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From Durkheim's anomie to Bauman's liquid love: A sociological exploration of the alienation of affection

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to explore the evolving sociological imagination of emotional alienation by tracing an intellectual trajectory from Émile Durkheim's anomie to Zygmunt Bauman's concept of liquid love. Alienation of affection though rarely theorized explicitly remains a crucial lens to understand how bonds of intimacy, trust, social solidarity are reshaped under the pressures of modernity, post modernity and late modernity. Durkheim's notion of anomie which is the breakdown of normative regulation offers an early framework for grasping how the weakening of collective conscience produces estrangement not only in economic or political life but also in the realm of emotions and personal ties. Building on this classical foundation, the paper tries to examine intermediary contributions such as Marx's account of alienation, Weber's insights into rationalization and disenchantment, and Erich Fromm's reflections on the commodification of love. These perspectives highlight how structural forces gradually transform intimate life, leading to fragility, insecurity, and a loss of stable anchoring in human relationships. The argument culminates with Bauman's liquid love which captures the precariousness of affect in present globalized consumerist societies. Relationships are increasingly fluid, provisional, and negotiable shaped by new age digital technologies and market logics. Here, affection becomes both intensely desired and persistently unstable reflecting broader dynamics of liquid modernity. By connecting to Durkheim's anomie to Bauman's liquid love, this paper proposes a sociological framework for studying the alienation of affection across time. It argues that the dissolution of traditional structures, coupled with the rise of individualized, networked forms of intimacy, constitutes one of the most significant transformations of social life in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Anomie, alienation, affection, liquid love, modernity, intimacy, sociology

Introduction

The concept of the 'alienation of affection', though often invoked in legal or psychological discourse requires systematic sociological articulation particularly in light of the changing nature of intimacy, solidarity, human bonding etc. under conditions of modernity and late modernity. Alienation of affection may be understood as a state in which the bonds of trust, and intimacy with emotional reciprocity that once anchored human relationships are eroded, leaving individuals feeling estranged from the very affective ties that provide meaningful social integration. This framing connects directly with the sociological tradition of analyzing the destabilization of social norms and interpersonal solidarities, beginning with Durkheim's (1897/1951) notion of anomie which highlighted how the breakdown of normative regulation undermines collective conscience and produces estrangement not only in the public but also in the private realm of emotions. In contemporary societies where globalized consumerism, digital technologies, and neoliberal individualism dominate, affection itself risks commodification, fragmentation making the need to theorize its alienation even more urgent (Bauman, 2003) ^[3]. The significance of focusing on affection and intimacy arises from the recognition that emotions are not merely private-psychological states but are deeply social phenomena that mediate between individuals and the broader structures of society. As Hochschild (1983) ^[14] argued in her path-breaking work on 'emotional labor', the ways in which emotions are organized, managed, commodified reflect structural imperatives of the economy and culture.

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In similar vein, Collins (2004) ^[8] conceptualized ‘interaction ritual chains’ to show how emotions bind individuals into communities while their absence or weakening leads to disaffection and alienation that causes social fragmentation. Thus, the alienation of affection deserves theoretical attention because it is not simply a matter of interpersonal failure but an index of wider transformations in social life as the erosion of solidarity, the rationalization of intimacy and the liquefaction of bonds in late modernity. Within the sociology of emotions, this concept occupies a distinct position insofar as it allows scholars to trace the subtle yet profound, ways in which modern social structures destabilize affective life reshaping not only how individuals relate to each other but also how they imagine community, belonging and meaning. Against this backdrop the central research questions that guide this inquiry are first, how does modernity alter the structures of intimacy producing new forms of emotional alienation; and second, what theoretical resources across classical and contemporary sociology help us trace and interpret this transformation? These questions are not merely academic but touch upon urgent social realities like the rise of loneliness despite hyper-connectivity, the fragility of familial and marital bonds, and the paradoxical desire for yet anxiety about intimacy in liquid modern societies. To address them, this article traces a theoretical journey from Durkheim’s anomie, through intermediary contributions such as Marx’s (1844/1978) account of alienation, Weber’s (1922/1978) analysis of rationalization and disenchantment and Fromm’s (1956) reflections on the commodification of love, culminating in Bauman’s (2003) ^[3] metaphor of liquid love. Durkheim provides the classical anchor by showing how the breakdown of normative integration destabilizes bonds while Marx extends the idea of alienation to interpersonal relations under capitalist logics. Weber enriches this analysis by highlighting how rationalization and bureaucracy drain affective warmth from relationships, replacing them with instrumental calculation whereas Fromm brings focus to the human need for love and the dangers of its commodification in modern consumerist contexts. Finally, Bauman synthesizes these insights by demonstrating how in late modernity relationships have become fluid, provisional and negotiable, reflecting both the intense longing for affection and its persistent instability. The structure of this paper therefore mirrors this theoretical trajectory as Section One introduces the problem of alienation of affection situating it within the sociology of emotions; Section Two examines Durkheim’s anomie and its implications for affective estrangement; Section Three considers intermediary thinkers like Marx, Weber, Fromm and Giddens who provide bridging concepts; Section Four analyzes Bauman’s liquid love as the culminating framework; and Section Five concludes by proposing a sociological framework for studying emotional alienation across contexts emphasizing both its global salience and its specific relevance to societies undergoing rapid cultural-technological change. In doing so the article aims to show that alienation of affection is not an accidental by-product of modern life but a constitutive feature of the transformations wrought by modernity and late modernity demanding sustained scholarly engagement across sociology, psychology and cultural studies.

Durkheim’s Anomie: Disintegration of Norms and

Affectional Bonds

Émile Durkheim’s concept of anomie has long been recognized as a foundational contribution to sociology, signifying the breakdown of normative regulation and the weakening of the collective conscience that binds individuals into a moral community, and while Durkheim (1897/1951) introduced the concept primarily to explain variations in suicide rates, its implications extend far beyond pathological acts of self-destruction to encompass the erosion of social cohesion, solidarity and affective bonds that anchor human life. For Durkheim, anomie arises in moments of rapid social transformation whether through industrialization, economic crises or shifts in collective belief systems when traditional norms lose their binding force and new ones fail to take hold leaving individuals unmoored in a condition of normlessness (Durkheim, 1893/1984). The collective conscience which Durkheim described as the shared moral framework that integrates society, functions not only as a regulatory mechanism in economic and political life but also as the cultural substrate upon which affective relationships of family, kinship, friendship are built, such that when the collective conscience weakens individuals experience estrangement not only from the social order but also from each other. In *Suicide*, Durkheim (1897/1951) identified anomic suicide as the outcome of disrupted regulatory frameworks emphasizing that without moral boundaries desires become infinite, expectations destabilize and individuals are left incapable of achieving satisfaction, a state that resonates with the modern experience of relational instability where affective commitments lack the durability that traditional moral orders once supplied. Later commentators such as Merton (1938/1968) expanded on Durkheim’s notion developing the concept of ‘strain’ to explain how disjunctions between cultural goals and institutional means generate deviance, yet the underlying insight remains consistent like when normative frameworks falter, individuals suffer psychological distress and social alienation that reverberate into their intimate lives. The link between anomie and emotional estrangement becomes clear when considering how trust, reciprocity, mutual obligation within families and communities depend on stable normative expectations, for once those expectations weaken, marital ties, kinship relations and networks of friendship become fragile, provisional and vulnerable to dissolution as has been demonstrated by contemporary studies of rising divorce rates, declining fertility, the fragility of long-term commitments in societies undergoing rapid modernization (Giddens, 1992). In this sense anomie not only describes a macro-social disintegration of norms but also provides an early framework for analyzing the alienation of affection like the sense that bonds of intimacy no longer provide security that love itself becomes precarious and that trust between individuals is increasingly eroded. For example Durkheim’s observation that economic crises provoke higher rates of anomic suicide underscores the intimate connection between macroeconomic dislocation and the disintegration of personal lives suggesting that affectional stability depends upon broader regulatory frameworks that structure expectation and obligation. Yet Durkheim’s theory is not without its limitations when applied to the sphere of emotions while he powerfully articulated how the collective conscience regulates social life, he tended to emphasize macro-level integration at the expense of exploring the

micro-dynamics of affective ties leaving relatively underdeveloped the question of how individuals experience alienation within specific relationships. Critics such as Besnard (1987) and Turner (1992) have argued that Durkheim's framework lacks a sufficiently nuanced account of agency, emotion, interaction etc., and while later theorists like Collins (2004) ^[8] built upon Durkheimian insights through the lens of interaction ritual chains they also highlighted the importance of situational dynamics in producing emotional solidarity. Furthermore, Durkheim's functionalist orientation sometimes rendered him blind to the role of power and inequality in shaping affective alienation as feminist sociologists have noted in showing how patriarchy structures emotional life in ways that reproduce domination and subordination (Hochschild, 1983; Illouz, 1997) ^[14]. Still, despite these limitations Durkheim's theory of anomie remains invaluable in situating the alienation of affection within a broader framework of social disintegration, for it underscores the systemic nature of emotional estrangement as rooted not in personal pathology but in collective breakdown. In the contemporary context, the instability of family structures, the weakening of kinship ties and the erosion of communal solidarity can all be seen as manifestations of anomic conditions where individuals experience not only uncertainty about their social roles but also fragility in their affective attachments. As Bauman (2003) ^[3] later observed, this fragility has intensified in liquid modernity, yet the groundwork for understanding it lies in Durkheim's early recognition that the weakening of moral regulation destabilizes the emotional architecture of social life. By positioning affectional alienation as an extension of anomie one can see how the dissolution of stable norms erodes the trust and reciprocity necessary for enduring relationships producing a world in which intimacy is increasingly fleeting and solidarity precarious. Thus, while Durkheim did not explicitly theorize the alienation of affection, his analysis provides the first sociological map for understanding how disintegration of norms translates into disintegration of emotional bonds, a map that subsequent theorists would refine, expand and complicate as the conditions of modernity gave way to those of late modernity.

Intermediary Theoretical Contributions: Classical to Mid 20th Century

Between Durkheim's classical formulation of anomie and Bauman's late modern depiction of liquid love lies a rich intellectual lineage of theorists who grappled with the ways in which modern social structures reshape the conditions of intimacy, affection, and human solidarity, and it is through their contributions that one can trace the intermediary conceptual bridge from normative disintegration to emotional precariousness. Karl Marx's early writings, particularly the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 articulated the idea of alienation (*Entfremdung*) which described the estrangement of the worker from the product of labor, the process of production, one's species-being and from other human beings (Marx, 1844/1978). Although Marx's concern was primarily with economic life, the resonance of his analysis extends directly into the domain of affective relations as when labor is commodified under capitalist relations of production, so too are human

capacities for love, intimacy, solidarity leading to a condition where relationships risk becoming instrumentalized, alienated, and devoid of authentic reciprocity. Marx's diagnosis suggests that alienation is not confined to the factory but permeates the entire lifeworld, thereby foreshadowing later concerns about the commodification of emotions and affection. Max Weber writing at the turn of the twentieth century offered another crucial perspective through his analysis of rationalization and disenchantment (*Entzauberung*). In *Economy and Society* and related works, Weber (1922/1978) argued that modernity is characterized by a relentless drive toward bureaucratic rationalization, calculability and efficiency processes that drain the world of enchantment, charisma and affective warmth. While Weber's core concern was with the rational organization of authority and economic life his insights have profound implications for intimate relations, for when relationships are filtered through the logics of rational calculation whether in the bureaucratic management of family life, the contractual formalization of marriage or the instrumental pursuit of advantage they risk losing the spontaneity and moral substance that make affection durable. Thus, Weber's diagnosis of modernity as rationalized and disenchanted resonates with the erosion of intimacy suggesting that love itself risks becoming formalized, bureaucratized or reduced to instrumental rationality, an insight that bridges Durkheim's anomie to later critiques of emotional commodification. Erich Fromm writing in the mid-twentieth century advanced this line of critique by directly addressing the sphere of love and intimacy. In *Escape from Freedom* (1941), Fromm argued that modern individuals faced with the burdens of autonomy and the collapse of traditional authorities often retreat into conformism, authoritarianism, commodified relations rather than achieving authentic freedom. Later, in *The Art of Loving* (1956), he made explicit the link between capitalist society and the commodification of love contending that in a market-driven world, love becomes a transactional exchange where individuals treat themselves and others as commodities to be marketed, exchanged and consumed (Fromm, 1956). For Fromm, true love requires care, responsibility, respect and knowledge yet the dominant social structures of consumer capitalism undermine these qualities, encouraging instead narcissism, superficiality and commodification. Fromm therefore provides a crucial intermediary step as he moves from structural accounts of alienation (Marx, Weber, Durkheim) to a psychological and interpersonal understanding of how alienation penetrates intimacy itself, producing what may be termed the alienation of affection. His insistence that love must be cultivated as an art underscores that in the absence of stable normative frameworks, affection requires conscious practice rather than being taken for granted. Building upon these insights, Anthony Giddens offered a late-modern account of intimacy in *The Transformation of Intimacy* (1992) where he introduced the concept of the 'pure relationship.' For Giddens the pure relationship is one entered into for its own sake, sustained only so long as both partners derive satisfaction from it and dissolvable when the emotional returns diminish (Giddens, 1992). This form of intimacy reflects the reflexive, individualized character of late modern societies like while it liberates individuals from traditional constraints, it simultaneously renders relationships fragile, provisional and contingent. Giddens'

account of the pure relationship thus prefigures Bauman's later metaphor of liquid love, as both capture the transitory, negotiable and insecure character of modern intimacy, yet Giddens places greater emphasis on reflexivity, negotiation with potential democratization of intimacy whereas Bauman stresses its fragility and commodification. Taken together, these intermediary contributions provide a theoretical synthesis that illuminates the trajectory from Durkheim's diagnosis of anomie to Bauman's description of liquid love. Marx contributes the foundational idea that alienation is systemic and rooted in capitalist structures that commodify not only labor but also human relations too, thereby establishing the economic basis of emotional alienation. Weber deepens this analysis by showing how rationalization and disenchantment transform the very texture of human relationships, draining them of enchantment and embedding them within bureaucratic and instrumental logics, foreshadowing the hollowing out of affect. Fromm translates these structural critiques into the language of psychology and love directly connecting capitalist commodification to the distortion of intimacy and proposing an alternative vision of love as an art to be cultivated against the tide of alienation. Giddens then provides a late-modern vocabulary of reflexivity and the pure relationship which both resonates with Fromm's concerns about fragility and anticipates Bauman's imagery of liquidity. The comparative synthesis suggests that these thinkers collectively form a bridge as where Durkheim described the disintegration of normative regulation, Marx, Weber and Fromm explained how economic structures, rationalization and commodification undermine affective life, and Giddens provided a late-modern account of intimacy that directly anticipates Bauman's metaphor of liquid love. Thus, the alienation of affection can be understood not as a sudden phenomenon of late modernity but as the outcome of a long historical trajectory of sociological reflection on alienation, rationalization, commodification with reflexivity. By situating emotional alienation within this genealogy, one can see more clearly how the weakening of collective conscience described by Durkheim evolves into the commodified and fragile intimacy analyzed by Bauman with Marx, Weber, Fromm and Giddens each contributing indispensable theoretical tools for grasping the disintegration of norms and the liquefaction of bonds in modern social life.

Bauman's Liquid Love: Fragility of Affection in Globalized Modernity

Zygmunt Bauman's theorization of liquid modernity provides the most compelling late-modern framework for understanding the alienation of affection as it captures the distinctive fluidity, instability, fragility etc. of human relationships under conditions of globalization, consumerism and digital mediation. In his influential work *Liquid Modernity* (2000), Bauman argued that the solidity of modern institutions like nation-state, family, class, religion had given way to a fluid world in which social forms no longer endure long enough to frame stable identities or long-term commitments and this condition of liquidity extends directly into the realm of intimacy which he elaborated in *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds* (2003) [3]. For Bauman, liquid love encapsulates the paradox of contemporary relationships while individuals yearn for affection and intimacy more intensely than ever before, the cultural and structural conditions of liquid

modernity render these bonds fragile, transient, easily dissolvable reflecting a world in which connections are made and broken with unprecedented ease. Unlike Durkheim's anomie, which emphasized the disintegration of normative regulation and the erosion of collective conscience Bauman highlights a more individualized, consumer-driven reality in which the very possibility of solidarity is undermined by the logic of choice, flexibility, disposability (Bauman, 2000, 2003) [3]. The core idea of liquid love is that relationships in liquid modernity are inherently unstable as they are negotiated continuously, maintained so long as they provide satisfaction, and abandoned when they cease to yield emotional returns, an echo of Giddens' (1992) [13] notion of the 'pure relationship' but with a sharper emphasis on fragility and commodification. This instability, Bauman suggests arises from the dominance of consumer culture which encourages individuals to treat relationships as commodities to be acquired, consumed and discarded reinforcing a pattern of serial attachments rather than enduring commitments (Bauman, 2007) [4, 5]. The impact of consumerism is compounded by digital technologies which expand opportunities for connection but simultaneously intensify disposability as seen in the proliferation of online dating platforms, hookup applications, and social media networks that facilitate rapid cycles of intimacy and detachment. In this sense digital intimacy epitomizes liquid love like it is immediate, customizable, transient fostering a culture of what Illouz (2007) [16] calls 'cold intimacies,' where rationalized choice and consumer logic dominate the search for love. Case illustrations abound online dating platforms like Tinder and Bumble structure intimacy around market like logics of profile selection, swiping, and matching transforming the pursuit of love into a rationalized, commodified process of maximizing choices and minimizing risks (Ansari & Klinenberg, 2015) [1]. Virtual communities too offer spaces for connection yet often reproduce liquid dynamics like relationships within these communities may generate intense short-term bonds but rarely sustain the depth and durability of face-to-face solidarities producing a pattern of episodic rather than enduring attachments. Even within committed partnerships, digital mediation transforms the landscape of intimacy, as constant connectivity creates both new opportunities for affirmation and new vulnerabilities to surveillance, jealousy and insecurity (Turkle, 2011) [20]. The commodification of intimacy also extends to cultural industries that market love through dating services, self-help manuals, therapy industries etc. reinforcing the perception of affection as a consumable good subject to cost-benefit calculation (Illouz, 2012) [17]. Against Durkheim's vision of solidarity rooted in collective conscience, Bauman's liquid love depicts attachment as precarious, individualized, contingent underscoring the transformation of intimacy from a stabilizing force into a source of anxiety, ambivalence with vulnerability. Where Durkheim understood affective bonds as grounded in normative integration, Bauman sees them as undermined by the liquidity of social forms such that affection is not stabilized by shared moral frameworks but destabilized by cultural logics of disposability. Yet the two thinkers converge in their recognition that social structures profoundly shape intimacy as Durkheim through the erosion of norms and Bauman through the saturation of consumer logics. Bauman's theoretical synthesis thus represents a

culmination of the trajectory traced from Durkheim through Marx, Weber, Fromm, and Giddens he combines Durkheimian concerns about the disintegration of solidarity with Marx's insights about commodification, Weber's diagnosis of rationalization, Fromm's critique of superficial intimacy, and Giddens' emphasis on reflexive relationships, fusing these strands into a distinctive account of late-modern affection as both intensely desired and persistently unstable. In liquid modernity love is paradoxical, it is simultaneously idealized and trivialized pursued obsessively yet abandoned readily, a condition that generates what Bauman (2003) ^[3] calls 'the unbearable lightness of bonding.' In this sense, liquid love epitomizes the alienation of affection not as the absence of intimacy but as its transformation into a fragile, consumerist and transient phenomenon reflective of broader dynamics in which all social forms are liquefied. The sociological significance of Bauman's framework lies in its ability to capture the contradictions of intimacy in globalized modernity where individuals long for security yet recoil from commitment, crave connection yet fear entrapment and engage in relationships that are at once profoundly meaningful and deeply unstable. By situating these paradoxes within the larger condition of liquid modernity, Bauman offers a powerful analytic for understanding the alienation of affection in the twenty-first century showing how the dissolution of solid social structures produces a world where affection is not absent but precarious, where bonds are not eliminated but liquefied, and where love itself has become both the most urgent of desires and the most fragile of achievements.

Conclusion

The intellectual trajectory traced from Durkheim's anomie through Marx's alienation, Weber's rationalization, Fromm's critique of commodified love, Giddens' theorization of the pure relationship and Bauman's metaphor of liquid love culminates in a sociological framework that reveals the alienation of affection as a defining feature of contemporary modernity. At its root the concept of anomie alerted us to the dangers of normative breakdown and the disintegration of collective conscience, leaving individuals without stable moral anchors. Marx deepened this perspective by demonstrating how alienation is structurally embedded within capitalist relations of production, estranging individuals from their labour, from themselves and ultimately from one another. Weber's insights into rationalization and disenchantment further illuminated how the bureaucratic, calculative logic of modernity corrodes affective life draining enchantment from relationships and replacing spontaneity with instrumentality. Fromm subsequently brought these macro structural concerns into the heart of emotional life diagnosing how freedom and individuality under capitalism create anxieties that often find resolution in commodified superficial forms of intimacy rather than in authentic care, responsibility and respect. Giddens then offered a late modern vocabulary of intimacy with his notion of the 'pure relationship,' highlighting reflexivity, autonomy and negotiated commitment but also underscoring the fragility of ties sustained only so long as emotional returns are provided. Finally, Bauman's liquid love distilled these insights into a compelling image of late-modern intimacy as inherently unstable, transient and commodified shaped by consumer culture and digital technologies. Recapitulating this

intellectual journey shows that the alienation of affection is not an incidental or marginal concern but a persistent thread running through sociological reflection on modernity, from the breakdown of norms to the liquefaction of bonds.

The concept of 'alienation of affection' teaches us several critical lessons about contemporary society. First, it highlights that emotional life is not a purely private domain but deeply structured by socio-economic and cultural forces. Affection and intimacy are embedded within the same dynamics of capitalism, rationalization with globalization that shape politics and economics meaning that the instability of love and family cannot be understood without reference to broader social transformations. Second, it reveals a paradox of late modernity like while individuals increasingly idealize intimacy and demand more emotional fulfilment from relationships, the conditions of liquid modernity make these very bonds precarious, fragile, subject to dissolution too. This paradox produces both an intense longing for affection and pervasive anxiety about commitment, generating what Bauman described as 'liquid fear' within human bonds. Third, it underscores that the alienation of affection is not simply about the absence of intimacy but about its transformation into a commodified, negotiable, unstable phenomenon in which emotions themselves are subject to market logics and digital mediation.

The implications of this framework are significant for the sociology of family, intimacy and digital culture. Families in late modernity are no longer secured by traditional structures but are increasingly organized around reflexive negotiation leaving them vulnerable to dissolution yet open to democratization. Intimacy itself becomes a site of experimentation and risk, as individuals pursue both freedom and connection in relationships that are increasingly 'pure' in Giddens' sense yet precarious in Bauman's sense. Digital culture magnifies these dynamics as online dating, social networking, virtual communities intensify opportunities for connection but also accelerate cycles of attachment-detachment reinforcing the liquidity of love. Sociologists must therefore attend to how digital technologies mediate intimacy producing new forms of alienation and belonging simultaneously. Future research should expand the sociology of emotional alienation in at least two directions. First, there is a pressing need to examine how alienation of affection manifests in non-Western contexts, such as India, where family structures, kinship systems, religious traditions etc. intersect with modernizing forces in unique ways. The impact of rapid globalization and digitalization on affective bonds in societies where collectivist values coexist with emerging individualism offers fertile ground for comparative research. Second, a global sociology of intimacy must be developed, one that compares how emotional alienation is shaped by diverse cultural logics, political economies, and technological regimes. Such an approach would highlight both the universality of liquid love under globalization and the particularities of how different societies negotiate the tension between tradition and modernity. In conclusion we can say that the sociology of emotional alienation reveals affection as both the most fragile and the most vital of social bonds. Fragile because under liquid modern conditions it is destabilized by consumerism, individualism and digital mediation; vital because it remains the foundation of trust, solidarity and meaning in social life. As Durkheim reminded

us, the health of a society is measured by the strength of its solidarities and in Bauman's world, those solidarities must be constantly reconstituted under conditions of liquidity. By synthesizing insights across a century of sociological theory this paper argues that alienation of affection is not merely a symptom of late modern malaise but a central analytic for understanding the contradictions of intimacy in the twenty-first century. If sociology is to grasp the full complexity of contemporary life, it must continue to place affection, intimacy and emotional alienation at the heart of its inquiry recognizing them not as peripheral but as constitutive of the human condition in an era where love is at once commodified, liquefied, desperately sought after.

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