

Rock around the Bunker

Paul Virilio: Design, War & Society

When flak towers become art galleries and the streets are filled up with Hummers it is time to raise questions on the intimate relationship between design, war and society. Civilisation and the military have long been allies, but how then can we process this alarming connection between war and the latest vogue? The architect, urbanist and bunker archaeologist Paul Virilio believes that war, technological development and the production of culture have always been linked. He also points out domains initially part of military strategies and now increasingly making up our daily lives, and reflects on the underlying implications for the human race.

interview THOMAS GEISLER / PIERRE DOZE

DAMn°: Paul Virilio, your ideas revolve around concepts such as military space, the organisation of territory, speed and perception. You have looked into the role of technology in these areas and the manner in which it contributes to drawing up the environment of everyday life and the transformation of our perception. Let's focus on everyday objects, their changes in style, their materials, the manner in which we use them and their aesthetic dimension.

Paul Virilio: War has accelerated technology, science and industry. You cannot understand the world of progress without the world of destruction. The mode of destruction carried progress into the production mode. The military-industrial complex began with the Arsenale in Venice, the place where Galileo demonstrated his telescope, not for looking at the moon, as is said, but to see the enemy as soon as possible: a telescope is a machine of optical speed – by bringing perception closer, it accelerates contact. War is a phenomenon of contact. In love, as in war, to succeed you need contact, as Napoleon said. What accelerated war originally was the training of horses, cavalry, knights, riding – speed. Then came artillery, tanks, planes, missiles, etc.

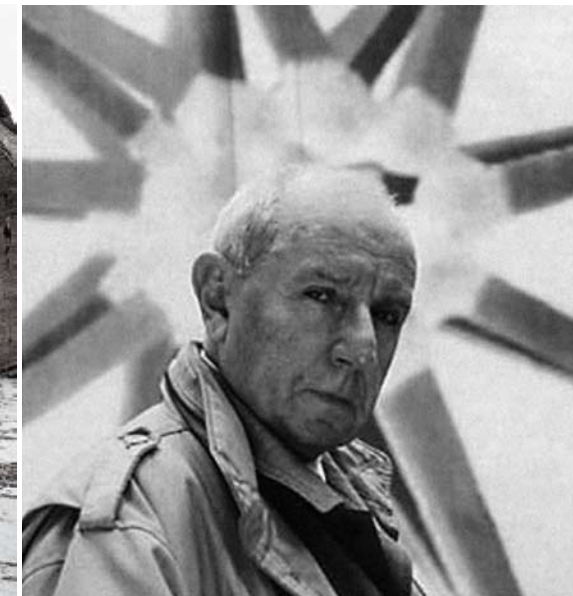
DAMn°: What are the emblematic objects of this acceleration?

PV: Vehicles; the car. 'A racing car is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace,' as the Futurist Marinetti put it. It shows to what point speed became beauty, an ideal aesthetic object – aerodynamics, which became hydrodynamics in future objects, and, of course, in the acceleration of information. The vehicle is the contemporary model of this, with the transport revolution, weighed down with the myth of the car today. I love Paul Morand's phrase, 'Take-off is the dream of any projectile.' The car is a projectile; it has been one, more or less.

DAMn°: Are there more immaterial influences?

PV: In light. Lighting phenomena were first developed in a war-like way. Auguste, the brother of Louis Lumière, created one of the first combat lights for the French army: the inventors of cinema were also the inventors of a light for war! And, of course, the speed of light; it's the speed of light that allows us to see. It's not light itself, but the speed of the photons. All the objects that have accelerated both human movement and perception are linked to war. In my opinion, you

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At the Atlantic Wall (above)
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Filmmaker and photographer as featured in *Native Land*, *Stop Eject* at the Fondation Cartier, Paris, 2008 (above, right)
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have to consider the logistics of images like the logistics of munitions: images are munitions to make war, just look at spy satellites or light accelerators to fire at night. Television, also: all these cinematographic phenomena are linked to war.

DAMn°: What about the symbolic level?

PV: Resistance. Next to speed, to rapidity, there is endurance, durability, what is hard [dur, in French], solid, what remains, what lasts. The towers of La Rochelle sitting in front of us date from the 14th century. In them, you will find the legend of the bunker and the shield. In war, the weapon is the principal object, and with it, the shield. The two are part of war. The flag too, but that's another story. The ramparts, the Blockhaus, or the Flaktürme [flak towers] in Vienna, which I worked on in Arenbergpark. Everything that is hard remains, must resist destruction. You have a contrast between the two: speed which passes and the duration. In this sense, war is the mother of everything, to follow Heraclitus. And I was a child of the war and I have published a book called *The University of Disaster* - not the disaster of university. I say that we need a university founded on the disaster we're discussing, the progress that turns to catastrophe. The earth is too small when faced with the power of technoscience. (...). Hence the wild imaginings of astrophysicists about finding an exoplanet, of constructing a terrestrial atmosphere outside the earth.

DAMn°: Central Europe has found itself at peace for 60 years. Physical confrontation and combat hardly exists anymore. So, if war is the mother of all things, what's going to happen?

PV: We are at a moment when the idea of nuclear weapons to not wage war is disappearing: we are on the brink of the last deterrence, that which will make all

war impossible. We are on the brink of a scientific innovation that will create this final deterrence: the anti-matter bomb. My feeling, confirmed in all I read, is that that we are going to try out this final deterrence. That is to say that the threat of destruction no longer lies in an atomic explosion. It's matter itself that explodes, so the earth itself is threatened. It's in this area that I find my work on 'negative monuments' - but now, rather than a museum, I'm proposing a university.

DAMn°: Is there a measurable scale of the possibly virtuous effects from armed conflicts in the context of domestic items?

PV: The question of speed is central. Everything we have said is based on the weapon and the shield, projectile and protection. Acceleration is on the front line because we continue to accelerate: it's not possible because we are earthlings - I've often asked that we replace the word 'human' with 'earthling,' to link humans to the earth. We are part of three bodies: the earth - the planetary body - the social body, tribe etc., and the animal body, us. All linked by gravity, as well. Walking, seeing, moving: all are effects of gravity. Everything would be so different if we could fly. The real question is our relationship to speed and the exhaustion of the world. What I call 'grey ecology' has to do with the pollution of distances by speed. Air, water, wildlife, flora, and grey ecology, that of distances, the life-sized, proportions. It's not nature that's polluted but the life-sized. Miniaturisation - tomorrow, today probably, this dictaphone is a chip and it follows on from ENIAC, the computer that was as big as a house and today fits in your pocket. Next to the central question of speed, you have to take into account the pollution caused by speed, the problem of pollution spread across the world. Our world!

DAMn°: The life-sized is today at the heart of your thinking.

PV: When I talk about this, I see that people no longer understand. What is life-sized? Life-sized means that I measure 167cm and this glass in front of me 15cm, that an apple is an apple and that the earth is still the earth. And that I don't measure 20m, which would mean that I wouldn't be a man, or that the earth doesn't measure 10 million light years, but 40,000km. But what madness! And you tell me that nature is polluted? But it's your [version of] life-sized that's polluted as a sentient being! You've lost all proportion! In your unconscious you have liquidated dimensions. That also pollutes, by miniaturisation. You tell me, 'Ah! Look how marvelous, look how small it is.' Ah, really? But then life-sized no longer means anything! Hold on. There are no more dimensions? That's called the critical space. You no longer know what space is. You need a GPS next to your watch, so you know the place at the same time as the time. Things like that touch on design, fundamentally. Stephen Hawking said, 'Our future will be secured the day that we have found another habitable planet.' That's a crazy sentence. A renowned and extremely able astrophysicist says that our future depends on a foreign body that doesn't exist? But that's religion!

DAMn°: Maybe it's as essential to believe as to know? The way political discourse functions sheds light on this point of view.

PV: Not until we finally understand that there is the space for establishing a political economy of speed to complete the political economy of wealth, the two being linked. Wealth is time, time is money, but it's speed that has become money. Octavio Paz wrote, 'The instant is uninhabitable, like the future.' I'm saying that we live in the futurism of the moment and we live in a habita-

ble world. Marinetti's Futurism was still the futurism of History - the racing car, etc. Russian and Italian Futurism was historic, that of long time periods, of history. What we have here is that of the real instant, the live, and that is uninhabitable. A big thought, like Octavio Paz's. Tomorrow this real instant will render the Earth uninhabitable, by its acceleration. Regarding all these objects, gigantism will lead to extinction. Ever bigger objects at the beginning, then smaller and smaller and disappearing afterwards. A large movement: an aesthetic of successive extinction and appearance. (...) What I'm saying here isn't negative in a desperate way. I'm Christian. I have hope.

DAMn°: So you're not simply the bringer of bad tidings?

PV: No, that's to limit me, I'm sorry. There's a very important phrase by Joseph Moingt, the great religious thinker: 'I so wanted to bear witness to my faith in terms of knowledge, not in terms of mysticism'. That's what I do. I am not a theologian. It's about knowledge meeting metaphysical and theological problems. Astrophysicists manage to do this. It's acceleration that gets them there, to 'multiverses', for example, not the universe. But let's come back to objects.

DAMn°: To respond to the operational demands of military orders and technical challenges, materials are constantly being renewed. Desert, sea, cosm: operational theatres stimulate research into new materials. From parachute silk to intelligent textiles, the cooperation between publicly and privately funded research (such as at MIT, for example) and the military-industrial complex has created a long list of new developments. Among them, certain results are obviously useful in a domestic setting, such as Teflon, acrylic glass, drugs,

At the Atlantic Wall (above, left and right)
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Paul Virilio (above, middle)
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etc. Could we naively imagine potential alternative research stimulated by something other than war?

PV: Straight away, we get into an ethical dimension. Have we forgotten evil? Read Hannah Arendt: progress and catastrophe are the head and tail of the same coin. An 800-seat plane is 800 deaths. I'm saying that progress is the end result of an agreed sacrifice. I will give you a brief example. Let's stick with the idea of the aeroplane: you can see that the question of good and evil is inseparable. This big Airbus: do we agree to 800 deaths? Yes. This consent is very important. A limit? – Yes, progress has a limit: the one that could be opposed to our consent. Let's imagine an island now, an island that flies and carries 1,000 people for a euro. Do you agree to travel on it? I think that you would. But an island that carries – the figure is symbolic – 6 million people for 10 cents? There, you no longer agree. What's happened? A refusal of consent. It's a complex moment, but historic, too. Because if we agree, we justify. All that so you can move around for 10 cents? In some way we find ourselves dealing with the question of good and evil. At the moment when it becomes aesthetic, we are in the logistics of ethics. Philosophical geostrategy; moral astrophysics; and we come back to Stephen Hawking. Amen! The question of evil is back, not in the sense of original sin – flesh, etc. – but in the sense of the sin of knowledge: fatal knowledge. That's where we are. This isn't tomorrow, but now. It's the news from Dr. Strangelove.

DAMn°: We wanted to broach questions of *savoir-faire*. As we know, designers in different countries and domains have found a client essential to their development in the military: Ray and Charles Eames (moulded plywood splints), Ferdinand Porsche (the Kübelwagen), Hugo Boss (uniforms for the Wehrmacht), Thomas Burberry (the original WWI trench coat) or Corradino d'Ascanio (Vespa scooter). A number of design icons come from this, too. It often seems relatively simple to transfer these technologies into the civilian sector, such as the Eames' techniques for shaping plywood that were subsequently applied to furniture. Can we discuss the idea of ethics as applied to the role of a designer, his or her responsibility to make or not make?

PV: You have to distinguish between the different moments. When war was a professional and hierarchical phenomenon, led by an order of knights, it had an artisanal dimension and there was virtually no fallout into the civilian sector – peasants and urban dwellers didn't benefit much from the impact of wars, except on the level of the imagination, from literature, of course. The mass phenomenon, with mass mobilisation, changed everything. René Girard and Carl von Clausewitz were right: the giant catastrophe was the invention of the French Revolution and what Napoleon did with it afterwards. This mass mobilisation brought mass de-

struction and, in fine, the destruction of the world, with the appearance of the final deterrent we've talked about. The military-industrial complex has become industry itself. The arsenal has replaced the factory: the civil factory is now part of the military-industrial complex. But I would add something that we don't talk about: the scientific landscape is also part of it, that is to say laboratories. And you can't understand what I've just said without talking about the militarisation of science that participates in this mass phenomenon. We can conclude with this idea that now we are witnessing a militarisation of knowledge. The military-industrial complex has not only eliminated artisanal thinking and artisanal culture, but also art with it – also see the link between sacred and profane art that I've talked about. We debase profane art today and scientific knowledge with it. If you take the accident of knowledge seriously, the accident is a failure. An absolute paradox. What has led science into debauchery is of course the technological.

DAMn°: As for the responsibility of the designer, the place we can accord him or her, can we perhaps say that this constitutes the final spinal column of the discipline of design, which we have been discussing in terms of its military links?

PV: Hence my total agreement with the Hans Jonas' principle of responsibility and refusal of the precautionary principle, that stops the principle of responsibility reaching the limits I was just talking about. We have to recreate the university and universalism with it. The university of disaster touches on all this, in an eminently positive way.

DAMn°: Is there a fascination with war or war-related objects, the cosmos and its objects being an obvious extension – a classic position in contemporary design?

PV: It's not a fascination with war, but more with extinction, with the aesthetic of extinction. In the past, aesthetics was of the order of appearance. A block of stone next to Michelangelo and it was Moses. Leonardo and a canvas: the Mona Lisa. Today, it's the cinematic, the energy of the visible: film is even more beautiful because it passes and disappears. The illusion of movement creates happiness. The aesthetic of extinction and disappearance has won out over the aesthetic of appearance.

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'L'université du désastre' was published in September 2007 by Éditions Gallée in French

Native Land, Stop Eject by Paul Virilio & Raymond Depardon, was presented at the Fondation Cartier, Paris