

2

ROMANTIC LOVE

One of the biggest cultural revolutions in the West has been individualization, the process by which individuals become detached from the all-encompassing, self-sacrificing lives of extended families, communities, religions and other social groups. This has been linked to a new rugged individualism and the belief, enshrined in policy and legislation, that individuals should, without damaging the rights of others or the common good, be left to pursue their interests, pleasures and desires.¹ There is a conception, which increasingly has become a moral expectation if not a demand, that individuals should be encouraged to see themselves as masters of their own destiny, free to make their own personal choices as long as they do not interfere with their duties and responsibilities to others.

Freedom of choice is linked to the right of individuals to develop a relationship with whomever they chose, regardless of gender, whether or not it will involve sex, and whether or not they will marry. Although they still exist in many parts of the world, the notion of arranged marriages or of children having

to get the consent of parents or religious leaders to marry, has become unacceptable and even unthinkable for many people in Western society. The choice of a partner, lover or spouse is left to the individuals concerned. They may get advice and support from friends, colleagues and parents, but it is ultimately their decision.

And while there are many factors that impinge on what choice is made, and that direct individuals to choose one partner rather than another, there is still the belief, perhaps illusory, perhaps necessary, that individuals who come together as a couple, marry or establish a formal partnership, should do so out of love rather than for money, status or power. Marrying for interests other than love is deemed to blemish the romantic ideal of pure love. For many men and women, the primary motive for marrying may well be money, to live in a nice house and have a good lifestyle, but they have to live the lie to live the dream. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who did not write much about love but who we will meet regularly on this journey of understanding, said the best way to understand social life was in terms of people operating in different social fields.² Each social field has its own way of seeing and doing things. In the field of romance, then, we can see how people embody existing beliefs and 'play' at being intimate, passionate, romantic and sexual. There are many different interests, or as Bourdieu puts it, forms of capital, in play in the romantic field, but the main ones are love and sex.

For Bourdieu, people who enter into a social field such as love and romance, not only have to embody the habitus or existing belief system about sex and love, they have to play the game. Participants have to make believe, or as he puts it, they have to live the *illusio*, that they are only interested in love and romance and that they are not interested in money or fame. In the same way that people who enter into the religious field have to talk and behave religiously to promote the collective consciousness and conscience of the religious community, those

who enter the romantic field have to make believe that relationships are founded on pure love. However, the difficulties of maintaining a pure love relationship are easily undermined by the expectation that individuals have a right, if not a responsibility to themselves, to pursue their interests, pleasures and desires. Individualization and the freedom of individuals to choose for themselves has ironically been the force behind romantic love: it enables and allows them to fall in love and mate and marry who they chose. But individualization is also the force that has undermined the possibility of a couple remaining in love. The ideal of a couple maintaining a pure relationship is also undermined when there are social, cultural, political and economic inequalities between them, when one partner has more economic, cultural and social capital than the other. The strength of a relationship based on pure love can also be put under strain when partners are from a different race, or come from different ethnic, class and religious backgrounds. In these circumstances, the belief that love conquers all has to be continually put into practice. To sustain their love, lovers need to make love, but making love has become conflated with having sex and the discourse and practice of romantic love.

The emergence of romantic love

Romantic love has been depicted throughout history.³ We know the stories of Anthony and Cleopatra, Romeo and Juliet, and Abelard and Héloïse. Films and historical dramas on television suggest that the emotional turmoil of romantic love permeated all levels of society. This is a classic case of history being read backwards, of the melodramas and sexuality of contemporary soap operas being written into the everyday lives of ordinary people. Making love and being romantic was a language and discourse that emerged and developed within court society, that produced a way of being in the world, of men and women seeing, understanding and relating to each other.⁴

Jean Claude Kaufmann has produced a masterful overview of the history of romantic love. He argues that the main form of love throughout history, but particularly in Christian societies, has been *agape*. This is based on the command to 'love thine enemy as thyself' and the hope that through a universal, all-embracing love, it is possible to change the world with generosity and self-sacrifice. He contrasts this with passionate love, which 'singularizes everything'. A passionate lover only has interest in the loved one. Everything else 'becomes invisible and of no importance'. The dreams and feelings of passionate lovers are so strong, 'it makes them forget about ordinary life'. While passionate love erupted regularly in ancient society, it had 'a bad reputation' because it always posed a threat to the existing social order.⁵ Outbreaks of passion were as dangerous as outbreaks of conflict in public life, or emotion in modern bureaucracies. Being sexually attracted to someone, dreaming, thinking and imagining having sex with them, was very different to putting thoughts into practice and openly displaying passion.

It was within court society that the discourse and practice of romantic love began to be developed. It was a way of being that revolved around the search for perfect love through sensuousness, gallantry, caresses and good manners. The codes and scripts of being romantic date back to court society. The emergence of a new class of aristocratic women in court society meant a shift in the balance of power between men and women. Men who wanted to enter court society, and who had grown up in homes in which men ruled and dominated women, were forced to take on roles of lower 'courtiers', of supplicating, entertaining and amusing women who now lorded over them. As we shall see, the legacy of this courting practice still persists. Being romantic still involves the man revering the woman, wooing, entertaining and amusing her and attempting to fulfil her desires.

Romantic love was not a significant part of the peasant society that surrounded court society. It took centuries to spread into wider society, first through the bourgeoisie of the eighteenth and

nineteenth centuries and then to all social classes in the twentieth century. Romantic love was, then, part of a wider change towards informalization, involving an increasing ease in expressing and discussing feelings and emotions and, at the same time, greater emotional control. This was linked to a demand and expectation to be reflective and self-restrained, and to be sensitive to, and considerate and tolerant of, others.⁶

The development of romantic love was linked to the growth of the arts and, in particular, to the development of printing technology that enabled the spread of love stories and romantic literature. Love stories, being romantic and making love became the discourse and practice of a socially and geographically mobile population. People who operated increasingly among strangers began to see and understand themselves as individuals. They searched for a sense of bonding and belonging.⁷ Traditional, locally dense social systems of villages blocked any type of private life for individuals. There was no thought or time given or space provided for couples to develop intimate relations.⁸

The emergence of romantic love can also be seen as a revolt against the strict religious regimes, often associated with Victorian Puritanism, in which the self was denied and in which everyday life was symbolically dominated by religiously informed discourse and practice and the *illusio* of salvation. There were external constraints – formal, rigid rules about social interaction – all of which were based on self-repression, particularly in relation to sex. But the overly rigid rationalization of life left a spiritual void and closed off any new explorations of meaning and well-being. The orientation to God, church and community gradually shifted to a search for self-realization through a new spirituality based on a hedonistic mix of bodies and souls. Romantic love came to be seen as a passionate revolt against the highly rationalized, disenchanted order of bureaucratic organizational routines and institutionalized family and religious life.

It is perhaps ironic that the development of romantic love as a key component of the cultural air of Western society took off

with the Victorians. While they were rigid moralists who valued self-control, sobriety and hard-work, they also became obsessed with the ideal of a good marriage and the role which sexual pleasure, that emerged from intercourse, played in maintaining a loving relationship.⁹ Although love and sex were seen as an integral part of marriage, they were wrapped in a religious discourse revolving around the search for salvation and spiritual fulfilment. Outside of marriage, love and sex had to be rigorously controlled. Victorians recognized that romantic love easily led to sex, which could quickly contaminate if not destroy the moral and social order of society. For this reason, while personal choice of marriage partners was increasing and with it, new forms of courting and dating, when couples were together, there were strict rules about who could do what to whom.

From the beginning of the twentieth century, particularly in America but also in many parts of Europe, there were rapid increases in the bureaucratization, industrialization and urbanization of society. The differences between social classes decreased while the variety of relationships increased. Young people became more mobile and independent. They met and chatted each other up in new venues without any formal introduction, and often without the knowledge of their parents. Courting became more private. It moved away from the confines of the home and the supervisory eye of mothers and fathers, siblings and neighbours. In the beginning of modern courting practices, if a young woman was enamoured with a young man, he would be invited to visit her home where they would sit together, perhaps in the parlour, on the porch or in the garden, but always in sight or earshot of others. If they went out together there would be a chaperone.¹⁰

By the 1920s, particularly in the USA, surveillance of courting couples began to erode, and a new regime of dating emerged. This was the beginning of the sexualization of romance. Courting began to move from holding hands and kissing to necking

and petting. There were numerous spaces where young men and women gathered without supervision. Dancing became increasingly sexualized. There was a new expression of the body and an exposure of female flesh, prompting strong reactions from social commentators, churches and governments. Young middle-class couples could find privacy in the back seats of cars. There were new codes of practice between couples as to who could do what, to whom, when and where. Dating became a complex game. Unlike courting, which was much more formal and regulated, the rules of dating were more open and flexible. There was a greater emphasis on the ability of a couple to read each other's feelings and emotions, to express them, and adapt and respond to them differently, in different social situations. The more educated, liberated and independent women became, the more the social, psychic and emotional distance between them and men declined. Women expected men to treat them and give them a good time but, in return, men expected that women would then give them a good time sexually through kissing, necking and petting. It was therefore a complicated game of give and take, often with high stakes. A woman had to calculate her date's wealth, status and prospects and how much he had spent on her, with how much she was willing to give him sexually. The *illusio* of romance, of being a player of the game, meant that although these calculations informed a woman's strategies as to what she did and what she permitted, they were never overt. Young people had to learn to balance their lust with their need for love and the need to find a good marriage partner. And yet there were double standards for men and women, with women mostly paying the highest price if they got pregnant or developed a bad reputation.¹¹

Slowly but surely during the twentieth century in the West, dating and romantic love became a dominant practice among young people. However, because there were strong sexual and emotional elements in romantic love, many commentators up to the 1950s felt it was not the basis for a good marriage and

dangerous for social order. There was a fear that if romantic love became the basis of choosing marriage partners, it could disrupt family lineages, ethnic and race relations, and class strata. It was also felt that lovers often live in a fantasy world. Romantic love, it was deemed, had the potential to become obsessive and possessive, which could then, so easily, turn into intense jealousy. And so, while formal restrictions and regulations in terms of choice of marriage partner were loosened, concerns and anxieties about choices made persisted, but they were expressed through more informal pressures such as the teasing and cajoling of peers and the wheedling of parents.

All of these codes of being romantic, all these scripts that boys and girls learnt, were part of the culture of modernity. Young people embodied these codes as part of their socialization. They made them their own. They brought their own character and personalities to the roles, but the codes and scripts were written and developed before them. Throughout the twentieth century, the codes and scripts became more sexual and erotic. This was part of what the American sociologist Steven Seidman has termed the sexualization of love and the eroticization of sex: being romantic became linked to being sexual and, increasingly, being sexual became linked to being erotic and, not necessarily linked to being romantic.¹² All of these long-term processes of change were reflected in, but also moulded by, the images, messages and stories generated in and through the media within books, magazines, films and television programmes, and marketing companies promoting and advertising products. The media and the market reflected, filtered and promoted social trends. But it was also in their interest to generate desires and to get individuals to fulfil their needs through consumption. The discourse, habitus and practice of making love was, then, shaped and structured by the market and the media within consumer capitalism. Increasingly, what couples like Mark and Lucy said and did to each other, the way they courted each other, the way they made love, the way they

dressed and looked, were shaped by masterminds of consumer capitalism.

Commercialization of love

Being romantic involves a temporary turning off from the normal world. There is a time and place to be romantic and to make love. There is a transformation of space. Couples go to a special place such as a remote cabin in the mountains, or they transform the existing space by lighting candles, playing soft music. There is also a transformation of time. Regular routines are abandoned. Couples stay up until the early hours of the morning talking passionately. Being romantic involves dressing up – women put on evening gowns; men wear tuxedos. They have exotic drinks – champagne and cocktails. It can also involve formal, almost ceremonial behaviour – like dining out in an expensive restaurant – in which food and drink are served as if they were sacred. Most of all, being romantic revolves around generating an emotional effervescence, of people becoming intimate, revealing their innermost thoughts, sharing secrets and experiences. It is not that being romantic necessarily involves consumption but that the essence of being romantic has become closely linked to an attempted denial or reversal of rational, calculated economic action in which costs and benefits are closely analysed. Instead the emphasis is on being not just spontaneous, feckless and frivolous but, also, indulgent, extravagant, and on 'spending like there was no tomorrow'. It is this tearing up of the stringencies of the economic order of everyday life that is often most associated with being romantic.

In *Consuming the Romantic Utopia*, her detailed historical analysis of the relation between romantic love and consumption, Eva Illouz identified two linked social processes: the 'commodification of romance' and the 'romanticization of commodities'. Throughout the twentieth century in Western society,

commodities were given a romantic aura, while, as part of the same process, being romantic became associated with the consumption of 'leisure goods and leisure technologies'.¹³ It was a symbiotic relation: going to the movies came to be seen as a romantic activity and through films many young people learned the behaviours and mannerisms of being romantic. The demonstration of love increasingly became associated with the consumption of luxury goods such as diamonds, perfumes, deserted beaches, exotic foods and champagne.¹⁴ Being romantic became a deliberative act that took on the glitter and glamour of rich, ornate religious ceremonies. Making love became an elaborate sacred ritual of displaying affection by couples being extravagant. If being religious is primarily about being spiritual, about disengaging from and transcending the material world, being romantic became linked to engagement in the marketplace, glamorous goods and services, travelling to exciting and exotic places. Love was seen as spiritual, but being spiritual became commercialized. In order to avoid contamination from the material world, couples were encouraged to 'get away from it all', to get back to nature. Being in love meant the possibility, but also a responsibility, of couples fulfilling their wishes and desires together. The quest for salvation and heaven in the next life, began to be substituted by the quest to find love and experience paradise in this life.

Cinemas, dancehalls, amusement centres, discos and clubs became theatres of dreams in which couples pursued and found love and romance, but also spent money. The strong link between being romantic and being sexually attractive meant that increasing numbers of women, but also now men, spent increasing amounts of money striving to be beautiful and attractive. The conflation of being romantic with being physically attractive meant spending money on products and services that help keep people looking and feeling young and beautiful.

The commercialization of love and romance also meant that people began to identify with, and become attached to, 'love'

products – services, icons, stars and celebrities created through the market and the media, the driving forces of consumer capitalism. The market and the media were also, however, the primary propagators of individualization. The realization and expression of self, the development of personal identities, revolved around choices individuals made through consumption. Individuals' sense of self increasingly became realized not just through loved ones but through things. Things have always mattered to us. We have always identified with and developed attachments to things we have made, used and bought. What has transformed everyday life in the West is how much our identity and sense of self is mirrored through consumption and attachment to the things we buy. We not only become attached to cars, computers, phones and so forth but often to a particular brand. We feel 'lost' without them. We become concerned about the love life, welfare, trials and tribulations, of a whole array of people we have never met, including film and television personalities, pop stars, sportsmen and women all of whom we have come to know, love and care about through the media.

Moreover, as contemporary Western capitalist human beings, we increasingly relate to others and, in particular, to loved ones, through our market tastes and preferences. The things we love become a reflection of who we are: they are a mirror through which others can know, understand and relate to us. And, of course, there is a close link between being concerned about media stars and the things we consume, as it is mostly media stars and celebrities that advertise products and services and persuade us to buy things that, supposedly, will improve and enhance the quality of our lives and make us happy. In the same way that love and romance became linked to luxury and extravagance, many consumer products are romanticized and eroticized by placing them in exotic locations and in the presence of attractive people.