

# **Cosineve and the Old Internet**

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From: cosineve (cosineve@ptd.net)  
Subject: FISH IN SPACE  
Newsgroups: alt.cult-movies  
Date: 1998/04/12

well a long last a new film by mark ebert  
it is marks latest film  
it takes place in 1981  
april of 1981 mark gets his welfare check he asks his mom for a ride to  
the bank to cash it mark his mother says i just worked a 14 hour shift  
all week long to pay off youre fines for pissing in the back of the town  
bus well fucking fine says mark i will walk besides i pissed on  
that fuggen bus because all the people on there had a big ass  
and i hated all of them  
mark then yanked up his black socks and walked his skinney ass to the  
bank as he got to the bank mark pushed his way to the front  
he went in front of a old lady and said hey i was here first he then  
told the 83 year old lady that she should be in work and that she was  
lazy the old lady turned around at mark and said listen you picky  
headed ugly fuck wait youre turn mark rolled his red eyes around in his  
head and waited for his turn  
next the teller says thats me says mark it is about fuggen time boy you  
people are slow says mark now cash my welfare check  
mark walked away after cashing his check mumbling about how people dont  
want to work he then goes over bashers house to by some reefer  
mark gets a nice sack of weed then goes home  
as mark gets in the door his mom is on her way out to work  
hey mom how about supper i had a very busy day you know says mark  
mark i did not have time i am sorry says his mom  
oh ya says mark i bet if i dug up grandma from her fuckin grave  
she would have me food  
mark then ran up the steps to smoke his reefer  
the phone started to ring while mark was getting stoned  
mark picks up the phone and slams it down  
he then loses his balance and hits his head off the table  
mark is knocked out  
he then has a dream he is aboard a space ship as the pilot and has a  
crew working for him and a robot  
as they get down to lift off mark puts his middle finger out the window  
he then lifts off killing all the insects on board first because he  
hears they all were talking about him behind his backs  
  
the end of this story will be posted on easter night

In the 1990s, I was a frequent reader of Usenet, a collection of Internet discussion boards, called newsgroups, whose history stretches back a decade before the emergence of the World Wide Web in 1991. Social phenomena that would later become part of today's Web already existed in prior incarnations on Usenet: there were local city groups that functioned like Craigslist today, others devoted to file-sharing and tech tips, and many clustered around certain professions, hobbies and pop culture topics like music, television, and film. Usenet was a text-based phenomenon, like early email, bulletin board systems, and IRC, the live chat protocol that likewise predates the Web; all of these structures were replicated in some consumer-friendly form within the gated communities of contemporaneous services like AOL, Prodigy and CompuServe. This loosely interconnected congeries of networks provided the linguistic biome where the peculiarly telegraphic cant of online culture first flourished, and evolved into a new mode that operated between writing and speech. Years before the Web, these were the places where colon-dash-parenthesis began to signify a smile or a frown, where "spam" and "troll" took on new meanings, and where users learned to input ROTFL and LOL while staring, physically impassive, at a screen.

By the second half of the decade, my online time-wasting began to earn its own paycheck. I began working for a firm contracted to Miramax, then the leading art house film distributor; my job was to read the Internet every day, scanning for mentions of current and upcoming Miramax releases, and write up reports of what people were saying online about films like *Mighty Aphrodite*, *Trainspotting*, and *The Crow: City of Angels*. This involved frequenting message boards on AOL, keeping track of primitive fan websites for certain celebrities, and searching Usenet, where one of the most active film-related newsgroups at the time was one called alt.cult-movies. Each morning I dialed in, surfing the Net until the late afternoon. I lurked, posting little, only occasionally attempting to spur discussion of a Miramax film in order to have something to put in our reports.

In 1996, I noticed a strange character who had started appearing on alt.cult-movies. This was a user who usually posted under the name "Cosineve," but also employed the names "Kerry Rizzo," "the fish," "Uncle EVE," "Happy Hat," "m. smiley," "m. simley" or "elroy jetson," all attached to the same email. Apart from occasionally engaging in the typical chatter of that newsgroup—consisting largely of the hunt for video copies of obscure exploitation movies—Cosineve posted summaries of imaginary films, all centering around the strangely disjointed adventures of a character called "The Fish." One of Cosineve's earliest reviews was about a film called *Amy Fish*, which presented only a fragment of a synopsis:

From: COSINEVE (cosineve@postoffice.ptd.net)  
Subject: AMY FISH  
Newsgroups: alt.cult-movies  
Date: 1996/10/15

this is a 1993 film in which the fish is teamed up with amy the fish is disturebd by her large ass ha then says fuck this i hurt my arm and goes home he then goes back on welfare

Another message posted that same day introduced Mark Ebert, as the actor who plays The Fish, in a more detailed review of *Flesh Eating Fish*.

From: COSINEVE (cosineve@postoffice.ptd.net)  
Subject: FLESH EATING FISH  
Newsgroups: alt.cult-movies  
Date: 1996/10/15

this spine chilling thriller has a strange twist another fish has stolen the fishes identity and goes on a rampage he starts to murder people and eat there flesh mark ebert is on the hunt for this new fish he is being blamed for these murders and is arrested the murders do not stop they then continue he is released from prison he stalks and finds the fake killer fish a brief struggle happens the fish pulls his nut and tells the fake fish he does not give a fuck he can be the fish as a matter of pollicy the police make him take a drug test he comes back hot and fired he then puts his hands on his hips and sayes fuck it and heads to the welfare office to get a medical card to get his nut fixed the end

Cosineve would go on to post at least twenty of these faux film reviews between 1996 and 1999, all written in the same distinctive style, with aberrant punctuation, unpredictable use of upper and lower case, and idiosyncratic misspellings. The titles of the films—which only sometimes bear any relationship to the story—each use the word “fish” and often reference real movies: [Fish Cracker](#), [Fish Wish](#), [Fish Dance](#), [Fish Wars](#), [Fish Flic](#), [Fishula](#), [Color Me Fish White](#), [Citizen Fish](#), [Snow Fish](#), [Sea Fish](#), [Survival Fish](#), [After Fish](#), [The Burning Fish](#). Some carry on for paragraphs; others are just a few lines. The ongoing conceit was that these were all forgotten z-grade films, the kind found on late-night TV or in VHS bargain bins. [Park Fish](#), for example, is described a “1965 film” that “was directed by Ed Wood” and “only released in drive in movies.”

The Fish himself is the only character sketched with any detail in these yarns. He’s a young man on welfare who lives with his mother, likes to drink and get high on “reefer,” and swears angrily, often at old ladies. Cosineve says The Fish has a “skinny ass” and wears black socks (which he “yanks up”), and The Fish’s testicles will likely become endangered or damaged at some point in the tale. Talking animals and birds sometimes appear, as well as spaceships, robots and other fantasy creatures. As narratives, the Fish sagas partake in the repetitive quality of comic strips, children’s cartoons, or the crudest of sitcoms, each story offering variations on a few key elements. The Fish exists in an elastic but minimal reality, like Krazy Kat or Wiley E. Coyote.

From time to time, the author’s pseudonyms enter into the stories as characters in their own right. In [Fish Cracker](#), Ebert is taunted by “his uncle stevie and his cosineve.” [Snow Fish](#) mentions two “rizzo brothers,” as well as “cosineve the most evil cosin of all and his older brother m. smiley.” In this film, The Fish obtains a computer from Rent-A-Center, logs onto America Online (using a “free for 50 hours” promotion that would have been familiar to any internet user in the mid-90s), posts obscenities, and unsuccessfully tries to find porn by typing the search term “fuck.”

From: cosineve (cosineve@postoffice.ptd.net)  
Subject: snow fish  
Newsgroups: alt.cult-movies  
Date: 1996/12/16

this film is the return to the big screen starring mark ebert in his classic role as the FISH. it also co stars burt reynolds.

in this film mark is at home listning to his . most cherrished record . by country joe and the fish. then he gets a idea hey why dont i steal my moms credit card and by me one of them fuggen computers. but remembers his mother hates him and wont let him near the house. fuck her he says . i will get one on my own so he goes down to the rent a center . and gets a computer . now the fish says i will get even with those 2 rizzo brothers that fucker with the long hair and his heckling brother are fugged now. i will get america online for free for 50 hours use it up . and tell them to fuck themselves . the fish installs his disc . and is on his way he goes in a chat room but is soon kicked out for his filthy mouth. he then types in the word fuck to see dirty pictures but there is no pictures . what gives here the fish then leaves his home to find out why he cant see fuck pictures he asks a old lady on the corner hey fuck face yells the fish . tell me how to view fuck pictures. the old women gets scared and runs then he bursts in the door of rent a center . hey wheres the fuck pictures

the fish is met with a solid punch to the balls and kicked out of the store . soon it begins to snow and snow it does it turns to a blizzard. the fish is trapped . oh fuck now i cant get home . the fish finds himself freezing his skinny red ass starts to tremble and falls down in the snow . the fish is near death and his life starts to flash in front of him oh i was such a evil bloated little prick he says to himself. but then he sees a vision why it is my guardian angel but he looks like burt reynolds he thinks out loud . well fuck it says the fish it is free help. his angel then lifts up the fish and carries him away . his angel then looks at him and sayes you sure are a smelly little fuck . then drops off the fish at the local shelter. one last thing says the angel you prommised to be a good fish. the fish as soon as he gets his feet on solid ground yells fuck you i dont owe you any money . then heads over to the table to sit down for a free meal . then he gets up after the meal and tells the cook the food was shit and wiggles his pecker at him running out the door .then outside he is met by cosineve the most evil cosin of all and his older brother m smiley . they both jump the fish and pound the fuck out of him . telling the fish that he is not a rare catch afterall.....

In a similar vein, over time Mark Ebert shifted between being an actor playing the Fish, to being a character himself who is nicknamed the Fish. Beginning the review of [Patient Fish](#), for example, M. Smiley writes that "THE FOLLOWING IS A SERIES of events that took place in the life of mark ebert" in which "the welfare office sent mark over to the hospital to get his nuts checked out." Ebert and the Fish are used interchangeably as the character's name.

30 seconds later the fish rang his buzzer and yelled for the nurse at the TOP OF HIS LUNGS.....  
"Mr. Ebert...Whats wrong" I'm Hungry and want to eat NOW!!!said the fish you herd the doctor, shut the fuck up and gp to sleep you ugly fuck said the nurse,and by the way Mr. Ebert keep your gown closed...your boney ugly ass is hanging out and the other patients are complaining.

On the other hand, [Cronicles of a Fish](#), according to M. Simley, "IS A SREIES OF STORIES TOLD TO YOU BY M.EBERT"—in this case, Ebert and Cosineve a.k.a. Simley a.k.a. Smiley seem to become a single narrator.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the Fish tales, characters, narrators and email identities slip in and out of fictional space, coalescing into a single person, or dispersing into separate entities in order to battle one another with swift kicks to the nuts. Many of the tales end suddenly, with a promise

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<sup>1</sup> Although such a connection is never mentioned by Cosineve, one can't help but imagine an indirect allusion to film critic Roger Ebert, who began [posting his own reviews to CompuServe](#) in the beginning of the 1990s, and has had a significant online presence ever since.

to be continued the next day. None ever really were, except in the sense that Cosineve kept churning out new permutations of the Fish's adventures.

I quickly became a fan of Cosineve's bizarre stories, and it was clear that I was not alone. Within days of Cosineve's first flurry of posts in October 1996, responses began to appear on Usenet from other readers. Following up a review of [Death Fish](#), one user asked "Does anyone else think this guy's actually way ahead of his time, and is spouting something that we, as mere mortals, just can't comprehend?" "He's definitely on the \*Cutting Edge\* (of something) and should be encouraged to continue," replied another. "He could be the next Tarantino, for all we know." A self-described "recent convert" [suggested](#) that "there should be a separate newsgroup for the fans of the fish to discuss these deep works." Readers were chatting eagerly about Cosineve's work as late as [1998](#), lamenting his absence when new stories hadn't been posted.

On at least one occasion, fans of Cosineve even engaged in deeper textual analysis. In a [thread of replies](#) to *Flesh Eating Fish*, one user complained about the abnormal use of punctuation—

Ever heard of a period? It's this character: "." See, it looks just like a little dot. It's used to end sentences. Sentences begin with a capitalized word and are ended with a period (.), question mark (?), or exclamation point (!) depending on the type of sentence. When organized in this way, writing becomes much easier to read and understand.

—prompting another writer to come to his defense:

I really really doubt the original post would have been any more comprehensible if it had looked like this:

This spine chilling thriller has a strange twist. Another fish has stolen the fish's identity and goes on a rampage. He starts to murder people and eat their flesh. Mark Ebert is on the hunt for this new fish. He is being blamed for these murders and is arrested. The murders do not stop. They then continue. He is released from prison. He stalks and finds the fake killer fish. A brief struggle happens. The fish pulls his nut and tells the fake fish he does not give a fuck - he can be the fish as a matter of policy. The police make him take a drug test. He comes back hot. He then puts his hands on his hips and says "fuck it" and heads to the welfare office to get a medical card to get his nut fixed. The end.

The deranged rambling stream-of-consciousness form "Cosineve" uses, which you're so critical of (despite it being a perfectly legitimate literary technique, as used by James Joyce and Samuel Beckett, among countless others) is in fact utterly appropriate to the contents of the post. It's not supposed to make any sense, and correcting grammar and punctuation just makes it look ridiculous instead of mesmerizingly surreal.

A different user suggested "Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs ..." This formalist argument isn't too far from Roland Barthes' insistence that "the term 'writer' (a term which here always refers to a practice, not to a social value) may be applied to a sender whose 'message' (thereby immediately destroying its very nature as message) cannot be summarized, a condition the writer shares with the madman, the

chatterbox and the mathematician."<sup>2</sup> Their author ultimately unknown—and at the time, effectively unknowable—Cosineve's stories became readable not merely as idiolectic utterances, but as exercises in a particular and pointed style.

These claims for literary precedents to Cosineve's writing should be taken as tongue-in-check, but perhaps not entirely so; the context of alt.cult.movies is important to keep in mind. The peculiar form of cinephilia found in aficionados of cult cinema engages in a parallel practice, applying a *politique des auteurs* to marginal purveyors of bizarrely constructed schlock. By such logic, the intentional formal extremes of vanguard filmmakers create new parameters by which more outré commercial directors may be newly appreciated. Andy Warhol's longeurs make the awkward minimalism of [Herschell Gordon Lewis's Blood Feast](#) seem willfully withholding rather than just a failed attempt at Hollywood convention, while softcore sex film purveyor Doris Wishman's eccentric cut-aways and disjointed sound-image editing become readable as nothing less than a [cockeyed avant-gardism](#). "The value of low-budget films is: they can be transcendent expressions of a single person's individual vision and quirky individuality," V. Vale and Andrea Juno argue in their canonical book on gore and sexploitation, *Incredibly Strange Films*. "Often the films are eccentric—even extreme—presentations by individuals *freely expressing their imaginations*."<sup>3</sup> Whether such individuals were artists, amateurs or mere crazy people is often set aside.

But eventually, Cosineve added [his own reply](#) to the debate, explaining that his lack of punctuation was simply because the Fish "does not give a fuck about that shit":

this is me youre cosin eve lately i have been getting replies about the fish first of all some one asked why no capital letters or periods are used because i am telling these true tales of the fish and i know the fish where ever he is does not give a fuck about that shit why the fuck does he care he is the fish some of you have seen some of his work i am told mark ebert is the fish the fish has many movies and i am hear to tell you he would not tell you nothing [...] if you do not want to hear about the fish why dont you stop bothering people and eat a chunk of cat shit meowwww

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Cosineve's mysterious origins are masked by multiple screen names and identities, each given the status of a fictional character within his own stories. His emergence on Usenet brings to mind the qualities of the Old Internet, before social networking took hold, when online personae were much more loosely connected to their real-world authors. Writing about online communities in the early 1990s, Mark Dery noted "the wraithlike nature of electronic communication—the flesh become word, the sender reincarnated as letters floating on a terminal screen."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Roland Barthes, "Writers, Intellectuals, Teachers," trans. Stephen Heath, *Image-Music-Text* (New York: Noonday Press, 1977) 194-5.

<sup>3</sup> V. Vale and Andrea Juno, *Incredibly Strange Films* (San Francisco: RE/SEARCH Publications, 1986) 5.

<sup>4</sup> Mark Dery, "Flame Wars," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 92:4 (Fall 1993) 559.

Like many other theorists at the time, Dery stressed the disembodiedness of cybertext, through which words become severed from their origins: "Electronic notes, posted in group discussions, differ from hand- or typewritten letters in several significant ways. Like public bathroom graffiti, their authors are sometimes anonymous, often pseudonymous, and almost always strangers," he wrote. "On line, users can float free of biological and sociocultural determinants, at least to the degree that their idiosyncratic language usage does not mark them as white, black, college-educated, a high-school dropout, and so on."<sup>5</sup> The uncannily identity-less nature of online writing was memorialized in one of the first works of internet art, [The World's First Collaborative Sentence](#), begun in 1994, which invited anyone who stumbled upon the page to add words to what soon became an enormous stream of semi-consciousness.

Dery's comparison of online communication to public bathroom graffiti seems particularly apt, given the impulse to profanity behind so much anonymous writing online, neatly envisioned by Cosineve's image of Mark Ebert going on America Online in order to type the word "fuck." Only a few months before Cosineve published his first fuck-filled story, pioneering internet artists Jodi created a newly commissioned intro page for fellow net artist Alexei Shulgin's site, [the Moscow WWWArt Centre](#), composed of the word FUCK tiled across the page. "the creators are obviously bearers of cyberpunk ideology with rather good taste," Shulgin noted in [an announcement](#) about the design. "They have presented a post-linguistic and post-visual research that reflects very well the state of contemporary culture and communication. it's very logical that they are using english word 'fuck' as a background—nowadays it has become a mere symbol that means nothing and everything at the same time—a synonym for all other words."<sup>6</sup> Or we might say that "fuck" satisfies the linguistic role of a syntactic expletive, a word with a structural function that bears no actual meaning; only a violent function remains.

Usenet readers would never know who was posting these strange little stories, decorated with *fucks* that had been emptied out, made into utterances of pure (and puerile) force, silly but nonetheless existential jabs into the ether from some mysterious fleshy phantom out there in meatspace. The Internet was connected to us then, having not yet developed the skein of social networks that traps our true identities and does its best to bind our electronic selves to their physical sources.

Today, we can search Google's archives, and attempt to piece together some picture of who Cosineve was. In addition to an interest in cult movies, he collected and traded [action figures](#) as well as memorabilia of [the 70's band Kiss](#), enjoyed [pro wrestling](#), and may have been a [Democrat](#). We might speculate that he peppered the tales with elements from his own biography, testing a boundary between truth and fiction his readers would never discern. But the true pleasures of his stories reside in how they cultivate a world unto themselves, one that points to the everyday, but is ultimately detached from the weight of reality. This oneiric universe of The Fish and his cohorts could only have emerged through an earlier form of the Internet, when online existence still felt distinct from the rest of life.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 562-3.

<sup>6</sup> This anecdote is mentioned in Rachel Greene, *Internet Art* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004) 41.

From: cosineve (cosineve@ptd.net)  
Subject: FISH TALE  
Newsgroups: alt.cult-movies  
Date: 1996/10/21

this is a story of the fish as a child as told by researchers the fish had a abusive alchoholic father who left him at 3 weeks of age but he had a mother who did not like him that much as a child the fish did not have any friends he was very ugly and skinny he had a very vulgar mouth and smoked to get attention the kids all called him stick fish he would say fuck you and run away from age 5 to age 13 he got the same gift for XMAS a cheap plastic horse with wheels on the bottom he would mumble what the fuck is this shit the only true friends the fish had was his next door neighbors pidgeons he would spend many hours every day cursing at them throwing rocks at them and picking fights with them one day they all said fuck this and flew away the next day when the fish came he said all those fuckers left he looked down and there was one pidgeon left he had a broken wing the fish took him home to fix his wing he fed him for days the third day when the fish came home he seen the pidgeon trying to fly away why you ungratefull fuck the fish said then took him outside and ran him over with the lawn mower he then took it in the house to hide it from his mother he put it in his closet then 6 days later he heard something in his closet he opened the door and was shocked to see a giant 5 foot 3 pidgeon coming at him the fish ran away the pidgeon ran after him outside knocked the fish to the ground and began to peck at his balls he then took a piece of the fishes balls and flew away he then got sick from the fishes little balls and died on the spot the fish seen this and went over and started kicking it fuck you i am the fish the moral of the story is there is a little fish in all of us