

new vitalism, arguing for the ineffability and irreducibility of life's description. Yet, this is perhaps the most frustrating and ambivalent aspect of biophilosophy. Biophilosophy is an attempt to draw out a political ontology, but it is also politically agonistic, even apathetic. There is no *ressentiment* in biophilosophy; only a commitment to a 'vital politics' accompanied by this 'molecular-wide' perspective. Biophilosophy picks up and reinvigorates the ontological questions left behind by the philosophy of biology: Why 'life'?

#### Notes

- 1 See my article, 'Networks, Swarms, Multitudes' in *CTHEORY* (2004), part one, available at [http://www.ctheory.net/text\\_file.asp?pick=422](http://www.ctheory.net/text_file.asp?pick=422), and part two: [http://www.ctheory.net/text\\_file.asp?pick=423](http://www.ctheory.net/text_file.asp?pick=423).
- 2 In particular, see the work of Symbiotica (<http://www.symbiotica.uwa.edu.au>), a group of artists and scientists engaged in exploring cell and tissue culturing techniques as artistic practice. In a different vein, Critical Art Ensemble (<http://www.critical-art.net>) has, for some years, explored the relationships between activism, art, and biotechnology.
- 3 Aside from *A Thousand Plateaus*, see Deleuze's comments on life as 'resistance' in Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, trans. Seán Hand (London: Continuum, 1999). For a sampling of other divergences from life, see Keith Ansell Pearson, *Germinal Life* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Alain Badiou, 'Of Life as a Name of Being, or Deleuze's Vitalist Ontology,' *PLI: The Warwick Journal of Philosophy* 10 (2000): 174-91; Mark Bonta and John Protevi, *Deleuze and Geophilosophy: A Guide and Glossary* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004); Critical Art Ensemble, *The Molecular Invasion* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2002); Manuel Delanda, 'Immanence and Transcendence in the Genesis of Form,' *South Atlantic Quarterly* 96/3 (1997): 499-514; Richard Doyle, *Wetwares: Experiments in Postvital Living* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); Miriam Fraser, Sarah Kember, and Celia Lury, 'Inventive Life: Approaches to the New Vitalism,' *Theory, Culture and Society* 22/1 (2005): 1-14; Mark Hansen, 'Becoming as Creative Involution? Contextualizing Deleuze and Guattari's Biophilosophy,' *Postmodern Culture* 11/1 (2000); Adrian Mackenzie, 'Bringing Sequences to Life: How Bioinformatics Corporealizes Sequence Data,' *New Genetics and Society* 22/3 (2003): 315-32; Lucianna Parisi, *Abstract Sex: Philosophy, Bio-technology and the Mutations of Desire* (London: Continuum, 2004); Luciana Parisi and Tiziana Terranova, 'Heat-Death: Emergence and Control in Genetic Engineering and Artificial Life,' *CTHEORY* (2000): [http://www.ctheory.net/text\\_file.asp?pick=127](http://www.ctheory.net/text_file.asp?pick=127); Eugene Thacker, *Biomedica* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).
- 4 For a quick overview, see Eric Bonabeau and Guy Théraulaz, 'Swarm Smarts,' *Scientific American* (2000): 72-9. For a more thorough, and more technical introduction, see Bonabeau and Théraulaz, *Swarm Intelligence: From Natural to Artificial Systems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).
- 5 This is the phrase often used by John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt in their book on military swarming, *Swarming and the Future of Conflict* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2000).

## 10 Hypervirus: A Clinical Report

THIERRY BARDINI

And everybody knows that the Plague is coming  
Everybody knows that it's moving fast  
Everybody knows that the naked man and woman  
Are just a shining artifact of the past.

Leonard Cohen, 'Everybody Knows.'<sup>1</sup>

The high degree to which AIDS, terrorism, crack cocaine, or computer viruses mobilize the popular imagination should tell us that they are more than anecdotal occurrences in an irrational world. The fact is that they contain within them the logic of our system: these events are merely the spectacular expression of that system. They all hew to the same agenda of virulence and radiation, an agenda whose very power over the imagination is of a viral character.<sup>2</sup>

Jean Baudrillard, 'Prophylaxy and Virulence.'

At the dawn of capitalism's fourth phase, the hypervirus awoke  
Poisonous parasite, undead, ubiquitous and omnipotent.

At the beginning of the 1980s, the logistic curve of the hypervirus (the 'virus' virus) passed its first critical point (i.e., second order inflexion). Materializing the cybernetic convergence of carbon and silicon, it infected computers and humans alike at unprecedented levels. From this point on, an explosive diffusion in 'postmodern culture' emerged, eventually it plateaued near saturation, redefining culture as a viral ecology. *Room for one more inside, Sir.*

True/false but remarkable identities:  
'Virus' is a virus: virus is a reflexive name.  
The virus is the quintessential Kantian thing-in-itself.  
The hypervirus is the quintessential Dawkinsian meme.

(Your clone is the idealized expression of your viral self.)

The postmodern master equation:

*language = virus = informational parasite*

Baudrillard adds the corollary proposition:

*Anathematic Illimited / Transfatal Express*

*Viral Incorporated / International Epidemics.*

The hypervirus rules our times like an indifferent despot (it practises *liberal* indifference). It is the ultimate boot sector parasite of our undead culture. Theorized, from Derrida to Foucault (who died of it), Baudrillard (passim)<sup>3</sup> and Deleuze, the virus is the master trope of 'postmodern culture' (whatever *that* is).<sup>4</sup> Let us sketch rapidly the progression of the pandemics.<sup>5</sup>

In his Cut-Ups trilogy of the first half of the 1960s (*The Soft Machine*, *The Ticket That Exploded*, and *Nova Express*), William Burroughs experimented with the stuff of words; in the early 1970s, Susumu Ohno coined the expression 'junk DNA.' Burroughs eventually synthesized the experiment into one fundamental thesis: language (and especially written language) is a virus.<sup>6</sup> At approximately the same time, the 'computer virus' appeared in science-fiction literature. William S. Burroughs is *patient 0* of the hypervirus, the original vector. It is an ironic corollary of his own thesis that the hypervirus was first detected in his writings. In *The Electronic Revolution*, he writes:

I have frequently spoken of word and image as viruses or as acting as viruses, and this is not an allegorical comparison. It will be seen that the falsifications of syllabic western languages are in point of fact actual virus mechanisms. The *is* of identity the purpose of a virus is to *survive*. To survive at any expense to the host invaded. To be an animal, to be a body. To be an animal body that the virus can invade. To be animals, to be bodies. To be more animal bodies, so that the virus can move from one body to another. To stay present as an animal body, to stay absent as antibody or resistance to the body invasion.<sup>7</sup>

Relevant here is an extended version of Deleuze's notion of the overman. The virus, more efficient than the overman, is not only 'in charge of the animals' (as in Deleuze and Guattari's version), but actually *is* the animal. This use of the verb 'to be' is, of course, highly problematic for Burroughs, to the point that it is quite accurate to consider him the detective-doctor of the antiviral fight.<sup>8</sup>

For Burroughs, the principals of this fight begin with a reform of language itself, in the 'therapeutic' tradition of Count Alfred Korzybski, whose seminar he attended in the late 1930s, and his non-Aristotelian semantics:

The categorical *the* is also a virus mechanism, locking you in *the* virus universe. *either/or* is another virus formula. It is always you *or* the virus. *either/or*. This is in point of fact the

conflict formula, which is seen to be archetypal virus mechanism. The proposed language will delete these virus mechanisms and make them impossible of formulation in the language. This language will be a tonal language like Chinese, it will also have a hieroglyphic script as pictorial as possible without being to (*sic*) cumbersome or difficult to write. This language will give one option of silence. When not talking, the user of this language can take in the silent images of the written, pictorial and symbol languages.

For Burroughs, the first enemy in language is the 'is of identity': 'The word *be* in the English language contains, as a virus contains, its precoded message of damage, the categorial imperative of permanent condition.'<sup>9</sup> Instead, Burroughs follows the advice of Korzybski, which is to reform language as a pictorial (iconic) language where silence is an option. Silence is understood here as the first step in the dissolution of the modern subject (i.e., the egoistic subject,<sup>10</sup> from Descartes on). Thus, where Simon and Garfunkel innocently sing, *fool said I you do not know / Silence like a cancer grows* – today South Park echoes, *Die Hippie Die!*

During the same general period, a philosophical project develops that mirrors the work of Burroughs. Between his books *Of Grammatology* (published in 1967) and *Dissemination* (published five years later), Jacques Derrida begins a philosophical enterprise that attempts to introduce the Other into the I: a redefinition of the subject. Eventually, this 'introduction' becomes 'infection,' and the Other is radically recast as the virus. Like Burroughs, Derrida first finds traces of the process in writing itself:

The absolute alterity of writing might nevertheless affect living speech, from the outside, within its inside: alter it [for the worse]. Even as it has an independent history... and in spite of the inequalities of development, the play of structural correlations, writing marks the history of speech. Although it is born out of 'needs of a different kind' and 'according to circumstances entirely independent of the duration of that people,' although these needs might 'never have occurred,' the irruption of this absolute contingency determined the interior of an essential history and affected the interior unity of a life, literally infected it. It is the strange essence of the supplement not to have essentiality: it may always not have taken place. Moreover, literally, it has never taken place: it is never present, here and now. If it were, it would not be what it is, a supplement, taking and keeping the place of the other. What alters for the worse the living nerve of language ... has therefore above all not taken place. Less than nothing and yet, to judge by its effects, much more than nothing. The supplement is neither a presence nor an absence. No ontology can think its operation.<sup>11</sup>

Derrida's claim that 'no ontology' can think this operation is questionable, because it disregards the possibility of viral ontology.<sup>12</sup> The question remains whether we could create, following Korzybski and his students, a non-Aristotelian ontology – an ontology of the immaterial supplement. Of course, Derrida later recognizes the dominance of the virus:

All I have done ... is dominated by the thought of a virus, what could be called a parasitology, a virology, the virus being many things ... The virus is in part a parasite that destroys, that introduces disorder into communication. Even from the biological standpoint, this is what happens with a virus; it derails a mechanism of the communicational type, its coding and decoding. On the other hand, it is something that is neither living nor non-living; the virus is not a microbe. And if you follow these two threads, that of a parasite which disrupts destination from the communicative point of view – disrupting writing, inscription, and the coding and decoding of inscription – and which on the other hand is neither alive nor dead, you have the matrix of all that I have done since I began writing.<sup>13</sup>

In 1976, Richard Dawkins (over)extends his (selfish) gene concept, into a number of notions: (re)birth of the *meme*, the other replicator, *toujours le même*. Dawkins renews a nineteenth-century image contemporary to the Darwinian synthesis, *the contagion of ideas*, by reinvigorating its vocabulary: 'When you plant a fertile meme in my mind you literally paralyze my brain, turning it into a vehicle for the meme's propagation in just the way that a virus may parasitize the genetic mechanism of a host cell.'<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the virus appears as the excluded third term that makes the analogy between gene and meme possible:

There are many ways of defining the meme but there are two that we should perhaps take particularly seriously. First, Dawkins, who coined the term meme, described memes as units of cultural transmission which 'propagate themselves in the meme pool by ... a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation' (Dawkins, 1976, p. 192). Second, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a meme as follows: 'meme (mi:m), n. Biol. (shortened from mimeme ... that which is imitated, after *gene* n.). An element of a culture that may be considered to be passed on by non-genetic means, esp. imitation.' Both these definitions include the critical point that memes are cultural information that is copied, and that it is copied by imitation ... There is a long history of research on imitation in both animal behaviour and human social psychology ... In the nineteenth century Darwin collected many examples of what he took to be imitation in animals, as did Romanes (1882, 1883) but they did not define what they meant by imitation. Baldwin (1902) gave imitation a central role in his theories of evolution, pointing out that all adaptive processes can be seen as imitative – perhaps foreshadowing the universal Darwinism that today enables comparisons between biological evolution and memetic evolution (e.g., Dawkins, 1976; Plotkin, 1993).<sup>15</sup>

Dawkins later makes the point even clearer, by referring to certain memes (religious ones) as *mind viruses*<sup>16</sup> (1993), and so opening the door to countless (ab)uses of the metaphor. Also in 1993, a final critical point (a second second order inflexion point) is passed, and diffusion is now bound to saturation: the hypervirus is now, in Nirvana's words, *In Utero*. To quote from Nirvana's (very Bataillan) song 'Milk It':

'I am my own parasite  
I don't need a host to live ...  
I own my own pet virus  
I get to pet and name her  
Her milk is my shit  
My shit is her milk.'

But I am getting ahead of myself here; it might be paradoxically better to return to the false heavens of chronology in order to describe the epidemics of the timeless entity.

In 1981 Elk Cloner, the first computer virus in the wild (i.e., affecting PCs), is documented, although early hackers will tell you that there were programs analogous to what we now call 'viruses' in the late 1960s or early 1970s.<sup>17</sup> Elk Cloner predated the experimental work that 'officially' defined computer viruses and spread on Apple II.<sup>18</sup> When infected, the monitor of the computer displayed the following rhyme: It will get on all your disks / It will infiltrate your chips / Yes it's Cloner! / It will stick to you like glue / It will modify ram too / Send in the Cloner!

In 1982 the first global epidemics of the fourth phase officially begin: the name AIDS, for *acquired immune deficiency syndrome*, is coined in August of that year. AIDS would soon become the syndrome of choice to synthesize and metaphorize the 'postmodern condition.' It eventually appears as the final term in a series of diseases playing this part in our culture: plague-tuberculosis-cancer-AIDS. *Room for one more inside, Sir.*

This sequence corresponds term for term to the sequence of the four phases of capitalism: plague is the archaic and thus the archetypical disease (René Girard); tuberculosis is the plague that corresponds to the second phase of capitalism (mechanized capitalism), and cancer the disease of the societies of control:

Early capitalism assumes the necessity of regulated spending, saving, accounting, discipline – an economy that depends on the rational limitation of desire. TB is described in images that sum the negative behavior of nineteenth century *homo economicus*: consumption; wasting; squandering of vitality. Advanced capitalism requires expansion, speculation, the creation of new needs (the problem of satisfaction and dissatisfaction); buying on credit; mobility – an economy that depends on the irrational indulgence of desire. Cancer is described in images that sum up the negative behavior of twentieth century *homo economicus*: abnormal growth; repression of energy, that is, refusal to consume or spend.<sup>19</sup>

In this quotation, Susan Sontag relates both diseases, tuberculosis and cancer, to an economy of desire. There is a profound resonance here with Girard's notion of mimetic desire,<sup>20</sup> a resonance that also evokes Richard Dawkins's recycling of the nineteenth-century sociobiologies of imitation.<sup>21</sup> Both mimetic desire and sociobiologies of imitation, again, were products of the same period, the second oil crisis of international capitalism in the mid-1970s.

In the viral ontology of the postmodern condition (capitalism of the fourth kind), the undifferentiating crime is ascribed to the radical Other, that is, the virus. Metaphorically speaking, the Other *becomes* a virus. Derrida is quoted by a Web author as saying: *All he has done ... is dominated by the thought of a virus.* That same author concludes that Derrida is a virus and thus there is the unbearable feedback of the becoming virus. 'Berlusconi is a retrovirus,' writes Lorenzo Miglioli, and he adds, in the most synthetic expression of the viral horrors of history, 'The Holy Inquisition (knowledge as a form of extortion), Nazism (knowledge as a form of indirect extortion, as an experiment), Pol-Pot (knowledge as a form of erasing/extermination of the actors for the sake of the scene) are pure and simple transcriptions, horror *vacui* translated into horror written on the flesh.'<sup>22</sup> G.W. Bush is a virus, Saddam Hussein is a virus, and bin Laden is a virus. *Room for one more inside, Sir.*

On 3 November 1983, the first 'official' computer virus is conceived of as an experiment to be presented at a weekly seminar on computer security. Fred Cohen first introduced the concept in this seminar, and his doctoral supervisor, Len Adleman, proposes the name 'virus.' In his presentation, Cohen defines a computer virus as 'a computer program that can affect other computer programs by modifying them in such a way as to include a (possibly evolved) copy of itself,' a definition he would stick to in his subsequent paper,<sup>23</sup> and one that would become the official definition of a 'computer virus.' Cohen produces such an 'infection' within a Unix directory-listing utility, proving that identifying and isolating computer viruses is a non-computable problem. This latter result, maybe the most crucial point in Cohen's work, meant that fighting the infection is therefore impossible to achieve using an algorithm, and one is left with the same aporia that philosophers have diagnosed.

According to Cohen, the first use of the term virus to refer to an unwanted computer code occurred in David Gerrold's 1972 science fiction novel, *When Harley Was One*. In an interview, Len Adleman concurred with Cohen: "The term "computer virus" existed in science fiction well before Fred Cohen and I came along. Several authors actually used that term in science fiction prior to 1983. I don't recall ever having seen it, perhaps it was just a term whose time had come. So I did not invent the term. I just named what we now consider computer viruses "computer viruses."<sup>24</sup> Indeed, it was a term whose time had come! And the convergence was not fortuitous:

A few years later, while reading about the AIDS virus and its effect on T-cells, Adleman thought about a mathematical description of immunitary deficiency. As certain cells were depleted, he realized, other cells – similar in type but not in function – increased proportionately. Adleman's hypothesis offered not only an explanation for how AIDS destroys the immune system, but pointed toward a method of treatment. If the population of the unaffected cell type (T-8s) could be artificially reduced, he reasoned, the homeostatic forces at work in the immune system would cause an increase in T-4s – the depleted cell types.<sup>25</sup>

In 1986 the diffusion curve of the hypervirus passes its first order inflexion point, and the hypervirus thus becomes mainstream. That year, two Pakistani programmers replace the executable code in the boot sector of a floppy disk with their own viral code designed to infect 360 kb floppies accessed on any drive. Their 'Brain virus' (infected floppies had '© Brain' for a volume label) becomes the first recorded virus to infect PCs running MS-DOS. It is also the first 'stealth' virus, meaning it attempts to hide itself from detection. If a computer user tried to view the infected space on the disk, 'Brain' would display the original, uninfected boot sector. Clearly, writers such as Burroughs and Derrida anticipated this form of dialectics of presence/absence. Also in 1986, the performance artist Laurie Anderson turns William Burroughs's original insight mainstream:

Paradise  
Is exactly like  
Where you are right now  
Only much much Better.  
I saw this guy on the train  
And he seemed to have gotten stuck  
In one of those abstract trances.  
And he was going: 'Ugh ... Ugh ... Ugh ...'  
And Fred said:  
I think he's in some kind of pain. I think it's a pain cry.  
And I said: 'Pain cry?  
Then language is a virus.'  
Language! It's a virus!  
Language! It's a virus!<sup>26</sup>

One year later, AIDS turns mainstream too, thanks to a 'hit' from Prince:

Oh yeah  
In France a skinny man  
Died of a big disease with a little name  
By chance his girlfriend came across a needle  
And soon she did the same  
At home there are seventeen-year-old boys  
And their idea of fun  
Is being in a gang called the disciples  
High on crack, totin' a machine gun.<sup>27</sup>

As in this song, the syndrome, however, is still restricted to certain stigmatized groups (homosexuals, junkies, etc.). At first, indeed, the syndrome is dubbed 'the gay cancer.' Contrary to the other three diseases associated with prior phases of capitalism, it is

highly significant that the main mode of AIDS transmission occurs by sexual contact. In 1988 Susan Sontag already understands this, as she follows her original essay on cancer and 'Illness and Metaphor' with an update focusing on AIDS. She writes, 'The sexual transmission of this illness, considered by most people as a calamity one brings on oneself, is judged more harshly than other means – especially since AIDS is understood as a disease not only of sexual excess but of perversity.'<sup>28</sup> This notion is quite well expressed in a song by the Pet Shop Boys, which is also released in 1987:

Now it almost seems impossible  
 We've drunk too much, and woke up everyone  
 I may be wrong, I thought we said  
 It couldn't happen here  
 I don't expect to talk in terms of sense  
 Our dignity and injured innocence  
 It contradicts your battle-scars  
 Still healed, so far.<sup>29</sup>

And the Boss (Bruce Springsteen) concurs, some years later (in 1993), when the time is ripe for a cinematographic representation of an AIDS patient (as a white lawyer): 'Oh brother are you gonna leave me / Wastin' away / On the streets of Philadelphia.'<sup>30</sup> The year before, 1,300 computer viruses were recorded, an increase of 420% from December 1990. By November 1990, one new virus was discovered each week. Today, between ten and fifteen new computer viruses appear every day. In fact, from December 1998 to October 1999, the total virus count jumped from 20,500 to 42,000. Perhaps soon we will stop counting; we have spyware now, and that too was anticipated by Burroughs: 'It is worth noting that if a virus were to attain a state of wholly benign equilibrium with its host cell it is unlikely that its presence would be readily detected or that it would necessarily be recognized as a virus. I suggest that the word is just such a virus.'<sup>31</sup>

It is worth noting that the ambiguity that surrounds the hypervirus is essential to its functioning as the master trope of the postmodern condition. If AIDS is the syndrome of choice to concretize the hypervirus in postmodern culture, it should be noted that, contrary to the three diseases associated with prior kinds of capitalism, AIDS is not a disease, but a *syndrome*. AIDS is the name of a medical condition associated with a wide spectrum of diseases that are usually assumed to be the consequences of the HIV infection. However, this very point is still the subject of controversy. Even if most of the medical and scientific community accepts today that AIDS results from the HIV infection, this is not a proven fact, and some say (e.g., the group of Perth; Kary Mullis, winner of the 1993 Nobel Prize for Chemistry) that it is only still a hypothesis, and a bad one at that.<sup>32</sup> To borrow a term from computer science, AIDS/HIV is a stealth virus. Rather than a mere epiphenomenon of big science, I consider this point to be a crucial characteristic of the hypervirus.

Today, the postmodern has turned ambiguity upside-down with injunctions like 'Embrace your viruses!' or, even more, 'Embrace yourself as a virus.' Steven Shaviro, in his 'Two Lessons from Burroughs,' proposed such a 'biological approach to postmodernism,' and offered violent viral replications and insect strategies such as swarming as models.<sup>33</sup> In a Deleuzian fashion, Shaviro suggested that one learn about the other by becoming other; furthermore, by posing 'the question of radical otherness in biological terms, instead of epistemological ones ... resolving such a problem would involve the transfer, not of minds, but of DNA.'<sup>34</sup> Deleuze and Guattari refer to this transfer as 'aparallel'; more recently it has been termed 'lateral':

No moribund humanist ideologies will release us from this dilemma. Precisely by virtue of their obsolescence, calls to subjective agency, or to collective imagination and mobilization, merely reinforce the feedback loops of normalizing power. For it is precisely by regulating and punishing ourselves, internalizing the social functions of policing and control, that we arrive at the strange notion that we are producing our own proper language, speaking for ourselves. Burroughs instead proposes a stranger, more radical strategy: 'As you know inoculation is the weapon of choice against virus and inoculation can only be effected through exposure.' For all good remedies are homeopathic. We need to perfect our own habits of parasitism, and ever more busily frequent the habitations of our dead, in the knowledge that every self-perpetuating and self-extending system ultimately encounters its own limits, its own parasites. Let us become dandies of garbage ... Let us stylize, enhance, and accelerate the processes of viral replication: for thereby we increase the probability of mutation. In Burroughs' vision, 'the virus plagues empty whole continents. At the same time new species arise with the same rapidity since the temporal limits on growth have been removed ... The biologic bank is open.' It's now time to spend freely, to mortgage ourselves beyond our means.<sup>35</sup>

What was formerly seen as a problem, or even a *stigma*, is now portrayed as a path to freedom, in a highly paradoxical statement strongly reminiscent of Philip K. Dick's gnostic theodicy. For the ambivalence, of course, remains. As I write these lines, my native country is agitated by the aftershocks of the declarations of a comedian who has proved (again) that anti-Semitism is still practised there. This man, whose name translates ironically into English as 'God-given,' has quite simply actualized the cultural ambivalence of the hypervirus's total diffusion in an aphorism equating Zionism with 'the AIDS of Judaism.'

I am reminded here of the famous characterization of my own generation by Louis Pawels, in an editorial for *Le Figaro* in December 1986, as 'suffering from mental AIDS.' As we were demonstrating in the streets against one more reform of the educational system, Pawels wrote that we, 'the children of stupid rock, the pupils of pedagogical vulgarity,' had 'lost our natural immunities.'<sup>36</sup> The viruses that were supposed to

infect us were, of course, 'mind viruses,' as Dawkins would say. By the time Pawels passed his judgment on my generation, AIDS was definitely going mainstream and 'low culture' (i.e., rock and roll and vulgar pedagogy) had rejoined sex and drugs to complete the list of the symptoms of the hyperviral infection. Most of us shrugged, laughing, and passed a joint – only to realize, a few years later, that the guy was one of the bouncers at the doors of perception, French style.

Today, such metaphorical uses of AIDS are so common that nobody seems to notice them anymore. A little Googling generates the following instances from the Web: AIDS as a metaphor for violence, apathy, fear, loneliness, colonialism, globalization, pollution, ecological collapse, homosexuality, the opposing basketball team (!), the corruption and betrayal of the masses, chronic illness, the social and political deterioration of a fictional country, the general loss of moral standards, the conflicts tearing at American society at the turn of the millennium, the American condition, inequities, social decay, or merely 'how the world works.' *Room for one more inside, Sir.*

There is one more crucial way in which today's troubled times are understood through the AIDS metaphor: terrorism as a consequence of 'metaphysical AIDS.' This one we owe to Jacques Derrida.<sup>37</sup> In an interview with Giovanna Borradori that took place in the wake of 9/11, he develops this thesis: terrorism is the latest symptom of (occidental) suicidal autoimmunity.<sup>38</sup> Borradori notes quite interestingly that Derrida began his reflection on the mechanism of autoimmunization during the winter of 1994, 'in connection with a study of the concept of religion, which frames his discussion of religious fundamentalism and its role in global terrorism.'<sup>39</sup> And Derrida agrees, referencing a text written during that period:

In analysing 'this terrifying but inescapable logic of the autoimmunity of the unstated that will always associate Science and Religion,' I there proposed to extend to life in general the figure of an autoimmunity whose meaning or origin first seemed to be limited to so-called natural life or to life pure and simple, to what is believed to be the purely 'zoological,' 'biological,' or 'genetic' ... Since we are speaking here of terrorism and, thus, of terror, the most irreducible source of absolute terror, the one that, by definition, finds itself most defenseless before the worst threat would be the one that comes from 'within,' from this zone where the worst 'outside' lives with or within 'me.' My vulnerability is thus, by definition and by structure, by situation, without limit. Whence the terror.<sup>40</sup>

Notably, 1994 is the same year that Derrida realized that all his prior work from *On Grammatology* on could be reinterpreted as a kind of virology. Susan Sontag writes about the same process: 'In the description of AIDS the enemy is what causes the disease, an infectious agent that comes from the outside ... Next the invader takes up permanent residence, by a form of alien takeover familiar in science-fiction narratives. The body's own cells become the invader ... What makes the viral assault so terrifying is that contamination, and therefore vulnerability, is understood as permanent.'<sup>41</sup>

Why, then, is there this elision of the virus in Derrida's account of terrorism? Why this strange feeling that if terrorism amounts to suicide, it is a spontaneous autophenomenon, with no external agent? In his first moment of autoimmunity, Derrida provides an answer. The aggression comes from the inside because it comes from 'forces that are apparently without any force of their own but that are able to find the means, through ruse and the implementation of high-tech knowledge to get hold of an American weapon in an American airport.'<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, this too is characteristic of viruses. More importantly, Derrida adds, 'let us not forget that the United States had in effect paved the way for and consolidated the forces of the "adversary" by training people like "bin Laden" ... and by first of all creating the politico-military circumstances that would favor their emergence.'<sup>43</sup> While this may seem to be a form of engineered virus, for Derrida, it is best described as *doubly suicidal*.

If Derrida does not see the stigmata of the hypervirus in 9/11, it might be because this would amount to a repetition of Jean Baudrillard's thesis. Previous to 9/11, even before Derrida understood that his work produces a kind of virology, Baudrillard begins to recognize terrorism as one symptom of the hyperviral infection (cf. my epigraph). Like Derrida, he recognizes it as the result of a suicidal drive: 'The terrorist hypothesis is that the system itself suicides in response to the multiple challenges of death and suicide.'<sup>44</sup> However, unlike Derrida, Baudrillard resorts to a viral explanation, even if it does not take the face of an 'external adversary':

Terrorism, like viruses, is everywhere. There is a worldwide perfusion of terrorism, like the shadow of any system of domination, ready to awake everywhere as a double agent. There is no boundary to define it [*le cerner*]; it is in the very core of this culture that fights it – and the visible schism (and hatred) that opposes, on a global level, the exploited and the underdeveloped against the Western world, is secretly linked to the internal fracture of the dominant system. The latter can face any visible antagonism. But with terrorism – and its viral structure –, as if every domination apparatus were creating its own antibody [*antidispositif*], the chemistry of its own disappearance; against this almost automatic reversal of its own puissance, the system is powerless. And terrorism is the shockwave of this silent reversal.<sup>45</sup>

This is exactly my point: the very core of the culture that fights the hypervirus – postmodern theoreticians included – is infected by it. Terminally. Terrorism is but one symptom – albeit a crucial symptom – of the infection. It reflects the vital (and morbid) condition of postmodernity, setting the stage for the fourth phase of capitalism. Terrorism is the source of pain and suffering and maybe the only sign of a future to come, a junk future. Could this future only be death, as *patient 0* seemed to have concluded?

'Fight tuberculosis, folks.'

Christmas Eve, an old junkie selling Christmas seals on North Park Street.

The 'Priest,' they called him. 'Fight tuberculosis, folks.' ...

Then it hit him like heavy silent snow.  
 All the gray junk yesterdays.  
 He sat there received the immaculate fix.  
 And since he was himself a priest,  
 There was no need to call one.<sup>46</sup>

Junk is yet another name of the hypervirus: Virus and junk are connected through the power of the image, another excluded third. From the awakening of the hypervirus in *Nova Express*, Burroughs had realized that 'junk is concentrated image' and that 'the image material was not dead matter, but exhibited the same life cycle as the virus.'<sup>47</sup> *All the gray junk tomorrows ...*

### Notes

- 1 Leonard Cohen, 'Everybody Knows,' in *I'm Your Man* (Columbia Records, 1988).
- 2 Jean Baudrillard, 'Prophylaxy and Virulence,' in *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena* (London: Verso, 1993), 67.
- 3 At a conference in Montreal, I had the opportunity to ask Baudrillard directly about the presence of the trope of the virus in his work. He answered that the virus was indeed a metaphor in his mind, albeit a metaphor which 'renews the terms of the analysis.' He added, 'Virtuality and virality get mixed up in my mind.' An apt conceptual rephrasing of the very thesis that I wish to defend here, under the cover of a fictional 'clinical report.' (See Jean Baudrillard, 'La parallaxe du mal.' Paper presented at the *Conférence Terreurs, Terrorismes et Mécanismes Inconscients*, Montreal, 31 Oct. 2005.)
- 4 'One must further recognize and accept the pervasiveness of the viral trope within postmodernism ... and understand the ontological confusion (and ideological anxiety) which it carries.' Scott Bukatman, *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 347.
- 5 For this purpose, I will draw heavily on the terminology of diffusion of innovation theory (logistic curve, inflexion points, critical mass, etc.). Ironically enough, the logistic model of the diffusion of innovations was originally borrowed from the field of epidemiology. See Everett M. Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations*, 4th ed. (New York: Free Press, 1995).
- 6 Incidentally, Salvador E. Luria, Max Delbrück, and Alfred D. Hershey were awarded the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine for their work on viruses in 1969. As early as 1955, Salvador Luria had written that 'a new view of the nature of viruses is emerging. They used to be thought of solely as foreign intruders – strangers to cells they invade and paratize. But recent findings, including the discovery of host-induced modifications of viruses, emphasize more and more the similarity of viruses to hereditary units such as genes. Indeed, some viruses are being considered as bits of heredity in search of a chromosome.' In '50, 100 & 150 Years Ago,' *Scientific American* (April 2005), 18.
- 7 William S. Burroughs, *The Electronic Revolution*, Expanded Media Editions (West Germany: Bresche Publikationen, 1970). English version available online at [http://www.ubu.com/historical/burroughs/electronic\\_revolution.pdf](http://www.ubu.com/historical/burroughs/electronic_revolution.pdf). Accessed 24 Oct. 2007.
- 8 Kathy Acker, 'Returning to the Source,' funeral oration for William Burroughs, 21C, 26 'No Future' (1998): 14. 'He was the detective. Being the detective, he was the doctor. He searched out the possessors some of whose other names are viruses and junk. The word is virus. In other words, language controls virally ... William spent a life-time investigating anti-viral techniques.'
- 9 Burroughs, *Electronic Revolution*.
- 10 Cf. Anne-Marie Christin, *L'image écrite, ou la déraison graphique* (Paris: Flammarion, 2001 [1995]), 16.
- 11 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. G.C. Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967), 314.
- 12 Although starting from a very different standpoint, Paul Ricoeur seems to reach a similar conclusion: 'Perhaps the philosopher as philosopher has to admit that one does not know and cannot say whether this Other, the source of the injunction, is another person whom I can look in the face or who can stare at me, or my ancestors for whom there is no representation, to so great an extent does my debt to them constitute my very self, or God – living God, absent God – or an empty place. With the aporia of the Other, philosophical discourse comes to an end.' *Oneself as Another* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992), 355. Here I am tempted to spell injunction with a 'k' and see the virus as its original source.
- 13 Jacques Derrida with Peter Brunette and David Wills, 'The Spatial Arts: An Interview with Jacques Derrida,' *Deconstruction and the Visual Arts: Art, Media Architecture*, ed. Peter Brunette and David Wills (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 12.
- 14 Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989 [1976]), 192.
- 15 Susan Blackmore, 'Imitation and the Definition of a Meme,' *Journal of Memetics – Evolutionary Models of Information Transmission* 2 (1998), available at [http://cfpm.org/jom-emit/1998/vol2/blackmore\\_s.html](http://cfpm.org/jom-emit/1998/vol2/blackmore_s.html). Accessed 24 Oct. 2007. Referred to in this citation are: Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (1976); G.J. Romanes, *Animal Intelligence* (London: Kegan Paul Trench, 1882); J.M. Baldwin, *Development and Evolution* (New York: MacMillan, 1902); H. Plotkin, *Darwin, Machines and the Nature of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).
- 16 Richard Dawkins, 'Viruses of the Mind,' *Free Inquiry* (Summer 1993): 34-41.
- 17 There are instances of 'viral infections' documented for the Univac 1108 and the IBM 360/370 ('Pervading Animal' and 'Christmas tree').
- 18 For more information on Elk Cloner see <http://www.skrenta.com/cloner>. Accessed 24 Oct. 2007.
- 19 Susan Sontag, 'Illness as Metaphor,' *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors* (London: Picador, 1990 [1978]), 63.
- 20 See René Girard, *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde* (Paris: Grasset, 1978), and *Le Bouc Émissaire* (Paris: Grasset, 1982).
- 21 Gabriel de Tarde, *Les lois de l'imitation* (Paris: Kimé Éditeur, 1993 [1895]), for instance.
- 22 Lorenzo Miglioli, 'Berlusconi Is a Retrovirus: From the Italian Theory-Fiction Novel,' in *Digital*

- Delirium*, ed. Arthur and Marilouise Kroker (Montreal: New World Perspectives, 1997), 145.
- 23 Frederic Cohen, 'Computer Viruses – Theory and Experiments,' DOD/NBS 7th Conference on Computer Security, originally appearing in IFIP-sec 84, also appearing in *Computers and Security* 6 (1987): 22–35, and other publications in several languages, available at <http://vx.netlux.org/lib/afco1.html>. Accessed 24 Oct. 2007.
- 24 Leonard Adleman, 'Interview with Diane Krieger,' 1996, available at [http://www.scu.edu.cn/waimo3/scu\\_cs/teach/adleman.htm](http://www.scu.edu.cn/waimo3/scu_cs/teach/adleman.htm). Accessed 24 Oct. 2007.
- 25 *Ibid.*
- 26 Laurie Anderson, 'Language Is a Virus,' *Home of the Brave* (Warner Bros., 1986).
- 27 Prince, 'Signs O' the Times,' *Signs O' the Times* (Warner Bros., 1987).
- 28 Sontag, 'AIDS and Its Metaphors,' 114. And she adds, 'I am thinking, of course, of the United States, where people are currently being told that heterosexual transmission is extremely rare, and unlikely – as if Africa did not exist.'
- 29 The Pet Shop Boys, 'It Couldn't Happen Here,' *Actually* (Parlophone Records, 1987).
- 30 Bruce Springsteen, 'Streets of Philadelphia,' *Philadelphia Soundtrack* (Sony, 1993).
- 31 Burroughs, *Electronic Revolution*.
- 32 It seems quite ironic again that the controversy about the HIV 'hypothesis' should have exploded right at the time the hypervirus pandemic passed its final inflexion point, around 1993. In 1993, Kary Mullis, in an interview for the *Sunday Times*, said: 'If there is evidence that HIV causes AIDS, there should be scientific documents which either singly or collectively demonstrate that fact, at least with a high probability. There is no such document' (28 Nov. 1993). A year later, again in the *Sunday Times*, Dr Bernard Forscher, former editor of the U.S. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, was quoted as saying: 'The HIV hypothesis ranks with the "bad air" theory for malaria and the 'bacterial infection' theory of beriberi and pellagra [caused by nutritional deficiencies]. It is a hoax that became a scam' (3 April 1994). Available at <http://www.virusmyth.net/aids/controversy.htm>. Accessed 24 Oct. 2007.
- 33 Steven Shaviro, 'Two Lessons from Burroughs,' in *Posthuman Bodies*, ed. Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1995), 38.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 47.
- 35 Steven Shaviro, 'William Burroughs,' *Doom Patrol*, chapter 10, available at <http://www.dhalgren.com/Doom/ch10.html>. Accessed 24 Oct. 2007.
- 36 Louis Pawels, 'Le monôme des zombis,' *Figaro Magazine*, 6 Dec. 1986, p. 103.
- 37 Although Derrida consciously avoided the AIDS metaphor, critics were prompt to make the connection: 'Derrida's most striking claim is that 9-11 is the result of an autoimmune disorder ... 9-11 was a double suicide of both attackers and their victims. We are suffering from a metaphysical AIDS.' Gergory Fried, 'The Uses of Philosophy,' *Village Voice*, quoted in Gary Sauer-Thompson, 'Derrida: Democracy after 9/11,' *Philosophy.com*, 23 Feb. 2005, available at <http://www.sauer-thompson.com/archives/philosophy/002925.html>. Accessed 24 Oct. 2007.
- 38 'Autoimmune conditions consist in the spontaneous suicide of the very defensive mechanism supposed to protect the organism from external aggression.' Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003), 150.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 154.
- 40 *Ibid.*, 187–8. Derrida refers here to his 'Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of "Religion" at the Limits of Reason Alone,' published in *Religion*, ed. Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1998).
- 41 Sontag, 'AIDS and Its Metaphors,' 105–8, first emphasis in the original, second and third mine.
- 42 Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*, 95.
- 43 *Ibid.*
- 44 Jean Baudrillard, 'L'esprit du terrorisme,' *Le Monde*, 2 Nov. 2001, revised translation based on Rachel Bloul's translation, available on the webpage of the European Graduate School, available at <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/ baudrillard/ baudrillard-the-spirit-of-terrorism.html>. Accessed 25 March 2005.
- 45 *Ibid.*
- 46 William Burroughs, 'The Priest They Called Him,' *Exterminator!* (Tim Kerr Records, 1960), spoken word released on CD in 1993 with Kurt Cobain and Nirvana.
- 47 Cf. Scott Bukatman, *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Post-Modern Science Fiction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 74–8, for an analysis of this figure.