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## "Miłość w Sieci: internet i emocje", Aaron Ben-Ze`ev, Cambridge 2004 : [recenzja]

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# REVIEWS

Aaron Ben-Ze'ev, *Miłość w Sieci. Internet i emocje*, Dom Wydawniczy Rebis, Poznań 2005.  
Original title: *Love Online: Emotions on the Internet*, Cambridge 2004.

*Close and Distant*<sup>1</sup>

Bo widzisz tu są tacy, którzy się kochają  
i muszą się spotkać aby się ominąć  
bliscy i oddaleni jakby stali w lustrze  
piszą do siebie listy gorące i zimne (...)  
są inni co się nawet po ciemku odnajdą...  
[For, you see, there are such who love each other  
and must meet to pass each other by  
close and distant as if reflected in a mirror  
they write each other letters, hot and cold (...)  
there are others who find each other even in the dark...]  
Rev. J. Twardowski

I've been going out with a girl for two years, and she  
starts to fuss:  
"I want to know your full name"  
Mike Binder [A. Ben-Ze'ev, p. 43]

*Love Online*. This title of the book, which was published in 2005, could be still considered an oxymoron a few years ago. It is though one of the many reasons to justify the thesis that an increasing number of elements in the social life of modern people is becoming virtual. It also concerns emotions. Including love. The reason is because love, as Tomasz Szlendak states in *Architektonika romansu* [*The Architecture of a Romance*], is a social product, "because behind love – according to sociology –

there is nothing not-standard, nothing unique, and nothing outstanding. Erotic love is a social institution, shaped in the long history of Euro-American culture, where sexual experiences are pushed into the machinery of standardized, repetitive and schematic rituals with constantly the same set of gadgets, words and tricks to use"<sup>2</sup>.

The fact that people living in the modern world are looking for love, a feeling that by the culturally shaped social institutions is considered as a fundamental phenomenon of human life, without which the personal life of a person seems unthinkable<sup>3</sup>, cannot surprise. Even more so, because it has been confirmed by a limitless number of literary works devoted to this subject, as well as by research. In the studies of Hanna Świdła-Ziemia it has been proven that for youth it is love that is considered the most important value (it takes the first out of the nineteen values given in the questionnaire). 67% of the respondents sees considers it fundamental. Life without love, as "drained from any sense, wasted" is seen by 22,1% of the respondents. The position of love in the lives of the researched is very high. Nearly a half of them identifies with the claim, "I would not appreciate life to its limits if I hadn't

<sup>2</sup> T. Szlendak, *Architektonika romansu. O społecznej naturze miłości erotycznej*, Warszawa 2002, p. 131.

<sup>3</sup> A. Siemianowski, *Zrozumieć miłość. Fenomenologia i metafizyka miłości*, Bydgoszcz 1998, p. 5.

<sup>1</sup> The title of the article is a quotation from a poem by Rev. Jan Twardowski, *Bliscy i oddaleni*.

experienced great love, that would be terrible. Love is a value even if leads to suffering”<sup>4</sup>.

The goal of the book *Love Online* by Aaron Ben Ze'ev is to analyze a new social phenomenon – the relation of human emotions and virtual reality, which the author sees as “one of the most exciting places, both from the social and socializing point of view” [p. 11].

Following the concept of a social scenario (a cultural script) by Edward O. Laumann and John H. Gagnon, all sexual behaviour is culturally and locally shaped. As a result, also the cyberspace can condition and redefine such behaviour, as it is a new “location” of people’s social interaction.

“Individuals collect in their lifetimes, from birth to death, cultural scenarios of sexual behaviour”<sup>5</sup>. Laumann and Gagnon note that the models are not static and given, and they are not subject to change over time. On the contrary. The changing conditions, new influence of people and technology can exert a considerable influence on them, notwithstanding the age of an individual. New mass media undoubtedly play an important role in the transformation.

What is love then, if we adapt the sociological perspective? It is a social script “defined in an inter-subjective interaction that is obligatory in our (and only our) culture”<sup>6</sup>. Its wonder, uniqueness, supernatural and unparalleled aspects are social products created by society to serve specific purposes, just as reactions and attitudes to love, an impression that it (in the western civilization) “moves stars

and the sun” (Dante)<sup>7</sup>. The term of needs, known in psychology, i.e. according to A. Maslow “a substantial lack in the organism, a somewhat empty place that must be filled to sustain health and that must also be filled by human beings other than the subject”<sup>8</sup>, the needs are also created by various social pressures. Therefore, if in a given society there is a present need of love, individuals will experience lack of it. According to the today popular scripts, they will try to fill this gap.

One of such cultural scripts is today finding a partner through electronic media. They generate a kind of processes that cause the closure of virtual world, they suggest a sort of solutions that exist only in one environment. “The Internet – simultaneously and paradoxically – being an enormous source of information about the surrounding reality, closes itself and leads to isolation as «a world within itself». It behaves like a car whose function is no longer to move in space to carry passengers to some destination. However, it attracts attention to itself by offering a formula, «Thus my inside is just as interesting as my outside. Let us stop on that»<sup>9</sup>. It is such, more and more “claimed” from the real world, phenomenon that the sphere of feelings constitutes: of love and friendship among people.

Aaron Ben Ze'ev, a philosopher, the rector of the University in Haifa, as well as one of the directors of the Center of Interdisciplinary Study of Emotions working at this university,

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<sup>7</sup> A. Siemianowski, op.cit., p. 111.

<sup>8</sup> A. Maslow, *W stronę psychologii istnienia*, Warszawa 1986, p. 28.

<sup>9</sup> W. Godzic, *Czy nowe media potrzebują nowej estetyki? Humanista w Internecie* [in:] K. Wilkoszewska, *Piękno w sieci. Estetyka a nowe media*, Kraków 1999, p. 259.

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<sup>4</sup> H. Świda-Zięba, *Obraz świata i bycia w świecie: z badań młodzieży licealnej*, Warszawa 2000, pp. 445–449.

<sup>5</sup> T. Szlendak, op.cit., p. 151.

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem, p. 153.

provides in his book a detailed analysis of changes in the nature of emotions, which have happened as a result of new communication possibilities, provided by the Internet and mobile phones.

*Love Online* was published by Rebis Publishing House located in Poznań, who had earlier published three important works devoted to reflexion on social phenomena happening on the Internet: *Wandering on the Internet* by J. C. Herz<sup>10</sup>, *Psychology of the Internet* by Patricia Wallace<sup>11</sup>, and *Galaxy of the Internet* by Manuel Castells<sup>12</sup>.

The book is comprised of ten chapters. Each of them tries to discuss in detail issues related to the subject of the work.

It is worth noticing already in the beginning that each of the chapters and sub-chapters is given an interesting quote, a motto. These are extracts from the canon of world literature, words of writers, pop-culture stars, anonymous Internet users, even texts from bumper stickers or tombstones. They provide an unusually concise summary of the sub-chapter content or, e.g. due to their controversial character, they are supposed to arise interest and encourage the reader to carry on. The clear organization of the book, the graphics, as well as the font, they all add to the goal. To study further the detailed issues there is an index of interesting terms and a bibliography placed at the end of the book – only in English.

Aaron Ben-Ze'ev dedicates his work to his wife Ruth – his “true love”. As far as publi-

cations from other subject areas, such a dedication would perhaps draw little attention. However, in the book that explores the phenomenon of emotion anchored in the virtual world, the dedication has – in my opinion – a slightly provocative character. It must be underlined here, that in the first chapter, discussing the nature of cyberspace from the point of view of inter-human communication, the philosopher claims that it is not the opposite of reality. It is a part of reality<sup>13</sup>. Therefore, online relationships are also true, just as the emotions that are experienced by the partners in interaction. The key thesis of the work is the following: any interaction of this kind is possible due to the extensive power of imagination. It is thanks to imagination that the mental reality of virtual relations is possible. It is imagination that Aaron Ben Ze'ev endows with a revolutionary meaning as far as evoking emotions online is concerned, since it does not limit an individual in almost any way, “It allows to present yourself and others in the most positive light – much more perfect than in reality” [p. 35]. The author discusses in detail various forms of communication (such as e-mail, messengers, chats, SMS), which are accessible via the Internet and on mobile phones. Pointing at their characteristic traits, he analyzes the nature of relationships based on text messages.

As the salient features of cyberspace, “responsible for its power of attraction”, he considers, as mentioned before, imagination, as

<sup>10</sup> J.C. Herz, *Wędrówki po Internecie*, Poznań 1999.

<sup>11</sup> P. Wallace, *Psychologia Internetu*, Poznań 2001.

<sup>12</sup> M. Castells, *Galaxy of the Internet*, Poznań 2003.

<sup>13</sup> Comp.: “Cyberspace is less real in the ontological sense – as it is a virtual place – yet it can be true in the epistemological sense, since it evokes live fantasies. The fantasies are even more real, because they do not only consist of passive pictures, but true interactions”, A. Ben Ze'ev, *Love Online...*, p. 85.

well as its anonymous character, interactivity, openness, accessibility and uniqueness. The interactivity strengthens the key feature of relationship: being for each other and feeling close, "Online relationships are defined as distant closeness (physical distance, emotional closeness)" [p. 71].

The anonymous aspect and openness is one of the paradoxes of online relationships emphasized in the second chapter. The sense of being anonymous decreases all kinds of dangers which appear together with openness in an Internet conversation, it enhances the honesty of speaking, and it makes it easier to talk about feelings, "the process of disclosing oneself will be happening in the cyberspace steadily and in one direction – from lack of trust to almost total disclosure". The charm of being anonymous on the Internet is reflected in the fact that people often feel the need to claim controversial views in public, to ask questions of which in reality they would be ashamed or afraid to ask, or they want to play social roles different from their real ones, outside the network. Some Internet users develop their Net skills for whole weeks, or even years. When they log in using their nickname, their digital personalities replace the real ones<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> The structure of human personality I-The World contains various layers: "intimate" and "public". Such a personality, which is experienced and preserved on the most intimate level of consciousness, is not entirely synonymous with the one that is revealed to others in social "public" relationships. In case of a well integrated personality, an individual feels natural in his "public" personality, totally accepting at the same time the "intimate" I.J. Nuttin, *Struktura osobowości*, Warszawa 1968, pp. 249–251. However, there can be some disturbances in this respect, and the intimate layer of personality, manifested for example during synchronized com-

A lot of people "exist" mostly on the Internet. Some people feel so well under cover of their nickname or number in an Internet messenger that they seem naked without them<sup>15</sup>. The nick is for them as important as their name in the driving license or ID. Their Net identity, just as their nickname and the person that hides behind it, is to some extent created by them alone. One of the proofs for this thesis is the introduction of legal rules that make it possible to keep the phone number in spite of the change of an operator. The strong relation with the number (apart from economical aspects) was so huge among phone users that they pressurized the legal system.

As Ben Ze'ev argues, this, and other kinds of deception are traditionally parts of emotional relationships. As far as online relations are concerned, this phenomenon is found much more often. G. Van Der Leun and T. Mandel claim that "a virtual figure is always deceitful"<sup>16</sup> the author of *Love Online* quotes the following words of a respondent, "Honesty is the secret. If you learn how to pretend it, you win" [p. 62]. It has been noticed that the longer and deeper a relationship is, the bigger is the honesty. Though it sometimes is painful.

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munication, e.g. on a chat or IRC, can begin to dominate over the public sphere. "Kieran spends his whole time on the Net, usually on MindVoks. He has no friends, he has nothing apart from his Net life and a net job on CompuServe. His existence outside the Net, where his name is Aaron, has almost entirely disappeared and there is only the ghost of Aaron – Kieran, pathetically jingling with his electronic chains to attract attention", J.C. Herz, op.cit., p. 213.

<sup>15</sup> P. Wallace, op.cit., pp. 147–150.

<sup>16</sup> G. van der Leun and T. Mandel, *Netykieta, czyli kodeks dla internautów*, Warszawa 1998.

Another feature of cyberspace, which immensely influences relations among people, is accessibility. The access to a conversation. A certain reference to the idea of the age of accessibility by J. Rifkin can be noticed here<sup>17</sup>. Apart from the access to goods and services, it is also people that belong to some resources that are "available". Even terms referring to the degree of availability are a part of the Internet messages: *available, inaccessible*. The "availability" is manifested by being often present on chats, setting the messenger's options to "available", an if there are some matters that distract somebody's attention from the computer, he sets a description that informs others when he will be back and "available" again.

The presence and "availability" for others can be revealed by a matrimonial-social-erotic add on one of the pages created for this purpose. Then, by clicking on pictures, a candidate becomes a potential "product" that may become attractive for somebody. Just as objects which can be bought in thousands of Internet shops that offer almost anything that can be imagined. Therefore, the Net availability leads in some sense to dehumanization. Thus, I agree with the thesis by T. Szlendak, who claims that modern courtship takes the form of rituals found in shops, "we select the «product» looking only at its outside cover and making sure that it will provide «a moment of relief», just as a product put into the shopping basket"<sup>18</sup>. Notwithstanding whether it is a trolley in a supermarket or a basket in an Internet shop. "This phenomenon can be, I presume, defined analogically to recreational shopping with the term *recreational romanc-*

*ing*. Postmodern society will increasingly get involved in consumption and will treat partners as providers of "powerful" experiences, and sex and courtship as a drug that eases the addiction"<sup>19</sup>. I have no doubt that the words of respondents included in various researches on cybersex, quoted by Aaron Ben Ze'ev, prove the existence of the described attitude.

The search for partners on the Internet becomes a kind of ritual, often similar to consumption attitudes. The Internet pages with candidates to flirt with remind us of a huge hypermarket, where being anonymous you can select people as the wares collected in a shop under some categories. "Someone even compared finding a romantic partner online to ordering pizza: we specify the kind, size, extras and the kind of delivery and in thirty minutes, maybe earlier, we receive a ready-made product. On the dating Internet pages it is possible to specify all the qualities that we wish for in our partner, including age, colour of hair, religion, profession and hobbies, and then choose only the persons that fulfil our criteria" [p. 79]. The problem is dealt with as one of many in the third chapter of *Love Online*.

In this part of the book are discussed also other important features of specific feelings present in online relationships: emotional intensity, responsibility, intention, as well as the role of intelligence. Internet relationships are created by mental contact. It is impossible to check what a partner is really like. A feeling is born not to a person but to an imagined identity of the person. In psychology, this phenomenon is called projection and is synonymous of providing society with our own feel-

<sup>17</sup> J. Rifkin, *Wiek dostępu*, Wrocław 2003.

<sup>18</sup> T. Szlendak, op.cit., p. 277.

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem.

ings and thoughts<sup>20</sup>. An enormous influence on this phenomenon is exerted by the ability to express thoughts in an attractive way. This aspect of Internet communication is also present in the seventh chapter, which is concerned with flirting, the rules of Internet dates, etc. Here is the motto of this part of the work: "All great lovers are eloquent, and seduction through words is the most certain way to true seduction"<sup>21</sup>.

The fourth chapter is devoted to imagination and its role in the creation, lasting and sustaining of relationships that are set in virtual reality. The author of *Love Online* defines it as "the ability to consider possibilities that are impossible for the senses (...), it is an intentional ability that refers to nonexistent events – or at least to events that we consider as such" [p. 97]. As mentioned above, it is to imagination that Aaron Ben Ze'ev allocates the key role in initiating the feelings of partners in an Internet interaction, it is imagination that compensates for the lack of real contact, as the author puts it, "it fills the gaps".

In this and the consecutive chapter, emphasized are the threats connected with imagination and emotions online, especially with those that refer to emotional betrayal, the feeling of frustration, regret, loss of illusion, expe-

riencing a pretended feeling, shattering of dreams, shame, disappointment, the threats of losing privacy (in a wide and multi-aspect meaning), as well as to cases of sexual abuse. These are undoubtedly problems that happen also in relationships in the real world, yet the scope of these phenomena seems to be wider here and an undoubted advantage of this book is their clear presentation.

Some aspects that refer to interpersonal attractiveness on the Internet have also appeared in the book by Patricia Wallace *Psychology of the Internet*, published in Poland four years ago. The ruminations concerning that problem are deepened in the eighth chapter of *Love Online*, which is entirely devoted to cyberlove. Aaron Ben Ze'ev pays attention to the phenomenon of the halo of attractiveness, so important in traditional relationships, which is replaced in cyberspace by the halo of personality. It means that "to a person at whom we notice some positive personality trait we attach other positive features, sometimes even related to physical appearance"<sup>22</sup>. Basing on the above, a partner in the interaction can fall in love in the other person. Idealizing him or her without any limits. It is an immensely significant phenomenon, directly related with imagination and the process of projection. "Falling in love in cyberspace is similar to the following situation: we do not have all the information, and we fill the gaps with idealization. Is there, then, «love at first bit»?"<sup>23</sup> or the first click?

The author of the book is of the opinion that online relationships are so common because they are much easier, they do not need

<sup>20</sup> *Psychologia*, (ed.) T. Tomaszewski, Warszawa 1978, p. 791; "the influence of the internal subjective states of a subject on the outside reality"; *ibidem*, p. 243; "The Net is your perception, and your perception has a tendency to project"; G. van der Leun, T. Mandel, *op.cit.*, p. 83.

<sup>21</sup> M. Mannes [in:] Ben Ze'ev A., *Love Online...*, p. 171. The Internet, and SMS now have the function of a butler, a messenger that used to carry letters for lovers, B. Pietkiewicz, *Kocha, lubi, kalkuluje*, "Polityka" 2001, no. 19, p. 3. Comp. Ch. de Laclos, *Dangerous Liaisons*, Warszawa 1998.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 190.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 205.



much effort. Internet love is not exclusive, i.e. there is a possibility to love a few persons at the same time. "The non-material character of an online relationship enables the emergence of a different kind of relationship"<sup>24</sup>. Here lies an emotional problem connected with jealousy and lack of devotion to each other online.

Important questions about moral dilemmas linked with online relations can be found in the penultimate chapter. As research shows, the problem of the Internet betrayal is increasing<sup>25</sup>, also the betrayal of imagination. Aaron Ben Ze'ev considers the emotional cost of Internet infidelity and decisively underlines that it "has always been considered as one of the

<sup>24</sup> Ibidem, p. 212.

<sup>25</sup> "«The Internet will soon become the most common form of unfaithfulness. Everyone can confirm that – the computer has already disturbed the family relations» – claims Yannick Chatelain, a specialist in modern technology, who has just published, together with a psychologist Loick Roch, a book entitled: *In Bed with the Web, internet et le nouvel adultere* [Internet as a New Form of Adultery] «Unfaithfulness has always existed, yet the Internet makes it easier, lets us remain anonymous, as well as to cross from a virtual secret to reality» – the psychologist adds. According to the authors, the Internet infidelity takes various forms, sometimes totally unexpected, which threaten relationships. The British Statistics Office conducted research on this subject, which revealed that the Internet is one of the factors that increase the number of divorce. (...) yet another statistics performed on 15 th. Internet users showed that in 2004, 32% of women and 13% of men were afraid that the Internet would make betrayal easier. This fear was confirmed in other American survey published on the website of BBC News, according to which, 30% of the respondents admitted to meeting their partners in virtual reality», 26.07.2005, PAP, [http://dziennik.pap.com.pl/?dzial=INT&poddzial=ZAG&id\\_depeszy=17009153](http://dziennik.pap.com.pl/?dzial=INT&poddzial=ZAG&id_depeszy=17009153).

worst offences of people against each other (...)»<sup>26</sup>. Cyber-infidelity also carries moral harm with it, as the author puts it, at its base "lies the harm that we do to others"<sup>27</sup>, and it is the loss of emotional exclusiveness that hurts the most. "It seems that online relationships are the biggest threat to stable emotional bonds that has ever existed. It is caused by the simplicity of venturing into a cyberromance, their private character and little cost"<sup>28</sup>.

The tenth and last chapter is devoted to reflexion on the future of Internet relations. They are based on contradictions, and the dynamics of cyberspace causes a distraction of balance in an individual's life. A lot of the so far constant landmarks in the social world of the Internet (time, space, the understanding of the traditional social structures or morality) have been ultimately torn away. Will there, since people look for love, maintain friendship on the Net, have cybersex, remain any areas that will "be saved" from digitalization? It is difficult to say, we can only observe, which is for a sociologist the best work and an enormous challenge.

*Love Online* is presumably the first book on Polish publishing market which discusses in such detail the questions of emotions as far as using the Internet is concerned. *Love Online* is undoubtedly an effort to exploit the most important topics that fall within the scope of the author's interests. It seems that the goal has been achieved. He presents a number of outstanding theses that prove the wide and deep analysis of the subject. Most of the assumptions are supported by the outcomes of surveys and internaut statements.

<sup>26</sup> A. Ben Ze'ev, op.cit., p. 239.

<sup>27</sup> Ibidem, p. 243.

<sup>28</sup> Ibidem, p. 252.



Although openness is one of the basic features of the Internet, I think that even if one of the basic questions analyzed in the work is cybersex, the fact that the most intimate confessions of respondents are provided in almost every chapter of the book is a disadvantage of the book. It is true that this sort of content can be extremely easy found on the Internet<sup>29</sup>, yet, striking the reader with such words in an academic thesis is to my mind negative for the publication.

In my opinion, in spite of a few drawbacks, the book is immensely useful and valuable. The popularization of knowledge on the relation of people in the cyberspace, as the research shows – an increasingly common phenomena, is in my understanding indispensable. The dynamics of the social processes and problems connected with human communication on the Internet and mobile phones, observed both in the real world and in the cyberspace itself, encourages researchers in asking questions and conducting academic studies in this field. I presume they can have a special meaning for all people. They help to understand the nature of the Net and they point at the ways of conscious usage of the benefits of modern technical inventions and prevent the extensive mental and emotional costs resulting from lack of knowledge on the subject. Aaron

Ben-Ze'ev, in his final remarks, points out that "The Internet has drastically changed the romantic sphere; the process will be even faster in the future. Such change will inevitably modify the present social structures, such as marriage and informal relationships, as well as the modern romantic strategies that refer to inter-human relations, such as accidental sex, close romantic relationships and romantic exclusiveness (...). Society is facing an enormous challenge if it considers including the cyberspace to our romantic relationships. We are facing a grave danger, since any failure in this respect will carry huge costs"<sup>30</sup>.

The author neither condemns Internet relationships nor claims that they will eventually replace the real friends and emotions. However, he notices that paradoxically, despite the predicted liberalization of norms, especially as far as emotional exclusiveness is concerned, still both in the real world and in the cyberspace it is trust that will play the key role.

The sixth chapter of the work is entitled "Is It Worth It?" Ben Ze'ev considers there, among others, the possibility of achieving happiness online. Even after reading "Love Online" the reader must answer the question himself.

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<sup>29</sup> "Day after day, Internet users all around the world search in their browsers for 68 million inquiries for porn and erotic content. It constitutes 25% of all the serviced by search engines (the data come from the Internet Filter Review). (...) according to the August results of the Megapanel PBI/Gemius survey, 2,51 million of Polish adult Internet users out of the 7,38 million, visits erotic services", *Internet rośnie dzięki erotyce*, [http://www.mediarun.pl/news/id/12390/internet\\_rosnie\\_dzieki\\_erotyce](http://www.mediarun.pl/news/id/12390/internet_rosnie_dzieki_erotyce)

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<sup>30</sup> A. Ben Ze'ev, op.cit., p. 286.