

Construction of Time

Design Build Studio

The following is excerpted from the essay *Light Time* by Paul Virilio.

“Painting cannot deceive us, for it does not have at its disposal the real hue of the light,” wrote Schlegel in the nineteenth century.

What can we say today about the deceit of the *live* television image except that it does possess that “real hue,” thanks to the speed of the light of physical optics? That real hue is nothing other than the real time of television broadcasts, which sheds light on the reality of the scenes observed. Whereas pictorial representation could not pretend to compensate for immediate lighting—all shapes formerly being registered in *delayed time*—thanks to the technologies of live broadcasting, television presentation does possess that light of immediacy, that sudden *credibility* that neither painting nor photography nor even cinema can ever had... Whence the emergence of a last *horizon of visibility*, from the moment you reduce the optical thickness of the human environment.

Currently, if the televised event does in fact take *place*, it nonetheless enlightens us about its ultimate limit, that of the *absolute* speed of light.

From now on, man makes use not only of the *relative* speed of the animal or the machine, but also of the speed of electromagnetic wave trains, without realizing that here he comes up against

an insuperable barrier; no longer the sound or heat barriers that are commonly broken by supersonic or hypersonic vehicles, but the barrier of light, the ultimate boundary of an energy intensity that forever limits human action and perception.

Indeed, as we too often forget, if the event does in fact take place *here and now*, it equally takes place *in the light* of a positive or negative acceleration. For example, the fortuitous sidewalk encounter of two pedestrians who hail one another is not of the same nature as the unexpected encounter of two motorists driving slowly past each other as they go by this same sidewalk.

Imagine for a moment that the two vehicles about to pass each other here and now were sped up considerably; the encounter, the exchange of greetings, would simply not take place unless there was sufficient time for perception, the relative invisibility of the two motorists present having nothing to do with the ghostly absence of their bodies, but solely with the lack of duration required for their mutual apprehension. The event of the pedestrians encountering each other on the sidewalk or of the motorists driving past each other on the road do both take place *by light*, or, as we often say, *at speed*—a speed relative to the motion of the various mobile bodies.

If, *a contrario*, the two interlocutors communicate with each other through

(real-time) interactive technologies, it is the absolute speed of radiation that will facilitate their tête-à-tête, their face-to-face encounter, and this happens no matter what intervals of space and time effectively separate them.

Here, the event *does not take place*, or, more precisely, *it takes place twice*, the topical aspect yielding to the teletopical aspect, the unity of time and place being split between the emission and reception of signals, here and there *at the same time*, thanks to the power of electromagnetic interactivity.

The problem of the *televisual horizon* of the ephemeral encounter, however, remains unresolved: indeed, if the transappearance of the appearance of co-present interlocutors is comparable, if not analogous, to that of the pedestrians or motorists evoked above, the *terminus* of their mutual perception differs. The horizon of the pedestrians who run into each other is the *end of the street*; the horizon of the motorists who pass each other going slowly is the *perspective of the avenue*—the vanishing point of the urban horizon demarcating the area of their effective encounter.

In the case of viewers co-present in front of their screens, the horizon is not *the background of the image*, but its delimitation: the frame of the screen, the framing of the broadcast, and, especially, the duration accorded to the interview before the cathode screen once again

becomes silent and opaque.

The *televisual horizon* is thus uniquely that of the *present* of the real-time emission and reception of the televised interview, a *present instant* precisely defined by the framing of the two viewers' viewpoints and, especially, by the time limit placed on their face-to-face dialogue.

“To define the present in isolation is to kill it,” Paul Klee once wrote. Isn't this the crime that the technologies of telecommunications commit in isolating the *present* from its “here and now”, and promoting a *commutative elsewhere* that is no longer the location of our concrete presence in the world, but merely that of a discrete and intermittent telepresence?

The real time of telecommunications is thus opposed not just to the past, to delayed time, but to the present, to its very actuality; an optical switching of the “real” and the “figurative” that refers back to the observer physically present here and now, sole persistence of an illusion in which the body of the witness becomes the unique element of stability in a virtualized environment.

