

HOME : EVENT-SCENES

Printer Friendly Version Event-Scenes: e020

Date Published: 10/25/1995

[www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=153](http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=153)

Arthur and Marilouise Kroker, Editors

Editors' note: On October 30th, a Quebec referendum will take place on the question of Quebec's secession from Canada. However, this week two other referendums will be held, one by the Inuit and the other by the Cree of Northern Quebec, to decide, in the event of Quebec secession, if they should remain in Canada, Quebec, or form an independent First Nations state. The peoples of the First Nations and their ancestral land rights are the silence which is not being heard in the debate between Quebec and Canada. This silence is the absence which haunts the Quebec and Canadian states.

For this reason, we are publishing "The Mohawk Refusal," an event-scene written in response to the Oka crisis of 1990, which speaks to some of the issues which are not being debated within the Canadian/Quebec discourse.

The Mohawk Refusal Arthur Kroker 1995

It is appropriate to reflect on Virilio's Pure War in the context of Montreal, a city which in the early 1990s was the scene of the violent application of the Canadian war machine against its aboriginal population, the Mohawks. A city, that is, which in the summer of 1990 experienced as part of its cultural politics the invasion of the Mohawk reservations surrounding Montreal by all the policing strategies that could be produced by the state: 6000 soldiers of the Canadian army, complete with tanks, armoured personnel carriers, and even TOW missiles, the greater part of the Quebec provincial police, and the RCMP. All of this array of power belonging to the state was set against, in the end, less than 50 Mohawks who only wished to prevent the destruction of a sacred pine grove of their ancestors by developers intent on extending a golf course to eighteen holes. (In a perfect Virilian gesture, the Mohawks not only reclaimed the sacred pine grove at Oka, but also took physical control of the Mercier Bridge - one of the main traffic arteries between the south shore suburbs and the island of Montreal.) If in cultural politics we should be able to read the universal in the particular, to decipher a larger war logic in local applications, then Oka is Pure War in Virilio's sense.

First, it is about an urban space, not as a site of commerce, but as defined in relation to war. That's Montreal, which has always been a site of war first, and of commerce second. A city of two founding exterminisms: the original genocide of aboriginals by French colonizers who, speaking the language of Christian salvation, imposed the spatial logic of "enlightenment" on the northern tier of North America; and then the attempted exterminism of the local French population by English colonizers, for whom the "conquest of Quebec" was most of all about suppression of a Catholic French America by a Protestant mercantilist logic. Montreal, then, as a Virilian space: an intensely urban zone as a spatial vector for the war machine: a site of manoeuvre, negotiation and conquest - a violent scene of sacrificial power.

Second, in the summer of 1990 Oka is a matter of tactics, strategy and, most of all, logistics. Just as Virilio has theorized in Pure War, it is about an indefinite preparation for war, involving the colonization ("endocolonization") of local populations. Thus, for example, the Canadian military stated that this "conflict" could be over in two or three minutes, but the real war was a "media war" to win over the

consciousness of the civilian population. Here, logistics could be an endless preparation for war: control of food, communications, space. And all of this accompanied by constant armed helicopter flights over Montreal as if to demonstrate symbolically the state's control of the local population. Is this not what Virilio has described as "state terrorism" - the act of war without declaration of war, so that there is no formal protection of civil rights, and no political rights for international agencies to intervene on behalf of the Mohawks? And is the indefinite occupation of Oka and the ceaseless police raids into other aboriginal territories not an indefinite preparation for war in another way: not really about the Mohawks at all, but a violent warning to all the First Nation peoples, most of all to the Cree in Northern Quebec, not to intervene physically (by blocking roads) or legally (by court actions) in the future construction of James Bay II, the Great Whale project (the state-driven plan for a vast extension of hydroelectrical development on aboriginal lands in Northern Quebec)? Oka, then, as a pure technological war between the energy requirements of the high-intensity market society and the irrepressible demands of aboriginal peoples for control of their territory and culture. A technological war, that is, where the war machine has come inside of us and taken possession of our identity. Virilio is correct: "All of us are already civilian soldiers. We don't recognize the militarized part of (our) identity, of (our) consciousness," And anyway, what is so dangerous about the Mohawks, about the sovereignty claims of the First Nations? Virilio states that the war machine is the crystallization of science as the language of power, of the depletion of the energies of society, and their draining away into the war machine. Maybe this is what is so threatening about the struggles of the First Nations. It violates and refuses the genetic logic of the technological dynamo.

Consequently, a politics of remembrance of twenty-five thousand years of aboriginal history versus what Virilio describes as the extermination of time (in favor of a purely spatialized power) in technological societies. Here, real tribal consciousness and real grounded sovereignty - duration and a vital sense of sedentariness - militate against the pure mobility of the war machine. And not just memory, but the cultivation of a dynamic ecological relationship with land, economy, and culture on the part of the Mohawks now stands opposed to the disappearance of territory into abstract vectors of speed in consumer culture. This is perfectly captured by the bitter political struggles between the Innu of Labrador and NATO over low level training flights by fighter jets. In Virilio's war machine, it is always land without history, people without remembrance, space without a sense of duration, the abstract control of territory against the loss of history of territory.

Finally, what makes the Mohawks really dangerous for the Quebec and Canadian states is their creation of a model of democratic politics based on matriarchal principles of rule. Here, the traditional form of the Longhouse society militates against rule by the technocratic specialists of the war machine. Virilio says that in the war machine, there are no longer any priests who could mediate death. Now, the leaders of the war machine can speak triumphantly of mega-deaths, because death is also total release from the earthly constraints of gravitation. In this sense, the Mohawks are like gravity, a fall into real time, whose very communal existence militates against the pure speed, the will to endless circulation, of the war machine. If the peoples of the First Nations can be so oppressed, not only in Montreal but also in all of the Americas, from the United States to South America, maybe that is because they are the bad conscience of what we have become in the society of speed and war: perfect sacrificial scapegoats for feelings of anxiety and doubt about that which has been lost in the coming to be of the technological dynamo.