

## Picnoleptic Conquests

In his 1980 publication, *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*, Paul Virilio outlines his concept of 'Picnolepsy', an epileptic state of consciousness he claims we all experience as a direct result of the speed at which we live our lives: *The lapse occurs frequently at breakfast and the cup dropped and overturned on the table is its well known consequence. The absence lasts only a few seconds... The senses function but are nevertheless closed to external impressions. Conscious time comes together again automatically, forming a continuous time without apparent breaks.*<sup>1</sup> For Virilio, this specific relationship to time has served to define the human condition since the advent of the Industrial Revolution. He continues on to describe the last years in the life of Howard Hughes as an example of the ultimate picnoleptic fit. Having spent the majority of his existence on a quest to become the fastest and wealthiest man alive, Hughes lived out his final decade in various dark hotel rooms watching the films he produced on loop, covered in bed sores and eating indefinitely from the same plate. Virilio equates Hughes' desire for speed with a desire for inertia. Hughes wanted to become a 'Master of Time', and therefore the most powerful man on earth. In a room at the top of the Desert Inn in Las Vegas, he achieved this goal. Here, "he could believe himself everywhere and nowhere, yesterday and tomorrow, since all points of reference to astronomical space or time had been eliminated."<sup>2</sup>

The fate of Hughes as outlined by Virilio somewhat eerily brings to mind the more recent proposition, made by fellow Italian theorist Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, that we now feel more at home in our devices than we do in our own bodies<sup>3</sup>. Fifty years prior to Berardi's thesis, and around the time of Hughes' initial sequestering, Ralph Nader published a book which quite literally addressed the body in relation to speed and technology. *Unsafe at Any Speed: The Designed-in Dangers of the American Auto Industry* became one of the most ground-breaking polemics of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, revealing that auto manufacturers had systematically neglected to introduce safety features into their vehicles, favouring designs focused on speed and aesthetic performance. Nader's 'Hughes' was the Chevrolet *Corvair*, the treacherous rear-engine car that included the vital safety features of the vehicle as an unadvertised at-cost option.

Perhaps less widely known is that Nader's book was precipitated by The Ford Motor Company's anti-Corvair ad campaign which specifically targeted the positioning of the engine in support of their more logically designed *Falcon*. Ford has since become synonymous with one of the biggest safety scandals in automotive history, involving 240 roll-over related deaths, 3000 catastrophic injuries, and a Sports Utility Vehicle called the *Explorer*<sup>4</sup>. Despite this incident, the Explorer has remained the world's best-selling SUV. Ford Marketing consultant Martin Goldfarb claims that when it was released in 1990 the family-friendly *Explorer* "filled a whole set of physical and psychological needs that no other car had previously managed to do"<sup>5</sup>. Billed as the 'civilized way to return to nature', the *Explorer* possesses the ability to conquer any terrain<sup>6</sup>. How might this be possible? Here, our 6 artists have performed a dissection on the vehicle so that we may better understand the whole. Stripped of its various power sources, its entrails strewn about, we can finally comprehend this great voyager, this master of time and space.

Rebecca Lemire

*Unsafe at Any Speed*. Organized by Eli Kerr. Works by Ivana Basic, Valérie Blass, Michel De Broin, Matt Goerzen, Jon Rafman and Sydney Shen.

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<sup>1</sup> Virilio, Paul. Trans. Phillip Beitchman. *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext, 2009. Print (Originally published in 1980 as *Esthétique de la Disparition* by Editions Balland, Paris), 19.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 36.

<sup>3</sup> Berardi, Franco *After the Future*. Eds Gary Genesko and Nicholas Thoburn. Trans. Arianna Bove, Melinda Cooper et. Al Edinburgh and Oakland: AK Press, 2011, 40., as discussed in Hilder, Jamie "The Economist Aesthetic: From the Ledger and the Database", 2014.

<sup>4</sup> "Ford Explorer-Firestone Wilderness/ATX Tire Failure and Rollover" *The Centre for Auto Safety*. Web. Accessed 1 October, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Goldfarb, Martin in "Rollover: The Hidden History of the SUV" *PBS Frontline* Dir. Barak Goodman and Marc Shaffer, 2002. Documentary Television Show.

<sup>6</sup> "The Ford Explorer" *Ford SUVs*. The Ford Motor Company. Web. Accessed 1 October, 2014.