Virilio and Total Thought

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Abstract

This note traces the development of Virilio’s ecological thought from the early Popular Defense and Ecological Struggles into his late writing in The University of Disaster to see how his talismanic concepts increased in resolution and angle of vision over the transition from the later 20th to the early 21st centuries.

Keywords

Virilio, ecology, logicism

Paul Virilio is sometimes seen as a technological determinist (e.g. Kellner, 1999). He might be better understood as an epistemological determinist. Though this epistemocritical tendency becomes more apparent in his later writings, it was always there. In 1978 he could write that “it is no longer enough to be educated about ones surroundings, one must also educate the surroundings” (Virilio, 1990: 15); thirty years later he drubbed “LOGICISM . . . clearly poised to become the heavy industry of the digital age”, the technique of “bringing the logic of reasoning to bear on the psychological or sociological aspects of the phenomena under study” (Virilio, 2010a: 17). In this note I would like to trace the impact of ecological thought as it develops from the early Popular Defense and Ecological Struggles into the late stage of Virilio’s writing in The University of Disaster to see how his talismanic concepts increased in resolution and angle of vision over the transition from the later 20th to the early 21st centuries.
The core of the later writing is the idea of the integral accident. It is possible the term owes something to Debord’s claim in his 1988 (1990) *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* that what he had earlier characterised as the triumph of appearances, differently in bureaucratic socialism and consumer capital in the 1960s, had now been subsumed under a single regime, the integrated spectacle (*le spectaculaire intégré*), which, among other features, “has brought the secret to victory” (Debord, 1990: 79). To bring this up-to-date it suffices to point out that today the secret is no longer secret but everywhere on display, as if Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson’s (1985) characterisation of Hollywood as “an excessively obvious cinema” now applied to the transparent machinations of spin doctors and bot farms that no-one even bothers to hide. There is however a difference in Virilio’s notion of integration. Debord still thinks of totality as the enemy, and Virilio follows him to the extent that totalising thought remains deeply suspect. But where Debord mourned the loss of a terrain that a critical assault might be launched from, Virilio leans palpably towards a critical thought that is itself total. For him, the ostensibly discrete accidents – the coincidence of the invention of transport technologies and their specific accidents (train wreck, car crash) (1991), the atom bomb (1997), the information bomb (2000), the genetic bomb (2002) – become, increasingly in the later writings, parts of a single catastrophe. It is this aspect of integration that makes Virilio a significant actor in current attempts to consider relations between media and other moments of our condition: ecologies, social well-being, economics and politics among them.

“To govern is more than ever to fore-see, in other words to go faster, *to see before*” (Virilio, 1990: 87) – and between 1978 when these words were first written and 2019 as I write this, the process has only accelerated. An important early section of *The University of Disaster* is devoted to the development of disaster management and other modelling software, to which might be added the millisecond speeds of contemporary financial software, well below the threshold of human perception. The ‘logicism’ of numerical systems, capable of billions of operations a second, allows them to fore-see scenarios of nuclear disaster, climate catastrophe, economic meltdown and civil war. This foresight, however, strips them of the temporality that might avoid them, makes them objects for a managerial ethos, and by their sheer speed dissolves the space between diagram and implementation. The epistemological stance underpinning
logicism and its rise to the status of governing technology is, for Virilio, not a symptom of power but its source.

In one direction, Virilio sees logicism as a denial and destruction of phenomenology: the end of human perception as the grounds of being-in-the-world. Globalisation, and even more so its exterior, deep astronomy and the search for exoplanets, are evidence of a parting of the ways between the technical and intellectual aspirations of the human and the world and the bodies that, till now, humanity had had to inhabit, and which provided its reality from the interchange between senses and things. On the other, his analysis drives him necessarily towards a sense that now, since everything is interconnected (power, wealth, knowledge, sensation), the only possible response is equally holistic.

This puts contemporary theory in a quandary. Since at least the post-modernism of Jean-François Lyotard (1970), theory has embraced the thought that a total system of ideas (Hegel’s for example) is necessarily also a totalitarian system. T.J. Demos’ (2017) polemic against the Anthropocene, reviewed on the Media Theory blog, is a case in point. Feminists, queer, post- and de-colonial thinkers have made us understand that Enlightenment universalism was grounded in exclusion, centred on racial and class-based patriarchy, and made us fearful of syntheses that draw the struggles against patriarchy, colonialism, inequality and injustice into a single mode of thought. The challenge of ecological thinking, as it develops in and beyond Virilio’s writing, is that the ecological attitude is necessarily one concerned with the mutual implication of everything in everything else. Black (Yusoff, 2018), feminist (Shiva, 2007) and post-development (Nixon, 2011) ecocriticism warns us off finding monolithic “solutions” even to shared challenges like climate change or the acidification of the oceans. At the same time, so do populist politicians like Bolsonaro in Brazil and Widodo in Indonesia, demanding that a national interest “of the poor” take precedence over colonialist attempts to impose restrictions on fire-based agriculture. Virilio had already made the case that the contemporary ecology is not green but grey, the ‘grey goo’ of nanotech (Drexler, 1986), the world we already inhabit of the fanatical pursuit of progress taking the form of the obligation to realise every technical option (another thought that had occurred to Debord), from bundling failed mortgages to rocketships to Mars, regardless of consequence (Virilio, 2010b). While it remains true Virilio is a prophet
for the wealthy world, capital still intends total control. The 16 billion devices connected to the Internet of Things, expected to outstrip the number of humans attached to the network in the next few years, indicates how redundant all of us are becoming, reducible to random number generators, navigated by a no-longer-human cybernetic steersman. You do not have to be persuaded of imminent (or immanent) apocalypse to understand that the question of whether we can be permitted to think globally (for example, while acting locally) is a political issue as well as an aesthetic and ethical one.

Virilio is certainly to be seen as an ethical thinker, and one much given to highly local issues. Like much of his later work, *The University of Disaster* springs from topic to topic, from Google Earth to RFID implants to sports software to iridescent cosmetics in as many pages, deriving from each a stream of concepts, from the loss of phenomenological horizon to automated ‘metascience’ to control over trajectories rather than objects, and on to the predominance of ‘the energy of the visible’ in the same span. These extrapolations, like the anecdotes they draw on, do not so much come together as accumulate, in emulation of the dispersed and distracted world he describes.

At the same time, he is capable of drawing from these fragments statements of considerable analytic power: “the omnipresent modelling of behaviours taking over from international economic integration . . . will only leave room for the passive security of probabilist anticipation” (Virilio, 2010a: 32). Automating the observational statistics of sociological analysis on the basis not of individuals but their atomised behaviours is a critical function for information capital. The development of affective AI depends on harvesting these unpredictable behaviours and drawing them into probabilistic models – we have seen this both narrativised and implemented in the 2018 Netflix interactive TV episode *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*, which not only warned of data harvesting but harvested data from its viewers’ interactions (Mitra et al, 2019). Perhaps Virilio is wrong when he argues that behaviour modelling has taken over from economic integration: it is far more likely that it is an extension of it, a result of the long period of crisis management following the 1973 oil crisis, a natural outgrowth of the neoliberal backlash of the 1980s. And likewise, he is undoubtedly overstating when he describes such systems as ‘omnipresent’: a majority of the world’s population would
appear to be of no interest to data analysts, human or mechanical. But it is also the case that the movements of the marginalised majority are still monitored and modelled, not least in relation to potential emergencies brought on by climate change, war or both, while it is equally the case that the overdeveloped world is leaving a biopolitical age of the management of bodies in favour of one focused on enumerating and predicting behaviours. This bifurcation in the handling of lives and economies indicates one major aporia in his thought.

Early in *The University*, Virilio quotes an axiom of Aristotle: “completion is a limit” (Virilio, 2010a: 15). As so often, interpretations of the Stagirite differ. ‘Completion’ translates Aristotle’s *telos*, often rendered as ‘goal’, but held by others to mean a terminus, regardless of intentions or purposes. For Aristotle, the unlimited is beyond comprehension, so a limit is a necessary quality of anything that can be understood. Virilio’s ecological concern is then not that the ecological system is beyond understanding (he is very much a Catholic: mystery is for him an article of faith). It is rather that the probabilistic management of micro-behaviours, human and environmental, has no boundaries and therefore exceeds or precludes human comprehension, even that ‘learned ignorance’ of one of his heroes, Nicholas of Cusa, for whom knowing the boundaries of knowledge ensures both what can be known, and the due respect for what lies beyond it. Most of all, the boundarilessness of mediated experience eliminates the horizon of the *hic et nunc* (Virilio, 2010a: 93), and in so doing disallows participation in the fullness of the world to itself, its limit, its completion as God’s creation. Here, Virilio’s media theory comes into its own. Godard wasn’t wrong when he described cinema as ‘Truth 24 times a second’; except he was looking in the wrong place. The Real remains impossible because it is beyond Symbolic (or Imaginary). But it occurs exactly as Lacan predicted: in the micro-seconds between frames where Virilio spies picnolepsia; i.e. when the subject is absent, that is precisely when the Real can enter. Film and video are privileged not because of their indexicality but because of the constitutive lacunae that enable apparent movement.

Perhaps, again, we should read Virilio, beyond his epistemological, ethical, theological and medialogical commitments, as a journalist, tracking symptoms of a widespread malaise, an alienation (a word he rarely if ever uses) and disorientation that increasingly permeates the technologically mediated organisation of human and wider planetary
life. A flurry of films around the time of the global financial crisis express this sense of drifting in a sea of information, or dream of taking control over it, or of there being some controller somewhere to be persuaded to alter the course of a life. A shared trope among them is the feeling that numbers are not just descriptions of the world but its reality (Cubitt, 2020). In Virilio, this paranoia is not a state of mind: it is the achievement of a fully integrated accident. The world and its inhabitants are vanishing into their enumeration and the algorithms that massage them.

An environment environs: it is defined by its exclusion from what it surrounds. But if the radical ontologists — speculative realists (Harman, 2005), feminist epistemologists (Barad, 2007) and neo-Whiteheadians (Hansen, 2015) alike, despite their disagreements — are correct, we are wholly entangled in our environs. This is in many respects a utopian projection: it might be better described as eschatology than ontology. But for Virilio, the implication of humans in ecologies is horrifying, because those ecologies have already been transmuted into digits, code, calculable probabilities. We have in this sense become our own environment, encircling a centre we still piously believe has some sense of how the system operates and how it might be steered. In this, Virilio is more radical than Debord: there is no centre, no conspiracy of silence, only the cacophony of a vast self-operating machinery, military in origin, as we read in Popular Defense, but now ubiquitous, the whole world militarised, strategised, a terrain for battlefield planning and disaster scenarios. It is a bleak landscape to look out on, of incessant Brownian motion with no point, direction or terminus in sight. This bounded infinity is the monad of the world.

At such points, scholars feel obliged to offer words of hope. Virilio’s intellectual history excludes the possibility of internal contradictions, but we can supply them, especially when it comes to the omnipotence he ascribes to media, where we know that from economic errors to technical glitches, from inconsistent scripts and performances to audience creativity, that power is far more dispersed and open to conflict. What he does challenge us with is the challenge of ecological thinking in general: is it possible or desirable to think holistically? This is one way of posing the central question of media theory. We can reject, I think, the idea that we are doomed to be clouds of behaviours oscillating dimly in an endlessly homogenous and enclosed sphere of our own making. But can we assemble a media theory that understands the
mediations of gender, race, class, wealth, power, all the binaries that structure our oppressions, as relations grounded in the fundamental separation of human and natural that constitutes the primal shape of communication, and which guides the media of exchange as they have risen to dominance over the last four centuries? Others might prefer to think of power and economics, or indeed technology and epistemology, as alternative cores, but the question remains: at a moment of planetary crisis, can we think, can we permit ourselves to think, can we afford not to think, at a planetary scale?

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References


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