

Paul Virilio / Derrick de Kerckhove **Man is the End of the World***

* Excerpt from the videoconference Paul Virilio / Derrick de Kerckhove, Ars Electronica 98

Paul Virilio: The robot is at the origin of work. The machine-tool is already a robot. It is obvious that the autonomization of machines of productions is—and it's an old story—is a part of the history of industry. No, what I fear are genetic robots. Today, roboticization threatens to become involved in the process of cloning or in the construction—thanks to biotechnology—of individuals, especially developed for certain activities/tasks. I think that the question of robots has been treated in depth, through a large body of writing on automatons, etc. But the question of the living robot, of the chimera or of the clone, reproduces the notion of roboticization—but this time by genetic means. Thus, there is a threat that computers, and genetic mapping (the ability to map the human genome), will allow us to make robot-humans, that is to say, roboticized living beings. This would be through a specialization which is no longer industrial but, rather, computerized, thanks to the treatment of the genetic code. Here we have an enormous threat, and I think we return to the notion of the three types of bomb. The atomic bomb and the genetic bomb are only possible because of the information/computer bomb. It's not by chance that Turing and others were developing the computer at the same time that the atomic bomb was being invented. Today, we need the computer to run simulations. And computers are absolutely crucial to genetic engineering. Thus, there is the possibility of another, trans-genetic roboticization which worries me even more because the work has not yet been done. The work on the critique of the robot has been done, even in religion. But the living robot, the living slave—this new form of living slavery, made possible by genetic engineering—we have not done enough work on this subject.

De Kerckhove: But another related question that's important in my opinion, is the following: In *Blade Runner*, we see androids who have completely human characteristics and emotions—or who discover their emotions. Is there a possibility that, in a not-so-distant future, we will transfer our active, effective and labor-oriented—our robotic-humanity—into these creatures and keep our weaknesses, our imperfect beings, thus avoiding a total invasion?

Paul Virilio: In any case, there is nothing else to do. (Laughter) Personally, I think that man is not the center of the world but, rather, the end of the world. Hildegard de Bingen, whose 900th birthday we will be celebrating this year, said, "Homo es closura mirabilium dei." Man is the closure of God's wonders. It is an extraordinary sentence, because of this word closure. Man is the end of the world. There will be no more genetics, no more genetic progress of the being. There is ethical progress and, in quotation marks, "moral" progress (if we can use this word while remaining politically correct). But man is the end of the world. He cannot be improved upon genetically. In reality, the great conflict of information warfare is old versus new genetics. The temptation is toward much more sophisticated studies of genetics than those of Galton.