

Sonali Gupta and H. Bolin

# Virality: Against a Standard Unit of Life

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e-flux journal #115 — January 2021 Sonali Gupta and H. Bolin  
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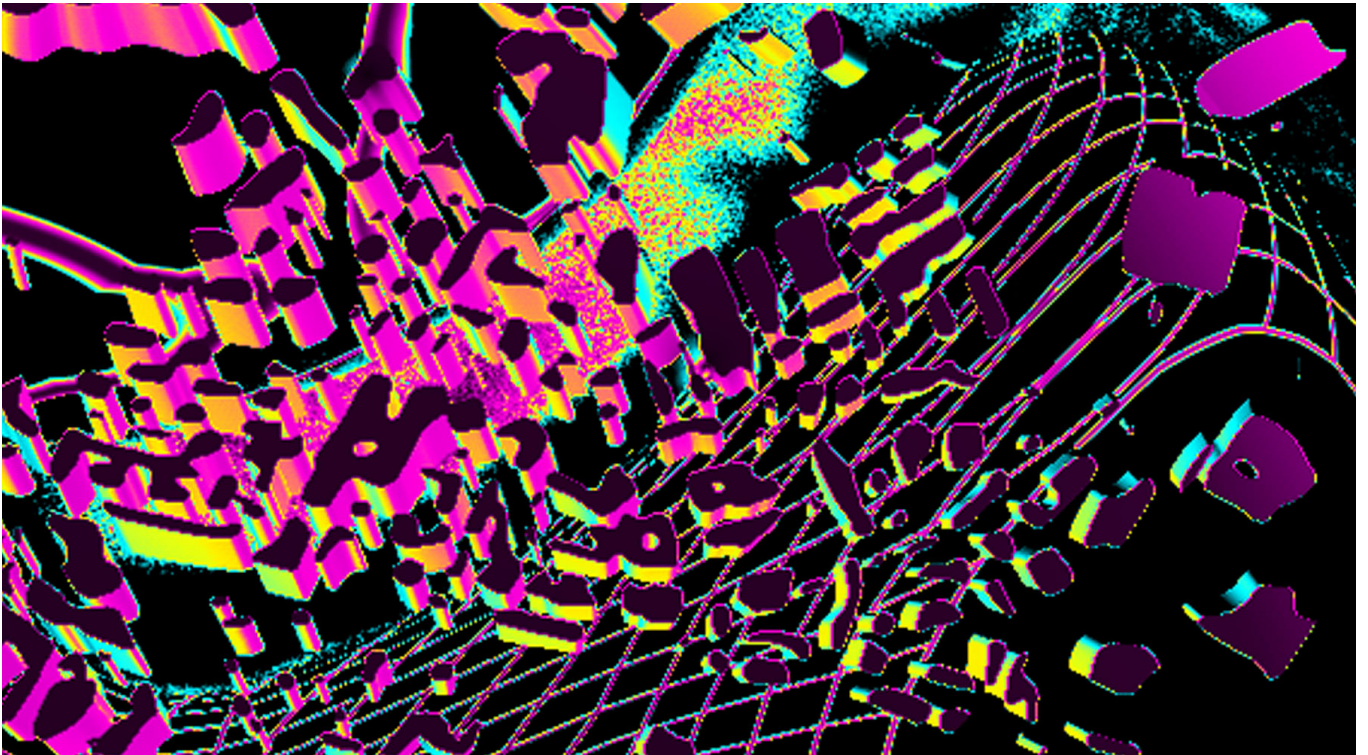
## Coronavirus Beyond Good and Evil

Viruses have been challenging our evolutionary fate since we crawled on this earth as single-celled organisms. The virus inserts its genes into the cells it infects, confusing the genealogy of every organism it encounters. It both ruptures the body to propagate its own spread and simultaneously encodes the body with the means for developing immunity. This ongoing dance is how viruses have driven the evolution of every species on earth. The Covid-19 pandemic is a unique challenge to the form and function of our continued existence on this planet. Covid-19 has besieged the greater body of global empire with as much tenacity as it attacks our lungs, hearts, and immune systems. Supply chains – the circulatory system of global trade and capitalism – continue to falter. The isolation, paranoia, and seemingly endless waiting that characterizes the quarantine is reflective of a deep metabolic fatigue on a global scale.

In the face of this threat, can we come to understand the virus *beyond good and evil*, that is to say, in a manner that neither applauds the virus (as eugenicist or misanthropic approaches would do) nor remains paralyzed by fear, uncritically accepting state measures of control and austerity in hopes of a return to normal? The former attempts to dictate what gets to live, while the latter reflects a flawed disavowal of death. Taken together, these two poles effectively produce the logic of biopolitical governance – to make live, and let die. We are made to live by adhering to the politics of health, where measures such as military-enforced lockdowns and curfews, threats of mandatory vaccinations, state fines imposed on social gatherings, and privacy-encroaching measures such as contact tracing and location tracking are justified because they are believed to administer the well-being of a portion of the population. This rapid expansion of state control further into the biopolitical sphere is only countered by fanatics who indulge in Covid-19 denialism, conspiracy theories, anti-mask rhetoric, and even austerity measures that are, in essence, eugenicist, as they choose simply to let people die. We seek a mode of existence that escapes biopolitics, one that confronts the facticity of the virus to manifest new forms of life even in the midst of the sixth mass extinction.

## Quarantined on a Sinking Ship

Deaths due to a virus are considered acceptable casualties as long as the crisis does not threaten the relations of global capital. Internationally coordinated state responses have not been seen for viruses such as dengue or yellow fever, even though they still cause mass deaths in Latin America, Southeast Asia, and Africa.<sup>1</sup> In



contrast, the Covid-19 pandemic has spread through China, the US, and Western Europe, those places that make up the core of the global capitalist empire. If we accept that Covid-19 was indeed caused by a spillover event due to habitat fragmentation resulting from the endless growth of capital,<sup>2</sup> then we can say that state-administered responses to the pandemic preserve rather than alter the conditions that got us into this situation. From this perspective, new methods of biopolitical control do not respond to the causes of the virus; they keep the species fixed in a state of decay. The virus festers in meat factories, cubicle farms, and jails – places that were already feeding off the heinous expendability of life. The loss of life due to Covid-19 is thus not a bug in the system, but a design feature. As Covid-19 reveals the infected core of an empire only capable of replicating sickness, a sweeping reorganization of life on a global scale becomes an absolute imperative. The question of revolution is now a matter of evolution.

What are we to make of the fact that this pandemic arrived in the midst of an unprecedented wave of insurrections all over the globe?<sup>3</sup> Is it possible to read the virus and the insurrections as two expressions of a unified impetus to escape the global empire of capital and economic governance? We make this comparison not for the sake of analogy, but rather in a bid to access, as Idris Robinson writes, “a hidden partisan knowledge to be uncovered surrounding the novel coronavirus pandemic that also can be exploited and weaponized against established power.”<sup>4</sup> It is not lost on us that biopolitical measures of control have failed to adequately address our collective situation, which continues to oscillate between the next wave of the pandemic and the next wave of the rebellion. However, we see these as a unified phenomenon that operates according to its own logic, and creates its own temporality. The machinations of virality provide us with figures of thought and movement to create new horizons in the face of an untenable situation on an increasingly uninhabitable planet.

### Life beyond the Calculus of Survival

Perhaps God is a virus that inhabits us.  
– Heiner Müller

In a brilliant essay on the politics of life, David Cayley writes that “the measures mandated by ‘the greatest health care crisis in our history’ have involved a remarkable curtailing of civil liberty ... to protect life and, by the same token, to avoid death.”<sup>5</sup> The terrain of governance takes life itself as its object, attempting to force it to adapt to – and importantly, not to transform in

the face of – the selective pressure put on the species. If this is the case, can a politics of life help us combat the governance of life? How do we insert asymmetry into this confrontation? Only that which comes from beyond life or between its interstices can do so. Rather than cling to the immanent categories of life, nature, and history to guide our political imaginaries, the virus inoculates us with an alien knowledge that restores the theological question of what is beyond these givens.

The virus exists in the liminal space between life and nonlife. A small amount of genetic material contained within a perfectly geometric molecular envelope is somehow able to self-propagate, manipulate its environment, adapt, and evolve – all features we might find evocative of life. And yet, a virus does not breathe. Whether you call it prana, qi, or basic biochemistry, respiration is simply a metabolic process of energy transduction. The smallest entity capable of breath is the cell – perhaps why we designate it as the “fundamental unit of life.” The final utterances of Eric Garner and George Floyd, “I can’t breathe,” reflect the singular experience of blackness in America. Yet, these words also echo within us like a phantom pain as a global pandemic chokes the life out of millions and uncontrollable wildfires decimate forests – the lungs of the earth. In this planetary asphyxiation, we look to that which does not breathe but nevertheless remains animated – the virus.

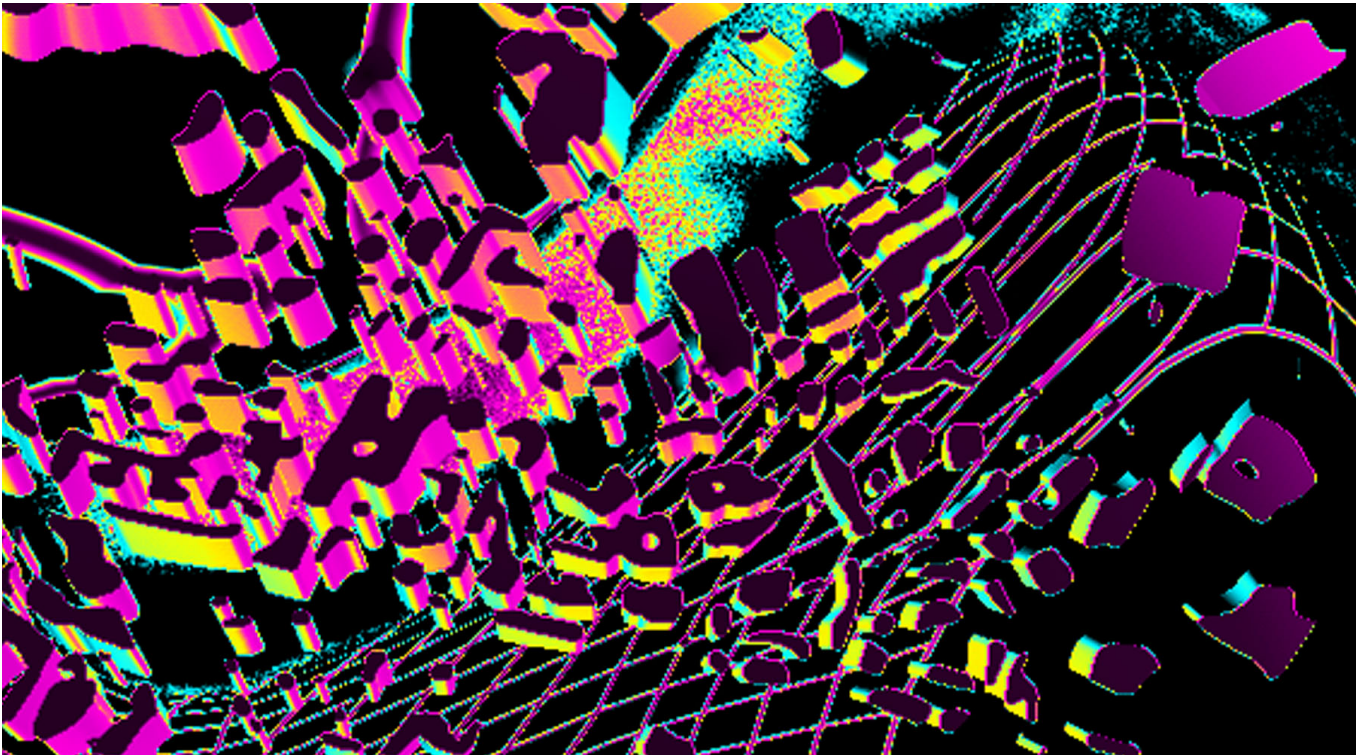
### Fugitive Mechanics

#### A. The New Information Episteme

From epidemiological models to communications networks, systems of governance seek to map sources of information, constructing a genealogy of sorts, in order to constrain and direct the flow of information. In contrast, a viral mode of information propagation is one that is fundamentally unbounded and anti-genealogical.

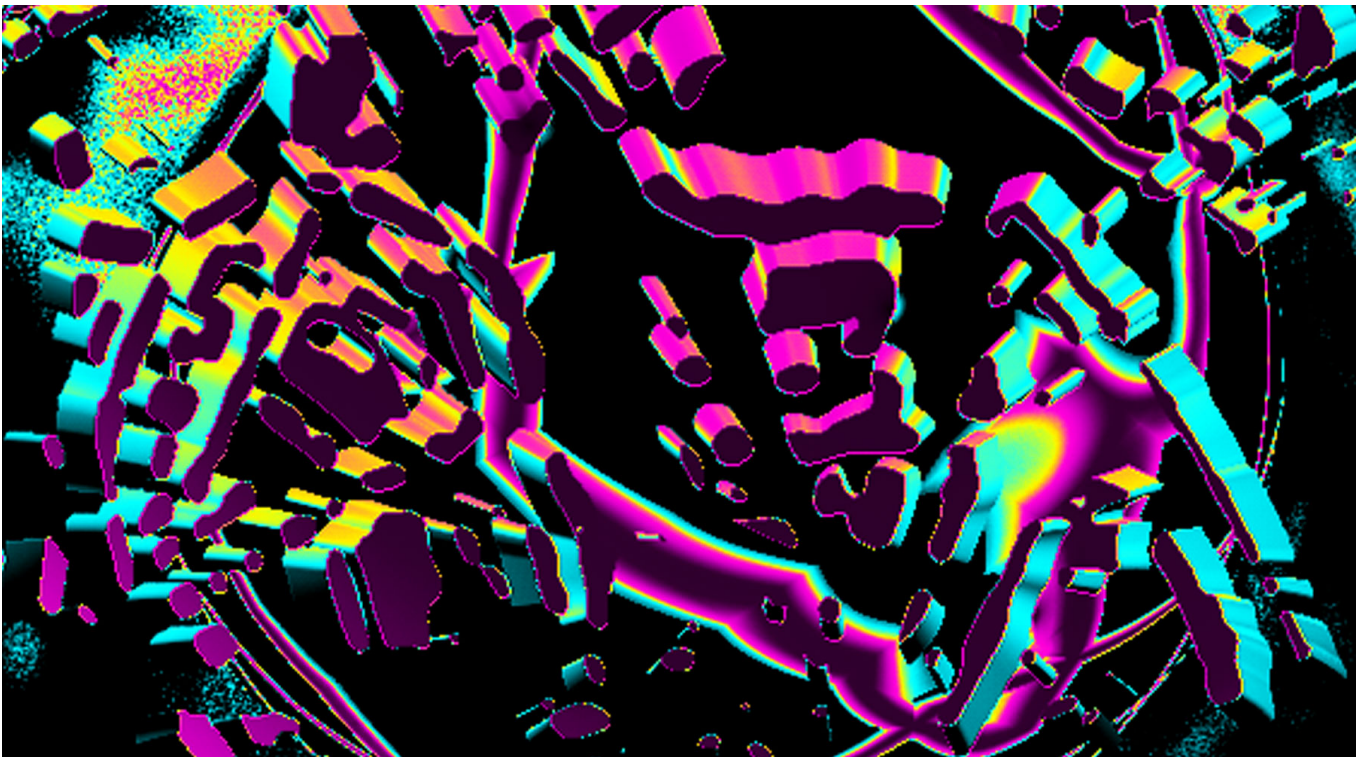
The source of an outbreak is often unknown and as transient as a single cough. Without any central logic dictating its spread, the virus simply multiplies where it finds itself through any medium available, like wildfire. The virus cares not whether its host lives in a prison or in the White House, cutting across the classes and orders produced by the economy and maintained by the state. Existing sites of encounter – the workplace, the church, the nightclub, the courts, etc. – are all suspended as our relations come to be defined foremost by our relation to the virus. As an immediate response to the pandemic, mutual aid and housing defense networks sprung up across the US, as people intuited the state’s inability to contain the crisis. This vast

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rearrangement of resource and communications networks produces a different plane of connectivity – a rich medium for political contagion.

In biological terms, viral information propagation proceeds through horizontal gene transfer. A virus will transport the genes of one of its hosts into another, allowing genes to be shared laterally across species, classes, orders, and even kingdoms.<sup>6</sup> Thus, if species are individuated on the basis of their genetics, if DNA is a barcode for the biological subject, then the virus is nature's de-subjectivizing machine. The synchronizers of ecosystems, viruses promote coevolution by entangling the genetic trajectory of all forms of life they encounter. The virus is a stranger to the arboreal order given to life through genealogical categorization. Instead, the virus acts as a connective element that unravels this tree of life, encountering each body as if it exists on its own plane beyond the genus or the kingdom.

Today we see this very mode of virality begin to undo existing political genealogies. If revolutionary processes in the twentieth century were commanded by specific constituted groups, whether the party, unions, or classes, in today's uprisings these forces are replaced by memes, infographics, and Instagram stories. Flows of information break through their cybernetic constraints and help leaderless groups coordinate actions with complete strangers. Revolts become the only connective element of an increasingly fragmented socius, calling into question pre-codified alliances and identities without ever congealing into a constituent body or coherent revolutionary subject. Virality designates a mode of contagion that destabilizes the way constituted groups interface with one another, confusing their position within the established order, which prepares the ground on which destituent powers can emerge.

#### *B. Silent Reconfigurations and Memory: The Lysogenic Phase*

The virus contains a biological switch between two modes of viral replication, the lysogenic and lytic, which correspond to two distinct temporalities and functions. The lysogenic consists of long, slow, invisible reconstitution, whereas the lytic phase is characterized by speed and sabotage. In the lysogenic mode, viral genes are integrated into the host genome and propagated through the regular replication of host cells. When this switch is flipped from lysogenic to lytic, the host cell is turned into a biological factory for the exponential production of more viruses. It is only at this point that the host becomes symptomatic; the virus makes itself visible only once the latent infection has progressed beyond

a critical point.

Just as a virus inserts its genes to transform the genome of the host, altering the body even as it continues its regular functions, so too a process of covert reconstitution (or destitution) precedes social rupture. If Covid-19 has a lysogenic phase of two to fourteen days, the George Floyd Rebellion had a lysogenic phase on the timescale of years. The lysogenic phase could be seen as a period of "social peace," being asymptomatic with no visible displays of upheaval. These periods are an opportunity for a process of incubation, in which partisans of the real have time to infect the social body with encoded sets of instructions and frameworks, so that when the lytic phase kicks in (always unpredictably), we have formulas to refer to as the physics that hold our world together break down. In 2019, as insurrections spread to every corner of the globe, we all knew this wave would come crashing on the shores of the US sooner or later. We took note of the uprisings, and looked for the tools and tactics used to coordinate the unrest. This knowledge was activated as lasers, umbrellas, and techniques for dealing with tear gas were imported and iterated upon night after night in many cities across the US. When the George Floyd uprising kicked off on May 26, 2020, Telegram groups formed in the initial phases of the pandemic to coordinate rent strikes were transfigured to help crowds of rebels outmaneuver the police with real-time information from police scanners. Transforming a time of social peace into a lysogenic phase means looking for ways to unravel the existing functions of constituted forms and subjectivities and instead turn them into vectors of escape.

It is notable that viruses do not necessarily produce rupture to affect the functioning of the host. In fact, 8 percent of our DNA is composed of remnants of ancient viruses.<sup>7</sup> These viral genetic sequences were initially thought to constitute "junk DNA" since their expression was silent or noisy compared to genes which mapped onto a clear function within the cell. Now we know that these viral elements in our DNA regulate our native genes and are critical for basic functions such as pregnancy and immunity.<sup>8</sup> Thus when viral latency lasts long enough, it becomes embodied memory. A professor of philosophy lamented last year that not a single student in his freshman college course even remembered the Occupy movement. Without a knowledge of this history, he contended, no truly emancipatory horizon could be forged. A year later, we find teenagers and those fresh out of high school participate in some of the bravest and most innovative actions on the streets. We need not remember Occupy to know how to act when the time is right. Such a

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thread of embodied memory may seem silent, but will nevertheless express itself on its own timescale. We look to political genealogies for our history, when in fact history is made by the very elements that corrupt existing genealogies.

### *C. Sabotage and Speed: The Lytic Phase*

In the rapid transition from lysogenic to lytic, viral genes begin to systematically repurpose the machinery of the cell to exponentially produce new viruses, which burst forth from the ruptured cell. When the social body ruptures, tactics, forms, and ideas self-replicate. We see the body of civilization become the medium for memesis, just as the cell becomes a site of pure propagation. The goal is no longer to block the flows of capital; instead, capital is arrested as a natural consequence of the free-flowing proliferation of desire. As Fanon said, “I shall attempt a complete lysis of this morbid body.”<sup>9</sup>

Viruses are the fastest evolving organisms on the planet. Their evolutionary speed can be attributed to their exponential replication – the more copies of a single entity, the more probable that it gains adaptive mutations. Each mutation adds to the possibility of evasion and makes viral spread difficult to control. For instance, the flu evolves so rapidly that some years the vaccine is only 10 percent effective.<sup>10</sup> What is instructive here is the concept that redundancies within systems create new vectors of escape. The LAPD chief of police recently stated that a crowd of ten thousand is easier to control than ten crowds of a thousand people.<sup>11</sup> These redundancies each retain the capacity to differentiate into new threats and spread thin the resources of the system to contain the evolving contagion.

This dynamic was evident in the George Floyd Rebellion, where social contagion on a national scale was disorienting for a coordinated federal response. In Minneapolis, the story goes that protestors were frequently warned by someone in the crowd, often after an explosive event, that the National Guard was just ten minutes away! This empty warning was repeated so many times that it became a running joke. In reality, the National Guard would arrive at a site of rebellion after it subsided locally and began to peak in another city, leaving the Guard to take care of cleanup duty and whatever managerial tasks were left in the wake of the chaos. The speed of lysis on a national scale reflected that the crowds were able to “observe, orient, decide, and act”<sup>12</sup> before the state apparatus, corporations, leftist organizations, and nonprofits, leaving them all to conduct autopsies of their lysed bodies – the charred remains of a precinct or a smashed and looted store.

The switch between the lysogenic and lytic phase is not deterministic, but rather

probabilistic. Viral genes form complex assemblages within the biological context of the host, such that various environmental stimuli, transient perturbations to the systems, and the ongoing background noise of living organisms all contribute to the probability that the threshold to the lytic phase is crossed.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, there is no algorithm that prescribes the specific conditions that produce social rupture; there is no such thing as an engineered riot. The predictions and punditry surrounding possible reactions to a given election or the not-guilty verdict of a murderous cop continuously fall flat because the rapid transition to rupture is subject only to the continuous compounding of internal stochasticities. The inherently statistical nature of this phase transition is a necessary feature of escape; if the process were deterministic it could be precluded. Escape only occurs to the degree that it surprises itself.

### **In the End Was the Beginning**

The advent of the coronavirus pandemic has solidified a destabilization of the categories that uphold the Western political order, and the state-administered and popular responses reflect this destabilization in their confusion: right-wingers appear to carry the torch of freedom as they protest against lockdowns, while the left clings to rules and regulations and reacts to the right-wing. Though the political poles seem to have momentarily been inverted, it is no surprise that neither pole, nor any established political power, has produced a response that addresses the root of our collective malady. Only the global wave of insurrections point to a horizon, still vague, beyond new forms of economic control that hold all life on earth hostage. While these uprisings seem to trespass the political categories of the twentieth century, the absence (or perhaps obsolescence) of party, class, and program also subjects them to a similar confusion as that which plagues the parties of order. This demands that we clarify new figures of thought for our time. Only by learning the language of the virus – its undoing of political genealogies, its latent reconfiguration of the social body, and the ancient speed at which it moves – can we begin to intuit these new figures.

Viruses are the undercommons of the biological world. With no traceable origin, the virus is at once a prehistoric entity and also at the very frontier of evolution. Always a fugitive, the virus never “belongs” to the organism in which it resides – a stranger to the body at best, an infection at worst. The virus is fundamentally impure; it has been touched by everything and yet incorrigibly seeks further contact. Never static, the virus oscillates between the vast temporality of memory and the ultrafast

timescales of microbiological replication. Often it remains silent but, as Fred Moten said of certain musical moments, “What is mistaken for silence, becomes all at once, transubstantial.”<sup>14</sup> Forever incomplete, continuously rewritten, the viral genome corrupts the very language of life – an electrified conduit between what was and what could yet be. A dazzling repertoire of geometries, the virus takes on innumerable forms but cannot be called a life-form. Always lesser than the fundamental unit of life, the virus exists in the liminal space between life and nonlife, nothing but not absent, bloodstained and, precisely because of this, able to give birth.

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All images courtesy of Peter Polack. For more information □.

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