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Dromoscopy, or The Ecstasy of Enormities ¹

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"For the driver, to look is to live."

--French Highway Patrol



Movement drives the event. In making transparency active, speed metamorphoses appearances. In the accelerated enterprise of travel, a simulation takes place which renews the project of *trompe-l'oeil*. The depth of the landscape rises to the surface like an oilspot on the surface of a painting. Inanimate objects exhume themselves from the horizon and come bit by bit to impregnate the sheen of the windshield. Perspective comes alive. The vanishing point becomes a point of assault projecting its arrows and rays on the voyager-voyeur. The goal of the chase becomes a hearth which hurls its rays at the astonished observer, fascinated by the landscapes' advance. This axis that generates an apparent movement suddenly becomes concrete in the speed of the engine, but this concreteness is one that is completely relative to the moment, since the object which precipitates itself on the film of the windshield will just as quickly be forgotten as perceived: put back in the prop room, it will disappear out the rear window. **[End Page 11]**



Let's disabuse ourselves: we are before a veritable "seventh art," that of the dashboard. The opposite extreme from stroboscopy, which permits one to observe objects animated by a rapid movement as if they were in repose, this *dromoscopy* allows to one to see inanimate objects as if they were animated by a violent movement.

To climb into a car is at once to step on board and to cross a border ² (the sidewalk's edge, for example). But it's also for the agent of this displacement to position himself before a sort of easel composed of the windshield and the dashboard showing the

instrumentation. Arranged before the eyes of the driver this instrument panel forms a totality: the agent of displacement will by turns observe the approach of objects which will not fail to hit the windshield (images --but also insects, gravel, feathered creatures) and also diverse movements which will animate the gauges and counters. In this driving fascination begins a double game of lining up the inside and the outside of the car. With the help of the steering wheel and the accelerator pedal, the author-composer of the trip will in effect arrange a series of *speed pictures*, which will playfully sneak up on the transparent screen of the windshield. With the monotonous unfolding **[End Page 12]** of roadside scenes, each object perceived in an advancing depth of field already identifies itself at that instant with a deferred crash. On the centerstage of the driver's seat, the driver, by rolling dodges, will pursue and flee at the same time, these precipitations being too unreal for their suicidal character to slow the driver's advance.

In fact, the dromoscopic simulation hides the violent compression of driving. Its dissimulation assures and reassures the driver in his drive. If in its aero-dynamism the vehicle of the trip is only the embryo of a constantly deferred becoming, by improvements decreasing wind resistance the vehicle is also the figure of a generalized desertion, a larva of speed the development of which one will not perceive except in the emergence of a better shape permitting still greater speed. It is the same with the dromoscopic play provided by the staging of the motor. Each dashboard is nothing but a moment in the *mise-en-scene* of the windscreen. ² The rushes of landscape are nothing but a cinematic hallucination which is the opposite of stroboscopy. In dromoscopy the fixity of the presence of objects ceases, seducing the voyeur-voyager. In the rapidity of this displacement, the voyeur-voyager finds himself in a situation which is the opposite of that of the habitué of darkened cinemas: it's the *traveler* who is projected. Both actor and spectator in the drama of projection, in the moment of flight the traveler plays the role of his own destination.

The art of the dashboard appears therefore both as a substitute for hunting with its scenery and also as a substitute for dueling with its feints. The accelerator pedal and the steering wheel function respectively like sword and shield: the accelerator pedal projects the assaulting vehicle which pierces through the theatrical sets of the traversed land, while the movements of the steering wheel dodge the rays projected from the enemy horizon.

In the mirror of the windshield, the windshield wipers maintain the play of transparency, that transparency just as necessary to the dromoscopic play of images as the escape in depth of the highway is to that of the automobile. Despite its pane, the opening of the cockpit is not a simple window: it's a stage where signs of the places traversed animate themselves in a play of scenery changes composed of speed changes. Restricting the visual field of the passengers, the frame **[End Page 13]** of the dashboard expands the acceleration of that unfurling which confirms the vehicle's speed. The dromoscopic simulation results from that double reduction: of the distance-time of the trip, and of the narrowness of the dashboard's frame.

In reality, the car driver's seat is nothing but a *landscape simulator*: elsewhere, on certain supersonic flights, the direct view from the aircraft of the landings is often abandoned in

favor of the electric images of a "flight simulator." Even if in flying school the flight simulator gives the pilot the illusion of flying, in driving school one uses a cinematographic projection to watch the sequences of the driving film unroll. The driver imagines the arrangement of dashboard meters of his future voyages. In the travel scenes of the windshield the world becomes a video game, a game of transparency and of "trans-peirce-n-cy" which drives the stage director of the mise-en-route.³ The ability to control blurs into the permission to move--that is to say, the *license to drive*.

The mastery of the dromoscopic projection assures the security of the trip--in other words, the traveler's comfort depends upon being immobile while moving. On the pain of death, the brutal truth of their status will never be revealed to the passenger. Those who travel violently must remain "silent as a painting," immobilized by the straps which recall those of childhood. They can only impotently watch the exhibition of tableaux of swirling colors which rapidly succeed each other before their eyes. So long as the dromoscopic simulation continues, the comfort of the passengers is assured. However, if this stops abruptly in a crash, the voyeurs-voyagers would be immediately projected like Alice through the looking glass of the dashboard, thrown from death but above all thrown from the truth of their trajectory when the swerving of the show ceases. The spectators will become actors. It's this sudden uprising which the safety belt attempts to subdue.

With the DROMOSCOPE, it's required under the gravest penalties to go through each gear. The opposite of CINEMASCOPE, the gear shifts necessitate that the agent-driver make each sequence replace one another on the screen of the windshield: from the acceleration, deceleration, until the still shot of the stop, by way of the reverse dolly shot of parallel parking. **[End Page 14]**



This backwards motion of images in the progressive arrest of the projection is similar to that of the transmission gears. The unfolding in stages is an obligation of speed. One never jumps over the order of gears--first, second, third, fourth. The agent-driver maintains the "dromocratic" order of the dictatorship of movement.

In this race-pursuit, the countryside is never exactly traversed but rather perforated, brought to light. The driver is only the verifier of this perforation where the real, it seems, folds back on itself like a glove. Going as well as coming back, the trajectory is only a tunnel where the meaning of distance's expansion reverses itself. With the scenery changes of the gear shifts, the informational content of places evolves, each state of movement of the car's engine corresponding to a state of the signification of the milieu driven through. By the dromoscopic figuration each gear appears a bit like a bureau of Time, of the trip's duration.

The opening of the windshield is therefore not a window but a kind of glass door through which the passengers pass non-stop, a glass door by which the voyeurs-voyagers engulf themselves in the attraction of arrival. **[End Page 15]**



Comparable to the vertical turnstile of a revolving door, the screen of the windshield functions a little like flaps at a tunnel's mouth, of which the horizontal axis would be the vehicle, the flaps the landscapes which

successively pass by the car's exterior. In this obscene overturning, the country exposes its underside, and in turning over its landscapes, the territorial body excites the master of place to the violence of speed by inciting him to a rape of distance. But the transparent screen is also a sort of dial, a gauge which shows in its dromoscopic simulation the violence of the trip. There, where the viewers and the other dashboard indicators make known the state of the motor, the glass of the windshield indicates the status of the journey. The dromoscopic vision gives in plain language a double transparency, of the window and of the road, the evolution of the physical world and the simulated deformations of the visual field traversed. These are the precious indications of the state of places. With daily mobility's gallery of dashboards, the cultural revolution of transportation exposes itself publicly. In the screen of the car trip, the speeding-up of images is equivalent to an apparent seismic movement of which the epicenter would place itself at the blindspot of arrival. The vector of transportation is therefore nothing but an implosion, and the users of this ambulatory catastrophe are less the privileged contemplators of the route **[End Page 16]** and more a thwarted landing party. With the speed of pursuit, it's the objective of the trip which destroys the path. It's the target of the projecting projectile (the automobile) which seems to provoke the ruin of distance. It's the passenger's desire to go to the end of the line as fast as possible which produces in the drawing-on of the voyage the brutal drawing and quartering of the landscape. The irresistible attraction of the route dissolves with the fixity of objects, the time of travel, the distance-time. The cognitive distance of space certainly subsists somewhere, but it tends to become a memory, the commemoration of ancient paths of faintly recalled journeys. The other end of the countryside is closer and closer but the consistency of places has disappeared in the aesthetic of rapidity, an optical phenomena. The goal of the voyage acts like a hardener. The instrument controls permit one to seize on the vivid--the suddenness of the tree, the instantaneity of houses, the hills which successively explode the route. The excessive attraction of the arrival changes the view of the passenger like the shutter of a camera--an instantaneous luminosity.

The acceleration of the camera of dromographic shooting corresponds to the progressive closing of the windshield, the will to rejoin as fast as possible the goal of the voyage restraining the field of vision of the voyeurs-voyagers, their *depth of field*.

Today, the means of communication not only produces as yesterday the transfer from one point to another (no matter what the bridge), the means of rapid transportation also produces a fleeting figuration of flight. In simulating the transitoriness of immobile things, the means of communication shows the unbelievable reality of an end to space. The dromoscopic simulation makes believable the counter-truth of the world's contraction.

The animation of dashboards deceives the voyagers with the cataclysmic movement of the end, the arrival of the end. Like a magic mirror, the windshield permits the future to be seen. In fact, the DROMOVISION (automobile media) simulated transitoriness well before the TELEVISION (audiovisual media) simulated proximity... all the way until the not-at-all-unimaginable moment when the instantaneity of omnipresence will abolish the distance of space, in the same blow making the dromovisual apparatus the perfect equivalent of the audiovisual apparatus! **[End Page 17]**



The departure of the automobile should, however, be the occasion to examine



the *prospects* of *projection*. Somewhat as one enters the laboratory, we should climb on board in order to decipher an enigma, that of the incoherence of the motorized wandering, trying to guess the logic of that desertion which impels travel.



If in the history of architecture the window initially appeared in places of worship before proliferating in its usual habitat, this is because the window's opening permitted one to contemplate the sky without touching it: the environs of a temple. Yet more slowly, in pictorial history this time, the frame of easel painting permitted a renewal of this critical distance which geometric perspective confirmed scientifically. Today, it seems very much that the screen of the dashboard repeats this false proximity: with its rear-view mirror, its windowed doors, its frontal windshield, the automobile forms a quadriptych where the travel lover is the target of a permanent assault which renews the perspective of painting. The illusion is the same, but henceforth it extends itself at the surface of the world and no longer only on the surface of the canvas. The drive replaces the painting's varnish: the painter (driver) brings along behind him the viewer (passenger) in the transparent wake of his driving. If yesterday **[End Page 18]** painting attracted the gaze of art lovers in the painted work's illusion of depth, currently the dromoscopic work attracts at the same time the driver and his passenger in the "work" of an entire country. Projected towards the light of the arrival, they occupy together the soul of a sort of translucent pit where the countrysides compose the measure of the journey.

From the driver's seat, immediate proximity means little. All that counts is what holds itself at a distance. In the pursuit of the voyage the vantage controls the advance. The speed of propulsion produces its own horizon: the *bigger* this is, the *farther* the horizon. The philosophy of the windshield necessitates foresight in addition to plain sight, because the latter is tricked by advancing. It's the future which decides the present of the route. In the accelerated wandering the past is overtaken. The landmarks are essentially those of the future. The dromovisual apparatus functions therefore above all like a means of exhumation. As a means of communication it only communicates that which is to come. In the unidirectionality of the trip, that which stands still has long since disappeared in the archeology of the departure. **[End Page 19]**



For the forward-looking driver of the trip, the driver's seat is a seat of foresight, a control tower of the future of the trajectory. On the contrary, that of the airport is for the air traffic controller the driver's seat of the airlines. Whatever be the apparent movement of the countryside in the screen of the windshield or the real movement of airplanes in the radar screen, that which counts for the controller of the trip is the anticipation, the advance knowledge.

The technique of vectors henceforth replacing the tactics of bodies, this vision of a world lost as soon as it's perceived identifies itself well enough with a conqueror's vision, to the point that the control of the dashboard could appear a bit like a misunderstood form of war game. Let's remember: in the dialectic of war, that which unveils itself undoes itself; the visible is lost because it escapes the prescience which is the rule of the game of strategy. Likewise in the automobile's path the foresight of the movement of the adversary horizon is for the driver the twin of that movement of the adversary for the

army commander. A sophisticated form of *kriegspiel*, the dromoscopy would be in some form a video game of speed, a *blitzkriegspeil* in which the military staff's exercises would ceaselessly perfect themselves, each rapid vehicle would be in sum a vector of command, a "command car." It is, moreover, instructive to consider the historical **[End Page 20]** evolution of diverse "cockpits": if yesterday one still drove in the open air, in contact with the atmosphere while hearing the noise of the motor and the wind, feeling the machine vibrate, one can notice that the excess of speed has contributed to progressively enclosing the driver, first behind the screen of goggles, then behind the windshield, and finally in the interior driver's seat.

The driving "by instinct" of the pioneers has given way to the "driving by instruments," then to the "auto-pilot," while awaiting the likely integral automation of automobility....

In fact, the driver's seat of machines offers a political image of the future. The instrument panel exposes to he who wants to observe it the foreseeable evolution of power. A veritable crystal ball, these screens and dials illuminate by their dim glow forthcoming political paths. The new "machine of war" brings with it the last "machine of surveillance." The two together become one. There is no more, as in the past, a dichotomy between the function of the weapon and that of the eye. The assault vehicle carries a scope machine, and the destruction of the looking illustrates that of living. Unfortunately, *the dromoscopic accidents* are less spectacular, it appears, in their immediate consequences than *the telescopic accidents*, not one wreck subsists and "visibly" nothing concerns itself with the security of looking. Nonetheless, in confronting this vertigo which attacks the passenger when he plunges in the depth of the countryside, we should question ourselves. This ecstasy of enormities which follows such vertigo and overtakes certain abatements of acceleration is formidable. The size of the world, its extension, is suddenly penetrated by the will to power of the driver: it's the assault which brings to light the regions of the journey. The territory no longer exists but by the violence of the advance. It's the advance which in the end provokes the dawning of places. The voyeur-voyager no longer has need like his sedentary brother to hold himself behind the keyhole of a center of panoptic convergence. His course is no more than a long look where the site and the sight etymologically intermix. ⁴

As Martin Heidegger declared in 1933 in associating himself with the philosophy of the Führer: "The beginning is also there. It is not behind us as that which was a long time ago, but it holds itself before us. The beginning has **[End Page 21]** burst forth in our future. It stands apart like a distant disposition. Through us, its greatness demands we rejoin it." ⁵ Since, a number of "drivers of the people" and other "great ensigns" have succeeded one another behind the dromoscopic screen of absolute power, but it seems no less reassuring to consider the army of their offspring motorcyclists, automobile drivers, and family leaders who reproduce in their little daily evasions the dromocratic order of the great invasions. In this sharing of the power of speed's violence, what political fallout does this betoken? In the control of the engine, to what democratic illusion does this pertain? To what liturgy does it belong?

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Notes

- [1.](#) This essay was originally published in *Traverses* "le simulacre" 10 (Feb. 1978): 65-72. The title in French is "La dromoscopie, ou l'ivresse des grandeurs." Virilio's invented neologism "dromoscopy" derives from the Greek "dromos" meaning track or course, as in *hippodrome*, etc. I have transliterated this Latinate term rather than translating, since it is as much a neologism in either language. Further, this solution retain the plays which Virilio makes between "dromoscopy" and "democracy."
- [2.](#) I've used the more British "windscreen" rather than windshield to capture the play in the original between film and theatrical terms such as "mise en scene" and driving terms.
- [3.](#) I have translated the French "transpercement," which means to pierce, penetrate or run-through, with an English archaism in order to emphasize the author's play on words. With the term "mise en route," Virilio clearly plays off of "mise en scene"; since both this phrase and "en route" are commonly used in English, I have left the phrase untranslated rather than produce an unnecessary English equivalent.
- [4.](#) The French words for "site" or "place" is "lieu" and that for "eye" is "oeil"; thus there is a closer literal proximity between the words in French, a proximity I have tried to intimate through the pun of "site"/"sight."
- [5.](#) In keeping with the French custom of avoiding footnotes, the author gives no reference. An examination of certain of Heidegger's texts from 1933 did not immediately reveal to the translator a likely candidate. Thus, given that this is a translation from French of a passage translated from German, the possibility is quite high that the English version produced here bears an undesirably weak relation to the German original. Cf. Martin Heidegger's notorious, *German Existentialism*, tr. Dagobert D. Runes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1965).

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