

# Modernity and the Crisis of Modern Romantic Love

A Comparative Study of *Sex and the City* and *Bridget Jones's Diary*

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As Anthony Giddens indicates in *The Transformation of Intimacy*, "Emotion becomes a life-political issue in numerous ways with the latter-day development of modernity. In the realm of sexuality, emotion as a means of communication, as commitment to and cooperation with others, is especially important" (202). Within the dynamic of modernity, the transformation of romantic love concerns the changing meaning of sexuality, love and eroticism. The perfect embodiment of romance within modernity must be the cinematic representation of romantic love and its discontent/crisis in not merely *Sex and the City* but *Bridget Jones's Diary*.<sup>1</sup> For one, *Sex and the City* presents a narrative of four dazzling female New Yorkers gossiping about their sex-lives and find new ways to deal with being a woman in the 90's. Motivated by feminism and modernization, Carrie, Miranda, Samantha and Charlotte attempt to counteract and problematize the societal force, which pigeonhole the roles of both sexes. Furthermore, these self-reliant and powerful women assert their status as sexual subjectivity and transform the norm for men and women to engage in a romance. In the filmic discourse, hence, the seemingly firm foundation of romantic love, influenced by the consequences of modernity, begins to be destabilized and nullified. For the other, *Bridget Jones's Diary* and the second episode, *The Edge of Reason*, are respectively the sarcastic, oblique revisions of Jane Austin's *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion*. In the former, Bridget Jones is described as a pathetic and eccentric British woman struggling against her singleton, her weight, her job, her romance, and her many imperfections. She determines to assure her subjectivity and discipline her life through the resolution of self-improvement. *The Edge of Reason* also approaches the changing messages of romance and female subjectivity from a sardonic perspective. Both episodes demonstrate

both her individuality and self-development with her management of her career and her relationship framework as she reconstitutes her self-identity extrinsically and intrinsically under the condition of modernity (Amanda).

The metropolitan romantic love represented in both texts suffers a sharp decline or faces a sudden crisis under the sway of urban modernity, which gradually transforms the city dwellers' life style and mental life. To start with, there is a close and straightforward connection between the globalizing tendencies of urban modernity and the transformation of intimacy in terms of self-reflexivity/self-autonomy and trust mechanisms.

Actually, with the decline of romantic love, modern intimacy or the pure relationship offers a detailed discussion of commitment, plurality of sexual intimacy (threesomes/homosexuality/cross-racial sex), and a reflexive constitution of self-identity. Therefore, first of all, this paper intends to demonstrate why I base *Sex and the City* and *The Bridget Jones's Diary* on the

theoretical issues concerning modernity instead of postmodernity, and in turn elaborate on the affinity between modernity and intimate attachments. Last, but not the least, by using Anthony Giddens's *The Transformation of Intimacy and Modernity and Self-identity* as a model, this paper will not only manifest how both filmic texts tackle the fragmentation of love and commitment in the current era but also discuss what changes romantic love undergoes.

What is modernity? Modernity is "a movement of fluidity, of flux, of change, of unpredictability" (Scott Lash and Jonathan Friedman 1). Douglas Kellner's *Popular Culture and the Construction of Postmodern Identities* unveils that "in modernity, identity, compared with premodern societies, becomes more mobile, multiple, personal, self-reflexive, and subject to change and innovation"

*"He's not my boyfriend; he's just someone I'm trying on"*

Carrie in *Sex and the City*

*"You think you've found the right man, but there's so much wrong with him, and then he finds there's so much wrong with you, and then it all just falls apart"*

Bridget in *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason*

## CRITIQUE

Modernity and the Crisis of Modern Romantic Love

(141). But the forms of modernity are still comparatively solid and “substantial” (141); identity in modernity still consists in mutual arrangements. As Marshall Berman writes in *All That is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, “To be modern is to be part of a universe in which, as Marx said, ‘all that is solid melts into air’” (15). Modernity appears to undercut traditional customs and preceding social structures. Also, to be modern is to be trapped between two spheres: “a will to change – to transform both themselves and their world – and by a terror of disorientation and disintegration, of life falling apart” (Berman 13-14). In other words, modern concerns involve the dimension of discrepancy and incongruity. For Zygmunt Bauman, he proposes two features to characterize light and fluid modernity, which requires rethinking modernity as the unstable structure of human individuality and community. The first is “the gradual collapse and swift decline of early modern illusion” (29). The second drastic change is “the deregulation and privatization of the modernizing tasks and duties” (29). In other words, the emphasis on improvement has shifted from the social/collective action toward the individual’s self-administration. In spite of the above literature review regarding modernity, these theorists’ delineation is not as detailed and comprehensive as Anthony Giddens’s *The Consequences of Modernity* and *Modernity and Self-Identity*. His two works will provide me with an insightful perspective with the essence of modernity and its relations to the decline and alteration of romantic love. Additionally, he even argues that we do not as yet transgress the frame of modernity, let alone enter into the period of postmodernity.

In Anthony Giddens’s theoretical framework, what does modernity indicate? Similar to Zygmunt Bauman’s propositions of liquid modernity, Giddens portrays the conditions of modernity as a “double-edged phenomenon” (*Consequences* 7) with specific focus on “*security versus danger* and of *trust versus risk*” (*Consequences* 7). In *The Consequences of Modernity*, Giddens surveys the consequences of modernity by investigating the disjunctures separating modern social institutions from the traditional or pre-modern social systems. Thus, owing to the natural outcome of the development of capitalist society, modernity

is depicted as post-traditional. The dynamics of modernity, moreover, derives chiefly from three primary sources: “the separation of time and space, the development of disembedding mechanism, and the reflexive appropriation of knowledge” (*Consequences* 53). The three traits of modern institutions “reforge” people’s self-identity, promote their self-reflectivity, and radically undermine the configuration of interpersonal relations.

Nonetheless, Jean-Francois Lyotard refers to the phenomenon of disintegration and heterogeneity and the emergence of a brand-new social system<sup>2</sup> as postmodernity.<sup>3</sup> Such a post-modernist as him insists that the disconnections with providential concepts of history and the destruction of foundationalism in postmodern conditions differ from the major judgment of the Enlightenment and modernity. Yet Giddens opposes Lyotard’s postmodernist consciousness by stating:

referring to these as postmodernity is a mistake which hampers an accurate understanding of their nature and implications. The disjunctions which have taken place should rather be seen as resulting from the self-clarification of modern thought, as the remnants of tradition and providential outlooks are cleared away. We have not moved beyond modernity but are living precisely through a phase of its radicalization. (*Consequences* 51)

On the contrary, Giddens argues that the distinctive attributes of these institutional transformations initiate our entry into the phase of high modernity and further uphold a democratization of the personal sphere.

Under the condition of late modernity, the reflexivity of modern social life exposes the truth that we desire to refute the stereotypical and dominant interpretations of love, sexuality, and eroticism. But why do those ludicrous misconceptions and irrationalities of sexual attraction or romantic love come into being, and why do these intimate relationships undergo such drastic transmutations in late modern societies?

In Giddens’s *The Transformation of Intimacy*, these values of romantic love aren’t a scheme engineered by men to validate and justify the patriarchal matrix. On the contrary, romantic

## CRITIQUE

Modernity and the Crisis of Modern Romantic Love

love is activated by women to heighten both the affective/emotive communication and the egalitarian relationship, so it can be portrayed as a women's dream and projection of achieving a mutual dialogue with men. Hence, romantic love lends itself to exploitation. To put it differently, the representation of romantic love in romances constantly manifests humanization and progressive equality and grants a female protagonist the chance to tame her beloved. The romantic novels, more often than not, culminate in the couple's mutual respect and realization. Nevertheless, however ideal this kind of romantic love proves to be, it still uncovers and projects a women's illusion in a male-dominated framework. Just Mary Evans states in *Falling in Love with Love is Falling for Make Believe*, "Love became not the resolution of human need and desire, but the form through which it has transparently distorted the possibilities of human relationships" (274). Furthermore, romance allows little space for individuals to articulate their self-identity, for romance is the form where the domestic oppression of women has been reinforced and organized. "Far from giving individuals a guide to the expression and articulation of emotional feelings, romance distorts and limits the possibilities of human relationships" (Evans 273).

In light of the late modern social order and social influences of the past few decades, the transformation of intimacy comes into existence with the loosening of traditional forces, and the break with social institutions. For instance, "ideals of romantic love tend to fragment under the pressure of female sexual emancipation and autonomy" (Giddens, *Transformation* 61). Modernity allows the romantic love to shift toward the egalitarian relationship of men and women, i.e., pure relationship. The affection in the pure relationship, named confluent love, presupposes equality and democracy in emotional involvement. As a consequence of increasing institutional reflexivity in late modernity, the confluent love, the surrogate form for romantic love, tends to become more visible to general view. "Love here only develops to the degree to which each partner is prepared to reveal concerns and needs to the other and to be vulnerable to that other" (Giddens, *Transformation* 62). Unlike romantic love, the confluent love involves the process of

individualization in the relations of sexes, where people break through the ideal of marriage and bonding. What's more, the confluent love, based on individual needs and self-satisfaction, imposes no bans on plural sexualities or episodic love. Ulrich Beck replies to the phenomenon in *Risk Society: Toward a New Modernity* stating, "men and women are released from traditional forms and ascribed roles in the search for a life of their own [...]. The need for a shared inner life [...] is not a primeval need" (105). Therefore, simply put, confluent love in a de-traditionalized society accelerates the emancipation of sexuality for both sexes and suggests a couple's equal give-and-take in a romance. "What holds the pure relationship together is the acceptance on the part of each partner, 'until further notice' that each gains sufficient benefit from the relation to make its continuance worthwhile" (Giddens, *Transformation* 63). In a pure relationship, the individual does not merely acknowledge each other's presence but find his self-identity affirmed through the process of self-development and the intimate interaction with the other.

Following the discussion of the close bond between high modernity and romantic attachments, I would appropriate and apply the theory of the pure relationship to the analysis of *Sex and the City* and *Bridget Jones's Diary*. To begin with, speaking of the pure relationship, I would like to address the emergence of what Anthony Giddens terms plastic sexuality first, for it is vital to the emancipation embedded in the pure relationship and to women's recognition of multiple sexual pleasures. In *Sex and the City*, almost the four sex activists may have had multiple sexual partners with relative impunity, particularly the sex addict, Samantha. She would yearn to savor diverse sexual orientations inclusive of interracial and lesbian sex. In "Defining Moments" of the fourth season, she engages in an erotic romance with a Brazilian lesbian artist, Maria. This is also the case with Miranda, the professional lawyer. In "Bay of Married Pigs" of the first season, Miranda's colleagues mistake her for a homosexual and sets her up with a lesbian. In spite of the misunderstanding pertaining to passion, Miranda's temporary encounter with a lesbian could still dismantle and queer the rigid boundary line between masculine and feminine,

## CRITIQUE

Modernity and the Crisis of Modern Romantic Love

heterosexuality and homosexuality. Additionally, Carrie also challenges and switches the divisions of genders as she double books dates in one night. In *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason*, Bridget misconstrues Mark Darcy's female counterpart's flirtation and considers it a deliberate display of the latter's admiration for Mark Darcy. Actually, Mark Darcy's female colleague, Rebecca, attaches her adoration to Bridget Jones instead. The astonishing plot exhibits the manifestation of plastic sexuality, introduced by modernity. The above instances further strengthen plastic sexuality as decentered sexuality, released from the necessity of production, and unfetter sexuality from "the overweening importance of male sexual relationship" (Giddens, *Transformation 2*).

In Giddens's definition, the consequences of the pure relationship can be spelled out as follows. Firstly, the pure relationship is free-floating in contrast with close ties in traditional contexts. What Giddens presents here is to gesture toward the elimination of these pre-supposed customs, "a phenomenon originally accompanied by the rise of romantic love as a basic motive for marriage" (Giddens, *Modernity 89*). Take Carrie in *Sex and the City* as an illustration. As Aidan proposes to Carrie in Episode 60, "Just Say Yes," Carrie starts feeling increasingly claustrophobic and panicking over everything. The main reason is that Carrie has been converted into a non-marrying type, who tends to eradicate the pre-existing standards and place high premium on her private feminine space.

The second perspective stemming from the pure relationship is that the egalitarian involvements are sought for what the relationship can bring to the partners involved (Giddens, *Modernity 90*). Nonetheless, the difficulties of finding and continuing a satisfactory relationship partly spring from "problems of love and gender asymmetries" (Giddens, *Modernity 91*). The perfect example would be Samantha, who has long thought she did have it all. She, however, comes down with a bad case of the flu, and learns all the men in her life are irrelevant to take care of her when she needs them. Despite her persistent management of the relationship with men, she loses contact with these men and perceives the gender inequality when trapped in a predicament.

Another characteristic of the pure relationship is that any intimate bond is "purely, reflexively organized in an open manner and through a self-reflexive questioning stance. "The more a relationship depends only upon itself, the more such a reflexive questioning comes to be its core" (Giddens, *Modernity 91*). In *Sex and the City*, Carrie as a first-person narrator exercises the tactics of questioning to contemplate on each of her or women's attachments to men. In the following stand those questions:

- 1) Why are there so many great unmarried women, and no great unmarried men?
- 2) Are soul mates a reality, or a torture device?
- 3) Carrie wonders if after Big and Aidan, she's all out of great loves. She asks: When it comes to being carefree single girls, have we missed the boat?
- 4) Will she be willing to give up a man for a baby that she may or may not want to have.

On the other hand, Bridget Jones adopts the method of confession and self-questioning to reflect upon her romance with Daniel Cleaver or Mark Darcy. The reflexive coordination of all close relationships today participates in the broader reflexivity of modernity.

In the context of risk society attributed to modernity, both commitment and trust mechanism play a central role in pure relationships. Before the era of modernity, risk was a neutral term, concerned merely with probabilities, with losses and gains. With the pull of modernity, uncertainty, chaos, and risk pervade any social dimensions, including relationship issues, so trust mechanism contributes much to the transformation of intimacy. To illustrate the viewpoint, in *Sex and the City*, Samantha, once falling in love with Richard, finds him a two-timer in a romance because not simply is the male's commitment destabilized, but the couple can no longer found a mutual alignment. In the case of Bridget Jones, she devotes considerable efforts to her affinity with Daniel Cleaver only to find him "splitting his legs" or two-timing. Daniel Cleaver doesn't involve enough dedication to the romance, which causes the disintegration of his relationship with Bridget. In *The Edge of Reason*, what triggers Bridget's breakup with Mark Darcy is the couple's lack of commitment to and trust in each other instead of

the intrusion of Rebecca in their relationship. "In order to achieve intimacy in late modernity, as a result, the pure relationship hinges mutual trust and equal commitment between partners" (Giddens, *Modernity* 93).

With the advent of modernity, Giddens asserts, "well-functioning relationships [...] is one in which each person is autonomous and sure of his or her worth" (*Modernity* 98). In a pure relationship, the individual does not just "recognize the other" and in the responses of that other affirms and justifies his self-identity. Self-identity is negotiated through linked processes of self-exploration and the development of intimacy with the other. For example, in the last episode of *Sex and the City*, escaping from France to her beloved New York with Mr. Big, Carrie confirms her own expectations from a relationship by demonstrating a provocative statement:

The most exciting, challenging and significant relationship of all is the one you have with yourself. And if you find someone you love, well, that's just fabulous.

The remark integrates the four female New Yorkers' process of self-development and self-quest within various relationships. Even though critics still condemn the happy ending of TV texts as a cliché formula endorsing the patriarchal tenets, in the conditions of modernity, the four women at least have paid continuous reflexive attention to their needs and self-identity against the backdrop of plurality of choice. Building on the mentioned ideas, Bridget's romance with Mark Darcy still culminates in a cliché-ridden denouement without a refreshing change divorced from a standardized romance, but unlike the convention of romances, the alternative narrative especially spotlights Bridget's self-growth and her achievement of New Year's resolutions. Conventional romantic novels or romantic comedies idealize a couple's mutual connections and strip the female protagonist of her self-identity and self-perspective in a relationship. Nevertheless, either *Sex and the City* or *Bridget Jones's Diary* subverts the presumptions of romances and delves into the discussion of how women maintain a relationship without much loss of individuality.

In conclusion, modern romantic love doesn't

hinge on "pressuring partners for commitment or sex and attempting to change partners to meet a single person's needs" (Giddens, *Transformation* 94-5) because it is merely "a cycle of pain and despair" (Giddens *Transformation* 95). The representation of romance, which changes into confluent love in *Sex and the City*, and *The Bridget Jones's Diary*, is supposed to be built on mutual commitment and individual needs. Although every now and then the filmic texts cannot be deprived of the norms resulting from romantic love, what they attempt to portray is to deconstruct sex and romantic love and assume Giddensian mechanism of reflexivity on modern relationships. After all, the mutuality of self-disclosure and "open communication is the sine qua non" (Giddens *Transformation* 194) of the modern relationship in the cinematic description of the two alternative modern romances. Such a strategy mentioned above serves the function of pandering to individual needs and problem-solving together "whereby the modern relationship is reflectively organized" (Giddens, *Transformation* 194).

### The Author

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### Notes

1 Candace Bushnell's *Sex and the City* and Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* both have been successfully adapted into the TV series and films. Therefore, in this paper, I would address the topic of modernity and romantic love through the visual representations instead of the novels.

2 Anthony Giddens illustrates this new type of social system with the "information society" or the "consumer society".

3 Postmodernity means that "the trajectory of social development is taking us away from the institutions of modernity toward a new and distinct type of social order" (Giddens, *Consequences* 46), whereas postmodernism is appropriated to connote "aesthetic reflection upon the nature of modernity" (Giddens, *Consequences* 45).

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