Dating Big Data: OkCupid's OkTrends

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Undoubtedly, online dating sites have profoundly changed personal lives. At times, they have accelerated serendipity, bringing together two people who will fall in love. More ubiquitously (and more mundanely), they have subtly altered users' means of flirting, understanding themselves as "datable" subjects, speculating on future families, or thinking through what a relationship could be. Yet, as exemplars of a meeting point between intimate, personal lives and the algorithmic gaze of big data analytics, these platforms also speak to a profound rearrangement in the relations between private lives and privatized interests. How can one best articulate this shift?

Philosophical responses to online dating have ranged from Alain Badiou's sweeping dismissal, to Michel Feher's (far more nuanced) account of dating platforms as exemplary of neoliberal sociality. For Badiou, dating sites make shopping lists out of love. Finding prospective partners based on shared interests fails to account for love as an event, which begins to construct a world of Two – a world lived from the perspective of difference. For Feher, on the other hand, sharing (so problematic for Badiou) is precisely the paradigm of neoliberal sociality. Both derivative finance and online platforms privilege sharing (of content, risk, interests, non-rival goods, investment and feeling). Thus, Feher argues, online dating platforms articulate a fundamental social question: in order to have a relationship, what must be shared? Is it a shared commitment, feelings, values, interests?

From the perspective of sharing, from the perspective of difference: can Badiou and Feher's geometries of online dating be turned toward that third partner, that silent, data-analytic witness that watches when two prospective online partners flirt? To explore this question, I examine OkCupid's OkTrends, a blog which makes light of trends in the dating site's data analytics. OkCupid, founded by Christian Rudder and a host of other data scientists, trades in user data rather than subscription revenue. The OkTrends blog reflects these analytics back to readers, exploring outcomes of their research on intimacy and partnership. (For instance, one entry analyses "Race and Attraction, 2009-2014.") This site not only provides a place for people to come to understand how their own behaviour might be shared by other daters; it also acts as a meta-site through which users can learn to fall in love with big data: to navigate its perspective of difference from singular human lives; to open oneself and share in its insights and wisdom. Sharing, in this context, becomes not only a social condition, but also a new form of coupling between human and analytic witnesses in love scenarios.