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Speed and Pessimism: Moral Experience in the Work of Paul Virilio

Paul Virilio passed away on the 10th of September 2018. An influential theorist of media, technology and communication, with a particular focus on the political question of speed, Virilio leaves behind a vast body of work – *Negative Horizon, Open Sky,* and *Speed and Politics* stand out – with which to theorise and problematise the transformation of human experience (see Pentzold, 2018, p. 930; Ytreberg, 2017, p. 313). His reputation for the negative, for excessive pessimism and a tendency to look for the very worst (see Hildebrand, 2018, p. 353), has led to an impression of Virilio as a moralist (see, for example, Featherstone, 2003, p. 198), a figure never warmly received, the preaching, pious character who decries the wayward path and the loss of worn values. But Virilio has been unfairly typecast. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate that his work should be read instead as constituting a kind of dispersed moral philosophy that, far from being conservative, embraces the spontaneity and otherness of intersubjectivity. Virilio understood moral responsibility as something that is grounded in the encounter with the other *as other*, and it is argued that his work, taken together, comprises a rigorously sustained defence of the spaces of moral experience.

In what follows the value of this moral work, and the conceptual art by which Virilio sustained it, is explored. This poses a methodological challenge, in that Virilio's work is,

to a large extent, fragmentary. The difficulty is not only that there is no equivalent to a *Phenomenology of Perception* (Merleau-Ponty, 2014) or a *Totality and Infinity* (Levinas, 2007), no grand statement of a philosophical system, but that there is often little explicit narration of the development of his position across texts that are only loosely united by a sustained critique of the acceleration of communication and the role of war in the development of technology and society. Virilio's work is episodic, or, as he himself saw it, more like a staircase: 'I work out an idea and when I consider it suggestive enough, I jump a step to another idea without bothering with the development' (in Crogan, 1999, p. 168). The first section introduces Virilio, his life and – bearing in mind John Tomlinson's (not unjustified) warning that it is 'impossible to encapsulate Virilio's work briefly' (2007, p. 58) – at least his approach to the work of theory, as well as noting common criticisms of this project. There then follow three sections, three vignettes or perhaps exposures, that explore Virilio's work with regard to a different technological circumstance: the Japanese shut-in culture of *hikikomori*; the viral pursuit of the warlord Joseph Kony; and the self-tracking devices by which we have come to pursue ourselves. The idea is not to lean into Virilio's approach or to emulate its style, but to draw out an underpinning philosophy of moral experience and perception grounded in concrete examples that explicate and organise his contribution to theorising media and technology. The work undertaken here is both synthetic and interpretive, a mereological reading that sketches in the risers between the steps.

The first vignette uses the example of the hikikomori to draw a distinction between visibility and vision. It is argued that when we have greater control over the visibility of the other then we are not as open to the vision of the other as a revelation of responsibility. The hikikomori are shown to provide a stark example of those populations left behind when a networked society becomes risk-averse and less hospitable to encounter. The second vignette takes the example of *Kony 2012* in order to highlight the structural contradiction between viral activism and the logistics of perception. It is argued that whilst digital media allow us to see further, the cost of that visibility is borne by the populations of those parts of the world already devastated by colonialism, toiling away to extract the mineral core of digital technologies and suffering the worst of the environmental catastrophe that sustains our digital media. The speed of the viral in the case of *Kony 2012* was predicated on the exploitation of those the campaign set out to help. The final vignette uses the example of fitness trackers to demonstrate how perception comes to be deferred to devices. It is argued that self-tracking encourages statistical conditioning towards a kind of movement without direction, which is contrasted with the idea of trajectory as an orientation towards the other. Self-trackers exemplify the way that information is used by corporations to monopolise perception at the expense of moral experience. In turns these vignettes explore responsibility with regards to the near, the far and the self, against a backdrop of the technological appropriation of perception.

Ultimately, what unites these examples is the question, posed throughout his work by Virilio, of how we are meant to feel at home amidst the pollution of our moral ecosystem. This presents a certain pessimism about speed, but one that is matched by its enthusiasm for moral encounter and a life lived towards others. The article concludes by drawing these threads together, but also with a call for the continuation of Virilio's legacy to thinking critically about media and technology.

Paul Virilio (1932-2018)

Paul Virilio was born in Paris in 1932, the son of an Italian father and Breton mother. He was evacuated to Nantes on the Atlantic coast in 1939, where he lived under German occupation and Allied bombing. Virilio (1999, p. 14) described himself as 'a *Blitzkrieg Baby*', having grown up surrounded by the acceleration of war and its devastation. After the war, he studied art, specialising in stained glass and working with Georges Braque and Henri Matisse; he served in the Colonial Army during the Algerian War of Independence; he converted to Catholicism under the guidance of the worker-priests that ministered to the industrial working class; and he studied at the Sorbonne under Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jean Wahl ('The courses were so extraordinary', he said, 'that it was like going to the opera!' in Armitage, 2001, p. 163). In 1958 Virilio returned to the

Atlantic coast that had been forbidden to him during the occupation – he did not see the sea until he was teenaged – to undertake his landmark study of the German Atlantic Wall defences. A work of considerable depth and duration, this confrontation with the blockhouses of the Second World War was published as *Bunker Archeology* in 1975. During this period, Virilio took to architecture, founding with Claude Parent the *Architecture Principe* group in 1963. This relationship produced very few buildings – a bunker church in Nevers completed in 1966 is possibly the most significant – and the partnership with Parent broke down amidst the events of 1968, leaving unfinished their plans for an oblique structure at the University of Nanterre. Virilio joined the student protesters of May '68, occupying the Odeon and earning their admiration; afterwards, the students demanded that Virilio teach them at the *Ecole Spéciale d'Architecture,* where he became Director in 1973. He recalled (in Virilio & Lotringer, 2002, p. 49) that it was at this point, as he focused on teaching and was no longer building, that he turned to the work of theory. Virilio (1999, pp. 39-40) rejected the label of *philosopher* and, observing his contemporaries in the French intellectual scene, marked out his difference by saying that his object of study was not the *subject* but the *traject,* the trajectories between people and, by extension, the question of proximity and contact. He spent much of his time outside of work helping those who, as he saw it, had been dispossessed by its transformation – left homeless or destitute by precarity and automation (see Armitage, 2001, p. 28). Virilio retired to La Rochelle in the late 1990s – returning to the sea.

Perhaps the simplest way to introduce Virilio's approach to writing theory is to first introduce its critics. Even Virilio's firmest supporters concede that his writing can be 'odd and oblique' (Armitage & Bishop, 2013, p. 1), and that his 'occasionally eccentric writings and accelerated style' (Armitage, 2011, p. 17) can be off-putting. As Patrick Crogan (1999, p. 167) acknowledges, Virilio's rapid-fire construction and accumulation of concepts opens the door to criticism as to the substance and rigor of his argumentation. Douglas Kellner (1999), Scott McQuire (1999) and Nigel Thrift (2011) each point to Virilio's pessimism with regards to technology as a considerable fault. For Kellner (1999, p. 103), Virilio is 'excessively negative and one-sided', to the point of technophobia, whilst McQuire (1999, p. 154) highlights his reputation as a 'doomsayer'; all three writers are agreed that this forecloses any possibility in Virilio's thinking that technology can be emancipatory, with Thrift (2011, p. 147) adding that his 'relentless negativism' is out of kilter with a 'politics of hope'. A related criticism is that Virilio has a 'propensity to exaggerate' (Kellner, 1999, p. 111), which Thrift (2011, p. 151) considers to be 'of more than mild concern'. And McQuire and Kellner each suggest a kind of conservativism at the heart of Virilio's work, with Kellner (1999, p. 120) arguing that he substitutes moralism for analysis, and McQuire (1999, p. 154) that he is nostalgic for pre-deconstructed ideas of identity and community.

These criticisms are certainly viable, but there is room for a more generous reading. Virilio justified his negativity by comparing his work to that of the art critic: 'I am a critic of the art of technology' (in Virilio & Lotringer, 1997, p. 172). His job, then, was to find fault; without criticism of technology, Virilio (1999, p. 11) wagered, there could be no progress with technology. He also described himself, in interviews with Niels Brügger and Nicholas Zurbrugg respectively, as a 'conceptual activist' (in Armitage, 2001, p. 96), whose work 'takes things to the limit and to excess' (in Armitage, 2001, p. 162), and whose role was to always consider the worst. Theoretical work need not limit itself to describing the world as it is; it has a responsibility to take it towards the better. Pessimism, even where it is exaggerated for effect – what John Tomlinson (2007, p. 59) characterises as Virilio's use of 'dramatic overstatement' as a stylistic device – is not opposed to a politics of hope if it is used to reject the worst. Virilio's approach, then, was one that forced his readers to confront the darkest possibilities of what is otherwise contingent and ambiguous in order that we might be hyper-focused on eradicating the negative and retaining the positive. As such, we ought to avoid reading Virilio's work as moralistic, which is a broadly conservative disposition, and instead as that of a conceptual activist whose pessimism underwrote the possibility of a brighter reading of the future. Ian James (2013, p. 227) rejects the idea that Virilio is nostalgic (for immediacy and presence and bodily experience) and positions him instead as a phenomenologist of perception with a radical bent. John Armitage (2011, pp. 3-5) identifies Merleau-Ponty – to whom James

alludes – along with Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger (and we should not forget Wahl) as the key influences on Virilio's thought. Situated in this way, Virilio's centring and privileging of first-hand experience and the first-person narrative looks less like nostalgia and more like justifiable methodology. Virilio's project was then to reveal modes of perception that repeat the same and obliterate the other, a task James characterises as affirmative rather than conservative. The phenomenological tradition from which he emerged had largely passed over the question of speed (see Tomlinson, 2007, p. 8), but Virilio centred this in order to extend an understanding of our lifeworld in a digital society. His account of trajectory – 'which means that I go toward the other' (Virilio, 1999, p. 81) – defends a kind of moral encounter. His 'technophobia' was a stand against the sensorial privation that comes about through adapted modes of perception, where we no longer *see* but instead *review* in a way that leads to 'the repetition of the same' (Virilio, 2008a, pp. 34-35). Virilio's concern was with the way that the speed of technology might lead to 'the rejection of the other' (Virilio, 2008a, p. 35), by bringing about changes in the way that we are present to others in the world. As Arthur Kroker (2011, p. 164) suggests, this work is 'deeply ethical', but far from being conservative, stands radical as a kind of 'ethical dissent' (p. 158) against the seduction of technology and the celebration of digital culture.

The Repulsion of Proximity

In 2010, the Japanese Cabinet Office estimated that there were approximately 700,000 *hikikomori* – abbreviated from *shakaiteki hikikomori,* a literal translation from the English *social withdrawal* – living in Japan, with Saitō Tamaki (2013) placing the figure closer to one million, given the difficulty in accounting for people who shut themselves away from society. Franco Berardi (2015, pp. 159-160) sets out the criteria for hikikomori status – spending most of nearly every day shut indoors; avoiding social situations; interruption of relationships; negative impact on employment or education; and being in such a position for at least six months – and adds that there are another 1.55m people in Japan who are on the verge. Stability of environment is crucial for someone experiencing this kind of social withdrawal (Saitō, 2013, pp. 137-138), with Michael Zielenziger (2016, p. 19) observing: 'The only space they can control is their own bedroom'. Saitō (2013, p. 37, p. 79) puts this down to a 'fear of others' or 'social phobia', but whereas Zielenziger (2006, p. 17) believes that the phenomenon cannot be found in other cultures, Saitō (2013, p. 6) rejects the idea that it is a peculiarly Japanese pathology. He observes that in Japan, *hikikomori* is used interchangeably with the British acronym *NEET* (Not in Education, Employment or Training), and argues that in other countries, people who experience this intense disengagement from society simply end up on the streets rather than locked away in a bedroom at their parents' home. The warning has been lost, as media focus on social

media and videogames has taken the term away from this association and given it a global currency. Saitō (2013, p. 5) notes 300,000 hikikomori in South Korea, often attributed to addiction to e-sports and online gaming. In the US, the figure of the corpulent housebound, permanently online and gaming, subsisting off take-away and defecating in jars, has captured the imagination (see Gozlan, 2012). This is curious, given that neither Zielenziger nor Saitō attribute any significance to digital culture in their studies. Kato Takahiro, a professor of neuropsychology, says that the hikikomori phenomenon is not caused by addiction to the internet or to video games – but he observes that these things 'reduce the need for face-to-face communication' (in Gozlan, 2012).

Paul Virilio might have seen in the hikikomori an example of the 'domestic inertia' (2000, p. 70) exemplified in his work by Howard Hughes, the reclusive billionaire who shared with the bogeyman videogame addict a tendency to hide away and to bottle his own bodily emissions (see Virilio, 2009, pp. 33-37). A similar figure, of the 'terminal-man' (see Virilio, 2008b, p. 11), reappears across his work, a character that looks a lot like the western media version of the hikikomori: housebound and glued to screens – terminal in every sense. Virilio's terminal-man prefers the distant over the near and has all but given up on those around him in favour of those he can connect with around the world from the comfort of his bedroom (see Virilio, 2008b, p. 20). This is a kind of *digital bunkerism* that, Virilio suggested (in Virilio & Lotringer, 2002, p. 88), reappears in society after the

blockhouses of the Second World War have fallen into obsolescence. But the danger is that we look too closely at Virilio's exaggerated (and perhaps crude) imagery and lose sight of the argument he is making about the connection between speed and inertia. His is not so much an argument that digital communications create shut-ins – even if, as John Tomlinson (2007, p. 103) argues, it was a mistake to so emphasise sedentariness when digital technology seems to be fully integrated with the mobility of bodies – but that they impact upon the way we orient our existence in the world and towards others. That is to say that this *bunkerism* is not total (very few people are this isolated) and is perhaps only rarely maximally present in any given interaction, but as an *exaggerated type* it poses questions about those small but frequent episodes of moral experience that bear its hallmark.

'Where is being-in-the-world', Virilio (2012b, p. 56) asked, 'in the era where speed is at the limit?' When we communicate via the screen, he argued, we get the visibility of a face but not the face as a vision, as a revelation of the other (Virilio, 2012a, p. 29). There is information but a denuded mode of sensation, a less than full encounter that Virilio (2010b, p. 78) suggested is missing tactility and urgency. This makes it a kind of 'false proximity' or perhaps 'the imposture of immediacy' (Virilio, 2002, p. 40), since it lacks the 'vivacious' and the 'vivid' dimensions of the proximate encounter (Virilio, 2008a, p. 40), the spontaneous existence of another person that needs to be navigated here and now.

Virilio (2008b, p. 104) argued that we have come 'to take the shadow for the substance' perhaps even to prefer the spectre of the other to 'the substantial being who gets in your way, who is literally on your hands'. This would be a foreclosure of moral trajectory. Virilio's point, like that of Kato, was that digital communication reduces the need for the face-to-face – and, more than this, that there is something morally important about such proximate encounters. We are then offered the terminal-man as an exaggerated grotesque to starken the warning, which is that when we can exert greater control over the environment of the encounter, by migrating interaction to the screen, where the barriers to entrance and exit are lower, we lose an experience that is vital. In Virilio's terms, the 'window replaces the door' (2012a, p. 135), which is to say that the visibility of the other replaces the welcome for the other. When things become images on screens, they lose their weight, such that 'figures without density prevail over things within reach' (Virilio, 2008b, p. 26). The triumph of speed in communication is a triumph over gravity; Virilio (2008a, p. 135) said that 'it has done away with inaccessible heights'. It is useful to read this through the lens of the work of Emmanuel Levinas (2007), who shared with Virilio his Husserl-Heidegger lineage. What has weight? The other, whose existence must be navigated in the encounter, whose existence forces us to negotiate our own existence in the world. What has gravity? Responsibility, the gravest of relationships, since this navigation and negotiation should not refuse the burden of the other in favour of a lighter load and an easier road. And what speaks to us from an inaccessible height? The demand

for responsibility, which emanates from the other who is unknowable *because* they are other, whose face is a vision that breaks with the same and opens to infinity. This is heavy stuff, and we can choose to mitigate it by reducing the immediacy of the encounter. This suggests what we might call *the repulsion of proximity:* the encounter with the other is scary because it is risky – because it binds us in a moral relationship without ontological security. So, we turn to the 'electromagnetic prophylactic' (Virilio, 2008b, p. 104) whenever we want to feel protected from the contingency of responsibility, the safer option, just as we take the easier option when we choose the escalator over the stairs.

The western media have missed the point about the hikikomori: these are not (necessarily) digital junkies, but people left behind by society – the same people, dislocated by globalisation and automation, that Virilio had taken to caring for later in his life. And if we read Virilio as a technophobe or an irredeemable pessimist, then we risk missing the point too. Just as inter-personal communication can be greatly aided by the use of digital media, the same tool can also be called upon to opt out of the moral burden of the encounter where desired. We have not become like Howard Hughes or the hikikomori – totally isolated like Virilio's terminal-man – simply because we sometimes have a preference for mediated communication; but we can protect ourselves from the contingent risk and responsibility of certain kinds of encounters by streaming those encounters to screens. In which case, we are not really isolated at all; we see those others, but we isolate

them from the full scope of our moral experience. The repulsion of proximity is then manifested in electing out of responsibility, which is one of the perversities of moral experience given that the repulsion emanates from the experience of responsibility itself. To be clear, and as Tomlinson (2007, p. 111) argues, mediated communication is not inherently deficient in comparison to co-presence; but it takes on a negative disposition when it becomes conveniently evasive. So, what becomes of the Japanese youth, the British NEET, the global homeless when our ways of experiencing the world become, like the hikikomori, more risk-averse? They are seen but they are not welcomed. We end up with what Virilio (2008a, p. 141) called 'dromogenous space': the refusal of the other in a society jolted by the 'postindustrial rhythm' of techno-capitalist development (Virilio, 2012b, p. 45). Ultimately, Virilio (2008b, p. 64) forces us to confront a very simple question: what is the point of seeing if it does not draw us towards the other?

The Colonisation of Speed

In 2012, the charity Invisible Children uploaded a video to YouTube with a seemingly simple objective: to make its subject, the warlord Joseph Kony, so famous that the world powers would do something about him. Kony had been leading the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda, Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo, massacring, displacing

and enslaving populations in the course of a seemingly incomprehensible terror campaign (see Meek, 2012). The charity's video, *Kony 2012,* focused on his recruitment of child soldiers, with the hope that moral repugnance would lead to the video being shared and shared some more until it became viral. Behind such a strategy is the hope that something like social media can increase awareness, and that awareness will then translate into response. It was hugely successful on the first count, with 100m views inside a week (Keesey, 2015). What the video missed, however, was the way that much of the violence that fuelled the demand for child soldiers was part of a struggle for the mineral wealth of the central African region. As Christian Fuchs (2014, pp. 172-173) reports, control over the mines of the Democratic Republic of Congo, where slave labour working in lethally unsafe conditions is forced to extract cobalt and coltan from the earth, is at the same time control over a small but vital part of a supply chain that leads all the way through to the device on which we watch and like and share our YouTube videos. 'Without Congolese conflict minerals', writes Jack Linchuan Qiu (2016, p. 22), 'there would have been much less a boom in the world system of electronic gadgets'.

Paul Virilio once said that 'space is no longer in geography – it's in electronics' (in Virilio & Lotringer, 1997, p. 114). Well, as Jussi Parikka (2015, p. 46) observes, those electronics – our smartphones and tablets and notebooks – contain tiny parts of distant lands, the logistics of communication and information tying us into a neo-colonial struggle over

scarce mineral resources. Virilio (2008a, p. 73) noted that logistics was much more about the management of time than of territory; logistics, he always reminded us, was developed to pursue greater speeds of warfare before becoming the dizzying logic behind the global production and distribution of things like flip-flops and computers (see also Bonneuil & Fressoz, 2017, pp. 137-141). The conflict across borders in central Africa is a reminder of this connection. The struggle for control over the minerals that go into digital technologies brings logistics back to its roots. As Virilio (1990, pp. 65-66) argued, environmental disasters are only terrifying for civilians; for the military, they are an opportunity to ransack natural resources – and to study the violent chaos for future reference. (On Virilio's 'war machine' and the management of civilian populations see Wood, 2004, p. 394; on the connection of the military and climate change see Marzec, 2016, pp. 391-393.) He would have recognised, then, that the ultimate ecological catastrophe – running out of the things of the earth – plays out in places like the Democratic Republic of Congo as a paramilitary conquest of mines and minerals, since whoever controls the stuff of technology, who conquers the infrastructure of communication, partakes in the wealth of speed. Virilio (1986, p. 64) characterised logistics as 'an assault on the world'; the logistics behind digital viability are locating the battlefields of the future. He argued that all ecological struggles emanate from speed (Virilio, 1990, p. 89), such that you cannot deal with green ecology without also addressing 'grey ecology' (2000, p. 82), or, the pollution of 'nature's real size' and the

'exposure of the world' by our demand for speed (1999, p. 59) – of transmission, of consumption, of interaction (see Featherstone, 2003, p. 197). Speed is as much to blame for environmental pollution as it is for car crashes (Virilio, 2007, p. 11). And if Virilio is correct then the military is already drilling for the ecological catastrophe to come; as such, we might heed his advice to join green politics with grey politics and mobilise for ourselves – or for our planet.

The example of Invisible Children also says something about the logistics of perception. David Meek (2012, p. 1431) argued that the use of YouTube by the charity behind *Kony 2012* increases awareness and forges connections that can be used to resist the violent excess of the Lord's Resistance Army. These viral campaigns are seen to act as an 'information intervention' that expands the user's moral geography (Meek, 2012, p. 1436). The point to make is not so much that this did not work – Joseph Kony has so far escaped justice – but that the account of moral perception does not work. Any account of moral responsibility grounded in an encounter with the other or awareness of their suffering is arguably without limitation, since, as Emmanuel Levinas (2008a) argues, any calculation of who to hold deserving over others obliterates the singularity of the relationship. A greater quantity of awareness, then, might increase the number of apparent responsibilities we ought to act on. But this does not guarantee that there will be more moral response, especially given that 'the bulk of what I see is, in fact and in principle,

no longer within my reach' (Virilio, 1996b, p. 7). Considering the functioning of the eye, Virilio (1996a, p. 4) argued that without visual limits you could not see anything; that is, when you can see everything, anywhere, you see nothing – at least in the sense of valuing what you see. Moral existence is always already infinitely demanding; the boundlessness of what we can see through things like YouTube does not change this, it simply extends the scope of our moral failure. More than this, when we consider the ecological costs of our extended visualisation, this moral picture becomes unsustainable. Infinite responsibility comes up against finite media. As Sean Cubitt (2017, p. 6) has argued, digital media are deeply dependent on energy and natural resources, despite their immaterial reputation, such that our communication technologies communicate our own dismissive relation to the natural environment. Data centres, for example, are the fastest growing contributors to emission growth (Cubitt, 2017, p. 16). And the demand for energy, of burning carbon fuels to sustain our digital infrastructure, and the pollution this creates, disproportionately affects the global south and the victims of colonialism (Cubitt, 2017, p. 35). The *information intervention* made by digital technology is to accelerate suffering in the poorest parts of the world, following and sustaining the crimes of empire. The conflict *Kony 2012* highlights is the unconscious of our technological consumption; shares and likes on social media are just as much part of the problem as they are a path to its solution.

We might not be able to touch everything that we see – it might 'no longer [be] inscribed on the map of the "I can"' (Virilio, 1996b, p. 7) – but our mode of seeing has an impact on what is visualised. The grey ecology of the pollution of distance laps against the green ecology of the pollution of substance. As Virilio declared, in an interview with Pierre Sterckx: 'I am trying to promote an ecology of qualities, an ecology that is both material and spiritual' (in Armitage, 2001, p. 147). His work suggests strongly that we confuse visualisation with the *vision* of the other, the *revelation* of my responsibility for suffering, all the time ignoring the material impact of our drive for digital speed. In the case of *Kony 2012*, we see the 'integral accident' of technology, whereby the technofix only serves to perpetuate the crisis (see Van Valkenburgh, 2018, p. 808). Under these conditions, the distant fares as badly as the near.

The Diversion of Trajectory

It is estimated that in 2016 around 110m wearable sensors or self-tracking devices were shipped worldwide (Neff & Nagus, 2016). As Deborah Lupton (2016, p. 4) notes, people have always measured themselves in various ways, but what makes the boom in self-tracking devices different is the way that digitalisation combines with connectivity to cloud computing so that those measurements are no longer reviewed only by the

measurer, and that the data collected now has immense commercial value. They allow for the tracking of things like health, fitness, sleep or mood, with sensors built into the devices to measure things like heart rate or body temperature, and a range of apps are available for smartphones that can tap into their various sensors (such as gyroscopes, GPS or accelerometers) to extend their application. Perhaps most common are those wearable devices designed to track fitness, such as the Fitbit wristband, or the various apps that transform smartphones or smartwatches into something similar. Chris Till (2014) focuses on these exercise aides – or *impersonal trainers* – designed to help people get into shape, arguing that they transform individual health activities into forms of labour, since something like going for a jog now generates a range of data for companies to capitalise on. Till (2014, p. 451) picks up on the way that the commodification of exercise goes hand in hand with the gamification of health, where people use apps to compete with users on distances run or completion times or other achievements, such as cycling particular hills or routes. That is, the more people compete, the more data they share to mark their achievements. Strava, a cycling and running app, calls this competitive comparison 'social fitness' (in Lupton, 2016, p. 24).

On the face of it, Paul Virilio (2010b, p. 103) was dismissive of the exercise boom, describing it as 'crazily aimless jogging around'. However, scratch beneath the surface, and throw in the self-tracking devices, and there is a more vital point in there about how

we orient ourselves in the world. His negativity about going for a run seems to stem from his concern for trajectory, here rendered banal by the excursion without objective, where all that matters, he argued, was acceleration – and not where you are going (Virilio, 2010b, p. 105). Jogging may be goal-oriented in terms of getting fit or hitting targets, but this overwhelms the purpose of the journey, with the pursuit of records or fastest times reducing the body to an instrument of speed (Virilio, 1996a, p. 109). Introduce 'electronic trinkets' (Virilio, 2012c, p. 54) such as the Fitbit fitness tracker or other such 'automatic diagnostics' (Virilio, 2012a, p. 65), and the body is further transformed into an instrument of measurement. But this is not a kind of measurement grounded in the life-size (such as feet) or in the earth (as in the original definition of the metre) but in light, in speed, and the result is that we no longer trust our senses but defer perception to measuring machines (Virilio, 2012a, p. 58). We are becoming, Virilio (2012a, p. 65) argued, 'conditioned by statistics'. And when space is treated as statistical rather than sensorial, measurement ceases to be a mirror in which we fix ourselves and becomes instead a corridor down which we hurry (Virilio, 2012a, p. 92).

Similarly, when we travel at speed, we do not so much traverse the landscape as perforate it – see right through it – as if we bring that corridor, perhaps now a tunnel, out with us into the world (Virilio, 2008a, p. 104). Speed without journey, or a movement without orientation, delocalises time, now no longer extensive but instead intensive (Virilio, 2000,

p. 62). In excursion without destination, where what matters is moving but not where you are moving or who you are moving towards, we occupy the instant at the expense of the future – of 'the value of time' (Virilio, 1999, p. 81) – and so we can no longer speak here of trajectory. For Emmanuel Levinas (2008b), for whom the present was a hypostasis, a solitude only broken by the relationship to the other which takes us towards the future, or a movement towards the future that takes us towards the other, time and ethics are inextricable. As they were for Virilio (1999, p. 81), for whom trajectory 'means going towards the other', something broken by inhabiting the instant encouraged by speed without end, without futurity. The self-tracker, as Virilio (2000, p. 64) argued of a much broader range of high-speed measuring devices, encourages us to shut ourselves away, not in the home, as with the hikikomori, but in ourselves. Virilio (2008b) asked us to take the study of *trajectivity* as seriously as that of *subjectivity*, but it should be clear that the two are intimately entangled in his work. Care for the self allows for recollection, for a readying of oneself to go out into a world of others with all the contingent moral encounters that entails. Looking in a mirror is not necessarily narcissism, or rather can be a kind of responsible narcissism, when looking after ourselves better equips us to look after others. But when we are encouraged to see health and fitness and self-care as a means of competition, co-opted into a digital race without end, without orientation towards the other, then we lose the trajectory. And trajectory, as a movement towards the other – for the other – is an encounter with exteriority and the revelation of our responsibility.

Co-opted by whom? Virilio (2010a, p. 12) observed that 'every time the speed of movement increases, monitoring and traceability increase in step'. These geolocation technologies, he argued, are little better than the ankle tags fitted to criminals on probation (Virilio, 2010b, p. 84), constantly relaying information back to the corporations that supply and sustain our networked gadgets. Control, he argued, is now enacted in the time-regime of technologies (see Kaun, 2017, p. 471). This feeds what Virilio called, in an interview with Niels Brügger, their 'conglomerate gigantism' (in Armitage, 2001, p. 100), as technology companies seek to adjust our attention and modes of perception in order to accumulate the wealth and power that can be derived from our data. Adrian Athique (2019) identifies what we now call Big Data with Virilio's account of the Information Bomb, whilst Robert Hassan (2011, p. 399) evokes Virilio when he writes of 'the tyranny of the algorithm' that characterises the entrenchment of control through the speed of processing. Take YouTube, which might have been a useful means of stopping warlords in central Africa, but as 'a zoo for the observation of mass online behaviours', as Sean Cubitt (2011, p. 88) puts it, is much more useful as a way of soaking up valuable data regardless of the inherent value of any particular video shared on its site. Virilio (2002, p. 59) understood this as 'big optics', or the monopolisation of appearances by technological corporations. Our demand for fitness trackers, then, is but one more contribution to the growing power of platform capitalism, and the shift from democracy

to *dromocacy* – where power in society belongs to those who control the impact of speed on perception (Virilio & Lotringer, 1997, p. 61). Strava wants us to compete against other users to bag the fastest times scaling the trickiest geographical landmarks by foot or by cycle; Virilio (2007, p. 7) wanted us to take a stand against the loss of ethical landmarks when space becomes statistical rather than an opportunity to move towards others. Only one of these two is motivated by *social fitness* – and the other by the wealth and power of big optics.

Concluding Remarks

What unites these explorations of shut-ins, warlords and joggers, is the question of being at home in the world. In one of his few explicit references to the work of Emmanuel Levinas, Paul Virilio (2010a, p. 30) argued that we cannot be at home in a rationalised world, where everyone and everything is quantifiable but anonymous, where the impact of speed on perception creates an uninhabitable instant that, he said, is incompatible with the ethics of *Totality and Infinity* (Levinas, 2007) or *Otherwise Than Being* (Levinas, 2008a). We saw first that the control we exert over the encounter when it migrates to screens is incompatible with the contingency of the moral encounter. The primacy of visualisation strips away the responsibility communicated by the vision of the face. And

whilst we might not risk joining the ranks of the hikikomori, by similarly reducing the urgency of the face-to-face we move towards a society that is altogether less welcoming. A society that is inhospitable has earned its shut-ins. Then, through the viral campaigning of Invisible Children and *Kony 2012,* we saw that the pollution of distances problematises the moral value of the visualisation of distant suffering. What we see is no longer within reach and, whilst *ought* should not necessarily imply *can,* the result is more likely a greater awareness of moral failure than a greater quantity of moral action. And whilst responsibility is infinite, our media is finite, such that the mode of seeing is a means of pollution that furthers the neo-colonial suffering we want to alleviate. The global village chases itself down the mine. Finally, we saw how self-tracking devices redefine our perception of space, from sensorial to statistical, whilst promoting movement without trajectory. This lost trajectory is a movement towards the other, an ethical gesture and a revelation of responsibility, that can have no extension in the instant. And this loss is driven by corporations hungry for data and whose vision of competition and quantification is an imposition of sameness. In a race sponsored by big optics, the only prize at the finishing line is the *dromogeneity* of a society no longer oriented towards the other. Ultimately, whether it is a question of proximity, distance or time, how we perceive the world alters how we inhabit a world shared with others – it is bound up with the question of responsibility.

The work above performs a kind of mereological reading, piecing together fragments from across a wide range of texts and combining synthesis with interpretation; it is, as such, *of* Virilio if not entirely *from* Virilio. His work has been read with Levinas *in mind* but not systematically through that of Levinas, since the argument is not that Virilio was in any way programmatically Levinasian – in fact, he rarely mentioned him. Such a reading suggests that Virilio's work begins with ethics *as first philosophy* and conducts a phenomenology of perception in order to essay the impact of technology on our way of being towards others in the world. This takes us away from the criticism of his project as one that is moralistic. Moralism is a broadly conservative position and, whilst Virilio defends the primacy of first-personal experience, he does so in defence of an account of moral experience that is radical in its concern for the other and the demands it places on moral existence. That said, there is perhaps no escaping Virilio's reputation for the pessimistic. But then the success of thinking of the very worst is measured by its not coming to pass. Pessimism and optimism are not mutually exclusive, that is, some degree of both is necessary to think of a future that is not merely a continuation of the present – a repetition of the same. 'Theory is construction', Virilio said (in Virilio & Lotringer, 2002, p. 160), and by focusing on the negative we might just be able to build something better for ourselves. For the cultural theorist, Virilio is often on hand to provide a negative counterbalance to thinking about technology and society, but he also offers something positive, even celebratory, about our experience of the intersubjective. Moving beyond

this image of moralism and pessimism *about* technology and working instead with the account we find of moral experience and applying it *to* technology and the spaces it encourages, would be a positive, even celebratory, use of the legacy bequeathed to us by Paul Virilio. As we say goodbye, he welcomes us to construct.

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