

moiré sinister

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The figures in the darkened room move round looking up at the screens where their smoky images move with them. When they touch, colours and sounds intersect. There is a virus in the room.

A virus cannot replicate itself: it needs a host. When William Burroughs described language as 'a virus from outer space' he implied that language needs a human host to reproduce, just like any other virus. From the point of view of language, we are just warm meat where it can find the missing sequences that allow its RNA to replicate. Communication needs us in the same way we need air. It doesn't care about us. Stories don't care who tells them, so long as they are told again, infecting the next generation. Religions infect generation upon generation. Ideas of science and beauty are passed along like colds. Media are the vectors of viruses, and meaning is their symptom. Meaning and emotion.

Out here in the cold of interstellar space there spins this fragile ball of warmth and wet. It is the most intricate thing we know. On this planet there is a huge biomass, millions of tons of it, called humanity. There is a law of ecological science: for a given area, there is an optimum number of species. You can observe this closely on islands. The human biomass is an island. There are not enough species to populate it. In a crowded world, lots of species would like to live in our nice island environment. Many species have been there for millennia, parasites that help us digest and take their percentage off the top, others that clean our teeth. Some are nastier, and kill us if we don't keep feeding them. And many have no care for us.

These are the viruses that are most like people. They come into an environment – me for example – thrive, reproduce, devastate the place they are in, and move on. This could be the history of SARS, or the history of Australian colonisation. Colonists care no more for the land than digital signals care about cables.

This metaphor breaks down only if you believe, as we have trained ourselves to believe, that cables don't care about signals either. But the truth is that signals and cables cannot be distinguished from each other, any more than story tellers can be separated from stories, the religious from their religions, media from what they mediate. And since societies are so entirely composed of mediations that it is impossible to conceive of a society without media, we must begin to recognise that infection with the virus of communication is not an option.

It is not an option because the infection brings us great delight. Our media of communication – stories and sex, clothing and cooking, songs and art – have as their symptoms pleasures and meanings we would not forgo. We love our disease.

But there are media we do not love so much. Weapons are media. They have simple, stupid, ugly messages: mostly, they say "Die". Many of our symbols speak about weapons, and other media we do not love so well, like money and its lack. That is a medium no-one wants to be entirely deprived of, now, in this economic world. Symbols of poverty and pain are mixed with the symbols of love, warmth, comfort and well-being, in unexpected shapes, shapes we call stories, poems, songs, works of art. Or television. Or the internet.

In this darkened room of *Contagion*, images from television swim up in response to movements and interactions. This is a curiosity. As a species, we were used to making images and symbols. Now they come to find us, in endless streams, seeking out the warm, wet interiors where they can nestle, breed and find new hosts. We think they are 'our' media, but the truth is that we are theirs: we are the medium they pass through on their way to the next warm host.

To this extent, humans are like television sets. Nobody cares about the inner life of a television or a computer. Stuff comes in, stuff goes out. There is one difference however. Humans are unusual because what came in to us before stays in us long enough the effect the next thing that comes in. We mutate the messages we get by making them interact with older messages. This makes us translating machines, machines which routinely produce misunderstanding. We also have the special quality of keeping things for years, even decades at a time, before we pass them on. Secrets, or things we have forgotten, or things we know so surely we have forgotten that once upon a time we had to learn them. Sometimes those things emerge, years later, in some utterly new form, magically transformed or horribly disfigured.

Into this darkened room we bring all our previous contagions: all the pictures, sounds, touches, tastes and scents we have ever sensed. We introduce them to the flux of other images. One shows these smokey figures that are in some electronic mirror 'us', pictures moving on a wall. But other pictures nudge at the edges of perception, images of great fragility and great violence. Gathered from the low-resolution environs of the Web, they are not clear. They too bear the scars of their histories, the trails of distribution, compression, decompression, formats they have passed through from camera to projection. They too remember how they got here, though like us they have no recollection of where they came from.

Some recall iconic moments: napalm in a Vietnamese rice field; nuclear tests. Some might be anywhere or any time: ultrasound embryos suspended before gravity; the microscopic replications of germs. Some are fearful. All are anxious, even the innocuous picture of a street corner seems to hide an ominous potential. Once it might have seemed that horror simply took place, untidily in a corner of a field while the rest of the world got on with ploughing and suckling the children. But now every contact, every turn of the road seems to hide a nameless threat.

What are we to do? The world has begun to notice the vast unpopulated pampas of the human biomass, and has begun to hurl at us retroviruses from SARS to ebola.

There is the religious defense. God strikes down his foes, the godless fornicators, with the vengeance of his immuno-deficiency syndrome. The god of the righteous is an unrighteous god. Ignorance is a great defense: there can be no transfer of avian flu to humans because there is no such thing as evolution. To stockpile antigens is blasphemy. Someone should tell George Bush.

Ignorance is deliberate isolation. People make themselves ignorant in an effort to protect themselves from the unwelcome. Their solution is to stop communicating: to allow nothing new into their translation machines, and to repeat forever the mantras of the past, as if the mantra would not mutate and evolve itself into something unrecognisably other than itself. Ignorance and the killing of communication means the beautiful colours and sounds of human interaction, the unforeseen excellence of acquaintance with a new mind, a new body, should be sacrificed. It is a kind of biosecurity, but it is also a kind of anti-immigration law, a Patriot Act of the mind.

It is an irony that so many of our symbols now are made to make us feel insecure, nervous, afraid. It has given rise to what is called biopolitics: the management of populations. Scared of what might happen, we surrender to governments and corporations, experts and civil servants, the task of arranging matters so that we only risk what we must, only gamble on sure-fire winners, or at least ring-fence the stubborn percentage of criminals, psychotics and sick people. From life insurance to epidemiology, we have given away our roll of the dice, our openness to chance, in favour of a planned and authorised regime of the good enough.

Some remnant of our old condition still remains. Mass management of populations has its limits. It can describe and plan for aberrations of the larger kind: crimes, illnesses. But the constant microscopic deviations of a body moving in a darkened room looking upwards at the screen, this is not controllable. If the biopolitical mind that manages populations is a database, the near-involuntary jostlings of people in this room are the database's unconscious, the material reality of gesture which escapes its plan.

Gina Czarnecki invites us to dive into the gene pool without washing our feet. To splash in the fluids. To take the risks, and to abide by the consequences. From initial exploration and play, the experience of the work gradually reveals its latent causalities, the interactions between people which make a difference. There is a risk of glamourising the terrible pictures, but only if we do not understand the theatre of responsibility which we are invited to perform. The degraded image, smoky, grainy, dusty, foggy, pixellated, its colours drained or displaced, is a token of our place in these chains of connection, the grammar of images, articulated in our eyes as the virus of language is expressed in our voices. We do not chose which language we speak, but we can choose what things we say, and to whom.