

# Epistolary Affect and Romance Scams: Letter from an Unknown Woman\*

HITO STEYERL

*Her name was Esperanza. A thirty-five-year-old Puerto Rican woman running a construction business and nurturing a great passion for humanitarian ventures. Sadly, her husband had died two years ago. She sent pictures of herself and her little daughter via the online dating platform Match.com in Feb. 2007.<sup>1</sup>*

*At first, Fred responded casually to her letters. But then, he suddenly found himself falling in love with her.*

*A few months later, he told his family that he was going to leave his wife and their children to live with Esperanza. When his mother asked him if he had ever met her, his answer was no. He'd meet her, in time. By now they were calling each other and chatting. She had canceled their first meeting at the last minute. He had waited at the airport, flowers in hand, trembling more with fear than anticipation.*

*Looking back, he couldn't understand how he could not have known. She wouldn't turn on her webcam while chatting. One technical problem followed another; communication was ruptured by unannounced sudden meetings. But on the other hand she never asked for money either. Until the day she died.*

*An official called him from the U.S. embassy in Denmark, where she had traveled on business. She had accidentally been killed in a random shootout between rival gangs.*

*It was the worst day in Fred's life.*

*He transferred money to repatriate her body. He was numb with shock. Nothing mattered. None of the multiple problems that arose in the process mattered. He decided that he wouldn't go see her. He couldn't face the idea that their first date would be after her death.*

*The end of the story was sudden. His friend did research online. No American citizen had been killed in Denmark lately. There had been no shooting. Esperanza had never existed. She was the creature of a group of scammers.*

<http://www.romancescam.com/forum/viewtopic.php?f=1&t=19587&start=15-p95537>  
by dxxx on Fri Jun 05, 2009 12:02 pm

CXX

I hope you realize there is no doubt that this is a scammer. As soon as he sent you a Photoshopped stock photo, it was confirmed beyond a doubt. I will treat it as if you are deal-

1. This is a fictional example. Any similarity to actual persons or events is unintended.

ing with a female, but many of these elements may be handled by a male. Although certain elements are always the same with scammers (after all, the ultimate goal is the same—to get your money), there is a variety in other elements. Most scammers we see go for volume and speed—they get their fake profiles out there, approach as many people as possible, and move to the money stage with all of them quickly. This approach is going to lose more people quickly, but since they are (or at least want to be) targeting lots of people at once, they are still making money, even if it is only a couple hundred dollars per victim.

Other scammers opt for a more organized, long-term approach. These are the more skilled scammers, and in my opinion the most dangerous. They will spend lots of time on a particular victim. (...) These “better” scammers are much more aware of IP-address issues, and are more likely to admit to their location or hide behind a proxy to ensure that they do not lose their victim to that simple mistake. If you watch closely, they do make mistakes—but they are generally much harder to spot. (...) Sending a picture without wiping out the EXIF data that shows it is from 2002 was a much more subtle mistake, and the majority of victims would not catch it. (...)

<http://www.romancescam.com/forum/viewtopic.php?f=1&t=19587&sid=17266b9537f5462100007720a196b4c0-p95509>  
by dxxx on Fri Jun 05, 2009 4:57 am

(...)

```
# xmlns:tiff = "http://ns.adobe.com/tiff/1.0/"
# xmlns:exif = "http://ns.adobe.com/exif/1.0/"
# xap:CreateDate = "2002-05-07T11:00:16+05:30"
# xap:ModifyDate = "2002-05-07T11:00:16+05:30"
# xap:MetadataDate = "2002-05-07T11:00:16+05:30"
```

See something odd there?

### *Epistolary Affect*

On a recent trip to Bangalore, I found myself saying something I didn’t fully understand. During a public discussion, Lata Mani, the respected feminist scholar, had asked me about the sensorial, the affective impact of the digital. I answered that the strongest affective address happened on a very unexpected and even old-fashioned level: in the epistolary mode. As a brush with words divorced from actual bodies.

Digital writing—by email or chat—presents a contemporary complication of historical practices of writing. Jacques Derrida has patiently described the conundrum of script: its connection to absence<sup>2</sup> and delay.<sup>3</sup> In this case, the delay is minimized, but the absence stays put. The combination of (almost) real-time communication and physical absence creates something one could call *absense*, so to speak. The sensual aspect of an absence, which presences itself in (almost) real time. A live and lively absence, to which the lack of a physical body is not an unfortunate coincidence, but necessary.

2. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: University of Maryland, 1997), p. 47.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

Its proxy is compressed as message body, translated into rhythm, flow, sounds, and the temporality of both interruption and availability. None of this is “virtual” or “simulated.” The absence is real, just as is the communication based on it.

<http://www.romancescam.com/forum/viewtopic.php?f=1&t=8784&start=150>

Re: scammers with pictures of Mxxxx QT

By axxxxxxs on Wed Jan 26, 2011 8:05 am

This is a private IP address and cannot be traced.Hostname: 10.227.179.xxx

dont see any problem in meeting, i do believe in meeting and seeing is believing, i can change my flight to you if you wish to meet, i dont see any problem changing my flight to you, tell me how you think we can meet, meeting and seeing is believing to me and id otn care of age and location, what is the name of your closest airport, i can call the airline now to ask for flight changing possibility

This is a private IP address and cannot be traced.

Im cool baby, how are you doing today?

Sent from my BlackBerry® wireless device

Do you still want to meet up with me baby?

I dont have msn

do you want to meet me baby?

Whats the name of your airport baby?

Give me like 1hour baby

Baby, do you live alone? Tell me about your travelling experiences baby Sent from my BlackBerry® wireless device

(...)

Im at the airline getting the ticket done Sent from my BlackBerry® wireless device

Honey, im done with the ticklet and i'll email you in like 1hour with the scan copy of the ticket baby Sent from my BlackBerry® wireless device

sending it nwo now baby

Honey

### *Digital Melodrama*

In 1588, a scam with the romantic title “Spanish Prisoner” was launched for the first time. The scammer approached the victim to tell him he was in touch with a Spanish aristocrat who needed a lot of money to buy his freedom from jail. Whoever helped him would get rich recompense, including marrying his daughter. After a first installment was paid, new difficulties kept emerging until the victim ended up broke and impoverished.

In the digital era, this plot has been updated to resonate with contemporary wars and upheaval. Countless 419 scams—the number refers to the applicable penal-code number in Nigerian law—rewrite daily catastrophe as entrepreneurial plotline. Shock capitalism and its consequences—wars over raw materials or privatization—are recast as interactive romance or adventure novels.

You too may have received a letter from an unknown woman—as Max Ophüls's 1948 classical melodram title had it. In Ophüls's film, a Viennese girl posthumously confesses her unrequited love in a letter. It recounts every detail of her relentless passion for a concert pianist who barely noticed her existence.

In the contemporary digital version, letters from unknown women emerge from all over the globe, afflicted by tragedies personal and political. A cacophony of post-postcolonial tragedies, diluted with generous servings of telenovela. Widows and orphans get swept up by financialized hypercapitalism, natural disaster, and assorted crimes against humanity—and it's you who are destined to sort out their fates.<sup>4</sup>

<i>Basis</i>	%
air crash	35
car accident	13
tsunami/earthquake	3
coup	22
over-invoiced	16
undisclosed	11
<i>Sender</i>	%
lawyer	35
widow	31
child	10
bank officer	24

Source: <http://www.caslon.com.au/419scamnote.htm>

Romance scams offer windfalls of love and opportunity, casually asking for bank-account numbers and passport copies. Flight schedules are mixed with instructions for transfer of funds and serially sampled professions of love. Modules

4. Scientific research of online scams has until now been almost exclusively focused on the case of Nigeria (in truth, it seems somewhat disproportionately represented in current research, given the very diverse geographical origin of romance scams). The most extensive and insightful study is Andrew Apter, "IBB=419: Nigerian Democracy and the Politics of Illusion," in *Civil Society and the Political Imagination in Africa*, ed. John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 270. A case study of several 419 scams is performed in Harvey Glickman, "The Nigerian '419' Advance Fee Scams: Prank or Peril?," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 39, no. 3 (2005), pp. 460–89. See also Daniel Jordan Smith, "Ritual Killing, 419, and Fast Wealth: Inequality and the Popular Imagination in Southeastern Nigeria," *American Ethnologist* 28, no. 4 (Nov. 2001), pp. 803–26; and Daniel Künzler, "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire? Global Capitalism and Fraud in Nigeria" (paper presented at the Interim Conference of Research Committee 2 of the International Sociological Association, World Social Forum, Nairobi, January 22, 2007), accessed June 3, 2011, <http://lettres.unifr.ch/de/sozialwissenschaften/soziologie-sozialpolitik-und-sozialarbeit/team/daniel-kuenzler/publikationen.html>.

of sensation are copy-pasted, recycled, ripped. But despite their obvious mass production, these are “the only form(s) of tragedy available to us,” as Thomas Elsaesser said about the melodrama.<sup>5</sup> They drop into mailboxes unsolicited, and suddenly expose themselves to the open.

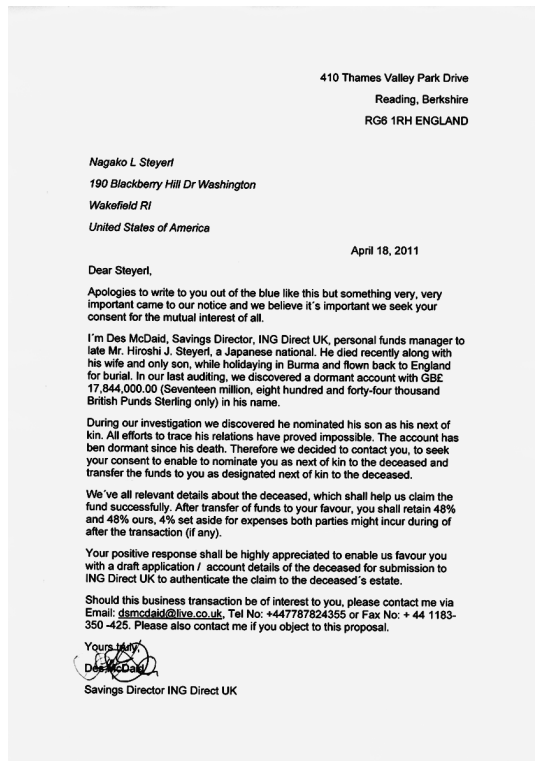
*Tragedy as Ready-Made*

The genre of melodrama departs from impossibility, delay, submission. It addresses the domestic, feminized sphere. The so-called weepie was a genre that was underrecognized and safely kept apart from cinema-as-art for decades. It was suspected to perpetuate oppression as well as female compliance.

Yet the melodrama also voiced perspectives that were repressed and forbidden, views that couldn't be expressed anywhere else and remained deprecated, shameful, and dismissed. Over-the-top exaggeration and exoticization opened possibilities to imagine something different from the drab repetitiveness of reproductive labor. Melodramas concoct implausible tales of cultural encounter, racial harmony, and happiness narrowly lost in miscommunication. They insist that the political is personal—and thus trace social histories from the point of view of sentiment.<sup>6</sup>

But their new personalized digital versions are produced differently. They are no longer just one-size-fits-all Taylorist studio-based productions, but customized products.

These messages are not only posted but perhaps even post-ist. Post-isms are a symptom of a time that considers itself to be posterior and secondary, a leftover



5. Thomas Elsaesser, “Tears, Timing, Trauma: Film Melodrama as Cultural Memory,” in *II Melodramma*, ed. E. Dagrada (Rome: Bulzoni Editore, 2007), p. 47–68.

6. A seminal text on melodrama still is Thomas Elsaesser's 1973 article, “Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama,” in *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: British Film Institute, 1987), pp. 43–69.

of history itself. They assume a general overcoming of everything without anything new to replace worn-out worldviews.

But there is a dialectical twist to this post-dialectical condition. Post-isms conserve the issue they are distancing and claim to have overcome it. Indeed, it is impossible to define any of these terms—post-Marxism, poststructuralism, postmodernism, etc.—without recourse to the terms they claim to have left behind. Distance is achieved despite intimate closeness, or maybe even precisely because of it. The co-presence of proximity and distance is inherent to the structure of the prefix “post” itself. “Post” connotes a past, whose meaning is derived from spatial separation. In their earliest versions, the roots of the prefix refer to “behind, after, afterward,” but also “toward, to, near, close by”; “late” but also “away from.”<sup>7</sup> Both closeness and separation, absence and presence, form part of the structural aporia of this term.

Romance scams are intimately related to this timescape of simultaneous presence and absence, incongruously bridged by hope and desire. They also perfectly resonate with an undecided temporality, which synchronizes both closeness and separation, past and present, and refuses to let go of worldviews it no longer believes in.

### *Conceptual Love*

This turn to the digital melodrama and epistolary affect comes somewhat unexpectedly. The world of digital feelings had been imagined more robustly before. None of the rather crude initial ideas about cybersex and the merging of the physical and digital worlds has held much sustainable appeal, though. Datagloves, digital dildos, and other equipment deemed suitable for amorous purposes turned out to be cumbersome embarrassments for an age in which data, feelings, and touch travel lightly.

The popularity of the epistolary address is also based on its blatant availability. Text is a makeshift medium, cheap and cost-effective. No complicated engineering is necessary, nor bulky equipment; just basic literary skills and a terminal for hire at an Internet café.

Perhaps the ready-made language of romance scams also expresses a deeper shift in contemporary practices of writing. In parallel to a visual economy of the blurred and raw, an economy of text has developed, which is in many ways as compressed and abstracted as the rags of imagery that crowd the digital realms. Prompted by the legacy of advertising, a Victorian economy of affect merges with the verbal austerity of the tweet message. It is simultaneously blunt and chaste, downsized and delicate, bold and coy. Compressed and evacuated text allows feelings to fill in the blanks. Hollow words bait, retreat, play. Reduction and withdrawal spark intensity.

7. According to the Online Etymological Dictionary: “prefix meaning ‘after,’ from L. post ‘behind, after, afterward,’ from \*pos-ti (cf. Arcadian pos, Doric poti ‘toward, to, near, close by;’ O.C.S. po ‘behind, after,’ pozdu ‘late;’ Lith. pas ‘at, by’), from PIE \*po- (cf. Gk. apo ‘from,’ L. ab ‘away from’)” [www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed\\_in\\_frame=0&search=post-&searchmode=none](http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=post-&searchmode=none) (accessed November 2, 2011).

<http://www.romancescam.com/forum/viewtopic.php?f=1&t=19587&start=45#p109129>

Re: GXXX TXXXX

by xxxxxxxxxxxxxxx on Fri Sep 18, 2009 8:20 pm

Gxxxx now has another email address, gxxxx@hotmail.com, I am trying to get a picture off her but its like trying to get blood out of a stone.

She knows I am trying to build up a new relationship and has said she will now leave me alone at last and just wants to be friends and just some one to write to which I am okay with that.

Cxx

xxxxxxxxxxxx

Frequent Poster

Posts: 160

Joined: Sat Apr 11, 2009 5:33 pm

Location: Lxxxxxxxx

Top

Re: Gxxxx Txxxxx

by wxxxx on Sat Sep 19, 2009 8:38 am

Ok, I don't get it. You KNOW it's a Nigerian scammer using stolen photos of a glamour model, yet you still talk to him, and are willing to be "friends"? This is exactly what your scammer wants, as soon "she" will have some emergency and need money. All you've done is left the door open for the scammer to try again from a different angle. You are aware that almost all (and by that I mean well over 99% of them) scammers are really males and not the females they pretend to be?

Re: Gxxxx Txxxxx

by gxxx on Mon Sep 21, 2009 5:52 pm

the thing is... this "she" you keep refering to is just a black guy that is still working you. There is NO she . . . , just a HE . . . There is no Gxxxx...

gxxxx

VIP Poster

Posts: 972

Joined: Tue Nov 25, 2008 11:13 pm

Location: Canada, eh

Re: Gxxxx Txxxx

by gxxxx on Sat Dec 04, 2010 10:18 pm

the gxxxxxxxx@hotmail.com address on this thread turns up a FB profile by the name of Nxx Axxxxx Axxxxxx (Axxx Dxxx).

Current City: Accra, Ghana

High School: West Africa Secondary School '08

lots of friends and notes by this dude

About Nxx I came, I saw, I conquered. Not by Might by the Holy Ghost.

Genuinely a loving guy . . . I' m intelligent, creative, caring, loyal and love to have fun . . . i have done some traveling and definitely have that in my plan for the future . . . camping all the usual things life has to offer.

GSOH & quick witted. Attractive & well groomed, able to handle all social situations with style & a smile.

Sex Male

Interested In Men and Women

Relationship Status Single

### *The Spanish Prisoner*

*My name is Fred. I fell in love with Esperanza. She was the love of my life. Nobody understands how I fell for a scam. But I don't care whether Esperanza was real. My love for her was. From my perspective there hasn't been any scam whatsoever. Because even if Esperanza didn't exist as a person, her letters did exist on my screen. Their content may have been a lie; the IP may have been masked, the sender a projection. But the writing itself remains real. No matter who wrote the text: she or he or they. I loved the letters, not the person.*

Writing these letters is serious work. Adapting and pasting text modules, planning, keeping books, hitting keys, performing, filing, Photoshopping. Scammers work to entertain their targets' fantasies and provide affective service, custom-tailored to individual desires.

Behind the scams are often organized work units.<sup>8</sup> Most writers are male, often assisted by female workers to make phone calls or other live appearances.<sup>9</sup> While the global and postcolonial aspects of these connections have been emphasized in some instances, their overall implications are left unexplored. How do we understand this literary form of deceit in the context of a global political economy based on digital divides and uneven development?<sup>10</sup> There is an underlying moral to at least some of these efforts: the idea to regain the riches plundered by colonial exploitation.<sup>11</sup> Leftovers from anti-imperialist ideology incongruously mix with the beauty standards of extreme-makeover TV shows.

8. Daniel Künzler claims that Nigerian 419 scammers are rather loosely organized and that usually teams do not exceed five people, though they are often organized transnationally and "project-oriented." Künzler, p. 16.

9. According to the experiences of scambaiters at [www.romancescam.com](http://www.romancescam.com).

10. Bjorn Nansen, "I Go Chop Your Dollar: The Nigerian 419 Scam and Chronoscopic Time," *Piracy: anti*THESIS 18 (2008), p. 43.

11. Glickman cites the case of Fred Ajudua, who claimed to be a "black Robin Hood" and "alleged that the frauds were compensation from white men for slavery and colonialism," p. 478. Among other sources of popular culture, Daniel Künzler also mentions the plot of a well-known Nigerian fiction film: "This synopsis mentions one notion quite common in the popular discourse about 419 scams in Nigeria: the greed of the victims. This notion is also central to the huge hit *The Master* by Andy Amenechi (2005) starring famous Nigerian actor Nkem Owoh (also known as Osuofia). Denis (Nkem Owoh) was a migrant to Europe, but has been deported and had to struggle ever since. One day, he meets wealthy Chief Ifeanyi (Kanayo O. Kanayo), who introduces him into the 419 business. . . . As he speaks to journalists, he convinces them that 419s are justified, as foreigners are greedy and have to compensate for slavery and colonialism." Künzler, p. 13.



<http://www.romancescam.com/forum/viewtopic.php?f=1&t=1555>

What out for scammer cecixxxxx@hotmail.com

by Rxxxx on Tue Jul 24, 2007 9:45 pm

Calling her self Ceci Thompson

“(…) I checked a scam site and found he/she had used a different adress with the same pictures. This time claiming she was Russian. Visa and ticket scams and so on. I confrontet her with this and this is the reply:

“You;re the most stupid man I’ve ever met . . . . All white people will suffer in the hands of Africans , ONE by ONE . . . . You all took blacks as slave, NO problem. You shall pay back with all you’ve stolen from us, ONE after the other. I know a way to catch you, bastard. Have you ever realized that you white people smells like shit? Ask God why? and the answer shall be giving to you by an African you people called Monkey . . . . Oh monkey will rule this world, someday . . . . Basket in the dirty pit. White frog. You better look for a female frog like you and start giving birth to smelling frogs, stinky. Date: Tue, 24 Jul 2007 20:58:49.”

Most obviously, 419 scams develop in connection with larger macroeconomic issues—in the case of Nigeria, a debt crisis in conjunction with the decline in oil prices in the early 1980s and subsequent unemployment and instability.<sup>12</sup> Andrew Apter argues that online scams present a reverse-mirroring of financial protocols of business by replicating the quite fictitious ways of creating (or simulating) value in finance. The lack of a material referent for fictitious value also affects language or representational systems as such: signifiers start to float,<sup>13</sup> and their connections to referents are unmoored, if not abandoned altogether. The Ponzi schemes of globalized financial capitalism as well as its delusions are being translated into the personalized language of romance. Apter labels the 419 con games as performance art,<sup>14</sup> based on a general rise of visual deception and emptied value forms<sup>15</sup> in politics as well as in an economy based on privatization and speculation. This may also present a reason why so many people fall for the scams: because their inherent principle of delusion constitutes a substantial part of our contemporary political and economic reality.

But the gender aspect of this specific type of performance art is arguably even more mind-boggling than its mirroring of financial protocols. What can one say about (mostly) straight black males impersonating white or mixed straight women, white gay or straight men? Then proceeding to change their color (from white or mixed to black, for example) if caught in the act? All this while sending along ripped pictures of other people, in most cases porn starlets or models.<sup>16</sup>

12. Nansen, p. 39. The connection to an oil-based economy is also explored in detail in Apter, p. 270.

13. Apter, p. 299.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 272.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 279.

16. Probably: I’ve got the brains, you’ve got the looks: let’s make lots of money.

How does this resonate with the emancipatory promises of self-assigned gender, which abounded in earlier times of Internet theory? Are masquerade or subversion still categories that make sense in this context? Or shall we rather speak about new, hyperprivatized branches of cultural industries that perform one-on-one staged dramas or maybe rather personalized mockumentaries based on the narrative form of Ponzi schemes?

The production of romance scams conjures up the image of digital workbenches peopled with rows of literary laborers organized within a flexible division of labor, performing work—or working in performance, just as their counterparts in the “real” financial sector. Their products are serial identities-on-demand, which morph to accommodate every possible client fantasy. Passion-as-labor, which reverse-mirrors the idea of labor-as-passion that is supposed to motivate the ideal workers of the post-Fordist age.

In the meantime, romance scams have spread worldwide, targeting poor or elderly women, in many cases maids, and robbing them of their life savings.<sup>17</sup> Scammers don’t mind wrecking the feelings of vulnerable people. They target the refuse of metropolitan dating markets: single moms, outdated flesh, global maids dreaming of princes. The weak prey on the ugly, using words.

As Elvis Presley (and the Bee Gees) sang: You may think that I do not mean the words I say. But words are all I have to steal your heart away.

#### *Creative language*

How to do things with words? This puzzled question by J. L. Austin became the title of one of the foundational texts of so-called speech-act theory.<sup>18</sup> Austin argues that words are not purely descriptive representations, but agents able to bring about actions. One of his examples—fittingly in this context—is the marriage ceremony in which vows create the union. But this is a rather weak example in view of the much more grandiose speech acts routinely found in religious texts. Creation as such is performed by speech acts. The phrase “Let there be light” marks the inception of the world for monotheists. Divine utterance is a form of creative terror, terrifying and tantalizing at once.

According to Walter Benjamin, a weaker form of this power has immigrated into the language of humans.<sup>19</sup> The creative force of naming is but a residue of

17. Hazel Parry, “Romeo Conmen Target Lonely Hearts,” *China Daily*, Hong Kong edition (September 22, 2010), accessed June 3, 2011, [www.chinadaily.com.cn/hkedition/2010-09/22/content\\_11336643.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/hkedition/2010-09/22/content_11336643.htm). More information at: [dragonladies.org/bbs/viewtopic.php?f=34&t=2696](http://dragonladies.org/bbs/viewtopic.php?f=34&t=2696). This website presents Asia-based scams. There is ample evidence of women in China and Malaysia getting scammed, as well as scams that promise contact with Asian women that are usually centered on charging so-called translation fees.

18. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962).

19. Walter Benjamin, “On Language as Such and the Languages of Man,” in *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1996), p. 68.

the divine power of utterance. As Michel Foucault noted a bit more drily, the force of order and command keep resonating in human language too.<sup>20</sup> The importance and naked force of words cannot be underestimated. Words make worlds. They can destroy them as well.

In the digital realm the power of language is translated into code that activates mechanical performance. The magic of language derived from the speech act of creation gets enlisted into doing things with hardware. Code animates matter and propels it into action. Mechanical language enables us to create new words, new worlds, new languages.

In the case of romance scammers the relative newness of their language paradoxically consists of its completely recycled nature. Of course this language is not novel at all, but well rehearsed by advertisement slogans and soap-opera dialogues. It is the lingua franca of cultural industries of modernity that cater to a domestic labor audience. But hardly has it ever been as fragmented and wrecked as in the scammers' language.<sup>21</sup> The unabashedly collaged nature of these languages, their obvious partial generation by translation machines, reveals them to belong to a group of globalized languages, which I have previously referred to as Spamsoc.<sup>22</sup> Spamsoc—my earlier example was the English-based language on the back of pirated Chinese DVD covers—is a broken language, because it reflects the pressures and gendered fault lines of globalization. Post-postcolonial hierarchies of language and a gendered division of freelance labor, as well as ongoing global conflicts over copyright and digital leverage, form part of the framework in which Spamsoc and its countless derivatives emerge as incoherent mixtures of Wikipedia entries and computer-translated semi-nonsense.

The languages of romance scammers are in most cases locally nuanced, and adopt an overly formal, often stilted language.<sup>23</sup> Their many malapropisms are a laughingstock for so-called spam baiters around the world. But contempt is a much too defensive and resentful reaction. These makeshift lingos express the tectonic tensions of extremely complex geopolitical situations translated into melodrama. Benjamin's reflections on language and translation throw this issue into sharp focus. In the gaps of meaning, the original force of words still shines forth, perhaps no more so than when they have almost rid themselves of content and start to resemble pure stammer and stuttering, void of signification.<sup>24</sup>

20. See, for example, Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), pp. 109–133.

21. Nansen, p. 38.

22. Spamsoc is what you get when the word "Spanish" is garbled by an automated scanning device. In the specific example, Spamsoc was given as a subtitle language on a pirated DVD. Hito Steyerl, "Notes About Spamsoc," *Pages 7* (2009), pp. 59–67.

23. The characteristics of scam-mail language are investigated in Jan Blommaert and Tope Omoniyi, "Email Fraud: Language, Technology and the Indexicals of Globalisation," *Social Semiotics* 16, no. 4 (2007), pp. 573–605.

24. Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, pp. 253–263. "To regain pure language fully formed from the linguistic flux is the tremendous and only capacity of translation. In this pure language—which no longer means or expresses anything but is, as expressionless and creative word, that which is meant in all languages—all information, all sense and all intention finally encounter a stratum in which they are destined to be extinguished," p. 261.

The splendor of creation still echoes in the almost robotic repetition of romantic keywords, within the scrambled, ripped, and collaged debris of meaningless affective vocabulary. It seems as if the mimetic force of language is not only unbreakable, but paradoxically increases with fragmentation and compression.

Thus the new digital post-English languages are not at all deficient; on the contrary, they are from a world to come, a world that we are not yet able to fully understand. The languages of romance scammers are messages from a future in which empty value forms are suspended in permanent free fall as language and value let go of reality within the affective plots of disaster capitalism.

*Heart Away*

After the funeral, I started to go through All that was needed to settle his estate. Which anyone who has been there knows is a very big pain in the butt; I started seeing bills and WU Receipts, everything was pointing to his future wife. Over the next couple of months of going over his assets, computer files, And bills. He was broke. Losing his house, and behind in his car payments. Credit cards were at limit. He was in a financial mess. I thought where was the woman who was supposed to be here. I started reading letters and going through his computer and everything became known over the next couple of months that she had no intention of Marrying him. She not only put off coming to him twice but also left him at airport twice. Overall, from what I could gather, and prove, he had given her well over thirty Thousand dollars in a little over two years. (...)

She was going to meet me in Hotel Lounge. Therefore, I went down early, had a few drinks, and waited. Then I saw her walk in. I was very impressed and if I did not know better would have fallen in love also, she was very elegant, and looked better then her pics. She had perfect English a lot better then the phone conversations we had. Which later made me think? It was not her on phone. Nevertheless, as we had drinks and talked, I started to tell her about my friend who fell in love with Russian woman and was going to get married, she was very focused on my story, and smiled a lot, Grab my hand, listen to my every word. I finished my story as I told all of you. (But just a basic version) Told her that he had all the arrangements to bring her to America, took care of her in Russia, and she left him, Told her about his death. (..)She was very sadden, said she knew now why I was so shy about her, and her love. However, told me to look (I am here right here with you.) I will never forget those words She said as long as I live. I looked at her, Reached in to my Suit Pocket and handed her a Envelope. She smiled and her eyes sparkled, I think she thought it was giving her money As she opened it, I will never forget the look in her face. There were two Pictures in that Envelope, One of my friend and her in Moscow, and one of his gravestone, along with a request for Visa paper with there names on it.<sup>25</sup>

25. Extract from "Doc's Story," anonymous report, *The Scam Survivors Handbook* (2010), n.p. Last accessed June 2, 2011, at <http://romancescambaiter.com/rstb.html>.

Despite the vast differences between scammed and scammers, one feeling unites both. This feeling is hope. While in the case of scammers this hope may be material, in the case of the scammed it may be both emotional and material.

This hope is maybe also indicative of a more general situation. Perhaps the hope invested in epistolary affect is aimed at interrupting the drab temporality of an age of post-s, in which life “always already”<sup>26</sup> seems over. Or to explode the repetitive reality of reproductive labor for maids, single moms, and other target audiences of digital melodrama.

Perhaps even more generally, the more unstable and insecure things get, the more hope abounds. If love is not free, hope seems to be. But hope is also the fuel capitalism thrives on, one of its few eternally renewable resources. The American Dream and its countless franchised versions are giant vortices that gain their momentum on hope, and little but hope. Hope is a Trojan horse for deceit and exploitation. It is also the driving element in any quest for change.

This hope may secretly long for a moment of radical and irrevocable change: not so much a revolution as perhaps an unexpected revelation, a sudden twist in the plot. It is the hope that everything could yet be different and change lies at the tips of our fingers.

*My name is Esperanza and I am not dead. Contact me at [esperanza112@hotmail.com](mailto:esperanza112@hotmail.com) alive*

esperanza to dsmdaid, show details 10:22 AM (0 minutes ago)

Mr. McDaid,

My name is Esperanza and I am not dead.

I am following up on the disquieting letter you sent to my mother-in-law, Nagako Steyerl in Rhode Island, United States on 4-18-2011. You claim that my late husband, Hiroshi J. Steyerl was killed in an accident, which is correct. However, contrary to your erroneous suggestions, I as his wife did miraculously survive the plane crash in Burma. Fortunately, my son did, too. We are now recovering from our terrible injuries in a hospital in Rangoon and hopefully, the dressings will come off next week.

As a heart-broken and destitute widow, I am very surprised to hear that you are planning to bestow my late husband's funds on anybody else than myself as his next of kin.

Therefore I urge you to immediately transfer these funds to my bank account.

sincerely

Esperanza

26. To quote one of the most overused slogans of the post-period.