

David Dufresne
Virilio – Cyberresistance Fighter: An Interview with Paul Virilio

City planner and authority on speed, Paul Virilio's smile is as wide as his remarks are serious. "Who loves well punishes well," he likes to repeat. "When you like something, you hope it will progress. Those who like technology can only resist all that is regressive, self-centered or insufficient. The limitations of technology must be exposed," he says, somewhat annoyed by the excitement surrounding the information superhighway. An occasional Internet user ("I prefer to keep my distance and participate laterally. Frontal encounters are encounters where you never fail to be 'had'."), Paul Virilio has come out with *Cybermonde, la Politique du Pire*, an interview format book about the frightening and profound risks inherent in new technologies. He is as lucid as he is alarmist.

– In *Cybermonde, la Politique du Pire* you talk about "propaganda" surrounding the Internet, going so far as to compare the media to the "Occupation" and your work to that of a "Resistance fighter". Isn't that an exaggeration?

When computer science appeared in 1947–1948, computer scientists said it was the best of things but that it could also be the worst. We were coming out of a totalitarian period and computer science itself, through the birth of the computer, served in the struggle against totalitarianism. But the computer scientists of that time warned us that this new power must not become a "cybernetic" power, a new, worse totalitarianism. I am only forging a link with this tradition.

If I have become a Cassandra, it is because the publicity became so strong in September of last year with the introduction of Windows 95, that I could only cry foul faced with this delirium of publicity. Serge Daney used to say, "During the Occupation you didn't talk about the Resistance. And the media are the Occupation". If the media are the Occupation, the multimedia are likely to be far worse. Just as they entail promise: the world citizen will be shaped by worldwide information. It's obvious. But we are not there yet. First we must fight against the negativity of the new technologies.

– Because for you there is no profit without loss, no invention without accident...

To invent something is to invent an accident. To invent the ship is to invent the shipwreck; the space shuttle, the explosion. And to invent the electronic superhighway or the Internet is to invent a major risk which is not easily spotted because it does not produce fatalities like a shipwreck or a mid-air explosion. The information accident is, sadly, not very visible. It is immaterial like the waves that carry information.

– Yet you call yourself an "adept of technologies".

I am an art critic of technologies, a fan worried about the propagandistic and sudden nature of the new technologies. When machines begin to be idolized, social catastrophe is never far behind.

– Is the "propagandistic nature" of the new technology, according to you, due solely to the financial powers?

If large corporations such as Time Warner, Microsoft, Disney, etc., are in the process of becoming giants, it is because they must be competitive on the worldwide level. The multinationals did not all aspire to worldwide status. But, today, a multinational corporation is necessarily faced with becoming worldwide. Hence, a considerable increase in publicity investment and an inevitable propaganda effect. The second aspect of this propaganda: the origin of technologies such as Internet. They derive from deterrence. Specifically, from the Pentagon and Arpanet, that network intended to resist the electromagnetic effects of a nuclear war. One cannot understand the development of information technology without understanding the evolution of military strategy. Since the atomic bomb is no longer a real deterrent, outside of superpower politics, an information war has occurred, an absolute power. This mixture is not to be

trusted: on one side an investment in publicity; on the other a silence concerning the control of information by the military powers.

– Yet, by giving the Internet user the possibility of being a receiver as well as a potential sender, it is hard to understand how information can be controlled.

This is true. But you cannot focus on Internet and forget the rest of the information superhighway and the whole system. The term "linked" applies to a system of which Internet is only a part. The debate on the Decency Act is linked to a future media control. There exists a de facto Department of Worldwide Information: it's the National Security Agency (the NSA, the American intelligence agency that intercepts almost all the radiowaves in the world). The Internet and the NSA are linked in one way or another. How far will this complicity go? Is the Internet the Resistance fighter of the NSA Occupation? You cannot focus on the Internet and forget what surrounds it. What characterizes cybernetics is that it is systematic. Everything is connected, linked in a system of world power, in the hands of the Pentagon, and maybe tomorrow, of the Europeans....

– Does this mean that channels of diffusion have been opened, the better to control them later on?

The Internet is a stunt designed to legitimize the future information superhighway. It is in kind publicity, a loss leader, very attractive as well, which therefore ensnares those who might have some reservations concerning information made worldwide. The goal of both the spiderweb and the Web is to catch everything.

– In your book, you claim that cyberspace has nothing to do with democracy, that "the point of absolute speed is to also be absolute power".

I do not at all believe in what I call automatic democracy. I believe in reflection, not reflex. The new technologies are conditioning technologies and they are frightening in that they are related to the Audimat [French Nielsen ratings] and to polling. So-called electronic democracy will be the end of participatory democracy. While direct democracy may be viable for microscopic societies like the Swiss cantons or university AG's, it cannot be viable on a worldwide scale.

– You even speak of a guarantee'd "regression", now that man has reached the limit of speed, that of real time ...

Each time a wall is reached, there is a retreat. And history has just struck the wall of worldwide time. With live transmission, local time no longer creates history. Worldwide time does. In other words, real time conquers real space, space-time. We must reflect on this paradoxical situation which places us in a kind of outside-time. Faced as we are with this time accident, an accident with no equal.

– What might this "regression" look like?

Worldwide application brings about the autonomization of limited groups. In other words, of sects that share power. There is an Internet sectorization and sectarianism, an integral part of worldwide becoming. The nation-state is superseded by smaller groupings. There is a deconstruction of the nation-state which does not mean a progression beyond but a regression to the tribes, to the special interest groups that had preceded the nation-state... And it will only be by fighting the negative impact of progress that a parade will be invented; as the railway engineers did in 1880 when they met to prevent train derailments by inventing the block system to regulate traffic. It is our turn to invent the block systems of worldwide information. Before there are any accidents.

– For you, as a City Planner, the new technologies undermine one of man's basic freedoms, freedom of movement..

The teletechnologies of distance information reduce movement. When traveling is no longer necessary,

the development of inertia or cocooning is to be feared. And that the overequipped able becomes the equivalent of the equipped disabled. There is a menace of infirmity and paralysis. But also a psychological menace, for the future generations of implemented interactivity who could see the world reduced to nothing. Generations may experience a feeling of "great internment", of an Earth too small for the speeds of transport and transmissions, a feeling of "incarceration". This is a fearsome distance pollution for the collective imaginary of tomorrow. We already feel this contraction of the world with the speed of supersonic planes or teleconferencing....

- Hence, your idea of a "hypercity", a world city, of a "real time which is urbanized as soon as real space is de-urbanized.

The virtual city is the city of all cities. It is each important city (Singapore, Rotterdam, Paris, Milan, etc.) becoming the borough of a hypercity, while ordinary cities become in some sense suburbs. This metropolization of cities leads us to conceive of a hypercenter, a real-time city, and thousands of cities left to their own devices. If I am correct, this would lead to a pauperization, not of continents but of cities, in all regions of the world.

- Despite these harsh observations, do you find some merit in the information society?

Yes. It finally poses the question of a common language. It cannot be otherwise if there is to be world citizenship. It is Babel, moreover. What we are witnessing is not the Tower of Babel but the return of Babel! Can the world have a single language? Is this unicity of communication good or evil? Another positive point: Information will make us Earthlings. In the sense that there is a natural identification of man and the Earth and that the question of world citizenship prompts that of Earth being where ecology would no longer simply be an ecology of nature, but a social, planetary ecology, where the human species would be united around the globe. But all this is also fearsome: these questions somehow accomplish what totalitarianism never even dared to hope.

Interview by David Dufresne

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