

# Transfiguration of the Risk Society

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**Abstract:** Postmodern deconstructions of the narratives about the virus generally depend on the inconsistency of the definition of life of a virus. The postmodern thought based around the conception of the network of meanings is, therefore, a categorical template for a very specific figurative development, that is linked with the paradoxical dichotomies inherent in the premodern, modern and scientific definitions of the virus. This postmodern reinterpretation of the virus is based upon the disintegration of the ontology of the virus by the reality of non-binarity of nature. The general ecological thinking of postmodernism does not, thereby, reduce the complexity of contemporary problems, but maintains different levels of narrativity about the ontology of human tragedies.

**Keywords:** *Postmodernism; Transfiguration; Derrida; Baudrillard; Science; Deconstruction; Narrativity; Virus.*

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*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 communication type, is coding and decoding. On the other hand, it is something that is neither living nor nonliving, 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. (Derrida, 1994, p. 12)*

### **The Invisible and the Visible**

Viruses are, but are invisible. Perhaps this is one of the most decisive second-order properties for any kind of a public theoretical framework for a virus. For it seems to be true, that the own concept of the virus makes it possible to project our ideas into it (Sick, 2002, p. 155), and yet it is not that easy to comprehend viruses in an easy conceptually representational way (Mitchell, 2012, p. 71). This means, that to try to explain the invisible that makes us sick is not only filled with the biological view, but also by our constant conceptually flux view on history, culture, politics, society, and the power relations of our human biases or rather posthuman (Odořcak, 2019).

One example is at hand, it may be true, that there are old, relic, and unbound myths, such as that of the demon that poses people, which may be intertextually linked with some of the variations about the metaphors of viruses and microbiology. The constant connotation of an unknown external influence that triggers illnesses and conditions in which one becomes uncomfortable, or possibly life threatened, proves to be understandable in terms of every existential experience (Melnik, 2014, p. 81). However, this effect is increased by the ability of the virus to infect and in return to be the infected. And even, if the interpretations before modernity seem to have nothing in common with today's scientific explanations about the natural and unnatural order of things, orders were still empirically recognized even then, such as the knowledge that certain contagious diseases were transmitted through close contact with the infected people, or that those who had survived the disease could in some instances not get it again. In this manner, it appears, that the scientific-theoretical ramification of the virus, which practically did not exist until the end of the 19th century, had been subconsciously constructed and changed for centuries until it appeared as an isochronal scientific and theoretical phenomenon (Taylor, 2014, p. 2).

Therefore, it is evident that the virus not only has a long history with humans, but also that this phenomenon has been stored in the collective memory of everyday life for centuries.

### **The Term and the Meaning**

The very own term virus existed centuries before the scientific differentiation, but mainly as a vague character. The historical term virus actually meant liquid moisture, but generally, it was taken from the concept of poison and poisoning (Battaglia, 2007, p. 142). Apart from the lack of clarity with this meaning of the term, the proto-definition of the virus also reflects the traditional pattern in the construction of denotation in the logic of a duality between good and evil categorization. The virus in combination with the toxicological representation takes the position of an alien ontological evil, an encounter. In any case, the virus is still also a purely liquid concept, that subsequently serves as a reference point in the representation of all other means of nefarious transitions and replications. But it should also not be forgotten that viruses, especially linked with epidemics, always had a paradigmatic social component that changed the presentation of certain assumptions about order, and thus were tied with implications that were perceived as amoral, among other things (Zaorski-Sikora, 2007, p. 82). In this topical meaning, a principle can be demonstrated that was just as valid for the representations of the Middle Ages, as for the early modern and modern times. However, this representation of the metaphysics of the virus does not prove to be that only one. The virus is not just a name, or a human concept, and therefore doesn't need to promise to usual definitional comfort.

As a result, it is not possible to pinpoint to a definite date, in the sense of an event, at which the modern scientific phenomenon of the virus occurred and succeeded, because only an abundance of events and circumstances led to the result of a modern and typologically naturalized definition of the virus. However, the approximate conceptual ramifications can be measured by the establishment of biological institutes, research laboratories, and their unique methodological groundings. From this point on, the virus was subject to a formally impartial, scientific, albeit not definite, object-orientated definition that had not existed until then. At first, the talks about the virus were only specifically related to such pathogens and theoretical research objects, that were used very undifferentiated for bacteria, diseases, toxic substances, etc. The subsequent concentration on the faculties of classification, instrumental specialization, and the need for

novel methodological theories differentiated the modern nomenclature for the virus as a parasite.

Modern definitions of the virus as a parasite and its status as inanimate matter contained, however, an inconsistency that arises from the parallel taxonomical definition of parasites as living organisms. The status of the virus has therefore been debated for a long time in the orthodox dilemma: Is the virus alive or not alive? Possibly to calm the discussion down, one can speak of a kind of provisional classification, that can be detected in the current conceptualization of a virus. Because the virus is (and isn't) not just a parasite, it cannot be classified by the customary bound of modern vitalistic definitions. Thus, the virus has to be seen and conceptualized as a so-called intercellular parasite. This means that it is only within a host cell that it develops the complete criteria that are needed to fulfill some of the possible aspects of life: self-reproduction. The most important representational characteristics of the virus, which can be found in some conceptual interpretations of the virus, are therefore the following categories: the virus is (some sense) invisible, the virus is (in some sense) dead matter, but also alive because at the (in some sense) same time it can and cannot reproduce itself - in its host.

### **The Reinterpretation**

The 1980s are the beginning of a boom for the figurative and literary terminology of the virus. In this case, the postmodern presents itself as a suitable template for a very specific development, which is linked with the paradoxical dichotomies inherent in the premodern, modern and scientific definitions of the virus. The postmodern reinterpretation of the virus is based upon the deconstruction of the ontology of the virus. The reconfiguration along the path from something evil to an interesting, or even healing being can be observed occasionally in the previous decades, but a real institutionalization and informational unitization only occurs in postmodern theories. The classical example is the participation in the discourse of the parasite, as explained by the lexical definition of the virus as an intercellular parasite. In this sense, the terminology of parasitic practices, viral strategies, viral practices or parasitic strategies comes to mind (Sick, 2002, p. 156). The discourse origin of these concepts is not clear cut, but apart from this uncertainty about the origin, it is extremely helpful to describe an expansion that can be observed as a heuristic postmodern concept (Baran, 1994, p. 91). It thus shows itself as a temporally locatable

phenomenon that appears not only as a mere theoretical construct but also as a means of practice.

Accordingly, to the discourse of postmodernity, the supposedly weak actors of the unequal struggle are usually cast positively. The postmodern inclination to hybridity has its roots in a rejection, or at least a suspicion, of all forms of fixity, determinacy (Bădulescu, 2014, p. 11). Pirates, guerrillas, outcasts, as well as parasites and viruses, may become system failures that change and update the system. But how did the image of parasites and viruses suddenly seem to generate paradoxical opportunities and goals, i.e. practices and strategies? And how did these agents become personalized? Simple, as for example Baudrillard had once proposed an internal logic of the systems that defend themselves against over-organization, integration, and control, and the virus is a means for the revenge of things in the machinations of people (Baudrillard, 1996, p. 215). Derrida, who agrees with Baudrillard that the systems have reached the limits of controllability, didn't hesitate to metaphorize himself as a virus, and thus ornament himself with the properties, which can be borrowed from the biological definitions of the virus (Derrida, 1994, p. 12).

This narrative is consequently based upon the idea that some parasites and their effects are generally fairly well tolerated by organisms, because the new balance, which is protected thanks to the defense systems in place, is proving to be more solid than the previous one. The parasite also sometimes provides the host with the means by which the host can get rid of it, albeit at a reflexively distinctive price. The generous hosts may become stronger than the bodies without visitors, but they can also fall (Baran, 2003a, p. 56). The other, the parasite can be presented as a guarantor, because they rely on the viral innovations of the invading virus: Evolution produces the parasite, which in turn produces evolution. The identification through this reinterpretation is the promise in an advantage of appropriating the actions of someone or something other, because of its subversive machinations, its adaptability, and flexibility compared to despotic systems and rigid structures.

This metaphorical euphoria of the viral and parasitic cannot, however, be applied to the whole of postmodernity. One can rather find an inner discourse in which the different interpretations and meanings of the concept of the virus compete one with another. Metaphorizing scientific work as a viral practice is also carried out by the postmodern method of deconstruction by distorting modern power ideas such as progress, veracity, authorship of fear (Melnik, 2015, p. 63). From the supposedly unequal balance of power between the host and its parasite, this idea increases in an

impenetrable mess of host-parasite constellations in which the host and the parasite are indistinguishable: Both positions always occur just in the one body and the ownership relations lose more and more meaning. Nonetheless, these strategies can also be seen as everyday practices that are often associated with a subversion component (Baran, 1992, p. 212). Culture, for example, can be seen as a set of individual action strategies in which meaning is perceived as a field of subversive or chosen personal reinterpretations (Ungureanu, 2019, p. 29). The reinterpretations of relatively small groups, thus must not always be seen in the context of the ideas of the majority (Thompson, 2008, p. 5). In this context of viral cultural strategies, these disruptions of the moral evaluation of the system represent a discourse of unequal opponents in which the little ones structure the big ones.

### **The End**

The old truth still holds, metaphysics has exhausted itself precisely at the point at which absolute knowledge as the unity of the subject and the object (Zaorski-Sikora, 2006, p. 90) was questioned by the non-binarity of nature. This wild exhaustion is one of the core aspects of the never-ending end of metaphysics. The critical analysis about a catastrophe of apocalyptic proportions necessarily brings up narratives of the end of it all, because they contradict, by definition, the insularity that the scientific experiment requires (Baran, 2003b, p. 78). Humans are mortal beings challenged by delimited realities (Odorcak, 2020, p. 54). Fictions, concepts and reasons make a disaster laboratory possible, and therefore man repeatedly understands his being in the environment through the concept of the threat (and fear) of destruction (Melnik, 2012, p. 92). The task of philosophy is to simulate this conceptual threat before it grows into an irreversible catastrophe. It is, therefore, a matter of finding a differentiated attitude towards the ontology of others, that enables us to actively participate in the development which makes it possible not only to formulate negative but also positive instances against misery. In this sense of a general ecological thinking, the postmodern does not reduce the complexity of contemporary problems, but thinks at different levels that withdraw from the trap to act, react, and repeat. The fundamental heterogeneity of the virus should perhaps also be seen as an opportunity to stop oppression, denial, deterrent rhetoric, violence of language, and the claim to master the present, or as an opportunity for institutional criticism, for the affirmation of the non-identical, for multipolar future thinking, and the revision about the assumptions on our philosophical responsibilities. This, however, doesn't anything to do with the required pill.

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