

## Conflicts

### The Threat of the First Global Civil War

**Derrick de Kerckhove:** In your text for *Ars Electronica*, "The Speed of Terror," you write: "Whoever comes first has the law on his side. This ancient Roman law of priority, which created a lasting order, is creating chaos in the world at present. Terrorism, fundamentalism, mass immigration, regional conflicts, national conflicts, economic crises, retro-Nazism, etc.—they all in one way or another claim adherence to the duplicity of this juridical argument, with its double thrust: to come first can mean to arrive first in a place as well as to be the oldest occupant of a territory."

What I want to ask you is this: regarding the question of temporal priority, did this not correspond for the Romans to a kind of conquest of space by time, in so far as a cognitive structure is imposed, i.e. measure? It is a question of the simultaneous appearance of space and time in the cognitive field. The conquest of space by time happens as much in a cognitive way as in a way that is uniquely social. We can come back to the question of the three unities which, in my opinion, are part and parcel of this same problem. The question is: do you see a cognitive condition, or the cognitive condition, that today would be just in the process of coming to an end?

**Paul Virilio:** The Roman Empire is a geographical empire. I want to invoke the Roman roads, that is, those structures that will invade Europe like irrigation; they will irrigate the world, and on them the Romans will advance in a manner that I would call totally new, by counting according to the temporal units which are the temporal units of Roman legions on the march. So, yes, we are dealing with a geographic and spatial perspective. The cognitive aspect is essentially the memory of places and the possibility of traversing these spaces as fast as possible. In the Peloponnesian Wars Thucydides remarked: "Incredible! In this particular region of the Peloponnese lies a straight road! It's unheard of. How strange." But the Romans will take this adage of the straight road and build their roads by it. We are dealing with a geographical, geopolitical, and geostrategic logic. But today it is the reverse. Our logic is temporal, tempo-strategic, and chrono-political. Hence the importance of speed as the decisive argument in imperialism, whether it is commercial imperialism or what I would call traditional imperialism, i. e. the imperialism of force and armies.

**Derrick de Kerckhove:** Could we speak of a confusion of time and space?

**Paul Virilio:** Yes, I would even say that real time dominates real space in an important way. Real space is geography and distances. But the new technologies have abolished distances in favor of real time; it is "live." So we are faced with a society in which world time, the time of immediacy, of ubiquity, and of instantaneity replace the local times of regions. This is one of those events which go beyond the problem of the media. When people say that it is the media at work ... no way, the problem is not the media, it is the fact that we live in global time and no longer in local time. The loss of distance is in a way the loss of politics.

**Derrick de Kerckhove:** One more question on something I didn't quite understand in this text. "So we will defend the limits of the city-state where we stand, and then the marches and frontiers of the nation-state that we inhabit. Legally, we will be able to run off and plant our flag in 'unknown lands,' provided we are the first to discover them." This is clear enough. "The Orient, Timbuktu, the sources of the Nile, the summits of the world,

the North Pole, the Moon ...everywhere you look, you will see the banners of the West flying high, showing the gains of this great Western competition,"—but here you lose me—“to be more pathetic than nothing at all.” This is completely beyond me, can you explain?

**Paul Virilio:** It's a reference to Karl Kraus's book, *Cette grande époque*, in which he explains the conquest of the North Pole in an absurd light. Globalization is something Karl Kraus sees as ridiculous. When he discusses the conquest of the North Pole, he tries to show that it is essentially laughable. Today, however, such derision is no longer the exclusive property of the men of those times; it concerns globalization in its entirety.

**Derrick de Kerckhove:** Well, I don't completely agree with you there. The problem of globalization is not something which we can really oppose. And globalization is not an economic story. So, I have a slight problem with that in so far as it is a fake rebellion: rebelling against something that is absolutely inevitable is like rebelling against a tidal wave. You are not going to stop a tidal wave. So we have to see what is at stake. For me, the tidal wave is the problem of electricity, the problem of the world becoming electric. That is the first tidal wave. And everything happening today is a continuation of that. I would even say there is a sort of contradiction between this wave of electricity and the old industrial technology of oil. But we'll come back to that. So I don't quite follow what Kraus is saying. Globalization is not ridiculous because it is totally inevitable. You said earlier that the situation we're in is out of our reach, but I would say that it is electricity which is out of reach.

**Paul Virilio:** Yes, but when I talk about globalization, I am myself a citizen of the world. It is not about opposing globalization. I am saying that the globalization of time—to return to what I was saying a minute ago—is a catastrophic event. So, to be sure, the problem is not the globalization of dialogue among nations. The problem is in the instantaneity and the ubiquity.

Let me give you a simple picture. The Industrial Revolution encouraged standardization. And we know the extent to which this is a loss of the socio-diversity of cultures, not to mention the loss of handicrafts, etc. The Informational Revolution, however, is no longer aiming at the standardization of opinions, products, and objects but at their synchronization, which is a tyrannical situation like we've never seen. Even Orwell did not foresee this idea of global synchronization, in other words, the tyranny of real time, and hence that the conquest of real time would replace the conquest of the North Pole. It is this level of temporality at which my attack is aimed, and not at all ... I am repeating myself; with Garry Davis I was one of the citizens of the world when I was young, and I haven't changed my mind, on the contrary—but I believe that synchronization is a tyrannical phenomenon the impact of which has not yet been fully appreciated.

This is the danger of the new technologies. Like all technologies, they obviously have their benefits. But they conceal an absolute accident which is the perfect synchronization of the opinions, and emotions, of the world.

**Derrick de Kerckhove:** Well then. You are speaking according to the three unities. For a long time now we two have been discussing questions of the theatre, and in this case the question is truly French—I quote your text: “The city-state will progressively move from the local times of astronomical observation to military calendars that depend on troop movements and choreography, while the unities of classical tragedy—action, time, and place—announce the establishment of universal time on the stage of the world, the time of a final realization of global conquest.”

The three unities relate to a cognitive strategy of individualization ... It is a Cartesian standard constructed according to Racine and Boileau to satisfy the intellect.

So the three unities are a French problem. In fact, though, they reflect a Western condition of mental organization. They correspond to a kind of condensation of the mind on itself and its internalization in a body. This was not the case in the culture that precedes ours, in oral culture.

And today these three unities no longer have much effect on globalization, everyone mixed in together, every action happening at the same time, and every place superimposed in cyber space and the media. Now I sound like you! But could you develop on this or tell me whether you believe that the three unities are not in fact exploding, being reduced, no longer serving as valves, no longer exerting enough force to confine minds within the body?

**Paul Virilio:** The theatre of operations was local, throughout battle fields, whether Verdun, Stalingrad or D-day. But today the operational theatre of conflicts—this is *Ars Electronica's* title—is the world. The stage and the operation are being confused. The theatre of operations is the whole world, and our TV screens and monitors give us these events to watch in real time, just as we watched the collapse of the Twin Towers. So we are facing a world that is closed in; enclosure is a terrifying event whatever our political vision may be. In a certain way, on account of enclosure, i.e. the world's closing in on itself from instantaneity, we are in the process of inventing the third man.

The first man since the Neolithic Age is the predator, the one who gave birth to capitalism, no less. The predator is part of history, pillage is part of history, and predation is part of history. The second actor up to the present day is the producer. First the farmer from the Neolithic Age on and then the industrialist.

Predator, producer, and now what? Exterminator. Not an exterminating angel. These are individuals who do not perceive the enclosure of the world, its instantaneous enclosure and thus the dangers of extermination. Not extermination by an evil genius, Hitler or Genghis Khan or I don't know who, but extermination by enclosure. We are in an echo chamber of the globalized world, the "live" world, which in itself is a problem. The enclosure of the stage is the drama. And this enclosure is handed to us instantaneously by world time.

**Derrick de Kerckhove:** You explain this effect of enclosure beautifully, and it is a pleasure to be reminded of it, since it lets me quote you and pursue this problem a little further: "Globalization is not so much the culmination of the acceleration of History as the closure of its virtual domain."

**Paul Virilio:** At this point we have to discuss ecology. After the events which have transpired—I am thinking of Johannesburg—we had a summit meeting on the question of ecology. But we should have a summit meeting on the question of civil peace, i.e. eschatology. The ecological stance is a stance of the end, a stance of finitude when faced with evolution, or with those great industrial catastrophes like Chernobyl, etc. In a certain way, this stance is taking on the question of the end, the end of the closed worlds that we were discussing a moment ago. But since the terrorist attack, and clearly since Hiroshima first of all, the question of an ecological stance has been raised, by which I mean taking account of the threat of extermination.

Enclosure obliges us to politicize the end and to avoid a politicization like Nazism or Fascism—I am talking about those who invented the idea of vital space. It's a major political debate that Greek tragedy had sketched out.

Greek tragedy is democratic. It dares to confront the end and the great dramas. Our politics is for the moment unfit to take on the tragedy of the modern world.

**Derrick de Kerckhove:** I wanted to ask your opinion about the extraordinary correspondence between the different stages of the event on 9–11 and the principle elements of Greek tragedy as they have been developed by Aristotle and others. What I am about to tell you is going to sound pedantic, I'm sure, but in the end it will be worth it since, after all, we have kept Greek tragedy alive throughout Western history—it was not for nothing, and maybe it's useful. First I want to point out how 9–11 is all about important families in a unified world, just like in the Greek world represented by the tragic drama, in which the whole Greek world is involved. The Greek world of tragic drama is total reality. Similarly, for us, what is happening today is clear, Paul perfectly explained it to us, it is unified world reality.

Who is in this reality? First and foremost it is the number one man, the big boss. Tragedies always involve important characters because these important characters have the power to act on the rest of the world. And today we are under their thumb.

Now who are these important families? They are the big oil families. These influential families have their finger on the new nerve of war, which is oil. One could prove it in every conceivable way. So I would like you to say something here precisely to expose the dynasty, the affiliation of the father and son in this story which puts two important characters on the stage, Osama Bin Laden on the one side and George W. Bush on the other.

**Paul Virilio:** If you don't mind, first it just so happens that before working on the text for Ars Electronica's catalogue, I read over again Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*. Really important. There are two books we should re-read right now: Freud's *Culture and its Discontents* and Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*. Now Nietzsche says something really positive about tragedy which people have underrated. There are the heroes you mentioned and those we talked about, Bush senior and junior. But there is also the ancient chorus. The ancient chorus is the city. The city is democracy, we are the city. Somehow the question of the ancient chorus has not been raised today. The heroes speak, but the ancient chorus remains silent. Hence the importance of a Johannesburg of civil peace. Because let me remind you that terrorism does not threaten so much the international peace as world civil peace. What is threatening us at the moment is not the Third World War, it's the first global civil war. New York is the equivalent of Sarajevo in the first European and World War.

So, to come back to tragedy, we have three characters—and there are many others. We have Bin Laden, but he is a quasi mythical character whose presence is furtive, discreet, like American weapons about which I can actually say very little, and then we have the two others, Bush senior and junior.

Let's not forget that Bush senior used to head the CIA. Let's not forget the importance of the secret services since the fall of the Berlin wall, including Putin and Gorbachev, all those who come from either the KGB or the CIA.

And now suddenly here comes the son: George W. The son is a character that was elected under dubious circumstances, and who finds himself in a situation that I would call one of uncertainty, which he imparts to the city. The uncertainty about this character is transmitted to the whole world. Not just to the American people during the commemoration of 9–11, but to the whole world. We have here a tragedy in the making, like a thunder cloud, and we have a character who was elected in an uncertain manner. This is an element of the tragedy we are discussing.

**Derrick de Kerckhove:** For me, this is the starting point. In tragedy there are certain conditions. The first is miasma. This is the discourse on pollution and contamination, in a climate of generalized uncertainty, which is absolutely the case in our own civilization. Then there are the two fundamental emotions which can be multiplied and organized in differ-

ent ways for each drama, but which remain fundamental: phobos and eleos, terror and pity—this latter is sometimes translated as self-pity or some similar term. And tragedy is meant to free the population from events going on in the society and politics of the day, to free them from the miasma, from pollution, horror, and also from terror and pity. Precisely, you put it so well, everything begins with the vote in Florida and goes along confirming the same image, almost a fractal, of the uncertainty about this character with respect to investments and the removal of his shares from the Harkness corporation. Not to mention the other scandal that has been squelched, involving Dick Cheney, the Vice-President of the United States, who may have taken his irons out of the fire at Haliburton under dubious circumstances. There is an uncertainty that hovers over all these people, and that is hamartia, which means mistake or error. The little misdeed that leads to great catastrophes.

**Paul Virilio:** Don't forget what happened in the White House during the attack on the Pentagon. In this case, doubt was once again cast over Bush's position. As much as Giuliani was a solid character at ground zero in New York, Bush at that precise moment in history was equally unstable. Just a parenthesis ...

**Derrick de Kerckhove:** No, you're exactly right. It is part of the uncertainty, and the problem of uncertainty at the heart of our reality is quite serious. This is the famous chink in the armor. So hamartia is already an indication that we have entered the tragic dimension.

Hybris, i. e. the sin of pride, is the American attitude displayed by Bush and his administration vis-a-vis the accords in Kyoto, vis-a-vis those in Rio, vis-a-vis everything you mentioned in connection with the world and its environment; the Americans say: "Not in my backyard! It's not my problem!" They just want to forget about it. Clearly, there is a problem on their side. Today this problem is coming at us from the Bush administration. It's nothing new, either, since this American attitude towards the rest of the world goes back to the politics of Monroe; but it has become a problem associated in a fundamental way with the politics of George W. Bush.

So hybris is the sin of pride, which brings on the catastrophe.

Agon is the act, when things start heating up. They throw at you two planes full of people, crashing them into New York's Twin Towers. That's when things start heating up, when the real trouble starts. Why? Not only because this accident and attack are abominable, but also because the very form of the attack contains in itself an element of tragedy, which is anagnorisis, recognition. In other words, to cognize something for the second time. But what happens? The first plane hits, smashes into the first tower: nobody is expecting a second plane. Every camera in the world, every relay station, some of which are on the other tower, is riveted on this event. We have twenty minutes to do a double-take—like when you recognize somebody on the street and say: "Wait a minute! That's him!" That is exactly what happened, a world-wide double-take for twenty minutes, anagnorisis. Anagnorisis makes you recognize something, but what? It makes you recognize the essence of the problem.

But Americans did their best not to recognize the essence of the problem at that very moment. Hence the tragedy is not over, hence it must continue, hence war must be waged in Afghanistan, hence the war on terror must continue, hence the need to gloss over everything that relates to internal politics, including the prodigious scandals that are part and parcel of the miasma, and that are part of all the hocus-pocus we have to put up with in the media. All this, instead of taking a lesson from Clinton. Instead of jumping on his plane after the first attack in 1993 on one of the towers, Clinton let the thing go, he smothered it. In this instance, he followed McLuhan's advice: if you don't want a catastrophe, pull

the plug. In other words, prevent the media from dwelling on the event too much. Now what's happening is we have to deal with a new shockwave of the tragedy. Now we are going to have another episode, another turn of events, which is the war in Iraq, even while we hope that it can be avoided. I will stop here, in the sense that here things are totally beyond us.

They could have stopped at the initial anagnorisis, and then more or less pursued the path of catharsis, beginning to care about the world the way it needs to be cared for, but no, they go on, they wage war, which is the stupidest and most brutish way to go about things, the most out-dated way to handle an event of this magnitude.

**Paul Virilio:** I would like to come back to the Greeks. Because I think the agonistic dimension of this attack is really important. When the citizen-soldiers in Athens or elsewhere used to go out to fight, they used to stand on the walls, strike their breast, and sing the agon, the song of the agon, saying: "I am already dead, you can't kill me, enemies of the city, because I have already given my life."

We have to go over these things again if we are to understand the suicide attacks.

But what is new in the suicide attack is that the actor kills himself. He is not killed by his enemy; he kills himself. And that is a new phenomenon that has nothing at all to do with the political battles we were discussing before.

In this sense, we are seeing a revival of the suicidal nuclear state: the nuclear theory of a balance of terror, the theory of assured mutual destruction by nuclear weapons. The state that lasted for more than forty years between East and West was already a suicidal state, but it was a suicidal state between federations, among nations. Now suddenly, whether it is in the Middle East or the attacks on the World Trade Center, the suicidal state is spreading in the population. It is no longer a state phenomenon of the military industrial complex; it is becoming the fact of each and every person. This goes beyond the agon of the Greek citizen. You have a fatalism here that indeed announces the appearance of the third term (in the evolution of mankind): the predator, the producer, and now the exterminator! The man who self-exterminates in his work.

**Derrick de Kerckhove:** This is really bad news. I don't like this idea of the exterminator. I would much prefer to find another model in response. My perspective here is that we have always had to go through extremely painful transition periods, and I am not trying to gloss things over. But there have been transition periods, and we have managed to get to the other side. Our way of being, human reality, managed to pass through monstrous transitions for which it was for the most part not responsible. How can we accuse those brave souls who took hold of the sacred sense of writing for interpretations that were increasingly personal, in accordance with Renaissance dispositions of writing after the invention of the printing press? How can we accuse them of doing anything else but what they believed was their profound sense of duty? Certainly political motivations must have been grafted on to this sense of duty to keep alive the two hundred years of war that followed the invention of the printing press. There is no doubt about it. Today, too, political motivations visibly manipulate religious sentiment. Things continue to be this way. But in a fundamental way, the Reform was part of an awesome transition from a collective society to a society absolutely individual. What we are doing is not at all collective, contrary to what my friend Pierre Lévy believes, but it is something connected with a kind of global, planetary interaction. And my problem is that I continue to ... well, I don't want to say hope, I hesitate to say think—I continue to imagine, that's the word, to imagine with all my might a world in which dreams lead to reality. What the Aborigines of Australia have known without technology for five thousand years.

**Paul Virilio:** If you don't mind, I want to come back to the notion of duty. There has always been in societies a duty of violence. I simply connect it with justice. Force without law is horror. Law without force is nothing. Today, however, thanks to these suicide attacks that prolong the suicidal character of nuclear deterrence, we entertain the possibility of a duty that is no longer one of violence, but one which the Nazis called depopulation. The duty to depopulate, if you reread Rauschnig, are Hitler's words. Now when an individual becomes a mass-killer, or when one or two individuals become mass-killers, it is not because he can kill 10 or 20 people, but because he can kill one hundred thousand, two hundred thousand, 3 million, with radiological bombs or with super-terrorist bacteriological attacks. We are faced with a logic that no longer has anything whatsoever to do with the political sphere. We are facing pure terror. Pure terror is on the horizon of the 21st century, we have to confront it. The duty of violence has become the possibility of a duty to depopulate, managed no longer by states, the U.S., Russia, China, or even the French strike forces—I have always fought against that—but by individuals capable of a level of ruin similar to that of the traditional world wars. I said as much in a book: if we continue like this, one single man equals a world war. The mass-killer, the exterminator becomes the tragic figure of the world to come.

**Derrick de Kerckhove:** Do you have any preventative measures? Is there something we can do?

**Paul Virilio:** Indeed we can, I mentioned it a minute ago. I think we need summits of peoples to address the question of civil peace. The question of international peace is the business of nations and states. Civil peace is a problem of the population, a problem of the ancient chorus. In a certain way, what super terrorism threatens is civil peace, not the peace between nations. Even if Bush wants to start an international war, the provocation in New York is in fact a threat to civil peace throughout the world. And faced with such a threat, only the meeting of peoples can deal with it, in the same way they are dealing with, or have begun to deal with the ecological threat. This is also an ecological problem. The exterminator, the mass-killer, the individual who is capable of killing thousands, hundreds of thousands and maybe more by means of weapons of mass destruction—this is a problem of survival, it is not simply a traditional problem of politics.

**Derrick de Kerckhove:** Let's stick to the political dimension. Bush is going to make the rounds in Europe, he is going to see his friends, Tony Blair and company. We can easily imagine the arguments he will use to seduce each head of state. When I suggested to you earlier the possibility that Europe could firmly and resolutely oppose this attack on Iraq, you alluded to the danger of a terrorist attack in Europe capable of reversing public opinion in favor of Bush.

**Paul Virilio:** Yes. Clearly, Europe has an historical role to play in the face of this threat of super-terrorism. In the first place, Europe must oppose this traditional war which absolutely does not fit, any more than the war in Afghanistan does, the nature of the attack. Europe has a role to play here. On one condition—and I mention this because I am worried: that there be no similar attack in Europe. I repeat. Last year when there was the Toulouse affair, the question of an accident or an attack was quickly raised. And thank God the experts opted for the solution of an accident. But I fear that there will be threats on Europe, I'm not saying from or by whom, you can imagine that for yourself. I am fearful of manipulations at the level of an attack; just about anyone can launch a serious attack. I am fearful that it will be a means of pulling the rug out from under our feet, of pulling the rug out from under Europe's feet, since Europe can play a significant role in world peace.

**Derrick de Kerckhove:** I am glad you mentioned that because I wasn't sure you would take such a risk, where only alluding to such a thing is practically to invite it. I was having trouble bringing it up. But you are right to mention it, and by God it is something we should think about. Now, so the two of us won't monopolize the conversation, I think we have fifteen minutes left, why don't we open up the floor to questions.

**Audience:** Hello. In Paul Virilio's commentary I heard all these words like tragedy, and how we are in a catastrophic situation—isn't this a little too pessimistic? What caught my attention, on the other hand, was this idea of the transition we are living in right now. Because you were discussing man as predator, then man as producer, and now man as exterminator. Maybe this idea I have is too utopian, but I believe today is the day of the spiritual man and that the computer has an important relationship with this spiritual man, that we are in a race between the destruction and the survival of spirituality, and the computer can help us resolve planetary problems. And all I am trying to say is that I really have hope we are going to win this race as human beings, with intelligence, with spirituality, with the use of machines and whatever can be done together, and that the exterminating man is going to lose. And I think insisting too much that we are now in the period of exterminating man actually hurts our cause, it contributes to the victory of the exterminators. So it is better not to say it too loudly and try to motivate people in a positive way and get them to think that all is not lost. But it is a question of time and we have to hurry. That's what I wanted to say.

**Paul Virilio:** First of all, I am not a pessimist in the least, I am a realist. I said as much last year. After the event of the World Trade Center, there are no more pessimists and optimists; there are realists and there are liars. Let everyone choose his side. The seriousness of the event in New York, like the seriousness of the event in Hiroshima, has stopped this ping-pong match between pessimists and optimists. I feel no desperation. Like Heraclitus, I simply believe that we should snuff out this outrage now rather than have a conflagration later. If we don't call a spade a spade now, we will stray into totally duplicitous situations. So, my mission, like your mission at Ars Electronica, is to talk straight and not to mask the realities of globalization. I think the time has come for us to leave hedonism and the cant of political correctness behind.

Translated from French by Michael Taormina



This is a transcript of a videoconference between Paul Virilio and Derrick de Kerckhove, Festival Ars Electronica 2002—*“Unplugged—Art as the Scene of Global Conflicts.”*