Virus, Viral

Zach Blas

In a recent article titled "After Life: *De Anima* and Unhuman Politics," Eugene Thacker writes, "If our global context of climate change, disasters, pandemics, or complex networks tells us anything, it is that political thought today demands a concept of life adequate to its anonymous, unhuman dimensions, an unhuman politics, for unhuman life" (2009, 40). Thacker's use of the unhuman, rather than the inhuman or nonhuman, alludes to the strange worlds and weird lives that reveal themselves by turning toward the emergent, unexpected, and challenging interactions, engagements, and limits between the human and nonhuman.

Thacker's call for an unhuman politics arises in a swarm of viral hype. Everything has seemingly gone viral: Alongside repeated panics of virus outbreaks, there are also fears of vaccine shortages—but there are plenty of Anti-Viral Kleenex; the rise of PC computer viruses are fought with antivirus security software; and just as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have described the new world order's institutional structure as being "like a software program that carries a virus along with it, so that it is continually modulating and corrupting the institutional forms around it," there is now viral marketing, viral advertising, and viral media to aid, support, and propagate this structure (Hardt and Negri 2000, 197–98). Concurrently, the emergence of theories like viral ecology, viral philosophy, viral capitalism, viral politics, viral affect, and viral aesthetics to diagnose our culture today suggests that the virus|viral looms as an exemplar for considering Thacker's unhuman politics, as the nonhuman virus comes to bear multifariously upon the human, in part, through the human nam-

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ing or classification of what is permitted to be considered viral. What a virus is and does cannot only be extracted into the qualifier viral just as the qualities of the viral cannot be reduced to the virus. To think the virus and the viral is to engage in their continuous states of flux, transformation, and movements toward and between as well as diversions away from one another, attending to the fact that there is some kind of recognition or identification process that binds or links the virus and viral together for the human. The virus is difficult to conceptualize not only because it can exist in so many material substrates and is constantly changing but also because the virus has historically produced different generations of itself that operate in greater or lesser degrees of complexity, in both biological and computational forms. Thus, a dizzying array of viralities have emerged and continue to rapidly proliferate; the viral has indeed gone viral.

The viral emphasizes a break, or rupture, between fiction and reality that is hazy, fluid, unstable. Imitations of the virus, commonly labeled "viral," are more like creative openings into fictions or poetics of the virus. These framings of the virus are unhuman, and unhuman politics is a framing for the examination of the overlappings, differences, and irreducibilities—*mediations*—of the virus and the viral.

What are our viral politics today? While Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker have written that "viruses and diseases are obviously not to be looked at as models for progressive political action," our contemporary moment forces us to look there (Galloway and Thacker 2007, 96). Galloway and Thacker hint that the virus, as a product of globalization and conquest as well as computer security and digital control, is a dead end for radical politics. Yet political art collectives like the Electronic Disturbance Theater and Queer Technologies use the virus as an anticapitalist tactic. If these groups create a notion of the virus|viral that does not simply coincide with capitalism, are there other possibilities for a radical viral politics?

In this essay, I will explore the potentials of a viral, or unhuman, politics. I will commence by considering two axes of the virus|viral relation. The first is from the virus to the viral based on action, or replication and cryptography: this is the most common usage of the viral today, what Galloway and Thacker call the "becoming-number" of the virus. The second is from the virus to the viral based on affect: in this speculative section, the work of Jakob von Uexküll and Ian Bogost will be used to generate a conception of the viral through an "alien phenomenology" of the virus's perceptual world, or Umwelt. Finally, I will discuss queer theorist Tim Dean's

recent study on gay male barebacking. Dean describes barebacking as "an arena of invention that involves experiments in how to *do* things with viruses" (2009, 47). Deploying Foucault's concept of "ascesis," defined as the creative work one performs to transform and develop a way of life, I will argue that barebacking is a form of viral ascesis, that is, a creative styling of viruses. I will suggest that viral ascesis, while attempting to engage both virus|viral axes, is one instantiation of a possible viral politics.

Virus|Viral 1: Action

Representations of the virus|viral today typically hinge on rapid spreadability and mutation. In fact, wherever one looks, the virus has gained the most attention through its abilities to replicate and disseminate. From SARS and H1N1 to the latest computer virus or meme, the virus is commonly perceived as that which quickly generates copies of itself and infectiously breaks through barriers or quarantines.

In line with this perspective of the virus, Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker, two theorists who have written extensively on viruses, state that the virus is "life exploiting life," that is, viruses take advantage of their host entities to generate more copies of themselves (2007, 83). The virus succeeds in producing its copies through a process Galloway and Thacker refer to as "never-being-the-same" (87). Maintaining within itself the ability to continuously mutate its code with each reproduction, the virus propagates itself. Defining the virus based on action, they write:

> Replication and cryptography are thus the two activities that define the virus. What counts is not that the host is a "bacterium," "an animal," or a "human." What counts is the code—the number of the animal, or better, the numerology of the animal. . . . The viral perspective is "cryptographic" because it replicates this difference, this paradoxical status of never-being-the-same. . . . What astounds us is that the viral perspective presents the animal being and creaturely life in an *illegible* and *incalculable* manner, a matter of chthonic calculations and occult replications. (87)

Galloway and Thacker conclude by claiming that this becoming-number of the virus *is* its identity.

This conception of the virus, as that which is solely concerned with replication and mutation, is representative of what has become known as viral today. It seems that everything has "gone viral" based on this dominant understanding of the virus as a becoming-number. Particularly, in

social media, the viral is representative of the virus-as-replication. For something to go viral in social media platforms all that is required is that things spread within a system or network. For example, a viral marketing campaign will use a preexisting social network to circulate advertisements for its products, but the viral in this campaign is not the self-replicating, mutating contagion of the virus that Galloway and Thacker discuss; it is only half their formulation. Contagion in this viral sense is not even self-replicating or mutating. Viral marketing requires *users* in a network to circulate advertisements, and the advertisements will typically remain unchanged, having only been copied and circulated by other agents, usually humans. This is the standard occurrence in viral media as well: a video going viral on YouTube simply means that it has received a large number of views in a short period of time and has spread to other sites.

While social media stresses the replication and spreadability of the virus and ignores its mutating never-being-the-sameness, current theorizations of capitalism focus on *both* the replication and mutation of the virus. Media theorist Jussi Parikka takes Hardt and Negri's assertion that capitalism is like a virus further in his writings on viral capitalism. He notes that capitalism is now viral in that it is capable of continuous modulation and heterogenesis (Parikka 2007, 96). "The commodity," he writes, "works as a virus—and the virus part of the commodity circuit" (97). Viral capitalism replicates itself through a mutating act of never-being-the-sameness, that is, it continuously modulates and reproduces to maintain a global infection. Viral capitalism is another gesture toward theorizing our phase of control capitalism, which has many other labels—ludic capitalism, Empire, protocological control, Deleuzian capitalism, and digital and liquid capitalism, all underscoring unstable, rapid fluxes of unhuman flows that induce a general commodification of life itself. Viral capitalism highlights the "infectious" nature of this multiplicitous, morphing control process.

In this axis of the virus|viral relation, that mysterious, allusive thing called a virus, evolving over time in biological matter and silicon, existing in ever complexifying, generational forms, somewhere between life and death, instigating excessive panic, hype, and thrill, is reduced to its properties of action. It is easy enough to argue that today's viral hype is a fictional relation to—or break from—the virus, creating a poetics or distortion of its movement and action. Perhaps this particular viral is rightly dominant because its focus on speedy replication and mutation is at the heart of

contemporary capital, neoliberalism, and globalization, and even though there are uses of this viral form that proffer and fight for an anticapitalism, can the viral go *elsewhere*? To another viral that might drastically depart from replication, mutation, speed, and capitalism?

VirusIViral 2: Affect

While there certainly appears to be a becoming-number of the virus based on its replicating and cryptographic existence, is a configuration of the viral based on this numeric paradigm a reduction not only of what could count as viral but also of the virus itself? Viruses not only change through replication, they also change their embodied contexts, in that all viruses require a host and can be spread from one host to another. Galloway and Thacker state that the material substrate of the virus—its materiality paired with its host—is not as necessary in understanding the virus's existence as is its mathematical identity, but given that a virus cannot survive unless residing within a host, it seems that the host is crucial, in that there would be no "number" without the host. To understand the virus as becoming-number leaves unanswered questions of a virus's affects, sensations, and desires. Are there not multiplicitous potentialities for the virus to become? Perhaps the code is what counts if the virus is to be understood as primarily a mathematical abstraction, but what of the perceptions of the virus, its affects, embodiments, and host organisms? Could their be another viral that emerges from these qualities?

The prospects of constructing a viral based on these criteria of the virus have an air of inaccessibility. What is the affect of the virus and how could it ever be corralled into a viral if it is irreducible to the human? How does one gain access to such affective knowledge of another thing? What this impasse makes clear is that all virals are ethical, aesthetic, and political treatments of the virus; they are configurations that gesture toward the overall inaccessibility of fully knowing a virus. This section will present the possibilities of another viral, not popular or in use, through a speculative practice on the impossible question of affect and phenomenology.

Jakob von Uexküll gives us the first conceptual tool needed, the Umwelt, or the perceptual world of an animal or creature. Uexküll, a biologist of the early to mid-twentieth century who popularized biosemiotics, developed the concept of the Umwelt to think about the radically diverse sensory worlds that different creatures exist within; he refers to these

worlds as bubbles or islands of senses, arguing that each animal can never leave or escape its self-world, or Umwelt. Crucial to Uexküll's phenomenological thought is the premise that things do not have an autonomous existence from the creatures that perceive them: "No one, who has the least experience of the Umwelten of animals will ever harbour the idea that objects have an autonomous existence that makes them independent of the subjects" (von Uexküll 2001, 108). While Uexküll's speculative Umwelten provide a potential framework for developing a notion of the viral from the virus's affects or perceptions, his argument against autonomy requires a second theoretical tool, media theorist Ian Bogost's alien phenomenology, which helps break from this position.

Alien phenomenology is part of a new philosophical movement called "speculative realism," primarily rooted in the continental tradition, that argues for an ability to *speculatively* gain access to that which exists beyond or outside the correlation of being and world. Within the strand of object-oriented ontology or philosophy, Ian Bogost is developing a "pragmatic," or "applied," speculative realism, which he calls "alien phenomenology" (Bogost, n.d.). For Bogost, the "true alien" is right in front of us, not hidden in the farthest reaches of another galaxy but in everything everywhere, from our kitchenware to the sidewalk cement to the electronics in our cell phones. He asks about the microcomputer: "But what do they experience? What is their proper phenomenology? In short, what is it like to be a thing? If we wish to understand a microcomputer . . . on its own terms, what approaches might be of service? . . . When we ask what it means to be something, we pose a question that exceeds our own grasp of the being of the world. These unknown unknowns characterize things about an object that may or may not be obvious, clear, or even knowable" (Bogost, n.d.). While Bogost claims, similarly to Uexküll, that all things infinitely recede from human grasp, he surprisingly argues that it is the philosopher's duty to speculate on these unknown unknowns. He writes that speculation is poetic and creative, a "phenomenology that explodes like shrapnel" away from the terrain of the human.

Fascinatingly, Bogost refers to this practice of speculation in terms of disturbance: "A speculum is a mirror, but not in the modern sense of the term as a device that reflects back the world as it really is, unimpeded and undistorted. . . . The speculum of speculation is . . . a funhouse mirror made of hammered metal, whose distortions show us a perversion of a unit's sensibilities" (Bogost, n.d.). Alien phenomenology operates as a break or

distortion, from the nonhuman unknown to human speculation, creatively paving the way for an unhuman poetics. When Bogost asks, "What is it like to be a thing?" can this be expounded upon to ask, "What is it like to be a virus?" More precisely, can the idea of alien phenomenology be used to speculate upon the virus's Umwelt and, as a result, conceive a new viral? This viral would surely bring about a different viral, or unhuman, politics.

This other viral—a minor viral?—would have to take into account questions like How does the virus sense? Is the virus dead, alive, undead? Does the virus emote? How does desire play into the virus's drive toward multiplicity? How does it feel to replicate and spread in a particular substrate, such as silicon, animals, or plants? How does the virus affect and how is it affected in different symbiotic encounters? If viruses assemble spontaneously within cells, what is the poetic dimension to such a choreography? If these affective dimensions of the virus are ambivalent toward capitalism or sexuality, how does one speculate on such relations?

Barebacking and Viral Ascesis

Tim Dean's book *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking* charts practices of gay male unprotected anal intercourse. While Dean is interested in keeping a continuity between general unprotected sex and barebacking, he is careful to point out that barebacking subculture is based on a community of gay men who have formed around the specific erotic practice of deliberately seeking unprotected anal sex. Dean suggests that barebackers not only play with the risks of HIV infection but also form an ethics of alterity through their openness to sex with strangers. Barebacking, Dean writes, is about creativity and experimentation.

While some might consider barebackers' desire for HIV infection as the desire to die like previous generations of gay men from HIV/AIDS, barebackers approach the virus as a gift that contributes to generating their social organization. Barebackers do many creative things with viruses: they name them, metaphorically describe their operations, and imaginatively engage and relate with them. While Dean insists in his book that barebacking is a practice against identity politics, the creative work barebackers do to HIV forms specific identities of the virus. Interestingly, while barebacking may be against an identity politics on the scale of the human, it crafts an identity politics on the scale of the virus. Foucault's concept of ascesis, as the creative work done on oneself, aids in explaining the production of

barebacking subculture. Barebackers engage in an ascesis with the virus, and I will suggest that this viral ascesis heightens the identificatory work done on the virus. These new imaginings and constructions of the virus are accomplished through attempting an engagement with both axes of the virus|viral relation. Barebacking, through inventions with viral ascesis, is an experiment in unhuman politics.

In his own discussion of ascesis, Foucault insists time and again that "to be 'gay' . . . [is] to try to define and develop a way of life" (1997a, 138). He writes that "we have to create a gay life. To become. . . . We have to create culture . . . [and the] innovations those practices imply. . . . It's the real creation of new possibilities of pleasure" (1997b, 163–65). Foucault, like Dean, privileges a doing that is a continuous, modulating, nonteleological openness and transformation. This mode of living evades dominant identity formations in favor of multiplicities of relationships, actions, behaviors. Foucault defines such a way of living as ascesis: "It's the work that one performs on oneself in order to transform oneself. . . . Yet it's up to us to advance into a homosexual ascesis that would make us work on ourselves and invent—I do not say discover—a manner of being that is still improbable" (1997a, 137). Ascesis is an invention of living, a creative forming of life; it is living like art, an "art of living" (1997c, 146). In turn, viral ascesis is creative, inventive experimenting with viruses; it also highlights a paradox within barebacking subculture: while the work done on the self may transform the human into acts, relations, behaviors rather than identity, the work done on the virus transforms the radically nonhuman otherness of the virus in a humanly conceptualized identity through acts of poetic anthropomorphization.

Dean claims that these actions deliver barebackers to an unlimited intimacy. He writes, "The virus itself permits unlimited intimacy, in the sense that it traces the persistence of multiple prior bodily contacts in the present moment . . . [through its] immortality" (2009, 88). Of course, the virus is not immortal, nor is it traceable in such a manner. Dean continues: "Through HIV it is possible to imagine establishing an intimate corporeal relation with somebody one has never met, or, indeed, could never meet—somebody historically, geographically, or socially distant from oneself. What would it mean for a young gay man today to be able to trace his virus back to, say, Michel Foucault?" (88–89). The use of the word "imagine" is crucial, as again, this tracing of a corporeal relation through the virus itself is impossible; it can only be imagined. Dean's unlimited intimacy is unlim-

ited by the creative work of viral ascesis. This unlimited intimacy requires a virus|viral relation, a fabricated, imagined identity of the virus, to reach such unlimitedness. Let's turn to three specific examples of viral ascesis in barebacking subculture.

Bug Chasers

Dean defines bug chasers as "men who want the human immunodeficiency virus inside their bodies" (2009, 48). In barebacking subculture, men do not seek to be infected by HIV but rather chase a bug. The move from viral infection to bug chasing is significant, as the term "bug" not only transforms the virus but it also affects the men who bareback. Dean notes that "bug chasing" can be a euphemism for HIV as well as a keeping up with the latest trends and fetishes (48). Dean also suggests that bug chasing aligns with a history of gay men being referred to as animals for performing or desiring specific sexual acts; wolves and pigs are his examples.

Bug chasing is an invention of viral ascesis that stylizes the virus. Barebackers chase a bug, not bugs and, therefore, not the multiplicitous never-being-the-sameness of the virus. A bug is extractable and exchangeable, not necessarily a parasite, and can be traded between individuals without dying. A bug is also typically visible to the naked human eye, while a virus is not. Bug chasing brings the otherness of the virus closer to the human by making it more familiar to human perceptual registers.

Seed

Dean quotes the blogger Geek Slut on "seed," or semen: "'Seed is a gift, it's love, it's acceptance. Taking a man's cum—in your ass, down your throat, rubbed into your skin, whatever—even if you don't know his name, is *closeness*'" (Dean 2009, 54). "Seed," a term for semen, suggests a number of creative capacities that the substance is able to enact or execute for barebackers. "Breeding culture" is a term commonly used to refer to the subculture, and while this again stresses the generative aspects of seed, it also complicates any understanding because of the potential for semen to be a carrier of HIV (84–89). Semen, even when carrying an infectious agent that can and does kill, is still thought to affirmatively produce love, intimacy, and closeness when exchanged. Indeed, Dean notes that "seroconversion can feel like becoming pregnant" (88).

Seed emphasizes the possible virus in semen as a gift, as that which breeds the subculture of barebacking: seed not only as the material sub-

stance of semen but also as inventions through viral ascesis. Dean tells us that "gift giving represents a basis for social organization rather than merely a sign of individual desire. . . . To give [seed] is thus not to lose but to gain" (76). To gain from seed follows the logic that seed typically grows into something more than itself, such as with fruit or tree seeds. Notably, the virus does not operate under this rubric. It replicates but remains no more or less than it was before; it does not generate an excess to its materiality, just more of it. Viral ascesis turns potentially HIV-infected semen in an affirmative social generator.

Cruising

In the introduction to *Unlimited Intimacy*, Dean writes that promiscuity is on "the route to something new. Promiscuity, in other words, concerns more than new sex partners: it also concerns new ideas and new ways of doing things. . . . [It is] a synonym for creativity. Sexual adventurousness gives birth to other forms of adventurousness—political, cultural, intellectual" (2009, 5). Dean returns to this new kind of expansive creativity in his final chapter, titled "Cruising as a Way of Life." Dean contends that cruising is an ethics of openness and alterity, an ethics of the stranger. He writes that an ethics of cruising is concerned with "how one treats the other . . . [and] how one treats his or her own otherness" (177). What kind of way of life is created when the barebacker and the virus are ethically thought and brought together? How do they treat one another?

In barebacking subculture, the intimate connectedness of the human and the virus is the stuff of the unhuman. Yet while Dean's ethics of openness is an unhuman ethics, it lacks a radical openness to the alterity of the virus. Even though the barebackers' viral ascesis veers far afield from the popular terrain of the viral as rapid spreadability and also enters into a powerful and passionate affective relation with the virus, these creative acts hyperbolize the virus in an anthropomorphic styling that restricts the otherness of the virus. As such, the viral remains a mediation of the virus that favors the human. Following this, can viral ascesis—or any virus|viral relation for that matter—ever stay open to the nonhumanness of the virus? How else can one ethically cruise for the alterity of the virus?

Coda

The virus|viral relations presented reveal that a mediation, or distortion,

always exists between the virus and the viral, and while the viral typically has a political leaning or inclination, the virus itself is politically ambiguous. All virals are captures, identifications, speculations; and yet the virus always escapes. Thus, the determination of what is viral generates political, poetic, and ethical schemas. These are the stakes of the unhuman: how the virus is framed to the human, through the viral, has social effects. Yet, as Eugene Thacker's call for an unhuman politics mandates, there must be a conception of the virus|viral relation that is "adequate to its anonymous, unhuman dimensions" (Thacker 2009, 40). What might such an adequacy entail? Pursuing such questions is the next step in understanding viral politics today.

Zach Blas is an artist-theorist working at the intersections of networked media, queerness, and the political. He is a PhD student in literature, information science and information studies, visual studies, and women's studies at Duke University and creator of the art group Queer Technologies.

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