

# Queer Epidemics

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*This chapter of my book Bodies Out of Rule (2014) considers John Greyson's Zero Patience – a 1993 musical satire on the early days of the AIDS epidemic – in the context of the epidemiological and immunity discourses inherent in neoliberal biopolitics. Greyson's film can be read as a queer critique of the broadly understood epidemiological operations of biopower, especially its authoritarian systematizations and taxonomizations that establish a certain "regime of truth" and are a necessary condition for the effective regulation of social practices and subjects. Through my reading of Greyson's film, I argue for a queer reclamation of the feared figure of the virus as a thoroughly transversal figure that transcends existing boundaries, identities, and cognitive categories.*

**Keywords:** *biopolitics, immunization, John Greyson, Zero Patience, virus*

In the previous chapter I discussed briefly some of the differences between the cultural figures of the virological and epidemiological imaginary that, as I want to argue, has become central to late modernity. Both vampirism and zombie-ism are like a contagious disease: they are unpredictable, their causes and sources are difficult, if not impossible, to detect, they get transmitted through direct bodily contact (blood and/or flesh), they spread exponentially and are difficult to contain, they spell chaos, if not an apocalypse. Indeed, the internet is replete with information on the alleged vampire virus (V5 or K-17, or other) or else the zombie virus (LQP-79 or the C-virus, or other), and comparisons to HIV are often explicit<sup>1</sup>. A growing number of cultural theorists (leading among whom are Tony D. Sampson and Jussi Parikka)<sup>2</sup> assert that in a globalized culture of networks and ever increasing connectivity, "contagion" becomes, for better or worse, the underlying logic of major social phenomena. "The age of globalization is the age of universal contagion," Hardt and Negri state bluntly (2001: 136). In the realm of the internet and the media the idea of "going viral" has itself gone viral, not to mention the very vampire and the zombie. What they have in common, besides the quality of "undeadness," is a familiar idea of the computer virus, itself, as Buiani points out, traceable to the discovery of the HIV virus (2009: 87) and the more general virological rhetorics that developed, over the 1980s and onward, in science, politics and other social spheres. (Incidentally, if HIV inspired IT specialists to think of malicious information codes in virological terms, a later hypothesis, proposed in 2003, concerning HIV infection – the Trojan Exosome Hypothesis – has probably borrowed its name from information technology; see Gould *et al.* 2003.)

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, South African Vampire Culture Center; Rannals 2013.

<sup>2</sup> See Jussi Parikka, *Digital Contagions: A Media Archaeology of Computer Viruses* (2007) and Tony D. Sampson, *Virality: Contagion Theory in the Age of Networks* (2012).

The last two decades or so have seen a (viral) proliferation of movies featuring epidemics or contagions, often with a (post-)apocalyptic twist. Some evocative titles include, among many others: *Epidemic* (1987, Denmark, dir. Lars von Trier), *Outbreak* (1995, USA, dir. Wolfgang Petersen), *12 Monkeys* (1995, USA, dir. Terry Gilliam), *Contagious* (1997, USA, dir. Joe Napolitano), *Virus* (1999, USA, UK, Germany, Japan and France, dir. John Bruno), *Contaminated Man* (2000, USA, UK and Germany, dir. Anthony Hickox), *Infection* (2004, Japan, dir. Masayuki Ochiai), *Mulberry Street* (2006, USA, dir. Jim Mickle), *28 Weeks Later* (2007, UK, dir. Danny Boyle), *Pandemic* (2007, USA, dir. Armand Mastroianni), *Carriers* (2009, USA, dir. David Pastor and Àlex Pastor), and *Contagion* (2011, USA and United Arab Emirates, dir. Steven Soderbergh). Among the less mainstream classics of the plague/ epidemic genre critics list two early (pre-AIDS) movies directed by David Cronenberg: *Shivers* (1975) and *Rabid* (1977). These and other movies, diverse as they are, evidence a voracious demand for an apocalyptic thrill, to be sure, combined with the postmodern inclination for morbid "teratology," akin to an aesthetics that Mark Dery has called the "New Grotesque" (1999: 145–166). But they also point to an epidemiological frame of mind which, arguably, underlies much of current (bio)political practice. Expanding zones of access and contact, the reasoning goes, call for enhanced preventive measures, based primarily on surveillance and identification. Public health is increasingly becoming a high security issue; or, rather, state security and population control are increasingly framed in terms of (global) epidemiological prevention. As Ronnie Lippens puts it, in reference to anti-terrorism, the present international relations conceives of the global Empire "as a complete, organic body of free-but-organic-and-therefore-orderly flows that however needs to be kept intact by means of epidemiological interventions aimed at excluding or neutralizing viral entities" (2004: 125, emphasis original)<sup>3</sup>.

Giorgio Agamben's influential idea that modern Western regimes operate increasingly on the principle of the "state of exception," where the executive power is justified to use any security measures beyond its legal prerogatives in a state of "higher necessity,"<sup>4</sup> corresponds to the epidemiological paradigm that I am sketching out here. "Normally" the state of exception would apply to war conditions: either a war between states, or a civil war within a state. In Hobbesian terms, the very existence of the state is justified through its primary function to ward off both kinds of war, or, indeed, the war of all against all. In late modernity, however, the "state of exception" – when not related to an open war as such – has come to be understood largely in epidemiological terms. An infection that might prove lethal to a body politic, or to humanity at large, is an ever-present possibility, and because of that all resources – scientific, technological, political, and social – must be mobilized for the sake of "survival" (however selective the idea of survival turns out to be, on closer scrutiny). As Bashford and Hooker aptly note,

<sup>3</sup> The category of epidemic/contagion movies frequently overlaps with that of zombie/vampire movies; one notable recent example is the 2013 blockbuster *World War Z* (USA), directed by Marc Forster.

<sup>4</sup> "One of the theses of the present inquiry is that in our age, the state of exception comes more and more to the foreground as the fundamental political structure and ultimately begins to become the rule" (Agamben, 1998: 20).

The uncontrollability and unknowability of contagion, its surprise appearance in other bodies, in other places, in other creatures, invites systems of control and knowledge: hence the huge scientific and bureaucratic machine of public health, touching on so many levels of conduct and social organization, from the personal and local to the national and international. (2001: 2)

Thus, modern sanitary regimes, instituted for the sake of *salus populi*, have a deeply political justification: the prevention of an apocalyptic pandemic of social disorder and the protection of the community's security. The imagined epidemic refers to a variety of possible threats: a "real" contagious disease, a deadly computer virus, an extremist idea that leads to acts of terrorism or rebellion, a market crisis, a weakening of the "moral fiber" of a society (through, for instance, pornography), etc. Since any of these (and more) is a constant possibility, the state of exception becomes permanent, which legitimizes modern governments' ever expanding control, surveillance and "necessary" preventive actions. In short, modern regimes can be said to be mostly panic-driven.

Within the epidemiological paradigm, the two major strategies employed by modern biopolitics are, arguably, containment and immunization. Simply speaking, containment refers to any policy that seeks to prevent a dangerous phenomenon (a "real" or "figurative" epidemic) from spreading. The US "containment doctrine" during the Cold War was supposed to prevent "communism" from spreading; today, it is "islamism" and terrorism (notoriously conflated) that have become the usual suspects. A variety of sanitary measures are undertaken to prevent an uncontrolled spread: identifying outbreaks (and particularly the "patient zero" of an epidemic and the pathogen's routes), physical elimination of possible animal pathogen carriers (e.g. burning poultry), quarantines, etc. Equally, if not more, important are immunological discourses and policies, which have gradually come to occupy a central place in contemporary socio-political and cultural imaginaries. In Donna Haraway's classic statement,

the immune system is an elaborate icon for principal systems of symbolic and material "difference" in late capitalism. Pre-eminently a twentieth-century object, the immune system is a map drawn to guide recognition and misrecognition of self and other in the dialectics of Western biopolitics. That is, the immune system is a plan for meaningful action to construct and maintain the boundaries for what may count as self and other in the crucial realms of the normal and the pathological. (1991: 204)

According to Haraway, the importance of the immunity discourse in late capitalism stems from its intersection with the discourses of self and other that regulate epistemological categorizations and, consequently, the current parameters of socio-political life. As understood in current medical usage, the immune system must constantly differentiate self from non-self, it "must recognize self in some manner in order to react to something foreign," in Edward S. Golub's formulation (quoted in Haraway,

1991: 203). The question arises, "When is a self enough of a self that its boundaries become central to entire institutionalized discourses in medicine, war, and business?" (Haraway, 1991: 224). Invoked in order to justify particular forms of social organization and political action, immunology and its scientific vocabulary are themselves thoroughly imbued with cultural assumptions about selves and others, and particularly the desired or undesired interactions between them. However, Haraway contends, immunity can also be conceived in terms of shared specificities; of the semi-permeable self able to engage with others [...]; of situated possibilities and impossibilities of individuation and identification; and of partial fusions and dangers" (1991: 225).

The Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito's take on the biopolitical immunity paradigm differs in several respects from Haraway's, although not in contradictory ways. It is worth pointing out that in Esposito's view a conceptualization of (legal or medical) immunity must necessarily be understood in conjunction with a conceptualization of community within the modern biopolitical paradigm that he traces back to the beginnings of modern political philosophy, especially Hobbes's foundational *Leviathan* (1651). Esposito defines immunization as the (communal) organism's internal mechanism which protects it not by "frontal opposition" but through the strategy of "exclusionary inclusion or exclusion by inclusion" (2011: 8). My contention in this context is that if present-day multiculturally-oriented liberalism seems to be ready to recognize certain kinds of difference and fold them into its posited body politic, this is happening largely in terms of the Espositian logic of immunization, i.e. a body politic internalizes a certain amount of what seems to constitute a danger in order to immunize itself against that very danger. "To survive," Esposito asserts, "the community – every community – is forced to introject the negative modality of its opposite, even if the opposite remains precisely a lacking and contrastive mode of being of the community itself" (2008: 52). He compares the immunization of a political body to vaccination, which consists in introducing into it a "fragment of the same pathogen that it wants to protect itself from" (2008: 46). In effect, immunization "saves, insures, and preserves the organism, either individual or collective" by subjecting it "to a condition that simultaneously negates or reduces its power to expand" (2008: 46). Shifting the view to the modern liberal bodies politic that have become relatively favourable to certain notions of "multiculturalism," I would claim that under these current regimes carefully selected forms of difference must be administered in tolerable doses, they must be closely regulated and made functional by and for the system, so that a more radical (and contagious) difference is prevented from jeopardizing the system's *status quo*.

Contagion and epidemic can thus be argued to constitute the nodal point that brings together major issues of late modernity: questions of defining self versus other, the importance of recognizability and identifiability, the vulnerability of bodies and bodies politic (and hence questions of state security), the medico-political imperative to control and contain, and the viral nature of the media and communication; the list is not exhaustive, to be sure. For example, if the major issue in current international politics is, as many believe, the phenomenon called "terrorism," it is certainly framed to a large degree in epidemiological terms. Terrorism itself aims at spreading an uncontrollable panic in

a given population, which means it considers fear to be contagious; the use of the media (e.g. the videos of bloody executions of captured “enemies”) is another dramatization of this attempt to trigger an epidemic of fear. The terrorists’ message is also perceived as a contagious “pathogen” whose dissemination must be brought under control, however difficult this seems to be due to the decentralized communication networks that have proliferated thanks to technological developments and an ever increasing access to those technologies. The fear of terrorism is, in turn, used by governments to terrorize their citizens into complicity and obedience; in other words, an official (controlled) panic – in the form of a declared “state of exception” – is employed to ward off the fatal panic that might be caused by terrorists. Terrorism is posited as a high security risk that threatens to weaken and possibly kill the body politic “from within,” which might be imagined either as “one of us” (one of the body’s cells) turning cancerous and deadly, or as a pathogen that enters the body from the outside to wreak havoc inside it. The state’s monopoly on violence is thus inseparable from its monopoly on fear: an administration protects the population from other “illegitimate” forms of fear, just as the official use of violence is justified in terms of protecting the body politic from other (and allegedly deadly) forms of violence.

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Considering the paramount importance of immunological categories in late modernity, the proliferation of “contagion” movies is hardly surprising. The two epidemiological strategies of biopolitical control I singled out above – containment and immunization – find ample illustration in such movies. In Soderbergh’s *Contagion* (USA/United Arab Emirates, 2011), for instance, it is crucial to both find the “patient zero” and trace the paths of the virus’s spread, and to devise a vaccine before it is too late, i.e. before the whole population (if not the whole humanity) gets killed by the disease. The movie’s plot is rather predictable and the “message” conventionally moralizing, but there is one aspect that merits mention here, namely the fatal discrepancy between the need for urgent action (finding and administering a vaccine) and the legal procedures that, if duly observed, would take much too much time<sup>5</sup>. In other words, the movie offers a justification of the breach of legal procedures in the “state of exception” caused by the pandemic. The protection of life – Hobbes’s *conservatio vitae* that Esposito declares the originary gesture of modern biopolitics – is posited as the highest law that justifies any necessary sacrifices. Similarly, in the more recent *World War Z* (dir. Marc Forster, USA/Malta, 2013) devising a vaccine is literally a matter of humanity’s life or death. We also find an element of individual sacrifice here, but the epidemiological “lesson” that the movie teaches is that in a globalized world the politics of containment is no longer tenable in the long run (the walls around Israel, though temporarily effective, eventually prove insufficient) and so the only salvation is in immunization through vaccination. In the late modern world some “classic” dichotomies must be redefined. One of them is the distinction between the inside (self) and the outside (other): the inside (self) must recognize its vulnerability to and dependence on the outside, or its ultimate permeability. Another is the distinction between poison and cure (or enemy and friend): the only way to protect

<sup>5</sup> It must be noted, however, that in *Contagion* it is not the government that sidesteps the law, but a brave scientist who is ready to risk her own life for the common good (and, perhaps, for her professional career).

human beings from the deadly zombie virus is, paradoxically, internalizing a different pathogen that makes humans “invisible” to the more deadly virus. In Espositian terms, it is life’s “negative modality” (an illness that, however deadly, can be kept under control) that is used in order to protect life from an apocalyptic destruction.

Although epidemic/contagion movies have many models on which to base their more or less fantastic and apocalyptic plots (bird flu, swine flu, SARS, the Spanish flu, not to mention the Black Death or smallpox), it is, arguably, the AIDS epidemic that for several reasons has become a primary instance of the epidemiological paradigm of late modernity. Its importance as a reference point has to do with its sheer scale, of course, as well as the fact that it has been the first disease of such scale since the Spanish flu of 1918–1919 that has killed millions of people in the developed Western world, especially in North America. Moreover, it has engendered complex political and cultural responses (including the queer activism of the 1980s and the queer theory that followed in its wake). Indeed, the epidemic itself as well as its medical, cultural, social and political contexts may be seen as a vivid dramatization of the mechanisms of modern biopolitical regimes, driven as they are by the fear of dysfunction and disorder, concomitant with the fear of some sort of socially transmitted contagion. Modern sanitary and medical regimes, instituted for the sake of *salus populi*, have proved to have a deeply political justification, i.e. the prevention of an apocalyptic pandemic of social disorder and the protection of the community’s security and futurity. Indeed, through the logic of catharsis, the genre of apocalyptic contagion movies may itself be seen as a functional element in the socio-psychological immunization of the public against “more real threats” present in social life, or more precisely against the governments’ and other powerful institutions’ claims as to what constitutes such threats and what counteractions they necessitate.

In her classic essay “AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification” Paula A. Treichler famously asserted that AIDS was not only an epidemic of an infectious illness, but an epidemic of meanings as well (1987: 268). As she explains,

“AIDS” is not merely an invented label, provided to us by science and scientific naming practices, for a clear-cut disease entity caused by a virus. Rather, the very nature of AIDS is constructed through language and in particular through the discourses of medicine and science; this construction is “true” or “real” only in certain specific ways – for example, in so far as it successfully guides research or facilitates clinical control over the illness. The name “AIDS” in part constructs the disease and helps make it intelligible. We cannot therefore look “through” language to determine what AIDS “really” is. Rather we must explore the site where such determinations really occur and intervene at the point where meaning is created: in language. (1987: 262)

The cultural constructedness of "AIDS" does not deny the reality of the lived experience of people living with AIDS (or HIV) or the people around them; rather, it makes those experiences intelligible and communicable. It also makes the disease controllable at least in symbolic terms, even if it remains incurable, because the act of naming and creating stories (whether personal narratives or medical discourses) helps to contain and tame the dangerous, socially and epistemologically disruptive phenomenon. The disease and the devastation it causes, however painful, become more emotionally "acceptable" when inscribed into explanatory, or simply meaningful narratives. At the same time, however, none of the narratives (even the scientific one, despite its authoritative status) can offer a final explanation, and so AIDS remains "a nexus where multiple meanings, stories and discourses intersect and overlap, reinforce and subvert each other" (Treichler, 1987: 269).

Arguably, the AIDS epidemic brought about a new level of critique of the socio-cultural formation of identities, bodies, sexualities, communities, and more; a formation that is always invested and contested politically, even though the scientific discourse more often than not claims a political neutrality that seems to lend it credibility and authority. The scientific community was caught red-handed, as it were: the definitions and interpretations of AIDS kept changing due to the debates among scientists themselves, the attitude shifts in the media and in the general public, politicians' decisions (or, more accurately, their prolonged inaction), and, significantly, the attention grabbing campaigns of the grassroots movement known as ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power). The AIDS crisis has become a nexus of contested meanings, convictions, affects and practices, where the political, the personal, the medical, the communal, and the cultural proved to be implicated in one another in ways more numerous and more subtle than most people may have suspected. And nobody can tell, as Treichler observes, "whose meanings will become 'the official story'" (1987: 287), at least for the time being. In fact, the more or less established HIV/AIDS narratives continue to be challenged and alternative narratives offered. Most of such alternative narratives, including the controversial 2009 documentary *House of Numbers: Anatomy of an Epidemic* (directed by Canadian born Brent Leung), are dismissed as conspiracy theories and/or "AIDS denialism," and accused of causing large-scale damage to people's health and lives. And yet, despite an overwhelming scientific consensus on the "official story" of HIV/AIDS, despite the fact that the disease seems mostly explained away and contained, if not yet effectively cured, doubts and uncertainties persist and questions multiply rather than disappear, within and without scientific circles. There is something in the very nature of the disease and epidemic (inasmuch as we understand it as, precisely, a disease and an epidemic) that seems to defy any ultimate explanations and biopolitical regulations. I would even risk the statement that with HIV/AIDS science may have reached the very limits of knowledge as we know it, the limits of any belief that science can faithfully represent, through its classifications and cause-and-effect explanations, the true nature of the real world. It is certainly able to offer provisional definitions,

preventive guidelines and temporary remedies, but unable to get a full grip on the virus and the disease it is believed to cause. As with Heisenberg's principle in quantum physics (to use a somewhat far-fetched analogy), AIDS marks the end of certainty in cultural and scientific definitions of diseases<sup>6</sup>.

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John Greyson's 1993 movie *Zero Patience* is, among other things, a playful comment on the multiple narratives that claim to uncover or contain the "truth" about AIDS. The very fact that Greyson, a major representative of the so-called New Queer Cinema, chose to tell the story in the highly unlikely – given the seriousness of the subject matter – genre of a musical comedy draws the viewer's attention to the importance of linguistic and narrative conventions and how they impact our expectations, emotional reactions and understandings of the "truth" behind the story<sup>7</sup>. In this respect alone, as well as in many others, Greyson ridicules the somber tone and the sensationalism of the dominant discursive conventions applied routinely to AIDS. The film's campy humor and, more generally, its multiple breaches of decorum, are more than just subversion for subversion's sake; not unlike Bruce LaBruce's Brechtian distancing techniques mentioned in the previous chapter, they convey the idea that, to paraphrase Marshall McLuhan's famous dictum, "the genre is the message."<sup>8</sup> Or, to put it somewhat differently, whatever societies take to be the "truth" depends crucially and inevitably on the alleged truth's discursive framing. This is, obviously, one of the key insights found in the writings of Michel Foucault; in a much quoted passage he ascertains that each society has its "regime of truth" which consists of the types of discourse that determine a society's criteria for distinguishing true and false statements (1984: 73). In modern societies, continues Foucault, this regime of truth is an effect of "scientific discourse and the institutions which produce it"; it is "transmitted under the control [...] of a few great political and economic apparatuses (university, army, writing, media)," but at the same time it is open to "political debate and social confrontation" (1984: 73). Greyson's *Zero Patience* explores several intersecting or conflicting discourses, their institutional frameworks and the various media in which they materialize, and it weaves a dense multidimensional narrative that sheds any simple notion of "truth."<sup>9</sup> The movie is a complex elaboration on the "epidemic of signification" (Treichler 1987, quoted above), the "crisis of representation itself" (Watney, 1987: 9), and the "epidemic of blame" (a phrase used in the movie by the leading character, Sir Richard Burton) triggered by AIDS. Even the title itself, let me note in passing, is an ingenious and politically charged resigni-

<sup>6</sup> For an overview of AIDS-related theory and activism, see especially Watney (1987), Crimp (1988 and 2004), and Treichler (1999).

<sup>7</sup> To be sure, *Zero Patience* was not the first comedy about AIDS. In 1985 the German filmmaker and activist Rosa von Praunheim made the low budget black comedy *A Virus Knows No Morals*, which may have been one of the sources of inspiration for Greyson. Matthew Sini argues that the New Queer Cinema in general was characterized by a particular predilection for a transgeneric aesthetics whose purpose was "to critique both the ideological implications of the [mainstream Hollywood] genres as well as the notion of genre itself" (2011). Sini concentrates on American cinema and does not mention Greyson.

<sup>8</sup> McLuhan's seminal proposition was, of course, that "the medium is the message" (1994: 7–21).

<sup>9</sup> On how "framing" organizes notions of reality, see Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (1986).



fictionation of the notion of “patient zero” as used in epidemiological discourse: the quest for the cause/origin is replaced by an urgent call for action.

Appropriately enough, the movie’s opening scenes, as well as the first musical number, make a reference to the *Tales of the Arabian Nights*, itself a frame narrative consisting of a large collection of imaginative (as well as “exotic”) tales. The aspect of the *Arabian Nights* that has come to be highly valued in the West (other than the literary quality of individual stories, of course) is the way in which storytelling becomes a strategy of deferring death in general, and of abating the ruler’s fatal anger in particular. Fiction becomes, literally, a matter of life and death (or, even better, of livability and disability), but also a way of dealing with authoritarian power and the “truths” it decrees or the realities it creates and sustains. Choosing Sir Richard Francis Burton<sup>10</sup> (whose major biography was published three years before the film’s release) as the unlikely leading character points in a number of ways at the question of discursively and institutionally produced “truths.” Not only the translator of *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night* and *Kama Sutra*, the Victorian personage is also referred to as an explorer, geographer, cartographer, writer, soldier, spy, diplomat, orientalist, ethnographer, linguist, and so on. Above all, Burton must be seen as an empire-builder, both through his geographic exploits and the “knowledge” he so extensively produced. This dizzying range of occupations reveals Burton as an ambiguous, multidimensional figure – a man of knowledge, a man of action, a man of imagination – and a scandalous one at that, given his eager interest in matters sexual (among other things, he carried out a massive study of penis size). One of Burton’s actual theories, expounded in an essay appended to his translation of the *Arabian Nights* and quoted in the movie, is that of the so-called “Sotadic Zone,” i.e. a zone where pederasty is a widespread and acceptable social phenomenon. Related to climatic factors, the Sotadic Zone left England (but not North America) safely protected from the danger of pederasty<sup>11</sup>.

In *Zero Patience* the “historical” Burton blends with the fictional character who happens to be an immortal taxidermist and diorama designer working for the Natural History Museum in Toronto. Burton’s “truths” are always framed or showcased: through his dioramas, his narrations, or the video documentary he sets about to make for his cherished Hall of Contagion on the alleged Patient Zero of the AIDS epidemic. In Burton’s hands, the world as we know it becomes a diorama full of stuffed animals, wax figures, artifacts and “special effects,” all placed in a frame narrative that pretends to be a truthful, factual, scientific representation of reality. A scheming, fame-hungry character, Burton proclaims to his boss: “We must be fearless in our pursuit of scientific truth, no matter how con-

<sup>10</sup> The Burton character is probably another witty resignification performed by Greyson: an important person in the early days if the epidemic was Democrat Congressman Philip Burton, one of the first US officials to push for AIDS-related research and legislation.

<sup>11</sup> In his “Terminal Essay” attached to volume 10 of *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night* (1886) Burton asserts that “[w]ithin the Sotadic Zone [including France, the Iberian Peninsula, Italy and Greece, with the coast-regions of Africa from Morocco to Egypt] the Vice is popular and endemic, held at the worst to be a mere peccadillo, whilst the races to the North and South of the limits here defined practice it only sporadically amid the opprobrium of their fellows who, as a rule, are physically incapable of performing the operation and look upon it with the liveliest disgust.”

controversial or unpopular!" before breaking into a song about his vision of a "culture of certainty" and an "empire of knowledge": "Classify and label, find the answers out,/ A culture of certainty will banish every doubt." Burton wants to persuade his boss to endorse his project to research the still mysterious causes of AIDS:

Geography has mapped every river, every glade,  
 Yet we still have much to learn about the mystery of AIDS.  
 Let's explore this foreign body, learn the customs of its cells,  
 Classify its nooks & crannies, pull its chains and ring its bells.

In an attempt to find a simple chain of cause and effect, Burton posits the necessity to identify the patient zero of the epidemic:

We will never find a cure, till we isolate the source ,  
 Once we know where it came from, we can kill it off by force.  
 What's the origin of this virus? Europe, Zaire, or Haiti?  
 The clues are here before us, Patient Zero holds the key.

The colonial echoes in Burton's reasoning are not incidental. Donna Haraway, alongside many other scholars, emphasizes "the residue of the history of colonial tropical medicine and natural history in late twentieth-century immune discourse," including the AIDS discourse (Haraway, 1991: 223). Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri state succinctly:

As AIDS has been recognized first as a disease and then as a global pandemic, there have developed maps of its sources and spread that often focus on central Africa and Haiti, in terms reminiscent of the colonialist imaginary: unrestrained sexuality, moral corruption, and lack of hygiene. (2001: 136)

Burton's original project (before his love affair with Patient Zero) is a neo-imperialist and totalitarian one: it is a project of nothing less than an epistemological colonization of the world, a turning of the world into a museum.

The ghost of Patient Zero is a character based on Gaëtan Dugas, although the name does not appear in Greyson's movie, effaced by the generic term "Patient Zero." Dugas was a Québécois flight attendant who was widely believed in the mid-1980s to have been the Patient Zero of the AIDS epidemic: a superspreader who wilfully infected thousands of men. Suggested by some epidemiologists, the hypothesis gained an enormous currency thanks to Randy Shilts's book *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic* (1987). Dugas was othered in the US as Canadian; othered in English Canada as Québécois; othered from heterosexual society as queer; othered from the community of "good citizens" as promiscuous and irresponsible; othered from the healthy as the bearer of the "gay cancer." Greyson's *Zero Patience* is, among other things, a reflection on this exoticizing and stigmatizing gesture, an epistemological and social othering, a distancing whose logic, I would argue,

is not far from the logic of quarantine. When MacKenzie, the Natural Museum manager, expresses his doubts about Burton's Patient Zero project ("A promiscuous, irresponsible, homosexual Canadian – hardly a positive role model, Dick"), the latter replies with emphasis: "He was *French-Canadian*" and thus wins his boss over. The other "othered" characters include the Haitian-Canadian George or even the Green Monkey (personified in the movie as a stone butch woman), the mythical transmitter of the virus to *homo sapiens*, now represented in Burton's diorama as a stuffed specimen. Situating Zero/Dugas within the US-Canadian national dynamics, Robert L. Cagle cogently remarks:

Nationality, sexuality, and HIV status became intermingled in this portrait of a monster whose only concern, other than maintaining his youthful good looks, was getting off – at any cost. [...] Patient Zero became a vampiric spectre of the AIDS generation, a phantom who drained the life out of vital young men while fussing and primping in a futile attempt to maintain his rapidly withering beauty. (1995: 71)

As an alien and shameful disease (doubly alien: allegedly gay-related as well as imported from the "dangerous Outside," i.e. Africa via Canada), AIDS was not mentioned in public by President Ronald Reagan until 1985. As I pointed out in the chapter on Canada's politics of multiculturalism and its relation to the cultural and literary mode referred to as the Canadian Gothic, this more general gesture of othering had one more specific dimension, which involved Reagan's ambition to boost America's self-confidence and propagate its masculinist image as a "superheroic state," to use Neil Renwick's phrase (1999: 154). This narrative rendered Canada – with its declared commitment to peacekeeping, conflict resolution and multiculturalism – an effeminate and vulnerable weakling. One could hardly find a better personification of this idea than "a promiscuous, irresponsible, homosexual [French] Canadian."



Sir Richard Burton and Zero Source. Author's screenshot (DVD).

For lack of any other name, "Zero" in Greyson's movie comes to function as the Dugas character's proper name. In a simple reading, this renaming or, rather denaming, may be read as a critique of the erasure of the "real" person, or more specifically his/her "real" experience and biography, from dominant cultural narratives. While Burton's cynical use of Zero as a demonized, destructive figure is exposed and censured, no "true" Zero is ever directly accessible, either; after all, we only deal with the nameless ghost. It is interesting how, especially in light of queer theory's anti-identitarian stance, this erasure of name/identity effected by dominant, authoritative discourses becomes, in fact, an opportunity for a renarrativization, or, better, a chain of renarrativizations that evade an identity position without at the same time erasing lived experience or memory<sup>12</sup>. Greyson's Zero is a paradoxical and liminal figure, irreducible to a single narrative. As a ghost, he occupies the nonspace between the living and the dead, but even his spectral status becomes "queered" in that he retains an exclusive visibility and materiality for Burton<sup>13</sup>, which technically speaking would make him a hybrid between an immaterial ghost and a fleshy zombie; let us keep in mind his promiscuous vampiric inclinations, too<sup>14</sup>. Moreover, as a "zero," he occupies the nonland between the positive and negative<sup>15</sup>; he is a (non)figure, a screen onto which multiple images and narrations get projected. Even though he originally wishes to be made visible (he asks Burton to make him appear), in the end he gives up on that wish, and instead chooses his zero-ness, so to speak, because whatever identity he might be granted through one definitive narrative or another (that of a demonic Typhoid Mary or that of a hero whose cooperation with scientists proved crucial for early AIDS-related research; negative or positive) would seem to fix the "truth" about him. It is not that Zero/Dugas is utterly unnarrativizable – stories are necessary for survival, as both Scheherazade and Greyson know very well; it is rather that all narrations should be aware of their own generic conventions and limitations, their epistemological and political ramifications, the precariousness of their truth claims (always contaminated with "fiction"), etc. The nullification of Zero's name/identity opens up the space for an endless chain of resignifications, which may be playful at one level, but also deeply political and/or "heartfelt" at another. As I have argued elsewhere, queer could indeed be defined through a "productive emptiness," a sort of "negative capability," to borrow a term from Keats, or the Platonian chora, reinterpreted by Julia Kristeva in terms of what she calls the Semiotic (Sikora, 2012: 46, 53). Against the

<sup>12</sup> In the opening song, Zero pleads: "Tell the story, clear my name." The basic meaning of this "clearing" of his is obvious: as Zero's appearance in Burton's video attests, he just wants the world to know he is innocent. But "to clear" may also be read as "to make transparent" or invisible, or simply "to remove."

<sup>13</sup> This narrative ploy must also be read as a dramatization of the all-important question of queer (in)visibility, the question of who is visible to whom, in what ways, and under what circumstances (see, for example, Hennessy 2000, especially chapter 4, "Queer Visibility in Commodity Culture"). A recent development in theorizing (and politicizing) queer visibilities has been animated by queer theory's turn to Jacques Rancière; see especially the 2009 issue of the *Borderlands* journal, "Rancière and Queer Theory," edited by Samuel A. Chambers and Michael O'Rourke. Rancière's approach also provides one of the key methodological tools for Tomasz Basiuk's main line of argument in *Exposures* (2013: 11, 34, 373–6).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Hanson 1991 and my discussion in chapter 6.

<sup>15</sup> It is worth noticing how the opening credits play with plus-, minus-, and zero-like shapes. More generally, the movie revolves around various meanings and usages of "positive" and "negative" e.g. George's song "Positive," where its basic meaning is "certain."

usurpations of the Symbolic order, which aims to fix all true meanings and identities, the Semiotic enables the never-ending movements of significations and resignifications (Sikora, 2012: 53).

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*Zero Patience* was Greyson's satirical response to the discourses and practices that grew around AIDS, especially the normative accounts that acquired the status of an official story (the truth itself) and started to dominate public space; accounts that followed the parameters of the apocalyptic epidemic imaginaries that I mapped out briefly at the beginning of this chapter<sup>16</sup>. More specifically, Greyson's movie was a response to Randy Shilts's 1987 book *And the Band Played On*, which quickly gained the status of the definitive history of the early days of the AIDS epidemic (not least because of its sheer size). Shilts's credentials were strong: as a well-known gay journalist he could claim (or be claimed) to be an "unbiased representative of the gay community." The book spurred massive opposition from what was later designated a queer movement; significantly, the organization that proved pivotal for a revision of queer sexualities and socialities, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) was formed in the very same year, 1987. It is beyond the scope of my discussion here to summarize the critiques, but what they had in common, generally speaking, was the ambition to maintain a non-homophobic and sex-positive perspective that would not yield to dominant (straight) conceptual frameworks and narratives that demonize (gay) promiscuity, promote moral rectitude, and rely on established "truths" about AIDS, sexuality, community bonding, etc<sup>17</sup>. As Douglas Crimp put it in one of the most influential essays of the nascent queer critique, "[t]he fact that Shilts places blame for the spread of AIDS equally on the Reagan Administration, various government agencies, the scientific and medical establishments, and the gay community, is reason enough for many of us to condemn the book" (1987: 239). Actually, Crimp's essay ends with a reference to John Greyson's 1987 music video "The AIDS Epidemic" as an example of "a new phase in gay men's responses to the epidemic," a phase in which, "we are now reclaiming our subjectivities, our communities, our culture [...] and our promiscuous love of sex" (1987: 270). While the reference to an imagined "us-ness" of gay men seems problematic, especially since earlier in his essay Crimp criticized Shilts precisely for assuming that "what all gay men want is identical" (1987: 242), the general critique of the ways in which queer sexualities and socialities are made, through representational techniques, to fit into mainstream scenarios remains valid.

In 1993 Shilts's journalistic novel was made into an HBO movie. Whether by accident or not, Greyson's *Zero Patience* and Ottawa-born director Roger Spottiswoode's *And the Band Played On* premiered on the very same day: ominously enough, September 11<sup>18</sup>. It is not my intention to posit a simple binary opposition between "gay" and "queer" stances, yet I find it most instructive to juxtapose the two movies with a view to highlighting the difference between "gay" and "queer" narrative framing.

<sup>16</sup> On the associations of queerness with apocalypticism see Sedgwick, 1990: 127–130.

<sup>17</sup> For a multifaceted discussion of the postmodern and antiliberal politics of ACT UP, see Aronowitz, 1995.

<sup>18</sup> The year 1993 saw one more important AIDS movie: the tear-jerking Hollywood blockbuster *Philadelphia* (directed by Jonathan Demme). For an insightful discussion of the movie's latent homophobia, see Edelman, 2004: 18–19.

The American movie is, properly, a high drama that capitalizes on sensationalism, sentimentalism, and uncomplicated moralism. With all the parts neatly divided between the “good guys/gays” and the “bad guys/gays,” Spottiswoode’s docudrama, after Shilts’s book, misplaces the question of (sexual) difference onto the question of individual moral qualifications or, at best, the ignorance of “scientific facts.” (The gay mob that opposes the ban on bathhouses in San Francisco does not realize it is acting against its own best interest; “they’re only human,” Dr. Selma Dritz comments condescendingly in the HBO movie.) The difference between Spottiswoode’s “gay” stance and Greyson’s “queer” one dwells mostly in the gap between the naturalizing authoritativeness of the former (“that’s exactly how it was!”) and the renarrativizations and resignifications that Greyson’s movie performs as it evades any final “truth regime.” (Indeed, any organization of the epistemological – and thus ideological – construct of “reality” that poses itself as the “truth” or the “natural order” itself must be seen as a phallic investment.) Like Shilts’s book, the HBO production “demonstrates so clearly that cultural conventions rigidly dictate what can and will be said about AIDS” (Crimp, 1987: 245); any sayable truth is always an effect of a particular convention. The convention adopted by Greyson in *Zero Patience*, however, is precisely one that aims to question the limits of every possible convention, or at least to expose each convention’s provisional character. Spottiswoode’s drama, on the other hand, following Shilts’s work, “adopted a no-longer-possible universal point of view – which is, among other things, the heterosexual point of view,” to quote Douglas Crimp once more (1987: 245). Spottiswoode’s is a heroic, regenerative tale in which the good will of the good people prevails, sooner or later, over the ignorance, excessive ambition and ideological biases of other people. It is about getting things right, so that humanity can survive<sup>19</sup>. As countless apocalyptic or near-apocalyptic movies make clear, saving the world is always saving the world as we know it: the heteronormative, patriarchal, liberal humanist world that either exorcises queerness out of existence or else, more “progressively,” normativizes it into its own institutional, conceptual and moral frameworks.

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Greyson’s parody – a very serious parody, no doubt – is an exercise in telling the story of a deadly epidemic not in apocalyptic terms. In its antiheroic playfulness it does not posit any clear-cut villains or heroes. Not even the HIV virus itself, personified as a flamboyant drag queen, gets the honor of being the story’s hated villain. In response to the “epidemic of blame” that surrounds the actual disease, the drag queen virus exclaims: “Blame? I’m a virus, right? Sickness is my job. If I was really responsible for the worst epidemic of the twentieth century, you can bet I’d be boasting about it! Mary, I’d ask for a promotion!” Indeed, in a humorous yet somewhat didactic tone, it/she/he goes on to warn against “everyone who says they’re an authority, who talks with certainty!” Paradoxically, the virus that Zero talks to makes him “appear” (he becomes visible to Burton’s camera), if only for a minute or so, which may be read as Greyson’s ironic comment on how it took a deadly virus to make queer people temporarily visible to mainstream media and high profile politicians. More generally,

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<sup>19</sup> The quest for a point of origin (here: the source of the epidemic’s outbreak) is inseparable from thinking a possible end, an apocalypse (here: a pandemic). To identify “patient zero” is deemed essential to containing the epidemic, and thus preventing the end of the world.

the virus stands for the indelible uncertainty and undecidability inscribed into any and all epistemological grids that organize our understanding of the world<sup>20</sup>. The drag queen as such, as a cultural phenomenon, occupies a similarly undecidable position: defined by the "straight mind" (to adapt Wittig's useful term)<sup>21</sup> as a "fake" woman behind which there sits a "true" (i.e. biological) man, in a queer understanding the drag queen points in a very different direction, the direction of the undecidability of "fact" versus "fiction," "identity" versus "masquerade," "male" versus "female," etc. It points, that is, towards an infinite chain of signification, in which this or that "truth" is merely a politically enforced effect.



Miss HIV Source. Author's screenshot (DVD)

<sup>20</sup> Incidentally, the word GRID was an acronym of the first designation of what later came to be known as AIDS (it stood for "gay-related immune deficiency"); see, for example, Shilts 1987: 121. Arguably, the association of "epistemological grids" with GRID, though not connected by any causal relation in the "real world," may reveal the way in which AIDS participates in the categorizations and systematizations that "empires of knowledge" impose on our perception of reality. For a brief moment in 1982, the newly discovered disease came very closely to conclusively proving the existence of a "gay essence" visible to the disease-carrying virus, and, consequently, recognized by the state and other powerful, life-regulating institutions.

<sup>21</sup> According to Wittig, the straight mind "develops a totalizing interpretation of history, social reality, culture, language, and all the subjective phenomena at the same time" and it produces "general laws which claim to hold true for all societies, all epochs, all individuals" (1992: 27).

While the “straight mind” can only imagine the virus (as well as the queerness that it is sometimes made to stand for) as apocalyptic, Greyson’s film, in a sense, shows how the HIV virus is reclaimed by queer culture itself – a culture that developed largely in response to the AIDS crisis. Deadly as it is, HIV not only destroyed “the best minds of a generation” (to paraphrase the opening line of Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl*), but it also triggered new ways of thinking sexuality, social relationality, political action and forms of knowledge building; it must be seen not just as a blind assassin, but a productive force as well<sup>22</sup>. Actually, the reclaiming of HIV has been literalized in the “bug-chasing/gift-giving” subculture, in which gay men proactively seek to get (or transmit) the virus. Not only is the virus eroticized here, but it also enables the creation of new forms of kinship and new levels of intimacy<sup>23</sup>. Shockingly to many, gay or straight or otherwise, the subculture spurns the dominant culture obsessed with health and hygiene, and the society dedicated to the regulation of bodies, desires, identities and relationships. It thus problematizes the idea of a good or livable life, and it blurs the line between what is “life-giving” and what is “death-dealing.” The members of gay men’s bareback/bug-chasing subcultures (based on unprotected sexual activities, often with a view to getting the “gift” of the HIV virus) certainly do not live up to the ideal of a responsible, good, value-adding citizen, participating in the (implicitly straight) “common good” and working towards “a better future.” Although the positive aspect of the bug-chasing network is emphasized (e.g. extending the limits of intimacy or creating new modes of social connectivity), there also transpires the more negativist message of “no future,” as postulated most forcefully (though in a different context) by Lee Edelman (2004)<sup>24</sup>.

In the early days of the AIDS crisis, the gay community and its allies demanded urgent action from the government, the healthcare system, pharmaceutical corporations and other social institutions, but simultaneously they defended their autonomy and resisted the institutions’ regulatory inclinations. The promotion of safe sex techniques by AIDS activists was often seen as a way of saving gay men’s “promiscuous love of sex” (Crimp, 1987: 270). But within a decade, once the idea of safe sex became part of the official gospel and an instrument in the regulatory operations of the state, some gay men started to feel alienated from the confining safe-sex culture, of which the relatively small but visible bareback subculture is a vivid manifestation. While the mainstream LGBT movement pursued further protection – and thus, inevitably, supervision – from the state by demanding, for instance, the right to same-sex marriage, a number of queer activists and theorists have resisted that direction, which came to be known as “homonormativity,” a term coined by Lisa Duggan and defined

<sup>22</sup> It is not completely irrelevant to mention that more and more scientific research is done on the use of HIV for the treatment of some diseases, especially cancer; see, for example, Rossolillo et. al. 2012.

<sup>23</sup> See Tim Dean’s *Unlimited Intimacy* (2009). For an informed critique of Dean’s theses in the context of the so-called antisocial and antirelational positions in queer theory, see Basiuk 2013.

<sup>24</sup> In a nutshell, Edelman argues that queers should reject any kind of “reproductive futurism” and instead embrace the figural position they are being ascribed within the current social order, i.e. the position of negativity (or the death drive). Queerness would thus act as a constant reminder that there is, there can be, no future at all, or that all futurity is nothing but fantasmatic: “Our queerness has nothing to offer a Symbolic that lives by denying that nothingness except an insistence on the haunting excess that this nothingness entails, an insistence on the negativity that pierces the fantasy Screen of futurity, shattering narrative temporality with irony’s always explosive force” (2004: 31).



as neoliberalism's sexual politics<sup>25</sup>. Just as safe sex was appropriated by the official epistemological regimes that regulate social practices, so – I would argue – the spirit of early queer resistance was skillfully rearticulated, within an increasingly dominant neoliberal milieu, as a personalized "risk management" or, in Antke Engel's apt phrase, "virtuous management of difference" (2013: 183). Once taken up and handled by the immuno-political machine of the modern state, the AIDS crisis was used successfully by neoliberalism to solidify and reinforce its claims and its grip on social relations in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. To put it bluntly, if you learn to use a condom and live in a stable monogamous relationship, then the specter of contagion is contained and you prove yourself to be a virtuous citizen, worthy of, say, the right to marry. It is perhaps no accident that recently, at a time of the growing dissatisfaction with the neoliberal order, the AIDS crisis in general, and the history of ACT UP in particular, have come to attract a refreshed attention. The year 2012 alone saw two documentaries devoted to this subject: *How to Survive a Plague* (USA, dir. David France) and *United in Anger: A History of ACT UP* (USA, dir. Jim Hubbard).

Despite the fact that John Greyson's *Zero Patience* was made two decades ago, it remains more than just a document of its time. It continues to be an important and relevant comment on queer's cultural, social, political, ethical and epistemological resistance to "straight" framings and fixings. I choose to read the movie through the idea of queerness as a sort of viral contagion<sup>26</sup> that refuses to be contained, policed and regulated by the immunological apparatuses of contemporary biopolitics. Queerness is a figure of the impossibility of being appropriated and taxonomized: like a virus, a zero, a ghost, a vampire or a zombie, it dwells between the living and the dead, between presence and absence, between the positive and the negative. Posited, as it often is, as a portent of death, self-annihilation (cf. Bersani, 2010: 29) or the apocalypse itself (cf. Sedgwick, 1990: 127–130), it nevertheless proves to be a creative social force that traverses, connects, transforms, hybridizes, disrupts and reassembles. The "queer virus" is no respecter of identities, persons, races or species. It claims no origin, no telos, no family tree, just a horizontal movement, an epidemic propagation which "has nothing to do with filiation by heredity" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 241). The apparently "innocent" and scientific search for origins and certainties is mocked and rejected for the sake of a mutable queer diaspora without an origin (as Gloria Anzaldúa puts it, "I am all races because there is the queer of me in all races"; 1987: 80). Queerness "introduces disorder into communication," to borrow

<sup>25</sup> Duggan defines homonormativity as "a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption" (2003: 50).

<sup>26</sup> The association between "homosexuality" and contagion is age-old, of course, and continues to be perpetuated, in one of its versions, by the popular myth that homosexuality is "caused" by (early) seduction, and although genetic explanations seem to prevail in recent years, the fear of "gay contagion" still persists. Indeed, Gregory M. Cochran, American physicist and professor of anthropology, has proposed his own theory of male (*not* female) homosexuality's origin, in which he literalizes "gay contagion" as a viral disease: "Now that we know that human male homosexuality looks like a disease caused by some infectious organism, the next question is how that could happen – how could some virus change sexual interest? I don't think that anyone can be sure of the exact mechanism at this point. I think we can be fairly confident that it is caused by an infectious organism, from the information we have and general evolutionary considerations [...]. All this is speculative, of course: but the idea that male homosexuality is caused by a pathogen makes good evolutionary sense, unlike every other explanation ever proposed" (2005).

Jacques Derrida's characterization of the virus (in Brunette and Wills, 1994: 12), it questions every consensual version of reality and tirelessly disrupts the apparently stable (because institutionally stabilized) relationships between signifiers and signifieds, on which the world's intelligibility and classifiability so crucially depends.

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