

INTRODUCTION: CULTURAL TRANSFORMATIONS OF LOVE AND SEX IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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This second volume of our journal addresses an uneasy topic. It is uneasy exactly because it is too easy to speak about love and sex and yet say nothing. It is uneasy because there has not been tremendous academic interest in this topic within the field of humanities and social sciences, and contributions to the field have thus been sporadic and unsystematic. Moreover, it is uneasy because, compared to other aspects of our everyday life, love and sex concern our being in a way that it is difficult to observe in a neutral or scientific way.

However, we are here: organizing a small conference on the consequences for love and sex upon the advent of the internet and digital technologies. We could not resist engaging this topic because our program as a research center concerns the cultural changes of the digital age, and we can hardly think of another sphere of life more affected by the development of digital communications technologies. In our preliminary research we have identified no less than six huge areas of semiotic interest (being helped by Sanders & Co. 2018):

- Cyber dating and hookup culture
- Erotica, pornography websites, and videogames

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- Webcamming, hidden cams, and online voyeurism
- Sex workers' platforms, websites, and forums
- Digitally engineered sex
- The dark side of the net: cyberbullying, online pedophilia, revenge porn, etc.

To our understanding, semiotic interest may emerge whenever a communication takes place, not only between humans but also between non-human animals, machines, smart devices and artificial intelligences. Semiotic interest may involve studying the meaning, habits, and cognitive conceptualizations resulting from communication and other sociocultural practices. Semiotics rules whenever identity is at stake, not to mention cultural patterns, issues of gender, and narrative. Last and probably most importantly, "semiotics is in principle the discipline studying everything which can be used in order to lie", as the great Umberto Eco postulated in 1975. Love and sex, of course, have always been an utterly semiotic phenomenon, but the premise of this journal issue is that the digital age has changed everything about the sociosemiotic grounds of love and sex.

Take, for example, *cyber dating and hookup culture*. Half of the papers in this issue are dedicated to that topic. Researchers claim that this is the second greatest shift in human sexual habits in history, second only to the establishment of marriage.¹ Can you imagine that? The institution of marriage (together with the advent of the incest taboo) represents the debut of human culture. For dozens of thousands of years the institution of marriage served as the basic structure of human societies, and it is now being seriously challenged by the rise of digital dating. Such a formulation might be exaggerated, but still raises very important questions. Demographic data supports similar observations: marriage is in decline, particularly among millennials and less so in older generations.² No one goes so far as to posit a cause-effect relation between digitally-enhanced dating options and the decline of marriage, but the correlations are quite clear: people with the same lifestyle patterns that are the primary target of dating platforms are those less inclined to marriage. As semioticians, we may start to investigate such cultural change through the meaning of intimate relations when confronted with the logic of projectuality. In traditional society marriage was a fundamental economic arrangement, representing the most reliable of few

¹ <https://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/people/love-me-tinder-how-technology-is-changing-sex-1.2348814> (last accessed 30/4/2019).

² <https://www.bentley.edu/impact/articles/nowuknow-why-millennials-refuse-get-married> (last accessed 30/4/2019).

available survival scenarios. The first structural change to marriage came with the industrial revolution and the development of romanticism (i.e. the last two hundred years), based on new associations of marriage with the notion of *love* and with free choice of a partner (Coontz 2005). Another structural change came with the rise of sexuality and popular culture, but these changes were all still compatible with the *long-term projectuality of marriage*. Even postmodern pure relationships, described by Giddens (1992) and based on intimacy and trust, are compatible with marriage.

Only the digital age brought a paradigmatic change in the meaning of intimate relations, rendering marriage hardly compatible with them. Dating platforms have apparently improved the chance for singles to find a better partner, and during the first decade of the mass internet use this was likely the case, but Web 2.0 functionalities changed everything. On a first sight there are *two major factors merging into a new cultural form*. On one hand the popularity of the dating sites still relies on the dream to meet the ideal partner, but once the people subscribe to the platform a new logic starts to shape their behavior. This logic undergirds the commercial success of the company. Obviously, using the platform just until someone finds their soulmate is not profitable: the platform's anonymous algorithms are designed to make subscribers keep using the platform, to share with and attract new users. The more people use these platforms, the more potential options there are, so why stop? The FOMO mechanism emerges (see *Vuzharov's* paper, FOMO representing "Fear Of Missing Out"), but it is a spiral without an end.

As a second factor, consumer culture and marketing are opening to the new principles of the *experience economy*. Experience economy means consuming in an entirely different way, wherein every commodity or service (thanks to these new communication technologies) is perceived as an occasion for a memorable experience. The new order of the day is constantly offering new experiences. This is why, in recent years, we have witnessed the outburst of hundreds of craft beers, a huge choice of gourmet burger experiences, a volume of touristic possibilities unimaginable only a decade ago, infinite numbers of immersive videogame and VR experiences, extreme sports, reality shows, sports and movie stars digital fandom, and I could continue for two more pages: this proliferation of experiences represents an entirely new philosophy of the way we spend leisure time and money. Love and sex are essential part of this consumer reality. The dream of the transcendental romantic love powers the digital dating system, even as dating sites commodify love and sex, dissolving the two into choices of leisure experiences with different people. Dating platforms concern intimate relations, but many are promoted entirely in the spirit of commodi-

fied consumer experience with another person.³ Marriage is incompatible with that social reality, inherent to millennials' lifestyles.

Another deep cultural change has come from the overwhelming presence of *erotica and pornography* on the internet. Digital availability makes this content accessible for anyone at any age. An essential part of the formation of the individual is gaining control of one's libido, its accommodation to the norms of society, and its sublimation to more sophisticated forms of self-affirmation. According to Freud (1962: 27, but see the article of **Bankov** below) the sublimation of the libido of gifted people in arts and sciences generated the highest achievements of our civilization. In the age of on-line pornography libidinal sublimation is on the decline: consumption of pornography is usurping the fundamental parental function in regards to sexuality and is creating dangerous gaps in the early education system. This is only one aspect, though perhaps the most striking, of the pornography industry's cultural impact, which also exposes deep ethical and feminist issues (see *Afaf's* article here, Sanders & Co. 2018). Digitally available pornography affects an entire sector of the creative industries and inspires many important design innovations, and, last but not least, pornography represents an important influence on adult sexuality and sexual practices.

Probably the biggest impact of internet concerns those who sell their love and sexuality on the market – *the sex workers*. Some claim that this is the oldest profession in the world (easily cast into doubt by the facts, however respectfully ancient), and may think that changes to the sex work industry are a question of quantity and not of cultural transformation. We are nonetheless convinced of the opposite. In *The Philosophy of Money* (1900: 379 ff.), Simmel has analyzed the values at stake when interhuman transactions concern sex and money. He refers to the Kantian moral imperative that (in the kingdom of ends, i.e. in a society of moral beings) things have either price or dignity. Selling sex, or granting access to the most personal and intimate sphere through transactional means, negates and annihilates dignity. Simmel stresses the striking gender inequality in Western societies when it comes to sexual commerce, and points out some examples of gender roles in other cultures with different values at stake.

Even today, despite considerable advancements in human rights and women's sexual emancipation in the 20th century, selling sex is still a socially and morally discredited activity. Sexuality is still a phenomenon of global awareness, though not in equal degree nor with equal meaning across cultures.

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ruhCl6QVqRE> (last accessed 30/4/2019);
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Rfz4bbILs8> (last accessed 30/4/2019).

However, the internet is structurally changing the sex workers' market (for an empirically grounded thesis, see Sanders & Co. 2018). Internet and the mobile devices have made *incredibly sophisticated ways of selling sex and intimacy* possible. When Simmel analyzes the monetization of sex he refers to a society with a strict division between “respectful ladies”, “compromised women”, and rakes. On the internet this distinction is blurred: much higher numbers of women and men are monetizing their sexuality, but only a small number of these cases are labeled as “prostitution”. In times when it was more difficult to hide from the “significant others” like parents, relatives, neighbors, colleagues, etc., labels were more easily assigned.

With the rise of the internet and mobile devices, the public sanction on selling sex can be neutralized and only the moral price remains, the resistance of the interiorized social sanction represented by the conscience. The power of digital capitalism is encapsulated by this shift. The monetization of sexuality may start with so innocent an act as publishing sexy pictures in social media (strictly censured for nudity). The publication of sexual images can generate a sufficient number of followers that financial compensation soon follows: according to the agency Inkifi,⁴ if an instagram user achieves 3000 followers they can earn sixty dollars for every post that contains some brand or service, and four hundred dollars if their followers number 100,000. As Drucker (1993: 184) said, in capitalism *achievement is addictive*. Very friendly and loyal followers may ask the instagram user for hotter pictures or videos only for private use, even to the point of paying for them. While morality should into this decision, it is easy to imagine that the offered price might convince the user to provide these photographs. The next step might be to extend this commerce to more specialized websites that are still far from pornography—or not: the scenarios for selling online sex appeal and intimacy are infinite, and quite addictive where profit is concerned.

For instance, the *webcamming platforms* industry is flourishing. In these online spaces one can dance and blow kisses in a public room for small tips, show nudity for larger tips, or perform hardcore actions in a private room for even larger tips. On some webcam sites couples have sex in front of the camera for tips, interact with the audience, and most girls have the *Lovense* device (see *Michos'* article here) inside them, a sex toy programmed to vibrate when viewers tip them. It goes without saying that such webcam platforms connect people from every single part of the world through the internet.

⁴ <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/heres-exactly-how-much-your-instagram-posts-are-worth-2017-11-08-1288153> (last visited on 03/05/2019).

I am sure that I am aware of less than 1% of the online options for selling sex: however, even this is enough to demonstrate that digital sexual transactions represent a new cultural reality, one that is different in quality and scale from pre-internet prostitution practices. Internet sexual transactions represent a very inclusive (in the “supermarket” sense) cultural reality, where women and men of any color, race, size, gender, and age can monetize their sex appeal and performance without physical contact, in a practice that is open to a global audience.

These cultural changes have significantly reorganized the world of *offline sex workers*. One of the less negative consequences for sex workers after the advent of the internet is the possibility of exercising their economic activity independently of the criminal sector. Traditionally, the sex market represents modern slavery and its worst practices. Researchers speak of the “digital divide” between those who have and those who do not have access to the internet technologies in the sex work sector (Min 2010, cited by Sanders & Co. 2018: 3), which is a divide in the cultural capital necessary to face the realities of the digital sex trade. Furthermore, online platforms can allow a gradual penetration into the sex trade, which may not initially provoke significant moral concern. Looking at even one of the thousands of existing platforms⁵ exhibits a long list of the options (40-50) offered to clients, including such innocent things as “Kissing”, “Bathing together”, “Receiving in stockings”, “Watching porn together”, etc. This range of options might lure people to make the first step towards sex work and provide an income based on gradually deepening interaction with clients, while still avoiding entering into a pure form of prostitution. Digital innovations in the sexual sphere may also generate the possibility of flexible part-time employment in the trade, a change that renders sex work fully compatible with a respectful job and even with the childcare responsibilities of mothers (Sanders & Co., 2018; 62).

On the margins of this new digital culture of love and sex lie *digitally engineered devices and hardware technologies*. This category includes sex robots, “teledildonics” (distance love making devices similar to the aforementioned *Lovense*), and VR technologies that promise to change the role of users from simple voyeurs to participants. This emerging reality can be considered a marginal culture as it is a young technology, but few doubt that conventional “sex with liquid transfer” (the phrase is from the sci-fi movie *Demolition man*) will represent a marginal option among many other technologically mediated (or augmented) forms going forward.

⁵ <https://rosszlanyok.hu/>

Last but not least comes *the dark side of the net*. The technological changes of this century have generated an entirely new culture of sexual cyberbullying, harassment, and pedophilia. Semiotics has already seen research on trauma studies around the Fig. of professor Patrizia Violi from the University of Bologna, and we may begin to think about the future specialization of this approach for the digital forms of that alarming phenomenon. We can semiotically examine the communicative strategies and efficacy of cyberbullying, sexting, use of emojis, and other visual tools both for understanding and preventing these social attacks.

Many aspects of the semiotic inquiry into the digital love and sex remained unexplored in our small conference, and will require further study beyond this present issue of the journal. However, this journal issue exhibits a rich selection of topics and approaches mostly by young scholars, first-person participants in the cultural trend we examine herein.

In his paper “The Semiotics of the Face in Digital Dating: A Research Direction,” **Massimo Leone** is concerned with the problem of whether or not the human face will lose its aura as a result of the digital manipulations popular on dating sites. The first part of this paper offers a profound analysis of the face’s semiotic essence and its role in the sociosemiotic reality of the everyday life. Then the analysis focuses on seductive behavior and the crucial role that the face performs in seduction. This analysis’ depth comes from the comparative approach between humans and primates, where the face is seen as a communicative project. The second part develops the context in which images of the face are used on digital dating sites. Leone explores the possibility of digital dating faces’ typology, wherein the degree of idealization varies. The semiotic tools of such idealization include make-up techniques (including modifications like false moles), a number of seductive facial expressions, and an infinity of digitally-assisted improvements or augmented reality effects used on the face.

One representative of the new generation of semioticians, **Gianmarco Giuliana**, has developed an original and innovative approach to account for the use of love and sex in video games. His perspective is part of a new general approach that tries to overcome the limits of structural semiotics by analyzing the video-ludic experience, going beyond the textual occurrence of the potential or accomplished game. Love and sex are entwined with all the major semiotic aspects of video games. In his paper “I kissed an NPC, and I liked it: Love and Sexuality in Digital Games,” Giuliana divides his study in semiotic typology into the *representation, enactment, and economy* of love and sex. The impressive variety of digital sexuality in gaming is explained and theoretically classified on the basis of a huge list of video games, tracing

the field from its origins to the latest products of VR immersive experience. Following this young Italian scholar's line of analysis, we may expect that the role of love in the video games—and the role of sex in particular—is destined to increase and bring a qualitative leap to the market of experience.

In his paper “Technology selling sex versus sex selling technology,” *Konstantinos Michos* (who is a PhD candidate from the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki) investigates advertising in the digital commerce of sexual and technological devices. His case study compares two extreme cases with a mirrored structure: that of the sexual device *Lovense* promoted through a website with a multimodal technological rhetoric, and a retailer brand that sells conventional technological products using heavy sexual (and even pornographic) rhetoric to advertise its offer. The author proposes a model that poses sex and technology as two extremities on a semiotic axis. We can position the huge variety of commercial appeals for the examined products and services along the semiotic axis.

The paper of young Algerian researcher *Mega Afaf* is unique in our collection. It is situated between academic research and an anti-pornography feminist manifesto, and represents a strong ethical stance. For this reason the paper has been approved with certain reservations on the part of reviewers. However, we insisted on keeping it because of this woman's brave act, coming from El Oued to Sozopol with all the obstacles of her socio-cultural reality. Her presence made our conference more valuable and significant. Shortly after announcing the call for papers, our journal was heavily criticized on Facebook by two or three feminists for having only male keynote speakers. Given the topic of our conference, they were quite right to raise the ethical issue of gender participation. The argument that these feminists did not want to accept was the fact that, as organizers, we made consistent efforts to invite two teams of female researchers from Leicester and Glasgow and a professor from UAS/Prague, all authors of important books on the transformation of love and sex in the digital age. These scholars were not available at the beginning of September, as is the case with many academics.

More concretely, Mega Afaf's paper begins with a historical reading of the feminist movement's socio-cultural implications as read through Juri Lotman's semiotic model (as presented in the 2009 book from *Culture and Explosion*). She situates the phenomenon of pornography within this theoretical frame and, contrary to some currents in feminism, sees it as entirely negative and counterproductive for the feminist cause, as a modern form of *civilized slavery*.

Can we talk about the “touristification of love” and the “lovification of tourism”? Questions about love and tourism motivate the research entitled

“Sex of Place. Mediated Intimacy and Tourism Imaginaries” by the young Italian PhD candidate *Elsa Soro*, presently working in Barcelona. Her fieldwork takes place on *Tinder*, and she analyzes the ways people increase their sex appeal and construct seductive strategies using images of touristic places and activities in their *Tinder* profiles. The study starts from a strong empirical observation: in the last few decades, global tourist activities have increased exponentially, at a rate that mimics the uptake of internet platforms for dating. The number of traveling people and the number of dating people has not only increased, but there is also an important lifestyle overlap between the two trends, suggesting there is solid ground for the cultural implications of this socio-economic reality. Soro makes a sociosemiotic typology of ways of being a tourist and performing tourism in *Tinder* profile pictures, which not only helps to decode the phenomenon but may also be used as a guide for performing a successful seduction strategy.

Francesco Piluso from the University of Bologna gives an excellent example of semiotic critique in the tradition of Barthes, Eco, and Baudrillard. In his paper “From sexual community to exclusive sex: Semiotic translation on gay chat and dating applications,” Piluso applies the semiotic method to one of the greatest expressions of present-day social media capitalism: dating platforms. According to the young Italian scholar, LGBTQ dating apps like *Grindr* and *PalnetRomeo* make use of LGBTQ community capital to transform it into a heteronormative, individualized product of consumption to maximize profits. Apparently platforms like these are inclusive and community oriented, but an examination of their internal structure and hidden ideology reveals that they promote individualistic sexual experiences in a very neoliberal way, driven by profit-oriented filters. These platforms thus commodify (i.e. re-appropriate and assimilate) the core values of the LGBTQ community, namely the acceptance of the individual difference. This commodification takes place through the list of participants’ qualities, qualities like weight, height, colour of skin, eyes, hair, and even the dimension of a user’s genitals.

Rather than a research paper, *Mihail Vuzharov’s* “UX & FOMO. Looking for Love or Looking for Options?” is an informative and analytical review of the latest trends in internet experience, with an explicit ethical stance and sound forecasts for the near future. It also contains a list of the most memorable phrases pronounced by the participants of the XXIII EFSS conference. One of the important things in this paper is the further elaboration of the notion (inspired by Eco’s *reader model*) of the “model user”, already introduced by Vuzharov in previous publications. Concerning love and sex, Vuzharov discusses the general behavioral trend among millen-

nials (as well as other groups) of FOMO – the “Fear Of Missing Out” – as relates to new forms of sexuality and intimacy that emerged after the widespread adoption of dating apps. “Fomosexuality” is a term used to speak about the commodification of our relationships, love, sex, and affection, topics widely discussed during the conference.

Kristian Bankov’s paper, “The Pleasure of the Hypertext,” is an updated version of the already-published chapter in book, *The Garden of Roses III: Lectures and Speeches (2007–2014)*, edited by Prof. Bogdan Bogdanov. This is a reflection on the shift from the age of the “cult of the text” (of which Barthes’ *The Pleasure of the Text*, 1973, is emblematic), and the age of the Hypertext (which is more or less the last two decades), wherein the cultural impact of the internet and digital technologies is devastating. The author conducts a sociosemiotic account of the opposition of the text’s eroticism to the eroticism of the hypertext. The former is quite evident not only in the Barthes’ book, but even more in the interview that the French semiologist gave for French national TV. The pleasure of the text is a cultural form where creativity and innovation are driven by sublimation (in the Freudian sense), whereas the pleasure of the Hypertext is a cultural form growing in the virtual space, dominated by uninhibited sexuality, immediate gratification, and self-expression. In the long-term, such cultural transformations will bring institutional changes in all spheres of socio-economic life.

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