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## ARTICLE

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# The boundaries that constitute us: *Parasite* and the illusion of solipsism in pandemic times

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## Abstract

In a very literal sense, a biological organism cannot be alive on its own. This paper emerges with a primary purpose to allow key premises in second-order cybernetics to resurface in current developments in philosophy of science and posthumanist thought. I attempt to coordinate these resonances to speak upon the state of precarity and lived reality of social and political life during the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic. I posit the parasite and the virus as biological and communicational forms which model the impossibility of solipsism in life (be it viral, parasitic, or human). I believe that disrupting a premise of solipsism operates as a central task in an attempt to see and speak of the skein of interrelationships that inform our shared understanding about current events.

To mobilize this discussion, I am sensitized to seek the resonances of the film *Parasite* on topics of radical interrelationality, systemicities within capitalist strictures, and muddled boundaries of biological and political life. The international success of *Parasite* less than a month before the exponential outbreak of COVID-19 may not be dismissed as a trivial coincidence, but seen as a coincidental intersection rife with the possibility of resonant meaning-making about relevant concepts extending beyond a singular niche of philosophy of science or film theory. Socio-economic boundaries affectively felt in the film provides a starting point from which I delve

into analogous scientific concepts, including notions of epistemological responsibility and the circularity of human relations and mutual interaction in the works of cyberneticians such as Gregory Bateson and Heinz von Foerster. This discussion will anchor my attempt to present a symbiosis of concepts that posit the existence of viruses as the existence of boundaries in life forms on earth. Such concepts include Jakob von Uexküll's *Umwelt* especially as it pertains to viral life, Michel Serres' malleable interpretation of the parasite, the difference between the parasite and the virus translated to particular and lived experience, and the formal analogies made by cyberneticists between viral 'consciousness' and Alan Turing's machine (self-)organization. I frame these concepts with their potential to offer a phenomenologically resonant *and* scientifically nuanced understanding into systemic class warfare in mind, as depicted in the film and ramifying throughout.

### Keywords

boundaries/borders, cybernetics, parasite, relation, solipsism, virus

### *Las fronteras que nos constituyen: Parásitos y la ilusión del solipsismo en tiempos de pandemia*

#### Resumen

*En sentido literal, un organismo biológico no puede estar vivo por sí mismo. Este artículo surge con el propósito principal de permitir que las premisas clave de la cibernética de segundo orden resurjan en los progresos actuales de la filosofía de la ciencia y el pensamiento posthumanista. Intento coordinar estas resonancias para hablar sobre el estado de precariedad y la realidad vivida de la vida social y política durante la pandemia, sin precedentes, de la COVID-19. Planteo el «parásito» y el «virus» como formas biológicas y comunicacionales que modelan la imposibilidad del solipsismo en la vida (ya sea vírica, parasitaria o humana). Creo que romper una premisa del solipsismo funciona como una tarea central en un intento de ver y de hablar de la madeja de interrelaciones que conforman nuestra comprensión compartida sobre los hechos actuales.*

*Para activar este debate, estoy sensibilizada para buscar las resonancias de la película Parásitos sobre temas de interrelación radical, sistemicidades dentro de las restricciones capitalistas y de los límites confusos de la vida biológica y política. El éxito internacional de Parásitos en menos de un mes antes del brote exponencial de la COVID-19 puede que no se descarte como una coincidencia trivial, sino como una intersección coincidente extensa con la posibilidad de dar significado resonante sobre conceptos relevantes que se extienden más allá de un ámbito singular de la filosofía de la ciencia o la teoría del cine. El papel de las fronteras socioeconómicas que se perciben de manera afectiva en la película ofrece un punto de partida desde el cual profundizo en conceptos científicos análogos, incluido el trabajo de los cibernéticos Gregory Bateson y Heinz von Foerster, entre otros, y sus nociones de responsabilidad epistemológica respectivas y a la circularidad de las relaciones humanas y la interacción mutua. Este debate fijará mi intento de presentar una simbiosis de conceptos que postulan la existencia de virus como la existencia de fronteras en formas de vida en la Tierra. Estos conceptos incluyen el *Umwelt* de Jakob von Uexküll, especialmente en lo que respecta a la vida vírica; la interpretación maleable de Michel Serres de «parásito»; la diferencia entre el «parásito» y el «virus» traducida a una experiencia particular y vivida; y las analogías formales que los cibernéticos hicieron entre la «conciencia» vírica y la (auto)organización mecánica de Alan Turing. Enmarco estos conceptos con su potencial para ofrecer una comprensión fenomenológicamente resonante y con matices científicos en la lucha de clases sistémica en cuenta, como se representa en la película y se ramifica completamente.*

#### Palabras clave

arte generativo, aprendizaje automático, inteligencia artificial, representación, algoritmos, aura, redes neuronales

## Introduction

So flies burn themselves in candles, deceived like mankind by the misapplication of their knowledge.<sup>1</sup>

I can imagine, but not directly know, what it's like to be you.<sup>2</sup>

To speak of coexistence and co-constitution, one cannot neglect the reality of being milled and contaminated by power. Despite the impartial pervasiveness of the COVID-19 virus, its violence and material consequence is disproportionately visible and felt for those who are poor, racialized, and otherwise marginalized from political and medical hegemonies.

Within the frame of this paper, I am indebted to Heinz von Foerster's definition of ethics as "not refer[ing] to the other but to one's self"<sup>3</sup>: as thinkers, artists, scientists, and theoreticians, to speak of the state of life in the pandemic is to already participate in the universe of our observations.<sup>4</sup> In his own words, a perception of the self inextricably entwined with the other "represents a fundamental epistemological change, not only in the way we conduct science, but... how we perceive relationships in our daily life."<sup>5</sup> Contra this model, the emergent questions from an already dissected universe—a universe seen through Cartesian coordinates—entangles the questioner into an impossible paradox: the paradox of asking questions that demand answers insufficient within the given framework and structure of the question. This is why Gregory Bateson writes: "The answer must already be in your head and in your rules of perception."<sup>6</sup> The study of cybernetics and systems theory in the 21st century is tasked with an unprecedented scale of precarity as the baseline reality in which we all live today, which attests to the existence of epistemic perplexity at the root of the COVID-19 pandemic. Regardless of whether we choose to label the crisis as one of public health, global and local policy, ecology, and so on, it beckons us as scholars to make

ethics implicit and embedded in the usage of language. Ethics here can be enlarged from von Foerster's preliminary definition as a task of communicating an aesthetic consideration of the self and other partaking in life in a shared environment, and which formulates the principle questions of any discourse we may instantiate.

It is my hope that I have constructed a way to see the models of the parasite and the virus as in a taut dyadic tension with one another, both with boons of knowledge to glean from in our present moment of socio-political, ecological, and medical precarity. Central to this discussion is the confounding problem of boundaries, which are employed to simultaneously police and enclose commitments to the other *and* exist as the only means to defend particular positionalities and desires already vulnerable. At best, the words spoken (and unspoken) here may be most fruitful with our shared contexts of global insecurity in mind, not as a solution to the issues we are facing but as a way to provide the images and languages helpful for understanding (actively participating) in their unfolding—for, in the words of Alfred North Whitehead, "... almost any idea which jogs you out of your current abstractions may be better than nothing."<sup>7</sup>

## I. boundaries: from arbitrary to liminal, fixed to porous

Dad, today I made a plan. A fundamental plan. I'm going make money. A lot of it. University, a career, marriage, those are all fine, but first I'll make money. When I have money, I'll buy that house. On the day we move in, Mom and I will be in the yard. Because the sunshine is so nice there. All you need to do is walk up the stairs.<sup>8</sup>

These are the last words of the young protagonist Ki-woo in Bong Joon-ho's Palme D'Or and Academy Award-winning class thriller *Parasite* (2019). After a frantic conning spree, the poor Kim family

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1. Erasmus Darwin, *Zoonomia; or the Laws of Organic Life* (Echo Library; Illustrated Edition, 2009, first published 1974), 171.
  2. Dorian Sagan, "Introduction: *Umwelt After Uexküll*," *A Foray Into the World of Animals and Humans*, trans. Joseph D. O'Neil (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 31.
  3. Heinz von Foerster, *The Beginning of Heaven and Earth Has No Name: Seven Days With Second-Order Cybernetics*, ed. Albert Müller and Karl H. Müller, trans. Elinor Rooks and Michael Kasenbacher (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 169.
  4. Defined by its content, cybernetics may be posited as the study of circular organization, the "branch of mathematics" that deal with problems of information, purpose, recursivity, and control. Yet, to study circularity at all, I must situate my positionality in the circularities I speak of. This becomes a matter of immanent importance in second-order cybernetics. To posit the validity of my own activity, I have to enter into my own domain of study—emergent here is a classic "chicken and egg" situation offering the dialectic tension ongoing in cybernetic thought. Furthermore, second-order cybernetics posits scientific observation as necessarily partaking in a participatory model. The scientist calibrates their patterns of search to live in the (ecological, social, cultural, political) phenomena at hand in all of its radically immanent stakes, and is therefore prone to paradoxes of self and other. A cybernetic scientific methodology understands that explicit talk about 'what we should do' or 'how we should act' achieves nothing but intellectualized moralization, possible only through normative conclusions. Instead, the emergent process of using language (before and beneath its content, any intellectual claim) is a process of reaching out to the strange other, which is *always* an implication of the self.
  5. Heinz von Foerster, *Understanding Understanding: Essays on Cybernetics and Cognition* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 2010), 289.
  6. Gregory Bateson, "Last Lecture," *A Sacred Unity: Further Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, ed. Ronald E. Donaldson (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991), 313. My emphasis.
  7. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (Free Press, 1979, first published 1929), 575.
  8. *Parasite*, directed by Bong Joon-ho (2019; Seoul, South Korea: CJ Entertainment, 2019), iTunes digital purchase.



Figure 1: Bong Joon-ho (dir.), *Gi-saeng-chung*, (*Parasite*, B&W ver.), (South Korea: Barunson E & A, 2019), 2:04:49

successfully infiltrated into the wealthy Parks' home as accomplished professionals unrelated to each other. This enthralling success, however, is quickly undone as the members of the Kim family are forced to confront the existence of another family secretly living underground the Park family's mansion. Ki-woo's father, Ki-taek, is condemned to live in hiding in the same basement in which he found the other destitute family after killing Mr. Park in a moment of unhinged rage and grief. Ki-woo himself has suffered brain damage and must find work to support his mother, while their semi-basement home has been devastated by a flood. His sister, Ki-jung, was murdered as a banal afterthought. Within a systematised architecture of socio-economic violence and disenfranchisement, Ki-woo has no other way of being than to hope for the moment in which he can be together with his whole family again. Yet the impossibility of such hope—impossible due to the material, systemic, and cruelly *real* confinements and precarities—binds him into an all-consuming and monomaniacal desire for the attainment of freedom and security. Ki-woo and his family are truly victims of their hope as they attempt their upward mobility at the cost of perpetrating violence onto those living in a full basement, truly in the dark and less fortunate than them. The carcerality of fantasies of upward mobility is precisely the cruelty of having to *knowingly* walk into one's own and another's descent. The audience must bear witness to the atrophying state of societal patterns within which the poor is antagonised against the poorer, and suffering is amplified solely for those already vulnerable. If Ki-woo's last stare into the camera could be translated into words, they would be Lauren Berlant's: "Even when [if] you get what you want, you can't have what you want."<sup>9</sup>

*Parasite* examines the accelerating dream of social mobility that plagues a family mired in double-binding patterns of social abjection

and poverty as well as the intergenerational inheritance of class trauma. Bong's critique of the systemic dynamics of capitalist (ecological, social, psychical) crisis begins by depicting the corporeal lives of subjects stigmatised and overdetermined by poverty with an irreverent and tragic humour, which contours the deplorable and heartbreaking reality of what is going on in a larger scale. Throughout the film, we are able to see hope (the eroticised wish for material plenitude and strength through achievement) crumble under its own demands and restraints. Ki-woo's hope of buying his father's liberation through his personal wealth is a non-negotiable compulsion: he has no money, he has no future, and he has no other way of being otherwise and elsewhere than through tortuous and torturous fantasy. It is the *idea* of wealth that allows him the right to be, here and now. This hope, conflated with his desire for social liberation and his family's togetherness, binds him to a maladaptive and historical pattern of aspiration and anxiety. Indeed, "I'm going to make money" could be the official slogan for the monocultural mentality of Ki-taek's generation, struggling on the edge of entangled and systemic precarities in Korea, from its endless political upheaval to irreversible socio-economic change in the late twentieth century.

Cinema allows us to envision Ki-woo's hope through the ending scene: to be free, to be far away from this bounded reality to a world that is hardwired to disenfranchise him, possible only by returning as the head of its hierarchy, the very organisational structure that persecuted him in the first place. And yet, cinema may also choose to bring us back—or bring Ki-woo *down*—to reality, where he is still half-overground and half-underground. In the semi-basement, his access to the world and to his own sense of self is latched in a liminal, bordering, perpetually precarious state. This is where the tragedy lies: as elites expect the lower class to be invisible ghosts, poverty itself becomes the process of generating a residual class unable to be considered and imagined. In cybernetic terms, this residual class signifies the production of a *disposable* class of programmes. This recursive model considers the redundancies in the noise of its own systemic activity and determines the eradication or silencing of a particular set of communicational input. The very existence of poor people is a source of disgust and upset, regardless of their explicit confrontation. The poor are then blamed for existing and must flee underground.

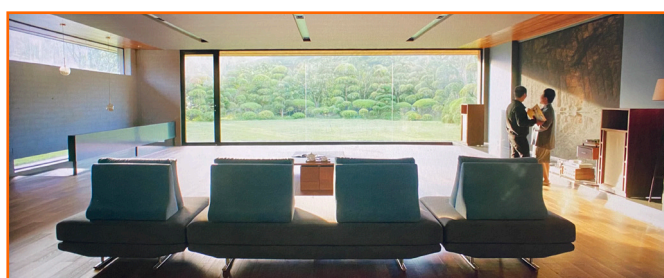
The fear and disgust of invasion, the impulse to enforce a strict separation of intimate space between the rich and the poor, and the crossing of invisible lines in social conduct as reinforced and monitored by the upper class prevail throughout the film in its dialogue and *mise en scène*. The wealthy Mr. Park, who scrutinises Mr. Kim's ability to work as his designated driver in the first half of the film, proclaims "I can't stand people who cross the line". When he assumes his previous driver used the backseat of the car to have sex, Mr. Park is less disgusted

9. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 266.



by the inappropriate act than his worker “crossing the line” into his territory. In an interview with Bill Desowitz, cinematographer Hong Kyung-pyo explains that the film is literally shot through the lens of class segregation and the estrangement of the lower class as abject residue to be abhorred. The film consists of largely vertical compositions to convey the hierarchal distinction between the two families. This emphasis accentuates the squalor and darkness of the Kims’ semi-basement home in contrast to a sense of vibrancy and unbridled potential with which sunlight flushes the Parks’ mansion. The lush greens of their extensive lawn attest to their bounty, health, and vitality like *plein air* painting. Hong explains that the characters have access to different scenery according to the vertical space they occupy due to the framing of or limitation in vision, which ultimately determines their perspectives (fig. 2 and 3).<sup>10</sup> The Parks, however, have *bought* the privilege of keeping their line of vision uncontaminated by others; impeccably secured and monitored, they are able to construct borders from these undesirable invasive others so as to encounter themselves and *only* themselves as a fact of being at home<sup>11</sup>.

In a context of epistemological investigation into scientific work, Gregory Bateson writes: “To draw a boundary line between a part which



Figures 2 and 3: Bong Joon-ho (dir.), *Gi-saeng-chung*, (*Parasite*), (South Korea: Barunson E & A, 2019), 0:59, 1:14:29

does most of the computation for a larger system and the larger system of which it is a part is to create a *mythological component*, commonly called a ‘self.’”<sup>12</sup> Concurrent with the myth of upward mobility and class aspiration as experienced by the Kim family is the myth of solipsism that the Park family safeguards as their most valuable asset. In other words, the borderline promises of late-stage capitalism condemn lives and whole generations to hope—hoping as a phenomenological participation in the unchecked runaway of aspiration and anxiety. Yet this myth cannot exist without another myth, presupposed and sedimented as bare necessity, which proclaims that a certain privileged class is able to *buy* self-determination and autonomy. To draw boundary lines is to secure eternity in one’s current state of comfort and prosperity, self-validating and self-sufficient with abundance in which to revel in. Because I am creator and manager of the boundaries that preserve me, and because my desire to exist as a diacritic singularity is and will always be matched with my power to do so, I am able to dispense with parasites that invade and choose to only enter in relation with those that match up to my sovereignty. Those with the power to wholesale adopt this mythology of sovereignty will also be prone to self-endow the power to normalise and institutionalise a notion of solipsism as immovable fact—ironically, *parasitically* at the expense of a disposable class of dependents and sycophants.

I do not think it is a coincidence that the invisible workings of smell, the unwanted reminders of poor people’s corporeality and material existence, play a significant role throughout *Parasite*. The shocking vibrations of the Kims’ smell function as ontological residuals of poverty that haunt the upper class. Smell as the indeterminate fact of encounter operates as a metaphorical device throughout the film: the encounters of the poor Kim family with the wealthy Park family is persistently punctuated with this white noise of smell.<sup>13</sup> It is the identical smell of the members of the Kim family perceived by the Parks’ young son that initially threatens to dismantle their scheme and performative schema, and it is the smell of the poor in general that haunts—and yet titillates—the imagination of the rich (“But that smell crosses the line. It powers through right into the back seat. It’s hard to describe... But sometimes you smell it on the subway”). Ultimately, it is Mr. Park’s expression of visceral disgust at the smell of the body of the man who hid in his mansion and has walked up the stairs (“crossed the line”) that triggers an explosion of unhinged rage and violence in Ki-taek.

10. In Hong’s words, “For instance, at the level of Ki-taek’s family living in a semi-basement, they see cement street floors and various garbage, street cats, and the wheels of vehicles passing through their neighborhood. The eye level of this neighborhood means watching the densely-built houses of strangers, their lives, and even some of their private lives. A drunk man urinating on the streets is one of the things they inevitably have to watch.”

11. Bill Desowitz, “‘Parasite’: Shooting Bong Joon Ho’s Social Thriller Through the Lens of Class Divide,” *IndieWire*, Nov 15, 2019. <https://www.indiewire.com/2019/11/parasite-cinematographer-hong-kyung-pyo-1202189824/>

12. Gregory Bateson, “The Birth of a Matrix, or Double Bind and Epistemology,” *A Sacred Unity: Further Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, ed. Ronald E. Donaldson (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991), 202. My emphasis.

13. This point emphasizes the inextinguishable *noise* of entanglement. Noise is defined by cyberneticists as that which is irreducible to a system, a predetermined rhythm. Smell is noise—asymmetrical but complementary in its disproportionate interrelationality.

The two families are condemned to communicate, to constantly “cross the line” between such segregations of social order despite the privileged class’s obsession at its policing and maintenance. If class stability is defined by silence, stability does not exist. The fact of relationality does not presuppose equality between those implicated; a parasite simply defends itself from being parasited. Within a late capitalist and neoliberal framework, one’s efficiency in such defences (as opposed to the impoverished other) is not a matter of what is inherent, created, or emergent in relationship, but autonomously acquired and accumulated by instrumental means. It is a matter of having the material privilege of complaining about a ruined camping trip because of a rainstorm, in comparison to that same storm irrevocably devastating the architectural and emotional stability of your entire home.

## II. the parasite, jamming sovereign power

We parasite each other and live among parasites. Which is more or less a way of saying that they constitute our environment. We live in that black box called the collective; we live by it, on it, and in it.<sup>14</sup>

A parasite is most readily defined as an organism that lives in and on an organism of another species, often called its host. It benefits from deriving nutrients and resources at the other’s expense. If any constructive or materially valuable byproduct is to emerge from inquiring into the paratextual resonances of *Parasite*, it is perhaps to seek how parasitism and its inherent relationality play out in particular situations. The parasite in capitalist residue is demarcated by a radical unknowing of what belongs to a system or what is against it, what interrupts, endangers, or *parasites* the agreed-upon and in-vested knowledge of what is the ‘host’ system. In other words, the ‘object’ of individuality is muddled into a *relation*—a relation determined only in relation to another relation. Within the film, the definition of the parasite as that which leeches off the wealth of the rich (identified as the poor) undergoes an inversion in a disruptive moment of reversibility. The upper class is as much of a parasite—if not more—than the lower class, for it infiltrates, habitually relies on, and exploits the vulnerable host for its labour, time, and allegiance.<sup>15</sup> This reversibility of identification (complicated by structures of power) is an insight that arrived in biological thought almost two centuries before the release of *Parasite* through the work of 19th century iconoclast Samuel

Butler. Butler situates power and desire<sup>16</sup> as engaged in an eternal schismogenic relation, where the increase of one simultaneously presupposes and catalyses the increase of the other:

... power and desire must be considered as Siamese twins begotten together, conceived together, born together, and inseparable always from each other. At the same time, they are torn by mutual jealousy; each claims, with some vain show of reason, to have been the older brother, each intrigues incessantly from the beginning to the end of time to prevent the other from outstripping him; each is in turn successful, but *each is doomed to death with the extinction of the other.*<sup>17</sup>

The eternal precarity of the one-who-parasites is in their attempt to navigate the contingencies of environmental structures as they attempt to grasp their own *Umwelt* or ‘self’, external to the presupposed existence of the other. In Michel Serres’ words, however, “[The parasite] has relations, as they say, and makes a system of them. It is always mediate and never immediate, It has a relation to the relation, a tie to the tie; it branches onto the canal.”<sup>18</sup> This is why Ki-jung, the female protagonist who differs from her brother Ki-woo in her ability to effortlessly pass and integrate into the upper class, is offered as sacrificial meat for the young son of the Park family at the climactic moment of the film. Bong Joon-ho makes the directorial decision to scapegoat Ki-jung precisely because she felt *too much at home* across the boundary line. She was too adept, too alike the host and its *Umwelt* into which she had infiltrated. She posed too substantial a threat to the myth of solipsism, the myth that power and desire can be separated with one dominating over the other. Her only option was to thrive, so she had to be eradicated. It was her ‘individual merit’ that condemned her to death; she had to be punished for having the audacity and ingenuity to instigate her own mobility. Serres, however, also posits that the prefix *para-* in the word parasite attests to a radical relationality, for to be a parasite is to exist alongside and resemble, to be beside oneself so that one may enter into the *Umwelt* of that which is parasited. A life predicated upon its ability to be adjacent to or coterminous with another organismic entity means that *it can never be its own object*. It is condemned to linger on its relations. The parasite is therefore a jam, a disruptive input of noise in the misled fantasy of neoliberal mastery that perpetrates the notion of the self as an objective, solipsistic state. The existence of the parasite *parasites* the belief in dominance over another, a state, or an environment, contesting not so much the feasibility of sovereign power but asserting its impossibility. This impossibility is

14. Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, trans. Lawrence R. Schehr (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980), 10.

15. Serres speaks in the background: “*We parasite each other and live among parasites...*”

16. For Butler, power and desire are two ‘forces’ moulding the biological constitution of the organism informed by evolutionary process *and* its historical trajectory in human thought.

17. Samuel Butler, *Evolution Old and New: On the Theories of Buffon, Dr. Erasmus Darwin and Lamarck, as Compared with that of Charles Darwin* (University of Michigan Library, originally published in 1911), 233. My emphasis.

18. Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, trans. Lawrence R. Schehr (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980), 38-39.

realized through multiple levels of tragedy for both the parasite and those who are parasited. It scrutinizes the drive of capitalist hope and aspiration, the affective belief of control entangled with a concurrent fantasy of security that such control may offer.

From a cybernetic point of view, the notion that the parasite systematizes its relations resonates with its epistemological task to situate the scientist (her relations) in the work that she may produce within the confines of her discipline. Heinz von Foerster relates his experience with the historical baggage remaining in scientific circles, namely with the residual aftermath of the singular desire for 'objectivity': "[Cybernetics, or the cybernetics of cybernetics] would violate the basic principle of scientific discourse which demands the separation of the observer from the observed. It is the principle of objectivity. The properties of the observer shall not enter the description of his observations."<sup>19</sup> It seems that *cybernetics itself can be understood as a parasite to pre-existing scientific normativity*. If there is no objective reality in an environment, and if the vibrations of 'my' perceptual marks are defined by its relations amongst other sources of perceptual marks, this means that the process of knowledge acquisition (the meta-level consideration of how we know what we know, which may be called epistemology) is always going to be parasitic to whatever extent applicable.

Serres defines the parasite as "a differential operator of change. It excites the state of the system: its state of equilibrium (homeostasis), the present state of its exchanges and circulations, the equilibrium of its evolution, its thermal state, its informational state"<sup>20</sup> The wisdom of the parasite is in its capacity to define *boundaries* not as structures that maintain solipsistic states, but as differential operators of change to the pre-existing state of the system. The notion of boundaries is defined by its epiphenomena, its material effects, more than its interpretations: to be reminded of the existence of boundaries is to experience the weight of cultivated ambiguity and misplaced expectations, both in our epistemological premises and our relationships. Yet it is at this site of vulnerability, confrontation, and reflexivity (the liminal space that posits the perception of self and other as perpetually intransit), that one may experience the remobilization of states of homeostasis that have become rigid and complacent. This is not an accelerationist thesis that posits a radical intensification of non-sovereignty as a weapon against the problematic system, nor is it a humanistic one grounded upon a tacit reliance on premises of stasis, solipsism, and, moreover, a dualistic conception of the individual and the environment. Instead, I would like to emphasize and perhaps

instantiate an epistemological context in which the *inevitability* of non-sovereignty as a phenomenological encounter, as a fact of living in a world amidst others, is validated and understood without the experience of threat, blame, or resentment.

The existence of the parasite, residing both outside and inside the boundaries of my skin, reminds me of the fluctuating, circuitous, and potentially creative nature of living process in general. The parasite may generate turbulence and interruption, and thereby reflective space to exchange words and objects about the state of those very words and objects. Despite and through the cruelty, its residual after-life, to navigate boundaries amidst unknowable others is to painfully ask oneself what it means to participate in a fractal of relations, to desire the steadfast comfort of belonging. To be a parasite to my own desires is to willingly cause interruptions in the form of fantasy and dreams that may delude me from feasible action—but may act in the short term as my only remaining refuge to live. I am condemned to know with every atom of my body that an already uninhabitable reality must be contaminated with fantasy in order to survive. To hope for the dissolution of boundaries, then, is to embark on an attempt to nurture them, to know of an emancipation through mutuality in dependence—*despite* the myths of power and solipsism that attempt to induce violence within the bounds of the concept.

### III. the virus, liminal life

Can there be anything that links us to others with whom we can declare that we are together? What forms might this solicitude take? Is another politics of the world possible, a politics that no longer necessarily rests upon difference or alterity but instead on a certain idea of the kindred and the in-common? Are we not condemned to live in our exposure to one another, sometimes in the same space?<sup>21</sup>

These are the questions that Achille Mbembe poses to scrutinize the compulsion towards borders and security in political relations, which seem to resonate into interesting nodes of inquiry when speaking of viral contagion—biological, communicational, and epistemological.<sup>22</sup> Viral life, however, evades such an end goal by nature of its being: virality has come to signify an extreme intensification of connectivity, where the boundaries demarcated by national borders *and* individual bodies can no longer guarantee security in beliefs of safety, autonomy, hygiene, and so on. As contemporary theorist Tony D. Sampson writes in *Virality: Contagion Theory in the Age of Networks*: "It is the porous

19. Ibid.

20. Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, trans. Lawrence R. Schehr (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980), 196.

21. Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), 40.

22. For Mbembe, the end goal of sovereignty as defined and perpetuated by martial occupation, biopolitical crusades, and otherwise exclusionary and death-inducing tactics stemming from residues of colonial and imperialistic power, is the *militant application of identity*: the compulsion to *know* (classify, genealogise, label) in order to exert certainty of power over that which evades the familiar matrix that is identified as, or constitutive of, the 'self'.



volatility of the political mind to the feelings and suggestions of others that leads to an important question for contagion theory: is it not what ‘we feel’ about what spreads that becomes the most effectual contagion of all? ... [Virality] reveals a multisensory intersection point between what have traditionally been regarded by much of academia as separate social and biological domains.”<sup>23</sup> Within a global situation of dynamic virality, identity cannot be identified. Identity is an *emergent decision*, a compounded third entity with a relation outside of the identity. Contra the parasite, a living organism that requires *particular* relationships with other living organisms to obtain nutrients and habitation, the virus is classified as abiotic: it must enter into radical relation with a *population* of living organisms in order to exist. Viral life is caught in a taut dynamic between the collective’s compulsion towards a fixed itinerary of certainties, and the individual’s precarious, injured, and particular notion of purpose and prosperity. The existence of virality as a lived phenomenon erupts tumultuous disorder in and between both.

In the historical context of twentieth century science, Alan Turing’s definition of computer consciousness coincided with the work of cyberneticists within the new information paradigm. Their shared tensions between connectivity and self-determination, most significantly on the topic of the human brain, allowed for unforeseen resonances to emerge. The cyberneticists posed the problems of identity, language, and certainty in identifications for the computer scientists from which they could mutually discuss matters of interrelationality—virality, contamination, and contagion. By positing the virus as a “class of programmes” through historical cybernetic explanation, I wish to understand viral life as one structurally analogous to a general-purpose machine, or, an *assemblage of purpose* directed towards a goal of survival and prosperity. Emergent again is the question of singularity in identity: in recognizing the perceptual marks that make a notion of ‘me’ me, and ‘you’ you, it becomes a matter of vital importance to understand viral life as a necessity for ‘our’ own survival and prosperity. Such a consideration presupposes the possibility of radical plurality in the definition of ‘consciousness’, mind, mental process, and so on, to all the names given to signify the existence of patterned organization and recursion.

Speaking in mechanical terms, when given a suitable programming language a population of general-purpose computers (which may be called ‘brains’ or ‘minds’) is capable of running classes of

programmes. First-order cyberneticists like John von Neumann and Gordon Pask extended this mechanical point of view to define an individual not as a sovereign ruler of its own solipsistic general-purpose machine, but as the name given to a class of programmes or pattern of behaviour. In other words, the individual constantly reproduces itself insofar as it does not perceive problems of homogenization and overpopulation, and allows for the individual to exist in a self-perpetuating, positive feedback loop of endless reproduction. This schismogenic runaway of a notion of a ‘self’ is what Pask succinctly calls the “in-built wish to reproduce that which specifies *me*”. Pask goes on to describe the nature of individual experience as one evolutionarily, corporeally, and socially entangled with that which falls outside the categorical framework of the ‘self’:

This isn’t of course, such a strange point of view, because although you may be offended mildly if I call you a class of programs, you would be equally offended if I insisted that you lived inside your heads, at least you should be. Isn’t it evident that you are distributed through a lot of these general purpose machines? *Don’t you love? Don’t you dislike? Don’t you take part in the self-images of other people? Don’t you interact in this unity we were talking about a moment ago, which weds the consciousness together?* If you do, you are saying that you partake of the nature of a class of programs. This is simply a statement of that fact.<sup>24</sup>

In an interruption to his own circle of scientists, Gregory Bateson concurrently elaborated upon two distinct classes of programmes: analogue and digital. Digital computers manipulate discontinuous and arbitrary signals, whereas analogue computers manipulate quantities. This would be the difference between briskly searching for the leash and moving around the house to signal a walk, and the word “walk” as it is spoken by the human and heard as a quantifiable sound by the dog.<sup>25</sup> In analogue systems, real quantities have to add up or reduce towards a change in structure, yet in digital systems, a slight signal of difference or discrepancy, a single word “may mark the difference between yes and no, between life and death.”<sup>26</sup> What we glean from analogue computers—that which is constructed through markers of context and gestural signals of relationality—is always going to be presented and received as an object of language, and therefore will always be digital. This theoretically and temporally coincided with Alan Turing’s problem of computer self-awareness: if the computer persuades the scientist *by its behaviour* that it is self-aware, so it must be considered as self-aware. The computer is self-aware insofar

23. Tony D. Sampson, *Virality: Contagion Theory in the Age of Networks* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 140.

24. Gordon Pask as transcribed by Mary Catherine Bateson, *Our Own Metaphor: A Personal Account of a Conference on the Effects of Conscious Purpose on Human Adaptation* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 307-308. My emphasis.

25. Gregory Bateson, “The Logical Categories of Learning and Communication,” *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. San Francisco: Chandler Pub. Co., 1972), 291. Bateson notes that the kind of errors made by an analogue computer are the kind of errors likely to occur in the manipulation of real quantities: if you rely on the briskness of your movements to signal the pending walk, you are likely to make an error of interpretation. On the other hand, if you say the sentence “Let’s go for a walk,” it is just as difficult to guarantee the outcome of the dog understanding and following you to the door. Bateson furthermore states: “The error is not a small but inescapable error of more or less, but can change the result completely, because his calculations are digital.”

26. *Ibid.*



that it is aware of the signs of its own continued existence and thus, contrarily, its own potential demise. The problem arises when markers of self-awareness must be presented through behaviour patterns (an analogue computer), but the scientist will use his words and symbols (a digital computer) to elaborate on the findings of his experiment. Turing's experiment confronted the cybernetic circle with the idea that an autonomously functional external reality divorced from minds *occurs only within minds*, that is, within the digital signs it produces. The question of computer consciousness becomes a matter of categorising life dependent on a system that is inherently turbulent and prone to erroneous conclusions.

The tension between analogue and digital computers and modes of communication resonates into considering the "self-awareness" of *viruses*—its organizational patterns of behaviour in precarious relations with its hosts—as a model of cognitive organization as 'real' as my own brain, and yours. The virus persuades us of its existence, its foreign, but immanently real perceptual life and environment, so that we can imagine, but not directly know, what it is like to be a virus. The virus may not love, dislike, or take part in the self-image of other people, but it is nevertheless co-constituting and co-inhabiting with programmes that do. By existing in the world, the virus is participant and player in human attempts to solidify ideals of mutuality and intersubjectivity towards a liveable future—but which are simultaneously, inevitably, relations of invasion, domination, and search for immunity. I must believe the foreign *Umwelt* of the virus is real, because the virus persuades me as such. The alternative would be solipsism.

To return to the questions with which I began this section, Achille Mbembe positions the notion of security, the mobilizing ideal of sovereign power, as a paradoxically destructive premise to the promises of sovereignty. This resonates with the cyberneticists' conundrum of being fluent in mechanistic terms to speak of matters that cannot be mechanistically determined. In Mbembe's own words: "A society of security is not necessarily a society of freedom. A society of security is a society dominated by the irrepressible need for adhesion to a collection of uncertainties. It is one fearful of the type of interrogation that delves into the unknown, unearthing the risks that must surely be contained within. This is why in a society of security, the priority is, at all costs, to identify that which lurks behind each new arrival..."<sup>27</sup> The prescriptive logic of identity fails to see new configurations because it is occupied by a singular purpose to quell uncertainty about that which is new and strange. In dealing with matters to do with systemic-scale problems and complexities, however, this uncertainty or unpredictability of a system is determined by its inexplicability through analysis period<sup>28</sup> Viral life could be said to provide an answer to the very

paradox it poses by demonstrating a thesis of *non-particularity*: the pervasive life of a virus constitutes (and is constituted by) a *dynamics of general reversibility*. One condition creates the other and vice versa by inventing bridges between members of a population through the formation of a commonality—namely, the fact of being affected by the viral presence. Identifications of personhood, economic position, or political power are rendered into a paradoxical claim towards commonality through a third presence—the viral entity. Virality and contagion do not speak of mutual relationality, the selective and singular, but instead introduces the notion that the fantastic potential for new connections is always interrupted by the danger of believing these relations (and boundaries) as absolute, exclusive, privileged.

From here, we are able to 'identify' the virus as on the cusp, occupying the space of radical liminality or the *boundary* between analogue and digital systems. Neither mechanical nor vitalistic, neither abstract nor concrete, viruses do not weep or laugh at the fissured territorialisms of political ideologies or identities. And yet, in their undefined betweenness, their potential to occupy both identifications within the intensity of contagious events, viruses sustain a chaotic existence of relationality unmeasurable by purposive attempts to delimit or manage it. The concept of *viral intimacy* provides a didactic tool with which we may begin to think through a second-order (or self-reflexive and re-cursive) communicational model as fluent as possible in the unprecedented stakes of living in a time of viral vulnerability and the pervasive 'threat' of contamination. The existence of viruses which haunt human activity disrupts the definition of human territorialisms into a reversible relation (much like the notion of the parasite as reflected upon in the previous chapter).

The relationship between what is going on in the territory at hand and the territorial attempts to isolate and scrutinize it will always be disproportionate and asymmetrical, all the while the affects of such disjunction and dissonance are felt mainly by those who cannot afford to build protective borders around themselves. In the words of von Uexküll, "Territory is purely a problem of the environment because it represents an exclusively subjective product, the presence of such even the most detailed knowledge of the surroundings offers no explanation at all".<sup>29</sup> Both the permeating viral presence and the particular instances of parasitism, although distinct in their formation and lives, remind us that it is impossible to isolate an object—whether for intellectual investigation or industrial expansion—in the territory we call and know as our shared environment. 'I' am constituted by the territories 'I' occupy. It would be a disastrous epistemological mistake to think that this constitution is separated both from the constitutions of those who co-inhabit it, as well as the territorialisms that are constructed in order to achieve a

27. Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), 103-104.

28. Herein emerges a classic Augustinian paradox interpreted as the paradox of language and logical typing: "If no one ask of me, I know; if I wish to explain to him who asks, I know not."

29. Jakob von Uexküll, *A Foray Into the World of Animals and Humans*, trans. Joseph D. O'Neil (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 103.

desired *Umwelt*. To sustain a workable perceptual environment and life-habitat, to know of one's own boundaries and those of others, entails an ongoing, polyphonic, and sometime chaotic participation in asymmetrical premises rife with contradiction and potential for violence. I must believe this process as necessary and real, however, because the current state of the world persuades me as such.

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