

Christopher D. Kilgore, “Bad Networks: From Virus to Cancer in Post-Cyberpunk Narrative.” *Journal of Modern Literature* 40. 2 (2017): 165-183

Critical interest in the uses of contagion as a metaphor and cognitive schema has exposed the multitude of ways in which contagion permeates modern modes of thinking and writing. Christopher D. Kilgore makes an interesting intervention in this growing field of contagion studies through his analysis of depictions of computer viruses as cancerous schemas in post-cyberpunk media, in particular, the Matrix trilogy films (1999, 2003) and Steven Hall’s *Raw Shark Texts* (2007). Close readings of these texts, coupled with a critical account of the history of the changing meanings of both “virus” and “cancer”, demonstrate how shifting depictions of info-viruses reflect both evolving cultural understandings of cancer and a difference in the political alignments of cyberpunk as a genre. By portraying info-viruses as internal threats arising from a desire for excessive growth in line with the cancer schema, post-cyberpunk texts leave behind both the xenophobic tropes of the virus schema and the genre’s initial political ambivalence in favour of a more explicit critique of the excesses of late capitalism.

In Kilgore’s analysis both virus and cancer are defined as cognitive schemas, “a prototypical association of ontological status, perceptual qualities, and functional behaviours easily recognised and applied by the human mind” (167). The virus, at first an ambiguous medical category for particulate infectious agents, became a cognitive schema towards the end of the twentieth century through its association with malicious software which disrupt other computer programs by replicating themselves. Biological viruses lack cell structure but carry genetic material, as such they occupy an ambiguous space between life and nonlife. When the concept of computer virus exploded in popularity in the 1980s, this equivocal ontological status of virus and the similarity between computer code and genetic code allowed a reconceptualization of informational networks and, perhaps the whole Internet, as organic entities which are the virus’s victims (167). Post-cyberpunk texts like *Snow Crash* (1992) or *The Raw Sharks Texts* (2007) go a step further and reconfigure the info-virus as a threat to all human cognition and communication, which are reimaged as informational networks. Cancer’s development as a schema follows a similar path.

As Susan Sontag’s celebrated monograph, *Illness As Metaphor* (1978) shows, cancer became the most frequent disease metaphor after WWII, accruing the meaning of both a deadly pathogen and death itself. Although Sontag asserts that attaching metaphors to illnesses is detrimental to those who suffer from them, Kilgore argues that metaphors are an unavoidable part of language and, furthermore, that our conceptualizations of cancer have changed. Due to new medical understandings of cancer’s origins in life processes of growth, healing and renewal, the cancer schema can no longer be read in purely malignant terms. Rather, evolving meanings of cancer allow for it to be used as a powerful critique of late capitalism and its tendency to prioritise growth above all else.

Kilgore argues that the viral Agent Smith of the Matrix trilogy is an example of the politicized deployment of this new cancer schema. Although he ends up taking over the software of the Matrix much like an info-virus would, Agent Smith is part of the Matrix’s own security system, a kind of antibody which fights human threats to the Matrix. He malfunctions and mutates into uncontrollable replications after Neo, the

hacker hero of the trilogy, destroys the original Agent Smith. This mutation resembles certain cancers which are caused by viral infections altering cell DNA and disrupting cell growth mechanisms. Reconsidering this character as a cancer rather than viral schema highlights the ambiguity of the films' portrayal of their heroic main character. In this interpretation of Agent Smith's replications, the human messiah is the malicious virus threatening life, not computer code. This reading also finds support in the speech Smith makes early on in which he suggests humans would be more accurately taxonomically classified as a species of virus, not as mammals. The ambiguous representation of humanity throughout the series highlights its engagement in a critique of techno-capitalism. Although Agent Smith and the machines are framed as the obvious villains, the films also make clear that the motivation behind their actions are the same as those of human techno-capitalism: a ruthless desire for growth regardless of consequences.

This article makes a valuable contribution to contagion studies, both through its emphasis on the historically contingent nature of contagion schemas and its original reading of post-cyberpunk texts. Further engagement with recent works on contagion metaphors, in particular research on contagion schemas in depictions of financial markets, would perhaps have made Kilgore's analysis even richer. Nevertheless, this article opens new avenues of research into the relationship between contagion metaphors and other pathological metaphors.

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