

LANGUAGE, A VIRUS?

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In an essay on experimental software, the net.art critic Tilman Baumgärtel points out that thirteen years prior to 0100101110101101.org's "bienale.py", in 1988, a computer virus had been programmed and disseminated as an artistic prank.¹ A detailed account of the case is available in Robert M. Slade's "History of Computer Viruses", the classic reference on the subject.² In February 1988, a file for Apple's HyperCard software turned up in a CompuServe online forum. Whenever downloaded and opened, it secretly installed a system extension which made the computer display a parodistic New Age peace message on every startup. The people behind the virus, Artemus Barnoz (a.k.a. Richard Brandow) and Boris Wanowitch were simultaneously the editors of the Canadian computer magazine MacMag and the "Computer Graphics Conspiracy" of the international subcultural network of Neoism.³ Brandow emphasized in all his statements on the MacMag virus that he had spread it being a Neoist, and for Neoist purposes.⁴ Since the MacMag virus had spread via floppy disks to development computers of the MacroMind (today: Macromedia) and from there onto the computers of the software company Aldus (later bought up by Adobe), version 1.0 of the popular illustration graphics program "FreeHand" came out on infected installation disks.⁵ This made the case spectacular, resulting in a jail sentence for Brandow, and inspiring the line "we are the virus in

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¹[Bau01]

²<http://www.bocklabs.wisc.edu/~janda/sladehis.html>

³Material on Neoism can be found on <http://www.neoism.net> and in Géza Pernecky's book „The Magazine Network“ [Per93], p.157-182.

⁴In a posting to the SubGenius newsgroup alt.slack on June 21th, 1997, Brandow commented on the news report that the virus had been "inspired by prankster groups like the Neoists and the SubGenii" as follows: "Yes and no. I am a Neoist (you can ask Monty Cantsin or tENTATIVELY a cONVENIENCE). So I wouldn't have said I was inspired by the neoists being one full time 100% as opposed to part-time neoists." – The Church of SubGenius, a hysterical travesty of born-again Christian sects, was something like a clerical equivalent of Neoism until it ceased its radical activities (like an anal sex blind dating service), and created a business out of softening its pipe-smoking gooroo Bob Dobbs jr. into a popular American college humor icon.

⁵This detail is covered in, among others, <http://www.geocities.com/ogmg.rm/Historia.html>

your computer” of the Neoist electro-pop anthem “I am Monty Cantsin”, released on the LP “Ahora Neoismus” still in the same year.⁶

According to Slade, the MacMag virus was one of the very first personal computer viruses. Its only predecessors were three viruses for IBM-compatible PCs – “Lehigh”, “Jerusalem” and “Brain” – which had been written, but hardly disseminated, in 1986 and 1987, and a couple of even older proto-viruses. Brandow’s and Wanowitch’s virus was the first of massive circulation, and it also was the first to spread not only via floppy disks, but also over electronic networks; the “Morris Worm”, which virtually crashed the Internet in 1988, came out in November, nine months later. Since the MacMag virus was all the more the first, as Tilman Baumgärtel observes, whose message consisted not only in self-replication and manipulation of the host system, but also in a plain English text on the computer screen, it was a hybrid of source code (with the binary-encoded signature of the programmer “DREW”) and text output. As such, it was textually more complex than all its predecessors. If the program of Neoism could be described as contagious replication of self-invented language constructs such as the proper name “Monty Cantsin” into “data cells” – a term coined already around 1985 –, collectively adopting and mythologizing them beyond recognition, then the MacMag virus was the first computer version of this program, i.e. the first implementation of Neoism into algorithmic code.

The history of computer viruses in the arts could thus be told the other way around. – Not only as poetic and aesthetic appropriations of virus code, as they recur in Net.art and digital poetry since circa 1997 (see Jutta Steidl’s essay “If() Then()” in this catalogue), but as a language-speculative impregnation and pervasion of computer viruses since they were invented. The possible influences on these speculations are abundant: the cognitive nihilist Henry Flynts whose project to refute analytical philosophy – and anything else – with its own methods had influenced some Neoists; the Deleuze/Guattari volume “On the Line” published in 1983 by Semiotext(e) New York states that “our viruses make us form a rhizome with other creatures;” the biologist Richard Dawkins is controversial for his theory of the “meme” as a contagious idea which he first published in 1976⁷; but more than anybody else, the novelist William S. Burroughs is interesting here. Created with radical collage techniques, his hallucinatory spy novel prose translated writing styles of the modernist avant-garde (predominantly the

⁶The complete stanza: „We love to horrify the good little children of bourgeois bureaucracy, / we love to terrify all the lying leaders of stupifying politics, / we love to play with blood & fire, we are the virus in your computer, / we make you swing, we make you smile, join us & never die“ [Kan88].

⁷See <http://www.memecentral.com>

French surrealism mediated through his friend Brion Gysin) into pop literature. But even importantly, his speculations on language and technology had a striking impact on subcultural currents and thinking in the 1980s.⁸ For Burroughs, the relationship between viruses and language amounted to more than just the idea that viruses could be created in language or – like in Dawkins’ “memetics” – that certain speech acts had contagious effects. For him, language itself was a virus:

„I have frequently spoken of word and image as viruses or as acting as viruses, and this is not an allegorical comparison.”⁹

– Burroughs’ phrase factually became a self-fulfilling prophecy thanks to its many citations in pop culture; Laurie Anderson made “language is a virus” a song title in her 1979 performance “United States Live” which Nile Rodgers produced as a disco hit for the 1986 movie “Home of the Brave”; a movie featuring Burroughs at seventy-two as Anderson’s tango dance partner. – Burroughs’ virus theory might be considered the most extreme antithesis to the nominalism of structuralist linguistics since Ferdinand de Saussure which conceived of language as a rational construct and for whom the relation between imagined concepts and pronounced speech was based on social conventions only. Still, Burroughs’ theory is far from original. He himself doesn’t obscure its traces back to occultisms and para-science: Aleister Crowley’s satanic theosophy, Alfred Korzybski’s “General Semantics” which sought to heal mankind by deprogramming, with the help of a string-puppet-like device called “structural differential”, false identifications of words and things,¹⁰ – and finally Lafayette Ron Hubbard’s doctrine of “Dianetics” and “Scientology”. Influenced by both Crowley and Korzybski, Hubbard’s chief concern was to “clear” (erase) “engrams”, traumas inscribed as words into the subconscious. Among the artist influenced by “Dianetics” were John Cage and Morton Feldman¹¹; Burroughs, who for a

⁸Burroughs’ influence on post-punk-subcultures is, for example, elaborately documented in the „Decoder Handbook“ of 1984 [MH84].

⁹[Bur82], p.59

¹⁰Korzybski’s chef d’oeuvre, the book “Science and Sanity” from 1932, contains a drawing of the “structural differential”; a digital reproduction is currently available at <http://www.kcmetro.cc.mo.us/pennvalley/biology/lewis/strucdif.jpg>. Burroughs refers to Korzybski on the first page of the explication of his language theory in his book “Electronic Revolution”, [Bur82], p.5

¹¹Feldman writes on his first encounters with Cage in the early 1950s: “There was a lot of talk about science fiction, also about Dianetics, a currently popular technique that was said to bring back memories of the womb. As I recall, John and I, with our crazy ideas about music, fitted in very well.” [Fel68], p.7

period was even a member of the Church of Scientology, extensively refers to Hubbard's concepts in his language virus theory.¹²

Just as Burroughs rewrote Dadaist text collages and Surrealist cadavres exquis into pulp fiction of which one never really knows whether it's intentionally parodistic or not, Hubbard could be seen, via Crowley, as a talented popularizer of classical (gnostic, neoplatonist and kabbalist) hermetic sciences which he recoded, 1940s popular science-style, into a SciFi gnosis in manager-speak. Burroughs' claim that language is a virus thus reads as modernist rewording of a language theory common, until the 17th century, in all sciences, but later only in para-science and romanticist poetry: According to Genesis 2.19, man in paradise had a god-given – adamic – language which gave him power to name all creatures and influence objects through words; a demiurgic power of language regained by Rabbi Loew through practical kabbalah when he creates the golem and attaches magic letters to his forehead, and regained by Dr. Faustus when we evokes mephistopheles. Both adamic language theory and Burroughs' virus theory have an a priori; they presuppose inspiration, be it divine breath or, biologically secularized, viral infection. Since both adamic and viral language are taken from higher beings, language speaks through humans instead of humans speaking through language.

But if there's is neither a god, nor an extra-terrestrial virus, but only a programmer lending a code its demiurgic powers, and if its language mobilizes things only by the virtue of a machine, it is evident why on the one hand medieval and Renaissance Christian kabbalah failed at implementing their combinatory language speculations into mechanical devices (Raimundus Lullus, Giordano Bruno, Athanasius Kircher, Georg Philipp Harsdörffer and Quirinus Kuhlmann tried), and it's evident on the other hand why this kabbalah ends up being a mere toy in the virus-programming Neoist subcultures. With the "corny" New Age message, to quote Brandow, the MacMag virus adopts the heritage of a speculative metaphysics of writing in regressive disguise. By implication, it states that a language formalized into the instruction codes of a merely mechanical demiurgy is a human construct and no extraterrestrial virus. Since computer viruses are constructs of contagious instructioncodes, they in turn reveal the contagious virulence of language. Writing like the American novelist John Barth's infinitely recursive "Frame Tale" from 1967 – a moebius strip bearing the sentence "ONCE UPON A TIME THERE WAS A STORY THAT BEGAN" – can be thus be read as a prototype of all computer viruses and script attacks; but also, with

¹²[Bur82], p.42-45.

the computer virus as a figure of thought, as self-exciting code virulent in all literature.¹³

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¹³[Bar68], p.3