



unctures
The Journal for Thematic Dialogue

15: viral

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Junctures: The Journal for Thematic Dialogue is a multidisciplinary academic journal founded by Otago Polytechnic Te Kura Matatini ki Otago in 2003 as a forum for trans-disciplinary discussion, analysis, and critique.

Junctures encourages discussion across boundaries, whether these are disciplinary, geographic, cultural, social or economic. *Junctures* embraces the long established fields of the humanities, arts, science, law, medicine and philosophy, as well as engaging with the challenges of more recent disciplinary and interdisciplinary fields. Each issue of *Junctures* is organised as a site of encounter around a theme. This allows us to highlight the resonances and disturbances of dialogue. With New Zealand and the Asia-Pacific region as a backdrop, but not its only stage, *Junctures* seeks to address the matters which concern us all as we negotiate the contemporary environment.

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Viral: distributed agencies and irreversible change

The call for papers for *Viral* suggests that “(p)arallel discourses of the viral have generated a space where attempts to contain and drive contagions continue to influence and determine relationships between people, animals, technologies and ecologies. In the 1980s and 1990s the virus was seen as a replication machine that forced a questioning of the boundaries of bodies (whether carbon or silicon) and the hybrid borders of identity.”

The writers here engage with what the term viral has come to mean, including a movement from the literal to the figurative. Its histories in 1980s philosophical concerns with the HIV virus, a direct challenge to the resilience of the human and therefore an indicator of what came to be known as the post-human, remain. The virus’s qualities equip it to serve as a model for the cyborgian theories of the post-modern and post-structural period, for changing understandings of subjectivity and its boundaries, and the elision of human and non-human futures. Understood as a microscopic entity, the virus combines organic and inorganic properties and its only concern is to replicate itself rapidly, sometimes through an inorganic and machine-like drill, by hijacking a cell’s nucleus. The sexualisation of the term, a consequence of its association with the HIV virus, gives the analogy further purchase on the imagination.

In this issue, we see discussions around agency and complexity, and in particular ways that apparently slight interventions can produce what seem to be disproportionate changes and different kinds of boundary riding. Most of the texts are concerned with or employ the arts, where the term viral in itself operates as a vector, transmitting a sense of contamination, of inevitable transformation, of radical imbalance between scale and agency. Writers deal with subjectivities that are at risk or transformed in some way, and with attempts to provide alternative viewpoints and strategies. The digital environment comes under scrutiny as its utopian ideals are challenged and appropriated by less benevolent entities.

Philip Leonard brings together London-based Canadian writer Cory Doctorow, Yochai Benkler’s *The Wealth of Networks* and the developers of free and open-source software to consider the hybrid and distributed nature of contemporary subjectivity. Doctorow’s interdisciplinary writing deals through a mixture of fiction and reportage with the hardening of corporate and legislative entities as they undermine the possibility of utopian ideals. But specificity and materiality also inflect and infect identity as, for instance, his characters include the progeny of a mountain and a washing machine. The social capacities of such extreme examples of distributed and cyborgian subjectivities provide a platform for an analysis of the power plays of network culture.