The European Legacy

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TOWARD NEW PARADIGMS

⌒ REVIEWS ⌒

The Virilio Reader

The Virilio Reader. Edited by James Der Derian (Malden, MA/Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), $59.95 cloth; £15.99/$24.95 paper.
Crepuscular Dawn. By Paul Virilio and Sylvere Lotringer (Cambridge, MA: Semiotext/MIT Press, 2002), 185 pp. $12.95 paper.

HALL GARDNER

The Virilio Reader presents a selection of Paul Virilio's writings that deal with the impact of new technologies on society, war, and the media. Given the complex philosophical and often elliptical, if not obscurantist, nature of Virilio's writing in French, the essays are generally well translated. In addition to writing a mildly critical introduction, the editor, James Der Derian, has engaged in a postmodernist rendition of an existentialist Paris café encounter with Paul Virilio himself.

During the Cold War, Virilio's primary focus was on speed, on the reduction of "time in war." He argues that the Cold War "arms race" should be more accurately portrayed as "the *'arming of the race' toward the end of the world as distance, in other words as a field of action*" (Virilio, "The State of Emergency," 48.) But his views begin to evolve with the advent of the 1990 Persian Gulf War, in which "stealth" becomes somewhat more important than the power of "speed"—in a world in which both distance and space have less and less meaning. In his view, the military strategy of the Gulf War (involving multimedia warfare) was less concerned with the actual geophysical environment of real space but more with the "microphysical environment" of the "electromagnetic environment" and of "real time" (Virilio, "Desert Screen," 169).

In other words, the high tech nature of post-Cold War warfare requires increasingly rapid electromagnetic and microelectronic forms of detection as well as deception. Systems of detection and deception, as well as assessment, subsequently rely heavily on a phenomenal load of information provided by the multiple electronic sources available to the central computer system—what in the Pentagon's vernacular is referred to as C^3I—command, communication, control and information.

In Virilio's view, the computerization of reality becomes problematic in that the virtual computer image has begun to re-place real things—and thus take objects (and ideas) out of their existential context. This possesses dangerous repercussions for the decision-making process in that decisions of life and death may be based on virtual—and not "factual" or even accurate information. By the same token, the total control over the media and information becomes a real, and not a virtual, possibility.

Virilio's essential argument is thus that contemporary decision-making must take place rapidly in stressful conditions that require the processing of an overwhelming input of data and at ever-faster rates through centralized facilities. What he calls the "tyranny of real time" now represents a true threat to democracy defined as power sharing and the open, truly informed debate of issues. He asks rhetorically: "How does one hope to control decisions that not only escape us by virtue of their speed, but which also escape their 'authors' by the very automatism of the materiel that make these decisions for them?" (*Ibid.*, 181).

Published in 1998, this book evidently does not analyse the post-September 11 "war

American University of Paris, 6, rue du Colonel Combes, 75007 Paris, France. Email: gardner@aup.fr

on terrorism" and the "new threats" that are presently emanating from more peripheral actors and obscure organizations. At the same time, however, in post-September 11 circumstances, military strategy has emphasized secrecy, high (and low) tech spying, cybernetics and cryptography, as well as electronic counter-measures. Moreover, as a second round of "stealth war" or "guerre furtive" (Ibid., 167) with Iraq, and with other "rogue states," has crashed from predicted scenario to reality, the book remains relevant. After September 11, it appears that a new form of "state of emergency" (Virilio, "The State of Emergency," 46–67) has been thrust upon us—although one that is very different from that outlined in his essay in regard to the Cold War.

In the post-September 11 "state of emergency," political leaderships have demanded the trust of their citizens, but have not provided their citizens with complete information—governments argue that they ostensibly cannot disclose their sources or expose the technological tools by which they obtain information. Moreover, because the citizenry cannot obtain access to such information, it is impossible to dispute governmental interpretations of its meaning, making it likewise impossible to devise viable alternative strategies through the use of different media and different means of mediation.

Virilio thus appears on the mark—in a theoretical sense—when he elliptically asserts that the fourth estate (i.e. the press, but sic! poorly translated as the "fourth power") no longer exerts an independent influence on governmental decision-making. As he puts it, the fourth estate "dissolves in the procedures of instantaneous information for which no one is truly responsible, the notion of MEDIA and MEDIATION tend themselves to disappear in a short circuit, a feedback that definitely nullifies the necessary independence of the news, especially its rational interpretation" (Virilio, "Desert Screen," 181).

Sylvère Lotringer's later May 2002 interview with Paul Virilio in Crepuscular Dawn does confront the ramifications of the attacks against the World Trade Center and Pentagon on September 11, 2001, as well as the new mediatized forms of "theatrical warfare" as implied by the "war on terrorism."

In regard to September 11, drawing from, but also critiquing, the Prussian theorist of war Karl von Clausewitz, Virilio sees accident as a new form of warfare that is replacing revolution and traditional warfare: "September 11 opened Pandora's box. In this new situation, New York is what Sarajevo was. Sarajevo triggered the First World War. New York is the first war of globalization. An internecine war, a civil war that has nothing to do with the Clausewitzian forms of war" (Crepuscular Dawn, 179). According to Virilio, the new instruments of warfare are often designed to create and provoke accidents; moreover, as Clausewitz himself noted, as events move more and more rapidly out of control—no one can foresee or control the unintended consequences of conflict. Yet, contrary to Clausewitz, traditional armed forces are largely useless in this new form of warfare, as symbolized by the commercial passenger jet that crashed into the Pentagon, a new form of "weapon" wielded by an essentially invisible and stateless enemy.

For Virilio, the consequences of globalization include Sicilianization (citing Leonardo Sciasci), as well as Balkanization, but also, on a deeper level, anomy: "… what threatens the decomposing world of globalization is anomy, and by this I mean, the loss of references, the loss of all distinctions" (Ibid., 165). Virilio is concerned that the forces of globalization represent forces of decomposition. Globalization is thus beginning to undermine the perceived legitimacy of the social fabric and body politic, in effect decomposing the power and influence of both minor and major states. In this regard, Virilio argues that the forces of globalization are undermining the possible formation of a "world-state"—as well as the American dream of empire, or what he calls the "American utopia" (Ibid., 166).

In Virilio's pessimistic outlook, there can be no common consensus or common framework to deal with the nature of today's crisis: "Already the twentieth century is past, over. We're heading towards the unknown, towards a world that has no history. All the bases for interpretation are insufficient, not only critical sociology, or psychoanalysis, or Marxism, obviously. We're entering a world devoid of cognitive interpretation, without references that would allow us to interpret what is emerging in peace, in war, in politics, in the universe, including in genetics, which is about

to replace atomic science and become the major science in the coming century. We are entering a black hole" (*Ibid.*, 148–9). As he calls himself an absolute anti-eugenicist, Virilio opposes the *manipulative* implications of the new bio-technology for nature and humanity, as well as its dangerous unintended consequences (i.e. accidents), in which he predicts more dangers than benefits, as science begins to manipulate genetic structures.

In Virilio's view, science, which has allegedly been "mobilized in the protection of humanity," is in reality in the process of destroying itself and humanity through three interrelated bombs: the atomic bomb, the cyber bomb and genetic bomb. These three bombs work together and reinforce one another. At the same time, however, "it is the information bomb that is knowledge. It decides" (*Ibid.*, 136). Thus real power resides with those who can obtain and utilize the most accurate information, as well as the latest technology, as swiftly as possible, for whatever ends they choose.

On the immediate level, the unintended consequences of scientific development mean that "terrorist" groups can utilize biological and chemical weaponry, or else the destructive power of the atom through the explosion of "dirty bombs" (spread radioactive waste with conventional explosives). On a deeper level, science itself is preparing the end of mankind in that three inter-related scientific revolutions appear beyond political and social control: the revolutions in transportation, transmissions, and transplants. The dilemma that Virilio raises is that there are no political or historical limits to the nature of these continuing revolutions. There is no common consensus as to how to deal with the continuing moral, ethical and social ramifications of these revolutions.

In reading Virilio's work, I am reminded of Henry David Thoreau's plea for us to let our lives "serve as counter-friction to stop the machine." While I dispute Virilio's argument that history is without relevance (past crises in history can be *systematically* compared *and* contrasted with the contemporary crisis), he is not wrong to say that we have entered a *qualitatively* new dimension of crisis, with no apparent end in sight. Certainly we, as a world community, need to bring the rapid rate in which these technological revolutions are "racing" back to a more tolerable and *mediated* pace, and to try to find a modicum of a common consensus so as to deal effectively and *as rapidly as possible* with as many facets of this crisis as is possible.