

»Grenzgänge«

5. Konsumromantik

Lieben und Leben im Kapitalismus

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Paper Presented in Tel Aviv, April 2003

I would like to offer a few thoughts on what we may call somewhat unsatisfactorily postmodern love. I am not fond of the concept of postmodernism but find it sometimes useful to describe the cultural sensibility which emerged after World War I and more especially after World War II.

Let me start with a vignette from a well known novel, *Madame Bovary*. Charles and Emma, to remind you, are the sad heroes of a familial drama in which Emma progressively comes to hate her husband, an unimaginative provincial doctor who drags Emma into social and emotional mediocrity. In the following excerpt we still know nothing of the fate of Emma Rouault and Charles Bovary. This is how Charles asks for Emma's hand. Monsieur Rouault here is Emma's father.

"So when he [Monsieur Rouault] noticed that Charles's cheeks turned red in his daughter's presence, which meant that one of these days he would ask for her hand, he pondered the whole matter in advance. He found Charles rather thin and frail, not the kind of son-in-law he would have preferred, but he was said to be level-headed, thrifty and very well educated, and he probably wouldn't haggle too much over the dowry. Furthermore, since Monsieur Rouault was soon going to be forced to sell forty five acres of his land, since he owed a great deal to the mason and the harness-maker, and since the cider press needed a new shaft, he said to himself, "If he asks me for her, I won't say no." (...) The time had come. Charles told himself he must make his declaration before they came to the corner of the hedge; finally, when they had passed it, he murmured, Monsieur Rouault, there's something I'd like to say to you.

They stopped. Charles fell silent.

Go on, tell me what's on your mind –as if I didn't know already! Said Monsieur Rouault, laughing gently.

Monsieur Rouault—Monsieur Rouault—stammered Charles.

As far as I'm concerned, I'd like nothing better, continued the farmer. I'm sure my daughter agrees with me, but I'll have to ask her just the same. “

He [Charles Bovary] returned to the farm at nine the next morning. Emma blushed when he came in, but she forced herself to laugh a little in order not to seem flustered. Monsieur Rouault embraced his future son-in law. They postponed all discussion of financial arrangements: there was still plenty of time. “

In this short passage, Flaubert's legendary virtuosity for terse descriptions serves to reveal much about the nature of love and marriage in the middle of the 19th century in rural and provincial France. 1. You may have noticed that the sentiments of the two protagonists are barely mentioned. In fact, they are not mentioned at all. The reader, like the protagonists, infers emotions and intentions from subtle changes of the face rather than from direct words of emotions. From his silent blush to her embarrassed laughter, everything has been settled, yet no words of love have been uttered, nor a clear emotional exchange has taken place between the future spouses. We witness here a curious mix of silent and awkward sentiments and very well rehearsed cultural codes and well known scenarios. There is very little emotional expressivity, yet the meaning of such a fleeting feeling as a blush is well known to all parties, and carries with it heavy institutional implications. If sentiments are barely expressed, it is because they are not relevant to the protagonists' decisions, or if they are, they are not the main focus of their attention. Actors do not define themselves and their action according to their feelings, but rather according to a sense of propriety. 2. This is also an economic transaction between two men, that is whatever emotional exchange between Charles and Emma, it can take place only after the business part has been taken care of. To be sure, this vignette comes from a cultural and social world in which marriage was for many the main financial operation of their lives. In such a social order romantic sentiments are not necessarily absent; but they are subsumed under the powerful normative demands of the group and the family. This is a world where, as is the case with Emma, one marries the first person who seems to be an adequate match. In other words this is a world with little choice both in the sense that except for the highest social classes, there were few partners to choose from and in the sense that one's choice was always constrained by that of parents. 3. It is obvious to us and to the protagonists that this fleeting blush may in fact decide of their whole life. Charles's attraction for Emma, has here enormous implications;

in fact it is the start of a life committing and even life engulfing narrative. So engulfing and all-encompassing is this narrative, that the novel *Madame Bovary* consists essentially in Emma's attempts to rewrite, without success, the narrative with which she has been forced to write her life.

Let me, as they say in cinematic parlance, make a jump cut and move in a somewhat cavalier fashion to 1905, to the American continent. Here again I would like to offer you a vignette.

The example dates from 1905. This is a popular American song that celebrates being, I quote: "Out in an automobile, in with the girl that you love. Riding at ease on the wings of the breeze, Teach her to steer the machine, get both her hands on the wheel. You kiss and you squeeze just as much as you please. Out in an automobile."

A few elements are worth noticing: first of all, gone are the intermediaries. The couple is alone, in direct contact with each other, safely isolated from family and community by the car. Two: the scene is overtly sexual; and this sexuality is playful rather than anxiously loaded with repressed desire. You kiss and you squeeze is quite self-explanatory. Three: The song does not make any mention of marriage; it refers to the autotelic pleasure of going out together; the encounter has become a self-contained episode which may or may not have a future, we do not know but is not projected into a life long narrative. What defines it is sexual intimacy and sheer pleasure experienced in the intensity of the present. Four: what enables them to escape the home, to define the encounter in hedonistic terms, to have a good time, to give expression to their sexual desire, all of this is enabled by what is perhaps the first mass-produced commodity in the history of capitalism, namely a car. Indeed cars were among the first products to be produced by the infamous Fordist in assembly lines. Like so many other mass produced commodities, it catered to the culture of individualism that had characterized American culture. Five, this little scene does not mention or presuppose any life long narrative. We do not know and are not interested to know if she is the only one or whether they will get married. The song takes place in the eternal present of pleasure and leisure. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, while Emma's and her father's decision was heavily tainted with economic considerations, these considerations have melted into the thin air of two individual's search for their own immediate pleasure. What was beforehand an economic transaction between two families has now become a shared act of consumption -- the money goes to the mass market of leisure rather than to the family.

Indeed the emotional weightiness of Emma and Charles has evaporated here in a climate of cheerful search for intimacy facilitated by an object of consumption (the car) which provides adventure and intensity. Gone are Charles's embarrassed blush, Emma's father cunning calculations, the ponderousness of marriage looming over the awkward couple. Instead we only have ephemeral sentiments which blend easily into the atmosphere of leisure and pleasure of the then-nascent mass market of consumption.

These examples help me to characterize some of the changes I would like to talk about in reference to the experience of love in the 20th century.

During 19th century, the practice of "calling" (going to the woman's house) was the middle-class standard way of courting a woman. At the turn of 20th century, calling was replaced by "going out" places and became the standard way for adolescents and adults to meet and interact with each other.

The word "dating" which started to be used at the beginning of the 20th century consisted in diverse activities such as dining, driving cars, going on trips, buying gifts, going to the movies. All of these activities which we naturally associate today with romantic encounters consist chiefly in going out in the public sphere of consumption and in purchasing leisure goods. These activities were far from being natural at the beginning of twentieth-century (they were harshly contested and decried by many groups) and were the result of the interaction between the emerging markets of leisure and the fact that Romance occupied an almost obsessive place in various sites of popular culture as in movies, women's magazines, romance novels and advertising. For example, the movie industry, tourism, cosmetics, amusement parks, dance halls, hotels, restaurants, cars: all these commodities began to be marketed in such a way that they could channel the desire of many to explore their romantic impulses and became integral but invisible components of dating. Men and women, boys and girls, would meet each other around and in the background of the new experiences that were afforded them by the mass market of leisure. The interlocking of images and commodities around the practice of romance is responsible for the rise of a new cultural category, namely what we call a romantic moment and atmosphere. While in the 19th century, the word romantic referred to an intellectual movement or to the properties of a landscape, it now increasingly meant an atmosphere conducive to special feelings, located somewhere between sexual attraction and love. What makes an atmosphere conducive to such sentiments is that it is saturated with symbols, and icons of romance: A walk on the beach, an exotic and foreign country, the long dinner in an elegant or charming restaurant, all of these became symbols of, and even equivalent to romantic

feelings, thereby suggesting that commodities have increasingly played an important role in shaping the contours of our emotional experiences. It is enough to ask people what feels romantic to them; which gesture, gift, word, ritual of courtship or character is romantic, and you stumble against an extraordinary degree of uniformity and conformity: walking on the seashore feels more romantic than walking in a crowded street; taking someone to an exotic restaurant feels more romantic than going to a falafel or humous place; to eat at candle light is more romantic than to eat with the neon on. Etc. etc. Most of you have no trouble understanding what I mean, which in turn suggests how conventional and stereotypical love is. In fact romantic love is such a cliché that it is a cliché to say that love is a cliché. And yet, it is extraordinary to see that no matter how aware we may be about the cliché character of love, we all are still deeply engrossed with it, and have a tremendous amount of difficulties adopting and being happy with alternative cultural and emotional scripts. In fact, the domain of the “romantic” is one of those areas where sociologists can quietly celebrate their discipline, because try to see what happens to someone when her or his partner/ lover deviates from cultural scripts of romance or when one fails to act in a way that matches closely the cultural imagery of love: it is usually accompanied by anything from unease, recriminations, to doubts and even crisis as to whether one feels “real” love or not. Love is the only emotion around which there frequently is a great deal of uncertainty, in the sense that many people feel often hesitant and unsure as to whether they really feel “love” or not (it is less the case with shame or anger). It is the only emotion about which everything happens as if people look for confirmation of their own –or someone else’s—sentiments in the material, physical, and behavioral scripts they perform, and in the symbols and signs they use to express and exchange love. To be felt, love has to be recognized, and it is for that reason that it is such a good topic for sociologists: To be recognized it has to use an array of words, symbols, and gestures that are highly conventional. And it is Consumer capitalism which has provided many of these symbols.

I will leave on the side the problem of evaluating such intermixing of commodities and personal relationships. Rather, I would like to dwell on the kind of experiences which are made possible, or alternatively excluded, from the close association of love and the culture of consumption.

The culture of Consumption can be said to be characterized by a few elements: it legitimizes the fulfillment of desire, the search for happiness, excitement, and individual welfare. It is driven by the monotonous consumption of novelty, and therefore implies an

anxious and deeply dissatisfied attitude with regard to one's own self. The culture of consumption is by definition the culture of the transient and recyclable. About the culture of consumption thus we may say that it is the first time in the history of the west that culture and economy alike unequivocally endorse Don Juan's compulsion to seduce. To quote Kierkegaard on Don Juan: "Don Juan enjoys the satisfaction of desire: as soon as he has enjoyed it, he seeks a new object, and so on endlessly." Or to quote Norton and Kille, two commentators of Kierkegaard, "energy is always in him and also desire, and only when he desires he is rightly in his element." It is this wandering form of desire which characterizes consumption and which has also come to characterize Romantic Love.

With regard to romantic relationships, It seems to me that one word characterizes quite well the kind of transformations I am talking about, it is the notion of "affair," a word which started being used with frequency after World War II, precisely when postindustrial capitalism had reached its full maturity. The word started being used not in reference to an illicit adulterous relationship, but in reference to a light and pleasurable relationship. The affair can be viewed as a postmodern expression of what Frederic Jameson dubs intensities or experiences of pure sensations, desire, pleasures. Romantic intensities differ from the 19th century love in a few respects, romantic intensities have eliminated the experience of "waiting," --which was so central in Victorian courtship. A standard courtship could take up to take three years. The traditional Romantic narrative of "le grand amour" was a double narrative of revelation --a sudden, unforeseen conviction of the unique desirability of another person, and of a kind of secular salvation: from love at first sight, the lover projected herself or himself whole into a future that could redeem one's entire existence, even though one might die of it. Indeed Emma Bovary clings to the idea that her relationship with Rodolphe is the prelude to the great narrative of love she strives and waits for. Love can only be exclusive, unique and all-consuming. But in the contemporary affair, there is no poignancy and existential gravity of the Romantic idea of the "great love," because there is not anymore an all-encompassing narrative of love initiated by the revelation of a unique and eternal love. The affair is light, eminently repeatable, disposable, and recyclable. In contradistinction to the teleological, absolute and single-minded Romantic narrative of "grand amour," the affair is a cultural experience which contains self-contained narrative episodes disconnected from one another, resulting in a fragmenting of the experience of love.

While human beings have doubtless always had sex before or outside marriage, the "affair" as it emerges after World War II reflects a postmodern sensibility in a number of respects.

First, while premodern love almost always presented a transgression of the social order, the affair is not transgressive: it only affirms the individual and his anxious search for himself through the accumulation of erotic and romantic experiences. In that sense, it is a part of the primal liberation of instincts which sociologists Daniel Bell had found to be characteristic of postmodern culture. Two: 19th century love aimed at transcendence, if one reads novels or letters or diaries of the period one is struck by the fact that love is shrouded with a terminology of absoluteness, salvation, and elevation. In contrast, postmodern love aims at liminality rather than transcendence, that is it aims at exiting the normal conduct of everyday life and taking on new roles, new selves, in which the more total organic fusion of selves can take place. Three: Because Victorian courtship contained built-in obstacles, almost by definition, pain was considered to be intrinsic to the process of coming to know and love another. Indeed, men and women of the nineteenth-century often recognized that pain was "essential and even unavoidable in romantic love" /. But pain is precisely what has been slowly but surely eradicated from the hedonist cultural idiom of love. Making pleasure and intensity paramount features of the romantic experience, the pain and the obstacles which had long been necessary and unavoidable features of love became not only unacceptable but more importantly, unintelligible. The "heaviness" of loving has melted into the air of consumption, leisure and pleasure.

Four, one may suggest that the sexual "liberation" since the 1960s' makes the postmodern affair not terribly different from the indiscriminate search for sexual pleasure embodied by the archetypal characters of Don Juan or Casanova. But that is not the case for, the contemporary affair is far more androgynous and equalitarian; both men and women participate of this new order. Moreover contrary to the character of the traditional seducers it is less about power than it is about the search for the self. Five, underlying the postmodern affair is a definition of identity based on lifestyle choices and consumer rationality. Because we can now meet people as if literally on market, the affair reflects in fact a deeply rationalized attitude-- a "shop-and-choose" attitude whereby one tries to get "the best bargain". Choice, as implied by the culture of consumption, demands a hyper specialization of the needs: the more choice there is, and the more specific and particular the demands: in the same way that we demand our toothpaste to be with fluor, with strawberry flavor, made of natural material, with a cap that remains attached to the tube, increasingly choosing a partner means to choose someone who has a small nose, a thin waist, big tits, blond hair, and then who knows how to play tennis, who has graduated from a particular university, who enjoys cooking, who does not want to have more than one

child, who likes travelling, who enjoys entertaining etc.. etc... you get the picture. It is easy to see this tendency deepening with the Internet, with the following paradoxical result: the more choice there is, the less easy perhaps it is to pair up. This tyranny of choice produces a form of hyper individualism that undermines love. We may perhaps suggest that the “commitment phobia” so abundantly glossed over in the US is a byproduct of a reluctance to give up the freedom to choose. As with the culture of consumption, at times it seems that the act and possibility of choosing have become more important than the object of consumption.

Historically, there is an irony here: for, love had been a synonym of freedom, but it now threatens to crumble under the unbearable weight of freedom.