“Revolution won’t be back. It is foreclosed, globalization has outflanked it”). The second is the form of *war* (“with the Third Great War, the second horizon of expectations came to an end”). And the third is that of what he calls *the great accident*.

Virilio’s account of successive epochs seems to stand apart from the major tendencies in historical analysis, just as his unique approach to the role of the media in the advancement of war, and the corresponding role of war in the progressive development of electronic media, seems to stand apart from the major tendencies in media analysis. But one can assemble without artifice a gathering of voices who over the last century also contribute, always in different ways, to a growing awareness of the implications of the most consistent motifs we also find in Virilio’s corpus. Virilio himself takes care in distinguishing his project from those he acknowledges as influences (e.g., Walter Benjamin, Franz Kafka) and contemporaries (e.g., Jean Baudrillard, Jean François Lyotard¹). But these names also serve to mark the enduring philosophical tendencies of the epoch.

The first and arguably the key concern would be that of *disappearance*. The aesthetics of disappearance engages the evolving sense of a kind of *disparition* that afflicts a self not as one who experiences the positive disappearances of things or values from its world but as one who occupies the place, or follows the route, of the missing, of the disappeared, of those who form the *apparition* of *les disparus*. What disappearance means to us in the era of motorized electronic media concerns the state in which we find ourselves: the state of the disappeared.

To focus in on this condition, and in keeping with both the architectural and the theological motifs that guide Virilio's exposition, we might refer to this state as a mode of dwelling, a kind of city. The collective inhabitants of the city, as Virilio suggests in "The Overexposed City" (Virilio, 1991: 9-27), exist as parts (components or *dividua*) of an urban architectonic expansion that gives way to its own material decay, thanks to the rapid transport and transmission technologies on which its growth is driven. Civic expansion coincides with a fractal shrinking in the experiential domain: in morals, consciousness, conscience. Alongside the mundane city, but also constituting its borders, its internal and external edges, a city emerges immune from the traditional experience of temporal change. The *civitas orbis terrarum* yields at length to the *civitatem disparata*.

Secondly, and intrinsically related to this mode of disappearance, the emergence of the photogram gives rise to a doubled sense of *light*. When in 1827 the inventor Joseph Nicéphore Niepce produced a "heliograph" (or "sun print"), preserving an image captured in a pinhole camera, using a prepared mixture of bitumen on a pewter plate, the light of an entire day was captured for the duration of a single glance. This earliest existing photographic plate, "La cour du domaine du Gras" ("View from the Window at Le Gras"), took an eight-hour exposure to fix, as the sun performed its cycle. Niepce had been experimenting with the process for several years, producing images known as photograms, by which he captured the contrast of light and shade from engravings, by passing light through them onto the plate and in this way preserving their image. The photogram thus makes possible a revolution in image technology. Once exposure time has been reduced, the now instant photogram leads inexorably to a world increasingly dominated by reproducible images and, in cinematography, to sequences

of image frames producing for perception an extramundane equivalent of the mundane itself.

The alliance between photographic and electronic technologies thus produces a world that surpasses the dimension of mundane optics (where the sun brings bodies to light) and that usurps it by both preserving it photographically and reproducing its effects. Finally, the digital signal brings light to its essential limit in the instantaneity of the speed-of-light transfer. One can reconstruct the history of photography in terms of the way the window, like the one looking out onto Niepce's yard, vanishes into the façade screens of the modern city: "In a certain sense," Virilio writes, "the screen becomes the last wall. No wall out of stone, but of screens showing images. The actual boundary is the screen" (Ruby, 1998: 181). The alliance brings together two relatively discrete instances of the *accidental*, which thus introduces the third of the three interconnected motifs. The role of the accidental is neither new historically nor original philosophically. But the vanishing of the window in the façade screen is both. Aristotle, both in *The Physics* and *The Metaphysics*, establishes as accidental processes that escape scientific discovery, but which nonetheless cause interminable destruction on the otherwise stable foundation of existence (Aristotle, 1991). The combination of speed and time (the "accident of accidents") in the electronic transmission of images brings a city of accidents into paradoxical existence.

The kinetic adventure of light therefore begins to divide the world into two domains or dimensions: the traditional sphere of optic illumination, in which temporal and spatial surfaces frame experience, leaving experience itself to lean towards a critical or utopian horizon beyond the present; and a dimension in which electronic light technology produces an extramundane performance of instantaneous transmissions, which function as the limit to, or the fundamental barrier against, any mobilization towards the future. In the field of architecture this division implies two cities in one, reactivating a traditional, even ancient, model in an unexpected way:

The first one is architectonic and urbanistic in that it organizes and constructs durable geographic and political space. The second haphazardly arranges and deranges space-time, the continuum of societies (Virilio, 1991: 23).

While the suspicion arises, and this is one of the most regularly rehearsed criticisms of Virilio, that a kind of Manichean technophobia prevails in his philosophy, we might hold onto his own resistance to that charge:

The point here is not to propose a Manichean judgement that opposes the physical to the metaphysical, but rather to attempt to catch the status of contemporary, and particularly urban architecture within the disconcerting concert of advanced technologies (Virilio, 1991: 23).

Two or three complications will need to be addressed. The first involves the destruction (or at least the deconstruction) of ontological certainties that the advanced technologies help to perform. It unfolds less as the historical continuation of a metaphysics and more as a form of classical onto-theology in reverse. The Aristotelian framework that tends to inform the traditional conceptual matrix implies an untroubled continuity between physics (bodies, space, time, finitude, divisibility) and metaphysical categories (being, substance, essence, accidents). In a universe governed by such ontological conditions, the accident, which in the contemporary world takes the form of a speeding up of transmission and motorization, ultimately signals the dissolution of being itself. Bodies, as well as time and space, decay in the speed of transmission: “the substantial, homogeneous space derived from classical Greek geometry gives way to an accidental, heterogeneous space” (Virilio, 1991: 25). A second complication afflicts the architectural as it spreads into space (“the proliferation of architecture through its projection into every spatial direction”). At length, it too yields to the decay of architectonics while advanced technologies continue the process under “the regime of trans-historical temporality derived from technological ecosystems” (Virilio, 1991: 24). It remains to be clarified why Virilio insists on this. But he consistently maintains the distinction between the mundane and the regime of trans-historical temporalities, between these two incompatible optic regimes. The disappearance of matter on one side and the corresponding disappearance of the self on the other seem to have their common root in the science and culture of the modern epoch.

I am convinced that, as with pointillism and divisionism in the arts of the nineteenth century, nuclear physics, the decay of matter, and, of course, fractal geometry have social consequences. That is, the decay of matter

not only affects the social structure of the individual but also the reflexive relationship of the couple, the latter of which is the true basis of the evolution of human history (Armitage, 2001: 103).

The impact of physics on society, which will happen at first in symptomatic and isolated cases, gathers currency in the world as technology advances. The model of the two cities (divided spheres, or the doubled dimension) has a wide reach, and is worth noting briefly. From St Augustine (*De Civitatei Dei*) to Kierkegaard (*Either/Or*) the doubling of a city or a way of life concerns the passage from one domain to the other (in Kierkegaard the celebrated “leap of faith”). Indeed, in *De Civitatei Dei* Augustine notes an apparent paradox: we know the day only by the setting of the sun each evening and its rising every morning. Yet, the Scriptures teach that the sun was made on the *fourth* day, *after* the light had been separated from the darkness. The day had a morning and an evening even before the sun was made. His explanation, employing the full force of analogical reasoning, establishes a sense of the dawn (this is the sense we have inherited and which we continue to employ) that gives us the vista or horizon of the future:

In comparison with the Creator’s knowledge, the knowledge of the creature is like a kind of evening light. But when our knowledge is directed to the praise and love of the Creator, it dawns and is made morning. And night never falls while the Creator is not forsaken by the creature’s love (Augustine, 1998: XI 7).

In relation to a light that in principle precedes the optic light of day and night, another kind of light that in principle *usurps* mundane existence performs a reversal of the onto-theological tendency that St Augustine, after Plato, rehearses here².

The sense of the dawn after the experience of the last century emerges in stark contrast. A disturbing continuum comes to dominate the epistemic image of the world as the twentieth century advances into the new millennium. Things disappear into their appearance, into an environment that both disguises and replicates the internal structure of the thing. The subject of knowledge struggles with the disappearance of the thing beneath the modes by which it can be objectified. Particle physics, cellular biology, concrete poetry, symbolic logic, algorithmic syntax, environmental science,

and so on, progressively confirm the disappearance of what each time concerns them: in the structurally incomplete understanding of matter; in the replication of the cell; in the meta-critical fecundity of contemporary poetics; in the dream of quantum computing; in the geofomations of a technoscience designed to correct the damage it has already inflicted on an earth that it thus remakes in its own image. An “image of the world” that increasingly complicates distinctions between, on one hand, the multiplying modalities of communication and, on the other, things as they ought to be independently of their re-presentation, their transformation, their mutating mutation, suggests that a new epoch dawns. What then becomes of the subject? And what kind of existential ground emerges in place of this fading ontology?

Some of these statements can seem perplexing, especially if one focuses on the mundane features, to which Virilio insists on adding the supplement of an “urban ecology” of disappearances, shrinkages, and fractal divisions. In *Crepuscular Dawn*, he identifies the “ecology party” as prefiguring the eschatological party, “The Party of the End,” who fail to “translate the horizon of expectations” (Virilio, 2002: 177). The point here, again, is to distinguish between an interest in the mundane, in the politics of the world as it translates into a politics of the end of the world, and an interest in the dromological sphere, the sphere of speed and light, the so called *grey ecology* (after Paul Morand, who wrote, “speed destroys colour”). The ecological party is “too preoccupied with pollution, flowers, birds, acid rain” (Virilio, 2002: 177). In *Open Sky*, he asks, “would it not be appropriate to set up a *grey ecology* alongside the *green*? An ecology of those ‘archipelagos of cities,’ intelligent and interconnected, that will soon reshape Europe and the world” (Virilio, 1997: 59). Such an ecology would be concerned with the erosion of space-time and the disappearance of bodies (and souls) in the epoch of cities dependent entirely upon telecommunications.

Douglas Kellner bluntly describes Virilio as “exceedingly technophobic” in his tendency to assemble a rhetoric of “military and religious metaphors.” It no doubt represents a sentiment with which many commentators agree. Kellner interprets Virilio’s concern with tele-technology as expressing a rigidly binary, mutually antagonistic, value system:

Virilio thus operates with a Manichean value system, rooted in materialist phenomenology, that contrasts a positive 'life' and the human to a negatively interpreted technology (Kellner, 1999: 114).

These terms "materialist humanist" and "phenomenologist" help to normalize, if not naturalize as too narrow, the philosophical grounds on which Virilio sets up the modes of disappearance that interfere with space-time and bodies. Virilio is "disturbed by the invasion of the human body by technology and the substitution of the technological for the human and lived experience" (Kellner, 1999: 114). Vision machines are "seeing for us," and nanotechnology "probes the body (and next the mind)" (Kellner, 1999: 111). Yet, the analysis, in *Open Sky*, of the increasing technologizing of the body in the wake of "the electromagnetic transmission revolution" (which may or may not be hyperbole but is touched by a typically dry humour) adumbrates more recent work³: "The pacemaker points the way to the coming insemination of *emotional prostheses* capable of adding to the pharmacological arsenal of stimulants and hallucinogens, physics quite clearly not wanting to let itself be outdone in this domain by chemistry!" (Virilio, 1997: 95). Again, it would be easy to fall into mundane analysis⁴. A double bind infests our concern with the health of individuals today. For example: the focus on health and fitness tends to privilege the able-bodied at the expense of those with disabilities; and discourses critical of the ideologies of health and fitness become aligned with celebrations of plus sizes, under the rubric, for instance, of "#EmpowerAllBodies" and other instances of body-positivity. Thus, the subject of disability is aligned with that of obesity: two kinds of unfairly maligned or underexposed individual. The prosthetic technologies that help to build the sphere of these autoimmune discourses, in the form for instance of wearables (smart watches and other kinds of body monitor), serve also to displace the very agency of the responsible individual, which they are ostensibly set up to support. Kellner's judgment is that: Virilio "demonizes modern information and communication technologies, suggesting that they are doing irreparable damage to the human being" (Kellner, 1999: 112). One can sympathise, yet the evident fact that increasingly the body has become a site of scientific (biopolitical) recreation might cause us to reconsider the framework that Virilio brings to the situation.

What status should we attribute to the religious rhetoric? Virilio speaks of a “monotheism of information.” In this case, the *civitate disparata* identified earlier, unlike the *Civitate Dei* of Augustine, which follows the guidance of a complex theological text requiring years of hermeneutic ingenuity, institutes a revaluation of knowledge and tradition that equates to its neutralization and replacement with the accidental contrivances of speed, light, and continuous war.

I believe that a caste of ‘technology monks’ is being created in our times, and that there exist monasteries of sorts whose goal it is to pave the way for a new kind of ‘civilization’; one that has nothing to do with civilization as we remember it. The work of these technology monks is not carried out in the way that it was in the Middle Ages. Rather, it is carried out through the revaluation of knowledge, like that achieved for Antiquity. The contribution of monks to the rediscovery of Antiquity is well known. But what is not well known is that we now have technology monks, not mystics, but monks who are busy constructing a society without any points of reference. Indeed, we are confronted with what I call “technological fundamentalism.” That is, fundamentalism in the sense of a monotheism of information (Armitage: 2001, 104).

This fundamentalism represents the culmination, in Virilio’s explanation, of the techniques of visual representation (perspective, chiaroscuro, telescopic lenses, and ultimately television) absorbed into a vision machine that serves as the *museum*—or rather, reduces to museum pieces—everything that once bathed in the light of day: “So here we are, then, at the very last museum, the Museum of the Sun! The museum of the light in which the horizon of appearances has bathed since the dawn of time” (Virilio, 2013: 35).

The telecommunications industry in the twenty-first century absorbs into its sphere every opinion, every relation, every point of view, obscuring and at the same time multiplying the boundaries between entertainment, politics, religion, philosophy, art and love. An example: Derren Brown’s televised trick, “Disappearing Sun,” which first aired in October 2007 as part of the *Mind Control* series, shows him bringing his subject out to a desert setting in the middle of an afternoon, hypnotizing him into sleep, and then reawakening him four hours later in the pitch black of night. “The sun’s gone,”

admits the subject sobbing before the chilling void. The expression of his loss is on display for us. The cameras provide a subtly shifting point of view, the numerous takes edited into a continuity. The reality television production, in self-effacing documentary style, first follows the two figures to the site of the trick. Then it performs the shot/counter-shot of the interaction between conjurer and subject, interspersed with some cuts to an elevated shot looking down on the couple as Brown prepares the subject. The camera then retreats to give a panoramic view showing the subject asleep against a backdrop of the afternoon sky as it decays: a few seconds at 4.10 pm, a jump to 5.03 pm, another to 6.25 pm (blue hour), and then opaque darkness at 8.05 pm. The time on the subject's watch, which Brown has covertly changed, shows 4.05. The military grade night vision lens now illuminates the scene, providing only a spectral impression in the close-up of the subject's face and his tears.

No one, except evidently the subject, believes the sun has disappeared. But although something does disappear, in or from the subject's face, in or from his eyes, this is no more an empirical disappearance than that of the trick disappearance conjured for the subject alone. It is no less a trick of the narrative form, of mediation, ellipse, conjuring, misdirection. The subject's sense certainty disappears in a traditional way, made possible by the classic hypnotic state of circuses and variety shows. In this way, the segment simultaneously produces and recovers a sense of loss made spectacular in the subject's face. And it does so by showing how it is done. It replaces what we still may regard as the persistence of the *here* and *now* with a technical mediation. Like all worthy showmen, Brown utilizes a spiel as both a part of the act and in its potential for techniques of misdirection. In "Disappearing Sun," he begins his voiceover with a critique of enlightenment: "the sun has come to represent enlightenment and salvation across many cultures. I think that if we remove such comforting concepts we are required to do more soul searching, that our eyes become accustomed to the dark and our lives become richer" (0.05-0.21). The typical gist of Brown's spiel affirms that his tricks, using modern psychological techniques as well as those of the traditional conjurer and hypnotist, can expose forms of mystification. In collaboration with the television idiom he has arrived on the scene as the figure of a great demystification: scientific, exhibitory, and pedagogical. He therefore consistently locates time itself within the sphere of empirical demonstration and simultaneously displaces it into the

aspectual gaze of the lens, the monitor, and ultimately the smart screen, the opaque representative and usurper of the transparent view.

Traditionally, the *here* and *now* makes itself felt as the negation of all the actual *nows* (past, present and future) in contradiction with each other. We may recall, with Virilio, Aristotle's exoteric aporia by which no two *nows* can exist at the same time. In "Disappearing Sun," Brown merely robs the subject of this contradiction between two *nows* (between 4.05 pm and 8.05 pm). He removes the contradiction not by employing the enlightenment of a dialectical philosophy but with trickery. With hypnosis, Derren Brown can demonstrate a level of confidence, floating like the camera above the contradiction by which night removes the sun from the day in the time lapse of the televised event. The mode by which the demonstration operates bypasses the persistent *now*. The demonstration exhibits just another instance of the reproducible work, the media artefact, a further instance, in other words, of the shrinking to nothing of the *now*. The enlightenment sun disappears but has been replaced by the ghostly eye of the post-enlightenment camera. Might this be how, in the age of mechanical reproducibility, the I of consciousness is fixed, by code and by limitless exhibition, to that of the enunciative camera eye? If so, a more disquieting truth infiltrates the platforms of immediate consciousness, a truth by which an implicit or tacit assumption, often unnoticed but capable of coming into focus violently and surprisingly, undermines the confidence, the self-certainty, of sense certainty itself: in truth, the becoming absolute of the I follows the formal route of a disappearance.

The Derren Brown trick can be regarded as exemplary in the context of Virilio's exhaustive survey of what he calls *picnolepsy*, by which an illusion of continuity, by way of a "production of appearance," is technologically pasted over gaps in visual experience. *The Aesthetics of Disappearance* exploits the paradoxes of a technological wizardry that anchors itself in impossible empirical grounds. Some of the arresting moments by which this mode of disappearing by appearing occurs are revealed in the rhetorical form of the *envois*. One packs oneself up to send oneself off. Or, as Virilio observes in *Open Sky*, we discover a figure that has become dependent upon their prostheses: "the catastrophic figure of an individual who has lost the capacity for immediate intervention along with natural motoricity" (Virilio, 1997: 20). The phenomenon of "cocooning" (online shopping, working from home, and so on) looks

like the logical consequence of a process already underway with cinema. Virilio refers to Kafka: “*Cinema means pulling a uniform over our eyes*, warned Kafka” (Virilio, 1997: 91). Kafka, the narrative architect of disappearance, in his first incomplete novel, *Der Verschollene*, follows the “missing one” of the title, the disappeared, into the domain of disappearance itself. Translated variously as *Amerika*, *The Man who Disappeared*, or *The Man who Went Away*, the novel structures its domain in two ways: from elements of a contemporary mythology derived from travel literature and fractured film clips it reproduces an uncanny artifactual America, a land to which countless refugees and immigrants from Europe had effectively disappeared; and it traces a logic of disappearance (expulsion, seduction, escape) recreated incessantly in the figure of Karl Bandemann, as at each stage of the narrative a further formation in an unlimited or at least incomplete series of disappearances is played out. Early in the book, the only chapter published in Kafka’s lifetime, as “The Stoker,” Karl leaves his suitcase behind before leaving the ship which has just arrived in New York harbour, to go in search of his umbrella. He gets lost on the way. He knocks on a door and at the threshold prepares to enter the room:

Through some shaft in the ceiling a dim light, long since used up on the upper decks, penetrated the miserable cabin, in which a bed, a cupboard, a chair, and the man were standing side by side as though they had been packed away [...] Karl crept in as best he could, laughing loudly at his first unsuccessful attempt to swing himself into [the bed]. But he was no sooner in the bed than he cried: “Goodness, I forgot all about my suitcase” (Kafka, 2009: 6).

The doubling up that occurs throughout these passages, between Karl and his objects of travel, the suitcase and the umbrella—lost, left behind, stolen, returned—gather into a narrative ensemble something like the rules of a game, a game we could call disappearance. In this instance, Karl, leaving his own suitcase behind, finds an alternative one into which he packs himself, as the crowd packs itself into the contemporary cinema. In Virilio’s account (1997: 94-95), a small step is taken between the standardization of vision “denounced by Kafka not so long ago” and “the audio-visual helmet” by which light is projected directly onto the occipital cortex.

Walter Benjamin, like Kafka, plays a precursory role for Virilio's identification of disappearance with the media. Benjamin describes the effect of reading Kafka in a letter to Gerhard Scholem written in 1938, where he evokes Kafka in words taken from Arthur Eddington's *The Nature of the Physical World*. Eddington's intention is to illustrate the complexities of standing on a physical surface before the hearth:

I must shove against an atmosphere pressing with a force of fourteen pounds on every square inch of my body. I must make sure of landing on a plank travelling at twenty miles a second round the sun—a fraction of a second too early or too late, the plank would be miles away [...] The plank has no solidity or substance. To step on it is like stepping on a swarm of flies (Benjamin, 2006a: 325).

Benjamin affirms the passage as having more of “the Kafka stamp” even than passages from Kafka. While it charts (in its culturally elegant fashion) the disappearance of solidity from the universe of particle physics, it also projects the vertiginous move towards the disappearance of solidity in the hospitable hearth. “What is actually and in the precise sense *crazy* about Kafka,” he writes, “is that this absolutely new world of experience comes to him by way of the mystical tradition” (Benjamin, 2006a: 325). Virilio has remarked on the time lag between the epoch of the scientific explanations and the epoch of their experiential fulfilment: “In our situations of televisual experience, we are living in nothing less than the sphere of Einstein's relativity, which wasn't at all the case at the time that he wrote it since that was a world of trolley cars, trains and at most the rocket. But we live today in a space of relativity and non-separability” (Armitage, 2001: 113). One might acknowledge, then, that the framework within which we interpret our world (the inevitable counterpart to changing it) lies in our capacity to draw upon the traditions against which and out of which it has developed. Benjamin concludes, “the long and the short of it is that an individual (here, Franz Kafka) who is confronted with the reality that presents itself as ours—theoretically in modern physics and in practice by military technology—would clearly have to fall back on nothing less than the powers of this tradition” (Benjamin, 2006a: 325-326). Military technology, modern physics, and the avant garde: three domains that in association provide a powerful and prophetic image of derealisation. In *War and Cinema*, Virilio focuses on the experience of the soldier: “The soldier had the feeling

of being not so much destroyed as derealized, any sensory point of reference suddenly vanishes in a surfeit of optical targets” (Virilio, 1989: 19). And here he uses the same quotation from Pirandello that Benjamin uses in “The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproducibility.” Benjamin identifies the role of the camera and the POV the camera represents: “*The audience’s empathy with the actor is really an empathy with the camera. Consequently, the audience takes the position of the camera; its approach is that of testing*” (Benjamin, 2006b: 260). Pirandello had written:

The film actor feels as if exiled. Exiled not only from the stage but from his own person. With a vague unease, he senses an inexplicable void, stemming from the fact that his body has lost its substance, that he has been volatilized, stripped of his reality, his life, his voice, the noises he makes when moving about, and has been turned into a mute image that flickers for a moment on the screen, then vanishes into silence (Benjamin, 2006b: 260).

The theme of disappearance in Benjamin’s essay concerns the role of *aura* and of the *cult* function of art but his observations are hardly limited to that. The audience appreciates the fortitude of an actor stripped of aura when faced with an entirely mechanical manifestation, the apparatus that records him, and into which he disappears. They appreciate this because they sense his stoic conquest of disappearance, his continuing into the world in which he has been dispelled, and so they gain strength or courage in an era where their own disappearance is ensured from day to day. Disappearance can be regarded as a mode of maintaining the privacy, the anonymity in the face of the question of oneself—one’s ipseity, sovereignty, at-home-ness—but only to the extent that one disappears into the techniques by which one exposes oneself to even more scrutiny.

If we return briefly to what Virilio had called the “monotheism of information,” it operates as much on the artificiality of common sense as it does on the artificiality of a dawn without solar optics, so the strangeness of the condition of disappearance, its paradoxical hospitalities, will need to be exposed once again if the “slide into the future without humanity” is to be checked.

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Notes

- ¹ "And my position is very different from Baudrillard's since what I see isn't simulation but substitution" (Armitage, 2001: 115).
- ² Horkheimer and Adorno's famous passage from "The Culture Industry" chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* provides a suggestive context for ways in which the media industries of the twentieth century might be said to recapture the iconic severity of the middle ages: "No cathedral chapter could have assigned the grimaces and torments of the damned to their proper places in the order of divine love more scrupulously than production managers decide the position of the torture of the hero or the raised hem of the leading lady's dress within the litany of the big film" (2002: 101).
- ³ Paul Preciado's *Testo Junkie*
- ⁴ See Elman (2018) and Murray (2017) for two very different readings of Virilio's remarks on disability in *Open Sky*.

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