



## Romantic relationships and their transformation in the reflexive society

### *Themes and methods in Jean-Claude Kaufmann's surveys*

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#### **Abstract**

*The process of individualization, associated with reflexive modernity, which assumes that individual actions are legitimized as a result of increased reflexivity, produces major changes in the universe of love action. Following Anthony Giddens (1992), who observed that increased autonomy and reflexivity were both elements that have shaken the romantic love, Jean-Claude Kaufmann notices the deep changes occurring in the way in which romantic relations are experienced - while this type of transformation happens slower in respect to love imagery. The space, a world increasingly strayed from traditions, opens up glorious new opportunities for individual autonomy and self-realization (Mottier, 2007), creating, at the same time, unprecedented pressures on long-term relationships, as more and more women and men choose to live alone.*

#### **Keywords**

*Jean-Claude Kaufmann, romantic love, relationships, survey*

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## Introduction

This article is a critical review of Jean Claude Kaufmann's research on romantic relationships and gender, with a particular focus on his survey research<sup>2</sup>. I will discuss several of the main methods and concepts, highlighting their role in the overall conception of the author.

## Methods

The method of Jean-Claude Kaufmann: take a simple element of our everyday life, conduct an in depth inquiry, and reveal the hidden aspects of the societal functioning. In the three surveys discussed here, the author chooses qualitative methods with variations in terms of instruments, depending on the particular matter being analyzed.

The motivation for the choice of the method and also for the research subject (naked breasts, the morning after the first love encounter, single women and the concept of Prince Charming) stems from the author's inclination to identify topics which have an original theoretical dimension, answering as honestly as possible the incentive of investigating genuine mechanisms of societal functioning (Kaufmann, 1998).

The author of '**Body of Women, Glances of Men – The Sociology of Naked Breasts**', employed the field survey technique with the help of a team of five investigators, who worked on the beach and tape recorded the testimony of over 300 people on the theme of naked breasts. The author and his team toiled on the beaches of Britain and Normandy, from Saint-Malo to Lorient, to interview 300 women and men and observe the contemporary behavior behind the movement to free up bra wearing on the beach. What did exactly happen?

Women wanted to be gazed at, but from a distance and in an anonymous manner. The beach is a place where the body is in the center of everybody's thoughts. On the beach, women's prevailing desires are to enjoy the caress of the sun and wind, the salt on their skin and the admiration of men. Men rely less on observed facts in their answers concerning the interpretation of naked breasts, defending moreover a principle, the idea of another game rule that they imagine as possible.

The issue caused many perplexities among the interviewed; many were surprised by the unusual nature of the theme (Kaufmann, 1998).

Both semi directive interviews and participatory observation were used, and all discussions relied on an empathic approach that involved understanding the value system of the person being questioned, in order to facilitate their confessions and emphasize their sincerity (Kaufmann, 1998). The scale was readjusted over the investigation and the sample employed an over-representation of women, men being less involved in the analyzed mechanism. The sample consisted of three equal categories:

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<sup>2</sup> The books discussed in this article include: Jean Claude Kaufmann, *Femeia Singură și Făt Frumos* (București, Humanitas, 2008, 312 pages); Jean Claude Kaufmann, *Prima dimineață de după. Cum începe o poveste de dragoste* (București, Humanitas, 2000, 268 pages); Jean Claude Kaufmann, *Trupuri de femei - Priviri de bărbați. Sociologia sânilor goi* (București, Humanitas, 1998, 328 pages).

one hundred men, one hundred women who practiced naked breasts, and one hundred women that were just watching.

The survey also presents elements of normative construction and role distance in social space. The main obstacle encountered in this vast enterprise was not the availability of people on the beach, but their laziness - what Kaufmann called 'drowsiness' or 'vegetative state.' The author noted that 'the beach does not like to think, to speak' (Kaufmann, 1998, p.7). Questioning its motives creates aggressive feelings. This applies even when he mentioned its main contradictions: on one hand, the proclamation of universal toleration, everybody is free, and on the other, aesthetic judgments that stigmatize the breasts that do not conform to the ideal pattern ('too old', 'too big', or 'too mobile').

**'The Single Woman and Prince Charming'** uses a mix of methods, both quantitative and qualitative. The theme of loneliness and living alone was researched by Kaufmann at the request of the European Commission who wanted to have an overall perspective on the development of the one person household. It started with a work of synthesis (the theme had drawn the author's attention for over 15 years); over 280 research papers in the fields of history, demography, sociology and psychology were analyzed and categorized. The quantitative data gathered by Kaufmann was enriched by an inside look at the problem through the collection and analysis of 300 letters sent to Marie-Claire magazine, as a response to the published testimony of a single woman. After a preliminary selection that removed those who were outside the subject, or which were too short and lacking in content, 154 letters were kept for analysis, constituting in the author's opinion, a relevant sample. The analysis focused on young and middle age women, Kaufmann (2008) stating that:

[...] a life without a partner at a young or at a middle age represents the motivation for a higher reflexivity, corresponding to a favorable relation with writing. Focusing on this limited group does not impose any problem, since the subject was not solitary life in general, but the moment from the path in which the reflexivity process connected to the marriage hypothesis is at its top (p. 282)'.

These letters are not a sample, according to statistical methodology; they were sent spontaneously, in response to a request and did not involve the provision of certain data. From this point of view information is uneven, as each woman felt the need to specify the landmarks that she considered significant. Kaufman argues that the information is highly revealing and should, therefore, be considered relevant (Kaufmann, 2008). Conclusions are derived by synthesis, as letters were used as an important organizational element in structuring the book.

Still, the difference in accuracy levels in the information collected from the summaries of works, from the various statistics such as budgets of a households, and from the analysis of the letters, leaves room for over-generalizations and intuitive interpretations, or for sweetened advice (Anne Ressayat, 1999) which weakens the

argumentative thread: 'it became difficult to build a couple, but hope dies last' (Kaufmann, 2008, p. 264).

The method of '**The Morning After**' relies on the comprehensive interview. The author employed it with 23 people including 12 women and 11 men, between 23 to 77 years old. Their employment status was diverse, such as unemployed, student, employee, psychologist, and retired. Kaufmann stated that he saw them more as informants, rather than parts of a sample. The diversity of ages and backgrounds leads to variety in the collected experiences. Moreover, this paper is not meant as a comparative study between social categories, so statistical representativity at any level is not an issue.

In order to begin the conversations with the subjects, the author had first chosen to start with a very simple open question: 'What ideas evoke the various early mornings that you went through? What memories come back to you first?' (Kaufmann, 2008, p. 283). This method does not block the questioning, nor influences it. The subjects responded in their own words, and they used very spontaneous association of ideas when they evoked the subject of the first morning. The author asked each person to select one or two early mornings which were to be detailed, and which systematically provided faster input for other experiments. Subsequently, Kaufmann guided the subjects over the interview by asking specific questions in order to get detailed answers, and he made the sometimes distant memories resurface. He then analyzed all interviews. He constantly cited excerpts of interviews to illustrate an idea that had just appeared, or contrary, he compared and analyzed different extracts that either contradicted or complemented each other, in order to infer an idea or to construct a concept.

The representations of the first morning in literature and films were also investigated by the author. Thus, at the beginning of each chapter Kaufmann offers an excerpt from a novel to illustrate the remarks to follow, or refers to changes in the history of ideas. He uses many references to other sociologists, relying on their concepts to clarify his remarks. He also uses references to the responses obtained in his former work.

This methodology, which virtually ignores any statistical approach, lends an essentially descriptive and interpretative look to the work of Jean-Claude Kaufmann. The causal model of explanation (e.g. relating dependent and independent variables) is not often present. From the author's perspective, the behavioral standards inside an initiating couple always result from couple interactions, without the possibility of predicting or explaining what standards will actually develop. As a consequence of this approach, the unequal distribution of tasks by household types (women still assume most of these tasks) are only seen and not explained except by the persistence of traditional models, though it is precisely this persistence that requires explanations.

### **Concepts**

The author of '**The Morning After**', '**Body of Women, Glances of Men – The Sociology of Naked Breasts**', and '**The Single Woman and Prince Charming**' uses different concepts (identity, biographical trajectory, path, romantic ideal, imaginary, intimacy, corporality

and ‘the paradox of appearance’) to portray the changes occurring in couple relationships. The concept of identity is the one that reappears in all the surveys, organizing the information concerning profound changes that occur in relationships between men and women at a romantic level.

### **Identity**

According to the author, being the subject of your own existence is something new in the history of humanity (‘a historical achievement’) and involves a complex, demanding and risky work. For Jean-Claude Kaufmann, identity is intrinsically linked to processes of individualization and modernity. In this regard, he distinguishes ‘two modernities’ in two parts of the twentieth century. In the first half of the century, if the sense of individual identity gradually becomes clear, this does not really imply a revolution. Rather, in the 60’s a change or turning takes place: the individual, the center of everything, must now, by himself give meaning to his existence. In the second modernity the author talks about the reflexivity of individual, which means the he questions everything, but at the same time remains himself. All aspects of the daily life are lived in the field of personal questioning, especially romantic relations between a man and a woman, because the social roles are changing as a result of the freedom of choice as well as the changes in partners’ expectations. As Zygmunt Bauman (2008, p. 1) said: ‘Freedom and autonomy have their glories and their miseries. Jean-Claude Kaufmann has composed a thoroughly researched inventory of both, while in depth the present-day condition of women and its impact on the male half of humanity’. This inventory is more visible than ever in **‘The Single Woman and Prince Charming’** where ‘as women replace self-effacement with newly gained self-confidence, the lynchpin is driven out of the family and the private sphere, and the-hard-to-reconcile drives to autonomy and companionship result in the increasing fragility of commitments and fear of loneliness for both women and men’ (Bauman 2008, p. 1).

Kaufmann (2008, p. 285) states, at least, one undeniable truth: ‘the individual (man or woman) is an open structure, constantly changing, reformulating oneself. Choosing one path does not change only the scenography of life; it makes us other persons, truly and profoundly.’ If the identity is a new ‘data’ with which modern man must play, the author emphasizes his role: ‘The identity is there to <<pick up the pieces>> trying to construct meaning when reflexivity shattered certainties, to maintain self-esteem so necessary to the action’ (Remy, 2004, p. 8). At the same time, the new data also influences the expectations, creating inequality.

The dominant model of privacy encourages women to find a partner to form a couple. But here, the expectations of men and women are not the same. For men, there are more sexual and management issues, for housekeeping, emotional and financial support, or communication problems. This is exacerbated when the search for a partner is prolonged, and the available candidates appear very disappointing from the women’s perspectives. We have then an induced single life, more than a desired one. At the same time, an opposite trend emerges. Is living solo not the best way to achieve the dream of

the individuals to be the master of their own destiny, to assert their freedom against the model of the 'small couple locked in its small framework', or to achieve their successful professional career without being entangled in the constraints of family life?

### **Biographical path**

The process of developing an identity, which we evaluate here as immaterial, quantifiable and shaped according to experiences and meetings, leads the author to the development of the concept of biographical path, referring to women that are in the situation of choosing between two identity poles (Kaufmann, 2008).

Kaufmann distinguishes two groups: 'the dinosaurs of love' and the 'galloping horses' (Kaufmann, 2008, p. 265). For the former, the absolute love falls from the sky. The present is filled with 'husband, baby, home', while the dream becomes an obsession. Some force themselves to go out to try to establish connections and finally meet the prince. Others, retreated to their homes, sink into dark solitude. The second, 'the galloping horses', are forced to leave to avoid head-to-head with the TV and combine 'therapy of escape with the logic of the carapace' (p.263), by hiding their doubt and unease. 'The single woman sees only the positive side of her split life' (p. 271); she takes care of her body and puts her life on stage. Beautiful, strong, confident, she draws attention, but also intimidates. The more assertive she is, the more she becomes revolutionary and subversive. Revolutionary, because she goes against the traditional image of a woman and her devotion to home life, as the cornerstone of family itself, a basic structure of society. The replacement of dedication values by those of autonomy may bring down the construction. These women are no longer on the margins; they seem innovative, living at the center of life, cultivated.

The biographical paths of autonomy yet stumble on the question of men: a lifetime without a partner seems too hard. This is why more and more women who have chosen the single life adopt a compromise position, by maintaining a relationship without forming a couple. They invent flexible forms of limited union. It is no longer a stable marriage model based on an exclusive and total connection, but 'a relational and emotional life <<a la carte>>, a new friendly-love short connection' (Kaufman, 2008, p. 240).

The analysis of these trajectories led Jean-Claude Kaufmann return to Prince Charming. The combination of the independent woman and Prince Charming seems against nature because the first stems from the world of concrete and the latter from the world of dreams. Yet, although the traditional marriage concerns the association of similarities, it can also be viewed as a collection of complementary and a combination of differences, Prince Charming not being in contradiction with the independent woman. Used in a good way, he supports the dynamic autonomy of the independent woman. He is intimate because she thinks a lot about him, but he should remain a distant and virtual member of the ideal society. Thus, the author concludes: 'The accompanied autonomy, when presented in a good condition, offers many opportunities for love butterflies and allows the invention of a new love code' (Kaufmann, 2008, p. 215).

### **Corporality and the 'appearance paradox'**

The concept is to be found in all three surveys discussed here, maybe not so explicit in the **'The Morning After'**, where the partners are embarrassed of showing themselves nude, an emotion caused both by former social representations concerning the good looks of a woman/man (influenced by consumerism and publicity) and by personal insecurity. This embarrassment indicates that intimacy, defined as a fusion of identities (Erickson, 1968), which presumes an almost full understanding of the partner, is almost impossible to attain in the first morning. Intimacy 'requires considerably more time to develop than passion does' (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, 1999, p.52).

A part of the sociology of body discussed by Kaufmann analyses what effect a partial naked body has on the viewers, and how women's sense of perfection has the opposite effect to the desired one in a relationship.

The naked breasts on the beaches allow the reader to see the details of a behavior apparently not important, but regulated by a set of very strict but secret rules: every woman must respect a behavior dictated by her morphology, age, culture, the context on the beach and by the people around them - especially men.

Whenever Kaufmann asked the interviewees whether all women can remain topless, the answer was classic: each does what she wants, but... Everybody was eager to assert the principle of freedom, but they understood the need to always add something, perhaps quietly, in contradiction with the principle of freedom. By insisting on questioning the respondents on this matter, the inevitable response was that beautiful natural breasts were allowed maximum exposure.

**'The Single Woman and Prince Charming'** presents the body language of women without a partner, in relation to a radical autonomy on the biographical path. Living without a partner makes women reconsider their body and the way this is valued. The high self-image in terms of appearance transforms the energy and professional success of women into public identity making. Kaufmann (2008) interprets this transformation as potentially counter-productive:

'The single woman appears beautiful, powerful, self-confident in such a way that she impresses and intimidates. This is the paradox of appearance: too positive an image (especially if associated with professional success) endangers the conditions of the so long desired encounter (which often represents the starting point for the entire effort of the woman)' (p. 231).

Representing an interface of communication and interaction with the world and others, the biological body has to be dressed in a socially acceptable way, until meeting the paradox of communicating more through cultural messages over-exposed by the body (clothing, jewelry, makeup, etc.) than by our natural, sensory or mental abilities (empathy, telepathy, etc.). What matters is the form, what we present to others, phenomenon generated and stimulated by the functioning of the consumerist society which almost imperatively proposes 'a seductive body, based on a true aesthetic

dictatorship' (Teampău, 2010, p. 2). The more the body is visible, exposed, analyzed, at the level of representation, the more the 'real' body is pressured; under the new aesthetic dictatorship, 'inequality embodies the heart of the body and of the anatomy' (Teampău, 2010, p. 4).

### ***The romantic ideal***

This concept appears both in '***The Morning After***' and '***The Single Woman and Prince Charming***' where Kaufmann asserts that sentimental love was created by novels. It can be defined as 'a passionate struggle against obstacles, and characterized by the exacerbation of feelings, the idealization of the partner while magnifying the love object' (Kaufmann, 2008, p. 212). However, this romantic style loses purity starting with the seventies with 'the automation of the sexual impulse' (Kaufmann, 2008, p. 232). Nothing in common with Shakespeare's (2003, p.53) lines:

'Love is not love  
Which alters when it alteration finds,  
Or bends with the remover to remove:  
O no! It is an ever-fixed mark  
That looks on tempests and is never shaken.'

According to Kaufmann, the romantic style disappears, but he brings little evidence on the reason of its disappearing, which he says is due to the fact that the individual is not satisfied anymore with genuine powerful emotions. Instead, s/he wants more experiments and partners in life. The romantic model disappears in practice, but not in ideas, states Kaufmann (2008). It remains present in literature and film, but especially in the way we all speak and idealize love (e.g.: the first love stories of young girls). His argumentation appears contradictory because, as discussed in the concept of biographical path, the return of Prince Charming coinciding with the creation of a new love code is nothing more than the resurgence of romantic love adapted from case to case to the postmodern capitalist society.

Eva Illouz's (1997) study argued that the resurgence of romantic love reflected a continuing search for 'the experience of utopia' (p. 5); but in postmodern capitalism this search had been deeply influenced both by a capitalist work ethic and by consumerism. According to her, 'commodities have now penetrated the romantic bond so deeply that they have become the invisible and unacknowledged spirit reigning over romantic encounters' (p.9). She found that, among her informants:

'Self-interest was disavowed in favor of the implicit model of a disinterested, organic, and gratuitous bond. Belief in romantic love is apparently sustained by a belief in its disinterestedness'(p.7).

But her findings show that in reality, relationship decisions alternated between 'agapic' and 'self-interested.'



Gunter Schmidt and his associates (2006), reporting on a large survey study carried out in Hamburg and Leipzig, found that 95 percent of men and women in all age groups saw life in a loving couple as an ideal. At the same time, 38 percent of their sample had separated from a spouse or partner while children were present in the household. The most common cause for these separations was the decline of emotional intensity (44 percent for men, 49 percent for women).

One of the reasons individuals resist the decision to commit to a single partner, in cohabitation or marriage, is their dissatisfaction with the gender-specific roles that usually come to prevail in the partnerships of stable couples. This is a concern which particularly affects women (Schmidt, 2006).

## Conclusions

For Kaufmann **the love relationship has changed**. More specifically, the birth of love stories evolves. In fact, Kaufmann said that in the earliest societies women were exchanged between families and these exchanges were governed by strict rules. The marriage was then in no event a private affair, but a public matter. For a long time, marriage would then keep track of this institutionalized method. Only in the twentieth century, thanks to novels and drama, a new vision, based on love, appeared. However, during this time nothing has changed profoundly concerning the behavior of partners. The author therefore seeks to show that the present situation is characterized by the decline of the romantic narrative for a much vaguer pattern, detached from any tradition.

A possible limitation derives from the fact that the data Kaufmann used refers to the social context of Western societies, and it may lead to an inadequate grid for understanding gender roles in other cultures. The three surveys are confronted with the 'pitfall of ethnocentrism' (Dogan, Pelassy, 1993, p. 12), the tendency to evaluate the studied groups according to the values and standards of the author's own society, especially with the conviction that this is the trend that will mark the evolution of romantic relations in other societies.

**People live through evolutionary (biographical), winding paths**, which they construct without being able to detach themselves from the idea of destiny. The love practices transform; people seek new ways, so society cannot remain attached to an old model that becomes an obstacle. Every aspect of what surrounds us is now called into question, subject to debate, but is then generalized. Kaufmann argues, however, **that nothing replaces the personal experimentation. And the first morning is now a 'critical stage of the experiment'**. The place of the first morning in the experiment plays an even more important role when the story has suddenly started the day after without a prior history or declaration of love (the change includes the change of mode of expressing feelings). Everything is then very intense and very fast.

Experimentation in the first morning is not only highlighting the partner, but also oneself. It deals also with being able to detect the commonplace as a true social process that constructs the social reality by producing the default, by the incapacity to detect the important facts (Kaufmann, 1998). Early mornings have become defining moments in the

construction of a marital history; they are 'squeaky' or are synonyms with 'love at first sight'. Jean-Claude Kaufmann analyses the formation of standards in contemporary social life. While ancient societies were dominated by the reproduction of inherited patterns of behavior, **contemporary society seems increasingly marked by individual freedom of choice (individualization) and diversity of behaviors.**

The sociology of Kaufmann consists of showing that this freedom is only apparent and that pacified areas in which this diversity manifests itself in behavior (such as the European beach where some women expose their breasts and some not) are still governed by implicit norms (also men avoid looking at women naked on the beach in a stare way), reflecting a major self-control, the result of socialization and what Norbert Elias called the 'civilization of manners'.

According to these surveys, the individuals' carrier is shaped by inherited models of personal history (which is also a social history). Still, despite the strength of internalized habits, people now face, through their interactions with others, multiple, diverse and sometimes mutually contradictory models. Nothing can be taken for granted any more in intimate relationships: everyone must engaged in negotiation, more or less profound, for example in defining the division of the housework in a couple. This forces contemporary individuals to perform reflexive work on themselves, which leads to an often unstable definition of their own identity.

In this context, **personal identity**, far from being inherited, **derives from 'work', a process in which individuals are required to engage in often long and risky negotiations with their partners.** This process tends to stabilize over time and transform the effects of trading into behavior patterns (which does not prevent a rupture from occurring later). The function of interpersonal standards and norms changes. Instead of preexisting to behavior and guiding it a priori, norms can be increasingly seen today as a more or less stable result of behavior.

In this construction of personal identity through individualization processes, **imagination plays an important role** as the norms and behaviors are, in part, built without having to refer to a real model. Thus, studying the status of unmarried and living alone women in France, Jean-Claude Kaufmann highlights the role the mental image of Prince Charming plays for them: a perfect, idealized image that, according to personal scenarios, changes into a 'little prince' not so bright or shiny, halfway between dream and reality, between fantasy and life experiences.

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