FCJ-010 Email and Epistolary technologies: Presence, Intimacy, Disembodiment

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Introduction

"Presence" is a major focus for researchers and artists of digital culture, computer networks and new medical, communication and entertainment technologies (Donati and Prado, 2001; Lombard and Ditton, 1997; Mitchell, 1999; Murphy, 2000; Ryan, 1999; Sheridan, 1992). Presence refers to the degree to which geographically dispersed agents experience a sense of physical and/or psychological proximity through the use of particular communication technologies. In areas as diverse as virtual reality, video conferencing, MUDs (multi-user domain), newsgroups, electronic discussion lists, telemedicine, web-based education, flight simulation software and computer gaming, a sense of presence is vital for the success of the particular application.

It ought to be noted that the term "telepresence" has been used both interchangeably with and in opposition to the term presence. Jonathan Steuer, for example, adopts the latter use arguing that the point of departure between the two terms depends on the degree to which the subject experiences their environment as technologically mediated. As he explains, presence 'refers to the experience of natural surroundings ... in which sensory input impinges directly upon the organs of sense'. [1] In contrast, telepresence refers to 'the experience of presence in an environment by means of a communication medium' (Jonathan Steuer, 1992: 75-76). Steuer's model, however, has been criticised because it relies on a mistaken dichotomy between, on the one hand, "real", "natural" presence and on the other hand, "mediated" telepresence. This, argue Giuseppe Mantovani and Giuseppe Riva, fails to acknowledge the mediated, culturally constructed nature of all communication environments. As they put it:

> presence is always mediated by both physical and conceptual tools that belong to a given culture: "physical" presence in an environment is in principle no more "real" or more true than telepresence or immersion in a simulated virtual environment. (Mantovani and Riva, 1999: 547)

In addition to these critiques, a number of writers have attempted to historicise the socio-critical formulations of presence, telepresence and virtual presence but these phenomena have usually been confined to representations within electronic media (eg Coyne, 2001; Sconce, 2000; Sobchack, 1994). The past several decades have also produced a substantial body of work that explores the ways that global communication networks reconfigure our experience of time and space. As a result of the rapid flow of data through digital information systems, distance appears to shrink and time seems to collapse. The speed up of communication and the concomitant perception of a collapsing time and space will often produce an intense, quasi-spiritual sense of presence: 'through the computer, thought seems to come across like a flowing stream from mind to mind' (Heim, 1986: 283). This sentence is instructive because it collocates "disembodiment", "presence", and an eclipse of the material vehicle of communication, conditions, that, as we shall see, are a defining formal property of the communication systems under investigation. However, current theorising about what David Harvey calls 'time-space compression' (1990), generally limits itself to a history that begins with technological inventions such as the telegraph. What remains under-examined is the extent to which older technologies, such as the postal service, also foster the sense that the constraints of space and time can be overcome. In response, this paper traces the persistence of tropes of presence and intimacy though the texts and socio-technological representations of three sites of communication: letters, postcards and email.

Epistolary presence

The construction of imaginary presence is a fundamental feature of letter writing. In Claudio Guillén's words,

> there is hardly an act in our daily experience, rooted in life itself, that is as likely as the writing of a letter to propel us toward inventiveness and interpretation ... [T]he 'I' who writes may not only be pretending to act upon a friend .... but acting also upon himself, upon his evolving mirror image. (Guillén, 1994: 2)

These epistolary inventions are both performance and interpretation. The letter writer performs a version of self and the recipient reads that performance. These interpretive acts help to produce

the imagined bodies of epistolary communication. As Ruth Perry has observed, through the 'solitary pleasures' of reading and writing, the lovers of epistolary relationships 'summon up images of each other, without need for the visible presence of the other, and then react joyfully to their own creations' (Perry, 1980: 101).

9 In face-to-face communication, questions of presence can seem unproblematic. Epistolary communication underlines the fact that, as Jacques Derrida has argued, presence depends on and is the effect of a complex set of assumptions and strategies (1976; 1978). As I shall argue, "presence" is dependent on (and in part created by) rhetorical strategies and effects such as intimacy, immediacy, spontaneity and disembodiment. At first sight, the last of these terms might appear not to belong to this list; yet in email and epistolary correspondence, presence often depends paradoxically on a type of disembodiment. In some instances this involves the eclipse of the material medium that supports and the temporal or physical obstacles that would otherwise thwart communication. As the author Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861) remarks to one of her closest epistolary friends: 'thanks warmest & truest, my dearest Miss Mitford, for your delightful letter, which is certainly delightful, as it made me feel just as if I were sitting face to face to you, hearing you talk' (16 September, 1844, 9:136). [2] Disembodiment, as this quotation suggests, is in epistolary communication coincident with the emergence of a fantasy of bodily proximity or presence.

10 In a letter sent to Mary Russell Mitford (1787-1855), Barrett Browning provides insight into the ways in which the signifiers of presence operate within epistolary discourse. Barrett Browning writes:

> 11 If I do not empty my heart out with a great splash on the paper, every time I have a letter from you, & speak my gladness & thankfulness, it is lest I shd. weary you of thanksgivings! (EBB, 24 March, 1842, 5: 269)

12 Barrett Browning's claim that she writes letters by emptying her 'heart out with a great splash on the paper' suggests authenticity, intimacy, immediacy and spontaneity. However, Barrett Browning's claims that her letters are written in blood that spurts from the author's heart also draws attention, in a somewhat macabre fashion, to the body. Within a discourse of disembodiment, there is a complex relation between the imagined body of epistolary discourse and the real "flesh and blood" corporeality of the epistolary actors. Since one is not physically co-present with one's interlocutor, references to the corporeal body play significant rhetorical and social functions in the production of meaning within letter writing practice. The physical absence of one's epistolary partner provides both the impetus and the "material" for a range of strategies, language uses and technological functions aimed at creating an imagined sense of presence. References to the physical body, to the scene of writing, to the place where the letter is received or to postal technology are often used by letter writers to convey and invoke a sense of immediacy, intimacy and presence: 'Mr Kenyon is here. I must end & see him – for the post will be fast upon his heels' (EBB, 24 March, 1842, 5: 268); 'this tiresome post, going when I had so much more to say' (EBB, 19 September, 1842, 6:83).

> 13 You will never guess what I am doing – my beloved friend – or rather suffering! – oh – you will never guess. I am sitting … rather lying for my picture. That sounds like vanity between two worlds, indeed! – only the explanation excuses me. (EBB, 16 April, 1841, 5:36)

14 By referring to the "here and now" of corporeality – 'you will never guess what I am doing … lying for my picture' – these correspondents strive to collapse the time and distance that separate them. Depending on the skill and eloquence of the letter writer, the recipient can feel as if he/she is actually face-to-face with them. But, of course, a key point is contained in that small phrase 'as if.' Were the two writers present to one another, there would be no need to correspond. Yet for many letter writers of the nineteenth century, the face-to-face encounter is not necessarily superior to epistolary communication. Indeed, on some occasions, epistolary discourse may be the superior mode. Letters can provide one with the opportunity to express what was unsaid, or could not be said, during a physical meeting. After Mitford had visited her friend Barrett Browning in London, for example, the former wrote:

> 15 My beloved friend how can I thank you enough! You came – you went away like a dream and as if it were a real dream, I never expressed or tried to express all the thankfulness & sense of your great goodness, which penetrated me through and through. You will let me thank you now, will you not? –

> and you will believe in the earnestness of the thoughts which revert to that day & go forward to you? (MRM, 18 November, 1843, 8:50)

16 For many correspondents, "absence" is creative; it opens a discursive space in which desires and subjectivities that might not otherwise be articulated can be explored.

17 A defining feature of epistolary discourse, then, is the dance between absence and presence: writing a letter signals the absence of the recipient and, simultaneously, aims to bridge the gap between writer and recipient. As William Decker puts it, 'exchange of letter sheet thus articulates and substantiates the central paradox of epistolary discourse: that the exchange of personally inscribed texts confirms even as it would mitigate separation' (1998: 46-47). Letters – like postcards and electronic mail – are conventionally understood as a technology that allows communication between bodies that are absent from each other. Epistolary communication is to that extent "disembodied". Yet the boundary between disembodiment and embodiment in epistolary practice is difficult to maintain strictly. Writing and reading letters are, of course, operations in which the body must play a role. As noted, the body of the absent correspondent can become "visible" in letter exchanges when, for example, the author refers to the epistolary scene of writing, its material supports and delivery systems or makes mention of the letter's temporality. These strategies aim for a sense of immediacy and presence by foregrounding the body of the writer. A related but not identical epistolary convention is one where the materiality of the letter is made to stand for the correspondent's body. Due to its physical proximity or contact with its author the letter can work metonymically; a function most obvious in amorous epistolary discourse where the letter is kissed, held, cried over or adored in place of the lover's body. In this way, the gap between letter writer and reader seems bridged. As Barrett Browning writes in a letter to Mitford, 'I should like to be near you my beloved friend, to kiss both the dear hands twenty times which wrote & touched the paper of this most tender letter!'(30 March, 1842, 5:286).

18 Illustrations such as these may seem relatively unproblematic as signifiers of "embodiment", proof that the fleshly body of the epistolary author is "present" at the time of writing and therefore can guarantee authenticity of communication. But even in cases we may call unproblematic, the sign that stands for the body seems at times to eclipse its own materiality. Still more remarkably, at times the materiality of the body that writes, along with the signs it makes on the paper, are eclipsed for the reader by a strong sense of communion between minds or spirits.

19 Barrett Browning gives an eloquent illustration of this "eclipse" in a letter written shortly after Mitford had visited:

20 > My dearest friend's letter was like a shadow of her presence thrown back & brought to mind so strongly all the pleasure I had had in the "dear Sunshine" that the letter itself was for the moment annihilated … not thought of! I thought of YOU too much. Oh, what a happy week for me! (EBB, 19 June, 1844, 9:23)

21 Barrett Browning is describing a transparency which many forms of communication have as an unachievable ideal: in the moment described, the material conditions of representation are effaced, 'annihilate', 'not thought of'. Interestingly, then, this suggests that on occasion the media of epistolary systems may need to be forgotten in order to function efficiently, or conversely, that there are times when the materiality of a letter seems actually to get in the way of its ability to communicate. Arguably, this is a feature of representation in general; the desire to experience unmediated "reality" appears satisfied when the material conditions of representation (the pen, the screen, the keyboard) are eclipsed. The presence, intimacy and immediacy created between epistolary subjects relies upon a complex dynamic between, on the one hand, materiality, physical locatedness and embodiment and, on the other hand, references to the material conditions of epistolary communication and the corporeal body. In order to create a sense of presence and immediacy one may refer to the material conditions of the postal service or the corporeality of the letter writer. But if too much attention is drawn to the vehicle that is creating the sense of presence, then the construction and artifice of this "immediacy" becomes apparent; one sees the signifier not the signified. What, at first glance, may appear to be a reference to the materiality or "embodied" quality of letter writing actually might be operating at a different register since the letter's materiality turns into a sign for the presence of the absent correspondent: 'Your letter, my dearest friend, is twenty times welcome – & stands for you, for that coveted presence, right worthily' (EBB, 21 November, 1843, 8: 53).

22

Paradoxically, then, references to the real, lived, situated, physical body of the epistolary exchange can produce a "fantasised body". That is, the letter form allows correspondents to enact an identity and even adopt a persona that may differ from their "real" or lived body and personae. This is not meant to imply there exists an authentic self from which the letter writer departs. Rather, this "imagined body" or virtual self is a productive effect of the epistolary exchange. As Lori Lebow notes, 'letter writing involves the writing self as a joint venture undertaken by the writer and reader. Writer and reader construct identity from textual cues based on the received responses from the selected audience' (1999: 75). The performance of presence in nineteenth century epistolary culture is enacted by a complex interplay between absent letter writers, face-to-face meetings and the material, epistolary system that renders problematic a strict dichotomy between embodiment and disembodiment.

Postcard presence

23 Epistolary communication has been formally and aetiologically viewed as closely related to privacy, the 'confidential inscription of private, inward, individual experience' (Decker, 1998: 79). For Decker, the expectation of privacy and confidentiality is the 'enabling condition' for the production of intimacy (1998: 5). What happens, then, to the "discourse network" (Kittler, 1990) of the nineteenth century when these categories of affect are put in question by the 1865 invention of the postcard? Descriptions of the shift from a system dominated by the letter to one that employed letters and postcards are often couched in terms of apocalyptic loss and destruction: 'Differing from a letter, a post card is a letter to the extent that nothing of it remains that is, or that holds. It destines the letter to its ruin' (Derrida, 1987: 249). [3] Indeed, the postcard has provided critical practice with an eloquent trope for representing transformations to certain regimes of symbolic and material organisation (Seltzer, 2000; Siegert, 1997).

24 For correspondents of the late nineteenth-century, the postcard introduced a new system of postal writing in which traditional epistolary values and protocols were challenged and questions of class were raised. Fears were regularly expressed that postal clerks or servants would spend their time reading the postcards that passed through their hands. A newspaper of 1870 warned of the 'absurdity of writing private information on an open piece of card-board, that might be read by half a dozen persons before it reached its destination' (Carline, 1971: 55). Yet, those who have noted the threat to epistolary privacy posed by the postcard have invariably overlooked the point that in some sense, at least, the privacy of epistolary communication has often been at risk. During the mid nineteenth-century, for example, there was the distinct possibility that government officials, on the pretext of protecting national security, might open one's letters (Robinson, 1948: 337-53). Even if one's letter arrived inviolate, one could not always assume that it would remain with its intended recipient. Quite often Barrett Browning, Mitford and their other friends would circulate letters without first securing the permission of their authors.

25 The disjunction between the imagined privacy of communication and the actual or possible dissemination, of this message to a wide audience, suggest that the latter must at least in part be occluded if epistolary communication based on the former is to continue. When intimacy or immediacy is the desired effect of a letter (not all letters strive for these qualities: business communication, for example, is informed by other characteristics), correspondents assume a level of privacy and act accordingly. It is worth noting, then, that privacy is a historically contingent and culturally determined term. Cultural theorists who posit the postcard's erosion of privacy, are fantasising about a level of epistolary privacy that, perhaps, has never been available. This is not to deny that the postcard dramatically changed postal communication. Perhaps for the first time the postcard made visible the discursive practices of the general public. The texts of "the everyday," the products of "ordinary" writers, were now being circulated and read in a manner and on a scale that had not previously been possible. Nevertheless, this loss of actual (as opposed to imagined) "privacy" did not make impossible epistolary effects such as intimacy, immediacy and presence.

26 The correspondence between William and Elsie Fuller provides a rich archive for mapping the degree to which narratives of presence and intimacy play out in postcard communication. William Robert Fuller was born in 1899 in Richmond, a suburb of Melbourne. In 1915 he enlisted in the Australian Army, serving as Lance Corporal with the 21st Battalion and was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal in June 1918. He was repatriated to Australia on 20 October 1918 and died of Spanish influenza in July of 1919 aged twenty. [4] The earliest postcard in the collection

is dated February 1916 and the last is August 1918. During this eighteen-month period, Fuller sent his sister, Elsie, about 140 cards. [5]

27 An important element in the production of presence and intimacy in the Fuller correspondence is the image carried by the postcard. These pictures convey a range of emotions, desires and fears as well as fulfilling particular rhetorical functions. Fuller commonly uses the postcard to reproduce for his sister something he has seen or felt. The assumption seems to be that if both writer and reader look at the "same" sight, the latter will share the experience of the former: 'at that building I have been on duty and where you see that person sitting I have also sat' (Fuller, 27 May, 1916).

28 The relation between picture and message is complex and takes a number of different forms. Sometimes, as with the above example, William appears to have seen the same monument, figure or streetscape that the card depicts. On other occasions, however, presence is produced despite the fact that William may not have seen the actual monument to which the postcard refers: 'these are a few photos of what I have seen or intend to see, I have not seen the pyramids yet but I intend to see them. They are only a few miles out of Cairo. I will tell you about them' (13 March, 1916). In this case, a shared present is created by the fact that neither William nor Elsie have seen the pyramids. It is strengthened by, perhaps, their shared desire to see the pyramids and by the simulacrum of the pyramids that they have both seen on the postcard. In this case, the simulacrum helps to effect an intimacy one assumes is felt as natural and spontaneous.

29 A sense of intimacy, therefore, is not dependent on a close relation between image and text. One of the postcards sent to his sister, for example, carries on one side a picture of 'the mosques of Sultan Hassan and Al Rifai' in Cairo. On the other side of the postcard, however, William describes a scene one would not expect to see on a commercially available postcard:

> 30 While we were waiting for the train to go, at Suez, I saw a terrible sight, it was a young native boy about sixteen, he had legs about one inch thick and could not walk on them so had to walk on his hands with his knees doubled up under his chin. Just for all the world like a monkey poor chap. I gave him four piastres (one piastre worth 2 ½d) and he almost went mad. Some of our chaps got onto the river and just to pass the time away they would push the natives into the water. It was very funny to see six of them in the water at once, but it did not hurt them for I could almost swear most of them never had a wash for months. (13 March, 1916)

31 While conveying the young boy's plight, William reveals something of his own "position" as a young Australian soldier. The language – a mix of emotional commentary and masculine bravado – tells much about the colonial discourses that help shape his views. This establishes an intimacy that is heightened by descriptions of difference and "foreignness". Although Elise does not view a visual representation of what William is able to see – the picture on the card is not the image, event or feeling that William wants to tell her about – a sense of intimacy is generated by the ideological position they share.

32 These instances provide the basis for thinking through the claims made by contemporary media theory that the postcard, as emblematic of a certain institutional and technological regime, brings to an end structures of intimacy, presence and affect. As noted above, a number of theorists focus on the letter as articulating a certain symbolic capital and cultural formation. The epistolary subject, so it is argued, is autonomous, has faith in authorial power, and believes that communication is the transparent exchange of thoughts from one consciousness to another. In short this is the Romantic subject re-worked by Postmodernism. Siegert, for example, argues that the combination of photography and the postcard had a significant impact upon contemporary regimes of representation and the belief in the originality of subjectivity. He writes:

> 33 In addition to standard postage, standard format and standard text, there now was a standard picture, as well. With the advent of the picture postcard, visual memories departed from the human soul, only to await people thereafter on the routes of the World Postal Union. The picture postcard opened up the territory of the World Postal Union as an immense space of forgetting, the object of which was the world itself ... Once memories circulated as picture postcards that could be sent any place on the globe .... travelling itself became unnecessary. (Siegert, 1997: 161)

34 Yet people continued to travel. However standardised early nineteenth-century correspondents felt their postcard images to be, they did not stop collecting and sending them. Siegert's argument about the relation between letters and postcards is based on a misreading of the cultural significance of "standardisation". It misses a key point about how dreams of presence, immediacy

and intimacy endure in the postcard era rather than, as he seems to suggest, dissipate. The difficulty with Siegert's argument is that he opposes the formal, standardised, mass-produced format of the postcard to notions of intimacy, privacy, presence and individuality. The latter qualities, he argues, are tied to the epistolary era and are thus made problematic with the new media of the postcard. But why should standardisation rule out the subjective and individual realms? After all, commodity culture and mass production are shored up by the belief in the individual and the rhetoric of "choice".

35 Contrary to popular and academic belief, therefore, the postcard did not destroy postal intimacy. Refuting commonly-held views that the standardisation of postcard media threatened individuality because it removed the privacy in turn assumed to be necessary for intimacy, the Fuller correspondence demonstrates that postcard communication can in fact increase levels of individuality, presence, intimacy and affect. The postcards exchanged between Elsie and William illustrate the extent to which privacy is performed and imagined rather than existing as a real, empirical condition. Despite the fact that the Fullers' correspondence was available for the wartime censors to read, a fact of which the Fullers were aware, these siblings found ways to construct their correspondence as private and intimate.

Email presence

36 Rose Mulvale, long-time member and passionate champion of the email discussion group Cybermind, died on 18 October 2002. [6] Although her death saddened many list members, it did not come as a complete shock since, two years earlier, Mulvale had announced to the list she was ill. In a series of vivid, descriptive yet oddly prosaic emails, she explained that she had been diagnosed with oesophageal cancer and needed an oesophagectomy. Requiring ten hours of surgery, this procedure results in partial or total removal of the oesophagus. She had the operation on Monday 11 December 2000, writing to the group on the Friday before that,

37 > if all goes well (one option is that the whole re-positioned tum might "fall apart") I'll be at my brother's place by Dec.21, and home here in time for Christmas (no heavy lugging, but I'll be able to take care of myself by myself). What greater Christmas gifts than privacy and autonomy – and the sure knowledge that both can be shattered by a simple call for help! (2000) [7]

38 Throughout the next two years, Mulvale regularly wrote to the group about her illness. During periods when she was too ill to write, other list members would report on her progress, having contacted her family by private email. Two years before the list lamented Mulvale's death, she had faced her partner's quite sudden death. Mulvale wrote to Cybermind advising the group that her partner, also a list member, had died:

39 > Kerry died this morning. I thought that writing those words time after time would blunt their impact. It doesn't. I thought that seeking purpose in his death would divert grief. It doesn't. I thought that thinking has the power to dispel emotion. It doesn't. So much for thought. (2000)

40 Death and illness are not infrequent topics of discussion for the members of Cybermind. Indeed, attempts to articulate pain, death and grief play a pivotal role in the construction of presence, affect and intimacy within Cybermind.

41 But why do some forms of email communication give us a sense of presence, as if we occupied the same physical or conceptual space as our interlocutor? How do the words we read on a screen seem to "embody" or represent their author? To draw a relation, as many of the participants in Cybermind seem to do, between the subject posting emails and the particular communications technology involved and even between the subject posting emails and the persona that subject wishes to portray, presupposes some kind of expressive relation between writing, the textual presence conjured by that writing, and the author. In other words, we assume the text expresses or stands in for the author.

42 In general, Cybermind list members treat posts as authentic expressions of their authors. Thus, Cybermind group members regularly comment upon each other's "personalities". This phenomenon is exemplified in those instances when a group member writes in a manner that seems "out of character". In such cases, members either deplore the writer's deviation from what had seemed their character or invent ways of re-establishing that connection (the divergence is not substantial, we see a new side of the person's character, we have previously been misled, there has been a misunderstanding and so on). On one occasion, for example, a recently

subscribed, female member of Cybermind, Tara, suspected that another member, Markku, was, in some manner, stalking her. She believed this person knew more about her email system than would be discernible simply through list interaction. Although the thread continued for a few days, none of the list members contributing to the discussion believed that Tara was being stalked. Some suggested to her that she had misread the original email from Markku; others claimed Markku was not capable of such action. Tara, however, continued to believe that Markku represented some form of danger to her. He had sent her rude emails "backchannel" (an email sent privately rather than to the list), she noted, and the 'constant patting of Markku online' was unfair (Tara, 2001). At this stage in the thread Rowena replied with the following post:

43 > Tara, you obviously dislike Markku, that is of course totally within your right. But I, and many of us, do like him, consider him a friend. So, it is not more than logical from our point of view that when we (or at least: I) see him accused of something we don't think is [in] line with his character as we perceive it and that on the basis of something that was clearly (as I think is now quite clear) a misunderstanding on your part of one line in a post of him, we reply in pointing out that you've misinterpreted his words and that as far as we know Markku is not the type to do what you've accused him of. (2001)

44 It is, in part, because email list interaction is able to create a sense of presence, intimacy and immediacy that Cybermind members feel they can judge the authenticity of each other's actions.

45 This evidence offers a certain resistance to early cyberculture narratives in which the subject was liberated from the exigencies of materiality. In these narratives of freedom, "online" subjectivity is playful, performative, flexible and decentred (Danet, 1998; McRae, 1997; Poster, 1990; Reid, 1995; Stone, 1995; Turkle, 1995). A fragmented, decentred, multiple self is in a "position", so to speak, to refuse to occupy the power structures of hegemonic subject positions. Recent cyberculture research, however, is less sanguine about the possibility for "online" environments to produce the decontexualised, incorporeal, genderless, raceless and ageless subject (eg. Burkhalter, 1999; Hall, 1996; Kolko and Reid, 1998; Sahay, 1997).

46 To a large degree, the "identities" of Cybermind, the various personalities and selves that are constituted though the list, operate in a manner that is relatively predictable and therefore fairly stable. This is not to ignore the fact that "identity" is always, in varying degrees, a performance: it is the result of complex cultural, technological, economic and institutional forces rather than being a natural, somatic or psychological process that is fundamentally independent of historical influence. This cultural determinism, however, may mean that "online subjectivity" is less "flexible", "mutable" and "radical" than was predicted by early media theory. As Jon Marshall comments:

47 > Though it has frequently been suggested that people use the Internet to explore a "postmodern" multiple or decentered self, this does not appear to be the case in practice. On Cybermind and the other lists and MOOs I have experienced, the main aim, or expectation, seems to be to uncover, or display, the authentic self. (Marshall, 2000: chapter 7)

48 Similarly, I would argue that whether subjectivity is represented as, on the one hand, "singular", "rational and autonomous" or, on the other hand, "multiple", "fragmented" and "decentred", the assumption is that the self can be made present on Cybermind. To a large degree, the selves of Cybermind conform to a Romantic or "expressivist" paradigm – 'the internal made external' – as M. H. Abrams puts it (1953: 22). Authors assume that the material signifiers of writing can be deployed to express, to make present, the particular version of subjectivity they wish to convey. Moreover, even the representations of multiple and playful selves are, in fact, quite carefully governed by their authors.

49 I conclude this section by making some preliminary observations about the contrasts between these different socio-technological representations of presence. To what degree are the epistolary narratives of disembodiment and intimacy different from those evident in email exchanges? In their one-to-one communications, the subjects of epistolary discourse engage in what we might call a dialogic performance, whereas for their email counterparts the one-to-many performance is more properly described as theatrical. The latter is, arguably, more difficult to regulate, since communication involves the participation of multiple subjects. Although, of course, misunderstanding and misrepresentation are possible in epistolary communication, in email discussion groups this possibility is amplified. Subjects must negotiate not only the portrayal of

self but also the audience response to this portrayal and, subsequently, their own response to the audience's reaction.

50 Arguably, the theatricality and the potentially instantaneous exchange of communication means the sense of presence and intimacy experienced by participants in Cybermind is less stable than that generated between epistolary partners. Part of this is due to the "interactivity" of a theatrical audience. As Brenda Laurel has argued, conceiving of 'computers as theatre' helps to explain the function of interactivity in the shaping of CMC performance. As she puts it, 'the audience's audible and visible responses .... are often used by the actors to tweak their performance in real time [which] reminds us that theatrical audiences are not strictly 'passive' and may be said to influence the action' (Laurel, 1993: 16). Thus, on Cybermind one is keenly aware of writing as performance or writing "for publication". Moreover, it is possible to occupy the role of both audience and actor because one encounters one's own email as if it were sent from another participant. I email a version of myself to the discussion group and it arrives in my mail inbox along with posts from other members. I do not, however, "own" this version of self; other members of the group can intervene to "read" me differently, to rupture and challenge the stability of my image.

51 This contrasts with the dialogic situation of epistolary practice where the "audience" does not constrain and regulate the performance of identity in quite the same manner. Perhaps this suggests that, in relation to the correspondents of this paper at least, the identities constructed through the exchange of letters are less constrained by socio-technological factors than the identities constructed through email systems. In a sense, this is a surprising discovery. As noted, the subject of cybercultural discourse is frequently viewed as more "multiple", "radical" and, therefore, capable of experiencing more "freedom" than the subject constituted by earlier forms of communication. If the subject of email discussion groups experiences his/her identity as in some sense "threatened" or unstable, this does not lead to a decrease in intimacy and presence. Indeed, it is a testament to the persistence of the desire for presence that despite the potentially disruptive, interactive and theatrical nature of email discussion lists, subjects are able to express feelings of intimacy with, and warmth and affection for, one another.

52 Occupying a "mid-point" between epistolary and email technologies is the postcard. With regard to the type of performance, the postcard represents a transitional phase between the dialogic situation of epistolary communication and the theatricality of email discussion lists. To the extent that postcards are generally intended as a one-to-one communication they are similar to letter writing. However, the fact that their contents are potentially available for public scrutiny qualifies this evaluation, providing a larger audience than is the case with epistolary practice. This latter point is why, of course, Internet Service Providers and other institutions often use the postcard's design to represent the lack of privacy in email communication. As one legal advisor puts it 'sending confidential or sensitive information through e-mail is like sending information on the back of a postcard' (anon., 1999). However, as this paper has argued, privacy is often an "effect" of discourse, a culturally and historically contingent term. Correspondents of letters, postcards and email assume a level of privacy (that may or may not be technologically, materially or institutionally supported) in order to experience presence and intimacy.

Conclusion: toward a historicised critical media practice

53 Many comparisons of electronic mail and the paper-based postal system identify the so-called "immateriality" of the former as one of the key points where it departs from the latter. The assumed immateriality of email is then associated with affective qualities such as "impermanence", "impersonality" or "transience". This is a common rhetorical move within academic contexts and the popular media, as the following quotations suggest:

54 > There is something very personal about a handwritten letter or even a typed letter that you just don't get with an email and unless you print an email out you've got no record of it. Once you move onto the next screen, that's the end of it. So there is something permanent, something personal about a letter .... you can preserve it, you can keep it. You can't keep the email, unless you print it out but it looks very uninteresting printed out. (Breen, 2002)

55 > Every few months, I climb the ladder though a hatch into my attic. Over near a dusty beam, I see a grey shoebox of letters. Here's a valentine from when I was ten; a postcard from my best friend. A love letter from my college sweetheart ... Network mail, even decade old e-mail lacks warmth. The paper doesn't age, the signatures don't fade ... Give me a shoebox of old letters. (Stoll, 1995: 157)

56

For other writers, the so-called "virtuality" of email is a virtue rather than a vice: because email communication involves 'no material mediation', it is less labour intensive than communicating by post (Stratton, 1997: 33). This (relative) freedom from material constrains allows email correspondents greater freedom, intimacy and presence than their postal counterparts. According to Jon Stratton, the "virtual" nature of email combined with its speed produces a different kind of intimacy than that experienced in epistolary communication:

57 > The material letter reinforces the absence of bodily contact, the virtual email, arriving instantaneously, emphasises a non-bodily intimacy .... 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 ... 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. (1997: 33)

58 Stratton is right to assume that within epistolary practice, handwriting, together with references to the corporeal body, can operate as signifiers of presence. As we noted earlier, epistolary partners can evoke immediacy, intimacy and presence by referring to the scene of the letter's construction or reception. Letter writers often draw attention to the materiality of the postal vehicle and the corporeality of their own bodies in the writing process. However, as we also discovered, the materiality of the epistolary exchange (the letter and the postal service for example) and the corporeality of the epistolary partners are often eclipsed by a "disembodied", imagined sense of each other. Indeed, one enabling condition of presence seems to be the partial or complete eclipse of the material conditions of communication.

59 While the "immateriality" of email is for some commentators evidence of its impersonality and lack of life, and for others the same quality intensifies the experience of intimacy and presence, it is striking that both sides align email with the immaterial and letters with the material. These correlations and the contrasts they enable are not self-evidently true. As I have argued, correspondents in the nineteenth century used letters and the postal system to construct an imaginary, spiritual body while eliding or "looking through" its material infrastructure. Similarly, the Fullers' postcard communication revealed that the material exigencies of wartime correspondence were often eclipsed to produce an incorporeal sense of intimacy and presence. Why, then, should the older communication technology be routinely cast as more material when compared with newer technologies? One of the answers to this question is that in modernity the past is often construed as a material impediment from which the present struggles to be liberated. In this instance, the unfettered bodies and selves of email have been freed from the material conditions imposed by an older technology. This discursive logic parallels that at work in the narrative of disembodiment, as it applies to the individual subject. That is, just as subjects struggle to escape the confines of corporeality in order to express their "real" but "immaterial" essence, so too digital technologies release human communication from the material conditions that had previously impeded it. Paradoxically, the desire to free information from its material and technological bases – what Richard Grusin calls 'the recurrent trope of dematerialisation' (1996: 51) – has very real, material, consequences (see Brook and Boal, 1995).

60 While attempting not to underestimate the transformative powers of technology, this paper argues for the remarkable persistence of the ideology of presence. Analysing a range of socio-material practices it demonstrates the complex interrelation between technological modalities, cultural assumptions and symbolic capital in the performance of presence. In so doing, it attempts to avoid the binary that has captured much of the research on digital media; namely, either technological materialities effect decisive, irreversible changes in the systems of communication (technological determinism) or the socio-cultural articulation that is under investigation transcends the particularities of the material infrastructure (cultural determinism). Rather than view these foci as strict binaries, then, I argue that they are involved in a symbiotic and dynamic relation. That is, fantasies of presence are embedded within material infrastructures and practices. These dynamic relations underwrite the use by postcard correspondents, for example, of public communications systems to convey private emotions such as desire, fear and intimacy. Similarly, the public nature of an email discussion list often enhances the sense of presence and intimacy generated for and by its participants. This paradox – a public signifying system used as the site for the articulation of

intimacy – reminds us of one of the fundamental paradoxes of cultural communication, namely that shared material signifiers and public communication systems can be used to conjure a sense of intimacy and mutual understanding between individuals, and even of the incorporeal presence of one correspondent to the other.

Author's Biography

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Acknowledgments

Thanks to Peter Otto and Andrew Kenyon for their invaluable discussions concerning critical themes explored in this paper.

Notes

[1] The emphasis appears in the original. For the remainder of this paper I note only those instances where the emphasis has been added by me. It may be assumed, therefore, that if there is no notation, the emphasis appears in the original quotation.

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[2] All the letters referred to in the text are from Kelley, Philip and Hudson, Ronald (eds) (1984). The in-text citations provide details of the date of letter, volume number and page number. For the purpose of the in-text citation, Elizabeth Barrett Browning is abbreviated to "EBB" and Mary Russell Mitford is abbreviated to "MRM".

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[3] Eschatological and apocalyptic tropes are, of course, common narrative expressions for the interpretation of cyberculture and the movement of global capital. See, for example, Baudrillard (1990; 2000) and Virilio (2000).

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[4] Biographical and historical notes about the Fuller family are obtained from two sources: Papers of William Robert Fuller, Accession Number MS 9701, La Trobe Australian Manuscripts Collection, State Library of Victoria, Melbourne and Australian War Memorial database: .

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[5] This calculation includes only the cards that bear messages. Fuller also sent Elsie cards without messages and counting these the full collection of postcards numbers about 170. Since William and Elsie share a last name, they will be referred to in the text by their first names.

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[6] For a comprehensive ethnographic history of Cybermind, see Marshall (2000).

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[7] The archives of Cybermind have moved through at least two servers each with quite different storage policies. During 2000, without warning AOL deleted two years of list email. Despite requests from Cybermind members, the missing data were not retrieved. However, the author holds copies of all emails cited.

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The Fibreculture Journal (ISSN 1449-1443) — Issue 2, 2003-12-06. This article is published under CC BY-NC-ND. The author retains copyright.

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