(Dark) Pure War: Virilio, the Cinematic, and the Racial

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Abstract

Paul Virilio’s work has largely been utilized in theories of media and war, specifically his discussion of ‘pure war’, or the continuance of war beyond its physicality. Cinema, for Virilio, was a pedagogical tool toward preparing populations for such a war. Cinema produced images of objects, perceptually distancing audiences from said objects; it, thus, prepared ‘everyone’ to become objects open to being watched, holding relevance for cinema, surveillance, and information studies. Yet, this concern with watching and surveillance is not race neutral. I argue that Virilio’s work on pure war can be reinterpreted as ‘dark pure war’, concerned with a militaristic, unending war against nonwhite populations. Such war presumes both physical and digital forms of colonialist militarism, policing, and surveillance, particularly as information is often assumed to be race-neutral, while also being weaponized toward dark pure war’s continuance. Thus, race is an underexamined, overlooked element of Virilio’s theory.

Keywords

Paul Virilio, pure war, cinema, race, surveillance

In Pure War, Paul Virilio argued that war continued beyond the physicality of the battlefield. Outside of the violence of the fight lay a violence of industrial production toward the conditions for war. Put differently, pure war signified the new ways that war was now acted out ‘in infinite preparation’ (Virilio, 2008: 29). Pure war indicated the always already active preparation for war by the state, even when war was not being physically waged.
One could say that a cornerstone of Virilio’s research has been media’s relation to unending war. A central component of pure war, for example, is information, or the gathering of data to surveil and police populations that are always under the watchful eye of the war machine. Interestingly, Virilio concerns himself less with the racial implications of those who are open to surveilling and policing and more with the expansion of policing and surveilling as practices that are applicable to ‘everyone’. Yet, his examples of war have racial undertones that he often does not fully investigate: the Vietnam War, the Iraq War, and the Italo-Ethiopian War, to name a few, all creep toward the pure war. Even as Virilio (2002) acknowledged the racial implications of the Second World War, he had less to say about the recognition that the Nazis pulled their racialized strategies of death for the European Jewish population from the US state’s approach to black and indigenous people (Whitman, 2017). Each of these wars, between white and nonwhite people or between white and white people in relation to those who could never fully be white, suggest that the wars that Virilio found most interesting were not race neutral.

What can Virilio provide for a media studies of race? I argue that Virilio’s work on pure war can be reinterpreted as a ‘dark pure war’, concerned with a militaristic, unending war against nonwhite populations. It is a dark pure war, one that structures the colony and the metropole, that lays the foundation for pure war. Dark pure war is not necessarily ‘black’ in the racialized sense, even as it often functions that way. Instead, it is black in the ‘blackening’ sense, in what Kumi Silva (2010) calls the ‘identification’ of nonwhite bodies as open to state violence. Thus, pulling from Virilio and Simone Browne’s (2015) Dark Matters, a dark pure war outlines the centrality of race to the continuance of war, even as race is the purposefully forgotten genesis of such war. This is not Michel Foucault’s (2003) ‘race war’, as Europe is not the central locale from which such war occurs. Rather, dark pure war is inseparable from Euro-American imperial, capitalistic expansionism (colonialism and racial slavery) as militarized projects toward the maintenance of white life and the conditions of black death, ad infinitum.

Virilio’s work has been called, rightly in my opinion, ‘wild and aphoristic’ (Sharma, 2013). Yet, I want to say that what Virilio may point toward is an investigation of the
centrality of technologies to racialization processes. Surveillance studies (which has long investigated race) and media philosophy (which has been slower to discuss race) are put into conversation with one another here. I advance the concept of dark pure war in three sections. I start by delineating the connections between war, cinema, and information that Virilio argued were important. I then move into outlining the darkness of pure war, particularly by outlining the racialized components of contemporary policing and surveillance. I conclude by calling for a rethinking of ‘dromology’, one that moves toward including the multi-symbolic capacity of ‘race’ in discussions of war.

The Perceptions of War: Vision and the Cinematic

In *War and Cinema*, Virilio argued that the history of war was both theatrical and a history of transforming perceptual fields, whereby vision was increasingly the site of power. As such, the rifle’s gunsights and the camera came together to situate the world as a field of vision that could be measured, calculated, and shot. For Virilio, film functioned as a pedagogical tool, one that involved an increasing sensorial detachment from film itself. Virilio’s example is the famous myth of an audience in Paris watching a film of a moving locomotive filling the screen causing the people in the cinema to believe the train was going to drive over them:

[In] fact it was the precision of the camera-shot which first created audience panic at the Lumières’ ‘motion demonstrations’ of the train’s arrival at la Ciotat, when everyone felt that they risked being crushed or injured by the train. This kind of fear, akin to the sense of speed that people seek on roller coasters, did not disappear but simply became more pernicious as the audience learnt to control its nervous reactions and began to find death amusing (Virilio, 1989: 39-40).

What Virilio pointed to was a transformation in perception: film produced images of objects, thus, perceptually distancing audiences from said objects, to a point where there would no longer be a need to panic at the sight of an oncoming train in a cinema. There have been a few attempts to debunk the myth of whether or not the audience was actually sent running at the sight of the train (Cooper, 2016; Grundhauser, 2016),
but the fact still stands: ‘film is now second nature to us, but it was utterly shocking not much more than a century ago’ (Cooper, 2016).

Cinemas were ‘training camps’, bonding ‘people together in the face of death agony, teaching them to master the fear of what they did not know – or rather, as Hitchcock put it, of what did not exist’ (Virilio, 1989: 40). In short, cinema readied people for ‘the artificial horizon of a screen or a monitor capable of permanently displaying the preponderance of the media perspective, the relief of the “tele-present” event taking precedence over the three dimensions of the volume of the objects or places here present’ (Virilio, 2006: 66). This training did not occur overnight, but involved multiple media forms that all worked toward perceptual transformation. As such, more than cinema, Virilio is interested in the ‘cinematic’, which included and exceeded cinema, proper; he tried to track the link between cinema, war, and later ‘vision machines’, such as television, CCTV, smart devices, and drone strikes, assuring us that ‘Components of a cinematic machine have been in use over many centuries: forms of projection, moving images, immobile voyages, and visionary illuminations’ (Crary, 2009: 13). The cinema, television, and war all worked together toward distancing audiences from objects, for Virilio.

Virilio’s work on cinema also adds much to those interested in studying the Web and information. In the wake of the atom bomb, Virilio warned of a second bomb, the ‘information bomb’, which is important for pure war. Whereas the atom bomb was a war of movement, the information bomb was a war of knowledge and speed, signifying a war ‘won’ by the increasing speed of interactivity in real time. Such a bomb included and exceeded cinema, and essentially structured computer screens and the Web – both media developed during and after the Second World War, and very much because of it. This is a trajectory of transformations that cannot be said to have origins in cinema, but were representative of the impact of the cinematic:

We’re still here in the domain of cinematic illusion, of the mirage of information precipitated on the computer screen what is given is exactly the information but not the sensation; it is the apatheia, this scientific impassibility which makes it so that the more informed man is the more
the desert of the world expands around him, the more the repetition of information (already known) upsets the stimuli of observation, overtaking them automatically, not only in memory (interior light) but first of all in the look, to the point that from now on it’s the speed of light itself which limits the reading of information and the important thing in electronic information is no longer the storage but the display (Virilio, 2009: 56).

For Virilio, then, the shift from ‘tele-vision’ to ‘tele-surveillance’ reflected the demands of capitalism and war. Whereas tele-vision held ‘the task of informing or entertaining the mass of viewers’ (Virilio, 2006: 59), the new tele-vision, or the ‘tele-surveillance’, was concerned with ‘exposing and invading of individuals’ domestic space, like a new form of lighting, which is capable of revolutionizing the notion of neighborhood unit, or of a building or district’ (Virilio, 2006: 59). The drone strike, then, could pinpoint a ‘target’s’ location, whether indoors or outdoors.

Thus, tele-surveillance spoke to a ‘dromology,’ a ‘speed politics’, or a politics of instantaneousness, sparked by the increasing need to entertain, monitor, and prepare others for their own monitoring. Further, it replicated the waging of war on people at a distance: ‘Making information resonate globally, which is necessary in the age of the great planetary market, is in many ways going to resemble the practices and uses of military intelligence, and also political propaganda and its excesses’ (Virilio, 2006: 62). Likewise, this spoke to what many have called a ‘slow violence’, one that disproportionately impacts the Global South (Nixon, 2011; Parikka, 2017), as a space largely viewed solely as a waste station of the Global North. War is a continual process that does not end when the last round is fired, but is also carried out via the circulation of information and propaganda in ways that penetrate architecture without necessarily physically destroying a building’s structural integrity.

**Dark Pure War: Surveillance and the Racial**

Pure war is the continuance of war after the physicality of war is over and done; now, information functions toward the continuance of war, as a preemptive strike against enemies: ‘But war doesn’t really end, as Virilio noted, it just accelerates, approximating ever more closely to its pure form’ (Wark, 2018). Information is now a central
component of war, whereby ‘Not only is architecture vulnerable to bombs, it proves
defenseless against information, passing through the doors and walls of our homes,
rearranging the space and time we imagine we live within’ (Wark, 2018). Indeed, ‘the
capability of war without war manifests a parallel information market of propaganda,
ilusion, dissimulation’ (Der Derian, 2002: viii).

To rethink Virilio’s pure war as dark pure war requires thinking about not only how
information is weaponized toward war’s continuance, but also the presumed racial
neutrality associated with both war and information. Thus, race is the underexamined,
overlooked element of Virilio’s theory. Like discussions of dark matter in physics,
Browne’s employment of ‘dark matter’ is meant to point toward the ‘unseen and
unperceived’ elements of antiblackness in the surveillant practices of contemporary
society. She argues that ‘rather than seeing surveillance as something inaugurated by
new technologies, such as automated facial recognition or unmanned autonomous
vehicles (or drones)’ (Browne, 2015: 8), we can instead think about ‘surveillance in and
of black life as a fact of blackness’ (Browne, 2015: 6). Thus, Browne connects
surveillance theory to a dark history concerned with the measurement of bodies to see
their ‘intentions’, a dark history often underexamined in surveillance studies. That
history is scientific racism:

Anthropometry, or Bertillonage, was introduced in 1883 by Alphonse
Bertillon as a system of measuring and then cataloguing the human body
by distinguishing one individual from another for the purposes of
identification, classification, and criminal forensics. This early biometric
information technology was put to work as a “scientific method,”
alongside the pseudo-sciences of craniometry (the measurement of the
skull to assign criminality and intelligence to race and gender) and
phrenology (attributing mental abilities to the shape of the skull, as the
skull was believed to hold a brain made up of individual organs) (Browne,
2015: 112).

What Browne points toward is a question unasked by Virilio: what if the ‘fact of
blackness’ is the structuring necessity for the new technologies of surveillance
themselves? This would require that we rethink pure war as a dark pure war, which is to say that pure war holds race as central, while never acknowledging its importance to the maintenance of war.

What if we thought about Virilio’s pure war as a racial condition in the US? In short, what if we were to rearticulate WEB Du Bois (1994) question of, ‘How does it feel to be a problem’, as a racialized question of war? The end of the US Civil War and the end of racial slavery marked the structure of pure war as a condition, rather than a contingency, of black life. Another way to say this is that white people went to war with each other over the right to own our black bodies in the US Civil War, and it presumably ended in 1865. Yet, the replication of racial violence, what Saidiya Hartman (2008) calls the ‘afterlife of slavery’, has yet to end for black people; instead, racial violence is fundamental to what it means to be black (and white) in the US. Jim Crowism, ghettoization, deindustrialization, white flight, mass incarceration, and gentrification are remnants of dark pure war. They are post-war answers to how to deal with a ‘problem’; to call for their end is to call for the end to what many cannot let go of: whiteness. Further, with race at its center, this entails that black people are not the only ones affected by dark pure war, but are part of dark pure war’s larger assemblage.

What Virilio pointed toward, then, was that cinema and war were necessarily interconnected and assistants in the perceptual transformations that readied populations for their own continual surveillance; and just as important, such forms of surveillance have been tested on people of color prior to their implementation on the larger society. This is what Browne refers to as the ‘unseen and unperceived’ component of dark matter and what I call dark pure war: it is the necessity of the black body as an always already surveillable, commodified object, one that can normalize even the contemporary surveillance of people’s information online.

For Virilio, the information war penetrates our architectural lives in new ways. Two examples will suffice. In Chicago, a city that has seen record highs in gunshot homicides, the Chicago Police Department implemented ‘gunfire locator’ technologies to track where gunshots were fired from. Using acoustic sensors, gunfire locators are
technologies that attempt to identify the source and direction of gunfire within the communities that they are set up in. In some black and brown neighborhoods in Chicago, where residents are wary of the police, gunshots are often not reported. Thus, the police department contends, gunfire locators, which use ‘audio sensors, GPS software, and machine learning algorithms’ (McCullom, 2017), are needed to surveill the largely black and brown communities that are deemed ‘high-crime’ areas. Similar technologies have been set up in Baltimore, MD and Wilmington, DE, where such technologies are marketed as ‘good crime-fighting news’ (The News Journal, 2014). More specifically:

Gunfire detection employs an array of acoustic sensors – each about the size of a small toaster – placed on the highest local rooftops, utility poles, street lights and other structures to detect and locate the source of gunfire. The sensors are automatically triggered by the two unique audio characteristics of gunfire: The muzzle blast following the explosion inside the chamber and the sonic boom that occurs when the bullet travels at supersonic speed. The system pinpoints the exact location of the gunfire by a [sic] triangulating the sound from three sensors. Machine learning algorithms factor the speed of sound – about 1,087 feet per second at 32 degrees Fahrenheit – to measure the difference between the time the gunfire is detected at three different sensors (McCullom, 2017).

Sound provides a digitized, instantaneous mapping of very specific Chicago neighborhoods – those that are already over-policed and underemployed. Thus, gunfire locators, like other sound technologies, assume questions of power, such as ‘who is permitted to make noise and who has recourse to its abatement’ (Akiyama, 2010: 457)?

Using data sets presumably free from biases, many of the communities where these gunfire locators are set up are presented as ‘objectively’ more prone to criminality, and, thus, logical choices for where to place gunfire locators. The Southside of Chicago, for example, is less an area that suffers from ‘poverty, massive levels of unemployment, deindustrialization, housing insecurity, mental health challenges and, racism’
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(McCullom, 2017); instead, the data reduces the community to a space where more crime occurs. This data is, then, profited on by companies such as ShotSpotter, which boast that its technology is central to crime reduction:

Oakland Police Department (OPD) has incorporated ShotSpotter data as a critical component in its initiatives to fight and reduce gun violence, and data show there has been significant progress in these efforts, with a 29% overall reduction in gunfire incidents per day from 2012-2017, and a 71% decrease in gunfire incidents per square mile from 2012-2017 (ShotSpotter, 2018).

ShotSpotter’s concern with data would suggest that they would attempt to show how the implementation of their gunfire locators has reduced crime in places like Oakland, but what they show is that Oakland is seeing reductions in crime like many cities in the country. ShotSpotter provides no causation, only correlation, suggesting that information technologies such as gunfire locators do not guarantee crime reduction. Still, rather than ‘address many structural barriers and socioeconomic disparities that contribute to the cycles of violence concentrated among younger African American men in these communities’ (McCullom, 2017), many cities are choosing to direct funds toward information technologies that further the surveillance of people of color and show little to no capacity to reduce crime, but perpetuate narratives of certain bodies as more prone to crime.

The capability to monitor people of color has exceeded local communities like Chicago and Oakland and entered into a national platform as well. In 2011, the Department of Homeland Security initiated its Countering Violent Extremism Task Force (CVE) programs. The programs were reportedly meant to tide the rise of ‘domestic terrorists and homegrown violent extremists in the United States, as well as international terrorist groups like al-Qaeda and ISIL’ (Department of Homeland Security, 2018). The problem that CVE is responding to is not only terrorism, but the capacity for terrorism to traverse national borders with the click of the mouse, meaning “CVE appropriately incorporates modern technologies and is informed by accurate information regarding violent extremists’ use of the Internet” (Department of
Homeland Security, 2018). With the capacity of information to enter architectures in new ways, the US government structures its ‘War on Terror’ as inseparably physical and digital. It is, here, that information gathered on potential locations and hideouts of ‘terrorist’ organizations meets ‘unmanned’ drone strikes that kill civilians with the click of a button (Wilcox, 2016).

One arm of CVE has been dedicated to digital ‘information campaigns’ (Price, 2017), which essentially are meant to combat the use of the Web by extremist organizations. In short, according to the Department of Homeland Security’s (DHS) Website, information campaigns and the use of ‘the Internet and social media’ are not inherently bad; instead, they are only bad if in the hands of the ‘extremist organizations’. Thus, as a counter to ‘individuals being radicalized to violence online’ and in ways that mirror McCarthyism, DHS offers funds to nongovernmental groups that can assist in DHS’s ‘ability to communicate and leverage the digital environment to reach stakeholders, address violent extremist narratives, and encourage alternatives to violence’ (Department of Homeland Security, 2018). CVE counters information with its own information, particularly with what some have called ‘soft surveillance’ programs, in which CVE ‘encourages institutions and education and health professionals…to (1) watch congregants, patients, students and clients for supposed “vulnerabilities” to “violent extremism” and (2) refer individuals for deprogramming “interventions”’ (Muslim Justice League, 2018).

Professors at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill were initially awarded a CVE grant of $900,000 to create online information campaigns in hopes of ‘countering activities such as online jihadist recruiting’ (Price, 2017). Originally awarded in the Obama administration, the CVE grant was later rescinded under the Trump administration. Yet, while these funds were promoted by faculty at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill as being targeted at many groups, including white nationalists, one of the grant’s recipients, Cori Dauber, stated that “our focus is on Islamic State”…“And I think it’s fair to say that the bulk of our emphasis is that” (Price, 2017). Dauber’s position is one concerned with igniting the information bomb: despite the fact that ‘Islamic state’ terrorism does not historically, or geographically, impact the US or the West, as ‘the majority of victims of terrorism are Muslim’ in the
Middle East (Aziz, 2017: 262), these information campaigns are needed to perpetuate the requirement of unending war, one that looks less like a ‘War on Terror’ and more like a ‘war with Islam’ (Aziz, 2017: 261). Further, in the wake of the Trump administration transforming CVE, particularly via cutting ‘its staff to eight full-time employees and its budget to less than $3 million’ (Beinart, 2018), based on the Trump administration’s rhetoric on Muslims, we should have caution in assuming that CVE has ended, and instead, the newly formed Office of Terrorism Prevention Partnerships suggests that resources will be more explicitly targeted at Muslims.

Similar to the reasons that gunfire locators are placed in specific locales in US cities, CVE couches its concept of extremism in the racially motivated gathering of information that assumes certain populations are more prone to terrorism. The main difference, and fear of CVE, is that rather than the problem being solely located in the Southside of Chicago which can be to some extent ignored, information can circulate into houses, dorm rooms, and offices throughout the country and, thus, radicalize people wherever they find themselves or their cellphones. CVE promotes itself as necessary in order to dissuade extremism from those who are ‘likely’ to find extremist messaging persuasive, no matter if it comes from a laptop, cellphone, or tablet. In the process, Browne’s (2015) critique of scientific racism as a ‘measurement’ of racialized bodies and their proclivities mirrors Muslim Justice League Deputy Director Fatema Ahmad’s argument that CVE’s focus on information as productive of terrorists is based on older ‘discredited theories that “radical” beliefs may predict propensity to commit politically motivated violence’ (Muslim Justice League, 2018). The surveillance programs rely on notions of the measurability of bodies, propensities, and intention, only now that information can be circulated on social media. This is a dark pure war that only mentions white nationalism as an afterthought, and centers nonwhite bodies as always already in need of watching, as measurably where danger comes from.

A dark pure war, then, is that which has long prepared its population for unending war against people of color. It is in this light that the FBI (2017) can release a document on ‘black identity extremism’ that conflates activism and terrorism. To critique state violence, particularly as a person of color, is to bring war to one’s doorstep. To not critique state violence, especially as a person of color, is also to bring war to one’s
doorstep. One cannot opt out of unending dark pure war. Furthermore, I would add, the disproportionate focus of CVE programs on ‘Muslims and dissidents’ (Muslim Justice League, 2018), as Dauber (Price, 2017) openly admits, suggests that white nationalists’ forms of violence, such as the ‘Unite the Right’ rally in Charlottesville, VA in 2017, are not the main objects of pure war. Alternatively, because they are not calling for as radical a redistribution of society’s resources as they imagine they are, white nationalists are assistants in the larger dark pure war that CVE and gunfire locators replicate. Put differently, Unite the Right, black identity extremism, and CVE are connected: information is the grounds on which to continue war against people of color’s critiques against the (white) state.

**Toward a New Politics of Dromology**

What are the materialist relations between race (its multiple meanings) and media technology? To answer such a question would require us to think about race not only in terms of media representations, but also in terms of Virilio’s speed. While cinema, war, and surveillance are central components of Virilio’s work, each are also structured by concerns of speed. One of the key theorizations that comes out of Virilio’s work is ‘dromology’. Virilio pulled dromology from the Greek word dromos for ‘road’ or, for Virilio, ‘racetrack’. He thinks about dromology as a study of speed, a new space-time where ‘the constant nature of light’s limit speed…conditions the perception of duration and of the world’s expanse as phenomena’ (Virilio, 1997: 13). Virilio argues speed is not reducible to automobility; instead, in ways that mirror James Carey’s (2008) work, transportation and communication are united in discussions of speed. Thus, ‘there exists a hidden dimension to the communications revolution, one that affects duration, the lived time of our society’ (Virilio, 1997: 22).

I want to end by playing with the meaning of dromology in ways that Virilio may not have intended in order to think about the implications of speed, race, and war. Race, as in speed or running, for Virilio, holds multi-symbolic value. Aside from speed, ‘race’ also speaks to the racial, the construct produced out of nineteenth-century scientific racism that Browne critiques, which has always held temporal and spatial assumptions. Indeed, the racial is structured in the post-Darwinian conception of time, whereby one population – ‘man’ for Western science and philosophy – is biologically developed and
fit based on ‘his’ capacity for historicity, that self-determined relation that Western conceptions of nature lack. This is what I call ‘technological Darwinism’ in my upcoming book by the same name – the continual concern with media as the measure of Western, racialized development and civilization. Indeed, Virilio’s theorization of who is ‘ahead in the race’, that figure who controls the communicative technologies of speed, who has the legitimate right to surveill and police, is also the same figure who has been under critique for ‘his’ racialized implication since at least the mid-twentieth century: man, the racialized, gendered construct of the human in Western discourses.

If we think about race as multi-symbolic, then we also recognize that there is little distinction between the two meanings of race as per man’s discourses: those who are presumably biologically fit are also those who are obsessed with increasing capacities for speed. Thus, speed justifies their previous positions as those beings of racial development, it validates the militaristic colonial practices as, maybe unfortunate, but necessary components of linear development. Race, for Virilio, assumes the speed of light, the blurring of time and space, of which cinema was one preparatory technology; for me, the capacity for increasing concerns with the regulation of the instantaneousness of information is not surprisingly also disproportionately in the hands of those who are winning a race to nowhere: man. The cinematic and the Web are interrelated: both speak to technological economies that work toward man’s development over and against those who do not circulate in such economies, or, rather, those who are presumably ‘gifted’ such technologies through Western benevolence. Virilio opened up a dark pure war, just one way to begin to think about technology, surveillance, and race under the contemporary conditions of increased speed.

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