The techniques and aesthetics of love in the age of big data

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EDITORIAL

The techniques and aesthetics of love in the age of big data

The nexus between love and digitization has become a significant matter of concern in contemporary society. On the one hand, the romantic subject has never had more help at hand to seek out love through apps and platforms. On the other, hand, these very same aids are claimed to signal the end of romantic love. While there is much debate on whether or not digitization and love are incompatible systems, and much time has been devoted to exploring the new technical devices and their methods, little attention has been given to the other part of the equation: namely what we mean by love. Instead, love is taken for granted in these discussions as a stabilized, if not stabilizing, entity. This special issue unsettles this focus, by exploring not only the effects of new technologies and big data methods on amorous love, but also what we mean when we talk about love.

Honoré de Balzac once claimed that love was the poetry of the senses highlighting love's aesthetic capacity and alluding to the feedback system that exists between sensory experience and the written word (Balzac 1997). Balzac subtly suggests that the instantiation of writing functions as a direct manifestation of physical sensory processes. Love's intense physical, sensory symptoms might signal *the return of the body* in cultures that have long privileged the cerebral. It is these sensory intensities that refer here to love's aesthetic qualities and that have long struggled with the capacity of language to give them communicable form beyond the experiential. This relationship is indicative of the wider inadequacy of words to give form to sublime aesthetic experience, a prerequisite of European Romanticism. Yet notions of love's ineffability go far beyond the remit of modern European romantic love or romanticism. According to the thirteenth century Persian poet, Rumi:

> Although I may try to describe love, when I experience it, I am speechless. Although I may try to write about love, I am rendered helpless. My pen breaks and the paper slips away at the ineffable place where lover, loving and loved are one (Rumi 1993, 50).

Rumi expresses an ineffability synonymous with love's expression and its ultimate sovereignty that binds humans to one another as well as to sacred doctrines. Although language may appear insufficient, love's sensory aesthetic form reminds us of the complex ways in which mind and body are inextricably woven: that words of love can enliven the blood and make the heart race, or cause the stomach to churn, the senses to sharpen. Even as we may attempt to consign it to literary formula or code, love persists in ideals of elevated states of consciousness where even the most insignificant detail can emerge in rich complexity from realms of the everyday.

The sacred and ineffable qualities of love give rise to its secular modern romantic form in European contexts and it is this modern romantic form and the media that distribute it that will be at stake in this special issue. The intention is to give pause to some of the issues that have come to define love at this particular post-digital moment in the age of big data, which is to say that love's literary codes are today augmented by symbolic structures that constitute digital systems. In this case, questions emerge about the capacity of digital- as well as linguistic- systems to adequately represent or initiate the interests and complexities of love. The explosion of online dating sites, hook-up apps and numerous other financialized sites that capitalize on aspects of intimacy, pose new questions about how social systems organize and conduct their most intimate relationships. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why, in recent writings on love, aesthetics has generally given way to politics.

A number of texts exploring the politics of love have emerged in the last 10 years: Hardt and Negri (2009); Hardt (2012); Badiou (2012); Cain-Nielsen and Silva (2017); Garofalo (2012); Boltanski (2012). Whilst not necessarily explicitly directed toward an exploration of digital context, they perhaps reflect the pervasiveness of contemporary network culture in considering love's political potential. In other words, as the digitally connective network grows, many are keen to counter its homogenizing tendencies and semi-automated templates with a serious consideration of love's individuating potential: if all of life has become little more than an expression of publically shared digital networks, how might our most individuated and private relation to others retain political currency and resistance?

A political focus on personal, intimate life was a feature of second wave and Post-Fordist feminist literature, which explored the labours of love as inextricable from politics in the 1970s and 80s (Fortunati 1981; Lonzi 1969; Firestone 2015; Hanisch 1969). These texts, like those that emerge out of the digital era, can be seen to materialize in tandem with concerns about the conditions of social production and

labour. In the case of the former examples, digital, semi- automated systems had become ubiquitous and the associated dismantling and corporatization of modern institutions was well and truly underway. In the latter case, sexual liberation was intertwined with post-Fordist attitudes that challenged the organization, division and conditions of post-industrial labour.

A further series of contemporary texts address love's politics in the context of financialisation, exploitation and the accelerated economic strains of marketability, directing us to the more particular and urgent implications of the network economy today. Identification of the *sugar economy* (Gonzalez and Troyan 2016); the *Hot Babe* (Black 2013); the *overly attached girlfriend* (OAG) (Black 2014); and the theorization of The Young-Girl (Tiqqun 2012), exemplify aggressively mined heterosexual qualities that provide endlessly diversifying channels of the thoroughly financialized subject. In all of these accounts, the *young girl* is the particular site of exploitation and an ideal toward which the entire socio-economic system is orchestrated.

But the idealization of the young girl is not a digital phenomenon. The idealization of youth and the feminine can be seen to have wed romantic love to capitalist systems since their earliest inception. A Dutch engraving from 1591 by Raphael Sadeler titled *Amour*, bears a Latin inscription that conflates these features as parts of a singular project:

> 'While glad youth adorned my cheek with its flower
> I enlist in your army, O Cupid
> Spendthrift and carefree, heedless and rash
> I love every kind of loose living
> Now gaming holds me in its thrall, now a pretty girl… (Nevitt 2003, 10)

Notably, spending and gaming are aligned with the flush, thrill, reckless abandon and even addiction, deemed characteristic of modern romantic love. Such sentiment is in keeping with the formation of the Dutch capitalist state as the first of its kind, where organized trade and gambling were themselves often difficult to separate (Kingma 1996, 199). In this respect, love's aesthetic forms are divested of their complex, ineffable *qualities* to become the fetishized constituents of *quantity*. Even so, the spread of romantic fiction, itself a capitalist technique and form of writing, insisted upon positing love as a state of transcendent bliss beyond words.

The conditions and codes of modern romantic love once extolled by romantic fiction can be seen to be rapidly evolving in the age of big data and reasons for this are multiple although they can be considered within the wider context of a post-digital paradigm: new forms of media and technology; new big data methods; new understandings of agency and matter; rapidly differentiating social sub systems; extended and increasingly fragmented family groups; acceptance of non-hetero relationships; acknowledgement of gender as a non-binary condition; evolving genetic reproductive techniques. Such cultural shifts force us to reconsider the romantic terrain that once claimed love as its sovereign- evoking reconsideration of love's origins and its future. These contexts begin to both erode and extend the sense of normativity and centrality of imperialist structures that have made white-hetero modern romantic love seem ubiquitous and natural. While on the one hand then, this dominance is eroded by the presence of a global, digital community, and practices that were once suppressed or ignored, on the other, we can see an equivalent effort to instate all forms of difference simply as iterations of the- once exclusive- normative family-state relation. While the desire for autonomy struggles against the homogenizing landscape of capitalist appropriation, the practices of everyday life, such as love, become increasingly multi-scalar and emergent. How do such changes relate to an aesthetics of love as we have come to understand them?

In its early modern beginnings, romantic love could provide a code of behaviour that seemed at once spontaneous and highly personalised whilst being codified and generic. In this case it perfectly expresses the terms of Agamben's (1998) state of exception, a paradoxical situation whereby inclusion of something within a set of any kind necessitates its extraction from the set to exemplify its own belonging. The paradoxical nature of romantic love has been highlighted by Niklas Luhmann (1998) who, in analyzing love as a system of communication, claims that it is predicated on an essential instability and uncertainty. Whether love is true or false provides the basis for love's system of inference whereby the alter attempts to internalize the thoughts and future maneuver of the beloved (Luhmann 1998). It is a system of communication that relies on little or no verbalization and thus attempts to make the impossible possible (ibid 24). Luhmann claims that modern romantic love utilizes chance as a prelude, democratizing its code through increasingly complex, differentiating social systems. Untethered from its previous forms of alliance, love comes to denote freedom and fate, even as it becomes a calculation of chance and a technique of probability (Mackinnon 2016).

While secular Western cultures may struggle to appropriate the notion of meaning outside of capitalist capture or the axiomatic, love is still placeholder for such a value. Love's ineffability has long claimed dissociation from capitalist values. The movement of romanticism reached its height in nineteenth century Germany and America, pitching itself against encroaching industrialization with nostalgia for an age of innocence. Romantic love's association with ineffability and excesses of passion help propagate

the idea of love as irrational and beyond control, as something that we are entirely subject to even against our will, and even where this may lead to subjection and violence. The apparent irrationality of love can itself be considered a form of neoliberal rationalization, whereby forms of rationality come to encompass irrationality itself (Foucault 2008, 177). For Foucault, love might eloquently express the biopolitical condition in which the intimate life of society is a matter of state interest, providing calculable statistical data that can predict national wealth and prosperity. That love has been calculated toward economic productivity has been discussed in the work of numerous Marxist scholars. For Max Weber ([1920] 2009), love is the beyond and outside of rational working life that also facilitates and normalises the desire to work. Love's perceived irrationality can be seen as a means that would make the rationalised structure of the industrial project seem more natural and intuitive. For John Bender love is the very "engine of productivity" (Bender 2009, 3). While for Wo (2011), it is the rationalisation of colonial violence that functions like a commodity fetish, veiled with mystical properties that obfuscate its actual purpose. Love, in the writing of Fortunati (1995), is an apology for capitalism and its means of naturalization is through the normative reproductive unit of the family. The labour of the female worker is central, not only to the reproduction of the family as workers, but to the perpetuation of use-value and so to the very valorisation of capital itself. Love, she claims, is utilized as a non-monetary form of exchange without which capital would not be able to propagate itself (ibid 137).

Today, ideas about love, family and nation state have moved into a new terrain, as we confront the unravelling of their constructed modern idealized purpose. For example, the notion of the family as a locus for love is extended inasmuch as the family itself incorporates a growing number of non-hetero, previously *non-normative* configurations. The family is fractured and dispersed in ways that can be emotional, geographical and biological. Yet, the unitary model of the family remains pervasive, even if its ways and means of love, and those who love within it, are differentiating and expanding with dramatic rapidity. Thus, whilst same sex marriage might once have opposed the oppressive structure of familial reproduction, it now seeks the sanction of those same contractual arrangements that were once zones of exclusion. While it is right that people have access to the same legal rights and representations regardless of their sexuality, gender, or any other feature considered to enact *difference*, it is interesting to consider how the movement is *toward* inclusion of the state's normative structures rather than to overwrite them.

Arendt would note that society is idealized as one extended family and its political form is called the nation (1958, 28–9). In this case, the love of the family can be seen to be a direct correlative of love of the nation. The figure of the refugee highlights the violence of such nationalist forms of love, indicative of zones of exclusion that delineate inclusivity and citizenship for the naturalized members of the nation state (Bissenbakker and Myong 2016). Thus, the forms of love that underpin such crumbling institutions as the nation state must shore themselves up against the tide of incoming novelty that always threaten to challenge the social, religious and economic conditions that these same institutions exemplify. It is in this sense that the mythic powers of love can be seen to dispense with the need for structural justice at both the level of the individual and the level of the state. How can the preoccupations of love with familial and national entities retain their value in the face of increasingly globalised concerns expressed by a growing borderless milieu and an increasing scarcity of global resources? In these examples, we see that the logic of love, often considered sovereign and ineffable, has distinct agendas that facilitate the subjugation of the many for the romantic preoccupations of the few. Indeed, narratives of love as the endless ideal, an infinite and unconditional unfolding, set love as an apology for capitalist and colonial interest, as discussed in the work of Wo (2011); Fanon (1986); Fortunati (1995); Weber (2009); and Engels (2010), amongst others.

Whilst in the nineteenth century, increasing methods of population sampling and statistical analysis were twinned with the technical devices that could make sense of collected data, twenty-first century data is "paralleled by innovation in the analytical devices required to read, process and analyse it" (Amoore and Pitokh 2015, 3). These devices are latterly digital and expressive of avalanching and increasingly abstract amounts of "big data" that they process and store. Indeed, the age of *big data* is seen to have initiated the phenomenon of "datafication" as well as being both "a product of and impetus for, new digital calculative devices" (ibid 3). The expansion of data and thus what can be analysed, not only changes social scientific understandings of "sampling" data but alters what can be perceived or apprehended of the world (Amoore and Pitokh 2015, 5). Amoore and Pitokh states that calculative devices in the age of big data and algorithm have several key impacts: they filter the seen, creating novel ways of perceiving the world (ibid 5); they "transform the ordering of space, territory and sovereignty" (ibid 7); they reorient temporalities (ibid 7); and finally, they "transform the nature of human subjectivity, pushing at the limits of what can be read, analysed and thought about" (Hayles 2012 in Amoore and Pitokh 2015, 9). The current cultural moment in Western European and North American societies can be defined by the post-digital—a moment that is permeated through and

through with digital, algorithmic structures and the increasing datafication of all aspects of life.

Moreover, new technologies and techno-ideologies have changed the mediation, governance and arithmetic of love and attachment profoundly. Connective devices allow us to not only to connect and stay in touch with present loved-ones but also seek out the new and keep old flames and disconnected family members within one's horizon. Digital devices create archives of information whose interfaces we may be able to access as users, but the storage of which simultaneously remains opaque and inaccessible, essentially beyond the reach of user control. These new love archives remind us that desires no longer belong only to ourselves but also to databases that store them, the equations that structure them, the social media firms that govern them and potentially, even the hackers that leak them and users that receive them. The discourse of data-driven dating often presents new techniques of love as neutral and reassuring. Management and securitization systems relieve the individual of the risk of human slip-ups by "letting the data speak for itself" in neutral fashion. Yet it has also become clear that modern love archives are increasingly haunted by *archival uncertainties* such as new forms of error, new vulnerabilities and new forms of control. The leaking archives of the dating service Ashley Madison that targeted customers who wanted to have discrete love affairs epitomized many of these new uncertainties.

The new technological love archives are not only growing in size and number, they are also becoming increasingly diverse forming out of fleeting hook-up apps, generalized dating platforms, specialized dating sites, social media sites and even algorithms that predict and arrange divorce. These archival devices use a plethora of techniques beyond-verbal technologies, such as facial recognition software, psychometric testing and ongoing algorithmic experiments to come up with ever-better ways to solve the problem that love has become. At first glance, the archival techniques may appear merely as natural extensions of previous forms of dating sites such as those known from the contact ads of newspapers. Yet, at a closer glance, it becomes clear that today's connective techniques organize around a new political arithmetic, which isn't simply about counting and division but also multiplying and dividing (Lury 2017). In short, these new archival technologies "make up", as Ian Hacking (1991) might say, lovers and their archives in new ways and posit love not only as an ineffable feeling but also as a problem to be solved. These technological, political and social developments raise new questions for theories about love regarding the capacity of love to function critically and theoretically, once more removing us from its aesthetic qualities.

Love is a method and a practice tied to types of social organisation, systems of communication and modes of exchange that characterize particular nations. In this respect, close attention might be paid to the ways in which modern European romantic love, in particular, has been naturalized as a benign feature of human life. Questions of *how* we love and *whom*, or *what* we love seem pressing in such circumstances. What are the factors and common understandings of the practice of love in a time of ecological uncertainty? Or in a period of political crisis that sees so many of the world's populations displaced by war, overt nationalism, and poverty. What kinds of love will endure in the face of sustained global uncertainty? This issue brings together a range of perspectives on love that speak to the many disciplinary vantage points posed by such questions. What brings them together is, however, an engagement with questions of the significance and experience of love—both as a critical entity and as a description of aesthetic experience.

Romantic love has always been inscribed in a complex entanglement between the individual's affective experience of love and an apparatus of love's normative regulation. This is not least evident in today's digital dating services and, in a broader sense, the big data methods of social media and their increasingly complex equations between the individual's affective desires and his or her social circumstances. Users that employ digital media and big data methods to find amorous love thus often also face a paradox: on the one hand they yearn for the spontaneous involuntary pull of what they have come to learn is amorous love; on the other, their meetings with the other is always already entangled in a series of preinscribed and calculated choices. Rune Gade has written a speculative essay on this situation, while also extrapolating it from its digital condition to a more fundamental human paradox, exploring the romantic subject as it hovers temporally between pre-formed cultural ideals of what romantic love is, and romantic love's experiential qualities. Mixing personal experiences, diaristic notes and academic reflections, his essay re-enacts the fascination and imaginary entrapments involved in the love encounter while simultaneously reflecting upon these aspects of love. The essay in particular reflects upon the function of images within the love encounter, drawing on the personal experience of the author and his partner, visual artist Stense Andrea Lind- Valdan. The essay begins where *want* replaces *need*, recalling Lacan's psychoanalytic movement from the Real of nature into symbolic structures such as language. Gade ruminates upon the capacity of language to adequately convey affect, and upon his own reliability as witness and critic where art and love become inseparably interwoven. This author questions his

capacity to recollect or to adequately address the object of desire, which the works of visual artist Stense Andrea Lind-Valdan, give form and life to.

Erotic love can be exhilarating in its capacity to make the world simultaneously remote, and yet invest the banality of the everyday with renewed vitality and proximity. It is an intensity that, like intimacy itself, brings one in touch with the material qualities of bodies and objects. In Mijke Van der Drift's article, this desire for proximity is laced with attendant danger and potential violence, yet is recuperated, reframing the subjects responsibility to otherness. Van der Drift's essay deploys Tripthi Pillai's writing on cuteness, where the cute is described as an instrument of violent organisational breakdown, a wound or cut. Van der Drift clams that the violence associated with cuteness can be used as a laceration that disrupts violent futurity, giving rise to new forms of life and difference. Cuteness is a quality of lack and vulnerability—it expresses both our power over a form of life and *its* power to usurp this imbalance. While such power imbalances can characterize romantic relationships, they can also give rise to a *radical romanticism* protecting difference as a politicised ethics, "avoiding a heterosexist mono-ethical relationship, whereby the good of one is essentially reduced to the aims of the other". Pillai suggests that cuteness can return the agent to the violence in themselves. Developing this as a feature of *somatechnics* and *trans- dispositional interruption* can displace the mono-logical genre "man" as a pervasive field of power.

Dismantling romantic heteronormative expectations is a feature of Lee Mackinnon's paper *Repeat After Me*, which explores love as part of the project of modern industrial automation. Love is seen to render forms of labour, as well as certain types of body and material practices, invisible. Mackinnon explores women's instrumentality in automated systems, developing Sadie Plant's (1998) idea that automation is also feminisation. Using examples from romantic fiction, labour, and automata, Mackinnon considers how abstract systems and symbols have supplanted both the discourse of love and love's object, provocatively suggesting that romantic love's discourse provided a prototype of automation that promised to humanize its users.

That love can be characterized by networks and systems, alludes to the sociological and systemic reading of love characterized by Niklas Luhmann (1998). For Luhamnn, writing in the 1980s, modern love was a social system whose particular characteristic was to make a world of intimacy and closeness in the context of increasingly complex social systems. Today, love has been devolved into vast digital networks and its premises proliferate beyond the simplified romantic heterosexual objective: Love loses the particularity

of scripted narrative and offers itself up to different *users* and *uses* via digital platforms and apps. Indeed, who is being addressed by the digital platform? Emily Rosamond explores Bhaktin's notion of addressivity in relation to the online dating website, OKCupid. *Addressivity* examines the way a literary genre can be defined by its conception of an addressee. What, then, are the particular forms of address that characterize mainstream online dating platforms? Okcupid seeks to "match, sort and share" users into aggregated, privatized data sets that are "witnessed with the desirous, automated gaze of data analytics." Online dating sites can be seen to alter the way in which subjects address prospective partners as datable subjects utilizing meta-utterances that are directed toward an "algorithmic witness". Whilst sites such as OKCupid offer free dating services they profit by *datamining*- customizing user profiles for advertisers, a term that Shoshana Zuboff (2015) frames as "surveillance capitalism". This automated "witnessing," which might also be termed "platform capitalism," raises further questions regarding what exactly is to be shared and between whom? Rosamond turns to Michel Feher's insightful questioning of romantic exchange in the context of platform capitalism.

Kristin Veel and Nanna Thylstrup foreground the uncertain terrain of love and flirtation by exploring the technique of geo-location in dating apps as a way for the user to both gain and lose control through new forms of territorial mappings. Indeed, dating apps deploy geo-location technologies for a wide variety of purposes ranging from a notification of the proximity of a given profile in relation one's own location measured in miles or kilometres, to the general indication of a region, area, city or map locating where one crosses paths with a potential love interest. Geo-location technologies thus produce a new form of intimacy mapping, which operates not only in spatial, but also temporal terms. Users are thus notified not only about where a given "datable subject" (Rosamond) is, but also her temporal positioning in relation to the user. The combination of temporal and geographical information, they suggest, is geared towards not only providing useful information, but also affective techniques of uncertainty and control. On the one hand, physical proximity is used as a matching technique that creates affinity between the user and potential partners, and on the other hand the dating apps deploy geographic location as a warranting technique that a user may employ to determine whether to trust an online profile or not (Walther and Parks 2002). Veel and Thylstrup argue that it is in the vulnerable emotional space between the user's desire for the unknown and her anxiety as to the implications of the unknown, that geo-location as a cultural

flirtation technique operates. The app demarcates a continuum between seeking to identify a stranger and avoiding subjection to potential stalkers, all the while leaving enough space for a sense of playful interaction. In other words, letting the right amount of uncertainty abound to make the experience enticing, yet not pose any unwanted risks.

Having explored some of the more problematic issues associated with recent iterations of modern romantic love, the final article will seek to reconcile the aesthetic and symbolic aspects of love, without foregoing criticality. For Chryssa Sdrolia, love is considered a system of mediation- an obscure point of generation between two points, whereby neither its meaning nor its value are limited to language. Drawing on Charles Sanders Peirce's concept of semiotics, Sdrolia demonstrates that an aesthetics of love also indicates an ethos, and that as a semiotic sign, love can constitute an ethic of relations. Whereas for Sassure's semiology, a sign is simply the relation between the two distinct realms of signifier and signified, in Peircian semiotics the sign critically includes the interpretant. Thus, for Peirce, the sign is not a point of finite meaning, but a process of transformation and creation. Signs appear to be so well habituated it may appear that we use them, but alternately we can conceive of a condition whereby it is they that use us. Sdrolia demonstrates the existence of a sign that is neither fixed nor stable, being also a fact called *love*.

The papers here move through numerous positions and media relative to love as both aesthetic experience, a literary construct, codification, and symbolic form. It is hoped that the collection gives insight into some of the ways in which love might be

Love's Archive by Kristoffer Ørum

both beyond symbolic, axiomatic structures, whilst also being reliant upon them to give love the particularities of its current forms and politics. In this case, we might do well to reconsider the relationship between love as sensory experience and the forms of its broader articulation in systems of mediation. Forms of media give love its communicable form and structure in social systems and it is incumbent upon us to consider the structure and particularities of the media that frame love's limits as well as to convey its aesthetic qualities.

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