

Art and Fear. By Paul Virilio. Translated by Julie Rose. New York: Continuum, 2003. 113 pp. ISBN 0826460801.

In *Art and Fear*, Paul Virilio's arguments resonate with a polemical tone. The book resembles a treatise and actually comprises three essays: two composed by Virilio, which are the products of lectures given in France in 2003, and an introductory exploration by one of Virilio's American interlocutors, John Armitage.

Dismissed by some as an unapologetic aphorist, the self-described "critic of the art of technology" is a unique theorist. Virilio's conceptual development, in *War and Cinema* (1989), of the historical cross-fertilization between cinematic technologies and perceptual weapons of war culminates in the genealogical emergence of a "*logistics of perception*"; in *Pure War* (1980), he outlines the creation of a pure, total war environment internal to the organization of cultural life. His theoretical persona—the ethos of a French high-theorist—finds some confluence with Deleuze and Guattari, while also coinciding with Krokeresque versions of "hypermodern" cultural theory. Virilio is also often associated with the theories of moral decay and the simulacrum elicited by that French theorist of the sign, Jean Baudrillard.

Preceded by a note from translator Julie Rose—an affirmation of the arrival of Virilio on the theoretical scene in North America—Armitage's introduction is an exercise in clarification and criticism, contextualizing Virilio's contribution to the intersection of aesthetics, technology, and politics. The rhetorical positioning of Virilio by both Rose and Armitage suggests the advent of a theoretical program suitable for mediating a global environment amplified with fear and violence following September 11, 2001. Armitage writes that "Virilio is crucially engrossed in examining the revolution that contemporary art is presently undertaking through its espousal of *terroristic aesthetic procedures* and the premeditated termination of the enunciation of science" (p. 5, emphasis in original).

Virilio's first essay, "A Pitiless Art," is a rumination on the alleged decay and disappearance of pity and compassion in contemporary art practices that are increasingly demoralizing, horrifyingly self-indulgent, and—ultimately—entirely irrelevant. The fascination vested in the horror of the monstrous and grotesque body is, for Virilio, divested of any once-radical imperative. Virilio argues that the aesthetics and ethics of the human body are ailing vis-à-vis the maxim of the unbridled freedom of a "denaturing" expression gone awry. He aligns these vacuous trends in high art with paradigmatic tendencies in science—especially at the level of genetic modification and organic nanotechnology—which take the integrity of the body beyond any reasonable limit of its very constitution and ontology. He writes that there is a threshold that should not be broken: "Without limits, there is no value; without value there is no esteem, no respect, and especially no pity: *death to the referee!* You know how it goes" (p. 71).

In his second essay, "Silence on Trial," Virilio confronts the problem of the polluting effects of what he terms the "sonorization" of art. The ability of works of art to "speak" in silence has been obscured and eradicated by the increasing encroachment of audiovisual effects and affects that pervasively colonize and inhabit media pathways. This diffuse force continues to trample the autonomy of expression or sensation, washing out the intensity of an utterance with the dull clatter of sonorized "noise." Virilio's cultural environment is perpetually droning. The emergent systematization of cinematic synchronous sound is for Virilio the contingent historical limit-event in this regard, where silence is mute and has "lost its voice" to bear witness to devastation and destruction. Events and encounters of all sorts suffer from the accumulation of noise branded as the manifestation of *the* contemporary new mediascape. Silence, then, is itself suffering from the fallout of the waste and residues of speed and acceleration that are not simply symptoms, but the physical reality of a hypermodern ethos vested in leaky, deregulated abundance.

Virilio's allusions and references intersect with philosophy, art history, and contemporary art practice. Composed rhetorically for oral delivery to an audience, the text contains innumerable rises toward bombast and diatribe, hyperbole, and exaggeration, reading like a loud, forceful, and didactic argument. The selective capitalization and italicization of words and phrases functions as a highlighting device, marking emphasis and ironically "sonorizing" the written text itself. He also tends at times toward a kind of conversational approach. His attempts to retain a uniform totality of the body require consideration of exactly what body he is suggesting be abstractly valorized for protection from depravity and demoralization. The privileging of uniform, total, and solid (White male?) bodies is an issue that Virilio glances over. His veneration for the integrity of the human body is well intentioned, but he effaces the question of context and variation: what of bodies that do not subscribe to culturally normative descriptions and valuations of an ideal type? Basically, he advances with monolithic totality a body that elides any consideration of the variable vectors of cultural mediations, politics of difference, or questions of agency. Yet one assumes he is not apologetic for these omissions.

Virilio's repeated assault on a strain of academicism that celebrates the pushing of thresholds in both art and science undermines his own position, which Armitage points out in his introduction: that of a well-placed academic courting an audience with the symbolic and cultural capital to recognize his references and the trajectory of his thought. Virilio's deionization subsequently ignores attempts in the academy to re-valorize the fragile materiality and matter of the body without re-constituting the hegemony of Enlightenment humanist universality. He also short-changes scholarly attempts to move beyond some of the now-orthodox poststructural conceptions of the body as textual or discursive constructions or categories, which themselves are increasingly embedded across a range of critical and cultural theoretical approaches.

Both of Virilio's essays express a suspicion of "the PRESENTATION of works that supposedly come across as obvious to all and sundry without requiring the intersection of any form of reflection . . ." (p. 46). This "fraudulent immediacy" is symptomatic of a culture infatuated with the immanent myth of "medium" at the expense of the possibility of transcendence in the consideration and contemplation of deep structures. This argument points to the erasure of duration to the extent that silence cannot speak—it is perpetually overwritten by sonorization—and to the inertial movement of the idealized medium, something he overdetermines and underproblematizes. The "message" is eviscerated and the medium that has incurred his wrath is less science and art specifically and more the larger matrix of Western meta-culture. Speed and acceleration—*culture as the medium*—is the constant worry for Virilio.

Instead of balancing an opaque material conception of technology and the subject-shaping, semiotic-symbolic capacities of such objects in discourse, Virilio leans toward teleology and the inevitability of material objects—both human and technical—which in turn irreparably determine and shape the practices he locates. This does not cancel Virilio's argument, yet his totalizing trajectory refuses any degree of empowerment or incredulosity in a contemporary context—that is, anything other than a droning, inactive audience—and this raises questions as to the historical specificity of media technologies, aesthetics, and the alleged continuity of the genealogy Virilio proposes. Speed and sonorization are paramount forces, but they are relative to the same processes, contexts, and material forces at work in, say, the version of early modernity described by Simmel, Kracauer, and Benjamin.

The waning capacity for pity is the response of a dominant culture bent on forgetting misery and suffering, which thus makes the perpetuation and degradation of trauma all the more possible. According to Virilio, the capability of humans to sense pain and suffering is the most important shared connection we have: recall Susan Sontag's recent essay,

Regarding the Pain of Others (2003). Our fear of that suffering, according to Virilio, is being exploited and subsequently washed out: pitiless art is soliciting fear for indulgent and evocative purposes. It is the disappearance of this awareness that is the foundation for the affirmation of abject spectacle that Virilio despises. He is, in different ways, working toward what Miriam Hansen (2003) has described as a “political ecology of the senses.” His cautioning against complicity with extreme frontiers of scientific thought and experimentation furnishes a loose empiricist phenomenology of art that should indeed matter. Though Virilio proceeds with some religiosity, he proposes a prescription for encountering the fuzzy intersections of art and science. Virilio expounds an ethics of encounter that privileges the acknowledgment of abjection, rather than its material exhibition. For the theorist of the accident, exploring the sources of contemporary art and its politics of hate and fear serves notice that limits must be redeemed and re-claimed. Conservation becomes radical, some things are sacred, and everything does not go.

References

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