

© 2004 Mort Gerberg from Cartoonbank.com. All rights reserved.



"That's it, Artie? Share a life with you online?"

sex!) and kitschy self-help manuals (listen up: here's how to meet your future husband online!). What makes Aaron Ben-Ze'ev's work unusual is that he approaches the topic from a scholarly mezzanine, seeking to explain the Internet's evolution from a cold fiber-optic knot to a strangely human place where emotions transmute into entirely new forms. Ben-Ze'ev, a professor of philosophy at the University of Haifa, wants to know what this means for the future of romance. Do we need to rewrite the rules?

Ben-Ze'ev has written perhaps the first truly thorough and thoughtful analysis of these topics. Defining cyberspace as "a psychological and social domain," he breaks down the processes of falling in love, cheating, flirting, and having (cyber)sex in this odd ether. He explains the seductiveness of a space where you can be at once connected and anonymous, and the nuanced ways in which this affects relationships, often allowing for purer emotional contact. "Netizens," as he calls them, may lie about their looks, professions, ages, and pasts, but they disclose deeper emotional truths online than when hanging out with friends, family, and spouses. That they may never meet in person, Ben-Ze'ev argues, doesn't necessarily diminish the exchange. Cyberspace, in other words, qualifies as a legitimate reality with its own emotional ebb and flow, a place where "superficial politeness is less common" and "emotional sincerity is more important."

Sadly, Ben-Ze'ev's approach to emotions is so devoid of, well, emotion, that you have to remind yourself that he's talking about the love lives of human beings and not the mat-

ing habits of plankton. The tone is relentlessly clinical, as when he describes falling in love: "The complex experience of romantic love involves two basic evaluative patterns referring to (a) attractiveness (or appealingness)—that is, an attraction to external appearance, and (b) praiseworthiness—that is, positively appraising personal characteristics."

What saves the book from collapsing under such lingual sludge are the tales from the frontlines. "I

have had cybersex once or twice," a gentleman reports, "and it's nice to have that instant feedback from the woman (God, I hope they're women)." A married woman says that having "a cybersexual affair was a real wake-up call in my life," one that "helped my marriage in the long run." These testimonials ground the book, and, more important, remind us of the perpetually unpredictable nature of love and sex.

Ben-Ze'ev concludes by arguing that we need the mental malleability to integrate the Internet into our relationships. Sure, it sounds a bit frightening, but we've always fallen for people who tempt our imaginations in one way or another. Now our princes and princesses are simply pixilated, too.

—DAVID AMSDEN

**ONE NATION UNDER GOODS:**  
*Malls and the Seductions of American Shopping.*

By James J. Farrell. Smithsonian.  
329 pp. \$24.95

People shop a lot but don't think about it much. They might discuss when they'll have time or money to buy something, but they rarely reflect on what they're buying and why. Perhaps we should all think a little more about these larger issues as we blow our disposable income on novelties and luxuries. James J. Farrell, a professor of history at St. Olaf College in Minnesota, convincingly argues that our incessant pursuit of more stuff, masterfully encouraged by malls, is eating away at the good life.

It all started innocently enough. After cars were invented and cities got congested, the

suburbs were born, and developers had to give suburban residents a place to buy what they needed. Thus was born the shopping center. But the suburban separation of work, shopping, and home—elements that were mostly integrated in the city—permanently changed American culture. Once we all shopped together in big, highly organized, well-marketed settings, we could see what others were buying and what it was possible to have. Aided by the growing influence of the media, our culture of consumerism was born.

But at what cost? Certainly not just the money we shell out for things. Our kids are bombarded by media messages telling them what they should buy, and they learn to value new purchases more than the simple pleasures of childhood. Our teenagers go to the mall to hang out and socialize, which can be a welcome distraction for kids with so many questions about life. “But sometimes,” writes Farrell, “shopping centers seem to suggest that distraction *is* the purpose of life, and that questions of consumption . . . *are* life’s big questions.”

Farrell spends plenty of time analyzing the contemporary mall: the history, the architecture, the retail design, the merchandising, even the escalators and the greenery. Most interesting are the developments that bespeak

our cultural values. We value fun, so malls now have movie theaters, places to eat, even amusement parks. We value luxury, so malls use more glass and marble to surround their tantalizing mix of aspirational and affordable retail. We value escape, so now we have Rainforest Cafe and other themed venues.

But the malling of America has also alienated us. On the nation’s retail floors, millions of sales clerks, underpaid and uninvolved, need only scan a UPC code to complete a sale. The human interaction once involved in a purchase is virtually gone. Through the magic of plastic, meanwhile, the question has changed from “Can I afford it?” to “Do I want it?”

Farrell also confronts readers with the harm American consumerism wreaks around the world. Overseas sweatshops employ children to churn out cheap goods; sprawling shopping centers damage the environment. With the media starting to pay more attention to these effects, Farrell believes that “the era of oblivious shopping is coming to an end.”

I’m not so sure. Retailers are geniuses at sanitizing what they sell, and Americans enjoy their obliviousness. The injustices deserve our attention, but what’s equally wrenching is the notion that we’re looking for that next purchase, the one that’s certain to make us happy.

—MARGARET WEBB PRESSLER

## SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

---

### *THE RETREAT OF THE ELEPHANTS:* *An Environmental History of China.*

By Mark Elvin. Yale Univ. Press.  
564 pp. \$39.95

Some 4,000 years ago, wild elephants roamed woodlands across much of China. Tame ones worked as war elephants in Chinese armies until 1662. Today, China’s elephants exist only in zoos and in tiny protected areas in the southwest. Mark Elvin, one of the foremost historians of China, uses this vanishing act as a symbol of environmental transformations over the course of Chinese history. Elvin made his mark more than 30 years ago with an insightful if controversial interpretation of the economic history of premodern China, *Patterns of the Chi-*

*nese Past* (1973). *Retreat of the Elephants* is a worthy successor, one that will long serve as the standard work on the subject.

The centerpiece of the story is the relentless deforestation of China, which has resulted from the extension of farming mainly to keep up with population growth. But Elvin takes pains to show that Chinese environmental history is not a simple Malthusian process; politics and the state played crucial roles. Regions that manipulated nature for short-term advantage, he contends, enjoyed a competitive edge over those that did not—more a matter of Darwinian politics than Malthusian pressures. This idea seems plausible for the periods when various regions struggled against one another in China, but less so for eras of centralized control.