

Some Remarks About Online Dating

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What is online dating? The process of actively influencing one's temporal tendency in order to increase the possibilities of romantic experience. **(1)** It is the merging of the non-technological behavior into the technological one. There is a belief that we will meet *following* a technological behavior – that of using a software, a piece of technology, and using it in relation to another person. Let us dive into an analysis of the usage of this kind of technology in order to understand some of its structures and outline some differences between that and the “real life” method of dating – between the technological and non-technological. **(2)**

We begin by creating our own *profile*, which in truth is no more than our own advertising campaign describing *to ourselves* how to see ourselves. **(3)** We have aims and goals in this process, a purpose or a reason why we decided to use this technology in the first place: a long term relationship, a fling, a call for sexual impulse, and so on. It is possible to have a nihilistic purpose as well – no active awareness of what it is we're looking for, – but this becomes the ignorance of what we really want, and it annihilates any possibility of anything happening until we find an aim along the way. Thus, as we have an aim in mind, or as we transcribe a purpose onto this technology we use, we go ahead and get confronted to a variety of goals and aims different than our own: we are shown *other profiles*. This confrontation will keep on emerging until it has no reason to exist – such as when our aim matches that of another's. We select, we pick, we choose by moving a finger or a thumb. What is this choosing? It's an aesthetic experience. We first and foremost apply an aesthetic judgement and experience the Other both as an aesthetic experience and as the embodiment of our judgement – they embody our judgement because we instinctively disguise our judgement as a descriptive claim, especially when that judgement is favorable to them, and because we have an awareness of their characteristics that fulfill us on paper.

Let us put on hold the description of this aesthetic judgement for a moment and first address the problematic of its upbringing. Where do we judge from? We judge these others from a specific pre-set – from a predetermined pool of *candidates*. It is

(1) In this analysis we shall accept for premise a Bergsonian conception of subjective time as a tendential flow. This tendency is continuously shaped through the transformation of virtual (possible and past) being into actual (present and future) being, and the actual turning into virtual being (past) again as the present elapses. Thus, our thesis is to affirm that technology's grasp into dating is to allow an active participation of subjects into the shaping of their temporality (that is tendential in nature) in order to give rise to a temporality that will tend toward certain (or more) experiences linked to love (including lust and romantic kinds).

(2) But what is this dichotomy of “real life” versus “virtual life” and why are we encouraging a social idealism supported by technology, in fact supported by materialism? This is something to consider.

(3) Because we don't know to whom we describe ourselves. There is no receiver of our message yet, which we shall discuss later.

predetermined for two reasons. It is predetermined first because the other's profile is framed by the other's aim: they mirror their projection of themselves as well, which does not provide us the same experience we would have had if we experienced the totality of themselves in person – without their attempt to entirely shape that totality. How they use this technology is reflected in how they make their profile and this will be subject to our judgement as well. Second, this technology itself is not genuine and honest. It's now a known fact that the manufacturers of these technologies establish ways of displaying the candidates offered to you: algorithms, ranks, and the like. (4) Therefore, you do not per se get to choose among all your options, you get to choose among *some of them*; and you will be encouraged to pay money in order to have more options – such as to make more choices without time constraints, to choose from a larger pool of candidates, etc., – which is in the financial interest of the manufacturers. (5) The aesthetic judgement, therefore, emerges in part from our aim – the reason we decided to use this technology in the first place, – but more specifically from the predetermined set of profiles that will be subject to our choosing, and this is done in view of an economic gain for the manufacturers.

As we have said, an aesthetic judgement is being appealed to by this dating technology. We are suggested to experience the other as they show themselves through photographs. We can then exercise a judgement of reason by experiencing the non visual aspect of the other, which is by reading their biographies or self-written descriptions. All biographies are dishonest in online dating – since they are linguistic statements addressed to a void. We don't know to whom our joke is going to land, to whom we describe ourselves, and in virtue of this we tend to either describe ourselves unconsciously *to ourselves* (process of self-mirroring, just as the choosing of our photos to display) or to simply throw the equivalent of a message in a bottle to a sea of unknown. This process of judgement is even encouraged to be done in a matter of seconds or milliseconds by these technologies – the merging of this time-lapse to the sensori-motor movement of our finger most likely has an underlying psychophysical component to it. Finally, there is so much missing in this other that is presented to us: their scent, their physical relief, the amount of space they occupy, the color or personality of their voice, and so on. And yet, despite these missing elements that would seem crucial in a non-technological context, online dating makes this bold promise that our quick and narrow judgement will provide us what we were looking for in the first place.

(4) See Tinder's own admission of using an algorithm to sort the pool of candidates presented to users: <https://blog.gotinder.com/powering-tinder-r-the-method-behind-our-matching/>. The creators of the application also explain having used a ranking system based on the ELO method to ascribe ranks to users.

(5) Tinder, for instance, restricts the number of choices you can make and imposes a waiting time before you can choose candidates again. This constraint can be removed by way of paying for an upgrade.

We've matched. It's a match – as in *it's a possibility of being that is left in your own hands to bring forth in your life*. We proceed to the social conventions of technology: the social linguistics as framed by technology – the slang, the smileys, the GIFs and memes, etc. – and this communication remains either empty or expressive according to Barthes. (6) In a turn of event, a date is set so that our eyes can shift from looking at a screen to a face. The crucial point begins here: the unrelatedness of the being of the situation supersedes the situation itself. Our relationship is temporally forced. Couple A and Couple B meet in a coffee shop for a first date. Couple A met each other through common friends at a social gathering. Couple B met through online dating. We can say of Couple A that they wanted to go on this date and indeed exercised a form of freedom; but in the case of Couple B their power of will is so much stronger and ontologically reflective of an attempt to force any form of determinism due to the lengths they went through in order to create this meeting. Their meeting is temporally unprecedented and out of the blue: they would not have met had they not wanted to actively make appear in front of them someone who would have remained absolutely unrelated to them as long as that person was not pushed to notice their existence through the flagging of their own existence on this medium. Going on a date caused by a dating technology is to adopt a behavior that expresses something such as “I can exist for you, let me make you appear in front of me.” The case in point is that for over a decade technology and its proponents had to turn around the social taboo about meeting online. (7) This social taboo has an ontological underlying: why would there be any significant connection to someone temporally unrelated to me? This connection is shaped by the promise made by the dating technology: that there is a slight chance the structures of our temporality can match – that we can get along in the now and possibly in the future. (8) In all fairness these technologies have simply highlighted a truth about humanity: there are common patterns in the structures of personal identity, we are less unique than we think, and as a result dating technologies attempt to profit from the fact that we have more similarities with the world than our everyday life could make us believe.

There is more to say concerning the futurity of a first date emerging from online dating. First dates emerge as possibilities without any futurity. This is because our sense of agency becomes harder to manage, and sometimes it's just too hard.

(6) Roland Barthes affirms that love letters – and written forms of love – are either codified by a sort of emptiness or expressive in a way to reflect and express desire. *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*. Éditions du seuil. Paris. 1977. pp. 187-189.

(7) “When we first studied online dating habits in 2005, most Americans had little exposure to online dating or to the people who used it, and they tended to view it as a subpar way of meeting people. Today, nearly half of the public knows someone who uses online dating or who has met a spouse or partner via online dating – and attitudes toward online dating have grown progressively more positive.” <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/02/29/5-facts-about-online-dating/>

(8) “As romance and its beginnings are segregated from the routines of daily life, there is less and less space for elevator flirtation.” <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/12/the-sex-recession/573949/>

Everything is literally up to us, considering that we had no reason to meet if it were not for our usage of this technology which, again, is reflective of a stronger grasp applied onto our agency. All is up to us: the phenomenological structures of the date and of the experience of attraction as a whole, such as the setting and the environment – a coffee shop, a park, a bar, a movie, etc., each setting is the frame in which we are at play in front of the other, hoping to attract them into this scenery they are being addressed to. Part of this phenomenological structure is also discourse, the speech, what is being the subject of the date and the conversation that will make things “seem normal.” Sometimes this discourse must be used in order to cover the awkwardness over the direct causation of the date – the fact that both of us *resort* to online dating.

By nature, the first date does not lead to a second one. This is because there could always be someone else. Dating technology makes us believe that there could always be another person – another date. (9) Once we overcome a form of self-projected pressure of making this event go well, there is nothing else pressuring us to make it go well. There is a priori no futurity for the first date, but its closedness can ultimately lead to an open ended future nevertheless. For this futurity to open itself we must get past a state that enacts Eddie Murphy’s “What have you done for me lately?” act. (10) Even though this comes from a stand-up act, it’s in fact underlying a serious structure of our behavior initiated by the technology of dating. From the get-go of corresponding with someone else on the dating platform, we experience a mindset of applying judgement in order to see what the other has to offer to us. *Although our relationship is close to being – temporally – irrelevant to me, what have you done for me lately? Oh, you have offered me a pick up line, a joke, or some sort of interest toward me. What else have you done for me lately? You are aesthetically or intellectually attractive to me. What else have you done for me lately? You are engaged in an activity, you are – you do – this or that. What else have you...* (11) We keep asking for what has the other done to us “in the past” – which really is an undetermined present – in order to feel secure, to spark attraction toward the other. This process gets repeated until we develop a form of attraction to them that, instead of requiring us to inquire the past for sufficiency, requires us to inquire the future for more. We have applied aesthetic judgement and judgement of reason throughout the selecting phase, but we remain judgemental during the communication process and during the first date – whereas the judgemental behavior we adopt in the following dates resembles more that of a typical behavior. We look for things to confirm our interest. Romance asks

(9) “Some lovers do not commit suicide: it is possible for me to emerge from that “tunnel” which follows the amorous encounter. I see daylight again, either because I manage to grant unhappy love a dialectical outcome (retaining the love but getting rid of the hypnosis) or because I abandon that love altogether and set out again, trying to reiterate, with others, the encounter whose dazzlement remains with me: for it is of the order of the “first pleasure” and I cannot rest until it recurs: I affirm the affirmation, I begin again, without repeating.” *Fragments d’un discours amoureux*. Trans. Richard Howard. Section “Encounter.”

(10) From Eddie Murphy’s one man show “Raw.” 1987.

(11) See also “Ravishment” in Roland Barthes’ *Fragments d’un discours amoureux*.

us to apply judgement after we have had an experience, whereas online dating asks us to judge before the kind of experience that was historically dominant in order for romantic love to take place – this kind of historically dominant experience is the first encounter also known as “love at first sight.” Through online dating, we pick from the past the design of our future, which is the complete opposite of every first romantic relationship. In technological love we look for what we want; in non-technological love we want what we didn’t look for. This happens until we somehow fulfill the structure of dating that we initially and personally developed before dating apps, and we then merge back into a temporal course shared with romantic love’s temporal structure. (12) This, again, is another of the dating technology’s promises: that by using the temporal structure of the past we can open up a future that was until now unprecedented in the Bergsonian notion of past.

We can conclude from this short analysis that online dating makes the promise of opening up a new temporal structure in our phenomenological experience of internal time. It makes the promise that by forcing the hand of the short-term deterministic structure of our everyday life, we can meet an individual with a temporal structure compatible with ours. Problems arise in the execution of this promise by the manufacturers of online dating. Has philosophy fully investigated the potential submission of a romantic experience to overarching politico-sociological themes of everyday life? To fulfill the promise of getting one step ahead of the game, online dating reduces individuals to commodities and clear cut finite objects. We actively judge without counting the number of judgements we make, we judge specificities otherwise lost in the totality of phenomenological experience, and we are submitted to a profit-oriented process – that of providing financial gains to manufacturers. Most of all, we get submerged by these ephemeral commodities. There are so many of them, so why settle? Without expanding too much on this, we can start to shape the contours of the critiques of hookup culture and fear-of-commitment inducing behaviors linked to capitalism and online dating. There is room to speculate that online dating answers a series of ontological and psychological needs by appealing to a capitalist mindset. But this speculation has to be investigated by understanding what a capitalist mindset is and how does it work at the phenomenological level – between experience and consciousness. From this starting point, the floor gets opened to the possibility of investigating the flexibility of love – especially romantic love – to social-constructionism in relation to its ontological structure.

Montreal, Spring 2019

(12) The kind of experience of attraction developed in non-technologically initiated romances is one where the future gives itself to us before the past. “Love at first sight” is the experience of realizing a need, desire, or attraction, for something we had no conscious knowledge of beforehand. Non-technological love is most often a surprise, whereas online dating resorting to using criteria (physical or psychological) picks from our past in a conscious way.