The Principle of Virulence

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Abstract: In this paper, I develop a theoretical outline for thinking about virulence as a guiding principle in the (re)production of information and social meaning. I argue that social meanings, in particular, are contingently shaped and reshaped by networking processes that semi-automate the everyday social practices of subjects using 'real-time' communicative technologies. These informational-production processes are intertwined with, or perhaps consequential of, the reproduction of a vast and complex global cybernetic order, which operationalizes subjectivity and reduces the subject to a functional, relational point in its circuitry. I argue that the variant processes of information proliferation involved in viral media phenomena (e.g., the meme, the viral video, the Tweet, the status update, etc.) generally echo/reflect/reify processes of globalization that violently eradicate, or in some cases, covertly integrate and absorb, alternative forms of cultural/social/political 'singularity' or exceptionality, which would otherwise hold potential value for opposing the global technological order. But a *viral order* (and its principle of virulence) is here opposed to the traditional image of a top-down, repressive, or ideological fascist order of the state; rather, it exerts control not by its own extension and strict enforcement, but by way of its own de-centering. What emerges in digital globalization is a new "techno-structure" that expands not by enforcing its own prescribed order, but by allowing all singularity to "freely and savagely expand" (Baudrillard, "The Violence of the Global"). Virulence is not something easily localizable or identifiable; it is to a large extent, I argue, the logical outcome of a history of representation. Because "viral media" have surfaced to form a primary technological modality of the contemporary production, consumption, and dissemination of information, I argue, we are presented with a unique opportunity to question it as a more perennial concept.

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[1] This paper is a first draft of an incomplete first chapter in my Ph.D. dissertation—"A Virology of Media: The Politics and Culture of Digital Reproduction."

The Principle of Virulence

"The franchise and the virus work on the same principle: what thrives in one place will thrive in another. You just have to find a sufficiently virulent business plan, condense it into a three-ring binder — its DNA — xerox it, and embed it in the fertile lining of a well-traveled highway, preferably one with a left-turn lane. Then the growth will expand until it runs up against its property lines."

-Neal Stephenson, *Snow Crash*

I. Introduction: An Inquiry into Viral Media

In May of the year 2000, when the dust of the Y2K panic had barely settled, a viral event of unprecedented magnitude—perhaps the first event of its kind—penetrated economic, social, political, and cultural reality on a global scale. Within a window of only a few hours, the "ILOVEYOU" computer worm—a wolf in sheep's clothing—had spread digital destruction across three continents, eventually managing to infect tens of millions of devices, or what has been estimated as 10% of all computers connected to the Internet at the time.[2] Several major corporations and governmental bureaucracies—some of the loci of global power—halted the functioning of communication systems in order to protect from themselves from the contagion. The event introduced, or rather, inflicted a new kind of violence onto the global scene: not the kind of violence characterized by bodily harm or death (because no one died as result), nor even the violence of monetary damage (although it was quite destructive in that sense), but rather, a kind of symbolic violence that, in this particular case, brings attention to the precariousness and penetrability of global

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[2] Margaret Kane, "'ILOVEYOU' E-mail Worm Invades PCs," (*ZDNet News,* May 4, 2000), http://web.archive.org/web/20081227123742/http://news.zdnet.com/2100-9595_22-107318.html?legacy=zdnn.

connectivity, and also, perhaps most importantly, the global economic, social, and political configurations for which this connectivity is most significant.

Yet somehow, against the thought of viruses as malicious virtual entities, today the predominant modality of our media is viral. At what point did the concern for viruses propagating through networks give way to networks and their media self-propagating as though they were themselves viral? Colloquially, we refer to this as 'viral media'—a term which has become practically everyday. 'Viral media' articulates a particular modality of the social reproduction and proliferation of information; it expresses the capacity for various kinds of informational media to be spread like contagion. As a phenomenon, or perhaps a series of phenomena (e.g., viral videos, viral marketing, memes, etc.), its very emergence and possibility is, at least to a degree, dependent on the contemporary material configuration of global communication technologies: Masses of digital networks (and the everyday practices occurring within and between them) that form an impenetrably dense and virtually inexhaustible circuitry of contingent informational input-output relations, which concomitantly serve to reify economic, cultural, and political interdependence on a global scale. In this sense, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri are probably correct in considering the epoch of globalization to be an epoch of contagion.[3]

Perhaps this a result of close social (albeit virtual) proximity—information self-replicates and spreads exponentially on the basis of a radically pervasive global connectivity. When a piece of information or a particular virtual media object such as a video or image "goes viral," it reproduces itself through mere contact, like a contagion. Without this over-proximity—which might also be referred to as hyper-connectivity—and also without the networks that cultivate it, the virus cannot proliferate. Just as proximity-

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[3] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 134-6.

contact along the Silk Road lent itself to the emergence of The Black Death, proximity-contact online lends itself to viral phenomena. On the one hand, it seems absurd to compare the devastation of a plague to any variety of banal memes circulating social networks such as Reddit or 4Chan, for example. But on the other hand, this absurdity is telling—somehow our descriptive language for virtual media came to adopt the language of the virus. Is this yet another cultural effect/vulnerability of what Jan van Dijk has referred to as "too much connectivity" in network society?[4] Can any historical, cultural, or philosophical sense be made of this shift into a viral media epoch? Or was there ever a shift at all? Have we always been viral creatures? Or, put differently, can virulence be considered a perennial concern?

In Neal Stephenson's novel, *Snow Crash,* the virus is explored not so much as a singular or immanent object, nor as a phenomenon, but rather, the virus is thought of as a kind of perennial figure that is deeply and mysteriously rooted in the historico-theoretical domains of language, theology, mythology, and technology.[5] As a deeply rooted figure, Stephenson writes about a virulence which is understood not purely as a biological referent, nor purely as a technological referent (in terms of the computer virus), nor as a metaphor or analogy: Instead, it seems these two dimensions of virulence—the biological and the virtual—are separate expressions of the same underlying figure. In fact, the terror of the novel comes at a point of total boundary dissolution between the physical/biological virus and the virtual/informational computer virus: a futuristic digital drug is proliferating throughout the virtual "metaverse" (a kind of virtual reality network interface) with devastating effects; mere visual exposure to its code not only crashes the computer

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[4] Jan *Van Dijk, The Network Society. 3rd ed.* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2012) 187.

[5] Neal Stephenson, *Snow Crash* (New York: Bantam Books, 1993).

terminal, but also penetrates one's own physical cognition, and in some cases, thoroughly destroys the psyche. The novel explores several dimensions of the figure of the virus without epistemologically privileging one usage over another: Everything from the spread of a computer virus to Herpes Simplex to ideology and religion are considered viral—without simile and metaphor. But even if we take this exploration seriously, and accept virulence as a force which underlies several domains without reference to any one domain in particular, what, if anything, can explain its surfacing in everyday language (and practice)? To what exactly do we owe the emergence of viral media?

In the anarcho-capitalist dystopia of *Snow Crash*, we are given a world in which all things have been leveled against one another, each entity—and particularly, each business, franchise, institution—is equally reducible to the other, and most importantly, to information. Moreover, without central power (and more specifically, without repressive power) things, in the most general sense of the word, are allowed to expand without much resistance. Central power gives way to bureaucratic intensification and the virulent enforcement of a power with a legitimacy that has long disappeared. Everything is open to virulent proliferation; because everything is reduced to information, everything has the potential, if coded correctly, to behave as a self-replicating virus. Despite its post-state imaginary, this world is not altogether unlike our present social reality: a global(izing) information society constituted of networks and informational traffic flows through those networks. Virulence as a primary modality of culture and production is at least in part indebted to the informationalization of all things—a great "leveling" of all things into indifferent exchange, as I will argue in the following section. Moreover, the history of this leveling is a history of representation: of language's representational function and the West's epistemological legacy of representational knowledge.

Out of this legacy, information conventionally tends to be treated as an *a priori* or preexisting fact, i.e., we tend to think that there has always been this stuff called information rather than consider information as an emergent and historically determined category. Here, even time and space have been reduced to information—virtualized. It seems that in the so-called digital age, which is in part the technological dimension of globalization, time and space no longer mediate social possibility to the extent they used to: The interstitial space between subjects—the bare separation and individuation of bodies (which is perhaps the ontological guarantee of at least some degree of social alienation)— has itself been compressed into information, virtualized, and thus can no longer serve as a boundary for general exchange (of commodities, ideas, culture, language) in the way it used to. Tantamount to this compression of space into information is how temporal facticity— namely, time as a barrier or constraint on general exchange—has been overwhelmed by digital "real-time."[6] The instantaneity of information lends itself to radical proliferation. Whereas cultural exchanges once developed over the span of many lifetimes due to various geographical challenges, today they are almost instant. This much is clear: Without the virtualization of time-space—perhaps as a corollary mechanism of globalization or a particular technology of capital—there could be no viral media. Moreover, without a leveling of everything into information, there could be no virtualization of time and space.

However, this is not to say I wish to reduce the contemporary technological ethos— insofar as we can call virality an ethos—to a mere effect of economic and cultural globalization. On the contrary, I argue that viral media have a deep rootedness in the history of Western representation. Far from a fad, ephemeral event, or contingent emergent

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[6] Paul Virilio has theorized a "tyranny of real-time," but the framing of tyranny is a normative maneuver this paper resists making. See Paul Virilio, *A Landscape of Events* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2000), 65.

phenomenon, I argue that the emergence of viral media is the logical outcome of representational epistemology writ large. The undercurrent of viral media then, we might say, is one of a perennial movement or force of virulence: Understood here to be both a guiding principle in the accumulative processes of digital reproduction, and also a conceptual framework for understanding the productive processes of digital media. Moreover, I do not wish to examine viral media through a sort of technological determinism. It is not merely the introduction of computing technologies that level all human reality into information. Rather, I agree with Gilles Deleuze when he argues "Types of machines are easily matched with each type of society—not that machines are determining, but because they express those social forms capable of generating them and using them."[7] This paper's concern is the social form not of disciplinary societies (Foucault), nor of control societies (Deleuze); my concern is with virulent society, its technological apparatuses, practices, and the underlying logics that make them possible.

In the following section, I begin a theoretical overview for describing the historical emergence of information out of the Western legacy of representation. Most importantly, I explore and speculate on the roots of the proliferation of informational media as being part of a global leveling of all values—the equi-exchangeability of everything from commodities to ideas. In the third section, I continue an analysis of representation by briefly examining the epistemological and linguistic roots from which I suggest viral media and the social form of virulence are logical extensions. Imbedded in the logic of representation, I argue, is a principle of virulence and a way of understanding the production, reproduction, and global circulation of information. I argue that virulence can be understood as principled tendency for any representational technology—whether it be the phonetic alphabet, the

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[7] Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control" in *October* 59 (January 1, 1992), 6.

typewriter, or the online social network—to provoke and operationalize authorial or subjective practices. This operationalization is, I suggest, more or less self-replicating and self-referential in nature; in other words, it is a global process—or series of local networking processes—always pointed towards instrumental efficiency, towards perfect systemic functionality on a global scale.

II. From Representation to Information

Re-presentation always assumes the existence of some original 'presentation'. When taken as 'representational truth', it assumes the role of reconstituting a truth that is or has actually occurred 'out there' in the objective world. In other words, representational epistemology seems to suggest a view of truth whereby truth is evaluated on the basis of measuring the accuracy of cognition—how closely the mental representation matches (objective) reality.

In his interpretation of "The Allegory of the Cave," Martin Heidegger condemns Plato for germinating in the "history of Western humanity" a particularly representational epistemological and ontological legacy.[8] The Greek *aletheia* (truth), he claims, originally referred to a kind of non-representational truth.[9] He thinks that truth for the Greeks was originally "what was wrested from a concealment. Truth, then, is just such a perpetual wresting-away in this manner of uncovering."[10] In other words, to risk oversimplification, Heidegger seems to think the original *aletheia* involves a kind of perpetual, inexhaustive,

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[8] Martin Heidegger, "Plato's Doctrine of Truth" in *Pathmarks.* Ed. William McNeall. Trans. Thomas Sheehan (Cambridge, UK, and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 21.

[9] Ibid., 2

[10] Ibid., 13

uncovering of being. Plato's theory of the forms, however, covers up this original meaning of truth. Heidegger examines the cave of the *Republic* as a kind of locus for this abstraction of human knowing, as well as the shrouding of the ontological origin of truth. The representational version of *aletheia* put into motion by Plato was, for Heidegger, catastrophic. Hereafter, truth is reduced to an impossible expectation—a subjective measurement of reality in the mental representation.

Heidegger's idea of original truth is profoundly ontological; it has much more to do with being than with mental representations of objective reality, and knowing has less to do with certainty than with a continuous process of revealing the "unhiddenness" of being—a process of knowing which is never comprehensive or complete.[11] Truth for Heidegger is *originally* something uncovered but not known in our contemporary conventional sense. Just as one can know how to play chess without actively recalling, computing, and consciously applying the formal rules of the game with each move, one can "know" truth without representing it.[12] Truth is something intuited, not consumable, and not particularly finite. To the extent that today we conventionally perceive the most obvious technological extension of human knowing as being computation, and likewise the most obvious extension of knowledge as being information, then we are perhaps living Heidegger's nightmare—the extinguishing of *aletheia* through the means of representational technologies.[13]

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[11] Ibid.*,* 13

[12] The chess analogy is borrowed from a similar analogy in Hubert L. Dreyfus*, What Computers Still Can't Do: A Critique of Artificial Reason* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1992).

[13] See also "The Question Concerning Technology" in Martin Heidegger*, The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays* (Harper Torchbooks, 1977).

Years after his critique of Plato's cave was written, one of Heidegger's former students, Paul Friedländer, challenged this conception of truth on the basis of Heidegger's etymological liberties. He argued that there is no real basis in Greek literature for this understanding of *aletheia* as being primary or original. There is no linguistic basis for thinking representational truth displaced a more authentic form of the true. Friedländer points out the fact that Heidegger only uses Hesiod's *Theogony* to justify his understanding of originary truth; and even in *Theogony*, both meanings of *aletheia*—representational and non-representational—are textually present.[14] Heidegger himself even retracted his understanding of *aletheia* years later.[15]

Heidegger's mistake, then, was to pose an alternate meaning to a sign—*aletheia*—as originary, rather than simply alternative. It was perhaps part of an effort to bypass the accumulative technological effects of representation—the tendency for words to swarm the objects or events they represent with a radical plurality of meanings. Perhaps in that sense, his longing to get at the core of *aletheia* was a philosophical mobilization against the forces of nihilism, or at least, against the terms of epistemological relativity which the problem of nihilism seems to entail. Heidegger's real mistake was to assume an origin could be found at all—which is ironic because, as I will argue, this desperate search for originality is a crucial process in the development of representational language: The representational sign or image always seems to want to secure a root or truth (an original presentation). But in doing so, it virally swarms the origin, rendering any possibility of accessing it (and for that matter, knowing it) wholly impossible. Oddly enough, Heidegger's effort to get at the

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[14] Paul Friedländer, *Plato. An Introduction*, trans. H. Meyerhoff (New York: Harper 1964).

[15] Vladislav Suvák, "The Essence of Truth (Aletheia) and the Western Tradition in the Thought of Heidegger and Patocka" in *Thinking Fundamentals*, IWM Junior Visiting Fellows Conferences (Vol. 9: Vienna, 2000), 11-2

linguistic root of truth was itself part of the very logic of representation; moreover, the

epistemological legacy of Plato's forms that he, like Nietzsche, wanted to invert, were in

turn only reproduced.

This irony is part of something which, perhaps akin to capital, is the most essential

character of a principle of virulence—the absorption of all negativity, all challenge, all

inversion. It is that principled tendency which will allow universal transparency only

insofar as it can also ensure universal blindness. Moreover, virulent society is the

mediatized society wherein the demands for "freedom of information" have been met with a

non-subjective, yet somehow strategic information overload. For if one takes a critical look

at the history of representation, it is as if the pressure of old dictum 'the truth shall set you

free'—the liberatory imagination of what is outside of Plato's cave—has broken a levy

through which formless content floods our virtual lives: Informational *aporia* due not to

lack, but to plethora and viral profusion. If this is indeed the case, we should consider with

caution the benevolence of an ethos of transparency across global online communities—

from the blogosphere to the political activities of Anonymous to the emergence of Wikileaks.

Could it be that this ethos of resistance to global power is, not unlike like Heidegger's

challenge to Western humanity's regime of representation, a mechanism whereby the terms

of global power are continuously (and unconsciously) reified, reanchored, reconstituted,

and/or reproduced? Maybe so, but perhaps this question presents us with a tension worth

preserving and should go unanswered for the time being: One ought to remain *aporetic*

about a system that ceaselessly demands certainty—a system that demands reality be

represented—if one is to resist its domination. However, we should also be careful: this does

not entail a relapse into the fashions of surrealism; it simply requires a commitment to

radical critique, or perhaps a commitment to what Marx called a "ruthless criticism of everything existing."[16]

For Frankfurt school critical theory, the commitment to critique has historically come with a commitment to the analytics of domination. Perhaps this is most pressing precisely at the point where domination shrouds itself, or when it has become almost automated. The so-called end of history, 'no way out' reach of global financial capitalism is first and foremost (for my purposes) a technologically mediated situation of social control; and perhaps most importantly, it is a one by which domination takes place without a dominator: the shape of power during a period in which the sovereign has long disappeared. But this situation of the lost sovereign-subject—or, more generally, the legitimacy crisis of power that peaked in philosophical and political thought in the 19th and 20th century, from Nietzsche to Schmitt—is itself rooted in representation. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno intimated this with profound insight as early as 1944, when they theorized our domination by "the principle of equivalence,"[17] whereby "Representation gives way to universal fungibility."[18] This, I take it, is one of facet of a pre-digital logic which presupposes the global proliferation of communicative information technologies: One which has reduced all things, all values, all ideologies, and all oppositions to equivalent terms and thus exchangeable variables. In other words, the emergent form of capitalism in the middle 20th century is one which no longer circulated only commodities, but also signs and images.

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[16] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "For a Ruthless Criticism of Everything Existing" in *The Marx-Engels Reader,* ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2d ed (New York: Norton, 1978), 13.

[17] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 12.

[18] Ibid., 7

This logical outcome of representation to result in universal fungibility is, I think, a large factor of what would provoke Jean Baudrillard to develop a "political economy of the sign" a few decades later.[19]

III. The Virulent Logic of Representation

The sign—or perhaps more broadly, the general operation of representational language—is subjected to alteration by historical change; likewise, history is subject to language. Through the unfolding of history, words themselves become compounded into denser and denser manifolds of meanings, whose breadths and depths no longer require a referent, a real, an origin, an aura, or an authentic meaning in order to function and proliferate—language is, in this way, the product of contingent historic composition (and sometimes also, destruction). Representational language is virulent from its first utterance.

In "The Precession of Simulacra," Baudrillard outlines quite neatly the transitional logic between representation and what he calls "simulation" by describing the four "successive phases of the image."[20] For all intents and purposes of explicating this transitional logic, we can understand 'image' to be more or less synonymous with 'sign'—it merely designates the operative term of representation. In the first stage, the image or sign is thought to reflect a "basic reality." That is to say, when one represents one does so accurately—the sign or image *re*-presents the originary objective presentation. The subject encounters an objective world and, in seeking to know it, utilizes language or images in order to communicate that knowledge. In the second stage, the image or sign "masks or

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[19] See Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign,* 1st Ed (*Telos Press Publishing, 1981*).

[20] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Phil Beitchman, Paul Foss, and Paul Patton (Semiotext(e), 1983), 11.

perverts a basic reality."[21] This stage accounts for the initial possibility of mis-re-

presentation. The significance here is that a faith in the representable remains—if

anything, a claim to re-presentation functions primarily as an affirmation of the presented

real and its quality of being representable. However, it seems that for Baudrillard this

phase in the development of representational knowledge contains within it at least a germ,

if not a predestination for its own dissolution. In the third phase, "it [the image or sign]

masks the *absence* of a basic reality."[22] In other words, representation continues to function,

but takes on a non-representational form.

　　Before explicating the fourth phase, it is worth pausing and reflecting on the

significance of this non-representational function of representation in order to render a

better understanding of what Baudrillard means by the 'hyperreal'. This non-

representational function in the third phase might be understood in terms of the somewhat

contradictory dimensions of its *excesses* and *absences*. It entails a kind of profound

absence—a void—in the sense that there is no longer a real being represented by

representation. One might also categorize this in terms of a kind of nihilistic modality of

representation, but to do so would be misleading: For Baudrillard, I think, it is not simply

that the real has never existed and representation is a ruse, but that the *determinable real*

has been propagated and proliferated in the development of Western (scientific and

philosophical) thought, and its logic has, in effect, self-annihilated. It is not necessarily a

matter of an *a priori* void, but rather, the crater left behind by the collective efforts to

represent reality—the content once thought to occupy a void. Moreover, this logic of

representation (which for Baudrillard is soon to become a logic of simulation) comes with its

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[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid.

own *excesses*. In other words, out of this void which representation has had a hand in creating, representation assumes also a *productive* function. There occurs "[…] a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality; of second-hand truth, objectivity and authenticity. […] there is a panic-stricken production of the real and the referential, above and parallel to the panic of material production […]"[23] Representation continues to function not on the basis of what it finds to be representable, but rather on the basis that no reality is reducible to representation.

When representation is faced with a void, or a profound situation of indeterminable reality—which is not an empirical void but rather a logical void left by the Western epistemological conditions for representing the content of reality—it enters into a panicked production to fill that void. This is the origin—insofar as it is appropriate to talk about origins—of virulence. This process culminates in an exponential production and viral reproduction of the variant and contradictory real—hyperreality. In this sense, in the third phase, representation might be deemed *ideological*—it functions as its own opposite. In trying to make objective reality *real* or intelligible/determinable to the subject, representation functions to annihilate that reality. What is left behind is not the apocalyptical void of the nihilistic imagination, but the cumulative result of "hyperreality"—a situation in which things appear more real than real. And accompanying, or perhaps at its root, is a deep thirst or desire for reality and authenticity; hyperreality is what happens when there is none to be found, and all attempts to get at the real of things only serve to accumulate and self-propagate. This is ultimately, I think, the heterogeneous hyperreality that has displaced capital-R Reality in the fourth phase, or the "fourth order" Baudrillard refers to, wherein the sign or image "bears no relation to any reality whatever:

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[23] Ibid*.,* 12-3.

it is its own pure simulacrum."[24] The pure simulacrum is, at least according to my reading

of Baudrillard, an early (and prolific) way of theorizing the viral (dis)order of words and

images across global informational flows. To speak of the pure simulacrum is a complex

oxymoron that reflects our contemporary global technological condition; it suggests the

simulacrum—traditionally, the synthetic copy of something real—can exist independently.

The pure simulacrum is a way of theorizing representation without objects and subjects—

what we might update today by calling them self-propagating mechanisms of informational

network society.

The recognition and explication of these processes are not completely unique to

Baudrillard's theory of simulations, however. In Foucault, for example, the sign also seems

to have taken on a function other than or more than that of representation, i.e.,

representation no longer represents, strictly speaking. For the former, the sign shifts from a

representational value to a constitutive value: an *operative lightness* to an *operational*

density. And because the sign deceives, because it takes on an ideological veil of the

function of representation, its status shifts from neutral to malevolent:

> […] its own density comes as though to open itself up, and all the negative concepts that had
> until then remained foreign to the theory of the sign can hurl themselves into the opening.
> […] Now a whole play of negative concepts, of contradictions, of oppositions, in short, the
> whole play of reactive forces that Deleuze has analyzed so well in his book on Nietzsche will
> be able to organize itself in the interior of the sign.
> "To stand the dialectic back on its feet": if this expression must have a meaning, would it not
> be precisely to have put back into the density of the sign, into this open space, without end,
> gaping, into this space without real content or reconciliation, all this play of negativity that
> the dialectic, at last, had unleashed by giving it a positive meaning?[25]

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[24] Ibid., 11.

[25] Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Freud, Marx" in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, Ed. James D Faubion (New

York: New Press, 1998), 277.

At least here, the sign is evidently for Foucault something that is no longer empty or outside of the real it represents, but rather the very density of that reality. The great authors of the 19th and 20th centuries cease to be prophetic or even all that prolific in outlining the contours of social, psychological, and political reality, but rather, they become subjective-nodes, mere micro-functors within a viral reproduction of signs. "Thus money functions in the way that one sees it defined in the […] first volume of Capital. Thus symptoms function in Freud."[26] In other words, Marx and Freud did little to diagnose a reality and much to engender it, or at least, put it in motion. It is not Foucault's terminology, but could we refer to this process—or rather, the series of contingent processes of history, which involve signs accumulating into systems of knowledge, and manifesting a real through self-propagation—as a kind of virulence? These processes precede the so-called digital age, but nevertheless, and particularly the case with Marx, it is possible to see how their viral proliferation makes up the historical fabric of the Internet as we know it. This, however, is a complex and speculative history which would probably require its own project.

But there is something about the idea of virulence that fundamentally separates Foucault and Baudrillard's reflections on language: Why does the former have to see density/malice in the sign? Against Foucault, the typical Baudrillardian line might be to argue that the sign is only malicious insofar as the interpreter interprets signs expecting them to correspond to something—to some reality or substantial truth. Does Foucault's very recognition of the density and malice of the sign not seem to evaporate its density and malice? This is to ask, does the recognition that representation no longer re-presents not relieve the burden of its gravity? If Foucault is unable to think so, this is because he is unwilling to enter the domain of "pure simulacrum" in the fourth order of simulation. Most

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[26] Ibid.

importantly, he is not willing to theorize virulent processes—and most importantly, a principle beneath those processes—of truth production. Instead of theorizing a principle of knowledge production, he localizes knowledge and gives various sophisticated empirical accounts of the discursive processes whereby knowledge is produced and disseminated; at times throughout his general corpus, he examines the discursive language situations and concomitant or symbiotic power configurations whereby one thing can count as legitimate truth and another cannot. Whereas Foucault emphasizes the local-particular, Baudrillard, for better or worse, thinks much more generally and globally: He writes, "The transition from signs which dissimulate something"—the first and second orders whereby the sign functions in attempt to dissimulate reality—"to signs which dissimulate that there is nothing"—the third order whereby the sign functions to mask the absence of the reality *by way of* assuming the appearance of representing it—"marks the decisive turning point."[27] This is a turning point to something new that Foucault is unable to identify, perhaps due to the demands of his hyper-empiricism.

This turning point Baudrillard refers to is not inauguration of the density of the sign, however, but its opposite in simulation. Signs, when arranged in variable narrative configuration with other signs, with other variables of representational language or modalities of expression, are always already inaugurating a successive phase of simulation, whereby the sign contributes to a weightless reality. "All of Western faith and good faith," Baudrillard entices, "was engaged in this wager on representation: that a sign could refer to the depth of meaning that something could guarantee this exchange—God, of course. But what if God himself can be simulated, that is to say, reduced to the signs which attest his existence? Then the whole system becomes weightless, […] a gigantic simulacrum […]

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[27] Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 12.

exchanging in itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference."[28]

Theorizing this global weightless system, which is also a deeply violent system whereby all

exceptionality and struggle is co-opted or integrated by a fragmentary self-referential

whole,[29] is part of a greater effort to acknowledge the logic and subsequent effects of

representation—if there remains a liberatory impetus in Baudrillard's work, it is to located

here: In a refusal to make the "wager on representation," yet also, as an invitation to think

about immanence in a "global techno-structure" where there is nothing outside, before, or

underneath the order and disorder of representation. On the other hand, despite his best

efforts, Foucault is perhaps still engaged in the wager on representation. He, like

Baudrillard, recognizes the sign in its own ability to configure and re-congfigure without

the use of a meaningful agent; but unlike Baudrillard, I am not sure he considers the ways

in which meaning (re)produces itself and proliferates. To reiterate the fundamental

difference here, Foucault seems to think these virulent abilities of the sign are due to the

function of its lie—representation claims to represent, but is only malicious because it no

longer (if it ever actually) represents. Baudrillard, on the other hand, seems to see virulence

as a fundamental principle in the production of both the material and "the real and

referential."

    Likewise, in Jean François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* there is recognition

of the significance of the "narrative function"[30] after or within "the context of the crisis of

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[28] Ibid., 10-11.

[29] On this question of violence, see also Jean Baudrillard, "The Violence of the Global" Trans. François Debrix
(*CTheory*, May 20, 2003), http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=385.

[30] Jean François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition a Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of
Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv.

narratives."[31] As he describes it, the crisis of narratives is more or less the crisis of representation. Narratives are released from the realities they narrate; they no longer serve a representational function. Like the representational sign, or perhaps even *as* the functional configurations of signs, the narrative continues to virulently proliferate, but loses "its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal."[32] The narrative becomes function without a functor. This fits the bill for Baudrillard's hyperreality, but unlike Baudrillard, what follows for Lyotard is not the analytics of *something new* (Simulation? Hyperreality? The digital?), but an analysis of the rules of legitimation in a self-contained whole of scientific knowledge (i.e., language games and the status of knowledge in postmodernity). Similar to Baudrillard's aforementioned problem of the simulation of God, for Lyotard, Western science has created simultaneously 1) the demand for legitimation (or in drawing parallel to Baudrillard, a demand for good scientific representation the real); and 2) a radical plurality of those legitimation processes—an exponential reproduction of internal legitimation functions in lack of an 'objective' external agent of legitimation. Lyotard thus submits to "the incommensurable" of this productive heterogeneity of the true-real, by 1) welcoming it as part of the postmodern attitude, and 2) developing the "incredulity toward metanarratives."[33]

It might be interesting to note that the metanarrative—specifically, *the referential guidance of principles to elaborate certain theoretical truths*—meets the end of its assumed legitimacy for both Foucault and Lyotard. This is not unique to Foucault, Lyotard, or postmodernism, however; most recent theoretical endeavors in psychoanalysis, for

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[31] Ibid.*,* xxiii.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid.*,* xxiv-xxv.

example—broadly speaking, from Herbert Marcuse to Slavoj Žižek—have had to comment on, if not reconcile, psychoanalytic roots in the identifications, developments of, and displacements between principle drives Sigmund Freud and others used to explain psychological-political-cultural reality. In discussing Freud's development in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, for example, Jacques Derrida poses precisely this question about the role of principles to a hypothetical, posthumous Foucault. He writes that Foucault's answer to the question of what significance the reality/pleasure/power/knowledge principles have for an analytics of disciplinary power "Would perhaps be something like this: what one must stop believing in is principality or principleness, in the problematic of the principle, in the principled unity of pleasure and power, or of some drive that is thought to be more originary than the other."[34] Perhaps Derrida is right, and this is Foucault's challenge to so many intellectual traditions (and a good one at that). But to pose a principle for theoretical explication, or even to claim this principle is active, is not to pose it as more originary. Moreover, to pose the principle of virulence as I have done here is not to claim any substantive form or static ontology: Virulence is, like any other sign, a historical compound. It does not pre-exist digital viral media, nor is it a complete imaginary. Its conception, like all conceptions, is historically conditional. To theorize the principle of virulence in this way fits the demands of Foucault, at least in the sense that it avoids claims to originary drive or impetus—virulence is drive as much as it is an effect. It is not a substance, but it is also not altogether an absence. Moreover, as I have described alongside Baudrillard's transitional logic from representation to simulation, the linguistic and epistemological mechanisms of viral production involve an operational contradiction between void and plethora. And with

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[34] Jacques Derrida, Pascale-Anne Brault, and Michael Naas, *The Work of Mourning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 89.

that in mind, as I will develop in the following chapter on methodology, an analytics of

virulence requires a methodology independent from archaeology and genealogy: virology.

If Lyotard, Foucault, and others stagnate in the refusal of the theoretical principle—

moreover, the illegitimacy of the metanarrative—then Baudrillard refuses stagnation in the

virulent infinitude of the resulting processes of simulation. The death of the metanarrative

is also its proliferation, which is something these aforementioned thinkers seem to leave

underexplored. To be sure, in simulation, no principle dies without also achieving a kind of

invincibility. The real is annihilated by the virulent reproduction of its sign *ad infinitum*.

My question is this: Can there be a principality derived from the processes which annihilate

the very possibility of principality? Baudrillard seems to think so, particularly when he

writes "The principle of simulation wins out over the reality principle just as over the

principle of pleasure." [35] My answer is also yes, but perhaps not as we may think, and not

along the exact contours of Baudrillard's theory of simulations. That is, in order to conceive

of principality after its possibility, one must conceive of a kind of unprincipled principle—a

principle for understanding our global virulence. In other words, if one is to take serious the

principle of virulence, one must recognize, at some level and by some measure, its

impossibility. That impossibility is, in a peculiar way, its very functionality. This is the

principle tendency of things to proliferate (in sign, image, and information) and destroy

their origins, uproot their histories, annihilate the hope of accessing their very cores.

However, we must understand that in doing so, there is all the more reason to want to get

at the core of things, to have access to the aura, to the authentic: a great functional

nostalgia—a demand for the real—accumulates and compounds over time. This is perhaps

the most basic curiosity of Baudrillard's later work: He asks, "What vertigo pushes the

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[35] Baudrillard, *Simulations,* 152.

world to erase the Idea? And what is that other vertigo that, at the same time, seems to force people to unconditionally want to realize the Idea?"[36] That vertigo is, in short, the principle of virulence, of which viral media is most likely only one expression, but a significant one insofar as it constitutes a surfacing of its principle, or perhaps more significantly, an opportunity to acknowledge and develop virality beyond its microbiological referent and technological metaphor.[37]

We ought to ask, I think, what are the historical or teleological stakes of virulent production? To what end or ends is this crazed productivist accumulation pointed? Most cynically, to ecological disaster? Total annihilation? Or perhaps to no particular end at all: To a broader and deeper technological systematization of what Horkheimer referred to as the "proliferation of means," the inertia of instrumental reason realized so globally and expansively that all human life becomes an algorithmic exercise in reproducing the present, the status quo, no matter what power configurations that status quo reflects, and no matter what global injustices and inequities it encourages.[38] Perhaps virulent reproduction edges the globalized world closer and closer to a state in which, as Adorno articulates it, "Nothing remains of ideology but the recognition of that which is—model of behavior which submits to the overwhelming power of the established state of affairs."[39]

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[36] Baudrillard, "The Violence of the Global."

[37] This effort has been most notably made in Tony D. Sampson, *Virality: Contagion Theory in the Age of Networks* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

[38] Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947).

[39] Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), 119–120. Marcuse is quoting Theodor W. Adorno, "Ideologie" in *Ideologie Ed. Kurt Lenk* (Neuwied, Luchterhand, 1961), 262.

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