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## SETTING FOOT: PAUL VIRILIO ON THE META-CITY AND ITS TRAJECTORY

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**ABSTRACT:** If the sign of culture is hospitality, as Jacques Derrida writes in *Cosmopolitanism* (2001), and hospitality presupposes an underlying reception of the other, then it may well follow that the contemporary city is quickly losing its cultural and ethical sign. This is precisely Paul Virilio's argument in *City of Panic* (2005). The modern metropolis is a kind of walled city, defined by increasingly automatic and ubiquitous forms of cybernetic telecommunication systems. In this sense, the so-called real city is being replaced by a deterritorialized meta-city in which our concrete access to others will be transformed and mediated through an artificial horizon. Virilio passionately and persistently describes this postmodern version of communication as virtual incarceration, and thus it comes as no surprise when he derides the globalization of the meta-city as inherently exclusionary and totalizing. In my paper I shall explore the relationship between these two fundamental aspects of the meta-city as Virilio, Baudrillard, and others contend that a "general accident" is necessarily entailed by these hyper-realized traits of mass synchronization. Acknowledging that there are real dangers to be addressed in the acceleration and simulacrum of reality, I will nonetheless argue that predictions of ineluctable catastrophe are deeply problematic.

**KEYWORDS:** Catastrophe; Meta-City; Virilio; Baudrillard.

A predominant line of argument in cultural studies, both modern and postmodern, exposes historical progress in politics, communication, and technology as an oppressive illusion. This kind of illusion is all-pervasive and catastrophic. Paul Virilio writes in his *Information Bomb* that we are prisoners of a visual bubble, and that this condition of slavery to artificial reality is already in itself a grave indication of things to come, as the ensuing apocalyptic social crash is nothing more than an extension of our cybernetic visual bubble apropos of culture and politics (Virilio 2005, 67). If everything is becoming a spectacle, a form of perpetual entertainment and mass hallucination, then the difference between consumer happiness and melancholic totalitarianism is quickly fading. We are losing our natural footing in all realms of life: sex is politics, death is cinema, information is business, and liberation is thought-control. Our categories of social reality no longer follow a spectrum in which antitheses are recognized and kept separate. In this manner, as Jean Baudrillard puts forth in the *Transparency of Evil*, "Everything is said, everything is exposed, everything acquires the force, or the manner, of a sign. The system runs less on the surplus-value of the commodity than on the aesthetic surplus-value of the sign" (Baudrillard 2002, 16). Baudrillard depicts a world in which everything is transformed into something more real and more authentic than its own objective reality. In fact, the surplus-value of the sign is precisely that which now constitutes the actual and material dimension of truth: there is simply no remaining objective reality beyond such a network of excess signifiers. In short, what we see and consume is the ultimate marker of truth, and this truth concretely actualized is the sign of our imminent destruction.

Paradoxically, however, the catastrophic element often associated with our virtual homogenization transcends death. If we are no longer happy with our individuality, it is because

we are tempted by minimal differentiation and everlasting life. This can be achieved, symbolically at least, by means of cultural assimilation. In this way, according to Ernest Becker, mortal anxiety gives rise to the illusory repudiation of our natural, animal existence: “As soon as man reached new historical forms of power, he turned against the animals with whom he had previously identified—with a vengeance, we now see, because the animals embodied what man feared most, a nameless and faceless death” (Becker 1975, 92). We move away from and eradicate the source of fear by assuring ourselves that we belong to a higher scheme of things, and for humans this higher symbolic function is ultimately social. The real limitations of the body are thus replaced by ritualized notions of happiness, self-preservation, and immortal spirituality. In the postmodern condition, as described by Baudrillard and Virilio, these ritualized forms of perpetual significance take on such an oppressive, all-embracing role in our lives that death itself has become a sign of dream-like sublimation. The horrifying aspects of bodily existence, in this way, take on a new meaning, one which is infinitely more satisfying and pleasing. Henceforth, we shall imagine ourselves as fully transformed and perfectly integrated into “an ideal universe of synthesis and prosthesis” (Baudrillard 2002, 71). Whatever is inhuman within ourselves, including the purposelessness of death, will have to be looked upon in a new light: cloning, plastic surgery, and cybersex all contribute to this dream of perfection in which the mortality of the self will cease to be an existential dilemma.

This in turn is predicated upon highly invasive forms of control by means of perceptual conditioning: we are not going to further repress our experience of death except to the degree that we likewise connect our vision and feeling of things to a technological simulation of disembodied experience. Perhaps, after all, this is the entire aim of that same perceptual conditioning: *to fool ourselves into thinking that we are on the verge of transcending real physical limits*. The postmodern, in this fashion, is simply an exaggerated and more radical version of the modern; so that if the latter privileged the autonomous will and the former reduces it to myth, in each case the realm of absolute truth is reinscribed as a fragmented perspective. The paradoxical conclusion to this historical hermeneutics of suspicion is that we finally escape the human body, as well as our fundamental animalism, at the precise point when we most fully accept it. As Baudrillard puts it, the more we study ourselves and study animals, the more we demand a certain unequivocal truth which tells us nothing except that we are neurotically reflexive: “With ingenuity, one thus discovers, like a new and unexplored *scientific* field, the psychic life of the animal as soon as he is revealed to be maladapted to the death one is preparing for him. In the same way one rediscovers psychology, sociology, the sexuality of prisoners as soon as it becomes impossible to purely and simply incarcerate them” (Baudrillard 2006, 132). We are imprisoned, trapped animals looking for the truth of our primordial condition, and as soon as we find it we transform our ineluctable death into a simulated gradation of normalcy. The animal who discovers the inner truth of his own existential finitude will never die for the simple, methodical reason that everything meaningless is thus apprehended as a self-constructed procedure.

When we free ourselves of death, or plug ourselves into its irreversible truth, what we see and feel is no longer the same: perspective loses its depth, the material realm merges with our collective hallucination, temporal existence is accelerated beyond linear succession, and the trajectory of the path comes to an end. To the extent that all things are accessible, we institute a new law of proximity which immediately destroys the idea of a subject who struggles with his environment. Virilio identifies and connects this law with the principle of least action. Stating that *less is more*, this principle is quite simple even though its consequences are profound. It applies to both external as well as internal technologies: “[W]here there is a choice between a lift or an escalator and a simple staircase to reach upper floors, no one takes the stairs” (Virilio 2003, 55). The opposition between the self and the other, subject and environment, is smoothed out and subsumed within a higher technological perspective. The goal is to exterminate every kind of resistance, so that we must never find ourselves actually doing anything. If we do less than we did yesterday, and less than that tomorrow, the distance between the beginning and the end of a human trajectory begins to collapse. Virilio describes this process of collapse in terms of *escape velocity* for the very reason that we attempt to transcend all things terrestrial. There is no other way of thinking through this loss of localized struggle and concrete embodiment except in relationship to a hidden perspective, i.e., the concept of geological time. The modern individual, already inscribed within a historical shift toward demythologization, was nevertheless acutely aware of an

abyss of time opening up from all sides. The end of movement, however, likewise spells the end of local temporality. All that remains for us is the inertia of instantaneous communication, or the compression of a singular, virtual point: “The immensity of the cosmic void or of deep time are merely handicaps for the atrophied being whose safety now takes precedence over all activity, to the point where, for him, the concrete environment has only a single dimension left, **the point**” (Virilio 2003, 128). What we therefore see and feel in this hypermodern age, based upon the separation of deep time from local pathways, is the increasing disappearance of every obstacle.

This kind of experience has been traced back to its genealogical antithesis: what is good or non-threatening about the single dimension of the point is itself derived from an experience of something terrifyingly real. Becker thus argued that we create a world of meaning so that we might transcend precisely that which puts meaning into question. If our individual death is purely insignificant, then every desire associated with human life will be fraught with unconscious contradictions. Excluding those contradictory forces from our everyday social practices, Becker theorizes, does nothing to eliminate them; and in fact only reinforces them at a more dangerous and aggressive level. The hypostatized version of social immortality, in all of its pompous self-glorification, is one manifestation of a predominantly *reactive* movement—a movement defined more by what it rejects and excludes than anything positively embraced. Nietzsche, who was well known to Becker, exposes the morality and psychology of this movement as a servile reaction to dangerous conditions (Nietzsche 1989, 230-31). What is evil arouses fear, and thus we create modes of symbolic interaction which protect us from seeing the world in its most frightening aspects. In this regard, the objective, universal image of a unified society – a society enamored by its ineluctable and ongoing progress – is a self-deceptive mode of forgetting our primordial instincts. While Baudrillard claims to think beyond the modern, beyond theories of repression and class duality, he nonetheless makes the same theoretical moves in connection with this basic, underlying element of negativity. When speaking of cosmetic surgery, for example, he suggests that we wish to transform everything ugly and imperfect into a positive, ideal form of beauty (Baudrillard 2002, 45). The dream of hypermodern utopia, in like fashion, relies upon a violent repulsion away from the world and our own deep-seated, intrinsic, ambivalent modes of temporality. It is, moreover, this kind of fundamental but unacknowledged disgust with ourselves, reflected upon as early as Nietzsche and Dostoevsky, which pushes us so frighteningly close to a perpetual state of dystopian homogenization.

Nietzsche says of us modern spirits, in *Beyond Good and Evil*, that what we most desire “is the universal, green-meadow happiness of the herd, together with security, safety, comfort, and alleviation of life for everyone” (Nietzsche 1989, 59). Pain and suffering of every kind must be extirpated, and doing so requires a collective effort. This is true today more than ever according to Virilio: “After the long history of the standardization of public opinion in the age of the Industrial Revolution and its systems of identical reproduction, we are entering the age of the synchronization of collective emotion, with the Information Revolution no longer promoting the old bureaucratic collectivism of totalitarian regimes, but what we might paradoxically call *mass individualism*” (Virilio 2007, 39). No longer do we merely speak of the mass conformity of externalized behavior, but even more so of its internalized programming and modeling. The current dominance of global propaganda reaches all the way down into the murkiest, loneliest depths of human anxiety. If the totalized world of experience is taking on the shape of a global accident, we ourselves are complicit in this deeply problematic development, for we have committed ourselves to it with all of the energy and emotion which defines our interior set of values. Thus, at this historical stage, the subject no longer acts but is a medium of action, the conduit and funnel through which a totality of signs and images make their appearances. We shouldn’t be altogether surprised: the very construction of the contemporary individual by means of fear and the “looping of terrorizing images” is precisely the same process whereby the individual is denigrated, commercialized, and ultimately vanquished. In our dreams of comfortable happiness and escape velocity, we fortify ourselves against all threats. In doing this, we anxiously and inadvertently create a world in which genuine dissidence will not be tolerated. It is this world which is presently succumbing to the false promises of a “totalitarian techno-cult” (Virilio 2005, 39). Human liberation, in Virilio’s reverse dialectic, now calls forth our own virtual incarceration by which all of our desires and fears shall be conveyed into the most simple, catchy, innocuous interactivity to be found in contemporary media and communication systems.

The urgency of this political and cultural analysis, however, does not guarantee its general validity; and there are several unresolved questions. First, it needs to be asked whether terms such as ‘totalization’, ‘simulacrum’, ‘virtual assimilation’, or the ‘meta-city’ can be properly and conceptually distinguished from everyday artifice. A common line of argument in Virilio is that the current age of the meta-city is likewise the age of an impending global accident. This presumes a critical distinction between global and local phenomenology in the sense that one is experienced as an all-encompassing force while the other is not. Hans Bellmer, as both Hal Foster and Therese Lichtenstein have shown, was very much concerned with exposing and deconstructing mechanistic, totalitarian influences in the ideal constructions of normalized identity. He nevertheless wrote in his *Little Anatomy of the Physical Unconscious* that all modes of physical expression share in a common law of birth, namely, the reflexive (Bellmer 2004, 5); and that the displacements of our basic, spontaneous responses to the world are always already confused with the virtual (Bellmer 2004, 12). His uncanny, sadomasochistic dolls were therefore emblematic not only of the abuses of mass delusion and conformity, but perhaps even more so of the human condition itself. In this way it might be argued that the catastrophic is inherently experienced as a localized phenomenon, and that self-identity is perforce defined as an instrumental, reflexive, and totalizing performance. An all-encompassing formation of bodily identity, that is to say, can never be so readily distinguished from its concrete particularity. Second, as already intimated, the virtual and the real are closely bound together. In a similar vein as our first question, we therefore need to rethink how it is viable to separate them in our analysis of hypermodern technologies. If the predominant critique of those technologies suggests to us that the real and the natural have been excluded and repressed, or at the very least assimilated to a principle of radical sameness, we may still need to ask ourselves if we have reintroduced into our analysis the same duality which we were otherwise hoping to diagnose as a mode of reification in modern economies. And lastly, if we should exercise more caution in using all-encompassing global terms to critique all-encompassing social trends, we may also want to ask ourselves if predictions of global catastrophe are the result of rhetorical flourish or the conclusion of a verified calculation.

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