

PREFACE

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There is a disturbing etymological puzzle underlying the title. “Contagion” appears to be a late fourteenth-century coinage, appearing in the wake of the Black Death in mediaeval French and Middle English, from the Latin roots “con,” meaning “with,” and “tangere,” the active verb “to touch.” The puzzle comes from another word we associate at least equally closely with electronic media, “contact.” Here the root words are the same, with the only exception that “contact” comes from the passive form “tactum,” “to be touched.” Oddly, most people probably feel positive connotations about “contact,” but negative connotations from “contagion.” We have had six hundred years to develop these connotations, and yet there remains a nub of their origins: the contagious principle of something coming to touch us or to touch us together is more subjective than the principle of contact, where any two things could be brought together. The usefulness of the electrical contact as a major metaphor, dating back through early electrical experiments and familiar from the literature of the pioneering days of motoring and aviation, gives it both a certain objectivity and a sense of familiarity that we bring into the realm of communicative contact. Not so contagion, even though it is very close, at least etymologically.

The spark that leaps across the spark plug or the telegraphist’s key has given us a metaphor of life since Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, and in that

same moment opened up the contact to contagion, a reversal of perspective that reveals, as Parikka emphasizes, the contagion in every contact, the toxic active in every passive. “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,” as Robert Frost observed. Something sees the structural forms on which communication depends as a barrier too many, a taxonomic frontier between orchard and pine, in Frost’s poem, that might as well divide on any arbitrary or lethal imaginary line, or indeed sender from receiver, signal from channel, signal from noise. To put in touch is to infect, and so we put in place immunological barriers, which are not merely hygienic but apotropaic. The very structures we create to enable communication are themselves barriers to communication. Yet if we want to touch the world, we must be touched by it; and when we touch, the world presses back; and that mutual pressure, that mutual permeation, is communication, and involves us opening up, and therefore taking risks.

Where there is an etymological “touch,” there are etymological fingers. The “digital” of digital technology derives from counting on our fingers, an action in which touching finger to finger enumerates the external world while also affirming reflexively the counting self and the counting body in an act that both unites and divides the counter as it unites and divides the counter and the counted, which now occur as tactile sensations as much as numbers abstracted from the welter of the world. To say such etymologies “derive” is to admit that it is *une dérive*, an errant word that has meandered away from its origin and taken on the connotations of its erring. As much as this wandering includes the fingerprints it has left and, as Parikka argues, implies the prints it might multiply into the future, the double touching of *Digital Contagions* implies a phenomenology, a bodily interaction with artefacts of the past that, as it multiplies sensations, multiplies the subjectivities they conjure into being. The more swiftly the digital operates, the closer it comes to prestidigitation.

Parikka invites us into an adventure in history and ideas about history through an archaeological method that has two major principles. On the one hand, it asserts the right of evidence to exist, whatever the tidal movements of societies, politics, economies, and cultures bearing on around it. It is not only that, since Hegel, the idea of history has implied its movement toward some goal, but that our most persuasive historians of left and right, from Giovanni Arrighi to Niall Ferguson, seek out from the storm of events some sense of coherence. The media archaeologist is bound to insist that even if the world is moved towards mechanisation or electrification, atomisation or flow, the individual instance of mediation has its own right to exist, whether it fits or not with the grander orchestrations of the times. In the fury and the mire of

human and nonhuman life, history is an afterthought: a post hoc rationalisation. In the midst of things, *in medias res*, in the daily operations of media and mediation, there is no such teleology, only the battering of the need to communicate and the barriers that the very act of communication throws in its way.

Rather than the grand march of history, there is then only the ongoing cataclysm of events, that storm of wreckage Benjamin's angel witnesses piling up at its feet as it is blown backwards out of paradise. *Digital Contagions* traces that ongoing cataclysm as the very condition in and through which we construct as best we may the connections from which we might discover some mode of becoming human, and not only human. Parikka suggests a tactical, minor politics of life, not as it is, but, as he cites AI maven Chris Langton, "life-as-it-could-be," a life profoundly interconnected with technologies of mediation. Language, William Burroughs opined, is a virus: like a virus it has no aim but to replicate itself and needs to infect a host in order to do so, even if in the process, like a virus, it makes the host organism sicken. Our technologies of communication operate in much the same way, despite us, beyond us, with a life that includes and traverses but equally happily abandons us. At the same time, these contagions have radically enlightening side-effects, as it were, rational hallucinations we would otherwise never have been capable of, while they are not in themselves ultra-efficient, but mutated by their contacts, becoming internally noisy and changed, otherwise than themselves, so that their purity is always endangered. If media contaminate us, we contaminate them, and in that noisy mutuality we encounter each other in ever unpredictable communicative events, mutually implicated in a zigzag nomadism through time that constructs time itself in its conjoint wanderings.

Though there is in this book a fine history and archaeology of the computer virus, there is also a profound contamination of efficient models of communication in favour of codependent mediations between human and nonhuman agents that questions the very boundaries we have established between ourselves and our technological and natural others. Parikka offers us the alien as integral to any sense of self, the strange in every familiarity, the resistance of that which makes us social to the forms of the social that we have erected to control it. You will not read this book without being infected.