On Speed and Ecstasy: Paul Virilio's "Aesthetics of Disappearance" and the Rhetoric of Media

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I

Speed is the form of ecstasy the technological revolution has bestowed on man.
—Milan Kundera, *Slowness*

October 15, 1964. A year later, Craig Breedlove will set the world land speed record at 600 mph on the Bonneville Salt Flats of Utah, driving a metal shell with a B-47 bomber engine strapped to its backside, but on this day he loses control at 400 mph, shears off a few telephone poles, sails airborne and upside down, and lands in a pond. I am less interested in the crash than in the resulting narrative. According to filmmaker Hollis Frampton, an interview made immediately after the wreck lasts "an hour and 35 minutes, during which time Breedlove delivers a connected account of what he thought and did during a period of some 8.7 seconds. His narrative amounts to about 9,500 words."[1] Frampton helpfully calculates that, compared to "the historic interval he refers to, [Breedlove's] ecstatic utterance represents . . . a temporal expansion in the ratio of some 655 to 1."[2] In this conversion rate—exactly so much, no more, no less—is an index of incontrovertible reality, already framed by Frampton's reading of the utterance as "ecstatic" and uttered in rela-

1. Hollis Frampton, *Circles of Confusion: Film Photography—Video—Text: 1968–1980* (Rochester, N.Y.: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1983), p. 97. Along with Frampton, I draw on the following sources for my account of Breedlove's crash: *Shell—Spirit of America*, Shell Oil website, *http://ms.shellus.com/SpiritofAmerica*, accessed March 29, 1999; David Diamond, "The Fastest American Hero," *Wired* 4:11 (November 1996): 184–187; Dean Kuipers, "The Need for Speed," *Wired* 5:10 (October 1997): 108–115; Paul Virilio, "Negative Horizons," in *Semiotext[e] USA*, trans. Mark A. Polizzotti (New York: Semiotext[e], 1987), pp. 163–180. Breedlove's engine was a Korean War–era surplus J–47, bought for $500.

2. Frampton, *Circles of Confusion*, p. 97.

tion to an "interval" that must be "historic." The crash is an epiphany of speed converted into words, guaranteeing its repetition as a parable of technical acceleration.

Richard Noble, a record setter in 1983 at 633.468 mph, whose latest vehicle is powered by turbojet engines from an F-4 Phantom fighter, records altered states similar to Breedlove's: "your mental processes speed up, just like when you're about to have an auto crash." He remembers "hammering on the side of the car," yelling "Get on with it! Hurry up!" Everything happens "in very, very slow motion. . . . there's plenty of time for everything. It's very relaxing," as if in "a stage of development where [you are] ahead of the car."[3] High velocity produces a delirium broken only by the crash. Indeed, delirium turns out to be the very point of pursuing the land speed record: Breedlove plans to supply live telecasts via on-board microwave cameras and data-acquisition systems of his attempts to pass the current record and smash the sound barrier, somewhere near 765 mph.[4]

Frampton describes Breedlove's crash with a terminology of ecstasy, defined as when "we feel the measured passage of historic time to be altered, or to stop entirely," where "consciousness seems to enter a separate temporal domain, one of whose chief characteristics is its apparent imperviousness to language."[5] Other limit cases of ecstasy—"erotolalia," "saints, the berserk and the possessed"—are sadly marred by "impatient terseness and an alien inflection."[6] Breedlove supplies the significant exception: not a linguistic substitute for something appearing in experience, but a rare instance of what Frampton calls "extended verbal reports from the domain of ecstatic time."[7] Breedlove supplies words for what cannot be said: not a description of ecstasy, but a report showing effects of ecstasy manifest in language. Language is the vanishing point of ecstasy.

Immortalized by the Beach Boys as "The Greatest American Hero," Breedlove long maintained a low-grade fame, but his crash recently reappeared as a parable explaining—in the words of one of *Wired* magazine's several articles on Breedlove—"what happens to

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3. Kuipers, "Need for Speed" (above, n. 1), p. 110.

4. The most recent attempts have failed. See the *Shell—Spirit of America* website (above, n. 1).

5. Frampton, *Circles of Confusion* (above, n. 1), p. 96.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

the bag of bones we drag around attached to our heads" as "we trill across the structures of cyberspace."[8] According to *Wired*, "digital technology allows us to live much faster in our minds than we can in our bodies," and because "cyberspace reconfigures our sense of time, we want our bodies and senses to respond as quickly as our brains process information."[9] Breedlove's crash "brings it all back to earth."[10] According to *Wired*, the story's improbable survival value lies in our "intuitively understanding" the physicality underlying the virtual—an intuition brought, interestingly enough, by reading about Breedlove.[11] Breedlove's story reveals a crux in the discourse on media technologies. I am less interested in the pseudo-Heideggerianism of ecstasy, with its presumption of Being revealed in the crash survivor's words, than in the background presumption of language as the medium of this revelation and, in turn, what this implies for technological speed under real-time conditions. The central premise of this essay is that all theories of media imply a moment of ecstasy, an epiphany that grounds theory in perception.

When *The Doors of Perception*, a high-profile meeting of European media theorists, designers, and artists, organized its 1996 conference around speed, the conference program stated that we "live at ever higher speeds. . . . in modern technological culture, speed has been internalised as an end-in-itself."[12] The ecstasy of the crash illuminates the internalization of speed. The cyberspatial reconfiguration of time experienced in the merging of driver and machine, which Frampton aligns with notions of history and measurement, runs in something like "real time." Real time is "the actual amount of time a thing takes," according to *Wired Style*, but the editors of *Wired* also offer another, antithetical possibility derived from the requirements of technical systems, where real time originated in the distinction between batch and on-line processes: real time is "no lag time."[13] Real time captures a tension between an irreducible reality and the mediation of virtual realities. And so, real time also suggests a "need for speed" in the effort to resolve this tension, a drive with no outer limit—as in a recent Motorola ad, promising that only extrasensory

8. Kuipers, "Need for Speed" (above, n. 1), p. 110.

9. Ibid., p. 108.

10. Ibid., p. 110.

11. Ibid., p. 108.

12. On-line at *www.doorsofperception.com*, accessed September 10, 2001.

13. Constance Hale, ed., *Wired Style* (San Francisco: HardWired, 1996), p. 55.

perception could be faster than the real-time functioning of hand-held e-mail; or as in the case of telecommuters, who no longer distinguish work and leisure time from the real time of the computer, and for whom the screen's open window mediates previously localized spaces. Real time brings the identification of speed with on-line response time and processor power, assimilating the user to the system (thus the metaphorics of "user friendliness"). Real-time stock market quotations mean they are as fast as possible. There is no upper limit when speed is the co-efficient of profit. The possibility of twenty-four-hour real-time stock quotes shows the conditioning of specific, local temporal orders by the regime of real time (in this sense, real time may correspond to the operating hours of globalized business). Real time refers to no specific time, but a generalized time determined by response speed. No moment is fixed or present; each tumbles into the next, each event already decided by the speed of real time. Stock market quotes and nuclear deterrence follow the same logic: insistent, instant computer-supplied information forcing the user's action.[14]

Sparing irony on the source value of *Wired* magazine, I suggest that Breedlove's ecstasy is a crucial topos for understanding real time. The hallucinatory tendency of media is already a commonplace. William Gibson's *Neuromancer* famously defined cyberspace as a "consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators,"[15] echoing Marshall McLuhan's definition of our media-staged experiences in terms of numbness and hallucination, on the one hand, and revelation, on the other.[16] If media theory promises to break down the immediacy and revelation of ecstasy, revealing instead the delusiveness of hallucination, this theoretical revelation involves a displaced repetition and revelation of ecstasy.[17] If Breedlove's story reveals cyberspace's body-machine topology, it is because the story literally *shows* the crash, a showing so literal that

14. The definition of real time in systems design rests on factoring time constraints into computations. Most computers can simulate real-time systems. Despite low-level clocks and counters, real time essentially means fast response time. Human users are bound by neither a particular response time—i.e., we can tolerate wide variations in lag time—nor a need to respond in a particular time. Real-time operation is also limited in most systems by the event-model of interface—i.e., interaction via mouse or keyboard.

15. William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (New York: Ace, 1984), p. 51.

16. As well as echoing Walter Benjamin's slightly more distant framing of the experience of film in terms of "distraction."

17. Similarly, Scott Bukatman claims that, in its role in cyberculture, "*Neuromancer itself* represents a 'consensual hallucination'" (*Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction* [Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993], p. 38).

without it—without the crash—"we may expect that [he] would have had nothing at all to say."[18] Breedlove exposes a presumption that media technologies reconfigure our senses, and, more significantly, that the theoretical discourse on media technology in some way disrupts this reconfiguration, reconfiguring once again and implicitly for the better. A perceptual surplus, however distorted in the first place by the medium, is recovered at a higher level in theoretical discourse on the medium. Media theory is on ecstasy.

The light of reflected ecstasy exposes a paradoxical yet deeply seated presumption: media frame our perception, yet we nonetheless have something to say about media. The paradox's most pointed version remains McLuhan's "the medium is the message." Friedrich Kittler's *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* begins with exactly this, formulated as a kind of imperative: "Media determine our situation, which—in spite or because of it—deserve a description."[19] He later concludes: "Understanding media—despite McLuhan's title—remains an impossibility precisely because the dominant information technologies of the day control all understanding and its illusions"; however, he continues, "blueprints and diagrams, regardless of whether they control printing presses or mainframe computers may yield historical traces of the unknown called the body."[20] If there is no understanding media, there are nonetheless traces for the media theoretician to read, revealed in the persistent tendency toward hallucination within historically contingent *Aufschreibesysteme*. I will not further discuss Kittler's important work here beyond remarking on the place of the media paradox that interests me, a paradox displaced in terms of a topology of technology and ecstasy.[21] Every description of media promises revelations transmitted beyond all mediation, beyond all semiotic codes and distortions, transmitted perceptions of immutable reality. As a result, Kittler can be set beside a work like Erik Davis's *Techgnosis*, with its unapologetic exploration of what its subtitle calls "myth, magic + mysticism in the age of in-

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18. Frampton, *Circles of Confusion* (above, n. 1), p. 97.

19. Friedrich Kittler, "Preface," in *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. xxxix.

20. Ibid., p. xl.

21. Kittler draws on Lacan's cybernetic *Seminar II*, which shows a similar "materialist" topology of the machine and resulting hallucination. In commenting on another essay of Kittler's, John Johnson states that Kittler "allows narrative no more significance than a drug-induced hallucination" (*Information Multiplicity: American Fiction in the Age of Media Saturation* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998], pp. 280–281 n. 22).

formation."[22] If writing reveals ecstasy, the interest in this revelation reflects and illuminates the presumption that the new digital images of cyberspace persist as something to be read and decoded.

I am less interested in ecstasy for itself than in the fact of its occurrence. My focus here will be on the "dromology" or speed philosophy of Paul Virilio, whose frequent references to Breedlove highlight the "aesthetics of disappearance" as the paradox at the center of all media. Virilio's arguments insistently turn from the content of media to focus on an underlying ecstasy, and pursue the hyper-reflection of this ecstasy at every level of analysis. Indeed, Virilio indicts the systematic claims of all discourses on media—presumably, his own manic writing is in some way included—as a kind of "delirium of interpretation" or "frantic interpret-osis."[23] Virilio's work seems particularly appropriate for understanding real-time media. Translating McLuhan as "the message is the velocity of deliverance,"[24] Virilio uses speed to explain media, arriving at something like the following: the aesthetics of immediate perception disappear through dromologistical media techniques, replaced instead by proliferating fantastical telepresent real-time images, and leading ultimately to a complete "derealization" of the world. No doubt, Virilio's totalizing theory can seem labored and naïve in its insistence on the phenomenology of perception.[25] It is easy enough to overlook the phenomenological motifs and to reference Virilio as the theorist of speed, perhaps by shifting his analysis from phenomenology to postmodern surfaces as the latest mutation of capitalism, but one is left wondering what makes the theory so important and yet so threatening. On the contrary, there is no need to reiterate the cultural history of perception or to update Virilio on the sad fate of aesthetics. The point is rather to grasp his paradox of speed as the "causal idea, the idea before the idea."[26]

In what follows, I read Virilio against the grain of his own hyperbole, taking his shrill rhetoric as an unveiling of media theory's pre-

22. Erik Davis, *Techgnosis: Myth, Magic + Mysticism in the Age of Information* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998).

23. Paul Virilio, *Lost Dimension*, trans. Daniel Moshenberg (New York: Semiotext[e], 1991), pp. 35, 48. All of Virilio's works since *The Aesthetics of Disappearance* include similar attacks on the excesses and delusions of media theory.

24. Virilio, "Negative Horizons" (above, n. 1), p. 180.

25. For example, David Harvey's critique of Virilio in *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 351.

26. Paul Virilio, *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*, trans. Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext[e], 1991), p. 22; cited parenthetically hereafter as *AD*.

requisites. Virilio pushes media theory to extremes, dissolving media into flows of speed. In doing so, he displays the aesthetic that makes theorizing media so interesting in the first place. At the risk of overemphasis, I defend Virilio's stubborn insistence that speed-media fulfill what aesthetics always promised: if not exactly a perception of what disappears, then at least an experience of its lack. Vanished perception leaves inert and apathetic bodies, which turn nonetheless into a source of experience. Our nonexperiences become the basis for subjectivity in new media environments.

The panic aesthetics of real time, so persuasively dramatized by Virilio, in fact result from a deeply seated misunderstanding of the rhetorical structure of what we call speed. We only recognize the aesthetic crux at the center of media through an overlay of rhetorical terminology, and only read the paradoxical transcription of perception through a metaphorical teleology. Virilio foregrounds speed to extract the metaphoric potential of media technology, blurring materiality into engines of appearance and delirium. In the words of James Der Derian, Virilio's leading English-language commentator: "when Virilio's dromology (the study of speed) crashes head-long into semiology (the study of signs) the order of things starts to look precarious."[27]

II

If it's working, it's already obsolete.

> —Lord Mountbatten, director of British wartime technology

Virilio offers the enigmatic definition of his work as "epistemo-technical," implying a focus on the relation between technology and knowledge, the technical implicated in knowledge.[28] He asks: in what space and time do the newly dominant images of digital technologies exist? First answer: in a collapsed space with no dimensions. What the computer displays has no permanence or reality beyond the screen display, beyond afterimages of the persistence of vision, those phantasms of code built on layers of translation and substitution.[29] Digital appearances are the medium of "the vision

27. James Der Derian, "An Interview with Paul Virilio," on-line at *Speed*, 1.4: *http://proxy.arts.uci.edu/%7Enideffer/_SPEED_/1.4/articles/derderian.html*, accessed September 10, 2001.

28. Paul Virilio, with Sylvère Lotringer, *Pure War* (New York: Semiotext[e], 1988), p. 23.

29. Der Derian's summary of Virilio's thought: "Television has become a 'museum of accidents'; cyberspace 'an accident of the real.' Globalization is a hoax, virtualization is the reality, and we are fast approaching the day of the 'big accident,' when virtual reality finally overpowers the real thing. Comprendez?" ("Interview" [above, n. 27]).

machine."[30] On the one hand, a generalized panopticism of constant surveillance and omnipresent spy cams, where there can be no space without cinema. On the other hand, a disappearance of public space into the politics of telepresent systems, with our experience of national and international events supplied by on-line information feeds, network coverage, and virtual town halls. Interface logistics hijack sight, ceding perception to an extended media sensorium, with a resulting loss of control, turning over decision and agency to technical systems. The embodied self disappears into the functionality of user interfaces.

The persuasion of this argument lies in the way it reveals networks of power operating through logistical control of perception. Consider the Pilot's Associate, an expert system for military fighter cockpits described in a 1986 DARPA report, reprinted as a documentary artifact among the academic essays of Routledge's useful *Cyborg Handbook* and frequently alluded to by Virilio.[31] The system offers integrated decision support, with AI-based situation assessment and mission planning, all of which would "relieve the pilot of numerous lower-level functions and present to him, for ultimate decision, the best courses of action"; to make this work, the Pilot's Associate utilizes an "intent-driven" graphical "pilot-vehicle interface."[32] Although currently envisioned as a computer display, the final model would read brain waves, follow eye movements, and test "the conductivity of sweaty palms" or galvanic skin response, all in order "to gauge mental states."[33] In the long run, implanted silicon chips—or, better, organic material grown onto chips, currently successful with leech neurons—would establish human-machine communication by allowing the nervous system to activate the chip directly.

The Pilot's Associate is based on the "time-sharing" theory of "cockpit-cognition," developed in the 1960s, an early real-time interactive computer system. For cognitive scientists, "time-sharing" exemplified "augmentation of the human intellect" to the point of

30. For the most concise summation of this notion, see Paul Virilio, *The Vision Machine*, trans. Julie Rose (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); cited parenthetically hereafter as *VM*.

31. DARPA, "Pilot's Associate," in *The Cyborg Handbook*, ed. Chris Hables Gray (New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 101–103. Virilio discusses the Pilot's Associate in *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*, trans. Patrick Camiller (London: Verso, 1992), pp. 87–88. In fact, he alludes more or less directly to the Pilot's Associate whenever discussing militarized perception.

32. DARPA, "Pilot's Associate," pp. 101, 102.

33. Chris Hables Gray, "Science Fiction Becomes Military Fact," in Gray, *Cyborg Handbook* (above, n. 31), pp. 104–105.

"symbiosis."[34] The cockpit computer is "read" for the "cognitive traces" that it screens, soon to be provided intracortically. This readability is the relay to a pilot suffering hallucinatory possession when mechanization takes command. Recall that cybernetics-founder Norbert Wiener arrived at the fundamental concept of feedback while working on antiaircraft guidance systems during the Second World War. The result was one of the earliest real-time computational systems. Wiener was faced with the multiple factors connected with considering aircraft velocity and missile velocity, a problem not simply of an object in motion toward a target but of relative motions—that is, a problem of speed. The task was "to shoot the missile, not at the target, but in such a way that missile and target may come together in space at some time in the future."[35] The model of space in this system is a function of "predicting the future position of the plane"; thus, to "predict the future of a curve," to map the curve in space, "is to carry out a certain operation on its past."[36] The AA gunner maneuvers in the depths of a pictorial field requiring feedback or "hunting," mapping of coordinates, flight patterns, air turbulence, and so on.

Recent cultural theory keeps the Pilot's Associate under tight surveillance as the leading edge of a mass-produced psychopathology, socializing the paranoid cyborg self. Elsewhere in the handbook, cyborg scholar and artist David Thomas treats the fighter cockpit as a site of "psychasthenic assimilation," where the transformed human body becomes a "sensory transducer between different experiential domains," one "product" among others in an "economy of artifacts and environment."[37] Thomas's enthusiastic reading considers the objectification and depersonalization resulting from assimilation as the conditions for a new concept of the self as a "mimetically integrated *technology*."[38] For Thomas, the model of psychasthenic assimilation assumes a mimetic affinity between cognitive states and technological positivities. In this version of McLuhan's "auto-amputation" of the senses and exteriorization of consciousness, the interface be-

34. Douglas Noble, "Mental Material: The Militarization of Learning and Intelligence in US Education," in *Cyborg Worlds: The Military Information Society*, ed. Les Levidow and Kevin Robins (London: Free Association Books, 1989), p. 26.

35. Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics: Or, Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), p. 5.

36. Ibid., pp. 5–6.

37. David Thomas, "Art, Psychasthenic Assimilation, and the Cybernetic Automaton," in Gray, *Cyborg Handbook* (above, n. 31), pp. 256, 257.

38. Ibid., p. 258.

tween body and machine redistributes flows of cognitive affect. Thomas draws on Roger Callois's theories of cultural mimesis to argue that the self breaks beyond bodily limits of identity and assimilates to the medium, becoming "similar, not similar to something, but just *similar*."[39]

The direct neurocybernetic wirings predicted for the Pilot's Associate have yet to occur, and must be understood as rhetorical correlates of state-of-the-art cognitive imaging. Human augmentation research considers computers "extracortical organizers of thought," while the computer screen displays "cognitive traces" that "mirror" thought processes.[40] The complexity of the mirroring lies in the screen trace as both representation and externalization of the user's thought processes. On the one hand, the pilot sees screen images responding to and representing outcomes of subjective intention. On the other hand, the pilot is a node assimilated to a larger cognitive system. The cockpit becomes a topographical distribution of sensation, an image readable as a theory of militarized cognition. Screen interactivity, with its cognitive traces, displays processes already occurring in cognition, picturing what occurs automatically. The neurocybernetic claims confirm and reinforce the credibility of this display.

For Virilio, the Pilot's Associate offers a kind of paradigm of real time as derealization. The pilot's reality disappears into the real time of the interface. Wiener had to assume that the enemy pilot, and ultimately the AA gunners as well, already behave as servomechanisms;[41] their actions could be coupled and optimized as dependent variables. In the Pilot's Associate, the pilot becomes a real-time function of the total weapons system, assimilating Wiener's AA gunner and marking a fundamental disappearance of space as depth into the flat screen's total visibility. The enemy plane's image appears in no depth at all, but in a kind of technically induced immediacy. To see the enemy is to fire at the enemy, the so-called "first look–first kill" capability—or, as a former State Department official put it: "once you can see the target you can expect to destroy it."[42] It is "as if the image in the mirror were suddenly modifying our face," Virilio argues.[43] The real-time image does not re-

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39. Ibid., p. 257.

40. Noble, "Mental Material" (above, n. 34), p. 26.

41. See Peter Galison, "The Ontology of the Enemy: Norbert Wiener and the Cybernetic Vision," *Critical Inquiry* 21:1 (1994): 228–266, at p. 240.

42. Quoted by Virilio in *War and Cinema* (above, n. 31), p. 4.

43. Paul Virilio, "Desert Screen," in *The Virilio Reader*, ed. James Der Derian (New York: Blackwell, 1998), p. 168.

present something absent, it is no longer a "picture" to be seen but a disturbance in the time of the viewer. It is a simple step from here to Stealth technology, where the plane is aerodynamically designed to maximize invisibility, the design auto-guided by the potential gaze, and where emergence into visibility means death.

Virilio targets the reality of the interface, a realism echoed as much by critics as by proponents, marking the reflected delirium of the aesthetics of perception. Les Levidow's insistence that a teleoperator "*does* behave as a virtual cyborg in a real-time, man-machine interface, regardless of whether he or she structures military weapons or children's games and educational programs," repeats and in fact reinforces the functionality of the Pilot's Associate.[44] The delirious belief in the readability of traces suffuses the pilot, the DARPA report, and the resulting cultural criticism. The interfacing of pilot and expert system in the Pilot's Associate transcribes perception into representation, but the occurrence of this transcription does not necessarily make perception readable. Said otherwise: bodily habit is assimilated, insofar as this can be automated from the first. The diagram of interface and body reflects the *systematicity* of cognitive states but not these states themselves. The body is left in place as a blind spot, as what we all perceive anyhow, what we all share, and what the interface merely confirms—confirming for each of us this share without any possibility of representing it. The body mimes what it is not in the first place—mimetic—suckered through a vast charade intended to persuade that perception and representation are one.

I do not wish to obscure the real necessity of thinking and intervening in the military information complex. What I am questioning, following Virilio's discussions of "first look–first kill" interfaces such as the Pilot's Associate, is the way the theory of reading therein applied presupposes that we see something—in this case, "cognitive traces," whatever this theoretical amalgam would be. An effect of "seeing" is projected in advance of any theoretical appraisal. What interests me here is the reflection of an ambiguous perceptual situation into discourse. What Virilio terms the "frantic interpret-osis" is no more than the seductive aesthetics of retinal persistence.

III

the problems of knowing what is the subject of the State, of war, etc., are exactly of the same type as the problem of knowing what is the subject of perception:

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44. Les Levidow, "The Eye of the Storm," in *Culture on the Brink : Ideologies of Technology*, ed. Gretchen Bender and Timothy Druckery (Seattle: Bay Press, 1999), p. 318.

one will not clear up the philosophy of history except by working out the problem of perception.

—Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*

It is not sufficient, however, to discuss Virilio's work in terms of a phenomenology of media, even while insisting on the priority of phenomenology over semiology and other theoretical approaches. Not sufficient, because we are still faced with the underlying paradox of the aesthetics of disappearance. For Virilio, if new media only resolve the object's "real-time presence," there must be a different mode of temporality, an "exposure time that allows or edits seeing," a phenomenologically irreducible experience of temporality that articulates real time with the "reel" time of technical regimes that appropriate and build on this experience (*VM*, pp. 60, 61). The real is preserved in the reel. Virilio focuses not on a pictorial, perspectival field of vision, but on a folded space of *events*. To understand the auto-induced blindness brought by the logistics of perception is to foreground the event of perception. Virtual images exist in terms of a basic phenomenological scheme, their coherence resulting from processes of memorization triggered by immediate perceptions. If what we see on the screen is the computer's imaginary projection, the imaginary repertoire drawn on in "seeing" is nonetheless an outcome of some immediate perception or another. In this argument, seeing is not the neutral taking in of information, but something that occurs as an event. No matter how artificial or mediated the object, we can see it only in terms of "a distant visual memory without which there would be no act of looking" (*VM* 62). The "paradoxical images" of real-time media thus acquire "a status something like that of surprise, or more precisely, of an 'accidental transfer'" (*VM* 64). Surprise: the displaced effect of the act of perception, obscured by real-time appearances. The immediacy of the Pilot's Associate mobilizes just this aesthetic effect.

The underlying explanation for this aesthetic surprise is disappearance. "All techniques meant to unleash forces are techniques of disappearance" writes Virilio, in 1981's crucial *Aesthetics of Disappearance* (*AD* 23). In a series of interviews with Sylvère Lotringer collected as *Pure War*, Virilio alludes to *The Aesthetics of Disappearance* as a juncture in his thinking, marking a more rigorous attention to issues of perception. In fact, each subsequent book cites it as required reading. It is a curious mélange of stories on topics such as epileptic children, Howard Hughes, and early Christian desert hermits, all contributing to the ascendance of real-time technologies. The book collects tableaux, short stories that fascinate as images of disappearance: images not of what has disappeared, but of the traces left by

disappearance. Each story tells of the visibility of invisibility. The perceptual paradox exposed underlies all Virilio's subsequent claims.

For now, I will insist that Virilio is concerned with "aesthetics" as immediate sense data and not as canonized in the aesthetics of the beautiful. If the general semantics of appearances suggests a reference to perceptual immediacy, the aesthetics of disappearance suggest an irreducible perceptual a priori of a highly qualified and paradoxical sort. An aesthetics of disappearance would show the effects of a withdrawn cause—that is, not a cause occurring in the past or elsewhere, but one that disappears from the first. Technological speed thematizes what this cause leaves in its disappearance. The aesthetic is felt as a force or energy, a kind of ineluctable reference to what has occurred, referential only insofar as the occurrence is inaccessible. The paradox involved is such that description proves impossible, allowing only thematization of this failure as the aura of impossible exclusion. The revelation is discovered only through the inadequacy of experience, through a kind of curious foregrounding of nonexperience, understood as the repeated supplementation of what has disappeared.

The Aesthetics of Disappearance opens by describing gaps in consciousness, followed by a return where "the arrested word and action . . . picked up again where they have been interrupted" (*AD* 9). The reader may feel that this first sentence is itself subject to the interruptions of "picnolepsy." The physiological condition of picnolepsy is characterized by frequent epileptic absence, such that conscious time is composed of constant interruptions that "come together again automatically, forming a continuous time without apparent breaks. . . . for the picnoleptic, nothing has really happened, the missing time never existed" (*AD* 9). There is an absolute separation between picnoleptic absence and consciousness. Present time is absent, but the absence is not perceived, neither as a gap nor as a gap displaced.

Virilio promptly generalizes the condition to a "mass phenomenon," arguing that to "the question: who is picnoleptic?" the response can only be: "who isn't, or hasn't been?" We are all picnoleptics and our consciousness is "*a state of paradoxical waking,*" leading Virilio to later describe the *paradoxical logic* of real time and the *paradoxical presence* of contemporary existence (*AD* 15).[45] This unresolved paradox in consciousness is the crucial point in Virilio's argument. What interests him is the teleology or "tendency" emitted by the paradox. While there are no "apparent breaks" in conscious time, the absence is manifested nonetheless through the very

45. See also *VM*, p. 63.

narrativity of consciousness, in "a tendency to patch up sequences, readjusting their contours to make equivalents out of what the picnoleptic has seen and what he has not been able to see, what he remembers and what, evidently, he cannot remember and that it is necessary to invent, to recreate, in order to lend verisimilitude to his *discursus*" (*AD* 10). The discursivity or narrativity of perception conceals a caesura always filled by the readability of "patched-up" and "readjusted" sequences. As Virilio notes, the Latin etymology of "discourse" means "to run here and there, a term that very well conveys the impression of haste and disturbance or normal mental operations in the picnoleptic" (*AD* 113–114 n. 2). Discursive consciousness speeds to overtake and occupy what it cannot. That the mental operations of the picnoleptic are normally hasty and disturbed foregrounds the underlying crux. Conscious perception is a fiction, an invention compensating for the state of paradoxical waking. This compensation is doubled, thematized as speed. The discourse on speed is the reflexive result of picnoleptic absence, and the discursivity of appearance a dance of signs distorted from without. Speed unglues reality (*AD* 16). In fact, the "aesthetics of disappearance" has a history and teleology as "the West's unique and irresistible project and projection toward a technical beyond" (*AD* 93). The efficacy of speed accumulates disappearance in an increasingly delirious experience of the world, an increasing loss of reality.

What results is a particular "schema" of the visible and invisible, or the seen and unseen. The schema functions with whatever material is at hand, visibility always conditioned by an unseen and unavailable world. The schema is modeled as a causal chain. Speed names the transfer of energy in perception, extracting kinetics from surfaces and screens of digital imagery; thus, "the optic and kinematic are indistinguishable" (*AD* 63). Virilio insists that we must accept the "factual" nature of images: in every image there is an invisible mark, an invisible reference. Certainly, one can see the influence of Virilio's former teacher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose late work elaborated a paradoxical phenomenology of *nothing*, a limit-phenomenology of "the imaginary and the hidden."[46] In its most pointed formulation, in his final work, Merleau-Ponty arrived at a central crux of the *punctum caecum*, a blind spot within consciousness that enables rather than excludes the invisible within the visible. To see "is always to see more than one sees,"[47] but also, as al-

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46. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1995), p. 229.

47. Ibid., p. 247.

ready set out in the earlier *Phenomenology of Perception*, "It is not seen in itself, but causes us to see the rest."[48]

In fact, recent cognitive science experiments return to the reality and materiality of mental images through the aesthetics of computer imagery. Steven Kosslyn, author of *Ghosts in the Mind's Machine,* insists that the brain functions as if there were a screen inside our heads to view perceptions. His still-controversial experiments redistribute cognition between the body and visualized image-objects. Test subjects are asked to memorize a map marked with a rock, grass, a tree, a beach, a well, a hut, and a lake. They are then asked to "image" the map in their memory and "scan" from location to location. What interests Kosslyn is that the time taken to "look" from one item to the next varies linearly with the distance between the items in the real map, as if the image were stored spatially, laid out before the "mind's eye" as on the page or the computer screen. The conclusion: mental images "*must* occur in a medium that acts like a space (though it need not be an actual space)."[49] For Kosslyn, the computer shows this medium. The relation between processing occurring in computer memory and the CPU, on the one hand, and the visual output or screen display, on the other hand, is "functional," in contrast to the more material or physical description of current differentials, micro switches, and so on. This functional "model" provides the schematic of mental imaging from the metaphorics of "space" embedded in mental "storage." Kosslyn severs the famously paradoxical status of mental images by using the metaphorics of "brain-as-computer" to salvage "the picture metaphor without being stuck with the obvious absurdities of a literal interpretation."[50] Images and data function heuristically, *as if* they were pictorial, and the fact that computers do "function" proves the point: the display supporting the initial comparison is a supplement to the automatic processing going on within the machine. As a result, it no longer makes sense to speak of images appearing on a screen, or of pictures to be looked at; what appears is "pictorialness," a kind of ghostly outer limit of the imaging process. The "pictorialness" of images allows them to be "interpreted in the mind as if they were actual displays by means of operations similar to those a CPU uses to interpret data as displays in a matrix."[51] The

48. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 309.

49. Stephen Kosslyn, *Ghosts in the Mind's Machine* (New York: Norton, 1983), p. 55.

50. Ibid., p. 21.

51. Ibid., p. 27.

similarity is a "medium" through which images arrive in the mind or digital data appear on-screen. Image or data both produce a kind of supplementary appearance, a ghost. The screen displays a doubling within images that are essentially data. On the one hand, the image seen is only a mark vanishing before the true image in memory, as if memory were harder or more material than the illuminated figure on-screen. Thus, on the other hand, there is a kind of an ineluctable referentiality to what is screened. The vanishing marks correspond to the transfer-mechanism of the image in and through memory. The surfacing of this reference is the invention of "seeing."

For Virilio, "the virtual images of the computer screen seem to confirm not only the existence of certain forms of representation but, more immediately, the objective presence of mental images."[52] Kosslyn pursues the analogy to its limit, describing the medium of mental imaging within the mind, including the size and resolution of the internal display screen. What the mind's eye was is suddenly running Windows. The result is a very specific, functional division between the space of representation and the technical positivity of machine-space. The functionality of the computer is conserved in its outcome as imagery. The machine in the ghost takes the image to a new place, carries the mind to its own place. The aesthetics of disappearance are felt in the "pictorialness" of imagery and in the transfer power of the interface. Pictoriality points to a kind of energetics of seeing, which Virilio comes to call "image energy."

Speed names what comes aesthetically from beyond all codes, what can only be metaphorized and thus cannot be named, naming a paradoxical movement of movement. The thematization of speed provides a terminology for the prediscursive immediacy of an experience we all share without being able to talk about it. Virilio returns again and again to the chronophotography of Étienne Jules Marey, whose studies of bodies in motion seem to exemplify the dematerialization of the world and offer a vital precursor to cinematic reality, truth at twenty-four frames per second. However, "dematerialization" does not account for the complex techniques involved in Marey's work, where the illumination of bodies presumes a memory traced in images caught by the camera, and inscribed by a range of recording devices. For Virilio, the disappearance involved is premised on "the readiness of a luminous emission" where "what is given to see is due to the phenomenon of acceleration and deceleration in every respect identifiable with intensities of light" (*AD* 19). The protocinematic appearance is enabled by the persistence of light,

52. Virilio, *Lost Dimension* (above, n. 23), p. 114.

light in motion transmitting disappearance. The aesthetics of disappearance describe this transmission beyond the logistics of perception.

IV

truth is not a process of exposure which destroys the secret, but a revelation which does justice to it.

—Walter Benjamin, "Epistemo-Critical Prologue"

Virilio's critique of the real-time image conserves the priority of the phenomenology of nothing, but his focus on aesthetic effects forces the visibility of the invisible. While Merleau-Ponty insisted on the paradoxical inaccessibility of the *punctum caecum*, Virilio makes its effects appear in the light of speed. If the aesthetics of disappearance inscribe a hidden point or disruption within appearances, reading the effects of speed reveals the transmission and translation of this crucial *punctum*. The result is a kind of transubstantiation of the medium, perhaps reflecting the religious faith that Virilio frequently alludes to as underlying his media theory. The inscribed point trembles.

Virilio seeks a guarantee certifying that the language of speed in fact reports an underlying phenomenological situation; he finds the answer in *light*, the oldest and most secure of metaphors for the truth of appearances.[53] The pixel of the computer screen supplies a new concept of a "light interval," as opposed to measurements based in space or time. Illuminated pixels or "picture elements" compose the images of new media. The pixel projects. It is a literal instance of image energy. What is seen is light: real-time images are epiphanies of light. The revelation of this perception of light modifies "the very definition of the real and the figurative" and leads to the insight of a background "illumination" or "clearing" which enables every real-time technology (*VM* 72, 74).[54] The ecstasy of light is the presence of the world.

But what could it possibly mean to discover a "paradox" in perception? Merleau-Ponty's insistence on the paradoxical invisibility of the *punctum caecum* carefully forbids its discovery; Virilio's thematization of picnolepsy as "paradoxical waking" is not so cautious. If

53. Compare Hans Blumenberg, "Light as a Metaphor for Truth: At the Preliminary Stage of Philosophical Concept Formation," trans. Joel Anderson, in *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, ed. David Michael Levin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 30–62; and Anselm Haverkamp, "The Memory of Pictures: Roland Barthes and Augustine on Photography," *Comparative Literature* 45:3 (1993): 258–279.

54. Similar photological arguments are presented in all of Virilio's books since *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*.

consciousness is a result of the discursive cover-up of picnoleptic absence, how can we distinguish, consciously, between this cover-up and the effects of absence? Picnoleptics—that is, all of us—invent our consciousness and experience nothing outside this invention. The paradox we are conscious of must be self-made, a "paradoxicalization" of consciousness; or, at least, the paradox is supplied to guarantee the aesthetic effects of disappearance. Paradoxical waking is a kind of invented and projected beyond. Named paradoxical, the discourse on consciousness brings out traces of the reality perceived. It is necessary to induce the effect of a beyond, to make evident the aesthetics that produce what is already, anyhow, the case, and thus to supply sufficient evidence to guarantee the appearance of disappearance.

Consciousness as paradoxical waking is another way of saying that we produce delirium anyway. On this, Virilio is very clear: picnolepsy can be induced, and it does not matter a bit whether we perceive anything at all.[55] While Virilio's references to Merleau-Ponty or Edmund Husserl no doubt add evidence to the claim for the aesthetics of disappearance, the surplus only attests to the failure of phenomenology. It may be that nothing is perceived, and we name it nonetheless, out of convention or habit. The purported inscription of perception in representation—as in the factuality of mental images—is a metaphor for the immediacy of these processes.

What can we make of Virilio's hyperreflection on the ecstasies of media theory? If at first the aesthetics of disappearance seemed to offer a paradoxical perception encrypted in the unreality of real time, this turns out to be an instituted mark, a sign of perception. Irreducible reference is induced through the metaphoric potential of light imagery. The metaphoricity of the digital image is grounded in the literalness of the pixel, the metaphor of light as the placeholder for the literal. We are within the Derridean metaphorics of the "white mythology" framing philosophical concepts. "Image energy" and "pictoriality" are nothing more than renewed expressions of the rhetorical tradition of *energia*, the energy or *pathos* of pictures. The suggestion of transcribed perception in technically induced appearance is a rhetorical effect, and the notion of reading hidden inscriptions as the act of perceiving perception is an activity within processes of formalization and sign reading. But the unreality of real time in no way destroys its efficacy. On the contrary, real time strengthens the reality of an inaccessible real. Virilio ends up telling less about the dominance of light-speed telecommunications (and is

55. See, especially, the first chapter of *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*.

this news?) than about the renewed and restaged rhetorical structuring of what we call experience. If *real time* characterizes contemporary historical experience, what we grasp in the ecstasies of real-time media is a kind of afterimage of tradition, historical reference achieved through modes of figuration. Virilio's phenomenological rhetoric turns out to be a rhetoric of the phenomenology in theory.

I offer a few closing remarks on the ecstatic inscription of light in the fixity of writing, and literature as the institution that continues to exemplify reading the ecstasy of media. Recall that Italo Calvino's *Memos for the Next Millennium* chose values that "only literature can give us, by means specific to it," and one of these was *quickness*.[56] Indeed, Virilio cites Proust, declaring art the fastest in "the order of arrival of information" (*AD* 35). Virilio's own writing resists argumentation and exposition for series of striking and allusive anecdotes. "I always write with images," he tells Louise Wilson in an interview; elsewhere he describes writing to capture the "tendency" of change.[57] Writing continues to structure what we mean by *medium*, and the notion that we write in images still offers the best metaphor for the immediacy of perception. Here we should recall McLuhan's Cambridge Ph.D. in English, written on the influence of classical rhetoric in eighteenth-century English poetry. Writing is the vanishing point of media epiphanies, and media theory a transposed literary theory.

The crash invents writing. According to Frampton, Breedlove "everywhere gives evidence of condensing, curtailing; not wishing to bore anyone, doing his polite best to make a long story short."[58] It would seem that the linguistic contexture of the narrative somehow codes the revelation of the crash, perhaps in terms of structuralist principles echoed in Breedlove's "condensing" and "curtailing." Interestingly, the many accounts of Breedlove never tell what he said, only make the point that he said it. For Virilio, this is exactly the point. The interest is not in what is told, but the narrative is nonetheless measured in a highly specific manner. Writing captures

56. Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (New York: Vintage, 1988), p. 1.

57. Louise Wilson, "Cyberwar, God and Television: Interview with Paul Virilio," CTHEORY web site: *http://english-www.hss.cmu.edu/ctheory/a- cyberwar_god.html*, accessed September 10, 2001. See also Patrick Crogan's helpful essay "Metaphoric Vehicles," on-line at Speed 1.4: *http://proxy.arts.uci.edu/%7Enideffer/_SPEED_/1.4/articles/crogan.html*, accessed September 10, 2001. Corgan aligns Virilio's use of metaphors to his discourse on speed. The neologisms of Virilio's "metaphoric vehicles" enable his rapid and encompassing cultural analysis. The metaphor employed becomes part of the phenomena analyzed, and, indeed, is the unique optic through which speed is revealed.

58. Frampton, *Circles of Confusion* (above, n. 1), p. 97.

the singularity of an experience of technically induced ecstasy, captures this *singularity only* in all its inaccessibility. The spatial displacement of "ecstasy" remains an adequate metaphor for the transcription of singularity as the condition of writing and resulting tropisms of discourse. In Breedlove's narrative, we read the nonexperience characterizing the poetics of speed: writing as outcome, as the fixation produced by the crash.

Near the end of *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*, Virilio quotes a chapter title from Breedlove's memoirs: "*Doing something other than merely living*" (*AD* 62). Such a concentration of unquestionable and utter subjectivity becomes proof of withdrawn experience. We are meant to experience Breedlove experiencing, not the experience itself—to read what was written in the crash: writing brings out the absent experience of ecstasy. No description will reveal an exact mark or code beyond this general principle. Frampton concludes that compared to Breedlove, "Proust, Joyce, Beckett, seem occasionally to achieve such explicatory plenitude."[59]

Acknowledgments

59. Ibid.