

# Paul Virilio and the Mediation of Perception and Technology

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## Background: Themes in the Work of Paul Virilio

John Armitage (“Beyond Postmodernism”) has given us a thorough chronology of Virilio’s writings, tracing broad developments and recurring themes. While this background shares some aspects of Armitage’s survey, it differs in that it identifies themes of interest to those pursuing research in rhetoric and media technology. Broadly described, Virilio’s research interrogates the critical history of logics of perception molded or enabled by technology, from the printing press, the telescope, and the photograph, to film, television, and the internet, and more. Virilio’s is a project that not only concerns a recognition of the internal logics and specificity of a given technology of representation, but also concerns the broadest implications of these technologies upon our collective perceptions of time and space, and the material and political consequences of these shifts. For example, the telescope does not merely let humans see farther, but also disciplines and alters our logics of perception (such as the concept of distance), and opens up new vistas for ideological colonization (e.g., the “space race”). This interest in the historical, the material, and the political aspects of media technologies places Virilio in a place unique in contemporary critical theory.

Virilio has been compared to scholars as diverse as Deleuze, Foucault, Benjamin, Ong, McLuhan, and Baudrillard (Der Derian 3-6), although none of these comparisons are a comfortable fit. Virilio has claimed allegiances with his teacher, the existential thinker Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who authored the influential *Phenomenology of Perception* in 1945 (*Politics* 22). Like Merleau-Ponty, Virilio seeks to

re-establish the roots of the mind in its body and its world, going against doctrines that treat perception as a simple result of the action of external things on our body as well as those that insist on the autonomy of consciousness. (Merleau-Ponty 3-4)

Virilio develops his work beyond that defined by Merleau-Ponty, however, by emphasizing—if not obsessing on—the ways in which technology mediates our perceptions and brings into vision things beyond our reach. If, following Merleau-Ponty, Virilio believes that “everything I see is in principle within my reach, at least within reach of my sight, marked on the map of the ‘I can’” (*Vision Machine* 7), then Virilio’s project interrogates the shifts in our cognition when “everything I see” includes television broadcasts from Eastern Europe and virtual reality video games. These things, prior to the introduction of these technologies, could not have existed within the realm of the “I-Can”; this tension energizes Virilio’s research.

In the face of what could be seen as dehumanizing technologies, Virilio shares Merleau-Ponty’s humanist impulse. While Virilio critiques modes of representation, his eye is always searching for a trace of the Real, a mark of the unmediated that (despite the technology) lies within reach and within the map of “I can.” For Virilio, it is this belief in an indubitable agency—the “I can”—that marks his debt to phenomenology and Merleau-Ponty. As Virilio notes with optimism, “there is nothing beyond humanity. . . . Humanity cannot be improved” (*Politics* 88). [1] Perhaps it is this humanist impulse that should make Virilio most attractive to the community of scholars in rhetorical studies, who have not yet given up on the agency of the individual, even in the face of theoretical and technological forces which have long seemed to result in the decentering or the erasure of the subject (from Bitzer’s “rhetorical situation,” to Biesecker’s rethinking of Bitzer, from the perspective of deconstruction).

Notes:

1. Much has been made of Virilio’s Christian impulses in framing his research: “Virilio’s is a deeply liberal critique, formed not only in his Christian faith but in the centrality he affords to individuals (Cubitt 127). This aspect of Virilio’s biography is most evident in his use of

Christian thinkers and Christian tropes (Bonhoeffer, etc.). At the moment, at least, it appears that the Christian strand in Virilio's thought is no stronger than other forces in his thought—the influences, say, of teachers and colleagues.

Are we still free to try and resist the ocular (optic or optoelectronic) inundation by looking away or wearing sunglasses? Not out of modesty or because of some religious taboo, but out of a concern to preserve one's integrity, one's freedom on conscience.

Paul Virilio (*Open Sky* 96)

In the media studies scholarship aligned with the trajectory initiated by the work of the Frankfurt School, Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of [Its] Mechanical Reproduction [Reproducibility]" is cited as the one of the first attempts to address the relationship between filmic technology and changing modes of human perception. Two elements of this essay have become crucial touchstones in film theory and cultural studies. First, Benjamin's discussion of the "decay of aura" speaks to the possibility that filmic representation can demystify the means of production and give some insight into ideologically informed arrangements of the base. Second—and more pertinent to our goals—Benjamin argued that the evaporation of aura achieved by formal reproducibility reveals an "unconscious optics" of filmic reproduction: "the camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses" (237). New media technologies, like the camera, allow us to become aware of the ways in which perception is molded and, consequently, aware of how ideology is perpetuated in the ways in which the subject is asked to "see" the world.

Though a trajectory in media studies for this work is clear, in rhetorical studies, it has yet to begin. This is not to say that rhetorical studies has been ignorant of the impact of technology upon perception. Work in the rhetoric of science, for example, has drawn from sociologists and philosophers of science who study the impact of technology upon perception and cognition. Think, here of Latour & Woolgar and of Lynch & Woolgar, as they have studied the ways that inscription machines and technologies for image production shape not only what is known, but also the ways that scientists know. Too, think of philosopher of technology Don Ihde, who seeks to create a "phenomenological, hermeneutic framework" ("Interview") for understanding the role of images in the production of scientific knowledge. But, even though rhetoricians of science (e.g. Bazerman, in *Languages of Edison's Light*) show the influence of the works of these philosophers on their own, rhetorical projects, they do not make the leap into connecting technologies of perception to ideology (rather than epistemology). Too concerned with unlocking the epistemological functions of science, Latour and Lynch and Woolgar and Ihde and Bazerman do not make the leap to ideology which a Benjaminian perspective requires.

Outside the orbit of rhetorical studies, film theory has made the leap to the study of the ideological, as part of the study of the impact of technology on the structuring of perception: Laura Mulvey's concept of the gaze, and Jean Louis Baudry's "cinematic apparatus," are two well known vocabularies for talking about unconscious optics at the intersection of media forms and textual content vis-à-vis the interpellation of the spectator (Mulvey, qtd. in Lapsley and Westlake 79-81). Central to these works is a detailed account of the relationship between the perception of the spectator, the mode of representation (or mode of communication; see Gross 60-1), and technology. The utility of film theory to those outside the discipline is limited because of its focus on the cinema, leaving its implications for the other technologies and others modes of perception implicit. And so, when scholars in rhetorical studies do draw on this theory (such as Joseph Harris), they become part of a soup of critical theories that "talk about how the mass media continue to fix the spectator . . . in a state of critical apathy and listlessness" (Harris, "The Other Reader"). The nuanced attention to the medium integral to film theory taken on its own terms is lost in this "theory soup."

And yet—it is clear that scholars in rhetorical studies require some consideration of the relationship between modes or logics of perception and technologies of representation. In an era where technologies change faster than we can describe them, and the experience of the

user under these technologies changes faster than we can theorize, we need a body of theory that can guide our investigations into this terrain. This is the terrain of contemporary communication, and we cannot pretend that rhetorical theories that efface differences in media are adequate. If the rhetoric and sociology of science can only serve as a partial guide, and film theory is too bound to its own disciplinary structure to be appropriated easily, then rhetoricians interested in media technology must look elsewhere,

To that end, this essay reviews the work of Paul Virilio as a source of a general theory of media technologies and the logics of perception. Virilio has devoted his career to describing the unconscious optics of media technology and human perception. Unlike many of the scholars associated with the Frankfurt school, Virilio has yet to find a large or faithful audience, and is relatively unknown among rhetorically oriented media scholars. Over the course of his career, Virilio has deployed an array of concepts that grapple with the relationship between perception and media technologies in fresh, unique, and often-unpredictable ways. We believe that Virilio's work can enhance the research currently conducted in communication studies, especially that which tackles new media technologies, or that which would cross the bounds of criticism of a single medium.

In this review essay, we attempt to organize and explicate Virilio's writing to encourage its up-take in future research. We begin with an introduction to the scope of Virilio's work, and then we move to describing a few key terms from the Virilian vocabulary that are particularly relevant to media studies today. Then, after a brief discussion of the political implications of Virilio's understanding of media technologies and perception, we conclude with suggestions for further research.

### **Virilio and Media Criticism**

The works of Paul Virilio are diverse and cut across several disciplinary communities (political science, media theory, art criticism, architecture, urban studies, cultural studies), so an exhaustive primer of Virilio's work for rhetorical scholars remains for a later project. In this space, we will explicate Virilio's contribution to rhetorically-centered media studies under three rubrics: 1) the history of technologies of perception; 2) the analysis of the dominant logic of perception of our day ("Real time"); and 3) the political implications of new technologies of representation.

### **The History of Technologies of Perception**

Virilio's theory is both contemporary (in that he analyzes the most current technologies) and historically grounded (in that he places these technologies along a continuum of prior technological development). [2] In *The Vision Machine*, for example, Virilio has schematized the histories he has written in three steps under the aegis of "logistics of the image":

The age of the image's formal logic was the age of painting, engraving and etching, architecture; it ended with the eighteenth century. . . . The age of dialectic logic is that age of photography and film or, if you like, the frame of the nineteenth century. . . . The age of paradoxical logic begins with the invention of video recording, holography, and computer graphics. (63)

These steps in the schema are broad, overlapping, and do not constitute by any means ruptures in the history of perception: photography and film did not rupture our perceptions of space; rather, they challenged the image's "formal logic" and so produced new modes of perception. These technologies of perception exist in relationship to one another. Virilio's work can be seen as a complicated mapping of these overlapping technologies of perception. Table one, below, lists just a handful of the technologies of representation that Virilio has analyzed in his writings:

### **Technologies of Vision in Science**

In *The Vision Machine*, he surveys technologies of vision in the Enlightenment: Alhazen (Al-Hasan ibn al-Haitam), Roger Bacon, Descartes) (4), with (for example) anecdotal attention to the Society of Jesus' use of technologies of perception to support missionary work: "the Jesuits of Beijing used anamorphic equipment as instruments of religious propaganda to impress the Chinese and to demonstrate to them 'mechanically' that man should experience the world as an illusion of the world" (5).

### **News Media Technologies**

Most significantly for traditional media scholars, in *Art of the Motor*, he traces the development of newspapers, as they spread and eventually are overtaken by radio and television (47).

### **Technologies of Illusion**

Virilio takes "technologies of representation" broadly, to include areas some might see peripheral to the history of technology. He includes, for example, illusionism, from Houdini to Melies in the *Art of the Motor* (66).

#### **Technologies of Film: *the aesthetic of disappearance***

Virilio distinguishes an "aesthetic of appearance" from an "aesthetic of disappearance" based on his reading of film within the history of art: "So, we move from the persistence of a material - marble or the painter's canvas [an aesthetic of appearance] - to the cognitive persistence of vision [an aesthetic of disappearance]" (*Politics* 22- 23; *Aesthetics*).

### **Technologies of Performance**

In *Lost Dimension*, Virilio addresses the history of technologies of representation from a performance perspective: the eidophusicon (1781), the panorama (1792), Daguerre's diorama (1822), and the Lumieres' moving-picture show (1895).

### **Art as Technology of Representation**

In *Vision Machine*, Virilio surveys the development of perspective in the arts as a technology of representation: "in the Middle Ages the background came to the surface" (14); while, in the Renaissance, "religious and cosmological uncertainties begin to proliferate along with the proliferation of optical devices" (15). Eventually, in the Impressionists Virilio sees the disintegration of composition; in the Pointillists, the decomposition of sight (15).

### **Technologies of Measurement**

In *Lost Dimension*, Virilio examines the ways that technologies of measurement contribute to a technology of representation. He traces a history of the science of measurement, from La Condamine and party (1735-1751), through 1789 and the establishment of a "unit of national length" by the constitutional assembly" (37). The end point is contemporary standards of measurement: "the Krypton lamp for the meter, the Cesium atomic clock for the second" (41).

Virilio looks for technologies of representation in all arenas. For example, Virilio argues that military technologies reinforce the logics of the image produced by media technologies (for example, film). There is a connection between

the trick effects of the depiction of actual events in graphic illustration, photography, film, and television and good old military camouflage, designed to conceal armaments, convoys and troop movements [and designed] to leave the enemy in the lurch, no longer able to tell where reality begins or leaves off. (Art 54)

Film and camouflage paint, then, both partake of what Virilio calls "the reality effect." The reality effect is Virilio's shorthand for the acceptance of the logic of perception: "the reality effect replaces immediate reality" (*Lost* 24). Technologies of representation have the effect on the perceiver of confounding, expanding, intensifying, or reorganizing reality as perceived. New technologies produce different reality effects.

As new technologies arise, other technologies (and the modes of perception they create) lose their dominance: "Nothing can be gained without loss. When a technical object is invented, say the elevator, the stairway is lost; when the transatlantic airlines are created, the ocean liner is lost . . ." (Politics 33). Of course, "loss" here is not to be read in extreme: buildings with elevators still have staircases. In the case of media technologies, when one mode of representation ascends, other modes of representation may lose their dominance, but are not erased. Virilio is most sensitive to the transitions evident in reality effects resulting from media technologies today. He says that

the world-view based on orthogonal orthodoxy has given way to a new perception, in which the basic concept of physical dimension has progressively lost its meaning and analytical power as a form of dissecting or dismantling perceptive reality. Instead we find other, electronic means of evaluating space and time, ones that share no common ground with the measuring systems of the past. (Lost 30)

These new, electronic technologies signal a change in our logics of perception: "infographic technologies will likewise force a readjustment of reality and its representations" (Lost 26-27). By Virilio's articulation, for example, we no longer measure distance only by yards, blocks, or miles; we measure it by the delay in the signal of a live television broadcast. We no longer measure distance only by paces walked, but by satellites as part of GPS.

These shifts in the standard of measure, enabled by broadcast and digital technology, are forcing us to rethink the logic of perception under which we interpret our world. Virilio argues that,

Faced with the stereoscopic nature of a reality divided between optics and optoelectronics, acoustics and electroacoustics, touch and teletactility, we have been given notice to quit our customary ways of seeing and thinking, in order to apprehend a new kind of 'relief' that even goes as far as undermining the practical usefulness of the notion of horizon and, with it, the 'perspective' that previously allowed us to recognize ourselves here and now. (Open 44)

Virilio is deeply interested in describing the current "logic of the image" manifest in today's media technologies. He is equally interested in the political implications following from the development and use of these technologies, in the service of power.

Notes:

2. Virilio's interest in the historical aspects of media may differentiate him from the majority of media scholarship in communication studies. However, it does place him squarely alongside the Canadian thinkers like Harold Innis, who have had some impact on American lines of research. See *The Bias of Communication* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1951). (back)

### **Political Implications**

Virilio looks to history not only to trace the evolving technology of perceptions, but also for an understanding of the political implications of these media technologies. His gaze extends back as far as ancient Rome, through the Enlightenment, to the present scene. He notes that, until recently, "to be mediatized meant literally being stripped of one's immediate rights" (Art 6). Interestingly, Virilio points specifically to Napoleon's rhetoric for an illustration of mediatization. In his own ascension to power, Virilio argues, Napoleon mediatized certain princes, allowing them to keep their title without their power. Mediatization, as Virilio takes the term, is not only a characteristic of tyrants. Virilio finds that even in Greek antiquity: "the democrats always claim to be replacing brute physical force with a moral force allowed by a mass mediatization that flies in the face of the very concept of reality" (Art 30). Democracy, then, also depends on mediatization, or on the ascension to power of one group or individual, by virtue of the stripping away of another's immediate rights.

Those who rise to power in these conditions of mediatization can reshape the perceptions of those whom they have stripped from power. Perspective, or the structure of our perceptions through perspective, has been structured into power for centuries. Virilio looks to ancient civilizations for example, as he discusses the placing of military posts in clearings overlooking recently occupied land:

Land clearing, the cultivation of the earth for subsistence, the receding of forest darkness, are in reality the creation of a military glacis as field of vision, of one of those frontier deserts spoken of by Julius Caesar, which, he says, represent the glory of the Empire because they are like a permanent invasion of the land by the dromocrat's look. (Speed 72-73)

While this passage is complicated by Virilio's use of "dromocrat" to refer to the figure of authority (a reference to Virilio's thinking about "dromology;" see Kellner, who summarizes dromology as the study of "those instruments that accelerate and intensify speed and that augment the wealth and power of those groups who control them" ["Virilio, War, and Technology: Some Critical Reflections"]), the key insight we wish to draw from this passage is that the land is brought into line with the vision of the conqueror. Perspective becomes not merely a facet of the science of optics, nor an art technique, but instead an expression of power and a sign of dominance.

Unsurprisingly, Virilio takes these historical insights into "media" and "perspective" and spins them into a heuristic for contemporary media studies. The media, far from serving a democratizing function, benefits from and so sustains the split between social groups. Virilio describes the trajectory of media and politics in American society as follows: "American democracy will make no real efforts to integrate its ethnic minorities, its factions, into a constant civilization, into a truly community-oriented way of life. For segregation is what sanctions the system's hegemony of the media" (Speed 108). By perpetuating this division, by dividing those in power from those who have been "mediatized" and so stripped of their rights, the media "are able to control the social chaos of American panhumanity; they are the guarantors of a certain civic cohesion, and thus of civil security itself" (Speed 108). One way to describe that civic cohesion is precisely as Caesar did—but framing the land within a single perspective (the perspective of the conqueror). More than any other technology that enables the restructuring of perception and the mediatizing of the individual, the current media technologies of "real time" have a tangible effect on our political power. [3]

Notes:

3. While Virilio contends that the majority of the media's unrestricted power stems from its ability to omit or distort the truth, he does acknowledge that certain groups can recraft the media to their advantage. Virilio looks to the Palestinians for an example of this: "Whether they horrify or become exemplary, the Palestinians are now the masters of an audio-visual empire, of a State founded on roads, airways and images. They exist, somewhere, with a precarious and phantasmal identity, deep in the memories of 400 to 500 million television viewers" (Popular Defense 57). (back)

### **Real time as the Dominant Logic of Perception**

The dominant logic of perception active today is one largely mediated by technology. In its most common-sense articulation, Virilio notes that, "in the past, if you wanted to know what temperature it was, you looked out the window and saw if it was nice out or not. Today, you turn on the television to get the news and the weather" (Politics 67). To turn to technology for guidance in our experience of weather no longer, for many, seems counterintuitive. Virilio sees that "the advanced audiovisual and automotive technologies have denatured direct observation and common sense" (Lost 111).

If we return, briefly, to the words of Merleau-Ponty as quoted by Virilio, the basic human experience of space, unmediated by these technologies, can be described as an experience of the "I can" (Vision 7). Virilio argues that, in the era of broadcast and online or digital technologies, "the bulk of what I see is, in fact and in principle, no longer within my reach. And even if it lies within reach of my sight, it is no longer necessarily inscribed on the map of the 'I can'" (Vision 7). In the age of broadcast media, Merleau-Ponty's assertion is drawn into question.

If, in fact, one can interact with that remote locale visible through new media (a possibility that technologies like the DataGlove make possible), it is in new ways that are distinct from our typical conception of the field of our perceptions and actions. It is that distinction that proves problematic, for Virilio. Virilio asks, in *Open Sky*:

How can we rationally manage the split, not only between virtual and actual realities but, more to the point, between the apparent horizon and the transparent horizon of a screen that suddenly opens up a kind of temporal window for us to interact elsewhere, often a long way away. (*Open Sky* 37)

This new means of viewing the world at a distance, and interacting with the world from a distance, Virilio calls "'teleobjective.' That is to say that television and multimedia are collapsing the close shots of time and space as a photograph collapses the horizon in the telephotographic lens" (*Politics* 21).

The compression of our sense of space under the new media technologies entails an alteration in our conception of time. Our perception of space is subsumed by our perceptions of duration and length. In the past, transportation technologies enabled this shift in our perception of space: "mental mapping evolves with the transportation revolution and the communication revolution. The faster I travel to the end of the world, the faster I come back, and the emptier my mental-map becomes" (Vision 42). If it is possible to fly to Europe overnight, our mental map (our perception) of space separating Europe and the United States shrinks. If we can receive broadcasts of news events live from Europe, our mental map of both the space separating Europe from the US shrinks again.

The term that Virilio develops for this phenomenon is "real time." Real time, as many online gaming fans would attest, refers to the notion that events are unfolding in one's immediate field of view irrelevant of spatial relationships. Real time is the word for the way that our perceptions are shaped by these technologies that place the not-here here, in the field of my present. Further: real time manifests when tele-objectivity allows one to witness an event at daybreak in England when it's pitch black night in one's neighborhood. Real time means, in the most current of online videoconferencing, for example, "meeting at a distance, in other words, being telepresent, here and elsewhere, at the same time" (*Open* 10). Certainly we are conscious of differences in time zones while we watch a live broadcast or partake of a videoconference; certainly we can see that it is dark here but light there. But we are primarily conscious of our "presence" at the event. We are primarily conscious that "now" for us is "now" for them, despite differences in the sun's position.

The real nuance to Virilio's theory enters here: Real time is not, as one might suppose, the opposite of "delayed time." The difference between watching a real time broadcast of Princess Diana's funeral and watching it on videotape at a later hour, for example, is not relevant to real time as a theoretical construct. Real time is, instead, opposed to "real presence"—a sense of local time and local place. While spectators or viewers partake of real time, a place of "here" gives way to the ever-present "now." Virilio argues that real time results in a loss of the spatial boundaries to which humans typically coordinate their bodies. But real time is also a result of a warped sense of what "present" can mean. Virilio points to Paul Klee for an articulation of the impact of real time on our sense of the present:

The painter Paul Klee expressed the point exceptionally well when he noted, "Defining the present in isolation is tantamount to murdering it." This is what technologies of real time are achieving. They kill "present" time by isolating it from its presence here and now for the sake of another commutative space that is no longer composed of our "concrete presence" in the world, but of a "discrete telepresence" whose enigma remains forever intact. ("Third" par. 5)

This example appears in many places in Virilio's work. Virilio argues that "Paul Klee hit the nail on the head" because murdering the now is precisely what Virilio says "teletechnologies of real time are doing: they are killing 'present' time by isolating it from its here and now, in favour of a commutative elsewhere that no longer has anything to do with our 'concrete presence' in the world" (Open 10). In a more consciously analytical approach, Virilio describes this phenomenon with some precision:

Human beings exist in three dimensions of chronological time—past, present, and future. It is obvious that the liberation of the present—real time or world time—runs the risk of making us lose the past and future in favor of a presentification, which amounts to an amputation of the volume of time. Time is volume; it is not only space-time in the sense of relativity. It is volume and depth of meaning, and the emergence of one world time eliminating the multiplicity of local times is a considerable loss for both geography and history. (Politics 81)

Real-time technologies (global broadcasting was a first step; interactive technologies only reinforces the effect) "eliminate the multiplicity of local times." It remains for us to explicate what Virilio sees as this loss.

Importantly, our entry into the mediascape of real time is described by Virilio as "pathological." In *Open Sky*, he laments: "I personally fear we are being confronted by a sort of pathology of immediate perception that owes everything, or very nearly everything, to the recent proliferation of photo-cinematic and video-infographic seeing machines" (Open 90). The primary effect of this psychosis is, in the end, neither a Nietzschean skepticism of these "seeing machines" nor radical doubt of the representations placed before us, but a disorientation. It is to the implications of this disorientation that we now turn.

Phrased most baldly, Virilio claims that "the tyranny of real time is tantamount to a subjugation of the television viewer" (Politics 87). The disorientation which Virilio believes to be inherent in real time (as the common-sense orientation toward space described in Merleau-Ponty is eroded) becomes pervasive. As Virilio claims, "the conquest of panoptical ubiquity would lead to the conquest of passivity, with populations not so much going down in military defeat as in the past[,] but [by] succumbing to mental confusion" (Strategy 55). We are "mediatized" (in the Napoleonic sense) by the media technology, rather than by force. Virilio sees this disorientation and inevitable confusion as inherently dangerous for democracy:

Specifically, there has been no analysis of the extraordinary revolution of long-distance control and destruction—a revolution whose historical importance is equal to that of the revolution in modes of production in the last century, but whose consequences for civil society and for democracy have not yet been fully acknowledged or evaluated. (Lost 129)

It is not clear, of course, whether the proliferation of real-time technologies will lead to the "succumbing" of our population. It is clear that Virilio's interest in the political implications of real-time media upon subjectivity and the political power of the individual are very much in tune with recent work in media studies. We turn, now, to placing Virilio more fully in the context of rhetorical studies and of media studies in the communication field.

### **Concluding Remarks: Cutting a New Path in Media Studies and in Rhetorical Studies**

In this essay we have provided a brief description of Virilio's critical project and underscored a number of useful concepts. Like certain approaches in the rhetoric and sociology of science

and in film theory, we suggested that Virilio's project can be understood as addressing the articulation of technologies of representation and modes of human perception. Because Virilio's approach moves beyond the epistemological to the ideological (differentiating it from the rhetoric and sociology of science) and because his approach is not grounded in the complex intellectual terrain of psychoanalytic discourse (as is film theory), we believe that Virilio offers a fresh lens with which to continue thinking about implications of media technology. The introduction promised some clearer path for reflections on media, from the rhetorical tradition. In closing, we would like to briefly describe the ways in which Virilio's work can be seen as continuous with the rhetorical tradition of the twentieth century. We would also like to explain what happens when Virilian thought is brought to bear on recent research that has appeared in "computer-mediated communication."

### **Virilio as Culmination of One Strand of Thought in the Rhetorical Tradition**

Science and technology has remained a consistent thread in rhetorical studies in this century. We have already pointed toward those interested in the rhetoric of science (Bazerman and others). But more pointedly, Virilio can in some ways be seen as the completion of the meditations on technology begun by Kenneth Burke. In *Permanence and Change*, Burke borrowed from social theory to discuss the "technological psychosis." In Burke's way of thinking, the advancing technology of the day and the patterns of work available within those fields of technology created in individuals a kind of interpretive screen, filtering an individual's thoughts and reflections (*Permanence and Change* 38-42). It is the rise of new technologies, in the age of industrialization, that enables this shift in interpretive patterns to create this technological psychosis.

But it should be noted that, in Burke, the technological psychosis was not tied to any specific technology. Burke was far more concerned with a kind of social mindset about technology, than any individual's experience of technology. This limitation is especially striking, because in later writings, Burke becomes committed to an embodied sense of what it means to be human (most famously encapsulated in the "Definition of Man" (*Language as Symbolic Action* 3-24)). But Burke never connects that embodied sense of humanity to an embodied experience of technology. The interpretive pattern called a "technological psychosis" is a poor analytic tool for rhetoric in an age of media studies. Instead, Burke's later works point the ways that rhetoricians can go—but Burke never went—in analyzing media: toward the bodily experience of media, as this experience affects interpretation.

We believe that, in many ways, Virilio enables the synthesis that Burke could never achieve. Virilio ties the Burkean interpretive experience under conditions of technology to the individual's experience of individual technologies. This is a direction enabled by Virilio's phenomenological roots. Though most rhetorical critics of media texts today do not consider their work rooted in the phenomenological tradition, we believe that Burke's work does represent a kind of heritage, within the rhetorical tradition, that makes Virilio a fellow traveler and Virilian criticism a natural end to that strand of thought in rhetorical studies. His work also represents a substantial improvement over current media scholarship, especially that done under the rubric of "computer mediated communication."

### **Virilio and Computer Mediated Communication**

The field of "computer mediated communication" is heterogeneous. Research originates in departments of English and in departments of Communication Studies. Despite this heterogeneity of sources, however, we can identify three ways that Virilio's work can improve upon extant scholarship:

- \* Virilio's work (unlike Bolter and Grusin's) is thoroughly political: every aspect of technology as it is described and experienced by users is connected to politics.
- \* Virilio's work encourages media scholars to encounter new media in all its richness—not, simply to read and redescribe a media text as text.
- \* Virilio's work, as influenced by the humanistic impulses inherent in phenomenology and in Virilio's Christian impulses, tends toward a belief in the subject and in the persistence of representations and interpretations of the external world.

We will look to each in turn.

Virilio is not the first to look to changes in technology to study changes in the way we perceive. Most recently, Bolter & Grusin, in *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, take pains to explore the ways that their idea of hypermedia is visible, in history, at the points where different media intersect. So, they discuss the “hypermediacy of the baroque” (36). But they look to this history of media the way that traditional art historians have looked (for example) at the history of the development of perspective and of photorealism in the history of art—a history of techniques, rather than a history of political and ideological changes, enabled by and manifest in those techniques. (Without doubt, they make claims to sociological and political significance to their findings, but they do not set out with that aim in mind.) In contrast, in Virilio as discussed in this essay, every change in media can be tied to a change in the relations and manifestations of power.

Virilio addresses a problem, too, in the way scholars in computer mediated communication engage critical practice. Larry Gross describes the dominant mode of such criticism as “impoverished translation” (62): Any dominant mode of communication is, *prima facie*, impossible to reckon in another. For example, musical meaning, which resides in a musical mode, is not reducible to the adjectives that we use to discuss musical meaning in the linguistic mode. Analogously, the combination of the linguistic, iconic, musical, socio-gestural, and logico-mathematical modes that comprise Internet experience is not reducible to the linguistic mode that dominates media scholarship. Unlike the two lead articles on the topic of internet discourse that open the December 2000 issue of *Critical Studies in Media Communication* (Cali; Flanagin, Farinola, and Metzger), a Virilian approach to internet discourse forgoes the analysis of text in favor of technological and perceptive form. The internet is not only a medium of communication through which verbal and iconic messages move, as these articles seem presume, but an extension of human modes of perception and a rearrangement of spatial and temporal forms that enable, extend, and determine a particular kind of experience. A Virilian approach to the Internet would answer McLuhan's bumper sticker, “the medium is the message,” with a virtual ticker or banner that reads, “the medium is the orientation.” A focus on the relationship between content and form—a bias borne of a long tradition of textualism—is replaced by a focus on form and perceptual transformation as the moment of ideological insertion.

Third and finally, this shift to a focus on form and perception has already been discussed in media studies, but in a way that has been compromised because of the deliberate, politically informed hyperbole of the figure/character/caricature that is Jean Baudrillard (Baudrillard has already earned some cache in contemporary rhetorical scholarship; see Chen 666-683; Mickey 271-284). We believe that Virilio's penchant for empirical evidence and more moderate tone is a better grounding for interrogating the dialectic of perception and technology and a significant improvement over the wildly apocalyptic speculations of Baudrillard.

Of course, we would be remiss not to note that Baudrillard and Virilio are colleagues: They have commented on each other's work, and they collaborated on the journal *Traverses* in 1976 (Gane 85-102). We suggest, however, that the theoretical languages that Virilio and Baudrillard offer critical media studies differ at a significant and fundamental level. Where Baudrillard speaks of “simulacra” and “simulation” (see *Simulations*), Virilio speaks of technologies of representation. Where Baudrillard speaks of a rupture in progressive history and the impossibility of human agency after this rupture (see *Illusion*), in Virilio we find technologies of representation existing in articulable relationships with each other and with the “real” world of human agency.

David Gunkel's work is an excellent representative of the introduction of Baudrillardian thought to address the dialectic of perception and technology (see “Rethinking”; “Hacking”). Gunkel uses Baudrillard to advance a research project in media studies which takes deconstruction as its guiding light and “simulation” as its enabling term. Gunkel argues that

virtual reality can rupture the split in classical metaphysics which divides "original" from "copy" (otherwise known as "mimesis"). In his review of the literature, he finds the beginnings of this position in critics who argue that there is a difference between simulation and imitation, a difference which is "difficult and not altogether clear" while being "vitaly important" and "at the heart of virtual reality" ("Rethinking" 51).

Baudrillard provides the richer theoretical articulation of these impulses, arguing that simulation is neither identical to nor the dialectical opposite of imitation. Following from Baudrillard's claims, Gunkel argues that simulation "deconstructs" the metaphysical split which supports the sharp line dividing imitation from the Real; it "displaces the relationship between these two terms" ("Rethinking" 55; Gunkel further explicates the deconstructive power of these new technologies in "Hacking"). Across his research, Gunkel imagines that virtual reality has the power to undermine the Western philosophical tradition.

We find Gunkel's claims striking and fruitfully productive in its posing new avenues of research into computer media. We also believe, however, that Gunkel's claims for the power of new media to effect a rupture in metaphysics to be tenable only if one supports Baudrillardian claims about a past-tense, apocalyptic rupture in history and a sudden shift away from previous modes of representation in the present age of Spectacle and Simulation. From a Virilian vantage, Baudrillard's claims that a rupture has occurred, that "the orgy is over" and the Real has been forever lost in a sea of simulacra, is untenable. Virilio parts from Baudrillard in that he does not believe that technologies of representation or simulation represent a rupture from the "real." As Cubitt notes, "Virilio's theory of representation appears to rest rather specifically on a concept of truth as total and complete, and completely identified with the existence of a pre-existing world, a unity only ruptured by its communication" (Cubitt 134). This claim that the real persists stands contrary to the Baudrillardian position, and closer to the ground upon which much media criticism is built.

Rather than assert a rupture in the era of simulation, a Virilian approach to understanding the new media technologies (Gunkel's virtual reality, the world wide web, and so on) in terms of their continuity with previous modes or technologies of representation seems better. Fundamentally, new media exist in relationship to (not in rupture from) old media, and if we are to understand one media technology, we must understand it (and its logics of perception) in terms of its relationship to the technologies it replaces.

We believe that it is very important to continue thinking about and theorizing the relationships between perception, technology, and politics in ways that are not reducible to the old rhetorical nutshell, the tension between form and content. The writings of Paul Virilio offer us the theoretical engine to advance this project.

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