Against Dead Time

Conrad Russell

ABSTRACT. This article connects Virilio’s critique of speed with Surrealist and Situationist writings attacking the homogeneous time of the commodity, which themselves echo Benjamin and Bergson. I suggest here that these authors can all be seen as taking a Romantic stance against the perceived reification and abstraction inherent in modernity and its dominant time. Further, they share a concern with interrupting modernity’s homogeneous time, to usher in more authentic forms of duration. I suggest, however, that the displacement of Newtonian time by other times, increasingly homogeneous and abstract, but constituted precisely by interruption, poses a problem for this strategy. KEY WORDS • accident • homogeneous time • moment • Romanticism • situation

‘Vivre sans temps mort . . . jouir sans entraves’
(To live without dead time and enjoy without restraint)

Can one even imagine the loss of extension and duration . . . Can one seriously imagine a ‘forgetting’ of place, of all places?
Paul Virilio (1994a: 148)

This article arose from what Walter Benjamin might call a ‘spark’ of ‘specific recognizeability’ – connecting those involved in May ’68 in France, including the avant-garde ‘Situationist International’, yearning to escape from the carcass of dehumanized ‘dead’ time, and Virilio 20 years later, fearing that time is not only dead, but on the point of disappearing altogether. The Situationists themselves drew on a tradition of radical French thought which rejected abstract time – from André Breton’s attack on ‘inexorable machines’ to Lefebvre’s meditations on everyday life.1 It is the assault on ‘dead’ time mounted by these contrasting yet complementary authors that this article explores.

In the first section, I will argue that Virilio and the Situationist ‘tradition’...
have a shared heritage in Romanticism, understood not in a narrow historical sense, as simply an early 19th-century aesthetic movement, but as a wider ‘structure of feeling’ opposed to reified modernity, and its specific effects on time and subjectivity. I will also consider different approaches to the controversial term ‘modernity’. In the second section, I will examine how these different authors confront dead time, from Breton’s critique of Fordism to Virilio’s attack on absolute speed. I will also draw some wider historical connections – with Bergson’s rejection of ‘homogeneous time’, and Benjamin’s critique of the dehumanizing nature of the concept of progress. In the third section, I will consider how the confrontation with dead time leads to attempts to subvert it, through tactics of interruption. Again, the figure of Benjamin appears as a ‘shadow’ behind the Situationist and Situationist-inspired authors – drawing out the temporally subversive nature of Surrealist aesthetics through the concept of the ‘dialectical image’, in turn echoed by Situationist tactics of dérive (‘drift’) and détournement (‘semantic hijack’). Virilio, on the other hand, is inspired more by phenomenology and his commitment to a certain ‘anarcho-Catholicism’, both of which inform his conceptualization of the ‘accident’ through which we fall back into the world (Armitage, 2000). I shall then conclude by considering what happens to what is essentially a critique of linear Newtonian time in our ‘postmodern’ era of fragmented ‘video-time’. I shall suggest that these attempts at subversion have been outflanked by a postmodern temporality which is fragmented, asymmetrical and abstract.

‘History is a Drag’ – A Romantic Critique of Modernity

Michael Löwy sees Romanticism, extending from its 18th- and 19th-century literary and philosophical origins, as a rejection of the reification – freezing subjects and social relations into things – lying at the heart of capitalist modernity (Löwy and Sayre, 1992; Löwy, 1998). Equally, Romantics reject reification’s corollary, monetary exchange – which transforms subjects and objects into measurable abstractions. Abstraction also stands behind the imposition of context-free formal logic on human behaviour. Further, once humans have been transformed into exchangeable things, they can be subjected to mechanization, a body of machinic processes also unleashed on ‘dead’ nature. The reified civilization of modernity has a very specific set of effects on time. The mechanization of the social world implies machinic work rhythms, displacing bodily or seasonal cycles as labour is turned to the emptying out of nature (Löwy and Sayre, 1992: 61). These mechanized gestures are measured in the homogenous interchangeable instants of clock-time, which mirror the exchangeable subjects and objects that people the modern landscape (Gould, 1980: 64). The abstract equivalence of the clock suggests that, in the words of Tom Ward, ‘history is a
drag, held on a virtual freeze-frame’ – there can be no sense of a creative, 
human progression in and through time (Ward, 1991: 22). Thus time and history 
become reified, filled with mechanized, exchangeable things, rather than human 
subjects.

This view of modernity could be criticized as pessimistic and one-sided. Scott 
Lash has recently argued that the abstract rationality of what he calls the ‘first 
modernity’ is challenged by a ‘second modernity’, which valorizes being, as the 
first valorized abstract knowledge. This second modernity is founded on reflex-
ive judgement, which does not rest upon cognitivist logic, nor does it reduce 
particulars to universals – rather, it reasons in an analogical, more aesthetic 
manner, understanding knowledge as always partial and constructed. This 
desire to give ‘free play to the signifier’ also results in a complex, shifting set of 
temporalities, as against the ‘homogenous temporality of cause and effect and 
productive labour’ of first modernity. This ‘deconstructive’ critique of first 
modernity is doubled or underpinned by a ‘grounding’, which precedes and 
constitutes rationalist dichotomies, such as absence/presence and self/other, by 
drawing upon organic notions of the body, the community and the life world. 
For Lash, this grounding actually issues from the early 19th-century Romantic 
movement – which he sees as profoundly modern, since ‘only in modernity . . . 
was it possible to achieve the sort of distance on tradition, on community, on 
place, to allow it to enter meaningfully into discourse’ (Lash, 1999: 5). This 
grounded critique brings into play a temporality drawing on the cyclicality of 
nature and tradition, alongside the deconstructive ‘anarchy of the event’.

Löwy accepts that, while it transmutes it into a thing, it is modernity that 
makes subjectivity and being as such possible, through its creation of the 
rational, calculating individual. However, when the individual seeks experience 
in purely subjective terms, s/he runs up against a reified and mechanized world 
(Löwy and Sayre, 1992: 41). Romanticism, in seeking a fuller subjectivity, free 
to explore the fullness of nature and its own embodiment, is mounting a critique 
of modernity in modern terms, an ‘autocritique’, seeking fulfilment of the 
promises of the Enlightenment. While Löwy agrees that Romanticism may 
share these concerns – and indeed the desire for the ‘free play’ of meaning – 
with certain aesthetic ‘modernist’ movements, this is not the same as accepting 
that Romanticism constitutes a form of ‘modernism’. Romanticism is usually 
informed by nostalgia for a lost past before modernity, but also, in its more 
radical variants, it has a utopian dimension, seeking to transform this nostalgia 
into ‘a poisoned weapon to be used against the existing order of things’ – and to 
go beyond the modern (Löwy, 1998: 33).

Modernism may have acted as a radical force in culture at certain specific 
historical moments, before Fordist technology became fully established in parts 
of Europe, but, tied to the project of modernity in a way Romanticism is not, it 
rapidly became trapped, ‘without an approipriate past, or imaginable future, in
an interminably recurrent present defined by the ever-same of commodity production and accumulation’ (Anderson, 1984: 109). The discontinuous and multiple times and spaces of modernism – which Lash identifies with ‘deconstructive’ modernity – rapidly become abstractions; ‘the “real” loses its old familiar features; it falls into pieces like a plywood jigsaw puzzle; it becomes simultaneously reified and derealized’ (Lefebvre, 1962/1995: 180). As we shall see in the conclusion, Lash himself in an earlier work discussed the hyper-abstractness of fragmented ‘late’ modern temporality. Regarding ‘grounded’ cyclical time, Lefebvre has argued that, in modernity, there is a cyclical temporality of everyday life, which intersects with the dominant linear time. However, relations between cyclical and linear times are marked by a profound sense of malaise, and the latter dominates and undermines the former (Lefebvre, 1961: 337). New temporalities are possible, but must be founded on a deliberate break with modern reification and abstraction.

Romanticism is a subterranean tradition within modernity, seeking escape into a world beyond modern reification and abstraction. This, I argue, is the project espoused by Virilio and (in a rather different way) the Situationists and their predecessors, starting from a sense of modern time as dead – abstract and inhuman. Committed to the Romantic project of releasing the full richness of the self, our authors frequently reveal a Romantic nostalgia for a lost past, in which the flow of duration was richer and fuller than modernity’s calculated time. From these starting points, they sketch out (if only in pessimistic or tentative terms) a different future. It is this search for an alternative that I consider in this article – although I do conclude that the ‘escape routes’ sought may have been closed off by developments within modernity itself, this only urgently underlines the need to seek others.

**Against Dead Time**

The writers considered here form an integral part of the Romantic critique of abstract temporality, which developed in French thought as a response to Taylorist ‘scientific management’ as it became widespread at the end of the First World War, ushering in ‘the reign of machine-like repetition, which threatened to crush independent human spirits’ (Shields, 1999: 14). The Surrealist André Breton voices his condemnation of the emptiness at the heart of Taylorism’s forward march in Nadja, denouncing ‘those inexorable machines which impose the repetition of the same gesture all day long, at a few seconds’ interval’ (Breton, 1928/1964: 78). Breton and the Surrealists did not accept that latent human historical forces lay trapped within commodity production. There is no authentic human content to capitalist, or official Marxist, notions of progress, and no revolutionary potential in factory labour; ‘it is not
the martyrdom which one undergoes [in the factory] which creates freedom’ (Breton, 1928/1964: 79). Here, Breton voices a characteristically Romantic rejection of the mechanization of subjectivity (Löwy and Sayre, 1992). Benjamin was later to echo this Surrealist refusal of ‘the illusion that the factory work that was supposed to tend towards technological progress constituted a political achievement’ (Benjamin, 1979: 258). As we shall see later, this links Benjamin to the Situationists, and their critique of ‘commodity time’. For Breton, modernity operates a double ‘chaining’ (enchaînement) both to dominant ‘chains’ of ideas, and to commodity production (playing on the word chaîne, assembly line). Therefore, the precondition of human liberation is an ‘unchaining’ (desenchaînement) to be sought in the rejection of work (see Cohen, 1993: 107 for a discussion of Breton).

While his intellectual trajectory was influenced by Surrealism, Henri Lefebvre distanced himself from Breton’s focus on individual revolt, seeking a public transformation of routines and material elements within the everyday (Shields, 1999: 70). For Lefebvre, everyday time has a dual character. On the one hand, it is shaped by cumulative processes, linear rhythms of accumulation, within which historicity is present, but blindly, under the sign of reification and alienation (Lefebvre, 1961: 324). Cumulative processes are closely bound up with abstraction and the mediation implicit in language. These processes infiltrate everyday life, introducing mechanized rhythms of work and consumption. However, the everyday is partly insulated from cumulative processes – retaining its connection to non-cumulative cycles, linked to rituals and bodily rhythms. These archaic cycles preserve embedded symbols, generated by the collective making of cultural works (œuvres). Insofar as they were connected to œuvres, these cycles had a certain limited historicity in pre-modernity. However, ‘cyclical times, smashed by the linear times of cumulative processes . . . han[g] in tatters, around us, and in us’ (Lefebvre, 1961: 337). This analysis reflects a certain Romantic nostalgia, however; the alienation marking everyday time requires not only a revitalization of the cyclical and symbolic, but also a release of the capacities for subjective participation in the historical process inherent in linear time (Lefebvre, 1961: 324).

The Situationists further developed Lefebvre’s work in the 1960s, through the concept of the spectacle. This is the ultimate mutation of laissez-faire capitalism – all aspects of life have been commodified, so that ‘the only possible relation to the social world is that of . . . contemplative and passive spectator’ (Plant, 1992: 10). Recalling Lefebvre, Guy Debord argues that capitalism engenders a cumulative, ‘irreversible’ temporality, as it applies labour to the transformation of historical conditions. Yet this historicity is ‘blind’, driven by the production of commodities, set over and against their producers. This linear ‘commodity time’ is made up of abstract fragments, marked by exchangeability, as measured by the clock – mirroring the abstract
This finds an echo in Benjamin, who argues that ‘the concept of the historical progress of mankind’, driven by alienated factory work, ‘cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogeneous empty time’ (Benjamin 1979: 261). This recalls Bergson, who tells us that ‘homogeneous time’ – a series of discrete instants, linked mechanically by cause and effect – is ‘a bastard concept, created by the intrusion of the idea of space into the realm of pure consciousness’ (Bergson, 1927/1997: 73). Pure subjective duration does not consist of the juxtaposition of a series of points, as on a clock face, as it does not distinguish between the present and prior states, but blends them together, as we do when we hear the successive notes of a piece of music. Debord named one of his films *On the Passage of a Few People Through a Rather Brief Unit of Time*, paying homage to Bergson’s critique of the reduction of time to spatial units (Bracken, 1997: 104).

In the ‘spectacle’, linear ‘commodity time’ acquires a cyclical double. The surviving rhythms of everyday life do not ‘hang in tatters’ – they are reconstructed as commodified products. As abstract and homogeneous as commodity time itself, they constitute its ‘consumable disguise’: ‘week and weekend . . . the news and the soap, the annual holiday and the office party . . . provide new cycles which punctuate and veil the reality of linear time’ (Plant, 1992: 27). This ‘pseudo-cyclical’ time is not the ‘motionless motion authentically experienced’ of archaic societies, but rather ‘the time of a real transformation [commodity production] experienced as illusion’ (Debord, 1967/1994: 113). Similarly, linear commodity time brings all humanity within the historical process (albeit only abstractly), yet it is a pale reflection of the ‘time of war and adventure’ lived by the rulers of early settled societies (Debord, 1967/1994: 94). Debord’s work was marked by Romantic nostalgia for the Age of Chivalry (Löwy, 1998: 33).

A subtly different reading of the spectacle is offered by Raoul Vaneigem. He also describes ‘commodity time’ as abstract and linear, but sees it as devoid of even a ‘blind’ social historicity – any sense of movement it provides is merely ‘time slipping by’ out of our control, the reaction of our conscious mind to forced adaptation to alienated labour and consumption (Vaneigem, 1967/1984: 231). Consumption is marked by empty repetition, as in Debord’s ‘pseudo-cyclical’ time. Our lives are comprised of ‘lifestyles’ – repetitions of others’ acts, gestures and attitudes. These tie us to the past, resembling commodities built up from dead labour (Vaneigem, 1967/1984: 154). They can be projected into the future – as daydreams of success, or ‘holidays in the sun’ – but they can never be directly lived in the present (Vaneigem, 1967/1984: 230). This absent present denotes a lack of *presence* in Lefebvre’s sense of a self-present subjectivity (Shields, 1999: 63). Vaneigem’s nostalgia for a lost past does not seek the
time of war and conquest so much as the ‘absolute present’ of mediaeval millenarianism, which contains eternity in an instant.

Vaneigem’s sense of time speeding away from subjects is echoed by Paul Virilio, whose central concern is modernity as exemplified by speed, vectorization and mobility, developing under the sign of the war economy rather than the commodity (Armitage, 2000: 2). This *dromocracy* (from the Greek *dromos*, ‘race’) dissolves the interiority of the ancient city, and reduces the subject to a ‘vector’ (Lash, 1999: 289). Virilio’s unease over these developments suggests both Romantic nostalgia and the influence of (Roman Catholic) Christianity (Armitage, 2000: 1). The vectorization of subjectivity transmutes into paralysis in the era of instantaneous communication at the speed of light. This ‘absolute speed’ dissolves the ‘ground reference’ provided by the Earth, which gives way to a purely abstract spatio-temporal order, threatening to utterly devalue our experience of time and space. Virilio asks, ‘can one even imagine the loss of duration and extension, which constitute the referential axis of the body? Can one seriously envisage a “forgetting” of place, of all places?’ (Virilio, 1994a: 148).

This loss of time–space accentuates individual psychological time. However, simultaneity and virtual reality, brought to us by accelerating technology in abstract space, transform the lived present into a lived *tele*presence, where we are passive spectators, deprived of any sense of time – everything comes to us in ‘real time’ (Virilio, 1994a: 141). Trapped in motionless motion, we experience ‘polar inertia’ – ‘the Pole . . . is an absolute place that does not move when the Earth rotates’ (Lash, 1999: 290–1). Unlike Debord’s false cyclicalty within forward-moving time, we have paralysis, linked to abstract acceleration. Our subjectivity, while defined by movement, is erased by absolute speed: ‘the primary freedom is freedom of movement, not freedom of speed. When you go too fast, you are entirely stripped of yourself’ (Virilio and Lotringer, 1983/1997: 66).

‘Firing Blindly into the Crowd’ – Creative Interruptions

The authors considered here developed a Romantic critique of modernity as driven by a denatured temporality which distorts subjectivity. This critique is often coupled with nostalgia for another time-sense, in which subjects possessed a truer relationship to history, to symbols, to totality, or to themselves. A desire to release the powers of being – seen by some of our authors as enhanced in a limited way by modernity’s ‘calculated time’, but always as ultimately crippled by it – lies behind these writings. Such a release is sought through the deployment of *interruption* as a means of unleashing what Vaneigem called ‘a time swollen by subjectivity, by passion, by dreams’ (Vaneigem, 1967/1984: 222). The new temporality generated by interruption
may evoke older temporal rhythms or cycles, especially in the work of Lefebvre, Debord and Vaneigem.

An example of this kind of temporal interruption can be found in Breton’s *Second Manifesto of Surrealism*, ‘the simplest Surrealist act consists of dashing down into the street, pistol in hand, and firing blindly, as fast as you can pull the trigger, into the crowd’ (in Plant, 1992: 53). Paul D. Miller identifies this as a ‘psycho-social critique’ of the regimentation of time and culture in industrial society (Miller, 2001: 4). The Surrealists parodied the monotony imposed by the industrialization of time through the activity of *crétinisation*, where ‘hours and hours going round in loops on city trams’ aimed at disalienation from the very empty repetition it mimicked (Bandini, 1996: 46). This activity of *dérive*, or drift, ‘has an immediate shattering effect on calculated time’ (Castro, 1997: 12). Through the shards of clock-time, another temporality appears, marked by ‘oneiric continuity’, as opposed to the fragmented state of Debord’s ‘commodity time’.

Castro associates the *dérive* with ‘utopia the revolutionary realization of the present [which] associates itself with the revolutionary act of shooting at clocks’ (Castro, 1997: 12). This recalls the incident from the July Revolution in Paris, in which clock towers were assaulted simultaneously at several separate points – which Walter Benjamin took as revelatory of ‘a historical consciousness of which not the slightest trace has been apparent in Europe in the past hundred years’ (Benjamin, 1979: 262). This consciousness explodes the continuum of history, seeking out those moments of the past with which it has a specific affinity, those which illuminate the traces of the new within it. In an article documenting various *dérives* through Paris, Breton pays particular attention to the Place Dauphine, which is possessed of an ‘infinite suggestion of the uncanny’ (*trouble*) (Breton, 1953: 234). For Freud, the uncanny is experienced at the moment at which long-abandoned collective beliefs resurface. In this case, these are beliefs about the ‘revolutionary destiny’ of Paris – the Place Dauphine was the site of the immolation of the Templars in March 1313 (Cohen, 1993: 86).

Breton’s article connects the *dérive* to the ‘historical consciousness’ described by Benjamin, which rejects linear historical progress. However, through his focus on the unconscious, Breton also dismisses the idea that liberation involves a conscious ‘self-present’ subject: ‘Ghosts endowed with powers of resistance only surge up in moments when . . . conscious experience is disrupted by forces coming from a mysterious unconscious realm.’ The liberated subject is a ‘dispersed’ subject – the Surrealist *flâneur*, assailed by unconscious forces, recalls the ‘strolling schizophrenic’ of *Anti-Oedipus* (Cohen, 1993: 112). Further, this stress on a fluid subjectivity connects the Surrealists both to Dada, and to ‘classical’ 19th-century Romanticism (Shields, 1999: 73).

Henri Lefebvre’s starting point is the Surrealist desire to ‘change life’ (Latour and Combes, 1991: 38). Everyday life is the basis of ‘moments’, the changing-
yet-recognizable forms of certain human activities (love, play, thought . . .).
These are forms of repetition, yet they synthesize all other repetitions, both linear (cumulative) and cyclical (non-cumulative). They break through the temporal separation of daily life, just as they negate the everyday itself by affirming it – expending what the everyday has accumulated through ‘patient seriousness’ (Lefebvre, 1961: 355). Moments bring together the symbolic richness of residual temporal cycles, with a revitalized historicity – immanent, in a distorted form, in linear processes of accumulation. Moments are conceived in terms of an individual history, which is the subject’s own creation (if in a limited sense) and recognized as her or his own work (if confusedly) (Lefebvre, 1961: 344).

Lefebvre describes moments as a ‘constellation’, usually obscured by the ‘false suns’ of morality, the state and ideology – making a quintessentially Romantic connection between light and vision and instrumental rationality (Löwy and Sayre, 1992). Moments are an attempt to seize hold of the Absolute, to live an activity or relationship to the fullest possible extent, to encompass totality. The disalienating moment collapses back into alienation by a dialectical movement, once the project of embracing totality is abandoned. The moment is a ‘tragic festival’, because it always collapses back into alienation. However, the aim of life is ‘not to allow festivals to fall into disuse [but] to unite festivity and daily life’ (Lefebvre, 1961: 348).

Recalling his period of collaboration with the Situationists, Lefebvre noted,

They more or less said to me . . . ‘What you call “moments” we call “situations”,
but we’re taking it farther than you . . . We want to create new moments.’
(Lefebvre, 1997: 72)

The Situationists understood purposefully created situations as the beach-heads of a future society. As Constant and Debord put it in 1958; ‘The creation of a situation means the creation of a transitory micro-world and – for a single moment in the life of a few – a play of events’ (Conrads, 1970: 162). This ‘play of events’ interrupts the empty and repetitive temporality of the spectacle by ‘discharging . . . the unfamiliar and unpredictable into the daily and mundane’ (Roberts, 1992: 118). To create situations, Debord and others sought to develop the Surrealist tactic of dérive, through various forms of practice, including the ‘possible encounter’, where one arrives at a specified time and place to meet another, who has been given the same assignment, but whose identity is unknown. The contingency of such a situation forces the participants into a direct engagement with their surroundings, free from the predictability of everyday routine (Debord, 1958/1989: 53). The dérive disrupts the passive contemplation of one’s life as spectacle implied by commodified time, and constitutes a qualitatively distinct moment of life, rather than a ‘fortuitous situation’, indistinct from other such situations (Debord, 1957/1989: 24).
The dérive could also involve ‘transient passage through varied ambiances’ to seek subjective readings of the reified, inert city (Debord, 1958/1989: 50). This unearthing of a ‘poetic geography’ generated maps made from scraps of cartography, photographs and found objects, ‘an open framework within which [subjects] can construct their own narrative readings’ (Burch, 1995: 13). This connects to the semantic hijacking of détournement, in which ‘the mutual interference of two worlds of feeling’ creates new meanings which escape the empty recycling of clichés and worn-out attitudes (Debord and Wolman, 1956/1989: 9). The Situationists used détournement against films, advertisements, and ‘kitsch’ artworks, to create unstable, open-ended artefacts open to further interpretation and recreation. Like Surrealist collage, this was a ‘fortuitous encounter’ of mutually distant realities, where the constituent elements were exposed to ‘an infinite series of latent possibilities not inherent to them’ and thus to future transformations (Ernst, 1948: 16; Breton, 1936/1972: 279, emphasis in original). The truly historical possibilities of collage were first developed by Benjamin, through the ‘dialectical image’, in which present moments conjoin with fragments of the past with which they have a specific affinity, to illuminate what is truly new in the present (Osborne, 1995: 150). As we have seen above, this sense of transtemporal historicity is also present in the Surrealist dérive. The ‘spark’ between past and present restores the complex temporal interpenetration of Bergsonian duration as against the empty succession of homogeneous time. Détournement and dialectical image both offer a historical experience, not only qualitatively new, but open to further conscious, purposeful transformations by subjects.

The ‘situation’ with which the Situationists are most often associated is May ’68 and the occupation of the Sorbonne. René Viénet sums up the way in which the May events cut across the empty and repetitive temporality of everyday life:

Capitalized time stopped . . . People strolled, dreamed, learned how to live . . .
Everyone was . . . able to measure the amount of creative energy that had been crushed during the periods of survival, the days condemned to production, shopping, television . . . to passivity erected as a principle. (Viénet, 1968/1992: 77–80)

It is this ‘creative energy’ that the situation sought to release, since Debord held to Lukács’ vision of the proletariat as both subject and object of the ‘real history of mankind’. For Len Bracken, ‘Debord . . . wanted nothing if not for the rabble to live a history of their own making’ (Bracken, 1997: 92). The situation was intended to interrupt spectacular pre-history, realizing the latent historicity within spectacular time, as Benjamin had sought to do by seeking affinities between present and past. The lived time of ‘war and adventure’, available only to warriors and princes in the feudal era, and to no-one under the spectacle, could now enter everyday life.

Debord’s collaborator Raoul Vaneigem also saw the situation as a breach in
spectacular time, through which subjects release their creative potential. However, here the situation is a moment where subjects break through the bounds of earthly time, and ‘a moment contains eternity’ (Vaneigem, 1979/1983: 24). Rather than releasing an historical potential immanent within commodified time, as in Lefebvre’s moments and Debord’s reading of the concept of ‘situation’, we have rather an ‘overcoming’ of time and history through the realization of the subjective will. This recalls the ‘absolute present’, which in Mannheim’s description of the time-sense of late-millenarian rebels, was a moment of ecstasy, in which ‘what was previously inward bursts out suddenly, takes hold of the outer world and transforms it’ (Mannheim, 1946: 193). Vaneigem seizes on the encounter with the Absolute inherent in Lefebvre’s moment, whereas Debord focuses on the more strictly historical aspects. Self-realization through the situation will enable us to communicate across time with past moments of struggle and revolt, a ‘rectification of the past’ akin to the ‘historical consciousness’ Benjamin sought in the dialectical image. However, Vaneigem seeks rather to seize the moment of redemption at the end of human history when humanity receives the fullness of its past, while for Benjamin, the very nature of redemption is its exteriority to human existence, from where it highlights the incompleteness, the openness of human history (Osborne, 1995: 147). This communion with the totality of history – available to the liberated subject for Vaneigem, always impossible for Benjamin – recalls Nietzsche in The Gay Science: ‘Every great human being has a retroactive force: all history is again placed into the scales for his sake, and a thousand secrets of the past crawl out of their hideouts, into his sun’ (Nietzsche, 1882/1982: 94, emphasis in original).

Paul Virilio has expressed a marked antipathy to Nietzsche (Armitage, 2000: 12). However, as the Situationists seek to breach commodity-time through creating situations, so Virilio is interested in ‘accidents’, which interrupt dehumanized speed. Speed incubates its own accidental interruption, just as moments of historicity, for Lefebvre and Debord, are immanent to linear accumulation. The accident is as much a technological product as technology itself – inventing the railway ‘invents’ the train wreck, inventing the aeroplane implies plane crashes (Virilio and Lotringer, 1983/1997: 38). Virilio’s accident has three intertwined meanings.3

First, the technological accident. The speeding up of exchanges – imploding distance and duration to the benefit of instantaneous ‘real time’ – is not just a concern for Wall Street, but will from now on shape the totality of human interactions. The 1987 failure of world financial markets – tied to the ‘big bang’ of computerized trading, echoing the primal accident at the origin of the cosmos – can be seen as ‘but the harbinger, not only of other economic catastrophes, but also of a number of dramatic ruptures in the realm of . . . social communication’ (Virilio, 1994a: 150). Instantaneous decision-making, entrusted to vulnerable networked computers, threatens to enact, not the original, but the terminal accident.
Second, the ontological accident. When speed finally outstrips the response time of the human nervous system, ‘there will be no time left for man’ (Virilio and Lotringer, 1983/1997: 62). As we move from temporal succession (the solar day) to instantaneous exposure (the speed of light), ‘lived telepresence’, consisting of virtual reality governed by light-speed, displaces the lived present (Virilio, 1994a: 159). This telepresence engenders ‘polar inertia’ – trapped in our audiovisual cocoons, we are drip-fed information at the speed of light – but also threatens a fatal breakdown in human consciousness.

Third, Virilio stresses that humans are inherently accidental:

There is, I would say, an old residue of pride . . . which makes what falls a lesser good, which makes the accident . . . less than the substance . . . I believe exactly the opposite . . . I am because I am accidental, a man in the midst of falling, a fallible man, that is my grandeur. (Virilio, 1994b: 48)

The notion of the Fall has been misinterpreted – we are human by virtue of a ‘fall into the world’ – the ‘accident’ of birth (Virilio, 1994b: 37). The accident is also necessary because we are defined by our relationship to death, and because interruptions structure consciousness, ‘what is living, present, conscious, here, is only so because there’s an infinity of little deaths, little accidents . . . little cuts in the sound track’ (Virilio and Lotringer, 1983/1997: 40). The technology of absolute speed, in interrupting itself, may actually remind us of our substance as accidental beings, bringing us back to our conscious selves. But what is the substance of this ‘accidental’ subjectivity? On the one hand, the notion of a ‘fall into the world’ underlines the phenomenological underpinnings to Virilio’s thought, which draws heavily on Heidegger, Husserl and Merleau-Ponty (Armitage, 2000: 1). In the eponymous final essay in L’Inertie polaire, Virilio takes as his starting point Husserl’s axiom of ‘the world as proto-foundation of meaning and direction’ (sens) (Virilio, 1994a: 138). On the other, Sylvère Lotringer, interviewing Virilio, connected his comments on the structuring of consciousness through chronic interruptions to Deleuze’s schizophrenic model of subjectivity. Virilio himself was cautious about this, criticizing schizo-analysis as ‘stumbl[ing] over the question of death, in the sense that materialism gives it’ (Virilio and Lotringer, 1983/1997: 43). Of course, as we have observed in the case of Breton, this more ‘fluid’ conception of subjectivity could also be seen as connecting Virilio to the early Romantics.

**Interruption Against Interruption?**

The project of unchaining subjects from abstract time links the Situationists and their precursors with Virilio’s contemporary critiques, notwithstanding the obvious differences between them. There are also differences of emphasis with-
in the Situationist literature and between the Situationists and those from whom they draw inspiration. One key distinction is whether the new temporality 'swollen' by subjectivity is immanent to homogeneous empty time, or sharply counterposed to it – Vaneigem and Breton lie closer to the latter position. More important, the authentic subjectivity released by interruption is envisaged in a number of ways – the more Humanist conceptions of Lefebvre and the Situationists contrasting with the 'schizoid' model of Breton, and, to a lesser extent, Virilio. However, all these writers share a Romantic distrust of reified, abstracted modernity, underlined in most cases by nostalgia – for the revolutionary past of mediaeval heresy, for the symbolic richness of pre-modernity, or for feudal 'war and adventure'.

The abstract temporality which is to be interrupted is primarily cumulative and linear, a Newtonian time, which ‘lubricated a culture based on highly stratified regulation of the . . . time available for production’ (Miller, 2001: 4). However, it is a commonplace that we are now living ‘video-time’, constantly cut up and rewound (Lash and Urry, 1994: 16). Interruption is now the dominant form of everyday time, and involves time’s fragmentation into asynchronic multiplicity. While scarcely a new phenomenon, since it was a central concern of high modernism, this intertwining of multiple times has arguably been accentuated by digital technology. Does this asynchronous experience correspond to the temporality of the dérive?

For Miller, ‘“now” becomes a flux . . . a Situationist reverie . . . a drift without beginning or end’ (Miller, 2001: 3). The self corresponding to this fractured temporality consists of ‘the random emission of desires [a] schizophrenic intensification of each moment . . . as something completely immediate’ (Frosch, 1991: 27). This experience seems to combine the presence felt by subjects in moments or situations, with the more ‘distracted’ self valorized by Breton. However, the dominant modern temporality remains abstract: ‘modernist domination operates temporally through the already disembedded meta-narratives of progress . . . late capitalist symbolic violence . . . destroy[s] even these last temporal foundations . . . reducing time to a series of disconnected and contingent events’ (Lash and Urry, 1994: 16). Thus, following Bergson and Benjamin, this is homogeneous empty time, a jumbled series of points in space, lacking even the pseudo-narrative quality of modern progress. The subjectivity inscribed within ‘video-time’ is equally depthless and empty, without direction, or any aspiration to a ‘perfect state of being’. There can be no sense in which this self has historical content, ‘if nothing exists beyond . . . the immediate . . . all attempts at understanding history are fraudulent’ (Frosch, 1991: 29). There can be no overcoming of alienation – if all is depthless surface, nothing remains to be alienated from. This echoes Virilio’s ontological accident – the terminal collapse of consciousness.

In clinging to a more positive sense of the accident, connected to our ‘fall into
the world’, Virilio remains attached to the ‘promise . . . that something more cohesive and supportive can be created’ (Frosch, 1991: 31). Yet the depthless self seems to exclude this. There can be no orientation to an origin for the ‘post-modern’ self, no sense of encountering Vaneigem and Lefebvre’s Absolute (which while ‘immediate’ is surely more than depthless surface), no sense of renewed historicity, as in Debor. Even the fragmented subject of the Bretonian dérive accesses an unconscious, beneath or outside empty Fordist repetition. ‘Video-time’ has no ‘outside’. It is the ultimate commodity, which has abolished any possibility of transcendence, anything outside itself. Paul D. Miller argues that this symbolic violence can itself be interrupted, but only as gruesome farce, as the ‘simplest Surrealist act’ is played out in the high-school massacre and police shootout:

A scenario on the screen: camera obscura, the perspective unbound walking through a crowd, gun drawn, firing wildly until everyone is gone . . . like the police whose 19 out of 41 bullets shot Diallo dead, or the kids who walk into the schools to live out their . . . stunningly banal lives by ending their classmates . . . something, anything to grasp onto. (Miller, 2001: 4)

If we are to avoid a future which simply consists of ‘firing wildly until everyone is gone’, we need urgently to find a way of shattering fractured and depthless calculated time, this dead telepresent of living absence.

Notes


2. I am grateful to Sarah Metcalf for an unpublished translation of the Eugenio Castro text ‘Sólo las horas’. My citations of this text are adapted from her translation. All citations of French-language texts appearing in the original in the References are my own translations.

3. This threefold typology, intended to clarify Virilio’s concept, was developed in conversation with Ian Robert Douglas – as always a source of priceless insights on movement, discipline and escaping the tyranny of the ‘dromocrats’.
References

Ernst, Max (1948) Beyond Painting – and Other Writings by the Artist and his Friends. New York: Wittenborn Schulz.


CONRAD RUSSELL is currently researching the ‘eternal return’ as a theme in radical French thought. His PhD thesis was on the Situationists and Surrealists. ADDRESS: School of Cultural Studies, Leeds Metropolitan University, Leeds LS1 3HE, UK. [email: conrad@macunlimited.net]