
Book Review

Aziz Ansari and Eric Klinenberg (2016) *Modern Romance*, New York, Penguin Press. 277 pages.

Modern Romance is a crossover of genres, as the first book of Aziz Ansari, – a stand-up comedian, best known for playing a hopeless Lothario and deluded entrepreneur on the television show ‘Parks and Recreation’ – it offers fact, observation, advice and comedy in equal measure. As Ansari described at a book show¹, he wanted it to be a ‘weird thing, a kind of sociology book with Ansari’s humor in it’. Conscious of the fact that he might be lacking the background to conduct a serious investigation on the topic of mate seeking, he teamed up with sociologist Eric Klinenberg, author of the 2013 book, *Going Solo: The Extraordinary Rise and Surprising Appeal of Living Alone*. Ansari’s romantic stumblings provided the initial inspiration, and the pages are peppered by personal anecdotes, but the core of the book is made up of substantial research that explores the trials and tribulations of the contemporary love seeker. The result is a pop sociology book that pairs statistics with the odd masturbation joke, where the extensive qualitative research is complemented with a photoshopped Jurassic Park themed love hotel suite.

The work is neither digital alarmist nor overly enthusiastic about the bright new future technological advances promise. As its premise, it considers technological developments, – the usual suspects, smartphones, online dating, and social media – to be only part of the explanation behind the significant transformation of the romantic landscape. A more in-depth analysis reveals that in the last few decades the whole culture of finding love has radically changed, it is not just the tools we use but who we search for; settling for anything less than the perfect person has become unacceptable.

The authors cite a wide range of studies from the fields of sociology and psychology but the primary source of data for their project comes from a year’s worth of focus group interviews they conducted around the globe. For Ansari, the most revelatory information was obtained when people volunteered to share the contents of their phones with the researchers; this way, instead of having to rely on individuals’ memory, they could observe first-hand how actual romantic encounters played out in people’s lives. To complement the interviews, Ansari and Klinenberg set up a subreddit forum (on the Reddit website) where they posed questions pertaining to the different aspects of the modern dating process and relationships and essentially conducted a massive online focus group receiving thousands of responses.

The subject material of the book is vast but the authors’ focus is on middle-class, heterosexual couples. Also, *Modern Romance* is not an in-depth scholarly analysis, Ansari comes to this project as a novice of sociological inquiry; his excitement of discovery is palpable but also reveals a lack of background in social sciences.

Chapter 1 examines how our ideas about ‘searching’ and ‘the right person’ are vastly different from what they used to be and how these transformations altered the

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JQAewgTopvc>

whole courtship process. A set of interviews conducted in a senior citizens' home underscored the changes that have taken place. In the 1950s, getting married was the first step in adulthood, young people, especially women, were primarily motivated by the prospect of gaining basic adult authority, they did not search far and married young. Today, there is a whole new life phase – what sociologists refer to as 'emerging adulthood' – that precedes marriage; the twenties and early thirties are a time for getting educated, trying out different jobs, having multiple relationships; marriage is no longer the foundation of adult life but sometimes a capstone (Cherlin, 2004).

The authors point out that not only has the timeframe for finding a mate changed but there is also a great shift in what people look for in marriage partners. Today, we are looking for the perfect person, who completes us, who we deeply and passionately love, 'good enough' is no longer an option, in the words of Esther Perel (2013) we say to our partners: 'give me belonging, give me identity, give me continuity, but give me transcendence and mystery and awe all in one' (Ansari and Klinenberg, 2016: 25).

And finally, the tools we use to find romantic partners have also changed; thanks to online dating we now have a virtually limitless number of choices available to us anywhere, anytime right at our fingertips. Ansari concludes that today, if you own a smartphone, you're in effect carrying a 24/7 singles bar in your pocket.

Asking someone out by text is on course to being the new norm. Chapter 2 details the problems that communication through text messaging poses. Through countless personal stories collected by the authors, a picture emerges that corresponds to what Dan Slater expressed so eloquently: 'But to live as a single adult in today's postrules world of technorelating is to play a nonstop game of puzzle-and-parse. ... To glean entire emotional states from messages hammered out in text-speak, punctuated with emoticons, all nuance rendered down to me happy, me sad (Slater, 2014: 187)'. People write cringe worthy messages, engage in endless texting banter that lead to no offline meeting, or play the 'nothing gambit' (Turkle, 2015) and disappear without any obvious explanation causing endless confusion and frustration. Texting also facilitates flakiness, rudeness and sexual aggressiveness, personal traits that would be far less dominant in in-person interaction.

Once heavily stigmatized, today it is estimated that a third of married couples met through an online dating site (Ansari and Klinenberg: 245 referring to Cacioppo et al.'s figures). The popularity of these sites is even more salient in 'thin markets' – the LGBT community being the most obvious example –, where the pool of potential partners is significantly smaller. In chapter 3 Ansari and Klinenberg conclude that it is easy to see why online dating has become so attractive to many: it provides a virtually endless supply of potential partners, it gives you the tools to filter and find exactly what you are looking for, the sites are available 24/7, and no intermediary is required. There is no doubt that online dating has opened up a plethora of new romantic opportunities, but interviews revealed that the fun and excitement soon dissipate, leaving exhaustion in their wake. This can partly be explained by the attention asymmetry – women receiving much more attention – and partly by the finding that what we think we want seldom matches what really attracts us.

The book mostly focuses on the dating practices of America, on a society where the individuals' freedom of choice is rarely contested. In chapter 3 the authors

take a brief yet intriguing detour to examine the impact of the increased privacy facilitated by smartphones and the Internet in the much more constraining culture of Qatar. In a place where casual dating is strictly prohibited and young women are heavily supervised, having a secret communication line to other singles brings unprecedented romantic opportunities.

Ansari's father's decision to marry the third woman he was introduced to feels very far removed from today's culture of seemingly infinite choice where – as Turkle writes: 'Nexting has become part of our emotional ecology (Turkle, 2015: 184).' The Internet 'doesn't simply help us find the best thing out there; it has helped to produce the idea that there is a best thing and, if we search hard enough, we can find it (Ansari and Klinenberg, 2016: 125).' We live in a culture that inundates us with the message that we want and deserve the best, and now we have the technology to get it.

In chapter 4 Ansari and Klinenberg draw on Barry Schwartz's prominent work *The Paradox of Choice* to highlight how the abundance of choice affects romantic decision making and potential satisfaction with the partner selected. Applying Herbert Simon's concept of 'maximizers' and 'satisficers', they conclude that online dating encourages a maximizer mindset, which in turn leads to an endless search and an inability to commit.

The online dating environment also fosters a heavily analytical mindset, what Eva Illouz called a 'hyper-cognized, rational method of selecting a mate' (Illouz, 2012: 92), which leads to increased pickiness. What is more, as the authors explain, this pickiness is based on overestimating the importance of qualities that are easily expressed and compared through the online dating platform, and that – according to Helen Fisher – have little importance in determining face-to-face attraction or the viability of a relationship. Relying on psychological studies and personal experience, Ansari recommends us to invest more in getting to know a person, in the relationship itself, instead of waiting for the elusive experience of being instantaneously swept of our feet. Serial first dates rarely provide an opportunity for people's deeper and more distinctive traits to emerge, something that requires shared experiences and a series of intimate encounters.

Chapter 5 contrasts the two fundamentally different dating scenes of Tokyo and Buenos Aires and highlights some salient cultural phenomena. Amid the backdrop of a pending population crisis, Ansari paints a desolate picture of the Japanese dating scene where an increasing number of 'herbivorous men' have become passive and show no interest in sex or romantic relationships.

After Tokyo, the romantically aggressive culture of Buenos Aires presents Ansari and Klinenberg with a very different dating world. Here, hitting on women with abandon – including street harassment – is deeply ingrained in the city's cultural tradition; men are expected to be pursuers in 'the hunt' that takes place mostly on the street, and 'no' is still considered a prelude to 'yes.' While the dating culture in Buenos Aires is no doubt extremely exciting, Ansari concludes that women bear the majority of costs associated with its darker side of unwanted aggression, lies and infidelity.

Chapter 6 examines how the unprecedented private forum for communication that our phone worlds enable affects issues of jealousy, infidelity, and sexual intimacy. Technological advancements facilitate regular dating and maintaining a relationship

but they also impact the potential of straying. The round-the-clock access to possible partners through the privacy of smartphones presents a perfect storm for temptation. As one man was quoted saying about other attractive women: 'It felt like the opposite of 'out of sight, out of mind.' They were in sight and in my mind (Ansari and Klinenberg, 2016: 191).' The privacy of the Internet and the phone world has also led to the emergence of settings - the controversial Ashley Madison site being a prime example - that are explicitly designed to facilitate adulterous escapades.

In this chapter Ansari and Klinenberg investigate the practices of sexting, snooping, and post-breakup disengagement on social media and conclude that there is no normative consensus on how people should navigate the digital landscape.

The last segment of the chapter examines the prevalence of cheating with a focus on differences in American and French attitudes toward adultery. Even though cheating is rampant, in the United States there is an optimistic expectation that most people will remain faithful and infidelity is considered 'morally unacceptable.' Contrary to this, France has the highest tolerance for extramarital affairs; Ansari and Klinenberg found that most people interviewed considered the urge to seek sexual novelty and excitement completely natural, there seemed to be a general understanding that at one point or another everyone will stray.

The last chapter of the book details why settling down is difficult in today's romantic climate - even if the endless string of first dates leads to widespread exhaustion. People are plagued by what Ansari refers to as 'the upgrade problem', constantly wondering whether there is a better match out there, and they are also driven by a desire for passionate love - an emotional intensity that long term relations fail to match.

Finally the writers investigate monogamy today and the concept of monogamish - a term coined by Dan Savage - relationships where couples are free to negotiate the terms of sexual freedom and infidelity for themselves.

Ansari ends *Modern Romance* by concluding that finding someone today is probably more complicated and stressful than it was for generations past - but there is also a higher likelihood of finding someone truly wonderful. He also warns that we should never forget that there is an actual living, breathing person behind every profile and every text. We should invest in people and give them a fair chance before moving on to the next one - he even names this concept the Flo Rida Theory of Acquired Likability Through Repetition.

In summary, *Modern Romance* does a good job at introducing the various problems that pertain to each phase of the contemporary quest for love, the questions of when, where, how, and what we search for, how individuals, without a set of normative guidelines, try to negotiate the ambivalences of searching for their soulmates in a market like environment offering an unprecedented abundance of choice. The writers offer a snapshot view, pointing out that the dating landscape is in constant flux. The copious sprinkling of explicitly present-day pop cultural references throughout the work subtly reinforces the ephemeral nature of any emerging patterns. As in the case of Tinder, which in over a little more than a course of a year went from the ultimate hook-up app to the go-to dating app, even a short amount of time can completely transform the perception of certain tools and behaviors associated with them. Thanks to the extensive research, the book is brimming with insightful personal

stories that help to paint a nuanced picture of the romantic search and shed light on the mindset of the men and women engaged in it. Ansari's unique brand of humor – although best suited to live performances – also makes it quite an entertaining read. *Modern Romance* – Ansari effortlessly taking up the role of modern romance guru – also qualifies as an advice book and incorporating the conclusions of several well-known psychological studies, offers rather sound guidance on how to avoid the pitfalls of digitally mediated dating, where Sherry Turkle's words on how seductive a technology becomes when its affordances meet our human vulnerabilities rings especially true (Turkle, 2015). On the other hand, for anyone wishing a more in-depth analysis of how in today's world, love, choice, and technology are intertwined; the book should present itself as only a starting point.

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