

Cinema and Telecommunication / Distance and Aura

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If Walter Benjamin had one true intellectual descendant who extended his inquiries into the second half of the twentieth century, this must be Paul Virilio. Indeed, Benjamin and Virilio share a number of crucial affinities both in terms of their method and the themes they explore.

The method: both are able to practice the most difficult philosophical method of all -- that of induction -- inferring general laws of culture and history from the minute details of everyday life. (This sets them apart from most critics who are predisposed to see such details through the filters of already existing theoretical paradigms.) Both also abandon the conventional method of theoretical exposition which requires the writer to first clearly state general arguments and then support them by particular examples in favor of another method, borrowed from cinema: montage of images. Benjamin, writing about the Arcades Project: "Method of this work is literary montage. I need say nothing. Only show." [1] Virilio, in a recent interview: "I always write with images." [2]

The themes: both Benjamin and Virilio repeatedly address themselves to the same ones -- the city, the relations between human senses and technology, the effect of forms of perception on forms of politics. This essay will focus on one of these common themes: the disruption caused by a cultural artifact, specifically, new communication technology (film in the case of Benjamin, telecommunication in the case of Virilio) in the familiar patterns of human perception; in short, in intervention of technology into human nature. This theme features prominently in Benjamin's celebrated "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936); half a century later, Virilio returns to it in an essay which presents one of the most interesting critiques of cyberculture to date -- "Big Optics" (1992). [3]

What is human nature and what is technology? How does one draw the boundary between the two in the twentieth century? Both Benjamin and Virilio solve this problem in the same way. They equate

nature with spatial distance between the observer and the observed; and they see technologies as destroying this distance. As we will see, these two assumptions lead them to interpret the prominent new technologies of their times in a very similar way.

Benjamin starts with his now famous concept of aura: the unique presence of a work of art, of a historical or of a natural object. We may think that an object has to be close by if we to experience its aura but, paradoxically, Benjamin defines aura "as the unique phenomenon of a distance" (224). "If, while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch" (225). Similarly, writes Benjamin, "painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality" (235).

This respect for distance common to both natural perception and painting is overturned by the new technologies of mass reproduction, particularly photography and film. Cameraman, whom Benjamin compares to a surgeon, "penetrates deeply into its [reality] web" (237); his camera zooms in in order to "pry an object from its shell" (225).

With its new mobility, glorified in such films as Dziga Vertov's "A Man with the Movie Camera," the camera can be anywhere, and, with its superhuman vision, it can obtain a close-up of any object. These close-ups, writes Benjamin, satisfy the desires of the masses "to bring things 'closer' spatially and humanly," "to get hold of an object at very close range" (225). Along with disregarding the scale, the unique locations of the objects are discarded as well as their photographs brought together within a single picture magazine or a film newsreel, the forms which fit in with the demand of mass democratic society for "the universal equality of things."

Writing about telecommunication and telepresence, Virilio similarly uses the concept of distance to understand their effect. In Virilio's reading, these technologies collapse the physical distances, uprooting the familiar patterns of perception which grounded our culture and politics.

Virilio introduces the terms Small Optics and Big Optics to underline the dramatic nature of this change. Small Optics are based on geometric perspective and shared by human vision, painting and

film. It involves the distinctions between near and far, between an object and a horizon against which the object stands out. Big Optics is real-time electronic transmission of information, "the active optics of time passing at the speed of light."

As Small Optics are being replaced by Big Optics, the distinctions characteristic of the former are erased. If information from any point can be transmitted with the same speed, the concepts of near and far, horizon, distance and space itself no longer have any meaning. (So, if for Benjamin industrial age displaced, dislocated every object from its original setting, for Virilio post-industrial age eliminates the dimension of space altogether.) At least in principle, every point on Earth is now instantly accessible from any other point on Earth. As a consequence, Big Optics locks us in a claustrophobic world without any depth or horizon; the Earth becomes our prison.

Virilio asks us to notice "the progressive derealization of the terrestrial horizon,...resulting in an impending primacy of real time perspective of undulatory optics over real space of the linear geometrical optics of the Quattrocento." [4] He mourns the destruction of distance, geographic grandeur, the vastness of natural space, the vastness which guaranteed time delay between events and our reactions, giving us time for critical reflection necessary to arrive at a correct decision. The regime of Big Optics inevitably leads to real time politics, the politics which requires instant reactions to the events transmitted with the speed of light, and which ultimately can only be efficiently handled by computers responding to each other.

Given the surprising similarity of Benjamin's and Virilio's accounts of new technologies, it is telling how differently they draw the boundaries between natural and cultural, between what is already assimilated within the human nature and what is still new and threatening. Writing in 1936, Benjamin uses the real landscape and a painting as examples of what is natural for human perception. This natural state is invaded by film which collapses distances, bringing everything equally close and destroys aura.

Virilio, writing half a century later, draws lines quite differently. By now film, which for Benjamin still represented an alien presence, became part of our human nature, the continuation of our natural

sight. Virilio considers human vision, Renaissance perspective, painting and film as all belonging to Small Optics of geometric perspective in contrast to the Big Optics of instant electronic transmission.

Virilio postulates a historical break between film and telecommunication, between Small Optics and Big Optics. It is also possible to read the movement from the first to the second in terms of continuity -- if we are to use the concept of modernization.

Modernization is accompanied by the process of disruption of the physical space and matter, the process which privileges interchangeable and mobile signs over the original objects and relations. In the words of Jonathan Crary (who draws on Deleuze and Guattari's *ANTI-OEDIPUS* and on Marx's *GRANDRISSE*) "Modernization is the process by which capitalism uproots and makes mobile that which is grounded, clears away or obliterates that which impedes circulation, and makes exchangeable what is singular." [5] This definition fits equally well Benjamin's account of film and Virilio's account of telecommunication, the latter just being more advanced stage in this continual process of turning objects into mobile signs. Before, different physical locations met within a single magazine spread or a film newsreel; now, they meet within a single electronic screen. Of course, the signs now themselves exist as digital data which makes their transmission and manipulation even easier. Also, in contrast to photographs, which remain fixed once they are printed, digital representation makes every image inherently mutable [6] -- creating signs which are no longer just mobile but also forever modifiable. Yet, significant as they are, these are ultimately quantitative rather than qualitative differences -- with one exception.

What may be radically new in electronic telecommunication, in contrast to film, is that it can function as a two-way communication. Not only the user can immediately obtain images of various locations, bringing them together with a single electronic screen, but, via telepresence, she can also be "present" in these locations. In other words, she can affect change on material reality over physical distance in real time. In this way, electronic communication makes instantaneous not only the process by which objects are turned into signs but also the reverse process -- manipulation of objects through these signs. [7]

Film, telecommunication, telepresence. Benjamin's and Virilio's analyses made possible for us to understand the historical effect of these technologies in terms of progressive diminishing and finally complete elimination of something which both writers see as a fundamental condition of human perception -- spatial distance, the distance between the subject who is seeing and the object being seen. This reading of distance involved in (perspectival) vision as something positive, as a necessary ingredient of human culture provides an important alternative for a much more dominant tendency in modern thought to read distance negatively. This negative reading is then used to attack the visual sense as a whole. Distance becomes responsible for creating the gap between the spectator and spectacle, for separating subject and object, for putting the first in the position of transcendental mastery and rendering the second inert. Distance allows the subject to treat the Other as object; in short, it makes objectification possible. Or, as French fishermen have summarized this critique to young Lacan who was looking at a sardine can floating on the surface of the sea: "You see the can? Do you see it? Well, it doesn't see you!"[8]

In Western thought, vision has always been understood and discussed in opposition to touch; so, inevitably, the denigration of vision (to use Martin Jay's term[9]) leads to the elevation of touch (for instance, witness the recent interest in the idea of haptic). For instance, we may be tempted to read the lack of distance characteristic of the act of touching as allowing for a different relationship between subject and object. Benjamin and Virilio block this seemingly logical line of argument as they both stress aggression potentially present in this act. Rather than understanding touch as a respectful and careful contact or as a caress, they present it as unceremonious and aggressive disruption of matter.

Thus, the standard connotations of vision and touch become reversed. For Benjamin and Virilio, distance guaranteed by vision preserves the aura of an object, its position in the world, while the desire "to bring things 'closer'" destroys objects' relations to each other, ultimately obliterating the material order altogether and rendering the notions of distance and space meaningless. So even if we are to disagree with their arguments about new technologies and to question their equitation between natural order and distance, the critique of vision -- touch opposition is something we should retain.

References:

- [1] Walter Benjamin, "N [Theoretics of Knowledge; Theory of Progress]," THE PHILOSOPHICAL FORUM 15, no. 1-2 (Fall-Winter 1983-1984), 5.
- [2] Louise Wilson, Cyberwar, God and Television: Interview with Paul Virilio, CTHEORY (http://english-www.hss.cmu.edu/ctheory/a-cyberwar_god.html).
- [3] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in ILLUMINATIONS, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schochen Books, 1969); Paul Virilio, "Big Optics," in ON JUSTIFYING THE HYPOTHETICAL NATURE OF ART AND THE NON-IDENTICALITY WITHIN THE OBJECT WORLD, ed. Peter Weibel (Kšln, 1992). Virilio's argument can also be found in his other recent essays. See, for instance, "InterCommunication Celebration Symposium: Media and Communication in the Computer Age. Asuda Akira, Edmond Couchot, Jonathan Crary and Paul Virilio," in ANNUAL INTERCOMMUNICATION '94 (Tokyo: 1994).
- [4] Virilio, "Big Optics," 90.
- [5] Jonathan Crary, TECHNIQUES OF THE OBSERVER: ON VISION AND MODERNITY IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1990), 10.
- [6] This point is argued in William Mitchell, THE RECONFIGURED EYE: VISUAL TRUTH IN THE POST-PHOTOGRAPHIC ERA (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1992).
- [7] I analyze the semiotics of telepresence in more detail in "To Lie and to Act: Potemkin's Villages, Cinema and Telepresence," in ARS ELECTRONICA '95 (Linz, Austria, 1995).
- [8] Jacques Lacan, THE FOUR FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPTS OF PSYCHO-ANALYSIS, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York and London: W.W.Norton, 1978), 95.
- [9] Martin Jay, DOWNCAST EYES: THE DENIGRATION OF VISION IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY FRENCH THOUGHT (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

