

TO FIND A PASSION WHOLLY OF THE MIND: LOVE, ETHICS, AND COMPUTER
TECHNOLOGY IN RECENT FICTION

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ABSTRACT

With Louise Bogan's injunction in mind, this paper examines the social and ethical ramifications of interpersonal relationships using and portrayed in books and electronic technology, particularly the Internet. Using Bernd Frohmann's paper, "*Cyber Ethics: Bodies or Bytes?*," as a starting point, Fietzer shows how recent fiction and movies, including his new novel, *Metadata Murders*, offer an alternative take on the ethics of behavior upon the Internet and other interactive technologies. Like the supercomputer of the Krell in the MGM movie, *Forbidden Planet*, the Internet has delivered electronic utilities and information all over the planet. While the impact of this capability has not annihilated the Earth's inhabitants, it has exposed and exaggerated the moral and ethical fissures amongst its cultures and beliefs. Fictional portrayals of this phenomenon range from the anthropologic eroticism of Cleo Odzer's *Virtual Spaces: Sex and the Cyber Citizen* to Mandy Ross's more cautionary *Cyber Sex: Prepared to Please* to Russell James' hardboiled *No One Gets Hurt*. Mainstream psychology and organized religion weigh in with web sites and white papers devoted to identifying and allaying the perils of disembodied and impersonal sex. Into this ongoing debate, Fietzer's novel reconfirms the notion that an act of selfless passion such as that stemming from the love a father feels for his daughter can triumph over the nihilistic forces of physical sexual gratification disseminated over the Internet. The emotional reality of the Internet fosters a democracy of interpersonal relationships and ethical behavior that can be as real and rewarding as any experienced in conventional physical space.

INTRODUCTION

Five years ago at the third Ethics in Electronic Information Conference, Professor Bernd Frohmann in his paper, "Cyber-Ethics: Bodies or Bytes?" addressed the issue of ethical behavior on the Internet. Unknown to him, his work inspired my second novel, *Metadata Murders*. In his presentation, he refuted the notion that the existence of our material bodies possesses little moral significance outside of face-to-face communication, as in the disembodied realm of the Web. Rather, he championed the rational notion of moral dependence that is necessitated by our material existence. Much as the speaker in Louise Bogan's poem, *The Alchemist*, seeks "Thought divorced from eye and bone, Ecstasy come to breath alone,"¹ and discovers "unmysterious flesh,"² Frohmann concluded that "social relations in which the body plays no role lack any serious moral dimension."³

BACKGROUND

Many of our cultural pundits would agree. Reports of fraud, deceit, and corruption over the Internet have become commonplace. Psychologist, Michael Conner, reports that 50 per cent of Internet users lie about their age, weight, marital status, and gender; and 20 per cent experience negative consequences as a result. Another eleven per cent become addicted.⁴ Scarcely a week passes without reading an account of some ordinary woman like Suzette Trouten meeting her doom at the hands of an acquaintance made over the Internet.

Despite, or perhaps because of such reports, the proliferation of Internet dating sites has become a recent trend. Some regard such dating as "extreme sport," especially amongst those who are considered part of the tech-savvy younger generation, i.e. under the age of 27.

Women, who now outnumber men on the Internet, revel in the newfound sexual assertiveness that the anonymity of the Internet provides. Regardless of its potential consequences, in using the Net to promote personal relationships everyone agrees about one thing: everyone lies.⁵

ETHICS AND SOCIAL PRACTICE

Does this evidence corroborate Frohmann's assertion regarding the morality of the Net? Perhaps. Does it mean that relationships fostered by the Web are potentially hazardous? Certainly. Is unmediated, face-to-face conversation the only ethical means of communication? It depends.

For Frohmann the ethics of communication are embedded in social practice. The use of language is an exchange of information designed to work within the constraints imposed by its own physical properties and by "the inertia of valuable social practices."⁶ The meaning of a communication, which is mutable and open to the interpretation of the mind that receives it, becomes secondary to the outside attributes that shape it such as custom and usage. In short, the existence of the message precedes its essence. From this anti-Cartesian standpoint, Frohmann develops a network of ethical contingencies which establish the moral credo that the greatest good derives from those information exchanges that recognize and foster the well-being of our material bodies in ourselves and others. Those communications are deemed good to the extent that they support and enhance this view of life. Those that do not are not. False information or deception is regarded as harmful and unethical in so far as it hurts the body and/or deviates from accepted social practice.

What of the denizens of sex chat rooms and traffickers in Web pornography? To the degree that these individuals stray from societal standards they are at best anti-social—or criminal. To their victims they are something much worse. Using Frohmann's criteria, those instances that involve consenting adults where neither party is physically touched border on anti-social. For some practitioners, such as the extreme sport enthusiasts mentioned above, these acts could be dismissed as part of youthful rebellion. But many of the people who indulge in such activities are women of all ages as are the men (or women) with whom they liaison. Should we condemn their activities as criminal because they have exceeded the customary age limit of acceptable rebellion?

EXAMPLES FROM THE MEDIA

In instances of this kind where any evidence, anecdotal or otherwise, is difficult to come by, we must resort to examples provided by those often deemed the most anti-social and rebellious among us—artists. Such evidence might be considered suspect, being based upon fabrication, deception, even outright lies. The relationships portrayed are not real. But since cyberspace is part of reality, the relationships conveyed within it are real. Given that content possesses no moral dimension in and of itself according to Frohmann, it also may be argued that things that are by their nature deceptions, fictions, can provide the most egregious examples of behavior that could be considered unethical or immoral.

Many Web sites such as *Suspect Thoughts: a Journal of Subversive Writing* and the *Complete Internet Sex Resource Guide* contain chat rooms, stories, monthly newsletters, and links to accounts of sexual escapades of all kinds on various types of electronic media. A typical example appears at a site entitled Free Stories, which promotes their material as the "perfect way to start the day or wind up the evening before bed."⁷ Cynthia McCaffrey writes a web-journal narrative of her encounters as Professor Taltos003 on Planet Cyber-Sex in *Cyber-Sex*

101. Describing her adopted persona as the "curious little soul that I am I never hesitate to go where angels would fear to tread," she writes of her experience spent one evening with "Mr. Beast" who "took me to a place that night I never knew existed."⁸ Beyond charming and seducing her with his words, Ms. McCaffrey states that "And it was a real experience. . . . His was a world of sensuality and caresses that could almost be physically felt. The fact that I couldn't quite feel it only enhanced the feeling for me."⁹

As with many of these encounters, the names and descriptions of both partners are imaginary; the feelings and emotions they engender are not. Psychology professor Aaron Ben Ze'ev points out, "Cyberspace is virtual in the sense that imagination is intrinsic to that space," but the relationships themselves are not imaginary. Their imaginative nature provides their most unique characteristic, but "less developed virtual realities have always been integral parts of human life."¹⁰ All forms of art reaching back to those of the cave man involve some kind of virtual reality. Cyberspace does not offer a new dimension to human life. What is new about life on the Internet and other media is its interactive nature. "This interactivity has made it a psychological reality as well as a social reality" of which Ze'ev declares "The greater and more profound the interaction is, the greater the degree of psychological reality we attach to it."¹¹

IN MOVIES

The psychological reality of relationships fostered by the media has served as a plot device in many of our best motion pictures. The comic antics contained in films like *Little Shop Around the Corner* and *Nothing Sacred* result from misperceptions of imaginary personas presented via letter and newspaper respectively. The idealized aspects of human beings finds its greatest expression in the story lines of films like *Metropolis* and *Pygmalion/My Fair Lady* where the protagonist endows his creation with ideal human qualities with disastrous results. The potency of human emotions combined with technology provides the theme of films like *Forbidden Planet* where a father's possessive love for his daughter causes him to invoke the deadly power of the alien instrumentalities of the Krell.

The more recent film, *S1m0ne*, combines electronic media with an alluring image that demonstrates the power such fabrications can have. As the protagonist, Viktor Taransky says, it is "the classic case of technology in search of an artist"¹² whereby a failing director rescues his film by creating a computer-fabricated image to replace the leading lady who walks out during the shooting of his film. When *S1m0ne* becomes a huge star and favorite to millions of moviegoers, Taransky comments of his ruse that "the scales have tipped in favor of fake."¹³ After she appears in a second film and wins an Oscar, Taransky's life becomes such a shambles that he tries to pull the plug—and can't. *S1m0ne* has become so real that the public refuses to believe she is dead, even when he admits his fabrication.

Like the other films mentioned, *S1m0ne* is a cautionary tale about the power of technology and its ability to deceive. It also reveals something else. It suggests the power these technologies and the creations that spring from them have to elevate, to better the people who are involved with them. The cynical editor of the tabloid newspaper who tries to prove that Taransky's star is fake succumbs to what he sees as her purity. After Taransky has tried to take responsibility for his actions, his ex-wife observes that rather than his having breathed life into a machine, "she made you."¹⁴

IN LITERATURE

This capability of the Internet to foster positive behavior appears in our contemporary literature. Fiction titles such as *Cyber Sex: Prepared to Please* and *Sex and Murder.com: a Paul Turner Mystery* use communication on the Internet as a plot device to steer their protagonists through the conventional obstacles specific to the romance and detective genres to a satisfying

conclusion. Other works such as *Nearly Roadkill: an Infobahn Erotic Adventure* and Neal Stephenson's *Cryptonomicon* have greater aspirations. These techno-thrillers explore topics like gender issues, censorship, and power on the Internet.

In William Fietzer's *Metadata Murders*, an emotionally wounded Internet security expert, Benjamin Hackwell, receives a message from his daughter, Caitline, to visit a web site where he witnesses a streaming video of her murder. When he discovers that no one, including his ex-wife, knows of Caitline's whereabouts, he begins an odyssey to discover the fate of the missing teenager. Prompted by his love for his daughter and the intangible sense that in this situation "the metadata feels all wrong,"¹⁵ he probes further to find her linked to Internet prostitution, identity fraud, international terrorism, and the murder of his best friend. The more Ben searches, the more he realizes that Caitline is not the helpless and blameless victim he thought. Nor is he the shining white knight destined to rescue her. Ensnared in a terrorist plot fostered by his limitations as a father and husband, Ben must decide whether his wayward daughter is worth sacrificing himself to prove her innocence.

DISCUSSION

The common thread in all of these works, regardless of medium or artistic aspiration, centers on control, or the lack of it, over the technology. Viktor Taransky's troubles begin when he can no longer control the environment in which S1m0ne appears. Ben Hackwell's belief in his daughter's innocence starts to crumble when he finds evidence of her other, less innocent, virtual identities. Professor Taltos/Cynthia McCaffrey speaks of her feelings when she relates her first encounter with "The Beast." It was right about here that I began to realize what it truly was that I feared. I feared naturally the things I didn't know. . . . Things I couldn't touch, things I couldn't see, but knew were there. This wasn't a physical thing. It wasn't something I could get my hands on. This was what was making me feel uncomfortable."¹⁶

Each of these characters refers to feeling out of control. Professor Ze'ev corroborates these impressions when he says of interaction over the Internet that "The more similar the inputs and outputs are to offline interaction, the more real they are typically perceived to be." This feeling of reality caused by the interactivity of cyberspace fosters the user's sense of greater control over his or her interpersonal relationships. Participants have time to consider their responses, which is "often central to enjoyable experiences." Moreover, these experiences do not deny reality so much as play with it. As a result, the participants embellish upon Karl Marx's statement that "'people make their own history, but do not make it as they please.' In cyberspace they can make it exactly as they please."¹⁷

What these personas feel is the empowerment of their imagination. Aware of the danger of losing themselves to the machine, they also become aware of its possibilities. They open themselves to the "mystery of the mind,"¹⁸ as McCaffrey/Taltos puts it, of engaging in relationships that allow them to fulfill specific fantasies and desires that remain unfulfilled in their offline relationships. As with artists working in other media, their explorations constitute a form of rebellion against exterior conventions and societal standards. From a metaphysical standpoint, their exploits reveal the possibility that the least among us in the material world can dare to dream, to live in a democracy of the imagination where any participant can transcend his or her environment.

Nor must these activities result in unethical behavior. McCaffrey writes that her persona remained always aware "that all I had to do was click out of the room and that would be the end of it." This control enables her to "stop generalizing [sic] people and see them as the individuals they are. This was my lesson one in cyber-land."¹⁹ Viktor Taransky's relationship with S1m0ne causes him to realize that all his actions in creating and exploiting her for his motion pictures

was not on behalf of the work, but to buttress his own ego. And Ben Hackwell's relationship with Lara, Caitline's virtual persona, forces him to reassess his relationship with his wife and daughter and become willing to sacrifice himself on their behalf.

CONCLUSION

The interactive aspect of the Internet and similar electronic forums has democratized the power of the individual imagination in our interpersonal relationships. Each participant becomes an artist who shapes the destiny of his or her life upon the Web. Rather than judged by exterior authority or societal norm, such control asserts the power of the individual conscience to determine the ethical standards of behavior during their existence in virtual reality. The events and situations that occur possess an impact with moral and emotional dimensions as real as those encountered in their off-line life. However, whatever occurs on the Web stays there unless the participants decide to bring their relationship into physical space. Aware of the dangers—and the possibilities, many of them do. However, the decision and the ethics that informs that decision remain their own.

As a result, the dictum that actions speak louder than words applies to Internet relationships as much as to those that occur face-to-face. The examples presented from various electronic media demonstrate the latitude of behavior that is available in electronic relationships. Participants follow societal standards as they see fit. Their actions in cyberspace may adhere to the moral and ethical and physical restrictions imposed by their material bodies, or they may not. Their behavior may be prompted as much, perhaps more, by the reality of their emotional attachments as by the logical dictates of their material bodies. The participants in the relationship must decide. The outcomes may be degrading or ennobling, disappointing or exultant, but each user retains the mystical possibility to experience Louise Bogan's "passion of the mind."

¹ Bogan, Louise. *Body of this Death: Poems* (1923).

² Ibid.

³ Frohmann, Bernd. "Cyber Ethics: Bodies or Bytes" *International Information and Library Review*, p. 6.

⁴ Conner, Michael G. "Internet Addiction and Internet Sex" *The Source* (July, 2001).

⁵ Durbin, Johnathan. "Internet Sex Unzipped" *Macleans* (Oct. 6, 2003)

⁶ Frohmann. "Cyber Ethics", p. 7.

⁷ Home page of "Free Stories" *Storiesbyemail.com*, p. 1.

⁸ McCaffrey, Cynthia. "Cyber-Sex 101" *StoriesbyEmail.com* (2003) pt. 4.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ze'ev, Aaron Ben. *Love Online: Emotions on the Internet* (2004), p. 2.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 4.

¹² Nicol, Andrew. *S1m0ne* (2004).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Fietzer, William. *Metadata Murders* (2005) p. 398.

¹⁶ McCaffrey, Cynthia. "Cyber-Sex 101" *StoriesbyEmail.com* (2003) pt. 2.

¹⁷ Ze'ev, Aaron Ben. *Love Online: Emotions on the Internet* (2004), p. 2.

¹⁸ McCaffrey, Cynthia. "Cyber-Sex 101" *StoriesbyEmail.com* (2003) pt. 2

¹⁹ Ibid.

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