

BOOK REVIEW

QUALITIES WITHOUT THE MAN

Darshana Jayemanne

Dominic Pettman, *Love and Other Technologies: Retrofitting Eros for the Information Age*, New York, Fordham University Press, 2006. ISBN: 9780823226696.

“Our dreams cannot see us – this is the tragedy of utopia.”
Giorgio Agamben

“There is no profound happiness without a profound ethos.”
Ulrich in *The Man Without Qualities*

Few things are as intimate as love – although much of popular culture would have us believe *nothing* is, there are certain things we’re much more likely to keep absolutely to ourselves than share with even our special chosen one. Conversely, few things are so impersonal as technology, which designs general solutions to the problems it gives rise to. Natural versus artificial, internal versus external, proximate versus distributed, production versus consumption, human versus machine. Life versus death. You could probably blame whoever you chose for the modern breakdown and problematisation of this happy conception. In pop music, for example, the relationship between love and technology was most paradigmatically revised by The Monks in 1965: ‘I Hate You... but call me’. You could blame Marx and Engels who, as Calvino notes in his introduction to the works of Fourier, may have subordinated the question of pleasure to that of labour by adopting a mocking attitude to the writings of the utopian socialists. You could blame Freud for metaphorically conceiving the libido in terms of energetic equilibrium, like a mechanical system. You could blame Valmont who writes the foolishly amorous Chevalier Danceny this marvellous prevarication on the matter of his *roman sans clef*: ‘If, my

dear fellow, your affairs are still not making as much progress as you would like, it is not I who am entirely to blame', which could just as well be a paraphrase of the innumerable error messages served to hapless computer users on a day-to-day basis (Valmont the epistolary scoundrel, after all, gets Hamlet the dramatic existentialist's heroic ending – a sure sign of a tragic lapse). You could go right ahead blame Hallmark.

Personally I blame Dominic Pettman, whose *Love and Other Technologies: Retrofitting Eros for the Information Age* is the efficient cause of my own recent reconsideration of the relation. What does it mean to be in the mode for love? Pettman's prose flaunts technique: it flashes with rhetorical turns and never passes up a pun: one gets the impression that this guy could turn a phrase on a dime. It sometimes seems as if the argument twists to suit the manner of its telling, but this often seems entirely in order. Taking up once more the question of the belated temporality of contemporary desire posed in *After the Orgy*, *LOT* in fact includes a third term, a guest star: community. Why? For Pettman, because both love and technology precede individual subjectivity, they converge in a togetherness, an essential rather than a derived co-belonging. Indeed, focusing on 'second love', Pettman argues that the ritualised forms of behaviour attending our loves suggest that these are, in fact, techniques of togetherness, of co-belonging, of community.

It is a point well taken that some form of togetherness is more originary than that proposed by the astonishingly influential human rights-style model (including its peacenik or anarchist correlates), according to which atomistic subjects emerged from some primordial environment and knowingly shook hands over a social contract that miraculously preceded the 'invention' of language, history and mediation. This model must however be challenged precisely at the source of its astonishing influence because its central technique – to incessantly reduce asymmetrical, heterogeneous relations to imaginary symmetries, from a radically multiple 'others' to a manipulable, externalisable other – is the very model of oppression by any meanness necessary. This proprietary attitude towards 'one's own' qualities is, as Pettman argues convincingly, an ontological problem and one not at all limited to the Nero-cons who fiddle while the world burns. And yet the critique of the idea of a unique personal essence has often been too simplistic, giving way to the giddy relativism of 'the B-movie histrionics of the "postmodern onion people" – who can shed layer after layer without revealing a "true" kernel of selfhood' (134) and more to the point, anything that may account for community.

In light of such concerns, it is auspicious that two of the first texts discussed are Musil's *The Man Without Qualities* and Nabokov's *Lolita*. The figure of Ulrich, whose effect on men with qualities is to appear a non-figure, remains for all that a strange attractor – Walter *feels* the strolling Ulrich and Clarisse 'just beyond his field of vision', somewhere in their garden surrounding their house at the edge of the city. The fact that Ulrich of Kakania exists at all is remarkable enough. The fact that such a man is the celebrant of the death-throes of a great European empire highlights all the more a modern crisis point in received ideas of both *jouissance* and community. If 'A man without qualities consists in qualities without a man' and technology (in its common usage) represents the unnerving power to strip 'us' of our qualities that they may go fraternise amongst them-

selves, Ulrich's negativity presages this power. Conversely, Humbert Humbert, prisoner of history that he is – as much as a heartbroken *émigré* as by the tautology of alliance and filiation inhering in his own name – is obsessed with the very figure of transience, the nymphet Lolita. It is the infinitely substitutable Lolita who in her lack of essence embodies the fountain of youth, the perpetual emotion machine – Humbert gets off play-wrestling with her on a couch, but Lolita doesn't know it. Energy without entropy is the ultimate technophilia.

Indeed with Lolita, the fourth major theme of *LOT* becomes clear: temporality and memory. 'It is the fluid movement of the aging process which provokes in Humbert a desire to control this particular flux' (50). Humbert, meditating on a photograph of Lolita, is cognisant of its stillness and desires movement. Thus 'In contrast to Bullet Time or still photography, *movement* seems to be the key to capturing the moment' (45). The technique of memory which is photography does not simply allow the recollection of a moment out of time, but opens onto the virtuality of its subject – in both directions. And this movement cannot be explained by a theory of cinema as moving picture in the simplistic sense because such a model relies on one moment succeeding another in linear fashion. The virtual movement in question is the mark of desiring-production.

The strange libidinal substitutability that inhabits two putatively stable frames (Lolita's photograph and Humbert's narrative thereon) fascinates Pettman in relation to a wide variety of contemporary phenomena. Innovative readings examine how complex exchanges between technology and love inform textual dynamics in Ballard, Vonnegut, Pynchon and Dick. The depersonalising plot devices in such texts (often hi-tech flimflammy such as drugs, virtual reality machines, androids, clones, and so on) are moreover formally immanent in the pornography of Andrew Blake with its substitutable locales and models, in advertising, in fashion photography, in Web 2.0. In Japan, where a mosaic is used to censor genitalia, the mosaic itself has been eroticised. For a hypercommodified society, such substitutable spaces and parts proliferate outside of traditional texts, founding what Marc Augé calls the 'non-places' of supermodernity: shopping malls, airports, supermarkets. From such a vantage, *The Matrix* was too nice by half. The machines are taking us over in order to steal our precious libidinal energy? What a comforting thought. Such confluences, whether enthusiastic or reactionary, bespeak a 'tectonic shift' (the most charming coinage in *LOT*) in which a new form of being-together can be glimpsed provided we can overcome the anxiety that we're losing an essence that was only ever a technical effect, a point of order, a politics of opposition and identity.

In attempting to bring this essential commonality into focus, Pettman has recourse to an impressive range of critical and theoretical sources. Central is probably Giorgio Agamben's *whateverbeing* and coming community, but Jean-Luc Nancy's 'being singular plural' and Gilles Deleuze's 'essence' figure prominently. Niklas Luhmann, Bernard Stiegler, Friedrich A. Kittler, Zygmunt Bauman and others also appear. Many of these thinkers are concerned deeply with the refiguration of contemporary community as a pure multiplicity rather than an aggregate of individuals. There is some concern that

Pettman's recruitment drive essentialises its roster as being overly ecumenical. While the author is quite upfront about this, stating that the works cited 'function as my own technologies for cutting through the Gordian Knot of mediated desire' (xvi), the objection is not so much to make a regressive appeal to 'what these individual authors actually mean' as to suggest that their differences are as interesting as their similarities and it would have been good to hear more about them.

Critical questions do arise from some of these appropriations, particularly as regards Agamben. If, for instance, he is seen to be 'Employing the kind of paradoxes which enrage those who dislike deconstruction (and giving only headaches to those more open to this project)' (155), this conflation perhaps pays insufficient attention to the headaches – Agamben's explicit critique of that project. In positing a tectonic plane on which to retrofit Eros, Pettman realises the often startling synchronicities of a politics of exhaustion. A critique, then, would ask what is left out from such a plane and in what ways we may diachronically disturb and separate the tectonic from itself in some paradigmatic fashion; if Agamben's work is anything to go by the retrofit must also include, in some way, the realm of biopolitics (or, thanatopolitics). The themes of shame and suffering are indeed raised, but like Agamben's work on the modes by which biopolitical sovereignty produces *whateverbeing* and cultural contexts outside the most lurid efflorescences of hypercommodification, given relatively short shrift. In a conclusion proposing the 'knowledge concerning the immanent isomorphy between ourselves and our environment' (208) as a guide to thinking about contemporary techno-erotics and community, *LOT* ironically risks construing exhaustion as a *fait accompli* rather than as a particular production by an anthropological machine. There is also a detectable animus against theories of melancholia and fetishism which, in favouring deconstructive reading, perhaps overlooks the apotropaic dimension in which Agamben locates the answer to his own question: "Where is the thing?"

Not that Pettman would seriously doubt the importance of a critique of violence for *whateverbeing*, or that such concerns are 'structuring absences' in the theory, so if matters have not proceeded as he would have liked, it's not entirely his fault. Indeed *LOT* seems written to provoke questions, not stifle them: 'Perhaps if I used the word "discourse" or "culture" rather than "technology", skeptics would breathe easier' (161). However, the fact is such words do not appear until near the book's conclusion, although the reader will have suspected the admission at some point. This may be read intolerantly by people who dislike such prestidigitation or more generously as a canny awareness of the contingency of the project at hand – which is after all at issue. It is in the taking of its central gambit seriously (which is not the same as 'not playfully') that *LOT* makes its great contributions to exploring the potential spaces of a profound ethical happiness.

Darshana Jayemanne
University of Melbourne