

Sveva Magaraggia

**Jean-Claude Kaufmann, "Love Online". Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012, 176 pp.**

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## Book Review

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In his last publication Jean-Claude Kaufmann draws on textual analysis of blogs about on-line dating, in order to understand how the internet shapes the way we date. This book is an insightful snapshot of on-line dating in the pre-Tinder era, it offers a complex overview about "the role played by sex in the symbolic architecture of our society" [p. 84].

Online dating sites are proliferating: since 2005, 35% of Americans have met their spouses online (as Ansari and Klinenberg show in *Modern Romance* [2015]). What is changing is not only the number of people involved in attempting to find love online, but also the rules of the dating game. In a world where anything seems possible and anything is revocable, a potential love interest is just a click away. "Online users can buy into the consumerist illusion that they can choose a man or woman in the same way that they would shop for groceries – this is the new hypermarket of desire," as Kaufmann states when introducing the book. Online dating is "the consumerist dream of modern times: take without being taken" [p. 3].

Historically, the dating system has seen two main innovations. If in the Twentieth century the dance hall was one of the main causes for the rise of a new dating system, in the contemporary world it is the internet that dramatically speeds up the process and makes it widespread not only geographically but also throughout the life-course: at least at the time the research was carried out it is not only young people who date on-line but also older adults, and that regardless of their religious backgrounds. Another characteristic that is changing our dating system is the growing confusion of love and sex.

The main questions that underpin this research are about the existence of new dating codes; what has changed and what has remained the same? How do reciprocal expectations change? What are the emotional costs and benefits of on-line dating?

Kaufmann takes up these questions with the sensibility of an ethnographer who feels "the boundless ocean of the World Wide Web" [p. 167], surfs the net, becomes familiar with the blogs, chatrooms and forums and analyses them. In a brief methodological note at the end of the book we find a reflexive analysis of weaknesses and strengths of using on line narratives. If on the one hand one cannot quantify the phenomena revealed, on the other there are thick narratives that allow us to get an insider's understanding of social processes while they unfold.

Kaufmann notes various discrepancies between on and off-line interaction, between the net and real life, and this at every step of the dating process. This delivers some interesting insights. It shows how people are still moving along contradictory lines of a new courtly code, that, in the translation of on-line into off-line meetings is still ambiguous and awaits further social evaluation. "Going on a first date is like starting all over again" [p. 47], what has been shared on line, preferably without showing a desire for commitment, seems to be erased when the date becomes real.

Another contradiction, typical of love, that has not been solved in this on-line dating systems is the trust in intuition and the desire for codes. These two different emotional logics seem to be amplified in the on-line world.

What can be read in between the lines of this very interesting book is the gendered dimension of these encounters, or, more specifically, the everyday doing of gender that these on line encounters reveal. Kaufmann remarks on the importance of the double standard, especially for women, meaning that “if you think that you’ve found the soul-mate, you should wait a little” (before having sex with him) [p. 82]. The importance, for women, of waiting, of not surrendering themselves to the desires of the male counterpart, takes us back to the convention of the courtly code and to the “virgin/whore dichotomy” (as in Bernau 2007).

In this dualism women are either seen solely as virtuous or as immoral, often as the defining aspect of their being. Women are understood as being pure and virtuous but can easily become cast as whores, if they succumb to the sins and temptations of pleasure. In the online discussions analysed in this book we can still detect this discourse: girls who actively seek sexual pleasure are depicted as marginal to common norms of behaviour. This discourse undermines women’s sexual agency; their freedom to express sexual desires is by no means unfettered.

Where Kaufmann finds innovation is in the fact that women’s behaviours are self-chosen; that women behave in whichever way because they want to do so, and they do not refrain from sexual exploration simply because of what other people might expect and think of them. According to Kaufmann, moralising discussions about what is right and what is wrong occur frequently online and are negotiated not so much against the background of collective rules, but rather in terms of a personal quest for happiness. What this research shows without doubt is the need for better communication between boys and girls, men and women about intimacy and sexuality. Whether on- or off-line, sex education is still very much needed. The role of sex education in developing healthy sexual practices and healthy gender identities amongst young people is still often stifled by conservative political agendas. Our allegedly great sexual freedom is not paralleled by greater understanding of erotic desires. Instead, we are facing a new moral panic surrounding sex education and discussions about gender identities in schools.

As someone who researches the gendered dimensions of social processes, I would have loved to read more insights about masculinity; about how men have to portray themselves in order to be successful on the dating market; about how and when the weight of history is felt heavily and when its burdens are more easily cast off.

Whether it is dating online or offline, meeting another in the quest for love is caught up in numerous tensions. Researching its experiences yields important clues about social change, about transformations in intimate life with its often tensionful negotiations of new desires and expectations against the background of traditional gender norms.

This research shows that the online love revolution has outpaced offline developments, that it is there that the relationship between love and sex has been redefined, along with the way people meet. The internet is seen as a source of potential freedom and “chat rooms and forums are the places where an attempt is being made to define a common moral code, and that cannot be undone unless people have strongly held convictions” [p. 88]. For Kaufmann, the tyranny of pleasure collides with day-to-day

life, a life that can still be very conservative and humdrum. Further questions remain. We might ask, for instance, to what extent innovation and freedom in the erotic sphere will be able to expand under conditions of contemporary modernity, now and into the future.

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