Becoming Positive
Sadie Plant

Neither living nor dead, virus thrives on an edge where it disrupts even this most basic of binary codes. To complex, multicellular, organic life it comes as a sugar-coated alien, slipping under the radar systems, through the screens of system security. Not living, but lively. Just alive. Undead, loa life, A-life code.

"What does virus do wherever it can dissolve a hole and find traction?–It starts eating. And what does it do with what it eats?–It makes exact copies of itself that start eating to make more copies that start eating to make more copies that start eating and so forth to the virus power the fear hate virus slowly replaces the host with virus copies–Program empty body–A vast tapeworm of bring down word and image moving through your mind screen always at the same speed on a slow hydraulic-spine axis like the cylinder gimmick in the adding machine." (William S. Burroughs, "Nova Express")

Viruses remained imperceptible until the late nineteenth century, by which time their procedures were running through enough of the communication machine to lock them into the cultural codes. The earliest detectable viruses replicated themselves with the accuracy of the first touch typists, spread with the new exchange functions of the telephone, traveled with the switching systems of electricity, and duplicated with the adding machines. By the mid-1880s, when it was first realized that microbial agents had been slipping through even the finest of the earlier nets, all these channels were interlinked.

Research on what were then called "fluid living contagions" began in earnest when the US military first observed a human instance of what was later to be known as viruses in 1900. After yellow fever, and for much of the following century, they were classified according to what were thought to be their three hosts: animals and plants, and bacteria, which themselves used animals and plants as hosts.

Naming them seemed only to encourage their fast breeding replications. Continually emerging, mutating, disappearing, these were unknown quantities, slippery sets of characters which posed enormous problems to the scientific codes and disciplines which tried to trace and study them.

As obligate parasites, they grew and duplicated themselves only in the context of their hosts, refusing to distinguish themselves even for the purpose of analysis.

After bacteria, plants, and animals, yet more viral hosts were defined. B23 was probably the first of the cultural viruses to make itself known.

Once the skipper told him that he'd sailed the route for 23 years before the ship went down, the number was suddenly everywhere. Dates, addresses, chromosomes, numbers killed … on the radio, in the street … the corners of torn posters, ripped tickets, dropped flyers, loose change … perhaps an instruction, a signpost pointing to the way out of the number one, the first: 1, then 23? Was it a number? Some other bit of code? What are numbers anyway?

Promiscuous, polymorphous, perverse in matters of space and time … It was obvious even then that viral activity ran through brains and bloodstreams, texts, currencies, calculators, and chromosomes without regard for any boundaries. Except that it wasn't obvious at all. Even when cultural viruses were rather more officially recognized, little had been learned from

B23. Cultures were still being defined as ineffable zones of minds, ideas, and patterns of socially perceptible behaviour, and their viral networks were supposed to carry rather cutesy and appealing messages–backward baseball caps and snatches of song, advertising jingles running through the head …

With the consequence that even the disciplined scientists were taken with the idea of what were then called memes. The notion that fashion statements were encoded and transmitted in strings analogous to DNA was hardly threatening, and even appealing to hosts who seemed quite happy to let them in and pass the mimetic bug around. There were a few references to the vertiginous possibility that the meme theme was itself a replicator to which its discussants were playing host, but on the whole cultural viruses were considered as questions of theoretical speculation, symbolic value, and metaphorical significance. Like read-only memory, talk-about memes seems to have been an early prescription for immunity, an inoculation which can even be said to have succeeded, for a while. It allowed them to believe that nothing was really being caught and no one was really getting hooked. It certainly continued to let processes which were then called "thoughts" be claimed as "one's own" and appear to circulate in zones distinct from other networks and their hosts.

These naive anthropomorphisms also left them highly vulnerable to the infections which were to come. Not until the emergence of CIV did the guardians of the straight white world really begin to appreciate that cultures are complexities by no means confined to some distinctly human sphere in which they could, for example, decide whether or not there were such things as memes and viruses. Animals, machines, plants, bacteria … CIV made it clear that this was already a network of cultures, not a list of separate things to be put or kept in order by some man or God. And if different contagions plied different hosts, they also had a connectivity which interlinked them and the zones in which they work. Repeating patterns run through them all without regard for scale or size or even the stuff of which they are composed.

"Cultural Immunodeficiency Virus" is the deep cover scrambler which rewrites the most basic programs of cultural control. Even now, and like all the retroviruses it retrospectively interconnects, it can only be seen in the effects it leaves behind–the antibodies produced by its hosts, and the havoc it plays with them.

If it now seems extraordinary that there was no mention of CIV until the end of the century, it has to be remembered that these were times when what were still called minds were peculiarly closed. This is the key to both their immunity and their extraordinary vulnerability.

It is not clear whether the 1980 convergence was a warning which was ignored, or a symptom of its own ability to lull its hosts into the senses of security which allowed CIV to proliferate. Either way, it had effectively preprogrammed their strategies of defence. What were later to be recognized as interconnecting elements of CIV were kept apart and, for as long as possible, even their existence was denied. Years after they began to replicate, computer viruses were still being dismissed as urban myths, and there were few suspicions that such so-called myths were viral contagions in themselves. It was harder for the guardians to ignore the retroviruses, but if Human Immunodeficiency Virus made reverse transcriptase unavoidable, the guardians of the straight wild world still considered themselves to be immune from what they thought were only a few isolated incidences of retroviral activity. But by the time this syndrome was observed, retrovirus had been spinning through the cultural codes for a very long time.

1980 was the year in which the viral theatre of operations suddenly began to extend itself: computer viruses, retroviruses … just one of these should have been enough to challenge all

conceptions of viral code. But the guardians seem to have been completely unaware of the fact that they were not just dealing with two or three new viruses, and on the rare occasions that the convergence of cultural, computer, and retroviruses was acknowledged, it was dismissed as a coincidence. Perhaps, as earlier reports on trauma suggest, their simultaneous emergence was simply too much for their hosts to take in. Not that this mattered to viruses themselves–host response is hardly an issue for contagions which thrive on their own surreptitious camouflage. This was doubtless an effect of their coding anyway. Regardless of their imperceptibility, it was as though a switch had been tripped, triggering unprecedented interlock of new–or dormant–elements of a singular viral code.

Viruses were toxic, poisonous enough. But they only tinkered at the edges of programmed systems which survived unchanged if they survived at all. Retroviruses run on very different lines, rewriting the very basis of an organism's programming, using reverse transcriptase to mutate the DNA, rewrite the operating system … Nothing was supposed to work this way. The immunity of DNA was the sacrosanct "central dogma" of evolutionary biology, the one-way exercise of control which nothing could disrupt. Except that retrovirus had done just this.

If viruses cannot be distinguished from their hosts, reverse transcriptase made it clear that hosts cannot be pulled apart from viruses. HIV made its presence known only in those bodies which resisted it. Although negativity was taken as a sign of immunity or lucky escape, to be defined as positive was simply to be seen to be fighting the invasion off. The extent to which the ROM of host DNA was being rewritten in those bodies which learned to live with HIV was to remain unknown for many years. The emergence of new species is something which can only be defined retrospectively.

Just like their supposedly straightforward predecessors, retroviruses were imperceptible until their procedures had become indispensible to the communications nets. HIV was considered to be an isolated aberration whose retroviral coding had no bearing on the behaviour of other viruses. The simultaneous emergence of computer viruses was considered to be nothing more than a coincidence, whatever that was supposed to be. As new hosts for new strings of viral code, computers made it clear that viruses could thrive in any culture which allowed them to get under its skin. Viruses had virtually ended the distinction between organic and nonorganic life from the first, but this was a further corrosion of what then still stood as a binary machine.

It was also immediately obvious that viruses had played some vital role in the emergence of their hosts. Viral contagion and attempts to contain it had injected huge doses of speed and complexity into the emergent technologies. Computers also rendered distinctions between virus and host untenable. Digital machines occupied the same zones of nonorganic life as the viruses they supported. They too were replicating A-life systems hitching rides on war economies and telecoms nets, taking blatant advantage of the weaknesses implicit in human immunity–hard driven desires for security, prediction and control, conquest and territorial claim. They not only served to support viral activity, they had themselves emerged as viral activities, parasitic programs hitching rides on older systems of communication and control.

By the time these procedures had been noticed, digital machines were everywhere. Viruses were ubiquitous. If replication was their problem, it was also the way they worked. When even immune systems are composed of replicants, nothing is immune from their contagions.

Computer viruses, it later transpired, were the superficial froth on a swathe of retroviral activity which ran through the emergence of digital machines and reprogrammed cultural activity itself. But in spite of their simultaneous emergence, the notion that computer and

retroviruses were both indications of some broader retroviral cross-context syndrome remained obscure for many years.

Long after the adventures of Linz's famous son, the old guardians continued to expound their faith in the sacrosanct fixations of the species, the immutability of what were supposed to be laws of nature, the impossibility of mutation and runaway replication, their ability to dictate the terms of cultural production, their loyalty to the ancient reproductive machine, and the strict disciplinary boundaries between what were increasingly obviously interconnected cultural zones. Of course, they panicked when they realized the extent to which the cultural police had lost control. But by this point it was far too late. Although cultural viruses were also considered in strict isolation from both the communications nets and the retroviral codes, their detection was the beginning of the end for any reassuring dreams of cultural protection or immunity. When the jigsaw elements were finally flush, it was suddenly obvious that CIV had been writing and rewriting the most basic levels of Western cultural code for decades, centuries ...