



## Contagion and Repetition: On the Viral Logic of Network Culture

Jussi Parikka

### abstract

The article analyzes the diagrammatic logic of the viral in network capitalism. Combining strands from post-Fordist philosophy, meme theory, and computer virus technology, the text aims to provide tentative ideas of the infectious quality of the network object in digital culture. Instead of merely analyzing the virality of subjectivity in control societies, we also need cultural analyses of the infectious object. Instead of analyzing virality in actualized terms of negativity or the automatic force of rhizomatic resistance, the article points towards a parasitic media analysis that focuses on relations – *in medias res*. This means studying the dynamics of network culture in terms of the excluded-thirds, the parasites, and offering new ideas for approaching the status of objects in the age of digital reproduction and contagion.

The commodity has become an abstraction. Once escaped from the hand of the producer and divested of its real particularity, it ceases to be a product and to be ruled over by human beings. It has acquired a 'ghostly objectivity' and leads a life of its own. 'A commodity appears, at first sight, to be a trivial and easily understood thing. Our analysis shows that, in reality, it is a vexed and complicated thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.' Cut off from the will of man, it aligns itself in a mysterious hierarchy, develops or declines exchangeability, and, in accordance with its own peculiar laws, performs as an actor on a phantom stage. [...] Things have gained autonomy, and they take on human features...<sup>1</sup>

The age of globalization is the age of universal contagion.<sup>2</sup>

### Disease and Capitalism

Since the 1970s and 1980s, contagious diseases spread as a cultural object across various media. AIDS cultivated political paranoia and the fears of the fragile body in the 1980s,<sup>3</sup> these having more recently been perpetuated by EBOLA, SARS, Asian Bird Flu and various other vectors of contagion. The movement of disease seemed to reveal

1 Benjamin, W. (1999) *The Arcades Project*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 181 (G5, 1). Benjamin quotes Marx here.

2 Hardt, M. and A. Negri (2000) *Empire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 136.

3 Sontag, S. (2002) *Illness as Metaphor and Aids and Its Metaphors*. London: Penguin.

does not necessarily (although the danger is present) succumb to a rigid systems thinking where the dynamics of socio-technical systems are seen as linear and determined like 'natural laws'. Instead there is the potential for new cultural analytical perspectives to digital culture, something that has been taken more advantage of in practical assemblages. Resonating with Deleuzian themes, various media activists and theorists have hailed the powers of the viral as potential disturbances of the networks of Empire.<sup>73</sup> This is, of course, a continuation of the tactical media ideas in the wake of Hakim Bey's Temporary Autonomous Zone or the interventions of the Critical Art Ensemble. One practical 'parasiting' example would be the on-going 'Google-Will-Eat-Itself' project (originating from 2005) by the 'digital actionists' Hans Bernhard, Lizvix (both from the group UBERMORGEN.COM), Alessandro Ludovico (Neural.it) and Paolo Cirio (epidemiC). A form of digital cannibalism, or parasitism, the GWEI-project collects money by serving text advertisements to Google and uses the money to buy Google shares.<sup>74</sup> Of course, at the moment (mid-January 2007) it would take approximately 202.345.125,3 years before the project owns Google entirely, but instead of this simple goal, the fascinating part is how the parasitic potential is revealed by the project.

Following Terranova, such are perhaps examples of a logic of a turbulent ecology which cannot be apprehended beforehand but only by engaging in it, in the midst of these contagious objects from consumer products to viruses, to scams and junk mails: "There is no cultural experimentation with aesthetic forms or political organization, no building of alliances or elaboration of tactics that does not have to confront the turbulence of electronic space."<sup>75</sup> This space is also the sphere of Marx's phantom-like commodity living its own semiautonomous life, now turned viral in the age of memetics and networks, but it is also a potential space of innovation and creativity, of experimentation with virality.

Yet, as said, the issue should not be approached on the level of pre-defined terms, but of relationships. The post-Fordist network object, the contagious immaterial labour, moves on similar patterns of virality as do the media art viruses and tactical media interventions. Hence, the virtual diagram differentiates and actualises in various modes and these actualisations cannot be adequately judged beforehand. This should not, of course, be interpreted as a vanity of experimentation – on the contrary. Only through experimental practices are we able to decipher knowledge of the concrete affects of various kinds of parasites and contagious connections that roam the dynamic spaces of networks. This means a micropolitical position that starts its analysis from the middle to "pull out potentials"<sup>76</sup> from the midst of the parasitical relationships.

---

73 A good example is the Biennale virus from 2001. See Parikka, J. (2005) 'Digital monsters, binary aliens – Computer viruses, capitalism, and the flow of information', *Fibreculture*, 4, [[http://journal.fibreculture.org/issue4/issue4\\_parikka.html](http://journal.fibreculture.org/issue4/issue4_parikka.html)]. Figurations of a virus are also used by, e.g., VNS Matrix in their classic Cyberfeminist Manifesto. See Runme.org-website for examples of viral net art, forkbombs, etc. [<http://runme.org>, site accessed 08/06/2006].

74 'Google will eat itself' [<http://www.gwei.org>, site accessed 16/01/2007].

75 Terranova, T. (2004) *Network Culture. Politics for the Information Age*. London: Pluto Press, 68.

76 Parisi, L. (2004) 'For a schizogenesis of sexual difference', *Identities: Journal for Politics, Gender and Culture*, 3(1): 84.

Entities of post-Fordist digital network culture are intertwined with their territories, and hence act collectively and inter-dependently. Following this paradigm we are enticed also to develop viral analytics that proceed from this complex state of contagious systems to an ecological and *ecosophical* mapping of the spaces, affects and virtual potentials of the contemporary terrain of capitalist media culture. This means approaching dynamics of network culture in terms of the excluded-thirds, the parasites, and offering new ideas to think (problematize) the state of objects in the age of digital reproduction and contagion. The task is also to update Benjaminian analysis of the mundane objects of mechanical media and capitalism in the age of cybernetic control machines and networks. Multi-scalar transversal mapping connects (parasitically) from technological platforms (such as computer viruses, and Turing machines) to ideas and affects, and on to social relations (*epi-demos*) in order to engage with the complex contagions of contemporary culture. It is here, in the symbiotic objects, contagious patterns and parasitic routines that one finds the crystallized but messy objects of the abstract machine piloting the production of (nonorganic) ways of network life.

**the author**

Jussi Parikka is Licentiate of Philosophy working at the University of Turku, in the Department of Cultural History. His book *Digital Contagions: A Media Archaeology of Computer Viruses* is forthcoming from Peter Lang Publishing in 2007. Parikka has published on digital culture and media ecology in various publications including *CTheory*, *Fibreculture*, *Game Studies*, *NMEDIAC* and *M/C-journal*.

Homepage: <http://users.utu.fi/juspar>