

Techniques of Telepathic Virality and Contagion in Art and Science

Jacqueline Drinkall

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Abstract: I want to look at the telepathy aesthetics of viral culture and contemporary art. Cybernetic and post structuralist theories of linguistics have considered the alphabet to be a cultural plague and cognitive virus. Alphabetic consciousness is inherently telepathic and viral, and emerged alongside agrarian, debt and literary cultures 5 000 years ago. My paper looks at the intersection of viral culture with telepathic culture of crowds as understood by Gabriel Tarde and theorists of affective, creative and epidemic contagion. Further, evidence of telepathic virality is found within science fiction and even within science itself. For example, the Marvel character Black Swan invents a telepathy virus, and telepathy viruses are a recurring motif within science fiction. Within medical science, the Telepath™ Ltd brand is closely associated with the tracking of microbiological infections, zoonotic transfer events, and data of virus patients. Medical data is literally entered into Telepath databases. Further, within medical and microbiological terminology, telepathology is the usual everyday method for diagnosing disease at a distance using digital technology. Endovascular surgeons and technologists are working to intervene in the high incidence of strokes within Covid19 patients using a variety of telepathic and telepathological techniques. The interventional neurosurgeon, stroke expert and tech entrepreneur Thomas Oxley recently developed an intracranial telepathic Brain Computer Interface for his interventional neurology. However, science generally prefers terms such as prediction, pre-emption and affect transfer instead of the word telepathy. The organisation called 'Predict Ecohealth' attempts to pre-empt future pandemics by data mapping the impact of capitalist exploitation of nature to viral mutation within wildlife.

Introduction

I want to introduce my existing work on contagion in art and review how I have already addressed the viral aspect of telepathy aesthetics in art. I do this in the first section *Viral contagion in Telepathic Art* where I reassemble my previous work on telepathic art to be more centred towards contagion discourse.ⁱ I then review literature on modern and contemporary cultural contagion discourse in the section *Telepathic Aesthetics in Contagion Theory*. This gives more emphasis to discourses of telepathy and viral contagion from the philosophy of media and communications humanities. Then I critique of the more medical oriented discourse foregrounded in my abstract that arose in thinking about our current pandemic situation in the section *Telepathology, Science and Science Fiction in the Time of covid19*. I anticipate I will be able to conclude that creative

contagion is required more than ever in order to make sense of the complex and traumatic environmental, biological and economic contagions associated with the pandemic.

Viral Contagion in Telepathic Art

Telepathy aesthetics and the idea of totally permeable consciousness was part of modernity and its utopia project, with tele technologies used to end secrecy and reduce crime. The accompanying dystopic danger of non-differentiating souls in favour of spectral profits is what contemporary art historian of Pascal Rousseau refers to in French as 'contagion telepathique' in his book *Cosa Mentale: Art and Telepathy of the 20th Century*.ⁱⁱ Dystopic telepathy can translate as viral and invasive contamination and capitalistic vampirization. The dark side of telepathy is precisely viral economic contagion of capitalism rather than viral empathy or kindness. I want to review the artistic telepathy aesthetics of viral, contagious and/or networked culture in my existing work. In a paper on *Human and Non-Human Collaboration* I identify 'a kind of viral telepathy contagion'ⁱⁱⁱ infecting modern and postmodern art via artistic influence, automatism, imitation with variation, transmission of ideas and shared ideas and identity through collaboration. The artist Susan Hiller explored telepathy and the transmission of ideas, for example in her artwork group automatic writing collaborative artwork *Draw Together*. This led her to intensified automatic writing with mysterious female entities from another place and time in the *Sisters of Menon*. There is a particularly strong lineage of telepathic influence, invention and infection from early modern to contemporary art, from the early modern artist Frantisek Kupka to Marcel Duchamp to Robert Filliou and Imants Tillers. Collaborative artist duos develop powerful forms of telepathic personas and contagion within their collaborative artistic identities and artworks, such as Abramovic and Ulay, Gilbert & George, Jane and Louise Wilson. Lygia Clark and Hello Oiticia collaborated via participatory group telepathic relations, Joseph Beuys collaborated with a coyote using animal-human telepathic communications, and Larry Miller's collaborated with his dead mother via hypnosis. Further in this paper on *Human and Non-Human Collaboration* I write: "Telepathic collaboration can be a contagious force in itself and trigger viral chain reactions, leaping between all possible models and combinations of human and non-human, artist and non-artist."^{iv} Some of the most successful and long lasting telepathic art collaborations are the duo collaborators who look alike or are in fact identical twins - and the aesthetic of imitation and difference is central to contagion theory. Freud's description of *doppelgänger* doubles describes the way imitation is conducive to shared psychological activity and dynamic affect transfer between doubles:

"These themes are all concerned with the phenomenon of the "double," which appears in every shape and in every degree of development. Thus we have characters who are to be considered identical because they look alike. This relation is accentuated by mental processes leaping from

one of these characters to another – by what we should call telepathy -, so that the one possesses knowledge, feeling and experience in common with the other. Or it is marked by the fact that the subject identifies himself with someone else, so that he is in doubt as to which his self is, or substitutes the extraneous self for his own. In other words, there is a doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self.”^v

The Anthropologist Marcel Mauss 'studied magical collaboration in the case of group mobilisation and used the term 'a savage telepathy' of what J.G. Frazer (an early anthropologist) used to describe the process of contagious binding.^{vi} Telepathy and sympathy operate in group bonds as do other forms of affective contagion, with a number of individuals sharing the same passion, carrying the same props and wearing the same makeup and making same sounds. In Mauss' book *A General Theory of Magic*, Mauss writes:

“The whole social body comes alive with the same movement. They all become, in a manner of speaking, parts of a machine or, better, spokes of a wheel: the magical round dance, performed and sung, becomes the ideal image of the situation. This image is probably primitive, but certainly still occurs in our own times...The rhythmic movement, uniform and continuous, is the immediate expression of a mental state, in which consciousness of each individual is overwhelmed by a single sentiment, a single hallucinatory idea, a common objective.”

Artist, curator and theorist Jean Jacques Lebel describes the revolutionary spirit of Happenings and May 68 On The Necessity of Violation as carrying out telepathic transmissions, and said that “artistic activity is founded on a high telepathy.” Like Mauss, Lebel was observing group, social and cultural contagion and he wrote:

“The domain known (for lack of a more precise definition) as that of magic is the only one in which art can exist. All art is magic, else it is not art. I mean that art is the means of transmission of certain psychic forces and that it has always, in all cultures, made it possible for man to express and satisfy a need for magic.”

In my PhD thesis 'Telepathy in Contemporary, Conceptual and Performance Art', I look at the telepathy of crowd contagion: “Gustave Le Bon's nonsubjectal and 'social' telepathy is only ever concerned with the desires, affects and representations of immediate communion with others.”^{vii}

“Le Bon and Gabriel Tarde also look at social psychology of the crowd in terms of telepathy. Le Bon's *The Crowd* developed, extended and amplified arguments of Gabriel Tarde.^{viii} Telepathy

fascinated scholars^{ix} and he picks up on how it extends the mesmeric galvanization of crowds and the hypnotic cohesion of the masses. Mikel Borch-Jacobsen observes via Le Bon and Tarde: “Thus the mass bond may have to be thought of as a telepathic umbilical cord.”^x This concept of telepathy is explored in contemporary Conceptual group performance interactions. Hiller’s *Dream Screens* gently hypnotises the Internet ‘crowd, ‘linked by the new telepathic umbilical cord of telecommunications.”^{xi} The artist and activist Heath Bunting works with social network telepathy and telecommunications aesthetics of George Brecht, Robert Filliou and mail art artists The Eternal Network.^{xii} A Guardian article wrote “with claims to special powers of telepathy, [Bunting] has propagated his multimedia communications projects all round the globe (his emailing list would wrap around it twice), via the Internet, fax, phone, post, pirate radio and even graffiti.”^{xiii} Heath created an electronic community in London in the early 90s ... his website provided a forum for “... tips on writing viruses...”^{xiv}

Telepathy aesthetics in contagion theory

In this section I look at telepathy aesthetics in contemporary theorists of contagion theory, in the work of Susan Blackmore, Teresa Brennan, Lisa Blackman and Tony D Sampson. I must note that telepathic contagion also needs to be explored in the work of Steve Pile, Anna Gibbs, Virginia Barrett, Ruth Leys, Bruno Latour, Patricia Tincetto Clough, Nigel Thrift and more. However today I focus on Blackmore, Brennan, Blackman and Sampson.

Susan Blackmore studies the way memes spread via imitation machines and enable things to go viral, and not unsurprisingly for myself and writer Abby Rabinowitz, she began her Oxford education researching telepathy and publishing psychical research.^{xv} Having written extensively on meme contagion, most notably in her book *The Meme Machine* with a foreword by Richard Dawkins, author of the *Selfish Gene*, Blackmore has more recently returned to researching telepathy and Out of Body Experiences as part of her ongoing work with psychology and consciousness. Blackmore’s research into automatism and consciousness overlaps with her research into telepathy and OBEs as well as interdisciplinary research into viral transmission, imitative radiation and epidemiological interactivity. Grounded in theories of evolution and cognition and modern psychological sciences, Blackmore notes that the large human brain is what enables memetic transmission, imitation and variation. Only a large and biologically expensive brain is capable of the imitation required for culture, learning and meme work - it is expensive in that it is difficult to give birth to such a large brain and because it requires 80% of human energy to even run. Imitation and invention is not easy work for a brain. She remarks that it is unusual for a species to survive with such big heads, as childbirth is dangerous. What has accelerated meme production even further is the technology that accompanies brain evolution, with technology

accelerating further automation of cultural, symbolic and memetic production and becoming more and more autonomous in itself with the rise of Artificial Intelligence.

In her book *The Transmission of Affect*, Teresa Brennan clearly states she is interested in the contagion and transmission of affect “rather than any notion of the transmission of thoughts or telepathy.”^{xvi} This is Brennan noting the intense proximity of affect, thought and telepathy, and asserting her focus on affect above the other phenomena that it can easily become entwined with. Brennan was indeed very interested in telepathy according to her close friend and former lover Ian Milliss, an artist and activist with whom she made ouija board experiments and predictions whilst squatting with the Sydney Push in 1973. Here is an artwork by Milliss that provides testimony to this. Brennan also refers numerous other times to telepathy later on in *The Transmission of Affect*, in reference to the social psychologist William McDougall and his 1920 book *The Group Mind: A Sketch of the Principals of Collective Psychology*.^{xvii} McDougall connects contagion, energy and telepathy in his work on group phenomena of suggestibility, emotionality and lowered intellectual level of crowds. He proposed ideas of collective consciousness and “primitive sympathetic response”. Brennan quotes McDougall:

"The consideration of the conditions of the spread of emotion through crowds affords evidence that this mode of interaction of the individuals is all-important and that telepathic communication, if it occurs, is of secondary importance. For the spreading and the great intensification of emotion seem to depend upon its being given expressions that are perceptible by the senses."^{xviii}

Theorist Lisa Blackman entwines research into telepathy within her work on affect, data, body and society, as well as Tarde. On Tarde, Blackman notes that Tarde and his contemporaries Henri Bergson and William James were members of the Institute for Psychical Research. Their interest in the contagion between minds and the social brain was inclusive of ‘unconscious cerebration, dreams, hypnotism, hysteria, inspirations of genius, the willing game, planchette, crystal-gazing, hallucinatory voices, apparitions of the dying, medium-trances, demoniacal possession, clairvoyance and thought transference’^{xix} Telepathy was part of their interest in how suggestion and contagious communication operated in economy, society, civility, governing, regulation and criminality.^{xx} Affective contagion is very much a question of media and communications, and Blackman draws upon the telepathic model of communication developed by John Durham Peters.^{xxi}

As Tony D Sampson says: “Tarde prefigured an epidemiological relationally in which things (caffeine, sentimental novels, pornographic works, and all manner of consumer goods) mix with

emotions, moods and affects.” Further on he says that Tarde worked with action-at-a-distance: “...akin to mesmerism, hypnosis, telepathy and mind reading.”^{xxii} Tarde’s epidemiological notion of culture as contagion results directly in an aesthetic of cultural contagion. Tarde visualises cultural contagion in his famous diagram of imitation and invention which is grounded in aesthetics of psychical research, action-at-a-distance and telepathy. Aesthetics of telepathy are not just part of an exotic underbelly of modernism, telepathy aesthetic persist and accelerate today in network culture through neurocapitalism and internet company investment in telepathic Brain Computer Interfaces. Tarde, McDougall, James and Adam Smith, the psychological philosopher and father of capitalism, were interested in how ideas and feelings move from brain to brain and this included an interest in telepathic contagion.

Artist, activist and cultural theorist Carl Scrase undertook an art science residency at Symbiotica in 2011 to develop an Empathy Virus. His interest in empathy, community-based social change and consensus lead him to investigate the Latin roots of the word consensus which means ‘to feel the same thing.’ He theorised that the Occupy movement is a demonstration of viral empathy and community building. As part of his Empathy Virus residency he interviewed me via Skype on my work with telepathy, and we discussed the role of empathy and telepathy in activism, consensus building, crowd contagion, viral memes and tele-technologically facilitated network art, activism and culture.^{xxiii} Here is a still from the interview recording when Carl Scrase showed me the pages on telepathy in the book *CULT-URE: Ideas Can Be Dangerous* on memes and contagious ideas and viral marketing strategies, image and design transmission.

Telepathology, Science and Science Fiction in the Time of covid19

Strangely, viruses are non-living and can not reproduce on their own. They rely on the metabolism and energy of the host to reproduce their proteins the infomatic genetic material contained inside the protein envelop of the virus. Infectious viral disease are nanomachinic results of human impact on nature. In order to fight viruses that defy national boundaries, an international ‘interdependence sovereignty’ is required not just for corona virus but also for climate change.^{xxiv} Zoonotic transfer, whereby an animal virus mutates into a new human virus, as well as liberation of carbon into the atmosphere to create pollution and climate change, are a linked result of what Karl Marx, Alexander Bogdanov and McKenzie Wark refer to as ‘metabolic rift’. Climate change likely affects the transmission of coronavirus, as animals head towards the poles to escape the heat and come in contact with animals they normally wouldn’t which in turn creates new hosts and deforestation and large livestock farms exacerbate this problem too. Metabolic rift was observed by Marx in industrialised processes of human extraction of natural resources that result in toxic discharges into the environment. Bogdanov was a physician who pioneered blood transfusion, developed

Marx's concept of metabolic rift and early industrial climate consciousness, and he challenged Lenin's counter-revolution that resulted in Stalinist Dialectical Materialism. Bogdanov's early climate change science fiction story *Red Star* imagined "subtle and invisible" threads connecting delicate brains and indestructible machines.^{xxv} Bogdanov, a pioneer of blood transfusion believed blood transfusions were anti-aging elixirs and possibly eternal youth analogous if not curative processes of rejuvenation and restoration. He even thought of blood transfusions as analogous to "conjugation or even telepathic exchange of thoughts." Bogdanov sadly died when he exchanged blood with a student suffering infectious epidemic diseases of malaria and tuberculosis, an accidental enactment of metabolic rift. Here we see the aesthetic of telepathy overlapping with flow, spread, imitation, pathology and epidemiological contagion.

Just as data wishes to be free, so do viruses wish to be free, transgressing immaterial, material, physical and geographic boundaries where possible. William Burroughs and Laurie Anderson's truism 'Language is a Virus' resonates with David Porush's further assertion that the invention of the alphabet is a kin to a "cultural plague" and "cognitive virus"^{xxvi} brought on by Agrarian culture. Porush highlights the telepathic aspects of viral alphabetic consciousness. Within Marvel comics, a telepathy virus is generated by the character Black Swan, an example of human imagination for viruses is itself infected by fiction. There are other Marvel characters who work with telepathy viruses, and telepathy viruses are also part of the Star Trek narrative. Victor Grech examines telepathic pathology in Star Trek and says:

"...telepathic disease is depicted as working a longer distances than conventional (even air-borne) diseases. This imaginary medium is shown to communicate neuroses or psychoses to others via direct, mind-to-mind transfer, to one individual or to multitudes in epidemic proportions, often at distances that would require the equivalent of electromagnetic radiation as a mode of transmission."^{xxvii}

This sorting out the difference between factoids and fiction is a big concern epidemiologists today, as Seema Yasmin says: "What I notice very early on and time after time with many epidemics was that disease was not the only thing that was spreading, and yet my sole focus was containing a pathogen, what I would see though was that rumours, pseudo science, health hoaxes, all of those things were spreading in tandem with the disease and those were often helping fuel the spread of infection and leading communities vulnerable to the disease and also to the spreading of misinformation and disinformation."^{xxviii} Misinfodemics associated with anti-science movements and antivax movements, mean that we are up against not just the spread of disease but the spread of misinformation that can hurt people.^{xxix} Journalism is part of the public health ecosystem. In a

public health crisis, disease spreads widely and so does information – misinformation, disinformation and false news can spread farther and faster than accurate information.

In tracking every day microbiological infections and zoonotic transfer, data of patients, and their GPs etc. are entered into a laboratory database (CDS Telepath™ Ltd). In many instances, medical laboratory work involves using a laboratory database referred to as Telepath. Further analysis of data from the widely used Telepath – also a laboratory computer system, laboratory management system and medical record database - can be done using Microsoft Excel. Further, within medical and microbiological terminology, telepathology is in fact the diagnosis of disease at a distance of disease using digital technology. Pre-emption of future pandemics is done by an organisation called 'Predict. Ecohealth' who partner with University of California at Davis, the Wildlife Conservation Society, the Smithsonian Institution and Global Viral Forecasting. Predict is creating a library of wildlife viruses in animals that are likely to affect humans such as those of primates, rats, and bats. Predict also maps both human viruses, human encroachment on wildlife and the potential intersection of viral mutation resulting from metabolic rift or the inevitable toxic result of capitalistic exploitation of nature. (Robbins) There is a telepathic speed of viral proteins and viral DNA data replication and protection, and the COVID-19 does doesn't obey borders and was probably in the USA and Russia at the end of last year if not by late January 2020. In reflecting upon the COVID-19 crisis Franco Bifo Berardi, who is acutely aware of futurist telepathy aesthetics of Zaum poetry and their grounding in ecologically sensitive animistic shamanism of revolutionary Russia, acknowledges that: 'Theological determinism is over, and the virus has taken the place of a teleological god.'^{xxx}

As all the world gets online with working-at-a-distance from home via zoom, we are warned that zoom itself is a form malware vulnerable to digital viral risk. The facts of the biological, technological and psychological situation are dynamic and unknown. Collective sense making serves psychological needs as well as searching for the truth, and influencers need to be able to get things wrong whilst they make sense, whilst reflecting on possibilities of misinformation, disinformation and fake news.^{xxxxi} The Tardean model telepathy contains virality^{xxxii} and extends online today to create viral rumours about everything including the COVID-19 virus. One conspiracy theory warns that the nasal testing for Covid19 is being used to implant microchips inside human heads. I have nicknamed these theorists The Manchurian Covidiot, in reference to the famous book and movie centred around brain implant conspiracy.

The corona virus does do enormous damage to many organs including the brain. Doctors and neuroengineers intervene in the high incidence of strokes within Covid19 patients using a variety of

techniques, one of whom has developed digital telepathy brain computer interfaces and telepathological digital imaging. The interventional neurosurgeon, stroke expert and tech entrepreneur Thomas Oxley works directly with Covid19 patients suffering strokes as strokes are relevant to his endovascular expertise, and he recently developed an intracranial telepathic Brain Computer Interface for interventional neurology. Oxley talked about telepathy and his Brain Computer Interface and artificial telepathic spinal cord in a TED talk. After giving an Oxford dictionary definition of telepathy and discussing telepathy whilst he introduces himself and his work he says 'This form of digital telepathy is going to be the first use of this brain interfacing technology, and its going to give a voice to people who are paralysed, who have lost their ability to move and to speak ...'^{xxxiii} Further artistic and cultural interventions accompany this neurological work of Oxley and the related new weird telepathic brain computer interface technologies of social media, data mining and surveillance giants: Facebook, Google, Neuralink and DARPA (Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency).

The prime example of an interventional artist and telepathic neuroactivist is Warren Neidich. Like Freud and Oxley, Neidich also trained in medical science - psychology, biology, neurobiology and ophthalmology - before becoming an artist. Neidich actively draws upon medical, biological and brain sciences when applying activist neuroaesthetics to the problems of telepathic technology as it is entwined multifariously within art and cognitive capitalism. Neidich's *Telepathy Drawing*, 2020, is a mind map of centripetal word composition that goes into the 'beyond sense' quality of transmental Zaum telepathy poetics.^{xxxiv} At the very centre is the typed and capitalised word 'TELEPATHY' radiating with spokes that emphasise the embodied molecular and viral nature of language and telepathy: Circulatory Capital, Cultural Evolution; Cultural Capital; Intra-Cranial Brain; Extra-Cranial Brain; Darwinian Evolution; Baldwinian Evolution; Lamarckian Evolution and more. Swarming as centrifugal contours or petals surrounding these spokes are words from material culture: Afrofuturism; Emancipation; Shamanism; Undercommons; Clairvoyance; Ayahuasca; Hacker; Surveillance Capitalism; iCloud; Neuropower; Google Effect; Cortical Implants; Brain Computer Interface; Neural Dust; Dematerialization and more. Neidich loves Tarde and there is no mistake that his *Telepathy Drawing* and artwork mapping the viral online Pizza Gate conspiracy theory resemble Tarde's Imitation Rays. Neidich's work with telepathy is liberatory and uses creative contagion to counter surveillance contagion of neurocapitalism.

Conclusion

Telepathy aesthetics operate in multiple dimensions of viral contagion cultures of art and fiction, disease, medicine and activism. The promise of digital telepathic connectivity and cures for brain injury, social isolation and alienation is also the promise of new forms of disability, disease and

psychosis. Telepathy aesthetics do not only persist in art and society, they persist in everyday medical and telepathological culture and current advances in medical science that will directly impact our ability to recover from covid19 pandemic as individuals and through transnational interdependence sovereignty.

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Jacqueline Drinkall
Artist, Independent Curator, Writer, Educator/Learning Facilitator and Researcher
Jacqueline Drinkall
Artist, Independent Curator, Writer, Educator/Learning Facilitator and Researcher

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<https://contemporaryarts.mit.edu/pub/allthatissolid/release/4> Neidich's friend and colleague Franco Bifo Berardi, also a theorist of cognitive capitalism, identifies the Russian Futurist Zaum poetry as working with shamanistic telepathy aesthetics in which words interchange with abstraction and images