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TOWARDS A THEORY OF CLAUSTROPOLITANISM

by Steve Redhead



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In John Armitage's stimulating article in the journal *Left Curve* (Armitage, 2006) he proposed a dichotomy between 'cosmopolis or chaosmopolis' when looking at the contemporary city. Taking this argument about the breakdown in city cultures further I want here to consider some preliminary possibilities of what I call a claustropolitan, as opposed to cosmopolitan, sociology. I look at how this might help us track the trajectories of the catastrophic, an enterprise which heavily involves an investigation of the contradictory work of the French urban theorist Paul Virilio. Claustropolitanism, and claustropolitan sociology, in my view is not only a potential alternative to the influential thinking of European 'cosmopolitan sociology' (of Ulrich Beck, Zygmunt Bauman, John Urry and others). It is, most certainly, a sociology of claustropolis not cosmopolis. But it also points to how social theory might be done 'after postmodernity' (Redhead, 2009) and constitutes a social theory from within the claustropolis – a reflection of how it is to live within the accelerated, 'shrunken' world we now inhabit, if Paul Virilio's vision is to be fully utilised. A reconstructed theoretical social and human sciences project, which a claustropolitan sociology may provide, is desperately needed – but this is also part of a more general methodological

'shout out' for what I see as a 'bunker anthropology' to re-conceptualise, and research more adequately, the socio-technologies of connection, resilience, mobility and collapse in contemporary cities in these 'scoundrel' times (Virilio, 2007b, Virilio 2005a, Virilio 2005b, Virilio 2005c, Virilio 2005d, Armitage 2005, Thrift 2005, Conley 2005, Kureishi, 2005, Ali, 2005) after the crash of October 2008.

Paul Virilio, urban and cultural theorist extraordinaire, is responsible for the idea of 'claustropolis'. He has characterised this process as part of a 'war on the cities' (1). Virilio has been theorising war and the city as long as anyone can remember, but essentially since 1958. He has most recently argued (Virilio and Lotringer, 2008) that the nature of deterrence has drastically changed and classical war has failed. Where once we had 'pure war' he now claims that we have 'impure war'. For Virilio war is no longer aimed at the military but at the population. As Sylvere Lotringer has noted in conversation with Virilio, 'the city has become the new battlefield' (Virilio and Lotringer, 2008).

Virilio here provides one example of his theory of the 'accident' – the network failure or collapse or catastrophe or breakdown in what I

term accelerated culture, or accelerated modernity. Virilio's theory of the accident is relatively little known and even less discussed. He is also a figure whose oeuvre has been generally imported into the English speaking academic world as just another, albeit quirky, complementary element in social and political theory (Armitage 2000, Der Derian, 1998) following on from other French theorists such as Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault, when in fact Virilio himself has accurately characterised himself over the years as explicitly 'against sociology' and, moreover, for, as he has put it, 'politics and war' (Redhead 2004a, Redhead 2004b) making him a quite distinct figure in contemporary urban theory. Moreover, Virilio's consistent influences over the years have been photography, Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, Gestalt psychology, stained glass painting and anarchistic Christianity, a very different intellectual background to the 'poststructuralists' and 'postmodernists' with whom he is often misleadingly bracketed. Paul Virilio is for sure no postmodernist even though he might talk of the 'postmodern period' and the 'atheism of postmodernity' as well as the 'profane art of modernity' in his recent book *Art As Far As The Eye Can See* (Virilio, 2007a). Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont (Sokal and

Bricmont, 2003), in their ill-conceived 'expose' of the supposed scientific inadequacies of 'French postmodernism' and 'poststructuralism', subject Paul Virilio to withering attack (the Virilio chapter is Chapter 10 in the second English edition) alongside Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, Bruno Latour and Felix Guattari amongst many others. Unfortunately for Sokal and Bricmont's project, Paul Virilio has little in common with such figures other than nationality or (formerly) Parisian residence. Indeed, Virilio has gone further with this self-labelling process and described his own distinct intellectual enterprise as that of a 'critic of the art of technology' (Redhead 2004a). His theory of the accident (Virilio, 2007b), then, not surprisingly involves what I elsewhere call an aesthetics of the accident, or in his own words an 'art as far as the eye can see' (Virilio, 2007a). Virilio, however, in providing a perspective on the art of the accident in our increasingly accelerated and dangerous modernities, falls short of what is required in the contemporary claustropolitan sociological project. What is required, more generally, is in fact a reinvigorated sociology, not merely an art, of the accident (2) but Virilio's work remains a part of the routemap. Furthermore, in search of this claustropolitan sociology of the accident I argue we

must move firmly towards the trajectories of the catastrophic, or what Virilio calls 'claustropolis', which in his view has replaced cosmopolis.

Virilio poses the question with characteristic aplomb :

'CLAUSTROPOLIS or COSMOPOLIS? A society of enforced seclusion, as once upon a time, or a society of forcible control? Actually, the dilemma itself seems illusory, within the temporal compression of instantaneity and the ubiquity of the age of the information revolution. This interactive society is one in which real time overrules the real space of geostrategy, promoting a "metrostrategy" in which the city is less the centre of a territory, a "national space", than the centre of time, of this global and astronomical time that makes every city the resonating chamber of the most incredibly diverse events (breakdowns, major accidents, terrorist outrages etc).' (Virilio, 2007b: 68)

Virilio, French theorist of 'urbanisme' and so-called high priest of speed, has been dropping these 'logic bombs' on us for fifty years. He first wrote, after all, albeit briefly, in 1958. In these tales of accelerated culture, or accelerated modernity (Redhead, 2004b), the speed of mass communications as well as the speed of 'things' is what counts. In this scenario we have all to some extent or other become historians of Virilio's instant present where immediacy, instantaneity and ubiquity rule. For Virilio it was with globalisation, through 'new technologies', that we began to inhabit a world that is 'foreclosed':

'Globalisation is a major catastrophe, it is the catastrophe of catastrophes. In the same way that time, like Aristotle said, is the accident of accidents, geographic globalisation is by essence a major catastrophe. Not because of bad capitalists, but because it is the end, the closing of the world on itself through speed, the velocity of images, the rapidity of transportation. We live in a world of forclusion' (Virilio and Lotringer, 2005: 77)

For Virilio the globe we inhabit is actually a 'world closed off and closed in'. He has come to this most recent vision over many years of foraging in our accelerated culture. He is now in his eighth decade. He was born in France in 1932 of an (illegal immigrant) Italian father and French Catholic mother. He experienced the Second World War first hand. He was sent to his maternal grandparents in Nantes in 1943 when he was 10 years old – American and English bombing devastated the city while he was there. He has said that the bombardment was his 'university of disaster' (Virilio and Lotringer, 2008: 220). Virilio retired in the late 1990s from his only academic position as Professor of Architecture at the Ecole Speciale d'Architecture in Paris, France, a post he had held since the late 1960s, after being elected by the students in the wake of the events of 'May 68'. On retirement he was nominated Emeritus Professor. Armed with his senior citizen card he moved from Paris to La Rochelle on the Atlantic coast of France, a considerable upheaval for

someone like Virilio who suffers from claustrophobia and rarely travels. He retired, he said at the time, to write a book on, in his own words, 'the accident', a project he had in mind then for over ten years (Virilio, 2007b). Much of his work ever since has been dominated by this idea. His haphazard progress towards the academy through the 1950s and 1960s was unusual to say the least and included a period where he spent his time obsessively photographing hundreds of the German bunkers on the North Atlantic coast of France which date from the Second World War, a conflict which had scarred him as a young man, and a spell where he trained as a stained glass painter working eventually with Braque and Matisse. His ultimate claim to international fame is that he has over many years developed a theory of speed, technology and modernity which whatever its flaws is worth taking seriously, even if it is ultimately jettisoned by its erstwhile users. For Virilio 'the major accident is the Medusa of modernity' (Virilio and Lotringer, 2005: 102).

This theorising of speed and modernity alone marks him out as a major contemporary thinker. Popular culture writer Simon Reynolds (Reynolds, 2008: 124) identifies 'speed – in the vehicular sense' as

'the central concept in Virilio's thought'. Moreover, Reynolds argues, 'you could just as easily read "speed" in his books like *The Aesthetics of Disappearance* as referring to both amphetamine and to 'ardkore's ever-escalating tempos'. As a mark of his growing influence in the theoretical development of human and social sciences throughout the globe in the twenty first century the Virilian idea of the 'dromocratic condition' displacing the notion of 'postmodern condition' which Jean-Francois Lyotard (Lyotard, 1984) first promoted in 1979, has become increasingly popular amongst cultural theorists in the international academy. Virilio's idea of the 'function of the oblique', a utopian radical theory of architectural space developed with French architect Claude Parent in the 1960s, has also started to receive the full attention it deserves in the overall assessment of Virilio's life and work (James, 2007a, Redhead, 2004a, Redhead, 2004b, Redhead, 2005, Armitage, 2000). However, it is Virilio's little known and barely discussed theory of the accident which should interest those involved in the urgent discussions around urban vulnerability and network failure in the twenty-first century. Speed dominated Virilio's thought, in fact, for a relatively short time in conceptual terms. As he puts it. Virilio is always interested in 'speed and stuff' (Virilio and Lotringer,

2005) and describes his role as a 'dromologist', but the determining factor of speed for society was short lived. The idea of a global 'dromocratic condition' comes, actually, from Virilio himself in a select few, but quite well known, writings in the 1970s (Redhead, 2004a, Redhead, 2004b). The 'society of speed' that this work analysed, was never actually part of a fully formed conceptual apparatus and Virilio soon moved on to other topics and ideas in the maelstrom of the neo-liberal 1980s and 1990s. The accident was one of them, initially he recalls triggered by an article he wrote (called 'The Original Accident') in 1979 for *Liberation* in France about the Three Mile Island 'accident' in Harrisburg in the USA. The idea of the theory of the accident on the other hand, though full of problems, is a more sustained part of his recent oeuvre and has been in thorough-going genesis since at least the early 1990s as Virilio has continued to accelerate his output of rapid, short books and distinctive, idiosyncratic interviews (see, for instance, the interviews in Virilio and Petit, 1999, Armitage, 2001 and Virilio and Lotringer, 2002). In this period, for Virilio, 'the world is more and more closed and more and more contracted' (Virilio and Lotringer, 2005: 87) and 'claustropolitanism' becomes more and more a possibility.

There are conflicting interpretations of Virilio's theorising in the parts of the academic world which have bothered to consider his work but essentially Virilio's contention is that the speeding up of technologies, especially communications technologies like the internet and e-mail, have tended to abolish time and distance. 'Speed and stuff' (Virilio and Lotringer, 2008) for Virilio, importantly, has had a largely military gestation. The way in which mass communication has speeded up at the same time has meant, in his view, that old-fashioned industrial war has given way to the information bomb (an idea which he takes from Albert Einstein, another major lifelong influence on Virilio) or information war. In Virilio's view there have been three distinct eras in the last two centuries characterised by war (in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries), revolution (in the twentieth century) and (now) the accident. Virilio asserts that 'the accident has replaced both war and revolution' (Virilio and Lotringer, 2005:82). The eras still overlap of course. As military conflict has increasingly become 'war at the speed of light' (a description of all of Virilio's work as theory at the speed of light might be made, too) – as he labelled the first Gulf War in the early 1990s – the tyranny of distance in civilian as well as

military life has almost disappeared. This does not mean that there is no deceleration, or slowness, though. Inertia, or better still what Virilio termed 'polar inertia', has set in for even the supersonic airplane traveller or high-speed train devotee.

Paul Virilio eventually left his post in academia to write a long planned book (Virilio, 2007b) on 'the accident'. The eventual book (published as *L'Accident Originel* in 2005 in France) was billed by the English publisher as a 'meditation on technoscientific Progress' and a contemplation of a 'future overshadowed by the nightmare of an outmoded humanity overwhelmed by a catastrophe of its own making, a kind of catastrophic grand finale that would mirror the original accident, the Big Bang, that some scientists believed created the universe'. Crucially, the same phenomena of speed, accident and war are different today in Virilio's view than they were when he first started writing about them in any sustained manner in the 1970s and 1980s. He has contemplated this change in a virtual conversation with interviewer Carlos Oliveira in the mid-1990s where he related the issue of the contemporary situation to the general arguments he had been making for a decade or more about the consequences of what

he has variously termed 'accelerated temporality' and the

'acceleration of our daily lives':

'This is because we are witnessing a radical break; it is not my thinking that has become radical, the situation itself has radicalised beyond measure. The end of the bloc-oriented confrontation between East and West, the transition from the industrial to the INFORMATIONAL mode of production, the globalisation that is being achieved through the telecommunication networks and the information (super)highways – all these developments raise grave questions.'

(Virilio and Oliveira, 1996)

For Virilio the 'grave questions' are increasingly explored through the notion of the accident in his writings during the 1990s and the twenty first century. The term accident though, in Virilio's use and specialised terminology, is a complicated and ambiguous notion initially used in the writings of Aristotle. Here, as frequently happens elsewhere in Virilio's original French language writing and speaking, the English translation oversimplifies by connoting merely a catastrophic event rather than the deeper philosophical reference to accident and substance and the phenomenological (James, 2007) and existentialist debates Virilio inherited from those he listened to (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Vladimir Jankelevitch and Jean Wahl) as a student at the university of the Sorbonne in Paris in the early 1960s. Virilio, for his part, has emphasised that:

'For the philosopher substance is absolute and necessary, whereas the accident is relative and contingent. So the accident is what happens unexpectedly to the substance, the product or the recently invented technical object. It is for example the original accident of the Challenger space shuttle ten years ago. It is the duty of scientists and technicians to avoid the accident at all costs...In fact, if no substance can exist in the absence of an accident, then no technical object can be developed without in turn generating "its" specific accident: ship=ship wreck, train=train wreck, plane=plane crash, etc. The accident is thus the hidden face of technical progress...one thing that must be considered here is the preponderance and role of the speed of the accident, thus the limitation of speed and the penalties for "exceeding the speed limit". With the acceleration following the transportation revolution of the last century, the number of accidents suddenly multiplied and sophisticated procedures had to be invented in order to control air, rail and highway traffic. With the current world-wide revolution in communication and telematics, acceleration has reached its physical limit, the speed of electromagnetic waves. So there is a risk not of a local accident in a particular location, but rather of a global accident that would affect if not the entire planet, then at least the majority of people concerned by these technologies...It is apparent that this new notion of the accident has nothing to do with the Apocalypse, but rather with the imperious necessity to anticipate in a rational way this kind of catastrophe by which the interactivity of telecommunications would reproduce the devastating effects of a poorly managed radioactivity – think about Chernobyl.'

(Virilio and Petit, 1999: 92-3)

The nature of the accident, according to Virilio, has changed, and changed speed and everything else in its wake:

'The information revolution which we are currently witnessing ushers in the era of the global accident. The old kind of accidents were localised in space and time: a train derailment took place, say, in Paris or in Berlin; and when a plane crashed, it did so in London or wherever in the world. The catastrophes of earlier time were situated in real space, but now, with the advent of absolute speed of light and electromagnetic waves, the possibility of a global accident has arisen, of an accident that would occur simultaneously to the world as a whole.'

(Virilio and Oliveira, 1996)

Despite the fact that the information revolution has not had a great deal of effect on Virilio himself – he uses the internet only rarely, he has at times almost given up watching television – he has said that he does regard cyberspace as a new form of perspective. Our world is a 'cybermonde' according to Paul Virilio. Especially through cyberspace, for Virilio, history has hit the wall of world-wide time where with live transmission, local time no longer creates history, where, in his view, real time conquers real space, producing what he calls a time accident, which he sees as an accident with no equal.

According to Virilio speeding up has meant reaching the limit of speed, that of real time:

'A possible symptom of this globalisation, of the eventuality of such an accident, was the stock exchange crash of 1987. We will no longer live in local time as we did in the past when we were prisoners of history. We will live in world time, in global time. We are experiencing an epoch that spells the international, the global accident. This is the way I interpret simultaneity and its imposition upon us, as well as the immediacy and the ubiquity, that is, the omnipresence of the information bomb, which at the moment, thanks to the information (super)highways and all the technological breakthroughs and developments in the field of telecommunication, is just about to explode.'

(Virilio and Oliveira, 1996)

For Virilio, what took place on September 11, 2001 was an ‘accident and emblematic of the current disorder’ (Virilio and Lotringer, 2005: 104).

The 9/11 events in New York and Washington are seen by Virilio as an explicit example of his theory of the ‘accident of accidents’, a generalised accident occurring everywhere at the same time, live on global television and the internet. In Virilio’s words ‘the live broadcast is the catastrophe of time’ (Virilio and Lotringer, 2005: 109). Unlike Jean Baudrillard (Baudrillard, 2004b) Virilio makes no reference at all to the myriad suggestions that 9/11 was ‘allowed’ to happen by the authorities, or, even, that it was an ‘inside job’. He seems to accept the official version of the 9/11 events to all intents and purposes. He says, for instance, about 9/11 that ‘unlike the first attack against the World Trade Centre, there was no missile, no bombardier, no explosions’ (Virilio and Lotringer, 2005: 104). The cover of the English edition of his book *The Original Accident* (Virilio, 2007b) carries a photo of the WTC collapse. He admitted to Sylvère Lotringer (Virilio and Lotringer, 2002) shortly after the attacks on New York and Washington that ‘the door is open’ with what he called ‘the great

attack' and furthermore that he saw New York as 'what Sarajevo was' when 'Sarajevo triggered the First World War'. On September 11, 2001, Virilio's earlier prophecy in his work of the 1990s about a generalised accident or total accident seemingly came tragically true as what he saw as an attack by a small, tightly knit group of men, armed only with stanley knives, taking over the cockpits of the hijacked planes and flew jet airliners with masses of fuel into the highly populated buildings of the World Trade Centre with the loss of nearly 3,000 lives and the destruction of several buildings (including the twin towers of the WTC and WTC 7) in the heart of the financial centre of American (and arguably world) capitalism. These nearly 3,000 deaths, Virilio noted, were 'more than Pearl Harbour', the 1941 catastrophe (Virilio and Lotringer, 2005: 104). The beginning of this post-Cold War age of imbalance as Virilio has called it, was, as he said at the time of the first 1993 attack on the twin towers (after which, rather bizarrely, he was called on as a consultant) seen in a new form of warfare – the accident of accidents, or the 'Great Accident'. The 1993 attack was precipitous for Virilio:

'In the manner of a massive aerial bombardment, this single bomb, made of several hundred kilos of explosives placed at the building's very foundations, could have caused the collapse of a tower four hundred metres high. So it is not a simple remake of the film *Towering Inferno*, as

the age-conscious media like to keep saying, but much more of a strategic event confirming for us all The Change In The Military Order Of This Fin-De-Siecle. As the bombs of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, in their day, signalled a new era for war, the explosive van in New York illustrates the mutation of terrorism.’
(Virilio, 2000: 18)

Virilio noted at the time of the 1993 World Trade Centre attack by another small group of terrorists that the perpetrators of such acts ‘are determined not merely to settle the argument with guns’ but will ‘try to devastate the major cities of the world marketplace’ (Virilio, 2000). Within eight years a slightly larger group had apparently done so (Ruthven, 2002). Many of the features of what Virilio sets out in a contemporaneous essay on the 1993 World Trade Centre attack (Virilio, 2000) as being on the cards for the future of humanity, were to be put into practice with exactly the predicted effect of the devastation of a world city on September 11, 2001. In fact, ironically, ‘*Towering Inferno*’ images probably were rife in the minds of many of the watchers of the 9/11 ‘accident’. In Virilio’s own book length musings after September 2001, implicitly about the 9/11 attack, entitled (3) *Ground Zero* (Virilio: 2002), he explicitly claimed that as the September 11 twin towers attack was being ‘broadcast live many TV viewers believed they were watching one of those disaster movies that proliferate endlessly on our TV screens’ and that it was only ‘by

switching channels and finding the same pictures on all the stations that they finally understood that it was true'. For Virilio, 'overexposure is the live broadcast, it is real time replacing the past, present and future' (Virilio and Lotringer, 2005: 109). Aesthetically 9/11 was taken as an 'art of terrorism' in some quarters. Virilio quotes the avant-garde electronic composer Karlheinz Stockhausen as saying it was 'the greatest work of art there has ever been' (Virilio, 2002).

Seemingly unknown to Virilio, the Brit-artist Damien Hirst, too, claimed, in the British media, that those responsible for September 11 should indeed be congratulated because they achieved 'something which nobody would ever have thought possible' on an artistic level. The event was in 'bad boy' Damien Hirst's view 'kind of like an artwork in its own right...wicked, but it was devised in this way for this kind of impact' and 'was devised visually' (*The Guardian*, September 20, 2001).

Although aspects of the work surrounding the art of the accident might be instructive, what is needed in my view in future theoretical developments in the social and human sciences is a move towards a claustropolitan sociology of the accident. Virilio thinks this is also an

accident of knowledge. For Benjamin Bratton 'there is also an accident contained in theoretical technologies, and in the absorption of Virilio's theory by the institutional positions it seems to criticise so fiercely. "I am studied in military academies" he tells Sylvère Lotringer in *Pure War*, and indeed he is' (Bratton in Virilio, 2006). For Virilio one of the problems of the highly mediatised modernities we inhabit today is that 'attack' and 'accident' are increasingly indistinguishable. We are unsure whether we are experiencing (terrorist) attack or system or network failure when we regularly consume news of events in the media, especially since the watershed events of 9/11 and the subsequent 'war on terror', itself a kind of mediatised never ending 'live' World War IV. The SARS crisis in China, Hong Kong and Canada, BSE scares in North America, train crashes in North Korea, plane crashes in the Middle East, electricity power failures in the USA, UK, Australia and mainland Europe to take some recent random examples are cases where an initial denial of terrorist attack shifts the 'blame' to technical failure of systems (in other words a 'real' accident) in such a way that the event is played down. It is only an accident proclaims the news anchor after a few days hype, and therefore everyone can breathe a sigh of relief. What is actually

needed is a concentration on the systems and the failure. 9/11, for instance, could be seen as a much an instance of systems failure as 'attack': failure of intelligence (CIA, FBI), governance (failure to act earlier against Al Qaeda), security (airport, airline), transport (aircraft), military (patrolling of skies) and so on. Accident, along with elements of its philosophical make up as envisaged by Virilio, may be one of the concepts necessary to understand better the modernities and mobile city cultures of the twenty-first century globe. But the social science in which the sociology of the accident is urgently necessary is itself a reconstructed urban sociological project; a sociology as John Urry has put it 'beyond societies' (Urry, 2000). We need, instead, a new sociology of mobilities, of what we might call the mobility of modernities around the globe, especially of mobile city cultures. In a world of mobile city cultures the 'city is already there' (Virilio 2005a: 5) echoing Virilio's 'mental map' view of his own city, Paris. As Virilio puts it, 'Paris is portable' (Virilio 2005a: 5). After 9/11, too, Virilio claims that 'the tower has been motorised' and the 'very high building has become mobile' (Virilio 2005a: 18) in what he calls 'towerism' or the 'avant-garde of modernity' (Virilio and Lotringer, 2008: 211) while

Lotringer, in conversation with Virilio, asserts that 'towers are bunkers' (Virilio and Lotringer, 2008: 211).

John Urry, has rightly argued (Urry 2003), that in contemporary sociology the 'global' has been insufficiently theorised. Urry, like Zygmunt Bauman, mentions Virilio occasionally in some of his writing (Urry, 2000) but in general cosmopolitan sociology has rarely explored what Virilio has to offer in any sustained way. One of the contributions Virilio has made more generally to thinking about modernities is to raise questions about the shrinking of time and space and the effect of the war induced technologies on the speeding up of that process; in other words to thinking about the global anew. Virilio's development of the philosophical idea of the 'accident of accidents' (and it is the ancient notion that 'time is the accident of accidents' that Virilio is fond of quoting) is one way of rethinking the global, specifying as he does that it is the new communications technologies which have created the possibility of an accident that is no longer local but global; in other words, that would occur everywhere at the same time. Virilio has stressed that 'time is the accident of accidents' and that 'we have reached the speed of light with e-mail, interactivity and telework' and that is why 'we are creating a

similar accident' (Virilio and Petit, 1999). An event such as 9/ 11, eliding accident and attack, was an example of a world wide accident because it was being screened live as it happened in real time all around the globe. That said, the theorising of the accident by Virilio, though suggestive and (in his own phrase which he likes to use to describe his personal intellectual method and enterprise) 'implicit', is often at such a level of generality that it is not particularly helpful for a rigorous claustropolitan sociology of the accident. Though Virilio's language sometimes appears to import what John Urry describes as the 'new physics' (Urry, 2003) into the equation of shrinking time and space, there is relatively little evidence of Virilio in actuality standing at the cutting edge of these contemporary breakthroughs in science. As other social theorists claim, it is better to view his work, alongside comparable theorists such as Jean Baudrillard, as a 'poetics' (Cubitt, 2001) not a form of physics. John Urry argues cogently that the social science enterprise of the twenty-first century which seeks to recruit the thinking of chaos and complexity from 'natural' sciences needs to conceive of systems which are always combining success and failure and are constantly on the edge of chaos. One of the reasons why the 'intellectual impostures' project of the physics pranksters Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont (Sokal and Bricmont, 2003)

attacking Virilio and others is so ill judged is that it has not caught up with the 'complexity' of science today, never mind the contemporary complexity of theory in the human and social sciences. These systems which John Urry talks about are systems where Virilio's idea of the accident, a kind of built in component of the constant invention of new technologies, is integral. They are part of what I have called elsewhere dangerous modernity (Redhead, 2004b) which requires an understanding of theory at the speed of light (Redhead, 2004a) but also a great many more conceptual resources to better capture its global complexities.

What can be said then, of a positive nature, about Virilio's contribution to a theory of the accident, catastrophe, network failure or breakdown in today's mobile city cultures? First, it is important to take Virilio's self-labelling seriously. He is by his own consistent admission a 'phenomenologist', an 'Husserlian' (Virilio and Lotringer, 2008) and 'a critic of the art of technology' and an overview of his life and career leave us in no doubt (Redhead, 2004a and Redhead, 2004b) that he is an 'artist' rather than a social theorist in any conventional sense. He is a high modernist, without connection to the

postmodernist and poststructuralist social theorists with whom he is routinely categorised and compared. He is also an avowed Christian who 'does not believe in death' (Virilio and Lotringer, 2008: 234). Second, Virilio has had in mind for many years the development of what he calls a 'museum of accidents' to further aesthetically display his theory of the accident. He has argued (Virilio, 2007b) for the creation of a Museum of the Accident to fight our habituation to horror and violence, and our daily overexposure to terror. In a sense Virilio is closer to Damien Hirst and Karlheinz Stockhausen when they take the controversial view that an event like 9/11 is an aesthetic question. They are all involved, from different perspectives, in the enterprise of the art of the accident. They are artists rather than social theorists.

The links between 'new media' (computer games, information technology and so on) and the events of accident/attack which Virilio has analysed (both the 1993 and 2001 World Trade Centre catastrophes, for instance) is obviously of interest to students of Virilio given his idiosyncratic focus on the relationships between war, cinema and photography (Redhead, 2004a). However the significance of 9/11 in assessing Virilio's notion of the accident is

more complicated than it might appear. For Virilio, unlike other French theorists of the image such as Gilles Deleuze, the cultural forms of cinema and television actually have nothing in common. Indeed Virilio has, on the contrary, argued the historical case that video technologies and what he calls technologies of simulation have been used for war (Redhead, 2004a and Redhead, 2004). In Virilio's version of the development of the logistics of perception, video was created after the Second World War in order to radio control planes and aircraft carriers. Further, Virilio has insisted that video came with World War II and it took twenty years after that conflict before it became a means of expression for artists. Nevertheless, Virilio has also noted that it is television (an old, or even dead, media) which is for him what he has to date constituted the actual museum of accidents. For years he had been reportedly planning to set up what he has termed a 'museum of the accident', first in Japan, in the 1980s, appropriately the home of the new technologies of the media, and then in other countries.

The accident museum, or museum of accidents, in Virilio's phrase, certainly preserved for posterity the attacks of 9/11 and enables us to look at Virilio's thinking on the accident with the backdrop of the 'live'

television pictures of the New York catastrophe, but Virilio has already started to give up on television as a cultural form (a medium he confesses he no longer watches much himself). He has gone on record as saying that:

'I think that the drilling of the gaze by television has gone so far that it is no longer possible to straighten out the situation in one hour. That being said, I am not opposed to showing catastrophes or accidents, because I believe a museum of accidents is necessary. (On this subject, remember that the tape of the Rodney King affair has been put in a museum.) However, I think that television has become the advertising or propaganda medium par excellence. We saw this during the Gulf War, with Timisoara, and we see it every day. Honestly, I am beginning to give up on television. I can no longer tolerate this kind of drilling. It would take the invention of another kind of television, but I believe it's too late. I think that there will be innovation with the new medium but not in the old one. The old medium has gone all the way to the end, which is to say to ITS end. In my opinion television is gone, but not video.'
(Virilio and Petit, 1999: 47)

The requirement of the accident or catastrophe as media event, as 9/11 showed only too well, is the urgency of the screening of the phases of the event 'live'. Television certainly still does still fulfill this requirement.

For Virilio though, what really counts is not so much the technology itself but the need to show what he sees as fallibilism in scientific and technological development in what is more and more an accelerated modernity filled with danger (Redhead, 2004b). The demand by Paul

Virilio is for our global culture to go beyond an ideology of progress, linear and interrupted, excluding the importance of the mishap or the beneficial mistake. To expose the accident, to exhibit the accident, in the accident museum is the crucial task for Paul Virilio the artist. As artist and exhibition creator, the job is to expose the unlikely, to expose the unusual and yet inevitable, in recognising the symmetry between 'accident' and 'substance'. The accident museum is necessary in Virilio's thinking in order to preserve for posterity the collapsing buildings, high speed plane crashes and other accidents (or attacks) of accelerated modernity.

As a self-proclaimed critic of the art of technology (rather than a conventional social theorist) Virilio, true to his word, jettisoned the televisual form and settled for the art gallery in his quest to preserve 9/11 along with hundreds of other disasters, catastrophes, urban network failures, crashes and explosions for his own real life museum of accidents. A little over a year after 9/11 Virilio helped to create the accident museum's first concrete realisation in a major French contemporary art exhibition (officially labelled 'Ce Qui Arrive' in France, what Virilio, in interviews, has translated as 'what happens' or 'that which happens, the accident'). The Ce Qui Arrive exhibition was translated as

Unknown Quantity (Virilio: 2003) in the English version of the catalogue and included diverse textual commentary on the theory of the accident by Virilio as well as hundreds of photographs and other artefacts. Virilio created the exhibition with a number of other artists at the Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain in Paris (opening in November 2002, closing in March 2003) explicitly incorporating photographic, video and other visual material from the event known as 9/11 as well as assorted plane crashes, earthquakes and high rise collapses from all over the world. Virilio, in the main, provided the concepts for this pioneering art exhibition while curator Leanne Sacramone mapped them onto a series of artworks. As an addition to the catalogue of the exhibition Virilio interviewed Svetlana Aleksievich, the author of a book about Chernobyl victims and witnesses. Virilio's emerging ideas on the accident formed the text of the catalogue's long introduction, under subheadings such as: the invention of accidents; the accident thesis; the museum of accidents; the future of the accident; the horizon of expectation and the unknown quantity. According to one contemporary art commentator (Patrick: 2003) on the Paris exhibition, 'as war between nation states gives way to the less defined area of international terrorism, so the distinction between acts of war, man made accidents and natural disasters becomes less

distinguishable'. This situation 'in turn leads to a panorama in which acts of God and events such as Chernobyl and September 11 together occupy an undifferentiated position at the centre of the world stage'. Paul Virilio's museum of accidents, then, in this context is a twenty-first century equivalent to the 'traditional war memorial's "lest we forget"'.

Paul Virilio has taught us that in the 'crepuscular dawn' of our twenty-first century modernities the attack and the accident are becoming indistinguishable. The 'art of the accident', or what has also elsewhere been termed 'apocalyptic art', is one credible response to this dilemma. However, Virilio asserts that 'this is not the apocalypse' (Virilio and Lotringer, 2005) and such aesthetic practice, a deconstructive play on the distinction between attack and accident, is certainly not sufficient to help us to theorise the new modernities which are catching up with the various new and old capitalisms on offer around the globe. It leaves us, strangely, exhibiting a kind of ghoulish fascination (4) with the effects of the failure of systems; 'rubber necking' at the art gallery and the accident museum or tuning in with compassionless glee to the reports in the media of the latest road crash statistics, a state of mind where

(Baudrillard 2004a: 61) 'what people watch above all on TV are the weekend's road accident figures, the catastrophes' (5). In Virilio's words:

'When you invent a concept, an art, a sculpture, a film that is truly revolutionary, or when you sail the first ship, fly the first plane or launch the first space capsule, you invent the crash. So it's not simply a footnote on the "Six O'Clock News" when they show the Concorde catastrophe, it's a phenomenon happening every moment' (Virilio and Lotringer, 2005: 88).

However, even if this aesthetics of the accident is a necessary condition, it is certainly not sufficient. The claustropolitan sociology of the accident, in my view, needs to take into account thinking around the art of the accident but also fundamentally needs to move beyond it.

Notes

1. In the case of war and the city, one of the best and most provocative attempts to carry out this task was by the late Paul Hirst (Hirst 2001). The work was completed before September 11, 2001, but poses crucial questions for the future of the modern state, military conflict, international law and the international system of states which has reigned since the Peace of Westphalia in the seventeenth century. Hirst's posthumously published essays (Hirst, 2005) are equally interesting, especially on war, environment and technology. He includes Virilio, misleadingly, in his tirade against postmodernist thinkers on war and technology (Hirst, 2005: 138)

2. See, for origins of this neatly reversible phrase, Virilio and Lotringer, 2005 and Redhead, 2006.

3. Originally entitled in French *Ce Qui Arrive*, the English version of the book was published by Verso (Virilio, 2002) with the more '9/11' oriented title *Ground Zero* to fit in with its mini series of books on September 11, 2001 alongside work by Jean Baudrillard and Slavoj Zizek. Virilio actually has a little more to say about 9/11 and its effects

on urban culture in later work (Virilio and Lotringer 2002, Virilio 2005a, Virilio and Lotringer, 2008, postscript).

4. Compare the similar fascination exhibited in the twentieth century by a distinctly unpalatable thinker like Ernst Junger. Virilio (2005a: 114 and 117) himself has sometimes quoted and cited Junger (see Virilio 2005a: 143, Virilio and Lotringer, 2008: 112, 218).

5. The words are those of Virilio's late friend Jean Baudrillard in conversation with Francois L'Yvonnet (Baudrillard, 2004a). Paul Hegarty (Hegarty, 2004) argues quite correctly, in an excellent book on Jean Baudrillard, that Paul Virilio is the theorist closest to Baudrillard's ideas (though he points out that they always differed in quite subtle ways) and that Virilio is the one person he engaged with most over the years. Rather accidentally they have often had linked publishing histories making it seem as if they are more of an intellectual pairing than they actually were (collegial work together did, though, often occur throughout Baudrillard's later life, from the 1970s onwards - as Mike Gane (Gane, 2003) notes, for instance Virilio worked with Baudrillard on the journal *Traverses* between 1975

and 1990). Baudrillard (Baudrillard 2005, Baudrillard, 2009) and Virilio (Virilio 2005a, Virilio 2007a) English translations have been recently published by Berg in England, and also Baudrillard (Baudrillard, 2006, Baudrillard, 2007) and Virilio (Virilio, 2007b) by Polity Press in England, adding to the longstanding translation and publication of Baudrillard and Virilio in Europe by Verso books. Alongside Virilio's Ground Zero (Virilio, 2002) Baudrillard contributed one of the other books in Verso's mini series on September 11, 2001 (Baudrillard: 2004b). Semiotext(e) in the USA has published Baudrillard and Virilio for decades. 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 3rd expanded edition of the classic book of early 1980s Virilio conversations with Sylvere Lotringer - Pure War (Virilio and Lotringer, 2008). Virilio and Baudrillard were both, at different times, lecturers at the European Graduate School. YouTube has several minutes of these various videoed lectures uploaded. For a critical comparison of Baudrillard and Virilio, and their intertwined histories, see Gane, 2003, Redhead, 2004a, Redhead, 2004b and Redhead, 2008. For Virilio's comments on his interesting differences

with Baudrillard, made after the latter's death, see Virilio and Lotringer, 2008, postscript.

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