

# The Cybercities Reader



Edited by  
Stephen Graham



# 'The Third Interval'

from *Open Sky* (1997)

Paul Virilio



## Editor's Introduction

Our second theoretical reading draws on the work of another influential French analyst of cities and ICTs: Paul Virilio. An architect and urbanist by training, Virilio is a leading critical theorist of the links between cities, speed, technology, war, space and time. Whilst his work is very diverse, in general, Virilio adopts an uncompromisingly substitutionist perspective to analysing the relations between ICTs and cities. He uses this to develop a series of critical and bleak portrayals of the nature of the current and future urban condition. In these he stresses the emergence of a world of hypermobility, electronic saturation, the computerisation of everything from war to consumption, and the digital manipulation of organisms, and natures, through genetic technologies.

In this reading Virilio argues that the city is threatened as its central *raison d'être* – the organisation of real space – becomes eclipsed by ICTs and their organisation of real time (based on speed of light electronic exchanges). Analysing the implications of this shift – at scales ranging from the human body and the city to the global capitalist economy – Virilio concludes that the future heralds a world where subjects will be universally telepresent anywhere at any time without physically moving their bodies in geographic space. The organisation of real time thus sits uncomfortably next to the challenges of organising real space that have long been the major concern of architecture and urban planning.

To Virilio, the saturation of societies and cities by extending arrays of ICTs thus means that arrival without departure now becomes possible. In fact, he argues that there is a kind of 'generalised arrival' as speed-of-light electronic signals mean that everything arrives without having to leave. Virilio speculates that the current growth of physical mobility will, in the future, shift to a growing inertia, as ICT use starts to substitute for the need for bodily presence and movement within and between cities.

In the end, certain elements of Virilio's critical analysis parallel some of the predictions of many of the cyber-utopian theorists analysed in the Introduction. Virilio finishes by arguing provocatively that the model for our future is that of the online disabled citizen: the human subject who is unable to physically move whilst being saturated by constant electronic mobilities. These are made possible through the integration of people's bodies and minds into sets of prosthetic devices which connect global universes of electronic space straight into users' senses and bodies. A further rendition of such a scenario, seen through a utopian rather than a critical lens, is delivered by the architectural commentator Martin Pawley (p. 401).



Without even leaving, we are already no longer there.

(Nikolai Gogol)

Critical *mass*, critical *moment*, critical *temperature*. You don't hear much about critical *space*, though. Why is this if not because we have not yet digested relativity, the very notion of space-time?

And yet critical space, and critical expanse, are now everywhere, due to the acceleration of communications tools that *obliterate the Atlantic* (Concorde), *reduce France to a square one and a half hours across* (Airbus) or *gain time over time* with the TGV, the various advertising slogans signalling perfectly the shrinking of geophysical space of which we are the beneficiaries but also, sometimes, the unwitting victims.

As for telecommunications tools, not content to limit extension, they are also eradicating all duration, any extension of time in the transmission of messages, images.

Mass transportation revolution of the nineteenth century, broadcasting revolution of the twentieth – a mutation and a commutation that affect both public and domestic space at the same time, to the point where we are left in some uncertainty as to their very reality, since the urbanization of *real space* is currently giving way to a preliminary urbanization of *real time*, with teleaction technologies coming on top of the technology of mere conventional television.

This abrupt transfer of technology, from the building of real-space infrastructures (ports, railway stations, airports) to the control of the real-time environment thanks to interactive teletechnologies (teleports), gives new life today to the critical dimension . . .

[. . .]

The urbanization of real time is in fact first the urbanization of *one's own body* plugged into various interfaces (keyboard, cathode screen, DataGlove or DataSuit), prostheses that make the super-equipped able-bodied person almost the exact equivalent of the motorized and wired disabled person.

If last century's revolution in transportation saw the emergence and gradual popularization of the dynamic motor vehicle (train, motorbike, car, plane), the current revolution in transmission leads in turn to the innovation of the ultimate vehicle: the static audiovisual vehicle, marking the advent of a behavioural inertia in the sender/receiver that moves us along from the celebrated *retinal persistence* which permits the optical illusion of cinematic projection to the *bodily persistence* of this 'terminal-man'; a prerequisite for the sudden

mobilization of the illusion of the world, of a *whole* world, telepresent at each moment, the witness's own body becoming the last urban frontier. Social organization and a kind of conditioning once limited to the space of the city and to the space of the family home finally closing in on the animal body.

This makes it easier to understand the decline in that unit of population, the family, initially extended then nuclearized, that is today becoming a single-parent family, individualism having little to do with the fact of a liberation of values and being more an effect of technological evolution in the development of public and private space, since the more the city expands and spreads its tentacles, the more the family unit dwindles and becomes a minority.

Recent *megapolitan* hyperconcentration (Mexico City, Tokyo) being itself the result of the increased speed of exchanges, it looks as though we need to reconsider the importance of the notions of *acceleration* and *deceleration* (vector quantities with positive or negative velocities according to the physicists). But we also need to reconsider the less obvious notions of *true velocity* and *virtual velocity* – the speed of that which occurs unexpectedly: a crisis, for instance, an accident – properly to understand the importance of the 'critical transition' of which we are today helpless witnesses

[. . .]

So, politicians, just as much as urbanists, find themselves torn between the permanent requirements of organizing and constructing real space – with its land problems, the geometric and geographic constraints of the centre and the periphery – and the new requirements of managing the real time of immediacy and ubiquity, with its access protocols, its 'data packet transmissions' and its viruses, as well as the chronogeographic constraints of nodes and network interconnection. Long term for the topical and architectionic interval (the building); short, ultra-short – if not indeed non-existent – term for the teletopical interval (the network)

[. . .]

The question today posed by teletopical technologies is thus a major one for the planner, since the urbanization of real time permitted by the recent transmission revolution leads to a radical reversal in the order of the movement of displacement and of physical transportation. In fact, if operating remotely allows gradual elimination of the material infrastructures rigging out the territory in favour of the

fundamentally immaterial wave trains of telesurveillance and instantaneous remote control, this is because the *journey* and its components are undergoing a veritable mutation-commutation. Where physical displacement from one point to another once supposed departure, a journey and arrival, the transport revolution of last century had already quietly begun to eliminate delay and change the nature of travel itself, arrival at one's destination remaining, however, a 'limited arrival' due to the very time it took to get there.

Currently, with the instantaneous broadcasting revolution, we are seeing the beginnings of a '*generalized arrival*' whereby everything arrives without having to leave, the nineteenth century's elimination of the journey (that is, of the space interval and of time) combining with the abolition of *departure* at the end of the twentieth, the journey thereby losing its successive components and being overtaken by *arrival* alone

[...]

Surely we cannot fail to foresee the future conditioning of the human environment behind this critical transition.

If last century's transport revolution already brought about a mutation in urban territory throughout the continent, the current revolution in (interactive) transmission is in turn provoking a commutation in the urban environment whereby the image prevails over the thing it is an image of; what was once a city becoming little by little a paradoxical agglomeration, relationships of immediate proximity giving way to remote interrelationships.

The paradoxes of acceleration are indeed numerous and disconcerting, in particular, the foremost among them: getting closer to the 'distant' takes you away proportionally from the 'near' (and dear) – the friend, the relative, the neighbour – thus making strangers, if not actual enemies, of all who are close at hand, whether they be family, workmates or neighbourhood acquaintances. This inversion of social practices, already evident in the development of communication equipment (ports, stations, airports), is further rein-

forced, radicalized, by the new telecommunications equipment (teleports).

Once more we are seeing a reversal in trends: where the motorization of transport and information once caused a *general mobilization* of populations, swept up into the exodus of work and then of leisure, instantaneous transmission tools cause the reverse: a *growing inertia*; television and especially remote control action no longer requiring people to be mobile, but merely to be mobile on the spot.

Home shopping, working from home, online apartments and buildings: 'cocooning', as they say. The urbanization of real space is thus being overtaken by this urbanization of real time which is, at the end of the day, the urbanization of the actual body of the city dweller, this *citizen-terminal* soon to be decked out to the eyeballs with interactive prostheses based on the pathological model of the 'spastic', wired to control his/her domestic environment without having physically to stir: the catastrophic figure of an individual who has lost the capacity for immediate intervention along with natural motricity and who abandons himself, for want of anything better, to the capabilities of captors, sensors and other remote control scanners that turn him into a being controlled by the machine with which, they say, he talks.

Service or servitude, that is the question. The old public services are in danger of being replaced by a domestic enslavement whose crowning glory would surely be home automation. Achieving a domiciliary inertia, the widespread use of techniques of *environmental control* will end in behavioural isolation, in intensifying the insularity that has always threatened the town, the difference between the (separate) 'block' and the (segregated) 'ghetto' remaining precarious

[...]

At the end of the century, there will not be much left of the expanse of a planet that is not only polluted but also shrunk, reduced to nothing, by the teletechnologies of generalized interactivity.

#### *Editor's references and suggestions for further reading*

- Armitage, J. (2000), *Paul Virilio: From Modernism to Hypermodernism and Beyond*, London: Sage.  
 Cooper, S. (2002), *Technoculture and Critical Theory: In the Service of the Machine?*, London: Routledge.  
 Mackenzie, A. (2002), *Transductions: Bodies and Machines at Speed*, London: Continuum.

- Virilio, P. (1987), 'The overexposed city', *Zone*, 1(2), 14-31.
- Virilio, P. (1991), *The Lost Dimension*, New York: Semiotext(e).
- Virilio, P. (1993), 'The third interval: a critical transition'. In V. Andermatt-Conley (ed.), *Rethinking Technologies*, London: University of Minnesota Press, 3-10.
- Virilio, P. (1997), *Open Sky*, London: Verso.
- Wark, M. (1998), 'On technological time, Virilio's overexposed city', *Arena*, 83, 1-21.