The Great Accelerator

Paul Virilio (translated by Julie Rose)
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The underlying premise of all of Virilio's work is that we must analyze speed and acceleration throughout history and see it as constitutive of historical epochs. Continual acceleration is the logic that underpins contemporary events. This is what decisively shapes our subjectivities. Written at a time when the world's largest scientific experiment appeared to have broken down and banks that were too vast to fail were going belly-up, Virilio's recent book has the hubris of Big Science and Big Finance in its sights: the physicists of CERN's Large Hadron Collider (recast in Freudian fashion as the LARGE HARDON COLLIDER on page 92) and Wall Street's automated share traders.

The Great Accelerator's diagnosis replicates previous works and Virilio's habitual concerns relating to today's technologies: exhaustion and deprivation, paralysis and inertia, risk and disaster, crisis and insecurity, hysteria and fear. Once again, those modern hazards that are delivered by digital technologies are addressed. Virilio is deeply troubled by closed-circuit single market share trading in which human action is ceded to software. Modeling replaces meditation; reflexes replace reflection. Digital culture is the culture of the instant. This threatens us in profound ways. All of our grids of intelligibility—norms and values, anchors, standards, and reference points—cease to serve or guide us. Tradition, memory, and collective sentiments offer no comfort in this perpetual present. Just as the automation of production created mass redundancies, its spread into other realms threatens the worst redundancy of all, that of humanity. Progress is anything but; "digital civilization" is actually "a return to numerological paganism and its cults of yore"[1] as today "*the irrational* is becoming more and more prevalent in the world's various financial markets".[2]

The Flash Crash is taken to be a "transmission accident" par excellence, serving as a prophetic warning for life in a hyper-connected world running at hyperspeed. Virilio argues that financial panics have replaced the nuclear-fueled panics of yesteryear. Indeed, the suggestion is made that of all the risks that now assail us—terrorist attack, environmental ruin, and so on—we are particularly imperiled by "a tyrannical political economics".[3] While Virilio sees all

1 Paul Virilio, *The Great Accelerator*, translated by Julie Rose (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), 16.
2 *Ibid.*, 111.
3 *Ibid.*, 62.

technologies as accidents waiting to happen, programmed into every technology as it were, when they are instant, interconnected, and interactive, they threaten something of an entirely different order: the accident to end accidents. Such an event will be globally simultaneous and universally disastrous.

Aside from the usual gripe to be made of French to English translation—sentences the length of paragraphs—Virilio's critics will find all of their usual complaints confirmed here: a propensity for letting the Caps Lock stick (HADRON, HELIOTROPICAL, KINEMATIC), a ready default to neologism (INTEMPORARY, INSTANTANEISTS), or words whose use is rarely found beyond his own pages (dromologist, MEGALOSCOPIC), and the deployment of ellipses instead of connected sentences. Indeed, Virilio always demands that the reader join the dots. As he said in *Pure War*: "I don't believe in explanations. I believe in suggestion…"[4] Still, the preference for suggestion over qualification means that he often eschews empirical elaboration and the associations do not always come easily. It will be a stretch for some readers to see CERN's scientists as the latest incarnation of sun-worshippers, as if the Atonism of ancient Egypt and the atom-smashers of contemporary Europe are intimately connected, and, perhaps more mystifying still, to infer from this experiment that animals are becoming plant, that we are turning "HELIOTROPICAL and photosensitive".[5] There is also the tendency toward hyperbole. CERN's scientists did not conjure a black hole ending life, the universe, and everything in it, and even harder to imagine, the Flash Crash did not bring about capitalism's demise. By day's end, it was basically business as usual. Perhaps the more remarkable point to be made is not that accidents happen, but given that complex cybernetic systems make millions of decisions at light speed every moment of every day, they happen so very rarely.

The Great Accelerator displays the very problem it diagnoses: topics arrive at breathless speed and pass too swiftly to be adequately comprehended. The order in which they arrive also gives substance to Virilio's claim that we live outside "the melody line of history as well as the great narrative of our common memory.'[6] To give but one example, pages 76-78 go from current weather modification practices in China to the Market Volatility Index to the development of money in the Middle Ages. Sometimes the connections are genuinely mystifying. A single paragraph on page 66 takes us from the *kuklos* of Ancient Greece to CERN's Genevan accelerator to the last lap of Abu Dhabi's Formula One course to Wall Street's insertion of a circuit breaker into automated trading to Toyota's new three-wheel vehicle, the iREAL.

4 Paul Virilio and Sylvère Lotringer *Pure War: Twenty-Five Years* Later, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2008, 44.
5 Virilio, *Great Accelerator*, 26.
6 *Ibid.*, 21.

Still, in doing all of this, Virilio reminds us of the potentially disorienting and dehumanizing effects of technology; he gives us insights into the consequences of living in an accelerated culture and offers warnings on the Janus-face of progress. His work also alerts us to a number of related changes in our socio-technical landscape that bear on today's world: the pace of technological innovation, increasing technological complexity, the shifting form of subjectivity in a networked world, the growing density and synchronization of human-machine relationships, and the novel types of accident and threat that result (integral events that are transmitted instantaneously, dispersed globally and experienced universally). So, what is our lot? Although Virilio does not spell it out as such, the answer seems to be life in the transit lounge. Out of time and out of place, living a provisional existence according to a schedule beyond our control, perpetually on the move, made passive by machines that are hyperactive, barely connected to those with whom we are co-present, we dwell disoriented in the here and now.

While critics may argue that Virilio is more of a sloganeer than a systematic thinker, his defenders will doubtless reply that such accusations misread the man and his work. Virilio should more properly be seen as a prophet and polemicist rather than any sort of orthodox social scientist (besides, he consistently locates himself within the world of art). In Virilio, one is either exhilarated or exasperated. Admirers are awed by the sheer range of sources he draws on, which here include: air force personnel (Lionel Max Chassib), artists (Claude Monet), athletes (Usain Bolt), bankers (Lloyd Blankfein), composers (Richard Wagner), economists (Jacques Attali), geographers (Gilles Lapouge), historians (Fernand Braudel), mathematicians (Benoit Mandelbrot), novelists (Georges Perec), physicists (Albert Einstein), politicians (Winston Churchill), sociologists (André Gorz), and theologians (Dietrich Bonhoeffer). In addition to his broad sweep, Virilio never shies away from the big topics: Big Science, Big Finance, and the fate of humanity in the face of omnipotent interconnected light-speed technologies. This work traverses cosmology, philosophy, and political economy. Nor is Virilio afraid of the big announcement. *The Great Accelerator* predicts the end of privacy, place, community, progress, capitalism, and history. To this end, it is likely to satisfy committed Virilians and conscript some new ones besides.

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