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Virilio's Speed-up, Winnicott's Hesitation¹

When a man makes a poem—makes it, mind you—he takes words as he finds them interrelated about him and composes them.

— William Carlos Williams, *The Wedge*.

I'm going to juxtapose two ways of producing and representing location, or what we commonly understand as the "here" of the "here-and-now." I am using Donald Winnicott, whose concepts of transitional and potential space, and of the location of culture, are complex accounts of the experience of the here-and-now, the psychology of owned and disowned inner and outer realities. And I am using Paul Virilio, theorist of instant-access, tele-present media, and prophet of an oncoming media-driven cultural and political disaster. Speed, the speed of light, is Virilio's prime topic of study, what he calls "dromology" after the Greek word for a foot- or horse-race, as in *hippodrome*, the ancient Greek racetrack. "Today," says Virilio, "almost all current technologies put the speed of light to work...we are not only talking about information at a distance but also operation at a distance, or, the possibility to act instantaneously, from afar... This means that history is now rushing headlong into the wall of time...the speed of light does not merely transform the world. It becomes the world" ("Kosovo War" n.p.). From dromology Virilio derives the concept of dromospheric pollution – or, as media theorist Rob Bartram summarizes it:

While we might readily recognize the detrimental effects of air and water pollution and the like, Virilio...argues that there is a simultaneous dromospheric and chrono-scopic pollution – the gradual reduction of space-time by the various tools of instantaneous, ubiquitous visual communication. It is this pollution that "attacks the liveliness of the subject" and ensures that "tele-viewer" activity is not so much spatial as temporal. That is, the subject's capacity for thought and movement is displaced by the technology that creates instantaneous, remote realities. ("Visuality, Dromology" 295; quoting Virilio, *Open Sky* 33-34).

What is it, though, that these two have to say to one another, Winnicott and Virilio? Winnicott the observer of mother and child in the close encounter of the analytic set situation. And Virilio the observer of the technologies of war, urban design, and telecommunications. This is the question prompted by a recent advertising flyer from my cable TV provider (Fig. 1). Here, three

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young men stare wide-eyed and open-mouthed back at us or, rather, at the TV screen whose viewpoint we occupy.² The three appear to embody Virilio's theory of a speed-up and compression of ordinary space-time so extreme that space is cancelled, leaving only the ubiquitous "now" of on-demand, real-time tele-presence. But, before Virilio, it is Winnicott that this scene recalls for me, specifically the figure of the infant in the so-called "spatula game," an infant wide-eyed and open-mouthed before the shiny object placed attractively on the table before him, as recounted in the 1941 paper, "The Observation of Infants in a Set Situation," and in the earlier 1936 paper, "Appetite and Emotional Disorder."

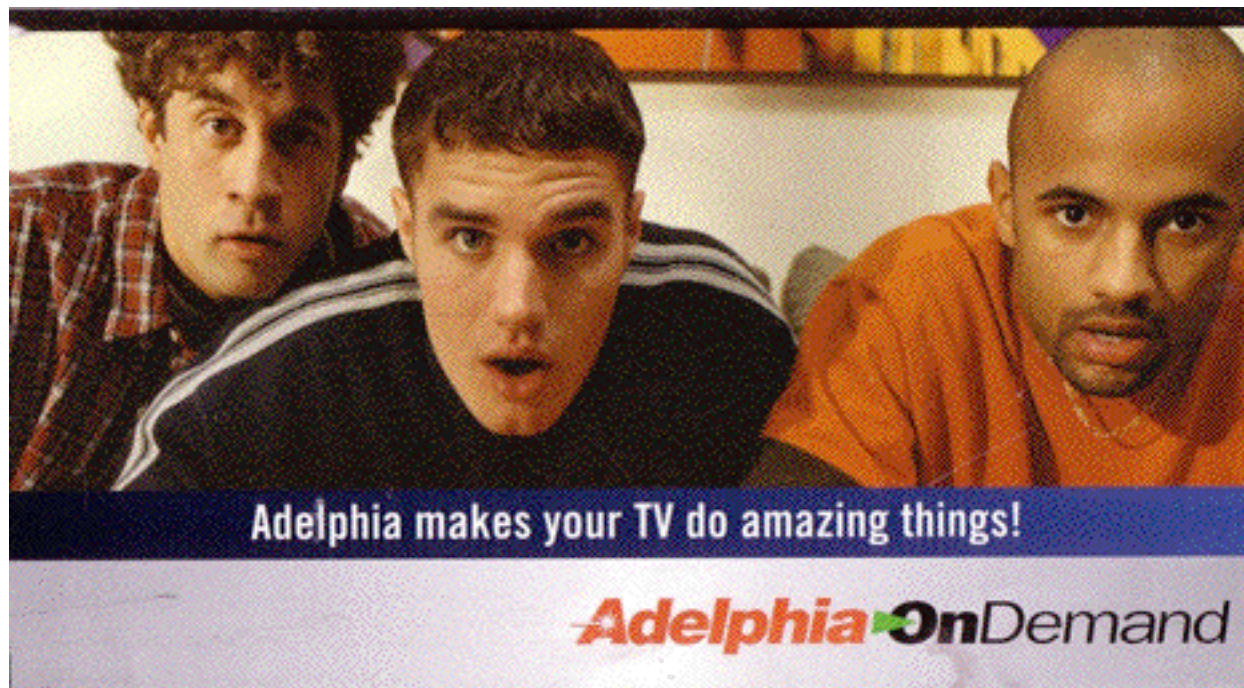


Figure 1

The trio in the ad, though, presents an odd version of the spatula game. Fixated and immobilized, each seems alone in his own fascination with the object. Nothing else, no one else, exists. There is nothing to negotiate. The wish is satisfied, on demand. Still, there is an alternative to this media situation. During the recent NBA finals in June, a *New York Times* article told of teenagers who were not watching the game on TV, they were playing it. But not the one played in San Antonio or Detroit. It was the video game on their 54-inch TV somewhere in Brooklyn – the very popular game, NBA Live (Fig. 2). One of the boys remarked, "When you watch [the game] on TV it's just boring." Another said. "I like Kobe, O.K.," referring to Kobe

² My wife, Liz Weston, points out the three young men are staged as a subtle reference to the Three Stooges – from left to right: Larry, Mo, and Curly (the hair is the give-away.) As a piece of "cool" advertising, the flyer invites us to participate in its ironic playfulness and – ironically, playfully – in the fantasy of "on-demand" pleasure. In a playful moment of my own, I thought that maybe Adelpia could clean up some dromospheric pollution by offering its video services "on request" rather than on demand. But that too is a fantasy.

Bryant of the Los Angeles Lakers. "But I like to play him because I can make him pass to the other guys. When I see him on TV, it's like he doesn't know how to pass." (Schiesel n.p.)

We might say these boys have found a Winnicottian solution to their boredom in the potential space of interactive video. There are obvious problems with this conclusion, many having to do with American consumerist culture, where Kobe Bryant is not so much a basketball player as a brand name, But the boy's remark about boredom suggests Virilio's darker vision of a real-time tele-present political nightmare, in which we become mere "terminal citizens of a teletopical City" (*Open Sky* 20), an atopian world where (with apologies to Gertrude Stein) there no here here.³



Figure 2

³ "The direct lighting of the day star that breaks up the activity of our years into distinct days is now supplemented by indirect lighting, the 'light' of a technology that promotes a sort of personality split in time between the real time of our *immediate activities* – in which we act both here *and* now – and the real time of a *media interactivity* that privileges the 'now' of the time slot of the televised broadcast to the detriment of the 'here', that is to say, of the space of the meeting place. In the manner of a teleconference that takes place thanks to a satellite, but which does so, paradoxically, nowhere in the world" (*Open Sky* 37).

So, it is in this image of on-demand media that I want to locate the conversation between Winnicott and Virilio.⁴ If, as Virilio contends, the pollution of instantaneous visual tele-presence "attacks the liveliness of the subject," displacing her "capacity for thought and movement" (Bartram), then this is exactly the kind of thing that interests Winnicott and provokes some of his best thinking.

Besides, the two men do have a lot in common, in that both Winnicott and Virilio were profoundly affected by their experience of war. Winnicott served briefly in World War I as a surgeon on a British destroyer. During World War II, in 1941, the year of his paper on observing infants in a "set situation," the Battle of Britain was in its final stages. The terrible raids on London had occurred the previous autumn, inflicting tens of thousand of casualties.⁵ And in 1940 Winnicott had become a Psychiatric Consultant for the British government program of evacuating children from vulnerable urban areas (Phillips 62-63). In observing the effect of war and evacuation on children, Winnicott gained some of his deepest understanding of child development.

While Winnicott was concerned with the effect of war on children, Virilio, born in 1932, was one of those children. He grew up in Nantes on the French Atlantic coast, living under Nazi occupation, from 1940 to 1944, and enduring numerous bombardments, including two devastating raids by allied bombers in September, 1943, which killed close to 1,500 civilians and wounded 2,500 (Fig. 3). Virilio today speaks of himself as a war baby and of his epoch as the "epoch of the Blitzkrieg" (Bartram 287). "Blitzkrieg" is the precise word for Virilio's consuming interest, the co-development of *lightning-fast*⁶ military, telecommunications, and imaging technologies, as in the First Gulf War ("Desert Storm") and the war in Kosovo.



Figure 3 – Nantes, September 1943

⁴ There is, however, a risk in doing so, a risk of privileging, or even sentimentalizing Winnicott as the observer of "real" intimacy in relationships that are direct and personal, in contrast to Virilio as the observer of "simulated" intimacy in relationships over distances mediated by global technologies. But, as I argue below, this misses the fundamentally mediated and mediating nature of the set situation, as well as the actual technology of its realization.

⁵ Civilian casualties for the whole period, July 1940 to May 1941, were 27,450 dead, 32,138 wounded (*Wikipedia*, "Battle of Britain").

⁶ In German, *Das Blitz* is lightning.

A bizarre moment during CNN's coverage of Desert Storm in January, 1991, captures for me Virilio's view of these first postmodern wars. News cameras showed troops at a base watching the Super Bowl. A reporter asked one soldier if he wasn't afraid of being hit by an Iraqi SCUD missile. The soldier replied, "No. I didn't come here to die – I came to watch them die."⁷

Once we are aware of it, we are likely to find the effect of dromospheric pollution everywhere – even in print media, as in this recent ad for the Infiniti sedan (Fig. 4). Leaving and



Figure 4

arriving are represented as occurring virtually simultaneously. As in most "cool" advertisements, though, the claim is only tongue-in-cheek, and we're invited to enjoy the playful joke together with the ad-maker. But the joke, precisely because it is a joke, provides a space for fantasizing, where leaving and arriving can be seen as fading into the telepresent now that is always already "here."

In the set situation, the baby sits on the mother's lap across a corner of the consulting room table from Winnicott, who has placed a spatula on the table between them. For a long time

⁷ Quoted from memory.

I have wondered what the "spatula" really looks like. Now, thanks to the worldwide web, here is a webpage of surgical tongue-depressors, or spatulas, on a Pakistani dealer's website (Fig. 5).⁸

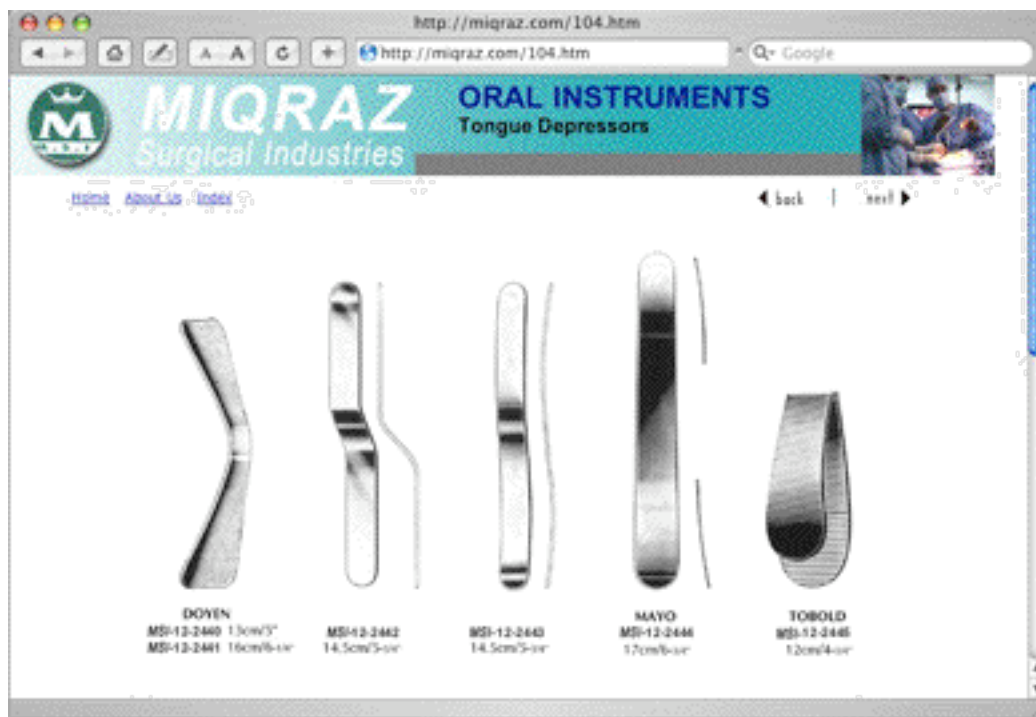


Figure 5

I display these instruments because I want to foreground the set situation as, not just a clinical method, but a method enabled by a technology, however elementary, whose materials are a table, chairs, and a surgical or diagnostic instrument (the spatula) that Winnicott offers to the child as a potential toy, knowing he will likely find it attractive and wish to play with it. And there is the room itself. It is a large room; in 1936 it is both waiting room and consulting room, and Winnicott, narrating an encounter with a one-year old boy, describes it as functioning like a theater.

I place a spatula for him, and as he takes it his mother says: "He'll make more noise this time than last", and she is right.... Of course the spatula goes to the mouth and... [s]o to the bowl with many bangs. All the time he is looking at me, and I cannot fail to see that I am involved. In some way he is expressing his attitude to me. Other mothers and babies are sitting in the room behind the mother some yards away, and the mood of the whole room is determined by the baby's mood. A mother over the way says: "He's the village black-smith." He is pleased at such success and adds to his play an element of showing off. So he puts the spatula towards my mouth in a very sweet way, and is pleased that I play the game and pretend to eat it, not really getting in contact with it; he understands

⁸ None of these apparently is Winnicott's spatula, which he describes as right-angled, but they're close enough ("Observation of Infants" 52).

perfectly if I only show him I am playing his game. He offers it also to his mother, and then with a magnanimous gesture turns round and gives it magically to the audience over the way. So he returns to the bowl and the bangs go on.

After a while he communicates in his own way with one of the babies the other side of the room, choosing him from about eight grown-ups and children there. Everyone is now in hilarious mood, the clinic is going very well. ("Appetite" 46)

This clinic scene has a history (there have been other, earlier sessions with this boy). It has a setting that is provided for by the everyday technology of a constructed interior space furnished with objects designed to hold the human body in attitudes of repose, attentiveness and interaction. Setting and history are available, materially and conceptually, to the participants, locating them, where they find themselves, in a "here-and-now" that comes into being only in the moment of the setting and the action sustained by its technology.⁹

Winnicott describes another spatula-game encounter as follows.

A child of one year... sees the spatula and soon puts his hand to it, but he probably withdraws interest once or twice, before actually taking it, all the while looking at my face and at his mother's to gauge our attitudes. Sooner or later he takes it and mouths it. He now enjoys possession of it and at the same time he kicks and shows eager bodily activity. ("Appetite" 45)

A lot more play is then possible before the child finally loses interest and discards the object, thus rounding out a completed experience. But this brief account highlights what for Winnicott becomes a central issue, the manner in which the child negotiates taking possession of the spatula. What is described here as a withdrawal of interest Winnicott, five years later in the paper on the set situation, will redescribe as a moment of hesitation. This is an important change, because it takes into account how the child negotiates not only with the two other figures at the table but simultaneously with himself and his own impulses. That is, negotiating with mother and doctor is the occasion of, the setting for, negotiating his own acceptance of the reality of his desire, his appetite, for the object. The child, in hesitating, "has first to curb his interest and desire, and he only becomes able to find his desire again in so far as his testing of the environment affords satisfactory results" ("Observation of Infants" 60). The plainness of Winnicott's writing style is often noted, his sparing use of analytic and metapsychological conceptual language, but this last sentence, in its simplicity and precision, has profound theoretical significance: the child finds his desire *again* in the setting and interplay of the spatula

⁹ Winnicott explicitly describes his role as *provider of a setting*: the moment of hesitation means that the baby "has first to curb his interest and desire, and he only becomes able to find his desire again in so far as his testing of the environment affords satisfactory results. *I provide the setting for such a test*" ("Observation of Infants" 60, italics added); and, "In my observations I artificially give the baby the right to complete an experience" (67). The experience here is the baby's appropriation and use of the spatula. A crucial part of Winnicott's analytic style is his insistence on allowing the patient to find his own way to the completion of an act of self-expression, without the analyst's intervention.

game. The word "again" signals that the desire the child finally acknowledges as his own is a transformation of a prior impulse, a transformation effected by his negotiating – hesitating and negotiating – his wish to take and use the object. Desire is not locatable in the initial impulse and movement toward the object. It is, rather, the product, the result, of a transaction played out in a setting provided for this purpose and sustained by a technology of material furnishings, institutional relations, and methodological design. Desire is realized, as is the "here-and-now" of its setting, in this space that Winnicott later calls "the location of cultural experience."¹⁰

Describing Winnicott in this manner, as an analyst whose work is framed by a technology, opens the way for him to be in conversation with Virilio. But Virilio himself poses a problem. His breathless apocalyptic style seems motivated by what John Johnston has identified as "an inherited metaphysical opposition between the human and the technical" ("Machinic Vision" 29), which is an epistemologically incoherent position. Winnicott died in 1971 and knew little if anything of our current media situation. But I think he would see immediately what is at stake, the question of whether the human, whose very humanity is the product of an ongoing technogenesis, will be able to use the technical object rather than being used by it. This is not a question about opposition between the human and the technical. It is a political question, about the design and control of telecommunications and media, and the kind of social and cultural space they make possible. Winnicott understood this through the concept of potential space – a space threatened, as he also understood, by the effects of war – the space that paradoxically is always already there but at the same time awaits the gesture that shapes and places it there.

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¹⁰ In the late paper, "The Location of Cultural Experience," Winnicott argues that analysts need to give less attention to issues of instinct satisfaction and more to the developing capacity for transitional object use in potential space:

We now see that it is not instinctual satisfaction that makes a baby begin to be, to feel that life is real, to find life worth living. In fact, instinctual gratifications start off as part-functions and they become *seductions* unless based on a well-established capacity in the individual person for total experience, and for experience in the area of transitional phenomena. It is the self that must precede the self's use of instinct; the rider must ride the horse, not be run away with. . . . When one speaks of a man one speaks of him *along with* the summation of his cultural experiences. The whole forms a unit. (98-99, italics in original)

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