

**Virilio and Visual Culture:
On the American Apocalyptic Sublime**

Joy Garnett and John Armitage

Introduction

Paul Virilio, philosopher and cultural theorist, has long been engaged with questions of art, history, and visual culture. A child of 1930s Paris, Virilio, remarkably, remains at the forefront of French thought concerning contemporary conceptions of visuality and cultural studies. Yet, as is well known, Virilio's theoretical preoccupations are associated with ideas involving the visual culture of art and its histories as forms of knowledge that reveal themselves as pictorial representations. Drawing on the work of existential or phenomenological philosophers and artists as diverse as Albert Camus and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Edmund Husserl, Maurice Blanchot, and Guillaume Apollinaire, Virilio's influential theorization of postmodern visual culture nevertheless shares little in common with other vitally important French theorists of art, perception, and seeing in the present period, such as Roland Barthes and Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Jean-François Lyotard. Focusing on the development of art and politics over the twentieth-century, artists, and their materials, Virilio's main work on visual culture in the twenty-first century is, arguably, his important text entitled Art as Far as the Eye Can See (2007).¹

Rather than offer an extended theoretical narrative that explores Virilio's conceptual engagement with the entirety of contemporary visual culture, in the first section of this chapter, we shall introduce and consider the main thrust of his endeavor to enhance the theoretical understanding of postmodern visual culture by way of a discussion of his Art as Far as the Eye Can See, a text that grapples with, amongst a myriad of other topics, new media's revolutionary impact upon art of the current era and its materials, information and communications technologies such as the Internet, and the transformation of twenty-first century societies into societies predicated on the politics of speed.

Having briefly outlined Virilio's theoretical relationship to contemporary visual culture and his attempt to augment our knowledge of art's association with perception in the first section, in the second section, we critique Virilio's (2007: 2-3) supposition in Art as Far as the Eye Can See that real time absolutely outstrips the real space of important visual artworks. In addition, we do so with a view to enriching his and our own appreciation of art and looking under postmodern conditions through a discussion of what we understand as a central yet absent theme regarding Virilio's comprehension of visual culture, namely, the absence of the vital concept of what we call the 'apocalyptic sublime', a 'Virilian'-like condition that 'may occur wherever there is a sharp discontinuity between what is expected and what is perceived' (Garnett and Armitage 2011: forthcoming). Moreover, we suggest that a remarkable and significant added difficulty with Virilio's present-day writings on visual culture is a surprising lack of engagement with contemporary painters and especially painters of the apocalyptic sublime, as evidenced by their continued absence in both his own Unknown Quantity (2003b) exhibition and his and the French photojournalist and documentary filmmaker Raymond Depardon's Native Land: Stop-

Eject joint exhibition at the Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain (Virilio and Depardon 2008).

What we are proposing, then, is that our conception of the apocalyptic sublime should be central to those current and as yet hypothetical theoretical perspectives in Virilio studies that are primarily involved with contemporary visual culture. To this end, in the third and final substantial section of this chapter, we offer a contribution to the embryonic sub-discipline of postmodern Virilian visual cultural studies by means of a discussion of three American painters whose work is especially concerned with what we label the 'American apocalyptic sublime'. We shall establish the parameters of this discussion by first focusing on a significant painting, Untitled (1983), by the late Canadian performance artist and filmmaker Jack Goldstein (1945-2003). Goldstein's important studies in the visual arts emerged from conceptualism and were, for example, included in Douglas Crimp's influential 'Pictures' exhibition at Artists Space in New York City in 1977 (Crimp 1979; Eklund 2009). Predominantly an appropriation artist, Goldstein is known for his use of found photographs, contemporary advertisements, television, and other media-derived cultural materials to produce his striking images. Interrogating, dismantling, and remediating such images, Goldstein's appropriated artworks appeared in various mediums that included film and photo-montage prior to his suicide (Isles 2003). It is, however, Goldstein's Untitled that we foreground below, first and foremost because of its significance regarding the affiliation between present-day visual art and vernacular or corporate-driven media narratives. Above all, Goldstein's painting resonates with our own idea of the American apocalyptic sublime. Goldstein's Untitled also forms the backdrop against which we will contemplate two other paintings, Super Terrestrial (2010) by Sarah Trigg (1973-) and Tomorrow's Forecast: Strikingly Clear

(2008) by Marc Handelman (1975-). Both American painters of the apocalyptic sublime and working in New York City, Trigg is increasingly known for her abstract paintings and visual language developed from her own photographic research conducted over the course of several years whilst Handelman is recognized for his large scale paintings, landscapes, and abstract images that reflect important conceptual developments that have occurred in painting since Goldstein's death, specifically artistic strategies of media intervention, remediation, and pictorial détournement. Goldstein, Trigg, and Handelman are then painters for the twenty-first century whose works exhibit the American apocalyptic sublime and, as we shall demonstrate, cause difficulties for Virilio's declaration that real time has overtaken the real space of postmodern visual artworks.

We conclude with a critical evaluation of Virilio's and our own theoretical work on visual culture and an assessment of their likely impact on current theoretical perspectives in Virilio studies related to the contemporary visual culture of the American apocalyptic sublime. But let us begin with an introductory consideration of Virilio's theoretical understanding of postmodern visual culture in Art as Far as the Eye Can See.

Virilio and Visual Culture: *Art as Far as the Eye Can See*

Although clearly not one of the first philosophers or cultural theorists to use the concept of visual culture (see, for instance, the work of the art historian Michael Baxandall (1988) or, more recently, Nicholas Mirzoeff (2009)), Virilio has, nonetheless, been concerned with issues of art and its histories for many years. For Virilio, of course, as for many other French thinkers involved with postmodern ideas of

visuality and cultural studies, the theoretical notion of visual culture, and especially in relation to art history, refers to the interrelated structures of knowledge and symbolic representation that have arisen since the Renaissance. More interested in the philosophy of art than in the sociology of art, Virilio's existential or phenomenologically derived perspective nevertheless recognizes that not merely aesthetic but also socio-cultural factors mold new theoretical and visual abilities as well as those postmodern methods entailing calculation and organization used in the visual arts such as the conventions of linear perspective. Still, Virilio's conception of visual culture is completely different from that of other significant French philosophers of art, perception, and looking in the present-day, like Barthes (1992) and Baudrillard (2005), Derrida (1987), Foucault (2000), and Lyotard (1993). This is because Virilio's idea of visual culture has less to do with its use in postmodern western societies per se and more to do with, firstly, its use in postmodern western art and politics from the twentieth century onwards, and, secondly, its use in relation to artists and their materials. In its suggested and far-reaching inclusiveness of objects of study stretching a long way beyond the scope of things typically incorporated within the conventional categories of art history, Virilio's contemporary view of visual culture involves an essentially reworked twenty-first century explanation of the conceptions and techniques required to appreciate postmodern western art, the place of politics, the twenty-first century behavior of artists, and the nature of their materials within the contemporary art world.

Virilio's theorization of contemporary visual culture is thus the designation for a new multifaceted conceptual engagement or field, a kind of speculative understanding or investigative synthesis centered on the

examination of postmodern western artworks. His account of contemporary visual culture and its goals are clearly evident in his Art as Far as the Eye Can See: anything but self-effacing or restrained, Virilio's Art as Far as the Eye Can See is an uncompromising text that aims, in effect, to politicize contemporary art to its limits. At the same time, Art as Far as the Eye Can See is also a challenge to the subject of art history since, for Virilio, whilst art 'used to be an engagement between artist and materials', today, 'in our new media world, art has changed; it's very materials have changed and have become technologized' (Virilio 2007: frontispiece). Given its radical form, Virilio's approach to visual culture brings together and considers these changes. Yet this transformation is for Virilio a sign of a wider socio-cultural and economic move towards 'chrono' or speed politics and what he describes as the crucial feature of the twenty-first century: the shift to an accelerated mass culture. From Virilio's perspective, contemporary students of visual culture should categorize and scrutinize those characteristics of mass culture that have been neglected by traditional art history, such as contemporary forms of panic. These traits of mass culture comprise films that provoke panic and television programs that depend on panoptic or mediatized and technologized methods of seeing like Big Brother. Virilio's historical yet transformative concept of visual culture can therefore be appreciated not only as a new theoretical domain relating to the socio-cultural, economic, and institutional investigation of postmodern western art but also to the cultural politics of that primary victim of induced panic and the new, panoptic technologies which, for Virilio, is the human reaction. Virilio's conception of visual culture thus develops out of an approach to film and cultural studies in particular that focuses on what 'we are losing' from 'the very human "art of seeing"', which is humanity's

increasing inability to connect with itself or even with political and artistic events (Virilio 2007: frontispiece). In this uncompromising form, Virilio's idea of visual culture has started to consider issues that art history tends not to, such as the technologically induced demise of our feeling for the arts, or has no interest in bringing in to its orbit, like terrorism.

In Virilio's radical description of visual culture, as evidenced, for example, in Art as Far as the Eye Can See's 'Expect the Unexpected' (Virilio 2007: 1-33), he appears to want to confront art history, querying and refusing its established beliefs. In this questioning, it is not so much the technologies of the mass media as 'fear' that 'has become a dominant culture, if not an art - an art contemporary with mutually assured destruction' (Virilio 2007: 1-2; original emphasis). Here, the history of 'a mounting extremism' and 'war', 'escalation', and the 'balance of terror between East and West over the twentieth-century' turn out to be the inducements for a reconsideration of our basic suppositions regarding notions of aesthetic value, not to mention our perceptions of peace and deterrence that, according to Virilio, are even now excluded from traditional art historical discourse concerning mass media culture (Virilio 2007: 2). Thus Virilio's approach to visual culture does not generally incorporate questions relating to conceptions of individual originality and physical skills, distinctive objet d'art, aesthetic styles and conventions recognized as consistent formal and themed objects, or the conviction that western standards in art are the absolute gauge and assurance of discrimination and aesthetic excellence. 'In fact', says Virilio:

the postmodern period has seen a gradual shift away from an art once substantial, marked by architecture, music, sculpture, and painting, and towards a purely accidental art that the crisis in international architecture flagged at practically the same time as the crisis in symphonic music.

This drift away from substantial art has been part and parcel of the boom in film and radio and, in particular, television, the medium that has ended up finally flattening all forms of representation, thanks to its abrupt use of presentation, whereby real time definitely outclasses the real space of major artworks, whether of literature or the visual arts.

(Virilio 2007: 2-3)

Beyond film and radio, television, and, naturally, the postmodern art and insubstantial digital aesthetic imagery of the Internet, its technological forms and networked systems, Virilio's bold reading of visual culture in Art as Far as the Eye Can See aspires to redescribe the entire field of visuality under postmodern global socio-cultural and economic conditions. However, his is not simply a discussion of television's destruction of representation and sudden use of presentation but also a deliberation on real time or the 'idée fixe of the twentieth-century', the 'acceleration of reality and not just of history', together with the nature and significance of chronopolitics and the 'turbocapitalism of the Single Market', mass culture, 'ubiquitous media', and 'the power to move the enthralled hordes' by way of this mass culture's stunning visuality as well as its characteristic visual, phenomenological, and ideological influence on people who live in societies where this 'cold panic of which terrorism, in all its forms, is only ever one symptom among others' (Virilio 2007: 3). Casting aside conventional

discussions of, for instance, advertising and hypertext if not of surveillance, reality TV, and conflict, Virilio's standpoint on visual culture is therefore unconventional in the sense that he approaches it from the standpoint of fear and fright, from the 'programmed repetition' of the 'population's disturbing panic attacks' and, to some, a somewhat depressive understanding of everyday life (Virilio 2007: 4).

Critics, though, and particularly those from a conservative intellectual and political position in art history, might doubt that Virilio's openly socio-political texts will amount to anything other than bewilderment if art and its histories are to be turned into the study of 'cold panic', into the analysis of the 'expectation horizon of collective anguish' where 'we strive to expect the unexpected in a state of neurosis that saps all intersubjective vitality and leads to a deadly state of CIVIL DETERRENCE that is the lamentable counterpart to MILITARY DETERRENCE between nations' (Virilio 2007: 4; original capitalization). Yet one window that is opened up by Virilio's contemporary conception of visual culture, we argue, is less one that is concerned with philosophical ideas of artistic worth, aesthetic intentions, or artistic intervention, and more one that is involved with theoretical ideas relating to art's association with a mode of creativity involving portents of widespread devastation and ultimate doom or the awe-inspiring condition we call the apocalyptic sublime.

The Apocalyptic Sublime

Now that we have summarized Virilio's theoretical associations with contemporary visual culture and his effort to supplement our understanding of art's connection to perception, in this

second section, we question Virilio's (2007: 3) hypothesis in Art as Far as the Eye Can See that 'real time definitely outclasses the real space of major artworks ... of the visual arts'. What is more, we do so with an eye to deepening his and our own grasp of art and looking in the postmodern age by means of a deliberation on what we appreciate as a vital yet up to now absent theme concerning Virilio's insights into visual culture, specifically, the absence of the significant theme and concept of the apocalyptic sublime, a Virilian-like condition that, as noted, may occur wherever there is a sharp discontinuity between what is expected and what is perceived. In addition, we propose that a noteworthy and important further problem with Virilio's recent work on visual culture is an startling lack of concern with postmodern painters and particularly painters of the apocalyptic sublime, as shown by their sustained absence in Virilio's Unknown Quantity (2003b) exhibition and his and Raymond Depardon's Native Land: Stop-Eject joint exhibition (Virilio and Depardon 2008).

Our Virilian inspired perspective on visual culture thus entails reflecting on art, perception, and looking in terms of the apocalyptic sublime, in terms of the sharp discontinuity between what is expected and what is perceived. Yet the concept of the apocalyptic sublime is not a grand philosophy or cultural theory but simply a hypothesis about contemporary visual culture that describes what may arise in that vacuum between what is expected and what is perceived. The work of those engaged with postmodern art history, we argue, would benefit from a concern with the apocalyptic sublime, or, put differently, with metaphysical states of combined awe and horror in face of immense natural or supernatural forces. Like Virilio, we too are involved with questions of art history. But, unlike Virilio's writings in the present period, we are interested in such issues from the viewpoint of man-made or human-influenced events where

technology goes terribly awry. To embrace a Virilian theoretical point of view on the apocalyptic sublime thus entails a postmodern conception of visuality and cultural studies, visual culture, and art history. However, the notion of the apocalyptic sublime also has to do with a critical perspective on those organized configurations of knowledge and pictorial representation that are surfacing today within the advanced societies. Equally engrossed by the influence of philosophy and photography on contemporary art as well as the impact of the social life of the postmodern city on such art, our Virilian outlook all the same acknowledges that not just the aesthetics of, for example, landscape painting, but also socio-cultural developments shape new theoretical and visual skills over and above those postmodern painterly techniques involving, for instance, an appreciation of how the transcendental landscape paintings of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries' are succumbing to the twenty-first century encounter with the apocalyptic sublime. Less concerned with measurement and aesthetic ordering conventions than with, say, photography and film stills, the apocalyptic sublime offers a visual art rooted in a truly critical perspective on modern-day representations and depictive mediums.

Consequently, our contemporary idea of visual culture is somewhat dissimilar to that of Virilio's postmodern philosophy of art, perception, and looking. Indeed, our conception of visual culture is not simply about its application to postmodern western art and cultural politics from the twentieth century and beyond, artists, and their materials. Rather, in its projected radical incorporation of objects of study continuing significantly beyond the variety of items habitually included within even Virilio's non-traditional categories of art history, our contemporary stance on visual culture implies a fundamentally revised twenty-first century account of the models and methods needed to understand

postmodern art in relation to its own history, to film, and to the space of the politics and aesthetics that is the apocalyptic sublime, the twenty-first century activities of artists, and the character of their materials and use of paint and images pertaining to the destruction of all narrative unity in the realm of contemporary art.

Our Virilian theorization of postmodern visual culture is therefore the name for a new sub-discipline, of postmodern Virilian visual cultural studies, a sort of tentative knowledge or analytical synthesis focused on the investigation of contemporary artworks. However, and different from Virilio's explanation of contemporary visual culture and its ambitious objectives as set out in Art as Far as the Eye Can See, ours is a modest proposal relating to our idea of the apocalyptic sublime, a proposal that seeks, effectively, to further politicize contemporary art. Simultaneously, and reminiscent of Virilio's Art as Far as the Eye Can See, the apocalyptic sublime is also a challenge to the discipline of art history as, for Virilio and for us, whilst art once was a juncture between artist and materials, nowadays, in the era of 'new media in art' (Rush 2005), artists must engage the problem of technologized information as a subject and subtext of painting in particular. Art's actual materials have moved beyond purely optical and existential concerns and have become increasingly enmeshed within the culturally and socially significant implications of mediatized or technologized information. Hence our radical Virilian notion of visual culture draws together and studies this problem of mediatized or technologized information as a subject and subtext of painting. Nevertheless, in contrast to Virilio, this change is for us not only a symbol of a broader socio-cultural and economic turn towards chronopolitics and twenty-first century accelerated mass culture but also an indication of far-reaching political and technoscientific, experimental, and

perhaps even deadly turns towards as yet undreamt of technoscientific events and a wholly mediated postmodern mass culture.

Somewhere beyond Virilio's terminology, therefore, our postmodern analysis of visual culture aspires to classify and dissect those traits of contemporary mass culture that have been deserted by both conventional art history and Virilio, for instance extant varieties of enactment, observation, and extreme experimentation with fleeting and precipitous landscapes. These features of postmodern mass culture include significant paintings and an aesthetics of the extreme that evoke the very real prospect of total annihilation and which count on the immense wonder of the physical universe or are intertwined and encapsulated in single photographic images or film clips. Our Virilian historical but original perception of visual culture can as a result be understood as a new conceptual specialism concerned with picturing the enactment of beauty and horror, with postmodern art, with the post-Romantic tradition of landscape painting, and with the cultural politics of the most important producers of the encounter with the apocalyptic sublime, an encounter that engenders new articulations of vision and other technologies of information, that, if not for Virilio, then for us, are the conflicted human responses to a rapidly developing moment. Our Virilian model of visual culture thus grows out of a perspective on painting above all that concentrates not on what humanity is losing from the human art of perception but on the re-absorption of new technologies in terms of the thoughts and predilections of earlier paradigms and media, a field that is flourishing today due to humanity's rising incapacity to relate to itself through new modes of image production and distribution or to the changed political parameters of visual art and cultural production. In this modest guise, our Virilian inflected appreciation of visual

culture has begun to inhabit a territory that neither art history nor Virilio ever actually do, for example the terrain where all contemporary aesthetic mediums are changing in response to the radical transformation in how we process technologized aesthetic information, or, in the case of Virilio, have no apparent interest in including in his own contemporary concerns, such as painting.

In Virilio's radical version of visual culture, as made clear, for instance, in Native Land: Stop-Eject's 'Conversation' between Depardon and Virilio (2008: 8-23), Virilio gives the impression of wishing to abandon art history. Discussing instead his well-known long-term work on speed and politics (Virilio 1986), Virilio questions and rejects many of our founding principles concerning the shrinking of the world and temporality, supersonic transport, the acceleration of telecommunications, and the emerging world of instantaneity. In this interrogation, it is neither the electronic mass media nor the prevailing culture of fear or even art contemporary with mutually assured destruction as real time, the pollution of distances, and what Virilio calls 'the natural scale of things' that governs Depardon and Virilio's Native Land project (2008: 9). No longer concerned with the history of a rising fanaticism and conflict, intensification, or the balance of terror between East and West during the latter half of the twentieth-century, Virilio's present-day inquiries are the stimulus for a reexamination of our key assumptions concerning conceptions of nostalgia and the magnitude of the world, of our awareness of scale and urbanism that, as indicated by Depardon and Virilio (2008: 9), add up not to problems relating to travel, country life, or a world in transit but to the following question: 'What is left of this world, of our native land, of the history of what so far is the only habitable planet?'. Accordingly, we feel obliged to pose another question: what

remains of Virilio's engagement with ideas of aesthetic appreciation or with conventional art historical discourse pertaining to mass media culture? A Virilian slant on visual culture does not, of course, normally include issues regarding notions of personal creativity and manual abilities, original works of art, artistic styles and practices understood as coherent formal and thematic objects, or the principle that western rules of art continue to be the unquestionable measure and warranty of discernment and artistic worth. Yet, we argue, any Virilian interpretation of the postmodern era must not only face up to the slow movement away from an art formerly substantial but also to the preventative qualities of painting as a substantial art. Certainly, it must come to terms with paintings of calamities and catastrophes, with an art that contends with the crisis not just in the international style of modern architecture, symphonic music, sculpture, and the drift towards insubstantial art but also in film, radio, and television, as the digitization of all 'optical media' (Kittler 2009) continues to crush every traditional mode of representation. Against Virilio, however, and because of its sharp discontinuity between what is expected and what is perceived, we maintain that the apocalyptic sublime in the form of the real space of important paintings can, if not surpass, then, as a minimum, rupture and arrest for a moment the real time of presentation in the postmodern visual arts.

Somewhere other than the world of the mass media, the contemporary art and digital aesthetics and visuals of the Internet, its technological modes and complex arrangements, our Virilian yet moderate interpretation of visual culture as the apocalyptic sublime seeks to redefine an aspect of postmodern visibility with a focus on socio-cultural and economic conditions in the twenty-first century generally and landscape painting in particular. Nonetheless, ours is not a heroic attempt to reflect on the digitization of every aspect

of optical media or on the obliteration of all customary forms of representation. More accurately, ours is a Virilian inspired consideration of the character and meaning of various aesthetic experiments relating to the sharp discontinuity between what is expected and what is perceived, to the apocalyptic sublime. The apocalyptic sublime has less to do with the unexpected speeding up of contemporary presentation and real time, reality, history, politics, and the economy, and more to do with the real yet apocalyptic forms and inspirational spaces of significant paintings that, we argue, are able to, if not outclass, then, at least, for a while, shatter and halt the real time of presentation in the contemporary visual arts. Within the context of a twenty-first century mass media culture of diffusion driven by the strength of the emotional condition that it can incite in its spectators through dazzling visuality, it is scarcely surprising to discover that its typical phenomenological and discursive effects on the populace are those not of societies inundated by Virilio's cold panic that is contemporary terrorism as societies swamped by the socio-cultural shifts that are triggered by new technological or mediated forms and their related symptoms. Ignoring traditional deliberations on paintings and conceptions of both the apocalypse and the sublime, our Virilian-derived position on visual culture is consequently sublime in that we consider it not from the point of view of terror and fear but from the point of view of representations, of paintings forged in the postmodern city by artists sensitive not just to the future of the metropolis but also to intimations of obliteration, human displacement, paranoia, architectural replacement, and alienation.

Sympathetic critics of Virilio, ours, like his, is a radical intellectual and political outlook in art history that, whilst it does not mistrust Virilio's candidly socio-political texts such as Art as Far as the Eye Can See, does

write from the viewpoint of two slightly disorientated and unofficial art historians. We are then less interested in Virilio's analyses of cold panic than we are in contemporary artists' foraging for images online, less in the examination of expectation horizons and communal suffering than in twenty-first century landscape paintings based on photographs found on the Internet. For us, it is not a matter of struggling to anticipate the unforeseen in a condition of psychosis that weakens collective energies and brings about a lethal situation of civil deterrence that is the regrettable complement to military deterrence. Rather, it is an issue of critically considering depictions of various and often contemporaneous global incidents. So one clearing that is opened up by our Virilian postmodern view of visual culture, we contend, is less one that is broadly concerned with philosophical conceptions of art's connection with a form of imagination relating to omens of pervasive destruction and eventual disaster or the breathtaking state we call the apocalyptic sublime, and more one that is engaged with the practices over and above conceptions of contemporary art and its correlation with a kind of originality we call the American apocalyptic sublime.

On the American Apocalyptic Sublime

What we are suggesting therefore is that our idea of the apocalyptic sublime ought to be integral to those contemporary and as yet hypothetical viewpoints on Virilio's analyses that are first and foremost engaged with postmodern visual culture. Consequently, in this last yet significant part of this chapter, we make a contribution to the nascent sub-field of contemporary Virilian visual cultural studies through various reflections on the American painters Jack Goldstein, Sarah Trigg, and Marc Handelman whose work is particularly related

to the American apocalyptic sublime. The limits of these considerations are determined initially by concentrating on Goldstein's important painting Untitled (1983), in the main because of its significance concerning the relationship between his contemporary American visual art and his conceptual picture-making, the aesthetic space of New York City, his appropriation art, films, photo-montages, and critical relationship with advertizing, TV, culture, mediated materials, and imagery. Goldstein's Untitled also creates the setting for our study of his own visual art and the critique of the standardized language of business-driven media narratives, all of which are crucial constituents of what we conceptualize as the American apocalyptic sublime. Two other paintings, Trigg's Super Terrestrial (2010) and Handelman's Tomorrow's Forecast: Strikingly Clear (2008), are also considered here. American painters of the apocalyptic sublime based in New York City, Trigg and Handelman's very different paintings reveal, in the case of Trigg, a move towards an almost purely abstract visual language derived from her own long-term photographic investigations and which is largely unconcerned with specific events or dates and, in the example of Handelman, key practical developments that indicate theoretical advances that have transpired in painting since Goldstein's suicide, in particular Handelman's aesthetic approach to media intrusion, remediation, and pictographic variations on previous advertisements, where his artworks convey meanings that are opposed to the original. Goldstein, Trigg, and Handelman are then painters for the present period whose works for us disclose an American apocalyptic sublime whilst simultaneously producing obstacles for Virilio's assertion that real time has left behind the real space of contemporary visual artworks.

Jack Goldstein

Our Virilian enthused perception of American visual culture therefore involves thinking about Goldstein's painting, insights, and looking through the vocabulary of the American apocalyptic sublime, through the visual language of the sharp discontinuity between what is expected in his appropriated photographic images of natural, scientific, and technoscientific events and what is perceived in phenomena that approach or embody an American apocalyptic and sublime state. However, the conceptual project of what we call the American apocalyptic sublime was not for Goldstein an all-inclusive attitude or aesthetic hypothesis but basically an assumption concerning postmodern American visual culture bound up with the recording of what he labeled the 'spectacular instant', a premise that explains what might happen within the context of a medium that breaches or overcomes the sentimental and realist norms of photographic narrative. In Untitled (Figure 1), that vacuum between what is expected and what is perceived arrives in the shape of our confrontation with a black ground, reminiscent of the size and shape of a billboard.

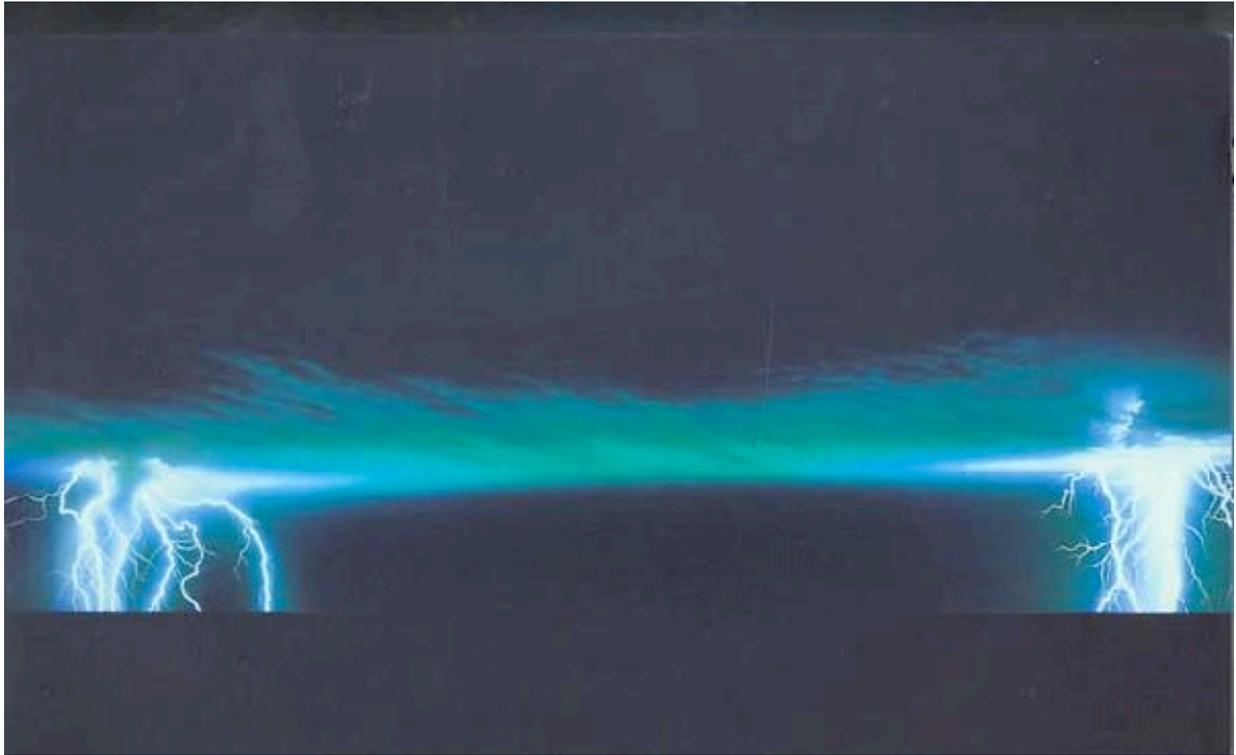


Figure 1: Jack Goldstein. Untitled, 1983,
Acrylic on canvas. 84 x 144 inches.

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The work of those connected with contemporary art history, as we shall demonstrate, can only profit from an involvement with Goldstein's American apocalyptic sublime, or, put another way, with his work on metaphysical, conceptual, and aesthetic conditions concerned with the effects, ideas, and peculiarities of cinema in particular. Hence, the shape of Untitled obviously alludes to the cinematic screen. Yet the painting's evocation of fear and dismay facing dark and huge physical and seemingly paranormal energies is punctuated on either end by two, irregular, dissimilar, and spectacular bundles of lightning, each touching down from the same height, illuminating in green and blue the otherwise static air around them, as well as underside of the invisible, dark, ledge-like storm above. Similar to Virilio's and our own work here, Goldstein was also preoccupied with issues of art, history, and, importantly, what Virilio (2009) calls the 'aesthetics of

disappearance'. In Untitled, for instance, the bolts of lightning arrive at a non-existent place: there is no land and no horizon line, but simply a horizontal strip of pure black, behind which the blots of glowing light disappear, cut off by what resembles the lower edge of the wide angle frame on a movie screen. Nonetheless, and distinct from Virilio's contemporary work on art, we want to pay attention here to similar questions to those posed by Goldstein and from the point of view of artificial or human-induced experiences. Consequently, as we engage in the contemplative role of viewers of Goldstein's painting, as expected, we are it appears also simultaneously positioned to fulfill the role of spectator or audience member, watching not a lightning storm in progress, captured on film, but a decontextualized and technologized film still, an instant on a screen. What we are seeing is a painting of a movie in which human inflected 'nature' has gone awfully wrong. To adopt a Virilian philosophical approach to Goldstein's American apocalyptic sublime as embodied in his Untitled is thus to contemplate Goldstein's contemporary notions regarding the functioning of the black horizontal strip which recalls other proscenium-like visual framing devices that pop up in many of his paintings. Clearly enthusiastically interested in American visual culture and art history, Goldstein's Untitled offers us borders of color or darkness, which, by recalling abstract painting, scuttle the viewer's conventional desire for the 'transparent instant' as normally displayed through photography. Here, Goldstein's American apocalyptic sublime presents a visual analysis of those structured arrangements of knowledge and symbolic imagery that court the contemporary American social desire to buoy up a generations-long emersion in a culture of ever-expanding, naïve proliferation and consumption of photographs both amateur and professional. Just as absorbed by the effect of philosophy and photography on postmodern

American art in addition to the influence of the communal existence of the American metropolis on his art, Goldstein's almost Virilian attitude and framing device ultimately dispels any doubts that what one is gazing at is indeed a painting, an artful and artificial construct wrought by the hand, despite the pristine, airbrushed, photograph-like rendering of the image depicted within the frame.

The aesthetics of Untitled, then, with its smooth, flawless surface reminiscent of other American landscape paintings, refracts and reflects, like them, available light, and calls attention to itself as both a contemporary object and as a representation of Goldstein's attempt at rendering seamless the representation of an event. Untitled therefore offers not a display of socio-cultural events but an image-instant as construct. Goldstein's painting is then a painting that is opposed to maintaining the powerful myth of truth that has fashioned old and new philosophies concerned with those visual abilities associated with photography. This also why, instead of focusing on those contemporary painterly procedures relating to representations of the moment, our attention and awareness, and nothing like the attention and awareness focused on the transcendental American landscapes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries', are drawn to Goldstein's attempt itself, to the display of the death of narrative through the primacy of the instant, or, in other words, to our giving way to the contemporary encounter with the American apocalyptic sublime. Essentially unconcerned with measurement and aesthetic organizational practices than with, for instance, photographic and filmic depiction itself, with the depiction of an instant, as opposed to its embodiment, Goldstein's painterly treatment of his subject evokes the American apocalyptic sublime primarily because his visual art based on a genuinely critical viewpoint on postmodern everyday life and, especially, on how the instant is a representation

of the very changes and conflicts that come to bear between the depictive mediums themselves, namely, painting, photography, and cinema. We see in Untitled the photographic medium itself euthanized, autopsied, and on-display, corpse-like, through the lens of something-like its historic rival, painting.

As a result, our postmodern conception, description, and, hopefully, accurate interpretation of American visual culture of which Untitled is a part, is rather divergent from that of Virilio's contemporary attitude to art, perception, and looking, and particularly since Goldstein's paintings, indeed his entire endeavor, like our own, was in tune with the tragic and, crucially, open to the exploration of the resounding nihilism of our age. Certainly, our perception of American visual culture is not merely concerned with its function in a postmodern American art wrapped up with the contemporary cultural politics of artists and their materials. Instead, our understanding of Goldstein's interpretation of American visual culture is also fundamentally about its function in a postmodern American art gripped by the contemporary cultural politics and aesthetics of dehumanization, catastrophic events, material occurrences and reoccurrences, and, in particular, his engagement with 'rationality' and ethical systems that have been delivered to us through narratives, creative and otherwise, and which, despite all the odds, continue to duplicate themselves whilst remaining somehow impervious to either explanation or sanction. In its anticipated radical inclusiveness of objects of study going appreciably beyond the diversity of things usually incorporated in even Virilio's avant-garde typology of art history, our postmodern perspective on Goldstein's place in American visual culture entails a basically reworked contemporary description of the paradigms and techniques required to appreciate his postmodern American art. Concerning

the history of Goldstein's paintings, for example, to his films, and to the sphere of their politics, aesthetics, and their embodiment of the American apocalyptic sublime, it is critical to keep in mind his artistic behavior, which was concerned with registering shock, awe, and numbness in the face of the complete lack of cohesion between one what sees and what one knows or wants to know to be true. And it is here that the character of Goldstein's materials and their use in his paintings employ many previously leapt over details and images that can be seen as an attempt at the obliteration of all narrative cohesion in the field of contemporary art.

Our Virilian conjectures concerning contemporary American visual culture can then be described as a contribution to the sub-discipline of postmodern Virilian visual cultural studies, a contribution which is epitomized in part by our discussion of Goldstein's Untitled. For Goldstein's Untitled is itself a kind of speculation on the nature of knowledge, a speculation that, for instance, can disclose those 'instants' that can be stolen from the 'truth' of photography. It follows that, while Goldstein's Untitled cannot actually be represented as an exploratory fusion centered on the study of postmodern American artworks, it can be characterized as photography re-rendered in the very form and medium of painting that, at its best, reaches beyond the appearance of things to give us a sense, a picture, that insinuates all that which may be absent. On the other hand, and deviating from Virilio's elaborate and bold description of contemporary visual culture in Art as Far as the Eye Can See, our perhaps more straightforward if provisional narrative of Goldstein's Untitled regards it as the essence of the American apocalyptic sublime, as a painting that advances the politicization of postmodern American art by treading lightly on the borders of contemporary nihilism. Even so, and perhaps inadvertently suggestive of Virilio's Art as Far as the Eye

Can See, Goldstein's Untitled does project a kind of cold tragicness if not cold panic as it walks us along the edges of the vast lacunae that continuously open up between meaning and salvation. Thus Goldstein's American apocalyptic sublime is something of a test for the subject of art history since, we argue, whilst American art previously signified the confluence of artist and materials, Goldstein's postmodern approach to new forms of media and art tussles with the question of technologized information both as subject matter and as the implicit meaning or theme of his paintings. Goldstein's art and often intangible materials therefore shifted outside of wholly ocular and experiential or empirical matters and became ever more entangled in the socio-culturally important repercussions of media and technologically derived information. There is therefore a sense in which our radical Virilian idea of American visual culture both organizes and scrutinizes this question of mediatized or technologized information as a topic and secondary theme of Goldstein's painting. This is revealed, for instance, by the way in which Goldstein's Untitled emits a similar sensation to that of Virilio's cold panic and related expectation horizon of collective anguish. Yet, counter to Virilio, this shift into cold panic is for us not just an emblem of a wide-ranging socio-cultural and economic move headed for some future chronopolitics or accelerated mass culture but also something that was perhaps anticipated by Goldstein's influential American contemporary art, by his politics, and, specifically, by his technoscientific experiments with paintings that co-opt potentially lethal yet sublime events, dismember and totally remediate postmodern mass cultural narratives of photography and cinema to clarify and render their helplessness in the face of cataclysmic realities.

Sarah Trigg

At or in a place we cannot yet precisely identify or know but which certainly lies on the far side of Virilio's vocabulary, then, our contemporary examination of Goldstein's approach to American visual culture converges with numerous other American painters working to catalog and explore specific features of American mass culture that have not so much been abandoned as only lately been exposed in the present period, such as Sarah Trigg, whose recent collection of paintings, Shape of a New Continent (Figure 2), is distinctive for its aura of the American apocalyptic sublime, for instance in the way that she applies the paint to her canvases.



Figure 2: Sarah Trigg

Super Terrestrial, 2010

Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 72 inches

Courtesy of Sarah Trigg

Very different from Trigg's (2009: 229-236) earlier Daily Markings on the Face of the Earth collection, the paint in her Shape of a New Continent series is poured on in paintings such as Super Terrestrial, with the occasionally exaggerated pull of gravity both defying Trigg's aesthetic predictions of or allusions to a successful outcome and adding a transcendent dimension. In Super Terrestrial, for example, the gravitational path is not at right angles to the horizon line, but leaning, which, disturbingly, means that this painting exhibits numerous gravitational directions simultaneously. Every so often pouring the paint with the canvas resting on

the ground, Trigg's American apocalyptic sublime is thus concerned with how the paint pools and cracks to some extent, much like the surface of the Earth itself, above all in times of devastation, in times of drought or abnormally low rainfall, for instance, characterized, as we all know, but most of us only know from our TV screens, by the seemingly sinister forces that bring with them adversely affected growing and living conditions, prolonged shortages, and dried mud for as far as victims' eyes can see. Trigg's individual paint marks are accordingly symbolic of the markings of humankind upon the Earth, with the canvas itself functioning as the Earth's surface. A fundamental idea emerging from Shape of a New Continent is that, like her previous Daily Markings series, the surface of the Earth is understood by Trigg as flesh that can be removed, examined, and sampled as a tissue, taken from the living body of the Earth for diagnostic purposes. So, for Trigg, a central motif of the Shape of a New Continent series is that, as she put it and emphasized to the authors in a 2009 email conversation, 'thought is like matter that can shift, change, explode, and transform like geological processes'.

In short, like Goldstein's, Trigg's work resides in a (perhaps gravitational) field of contemporary painting that seems to have escaped much of traditional art history and certainly Virilio. Choosing to situate herself in New York City, the United States (US) art market capital, to watch and to visually record America's and, at times, the world's excessive experiments with transitory and sheer landscapes, Trigg's encounters with the Shape of a New Continent alert us to an American apocalyptic sublime of flows, wrenches, and the natural force of attraction that is exerted by the Earth upon every object at or near its surface. Artists such as Trigg, who have chosen to remain living and practicing through and beyond the events of September 11, 2001, in a New York City

that, with uncanny resilience, continually overcomes and outruns its own peculiar, continuously renewed, condition of 'prime-target-fixation syndrome' (Vanderbilt 2002: 75) are accordingly uniquely positioned to appreciate the current state of American mass culture. Furthermore, Trigg's and countless other contemporary American artists' choice of painting as primary medium and mode of expression, despite (or perhaps, ironically, partly due to) their unflagging interest in and respective individual ease with an aesthetics of the extreme based on digital media technologies, also bring to mind the exceedingly genuine possibility of complete destruction. What we are putting forward here is the idea that artists which we associate with the American apocalyptic sublime are connected both by their similarly intense, if not obsessive, longstanding researches into the incalculable marvel that is planet Earth and by how this world becomes interlaced with the vernacular, summed up in single photographic images or, periodically, terror-inducing, and frequently topical source materials, for example as film clips of September 11 or, more recently, the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, which is the biggest marine oil spill in the history of both the US and the global oil industry. Our Virilian yet innovative historical view of this personal approach to and problematisation of the visual culture of the American apocalyptic sublime can thus be grasped as a new theoretical area that centres on the work of artists such as Goldstein and Trigg. This conceptual arena is then one that is involved with Goldstein's, Trigg's, and others' paintings of the eruption of the splendor and revulsion witnessed not only in American but the world over in the present day.

Marc Handelman

Focusing on postmodern American art that is primarily influenced by the work of Goldstein, we now want to turn to the contemporary painting and cultural politics of one of the principal creators of the encounter with the American apocalyptic sublime, Marc Handelman. An encounter with Handelman's American apocalyptic sublime as discussed here is an encounter with a new post-Goldstein expression of vision, studies of military technology, and reflections on corporate information, that, pace Virilio, for us, is symptomatic of the uneasy artistic reaction to an accelerated and emergent spectacular instant. Our Virilian strain of American visual culture as a consequence develops out of a perception of postmodern American painting in particular that focuses not on what artists like Goldstein, Trigg, or Handelman lose from their art or awareness but on their re-incorporation of new technologies, on their ideas and preferences concerning previous models and media, and on the limitations of human agency in the face of various products of our information saturated media environment. These are subjects that are thriving at present owing not just to artists' mounting inability to fully involve themselves with or intervene in new technological forms of pictorial construction and dissemination, to the altered political strictures of American visual art and cultural production, but also to their increasing confusion when faced with the reification of dogmatic imagery and the fetishization of violence through its commodification. From this angle, therefore, our reworked Virilian understanding of the tropes, methods, and processes of the visual culture of the American apocalyptic sublime has initiated a project that goes beyond both traditional art history and Virilio's conception of visual culture. In fact, it is an undertaking which simply assumes that every postmodern American aesthetic medium is altering in reaction to the radical changes taking shape in how we deal with

technologized information. Hence, unlike Virilio, we have a strong interest in incorporating into our own contemporary concerns American painters such as Handelman.

In contrast to Virilio's radical account of visual culture, particularly as it is expressed in Native Land: Stop-Eject, we want to shift the discussion away not from art history as from Virilio's current and seemingly obsessive concern with chronopolitics, spatiality, temporality, air travel, telecommunications, and instantaneity. Instead, we want to focus on Handelman's 2008 series of paintings, Tomorrow's Forecast: Strikingly Clear, chiefly because in this series Handelman explores the American apocalyptic sublime head-on through the remodeling of nineteenth century American landscape painting, focusing solely on the sky above the horizon rather than the landscape as such. In this examination, it is not the mass media, Virilio's rampant culture of terror or an art contemporary with mutually assured destruction that concerns Handelman as the highly aestheticized and romanticized images produced by corporate, military, defense advertising campaigns. For Handelman's current paintings are based on spectacular images, on what might be called the appropriation of the sky as icon and as subject. Essentially undisturbed by Virilio's fixation on real time and spatiality, extremism, escalation, the balance of terror, if not war, Handelman's contemporary explorations are, rather, motivated by a desire to reconsider our basic suppositions involving the imagery offered in full-page newspaper advertisements by US defense contractors such as Northrop-Grumman, to reassess our consciousness of advertising's seductive landscapes that, as revealed in Handelman's Tomorrow's Forecast: Strikingly Clear (Figure 3), come down not to Virilian quandaries regarding temporality and spatiality but, initially at least, to issues linked to

advertising's use of block letters, in this case to spell out TOMORROW'S FORECAST? STRIKINGLY CLEAR.



Figure 3: Marc Handelman:
Tomorrow's Forecast: Strikingly Clear. 2008.
Oil on canvas. 74 x 58.25 inches.
Courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York

What can we possibly say about Northrop-Grumman's world, except, perhaps, that it is a clever, if glib, evocation of weather control? Yet, in Handelman's world, in his contemporary art and history as encapsulated in one of his most eponymous paintings, we are presented instead with an uninhabitable planet, with a 'landscape' dominated by a central, white-hot ball, the sun, not setting or rising, but

floating in a seeming moment of sublime stasis, and, moreover, obscured by a device reminiscent of Goldstein's wide-screen edge and other proscenium-like elements. For these reasons, we think it important to consider a number of the issues that Handelman's painting raises. Indeed, and distinct from Virilio, we want to scrutinize Handelman's thoughts on aesthetics, art, and alternative art historical theories and practices about America's mass media culture. Handelman's Tomorrow's Forecast: Strikingly Clear, for instance, includes a 'window' or layer to look through, a curtain-like encumbrance that appears and disappears throughout the picture plane in an all-over pattern, an obstruction through which we must peer while being blinded by the burning orb. Our Virilian take on American visual culture does not, obviously, typically involve questions on the topic of, for example, Handelman's individual vision and physical capabilities. However, we would like to draw the reader's attention to some of the original features of this work of art. Handelman's 'window', for instance, can be described as a 'pliage', as a folding that that functions at once to partially obscure and to focus our gaze on the view beyond, as well as to call attention not to Handelman's artistic methods or practices per se but to the 'objectness' of the painting itself. And yet there is nothing here that could be considered coherent or formal since the thematic object, the image - and the message - to which our gaze is drawn, diverts and obstructs so as to become strikingly unclear. It is not that Handelman is questioning the principle that today American rules of art are the indisputable gauge and guarantee of taste and artistic value. Rather, we contend, any, perhaps post-Virilian, elucidation of Handelman's postmodern painting must not only accept the gradual transfer away from an art once substantial but also the pre-emptive character of his painting as a substantial art. For Handelman's painting is intended to rupture or arrest

our view much the way in which the similar devices of Goldstein offer up not the fact of disaster but the 'fact' of 'depiction'. Handelman's art does not of course wrestle with Virilio's crises in modern architecture and music, sculpture, film, radio, and television but, all the same, is a sort of reflection of the drift in the direction of insubstantial art, of a hovering between the readymade digital image and the painting, between optical representation and mediated abstraction. But, more significant, as with all of his contemporary paintings, is Handelman's concentration not on Virilio's obsession with the compression of every form of representation but, instead, on the equivocal aspects of representation itself, on, in the present context, the genre of romanticized, corporate, military advertising photography. Almost in opposition to Virilio, therefore, and on account of the striking disparity between what is expected - between the 'real' message hinted at - and what is perceived even as it is romanticized in the source image itself, we insist that Handelman's American apocalyptic sublime in the form of the real space of his significant painting, Tomorrow's Forecast: Strikingly Clear, can, if not exceed, then, at least, break or block for an instant the real time of presentation in American postmodern visual arts through an entity displayed on a canvas, an assertion that forms both the main thrust of our own work here and Handelman's artwork.

In a place still under development yet somewhere other than Goldstein's conception of the American mass media, other than his postmodern art and sense of futility, and other than his digitally mediated aesthetics founded on a lack of human agency and a visual project rooted in techno-nihilism and multifaceted remediations of the photographic and cinematic image, both our own and Handelman's post-Goldstein approach to American visual culture and its imagery as the American apocalyptic sublime aim to redescribe a facet of

Goldstein's postmodern visuality with a concentration on Handelman's contemporary American socio-cultural and economic circumstances and on his landscape painting that, crucially, rejects Goldstein's annihilation or abstraction of the subject regarding the image. On the other hand, neither ours nor Handelman's are superhuman efforts to hypothesize the digitization of all optical mediums, the elimination of all traditional varieties of representation, or even Goldstein's ideas concerning our desire for technological imagery, media, or film bound up within various kinds of annihilation. To be more precise, both ours and Handelman's are a kind of post-Virilian inflected reconsideration of the nature and implications of artistic research involving the sharp discontinuity between what is expected and what is perceived, the American apocalyptic sublime, and, of course, Handelman's interpretation of Goldstein's fascination with banal images and objects that, for Goldstein himself, became after-images for destruction, war, and conditions of alienation. Handelman's American apocalyptic sublime, unlike Goldstein's, thus has very little to do with the unforeseen acceleration of postmodern presentation and immediacy, truth, history, politics, and the economy, and a lot to do with resisting real or false apocalyptic forms of alienation. Flying in the face of Virilio's cold panic and his now (in)famous descriptions of 'Delirious New York' (Virilio 2000: 18-23) as Ground Zero (Virilio 2002), Handelman's stimulating and crucial painting, we contend, reaches instead for his own renegotiation of the same territory, based not on Goldstein's glowing pristine surfaces and a seeming absence of the hand, but instead on a rupturing or halting of the real time of presentation in American postmodern visual art through a re-emphasis of the human scale and the body itself, and hence, of the human origin of picture-making. For even within the framework of a contemporary American mass media culture of transmission

powered by the force of the emotional state that it can rouse in its witnesses using incredible imagery, the human body still has to negotiate and renegotiate actual, tangible, paintings. As Handleman, in an email discussion with the authors put it in April 2010:

The reading of the image is never just at a level of signification and this perceptual dependency on the body, however, subtle, or retracted from, say, the movements of the body in Virilio's (Virilio and Parent 1996) 'oblique function' architectural scenarios is still an engaged perception.

Thus, for Handelman, the key questions concerning spectacular imagery today are not about its phenomenological or discursive impact on the general public as such as on the specificities of the human body as a thinking entity. Here it is not contemporary societies swamped with Virilian cold panic, terrorism, or even the socio-cultural transformations activated by new information and communications technologies, by new media and their associated effects as how painting might yet still offer something to perception that is currently being thoroughly reorganized by the perceptual logics of digitized screens. In presenting this non-alternative consideration of Handelman's Tomorrow's Forecast: Strikingly Clear by way of the concept of the American apocalyptic sublime, a post-Virilian attitude towards American visual culture has emerged, one that is less interested in the sublime as fear or dread but in the sublime as an apocalyptic representation in the form of painting. Perhaps what we have discovered is thus that New York City's artistic population, particularly in the shape of Goldstein, Trigg, and Handelman, were and are at the same moment apprehensive and passionate about the future of a city which, prior to September 11 2001,

was, unlike a lot of other cities around the world, innocent of the destruction of its buildings from the air, of events that bring in their wake individual dislocation, suspicion, architectural substitution, and estrangement.

In this final section our aim has been less concerned with making a critique of Virilio and more concerned with exploring ways in which we might develop his and our own radical intellectual and political position in art history. It is not a matter of rejecting Virilio's outspoken socio-political analysis in Art as Far as the Eye Can See as attempting to take it in new, perhaps oblique, directions and beyond the confines of traditional art history. We are not against Virilian studies of cold panic but feel that our contribution has involved a re-focusing not merely on postmodern artists but on postmodern American painters such as Goldstein, Trigg, and Handelman. For these and many other American painters, whilst wholly content to scavenge for their source images online, point to and consider different expectation horizons and communities through their contemporary American landscape paintings than Virilio does when remarking on postmodern vision technologies. Like Virilio, Goldstein, Trigg, and Handelman work hard to expect the unexpected. Distinct from Virilio, however, Trigg and Handelman, if not Goldstein, whilst recognizing the neurosis and deteriorating social dynamism all about them, refuse to surrender to such toxic circumstances or to the substitution of military deterrence by civil deterrence. Trigg and Handelman, above all, not only critically reflect on but also strive to represent what we have identified as the American apocalyptic sublime. And so, using Virilio's work as a springboard into a postmodern conception of American visual culture has, we argue, been productive in that the philosophy of art now has a new sub-concept, the American apocalyptic sublime, with which to engage the practices of diverse

contemporary American artists and their unique concern with the aesthetics of disaster.

Conclusion

We want to end our thoughts on Virilio's links to visual culture with a critical appraisal of his and our own speculative writings on this important theme and appraise their theoretical value. What, for example, might the probable effect of our current perspective on Virilian studies concerned with the contemporary visual culture of the American apocalyptic sublime be? Let us bring this chapter to a close with a concluding reflection on Virilio's and our own philosophical appreciation of postmodern visual culture and the art of the American apocalyptic sublime.

To begin with, Virilio's philosophy and cultural theory regarding art, history, and visual culture amount to an extraordinary tour de force of French thinking about postmodern visibility and cultural studies. His theorization of visual culture and contemporary art, history, and imagery is second to none. Inspired primarily by Merleau-Ponty's existential philosophy and phenomenology of art, Virilio's influential viewpoint on postmodern visual culture is unique. Who else but Virilio could devise a theory of art, perception, and seeing rooted in the belief that our eyes are presently wired shut and, moreover, are preparing our bodies to comply with the logic of panic? Who else but Virilio could ponder the contemporary development of aesthetics and politics, artists, and their materials, and present a work on visual culture, Art as Far as the Eye Can See, devoted not to seeing as such but to a phenomenology of blindness, to a 'lapse of attention which lasted not for a minute but for a whole century' (Virilio 2007: 4)? Undeniably, few postmodern cultural theorists produce texts that are either as innovative or as significant as those created by Virilio.

Yet we have in this chapter been less involved with Virilio's theoretical ruminations on 'teleobjectivity', on his examination of blindness, or even with his abstract engagements with television. Instead, we have focused on Virilio's theoretical ideas about contemporary visual culture as articulated in his Art as Far as the Eye Can See. And, as we have established, for Virilio (2007: 4), new media's radical effect upon postmodern art and its materials is such that 'we no longer seek to see' in the era of the Internet, no longer seek 'to look around us' in our newly transformed societies founded on chronopolitics and, increasingly, blindness.

Even so, and as we have also ascertained, for us, Virilio's philosophical study of contemporary visual culture, whilst certainly imposing with respect to expanding our knowledge of art, perception, and looking, is rather off beam in one respect, which is his (2007: 3) contention in Art as Far as the Eye Can See that 'real time definitely outclasses the real space of major artworks, whether of literature or the visual arts'. In this chapter, we have then questioned Virilio's line of reasoning on postmodern art whilst concurrently instituting and cultivating a key yet absent concept concerning his insights into visual culture, which is the important concept of the apocalyptic sublime. Akin to Virilio, we too are enormously preoccupied with expecting the unexpected, with visual environments relating to acute deficiencies in perceptual continuity, illogical perceptual sequences, processes, acts, and faculties. But what is most extraordinary and which generates major obstacles for Virilio's recent work on visual culture is his notable lack of curiosity as regards postmodern painters. As we have argued and confirmed, one looks in vain, for instance, for painters of any sort, let alone painters of the apocalyptic sublime, in Virilio's recent art exhibitions.

Consequently, we employed our hypothesis concerning the apocalyptic sublime with the intention of nurturing current if so far conjectural premises in Virilio studies which are first and foremost engaged with contemporary visual culture. Our contribution is thus to the developing sub-discipline of postmodern Virilian visual cultural studies. Contemplating the work of Goldstein, Trigg, and Handelman, three American painters of the apocalyptic sublime, we concentrated initially on Goldstein's important painting, Untitled, followed by Trigg's Super Terrestrial and Handelman's Tomorrow's Forecast: Strikingly Clear. For us, these painters and their works offer vital clues as to the appropriate techniques for researching the visual arts today, for investigating new conceptions of picture-making and aesthetic spaces. Either past or present residents of New York City, these appropriation and landscape artists exploit found photographs, advertising, and TV imagery to create arresting paintings out of a progressively more dematerialized mass mediated American culture. Examining, questioning, taking apart, and reworking media representations, these artists' principally appropriated artworks, paintings based on film, photo-montage, and advertising, thus make a noteworthy postmodern contribution both to American visual art and, critically, to the critique of the everyday language of corporate media discourse. Illustrative of what we have identified as the American apocalyptic sublime, these paintings, these American landscapes and nonfigurative images, signal crucial theoretical events that have taken place in painting following Goldstein's ground-breaking aestheticization of the American mass media. Goldstein, Trigg, and Handelman, contemporary painters of the American apocalyptic sublime, we have been arguing, are not just important American painters in their own right but also, with respect to postmodern theoretical debates within art history

and visual culture, emblematic of the problem that we have identified with Virilio's declaration that real time has left behind the real space of contemporary visual artworks.

Note

1. Art, politics, and the contemporary history of aesthetics and technology are, needless to say, integral to all of Virilio's major writings, such as his Art and Fear (2003a). However, in engaging with his existing work on visual culture in this chapter, we have, mainly for reasons of space, chosen to focus on Virilio's current full-length text on art, perception, and looking, Art as Far as the Eye Can See.

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