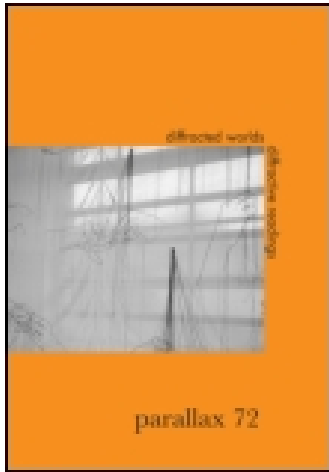


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A Defence of Daylight

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Book Review

A Defence of Daylight

John Armitage and Ryan Bishop, eds. *Virilio and Visual Culture*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013)

This edited collection, assembled by John Armitage and Ryan Bishop, focuses on the ‘visual domain’ in Paul Virilio’s work, which is always concerned ‘with movement, speed, time, the built environment, technology and their complex interactions, resulting in the constantly increasing militarisation of all aspects of daily life’ (p.2). The questions raised, as such, relate or refer – as they do in Virilio’s work – to battlefield perception, the act of taking aim through ‘images department[s]’¹ of so-called democratic states, engaged in ‘pure war’, endless war whose conquest also occurs endo-psychically. Hence the imperative to put under scrutiny knowledge production, world rendition, through technologies of vision which are, at the same time, technologies of targeting; it is the early, most influential writings like *Speed and Politics* (1977), *The Aesthetics of Disappearance* (1980) and *War and Cinema* (1984) that form ground zero, or points of eternal return, of this essay collection, which nevertheless covers a range of Virilio’s work.² The objective is to provide investigations into contemporary culture informed by Virilio’s thinking over the course of his extensive ‘corpus’ of work, invariably attentive to the ‘thanatopolitics’³ of said culture: the ‘logistics of perception’ that make the planet spectacularly visible.

The chapters, then, preceded by one of Virilio’s articles, ‘The Illusion of Zero Time’, consider material from across his prolific career: *Bunker Archaeology* (1975), *The Vision Machine* (1988), *The Art of the Motor* (1993), *Art and Fear* (2000) and *Grey Ecology* (2009), to name but a few.⁴ The sections are gathered together into a book with a clear

force of argument directed at/against the optics of techno-culture, the speed with which images (as projectiles) appear and disappear, resulting in ‘picnolepsy’, that particular form of perception emergent from the absences produced by accelerated movement. The various contributions, by, amongst others, John Beck, Jordan Crandall, Caren Kaplan, John W.P. Philips, as well as the two editors, deal with the collection’s premise – e.g. vision machinery, totally technologized environments – and Virilio’s philosophy in vastly different ways without losing that sense of coherence so often missing, or stunted, in such efforts, paper assemblages. Saying that, and I mean this as a point of strength, the work here really is by no means brought into alignment in terms of the approach taken by these contributors. Essays can take the form – or work against academic form – of, say, meditations, or an impulse of ‘spontaneous’ gestures in Joy Garnett’s chapter, whose argument is, as she announces in her title, a drawing nearer, ‘towards’ a ‘new ecology of time’: a subversion of the dromosphere through artworks that give the impression of slowness, of slow development. This might well be – a comment that refers to the collection as a whole – not simply a deliberate reflection on Virilio’s way of thinking (and therefore also quite clearly an indication of influence), but, more so, an incorporation, as it were, of his ‘odd and oblique’ (p.1) method of study, which the editors specifically raise in the introduction. There is evidence of a critical writing that, purely formally, testifies to the importance (as well as the seductive properties) of Virilio’s work, if not to critical theory more generally, which is itself odd, oblique, moving laterally, like a chess knight, across and against the conventions of codes. The most notable example of such writing/thinking is Jordan Crandall’s piece, a piece of pieces, composed of sketches and boxed-in concepts, diversely capitalized, in bold, full of forward slashes, etc., announcing ‘the event’, the subject matter of his

paper/technology, this typed and written thing that states that ‘the *event* is not an object but an agency of gathering: it assembles and focuses the agencies that help compose it. Actors may “take hold” of the event, but the event also takes hold of them’ [original emphasis] (p.154). Crandall’s contribution is obliqueness (and possession) *par excellence*, an errant work of dislocation that mirrors the ‘event’ it ‘describes’ or unsettles through a refusal of linear writing, an insertion of handwritten scribbles as an exploration of another type of ‘grey ecology’: disorders of thoughts on grey paper. Virilio’s work, at first sight, is restricted to a single interview, but the encounter with his philosophy happens from the inside, wayward, as dissolution, as if Virilio had become atmosphere.⁵

John Beck’s chapter similarly treats Virilio’s ‘presence’ according to the concerns of his paper, ‘hidden but not concealed’: this ‘awareness of hiddenness’ (p.65) applies as much to the philosopher’s writing (embedded in the structure of this paper, only emerging into full view at the end) as to the material under consideration – aerial photography that in its ‘violent flattening of depth’ (p.66) and abstraction paradoxically reveals its modes of operation and erasure. Beck’s argument proceeds from the by now clichéd analogy between aerial photography and abstract art – territories as deep seas, a visual field as ‘blankly non-figurative’ (p.47) – in order to propose a ‘potentially more resistant view’ (p.66) of this correspondence. What he does here is to follow it up, by juxtaposing ‘flat’ images of military surveillance with Jasper Johns’ mid-1950s painting, *Flag*, as well as David Maisel’s photographs taken around the Great Salt Lake in Utah, titled *Terminal Mirage* (2005), in terms of an uncomfortable doubling, a scrambling of messages (the work of Michel Serres also comes to mind here). The gist of his argument is that these conflicting messages interrupt each other because they ‘cannot be separated out’ (p.63): rabbit and duck or vase and face, to bring up R.D. Laing’s example from *The Divided Self* (1960), flicker in and out of existence – this rhythmic variation can’t be unseen. The ‘light is unflinching but not in a revealing way; it is hallucinatory, challenging the certainties of sight and perception’, as Beck notes (p.63) in relation to Maisel’s photographs/paintings, real yet unreal, ‘natural’ yet manufactured, so that these possibilities (duck/rabbit; vase/face; flatness/depth, etc.) exist at the same time, as oscillating, interdependent, mutually disruptive phenomena. The latter form, to slightly appropriate Ryan Bishop’s words, ‘spectres of percep-

tion’, images or eruptions that occur, in his paper, between presence and absence through an ‘ethics of movement’ (p. 129). Bishop proposes the latter with respect to Bashir Makhoul’s 2011 installation *Enter Ghost, Exit Ghost* as ‘discourse (this course)’ (p.138) through the maze of, in one part of the exhibition, a cardboard village, itself indicative of ‘untenable political conditions’ (p.129).

This collection, as such, sends echoes back and forth, between the chapters, whose resounding concerns are those of returning, interrupted images, alternations of presence and absence that haunt each other, possibilities of vision through precisely those interruptions, ‘discourses of “dizziness”’ (p.159) as John Armitage notes, that have the potential to yield a reconfiguration of being/seeing in the world. It is, then, excellent work, yet the main drawback, which is a reservation I also hold for Virilio’s thinking – a thinking that remains absolutely necessary as a critique of techno-culture, its surveillance systems and endo-colonial control – relates to the sacredness of the ‘human’ as a concept, a myth, which is largely upheld in this collection. Even though Ian James, in ‘The Production of the Present’, acknowledges the ‘nostalgic attachment to the values of immediacy and presence’ (p.227) – Virilio’s opening essay is indicative of this (anti-vampiric ‘last man’)⁶ longing for ‘daylight’, for which read presence, reality, becoming ‘enshrouded’ in cybernetic spaces (which ‘will win out’) or ‘Museum[s] of the Sun’ (p.35) – there is no sustained engagement with what occasionally emerges, here more so than in Virilio’s writings, as a celebration of a ‘human spirit’, ‘fully human’ gestures (p.39), the ‘primacy of the flesh and of the human’ (p.42). Such statements or propositions are deeply problematic, particularly when considering the works of techno/theorists like Friedrich Kittler or Jacques Derrida in ‘*Geschlecht II: Heidegger’s Hand*’, which, though by no means recent either, nonetheless seem more suited in providing theoretical reflections of/against the present moment. The point is not to ignore Virilio’s ‘horizon’ of the ‘human’ – mechanized from the start – but to address it, yet not in terms of a consecration, which doesn’t stand in opposition to targeting techniques, but rather a desecralization: to frame a critique ‘in the name of a reinstating/resurrection of the (hydra-headed)’ ‘human’ against the ‘dehumanizing’ forces of watching war machines is to risk legitimating the discourse on the basis of which these devices, policies and systems operate. Because, at heart, the ‘logistics of perception’ depend on a narrative of ‘value’, the ‘value’ of some lives over others, those

that turn into ‘collateral damage’ or are ‘non-combatants’ and therefore are always already, even if not yet quite, the ‘enemy’. As Armitage claims in his paper, where he advocates a ‘sacred humanism’ to oppose ‘profane’ forces of destruction, this ‘concept [is] focused on a concern for human interests, values of rationality, the nobility of freedom’, and which is, further, ‘dedicated to the study of the humanities as something venerable, to learning in the liberal arts as something worthy of respect’ (p.161). The intention might well be to keep safe or rescue lives deemed less worth living, and defend practices gradually eroded of consequence, yet this edification/fetishization of matter, flesh and art, as/if opposed to the spectrality of a disappearing techno-culture, ultimately isn’t a tactic that will pose a significant threat to this economy of ‘pure war’. Largely, this is because the idea of the ‘human’, for one, is no longer tenable as a ‘thing’ that exists outside the ‘handiwork’ of technologization⁸ (though the narrative of the ‘value’ of art is equally to be resisted, because it tends to accept a rhetoric of rationality and instrumentalization employed in auditing its ‘usefulness’).⁹ In order to function, or, rather, to be radically dysfunctional, thinking/writing against techno-culture can only go so far when occurring on such premises that sanctify, mythologize or resurrect the ‘human’.

Notes

¹ Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema* (London and New York: Verso, 1989), p.2.

² These dates refer to the French editions. See <<http://www.egs.edu/faculty/paul-virilio/bibliography/>> [14/07/14] for details.

³ Achille Mbembe quoted in Ben Anderson, ‘Facing the Future Enemy: US Counterinsurgency Doctrine and the Pre-Insurgent’, *Theory, Culture, Society*, 28:7–8 (2011), p.235.

⁴ With the exception of *Grey Ecology*, these dates refer to the French editions. See <<http://www.egs.edu/faculty/paul-virilio/bibliography/>> [14/07/14] for details.

⁵ This is what Crandall writes: ‘One gathering of actors is constituted as a change – shifting or

settling into a state that is relatively stable or discrete – only because another has been transformed into atmosphere’ (p.152).

⁶ The reference here is predominantly to Richard Matheson’s *I am Legend* (London: Gollancz, 2010) but also to arguments that link techno-culture to vampirism; see Laurence A. Rickels, *The Vampire Lectures* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999) and Friedrich Kittler, *Draculas Vermächtnis: Technische Schriften* (Leipzig: Reclam, 1993).

⁷ See Neil Badmington, ‘Theorizing Posthumanism’, *Cultural Critique*, 53 (Winter 2003), pp.20–7. In *Strategy of Deception*, Virilio ends his argument, largely concerned with the war in Kosovo, by calling attention to subjects denied their ‘humanity’, the ‘living body of the human being becoming an object of experimentation and a *raw material* in a period of extreme shortages’. I understand the urge and urgency of such statements – a ‘living body’ that cannot, should not, be treated as ‘raw material’ – but a return to ‘humanism’ doesn’t, I don’t think, allow ‘us’ to move any closer towards a stage of ‘lesser violence’. See Paul Virilio, *Strategy of Deception* (London and New York: Verso, 2007), pp.80–1.

⁸ Jacques Derrida, ‘Geschlecht II: Heidegger’s Hand’, in *Deconstruction and Philosophy*, ed. John Sallis (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp.161–96.

⁹ This is a reference to Sam Ladin’s paper titled ‘Against Value is Not Enough’, University of Sheffield, 20 March 2014. He argues here that ‘the greatest possible value of the arts has been, and might continue to be, to oppose, rigorously and constitutively, dominant and dominating ascriptions of value’. His project, ‘Against Value’, suggests that ‘the best way to engage critically with our society is to suspend presumptions of value, to propose an incommensurability, the critique of any “common measure,” even if that common measure pretends to be as neutral as “value”’. Thanks to Sam for sharing his thoughts.

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