

# Love and Other Technologies

**Retrofitting Eros for the Information Age**

*Dominic Pettman*

FORDHAM UNIVERSITY PRESS

NEW YORK 2006

C O N T E N T S

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	vii
<i>Preface</i>	ix
Introduction	i
1. Love and Other Technologies	16
2. The Storable Future and the Stored Past	42
3. In the Artificial Gardens of Eden-Olympia	70
4. Facing the Interface	84
5. “How Was It For Me?” Not-Seeing the Non-Spaces of Pornography	108
6. A Self of One’s Own?	129
7. Mind the Gap	159
8. Asymptotic Encounters: Love Freed from Itself	179
Conclusion: Of Mice and Multitudes	198
<i>Notes</i>	209
<i>Works Cited</i>	237
<i>Index</i>	251

PREFACE: A NEW KIND OF LOVE

In Hermann Broch's 1931 novel, *The Anarchist*, the protagonist, August Esch, wanders through the hallowed halls of the head offices of the Central Rhine Shipping Company, having recently accepted a job there as an accountant. He stops short upon reading a woman's name on one of the seemingly endless office doors and

felt a sudden desire for the unknown woman behind the door, and there arose in him the conception of a new kind of love, a simple, one might almost say a business-like and official kind of love, a love that would run as smoothly, as calmly, and yet as spaciouly and never-endingly, as these corridors with their polished linoleum. (59)

This "new kind of love" is not only hatched in the heart of Esch but linked to a world-historical condition via an experience we could dub, with a nod to Kafka, the bureaucratic sublime. It is a cold love. A smooth love. Balanced in the same fashion, and according to the same principles, as company accounts.

As Broch makes clear, in some obscure way this new kind of love is linked to gender and can quickly switch into a different mode:

But then he saw the long series of doors with men's names, and he could not help thinking that a lone woman in that masculine environment must be as disgusted with it as Mother Hentjen was with her business. A hatred of commercial methods stirred again within him, hatred of an organization that, behind its apparent orderliness, its smooth corridors, its smooth and flawless book-keeping, concealed all manner of infamies. And that was called respectability! (Ibid.)

And so, on the one hand, we have that ancient principle "love," and on the other, we have a new genus, perhaps a genetically modified strain, devel-

oped in order to survive modern economic exigencies. Such a new species of love has different names according to different agendas. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri call it “affective labor,” while Zygmunt Bauman calls it “liquid love” (a symptom of so-called liquid modernity). But whichever name this mutation of feeling masquerades under, it prompts us to examine the mysterious relationship between longing and *be*-longing in an era often characterized as isolated, discordant, bankrupt, godforsaken, and even inhuman.

Within this rhetorical context, it is worth speculating whether love is the only discourse still available to us that is capable of salvaging singularity in a late capitalist epoch, or whether it is rather a case that “love” has become (or perhaps always was) a decoy that lures us into a libidinal economy no less indifferent to individual suffering than the macroeconomy overseen by the IMF and the World Bank.

Love today is performed and assessed not so much in an age of cholera as one of BSE and CJD, pathogens created for us by a cannibalistic regime of “mechanically recovered meat” (a technical term from the abattoir industry but equally appropriate for almost all other kinds of commerce, of which the dating and entertainment industries are only the most obvious). Hence, Stendhal’s famous definition of love as a “crystallization” has taken on a sinister meaning in a time when one bite of a hamburger can lead to a very literal crystallization of brain tissue (1975).

Several questions emerge from such ambient conditions. Is love a fetish? Is our emotional surrender to the phrase “I love you” a disavowal, in the Freudian sense, or a delusion, in the Marxist sense? Is this institutionalized form of desire the addictive element which is actually poisoning the fragile ego-system of twenty-first-century social life?

And yet, I do not simply want to regurgitate that particular strain of Continental philosophy which can be boiled down to the statement “Things may not have been better before, but they are certainly getting worse.” There is sensible work to be done, sleeves to be rolled up, paradigms to be dismantled.

For instance, we often ponder the meaning supporting the Ur-sentence “I love you.” Remaining faithful to a kind of Howard-Jones effect, we have concentrated most of our efforts on the word “love,” rather than questioning the “I” and the “you,” as if the bridge were more important than the

banks it claims to connect. Indeed, we tend to assume that this metaphor of bridging two stable and identifiable entities or locations is enough to capture the passionate event, which it clearly is not. Love is more than merely an engineering feat which joins two previously isolated points. (Remember, no man is an island.) In contrast, love (perhaps I can drop the quotation marks for this word at this point, or at least render them invisible) must negotiate the “being singular plural” (Nancy) of beings. It must recognize the fact that “we” are not completely coincident and/or consistent with ourselves. That is to say, our imagined identities never fully match that bundle of behaviors which comport themselves under our name. To put it yet another way, our shadows (fantasies, delusions, self-projected images) are of different shapes from those which cast the shadows (not to be mistaken with a “true-self,” but closer to a heterogeneous set of elements revolving around an absent organizing center).<sup>1</sup>

The significance of this approach to subjectivity will become more apparent as my argument unfolds, but at this point it is necessary to establish the flexible idea of ontological overlaps, rather than the rigid metaphysical buffer zones of Cartesian intersubjectivity (the reasons I don’t say “Platonic intersubjectivity” are explained in chapter 1). We live so much through the media that it seems almost tautological to say that the world is mediated. When the medium becomes the message, and vice versa, it is perhaps time to start talking about immediacy again. And it is in this context that love enters the equation.

For example, think of those everyday ex-pathic circuits which trace the Möbius strip of “me” versus “not-me.” We say “Oops” when someone is dropping a carton of eggs.<sup>2</sup> We yawn when we see someone else doing the same. Such contagion is not necessarily a case of empathy, the human capacity to imagine oneself in another’s place, but a way for *community* or *technology* or *intelligence* to manifest and transmit itself. From this perspective a yawn is a cosmic entity which enlists people as its host in order to bring itself into being. And who is to say that this is not a valid perspective (especially when we replace the seemingly trivial example of “yawn” with, say, “music” or “art” or “culture itself”)?

*“Here’s Looking at You, Kid”*

“Separate the sexual act from love, and the language of love is devalued.” So states Anthony Burgess (1978, 102). In the very next sentence, he goes

on to say, “An aspect of our freedom is our right to debase the language totally, so that its syntagms become mere noise.” The link between the first and the second sentence is left intriguingly open, inviting us to fill in the blanks with our own thoughts on the relationship between eros, agapē, communication, and structure (and not only that, but to reflect on the notion of “relationship” itself).

Identifying the signal-to-noise relationship of amorous discourse seems like a technical imperative in these troubled times.<sup>3</sup> While at first glance a study of love may seem like a retreat into the personal, it will soon become apparent that it is anything but. Love, like weaponized anthrax spores, has a habit of getting into everything.

One entry point we can use for such an all-encompassing and diffuse discourse is the visual mechanism which often triggers its existence in the first place.<sup>4</sup> As Kaja Silverman maintains, “Passion is a semiotic affair” (2000, 50). Indeed, this same critic identifies a formal transhistorical human subject, the “world spectator,” who is referred to as such because they are *subject* to the scopic regime of love: “The world spectator is emphatically a desiring subject” (11). Describing a conceptual trajectory linking Plato’s hypnotized cave dwellers with Debord’s equally mesmerized cinemagoers, Silverman focuses on the ontological feedback loops of (visual) attraction:

Were others to look at us through our own eyes, ‘ourselves’ is precisely what we would never be. We can appear, and so Be, only if others ‘light’ us up. To be lit up means to be seen from a vantage point from which we can never see ourselves. It also means to embody not our own, but *someone else’s* idea of beauty. Our ‘essence’ is thus strangely nonessential. . . . The being whom I light up with the radiance of affirmation supplies me with the form which allows me to see what I could not otherwise see; it alone makes possible beauty’s embodiment. It is together, then, that we bring about its appearance. (19–21)

If Beauty goes for a walk alone in the forest, would Beauty still be beautiful? The answer is an emphatic No.

Thus, for Silverman—as for myself—“libidinal signification has an *ontological* force” (43). That is to say, every relationship is a transductive relationship, one which doesn’t merely link but *creates* the terms in that same relationship. Beauty—or more simply Self, whether figured as beautiful or ugly or somewhere in between—does not precede the encounter with Others. This “ontological force,” the one emphasized throughout the following

chapters, prompts an ethical assessment of one's own actions, not so much in the moralistic-behavioral sense ("Am I a good person?") but according to a more symbolic economy of recognition and deferral ("Am I a person?"). Silverman states: "To each of us, through our particular libidinal history, has been given the potentiality for participating in a unique series of disclosures. This potentiality is not so much a talent as a responsibility. When we fail to realize it, we are bottomlessly guilty" (48).

Without embracing this statement completely (in what sense is this series *unique*, and why give so much ground to the deployment of guilt; do we detect a whiff of emotional blackmail here?), the notion of responsibility in relation to an erotics of Being is nevertheless a revealing one. Through it we can *see* the stakes involved in being together, longing together, and belonging together (in the sense of W. J. T. Mitchell's desire to "make seeing show itself" [2002, 175]).

For in English at least, the verb "to look" can be both objective ("You look good"), and subjective ("I look at you"). It is simultaneously passive and active, gazing and gazed upon. And yet, from the myth of Aphrodite's lazy eye to those infamous blinkers which fall over the retinas of the impassioned, love is an interactive event which involves not only sight but all of the senses—and perhaps others we are not even aware of . . . yet.

To coin a phrase, then: If love is blind, sex is Braille.

### *Tectonic Movements*

Love, technology, community.

It is my suggestion in this book that these three terms in fact designate the same thing, or at least the same movement—specifically, a movement toward the other.

If we recall the bone-wielding man-ape in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), we have access to a fable of the origin of tools—tools which begin under the sign of weaponry and hostility. The primate, known as Moon-Watcher, beating another simian to death with a bone, certainly fails to qualify as an originary figure of love or community. Yet, when viewed as a negative template, such an image provides the outlines of an encounter which can allow us to think through the emergence and legacy of these crucial cultural and political terms. That is to say, if we suspend for

a moment the idea of motivation, human social life can be figured as always already a movement toward others. Whether this movement is born of violence or tenderness, the vector remains the same. Simply put, we would do well at the outset to avoid dividing “love” on one side of the fence and “hatred” on the other—and the same can be said for “technology” and “nature,” or “community” and “alienation.”<sup>5</sup>

For instance, definitive distinctions between tools and weapons are notoriously difficult to sustain, as the case of the spanner, which can be used to tighten a bolt or seize the machinery itself. And as the West shifts further into a postmillennial paranoid phase in relation to the Scylla and Charybdis of “terror” and “security,” the emphasis on so-called technological superiority only intensifies. As theorists such as Manuel de Landa, Paul Virilio, and Friedrich Kittler have shown, cutting-edge technologies are produced and developed in the context of the incessant war machine, then later trickle down into other spheres, such as medicine, civil engineering, agriculture, and, eventually, domestic convenience.

Despite this ancient alliance between technology and violence, itself generated by the engines of alterity which are used to distinguish allies from enemies, there is an argument to be made that *eros*, *techne*, and *communitas* are so inextricably linked as to often be indistinguishable. Just as love can spasm simultaneously into hate, the words we use to designate these phenomena cannot adequately capture the dynamic relationships which comprise the immediacy of the moment and the enigmas of history (or indeed the enigmas of the moment and the immediacy of history). It is the triangulation of these terms that reveals some of the blind spots in our current discussions and debates of the role of technology in contemporary life.

At the end of my previous book, *After the Orgy* (2002), I signaled a “preemptive” exhaustion back on the other side of the year 2000, the already inscribed expectation of a kind of depleted politics. This phenomenon, I argued, both informs and creates the liminal space between anticipation and anticlimax, a space which need not necessarily be as debilitating as it appears in daily life. In this sequel of sorts, I explore the ethical implications of this posthuman(ist) politics in relation to contemporary media and literature. This book thus traces the various vectors and movements of emergent globalization, specifically in order to locate and identify the cultural stakes which



are forged at the rhetorical intersections between love, technology, and community.

While my previous project relied heavily on Freud, Nietzsche, Baudrillard, and Bataille, this new book primarily relies on more recent, poststructuralist theories of communication; but with a twist. In place of those posed by the elongated Ur-concepts of first-wave psychoanalysis and transgressive philosophy, my methodology is both pragmatic and strategic, enlisting ideas poached from different contexts and epochs to support an argument which witnesses change over time and yet maintains a certain formal consistency. (Love is always already a technology of being together, yet the experience of “being” and “together” is something composed in historical time.)

Michel Foucault identifies the issue when he states that certain codes can remain remarkably stable and consistent through different periods, while the ethics surrounding them change by way of integration, displacement, and reutilization. Ruptures occur in different historical contexts, reconfiguring the symbolic systems by which we are constituted and through which we articulate new phases and techniques of symbolization. But as Foucault reminds us, “There is a technology of the constitution of the self which cuts across symbolic systems” (1988, 369).

My approach thus takes a leaf from this Foucaultian fracture, and strategically emphasizes continuity when it is significant, and discontinuity when it tangibly impacts or disrupts codification (in my case, of intimacy). Indeed, part of the difficulty with this project is my own desire to sidestep the lumbering linearity of diachronic analysis. One method is to superimpose symptomatic synchronicities (a fancy way of saying “to compare and contrast different epochs”) in order to circumvent temporally discrete periods. This calls for an analytic which mimics Hitchcock’s famous camera technique in *Vertigo* (1958): pulling the camera back while zooming in at the same time. Periodization is approached as both an open problem and a taxonomic technology in its own right.

From a certain angle, to trace the influence of technology through time is to beg this question of periodization. However, it is clear that chronological models are failing us when it comes to understanding something this “patient and deranging.” For Heidegger, the question of technics is intimately bound up with one’s quotidian-epistemic wherewithal. In his scheme, both *techne* and *episteme* “mean to be entirely at home in something, to understand and be expert in it” (1977a, 13). Or at least it *did* mean this. Before

“the turning,” world-historical periods could be marked by the age before and after the “world-picture,” or the increase in “unreasonable demands” placed upon nature. And yet for those feeling decidedly unhomed, or homeless, in the digital age, technics obliterates our access to such neat, even quaint concepts as “before and after,” by virtue (if that is the right word) of its own momentum, or blind becoming.<sup>6</sup>

Hence my decision to drop the original subtitle of this book, *New Questions for Old Media, Old Questions for New Media*, both for being unwieldy and for its inability to recognize the undecidability of technics in relation to origins, overlappings, applications, innovations, and mutations. By complicating the relationship of past to present to future, precisely by suspending it, is to go beyond—or at least seek a space apart from—repetition-as-difference (for instance, McLuhan’s vicious spiral of tribalism to modernity to neotribalism).

No doubt, with a canvas this vast, it is prudent to give some of the more dominant names in the field a certain amount of shore leave. Those listed above, along with seemingly obvious candidates like Derrida and Lacan, thus make only cameo appearances in the following pages (although it would be a mistake to underestimate their influence). Instead, Jean-Luc Nancy, Bernard Stiegler, Gilles Deleuze, and Giorgio Agamben act as our primary guides to the material, since they function as my own technologies for cutting through the Gordian Knot of mediated desire.<sup>7</sup>

It is these thinkers who taught me that definitions of *technology* should not be limited to industrial infrastructure and other “machines that go beep,” but should extend to specific relationships involving power, knowledge, and discourse (often based on the biomechanics of natural organisms and processes). It is they who emphasize the facts that language itself can be considered a technology and that the very concept of “the human” is being reinvented by rhetorical and technological drift. They offer hope in a climate where the invocation of the very word is often enough to confirm that there is none. What’s more, as with all cultural phenomena, there are periods of waxing and waning. Some critics and concepts seem to bear a heavy burden of overcitation and *déjà vu*, while others build on these in more timely and less familiar ways. (My last book was deliberately untimely; this one attempts to be pre-timely, or “ahead of the curve,” as the corporate analysts say.)

Yet no useful idea is rejected merely because it happens to come from a dubious or unfashionable source. Kierkegaard is connected to Bergson, Luhmann to Silverman, and Barthes to Kittler in a concerted effort to “think diagonally,” cutting across the artificial fences which are still—even in the age of Monsanto—built and mended, then rebuilt and remended, in order to keep the trespassers out of disciplinary fields.

The movement I wish to trace is, for my purposes at least, a *techtonic* movement. The question then becomes: What logic informs this particular neologism? Well, specifically the logic of the planet itself, which is not only hurtling around a finite star but also shifting internally according to its own geological imperatives, tectonic forces bringing buried elements up from the molten mantle and plunging vast continental plates back downward on enormous lithic conveyer belts. The texts, spaces, people, practices, and places documented in this book are framed in terms of parallel “techtonic movements,” those being the constantly shifting plates and planes which make up the dubious foundations of our cultural assumptions. As with the earth itself, these movements can be slow and imperceptible, indifferent to the vicissitudes of human time, or else they can be quick and violent, as occurs with volcanic eruptions and earthquakes.<sup>8</sup>

Changing the spelling of *tectonics* to *techtonics*, however, obviously emphasizes the technological element of these movements and therefore subscribes to an etiology of “the human” largely indebted to Bernard Stiegler, as well as to the various intellectual giants on whose dandruff-covered shoulders he so brilliantly perches. It thus becomes necessary to trace an emergent globalism in order to locate and identify the ultimately political stakes which are forged at the textual intersections between love, technology, and community.

Such an approach necessarily draws us into a wider constellation of more general questions regarding passion and legibility, essentialism and rhizomatics, historical sequentiality and its construction, nostalgia and its reconstruction, and that network of discourses which articulate social behavior within the mediascape of the electro-information era. In order to map the movement of these techtonic fluxes, we must therefore consider existing definitions of cultural transmission, difference, representation, moralized monogamy, and their potential alternatives. The hope is that in thinking such notions through, we can unearth adequate evidence to counter the

overdetermined geopolitical axes of our age, on both micro and macro levels.

Perhaps this project springs from my own interest in a “politics of exhaustion,” an orientation suspicious of those movements which seek to harness energy and optimism, as if these forces were not constantly vulnerable to being funneled into deep-cut circuits of Capital, Art, Expression, Charity, Street Theater, and other horrors of the modern world. Its intention is not to fetishize or romanticize the Other but rather to listen attentively to the feedback loop produced when “self” and “other” give way to an ethical assemblage beyond intersubjectivity.

As David Odell points out in his online book *A Rushed Quality*:

It is remarkable that we can forget our primordial sociality to such a degree that the “constitution of intersubjectivity” seems to be a legitimate question. What is the evidence for basal solipsism? We die alone, we fear others, we can never know what they are thinking much less understand them, we must study to bend them to our will and so on. As well to say that all of these must be constituted on prior sociality, and far easier to sketch out the lines. What an absurd imposture the solitary self is! It is a myth that gives consistency to our emotions, our desires and our ignorance. And to our loves as well? (2001)

## Introduction

Ontology does not occur at a level reserved for principles, a level that is withdrawn, speculative, and altogether abstract. Its name means “the thinking of existence.” And today the situation of ontology signifies the following: to think existence at the height of this challenge to thinking that is globalness as such (which is designated as “capital,” “(de-) Westernization,” “technology,” “rupture of history,” and so forth).

—JEAN-LUC NANCY, *Being Singular Plural*

The unthinkable is not something we are thinking about at the moment.

—PETER KENYON, chief executive of Manchester United Football Club

### *In the Fine Underwear of Our Minds*

There is a scene in Tom Tykwer’s rather pedestrian film *Run Lola Run* (1998)<sup>1</sup> when the two protagonists—Lola (Franka Potente) and her boyfriend, Manni (Moritz Bleibtreu)—lie in bed discussing the random nature of love and existence. Lola asks Manni that age-old question which lovers often pose their partners: “Why me? Of all the people in the world, why did you pick me?” As we know, one of the main functions of romantic narrative is to weave all the strands of coincidence and contingency together in such a way that the lovers feel compelled to believe in the benign intervention of an invisible hand of fate. “It could not have been otherwise,” they tell each other. (If it *could* have been otherwise, then this counterfactual eventuality would have erased the first possibility, thereby permanently sealing the other road not taken.)

“Why me,” asks Lola, “and not one of those other girls?” Her boyfriend responds as the ancient script demands, reassuring Lola of those unique

qualities that ensure her status as the loved one: the individual who stands out amongst other individuals. Imagine, however, that we were to indulge in some retrospective script doctoring, delicately rewriting this scene according to a less-established romantic formula. In such a case, Manni's answer could have been "But Lola, you *are* one of those other girls."<sup>2</sup> Such a subtle shift in perspective may seem trivial, pedantic, and even a little cruel in the context of ego reassurance. Nevertheless, emerging conceptual models of "being-in-the-world" are forcing us to rethink the relationship between self and other, subject and object, individual and community in ways which are anything but trivial. How the subject negotiates the highly fluid character of contemporary society and orients him- or herself within the schizo-semiotic flux of the twenty-first century have become questions of pressing concern to those with an interest in deconstructing the relatively stable (and staple) Freudian-Enlightenment unit of ego-based individuality.

The seeds of this emerging perspective have recently been harvested by the philosophical investigations of community by Giorgio Agamben, Maurice Blanchot, and Jean-Luc Nancy, although they were sown several decades earlier in the sprawling literary fields of Marcel Proust and Robert Musil. As is the way with agricultural metaphors, such seeds can be traced back to the earliest articulations of art and philosophy.

In *Remembrance of Things Past*, Proust's narrator, Marcel, travels to the seaside town of Balbec, where he is confronted by a gestalt gaggle of young women walking along the sand:

Although each was of a type absolutely different from the others, they all had beauty; but to tell the truth I had seen them for so short a time, and without venturing to look hard at them, that I had not yet individualised any of them . . . and when (according to the order in which the group met the eye, marvellous because the most different aspects were combined in it, but confused as a piece of music in which I was unable to isolate and identify at the moment of their passage the successive phrases, no sooner distinguished than forgotten) I saw a pallid oval, black eyes, green eyes emerge, I did not know if these were the same that had already charmed me a moment ago, I could not relate them to any one girl whom I had set apart from the rest and identified. And this want, in my vision, of the demarcations which I should presently establish between them permeated the group with a sort of shimmering harmony, the continuous transmutation of a fluid, collective and mobile beauty. (1989, 847–48)

This "pale madrepare" constitutes an "invisible but harmonious bond, like a single warm shadow, a single atmosphere, making of them a whole as

homogenous in its parts as it was different from the crowd through which their procession gradually wound" (851).

When Marcel is later shown an old photograph of these childhood friends, he notes that "those children, still mere babies, had been at that elementary stage in their development when personality has not yet stamped its seal on each face. Like those primitive organisms in which the individual barely exists by itself, is constituted by the polypary rather than by each of the polyps that compose it, they were still pressed one against another" (882). At this stage in the girls' development, something as evanescent as a giggle is enough to dissolve the ontological boundaries between them, "obliterating, merging those imprecise and grinning faces in the congealment of a single cluster, scintillating and tremulous."

When merely children, these girls are incipient creatures, awaiting the "stamp of personality." Nevertheless, even some years later and in the flush of early womanhood, the sheer plurality of their presence overwhelms Marcel. While in Balbec "each of their physiognomies was now mistress of itself" (882), it takes a while before the narrator's libidinal and phenomenological excitement calms down enough to sift each girl out from the other. In contrast to Levinas's "epiphany of the face"—that unavowable confrontation with the other's incommensurability—Marcel experiences a confusion of features, a multiplication of qualities which suspends any kind of ethical relationship.

It is within the context of this sensory overload that we can approach the question of communicative identity. As Walter Benjamin has shown, the public spaces of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries confronted the subject with an unprecedented amount of information to process and interpret. The boundaries of the self soon became threatened by the semiotic missiles hurled by advertising men, architects, and city planners, designed to penetrate the consumer-citizen. While Balbec is not exactly Times Square, it too is prey to the confusional order of comingling classes and types. This particularly modern form of discordant order follows the techno-logic underpinning contemporary quotidian life and the fleeting encounters that it promises. Marcel meditates on the effect produced by women glimpsed from train carriages, especially how the charm of a girl can often be measured in direct inverse ratio to the amount of time she is in view. He reflects on the "evanescence of persons who are not known to us" and laments the "numberless strangers whom, even at Balbec, the car-

riage bowling away from them at full speed had forced me for ever to abandon” (853). In an age when the tempo of life is gaining pace in all quarters and the earth itself seems to be spinning faster on its axis, technology, and technological metaphors, seem best equipped to capture the acceleration of perception. Accordingly, Balbec beachgoers are forced by that dazzling gang of young women to move “as though from the path of a machine which had been set going by itself and which could not be expected to avoid pedestrians” (848).

Robert Musil’s man without qualities, Ulrich, is also finely attuned to the new kinetic geometries of city life. We first meet him standing behind a window, “ticking off on his stopwatch the passing cars, trucks, trolleys, and pedestrians, whose faces were washed out by the distance, timing everything whirling past that he could catch in the net of his eye. He was gauging their speeds, their angles, all the living forces of mass hurtling past that drew the eye to follow them like lightning, holding on, letting go, forcing the attention for a split second to resist, to snap, to leap in pursuit of the next item” (1996, 6).

We are therefore introduced to Ulrich as a kind of narrative Archimedean point, the only still mechanism in the urban machine. But this is something of a red herring and should not lead us into the traditional assumption that Ulrich represents a stable subjectivity, someone who can successfully negotiate the bustling activity of the street and absorb the shocks of city life by harmlessly incorporating them into his person. Musil’s protagonist represents a distinctly modern (or perhaps postmodern) attitude to his environment. As a consequence, he is not the type to use each info-missile as a pertinent reminder of the flesh, which acts as the border between himself and others, between Ulrich and not-Ulrich.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, his identity adapts to the semiotic swirl by becoming indistinct and indefinite. “It is not difficult to describe the basic traits of this thirty-two-year-old man Ulrich, even though all he knows about himself is that he is as close to as he is far from all qualities, and that they are all, whether or not he has made them his own, in a curious fashion indifferent to him” (159).

Indeed, when he gets into some trouble with the police and comes face to face with the machinery of the state, Ulrich perceives his interrogation in similarly technocratic terms:



He felt as though he had been sucked into a machine that was dismembering him into impersonal, general components before the question of his guilt or innocence came up at all. . . . His face counted only as an aggregate of officially describable features—it seemed to him that he had never before pondered the fact that his eyes were gray, one of the four officially recognized kinds of eyes, one pair among millions. . . . He could, even at such a moment as this, himself appreciate this statistical demystification of his person and feel inspired by the quantitative and descriptive procedures applied to him by the police apparatus as if it were a love lyric invented by Satan. The most amazing thing about it was that the police could not only dismantle a man so that nothing was left of him, they could also put him together again, recognizably and unmistakably, out of the same worthless components. (168–69)

Ulrich is thus something of an enigma to people like Paul Arnheim, the rich industrialist, intellectual, and philanthropist who embodies the man *with* qualities. All of Arnheim’s decisions are based on his belief that it is “far from impossible that a great, superrational collectivity was coming to birth and that, abandoning an outworn individualism, we were on our way back, with all the superiority and ingenuity of the white race, to a Paradise Reformed, bringing a modern program, a rich variety of choices, to the rural backwardness of the Garden of Eden” (444). (This is something of an irony, considering that Arnheim is a constant focus of the media’s cult of personality.)

Such a vision, however, rests not on a dissolution of identity but on a humanistic faith in communion as a sacred form of unification. For Arnheim the twentieth century leads inevitably to a secular fusion of values and ideals, as embodied by the ideological ambitions of the European Union. Ulrich, on the other hand, anticipates the Deleuzian model of schizoanalysis, the complex fragmentation of subjectivity in the face of the Spectacle. Thus, we

should remember that having a split personality has long since ceased to be a trick reserved for lunatics; at the present-day tempo, our capacity for political insight, for writing a piece for the newspapers, for faith in the new movements in art and literature, and for countless other things, depends wholly on a knack for being, at times, convinced against our own convictions, splitting off a part of our mind and stretching it to form a brand-new whole-hearted conviction. (424)

As Musil reminds us, in the age of rampant capitalism, “what people are” evidently keeps changing as rapidly as “what people are wearing” and that

“no one, not even those in the fashion business, knows the real secret of who ‘these people’ are” (494). Those economically privileged people who, in the “fine underwear of their minds,” once knew who they were and where they belonged, as surely as if it were monogrammed on their souls, are already in jeopardy in Musil’s prewar Vienna.

Significantly, Musil’s friend and fellow writer Hermann Broch takes up this same theme in his own major work, *The Sleepwalkers*. Broch’s initial protagonist, Joachim von Pasenow, is an army lieutenant and, as such, a member of that “cult of the uniform” which transforms the wearer “into a property of his uniform” (2000, 14). The uniform is thus a hard casing, as much psychological as material, which is used to “arrest the confusion and flux of life, just as it conceals whatever in the human body is soft and flowing, covering up the soldier’s underclothes and skin” (15). Indeed, when in uniform, Joachim “begins to forget his own undergarments,” and along with them the uncertainties of modernity. Fighting a constant border war on “the frontier between his self and his uniform,” Joachim is tortured by the shame which he associates with life outside the military for the simple reason that “everything civilian” is “a matter of underclothing” (16).

And so, between Ulrich and Joachim, Musil and Broch, underwear and uniforms, we see the emergence of the postdeterministic character of a modern subjectivity without qualities. The “dehumanizing” agenda of certain globalist tendencies, where the qualities of one person can seemingly be recombined with another (even beyond the laws of physics, physiology, and cosmetic surgery), thereby becomes the site of an antiessentialist struggle over the very notion of identity. Writing between Nietzsche and Foucault, these literary prophets helped trace the various faces of Western individuality in the very sand which awaits the erasing wave of history.

### *Whateverbeing*

The Irish tourist bureau has a saying: “A stranger is just a friend you haven’t met yet.” From a different perspective, however, a friend is just a stranger who happened to cross your path. (This may also explain why strangers are very rarely strange, at least within one’s own circles and experience. Indeed, it may make more sense to call them “strangely familiars.”)<sup>4</sup> Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben has coined the term “whatever being” (*qualunque*)

for the emerging postsovereign subject. This whatever being is the mode for the “coming community,” a rather abstract theoretical blueprint for a way of imagining life between the metaphysical landmarks of becoming, being, and belonging. The crucial point to remember in the context of this discussion is that the coming community is based on an “*inessential* commonality” (1993a, 18). According to Agamben, then, “coming being” represents pure possibility: Humankind “has to *exist as potentiality*” (1, 44).

On a slightly more pragmatic level, this entails a fundamental revision of what it means to be a person: to declare that uncoded existence precedes the modern circumscriptions of citizenship, family, religion, ethnicity, and other blood-soaked calls to an essential identity. According to such a perspective, even the United Nations’ alleged mandate of defending “human rights” colludes with the tyranny of essentialist discourses, smuggling all sorts of assumptions about human nature across the disputed borders of the planet.

One of the motivations behind my decision to write this book began with a seemingly simple question: What does Agamben mean when he talks about “whatever being”? As is usually the case with seemingly simple questions, they lead to other questions, which themselves spiral out into a network of interrelated and ultimately more complex questions. How does this notion of whatever being relate to Agamben’s concept of the coming community? What would an “inessential commonality” (the basis of such a community) actually look like? Is the “automatism of love” (Žižek) a stumbling-block to thinking the coming community, or is there a way to reinfect the lover’s discourse beyond notions of subjective essence? And how do contemporary forces or phenomena—such as the media, globalization, and the information revolution—encourage or discourage an emergent conception of community outside the exhausted coordinates of humanism, the humanities, nihilism, postmodernism, and psychoanalysis (to name only a few)?

It is this cluster of questions which connect the different chapters of this book as they pursue the conceptual antimatter of Agamben’s critical project, which—sometimes maddeningly—“consists not in discovering its object but in assuring the conditions of its inaccessibility” (1993b, xvi).<sup>5</sup> Whether it be via cinema, software, literature, photography, or philosophy, the following case studies seek an encounter with emergent postmillennial conceptions of community, neither beginning nor ending with the subject but

flowing through the increasingly obsolete circuits of ego-centered individuality. This enables us in turn to develop the the mental muscles necessary for thinking whateverbeing. Humanist metaphysics insists we are all unique and yet share an essential, universal humanity. A caricature of the coming community suggests a different approach: None of us are unique, yet there is no point which we all share.

The task at hand, therefore, is twofold: to trace the emergent conceptions and amplifications of an anticipated coming community and to map the textual reworkings of “love” on the level of an a-subjective subject. Indeed, Agamben tells us:

Love is never directed toward this or that property of the loved one (being blond, being small, being tender, being lame), but neither does it neglect the properties in favor of an insipid generality (universal love): The lover wants the loved one *with all of its predicates*, its being such as it is. The lover desires the *as* only insofar as it is *such*—this is the lover’s particular fetishism. Thus, whatever singularity (the Lovable) is never the intelligence of some thing, of this or that quality or essence, but only the intelligence of an intelligibility. The movement Plato describes as erotic anamnesis is the movement that transports the object not toward another thing or another place, but toward its own taking-place—toward the Idea. (1993a, 2)

If we return to Lola and her nocturnal conversation with Manni, the key question then becomes: How does love figure in the coming community? If we are all men and women without qualities, then according to what criteria do we select one partner over another?

(It is no doubt prudent to clarify that I do not ask this question in order to find a psychological or biological explanation for object choices. While I think it is misguided to underestimate the power of pheromones, or indeed the Oedipus complex, in the great arena of human seduction, I am more interested in the “color of love” when it is dropped into a solution comprising equal parts literary, visual, and media culture.)

Fortunately, Thomas Carl Wall’s book *Radical Passivity* (1999) has provided us with a useful metaphor which we can apply to the mysteries of Eros. Wall’s example of whateverbeing (hereafter fused into one word) is the character actor, that cinematic stereotype who remains “so unknown to us not because they hide an essence, but because they are completely exposed”

(133).<sup>6</sup> Unlike the movie star, whose particularly magnetic qualities draw us toward the silver screen, the character actor is “the pure ‘taking place’ of those qualities: an actor = x, sort of” (138). As Wall reminds us, nobody goes to the movies to see a Thelma Ritter movie. The character actor is therefore an example of whateverbeing, an enactment of existence without qualities, or at least qualities so interchangeable and obvious that they erase all identity. This is not to be confused with an essence, or existential common denominator, but rather the sheer generic potentiality of being. The character actor is “nothing other than its qualities but such that these qualities cling to no reality, no identity, and refer only to themselves” (134).

Let us consider another recent film which thematizes the blurring of boundaries between self and other, Spike Jonze’s *Being John Malkovich* (1999). In this story a bedraggled puppeteer, Craig Schwartz (John Cusack), discovers a portal into John Malkovich’s brain, allowing anyone access to another subjectivity for at least 15 minutes (which may or may not have a Warholian subtext). The puppeteer’s wife, Lotte (Cameron Diaz), soon becomes addicted to this experience, claiming that she only feels truly “her-self” when she is inside John Malkovich’s head. “But you weren’t you; you were John Malkovich,” the puppeteer reminds her. Yet, she remains unimpressed by such pedantic distinctions.

While the notion of mind-hopping and body-jumping is also the basis for countless identity-swap films, *Being John Malkovich* presents the self as something far more fluid, vulnerable, and communicative than the average Hollywood depiction. Wall tells us:

Every statue, every cadaver, every puppet, toy, or artifact—indeed every thing and every person who falls, if only for a moment, outside utility—returns to an inconceivable image void of either subject or object. . . . They invert the “motion of the world” and “return us to ourselves” [Blanchot], but to ourselves insofar as there is no one to return to, no society of identities in which we can recognize ourselves. (110)

“What remains,” continues Wall, “is pure *-jection* (or thrownness)” (110).

From this Heideggerian standpoint, the puppeteer fuses with the puppet as he is *thrown* down the portal into the ontic space of another human vessel. The fear of rejection therefore acquires an altogether different meaning in this film: the literal fear of being repetitively thrown back into the agonizing loneliness of the self, rather than the dialectical dance of the other. Hence

the repetition throughout the film of the puppeteer's tortured "dance of despair" (dejection), in which the puppet smashes a mirror in a bid to erase the solipsistic reflection of the self.

Deleuze and Guattari anticipate such a *mise-en-abyme* when they write:

Puppet strings, as a rhizome or multiplicity, are tied not to the supposed will of an artist or puppeteer but to a multiplicity of nerve fibers, which form another puppet in other dimensions connected to the first: "Call the strings or rods that move the puppet the weave. It might be objected that its multiplicity resides in the person of the actor, who projects it into the text. Granted; but the actor's nerve fibers in turn form a weave. And they fall through the grey matter, the grid, into the undifferentiated. . . . The interplay approximates the pure activity of weavers attributed in myth to the Fates or Norns." (1999, 8).<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, *Being John Malkovich* zooms in on the fine lines separating self-directed love from other-directed love, exposing the artificial nature of such a binary.<sup>8</sup> Take, for instance, the scene where John Malkovich slides down his own portal, emerging into a dream restaurant where every person wears his face. This nightmarishly narcissistic realm tortures Malkovich, for though he is surrounded by other people, they are all "Malkovich." Moreover, this explosive solipsism (which we could call "Aphex Twin syndrome," after the avant-garde musician whose video clips have perfected this abject form of *me-jecting*) both destabilizes and reinforces the eternal conflict between attraction and repulsion which informs sexual attraction from infancy to senility.<sup>9</sup>

Once again, such a conflict prompts many questions: Am I looking for a piece of myself in the other, or the other in myself? Is the romantic notion of the perfect couple merely "two views of the same person" (DeLillo 1985)? Or is the yin-and-yang simplicity of modern monogamy, however fleeting, an attempt to control the sheer infinite potentiality of human combinations?

### *Go-Sees*

There is a photography book currently on the market entitled *Juergen Teller Go-Sees*, a collection of nearly five hundred shots of budding fashion models, captured by the *über*-hip Teller (1999). In contrast to most glossy coffee-

table books related to the glamor industry, these are candid shots of young women who come knocking at Teller's door in the hope of becoming the next Kate Moss, photographed previous to their receiving any styling treatment as models.

The blurb is an interesting case of cultural-theory-as-advertorial:

These are photographs of arrival and departure, portraits of brief but loaded encounters that articulate underlying continuities and discontinuities. The changing texture of light registers the passing seasons, while the recurrent back-drop hints at an overarching narrative. The models become characters in a fiction that the viewer is invited to imagine. In the course of the book the doorway, as a charged liminal space, emerges as a site of meeting and contest, at once enticing and forbidding: a point of rupture and a contact zone. . . . The doorway, as border, provides a visual analogy for the ambivalent politics of inclusion and exclusion. The photographs demonstrate how, in the fleeting interstitial space of the go-see, the body can momentarily elude the constraining stereotypes of a world in which stardom is the longed-for exception. (n.p.)

In my experience, the most common viewer reaction to this collection of photographs is an expression of being overwhelmed. Face follows face, until it gets so each model simultaneously cancels and converges into a palimpsest of waifish features without qualities. Like Proust's Marcel, we are confronted by "a sort of shimmering harmony, the continuous transmutation of a fluid, collective and mobile beauty," or better yet, of a piece of music in which we are "unable to isolate and identify at the moment of their passage the successive phrases, no sooner distinguished than forgotten."

In *Go-Sees* we have a perfect example of Wall's notion of the character actor and its relation to whateverbeing. These models represent "constraining stereotypes of a world in which stardom is the longed-for exception," an exception which necessarily negates its own desires. The model seeks fame in order to enhance the egocentric delights of wealth and attention. And yet this attention isolates the model further and further, so that she is a cutout in sharp relief to the rest of the population, placed in a spotlight or upon a pedestal. The celebrity's wish for anonymity is the inevitable consequence of fame, since love cannot adhere to such a strong social substance as stardom and to the fetishization of "personalities."

The burgeoning popularity of candid street-portrait photography is a testament to the inchoate cultural acknowledgment of whateverbeing. Japan

in particular has produced magazines—such as *Fruits*, *Kerouac*, and *Street*—which do not so much celebrate the idiosyncratic plumage of the individual as champion the malleable fundament of human being. As we shed the shell of Enlightenment individualism, these modern-day flip books reveal more than one might imagine about the dialogue between different pop cultures. From a certain angle these photographs tentatively capture a coming community based on sheer commensurability, the spectacular circulation of qualities which today's city dweller prefers to wear than absorb. (Recall Musil: “What people are” evidently keeps changing as rapidly as “what people are wearing.”)

Yet, *Go-Sees* also reminds us of the gendered aspect of my reading of whateverbeing. To be overwhelmed—as we are, flipping glossy page after glossy page or watching the girls on Balbec's beach—is itself a Romantic trope par excellence, bequeathed to us by such skilled literary programmers as Flaubert and his search for the perfect gynaeceum. The vision of being surrounded by a sea of sexual creatures, figured in the feminine, is an explicitly erotic mobilization of the sublime, an oceanic trope which, as we have seen, now has its urban equivalents. While it is important to remember the constitutive character of the masculinist gaze in the texts mentioned above, it is not difficult to find examples of the “female” deployment of this particular motif (for instance, countless television commercials for luxury-end chocolates).

The camera is thus one of the latest in a long line of technologies (including language itself) which has the capacity to cut the other into pieces, specifically for the thrill of rearranging personal qualities and putting them back together differently in a collage. In the late-twentieth-century obsession with recombinant identities—beginning with Proust and Musil, among many others, and extending to Teller, Tykwer, and Jonze—we see an emerging renegotiation of embodied identity in an unprecedented technophilic and -phobic age.

While one of the intentions of this book is to find “examples” of whateverbeing, it does so in the knowledge that Agamben has warned against such an exercise, since this concept necessarily resists its own representation. For its founding architect, the coming community is neither prophetic nor prescriptive, but works against such deterministic models (much like Derrida's “messianism without a messiah”). In fact, the coming community is not a



model at all but an antimodel. With this in mind, the chapters which follow do not simply offer concrete incarnations of whateverbeing but simultaneously dwell in those potential and emergent spaces where the elements of its figuration take precedence.

Indeed, whateverbeing may be like those messages beamed by lighting devices which rely on creating negative afterimages in the eyes; we may have no idea what such a message is trying to tell us until we look away. Those glimpses of whateverbeing that we manage to catch in the following pages whisper to us of *les arrivants*, the ones who perpetually approach but will never arrive. But expectation itself—provided it partakes in the informed politics of exhaustion, as opposed to the historical reflex of utopianism—can fruitfully deploy itself within real-world conditions. Whether it be through Lolita, Cordelia, Ulrich, Hong Kong drifters, or Los Angeles pornographers, the undoing of violent essentialism becomes a powerful figure through which to comprehend the process of becoming itself.

Chapter 1 begins by outlining key terms and introducing the conceptual instruments which will be used to forge *eros*, *technics*, and *communitas* into a passionately turbulent (re)union. This discussion encompasses Plato, Roland Barthes, Bernard Stiegler, and Niklas Luhmann, among others making cameo appearances, in order to highlight the ways in which “the lover’s discourse” functions across different epochs, despite several critical flaws.

Chapter 2 continues to pick at these immanent contradictions in the romantic code by focusing on Vladimir Nabokov’s canonical text, *Lolita*. The character of both Humbert Humbert and the nymphet herself are explored via the matrices of mnemotechnics, the passionate compulsion to write, record, and otherwise “salvage” the beloved from the ravages of time. Particular attention is paid to the different figurations of Lolita by Humbert, so that the novel itself is read as an instance of science fiction or, more specifically, an erudite essay on the practical possibilities of time travel.

Chapter 3 turns its attention to the corporate business park of J. G. Ballard’s *Super-Cannes* in order to identify the contemporary macro conditions of whateverbeing. In this novel a new caste of elites inflicts a disciplined and externally applied form of psychopathology against the local immigrants, as a salve against a life dominated by work rather than emotional attachments. Indeed, Ballard’s novel is a revealing treatment of certain dangers inherent in the politically charged nonspaces of today’s vocational environments.

Chapter 4 updates Deleuze's concept of "faciality" to a more networked notion of "interfaciality," examining the way the face has been traditionally considered as a marker, or mask, of a singular soul. This discussion incorporates new technologies such as digital avatars, recent research on the biological mechanics of perception, films such as *Face/Off* and *Seconds*, William Gibson's novel *Idoru*, as well as Levinas's approach to "the epiphany of the face." And it does so in order to reinject an awareness of ethics, albeit one untethered from the traditional criteria of sovereign subjectivity and more aligned with open membership in the coming community.

Chapter 5 argues that "mainstream" pornography enacts the fundamental tension of whateverbeing—that is to say, the *structural interchangeability* of the "beloved" with the simultaneous *radical irreplaceability* of the same. Incorporating Žižek's notion of "inter-passivity" as well as Agamben's thoughts on the sexualized, post-auratic body, this section finds evidence for the (perhaps surprising) claim that a "saving power" grows within the "danger" of pornography, since it explicitly frames and thematizes the "essential commonality" of desire.

Chapter 6 gathers together the themes of belonging, identity, and desire and reads them through the rigorous attempts to rethink community by Jean-Luc Nancy, Martin Heidegger, and Giorgio Agamben, particularly those thoughts dedicated to the role of the lover's discourse in this new ethical assemblage. Such a synthetic balancing act is supplemented by Gilles Deleuze's particularly intriguing notion of *essence* from his book *Proust and Signs*, which I use to counter the increasingly ritualistic denunciation of "essentialism" in the academy.

Chapter 7 builds on this new foundation in order to consolidate our understanding of the "immanent isomorphism" of love, technology, and community. As such, Irigaray's more recent work on the ontology of love is used as a foil to my own argument, since she exhibits a neo-Luddite approach to technology, as if it could simply be quarantined from such an allegedly pure and innocent sphere as the human heart. The work of such contemporary critics as Steven Shaviro and Mark Poster is then enlisted to provide a more nuanced account of how the conceptual status of the subject is being recoded by actual new-media practices and formations.

Chapter 8 reinforces these ideas under the assumption that humans are, at the most fundamental level, "culturally accented" (Naficy), and thus we should be wary of metaphysical generalizing. The films of Wong Kar-wai

as well as the writings of Haruki Murakami are introduced in order to tease out some of the contemporary poetics of global techtonics. These “fallen angels,” I argue, mark the current state of our subliminal thinking on what-everbeing, which unfolds within the context of cultural diaspora and disorientation.

The conclusion, for its part, ties all these threads together, re-presenting the basic premise that current conceptions of love and community are hampered by our neglect of a third term, namely, technology. *For it is emphatically not a case of technology rampaging out of control, crushing human nature in its machinic path, but rather a situation wherein the human is constantly recreating itself, from the very beginning, as a technical animal.* The erotic encounter is inevitably enframed by technologies, from architecture to etiquette. Even if we happen to fall head over heels for someone in the forest or on a beach, naked, there is the *über-techne* of language to take into account. And where there are two (as Friday’s footprint told Robinson Crusoe), there is a virtual community. In other words, there is no human outside technology or, for that matter, outside the legacy of love and community. We are cut from this same cloth, and the first step toward reverse-engineering a flexible future is to recognize the way these terms are each implicated in the others.