



LOVE ONLINE



Jean-Claude Kaufmann

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Translated by David Macey

polity

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David Macey 1949–2011

A translator does not just translate; he is really co-author of any new book that passes through his fingers. David Macey was an exceptional co-author, at once respectful of the original text and inventive and careful in its translation. His death leaves a great void. But his books will survive him. This one is largely his. I am forever grateful, David.

Jean-Claude Kaufmann

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Introduction

She pulls on the stockings she's only going to wear once.

She's wearing her lacy bra, and a matching thong with flowers on it. Suspenders, heels, handbag.

Every curl carefully in place, a dab of Elizabeth Arden or Chanel behind her neck. He'll fall for her. He has to. Eye shadow. He'll look deep into her eyes and fall under her spell. She wants to be the one, the only one. The one who'll make him forget all the rest of them. And God knows he's had enough women: tall women, supple women, bi-women, older women, big-breasted women . . . Had them this way and that way, every way you can think of. She wants to be the one he can't compare with anyone else because he'll have forgotten them all.

What she really wants is to make him forget all the other women he's had a laugh with, all the other women he's danced with. Make him forget them, tonight and tomorrow.¹

She is already quivering with emotion. The feeling of excitement is almost palpable. *Missardonic* is already on cloud nine. She talks about herself in the third person, as though she was describing a sort of different self who has escaped from her ordinary life. Tonight will be (might be) intensely pleasurable. Tonight might change her whole life.

¹ From the blog of *Missardonic*.

Time to go. She leaves for her date.

The clock says 19:03. He can wait a bit longer. He'll *have* to wait if destiny is to be fulfilled. A last touch of lip gloss as she gets out of the car at 19:17. Her lips are plumper and fleshier than they have ever been. She walks slowly towards the bistro, letting her heels tell everyone she is on her way, begging the men she passes to turn and look at her. Her skirt is too short, and she can feel a bit of a breeze. She can tell that they fancy her and that just the sight of her long legs as she strides confidently towards another man turns them on. They're jealous. He'll fall for her, all right. For just one night, he'll forget everything.²

He's there, waiting for her in the back of the café. The photos didn't tell the whole truth and even the webcam gave only a vague idea of what he looked like. Now that she's face to face with him, she gets a different impression: their bodies are talking to one another. The waiter comes over to take their order. 'Another mojito, please.' There's everything to play for now. She knows that. It's not like the *commedia dell'arte* of old. The codes governing today's little plays about love are all the stricter in that the script is open-ended. It might be just a drink and it might be just for one night. Or it might be for the rest of her life. Who knows?

But surely there's nothing new under the sun when it comes to dating. It's just a first date, and there's nothing new about a first date! That's where you are wrong. This might look like a traditional date, but times have changed and the stakes are very different these days. Only a few elements of the ritual (getting to know one another over a drink) seem to have survived intact. But appearances can be deceptive. The rituals remain unchanged (and they are even more rule-governed and conformist than ever) in order to mask the fact that things have changed. The point of all these rituals is to ward off the fear of falling into an existential void. It is as though we need what is in effect a new courtly code in order to find our way in an emotional world in which no one has a compass.

The world of dating suddenly changed at the very beginning of the third millennium. A combination of two very different phe-

²Ibid.

nomena (a new sexual assertiveness on the part of women, and the fact that the internet had become part of everyday life) triggered a velvet revolution. History sometimes does prove to be made up of unexpected combinations of events.

I do not have the space in this book to go into everything; the issues raised are too far-reaching. The Prologue does no more than look briefly at how people talk to teach other online. Thanks to the internet, there are now two very different stages to a date. Our lonely hearts have spent time – just how much time varies – chatting online before they meet for their first real-life date. The first part of the date is, in psychological terms, very relaxed. Anyone who goes online enjoys great freedom. They can say things that they have never dared to say before. They can cheat and, most important of all, they can break off the relationship when they see fit. They don't even need to apologize. It is the consumerist dream of modern times: take without being taken in. It is only when love comes into play – if only in a modest way – that the dream proves to be an illusion.

Prologue: On the Net

Love's new world

Something really did happen at the turn of the millennium. The atmosphere suddenly changed. Bestsellers like *Bridget Jones's Diary* and cult series, such as *Friends* and *Ally McBeal*, were unashamed celebrations of the single life, as were the trendy urban games based upon the 'search for a soulmate' (speed dating). At the same time, the number of computer dating sites, which first appeared in the mid-1990s in the United States (but which only developed slowly because of their technical limitations), literally exploded and increased their turnover tenfold in the space of three years (Online Publishers Association 2005). The world of dating suddenly changed. The internet bubble made us all very daring. Unfortunately, the bubble burst. The energy could not be sustained, and 9/11 revived our fears about security. The change of atmosphere had been nothing more than a cheerful parenthesis. But once that parenthesis had been closed, the internet revolution continued at the same pace as before. The real change had already taken place: the landscape of dating had changed completely. Everything was now just a click away.

In the first edition of *The Single Woman and the Fairytale Prince* (Kaufmann 2008 [1999]), I analysed women's expectations and the new difficulties they experienced when it came to commitment. The internet then caused such an upheaval that I had to

update my book. In the second edition (Kaufmann 2008 [2006]), the emphasis was on the new possibilities opened up by online dating.¹ But I then had to go still further and to demonstrate that the internet revolution has also revolutionized what surfers call face-to-face real-life dates. That is the goal of the study described here. It can also be read as a sequel to *The Single Woman and the Fairytale Prince*.

At the moment, the number of dating sites is increasing rapidly and they are generating considerable profits (they have an annual growth rate of 70 per cent in the United States: Belcher 2006), even though they face growing competition from free sites and even though a new trend has emerged in sites that specialize by bringing together specific types of users (defined by race, religion, occupation, affinities and so on). They also face competition from messaging networks and blogs, which make it possible to talk openly and to become intimately involved in someone else's life. The future will therefore probably be very different from what we are seeing today. But, whatever innovations the future might bring, the important thing is that dating via the intermediary of a computer screen has become not only widespread but commonplace in a very short space of time. The way in which it has become part of everyday life has been analysed by Robert Brym and Rhonda Lenton (2001), who demonstrate that the use of these sites is spreading rapidly and that news of them is passed on by word of mouth within networks of acquaintances. New users quickly overcome their inhibitions and criticisms and rapidly convince their new friends that they too should 'join the club'. Online dating, whose image was once little better than that of marriage agencies, has, in the space of only a few years, become a normal and legitimate way of finding a soulmate. And as we shall see in this book, it has become a normal and legitimate way of finding a sexual partner – long-term or otherwise. It has even become trendy, which is not something that can be said of marriage agencies. Agencies tend to appeal to a public that is rather traditional, rural and mature, and are the last resort for those who are desperate to find a partner. Those who visit dating sites, by contrast,

¹ The following pages either draw on or are inspired by the chapter on 'The Internet Revolution' in *The Single Woman and the Fairytale Prince*.

tend to be young, highly educated people who live in the cities and take part in a lot of social and leisure activities (Brym and Lenton 2001). They are open-minded about change and are, for example, more likely than most to be in favour of women's rights and sensitive to anti-homosexual discrimination (Madden and Lenhart 2006). They are by no means as lonely and desperate as we sometimes imagine them to be. The other reason why computer dating has spread so quickly is that it has been imposed from on high as a model for youth and modernity.

Its popularization has been so smooth that the internet revolution looks like no more than a peaceful and essentially technological change that is far removed from 'real life', which appears to go on as it always has done. The change is in fact much more radical than that, and the internet really has ushered in a very different age of dating. Dating is easy and intoxicating, but it is full of hidden traps that can make it even more difficult to find love.

The hypermarket of desire

Women were a little suspicious at first, but lots of them now use the net. How can a woman resist? All it takes is one click. It takes only one click to see a succession of men, and more men – hundreds of them. They are smiling, pleasant and available. They put their masculinity on display, tensing their muscles in their swimming trunks or proudly showing off their leathers as they pose on their bikes. A click is all it takes to choose one. Welcome to the consumerist illusion which would have us believe that we can choose a man (or a woman) in the same way that we choose a yoghurt in the hypermarket. But that is not how love works. Love is not reducible to consumerism, and that is probably a good thing. The difference between a man and a yoghurt is that a woman cannot introduce a man into her life and expect everything to remain the same. A man will turn everything upside down, and she will never be the same again. And nor will he, come to that. Both their identities will undergo a metamorphosis. And that is both irresistibly attractive and terrifying.

The internet gives the opposite impression. For a man or woman who is sitting quietly at home in his or her slippers, unshaven or with no make-up on (if there is no webcam), the great advantage

of making contact on the net is that it all feels so safe. She can log on with one click, and log off with another click. With one click she can look at a profile and then close the page with another click. She can send an e-mail with one click and, if the message she gets in return does not appeal, she does not even have to reply. An individual armed with a mouse imagines that she is in complete and absolute control of her social contacts. She does not realize that she is becoming caught up in something that is beyond her control and that she will not emerge unscathed. It is all very exciting to begin with. All the usual obstacles appear to have vanished, and a world of endless possibilities opens up. It is as though all she has to do is to pick and choose in a magical wonderland. A woman on the net is like a child who has been let loose in a sweetshop.

And yet the first difficulties appear very quickly. They have to do with search methods. The techniques that guide the novice through the sites are very effective. But some questions remain unanswered: how does love work? Is she in some way destined to find her soulmate? Will she know intuitively, or will the first messages they exchange tell her in a flash that she has found the man Love meant her to meet? Paradoxically, the internet reactivates the idea that 'somewhere, it is written'. Jennifer, also known as *Cinderella69* (she was born in 1969), dreams aloud in her blog: 'I'm telling you, this is Love Year Zero, the Year of True Love, the Real Thing. You couldn't do this until now. You went on waiting and waiting for your Prince, and you still had a long wait ahead of you. Because he didn't know you were waiting, poor thing! Now you've gone on the net, and everyone knows it. If it is written somewhere that you will meet him, there are no more excuses. It can't fail to work. All you have to do is look.' In the old, pre-net society of the twentieth century, 72 per cent of us met our partners at school or university, at work or in our networks of family and friends. In that sense, the internet really is revolutionary because it makes it very easy to make contact with people we do not know. For singles who live outside the big town centres or who have been marginalized for some reason or other, it represents an unhopd-for tool, and a truly magical opening onto the outside world. The net already has its stock of wonderful legends, like the tale of the disabled couple who would never have met without it.

But let us reread very carefully what *Cinderella*⁶⁹ told us. Although she is firmly convinced that she is destined to meet someone, she ends by saying 'All you have to do is look around you.' Fate needs a helping hand. The internet only works if we make active use of it. And it is, of course, when she begins to look around that things start to go wrong. The reversal is spectacular: the very thing that was so exciting (the vast number of men on offer) is now mentally exhausting. There are too many of them, and too much choice makes it impossible to choose. *Channelchris* feels that her head is spinning: 'In any case, when you look at their profiles, they're all the same. Charming, sporty, generous, funny, "no mind games", good looking, sensual . . . They practically guarantee that you'll be on cloud nine. Everyone's a winner. Let's give it a go!'²

A virtual slap in the face

Computer dating is attractive for two reasons. The possibilities are endless (everything seems to be both possible and easy). In psychological terms, you feel perfectly safe, so long as you stay in front of your screen. The feeling of safety is in fact relative, as the internet is not as virtual as it is often said to be. Once contact is established, the relationship is real, and the distance changes only the way it works. It is, of course, easier to back down (either by making an excuse or by saying nothing), and this does make very intimate exchanges easier, but doing so is not without its repercussions for the man or woman who is on the receiving end. Many people prefer to meet on the net because they are afraid of being rejected 'in real life'. Unfortunately, they are even more likely to be rejected on the net, and the rejections can hurt. The man or woman who does not know how to break things off quickly enough is immediately trapped. *Channelchris* learned this to her cost.

Before, I used to reply to everyone out of politeness. It seems that doesn't happen very often on dating sites. You have to learn to delete them very quickly. Now I understand why they wouldn't let

²Comments from her blog, *Journal de mes rencontres sur internet*. Christelle has also published a book based on her blog (Masson 2006).

me go and sang my praises. 'Thanks for replying. It's unusual for a chick to reply. Thanks, many thanks. Someone nice at last. Let's get to know each other better. We can't leave things at that.' And so on and so on. 'No', I said, 'No.'³

Some people are inundated with offers, while others are suddenly dumped. The internet is like everywhere else: you can be slapped in the face.

The anonymity is relative too. *Channelchris*, who is looking for the love of her life, reacts when she comes across her 'exes' yet again. 'All present and correct. *Summersun*. *Hope62*, *Bond-008*, *Homerus*, *Ace of Hearts*, *F-Sharp* . . . So it didn't work out the way they wanted it to. Obviously not. Didn't work out for me either.' Their fruitless quests are a reflection of her own failures. The endless profiles are beginning to look less magical. A month later . . .

Click . . . Oh no, not him again! *F-Sharp* . . . Oh no . . . Still signed up. That's a bit much coming from someone who's always said no to 'dating to order'. I could have done without that. That will teach me to be curious. Mind you, it's just like passing an ex in the street. Except that on a dating site, it's there in black and white that he's still single. And except that he doesn't want to go on being single.

The internet has a long memory, and every click leaves a record, even when we try to delete it.

Breaking news: *Hope62* is single again. He's back. Not a comma in his profile has been changed. Fancy that, I'd forgotten that he claimed to be 'shy'. That's one way of putting it. For the benefit of new readers, this was the famous date on 8 October. Not something you forget. So, the thing with his *Girl from Toulouse* must have gone belly-up if he's signed up again.⁴

The traces they leave behind are especially damning for anyone who really is looking for a soulmate, especially if the search has been going on for a long time and seems to be getting nowhere.

³ *Journal de mes rencontres*.

⁴ *Journal de mes rencontres*.

For official purposes, the net is free and tolerant, but the criticisms can be violent. *Q-Tip* knows all about this.

Being single is like being unemployed. The longer you're out of work, the more reluctant employers are to give you a job. Oh yes, being unemployed for too long really is something to be worried about. Being single is the same. The longer you stay single, the fewer guys you attract. Because there's something fishy about a man or woman who has been on their own for a long time.

Is it better for your image to describe yourself as someone who is just looking for a good time and not a soulmate? Not in the case of women, as we shall soon see.

A new drug

Once the excitement of the first months is over, disillusionment begins to set in. The would-be dater feels she has had enough. And yet she still finds it impossible to tear herself away from the computer. The attraction is too strong. Even though it becomes nauseating, virtual reality proves to be less virtual than it seems because thousands of tiny threads irresistibly bind us to the screen and give us the feeling that we exist and are recognized as existing, and even that we can expand our horizons to infinity. How could anyone turn down such an intensification of the self? Online dating quickly becomes a drug, and we cannot do without it. Pascal Lardellier (2004) describes the stages of cyber-dependency. The worst addicts are those who are not good at relationships in the real world. The computer gradually becomes the most important thing in their lives and takes over completely. It becomes an obsession. They have to log on as soon as they get home.

Increasingly, we live in a world of addictions. This is because autonomous individuals who are doomed to construct their own lives need to be supported, to have people around them, to have cuddles and to be swept off their feet. Cocaine, alcohol, tobacco, sex, work and telly can all be misused and taken as drugs. For some people, visiting dating sites is a drug, and there is nothing soft about it. The exasperated *Channelchris*, who dreams of 'getting back to real life', 'staying in bed all Sunday morning' and

‘making lots of chocolate cakes’, took drastic measures. ‘My computer is on holiday too. Complete rest. I’ve uninstalled MSN, and that’s saying something . . . I’ve even put a sheet over it, so that it looks like a cage where the budgie has gone to sleep. That way, I’m not tempted. *Vade retro Satanas!*’ Two days later, the computer was back on again.

It is also possible to become addicted to a compulsive form of online dating that never leads to anything in real life. But the worst form of addiction has to do with the initial phase of making virtual contact. As I have already said, the internet means that there are now two stages to a date. It is as though the first real-life date marked a new beginning. Because they want to see it as a seamless process, two-thirds of those who use dating sites send photos, and 86 per cent make phone contact. A few turn on their webcams (Brym and Lenton 2001). There is also a growing tendency for people to get ready for a date by investigating who the online contact really is, without saying anything to him or her. How? By going on the net, of course, and by using search engines to follow up the clues he or she has left. Anyone who uses the net leaves countless clues that make it possible to reconstruct their history and to discover various facets of their personality.

These searches become more common when someone is seriously looking for a life partner. When they are just interested in having a good time, the stakes are not so high, and the surprise effect might even be quite pleasant. But who is looking for what on the net? This is where everything becomes confused. Men, who have always been very keen on the idea of sex with no strings attached, often use false identities. And in the meantime women, who were until recently quite shy about this, are increasingly tempted by the idea of a one-night stand. Even *Channelchris*, who does not have a one-track mind and who is hoping to meet the love of her life, is sometimes tempted. She finds *Fireblade11* quite tempting: ‘I like briefs or Y-fronts but never boxers. I hate clothes that are loose-fitting. I’ve nothing to hide, and I don’t need to cheat.’ He’s got some nerve, this “*Fireblade11*” . . . Hmm . . . Calm down.’ She was very tempted, but five days later she is not so keen on dating *Fireblade11*:

‘So, you like my profile. Do you? Let’s get to know each other better. If you don’t like me, I’ve lots of friends who are single.’ Oh