In the Cities of the Beyond
An Interview with Paul Virilio

John Armitage

Interview – November 1, 2009

At the request of *Open*, the cultural theoretician John Armitage interviewed the French urbanist and philosopher Paul Virilio (b. 1932, Paris). A discussion on the future of the city.

Virilio's futuristic writings on war zones, architecture and critical theory have appeared in many books, journals, and exhibition catalogs. An enduring theme has been the question of critical space, a question addressed in both his 1975 *Bunker Archeology* exhibition at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs and his 2009 'Native Land: Stop Eject' joint exhibition with Raymond Depardon at the Fondation Cartier pour l'Art Contemporain. Now inspiring countless interdisciplinary researchers in the arts, the humanities, and the social sciences, Virilio's investigations into the impact of new information and communications technologies, into the effects of mobile phones, video cameras, and the Internet, are above all concerned with their reconfiguration of cities such as Amsterdam. Theoretically sophisticated yet accessible to anybody interested in the relationship between the arts and inner-city anxieties, the geopolitics of public space, speed, and the contemporary technological revolution, Virilio's interview with John Armitage is part of a captivating discussion that concentrates on Virilio's *The University of Disaster* (2007) and *Le Futurisme de l'instant: Stop-Eject* (2009). [1]

JOHN ARMITAGE Professor Virilio, before we talk about your conceptualization of contemporary cities, can we explore the place of war as the main driving force behind your theoretical attempts to further our knowledge of technology and the city?

PAUL VIRILIO First of all, I am a war child. But I am also a child of the city. Furthermore, the Second World War, which was the war of my youth, was not only an urban war but also a hyper-technical war; a war involving the means of transportation, armoured vehicles, the aerial bombardment of cities, the development and use of telecommunications, radio, radar, and so on. Thus I am a child of a war where technology was the central element in the destruction of cities. This last is very important because, as we know, cities have been, from the outset, sites of technology. Technology was not primarily born in the fields or in the mountains. Technology was for the most part born in cities, through the development of arts and crafts and through the work of artists and artisans. By the time of the Second World War, of course, technology and modern industry were concentrated in modern cities and in their suburbs. As a result, during the Second World War, it was, above all, modern cities that had to be destroyed.

JA How does your stance as a critic of the art of technology add to our appreciation of war, technology and cities?

PV Let me explain: just as one might say 'I am a critic of painting', of the visual arts, of sculpture, or even of architecture, one can also say that 'I am a critic of the art of technology'. [2] Yet my position or response to your question is really that the study and

explanation of war, technology and cities are, for me at least, all bound up together.

JA Perhaps, in that case, we can begin to address the central themes associated with your conception of cities? What, for example, is the relationship between cities and the state for you, between cities and political power? As far as I understand it, for you, the 'real time' of information and communications technologies, of the Internet, mobile phones, and so forth, now overshadows the real space of cities. But what do such developments mean for the destiny of what might be called geographically based or geopolitical cities or for the fate of what the urban sociologist Saskia Sassen labels in her book *The Global City*?

PV For me, cities are first and foremost places or locations. However, I want to stress that, in the West at least, cities are also places or markers of the state. Cities were in the first place *city-states*. It was only after the stage of city-states that they became part of nation-states and, today, of federations of nation-states such as the European Union. Cities are therefore places where the accumulation of power takes place. Urban agglomerations are sites of accumulation, not simply of wealth, but also of power. Accordingly, cities can be conceived of as states-within-the-state, as the original state of today's nation-states. Before developing into the 'megapolis', into the 'megalopolis', cities functioned in line with the logic of the geopolitics of city-states and nation-states.

Nowadays, though, I argue that we have arrived at a critical threshold regarding cities. This is because, very simply, today, as you remark, the real time of information and communications technologies surpasses the real space of cities. We are thus becoming aware, and I *insist* on this very important point, of the possibility that what you call geopolitical cities are now at an end. Indeed, geopolitical cities are giving way to what I call, in *Le Futurisme de l'instant*, 'cities of the beyond'. Leaving geopolitical cities behind, such cities of the beyond are 'meteo-political' cities or cities based on a sort of atmospheric politics related to the immediacy, ubiquity and instantaneity of information and communications technologies. Unlike geopolitical cites, the cities of the beyond are not anchored in urban concentration, in agglomeration, or even in accumulation but, rather, in the acceleration of the electromagnetic waves of information and communications technologies.

In complete contrast to Sassen's conception of London, New York and Tokyo as focal points within the networks of global finance capitalism, as supposed 'postmodern' 'global cities', I propose that the acceleration of cities brought about by information and communications technologies, the acceleration that is presently rushing headlong towards us, is not that of Sassen's global city but that of the '*city-world*'!

JA Yet what is the importance of your own work on the acceleration of the cities of the beyond or what you call the city-world? What, for instance, are the main changes that are happening within the cities of the beyond, within these apparently technologized and instantaneous megalopolises of globalization?

PV The significance of the accelerated cities of the beyond is linked to the instantaneity, ubiquity and immediacy of information and communications technologies based on electromagnetic waves. For such electromagnetic waves are the key causal factors behind what I call, in *The University of Disaster*, 'photosensitive inertia', a new regime of visibility wherein the temporal perspective experiences a transmutation to such a degree that, today, time is exposed at the speed of electromagnetic waves. The temporal order thus becomes the order of absolute acceleration, an order of light, or what I call 'luminocentrism', where the three tenses – of past, present, and future – can no longer be described as a *chronology* but, rather, must be characterized as a *chronoscopy*. [3] Here, the real time of interactivity not only transports us to a kind of intangible 'place' but also becomes *the* new ethereal 'place' of the city. Crucially, this indefinable 'place' usurps all our previous understandings of the reality and materiality of geopolitical cities, of, if you like,

particular real places and specific material cities. In other words, geography is replaced by what I term 'trajectography'. With photosensitive inertia and trajectography the inertial properties of objects are increasingly dismissed. What is advocated, instead, is our immersion in a photosensitive inertia, our submergence in a trajectory of endless acceleration, so much so that this trajectography has now reached the speed of light.

Similarly, identity is more and more substituted by what I call 'traceability'. What I mean by traceability is that, today, all our gesticulations, our slightest actions, are observed, sensed and highlighted by the techniques and technologies of computerized tracking. Each and every one of us is now under the controlling gaze of various detectors, of video cameras, of radars, and of other forms of control and detection, such as the electromagnetic waves carrying the messages of our appropriately named 'cell' phones. Abandoning the ancient trajectory of our former extended journeys, we have today arrived, almost unnoticeably, at a 'place' where 'on the spot' gesticulations, signals, motions and waves are now a vital sign of our growing photosensitive inertia, an inertia that will, tomorrow, root all of us to the spot.

Something is at work here that is truly extraordinary. To be sure, it is the idea that, henceforth, cities are, as the English architects of the Archigram group of the 1960s used to argue, 'instant cities'. Yet these movable cities, these technological cities of photosensitive inertia, are cities of insubstantial, almost atmospheric, 'places', cities where the structures of geopolitical cities are replaced by trajectories, by acceleration and by the gesticulations of traceability.

It is for these reasons and those that I stated before that I am against Sassen's idea of the global city. But this opposition is not simply because of my concern with automated vision technologies and the techniques of pursuit. It is also because, as has been demonstrated by Non-Governmental Organizations like Christian Aid as well as the United Nations, the coming megalopolises of 30 to 40 – or even 50 million plus inhabitants are the real future cities of the beyond. For when one says that the global city is our future that does not merely mean a future of detectors, of cameras and of radar sensors and mobile phones, but, in addition, a future in which the megalopolis has 'won', so to speak. We have to ask ourselves: are cities of 70 million inhabitants – I am thinking here of New Delhi in 50 years, as has already been forecast – a triumph for geopolitical cities or a failure of geopolitical cities? For me, the dawn of the megalopolises is the *absolute failure, the absolute end, of geopolitical cities as we have known them*. What is happening here is not simply the disappearance of geopolitical cities, and of geo-strategies, for that matter, but, besides, the appearance of instantaneous electromagnetic cities, of cities founded on waves, on photosensitive inertia, on immediacy and ubiquity. Thus *it is the world that has become the city*, an instant city of interactivity and photosensitive inertia, of elusive public 'places' that eliminate even the idea of the capital city itself. The supersession of real space by real-time information and communications technologies is therefore a break without precedent and one of the key transformative spatiotemporal shifts of the twenty-first century.

JA To what extent is the general take-over of real space by real-time information and communications technologies a result of the spatiotemporal break brought about by the particular supersession of the inertial telephone by the mobile telephone? How does the technology of the mobile telephone impact upon the space of the body and the temporality of subjectivity?

PV Let me explain: today, cities are not real places that we actually inhabit. Rather, in the era of real time, in the age of technologized screens that accompany our increasingly displaced lifestyles, cities are a series of corporeal and technological trajectories, made up not so much of 'televiewers' as what I term in *The University of Disaster* 'mobiviewers'. [4] In this respect, the course of our lives is no longer attached to our homes, even if we 'live in' a large metropolis. This is because, as addicts of acceleration, we are becoming post-

sedentary men and women who are now *at home everywhere*. Whether we are on a train or in an airplane, it no longer matters. This is because our 'place' of residence is, thanks to the mobile phone revolution, *everywhere*. Yet, like nomads, we are *at home botheverywhere and nowhere*, and, I would suggest, seemingly permanently veering off track.

Consider ordinary pedestrians. Are they not in a condition that is close to being intoxicated? In reality, they have become what can only be described as accidental choreographers, much like handicapped people. Without any kind of field of vision relating to the objects and other pedestrians along the street, such people concentrate instead on the spatiotemporal realm of the audiovisible, on the people they are talking to on their mobile phones. In short, pedestrians no longer see anything in front of themselves. The question is: What do these mobile phone practices tell us about contemporary cities? Surely, they tell us at the very least that we are now faced with a new spatiality of the body, with a new 'body technology'. This body technology, moreover, seems to involve people rejoicing in a new kind of corporeal or postural drift. The rambling actions and lopsided appearance of contemporary pedestrians is therefore a good example of how they are now unfamiliar even with the immediate vicinity around which they walk. Such lonely individuals desert the immediacy of their surroundings because they are totally absorbed in the collective fantasy of a far-away audiovisible figure that will, so they believe, fulfil their desires to the detriment of any genuine human encounter.

These solitary individuals are what I call in *The University of Disaster* 'object-oriented' but, critically, '*subject-disoriented*'. [5] For them, cities are not 'places' they inhabit; their 'home' is no longer in the geopolitical cities. As alternatives, the cities they 'inhabit' or, rather, which actually *inhabit them*, are cities which are *on* them and, with radio waves everywhere, *in* them as well. For, unlike in the nineteenth or twentieth century, we no longer live *within* cities because cities live *within us*. At this point, and although we could focus once more on the idea of acceleration and the technological revolutions of transportation and transmission associated with the nineteenth or twentieth century, it is equally important, nevertheless, to insist that cities are no longer 'ours', that is, they are no longer 'our places', in the sense of being 'our home'. There are without doubt a number of precedents for this sort of urban dislocation. Our sense of being 'at home' was, as we know, eventually penetrated by the telephone, by the radio, television, etcetera, throughout the twentieth century. But today we are already at the stage where cities, as entities that are *on* us, as things that we literally *take with us*, are making the metropolis almost uninhabitable as people attempt to move around on a daily basis with the entire city strapped to their bodies. With the mobile phone revolution, then, cities are now *us*. And cities have become something like a snail shell on our bodies. These, therefore, are not merely cities of the beyond but also, I might add, cities of *transplantations*. Meanwhile, other people have become nothing more than impediments to us or our opponents.

And so, our long appreciated freedom of movement, the first freedom of all living beings, is giving way to a kind of incarceration within a photosensitive inertia, an incarceration not within a room or within the geopolitical cities of the twentieth century, but within the cities of the beyond, the twenty-first-century cities of electromagnetic waves.

JA Is there a connection between losing our freedom of movement, between becoming imprisoned within a photosensitive inertia, and contemporary forms of economic accumulation within the cities of the beyond?

PV Many economic analysts of large cities are still trapped within investigations that foreground the logic of metropolitan economic accumulation. They are still ensnared within the realm of the quantitative. In contrast, I believe that we have entered the age of acceleration. As a matter of fact, acceleration has now superseded economic accumulation. Acceleration is, for example, one of the key causes of the current global

economic crisis. Actually, the present global crisis of capital *is* the crisis of accumulation as such. I remind you that capital is not just accumulation but also acceleration. The first bankers, for instance, were horsemen. Bankers were knights before becoming ship owners and seafarers. So, initially at least, in historical terms, accumulation prevailed over acceleration. Of course, the acceleration of a horse or a ship is laughable when compared to the power of accumulation we have witnessed throughout history in cities such as Venice, London, and Amsterdam. But today *it is the reverse*! Economic accumulation has been superseded by acceleration! This is because the speed of light, the instantaneity, ubiquity, and the immediacy of electromagnetic waves all accelerate accumulation. The current global economic crisis is thus not only an economic crisis but also a crisis of accumulation brought about by the overthrow of capital by ceaseless acceleration.

JA Nevertheless, what are the consequences for the city and its inhabitants of the existing global economic crisis of accumulation detonated by the domination of capital by unending acceleration?

PV As I have said many times before, both the city and the earth are too small to accommodate the propaganda and consequences of so-called twentieth century progress, especially as our urban and ecological footprint grows ever larger and deeper. We must recognize that, as city dwellers, we have entered a period where we are dealing with the *consequences* of twentieth century progress. Technoscience, geography, economics and politics are all confronted with their own limits, with the restrictions not purely of a now completed globalization but also with the limits of the planet itself that, today, reveals all too clearly its, and our own, troubled history. This period of consequences is an incontrovertible fact and is the product of the damage wrought by the propaganda of twentieth-century progress.

However, such a realization does not necessarily lead me directly from the current global economic crisis of accumulation to a call for the creation of a new kind of political ecology. Obviously, political ecology is important. But so too is the development of a political economy of speed, especially given that political economy in the twenty-first century is not simply about the accumulation of wealth but also about acceleration. Acceleration, therefore, must be placed at the forefront of our concerns because it is now at the heart of the accumulation of wealth in the cities, of the accumulation of knowledge, and the very reality of all our social lives that are increasingly driven by unrelenting interactivity. Today, we are facing a major historical phenomenon that, for example, Marxism never anticipated: that a political economy of acceleration has come to supersede the political economy of accumulation. Thus what is very important right now is the construction of a political economy of speed.

JA I can appreciate how economic accumulation is related to acceleration and to the need for a political economy of speed. But how is acceleration linked to geographical agglomeration, to cities that are, for all intents and purposes, spatially immobile?

PV Acceleration and geographical agglomeration are connected, particularly in relation to cities, and have been associated, since at least the time of ancient Rome. The ancient Romans' simplest symbol of the city of Rome, for instance, traced out a circle with a cross through it. Indeed, this symbol was also the symbol of ancient Roman city planning, and was used together with the term *decumanus cardo* or east-west and north-south oriented roads. But what is important here is not only that the city was, even in Roman times, divided into allotments and buildings, but also that what prevails is the tracing out, the marks, or the charting or mapping not so much of stoppage or of stasis but of *movement*.

Consequently, even at the point where the Romans, or anyone else either before or since for that matter, decided to allot or build a parliament building here, or an entertainment complex there, they were, in effect, tracing out movement. *The city is movement!* One

cannot build a city without first of all tracing, marking, charting, mapping out, or drawing lines of movement! Evidently, life in the ancient world of the Roman city was not *motorized* as cities are today. In that sense, Roman cities were far from being based on technology in the way that cities are nowadays. Nonetheless, they were cities founded on movement. This is hardly surprising since all ancient societies were 'animated' societies, societies of movement, and movement of the most physical kind possible given that they were rooted in the soldier on horseback. Yet, as I indicated before, the socially dominant factor has always been acceleration. It has always been the *speed* of the soldier on horseback that mattered most. Clearly, these days, people are much more concerned with the speed of their urban telecommunications connections and transmissions. But the chief problems, ever since the birth of cities, have always been those associated with the tracing, with the marking, and charting or mapping of movement, with animation, motorization and, today, telecommunication. So, although I suggested earlier that I am currently researching the contemporary question of traceability, the fact is that the problem of tracing, of traceability, is not new at all. Rather, traceability has been a problem that has overshadowed the question of the city from the beginning. Questions concerning the city and movement, then, have always taken precedence over questions concerning the city and inertia. It is equally important to remember that ancient societies were *nomadic* societies, societies predicated on movement. Human sedentary life is thus but a secondary phenomenon, a mere moment in the longer human history of a life lived in movement.

JA As a final point, and even though our discussion of ancient Roman cities, of stoppages, stasis, nomadism and movement have been extremely productive, I would like to ask: What is happening to sedentary life in contemporary cities? What are the key terms here? Stoppage? Stasis? Nomadism? Is the present moment one of human stasis or one of human movement?

PV As I have already indicated, unlike ancient Roman cities, or even nineteenth- and twentieth-century cities, the cities of the beyond are not derived from stoppages and stasis but from the *explosion* of former geographical agglomerations, from the *break-up* of geopolitical cities, and from the contemporary *exodus* from the materiality of existing cities. The cities we are headed for are cities of immateriality, of telecommunications, air corridors and high-speed railway lines, of airports, railway stations and harbours *as* cities. That is why in *Le Futurisme de l'instant* I write not of urbanism or suburbanism but of an accelerated '*exurbanism*', which is, by means of a range of technologies, such as the Internet, gearing up to displace the urbanism and the suburbanism of the cities of the industrialized era. **6** Exurbanism is nothing like the sedentary urbanism of the recent past because contemporary societies and cities are increasingly *nomadic*. The cities of the beyond are cities of movement, cities of migrants, of temporary shelter, and of segregation by the newly resurgent city-state. These are cities of '*foreigners*' living in steel containers in Rotterdam, Amsterdam and in other places. And, as urbanism and suburbanism yield to the critical space that is '*exurbia*', to urban *up-rootedness*, what follows is the outsourcing and subsequent flight of important economic enterprises. Essential businesses, inclusive of their research and development laboratories and other facilities – the most valuable part of any economic enterprise today – are then leaving their traditionally localized spaces of production. Such industries and companies are thus heading for the externalized 'centre' of the cities of the beyond, for those 'cities' no longer based on sedentary urbanism but based on a nomadism or an accelerated urban exodus wherein *no one feels at home anywhere*. Remember what I said to you about tracing, marking, charting, mapping and the allotment of buildings in space and time. *These are not mere words!* In truth, we are currently tracing and planning cities of the beyond with an eye to finally leaving the twentieth-century city behind. We are seeking to achieve an exurbanism that entails both the end of sedentary urbanism and also *the 'resettlement' of the entire world*! This sort of development amounts to nothing less than the end of geopolitical cities, the end of the rural-urban exodus, at least in the advanced countries, and the beginning of the cities of the beyond.

In other words, we are 'exiting' towards cities that are founded on movement. Also, as I have always argued, even in the geopolitical cities, in the cities where belonging, centres and peripheries obtained, the 'exit' – of the railway station, of the seaport, of the airport – has always been extremely significant. Certainly, this is why the subtitle of *Le Futurisme de l'instant* is *Stop-Eject*! [7] For what we are faced with here is a movement of both stoppage *and* ejection, of 'places' and cities *of* ejection. *Stop-Eject* therefore refers to events of monumental proportions, of unheard of population growth, for example, of instantaneous transmission and high-speed travel that is currently resulting in billions of people becoming dislocated in the twenty-first century. Yet, at the same time, and as inhabitants of the city-world, we are also being told to leave it, to 'get out', and to become exiles or outcasts from the world of both physical and human geography.

However, the essential point, as I have been stressing throughout this interview, is the domination of the real time of global information and communications technologies over the real space of Sassen's supposed global city. Speed, for instance, not only signals a form of power, a form of political economy, but also the end of geography. The instantaneity of contemporary speed for that reason brings with it a kind of 'spatial pollution'. This is what I have called elsewhere the 'old age of the world' because, like human beings, as the world grows old, time seems to pass ever more rapidly. But, today, we can also see that accelerated transportations and telecommunications force the world to operate under instantaneous conditions that nevertheless *have a real impact* on geography, history and on our sense of real time and real space. But much more than the end of geography is at stake as the pollution of distances and substances takes hold. For the instantaneity of acceleration also signals the end of history, not in the sense that Francis Fukuyama argued, but in the sense that we have come to the end of the natural historical and spatial scale of earthly things, such as a human-centred sense of distance. As the former enormity of the world is reduced to nothing more than *speed-space*, then, geopolitics, geo-strategy, the human spatial scale of the city and the nation-state are accordingly obliterated in favour of the realm of the urban *instant*, a realm that is not simply far removed from the physical geography of the real world, but that is also the province of technologized traceability and contemporary trajectography, of, in other words, an almost uninhabitable planet.

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Transcription and translation from French into English: Patrice Riemens.

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Footnotes

1. See Paul Virilio, *L'Université du désastre* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 2007) and Paul Virilio *Le Futurisme de l'instant: Stop-Eject* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 2009).
2. Virilio was presented with France's 'National Award for Criticism' for his entire oeuvre in 1987.
3. See Virilio, *L'Université du désastre*, op. cit. (note 2), chapter 3.
4. Ibid., chapter 5.
5. Ibid.
6. See Virilio *Le Futurisme de l'instant*, op. cit. (note 2), chapter 1.
7. Ibid.

Tags

Architecture, Media Society, Urban Space, Philosophy

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