

UC Irvine

Sex and Sexuality

Title

GRID: Viral Contagions in Homosexuality and the Queer Aesthetics of Infection

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4720v3rx>

Author

Blas, Zach

Publication Date

2009-12-12

Peer reviewed

GRID: Viral Contagions in Homosexuality and the Queer Aesthetics of Infection

Zach Blas
Literature & ISIS, Duke University
001.617.470.7331
zachary.blas@duke.edu

ABSTRACT

This paper seeks out a new queer viral aesthetic configuration that binds, interconnects, extends, and reproduces the biosocialities of homosexuality.

The digital art and activist organization Queer Technologies presents their project “GRID” as viral methodologies for reconstructing the dominant GRID of homosexuality, working from Alan Liu’s call for destructive creativity—a creativity that goes “beyond the new picturesque of mutation and mixing to [...] the new sublime of ‘destruction.’ [...] a viral aesthetics.” Such an aesthetic tactic would be a viral exploitation of the homosexual’s self.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

J.5 [Arts and Humanities]: Fine arts

General Terms

Performance, Design, Human Factors, Theory

Keywords

queer, viral, aesthetics, art, activism, grid, political, structure, topology

1. INTRODUCTION

The design, fabrication, production, dissemination, and use of Queer Technologies operates on /as a grid.

Today, two grids can be identified that mutually shape and define the biosocialities of homosexuality. Importantly, these grids are not static positioning structures but rather comprise an assemblage—unstable, in movement, of material. They do not pin the homosexual by abstractness but actually consitute it. Firstly, a history of viral contagion and disease interlocks with and generates conceptions, representations, and bodies of homosexuality. G.R.I.D., or Gay-Related Immune Deficiency, the identifier briefly given to AIDS until 1982, is a locus of this infectious rhetoric. The term, as words that explicitly order homosexuals into the marker of sickness from health, etymologically links homosexuality beyond its all-too-real, continuing struggles with HIV/AIDS to other modulating constructions of “disease” and “sickness.” Secondly, contemporary grids of digital communication and capital virally generate a dominant assemblage of homosexuality that is complicit within flows of consumption and nationalism. A

“sterility” of sorts, a type of homonationalism, as Jasbir Puar has previously defined, enfolds homosexuals into these machinations and visually projects and materially constructs a form of homosexuality as included within the nation-state and mass culture, while simultaneously excluding those homosexuals who reside outside of these homonormative representations and life formations.

These two grids are collapsed into one another, interlocked in a viral logic that structures the homosexual body from a diseased or infection formation, while generating a dominant form of homosexuality as anything but an other to heterosexuality and the nation.

Queer Technologies refers to this larger construction simply as GRID. This assemblage called GRID—the relationalities and interactions that come to form the homonormative homosexual of today, infects the multiplicitous biosocialities of homosexuality. Yet, Queer Technologies argues that through an exploitation of the virilities at work here, another grid can be replicated—a queer grid that provides viral tactics of infection and escape from the representations and formations of GRID. Queer Technologies sees this grid developing through the potential of product deployment and distribution.

2. BODY

2.1 Grids, Virilities, Capital

What is a grid? Grids appear to permeate contemporary life: there are the grids of urban planning and the geographical locations they correlate to, various electrical power grids of communication and the social grids they enable and foster through their use, grids of digitization from the pixel upwards through larger scales of construction and the representations and objects that embody them, as well as vast networked grids of computation, biology, and capital that formulate and structure new ontologies, epistemologies, and relationalities. Indeed, in her 1979 article on grids in art, Rosalind Krauss heralds the grid as our declaration of modernity, for while the grid is ubiquitous in the 20th and 21st centuries, it appears in no artworks of the previous century.[1] Krauss also points out that the grid is antimimetic, in that its organization is not one of imitation but of its own “aesthetic decree.”[2] Importantly for Krauss, this autonomy of the grid reveals a paradox at the heart of its construction between matter and spirit (or socialities), in that the grid both masks and exposes the dimensions of its spirit through its material make-up. Thus, a grid is a form endemic to our time that materially and visually organizes something through its own logic—a logic that emerges

as a relationality between various social and material forces that come to constitute a thing. Of course, a thing may be constituted by many grids; certainly, this is the circumstance rather than not. Furthermore, the work of the grid is always in flux, as material and social processes alter and mutate. Grids may rigidify but they may also hyperfluctuate.

Homosexuality is no exception here, as many mutable grids at various scales, frames, and dimensions could be suggested to inflect upon it. Queer Technologies focuses upon two overarching grids within homosexuality as a tactic to problematize the paradox within GRID: that is, the persistence of homosexuality as ghostly, with its certain bodies disposed of and an image-form in its place that is antithetical to the bodies it “correlates” to that spreads at the rate of digital replication and infection. GRID, infecting all biosocialities of homosexuality, operates as a viral, networked topology.

Some words on topology: A network topology is the mapping of elements in a network, including the physical connections between points and the logistical flows of data between these nodes. McKenzie Wark writes, “Topology begins when the topical ceases to have autonomy, when the line along which communication flows closes the gap between map and territory.”[3] With this proclamation at hand, grids appear to be a particular instantiation of topology, where the material and social are flattened together into the visuality of grids, commonly seen today in perpetuations of mass media. To think topologically [4], as suggested by Alex Galloway and Eugene Thacker, calls for interpreting the rules and relations structuring the diagrams. GRID, as a topology, is structured by the previously discussed grids of biology and global capital. Thus, to parse the homosexual’s nodes in this topology, one must ask how GRID restructures the logic of the homosexual, that is, what data does GRID infect into the formation of the homosexual, how GRID mutates the quality of the homosexual’s interactions within this topology, as well as the representations that emerge from this.

Now that the general logic of GRID has been identified as viral, Queer Technologies would now like to further examine the dual nature of this viral logic, which is constituted by the two grids that formulate GRID, so that we can further understand the political conflict between GRID, the topology, that diagrams (grids) homosexuality and homosexuality as something gridded and ungridded, always somehow partially beyond GRID.

First, Queer Technologies will discuss the qualities of viruses and build from that framework into an examination of the viralities of GRID. Alex Galloway and Eugene Thacker succinctly define the virus as “life exploiting life,” that is, viruses, as beings, take advantage of their host entities and/or systems to generate more copies of themselves.[5] The virus succeeds in producing its copies through a process Galloway and Thacker refer to as “never-being-the-same.”[6] Maintaining within itself the ability to continuously mutate its code with each reproduction, the virus propagates itself. Therefore, replication and cryptography become the two actions that define the virus. What astounds Galloway and Thacker--and also myself--is that the virus reveals a life in an “illegible and incalculable manner.”[7] They suggest that the virus’ ability to mutate and modulate itself is an example of artificial life.[8]

If the virus is an artificial life, what is the potential of such a life? Hardt and Negri hint at such an answer when they write on the

monstrosity of the flesh. For them, all flesh is pure potential, and it is the social forces that give form to this fullness of possibility. All flesh, then, is monstrous, in that all life (constituted by flesh) is an artificial life, a social life.[9] So we are all monsters, but here, the virus is a particularly fascinating monster: our socialities have made it extremely monstrous to most of the world, while its own monstrous flesh inflects and shapes the host systems it infects. Importantly, Hardt and Negri note that there are some monsters we should work against but others are benign. Thus, the virus, as a mutating artificial life form, is politically ambiguous. That is, if something is said to be viral, it is not necessarily a bad monster. Interestingly, this viral flesh of potential opens the possibilities for resistant practices, in that viralities can be used to infect dominant systems.

These traits of the virus have recently been discovered in larger dynamic structures of contemporary life and society. In their writings on global capital and the new world order, Hardt and Negri argue that “Empire’s institutional structure is like a software program that carries a virus along with it, so that it is continually modulating and corrupting the institutional forms around it.”[10] Jussi Parikka has taken this claim further in his writings on viral capitalism. He notes that capitalism is viral in that it is now capable of continuous modulation and heterogenesis.[11] Parikka identifies this viral mode of operation organized around contagion, mutation, and colonization. “The commodity,” he writes, “works as a virus--and the virus part of the commodity circuit.”[12] The flows of these commodity circuits produce as assemblage that allows capitalism to be examined topologically: the connections they foster, enable, and forbid, the relationalities produced as results of these connections between things, the forms these processes give rise to, as well as the constant mutation of all present a grid (or diagram) of flows operating under a viral logic. Viral capitalism, as an artificial life form, replicates itself through a mutating act of never-being-the-sameness. By this viral replication of difference, capitalism generates an image (or face) of inclusion. Parikka points out that “viruses, too, have faces.”[13] To work against viral capitalism, it would seem one must first identify the face (overcoded thing)--and then escape it, as Deleuze has called for.

A biopolitical structure of modernity and globalization, an artificial life, GRID is that mutating topological structure that virally produces and replicates something it refers to as “homosexuality.” GRID reproduces a biosocial monolith of homosexuality through encrypting the very real histories of various homosexual infections (including HIV/AIDS, clinically diagnosed psychopathologies, and societal exclusion)--that is, GRID infects the historical infections of homosexuality and then replicates homosexuality-in-and-of-itself as a commodity. The commodity, constantly, multifariously manufactured, becomes GRID’s ability to never-be-the-same: the homosexual as viral commodity is never the homosexual but a viral infection of global capital. GRID is a faciality of homosexuality.

2.2 GRID and Queer Technologies

The question becomes: How do we escape GRID? Can we escape GRID?

Queer Technologies proposes a queer grid. If the virus is life exploiting life, Queer Technologies’ formation of a grid calls for an exploitation of the queer self to manufacture difference, that is, to combat the dominant viral GRID of homosexuality, a queer

grid must replicate and mutate the dominant never-being-the-sameness to produce its own queer never-being-the-sameness. Queer Technologies aligns with Alan Liu's notion of "destructive creativity"—a creativity that goes "beyond the new picturesque of mutation and mixing to the ultimate form of such mutation and mixing: what may be called the new sublime of 'destruction.' [. . .] the critical inverse of the mainstream ideology of creative destruction [. . . a] viral aesthetics." [14] This aesthetics becomes like a repetitive stream of disidentifications—disidentifying as queer cryptography, repetitively infecting the infections of mainstream ideology at the risk of obliterating one's own "hygiene." Queer Technologies locates the potential of such an aesthetic viral infection in queer affect. Queer affect as a type of cryptography--nonhygienic ways of being, living, experiencing--generates a life-resistance that, in its contingencies, mutations, and infections with global capital, produces another queer, viral grid that is an "illegible and incalculable" artificial life to GRID, as it is always forming its life in relation/exploitation to this dominant GRID.

A queer GRID is mapped through the potential of relationalities and affects generated in a Queer Technologies event, situated within the context of the encounter between the body in contact and the autonomy of the technological product. The affective encounter holds the potential to explode out into a queer collective force. To diagram this reveals the topological possibilities for queer world-making on and off GRID: the queer grid is both visible and invisible.

Queer Technologies identifies these material practices as queer capitalism. If, in viral capitalism, the commodity is the virus, Queer Technologies produces and manufactures its own line of commodities as political products to infect the desiring-product logic of GRID that constitutes the biosocialities of homosexuality. Queer Technologies refers to its products as gay bombs. Appropriating the mid-90s US Air Force proposal for the development of a biochemical weapon that would turn combatants of war gay, gay bombs, as queer political products circulating in GRID, explodes and infects GRID's viral logic. Simply put, the circulation of Queer Technologies must exploit capital. Queer Technologies executes this through a variety of tactics: shop dropping, barcode manipulation, price based on cultural institute of dissemination, e-business scams, free giveaways at rallies, and fake tech support centers.

Queer Technologies has commenced developing sets of maps and battle plans that are referred to as GRID. Queer Technologies uses the same name for its own queer grids as well as the dominant GRID to virally bind them linguistically and etymologically, in that Gay-Related Immune Deficiency (G.R.I.D.) is always left as a trace (an infection) within the term "grid."

As Queer Technologies circulates within various cities and geographical areas, at sites such as Target, Best Buy, Circuit City, RadioShack, Wal-Mart, Borders, Barnes & Noble, Apple, and other places of technological consumption, Queer Technologies diagrams and situates these products--gay bombs--within a grided structure. These queer grids, once mapped out, are distributed all over the areas they correlate to: on billboards, sidewalks, signposts, websites, store fronts, etc. Akin to a Situationist *dérive*, these queer grids attempt to restructure the replications of homosexuality virally produced by GRID.

Queer Technologies' grid project fashions a new topology: these circulated diagrams and situated products in various consumer outlets work toward producing another type of virality that emerges from the fusion of map and territory--viral in that it uses the same logic of viral capitalism: the queer grid allows itself to constantly change and mutate with the dominant GRID to continuously infect capital; it is its own mutation engine that produces queer never-being-the-sameness. The queer grid will crash, succeed, re-chart, change always, replicate always. Its value lies within the fact that each node in the topology--as a gay bomb--has the potential to explode into a queer relationality, encrypted by another grid, that can generate a whole new set of infections against GRID.

Queer Technologies, through all its various tactics--broadly defined as viral aesthetics, infects GRID with another grid. Perhaps these escapings from GRID are momentary, fleeting, but they continue undoubtedly. Escaping the face, the representation, the image, the formation that infects the biosocialities of homosexuality generates the potential for a new viral logic of new queer biosocial formations, a new monstrosity of the homosexual flesh. Queer Technologies calls this flesh the *SoftQueerBody*—a social, artificial flesh, a materialism of everything, infected as queer.

3. REFERENCES

- [1] Rosalind Krauss. "Grids." October, Vol 9. MIT Press: 1979, 52.
- [2] *Ibid.*, 50.
- [3] McKenzie Wark. *Gamer Theory*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 56.
- [4] Alexander R. Galloway and Eugene Thacker. *The Exploit: A Theory of Networks*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 13.
- [5] *Ibid.*, 83.
- [6] *Ibid.*, 87.
- [7] *Ibid.*
- [8] *Ibid.*, 85.
- [9] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. *Multitude*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 190 - 193.
- [10] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. *Empire*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 197 - 198.
- [11] Jussi Parikka. *Digital Contagions: A Media Archaeology of Computer Viruses*. (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 96.
- [12] *Ibid.*, 97.
- [13] *Ibid.*, 144.
- [14] Alan Liu. *The Laws of Cool: Knowledge Work and the Culture of Information* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 325.