

Paul Virilio, 1932–2018

Paolo Fabbri

The disappearance of Paul Virilio is my concern.* It provides an opportune moment for a ‘spontaneous declaration’, as well as for some clarification with respect to a series of apodictic interventions.

1. The personal facts. Memory – transformed recollections and changed expectations – delivers to me a Virilio who was, alongside Michel de Certeau, Louis Marin and Jean Baudrillard, editor of *Traverses*, the review of the Centre de Création Industrielle (CCI); on the scientific board of the *Cahiers d’Études Stratégiques* of the Centre Interdisciplinaire de Recherches sur la Paix et d’Études Stratégiques (CIRPES/EHESS); contributor to the debate on ‘the nuclear state’ in the special 1984 issue on war in *Change International*; co-director of the CIPH, Collège International de Philosophie. Virilio also presided over the series *Images et Politique*, *Rencontres Internationales de la Photographie*, Arles, 1997, which I participated in with my own article ‘Faire de l’Image un Monument?’¹

2. Explications. Turning too hastily towards such a productive author – translations abound – runs the risk of consigning him to the Hades of forgetfulness, something that befell our common friend Jean Baudrillard – though such fate is undoubtedly preferable to cheap embalming procedures: the inventor of dromology, the sprinter-visionary of technology, the theorist of catastrophes and, *absit iniuria verbis*, the mass-mediologist. Above all, there is the Philosopher, a commendation of thought that Virilio was never awarded, at least in the French philosophical tradition – torn between Sartre and Merleau Ponty, on the one hand, and Koyré and Bachelard, on the

other – not even philosopher in the sense of a scientific anthropology (Serres) or empirical philosophy (Latour). If anything, he was closer to Guattari, with whom he experienced May ’68 – Deleuze’s absence was excused! – for whom a philosopher was a concept synthesiser. Rather than suspending him from the protean hanger of pop-philosophers – whom he would have likely accused of philo-*folly* – it is best to recognise his Dreyfus-like role as an intellectual. A strong thinker, critical in content, an essayist of a writing both graphic – books, reviews, collections – and visual, as manifest in important exhibitions: *Vivre à l’Oblique* (1970), *Bunker Archéologie* (1975), *La Vitesse* (1991), *Ce Qui Arrive* (2002) and *Terre Natale, l’Ailleurs Commence Ici* (2008-9). Visible experiences of thought and of ‘Revelatory Art’!

2.1 An intellectual marked by war. Son of an Italian immigrant, Virilio experienced the German *blitzkrieg* before and after the disappearance of the city of Nantes during the ‘liberation’ bombings. From world war and total urban destruction, he developed an original perspective on velocity and architecture, the city and techniques of war. In 1987, Virilio received the *Grand Prix National de la Critique Architecturale*: he was an urbanist first and foremost, an architect who was passionate about the spatial arts – theatre and dance – and who was gifted with an international vision of culture. Director of the École Spéciale d’Architecture in Paris, his interest in the German bunker of the Atlantic Wall – the Valhalla of Bauhaus monoliths in military space – derives from his preference for the Cave – as opposed to the fortified Tower – as a primary space of survival, and for cement as the

* The following text is a translation of ‘Il gusto di Paul Virilio per la parola penultima’, *alfabeta2*, published 7 October 2018, <https://www.alfabeta2.it/2018/10/07/il-gusto-di-paul-virilio-per-la-parola-penultima>

material of resistance. Theorist of an Oblique Architecture made of seamless interiors through the concatenation of oblique and horizontal planes, he built a bunker-church in Nevers (St. Bernadette in Banlay) and influenced architecture stars such as Jean Nouvel. Obliquity is a strategic propensity to diagonally flee the opposition between vertical and horizontal, an ideogram that gradually led him to its opposite: the contemporary de-materialisation of virtuality.

After the radical experience of 1968 – Virilio had joined the occupation of the Sorbonne and the Théâtre de l'Odéon – and the disillusionment that ensued, he founded the review *Cause Commune* with Georges Perec who, like him, had been deeply affected by the war. For both of them, May '68 was a cultural more than a political event, and its implosion posed questions to a left-wing realpolitik and the necessary safeguard of common spaces. Virilio analysed the shape of buildings and, in his inquiries into urbanism, studied the *detournement* of places – churches turned into garages, barracks into museums, warehouses into theatres. Above all, like Perec, he noted the infra-ordinary character of banal signs that are neither ordinary nor extraordinary, in order to give a language and meaning to the 'daily anti-spectacle that newspapers fail to talk about'. Perec joined the *Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle* (Oulipo) in 1967, but Virilio refused to reduce this to mere language games, pointing out its tragic violence, which affected his own work also. For Virilio, Perec's new voyeurism was, unlike Alain Robbe-Grillet's, that of an urban nomad who, with writing, exhausted space both sociologically and politically. Perec's *Espèces d'Espaces* (1974) was the first publication in the series 'L'Espace Critique', curated by Virilio for Éditions Galilée, which aimed to reflect upon the new branch of knowledge he named 'Dromology'. As a discipline of trajectories replacing metrology, or the geometry of objective forms, dromology was necessary to an investigation of the greatest catastrophe of the twentieth century – the 'omnicities' of millions that we are going to leave behind, Virilio thought, just as peasants once left behind their land.

2.2 After 1968, the notion of the Event imposed itself, focused upon the works of Deleuze and Guattari. In

the landscape of events, Virilio grasped the accidental dimension of a planetary acceleration of technique first and technologies second. The Accident, which he transversally considered in his research, points not only to the absolute unpredictability of the event, but also to a breakdown or failure [*guasto*]: the inevitable and unimaginable outcome of any technical making ('it is the ship that invents the shipwreck!'). His reflection upon the always-new accidents that occur whilst avoiding accidents resulted in a definition of the catastrophic 'Integral Accident': rupture points such as Seveso, Chernobyl, Fukushima and the destruction of the (hated, Babelesque) Towers. Catastrophes are outcomes inherent not to technical failure but to technical success: the more performative the invention, the more traumatic the event. The ecstasy of acceleration that marks the Golem-like gait of science and the technical arts not only demands principled precaution, but also a political and ethical rethinking, including the urgent need for de-growth and dis-invention (as in the case of plastic and cars). This is especially so because the unfolding of technique in a military-industrial society is always oriented to, when not dictated by, the logic of war, the invention of deadly prostheses (already nuclear and now cybernetic). War advances under the guise of the 'freedom' of liberated and costless [*libera e gratuita*] interactivity. For Virilio, even means of communication – from the telegraph to photography and cinema, from the radar to the internet – are devices of optical and electronic domination, homologated and adopted in techno-systems of strategic interaction. The postmodern arsenal, ready for deployment, now relies on three macrosystems of bombs: nuclear, informational and genetic – the deliberate, sinister mutation of human nature.

2.3 The value of speed – whose discovery Virilio ascribed to the warmongering vanguard of Futurism – guided his last reflections.² From space to time, from topology to 'nano-chronology': means of transport and tourist flows put an end to local time and jetlag. This upturns the relationship between the Sedentary – who is communicatively equipped and always knows where he or she is and is going – and the Nomad, who is out of place anywhere.

For Virilio, temporal synchronisation pollutes distances and reduces the very perception of the Earth itself, its dimension and ecosystem. This is the root of the ongoing planetary re-population, a diaspora against which it is futile to furnish space with walls.³. Simultaneity creates new inertias and insecurities, not only spatial, but temporal too – terrorism is indeed ubiquitous and omnipresent. In his late works, Virilio pointed to the phenomenon of an instantaneous synchronicity of affects as the matrix of new collective and political flows and intensities. Concurrent emotions that play out in real time have replaced the reckoning of interests that formerly standardised public opinion in representative democracies. The synonymy of information and disinformation (so-called ‘fake news’) is, in this respect, among the effects of globalisation: ‘the largest-scale transmutation of public opinion ever attempted in peace time’.

A ‘futurism of the instant’ is the ‘here and now’ of a radical presentism that catastrophically alters the meaning of history, though without marking its end. It is a different history, accidental, free of any civil religion of progress that would be added to the regime of events [*événementielle*] envisaged by Braudel.

3. This multiform and radical oeuvre, recalcitrant by default, and beyond disciplinary labels, has been met with virulent critique: like the notorious, laughable ‘Sokal Hoax’ which was mobilised against those who define themselves as critics of the art of science, as well as the pamphlets of sociologists for whom Virilio, like his friend Baudrillard, ‘did not take place’. The benevolent defence that ascribes to him the Fourierist title of ‘visionary’ only aggravates his position. Through the drafting of documentary dossiers on technology and war, Virilio grasped accidents as signs that anticipate tendencies and premonitions of collective orientations in the process of being realised: like the shift from the Cyclops’s gaze of Orwellian dictatorship to the countless eyes of contemporary capitalist surveillance. Digital prints and eye scans, DNA data, facial recognition security cameras, doppler radar, drones, number-plate recognition: from

panoptical observation to the most private of traces.

Unlike failing econometric models, Virilio sent out probes and sounded warnings: in the pragmatic and neorealist world of the *matter of fact*, he sought to invest in difficult questions and general problems: he did not search for pre-packaged answers and solutions. The ire his proposals provoked – a Museum of the Accident, a University of Disaster, a Ministry of Temporal Planning, the inclusion of the night in the lists of the world heritage of humanity [*Patrimonio dell’Umanità*]– was deliberately and ironically calculated.

More surprising is the general refusal of an idiosyncratic aspect of his style: the creation of neologisms. Virilio did not use keywords ready to be put into search engines. With varying success, he tried to take responsibility for new events and situations, to place writing at the same level as the infra-ordinary disasters he investigated. *Claustropolis*, *Dromosphere*, *Meteo-politics*, *Megalopolis*, *Nanoworld*, *Post-intimacy*, *Trajectory*, but also *endo-colonisation*, *telepresence*, *conditioned reflex*, *photosensitive inertia*, and so on and so forth. An experimental writing in intent is no different from avant-garde literature, or from the optically ‘incorrect’ [*scorretto*] work of artists – Baj, Beuys, Pollock, Turrell, etc. – whom Virilio liked because they had abandoned the atelier for the workshop.

As an experimenter, Virilio had a taste for the penultimate word: he did not warn of a final catastrophe, instead he was apocalyptic in a ‘revelatory’ way. A fervent catholic, he would quote St. Paul: ‘Hope against all hope’.

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Notes

1. Paolo Fabbri, *Images et Politique*, Actes sud/AFAA, Arles, 1998. https://www.paolofabbri.it/image_monument/
2. See, ‘Futurismo dell’istante’ [Futurism of the instant] in the first issue of *Alfabeta2*, 2010.
3. See the exhibition, *Terre Natale, Ailleurs Commence Ici* [Native Land, Stop Eject], 2008-9. <https://www.fondationcartier.com/en/exhibitions/terre--natale-ailleurs-commence-ici>