Paul Virilio and the articulation of post-reality

MARC HANES
Department of Philosophy, Fordham University, Bronx, NY 10458

"Reality used to be a friend of mine" — P.M. Dawn

When a chart-topping pop musical group espouses such disenchantment, more serious followers of the modernity/postmodernity debate should develop a deeper appreciation of the degree to which the problem of the nature of reality has permeated contemporary culture. The tension between the movements of modernity and postmodernity, between the search for a rational basis from which to guide human lives and the opposition to the sole, hegemonic use of this approach, crystallizes at various points of intersection, often instilling an almost panic mode in both camps as lines of thought are thrown up in moves and counter-moves of tactical offense and defense. Paul Virilio's ruminations on the technological transformation of Western culture provide a valuable Archimedean point from which to reframe the entire debate and its increasing role in both the academy and non-academic, mainstream lives. His writings echo with the cries of both the modern and postmodern, both of which in different ways are searching to slow down today's cultural maelstrom long enough to *even react to oneself*. By looking at Virilio, we may be able to witness in microcosm a troubled 20th century's attempt at self-diagnosis and then plumb the nature of this apparent malaise.

From modernity and postmodernity to reality and post-reality

Both an architect and philosopher, Paul Virilio teaches architecture and urban planning at the *Ecole Spéciale d'Architecture* in Paris, and has been active in political movements since the 1970s. His primary philosophical influences include Jacques Ellul and Etienne Gilson, both exemplars of previous attempts at moral refusals of technology's march toward unquestioned omnipotence. This foundation in architecture, cinema, and visually-oriented design has served Virilio well, providing an appreciation for, and mooring in, practical application of complicated philosophical theories. But an unfortunate by-product of his background is the fact that until very recently, there has been an absence of discussion of his thought outside of a small segment in the circles of art, cinema, architecture, and philosophy.

But newcomers to Virilio will find an attention to historical detail which rivals Michel Foucault, balanced by an abiding desire to apply his theories to contemporary issues and settings in a manner which is reminiscent of Jean Baudrillard. Virilio possesses broad analytical skill coupled with a moral imperative which impels him to focus his skills equally on broad theoretical and political registers.

His basic insight finds that the conceptual dimensions of time and space have become fundamentally destabilized due to modern technology's strategic urge to produce better results and more complete knowledge at an increasingly faster pace. Technology's architectonic structure reaches virtual totalization, swallowing both *time*

and space (that is, if one can move fast enough one is concurrently *everywhere* bringing about a speed-induced *flux* so far-reaching and totalizing as to be *static*). Speed allows the power of the real, a fixed location in time and space, to disappear. "Speed suddenly becomes a primal dimension that defies all temporal and physical measurements" (1991b: 18). The real, the point in time and space, is replaced by the "reality effect," the vector hanging in no-time, no-space ready to follow (more so, to be) any possible trajectory. That is, speed makes potentiality or possibility *actuality*—what *may* come about or appear is given equal standing to what *does* appear.

At every level, social, political, or military, speed has resulted in what Virilio calls "dromological" violence,[1] which does not allow for a time or place to appear in which this trend could then be evaluated and questioned. While at first this observation may strike one as an essentially modernist complaint against the standard-less aporia of postmodernity, Virilio intends it otherwise. Modern progress has not been defeated by its relativist enemies: progress has destroyed itself by fulfilling its goal only too well, i.e., by improving its technological abilities until those abilities went beyond any effective control. He writes: "It is *speed* as the nature of dromological progress that ruins progress....Western man has appeared superior and dominant, despite inferior demographics, because he appeared *more rapid"* (1986: 46-7). That is, when speed voids time and space, any Western-style notion of progress becomes impossible to situate—positive movement suffers from a type of regenerative obsolescence in which the novel never even has its day to shine since speed renders it superfluous even before its very occurrence. Thus, while the appearance of improvement may be maintained constantly, without actual instantiation the superiority of the technological West remains at a hypothetical or theoretical level. For example, Virilio would point to the economic shifts which threaten the 'American dream' such as the replacement of corporate middle managers with swift, efficient computers. The system has 'improved' but those it was designed to serve and benefit have been devastated or ruined by this 'advance.' And the survivors work longer hours with less leisure time than the workers of previously less advanced stages.

Here Virilio may appear more like a jaded and politically voyeuristic postmodern, complacently scoffing at any attempt to make life better, to effect positive change and growth. But, a richly ambiguous figure, he is not so easily labeled. He reverses field as often as the vectors he indicates and traces. If any description fits, perhaps it is that of the failed modernist who is nostalgic for the possibility of the real, but too disillusioned to retain any faith in it. But then again, he often lapses into the position of failed postmodernist, without guiding critical reference points, unable even to allow postmodernity's role as loyal opposition to Enlightenment ideals of progress. Thus, he writes:

> The recourse to History proposed by experts of postmodernity is a cheap trick that allows them to avoid the question of Time, the regime of trans-historical temporality derived from technological ecosystems. If in fact there is a crisis today, it is a crisis of ethical and esthetic references, the inability to come to terms with events in an environment where the appearances are against us. With the growing imbalance between direct and indirect information that comes of the development of various means of communication, and its tendency to privilege information mediated to the detriment of meaning, it seems that the *reality effect* replaces immediate reality. Lyotard's modern crisis of grand

narratives betrays the effect of new technologies, with the accent, from here on, placed on means more than ends (1991b: 24).

Representation, whether modern or postmodern in conception, aims at creating a clearing for understanding, that is, aims at localizing (a) truth by means of an oral or written sign. Until now, debates regarding representation have centered on the ability of the sign to retain its referentiality—both the Idea in Plato or Husserl, and even the trace of the Idea in Derrida, rely on there at least having been a time and space for the sign. The degree of 'truth' these concepts bestow remains the point of contention. But for either camp, truth needs time and a place to accrete to itself and become concretized. And for Virilio it is precisely this which is no longer possible:

> There was less to know in preceding centuries, and you'll notice that, paradoxically, knowledge then aimed at certainty and totality. The more knowledge grew the greater the unknown grew, we might conclude; or rather, the more information flashes by the more aware we are of its incomplete fragmentary nature (1991a: 45).

The more speed eats away at a truth and reality which is supposed to be only communicated through the representational sign, the less the human perception of—for example—the self's existence as unitary subject can keep up and be kept up; one no sooner fixes on one thing and tries to move to the next than the former recedes to a vanishing point, leaving no foothold or foundation on which a chain of meanings can accumulate. Again, the leveling of any distinction between primary and secondary aspects of the sign, of even the chronological ordering of a concept's aspects, removes the dialectical sense in which meaning progresses:

> To deny the ideal hierarchy of the crucial and the incidental, because there is no incidental, only dominant cultures that exile us from ourselves and others, a loss of meaning which is for us not only a *siesta* of consciousness but also a decline in existence (1991a: 37).

Similar to many contemporary post-linguistic turn thinkers, Virilio conceives reality through representation, but with a unique twist. Existence, the human conception of subject and object, changes with different modes of representation. Following the concurrent genealogies (as found in the various deconstructionist, hermeneuticist, or critical theory schools) of both semiosis and the conceptual effects of the study of semiosis, both history and historiography, Virilio outlines the descent of the visible and the simultaneous ascent of the invisible as the human barometer of what counts as reality. That which the human can see (light's refraction off an object over a period of time) loses conceptual importance to a reality impelled by speeds invisible to the human eye and the cognitive state dependent on visibility. His approach to the human condition is informed by the mutations in these human modes of representation:

> The enigma proposed by the Sphinx to Oedipus is a question on the *strange being that moves through time*, and it is really the diversity of techniques used by the being that is the basis for the interrogation; it is this very diversity that in turn designates man among other animals (1991a: 85-6).

The statement that the human is that which moves through time equates human reality with time and space and in a sense inextricably entwines the future of both. Thus, as technological speed levels the concepts of time and space, these can no longer serve as the site for meaning and our representations. Since antiquity, we have understood ourselves through a stable notion of time and space, and Virilio strives to show precisely that destabilizing this notion, through anything from quantum physics to deconstruction, is not without its immediate ramifications. Speed precludes that situating of consciousness which gives the human its distinct and unified place in the cosmos. The resultant erosion of consciousness is for Virilio a slow cultural suicide—we are losing the means to distinguish between the original (that which remains authentic or static) and the copy or simulacra, hence also losing the ability to make informed political or social decisions.

As with many recent French works of note (from Bataille to Baudrillard), Virilio's texts performatively resemble their subject matter. Thus, his writings on speed and dromology careen from one topic to another with a sense of fatal acceleration. Indeed, as one astute commentator (Kroker, 1992: 34) notes, Virilio "is one aesthetic rebel who goes all the way." As a result, especially an initial foray into his thought, such as the one attempted here, should focus and refocus on his core points and their kinetic style of presentation, lest it too run the risk of "disappearing."

By paying greater attention to Virilio's application of his ideas to topics such as war and the logistics of battle, he may be understood with greater breadth and depth. When he issues pronouncements such as "space and time are amalgamated" (1991b: 65) or "the standard for measuring the space traveled through is no longer the time of passage but rather the speed, the distance-speed, which has become the measure and the privileged dimension of space as of time" (1991b: 58) he is leading us through two conceptual movements. The first can be grasped by noting his reversal of the traditional chronological order of offense and defense. In battles or wars of previous technological eras, the offense moved and the defense reacted. But advanced methods of war today allow the defense to plan strategy *proactively*, acting prior to the offensive assault, in turn altering the offense's plans before they are enacted. This creates a series of strategies and counter-strategies wherein surveillance of the enemy's possible movements and reformulating plans based on this up to the moment information overshadows actual engagement. Actual motion is denuded, speed leaping over the plodding tortoise of any empirical event encumbered by a beginning, middle, and end. As a result, generals on both sides vacate the field of battle in favor of the 'war room' wherein computers play out endless scenarios and casualty projections, and one takes into account the enemy's computer models while eliminating the need for physical activity by actual troops.

The second conceptual movement is the reification of this circular trend.[2] Events such as the Cold War are the norm—if nothing palpable occurs as past wars were understood to occur, this does not make them any less real. Simulation models are the new reality, and here speed breaks down previously entrenched notions of representation and *mis*representation, putting into question classic models of the real and irreal. Thus, speed allows endless counter-strategies to occur without any 'real'

terrain ever being fought on. This is what Virilio calls 'pure war.' Battles, whether military or social, happen for us less as material and bloody collisions and more as distant computer or television-based simulation: "The new unknown combatants, come from nowhere and *no longer finding a strategic terrain, fight in strategic time, in the relativity of travel time"* (1986: 121). Success is measured in the ability not to be found, to *disappear* before one's opponent, while retaining the ability to reappear on any vector:

> Basically, reality encounters the fate of modernity: it has always already happened… We live today in an ever-growing fault between the promptness of the broadcasts and our own capacity to grasp and measure the present moment. The question of *modernity* and *post-modernity* is superseded by that of *reality* and *post-reality:* we are living in a system of technological temporality, in which duration and material support have been supplanted as criteria by individual retinal and auditory instants (1991b: 84).

Modern or postmodern, participant or voyeur?

The resulting aesthetics of disappearance, with the speed of light as its limit-concept, brings about an inability to make distinctions or raise political or social criticisms because there is neither stable time nor space in which to register them. The representations which comprise life fold in on themselves as we make the leap into hyperspace, thus making "the derangement of the senses a permanent state" (1991a: 92). We cannot react at the pace technology establishes as (hyper-)reality:

> Speed again ostensibly perverts the illusory order of normal perception, the order of arrival of information. What could have seemed simultaneous is diversified and decomposes. With speed, the world keeps on coming at us, to the detriment of the object, which is itself now assimilated to the sending of information. It is this intervention that destroys the world as we know it, technique finally reproducing permanently the violence of the accident; the mystery of speed remains a secret of light and heat from which even sound is missing (1991a: 100-1).

What has withered away is the lived time of the orderly and unified narrative. Virilio explains this displacement and replacement, as well as the illusion of stability, by drawing out Einstein's example of passing trains: "The moment when two trains seem immobile to travellers while they are really launched at top speed one beside the other" (1991a: 108). It is this illusion of stability which indicates and accounts for our contemporary sense of 'static' reality. With wry irony Virilio notes that, "paradoxically, it's the extreme mobility which creates the inertia of the moment, instantaneity which would create the instant!" (1991a: 108).

At such points it is difficult to characterize Virilio's words as either the lament of the disillusioned modernist or the detached observation of the postmodern aesthete. On the one hand, it seems that what drives his critique is that this dromological phenomena happens *to us*—our very human essence is transformed by it and this trend must be stopped. On the other hand, one senses that something nags at Virilio and prevents any total sense of satisfaction with his own critical conclusions, namely, that he would almost rather shrug and watch the collisions of war-machines moving toward the speed of light. While his insistent moral indignation at the cultural decay caused by technology urges him to find a mode of transcending this decay, this imperative clashes with his

fascination with the schizophrenia inherent in our dromoscape.[3] At these turns in his thought he may ponder the questions which haunt him most powerfully, such as: "Do we represent the construction, or construct the representation?" (1991b: 103). Virilio's indecision is apparent here regarding the subject's autonomous agency and her complicity in the technological revolutions plaguing contemporary society. His emphasis on ideas such as the reversibility of appearance (wherein a representation presents a chameleon-like ability to encompass simultaneously opposing predicates) and the enigmatic interstices between oppositional poles (where these reversals occur) helps to locate similarities between him and his better known French contemporaries Jean Baudrillard and Jacques Derrida. But while these two figures often are accused—perhaps mistakenly—of withdrawal into a semiotic dreamscape, offering no ethical or political course of action, Virilio's internal tension between participation and voyeurism keeps him on the precipice of hope and avoids charges of political or ethical quietism.

It is this characteristic which makes Virilio such a paramount benchmark for his time. As postmodernity loses its initial veneer of radicality, a realization dawns on us that, after the collision of modernity and postmodernity, both are still left standing. The former still spins out rationally defensible meta-narratives and vigilant critiques, while the latter has settled in permanently, thus proving itself more than a passing fad. And as both grow further accustomed to each other's presence, a new tension arises when one notices the *similarities* they still share. Perhaps more than any other contemporary French thinker, Virilio, with a foot in either camp, *is* this tension.

Virilio and postmodern metaphysics

Focusing on the tension in Virilio enables us to revisit the confluence between his theories and everyday 20th century culture. One of postmodernity's primary rallying points, especially for theorists of representation, is the 'end of metaphysics.' Yet, metaphysics, this essential part of modern thought, is not so easily leveled and Virilio provides a clue to the complicity of modernity and postmodernity when he states that "speed finally allows us to close the gap between physics and metaphysics" (1991b: 63). Has metaphysics truly been delimited or even eradicated by postmodern critique, or has it mutated into new, unforeseeable forms? The better question is: Should postmodern thought desire to discuss ethics, politics and reality, can it do all this without metaphysics? As well as anyone in France today, Virilio is prepared to tackle these questions and help move the debate forward.

Virilio certainly senses a limit to what a postmodern approach can do. But his 'failed modernist' side will not let these ethico-political questions remain unanswered; the quest for meaning cannot end here. By singling out his concepts regarding the problem of the nature of reality, a tentative outline may be sketched here regarding how metaphysics still operates in postmodern culture. This will suggest that it is partially the postmodernist's recalcitrant resistance to metaphysics which contributes to our cultural malaise.

The question of what reality 'is' was conceived in the modern tradition as a metaphysical question (epistemology not yet having asserted fully its independence

from metaphysics). Even though they may have been unaware of it, Descartes, Locke, or other modern thinkers could turn to questions of epistemology, aesthetics, or ethics only after the metaphysical question had been dealt with. However, since Hume, talk of substance or the essence of the world has become so problematic and suspect that thinkers with sympathies in this direction gave them up or expressed them in narrower epistemological terms. Humean skepticism surely is alive and well today, but so is the need to explain ultimate reality, to find some solid rock upon which to build a definition of knowledge. Today, both modernists and postmodernists (with perhaps the exception of some Kierkegaardians) generally agree that the nature of reality cannot be known or explained either metaphysically or through faith. Hence, the popularity of such 'epistemological' strategies such as adopting weak foundationalism (as expressed by William Alston (1989, particularly essays 1 and 2) and Ernest Sosa (1991, particularly essays 9 and 10) among others), forging ideal speech situations (Jürgen Habermas (1984)), or relying on terms having "no name in our language" which we are to affirm as long as they avoid linguistic nostalgia for a stable and timeless Truth (Jacques Derrida (1982)).

Yet, leaving the mystery and ineffability of the failed metaphysical systems behind for a more scientific or epistemological approach has not eliminated the prime motives behind them (a point Kant often noted). Virilio's awareness of this is found in his various writings, especially insofar as he continues to press for distinctions he states are all but beyond our ability to make. Thus, he himself attempts simultaneously to distinguish between the real and the imagined, and to reveal this attempt as charade, only to finally conclude that despite our continued attempts to locate the real, speed has caused the impossibility of any discernment here due to the increasingly evident limits of the human cognitive apparatus. Because of technological speed we can no longer parallel and absorb the growth of images and representations, and make the traditional empirical distinctions regarding the real and the imaginary, all of which leaves us with the need for knowledge, but with the explanatory skills of earlier cultural stages where the primary explanation was sheer acceptance of the inexplicable. Our cognitive apparatus and science fail our modernist aspirations, even as our semiotic representations themselves lose the characteristics which previously enabled distinctions of truth and falsity.

Indeed, physics and metaphysics appear connected in destabilizing knowledge today, for Virilio finds the physics of technology and the transcendentalism of metaphysics operating in tandem to oppress the circulation of knowledge necessary for political resistance. He states that: "the two-in-one of historical totalitarianism is realized by nuclear deterrence, along with the 'get out of Nature' of metaphysics, which from the outset was the foundation of colonial strategy" (1990: 31). Human knowledge creates its own *aporias* via the technological and metaphysical urges to growth and transcendence. In this vein, another commentator (Wark, 1990: 98) on Virilio notes: "Besides mobility, or the problem of temporal relativities, the logistics of perception also entails a problem of scale, or of relating the proportions of simulated images to what we imagine the real thing to be." Again, our inability to even *imagine* the speed the world moves at (what does 186,281 miles per second mean to **you**?) gives rise to the question: is a world beyond our senses real or imaginary?

Speed, scale, proportion—all are integral elements of Virilio's aesthetic dromoscape. All play roles in the perceptual changes which for Virilio threaten received notions of human consciousness. It is here that Virilio helps take us beyond the modern/postmodern debate to new insights into contemporary culture. To see this, we need to ask Virilio a question which will draw out the larger metaphysical implications of his writings, namely: what has *really* changed here?

In order to propose a fundamental shift in the architectonic structure of the world and the enclitic shift which arises in human consciousness, one assumes that there *is* such a thing as a structure of the world which could then remain the same or change. Virilio's comment on the convergence of metaphysics and physics indicates that his methodological assumption exceeds the boundaries of epistemology. Yet, given his understanding of the role metaphysics plays in the larger culture, he curiously hesitates to acknowledge that his assumptions regarding the "logistics of perception" necessitate a pre-technological framework of forms and essences. His long genealogical excursus on the history of speed approaches Foucauldian depth and precision, but one might expect that a critique which decries 'dromocratic intelligence's permanent assault on human nature' would result in a more explicit discussion of the meta-empirical sense of human nature which is needed to make such criticisms. Similar to Derrida's term *différance*, Virilio tries to establish speed as "the causal idea, the idea before the idea" (1991a: 22), while trying to link its non-being, its non-essence, concretely to our lives. 'Disappearance' here threatens more than our cognitive abilities—it corrupts our daily lives and our very essence. But can Virilio make his critique stick without performatively betraying his position?

Furthermore, in true metaphysical fashion, essence is bound up with form for Virilio. He adumbrates this connection by stating that "the pursuit of forms is only a pursuit of time, but if there are no stable forms, there are no forms at all" (1991a: 17). When the essence of the world is corrupted, the actual forms of the world follow suit. As a result, the 'Real' real blurs with the imaginary. Virilio tries to maintain his theories from the perspective of the knowing subject, but it appears that his larger concerns disallow leaving the problematic in such epistemological terms and return again and again to the metaphysical question of *how the world itself has changed*.

Admittedly, the border between metaphysics and epistemology has always been a puzzling and difficult terrain. But the interplay between what one *wants* to show and what one believes one *can* show is perhaps the continuous driving force in philosophy (and theoretical thought in general). Virilio wants to reveal an actual change in the world, that is, that speed has disqualified the old vehicles of our human environment and that, furthermore, this change has not been lost on how humans lead their lives. We have lost our substance and are now merely accidents waiting to happen. But it is not always apparent that Virilio can show this, especially without explaining the self-exemption from this problem which is necessary to describe and frame it from without.

Virilio's observation finds echoes in our social environs: for example, we lambaste the attention span of the 'MTV generation' or the 'sound-bite' mentality of the media. How far off is the editorial page complaint about the citizen's non-existent attention span from Virilio's criticism that "representation now stretches beyond the real… technologies

have denatured direct observation and common sense" (1991b: 111)? As a culture we still seek metaphysical comfort and postmodern critique seems equally complicit in this, despite many avowals otherwise. The implicit tension in Virilio as both modernist and postmodernist reveals that the further one tries to run from metaphysics, the more it drives this 'need for speed.' Ethical or political critique's need for a foundation remains even if the foundation is the postmodern "disappearance" of all objective foundations. Metaphysical 'atheism' stands firmly on the basis of the need to end metaphysics, and in taking a stance here, is it so different from that against which it reacts?

Now we can begin again to ask straightforwardly of Virilio, modernists and postmodernists, and 20th century culture: what has really changed in the fabric of reality? Granting Virilio his incisively powerful observations on technology and the impact of speed, I agree that politics, economics, and all socio-semiotic interaction is driven by the "speed of the moving body and the undetectability of its path" (1986: 135) because the evidence surrounds us. For instance, advertising sells its products this way, be they Pepsi or Presidents, draining virtually all substantive content from the communication. And one rarely finds the time/space even to begin constructing something along the lines of a Habermasian ideal speech situation. But does this mean that the fabric of reality has been altered?

Articulating Virilio's post-reality

For the above-mentioned reasons, Virilio's concern is that the answer is yes. Certainly, this question looms as an important one for future philosophical and cultural critique. I will now try to provide some depth and contrast to Virilio's ideas on this problem by briefly turning to some comments of Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Virilio subscribes to the increasing inability of humans to distinguish a real from an imaginary due to technological speed. But is this inability a cognitive problem or a problem of *articulation?* Wittgenstein pays particular attention, not to the actual veracity of our cognitive faculties, but rather to what we make of them 'after the fact': "The point here is not that our sense-impressions can lie, but that we understand their language. (And this language like any other is founded on convention)" (1958: 113). Wittgenstein does not want to comment on any purported change in reality; moreover, in order to make his case he does not have to. Contexts (that is, conversations) change and *human* reality is nothing more than the recontextualization of these changes.[4] Because Virilio likewise places such emphasis on the "aesthetics" of disappearance, it is fruitful to explore Wittgensteinian recontextualization via his thoughts on aesthetics.

For Wittgenstein, aesthetic judgment derives from contexts: "We don't start from certain words, but from certain occasions or activities" (1967: 3). That is, the situation ('reality') determines what we make of it (beautiful or ugly, right or wrong). After this, the accretion of aesthetic judgments form rules which enable further aesthetic judgment: "Learning the rules actually changes your judgement" (1967: 5). Aesthetic judgment includes an essential element of adaptability. Indeed, it is this almost ineffable adaptability, this environmental harmonization, which causes Wittgenstein to sense that appreciation or aesthetic understanding is "impossible" to describe. Reality changes and

our evaluative descriptions change as well; but for Wittgenstein's aesthetics the changes in reaction are more important than the change in context. He plays down the causal link between reality and perceptual reality in favor of an almost mysterious synergy between reality and our appraisal of it: "There is a 'Why?' to aesthetic discomfort not a 'cause' to it" (1967: 14). "You could say: 'An aesthetic explanation is not a causal explanation'" (1967: 18).

Wittgenstein's malleable aesthetics accepts with equal welcome whatever reality throws at it. Changes in context have no inherent nature, one is not better or worse, more real or imagined, than the other. Which rubric we are supposed to place things in, reality or imagination, is often beyond our ken: "The attraction of certain kinds of explanation is overwhelming. At a given time the attraction of a certain kind of explanation is greater than you can conceive" (1967: 24). This is why Wittgenstein in his *Lectures & Conversations* criticizes Freud's purported ability to concretize the meaning of dreams: Wittgenstein cannot bring to closure the relationship between the real and the imaginary. 'True' reality may or may not include both; anything beyond silence is not discovery, but *persuasion.* He was aware that many aspects of what we consider reality shift with the linguistic contexts which reality is presented in and through, and that one cannot opt out of one's context to find a 'true' reality. As a result, Wittgenstein may note Virilio's observations, yet question the extremity of his conclusions.

Wittgenstein's brief thoughts on these matters reveal the pervasiveness throughout philosophy of the metaphysical problems Virilio presents to us in his writings. The context of doing political or social critique after the fallout from the modern/postmodern collision becomes gradually clearer due to figures such as Virilio who are concerned with the problem posed earlier in the 20th century by the novelist and playwright Luigi Pirandello: "But what mankind will do then, after all the machines have been taught to go by themselves, that, my dear Sir, still remains to be seen" (1990: 8). Virilio seeks to awaken us to the urgency of finding a role for humankind in a dromoscape which proves increasingly able to do without human understanding or critical input.

Only by grasping the importance of thinkers such as Paul Virilio can such a 'post'-postmodern metaphysics be seen for what it is: the human context of the 21st century. Virilio points out the difficulty we are faced with in 'keeping up with the times.' Technological speed plays a large and often vastly underestimated role in our contemporary contexts and conversations. His dromology rests with one foot in modernity and the other in postmodernity, and by standing on his shoulders we may glimpse the (dis)appearance of what comes next.[5]

Notes

[1]   Dromology is Virilio's term for the study of technologically produced speed and its effects on the received notions of time, space, and progress.

[2]   Virilio's position is similar to the contextualist or coherentist schools of thought found in mainstream Anglo-American epistemology insofar as foundational concepts which could provide a stable ground for meaning or action are replaced by a set of concepts which act to justify action (often self-

referentially) based on circular or context-based sets of criteria. However, he pays little direct attention to the strictly epistemological issues found in analytic philosophy. The ramifications of his 'epistemology' are dealt with later in this paper.

3   Kroker notes this tension, paying greater attention to Virilio's Christian ethical background than we are here.

4   Using Wittgenstein as a foil here raises the issue of what *his* metaphysics might be. While I do believe that there is a coherent metaphysics operative in his thought, I cannot deal with it in detail in this paper.

5   I would like to thank Tim Benjamin and John van Buren for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.

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