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GRID: Queer Technologies' Topology and Viral Aesthetics

Introduction

In digital networked culture, the intensification of global connectivity has opened itself to universal contagion. Indeed, it has been argued we now live in a viral ecology under the sign of viral capitalism. As viralities spread into various realms of culture, new media artists explore the viral not only in content but also as a technical method of propagation and distribution.

Our current viral ecology has not only opened up new tactics of resistance for various artists, activists, and cultural producers but has also revealed the shortcomings of a purely representational cultural analysis. Media theorists like Jussi Parikka have called for a topologically focused form of cultural analysis that moves beyond representation to take into account the nonvisual aspects of digital networked culture, a kind of “assemblage theory of media,”¹ while Tim Murray has gestured toward the fold and away from only projection in new media art criticism.

The viral in contemporary culture needs to be taken up both topologically and representationally, which is what Queer Technologies has commenced. QT's current project GRID *represents* homosexuality and queerness *topologically*.

¹ Jussi Parikka and Tony Sampson. “On Anomalous Objects of Digital Culture: An Introduction.” *The Spam Book: On Viruses, Porn, and Other Anomalies from the Dark Side of Digital Culture.* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2009), 8.

What is Queer Technologies?

Queer Technologies (www.queertechnologies.info) is an organization that produces a product line for queer technological agency, interventions, and social formation. Queer Technologies aims toward Automating Perverse Possibilities. QT products include: transCoder, a queer programming anti-language; ENgenderingGenderChangers, a “solution” to Gender Adapters’ male/female binary; and Gay Bombs, a technical manual manifesto that outlines a “how to” of queer networked activism. QT products are often displayed and deployed at the Disingenuous Bar, which offers a heterotopic space for political support for “technical” problems. QT products are also shop-dropped in various consumer electronics stores, such as Best Buy, Circuit City, Radio Shack, and Target. All QT pieces are designed as product, artwork, and political tool, materialized through an industrial manufacturing process so that they may be disseminated widely. Queer Technologies identifies its larger discursive practices as a viral aesthetics, in that it encrypts itself within flows of capital to replicate / permeate itself in relation and tension to capital’s own modulating, viral structure.

Queer Technologies is currently developing a mapping application and data visualization named GRID—a taking-up of Gay Related Immune Deficiency (the name previously held by HIV/AIDS) and digital grids of communication, capital, and transmission—that tracks the dissemination of QT products and maps the “battle plans” for Queer Technologies to more thoroughly infect networks of global capital.

Today, two grids can be identified that work toward shaping, structuring, controlling, and defining the biosocialities of homosexuality into a dominant singularity.

Importantly, these grids are not static positioning structures but rather comprise an assemblage--unstable, in movement, of material. They do not pin the homosexual by abstractness but actually constitute it. These grids are not metaphors but diagrams; as such, they are a kind of living concept, a living abstraction, that moves--comes into life--through various bodies and things in the world.² As these grids diagram homosexuality, they map out the potential to think about homosexuality beyond representation--and the human, toward the forces and flows that come to bare on homosexual existence. This has been called “thinking topologically,”³ and *Queer Technologies* is interested in asking what can be gained from thinking the homosexual topologically: do new potentials of queer resistance emerge? As queer theory continually battles against claims of obsolescence, can this other thinking offer a queerly-aligned divergence to account for the “queer” things in the world? In this context, thinking the queer topologically demands the creation of new diagrams.

Grid 1 (on biology): a history of viral contagion and disease interlocks with and generates conceptions, representations, materialisms, and bodies of homosexuality that become ordered into hyperpoles of sickness and health. G.R.I.D., or Gay-Related Immune Deficiency, the identifier given to AIDS until 1982, is a locus of this infection. The term “grid,” a word that has explicitly ordered homosexuals into markers of sickness

² See the *Technologies of Lived Abstraction* book series published by MIT Press and edited by Brian Massumi and Erin Manning.

³ Alexander R. Galloway and Eugene Thacker. *The Exploit: A Theory of Networks*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 13.

from health, is now etymologically bound within homosexuality. This “grid” becomes gridded, as it replicates, traces, and expands into other broadly modulating constructions of “disease” and “sickness,” gridding an assemblage of homosexuality. As this assemblage of homosexuality in the world becomes structured by such an extreme politics of health--gym body or AIDS body, this grid disconnects the complexities of homosexual health to present to the world a functional homosexual that is not only healthy, but almost superhumanly healthy. This grid of homosexual biology as extreme health--already a kind of infection--wants to cover over the threat of “perverse sexuality” that many consider the cause of G.R.I.D. and HIV/AIDS. Thus, the grid here makes all homosexual flesh an infection: either an infection into the world by working out / away sickness, or an infection out of the world from perverse sickness.

Grid 2 (on communication and capital): contemporary grids of communication and capital virally transmit this dominant assemblage of the homosexual and encode it as complicit within flows of consumption and nationalism. A “sterility” of sorts, a type of homonationalism,⁴ as Jasbir Puar has previously defined, enfolds homosexuals into these machinations by visually projecting and materially constructing a form of homosexuality as included within the nation-state and mass culture, while simultaneously excluding homosexuals who exist outside of these homonormative representations and life formations.

These two grids are collapsed into one another, interlocked in a viral logic that frames the homosexual body from a diseased or infected formation, while generating a

⁴ See Jasbir K. Puar. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007). Her excellent example of a *Gay.com* ad with two muscled men swaddled in an American flag, urging visitors to the site to enter, resonates powerfully here.

dominant form of homosexuality as anything but an other to heterosexuality and the nation. These grids *move as* the homonationalist. Others that do not want to move this way must move in tension to these grids, not necessarily against but still somehow against; they must be, move, as other grids.

Queer Technologies refers to this dominant construction as GRID. This assemblage called GRID--the relationalities and interactions that come to form the homonormative homosexual of today, infects the multiplicitous biosocialities of homosexuality. Yet, Queer Technologies argues that through an exploitation of the viralities at work here, another grid can be replicated--a queer grid that provides viral tactics of infection and escape from the representations and formations of GRID. This queer grid is like the "impossibilities" described by Tim Murray, where "the *in-between* of opposed technologies, cultures, and philosophies"⁵ offers a political and artistic divergence. Between the conflicts and overlappings of digital networked culture, homosexuality, and queerness, exists the queer grid. Queer Technologies sees this other grid developing through the potential of product deployment and distribution and the affective call to action (to move) that can be generated. The queer grid is a creative diagramming.

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Grids appear to permeate contemporary life: there are the grids of urban planning and the geographical locations they correlate to, various electrical power grids of communication and the social grids they enable and foster through their use, grids of digitization from the pixel upwards through larger scales of construction and the

⁵ Timothy Murray. *Digital Baroque: New Media Art and Cinematic Folds*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 20.

representations and objects that embody them, as well as vast networked grids of computation, biology, and capital that formulate and structure new ontologies, epistemologies, and relationalities. Indeed, in her 1979 article on grids in art, Rosalind Krauss heralds the grid as our declaration of modernity, for while the grid is ubiquitous in the 20th and 21st centuries, it appears in no artworks of the previous century.⁶ Krauss also points out that the grid is antimimetic, in that its organization is not one of imitation but of its own “aesthetic decree.”⁷ Importantly for Krauss, this autonomy of the grid reveals a paradox at the heart of its construction between matter and spirit (or socialities), in that the grid both masks and exposes the dimensions of its spirit through its material make-up.

Thus, a grid is a form endemic to our time that materially and visually organizes something through its own logic--a logic that emerges as a relationality between various forces that come to constitute a thing. Of course, a thing may be constituted by many grids; certainly, this is the circumstance rather than not. Furthermore, the work of the grid is always in flux, as material and social processes alter and mutate. Grids may rigidify but they may also hyperfluctuate.

Homosexuality is no exception here, as many mutable grids at various scales, frames, and dimensions could be suggested to inflect upon it. *Queer Technologies* focuses upon two overarching grids within homosexuality as a tactic to problematize the paradox within GRID: that is, the persistence of homosexuality as ghostly, with its body disposed of and an image-form in its place that is antithetical to the bodies it “correlates”

⁶ Rosalind Krauss. “Grids.” October, Vol 9. MIT Press: 1979, 52.

⁷ Ibid., 50.

to that spreads at the rate of digital replication and infection. GRID, infecting all biosocialities of homosexuality, operates as a viral, networked topology.

Some words on topology: A network topology is the mapping of elements in a network, including the physical connections between points and the logistical flows of data between these nodes. McKenzie Wark writes, “Topology begins when the topical ceases to have autonomy, when the line along which communication flows closes the gap between map and territory.”⁸ With this proclamation at hand, grids appear to be a particular instantiation of topology, where the material and social are flattened together into the formal structure of grids. To think topologically, as suggested by Alex Galloway and Eugene Thacker, calls for interpreting the rules and relations structuring diagrams.⁹ GRID, as a topology, is structured by the previously discussed grids of biology and global capital. Thus, to parse the homosexual’s nodes in this topology, one must ask how GRID restructures the logic of the homosexual, that is, what data does GRID infect into the formation of the homosexual, how GRID mutates the quality of the homosexual’s interactions within this topology, as well as the representations that emerge from this. Queer Technologies wants to locate, interpret, and evaluate the diagrams of homosexuality, such that new, resistant ones can be created. This task relies on the ability to think and work through the multifaceted viral logic of this assemblage topologically: its viral bodies and biology, viral replication, and viral commodification.

⁸ McKenzie Wark. *Gamer Theory*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 56.

⁹ Galloway and Thacker. *The Exploit*, 13.

The emergence of theories like viral ecology, viral philosophy, and viral politics to diagnose our culture today suggests that the virus perhaps is the major trope of the postmodern condition.¹⁰ Thriving upon ambiguity and indifference, shall we say political practices must replicate the viral, that it takes a virus to fight a virus? Thierry Bardini has called this viral epoch a “junk future,” claiming that the “virus and junk are connected through the power of the image.”¹¹ The gridded homosexual as commodity is the junk future of GRID.

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

First, Queer Technologies would like to discuss the qualities of viruses and build from that framework into an examination of the viralities of GRID. Alex Galloway and Eugene Thacker define the virus as “life exploiting life,” that is, viruses, as beings, take advantage of their host entities and/or systems to generate more copies of themselves.¹² The virus succeeds in producing its copies through a process Galloway and Thacker refer to as “never-being-the-same.”¹³ Maintaining within itself the ability to

¹⁰ See Thierry Bardini. “Hypervirus: A Clinical Report.” *CTheory*. <http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=504> (accessed 10 December 2009).

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, 83.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 87.

continuously mutate its code with each reproduction, the virus propagates itself. Therefore, replication and cryptography become the two actions that define the virus. What astounds Galloway and Thacker--and also myself--is that the virus reveals a life in an "illegible and incalculable manner."¹⁴ They suggest that the virus' ability to mutate and modulate itself is an example of artificial life.¹⁵

If the virus is an artificial life, what is the potential of such a life? Hardt and Negri hint at such an answer when they write on the monstrosity of the flesh. For them, all flesh is pure potential, and it is the social forces that give form to this fullness of potential. All flesh, then, is monstrous, in that all life (constituted by flesh) is an artificial life, a social life.¹⁶ So we are all monsters, but here, the virus is a particularly fascinating monster: our socialities have made it extremely monstrous to most of the world, while its own monstrous flesh inflects and shapes the host systems it infects. Importantly, Hardt and Negri note that there are some monsters we should work against but others are benign. Thus, the virus, as a mutating artificial life form, is politically ambiguous. That is, if something is said to be viral, it is not necessarily a bad monster. Interestingly, this viral flesh of potential opens the possibilities for resistant practices, in that viralities can be used to infect dominant systems.

These traits of the virus have recently been discovered in larger dynamic structures of contemporary life and society. In their writings on global capital and the new world order, Hardt and Negri argue that "Empire's institutional structure is like a software program that carries a virus along with it, so that it is continually modulating

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 85.

¹⁶ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. *Multitude*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 190 - 193.

and corrupting the institutional forms around it.”¹⁷ Jussi Parikka has taken this claim further in his writings on viral capitalism. He notes that capitalism is viral in that it is now capable of continuous modulation and heterogenesis.¹⁸ Parikka identifies this viral mode of operation organized around contagion, mutation, and colonization. “The commodity,” he writes, “works as a virus--and the virus part of the commodity circuit.”¹⁹ The flows of these commodity circuits produce an assemblage that allows capitalism to be examined topologically: the connections they foster, enable, and forbid, the relationalities produced as results of these connections between things, the forms these processes give rise to, as well as the constant mutation of all present a grid (or diagram) of flows operating under a viral logic. Viral capitalism, as an artificial life form, replicates itself through a mutating act of never-being-the-sameness. By this viral replication of difference, capitalism generates an image (or face) of inclusion. Parikka points out that “viruses, too, have faces.”²⁰ To work against viral capitalism, it would seem one must first identify the face (overcoded thing)--and then escape it, as Deleuze has called for: “Know them, know your faces; it is the only way you will be able to dismantle them and draw your lines of flight. [. . .] to the point that if human beings have a destiny, it is rather to escape the face, to dismantle the face and facializations, to become imperceptible, to

¹⁷ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. *Empire*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 197 – 198.

¹⁸ Jussi Parikka. *Digital Contagions: A Media Archaeology of Computer Viruses*. (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 96.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 97.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 144.

become clandestine [. . .] by strange true becomings that [. . .] make *faciality traits* themselves finally elude the organization of the face.”²¹

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

3.1

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

Queer Technologies proposes a queer grid. The design, fabrication, production, dissemination, and use of Queer Technologies operates on / as a grid. If the virus is life exploiting life, Queer Technologies’ formation of a grid calls for an exploitation of the queer self to manufacture difference, that is, to combat the dominant viral GRID of homosexuality, a queer grid must replicate and mutate the dominant never-being-the-sameness to produce its own queer never-being-the sameness.

Queer Technologies wants to align with Alan Liu’s notion of “destructive creativity”—a creativity that goes “beyond the new picturesque of mutation and mixing

²¹ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 171 - 188.

to the ultimate form of such mutation and mixing: what may be called the new sublime of 'destruction.' [. . .] the critical inverse of the mainstream ideology of creative destruction [. . . a] viral aesthetics."²² Yet, when put to practice, Liu has seemed to fail the radical potential of this aesthetics by primarily focusing on abstract form, as if whatever form and content is can be separated. If there is to be anything sublime about destructive creativity, it is in aiming toward the destruction of our world. A work here must not only destroy itself as an "artwork" but must also attempt to destroy everything, as it virally explodes beyond itself and into the world. The "viral" here must be put toward the absolute limit.

Queer Technologies' viral aesthetics becomes like a repetitive stream of disidentifications. José Muñoz describes disidentifications as "the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship. [. . . These strategies are] a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture."²³ Disidentifying in this viral aesthetics is a kind of queer cryptography, repetitively infecting the infections of mainstream ideology at the risk of obliterating one's own "hygiene."

Queer Technologies locates the potential of such an aesthetic viral infection in queer affect. Queer affect as a type of cryptography--nonhygienic ways of being, living,

²² Alan Liu. *The Laws of Cool: Knowledge Work and the Culture of Information* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 325.

²³ José Esteban Muñoz. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 4.

experiencing--generates a life-resistance that, in its contingencies, mutations, and infections with global capital, produces another queer, viral grid that is an “illegible and incalculable” artificial life to GRID, as it is always forming its existence in relation/ exploitation to this dominant GRID. As Sara Ahmed has explained, queer affect is a sideways experiencing, an experiencing that is off track, dis-aligned.²⁴ Queer affect unfixes the grid and turns it on its side. If Deleuze and Guatarri have previously told us that politics is perception, then queer affect is our “shock to thought,”²⁵ our call to a politics. Brian Massumi tells us that affect “is inseparable from the concept of shock. It doesn’t have to be a drama. It’s really more about microshocks, the kind that populate every moment of our lives. For example, a change in focus [. . . yet, this] cut can pass unnoticed.”²⁶ What arises depends on this event, this call to action.

A queer GRID is mapped through the potential of relationalities and affects generated in a Queer Technologies’ event, situated within the context of the encounter between the body in contact and the autonomy of the technological product. The affective encounter--the event--holds the potential to explode out into a queer collective force. To diagram this reveals the topological possibilities for queer world-making on and off GRID. Diagramming reveals what can be mapped and what cannot: the queer grid is both visible and invisible.

²⁴ See Sara Ahmed. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

²⁵ See Gilles Deleuze. *Cinema 2: The Time Image*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

²⁶ Brian Massumi. “Of Microperception and Micropolitics.” *Inflexions* Issue 3: Exploring Ethico-Aesthetics. http://www.senselab.ca/inflexions/volume_3/node_i3/massumi_en_inflexions_vol03.html (accessed 9 December 2009).

The queer grid, of moving affects in tension to GRID, is a tactic of nonexistence. If we want to escape the face, Queer Technologies asks, alongside Galloway and Thacker: “how does one develop techniques and technologies to make oneself unaccounted for?”²⁷ Galloway and Thacker answer with this: “Future avant-garde practices will be those of nonexistence.”²⁸ They qualify this nonexistence, importantly, not as an absence but as a fullness only to be found within the abilities to be a nonrepresentable identity. Nonexistence is the mode or function to escape or avoid sovereign control—not as an outside, some excluded fantasyland, but as a full-outside that is within. Suggested nonexistent dismantlings, such as nonaction, pointless desertions, unmeasurable or not-yet-measurable human traits,²⁹ configure against the technologies of the face (GRID) that must be known. These tactics, therefore, hinge upon a not-knowing; could a viral queer affect that is illegible and incalculable be such a tactic? When Galloway and Thacker write that “the bland, the negligible, the featureless are its only evident traits,” it is an escaping brought by a not-knowing that construes these traits as such. The queer grid moves within GRID, unknown, invisible, nonexistent, but waiting to be perceived.

Crucially, for Galloway and Thacker, nonexistence is constituted by a politics of love. Indeed, they call nonexistence “the purest form of love.”³⁰ Here, pure love seems to stem for a notion of political love, which qualifies the tactics of nonexistence as an act excluded from sovereign dominance. Michael Hardt writes that love as a political

²⁷ Galloway and Thacker. *The Exploit*, 135.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 136.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.* 137.

concept, in a passionate fusing of the personal and the political, binds us to transformative operations of reason that extend beyond rationality yet hold us within a training or disciplining.³¹ In opposition to political love, Hardt notes that evil is this type of love gone bad, the destruction of love as a political concept.³² While political love produces joy in the construction of difference, evil distorts and blocks. The logic of the sovereign denies itself the obtainability of political love, leaving it to reside somewhere in the bad love of evil. If the queer grid is generated by viral affects, which is a call to political action and engagement in tension with GRID, shall we call this grid an assemblage of such political love? That the queer grid moves in the world as political love?

3.2

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

³¹ Michael Hardt. "About Love." European Graduate School Lecture Series (2007) http://www.youtube.com/view_play_list?p=D3501DB6E18F2A74 (accessed 10 December 2009).

³² Ibid.

price based on cultural institute of dissemination, e-business scams, free giveaways at rallies, fake tech support centers, and various other performative platforms.

Queer Technologies has commenced developing sets of maps and battle plans that they refer to as GRID. Queer Technologies uses the same name for its own queer grids as well as the dominant GRID to virally bind them linguistically and etymologically, in that Gay-Related Immune Deficiency (G.R.I.D.) is always left as a trace (an infection) within the term GRID. As Queer Technologies products circulates within various cities and geographical areas, at sites such as Target, Best Buy, Circuit City, RadioShack, Wal-Mart, Borders, Barnes & Noble, Apple, and other places of technological consumption, Queer Technologies diagrams and situates these products--gay bombs--within a grided assemblage. These queer grids, once mapped out, are distributed all over the areas they correlate to: on billboards, sidewalks, signposts, websites, store fronts, etc. Akin to a Situationist *dérive*, these queer grids attempt to reconstruct replications of homosexuality virally produced by GRID. A kind of speculative cartography, the queer GRID, as a map, follows its own immanent logic. Importantly, this GRID does not necessarily correlate directly with the territory of stores and product placement. GRID re-diagrams as an opening up to the potential of political love. For instance, a Target store might be mapped as a location for Queer Technologies products; yet, upon arrival, none are to be found. The GRID here has brought about a different kind of event. Even in this absence, something can emerge.

Queer Technologies' grid fashions a new topology, moving toward a new assemblage of queerness, a "resistant" movement in the dominant GRID: their circulated diagrams and their situated products in various consumer outlets work toward

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

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