Beyond Postmodernism?

Paul Virilio's Hypermodern Cultural Theory

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Paul Virilio is one of the most significant French cultural theorists writing today.[1] Increasingly hailed as the inventor of concepts such as 'dromology' (the 'science' of speed), Virilio is renowned for his declaration that the logic of acceleration lies at the heart of the organization and transformation of the modern world. However, Virilio's thought remains much misunderstood by many postmodern cultural theorists. In this article, and supporting the ground-breaking work of Arthur and Marilouise Kroker, I shall evaluate the contribution of Virilio's writings by suggesting that they exist *beyond* the terms of postmodernism and that they should be conceived of as a contribution to the emerging debate over 'hypermodernism'. Consequently, the article details Virilio's biography and the theoretical context of his work before outlining the essential contributions Virilio has made to contemporary cultural theory. In later sections an appraisal of Virilio's hypermodernism, together with a short evaluation of the controversies surrounding Virilio's work, will be provided before the conclusion.

The World According To Paul Virilio

Born in Paris in 1932 to a Breton mother and an Italian Communist father, Virilio was evacuated in 1939 to the port of Nantes, where he was traumatised by the spectacle of Hitler's *Blitzkrieg*during World War II. After training at the Ecole des Metiers d' Art in Paris, Virilio became an artist in stained glass and worked alongside Matisse in various churches in the French capital. In 1950, he converted to Christianity in the company of 'worker-priests' and, following military conscription into the colonial army during the Algerian war of independence (1954-1962), Virilio studied phenomenology with Merleau-Ponty at the Sorbonne. Captivated by the military, spatial, and organizational features of urban territory, Virilio's early writings began to appear while he was acting as a self-styled 'urbanist', in *Architecture Principe* (Virilio and Parent, 1996), the group and review of the same name he established with the architect Claude Parent in 1963. Although Virilio produced numerous short pieces and architectural drawings in the 1960s, his first major work was a photographic and philosophical study of the architecture of war entitled*Bunker Archeology* (1994a [1975]). The creator of concepts such as 'military space', 'dromology', and the 'aesthetics of disappearance', Virilio's phenomenologically grounded and controversial cultural theory draws on the writings of Husserl,

Heidegger, and, above all, Merleau Ponty.[2] After participating in the *evenements* of May 1968 in Paris, Virilio was nominated Professor by the students at the Ecole Speciale d' Architecture, and he later helped Jacques Derrida and others to found the International College of Philosophy. An untrained architect, Virilio has never felt compelled to restrict his concerns to the spatial arts. Indeed, like his philosopher companions, the late Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari and Jean-Francois Lyotard, Virilio, like his current sympathetic adversary, Jean Baudrillard, has written numerous texts on a variety of cultural topics. Commencing with *Speed & Politics: An Essay on Dromology* (1986 [1977]) before moving on to *The Aesthetics of Disappearance* (1991a [1980]), *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception* (1989 [1984]), *Politics of the Very Worst* (1999a [1996]), *Polar Inertia* (1999b [1990]), *The Information Bomb* (2000a [1998]) and, most recently, *Strategy of Deception* (2000b [1999]), the power of Virilio's cultural theory has only recently begun to be felt in the English-speaking world. This situation is probably due in no small part to the fact that, despite receiving several international speaking invitations weekly, he rarely leaves Paris and seldom converses in public outside France. Virilio retired from teaching in 1998. He currently devotes himself to writing and working with private organizations concerned with housing the homeless in Paris.

The importance of Virilio's theoretical work stems from his central claim that, in a culture dominated by war, the military-industrial complex is of crucial significance in debates over the creation of the city and the spatial organization of cultural life. In *Speed & Politics*, for example, Virilio offers a credible 'war model' of the growth of the modern city and the development of human society. Thus, according to Virilio, the fortified city of the feudal period was a stationary and generally unassailable 'war machine' coupled to an attempt to modulate the circulation and the momentum of the movements of the urban masses. Therefore, the fortified city was a political space of habitable inertia, the political configuration, and the physical underpinning of the feudal era. Nevertheless, for Virilio, the essential question is why did the fortified city disappear? His rather unconventional answer is that it did so due to the advent of ever increasingly transportable and accelerated weapons systems. For such innovations 'exposed' the fortified city and transformed siege warfare into a war of *movement*. Additionally, they undermined the efforts of the authorities to govern the flow of the urban citizenry and therefore heralded the arrival of what Virilio (Virilio and Parent, 1996: xv) calls the 'habitable circulation' of the masses. Unlike Marx, then, Virilio postulates that the transition from feudalism to capitalism was not an economic transformation but a military, spatial, political, and technological metamorphosis. Broadly speaking, where Marx wrote of the materialist conception of history, Virilio writes of the military conception of history.

Beginning in 1958 with a phenomenological inquiry into military space and the organization of territory, particularly concerning the 'Atlantic Wall' the 15,000 Nazi bunkers built during World War II along the coastline of France to repel any Allied assault Virilio deepened his explorations within the *Architecture Principe* group. An absolutely crucial but somewhat overlooked aspect of Virilio's work from the beginning is his continuing allegiance to a psychologically based *gestalt* theory of perception.[3] This theory was not only chiefly responsible for Virilio and Parent's development of the concept of the 'oblique function' but also for their construction of the 'bunker church' in Nevers in 1966 and the Thomson-Houston aerospace research centre in Villacoubly in 1969 (Johnson, 1996). Later, Virilio broadened his theoretical sweep, arguing in the 1970s, for example, that the relentless militarization of the contemporary cityscape was prompting what Deleuze and Guattari (1988: 453) call the 'deterritorialization' of capitalist urban space and what Virilio terms the arrival of speed or *chronopolitics*. Reviewing the frightening dromological fall-out from the communications technology revolution in information transmission, Virilio investigated the prospects for 'revolutionary resistance' to 'pure power' and began probing the connections between military technologies and the organization of cultural space. Consequently, during the 1980s, Virilio cultivated the next significant phase of his theoretical work through aesthetically derived notions of 'disappearance', the 'fractalization' of physical space, war, cinema, logistics, and perception. Further, as Arthur Kroker (1992: 20-50) has suggested, throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, Virilio critically examined the cultural repercussions of the use of remote-controlled and cybernetic technologies in the rapidly accelerating urban environment of 'techno' or 'crash' culture. Tracking the 'third age of military weaponry' in the shape of new information and communications technologies such as the Internet, Virilio's post-Einsteinian cultural theory is presently focused on the idea of 'polar inertia', the 'third', or, 'transplant revolution', Stelarc's cybernetic performance art, and the Persian Gulf and Kosovo wars.[4] Nonetheless, a significant strand of his current thinking is also centred on Virilio's critical conception of 'endo-colonization', 'cyberfeminism', 'technological fundamentalism', 'the information bomb', and 'the strategies of deception'.

Although there can be no doubt that Virilio has made a significant contribution to the Krokers' (Kroker and Kroker, 1997; Armitage, 1999) initial development of 'hypermodern' cultural theory, it is important to stress that Virilio characterizes himself as a 'critic of the art of technology' and not as a cultural or social theorist (Virilio and Lotringer, 1997: 172). In fact, for the most part, Virilio abhors cultural theory and sociology in particular. Still, let us consider his theoretical writings by looking first at Virilio's contribution to our understanding of the oblique function, dromology, and the 'integral accident'.

Virilio's Contribution To Cultural Theory

Virilio's early work focused on the oblique function a proposed new urban order based on 'the end of the vertical as an axis of elevation, the end of the horizontal as permanent plane, in favour of the oblique axis and the inclined plane' (Virilio and Parent, 1996: v). Such writings also foreshadowed Virilio's military and political critiques of deterritorialization and the revolution in information transmission that surfaced in *Bunker Archeology*, his as yet untranslated *L'Insecurite du territoire* (1976) and *Speed & Politics*. Moreover, it is these themes that make Virilio's current writings of interest to contemporary postmodern cultural theorists like Bauman (1999: 120) and 'global information culture' theorists such as Lash (1999: 285-311).

Virilio's doubts about the political economy of wealth are primarily driven by his 'dromocratic' conception of power. Considering Von Clausewitz's *On War* (1997 [1832]) to be outmoded, Virilio is decisively influenced by Sun Tzu's ancient Chinese text, *The Art of War* (1993). Debating with himself about war, the 'positive' (Fascist) and 'negative' (anti-Fascist) aspects of Marinetti's artistic theory of Futurism, Virilio suggests that political economy cannot be subsumed under the political economy of wealth, with a comprehension of the management of the economy of the state being its general aim. Indeed, for him, the histories of socio-political institutions such as the military and artistic movements like Futurism show that war and the need for speed, rather than commerce and the urge for wealth, were the foundations of human society. It is important to state that Virilio is not arguing that the political economy of wealth has been superseded by the political economy of speed, rather, he suggests that 'in addition to the political economy of wealth, there has to be a political economy of speed' (Zurbrugg, 2001: forthcoming.) Hence, in *Popular Defense & Ecological Struggles* (1990 [1978]) and *Pure War* (Virilio and Lotringer, 1997 [1983]), Virilio developed his dromological investigation to include considerations on pure power the enforcement of surrender without engagement and revolutionary resistance Virilio's case against the militarization of urban space. The 'rationale' of pure war might be encapsulated as the logic of militarized technoscience in the epoch of 'Infowar'. For Virilio, the epoch of Infowar is an era in which unspecified civilian 'enemies' are invoked by the state in order to justify increased spending on the third age of military weaponry and, in particular, in the form of new information and communications technologies such as the Internet. Thus, for Virilio, in the post-Cold War age, the importance of the military-industrial complex or what he calls the 'military-**scientific** complex' is not decreasing but increasing (Armitage, 2001a: forthcoming. Original emphasis.) For the weapons of the military-scientific complex are not merely responsible for integral accidents like the 1987 world stock market crash, accidents brought about by the failure of automated program trading, but also

for the fact that, 'in the very near future' it '**will no longer be war that is the continuation of politics by other means, it will be the integral accident that is the continuation of politics by other means**' (Armitage, 2001a: forthcoming. Original emphasis.)

In *The Aesthetics of Disappearance* and *The Lost Dimension* (1991b [1984]), Virilio, a devotee of Mandelbrot's (1977) geometry of fractals, argues that cultural theory must take account of interruptions in the rhythm of human consciousness and 'morphological irruptions' in the physical dimension. Using his concept of 'picnolepsy' (frequent interruption) and Einstein's General Relativity Theory, he suggests that modern vision and the contemporary city are both the products of military power and time-based cinematic technologies of disappearance. Furthermore, although there are political and cinematic aspects to our visual consciousness of the cityscape, what is indispensable to them is their ability to designate the technological disappearance of Lyotard's (1984) grand aesthetic and spatial narratives and the advent of micro narratives. In Virilio's terms, Mandelbrot's geometry of fractals reveals the appearance of the 'overexposed' city as when the morphological irruption between space and time splinters into a countless number of visual interpretations, and 'the crisis of whole dimensions' (Virilio, 1991b [1984]: 9-28). Important here is that Virilio's concerns about the aesthetics of disappearance and the crises of the physical dimension are not exercised by the textual construction of totalizing intellectual 'explanations'. Rather, they are exercised by the strategic positioning of productive interruptions and the creative dynamics of what he, following Churchill, calls the 'tendency' (Virilio, 1989 [1984]: 80). As Virilio maintains in *The Lost Dimension*, the rule in the overexposed city is the disappearance of aesthetics and whole dimensions into a militarized and cinematographic field of retinal persistence, interruption, and 'technological space-time'. Speaking recently about the overexposed city within the context of the 'totally bogus' court cases surrounding O. J. Simpson and the death of Princess Diana, Virilio suggested that, today, "**all** cities are overexposed". London, for example, "was overexposed at the time of Diana's burial' while 'New York was overexposed at the time of Clinton's confessions concerning Monica Lewinsky". (Armitage, 2001a: forthcoming. Original emphasis.)

In *War and Cinema*, Virilio applies the idea of 'substitution' when discussing the different kinds of reality that have appeared since the beginning of time. Bearing a remarkable similarity to Baudrillard's (1983) concept of 'simulation', Virilio's chief concern is with the connection between war, cinematic substitution and what he calls the 'logistics of perception' the supplying of cinematic images and information on film to the front line. The importance of the concept of the logistics of perception can be seen in the context of 'post' and 'hyper' modern wars like the Persian Gulf War of 1991 and the Kosovo War of 1998-9. For in these kinds of conflicts not only do

settled topographical features 'disappear' in the midst of battle but so too does the architecture of war. Indeed, the military high command has only two choices. It can entomb itself in subterranean bunkers with the aim of evading what one of Coppola's helicopters in the film*Apocalypse Now* announced as 'Death from Above'. Or, alternatively, it can take to the skies with the intention of invading what Virilio has dubbed in the *CTHEORY* interview, 'orbital space'. Conceptualising a logistics of perception where 'the world disappears in war, and war as a phenomenon disappears from the eyes of the world', Virilio has thus been analysing the relationship between war, substitution, human and synthetic perception since the 1980s, particularly in texts such as *L'ecran du desert: chroniques de guerre* (1989 [1984]: 66; 1991c). [5] Virilio's interests in war, cinema and the logistics of perception are primarily fuelled by his contention that military perception in warfare is comparable to civilian perception and, specifically, to the art of filmmaking. According to Virilio, therefore, cinematic substitution results in a 'war of images', or, Infowar. Infowar is not traditional war, where the images produced are images of actual battles. Rather, it is a war where the disparity between the images of battles and the actual battles is 'derealized'. To be sure, for Virilio, wars are 'no longer about confrontation' but about movement the movement of 'electro-magnetic waves'. (Armitage, 2001a: forthcoming.) Similar to Baudrillard's (1995) infamous claim that the Gulf War did not take place, Virilio's assertion that war and cinema are virtually indistinguishable is open to dispute. Yet Virilio's stance on the appearance of Infowar is consistent with his view that the only way to monitor cultural developments in the war machine is to adopt a critical theoretical position with regard to the various parallels that exist between war, cinema, and the logistics of perception. It is a view he developed in his trenchant critique of *The Vision Machine* (1994b [1988]).

In Virilio's universe, therefore, people 'no longer believe their eyes'. For him, 'their **faith in perception**' has become 'slave to the faith in the technical **sightline**', a situation in which contemporary substitution has reduced the 'visual field' to the 'line of a sighting device' (1994b [1988]: 13. Original emphases.) Viewed from this angle, *The Vision Machine* is a survey of what I have called 'pure perception' (Armitage, 2000a: 3). For, today, the military-scientific complex has developed ominous technological substitutions and potentialities such as Virtual Reality and the Internet. In Virilio's terms, 'the main aim' of pure perception is '**to register the waning of reality**'. The aesthetics of disappearance is a form of aesthetics that is derived from 'the unprecedented limits imposed on subjective vision by the instrumental splitting of modes of perception and representation' (1994b [1988]: 49. Original emphases.) Hence, Virilio conceives of vision machines as the accelerated products of what he calls 'sightless vision' vision without looking that 'is itself merely the reproduction of an intense blindness that will become the latest and last form of industrialisation: **the industrialisation of the non-gaze** (1994b [1988]: 73.

Original emphasis.) Virilio further details the far-reaching cultural relationships between vision and remote-controlled technologies in *Polar Inertia*.

In *Polar Inertia,* Virilio examines pure perception, speed, and human stasis. In 'Indirect Light', for example, Virilio considers the difference between the video screens recently adopted by the Paris Metro system and 'real' perceptual objects such as mirrors from a theoretical perspective that broadly conforms to what Foucault (1977) called 'surveillance societies' and Deleuze (1995) labelled 'control societies'. In contrast, other articles note the discrepancy between technologically generated inertia and biologically induced human movement. Discussing the introduction of 'wave machines' in Japanese swimming pools, the effacement of a variety of 'local times' around the world and their gradual replacement by a single 'global time', Virilio notes the disparity between 'classical optical communication' and 'electro-optical commutation'. In the era of pure perception, though, Virilio argues that it is not the creation of acceleration and deceleration that becomes important but the creation of 'Polar Inertia'. Here, Virilio proposes that in the early modern era of mobility, in his terms the era of emancipation, inertia did not exist. The idea of polar inertia thus excludes what would have been alternate aspects of the speed equation simple acceleration or deceleration in the industrial age. Yet, as Virilio has been arguing since the 1980s, in the post-industrial age of the absolute speed of light, real time has now superseded real space. In such circumstances, the geographical difference between 'here' and 'there' is obliterated by the speed of light as history itself 'crashes into the wall of time'. (Armitage, 2001a: forthcoming.) Additionally, in its terminal mode, as exemplified by reclusive billionaires such as the late Howard Hughes, polar inertia becomes a kind of Foucauldian incarceration. Holed up in a single room in the Desert Inn hotel in Las Vegas for fifteen years, endlessly watching Sturges' *Ice Station Zebra*, Hughes, Virilio's 'technological monk', was not only polar inertia incarnate but, more importantly, the first inhabitant of a 'mass phenomenon'. Equally significantly, for Virilio, this phenomenon has stretched far beyond domestic cinema and TV audiences and on into the global war zone. In fact, according to him, in recent conflicts such as the one in Kosovo, the army now 'watches the battle from the barracks'. As he puts it, "today, **the army only occupies the territory once the war is over**." (Armitage, 2001a: forthcoming.) At the broadest level, then, Virilio's writings on polar inertia seek to show that large tracts of civilian and military physical geographical spaces no longer have significant human content. Therefore, in *The Art of the Motor* (1995 [1993]), Virilio turned his attention to the relationship between the spaces of the human body and technology.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, then, Virilio's cultural theory is concerned with what he calls the third, or, the *transplant revolution* the almost total collapse of the *distinction between the human body and technology*. Intimately linked

to the technological enhancement and substitution of body-parts through the miniaturisation of technological objects, the third revolution is a revolution conducted by militarized technoscience against the human body through the promotion of what the Virilio calls 'neo-eugenics'. Such developments range across Virilio's (1995 [1993]: 109-112; Armitage, 2001a: forthcoming) criticisms of the work of Stelarc, the Australian cybernetic performance artist, to his concerns about the eventual fate of the jet-pilots in the Kosovo war. This is because, for Virilio, both Stelarc and the jet-pilot represent much the same thing: "the last man before automation takes command". (Armitage, 2001a: forthcoming.) Nevertheless, it should be stressed that Virilio's criticisms of automation are closely connected to the development of his concept of endo-colonization what takes place when a political power like the state turns against its own people, or, as in the case of militarized technoscience, the human body.

As a result, in *Open Sky* (1997 [1995]), *Politics of the Very Worst*, and *The Information Bomb*, Virilio has elaborated a critique of cyberfeminism that Plant (1997), following Haraway's (1985) 'manifesto for cyborgs', describes as a revolution on the part of cybernetic technology and feminists against the rule of patriarchy. Nonetheless, Virilio has little time for cyberfeminism or 'cybersex'; notions that he criticises, likening cybersex, for example, to the technological replacement of the emotions (Armitage, 2000b: 5). For Virilio, it is imperative to reject cybernetic sexuality, refocus theoretical attention on the human subject, and resist the domination of both men and women by technology. According to Virilio, cyberfeminism is merely one more form of technological fundamentalism the religion of all those who believe in the absolute power of technology (Virilio and Kittler, 1999.) Having departed from the religious sensibility required in order to understand the contemporary Gods of ubiquity, instantaneity, and immediacy of new information and communications technologies, cyberfeminists, along with numerous other cultural groups, have thus capitulated to the raptures of cyberspace.

Virilio's newest work, though, is *Strategy of Deception*. Focusing on the Kosovo War, Virilio argues that while war was a failure both for Europe and for NATO it was a success for the Unites States (US). In the world according to Virilio, this is because the US conducted an 'experiment' on Kosovo using the informational and cybernetic tools of the Pentagon's much-hyped 'Revolution in Military Affairs' (RMA). The RMA is thus a revolution that Virilio perceives to be analogous to his conception of 'the information bomb' and cyberwar as well as his contention that the present aim of the US is to seek what its military chiefs term Global Information Dominance (GID).

Virilio's exegesis of military space and the social organization of territory is an important contribution to critical cultural theory because it diverges from the increasingly sterile current debate over the differentiation of modernism and

postmodernism. It is, for instance, quite wrong of critical cultural theorists such as Harvey (1989: 351), Waite (1996: 116), and positivist physicists like Sokal and Bricmont (1998: 159-166) to characterise Virilio's thought as postmodern cultural theory. Indeed, such characterisations are so far wide of the mark it is difficult to know where to begin. I will explain.

For one thing, although the concept of postmodernism, like Virilio, came to prominence in architectural criticism in the 1960s, Virilio's thought is neither a reaction against the International Style nor a reaction against modernism. Postmodernism, Virilio proposes, has been a 'catastrophe' in architecture, and has nothing to do with his phenomenologically grounded writings (Armitage, 2000b: 25.) This is because Virilio's work draws on the modernist tradition in the arts and sciences. As I have noted elsewhere, in *The Information Bomb*, Virilio routinely references modernist writers such as Kafka and relishes the latter's declaration that 'the cinema involves putting the eye into uniform'. The same could be said of Virilio's combative relationship to both Marinetti's modernist Futurism and the Chapman brothers' postmodern or 'terminal' contemporary art practices (Armitage, 2000c: 146; and 2000d). Virilio's philosophical reference points are Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, phenomenologists and modernists. Furthermore, he regularly cites Einstein's writings on General Relativity Theory, instances of Virilio's commitment to the theory of scientific modernism established in 1915.

For another, Virilio sees no connection between his thought and that of deconstructionist and poststructuralist theorists like Derrida (Armitage, 2000b: 34-5.) Virilio has, for example, never shown any interest in de Saussure's structural linguistics, preferring to this day the world of phenomenology and existentialism. As an anti-Marxist (and anti-Sartrean), committed 'anarcho-Christian' and thinker who has 'absolutely no confidence in psychoanalysis' Virilio has little in common with the pioneers of structuralism such as the semiologist Barthes, the Marxist philosopher Althusser, the psychoanalyst Lacan, and the anthropologist Levi-Strauss (Virilio and Lotringer, 1997 [1983]: 39.) Virilio's theoretical connections with Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* and Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* also need to be treated with care. This is because, unlike most poststructuralist theorists, Virilio is a *humanist* and a practising Christian. His work is vehemently opposed to the viewpoint of anti-humanism and to the philosophy of Foucault's and Deleuze and Guattari's messiah, Nietzsche. As Virilio recently exclaimed, while he admires the '*operatic part of Nietzsche' he 'cannot stand' his 'underlying philosophy*'. Indeed, for Virilio, it's 'physically repulsive!' (Armitage, 2000b: 34.) Thus, there are only indeterminate and convergent relationships between Virilio's thought and Foucault and Deleuze and Guattari's poststructuralist theories, something that Virilio has pointed out before (Virilio and Lotringer, 1997 [1983]: 44-

5.) For Virilio, the crucial pointers on all his cultural theory have been World War II, military strategy, and spatial planning (Armitage, 2000b: 26.)

Moreover, in contrast to many postmodern cultural theorists, Virilio does not wholly condemn modernity. Instead, he views his work as a 'critical analysis of modernity, but through a perception of technology which is largely ... catastroph**ic**, not catastroph**ist**'. Arguing that 'we are not out of modernity yet, by far', it is, then, 'the drama of total war' that lies at the core of Virilio's cultural theory (Armitage, 2000b: 26.) Concentrating his thought on the varying speeds of modernity, Virilio's texts thus concern themselves with its important characteristics such as technoscience, surveillance, urbanism, and alienation. In addition, and despite his reputation as a Cassandra, Virilio often insists that his conception of modernity, as distinct from the theorists of postmodernism, is essentially optimistic (Zurbrugg, 2001: forthcoming.)

Furthermore, Virilio is not wholly antipathetic to reason, even if he is critical of aspects of the 'Enlightenment project'. Yet, he certainly is inimical to Hegelian and Marxist theories of knowledge and ideology. In this respect, Virilio can be considered as a kind of 'left Heideggerian' (Kellner, 2000: 118.) Virilio's critical relationship to modernity is, then, somewhat removed from the description of it given by postmodern cultural theorists like Waite although a useful recent discussion of Virilio's ideas about the Enlightenment, technological objects, modernity and rationality can be found in Lash's work, *Another Modernity, Another Rationality*.

Lastly, Virilio's thought has almost nothing to do with that of advocates of postmodernism like Lyotard or Baudrillard. Unlike Lyotard's writings, for instance, Virilio's work remains true to the principle of hope with regard to making sense of history even as it crashes headlong into the wall of real time. Actually, nearly the entirety of Virilio's work is a sustained attempt to make sense of his own history and, through it, ours too. Nor does Virilio accept the demise of all the 'metanarratives', insisting in interviews, for example, 'that the narrative of justice is beyond deconstruction' (Armitage, 2000b: 39.) Likewise, Virilio's hostility to Marxism, semiotics, and Nietzschean 'nihilism' explains his antagonism toward Baudrillard's concept of simulation. Again, and while Genosko (1999: 96) may well be correct that Virilio's hypotheses on speed are 'consonant with McLuhan's' the truth is that, unlike many postmodern cultural theorists, Virilio does *not*share Baudrillard's admiration for McLuhan's (1994) 'drooling' (Virilio, 1995 [1993]: 10; Armitage, 2001b: forthcoming) over new media technologies. Genosko (1999: 97), for instance, argues that the 'differences between Virilio and McLuhan are profound', particularly with respect to their 'representations of the drive toward automation'. 'The war machine of Virilio and the love machine of McLuhan', Genosko (1999: 97) rightly concludes, 'create quite different kinds of worlds: contest or contact'. Virilio's war machine is therefore neither concerned with Baudrillard's conception of 'hyperreality' and 'irony'

or with McLuhan's love machine. In fact, Virilio's thought is more concerned with the historical, socio-cultural, technoscientific and military realities of everyday life.

It is therefore very difficult to appraise the important advances of Virilio's thought in terms of postmodern cultural theory. It is also why I believe it is preferable to interpret it as the work of a cultural theorist whose thinking addresses what might be called the question of *hypermodernism, or, the cultural logic of contemporary militarism*. All the same, hypermodernism remains a tentative term and an embryonic tendency in cultural theory today. Arguably, it began with the publication of Kroker's *The Possessed Individual*. Nevertheless, in the present period, I want to suggest that, along with Virilio, it is necessary to move away from the polarised assumptions of modernism and postmodernism. Why? Because it is imperative to shift toward an understanding of Virilio's work on acceleration through the 'excessive' intensities and displacements inherent within hypermodern cultural thought about the military-scientific complex (Armitage, 2000a.) [7]

A Brief Critique Of Virilio

Virilio's cultural theory and numerous activities have courted controversy since the 1960s. When Virilio and Parent built their 'bunker church' and which has to be seen to be believed the bishop who consecrated it was, according to Virilio, muttering to himself the following words: 'what a ghastly thing! Amen! What a ghastly thing! Amen!' As Virilio tells the story: 'the priest turned towards the bishop and said: "Monsignor, this is not an exorcism! It is a consecration!"' (Armitage, 2001a: forthcoming.) Religious criticisms of Virilio and Parent's architecture aside, there have also been a number of recent academic critiques of Virilio's ideas concerning the state, technology, and speed. Deleuze and Guattari (1988: 351-423), for instance, attempted what Crogan (1999) calls a problematic effort to 'subsume' Virilio's thought into their own poststructuralist approach to cultural theory. But, as Crogan suggests, Deleuze and Guattari's 'static, ahistorical model' of the state and technology cannot easily be combined with Virilio's writings without undoing 'its own coherency in the process'. In turn, Virilio's *The Aesthetics of Disappearance* has outraged the neo-Marxian geographer Harvey (1989: 293, 299, and 351; 2000: 88). For Harvey, Virilio's 'response' to what the former recently called the 'theme of time-space compression' 'has been to try and ride the tiger of time-space compression through construction of a language and an imagery that can mirror and hopefully command it'. Harvey places the 'frenetic writings' of Virilio (and Baudrillard) in this category because 'they seem hell-bent on fusing with time-space compression and replicating it in their own flamboyant rhetoric'. Harvey, of course, has 'seen this response before, most specifically in Nietzsche's extraordinary evocations in *The Will To Power*'. Yet, in *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*, Virilio's unfolding and wholly intentional

reactions to the emergence of the dromocratic condition are actually concerned with 'the importance of interruption, of accident, of things that are stopped as *productive*' (Virilio and Lotringer, 1997 [1983]: 44. Original emphasis.) As Virilio told Lotringer: 'It's entirely different from what Gilles Deleuze does in *Milles Plateaux*. He progresses by snatches, whereas I handle breaks and absences. The fact of stopping and saying, "let's go somewhere else" is very important for me' (Virilio and Lotringer, 1997 [1983]: 45.) What Virilio's 'frenetic writings' actually substantiate throughout the 1980s are the material and, crucially, the *immaterial* consequences of dromological changes in aesthetics, military power, space, cinema, politics, and technology. In an era increasingly eclipsed by the technologically produced disappearance of cultural life, war, matter, and human perception, this is a very significant achievement. In the contemporary era, though, the limitations of Virilio's cultural theory are likely to rest not as Harvey suggests with his similarities but with his *differences* from Nietzsche. As Waite (1996: 381-2. Original emphases.), quoting the American performance artist Laurie Anderson, has argued:

Virilio still desperately holds on to a modicum of modernist *critique* of postmodern military tactics, strategies, and technologies, whereas Nietzsche basically would have been impatient with mere critique, moving quickly to *appropriate* them for his own *use*, at least conceptually and rhetorically, as metaphors and techniques of persuasion to preserve power for elites over corpses 'now that the living outnumber the dead'.

Conclusion

Although there are many controversial questions connected to Virilio's cultural theory, his hypermodern critique of military tactics, strategies, and technologies is beginning to collide with the thought of a growing number of other cultural theorists such as the Krokers' (1997). The reason for such collisions is that Virilio's texts like *The Politics of the Very Worst*, *Polar Inertia*, *The Information Bomb*, and *Strategy of Deception* address some of the most disturbing and significant contemporary cultural developments of our time. Moreover, such developments are often designed to preserve the power of the increasingly virtual 'global kinetic elites' over the creation of the actual local corpses of what I call 'the (s)lower classes'. A child of Hitler's *Blitzkrieg*, Virilio has theorised the cultural logic of contemporary militarism. This is the most important aspect of his thought. Revealing the dromological and political conditions of the twenty-first century, Virilio interprets modernity in terms of a military conception of history and the endo-colonization of the human body by militarised technoscience. As I have indicated, the concept of hypermodernism needs to be uppermost in any understanding of Virilio's particular contribution to cultural theory.

Virilio is, therefore, one of the most important and thought-provoking cultural theorists on the contemporary intellectual battlefield. Just the same, unlike Lyotard's or Baudrillard's postmodernism, Virilio's hypermodernism does not articulate itself as a divergence from modernism and modernity but as a critical analysis of modernism and modernity through a catastrophic perception of technology. It is for these and other reasons that Virilio defines his general position as a critic of the art of technology. Virilio's theoretical position and cultural sensibilities concerning technology thus remain *beyond* the realm of even critical cultural theory. He does not depend on intellectual 'explanations' but on 'the obvious quality of the implicit' (Virilio and Lotringer, 1997 [1983]: 44.) On the one hand, therefore, Virilio is a cultural theorist who movingly considers the tendencies of the present period. On the other, he is a cultural theorist who utterly rejects cultural theory.

Hence, it is debatable whether there is much to be gained from cultural theorists attempting to establish the 'truth' or otherwise of Virilio's thought. For Virilio's critical responses to the military, chronopolitics, cinema, art, and technology are actually ethical and emotional responses to the arrival of technological culture. However, it is crucial to remember that Virilio's responses are not the passive responses of the armchair critic. As he emphasises in the CTHEORY interview, '[r]esistance is *always* possible! But we must engage in resistance first of all by developing the idea of a *technological culture*'. Virilio is of course also aware that his work is 'often dismissed in terms of scandalous charges!' As he has noted, in France '[t]here's no tolerance' for 'irony, for wordplay, for argument that takes things to the limit and to excess' (Zurbrugg, 2001: forthcoming.) Hence, to raise the question of Virilio's cultural theory is to raise the question of whether, outside France, his work should be dismissed in terms of scandalous charges, received in terms suffused with praise, or a mixture of both? In short, it is to raise the question of how much tolerance there is in the English-speaking world for irony, for wordplay, and for arguments that take things to excess? Attempting to answer such complex questions will ensure that Virilio's hypermodern cultural theory continues to elicit theoretical argument and social debate for many years to come.

Notes

1. This article is a substantially revised version of an earlier conference paper of the same title presented at the *3rd International Crossroads in Cultural Studies Conference*, Birmingham UK.

2. For a useful and accessible overview of the works of all three thinkers see Kearney (1986.)

3. Gestalt psychology originated in Germany at the start of the twentieth century. Founded by Wertheimer, Kohler and Koffka, 'gestaltists' believe that mental phenomena are extended 'events', or 'gestalts'. For Gestaltists, cognitive processes cannot be comprehended in terms of

their individual components. Instead, for them, when some new piece of information is acquired, an individual's entire perceptual field is changed forever. Virilio's own particular influence is Guillaume (1937.)

4. Virilio considers the Internet to be a constituent feature of the 'third age of military weaponry' or what he sometimes calls *The Information Bomb* (Virilio, 2000a [1998].)

5. Virilio's *L'ecran du desert: chroniques de guerre* (1991) is currently being translated into English as *Desert Screen: War at the Speed of Light* by Michael Degener. The Athlone Press will publish the book in 2001.

6. For an alternative conception of hypermodernism to the one presented here see, for instance, Albert Borgmann's *Crossing the Postmodern Divide* (1993.)

7. For an attempt to develop Virilio's work via a conception of excessive hypermodern cultural and economic thought and the military-scientific complex see, Armitage and Graham (2001: forthcoming.)

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