

ALL THINGS ARE CURVES

by Steve Redhead



Professor of Sport and Media Cultures in the Chelsea School at the University of Brighton in the UK, Steve Redhead directs research into Mobile Accelerated Nonpostmodern Culture (MANC). He is the author, or editor, of sixteen books including *Paul Virilio's Passwords* (forthcoming 2011), *The Jean Baudrillard Reader* (Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh and Columbia University Press, NY, 2008), *Paul Virilio: Theorist For An Accelerated Culture* (Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh and University of Toronto Press, Toronto and Buffalo, 2004) and *The Paul Virilio Reader* (Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh and Columbia University Press, NY, 2004). He is co-editor of Berg's *Subcultural Style* international book series.

“All things are curves”...there are no end points or the end points connect in a curved mirror. All things, in this sense, fulfil their own cycle.’

Jean Baudrillard, in conversation with Jean Nouvel, *The Singular Objects of Architecture*

The late Jean Baudrillard once said, as Jean Nouvel reminded him in conversation, 'all things are curves' (Baudrillard and Nouvel, 2002:15-16). Paul Hegarty (Hegarty, 2004) argued quite correctly, in an excellent book on the 'live theory' of Jean Baudrillard, that Paul Virilio was the theorist closest to Baudrillard's ideas (though he also pointed out that they always differed in quite important ways) and that Virilio is the one person Jean Baudrillard engaged with most over the years before his death in 2007. The 'curves' connecting and defining the two theorists of the 'end' (or in Virilio's word 'finitude') are certainly intriguing and surprisingly underexplored.

Rather accidentally Baudrillard and Virilio have often had linked publishing histories making it seem as if they are more of an intellectual pairing than they actually were. Semiotext(e) in the USA has published the original work, translated into English from the French, of Baudrillard and Virilio for decades. Also more recently both Virilio and Baudrillard have had new editions of their books by Semiotext(e). For instance, in 2008, after Baudrillard's death in 2007, Semiotext(e) published a 'lost' series of seminars from 1990 and 1991 about 'radical alterity' (Baudrillard and Guillaume, 2008) and a

2<sup>nd</sup> edition of *Forget Foucault* (Baudrillard, 2008). In 2007 Semiotext(e) had already published a 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of Baudrillard's *Fatal Strategies* (Baudrillard, 2007). A new, 3<sup>rd</sup> expanded, edition of the classic book of early 1980s Virilio conversations with Sylvère Lotringer - *Pure War* (Virilio and Lotringer, 2008) was also put out. Virilio's *The Aesthetics of Disappearance* has also been given a second edition by Semiotext(e) (Virilio, 2009a). Two English translations of Virilio books have been published by Berg in England (Virilio, 2005, Virilio, 2007a) and Berg were until April 2009 the distributors for Seagull Press, a small Indian publisher based in Calcutta who published Baudrillard's own first posthumous book (Baudrillard, 2009). Also Baudrillard and Virilio have been published by Polity Press in England (Baudrillard, 2005a, Baudrillard, 2005b, Virilio, 2007b, Virilio, 2010), adding to the longstanding translation and publication of Baudrillard and Virilio in Europe by Verso books, the publishing voice of the new New Left. In 2002, alongside Virilio's *Ground Zero* (Virilio, 2002) Baudrillard contributed one of the other books in Verso's mini series on September 11, 2001 called *The Spirit of Terrorism* (Baudrillard, 2004).

Collegial work between the two French intellectuals together did sometimes occur, especially in their middle age, from the mid-1970s onwards. As Mike Gane (Gane, 2003) noted in his forensic analysis of French social theory and its main protagonists, Virilio, for instance, worked with Baudrillard in Paris on the journal *Traverses* between 1975 and 1990 after previously working on the Catholic-inspired journal *Esprit*. Virilio told European Graduate School students at La Rochelle in 2007 (Virilio, 2009: 68-70), a couple of weeks after Baudrillard died, about their collaboration and that he saw that:

‘The big difference between Jean and me is that he worked on simulation and I worked on substitution...I would like to relate a small anecdote about Baudrillard and simulation and substitution. When we found ourselves at the *Revue Traverses*, I had just finished my photographic campaign, which took ten years, on the wall of the Atlantic. Baudrillard hated photography at the time. I went to the *Revue Traverses* because before, in the *Revue de L’esprit*, they didn’t have photos or images. At the *Revue Traverses*, I could publish my photos and I told the revue, “I am coming”. When I saw Baudrillard, he said “Tisk, tisk, tisk”. And now he is dead and I am still alive...It’s been quite a long time now since I have stopped taking photos, but he, he began taking photos. He even finally became a photographer. This is typical in our movement.”

Virilio and Baudrillard were both, separately, at various times in the noughties, Professors at the European Graduate School, Saas-Fee, Switzerland, where Sylvere Lotringer (a long time friend, publisher

and interlocutor of both theorists is now the Baudrillard Professor). Indeed Virilio's current designation, at 77 years old, is Professor of Urban Philosophy at the European Graduate School. YouTube has several minutes of both Virilio and Baudrillard giving their various independent French language lectures for the Swiss based European Graduate School; the video lectures have been uploaded on the internet for free downloading by anyone, all over the world at the same time – exactly Virilio's imagined 'city of the instant'.

A critical comparison of Baudrillard and Virilio, and their intertwined histories can undoubtedly be made both within and without French social theory as a specific body of knowledge (Redhead, 2004b: 1-9, Redhead, 2004a: 119-124; Gane, 2003, Redhead, 2008:1-13). Virilio, as well as seeing the simulation/substitution debate as a major dividing line between them, commented on subtle, substantive differences with Baudrillard, after the latter's death. In conversation with Sylvere Lotringer of Semiotext(e) in La Rochelle three months after Baudrillard's passing Virilio (Virilio and Lotringer, 2008: 235) emphasised that he and his old friend Baudrillard disagreed and that they actually:

'had a radically different approach to things. For me, things have a purpose, every moment has its purpose. He didn't believe so. That is why we could never discuss certain subjects. On the other hand, we had something in common, which was the uncertainty principle, not believing your own eyes, conscientious objections. That is why he wrote what he did about the Gulf War. There are conscientious objectors who don't want to see the war and those who don't believe in the war, even when it takes place, since the war was created out of its image.'

Other commentators have drawn attention to the similarities *and* differences in Baudrillard and Virilio. In 'Elegy for a Dead Friend' in *Grey Ecology* (Virilio, 2009b: 19) Drew Burk, Virilio's translator into English from the original European Graduate School French language seminars in Virilio's home town of La Rochelle in April 2007, and an interpreter at the event, commented:

'I must say that before meeting and interpreting for Virilio, I had quite a few problems with his writings, especially concerning art. I was more akin to his friend and theoretical antagonist, Jean Baudrillard and while I desperately wanted to enjoy both of these thinkers' philosophical inquiries into the mediated world that we find ourselves immersed in today, Virilio's thought, as opposed to Baudrillard's, at the least seemed too defensive. But as Virilio began to plead his case, his presence gave another quality to his work. I couldn't help but deconstruct the scene. Virilio, in the aftermath of his friend's death (Baudrillard had died two weeks prior) seemed more concerned than ever with maintaining a "distance" from what Baudrillard would name the hyperreal...But something struck me quite curiously here when Virilio proposed his grey ecology and with it a *recoil*, a necessity to take a step back from the instantaneity of what he calls "cinematic energy" in order to maintain a distance. One started to see a certain difference in the unfolding of Virilio's critique and that of his friend Jean Baudrillard...Virilio would call this position of study the University of Disaster.'

As ever, though, it is religious belief which most clearly divided Baudrillard and Virilio throughout their long friendship. Burk (Virilio, 2009b: 20-21) noted the source of this breach, which has deep theoretical repercussions for the interpretation of their work, as the:

‘Christian ether surrounding Virilio. When he responded to a question regarding what artists today should do to fight the problem of speed and technology he quoted St. Augustine, “Do whatever you want, but do it with love”. But for Virilio there is an interesting twist that makes all the difference. His idea of revelation is not that of the end, but of a revealing, and this for Virilio is the essence as well of his concept of the integral accident. This leads me to Baudrillard and his relationship to Virilio. Virilio believes the biogenetic bomb is one we must be wary of. He warns against cloning not only of people, but perception itself. Virilio however does not believe that we have already entered the “hyperreal” of Baudrillard. I asked him the question. He thinks we have yet to move over. Virilio still claims we can gain the necessary distance from the technological speed of the virtual. But Baudrillard obviously thought differently. He states “Distance is obliterated, both external distance from the real world and the internal distance specific to the sign” (Baudrillard, 2005a). Virilio calls for us to take a step back from the instantaneity of screen technology, but for Baudrillard, it has already burned itself onto our retina. For Baudrillard, the cloning that Virilio speaks of has already taken place, perhaps not physically yet (this is debatable, but at least psychically with the mass popularisation of certain figures, styles, etc). For Baudrillard, the hyperreal has already taken over, and more to the point, we have entered the realm of the pataphysical, the theatre of cruelty that is the science of imaginary solutions. The “integral accident” of Virilio, his thought is always/already framed in the theatre of the global. But Baudrillard reminds us of the place to which thought should not be instructed, to an idea which he and his friend Virilio would perhaps have agreed upon. Baudrillard states, “Thought must

refrain from instructing or being instructed by, a future reality, for in that game, it will always fall into the trap of a system that holds the monopoly of reality. And this is not a philosophical choice. It is, for thought, a life-and-death question” (Baudrillard, 2005a). And this brings me to point on which I think both of these philosophers (one always reminding us of his architectural hauntology, the other of his Jarry nature) can agree. They are both trying to carve out a thought and a mimetic mirror of actuality without coming to a limit, an absolute. When Virilio quotes St Augustine, it is in the same way that Baudrillard makes up a fake quote from Ecclesiastes. It is for a love of existence, even if it is the smallest of things.’

Virilio (Virilio, 2009b: 42) has stated that ‘contrary to my old friend Jean Baudrillard, I have no psychoanalytic culture; zero, it doesn’t interest me’ and further that:

‘concerning Baudrillard, I believe that there wasn’t much we agreed on. Like the saying goes, we don’t have to agree to get along. Jean was a great friend. On many points we were in complete disagreement. Well, you have understood I am a Christian. That is to say, I don’t believe in death. And Baudrillard didn’t believe in life, that is the reality of life. This is where one gets the idea of simulations. We were both conscientious objectors. Both atheists, but not the same kind: he didn’t believe in reality, in particular in its acceleration, and I don’t believe in death, that is to say, in cessation.’

Whatever their differences(and I would argue that they are singular voices which should be listened to separately) both Baudrillard and Virilio are essential tools in these ‘catastrophic’ and ‘claustropolitan’ times. Baudrillard is dead. Virilio, as he never tires of telling us, is still alive. Slowing down but still moving. But linearity is also dead. Remember Baudrillard’s enigmatic phrase – ‘all things are curves’.

## **Bibliography**

Baudrillard, Jean (2009) *Why Hasn't Everything Already Disappeared?*

London, New York and Calcutta: Seagull Press.

Baudrillard, Jean (2008) *Forget Foucault*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2<sup>nd</sup> edition.

Baudrillard, Jean (2007) *Fatal Strategies*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2<sup>nd</sup> edition.

Baudrillard, Jean (2005a) *The Intelligence of Evil or the Lucidity Pact*. Cambridge: Polity.

Baudrillard, Jean (2005b) *Cool Memories V*. Cambridge: Polity.

Baudrillard, Jean (2004) *The Spirit of Terrorism*. London: Verso, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition.

Baudrillard, Jean and Guilliams, Marc (2008) *Radical Alterity*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e).

Baudrillard, Jean and Nouvel, Jean (2002) *The Singular Objects of Architecture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Gane, Mike (2003) *French Social Theory*. London: Sage.

Hegarty, Paul (2004) *Jean Baudrillard: Live Theory*. London: Continuum.

Redhead, Steve (2008) *The Jean Baudrillard Reader*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press/New York: Columbia University Press, European Perspectives Series, 2008.

Redhead, Steve (2004a) *Paul Virilio: Theorist for an Accelerated Culture*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press/Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2004.

Redhead, Steve (2004b) *The Paul Virilio Reader*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press/New York: Columbia University Press, European Perspectives Series, 2004.

Virilio, Paul and Lotringer, Sylvere (2008) *Pure War*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e) 3<sup>rd</sup> edition.

Virilio, Paul (2010) *The University of Disaster*. Cambridge: Polity.

Virilio, Paul (2009a) *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2<sup>nd</sup> edition.

Virilio, Paul (2009b) *Grey Ecology*. New York: Atropos.

Virilio, Paul (2007a) *Art As Far as The Eye Can See*. Oxford: Berg.

Virilio, Paul (2007b) *The Original Accident*. Cambridge: Polity.

Virilio, Paul (2005) *City of Panic*. Oxford: Berg.

Virilio, Paul (2002) *Ground Zero*. London: Verso.