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Historical Provocations: Postal Presence, Intimate Absence and Public Privacy

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Abstract

This paper traces the production of presence across nineteenth century postal networks of communication in order to make some preliminary remarks, some historical provocations, about twenty first century platforms of social media. It argues that many of the questions facing the field of contemporary presence research are best approached within their socio-technical historical settings. The writing of a letter offers one such site. Separated by time and distance, interlocutors develop strategies to make themselves 'present' to each other. Creating a sense of presence and intimacy imply the concomitant creation of privacy. Yet the postal system has never been an incontrovertible private communication space. This paper, therefore, suggests that the performance of presence helps to shape emerging patterns of 'public privacy'.

Keywords---postal presence; epistolary; social media; mail art; postcards; public privacy; intimacy.

1. Introduction

During the last decade, presence research has registered as a significant mode of inquiry across a multiplicity of disciplines, platforms and applications. The construction of an apparently unmediated sense of the other has been explored in diverse areas such as criminology [1], medicine [2], locative media [3], education [4], performance studies [5], games [6], and philosophy [7]. Although some important contributions have been made to historicising the field [8] there is potential for further productive research. In response, this paper argues that the desire for psychological or symbolic representations of a distant other's presence existed before the 'digital turn'. After all, the *raison d'être* of the postal network is to make us present to those who space and time keep distant.

2. Postal Presence

Epistolary discourse is enabled by the tension between absence and presence: writing a letter signals the absence of the recipient and, simultaneously, aims to bridge the gap between writer and recipient. What we might call 'the intimacy of absence' is a defining feature of epistolary communication as Mireille Bossis explains:

One is familiar with correspondences which can thrive only upon absence (Kafka, Rilke and others). Such letters allow two people to share a dream both have woven, as the words bring about the exact coincidence of two fantasy worlds. Strange paradox indeed where the real – that is, the fact of writing, of sending the missive, of receiving it – guarantees the illusion! [9]

As an evocative illustration of Bossis' theory of the fantasy worlds created by letter exchange consider the following letter written by Elizabeth Barrett Browning to her lover Robert Browning at the beginning of their courtship:

You never guessed perhaps ... what I look back to at this moment in the physiology of our intercourse ... the curious double feeling I had about you ... you personally, & you as the writer of these letters, ... & the crisis of the feeling, when I was positively vexed & jealous of myself for not succeeding better in making a unity of the two. I could not ! And moreover I could not help but that the writer of the letters seemed nearer to me, long . . long . . & in spite of the postmark, ... than did the personal visitor who confounded me, & left me constantly under such an impression of its being all dream-work on his side, that I have stamped my feet on this floor with impatience to think of having to wait so many hours before the 'candid' closing letter could come with its confessional of an illusion [10].

This extract highlights a number of areas that are central to the production of presence. It demonstrates that the 'intimacy of absence', that is, the production of a symbolic sense of presence, may at times be preferable to

real embodied face to face presence. The Barrett Browning correspondence is such an eloquent demonstration of the delicate balance between absence and presence because so much of their courtship was carried out by letter. On the day of their wedding, September 12 1846, Robert Browning notes in his diary this was the pair's 91st meeting. Yet they had, by this time, exchanged over 500 letters [11]. Moreover, as Marianne Camus demonstrates, during the period leading to their wedding and migration to Italy, Browning seems reluctant to call a close to the epistolary element of their relationship. Despite their impending cohabitation, he is fearful of a life without Barrett Browning's letters. On 12 August 1846 he declares to her: 'how strange it will be to have no more letters!' A few days later begging her 'You will continue to write through the remainder of the writing time?' [12]

It is important to acknowledge the historicity of such encounters that are performed at a distance since it functions as a rejoinder to contemporary elegiac complaints directed at social media. One is all too familiar with claims that these new patterns of sociality are less authentic or emotionally rich than the face-to-face encounter [13]. Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, the experience of presence through epistolary networks is usefully understood in relation to the taxonomy of categories sketched by Matthew Lombard and Teresa Ditto [14]. Particularly applicable is their description of 'presence as social richness'. This conceptualisation, as they explain, measures the degree to which a media technology is judged as 'sociable, warm, sensitive, personal or intimate when it is used to interact with other people' [15]. As should be clear from the above example, these socio-psychological qualities are commonly associated with and experienced within epistolary exchanges. Moreover, such expressions of intimacy and immediacy help to eclipse the materiality of the medium. Correspondents overlook the mediated nature of the exchange thereby producing a strong sense of propinquity:

Do write & tell us all what you are all doing, & in detail ... My thoughts & affections are looking in upon you thro' the windows, by daytime & night time [16].

Immediacy, intimacy and spontaneity all contribute to the effect of presence in the epistolary exchange. As such, they help to shape the notion that the familiar letter is a vehicle for ideal communication: 'more than kisses, letters mingle souls' in John Donne's well known phrase [17]. For immediacy and intimacy to reach their apogee, for ideal communication to occur, the materialities of the writing system must be eclipsed. William Decker explains it in this way:

A longing for transcendental or telepathic contact – mind speaking to mind without the intermediary of paper and ink – appears in numerous nineteenth-century correspondences. The motif draws attention to what letter writers often perceive as the discouragingly material condition of epistolary relations ... Consciously projecting an impossible ideal, the letter writer's fantasy of unmediated converse proposes an inter-subjective accord beyond the complications of time and space, spoken and written language [18].

Presence scholars will no doubt recognise the point Decker makes in relation to the materiality of representational systems and the desire these conditions be elided. As Ron Tamborini and Paul Skalski explain, 'presence can be understood as a psychological state in which the person's subjective experience is created by some form of media technology with little awareness of the manner in which technology shapes this perception' [19].

This assertion seems particularly pertinent for exploring the ways in which correspondents imagine one another and, in turn, how this contributes to the production of presence within their exchanges. Generating a sense of presence, therefore, relies on the ability of letter writers to create images of themselves for another. As Bossis notes, 'in order to vanquish absence, a letter must call up images and particularly those of oneself for the other, of the other for oneself' [20]. Similarly, Ruth Perry argues that 'the letter writer fantasizes the beloved and writes to that shadow' [21]. Emphasizing the reciprocal nature of epistolary performance Cynthia Lowenthal explains:

[T]he letter writer first establishes his or her sometimes idealized but always constructed particularity in the transaction; as the relationship grows, such repeatable particularity authenticates the performance. Simultaneously the letter writer adds new facets to the role as an emergent self is constantly shaped [22].

The 'emergent self' of nineteenth century letters is achieved, in part, by references to the scene of writing, to its networked systems of support or to the site of its reception. By referring to letter transmission or receipt, the presence of an imagined epistolary subject is constructed:

I begged your servant to wait – how long I am afraid to think – but certainly I must not make this note very long. I did intend to write to you today in any case. Since Saturday I have had my thanks ready at the end of my fingers waiting to slide along to the nib of my pen [23].

This letter evokes the immediacy of the scene of writing by suggesting that the writer's emotions can be transmitted, almost literally, by the pen to the paper. Also interesting is the reverse of this process where the writer imagines the location of the letter's reception:

From the date of the beginning of this letter, six days ago, you must necessarily have been expecting it for the last four days, and I am really sorry to disappoint you, but you may depend on receiving it within these four days to come ... [24]

However, the imagined body of the epistolary act may sometimes be the site of tension and pain as partners imagine each other in conflicting ways. As we observed in the 'courtship' letter quoted from above, for Elizabeth there is a disjunction between the person she communicates with by letter and the one she meets in the flesh. And it is Robert as 'the writer of these letters' to whom she feels 'nearer'. Barrett Browning's letters are full of references to the 'visions' and 'dreams' she has of her many correspondents and the various writing systems and genres through which these visions emerge. When she begins her correspondence with Mary Russell Mitford, for example, she draws a distinction between the authorial persona of Mitford and the recipient of letters. Until their meeting Mitford functioned for Barrett Browning only as a 'literary abstraction'[25]. As she says of Mitford in a letter to another correspondent, 'she is better in herself than in her books – more large, more energetic, more human altogether' [26].

For her own part, Mitford also admits to experiencing disquiet at the apparent disjunction between her writing and embodied 'selves'. In epistolary discourse, the oscillation between physical presence and absence can manifest itself as a tension between the epistolary moment and the potential face-to-face encounter. During her 20 year correspondence with William Elford, for example, the pair met very rarely. In 1812, two years after they are introduced to each other and their first letters are exchanged, Mitford discusses with Elford the possibility of meeting in London and hopes:

That by April or May we shall have the pleasure of renewing (I might almost say commencing) our personal acquaintance ... You will find just the same plain, awkward, blushing thing whom you profess to remember; only I think the almost hermit life that I have led for the last year has rather improved all these enchanting qualifications. I talk to you with wonderful boldness upon paper, and while we are seventy miles distant; but I doubt whether I shall say three sentences to you when we meet, because the ghosts of all my

impertinent letters will stare me in the face the moment I see you [27].

Mitford fears that the disparity between her epistolary identity and her flesh and blood presence will render their meeting unsatisfactory and she implies that, perhaps, their epistolary exchange is in some way the superior relationship.

3. Public Privacy

For many correspondents the disquiet expressed between the writing self and the embodied self of a face-to-face encounter is underpinned by the public/private dichotomy. The disjunction, explained above, between Barrett Browning's visions of Mitford as literary author and as correspondent can be explained by the fact that epistolary communication guarantees an exclusivity and intimacy between correspondents that is not available in the traditional literary relation between writer and reader.

In most epistolary friendships a feeling of privacy is a central requirement for intimacy, immediacy and simultaneity to emerge. It is not necessarily that intimacy is produced by the fact that the letters will only be read by the two correspondents although this may be a contributing factor at certain times in some of the relationships. As Barrett Browning comments at one point to Mitford, 'you & I dearest friend are talking low together & nobody by to hear us' [28]. However, in other epistolary contexts it is regular practice to enclose letters from different correspondents, thereby creating a network of readers.

We need, therefore, to question the 'letter's status as a privileged marker of privacy' [29]. Perhaps a slightly more precise and productive term might be 'exclusivity' identified by Thomas J McCarthy as one of the 'striking features of Romantic correspondence'. There is, he argues, the 'expression of isolation and concomitant sense of exclusiveness between correspondents: only we two sympathise with each other in an otherwise unsympathetic world' [30].

A fascinating feature of epistolary discourse, then, is the tension between, on the one hand, the desire for an exclusive, private one-to-one conversation and, on the other hand, the correspondents' realization that their missives may be read by a third party. As already noted, epistolary partners have often been aware of the fragility of an assumed private correspondence. It was common practice during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries for letters to circulate without their author's explicit agreement. Writing to Elford, Mitford highlights the fallacy of epistolary privacy in the following way:

A friend, to whom I have long been in the habit of writing very frequently, had a most whimsical trick of sending my careless letters round to half her acquaintance ... in this manner travelled my unlucky epistles; and I, quite unsuspecting, wrote on as carelessly as ever, till at length one of my letters, written to Miss R in London, actually returned to me here, by the hands of a mutual friend to whom she had lent it [31].

With the invention of the postcard in 1865, epistolary privacy was further compromised since the 'open' nature of its writing space appeared to render personal communication impossible. Objecting to its introduction, the German Postal Director called it 'an indecent form of communication on exposed post pages' [32]. However, postal networks continued and continue to carry messages of love, intimacy, warmth and confidentiality. 'Nothing gets through like a letter' was how one Royal Mail advertising campaign described the efficacy and authenticity of postal discourse in an effort to target female letter writers [33].

What this suggests is that 'privacy' is an effect of particular socio-material technologies of communication rather than existing as an empirically verifiable, static fact.

Once again, it is important to note the historical weight of such observations. If it can be demonstrated that these public signifying systems are deployed to circulate expressions of intimacy and familiarity then it is difficult to countenance the often messianic statements that proclaim the twenty first century marks the 'end of privacy' [34].

This is not to imply that privacy does not matter. Indeed, I would argue that online social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter materially demonstrate the significance of privacy, sharing and presence. As evidence there are, of course, the always heated reactions whenever changes to terms of use, privacy settings and policies are announced [35]. But what goes less remarked upon, perhaps, are the finely calibrated decisions made by users about what to share with whom. It is a misnomer to assume that the decision to join an online social media site is, of itself, a decision to publish all of one's data. Quite to the contrary, as a recent study of Facebook privacy settings found, users employ a highly nuanced system to govern their selection and publication of information [36].

This 2011 research project from Columbia University surveyed Facebook users to determine whether the privacy settings they had selected matched their sharing intentions. The researchers surveyed a broad range of what they called Facebook 'data types' including wall posts, status updates, tags, comments on photos, event

RSVPs, basic profile information and page memberships. Respondents were asked to rate the importance of various privacy levels and to explain their sharing intentions. These intentions were then matched against the actual publication of data.

The survey investigated two forms of privacy violation: The 'hide violation' referred to 'visible information that was intended to be hidden' while a 'show violation' designated 'invisible information that was intended to be shown'. The results demonstrated a 'serious potential for privacy problems' since 93.8% of participants displayed information that they did not intend to disclose and 84.6% of the cohort were hiding data they had wanted to share [37].

In addition to demonstrating the ineffectual privacy settings of Facebook (the researchers conclude that 'the user interface design is working against the very purpose of online social networking'[38]) this study illustrates the fine cultural gradations that subsist within notions of the private and public spheres.

For Ilana Gershon, the complex, multiple registers of social media are explained through what she calls 'media ideologies and idioms of practice'. In her sophisticated ethnography of Facebook, Gershon tracks emerging conventions framing romantic involvement; specifically examining the role social media plays in the dissolution of a relationship. A media ideology is not about making true/false evaluations or uncovering 'beliefs that mystify' [39]. Rather, it is a set of assumptions or codes that accrue to a particular medium – text, Facebook, phone call, email – that materially shape the interpretation of a message. If email is viewed as more formal than, for example, texting this will determine what is said to whom. Importantly, however, media ideologies vary across users and a significant element in using social media effectively requires what we might call 'sociotechnical reciprocity'. As Gershon explains, respondents to her survey often 'described having to guess what other people's media ideologies might be to interpret why they were using a particular medium to accomplish a certain communicative task' [40]. Such interpretive skills become crucial when decisions are made about the intended audience for one's message. Gershon's study found tension, conflict and disagreement about how to navigate 'multiple publics' and 'manage one's public performances of friendships, romances, and identity when different audiences can have contradictory demands [41].'

In response to such complexity, critical theory has been interested in articulating the various forms and settings that produce 'public privacy'. danah boyd, for example, coins the term 'social steganography' to describe

the ways in which the users of Facebook and Twitter ‘hide in plain sight’ by coding updates and comments, often through the use of song lyrics, to address a targeted audience [42]. This seems to me to be an evocative signifier of presence and one with a postal pre-history. Wartime correspondents, for example, discovered novel ways to evoke their presence to one another without attracting the censor’s ire [43].

Also germane is Michael Warner’s work on ‘publics and counter publics’. Warner reminds us of the technological and historical specificity of the public and private spheres when he writes:

This essay has a public. If you are reading (or hearing) this, you are part of its public. So first let me say: welcome. Of course, you might stop reading (or leave the room), and someone else might start (or enter) ... a public is a space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself. It is autoelic; it exists only as the end for which books are published, shows broadcast, web sites posted, speeches delivered, opinions produced. It exists *by virtue of being addressed* ...[44]

For Warner, it is the circulation of texts (whether written, audio or image based) that calls a public into being. In relation to his argument, and significant in the present context, one would want to note the particular kind of public that was produced in the eighteenth century by print culture generally and epistolary discourse specifically, commonly understood as ‘the Republic of Letters’ [45]. Interestingly, writing in 2002 about the potential for web based discourse to produce ‘publics’ Warner suggests the continuous (24/7) nature of the internet might be the conditions of possibility for a radically different public.

Public discourse indexes itself temporally with respect to moments of publication and a common calendar of circulation ...[and] one way the Internet and other new media may be profoundly changing the public sphere is through the change they imply in temporality ... At the time of this writing, Web discourse has very little of the citational field that would allow us to speak of it as a discourse unfolding through time. Once a web site is up, it can be hard to tell how recently it was posted [46].

At the risk of stating the obvious, it does seem worthwhile noting that sites such as Twitter and Facebook, meticulously (some might say, maniacally) register the precise time of data publication, often to the second. This rhetorical and material affordance gestures to a specific form of presence performance. Like a postcard or the date paintings of On Kawara [47], Twitter evokes a

sublime presence, at once prosaic yet curiously ineffable: ‘I am here’.

Conclusions

This paper has argued for historical specificities in presence research. Although, as noted, important historical studies do exist there is further scope for work that asks of analogue systems the same questions posed of the digital field. In tracing signifiers of presence through sites of postal and social media I seek to intervene in those media histories that speak in the often apocalyptic tones of absolute rupture: ‘never before, never again’ [48]. Instead, I follow the nuanced approach of Geert Lovink who says of ‘media archaeology’ it ‘is first and foremost a methodology, a hermeneutic reading of the “new” against the grain of the past, rather than a telling of the histories of technologies from past to present’ [49]. Reading the signifiers of presence that operate on Twitter through the lens of epistolary culture seems a useful example of such media archaeologies.

Indeed, the postal principle of Twitter has recently been explored in art practice. The New York art collective ‘Hyperallergic’, for example, curates regular mail art exhibitions, suggesting that ‘Postcards are the tweets of the mail art world. Pithy, quick and often clever, they communicate without the ceremony of unveiling that most other mail art exploits’ [50]. Similarly, consider the street art work from the artist Alban Low who captions photographs with Twitter transcripts and affixes to newsagent windows throughout London [51]. These projects reference older mail art practices such as ‘PostSecret’ which invites people ‘to anonymously contribute a secret’ by way of postcard. This became an edited book and a Twitter site [52]. Also worth mentioning is the Edwardian Postcard Project which posts transcripts of real postcards to Twitter [53].

Such art practices help to illuminate how postal presence shapes emerging patterns of ‘public privacy’. Sending a secret on a postcard articulates a paradoxical desire: if the privacy of a message should remain intact why choose a media of distribution that operates as a public signifying system? Responding to this conundrum a 19th century etiquette manual warns: ‘a private communication on an open card is almost insulting to your correspondent’[54]. The unease expressed by this manual turns on fears about the loss of intimacy. It is possible that your correspondent is slighted because you have made public a private moment and thereby shattered the intimate bonds of reciprocity. Put in the language of presence research, this bond is a version of what Lombard

and Ditton call ‘We are here’ where subjects feel they occupy a ‘shared virtual space that is different from any of the individuals’ “real” environments’ [55].

Rather than simply to destroy such private moments and intimate bonds, these media transgressions are the enabling conditions for the emergence of socio-technical reciprocity and public privacy. As I have argued, postal presence is instructive for understanding private affect uttered in public and we need to develop subtle calibrations to measure the desire for presence and the intimacy of absence.

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