

## ***The Virtual and the Viral: Deleuze, Dark Philosophies, and Global Pandemics***

by CHRISTIAN FRIGERIO

### **Abstract**

At the point of convergence between speculative realism, nihilism, and a certain taste for horror culture, “dark philosophies” have emerged as some of the most original theoretical proposals of our times. All these philosophies see *virality* as the paradigmatic event that disturbs the global axiomatics of capitalism. Today, this globality is precisely what gives virality its enormous strength. What dark philosophies can teach us, through a crossed reflection on current social-political conditions and on the concept of life, is how to draw from virality a possibility for thought: virality is a pharmacological concept, and its meaning will be in a great part dependent on what we will be able to make of it. A thorough reflection on virality could bring us to see in the present situation not only a possibility for new kinds of individuation, but also a catalyst for a type of politics that is perhaps the only possibility to cope with imperial axiomatics.

### **Introduction: lessons of darkness**

Darkness is not the absence of light...but absorption into the outside.

Georges Bataille (1988: 17)

The distinction between axiomatics (or theorematics) and problematics is among the guiding dichotomies of Deleuze’s philosophy. This opposition has its source in mathematics, where it indicates two different modes of formalization and deduction: “in axiomatics, a deduction moves from axioms to the theorems that are derived from it, whereas in problematics a deduction moves from the problem to the ideal accidents and events that condition the problem and form the cases that resolve it” (Smith 2006: 145). But Deleuze extends these concepts outside of their original field, giving them an ontological and a practical significance, that can be framed through their attitude towards what they identify as an *outside*. Axiomatics, on the one hand, “develops internal relationships from principle to consequences” (Deleuze 1989: 174) and identifies the success of a system with its capacity to exclude any ingression from an outside: for instance Hegel’s self-enclosed spirit, or Derrida’s famous claim that “There is nothing outside of

the text” (Derrida 1997: 158; italics removed), or Kafka’s bureaucracy, endlessly extending the process without ever coming to a resolution. On the contrary, “the problem introduces an event from the outside...which constitutes its own conditions and determines the ‘case’ or cases” (Deleuze 1989: 174). We have a problem once a fissure is opened in the system. A problem is the ingression of an Outside – in the pregnant sense that Blanchot and Foucault have given to this term – that obliges us to think: “the problematic deduction puts the unthought into thought, because it takes away all its interiority to excavate an outside in it, an irreducible reverse-side, which consumes its substance” (Deleuze 1989: 175). Deleuze’s definition of thought is identical with this process of problematization, with the unhinging of our accomplished systems of thought: “To think is to fold, to double the outside with a coextensive inside” (Deleuze 1986: 118); “Thinking doesn’t come from within...It comes from this Outside, and returns to it, it amounts to confronting it” (Deleuze 1995b: 110). As long as we remain within an axiomatic space, we can only hear Heidegger’s appeal that *we are still not thinking*. For Deleuze, thought is the life and movement of the concept, but a movement that is attainable only through the impact with the Outside.

However, axiomatic systems do not merely exclude the outside. As Deleuze and Guattari made clear in *Anti-Oedipus*, capitalism is axiomatic not only because it has no laws of development apart from immanent ones, but because of a dynamicity that tends to *englobe* what it encounters on the outside: “capitalism...is continually drawing near the wall, while at the same time pushing the wall further away” (Deleuze & Guattari 2000: 170). While in 1972 they recognized schizophrenia as the *absolute limit* capable of unhinging the relative limit constitutive of capitalism, neo-capitalism is marked by an even more voracious and global quality that seems to inhibit the schizophrenic option: not only does the postmodern insistence on openness play the game of what Hardt and Negri (2000) called the *empire* – and “Postmodernism is indeed the logic by which global capital operates” (Hardt & Negri 2000: 151) – but imperial voracity has developed to the point that “there is no longer an outside” (Hardt & Negri 2000: 189). The opposition between openness and closure is thus no longer a useful critical weapon, and the possibility of distinguishing between axiomatics and problematics must be itself problematized.

But this is not the end of the story. According to Reza Negarestani (2008), capitalism is grounded in a kind of “economic openness” based on a relation of *affordability*, for which ‘I am open to you’ means ‘I can afford you.’ But this shall not stop the development of “schizotragedies” and the search for a “radical openness,” that is opposed to economic openness as much as to closure. Negarestani’s “dark materialism” is only one of the *dark* philosophical tendencies born in the womb of speculative realism from this alarm towards the deceptive uses of openness: Ben Woodard’s “dark vitalism,” Eugene Thacker’s “horror of philosophy,” Timothy Morton’s “dark ecology” – not to mention Andrew Culp’s (2016) *dark* reading of Deleuze himself – are other attempts to

theorize a kind of radical openness which is alternative to the affordable openness of global market.

Steven Shaviro (2014: 83) has described these philosophies as a paradoxical synthesis of eliminativism and panpsychism: on the one hand, they deprive men of the secure ground of the world-for-us showing the horrific face of the world-without-us (Thacker 2011); on the other, they attribute to what is radically alien to the human world (anonymous materials, oozes, hyperobjects, and Lovecraftian creatures) an uncanny agency, a capacity to assault what remains of man in such a world. It goes for them what Thacker says of the medieval philosopher John Scotus Eriugena: “The language of darkness...allows him to think the limit of thought itself” (Thacker 2010: 75). Darkness ventriloquizes the Outside, and a post-postmodern, renewed thought of the outside is what dark philosophies can offer us.

If the insights of these philosophers are more compelling today than ever, it is because they all use virality and epidemics as the paradigmatic events that unhinge axiomatics. They are thus the great heirs not only to Deleuze’s enquiry into the available lines of flight of a given system, but also to Bataille’s “virulent nihilism” (Land 1992). A virus is something that obliges to an openness irreducible to affordability, and “Epidemic Openness” is indeed directly opposed to economic openness (Negarestani 2003).

This is why it is important that we do not reduce virality to a social construction<sup>1</sup> or to a mere pretext used by governments to bring bodies to a status of “bare life.”<sup>2</sup> Only when it is considered as a *problem*, as an event that acts as the presentation of the Real (in a Lacanian sense), can virality be turned into a powerful weapon against what the axiomatic system sells us as a ‘reality’: according to Mark Fisher, “one strategy against capitalist realism could involve invoking the Real(s) underlying the reality that capitalism presents to us” (Fisher 2009: 18). Still, Naomi Klein (2007) famously noted how governments in the latest decades regularly used disastrous events to introduce important measures without the consent of the population: isn’t there the risk for virality to be absorbed and turned into one more expedient for a biopolitical shock-strategy, a renewed enforcement of imperial power?

Using insights from the dark philosophies mentioned above, as well as Deleuze’s indications for a problematic art of life, this paper aims to outline some ways of resistance to this absorption – resistance that, it will be argued, can only be attained by making of the virus a catalyst for thought, by overcoming the contemplation of its disastrous (humanitarian, social, and economic) effects, by “making kin” with viruses (Haraway 2016), by turning this shock into the problem that announces the advent of the Outside and engenders the practice of thought. And if the unpleasant neighborhood that virality has

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<sup>1</sup> As noted by Žižek, “Both Alt-Right and fake Left refuse to accept the full reality of the epidemic, each watering it down in an exercise of social-constructivist reduction, i.e., denouncing it on behalf of its social meaning” (Žižek 2020: 76).

<sup>2</sup> See for instance Agamben (2020).

imposed upon us is hopefully destined to end soon, the operation of drawing from it an act of thought is all the more urgent.

### **Miasmatic insurgence**

As written by the dark philosopher Ben Woodard, “Viruses serve as an uncomfortable reminder of how tenuous our so-called dominion over nature turns out to be” (Woodard 2012: 19). If virality can be considered a revolt of darkness against the brightness of global capitalism, it is also because it is the structure of the empire itself that endows virality with its destructive power. This has been efficaciously highlighted by Timothy Morton, who frames global capitalism in the wider context of “agrilogistics,” a “viral logistics” that consists in a “twelve-thousand-year machination” (Morton 2016: 42) starting in the Neolithic and harboring from the very beginning the contemporary horror of Anthropocene. Its basic axiom is the observance of the Law of Noncontradiction (Morton 2016: 47), meant as the exclusion of what resists its programmatic assimilation: “Agrilogistic space is a war against the accidental. Weeds and pests are nasty accidents to minimize or eliminate” (Morton 2016: 50). But it is not only the accidental that agrilogistics has to deal with: there are also *hyperobjects*, those “things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans” (Morton 2013: 1). Nonlocal, temporally undulating, inhabiting a high-dimensional phase-space – in brief, *uncanny* – these “strange strangers” resist the agrilogistic drive to assimilate them into the trap-concept of “nature,” revealing our time as an *Age of Asymmetry*:

Hyperobjects have dragged humans kicking and screaming...into an *Age of Asymmetry* in which our cognitive powers become self-defeating. The more we know about radiation, global warming, and the other massive objects that show up on our radar, the more enmeshed in them we realize we are. (Morton 2013: 160)

The same self-defeating character of human axiomatics is displayed by virality, which is in fact the first hyperobject created by humans after agrilogistic space itself. The functioning of agrilogistics turns against itself in epidemics: “The global reach of agrilogistics is such that antibiotic-resistant bacteria may now be found throughout the biosphere...When you think it at an appropriate ecological and geological timescale, agrilogistics actually works against itself, defying the Law of Noncontradiction” (Morton 2016: 50).

Developing into imperial axiomatics, agrilogistics became a bait, “good meat” for the Outside (Negarestani 2008): the global reach of capitalism, its connectivity and its metabolic power allow epidemics to strike with full-fledged virulence. A fundamental feature of virality considered in itself is its *blindness*: it is almost “a biological caricature...of life at its most stupid level of repetition and multiplication” (Žižek 2020: 78-9), the main ex-

ample of what Thacker (2013: 138) calls “acephalous animality,” the inversion of an organism, in which the Many preexist the One, generating the paradox of a control without a controller. But the connectivity of imperial axiomatics provides virality a controlling unity, a *brain*. The distinction between ‘natural’ and ‘social’ is for a moment hyperbolized, before the two domains are brought together again turning the blindest of phenomena into the most intelligent one and making it capable of conducting a global-scale attrition warfare.

Born and alimented from the planetary empire, this miasma reveals the dark backside of global axiomatics, bringing to light the first practical tasks for a virality-informed praxis. While the human population cannot escape its status of *people*, virality actualizes the *multitude*, that in Hardt and Negri’s project was meant to overcome the empire:

The multitude is a multiplicity, a plane of singularities, an open set of relations, which is not homogeneous or identical with itself and bears an indistinct, inclusive relation to those outside of it. The people, in contrast, tends toward identity and homogeneity internally while posing its difference from and excluding what remains outside of it. Whereas the multitude is an inconclusive constituent relation, the people is a constituted synthesis that is prepared for sovereignty. (Hardt & Negri 2000: 103)

Reproducing its power of circulation – its “right to global citizenship” or “the power to affirm its autonomy, traveling and expressing itself through an apparatus of widespread, transversal territorial reappropriation” (Hardt & Negri 2000: 398) – the *virality* of the miasma is realized at the expense of the *virtuality* of multitude. But this is precisely how virality displays the possibility of virtuality itself: “The power to circulate is a primary determination of the virtuality of the multitude, and circulating is the first ethical act of a counterimperial ontology” (Hardt & Negri 2000: 363). The virus weakens the bodies that were supposed to realize the multitude, but embodying it in their place it shows the possibility of a *political contagion* that operates as a paradigm for the overturning of the empire. This duplicity is the reason why virality can’t be defined as pro or against the empire, but can only be described as *uncanny*: to prevent virality from absorption in axiomatics, such uncanniness must be conceptualized.

### ***Élan viral: the Corpse-Without-Organs***

Viruses are the major difficulty in any definition of life. They carry genetic material and evolve, but they lack any cell structure or metabolism and they can’t reproduce on their own: from a biological point of view, viruses are “organisms at the edge of life” (Rybicki 1990). Even from a philosophical standpoint, the second reason for the uncanniness of virality is that it crosses the boundary between the organic and the inorganic,

and even between life and death themselves: “viruses are neither alive nor dead in the usual sense of these terms, they are a kind of living dead” (Žižek 2020: 78). They display at the highest degree the explosivity of life as a principle, but this explosion is built upon the negation of the life of others.

Eugene Thacker has shown how, since Aristotle’s *De Anima*, philosophies of life have operated through a split between Life as a principle and the Living organisms traversed by life – or between “that-by-which-the-living-is-living and that-which-is-living” (Thacker 2010: 17). Viruses turn this distinction into a hostile disjunction: they are something like a Life without a Living, a pure Life too deadly to be alive. They bring Life closer to Thanatos than to Zoe: virality is a *corpse-without-organs*, that shows how Life can be turned against the living and makes the Deleuzian “germinal life” (Ansell-Pearson 1999) indiscernible from a “germinal death” (Negarestani 2003). This is why viruses constitute the best paradigm of darkness and horror in contemporary philosophy: “horror expresses the logic of incommensurability between Life and the living” (Thacker 2011: 117).

If the virus has such a major place in a horror-oriented biophilosophy, then illness should also be a matter of concern. But illness can be conceived in several ways. Consider Ben Woodard’s “dark vitalism,” which traces the birth of life from slimes and oozes. In Woodard’s frame, viruses act as a “remainder and reminder” of our obscure origins: “Contagion forces life and death into the same generative slime” (Woodard 2012: 19). Woodard is however prone to dismiss the “meaning” of life, which he describes as “additive,” whereas “Life is merely life” (Woodard 2012: 60): only by subtracting meaning can we reduce “ontological life” to “biological life,” thereby grasping life as “pathology,” the paradigmatic figure of illness, that according to Woodard is the best weapon to respond to certain forms of imposed individuation.

Woodard thus follows Agamben more closely than he should. Agamben’s analysis is famously concerned with the ways through which power has reduced bodies to *bare life*, a mere biological status deprived of any inherent normativity. *Homo sacer* is the juridical configuration of this bare life, without any immanent bond with law or politics (Agamben 1995). Agamben’s thought is a powerful tool when taken as an analysis of the ways power has *de facto* historically operated to separate bodies from what they could do. But he often appears unsatisfied with a *de facto* account, pretending to turn his diagnosis into an ontology. This ontology is rooted in a fundamental dualism of *living beings*, conceived in the Aristotelian terms of *substratum*, and *apparatuses* that define the effects of sovereign power: it is in the hiatus between living being and apparatus that what we call a *subject* is born (Agamben 2009). Thus, life and power are not only *de facto* but even *de jure* disjoined, at the point that it is only in modern biopolitics, in the chiasmic figures of the *Führer* (life turning directly into law) and the inhabitant of the concentration camp (law brought to indeterminacy in bare life) that the two poles are reconciliated (Agamben 1995: 209).

Ontologizing his historical analysis, Agamben thus deprives bodies of their inherent powers and makes of their normativity a mere accident of a living substance – an ambiguity that, according to Roberto Esposito, was already pertinent to Foucault’s original theorization of biopower: “notwithstanding the theorization of their reciprocal implication, or perhaps because of this, the two terms of life and politics are to be thought as originally distinct and only later joined in a manner that is still extraneous to them” (Esposito 2008: 43-44). Woodard shares Agamben’s disjunction of life and power, or – in his words – *pathology* and *meaning*.

A more desirable view is exposed by Georges Canguilhem. In Canguilhem’s philosophy of life, power and normativity are *immanent* to the body rather than imposed on it: life consists in “an unconscious position of value...life is in fact a normative activity” (Canguilhem 1991: 126). A “normal” body is the one capable of expressing its inherent normativity and of shaping it according to situations:

Being healthy means being not only normal in a given situation but also normative in this and other eventual situations. What characterizes health is the possibility of transcending the norm, which defines the momentary normal, the possibility of tolerating infractions of the habitual norm and instituting new norms in new situations. (Canguilhem 1991: 195-196)

At the cost of oversimplifying, we may distinguish two paradigms in biophilosophy. The first, represented for instance by Spinoza, Nietzsche, Bergson, Canguilhem, Deleuze, sees life as immanently powerful and normative, as irreducible to the bareness of organism, and pathology as a mere historical accident. The second paradigm instead identifies life with a bare organicity that is invested in power only extrinsically: Freud, Agamben, Woodard, thus turn pathology into a *de jure* condition.<sup>3</sup> But this second conception “is only sustainable on account of the privileged status accorded to the organism” (Ansell-Pearson 1999: 109), and therefore it is tenable only if one is able to draw a dividing line between the living and the non-living. Exalting the difference between Life and the living and erasing that between organic and inorganic, the corpse-without-organs of virality makes such a line impossible.

The organism may be characterized by a pathological desire for death, but the corpse-without-organs is a “death that desires” (Ansell-Pearson 1997: 62), a Nietzschean “viroid life,” and the second biophilosophical paradigm doesn’t seem able to account for it. Woodard saw in pathology – meant as a mere malfunctioning of the organism, as the subtractive reduction of ontological life to biological life – the preeminent figure of illness. But following Canguilhem’s immanentization of normativity to life, it is *infection*

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<sup>3</sup> Keith Ansell-Pearson is particularly sensible to this difference between Freud and Nietzsche on the question of life and death: “the difference between the two is that whereas Nietzsche conceives death in terms of an open-ended becoming of forces, Freud construes death in terms of a biological lock-in (a *deadlock*)” (Ansell-Pearson 1997: 61).

rather than pathology which emerges as the *de jure* condition of illness, since infection does not express the bare organicity of life but rather constitutes *the expression of a vital normativity different from the one of the living being actually considered*. Infection is the expression of the mode of existence proper to viruses, manifesting itself as a perturbation of the organic order of a bigger living being, a perturbation resulting from a clash of biological normativities and not from the defective character of life itself. It seems therefore that the concept of bare life, when meant not as a deprivation of normativity operated by an extrinsic power but as a *de jure* condition pertaining to life itself, undermines our possibilities to think of a different kind of normativity for the living beings that we are. Agamben is the first theoretical accomplice to the biopolitical regimes he's trying to criticize. Bareness is always a product of contingent forms of government: bareness is not *of* life, but it is imposed *upon* life, and life is more efficaciously thought of with Canguilhem as an intrinsically normative phenomenon.

If thoroughly endorsed, dark vitalism would lead to a biophilosophy which identifies life with its inorganic normative power. Reza Negarestani's analysis shows how, once bareness is reduced to an historical accident, it becomes possible to invert Agamben's (2020) diagnosis of the current events. It is true that quarantine responds to the governmental problem of "how to control the pervasiveness of pestilence without losing control of the pervasiveness of people" (Thacker 2011: 107). But Agamben's fear of quarantine, of confinement and immobility, shows his complicity with what Negarestani calls "survivalism" (Negarestani 2008: 210): seeing life as bareness, Agamben is led to fear the deprivation of an environment of survival without which such a life would wither. This environment is identical to the "economic outside," the space of affordability that grants the functioning of modern axiomatics. Survivalism is the cult of the living; but Life is something else. Showing how Life can be turned against the living, virality allows to see quarantine as harboring the conditions for an ethics of "radical openness": "Once we realize that the ethics of life is external to that of survival, and that survival is a resistance to the epidemic and overpowering presence of life, then we can say that to be pro-life is to be essentially anti-survival" (Negarestani 2008: 210). Hence Negarestani's positive evaluation of the potentialities found in quarantine:

The contagious bodies and aggravated libido — massively intensified in quarantine — of isolated people exhibit the twisted destiny of survival once it is forced to break apart from its ideal openness...In departing from its life-supporting environment and in isolation, survival is aggravated by a hollow zeal to recover itself. Yet dispossessed of its supportive environment (the economical outside)...survival exhausts itself and becomes an emphatic affirmation of the impossibility of life being lived. In this sense, the separation of survival from openness offers survival the opportunity to act strategically on behalf of radical exteriority and its refractory impossibility. (Negarestani 2008: 220)



Negarestani's description of quarantine presents affinities with Bernard Stiegler's characterization of a certain kind of dis-individuation, "*that which is necessary for individuation as the epochè of an earlier individuation, through which the psychic individual accomplishes a 'quantum leap', that is, crosses a threshold in their psychic trans-formation*" (Stiegler 2015: 62). The axiomatic individuation *via* economic openness and environmental survival was actually a form of *inter-individuation*, a deprivation of immanent normativity resulting in a reduction to stupidity. Instead, by depriving bodies of their survival environment and suspending the usual modes of individuation, the closure imposed by quarantine can be turned into a locus for the experimentation of new kinds of normativity and different ways of individuation.<sup>4</sup> Quarantine may be the place where we discover that bare life is only a *de facto* condition, and that our bodies always exceed any regime they can be subjected to. This may be where the impact with the Outside tears the axiomatics apart, where stupidity is overcome, and the practice of thought begins.

### **Towards a praxis of virulence**

The multitude is effaced by the virality that at the same time displays its possibility. Society becomes one with nature by granting natural processes of epidemics an unnatural power of diffusion. Life is discovered as inherently powerful and normative only when it is attacked by a virus that negates life itself. Virality is thus not only uncanny, but *pharmacological*: in the womb of the empire, it can be put at the service of the shock strategies exposed by Klein, but at the same time it secerns the potentials to imagine different ways of individuation. This is why it is important to consider the effects of our ways of thinking about virality: its sense will be in a great part determined by what we will be able to make of it. The question then is how to let virality become a part of our modes of existence: something like an *education to the problematic* (probably the aim of Deleuze's whole practical philosophy) is needed. By way of conclusion, I will sketch some ways this pedagogy of the uncanny can be performed.

Consider the process of *immunization* that, according to Sloterdijk (2011), has in its various forms – from placentas to the global empire – allowed the development of humans by creating a safeguarding Inside. We have seen with Morton how, while protecting humans, immunization makes of their environment a bait for the functioning of the Outside. Given Deleuze's identification of thought with problems, immunization makes thought impossible, and at the same time it makes the ingression of the Outside disastrous once it can no longer be contained. While appealing to the necessity of the impact

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<sup>4</sup> Catherine Malabou (2020) gives a wonderful expression of such an *epochè* in her personal reflections: "I think on the contrary that an *epochè*, a suspension, a bracketing of sociality, is sometimes the only access to alterity, a way to feel close to all the isolated people on Earth. Such is the reason why I am trying to be as solitary as possible in my loneliness."

with the outside, Deleuze always solicited thinkers to be wary of its risks: thought must be engendered, but *prudence* is the key word if one doesn't want to precipitate into a *black hole*, a "demented or suicidal collapse" (Deleuze & Guattari 2005: 161). Deleuze is on the side of a radical openness that never degenerates in destruction: "You have to keep enough of the organism for it to reform each dawn" (Deleuze & Guattari 2005: 160).

Rather than Sloterdijk's immunization, we should seek for an operation like the one Walter Benjamin (2008) called *vaccination*: in Benjamin's view, "vaccination does not merely mean to administer an antibiotic, but rather it provokes, in an artificial and dosed way, an infection in order to activate the natural immune system" (Salzani 2018: 173). Immunization is a protection that leaves the body bare once the infection can no longer be contained, grounding the possibility of the shock strategies implemented by "disaster capitalism" (Klein 2007); but vaccination is a training that consists in a prudent experimentation of dosages and combinations and aims to render the body capable of coping with the Outside that sooner or later will creep in, without reducing it to the existent axioms. Immunization has overdose as its dark side; but *prudence*, described by Deleuze as "the art of dosages" (Deleuze & Guattari 2005: 160), is a more nuanced practice, that operates as an *ethical vaccine*. "This is how it should be done":

Lodge yourself on a stratum, experiment with the opportunities it offers, find an advantageous place on it, find potential movements of deterritorialization, possible lines of flight, experience them, produce flow conjunctions here and there, try out continuums of intensities segment by segment, have a small plot of new land at all times. (Deleuze & Guattari 2005: 161)

The medical opposition between immunization and vaccination can be generalized to frame a Deleuzian ethics of *habit*. If the concept of habit is fit to constitute the conceptual motor of an ethics for our times, it is because it shares with virality a *pharmacological* character (Malabou 2008a), since it analytically contains the concept of constancy as well as the concept of change. Bergson used to say that all habits are contingent, except for "the habit of contracting these habits" (Bergson 1977: 26); the object of a Deleuzian ethics of habit could at first be seen as the inversion of this movement: *to make a habit of breaking one's habits*.

But another distinction must be traced here. To make a habit of breaking one's habits is something like what Catherine Malabou (2008b) calls "flexibility," the reproduction on a bodily level of the economic openness typical of late capitalism. As explained by Fisher:

The "rigidity" of the Fordist production line gave way to a new "flexibility", a word that will send chills of recognition down the spine of every worker today. This flexibility was defined by a deregulation of Capital and labor, with the workforce being casualized (with an increasing number of workers employed on a temporary ba-

sis)...As production and distribution are restructured, so are nervous systems. To function effectively as a component of just-in-time production you must develop a capacity to respond to unforeseen events, you must learn to live in conditions of total instability, or “precarity”. (Fisher 2009: 33-34)

Rather than for flexibility, a Deleuzian ethics of habit should look for *plasticity*. Malabou writes that “the word plasticity has two basic senses: it means at once the capacity to *receive form*...and the capacity to *give form*” (Malabou 2008b: 5). But even more important is plasticity as “the capacity to annihilate the very form it is able to receive or create” (Malabou 2008b: 5). Habit should take plasticity as its model: neither stiffen in a “bare repetition” (Deleuze 1995a) nor ideologically simulate openness through flexibility; instead, it should look for a kind of openness that lets the Outside creep in through controlled dosages, letting it enrich its potentialities without precipitating the organism in a black hole. This is how habit can function as a means of individuation: not only to make a habit of breaking one’s habits, but *to make a habit of searching for what breaks our habits*. This is the formula of vaccination as the individuating modality of radical openness, the first way to put virality at the service of thought. By suspending our usual flexibility, the isolation imposed by quarantine could trigger the search for more radical forms of plasticity.

This individuating practice is perhaps a precondition for a *trans-individuating* one. Eliciting the plastic problematization of individual praxis, virality contributes to a wide process of *virtualization*, as described by Pierre Lévy (1998): “Virtualization...calls into question the classical notion of identity, conceived in terms of definition, determination, exclusion, inclusion, and excluded middles. For this reason virtualization is always heterogenesis, a becoming other, an embrace of alterity” (Lévy 1998: 34). After opening the boundaries, virality crosses them all.

Firstly, it undermines the distinction between species. When the virus passes from bats to humans, we finally come to experience what it is like to be a bat (Nagel 2013). Virality obliges us to what Ian Bogost (2012) calls an “alien phenomenology,” the forced sympathizing with beings other than us. It is only a matter of degree whether we do so with bats, trees, things, or with the Lovecraftian beings enquired by the dark philosophers. We come to the point of sympathizing with the virus itself: *what is it like to be a virus?* The virtualization of the species brings to a “heterogenesis of the human” (Lévy 1998: 44), which implies a *pars destruens*, according to which “The species...is a transcendental illusion in relation to the virtual-actual movement of life, which is always evolving in the direction of the production of individuation” (Ansell-Pearson 1999: 93); and a *pars construens*, something like what Donna Haraway calls “sympoiesis,” the act, based on a “viral response-ability,” of “carrying meanings and materials across kinds in order to infect processes and practices” (Haraway 2016: 114). This is probably the question proper to a *dark ecology* (Morton 2016): in the wake of virality, our aim should be to design kinds of collective praxis that foster the processes of compatibility

immanent to nature rather than enlarging the already disturbing ones. This could possibly result in a compulsion towards a post-human logic of coexistence in which the meaning of what remains of humanity becomes indissolubly tied to the existence of other species.

Also, virality problematizes the boundaries between bodies. Whereas my body ends and yours begins, the viral corpse-without-organs only expands. The necessity to keep the distance from one another acts as a reminder of our existential proximity and of the permeability of our skins. While *de facto* quarantine separates bodies in the rigidity of private houses, *de jure* it makes thinkable a way of trans-individuation that nuances the boundaries between bodies. Life is not a bare organicity with rigid boundaries on which power is exercised extrinsically, but an intrinsically normative phenomenon made by continuous fluxes: this is how virality makes manifest the possibility for a *multitude* to rise over the empire, and how it allows to think what Esposito (2008) calls an *affirmative biopolitics* – an expressive politics *of* life, rather than a politics exercised *upon* life.

This sketch of a practical project was meant to draw some lessons from the theoretical understanding of global pandemics that dark philosophies offer us. Virality enacts the *absolute limit* that the empire seemed to inhibit, designing an openness which is radically different from the affordability of neo-capitalism, and the question is how to cope with it through an *ethos* of vaccination rather than one of immunization, in order to prevent the shock from being put at the service of the axiomatic system. The viral exploitation of imperial connectivity shows that the multitude may find the resources to actualize itself, and the “living death” of virality undermines the concept of bare life in favor of a view of life as intrinsically normative and powerful. This lays the ground for a practice of individuation, drawing all the possible potentialities from quarantine, and for a collective trans-individuation that virtualizes the boundaries between species and between bodies. While the sketchiness of this conclusion asks for a more thorough engagement with darkness to be developed, it should at least show the conceivability of a counterimperial vir(tu)alization of praxis, of an effective *politics of virulence*.

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