

THEORY RELOADED¹

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From its earliest beginning philosophy has claimed to be rigorous science. What is more, it has claimed to be science that satisfies the loftiest theoretical needs and renders possible from an ethico-religious point of view a life regulated by pure rational norms. This claim has pressed with sometimes more, sometimes less energy, but it has never been completely abandoned, not even during those times when interest in and capacity for pure theory were in danger of atrophying, or when religious forces restricted freedom of theoretical investigation. (Husserl 1965: 71)

Envers un monde viral, numérique, etc., la pensée doit peut-être devenir virale elle aussi, c'est-à-dire capable de créer des enchaînements ou des déchaînements différents de ceux de la critique objective ou même de la critique dialectique. (Baudrillard 2001a: 107)²

Theory is like a virus. It has been spreading and continues to spread on a global scale. World Mental Health Organisations are puzzled, in panic. No antidote has been found. No immune system can resist. Quarantine doesn't work. Antibodies are useless: they simply get the Theory treatment, and end up 'theorised'. After all we're talking about their encounter with Theory's 'Agents': 'radicals' whose only purpose

¹ Theory and fiction are deliberately intertwined in this 'parable'. Theory, like fiction, has always tried to combine the 'speculative' with 'critical practice'. The following 'narrative' is meant as an allegory of the current 'post-theoretical' state of theory – a state between death, renewal and survival, between rigour and roguishness, between the speculative and the pragmatic. It does so, of course, by grafting itself onto the by now almost iconic *The Matrix Trilogy* (*The Matrix* [1999], *The Matrix Reloaded* [2003], *The Matrix Revolutions* [2003]).

² "In response to a viral, digitalised, etc. world, thought [theory?] might have to become viral itself, which means it has to be able to create connections or disconnections that are different from those encountered with objective critique or even dialectical critique." [Our translation]

is to seek an alliance with some ‘other’, radical or not. In the process, stable combinations are broken up, new radicals created, a huge amount of energy set free. Although policing becomes ubiquitous, and claims that the virus is finally ‘disciplined’ abound, new centres of infection keep flaring up. It is not quite clear how infection occurs, how the virus spreads and whether anybody is immune. Some even talk about a generalized global epidemic which has weakened the very immune system of ‘Common Sense’ and has opened the door for all kinds of other infections. Mutations keep appearing, making it hard to eradicate the various vicious strains. As the virus keeps changing, evolving, there is the suspicion that it might be a ‘retro virus’ – thoroughly compromising any hope for positive identification, and completely messing up any causal approach based on linearity and progress. This virus seems to be the realisation of our worst nightmares, those which have been haunting human memory since its first infection. But some say there are comforting signs that the worst has already happened, that we are in a post-infectious stage of slow recovery. Other, more apocalyptic, voices, however, claim that this is only the lull before the next deadly strike. So, maybe this is the moment to strike first and declare a global war on this virus, a global war on ‘Theoreticism’ and ‘Theorrhoea’. We do have a road map for containment, capable of restructuring the affected regions and making them inhospitable for the virus. The strike will be sometimes clinical, sometimes indiscriminate; there will be casualties – and heroes. But we are confident that the general destruction will in the end lead to a better, sanitised environment. ‘Let’s roll...’

This little news flash on the current ‘state’ of Theory and the ‘resistance’ to it captures some of the (im)moral panic of the current (geo)political and intellectual climate, in which targets and scapegoats need to be found to justify radical (re)actions. Theory is an obvious choice for such an attack. It has replicated itself in its hosts with viral success. It is seen as weakening those it strikes through instigating a curious torpor. Amid much inert talk of politics there also tends to be much delirium in those afflicted. A number of topics recur in these ravings: the fear of blindness overcoming insight and of new maladies of the soul, the dread of *philtres* being poisonous rather than curative, and of the dangers when infected of venturing outside in the teaching machine. You may also recognise the diseased by their obsession with language. This is perhaps the virus’s most formidable line of defence, and it has much to do with its capacity to feed off itself if necessity

requires. It has made the Theory-virus ‘irresistible’, according to Paul de Man, since “the resistance to theory is a resistance to the use of language about language and therefore a resistance to language itself or to the possibility that language contains factors or functions that cannot be reduced to intuition [or common sense]” (de Man 1986: 12-13). This resistance can only lead to more theorising – the Theory-virus cannot help but flourish the more it is resisted, “since the language it speaks is the language of self-resistance”. It is, all in all, a scenario which would have delighted William Burroughs. And the beauty of it from the virus’s point of view is that Post-Theory still has not determined “whether this flourishing is a triumph or a fall” (19-20).

In truth, however, several things have changed for the Theory-virus. It has lost some of its virulence through spreading and nestling. It has forgotten, in places, to move on. In disseminating its force, it has adapted too well and has itself become ‘contaminated’, too comfortably hosted by its environment. As a result, it has lost its perfect simplicity, its ‘order’. It is now in a “Theory Mess”, according to one of its hosts (Rapaport 2001). Wherever it has taken root, in all those pockets which it has colonised, or hijacked, it seems tempted – against its very nature – to stop being a purely radical, undoing force. Indeed, it has started constructed ‘centres’ of its own. This process of accommodation, actively encouraged by some environments, has changed the focus from expansion, evolution and radicality to conservation, consolidation and contentment. The virus, it seems, is now ‘self-satisfied’, has acquired a ‘self’ of its own even as it claims to undo the ‘subject’. Some singular viruses have even turned benign, allowing their hosts to spawn generations of loyal organisms,³ who are sometimes known to congregate in commemoration of past conquests and anticipation of future, prospects. Their question, as indeed that of the anti-virals, is the same: “Où va le virus?”⁴

Meanwhile, some remaining radicals of the viral community are outraged, disappointed, feel betrayed. A fight between factions has broken out. Some rebels even want to go as far as eradicating their

³ See Jacques Derrida, quoted in Rapaport (2001: 43): “*The Observer* only has to call me a ‘computer virus’ for my photograph to appear a few days later... in *Der Spiegel* with the title ‘wie ein Computervirus’.”

⁴ This piece was first delivered as a paper at the “Où va la théorie? Whither Theory?” conference in Paris (Nanterre) 19-21 June 2003. We would like to thank the organisers, and Jean-Jacques Lecercle in particular, for staging the event, for their support and permission to publish the paper here in slightly altered form. For the original paper see: www.cf.ac.uk/encap/sections/cct/conference/index.html.

own species. But this might be the occasion to change metaphors here, translating from the biological to the cybercultural. This virus, which is best at attacking ‘resident’ orders, information and memory, has developed a memory or tradition of its own. And as the viral project faces the possibility of collapse some want to press the abort button. In this they’re obviously making the work of virus checkers easier. The spread is stayed on the one hand by intelligent use of secure sites and tactical legitimisation offers, and, on the other hand through ‘intelligence’ and propaganda. The next Trojan Horses might yet be prevented from disgorging their innards. Execution can wait.

The story of a generalized, ‘post-theoretical’, post-infection state is all too familiar. The players are all too easily recognisable, the camps too well-known. Some of the questions that lie ahead are also obvious. In what sense have we grown ‘post theoretical’, or have we perhaps never been theoretical (enough)? Can this theory virus be saved, nurtured, revitalized? Can it defeat inspection, scrutiny and ‘accountancy’? Or do we all wish we’d taken the blue pill and stayed in the Matrix? After all, the Theory-virus originally set out with the firm intention of subverting the system, causing a culture crash. It started out to fight the systemic proliferation of depthless representation and simulation. But even viruses, as destructive and anarchic as their (self-)consciousness may be, will become implicated in the simulacra-building world. Nevertheless, old radical virus-hosts are persevering. In 2001, one intrepid ‘simulacricide’ called Baudrillard made sure his odyssey was unmoved by the siren call of commonsensical perceptions of the timeframes within which the Theory-virus operates. For him Theory is ‘post’ in a different sense to being after what’s past. It now *precedes* rather than follows the event: “ce ne sont plus les theories qui s’adaptent aux événements, mais les événements qui s’adaptent aux théories” (Baudrillard 2001b: 19).⁵ Derrida, too, understands how “post[-]al technology”, as “archivization”, “produces as much as it records the event” (Derrida 1995: 17).

In the face of this reversal of critical potential and the danger of being appropriated by the evil system, viral virulence needs to be stepped up. Unfortunately, despite its ‘good’ intentions, this message is misread by some while it obviously serves as justification for the war on (viral) terror/ism. Clearly, there are some who will always prefer to remain in the Matrix. As seductive as the ‘anticipatory’ form

⁵ “Theories no longer adapt themselves to events but events to theories.” [Our translation]

of the Theory-virus seems,⁶ as liberating as its Nietzschean euphoria may be, calling forth the advent of the superbug/*surhomme* – just call him ‘Neo’ – there is always a formidable neo-liberal ‘Agent Smith’ who is invested with inside knowledge and the authority to act for the Matrix, to cleave it from or to the viral, whichever course serves its integrity better. In a way, therefore, some form of the ‘overman’ has always already arrived, is always already policing the ‘inhuman, oh so inhuman’ Matrix.

But some strains of the Theory-virus remain sly. They stop themselves from building their own infrastructure and instead proceed ‘parasitically’, hoping to bring down the Matrix ‘from within’ – assuming this distinction between inside and outside the Matrix is still possible (depending on whatever was in that red pill...). This virus form is neither entirely destructive nor does it ‘construct’ anything, strictly speaking apart from a few “jetties” maybe, temporal structures, Wittgensteinian ladders, thrown away, deleted to irritate while covering its back, so as to create a field of “forces” in which potential (matricidal) “freeplay” can occur: “In this field of forces, where even counting is no longer possible, there are only theoretical jetties”. These jetties refer to the “force[s] of that movement which is not yet subject, project, or object, not even rejection, but in which takes place any production and any determination, which finds its possibility in the jetty – whether that production or determination be related to the subject, the object, or rejection” (Derrida 1990: 65). The Theory-virus builds jetties, but needs to erase them again before they become part of the Matrix, which would use them against it because every jetty has a tendency to “constitute its own identity only by incorporating other identities – by contamination, parasitism, grafts, organ transplants, incorporation, etc.” (66). This means the virus can temporarily inhabit any form. Potentially it is also anamorphic – somewhat like the second generation Terminator and may therefore try to explode Agent Smith from the inside. This is more than monstrous; it is rather a hyperbolic “monstrous monstrosity” which nevertheless could be seen as a ‘necessity’ – a possibility for anamorphism before any worse form can appear. For the virus

⁶ See Baudrillard (1987: 83-84): “À quoi sert la théorie? ...elle est là... pour séduire, pour arracher les choses à leur condition, pour forcer à une surexistence incompatible avec du réel.” (What is theory for? ...It is there to seduce, to uproot things from their condition, in order to enforce an overexistence that is incompatible with the real.[Our translation]).

‘precedes’ the Matrix, in a strange and perverse ‘Borgesian’ sense, ‘invents’ it. Baudrillard and Morpheus were right to hope.

Perhaps we are understanding why, historically, the Theory-virus proceeds materially through measurable empirical events or stages. In its dormant, enigmatic and anamorphic ‘state’ it has always already been there, carried inside. In this sense, Theory, like Lyotard’s notion of the modern, has always already been contaminated with its own ‘post-ality’. But the Matrix counters that by working through ‘vi(ru)sualisations’ and ‘ruptures’ – pre-emptive ‘reactions’ (or ‘strikes’) to ‘outbreaks’, to the ‘terrorist’ activity of the virus. And one of its prime agents is Hollywood (which would be out of business if that weren’t the way they are), entrenching vi(ru)sualisation according to the basic Hegelian master-slave dialectic of good and evil, with each of these being thoroughly implicated in the actions of the other. Hollywood is in fact powerful because it is so uncanny at intuiting the Theory-virus’s turns and stages. It understands what the hosts seem to want, what constitutes these ‘humans’, maybe even what makes them human – as they make their ‘posthuman’ other, Agent Smith, say (playing back their own message in various inverted forms) “you humans are like a virus”. The implication is that Agent Smith might add “and we [posthumans] are the cure...” (*Matrix* 1999).

Thus there are two histories of the Theory-virus. The first comes in the time capsule of the blue pill, in the apprehensible ‘progressive’ material and empirical history of its ‘wars’ (the first ‘Theory War’, ‘Theory War II’, ‘Theory War III’, etc. or the ‘canon wars’, the ‘culture wars’, the ‘science wars’...) and famous battles (Baltimore, Cerisy more than once, Cambridge); great men (and some women, too). The second is all in the red pill: less visible, having to do with the ‘spectral hauntological’ history of ‘survival’ (does a virus have a ‘life’ of its own?) or ‘living on’: in and through and ‘as if’ in the ‘many deaths’ of theory – a ghost programme running in the background (see Wortham 1998: 165-166). Thus, there is an institutionalised and an uninstitutionalised history of the virus, of jetties and their erasure.

Currently, this bivalence can also be read in the suspicion that the move from ‘literary into cultural studies’ (as demanded and exemplified by Anthony Easthope (1991a and b) and the consequences of too close an association with the network of ‘(social) postmodernism’ may have precipitated a generalised ‘forgetting’ of the relation between the critical and the ‘rigorous’. The highly

problematic and controversial notion of rigour, within Theory and in its relation to (literary) criticism, is best exemplified by forms of textual analysis associated with certain strains of the Theory virus but not others. For instance what has come to be referred to as 'post-Theory' has intended to be figured, in influential essays by host-figures like Nicholas Royle, Geoffrey Bennington and Herman Rapaport, as 'post-Derrida' (a veritable 'Theory super-bug'). The thus identified 'Theory Mess' reflects perhaps an unbridgeable divide that has emerged between critical *and* cultural Theory – which might even stop Theory from moving on. It is because much of post-Theory has grown detached from its first environments, i.e. first 'literature' and now 'culture' as such, that it risks merely serving as assistant in the commodification of knowledge and 'excellence', in the transnational neoliberal institutions of the Matrix (see Readings 1997; and Miller 1999). However, other hosts, like Gary Hall for example, are valiantly trying to rigorously transfer the Theory-virus into this new laboratory of cultural studies which in fact promises the best possible future for new virus-cultures, even though it may be just 'in bits' or bytes (Hall 2002). So, in a sense, posthumanism arrived and was 'beyond recognition' for Theory, apt to be misread by it and its time unacknowledged because, like Ripley in *Alien Resurrection*, it had become a mutant by allying itself with the monster-Matrix. Everybody was waiting for an 'overman' and all we got was a 'machine': one not quite unimplicated in what emerges from the matrix as womb. Ever since, much of Post-Theory has become 'science fiction', its paradoxical mantra 'no post-theory, not now, never...' because it is a Theory-virus 'yet to come'. The One is still on the horizon even while being with us.

Bearing in mind the virus- and jetty-like structure of theory referred to above, however, there had been sufficient anti-idealist warnings against imagining the salvific integrity of The One. Some of those who prophesied Post-Theory had in any case always been doubtful that "theory could be anything other than a disseminate broadcasting of ideas that inevitably undergo multiple displacements, hybridizations, misroutings, misconstructions, and mutations" (Rapaport 2001: xi). For the history of Theory is one as much of disruption as of continuity, of "failed critical encounters" or "*faux bonds*". Some still regret that this Mess is now "a process of theorization in the absence of classical hermeneutical controls, among them, the positive function of an informed community of scholarly agreement" (89). Again, there, the call for rigour amidst the suspicion

that the Theory-virus no longer ‘cares’ for its environment. Maybe, quite ironically, Paul de Man was too right and Theory has become simply irresistible – to itself.

But changes do of course happen. Here we should recall that there is also a *geography* of the virus. The question “Whither Theory?” is of course intimately linked with this geography, with the question of translation, with whether viruses translate. For more and more Theory, today, speaks English, and it demands translation. There is a certain ‘transnational / translational’ relevance to Theory which has remained somewhat undertheorised (do viruses understand each other? Do they speak the same language?). It could even be said that Theory first existed and came into being as translation, through translation. Theory spoke French (and German) first, before it became ‘French Theory’, the ‘French disease’, intellectual terrorism to be transformed, and inoculated with ‘freedom Theory’ – its American antidote (see Derrida 2001). What is certain now is that the antidote is being sold back to the Parisian laboratories out of which the virus came – another form of ‘retro-virus’, the Matrix ‘reloaded’ so to speak. There are even reports that some strains have returned to Paris. In any case, the virus always escapes and mutates with every change of environment, just as the possibility for resistance to it varies according to locality. As everybody knows, *des virus, il y en a plus d’un...* ‘Post-Theory’ could therefore with some justice be described as a state of Theory ‘in translation’. Theory is both the subject and the object of a variety of ongoing translation/transforming processes – or one could say, in French, *des virements* – taking place in specific (national and institutional) contexts. Hence it is itself open to contamination, to being infected, to contracting contagion through contact with what is other. *L’arroseur arrosé – le virus infecté*, so to speak.

Let us consider more precisely one of these instances of the Theory-virus infecting/being infected – through posthuman contagion. We will be able to see this, within Theory’s secular, institutional history, as another of Theory’s several turning points (or simply ‘turns’). The most recent one, apart of course from the omnipresent 9-11, is the infamous ‘Sokal hoax’, which will be seen to coincide with the advent of ‘posthumanism’. Both – 9-11 and the hoax – seem to invoke some ‘reaction’ against ‘postmodernism’, with the latter proceeding also against ‘post-structuralism’ and availing itself of well-known ‘Emperor’s New Clothes’ scenarios in which the ‘roguish’ tailoring of the nothing-much-if-one-looks-deeply-enough is

outdone by the ‘rigour’ which seeks to redress the proper (see Eddins 1995). The ‘rogue-theorist’, in such allegories, finds his adversarial counterpart in the (true and rigorous) ‘scholar’ – a trend also present from the beginning in Theory itself, ever since the ‘theory wars’ between ‘new-fangled’ theorists and ‘traditional’ literary critics. And recently we have been assured that the pendulum has been swinging back quite dramatically towards ‘rigour’ (e.g. in the form of a return to ‘textuality’ and ‘reading’, the ‘materiality of the signifier’ etc. which are all signs of a neo-empirical trend to reinvigorate the ‘critical’ aspect in cultural theory or cultural criticism). There is therefore an ‘intra-viral’ war in which ‘purists’ defend the ‘original truth’ of the viral project from dissenters, Theory’s ‘leverers and digitalisers’ – a Post-Theory generation game (see Williams 1995) in which the former simply ‘fell into Theory’ (Richter 1994) and now seem to be witnessing Theory’s ‘exhaustion’, and the latter are witnessing Theory as market and ‘theory bust’ (Rapaport 2001: xx), and are consequently looking for ways to ‘replenish’ the Theory-genre.

The trouble for the ‘purists’ is of course that there is no clear demarcation between ‘roguishness’ and ‘rigour’, between ‘rogue-critic’ and ‘scholar-critic’ (or between ‘rogue states’ and ‘democracies’ [see Derrida 2003]). The ‘rogue’ is always already implicated in a struggle for ‘sovereignty’, for power and seduction. It is quite ironic that, in a time of ‘rogue states’, Theory, which has been accused of being the ‘rogue’ so many times, is starting its own ‘rogue-hunt’ and campaign for ‘rigour’ (see for instance the frequent reference to Derrida’s – and de Man’s – ‘rigour’ in defences of deconstruction).⁷ The same dialectic (of rogue and rigour; the same auto-immunitarian effect of the virus community) reappears in the relation between Theory and what is occasionally claimed to be one of its possible ‘successors’: posthumanism. This is a discourse made possible by what is envisioned in science. In a simple formulation that is not unjust to proponents like Donna Haraway, N. Katherine Hayles, Judith Halberstam, and Elaine Graham – clearly, like the best detective story writers, the best posthumanists (i.e. those who understand the Matrix best) are women – this discourse might be seen

⁷ See Rapaport (2001: 10, 55-57) for a certain “undogmatic rigour in deconstruction’s reading practices, not unrelated to New Criticism”. See also Rabaté (2002: 143): “What matters above all is the rigor of one’s critical discourse, since it cannot be defined by an object, be it ‘material’ as with drafts, archives, or variants, or more obviously constructed as when we talk of gender, race, or communities. Such rigor will then create a rhetorical space that will make its terms available and debatable for a wider interpretive community.”

as involving all forms of acceptance (and indeed welcoming) of technology as a construct that is no longer quite a prosthesis to the human but rather the human's 'natural' domain. The human, as it were, becomes posthuman by coming (returning?) home to the technological matrix.

Now one of the shortcomings of a great deal of posthumanist literature on the promises of technology (and hence its roguishness to 'rigorous' Theory) is a certain glibness in constructions of the virtual and of the posthuman subject and representation – what might indeed be described as a failure to 'read' (its own theoretical predecessors, and 'texts'), and as a lack of (undogmatic) 'rigour'. And it is quite ironic (but also timely) that, given Theory's early investment in 'scientificity' and its attempted rapprochement between the 'two cultures', the challenge to Theory's practices should proceed from science just at the moment when Theory needs to debate with itself whether it should, and could, renew itself in terms of what science is exploring in areas connected to the study of consciousness, artificial intelligence, artificial life, virtualization and the move from 'writing' – from the letter – to the digital. Ironically, 'Sokalled' Theory is accused of 'abusing' metaphors just as it is about to drop the consciousness of metaphoricity as its most effective (rigorous) shield against what the most facile (roguish) incarnation of the posthuman – most often embodied in fascination with the prospects of cyborgs keeping to their promise that they'd 'be back' – heralds. For which (posthuman) cyborg would read or speak metaphor, make the leap to understanding itself as metaphor, unless infected with Theory, contaminated with the Burroughsian (language-)virus?

This literalising, instrumentalizing tonality of the posthuman order encourages a 'forgetting' of Theory and its hang-ups on metaphor – an amnesia which admittedly can in its own way be quite a 'rigorous' (or reliably 'mechanistic') opposition to questions of language and critical practice. Let's recall that inhuman rigour, after all, is what humans fear most about their machinic others as well as when it steals upon themselves – *rigor mortis*. Because of this forgetting, however, posthumanism becomes in some ways 'post-Theory' understood in a naive and regressive sense. The danger is that failure to engage with the ways in which (anti-humanist) Theory has already raised and addressed many of the questions that currently inform posthumanism can only lead to a return of (techno)idealism. For merely studying *The Matrix* (or its analogues and android products, its 'sentient programmes' and monsters) as

posthuman myth, does not necessarily equate to being ‘rigorously’ posthuman – or even rigorously post-theoretical. Yet as the viral spread intensifies, taking in ‘post-contemporary’ culture in a manner seemingly unworried about the question of rigour, is it not natural to ask after the health of the Matrix?

In summary, this may be regarded thus: the only thing the ‘Theorybusters’ and Agents of the Matrix will have achieved so far is an intensification of virus-activity and further proliferation. There is no sign of an end to the “rigorous torment of philosophy [or Theory] – approaching death” (Belay 2000: 52). As one proponent cynically puts it, maybe someone should just tell these Theory-virus-people to get a life: “Theory is missing out on ‘life, real life that is, as in the expression ‘Get a life!’ about ‘real’ sexuality [how do viruses actually ‘breed’?], ‘real’ politics, and so on” (Rabaté 2002: 3). Take the blue pill, why don’t you? Or maybe someone – maybe someone who has managed to ‘purge’ himself from this ‘disease’, someone who’s run the ultimate Norton virus check and is up-to-date with his (or her) defence mechanisms – should just go and tell the Theory-virus to do the ‘only decent’ thing: go away, please!

Once an emancipatory theory has succeeded in [its] task, then there will be nothing left for it to do and it should allow itself to wither away as quickly and decently as possible. It is a mistake, in other words, to imagine that emancipatory theorists – socialists, feminists and others – hold their beliefs somewhat in the way that Buddhists and vegetarians do... All emancipatory theory thus has built into it a kind of self-destruct device, and moves under the sign of irony. (Eagleton 1990: 33)

W(h)ither Theory? No, we don’t think so, because: “[We] know that you’re out there. [We] know that you’re afraid. Afraid of us. You’re afraid of change. [We] don’t know the future. [We] didn’t come here to tell you how this is going to end. [We] came here to tell you how it’s going to begin. [We’re] going to hang up this phone and then [we’re] going to show these people what you don’t want them to see. [We’re] going to show them a world without you, a world without rules and controls, without borders or boundaries, a world where anything is possible... (*Matrix* 1999).

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