

*Desert Screen: War at the Speed of Light*

Paul Virilio

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This present volume is a compilation of previously published articles, which Michael Degener has translated into English. The essays were collected and published in French, but in the new, translated version, an interview from 2000 with James Der Derian is included which takes a retrospective view of his work in the light of recent developments. Since the conflict in Iraq, this work has fresh relevance and Virilio's reading of the Gulf War of 1990-1991 contains perspectives which subsequently proved to be prescient and illuminating.

In this book, Paul Virilio is both prophetic and visionary. He identifies the gulf war as the epoch of a new paradigm for warfare. From the industrial to the informational, a paradigm shift has taken place. That a few antagonists armed with box-cutters could have initiated the World Trade Center bombing is indicative of the terrorist dimension, which although peripheral to Virilio's totalizing vision, is nevertheless part of the equation. This is somewhat in contradiction to his assertion of the importance of speed in warfare. "The very long period of supremacy of *defense* over *offence* . . . Is superseded today by the era of the supremacy of the absolute speed of weapons of interdiction on the field of battle over the movement of the *relative speeds* of mechanized forces. (p. 2) Virilio's assertion of the predominance of the logistical era over the strategic has been somewhat contradicted by the subsequent ambiguities that have resulted from reconstruction era Iraq.

However, the media treatment of the war event re-enforces his perception of the pre-eminence of the image. The logistics and ideologies contingent on the events of the conflict were subordinated to the spectacle portrayed and repeated on television. This point is stressed on page 5 where Virilio talks of the "strategy of deception" and the subsequent loss of credibility of the media. In the most recent chapter of the conflict, a less censored view of events than that available through the mainstream was available on the Al Jazeera web site. The book written by Hassan A. El-Najjar entitled *The Gulf War: Overreaction and Excessiveness* (2001) has some observations about the human dimension of the

conflict and, in contra-distinction to Virilio, sees the direct impact of the war on the civilian population. These perspectives do not contradict the author's observations but rather reinforce his perception of what he terms a "mutation of contemporary humanity's relationship to time." (see p. 31). He states in an interview with J. C. Raspiengeas whose transcript is included on page 41 that we must be not only conscientious objectors but also objectors to the objectivity of the representation. Having recourse to such alternatives may create what Umberto Eco referred to when he wrote of "semiotic guerillas" as long ago as 1967:

The receiver of the message seems to have a residual freedom: the freedom to read it in a different way. I am proposing an action to urge the audience to control the message and its multiple possibilities of interpretation . . . The universe of technological communication would then be patrolled by groups of communications guerillas, who would restore a critical dimension to passive reception. (See "Reports from the Global Village" in his *Travels in Hyperreality* (Harcourt Brace, 1987).

As Virilio points out on page 53, "A true *deus ex machina*, the electronic war machine is not neutral; politically, it represents a serious danger of contamination of conscience to men of goodwill." The fact that one of the casualties of bombing in Baghdad was the International news correspondent's building could be seen as sinister, as this vehicle for the proliferation of uncensored opinion may have been a threat to the consumption of prepared and received images that complied with the official line of the allies. He continues to reiterate that the seeds of the future are to be witnessed in the present. "War games will reveal more about a conflict than the press" (p. 92). Does this mean that such online games as Counterstrike, Half-life and other clones and the US military's own training version are attuning us to the reality of future warfare?

In the after-word, Virilio re-iterates his belief of an apocalyptic accident. Present events in Iraq and elsewhere preclude something of this as they suggest a devolution of major conflict into a running battle with an illusory opposition, where allegiances are mutable and shifting. Indicative of the intermediary technology employed is the de-escalation of communication. Saddam Hussein responds with an audiotaped mes-

sage—no images.

The victory now so eagerly proclaimed by Bush in the aftermath has resonances with Vietnam; the cyclical, periodicity of events is suggested by the alienated appearance of the occupying forces. The media presents George Bush in Africa, a shift of focus for the self-appointed global police. Having reached a stalemate in Iraq, we seem set to move to another trouble spot. The standoff with North Korea is politely ignored, problems with China and Taiwan sidelined whilst other, more amenable conflicts are played out via the media. The dromology that Virilio posits as being pivotal in the shaping of future scenarios incorporates the rapidity of information transfer. As Baudrillard says, 'the map precedes the territory.'

This is borne out by the ability of software to be employed as the cornerstone of attacking strategies in conflicts, superseding the human agent. Whilst the television screen provides the narrative as the "true intervention force" (p. 20), software provides the process, the enabling power to further the conflict. Virilio reinforces the Baudrillardian notion of the pre-eminence of the simulacra. "Once a way of weighing words, most often in saying nothing, the diplomatic exercise now involves weighing images in order to show nothing, or nearly so ." (p. 21). Virilio makes a departure from Baudrillard in that he emphasizes the importance of the dynamic of the image, its contingency upon events. It is the presence of these images in the time continuum, their intrinsic importance. The dissonance of the political rhetoric with the transmitted imagery, the failure to provide the images of 'weapons of mass destruction' bears out the primacy of Virilio's thesis that politicians are condemned to play endless 'catch-up' with unfolding events as portrayed on the media, to rationalize the already occurred.

Virilio is not nihilistic in his outlook. As he espoused in his interview in *C-Theory* with John Armitage in October of 2000, "Resistance is always possible! But we must engage in resistance first of all by developing the idea of a technological culture." This point is expanded upon and made more specifically on page 134 in his concluding statement in the 1991 section of the book where he calls upon us to "respond politically to the challenge of real time." He poses the question: "Can one democratize ubiquity, instantaneity, omniscience and omnipresence which are precisely the privileges of the divine, or in other words, of autocracy?" One of his final points in the after-word of 2000 is made by

quoting the supreme commander of NATO who stated in 2000: "Henceforth NATO will fight illegal immigration, ethnic violence and international crime." George Bush affirms this point in his 'perpetual war for perpetual peace' and 'global war on terrorism.' The 'accident' is prefigured in the arbitrariness of the nature and protagonists of the conflict. Its location is predetermined by the "transpolitical politics of liberalism" (p. 138). It becomes a question of what determines a 'full-scale accident.' Virilio's final prognostications are far from optimistic as he enjoins the military educators to heed old and new testament tracts that deal with the ecliptic and apocalyptic. His confrere, Jacques Derrida has espoused a belief rather than in the procession of history, that of the arising of an individual or individuals and their ability to profoundly alter the course of events; as depicted in Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering's documentary.

Whilst Virilio's work may be prescient and prophetic in its vision, ultimately, although it may not be his intent, this techno-determinism is more fatalistic than utopian.

Further to this, *Jarhead: A Marine's Chronicle of the Gulf War and Other Battles*, a recent book by Anthony Swofford talks about the speed of conflict quite explicitly. This is a first-hand account of conflict 'on the ground' of a marine during the 'desert storm' conflict and bears out much of what Virilio states with respect to the dynamics of present day conflict. Here is a quote, which underlines Virilio's assertions about dromology: "Hell, I don't know if we'll be needed. The war's going to be moving too fast. Sixteen hundred yards is nothing. Sixteen hundred yards was two weeks of fighting in Vietnam and a whole goddamn year in World War One. It'll last about five minutes out here, if you ask me." (p.158) This is a graphic account of how time and space have contracted under the impact of technology.

*Reviewed by Jim Sinclair, The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand*