

LUST IN AMERICA—WHO SAYS MONOGAMY IS BACK?

\$2.50

FEBRUARY 1986

New Age

ACHIEVEMENT · COMMITMENT · CREATIVE LIVING

Journal

SUSAN SARANDON

The Inside Life of a
Hollywood Outsider

▶ Charles Garfield's
Six Secrets to
Peak Performance
at Work

▶ The Great Subliminal
Self-Help Hoax



LOVE AT FIRST BYTE

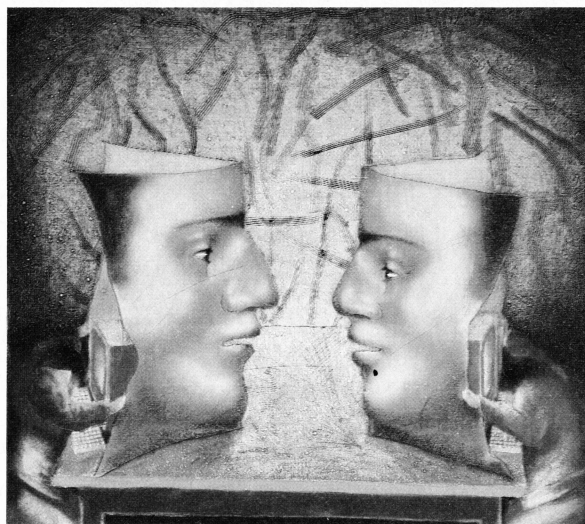
*Why go to a singles bar and pick up a body
when you can log on to a computer and meet a mind?*

BY JUDITH HOOPER

IT WAS A lovely wedding. The bride and groom, "Silver" and "Mike," logged on to a computer in Dallas and typed out their "I dos" on the screen. The minister was on-line, too. Some sixty friends and relatives around the country "attended" the ceremony, including the bride's sister, who logged on from a Radio Shack store in California. An on-line "organist" typed in the wedding march ("Dum dum dee dum..."), champagne toasts were accompanied by a typographic clinking of glasses, and rice was tossed in the form of commas.

Silver and Mike had met and fallen in love on CB Simulator, a program of CompuServe, which is a large public computer network based in Columbus, Ohio. "Since they met on CB and everyone on CB had seen their relationship grow, they wanted to share the marriage with everyone," CB manager Pat Phelps says. Now Silver and Mike have a small daughter who communicates on CB (with some help from her father) under the handle L'il Kid.

The electronic society to which Silver and Mike belong is accessible to anyone with a computer and a modem (the device that translates your computer's signals into signals that your telephone can transmit). It is a realm that encompasses the large computer networks such as the Source and CompuServe, a host of smaller net-



works, and a whole smorgasbord of private computer bulletin boards catering to everyone from household PC users to born-again Christians to S&M aficionados seeking mates. In it you can find electronic equivalents of encounter groups, academic seminars, dating services, poetry readings, fantasy novels, hobby clubs, soap operas, and just about anything else.

Every day several thousand people access CompuServe's CB, communing with on-line friends and acquaintances known by handles such as Sexy Lady, Shasta Darklighter, Surfer, and Bandid. Partly because of the anonymity, an unusual openness prevails among the regulars on the seventy-two channels. "I call it an electronic family. It's a little neighborhood of friends, who for the most part are very trustworthy people," says Phelps, whose handle is LooLoo. "People are more open, I think, because it's a very seductive medium. It's easy to reveal more about yourself than you intend."

"This is a small town," says Sherwin Levinson of Atlanta, who is a resident guru of the computerized conferencing system Participate, available on the Source and Unison networks. "It's a

community where everyone knows everyone else. In fact, the version of Participate on Unison is designed as a small town, with a Main Street, a town square, a corner pub, a town crier, a soapbox, various restaurants, and public rest rooms whose walls are covered with graffiti."

In the on-line universe you can gossip with electronic neighbors in Alaska, Alabama, or Sierra Leone as easily as regular neighbors chat over the back fence. That means you can select your companions on the basis of shared interests rather than geographical accident.

It would take an encyclopedia to list all the interactive activities available on-line. They range from hot-tub parties, mock mud-wrestling contests, senior-citizens groups, and Spam nights on CB to rock-music groups, software trading, and veterans groups on CompuServe's 126 SIGs, or special-interest groups. On Public, a feature of the Source, you can publish your novel or poem on-line and receive royalties. On Participate you can join any of thousands of conferences ranging from Jokes, IBM PC, and Dreams—to Sex. For emotional help, there are Splitting Up, Tough Love, Women Only, and other support groups. For pure play, there is an ongoing on-line fantasy novel where participants become characters.

Like other societies, on-line communities have their local dialects and customs. On CB, "Oh, I see," is rendered as "O I C," and to ask, "Are you male or female?" you simply type, "R U M or F?" or, more succinctly, "Morf?" This neologism, in turn, has spawned the expressions *morfing* and *morf attack!* Asterisks and brackets

Judith Hooper is coauthor with Dick Teresi of The Three-Pound Universe, released this month by Macmillan.

ILLUSTRATION: WOJTEK GORCZYNSKI

abound, perhaps as a typographical equivalent of gestures. Hugs usually come encased in angle brackets—as in « hug »». Body language is supplied in parentheses—as in “Aw, shucks (blush).”

Age, gender, race, physical characteristics, regional accents, and the like are invisible on-line, of course, which means that a person is judged solely by the quality of his or her mind. As Elaine B. Kerr, assistant director of administration and research at the noncommercial Electronic Information Exchange System, or EIES (pronounced “eyes”), points out, “Women, minorities, the handicapped, people who are ugly and fat all have the same chance of being taken seriously as the males, the WASPs, the good dressers—the people who usually dominate meetings.”

EIES, the brainchild of computer scientist Murray Turoff, who is known as the father of computer conferencing, is headquartered at the New Jersey Institute of Technology's Computerized Conferencing and Communications Center. It is a kind of think tank, smaller and more serious than the large commercial networks; logging on to EIES, you may find yourself in the company of legislators, academics, honchos from Hewlett-Packard, renowned epidemiologists or even such luminaries as Alvin Toffler. Which is not to say that EIES is all work and no play. It also offers an on-line soap opera, a bulletin board called Graffiti, experimental conferences such as Childish Bickering and Abusive Behavior, and produces the usual smattering of electronic flirtations.

For just as the era of knights-errant gave birth to courtly love, so on-line societies have spawned their own characteristic form of eros. The “cognitive affairs” (to use Turoff's term) that occur on-line may even be the computer-age version of the platonic, incorporeal passions of medieval romance. “It's great,” Pat Phelps says. “You can sit there in your ratty bathrobe and go waltzing with a man.”

While she has never herself indulged in any terminal romancing, Phelps has witnessed many an electronic attraction blossom on CB, where one channel (Number One) is expressly designated an adult channel that has come to serve as a sort of singles bar. Because computer love is limited only

by the imagination, you and your date can enjoy a candlelight dinner at your Manhattan penthouse or go for a moonlight swim in the Adriatic.

If you subscribe to the Source, an alluring stranger may invite you for a “hot chat.” Hot chats are private, simultaneous interactions that may or may not be X-rated. “You might be describing what you're wearing and what you're taking off, or you might have a shared sexual fantasy where you both describe what you're doing to each other,” Levinson explains. “You don't have to worry about what you look like, how you're dressed, what you smell like, whether you've shaved. You can be anybody, and your partner can be very idealized.”

Eventually, most electronic lovers (as well as electronic friends) arrange to meet off-line—at which point reality may or may not live up to the fanciful romance of the green screen: “One guy, who worked at a computer magazine, had an electronic love affair,” Levinson recounts. “When he and the woman met face-to-face, it didn't work out. The personal meeting couldn't possibly match the ideals each had set up about the other.”

One cognitive liaison on the EIES network involved a black teenage girl with cerebral palsy who was mildly retarded and confined to a wheelchair. Her on-line suitor was a white, middle-aged professional man on the West Coast who had no idea about her vital statistics. When he proposed a trip to New Jersey to meet her, the girl panicked. “She confided in one of the professional people on-line,” Kerr recalls. “The situation was resolved. She wound up feeling good about herself, and he wound up understanding. It might sound like a sad story, but for her to find out that someone like that would be interested in her was a wonderful experience.”

But the computer networks also have their share of broken hearts and electronic two-timing. Sociologist and EIES networker Starr Roxanne Hiltz, for one, believes that large commercial networks like the Source and CompuServe lend themselves to interpersonal hanky-panky. “They are gigantic, impersonal singles bars where no one is what they seem,” she notes. “Instead of going to a singles bar to pick up a body, you go to a computer network and pick up a mind. People use pen

names or handles. There's no accountability, no central directory. People lie, exaggerate, pretend to have feelings they don't have.”

In a recent article in *Ms.*, writer Lindsay Van Gelder, herself a CBER, chronicled the bizarre case of a New York City psychiatrist who was a prominent presence on the CB channels for two years in the persona of a severely disabled woman named “Joan.” Joan formed a number of intimate friendships with other women on CB, many of whom felt like victims of “mind rape” when the truth—that Joan was a man—came out. According to Van Gelder, the psychiatrist was “engaged in a bizarre, all-consuming experiment to see what it felt like to be female.”

“I wish I knew the man's motive,” Pat Phelps comments. “He's been on a few times since, but he's never explained. It went past the point of just playing a joke or having an anonymous on-line relationship. It touched some people very personally.”

Is on-line society a healthy society? For many people the model seems to be an antidote to modern isolation, creating a sort of high-tech nineteenth-century village. The pure mind-to-mind interactions that unfold on the computer screen seem to hark back to the noble tradition of epistolary romances, to the pretechnological world of the Brownings and Jane Austen. On the other hand, perhaps the electronic community offers a mere facsimile of relationship. Perhaps compulsive networkers disappear into an abstract realm of words and unseen strangers and neglect their off-line friends, spouses, and families. We probably won't know all the answers to such questions until a high-tech Margaret Mead arrives to analyze the customs, kinship systems, taboos, and rites of this new culture.

For now network veterans insist that most people's lives are enhanced by the medium. “I think a lot of people have come out of their shells on-line,” Levinson says. “They can talk more openly than ever before. And they may just try it with real people, face-to-face, and not just on the green screen.”

“We all want to communicate, share our thoughts, be around other people,” Phelps says. “And on a computer it's so doggone easy.”

