

Security, Technology and Global Politics: Thinking With Virilio

By Mark Lacy. Routledge, 2015. 168 pp. pb.

Reviewed by Jacob Rollison

Jacob Rollison is PhD candidate at the University of Aberdeen. He is the author of *Revolution of Necessity: Language, Technique, and Freedom in the Writings of Jacques Ellul and Slavoj Žižek*, forthcoming from Atropos Press.

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It has been said that a significant challenge for those introducing Ellul for the first time is “to persuade sensible people not to throw it down before they have negotiated even the first ten pages.”¹ This challenge applies equally, if not more so, to the Italian-born French theorist Paul Virilio, and it is a challenge which Mark Lacy has constructively navigated in this concise volume.

Lacy is a Lecturer in Politics and International Relations (IR hereafter) at Lancaster University, UK, who has published variously on intersections of security, IR, politics, and art. This book is intended for an academic readership, primarily in the English-speaking world, who are not familiar with Virilio (or the terrain of continental critical thought to which he more or less ‘belongs’) or who are likely to misread and dismiss him (as they might Ellul) as an outlying, pessimistic, rhetorician so insistent on questioning that he doesn’t give many ‘satisfying’ answers. Lacy’s stated audience of technology, politics, and IR students will likely find it especially worthwhile.

Lacy begins with a short biographical introduction to Virilio and his works. For Ellul Forum readers not familiar with Virilio, a short word of introduction:² the son of an Italian immigrant to France, a ten-year old Virilio was profoundly shaped by witnessing the bombing of his hometown of Nantes in occupied France during WWII—rendering him a self-named “child of total warfare.” A radical leftist (but against Marx), a practicing Catholic, a student of architecture, media, war, aesthetics, philosophy, and ‘dromology’ (his term referring to studying the increase of *speed*, his most constant theme), an activist, artist, and teacher with a large body of work from the 1960s to the present—one can both understand why he requires an introduction for the average reader, and recognize some Ellulian similarities.

Lacy follows this with a section on how to read Virilio, warning readers that Virilio’s *style* might be the biggest difficulty in reading him. “Virilio writes like a French Science Fiction Existentialist,” Lacy remarks, and he’s not wrong.³ Readers who enjoy the rhetorical jabs occasionally landed in Ellul will likely find the heightened pace and pithy power of such punches in Virilio’s hyperbolic style an exhilarating force, though sometimes exhausting and perhaps excessive.

Here (and throughout the work) Lacy carefully introduces Virilio interestedly but fairly, arguing for his relevance for contemporary political/IR thinkers while cataloguing critiques of Virilio along the way. Lacy focuses on the political dimension of Virilio's thought, a focus which sets his apart from other introductory volumes.⁴ A central value which Lacy finds in reading Virilio is the critical questioning which he performs and to which he drives his readers; as such, Lacy's volume is in part the charting of his personal journey reading Virilio and his resulting path. But he also aims for a synthetic course through Virilio's works, "a body of work that is often difficult to 'access' simply by reading one or two books."⁵ The majority of the work follows these two paths alternately and links them together, including contemporary political and pop-cultural references along the way (and situating Virilio against other continental thinkers like Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, Agamben, and Baudrillard).

He splits the body of the text into two parts, corresponding to overriding themes of Virilio's corpus. Part I addresses "The endo-colonization of society," a term signifying both the end of nation-state expansion through colonization of external geographic territories, and what Virilio views as its replacement, the turning-inward of the 'military class' on its own population, driven by ideologies of health, security and consumerism, presupposing a "degraded political culture."⁶ Part II focuses on the "Integral Accident," Virilio's term for destruction which emerges by virtue of the networks of our society. Virilio's focus on the accident—on the form of destruction created by the inevitable eventual breakdown of every new invention—lends to his perceived pessimism. Virilio's conceptual vocabulary receives proper elucidation throughout; Lacy focuses on terms such as 'chronopolitics'—the post-geographical politics of 'real-time' surveillance, 'democracy of emotion'—a 'synchronization' of emotions which "reduces the world to fear, panic, and insecurity," 'siege psychosis'—a fearful obsession with security and fear of 'dangerous otherness', and others.⁷ These terms function (similarly to Ellul's *la technique*) as "a vocabulary or set of concepts to help us make sense of the world around us."⁸ Lacy also highlights how, despite the apparent political despair Virilio drives us towards, he ultimately considers himself a 'revolutionary'—he is interested in looking at the world through "an unfamiliar gaze," looking at problems head on in order to move past them.⁹ We might say that Virilio aims to enact a shift in perception, creating awareness of the ways we are shaped by the world around us; Lacy finds and critiques these things in his own life.

Lacy's work admirably provides a 'sensible' entry to Virilio's work for many readers who might never encounter it. Virilio's works (and thus Lacy's book) should be of interest to Ellul Forum readers not least for common themes too substantial and numerous to detail here. In making Virilio more widely palatable, Lacy necessarily dulls some of the stylistic edge which makes Virilio so incisive. This is understandable: he's trying to bridge a gap between the apocalyptic critique of a French radical and a more tame, academic, and institutionalized readership, between Virilio and the fearful, anxious, integrated, and security-obsessed society he describes.

In his conclusion, Lacy suggests that Virilio’s “profound hope” “comes from his ‘method’, his commitment to our capacity to keep asking questions...”¹⁰ In light of the similarities between Ellul and Virilio, and Ellul’s insistence that his sociology would have driven him to suicide without the hope his theology offered, Lacy’s attribution of Virilio’s hope only to a method of questioning—and not to something as subversive to modern categories as the “hope against hope” of his theology—comes off as going beyond the rhetorical ‘dulling of an edge’ and borders on taming Virilio’s radical position.¹¹

¹ John Wilkinson in his introduction to Ellul’s *The Meaning of the City*. Ellul, Jacques. *The Meaning of the City* (Vancouver: Eerdmans, reprinted by Regent College Bookstore, 1993), xii.

² Some of this paragraph, and its quote, come from this *Vice* interview with Virilio: “Paul Virilio”. Interview by Caroline Dumoucel. Available at https://www.vice.com/en_uk/read/paul-virilio-506-v17n9, accessed Jan. 13, 2016.

³ Mark Lacy, *Security, Technology and Global Politics: Thinking With Virilio* (London: Routledge, 2015), 6.

⁴ See footnote 66 on page 24.

⁵ *Security, Technology and Global Politics*, 19.

⁶ *Security, Technology and Global Politics*, 27.

⁷ *Security, Technology and Global Politics*, 40.

⁸ *Security, Technology and Global Politics*, 145.

⁹ *Security, Technology and Global Politics*, 150.

¹⁰ *Security, Technology and Global Politics*, 150.

¹¹ Virilio mentions this theological ‘hope against hope’ in the interview listed above. To be fair to Lacy here, Virilio mentions his faith, but rarely discusses its relation to the rest of his thought at length. In general, Virilio certainly isn’t at pains to explain himself in detail—his style addresses the reader more as an enigmatic provocation.