

# NOT REALLY DESIRING BODIES

## THE RISE AND RISE OF EMAIL AFFAIRS

The text is a fetish object, and this fetish desires me (Barthes 1975, 27).

In this paper I want to use email affairs as a pretext for talking about a more general phenomenon: the increasing acceptance that the 'self' can exist apart from the 'body'. One historical reference here is to Cartesian dualism. This form of thinking, first set out philosophically in Descartes' *The Discourse on Method* (first published in French in 1637), was central to modern understandings of the 'individual' and of identity. It distinguished the 'mind' from the 'body', situating the 'self' in the mind, and limited the specificity of the self to the particularity of that mind in that body. I want to argue that the acceptance of virtual selves is a consequence of a cultural articulation with the technologies that produce cyberspace. Here, the distinction between mind/self and body has been reconstituted in such a way that the self is no longer thought to be unitary and singular, rather it is thought of as fragmented and multiple. Mark Poster has argued that:

If modernity or the mode of production signifies patterned practices that elicit identities as autonomous and (instrumentally) rational, postmodernity or the mode of information indicates communication practices that constitute subjects as unstable, multiple and diffuse (1995, 87).

The spread and naturalisation of a variety of interactive and bodyless media of communication have provided a context for the reworking of the Cartesian understanding of the self. Allucquere Rosanne Stone describes how, 'compared to "real" space, in virtual space the socioepistemic structures by means of which the meaning of the terms "self" and "body"

are produced operate differently' (1995, 34). One consequence of this difference is a radicalising of Cartesian dualism. Where, in modern thinking, the body served to contain and limit the self, the singularity of which was guaranteed by the continuity of the mind in the body, there is now an increasing acceptance of the idea that not only are selves separate from the body, they are not limited and determined by the mind's containment in the body. I do not want to give the impression that this is a technological determinist argument. There are other, at least as important, factors in the postmodern reformation of the self. Perhaps most important has been the decreasing interpellative power attributed to the modern state. This, after all, as Louis Althusser (1971) indicated, was the key interpellating institution in the formation of the modern subject (for a brief discussion of this see Ang and Stratton 1995). With the fading of this interpellative power, a consequence of many factors including the loss of a sense of individual destiny for states in the globalised economic order, has come a decline in the experience of one's identity as natural, unitary and permanent. While this development forms a context, the impact of new communication technologies has been central to the postmodern acceptance of mediated selves.

Cyberspace is usually discussed as the virtual spatial production that is a consequence of the convergence of computers and telecommunications systems known generically as the Internet. I have suggested elsewhere (Stratton 1996) that this is a misunderstanding; that, in fact, an early and limited form of cyberspace is produced in telephone calls. I now want to take this argument further and suggest that the basis of cyberspace lies in forms of

communication technology where the body is absent. Using this definition we can find a very rudimentary form of cyberspace present in the exchange of letters. Here, however, cyberspace maps onto 'real' space in a one-to-one manner.

The most useful place to situate an origin for cyberspace lies in the mid-nineteenth century with the invention of the telegraph. As James Carey puts it:

The simplest and most important point about the telegraph is that it marked the decisive separation of 'transportation' and 'communication'. Until the telegraph these words were synonymous. The telegraph ended that identity and allowed symbols to move independently of and faster than transport (1988, 213).

We might, then, define cyberspace simply as the space produced by human communication when it is mediated by technology in such a way that the body is absent. One consequence of this has been the increased focus on language as the site of communication. The separation of communication from transport was produced by an increasing speed of communication technologies which constituted a cyberspace distinct from 'real' space.

Peter Lamborn Wilson acknowledges the importance of bodily absence when he writes that: 'Cyberspace itself, however, involves a curious form of *disembodiment*, in which each participant becomes a perceptual monad, a concept rather than a physical presence' (1996, 224). Wilson suggests that a preview to this development can be found in phone-sex. He argues that:

The deep purpose of phone-sex is probably not really the client's masturbation or his credit card number, but the actual ectoplasmic meeting of two ghosts in the 'other' world of sheer nothingness, a poor parodic rendering of the phone company's slogan, 'Reach out and touch someone', which is so sadly, so finally, what we cannot do in cyberspace (1996, 224).

There are several points to make about this statement.

First, it reduces phone-sex to phone-prostitution. Anecdotal evidence, and Hollywood films, suggests that many couples in long-distance relationships

indulge in what we might call mutual phone-sex and that it is, therefore, much more common and accepted than its apparent limitation to the relatively recent phenomenon of phone-prostitution would imply. The first film that I know of that has a mutual phone-sex scene is *Mike's Murder* (1984). In the scene in question Mike rings Betty and gradually engages her in a mutual phone-sex scenario while explaining to her how to go about it. Such a narrative technique, which also explains to the film's audience what is happening, suggests the possibility that the film's makers thought that the audience at that time might not have been aware of phone-sex. In the 1990s films with scenes of mutual phone-sex in them have become more common, including *Speechless* (1994) and *The Truth About Cats and Dogs* (1996). There is also a Dutch film, *06* (1994), also known as *Sex Without Hangups*, which is devoted to mutual phone-sex, though here between strangers. This suggests that there is a gradually increasing public knowledge and acceptance of mutual phone-sex.<sup>1</sup>

Second, the importance of the example of phone-sex is that sex is usually thought of in modern Western culture as the most physical, most bodily, most intimate form of human interaction. Phone-sex, therefore, involves a critical renovation of the practice of sex. Masturbation has been usually described as a solitary pleasure, we need to ask how it is reconstituted as an aspect of bodyless phone-sex. While the body remains, the body contact is missing. Phone-sex, for one thing, offers greater opportunities for 'fantasy' than 'real' sex. The distinction between 'fantasy' and 'reality' here is a modern one, couched in terms that privilege the material world as more 'real'. However, phone-sex is a different kind of sex to embodied sex. It takes place between two selves that meet apart from their bodies and offers opportunities commensurate with this freedom.

Finally, we need to note Wilson's remarkable nostalgia for bodies. The phone company's advertisers clearly realise much better than he does that, in a world where 'selves' and 'bodies' are pervasively separated by communication technologies, reaching out and touching someone is primarily an emotional and simulatary

appeal with only a subtextual reference to any claimed 'reality' located in physical touching.

The instigation for my writing this paper was the anecdotal evidence of a very significant number of friends, acquaintances and people in newspaper stories who I heard had had email affairs. Indeed, so common is the 'knowledge' about email affairs, there are already three novels based on them (Borsook 1991; Fletcher 1996; Offit 1994), and a poem entitled 'E-mail by Love' (Estess 1996).<sup>2</sup> There is even a book written by two psychologists which sets out to help people who are involved in affairs on the Net, or who want to have one (Adamse & Motta 1996). Its aim to be helpful is signalled by its subtitle, 'Your Guide to Affairs of the Net'. All this suggests that the possibility at least of email affairs holds much fascination in our culture. The narratives of my friends' and others' stories have many common features I just want here to adumbrate the features most structurally central to the organisation of the narrative.

One characteristic of the true email affair is that the couple have never previously met. Many long-distance relationships are now carried on partially by email but this is not the same thing. Unlike the phone, where only in extremely rare circumstances do, say, work phone calls turn into friendly calls or sexually-charged calls, it seems much more common for email to develop this way. Because the couple have not met, there is even greater latitude for the development of bodyless selves, and for the fantastic creation of virtual bodies for those selves.

The connection between bodyless forms of communication and sex is not new. One assumes that some lovers have included descriptions of their desires about their partners' body for more or less as long as lovers have exchanged letters. I have been told of morse code being used for the same purpose. I have already noted the shift towards an acceptance of phone-sex. While mutual phone-sex may have been practiced by some couples for a long time, it only seems to have become commonly known about, and perhaps more commonly practiced than before, through the 1980s. This change coincided with, but was by no means caused by, two other innovations. First, there was the introduction of pay-to-

listen phone-sex, phone-prostitution if you like. Second, was the development of community phone lines where people who did not otherwise know each other could meet. This system was rapidly put to use in a way that individuals could meet one another by phone for sexual purposes. In 1992 Nicholson Baker, a New Yorker, published a novel about just such a couple. As the back-cover blurb explains:

Vox is the story of two voices, his and hers: two strangers who, having met on a telephone chat-line, switch to a private, one-on-one connection – and find it impossible to hang up (1992).

The book climaxes in a scene of mutual masturbation stimulated by each person describing what they are 'doing' to the other. Interestingly the descriptions are in the conditional tense rather than the present tense, suggesting, still, that 'real' sex, sex between bodies, is the referent and phone-sex is a virtual representation. Perhaps what is most important, though, is the existence of the novel itself, written by a known author and published in the United States and Britain by major publishers.

These things suggest that, by the turn of the decade, phone-sex was no longer thought of as something fairly esoteric. Rather, it was becoming a well-known, if not commonly practiced, phenomenon. It was during the 1980s that bodyless selves and multiple identities began to be thought of as characterising the postmodern subject's experience. Although the syndrome of multiple personalities was classified in psychology much earlier, the classification of multiple personality disorder was mainstreamed during the 1980s, exemplified in the publication of Colin Ross's (1989) book, *Multiple Personality Disorder: Diagnosis, Clinical Features and Treatment*.<sup>3</sup> What I am implying here is that it was during the 1980s that bodyless selves and fragmented identities began to be accepted as a part of everyday life.

At this point we can establish that one of the features that distinguishes the phone from email is the heightened lack of body. Phone calls extend hearing and speech. The grain of the voice, to use Roland Barthes' (1977) term, is located in the body's speech-making apparatus. Furthermore, a person's pauses, breathing, intonations, speed of speech, all contribute to an image, which

may nevertheless be quite inaccurate, of the body that produces them. It would seem, then, that one component in the development of email affairs is, precisely, the *lack* of bodily resonances.

Email partners meet in a variety of ways: through work, friends passing on email addresses, by way of Internet Relay Chat lines, to name a few. The properties of email are such that significant degrees of informational intimacy are reached far quicker than in relationships involving bodies. In their discussion of Internet affairs, Adamse and Motta argue that:

the Internet is a medium which often encourages users to open up and become more personally involved than they might in a real-life setting. Sharing of intimate thoughts and feelings is commonplace. Individuals lower defenses quickly because they feel safe and less vulnerable in cyberspace (1996, 105).

After the often remarkably quick recognition of quite high levels of compatibility the couple may arrange to meet. Sometimes at this point there is a shift to the use of the phone. This, in itself, is experienced as a developing of bodily intimacy. Sometimes also, around this time, photographs are exchanged.

The next step, and the pivotal moment, is a real-life meeting. Adamse and Motta describe this as 'the moment of truth when fantasy gives way to reality' (1996, 105). The terms used here are important. They make it clear that Adamse and Motta place fantasy and reality in a hierarchy and see bodily interaction as more 'real' than the cerebral interaction enabled by the Net.

In the newspaper versions of the email affair narrative, resolution takes place in the form of marriage. In this version, the email relationship takes on the form of a modern romance. The story is written to suggest that this was just an unusual way to meet one's true love. Adamse and Motta provide an actual example, narrated by the female protagonist, which also reads like a romance:

Within a month [of meeting on the Net], Andrew made the trip out here and it was love at first sight. Actually, we knew how we spiritually felt about each other through our correspondence and phone calls, it was just the anticipation of actually seeing

each other and being together that was so scary ... Andrew proposed that weekend (1996, 110).

Here, the mental intimacy was rapidly and easily embodied. It may be that one reason why the translation from mental to embodied intimacy was so easy, and so successful, is that the couple progressed so rapidly from mental intimacy to embodied intimacy. Because of this – it seems that they were very quickly having phone conversations – there was little opportunity for the development of a distinct mental intimacy, with the associated productions of particular selves that might have proved confusing, distracting or preferable to the embodied selves they found when they met in the flesh. The conflation of the Internet with the romance topos operates by way of that aspect of the myth of romantic love which suggests that somewhere there is the perfect person for each of us. In this context the Net functions as a venue for meeting new people and, because there are so many people connected to the Net, our opportunities of meeting our 'one true love' are correspondingly increased.

However, in the versions that I have heard from friends and acquaintances, and this would seem to be more statistically normal, the relationship most usually goes downhill rapidly after the meeting. In one case I have heard of, where the couple did indeed get married, the marriage lasted no more than two or three weeks. In another case, where the man flew to Sydney from the United States, the woman 'knew' immediately on meeting him, that she could go no further with this relationship.

The lineaments of this story are so common, with the choice of endings, that we are talking, in some sense, about an urban myth. We have, I would suggest, an ending that establishes a modern moral, and one that establishes a postmodern moral. In the modern ending, the happy one, it is being asserted that non-bodily intimacy produced by email/human cyborg selves can naturally progress into a typically modern bodily intimacy which expands the limited intimacy possible using email. The moral of the story with the unhappy ending is quite different. Here it is being suggested that email cyborg intimacy is quite different from bodily-based intimacy; that, in fact, the

email cyborg self is a very different self from the body-based self. The implication is not that one shouldn't have email affairs, but that email affairs are distinct things from bodily affairs, and that the two should not be confused.<sup>4</sup>

What I am suggesting here is that one of the things that is central to the experience of email affairs is a claim to a high level of intimacy between the people involved. Above, I described how email affairs are very often narrated in the terms of romance. The mental intimacy of email affairs, including the fantastic, in both senses of the word, sex, is thought of in the same terms. Adamse and Motta make this connection without elaborating on it. They assert that 'romance is one of the most intimate connections that two human beings can have' and that 'the Internet is a medium that can pique one's romantic interest in combination with a heightened sense of human curiosity' (1996, 108). In modern Western culture, based on the ideology that we are all discrete individuals, and in which sex is usually thought of as the most private – and intimate – act which two individuals can engage in with each other, indeed where sex is sometimes described in English as 'being intimate' with someone, there is a cultural myth that intimacy and sex are connected. A good example of this connection can be found in *Vox*. This is Jim talking at a fairly early stage in the conversation:

You told me the secret word you have for the adult male cock, anyway. Not for my cock, leave me out of it. For the one you think about *on your own*. See, see, this is what I need. I need to know your secrets and have secrets and keep secrets. I need to be confided in. Each time you come alone and don't tell anybody, that's a sexual secret. The event has taken place and only you know about it and you have ministered to yourself in exactly the way you wanted to and thought of exactly what you wanted to think about (Baker 1992, 65).

The masturbatory orgasm is being described here as the most private of experiences. Jim wants to share Abby's secret and, in doing so, become completely intimate with her. Here we can see that the discourse that conflates intimacy and sex articulates in a complex way with forms of bodiless communication. This increases the

possibility of an intimacy which may be expressed sexually in a bodiless context. Here, we ought to remember Adamse and Motta's admonition: 'Let's not forget that the world's greatest sexual organ is the mind' (1996, 137) which shifts the emphasis away from bodily contact as the defining aspect of a sexual relationship.<sup>5</sup>

In her discussion of the modes of sexuality found in cyberpunk comic books, Claudia Springer argues that:

Imaginary sex – sex without physically touching another human – prevails in cyborg discourses, although bodily sex is not completely absent. The emphasis on cerebral sexuality suggests that although pain is a meat thing, sex is not (1996, 70).

In the linkage of sex with intimacy we have one answer to why pain remains thought of as a bodily thing while, with the use of bodiless forms of communication, sex is very often thought of – and practiced – in ways that make physically touching another person's body unnecessary. For Jim, in Baker's novel, the height of intimacy is listening to his phone partner coming. This sexual moment is so charged for him that, as he says, 'I heard you come and I came' (Baker 1992, 67). What I want to suggest is that this kind of sex is a different kind of sex to embodied sex. Adamse and Motta suggest that the acceptance and proliferation of cyberaffairs and cybersex is a consequence of relationships becoming more complicated:

The epidemic proliferation of sexually transmitted diseases in many ways makes the simple equation of 'boy meets girl' an anachronism. Add to this the recent increased awareness of emotional and physical abuse in many relationships combined with concerns of date rape and a picture emerges that is complex indeed (1996, 105-106).

None of this seems to me to provide an adequate explanation for the cultural acceptance of email affairs, and cyberaffairs more generally, and cybersex. Rather, it seems that during the 1980s there developed a much greater cultural acceptance of non-bodily intimacy and that this flowed on to an acceptance of cybersex.

Here, we need to distinguish clearly between solitary masturbation and the kind of stimulated and sometimes even temporally mutual masturbation that

characterises cybersex from phone-sex to IRC-sex to sex via email. For Rousseau, as Jacques Derrida points out (1976, 150), masturbation was thought of as 'that dangerous supplement' – dangerous because it was thought to be health-threatening – to 'proper' sex. It is also a dangerous supplement because it problematises the cultural assumption that natural sex is that which occurs between two bodies in physical contact. In cybersex, masturbation may be thought of as the supplement which returns the somatic to a virtual presence in what is a linguistically privileged form of interaction. Mutual, or stimulated, masturbation is not solitary in the same way that onanism is usually described as being. However, setting phone-sex aside, because of the complete absence of the body in cybersexual masturbation, the partner's only knowledge comes through a written translation, one which introduces a virtual somatism and turns desire back to the body of the email cyborg.

The kind of intimacy produced in disembodied communication is different from the intimacy produced in embodied situations. One of the points to make about email, then, is that the kind of intimacy it offers enables a mistake to be made, that one is 'getting to know the other person well' such that the transition to bodily intimacy will be possible. This is an understandable mistake given the continued currency of the modern privileging of the material as the 'real', as evidenced in the newspaper versions of the email affair story.

In order to understand how email intimacy is produced we need to think about some of the characteristics of email. First, email is a communication system which, even in the most basic programs, makes it easy to reply. This, quite literally, encourages communication. Second, while email uses writing, which encourages the idea that email and letter writing are similar, in fact there are major differences. Email writing is virtual, this means that there is no material mediation. Unless you print out your email you cannot hold it. With a letter you can think that you are touching the same paper that your beloved wrote on. The impossibility of this with email might suggest a decrease in intimacy. In fact, it produces a different, and greater, non-bodily intimacy. The material letter

reinforces the absence of bodily contact, the virtual email, arriving instantaneously, emphasises a non-bodily intimacy.

Marlena Corcoran has commented on the erotics of email immediacy:

The thing to understand about electronic relationships is that they have a built-in boundary that cannot be crossed. The thing about pleasure is that it takes place along boundary lines. Fingertips and lips are bodily boundaries; in the non-material realm, as well, resistance is marked by lag (1995, 340).

Lag is the time it takes to get a reply. It can be caused by anything from the slow speed of one of the mainframes to the time taken for one's email partner to key in their response. The fantasy of bodyless intimacy is of a merging of identities, a 'completion' if you like where the Other becomes the Same, in which the lag involved in responding is eradicated in a single orgasmic unity.<sup>6</sup> Real-time mutual masturbation, as in the climax of *Vox*, may be the nearest actuality to this fantasy. It may also be one of the desires that underlies the fascination with teledildonics as an aspect of virtual reality research.

The instantaneity of email, that it arrives so quickly after it was sent, something which provides a sense of closeness, of an immediacy that suggests presence, is heightened by the lack of the apparatus that goes with letter writing. You don't need to find a pen and some paper, you don't need an envelope or a stamp and, finally, you don't need to go to the post-box. All these aspects of letter writing formalise the process and, in the time they take, emphasise a metaphorical distance between sender and recipient. It is not for nothing that new email users are encouraged to leave some time to cool off before replying to an email that has angered them. In its instantaneity of response, email can be experienced like speech – the names of IRC and the program 'talk' make this similarity explicit – but the written nature of email means that it can also be read and reread, and replied to at a later date.

In letter writing there is a hierarchy of writing forms that runs from the private to the public. These range from handwriting to typewriting or computer-writing. The most intimate letters are handwritten because they involve the body directly, and handwriting has an individualised quality.

Email can only use the computer keyboard, this decreases the bodily involvement, and the bodily intimacy. However, whereas even love letters have, historically, been highly crafted, email writing tends to be fast and off-the-cuff. On the Australian Literature List (AUSTLIT@banks.ntu.edu.au) there are a number of traditional literary critics. In mid-1996 one posting was singled out for criticism because of a particularly complex sentence. Some subscribers to the List considered that email postings were simply material writing in another medium. These same people went on to bemoan the use of emoticons.

The emphasis on the interactive, informal, conversational possibilities of email suggests it has romantic connotations. Michael Spooner and Kathleen Yancey pick up on this possibility, arguing that: 'In many one-to-one postings, email shows all the features of the lovers' correspondence you used to read (or did you write it?) every day' (1996, 259). Spooner and Yancey distinguish between more formal letters and email, and the informal, transactive, as they put it 'not plain exposition, not pure narrative' (1996, 258). This sort of email:

speaks in the familiar voice of news, disappointments and desires. It's affectionate – full of affect. Sometimes it's telegraphic, sometimes oblique, sometimes it includes a sort of lover's code: silly abbreviations <imho><rotfl>, smiley faces :), Xs and Os (1996, 258).

The combination of immediacy, informality and conversational intimacy without the boundary-defining presence of the body can easily lead to a mental intimacy that can be experienced by one or both emailers as romantic. The same circumstances can also lead in the opposite direction, to the surprisingly intimate and wholehearted aggression that is described as 'flaming'. Flame wars, most obviously when they are between just two people, have about them the kind of intensity that typifies arguments between lovers, that is people who have been highly intimate with each other.

The so-called 'decline in letter writing ability' correlates with the spread of the telephone and reconstitution of letter writing as more like speech than an essay. Email has taken off from this reorientation and, again, has decreased the bodily

association while increasing the level of speech-like intimacy. This is most obviously demonstrated by the use of emoticons. Emoticons appear to provide a representation for the non-verbal cues available from the face in bodily communication. In fact, while this is their source, they operate to increase the non-bodily simulation of 'email talk'.

Finally, in this characterisation of email, there is the experience of keying-in. When writing personal emails anecdotal evidence suggests that many people find it easy to move into what we could call the 'Dear Diary mode'. Writing a diary enables a person to organise their thoughts, run over experiences and express emotions previously pent-up. The diary offers a form of personal confessional communion without anybody interrupting! Writing email can have the same effect. Corcoran notes that:

It's not just the speed at which you can expect a reply [that is shocking], but the directness of the reply itself. People tell you things on email that they would be unlikely to divulge in person. To all the women who lament that men don't talk, don't share their feelings, I say: Send him an email message (1995, 340).

The difference between writing a diary and an email comes in the sending of the email which, as I have remarked, can be done with great ease.

All these features produce an email intimacy without body quite unlike that produced by any other communication technology. What this means is that a 'self' can be constructed which is not limited by the material features of the physical body. I am not thinking of the intentionally different identities often taken on by people in IRC situations, or in MUDs. Here, a woman may claim to be a man, a man may claim to be disabled and so forth.

In email affairs people usually do not claim to be other than who they are. The difficulty comes in the process by which we produce a 'self' intersubjectively. In this sense, the self we produce in interaction with one person will be less or more different from the self we produce in interaction with another. How our bodies are, and how we inhabit them, limits the intersubjective selves we can produce. Without bodies the similarities of interest



can be intensified and the feelings of compatibility can be heightened. Moreover, the specifics of telecommunicating computer technology also play an important part. Jean Baudrillard argues that:

the Other, the sexual or cognitive interlocutor, is never really aimed at – crossing the screen evokes the crossing of the mirror. The screen itself is targeted as the point of interface. The machine (the interactive screen) transforms the process of communication, the relation from one to the other, into a process of commutation, ie, the process of reversibility from the same to the same. The secret of the interface is that the Other is within it virtually the Same – otherness being surreptitiously confiscated by the machine (quoted in Springer 1996, 71).

The screen is indeed experienced as the material point of the interface. One image which expresses this well is of the emailer who realises that their email partner is logged on at the same time and who has the fantasy that they could both reach out to touch their screens together. In doing so they could, virtually, touch each other.

Baudrillard's more general point is about how the screen transforms the Other's message into an aspect of one's own computer system. Its material form is determined by your own computer and the configuration of your own screen. In this sense the message of the Other is reduced to appearing the same as your own messages appear as you key them in. This suggests another effect. There is a blurring between one's own messages and those of the other person. When one keys in, it appears immaterial on the screen, just as the other person's does. One's cyborgian identity is produced through a technology which diffuses boundaries and differences, and enhances similarities.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, the sense of the other person as another distinct individual, inevitably demarcated from you by their body, is lessened. In this circumstance a mental intimacy, unconstrained by bodies, is experienced as being encouraged. Again, we need to remember that this distinction between the mental and the bodily is founded in Cartesian dualism.

On email one may experience oneself, one may produce a self, quite different

from one's bodily self. Ellen Ullman puts it like this:

I fell in love by email. It was as intense as any other falling in love – no, more so. For this love happened in my substitute body, the one on-line, a body that stays up late, is more playful, more inclined to games of innuendo – all the stuff of romantic love (1996, 12).

Ullman and her lover finally meet for dinner. She is terrified about the meeting. It goes smoothly. Then, as the conversation flows:

With a shock I realise that we have finally gone out to dinner only to exchange email. I can almost see the subject headings flying back and forth (1996, 17).

As she tells the story it is Ullman who had a desire for increased bodily contact. She expected, indeed wanted, the evening to end with sex. It didn't. Clearly, her lover wanted the kind of non-bodily intimacy made possible by email.

The motif of the meal, here, is important. In Western narratives about dating, going out for a meal together holds an important place. Why? Well, for one thing, the meal is often described as an opportunity for relaxing and increasing the intimacy between the couple. Here is an opportunity for the mental intimacy to be increased while the physicality of the meeting is acknowledged by way of the pleasures of food. Of course, in the light of this, it is not surprising that in Western culture eating has sexual connotations. Given this, then, we can understand that the impact of the meal, with its emphasis on bodies, should have such a profound effect on Ullman, showing her that precisely what her email lover did *not* want was bodily intimacy.

In a slightly different context, Corcoran's narrative makes the same point. She is a poetry performance artist who had a lengthy work interaction with another artist which became quite intimate through their sharing of ideas. Finally, they met for the joint performance they were to give. As Corcoran writes:

I was tired from our performance, and from the unaccustomed sensory overload of Sean's physical presence. Accustomed to the built-in lag time of our electronic friendship, I was strangely disorientated



by his immediate, warm response. Four of us – his girlfriend, my husband, Sean, and myself – settled on a more traditional form of male/female interaction, namely going out to eat (1995, 345).

Earlier in her article Corcoran has already acknowledged the erotic qualities of email. She writes: 'This feature of electronic communication – the invitation to log on to another person's brain – is experienced as erotic' (1995, 340). Consequently the sexual not-so-subtext of the meal which includes their partners is quite explicit. The point here, though, in contrast with Ullman's narrative, is that the meal 'normalises' Corcoran's relationship with Sean, both because it includes their partners and therefore officially de-eroticises their relationship as a friendship, and because, by asserting the centrality of bodies to everyday life – real life, RL as computer nerds call it – it reforms their email intimacy, placing it, conservatively, in relation to an intimacy that valorises the body and privileging the latter.

The relationship between bodily and non-bodily affairs has yet to be thought through. This is most obvious when it comes to adultery. Some of the differences are brought out in this fictional email comment from Stephanie Fletcher's novel, *E-mail*:

No, I guess [an email affair] is not technically adultery, but it can be just as damaging. The computer relationships divert energy away from other relationships, especially marriage. There is also the real problem of a transfer of intimacy. It seems, because of the anonymity factor, people are willing to become very vulnerable in expressing their emotions, weaknesses and hopes to each other over the computer in addition to trading sexual fantasies (1996, 139).

Here, email intimacy is placed on a spectrum with bodily intimacy. In this way, because an email affair cannot include physical sex, it is not counted as adultery.

Adamse and Motta make this picture more complex. From their research, they argue that:

Most on-line users maintain that cyberaffairs are nothing more than a harmless erotic diversion. Off-line partners are more likely to view them as a definite violation of the primary relationship (1996, 208).

What is important here is the distinction, which cybersex – including phone-sex – allows between bodily intimacy and emotional intimacy. While the on-line partner emphasises the lack of actual bodily contact, the off-line partner tends to be concerned about the redirection of emotional intensity, the unfaithfulness founded in a mental intimacy that is so great it allows for fantastic cybersex.

The conventional view that adultery requires actual physical contact reflects the legal situation. As Sue Reid notes:

Yet while cyberlust may be fuelling visits to marriage therapists, most divorce lawyers are adamant that computer liaisons do not constitute adultery unless there is actual sex (1996, 6).

However, in 1996, John Goydan in New Jersey started suing his wife for divorce because of her 'explicit cybersex affair' (Reid 1996, 6). Goydan's lawyer argued: 'We're breaking completely new ground here. I know how the dictionary defines adultery, but technology has a way of changing definitions' (Reid 1996, 6). The assumption in Reid's article and by Goydan's lawyer is that the intensity of the non-bodily email intimacy makes email cyborg sex the equivalent of bodily sex even though bodies are absent.

If, like many email couples, Goydan's wife and her lover had actually met they may not have wanted sex. The problem then becomes one of the comparability of the forms of intimacy made possible by non-bodily communication and bodily communication. In this particular case, what is the relationship between email sex and bodily sex? One thing does seem to be clear. From phone-sex to email affairs that include sex or not, there is an increasing acceptance of the idea of bodyless selves.

## ENDNOTES

1. It is useful to distinguish three categories of phone-sex: between a couple who know each other outside of the phone-sex situation, and who have usually met in the flesh; between a couple who have met on a telephone chat-line; for money, usually between a female phone-sex 'prostitute' who is very often disengaged from the service she is providing, and a male customer. The first two categories can be identified as involving mutual phone-sex.

During the 1990s there have been a spate of films which have used commercial phone-sex as a motif. These include *Intimate Stranger* (1992), *Short Cuts* (1993), one segment of *Erotique* (1994), *Girl 6* (1996), and the German film *Der Kalle Finger* (1996). This list is not exhaustive. So common has phone-sex in one form or another become in films that at least one major film reference site on the World Wide Web, the Internet Movie Database Ltd, even has a genre heading for phone-sex. I must also mention *Denise Calls Up* (1995), which is devoted to phone and fax mediated relationships and includes an extended mutual phone-sex scene. The proliferation of films including phone-sex in some form or another, and especially *Denise Calls Up*, suggests our new acceptance of, if not ease with non-bodily relationships, including non-bodily sexual relationships. (I would like to thank the members of cultural studies list, CULTSTUD-L@nosferatu.cas.usf.edu, for help in the compilation of these films.)

2. There is a major complexity about email-based novels that needs to be mentioned. As I will explain, the experience of email writing is not the same as that of letter writing, or of print, which are comparable. Printing a novel that is written as the exchange of emails translates one experience into the other in a problematic way. In short, the email novel takes on some of the qualities of epistolary fiction when it is not, of course, that thing.
3. A good discussion of the history of the discourse of multiple personality disorder is Hacking (1995).
4. There is one further alternative which is gaining some currency. In this version the couple meet and one kills the other – normatively the man kills the woman. *Time* reported just such a case under the headline 'Death on the Internet: An Email Liaison between two Strangers ends in Murder' (19 November 1996, 89). Here the moral is concerned with new communication technologies as a potential threat. It is not surprising that the murder-through-meeting-via-the-Internet scenario has already become a sub-genre in its own right in detective fiction. (See, for example, Sandra Scoppetone (1991), Philip French (1996).) Even the cult television series, *The X-Files*, has used the scenario. (See Series 3, episode 6, entitled '2 Shy'. The Log Line, in Lowry (1996, 105), reads 'Mulder and Scully track a serial killer who preys on lonely, overweight women via the Internet'.
5. Adamse and Motta are echoing the writer D H Lawrence. It is, perhaps, not coincidental not only that Lawrence was a novelist preoccupied with sexual desire but that he was writing during the period of the social acceptance of the telephone.

6. I am tempted to refer, here, to Lacan's theorisation of desire (see, for example, 'The Mirror Stage' and 'Subversion of the Subject and Dialectic of Desire' both in *Écrits*, 1977) in which the individual yearns out of lack for completion.

7. We should also note Springer's point that 'popular culture often represents a collapse of the boundary between the human and technological as a sexual act' (1996, 61). The sexual connotations of the loss of a clear boundary between oneself and one's computer as you experience the virtual appearance of your own thoughts on the screen – quite different from the experience of, say, using a typewriter – reinforces the sexual quality of the intimacy of the email affair.

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*Jon Stratton is Associate Professor in the School of Communication and Cultural Studies at Curtin University in Perth, WA. His latest book is The Desirable Body: Cultural Fetishism and the Erotics of Consumption, Manchester University Press, 1996.  
Email: tstratto@alpha2.curtin.edu.au*

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