Ennuri Jo and Michael Anthony Turcios

As If, Beyond Contagion
Editor's Introduction

*This conference issue of *Spectator* is the result of First Forum 2017, the graduate student conference at the University of Southern California's department of Cinema and Media Studies.

In summer of 2016: alt-right forces continue to be on the rise across Europe and the U.S.; protests are frequent and widespread. Philando Castile and Alton Sterling's deaths play on screens everywhere, rendering the fallen bodies achingly visible, but their lives invisible, erased. Deadly attacks fueled by xenophobia and homophobia targeted Orlando, FL, and Nice, France; even more lives and communities were destroyed in Dhaka, and Baghdad in the name of religion and justice. In the midst of this chaos, and as the U.S. presidential election drew even more anxiety, Darius Lerup wrote an essay titled "Contagion and the Ethics of Difference" in *world picture*.[1] Here, with Jean-luc Nancy and Gilles Deleuze as his primary interlocutors, Lerup considers the possibility of an ethico-ontology based on the notion of difference, and asks whether the concept of "contagion" can be useful: "whether the concept of contagion can become a vehicle for the communication of both ethical and ontological considerations within (and perhaps beyond) a philosophical context. . . whether contagion can be understood as a means of communicating an ethics rooted in the promiscuous *creation of difference*."

It is not difficult to speculate that what motivates Lerup's turn to "contagion" is perhaps the necessity to address the impulse to transgress boundaries and to contaminate rhetoric of purity and segregation. "Contagion" immediately signifies the breach and blurring of boundaries, whether of singular or collective identities, between territories, of discourse, of affect, and more. Moreover, as the word is conventionally understood in the medical context, it signals a damaging influence that involves a direct physical contact – an immediately apparent mixing and touching between otherwise distinct entities. A close look at its etymological roots shows the following:

> contagion (n.)
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> late 14c., "a communicable disease; a harmful or corrupting influence," from Old French *contagion* and directly from Latin *contagionem* (nominative *contagio*) "a touching, contact," often in a bad sense, "a contact with something physically or morally unclean, contagion," from *contingere* "to touch," from assimilated form of *com* "with, together" (see con-) + *tangere* "to touch," from PIE root tag- "to touch, handle." Meaning "infectious contact or communication" is from 1620s.[2]

In Lerup's formulation, "contagion" acquires a force that comes from its power of touch, contact, and communication. Free of its moral determination and signification of purity and segregation, contagion instead connotes the plurality of being, and the possibility of heterogeneous, multiple worlds.

Throughout 2017, as we began conference planning and October drew near, we watched white nationalists march in Charlottesville, VA; Donald Trump's travel ban on Muslims led to nationwide protests in all major airports; the policemen responsible for the taking of Black lives were once again acquitted. Measures and images of segregation were under the spotlight everywhere: borders were everywhere – the immovable mechanism that fosters one's identity, and forms and sustains communities and sanctuaries, by excluding and banishing that which is different. Why not look at borders, we thought.

Yet, Édouard Glissant once said: "I find it quite pleasant to pass from one atmosphere to

Ennuri Jo and Michael Anthony Turcios, editors, Spectator 39.1 (Spring 2019): 5-8.

another through crossing a border. We need to put an end to the idea of a border that defends and prevents. Borders must be permeable; they must not be weapons against migration or immigration processes."[3] Implicit yet integral to his imagination of a permeable border, a border that distinguishes identity yet fosters difference, is the transgressive agent that crosses such borders. Is this not the very phenomenon of contagion? In this vein, we, too, turned to a particular thread of etymology of contagion: from Latin *contagio (n-)*, from *con-* "together with" + the base of *tangere* "to touch." To consider contagion as our mode of approach, in this sense, allows us to move beyond investigating the border and borderlands as a notion and a site, not only drawing upon the spectrality of borders, that is, the impossibility of erecting and maintaining impermeable, immovable "borders," but more importantly also recognizing that which is contagious, excessive, overflowing, transgressive. Here, we arrived at a similar set of questions to those of Lerup's: Can "contagion" be a productive model with which to think about the movement and organization of ideas, cultures, and peoples? In particular, how can we think about "contagion" as an academic and artistic mode of approach, and how does this mode newly expose the interstices between the realms of discourse, the arts, and the exigencies of resistance?

Giorgio Agamben writes: "The face is at once the irreparable being-exposed of humans and the very opening in which they hide and stay hidden. The face is the only location of community, the only possible city."[4] We also ask whether the concept of contagion can be used to understand the mechanism of what we see in one's face—the image, the appearance of oneself that pivots around language and discourse of representation. In particular, we ask whether there exists a meaningful relationship among "contagion," the *moving image,* and the various forms and networks it sustains. If one can construct from contagion a politics of difference, how does one account for the significance of representation in this schema of contagion? If the concept of contagion can be used to destabilize seemingly discrete and singular categories of identity, what do existing media portrayals of contagion represent? Can cinema be considered a contagious medium, as it shows the passage of time and movement via sustained contact between still photographs, and as it invites an active sensory engagement from the spectator? What can we learn anew about the changing economy of images as we move between filmic and digital media amidst the contagious flow of objects and capital? What can images in all of their iterations do when we recognize their contagious potential?

The 2017 First Forum conference, curated around these questions on "contagion," featured panels and guest speakers whose subjects were designed and deployed in order to think with these questions. Alongside the presentations, we were joined by Dr. Bliss Cua Lim (Associate Professor, UC Irvine), who presented her research on the precarious status of archival films in the Philippines. Dr. Patrick Anderson (Associate Professor, UC San Diego) discussed his 2016 book *Autobiography of a Disease*, his beautifully written, essayistic account of his own experience battling a near-fatal bacterial infection, uniquely rendered as a speculative account of life from the viewpoint of bacteria.[5] We also had the privilege of hosting the renowned experimental filmmaker Claudio Caldini, whose films reiterated the political significance of the avant-garde film vis-a-vis the communicative potential born by cinema at large.[6]

The following dossier comprises seven essays that were initially presented at First Forum 2017 and all address the theme of contagion in its different iterations. If the conference itself could be characterized as a contagion of ideas, where each presentation also worked through the notion via a vibrant range of disciplines, methodologies, and material forms, this issue of *Spectator* is perhaps what comes after the initial contact, the aftermath of the event of contagion. What lies beyond the contagious touch? Is that which is contagious always overflowing, transgressive, contaminating, and contaminated? Is contagion an event, or an ongoing process? Underneath these questions concerning the temporality of contagion is evoked a series of powerful and perennial thinking that addresses the temporality and the legitimacy of politics of resistance.

One clue with which we might attempt to think about such questions is the spectrality of the contagious touch (or perhaps a laugh, a tear, a

cough): a flash of transgression of boundaries and codes, that connects us through otherwise rigid and fixed constructions of bodies and identities, whose momentary existence is barely registered, yet when identified, ripples through the entire event of contagion. That which cannot be easily identified, and more importantly contained, signals to us not only a flash of possibility of an act or an idea, but that of possibility itself. "Our present ignorance of what might come has to be seen as the space of a possibility," Franco "BIFO" Berardi writes.[7] For BIFO, what allows for a continued resistance in the face of the catastrophe – the irreversible effects of capitalism in all political, economic, and social spheres, the "privatization of every living space and activity"—is the mode of the "as if." Unaware of what lies after the catastrophe, we must act *as if* the world we imagine is possible. Is this not the logic of contagion, and our response to it, in all its iterations? The transgressive potential of that which is contagious is often recognized belatedly. One acts "as if" the contagion is in fact fully active in its contamination: we act as if it has already executed its full force, even when its full extent remains unknown. (By the same logic, a contagious agent spreads *as if* its unannounced presence is welcome.) Then, our attempt to model a discursive approach around contagion must also take into account this mode of the subjunctive imagination it evokes in response, only instead of acting as if that which is contagious has harmed us, we imagine as if it moves with us and beyond the normative boundaries of discourse and politics.

We want to invite readers to think with us around the notion of contagion as a curatorial logic as well as a methodological schema when moving through the collection of essays that follow this introduction. Laura Stamm's piece, which begins this dossier, addresses the divide between the seemingly rigid walls of the institution and the viral potential of queer art by examining the artwork of Kia Labeija. This foray into the visual arts is followed by Emma Ben Ayoun's piece on the film *Cure* (1997), in which we see the usefulness of the framework of contagion in a new light. While Stamm's piece challenges the rigid boundaries of normative personhood with an emphasis on queer identity, Ben Ayoun's work views such boundaries with a focus on the precarious epistemology of sickness. In what ways does sickness define the outlines of an individual, and how do we understand personhood when such sickness is registered primarily as its contagion? The essay's consideration of contagion in this light is coupled with a sustained formal analysis of the film, in which Ben Ayoun identifies another mode of contagion: the slow, fluid passage of movement and time that discreetly registers itself as a legible filmic image.

Amy Skjerseth's piece glides into the sphere of contagious sound by considering the atonal and discordant soundscape of the 2014 horror film *It Follows.* Offering an incisively detailed analysis of diegetic and non-diegetic sound used in the film, one that is often reserved for the realm of the visual, the essay extends the scope of contagion to the realm of the viewers, or perhaps *listeners,* by evoking a haptic audibility, *à la* haptic visuality. What would we hear if we could touch, and be touched by, contagious sound? Following these discussions on the audiovisual specificity of the film form, Josh Foley's article investigates the figure of the vampire in early cinema in order to examine the relationship between the early development of cinematic narrative and the discourse of modernity.

Michael Anthony Turcios' piece signals a significant turning point as we see works that draw from extra-filmic objects. More importantly, we are reminded that the positive logic of transgression we locate in contagion bears no ideological allegiance. In his complex assemblage of contagious thoughts that brings together environmental thought and decolonial activism, Turcios identifies the logic of contagion in the border complex itself—the very infrastructure through which contagious agents otherwise transgress. Similarly, Patrick Brodie's work that opens with an incredibly cinematic scene of drug-induced "zombies" in Brooklyn, NY shows us that the logic of contagion at work is, not unlike the vampire, ambivalent and highly complex in its movement. Jeremy Hsu's work centers around yet another highly specified site: K-Pop music videos. Considering the act of dance as a performative identity that is highly contagious, Hsu locates a rhetoric of contagion both within the videos and in the digital mediascape they travel through. The issue concludes with Allison R. G. Ross's review of *Distillations* by Mari Ruti.

CONTAGION

We began this note by situating ourselves alongside an academic essay musing on the possibility of an *ethico-ontology* of difference and in scenes of resistance in contemporary political landscape. On one hand, it is to emphasize the contemporariness of our motif of contagion, or its necessity. On the other hand, we want to configure our work specifically as that which must belong to the public milieu, despite the fact that it is shaped in and funded by a privately owned, academic space: the orientation of intellectual work must be always already political. Perhaps this multivalent mode is another site of contagion; however, it is not complete—if contagion can ever be considered complete, that is—without those who read and think with us. It is our hope that you, our reader, can join us in our endeavors encapsulated in this issue of *Spectator,* as if the strange amalgam of ideas here have always already been contagious.

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Notes

1 Darius Lerup, "Contagion and the Ethics of Difference," in *world picture journal 11* (2016): 1-21.
2 "contagion (n.)." Online Etymology Dictionary. https://www.etymonline.com/word/contagion
3 See Édouard *Glissant: One World in Relation*, dir. Manthia Diawara, French with English subtitles, 48 minutes (K'a Yéléma Productions, 2009).
4 Giorgio Agamben, "The Face," in *Means Without End: Notes on Politics,* translated by Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 91-99.
5 See Patrick Anderson, *Autobiography of a Disease* (New York: Routledge, 2017).
6 Mr. Caldini's films were presented in partnership with Los Angeles FilmForum as part of its program "Ism, Ism, Ism: Experimental Cinema in Latin America," and the "Pacific Standard Time" series. For more information, see here: https://www.ismismism.org/; http://www.pacificstandardtime.org/.
7 Franco "BIFO" Berardi, "Precariousness, Catastrophe and Challenging the Blackmail of the Imagination," *Affinities: A Journal of Radical Theory, Culture, and Action* 4:2 (Fall 2010): 1-4.