



# On unsolicited nostalgia and Tinder frustrations

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'I've been here before' - the feeling of the present being firmly rooted in the past can be intense and disorienting. It is difficult to trace, like a *déjà vu*: an experience in which every familiarity is produced seemingly out of thin air. Suddenly sparked memories are somewhat 'out of place'; they don't seem to quite fit the context but may, nevertheless, have real emotional weight to them.

It is this mismatch of background and bodily response that I feel every time my



phone provides me with short, musically underlined video animations. These consist of a selection of pictures. In my case, they usually depict myself in the company of family or friends visiting me in Cape Town, South Africa, where I have lived for the past ten years. Similarly, Facebook makes clips to celebrate my 'friendaversary' with fellow Facebook users. Since very few pictures of me are available on Facebook, the creations feel somewhat random and do not have the same effect than the clips created with access to my much richer phone archive. The latter also tend to be accompanied by a piece of more melancholic music and thus seem to poke at a particular kind of sentiment.

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In recent years, digital reminders have become more pervasive. I have found myself sharing a lot of the photos that pop up at the very top of my phone archive titled 'one year ago', 'two years ago' or 'five years ago'. Thanks to cloud storage, all of these are still available even after multiple phone losses/breakages and are archived according to date - more meticulously than I would ever have done myself. Living far away from my family in Germany and associating the moments I am regularly reminded of by my phone with happy reunions (the joyful moments being the ones to stick with me in retrospective), my response to them resembles a wholehearted inner sigh, creeping through my body and warming it up from chest to toes and fingertips. The reactions I receive to sharing them with the relevant person add a slight giddiness and feeling of contentment. In the moment, it feels as though the experience is now complete: it has run full circle and I am satisfied knowing that it is firmly rooted in my own and the other person's memory. Yet, with the next reminder replacing the former on the phone screen a few days later, it soon becomes a memory hard to collect.



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What is new about this manner of remembering is that, while it does reflect an interaction of a social nature, it is re-designed as an emotional moment not by any of the people involved in the shared experience, but by a digital mechanism. There is no intentionality beyond the algorithms involved, no knowledge of the context by the digital initiator. Still, looking at the audio-visual creations can be touching and invoke a feeling of nostalgia – an unsolicited but not necessarily unwelcome one. The returning pictures are memory props and, as such, they may but do not revive memories, which they, in my case, often do.

## **Frozen moments?**

Philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (2004) said ‘it is a singular feeling when, in the midst of enjoyment, one looks at it in order to recollect it’. In the age of smartphones, this often takes the form of us interrupting a moment in order to take pictures, freezing it into a certain format. This has become part of an embodied habitual repertoire for many of us whether in the form of a group or landscape snapshot, a short video clip, a selfie, or an impermanent (?) Snapchat image with additional design elements. The practice marks special occasions but is also part of the everyday humdrum. Within it, unsolicited nostalgia of this kind could be seen as having an adaptive function. It can facilitate a sense of rootedness, of perspective and connectedness. It can counterweigh loneliness and meaninglessness in re-connecting with former experiences, their textures and smells. Nevertheless, they are not born out of an inner narrative, but are – ready or not- placed upon oneself. What is more, instead of embedding experiences in one’s memory and documenting it for posterity, their presence is not designed to be of permanence but to evoke a momentary response soon to be exchanged for another.



Like a ritual, the interaction with my phone I initially described involves knowledge (on my part), imagery and a shared memory but it is not the result of a desire to link the present with the past in this specific way and with this particular image. It is different for me digitally scanning an old photograph with continuity in mind. It also relies on my momentary oblivion to the structures guiding what appears to be a spontaneously triggered phenomenological state. After all, most social media strategies many of us are exposed to daily serve to steer, market and sell – also with the help of algorithms. As such, many of the thoughts we have are strategically guided by advertisers who profit from a decrease of face-to-face contact and an increase in time being spent online.

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As a result of a decrease in analogue human interaction, many rituals that serve to cultivate memory and identity will likely change in the era of the digital and involve either imagined communities (Anderson 1991) or individuals rather than shared habitus and collective practice. Some of them may be limited to interchanges between individuals and machines. What matters here is whether these rituals consist of mere recollections or if they serve cultural reproduction and feel consequential. In the face of a fundamental fear of meaninglessness, Marcus Gabriel (2019) says, a lot of human cultural work is invested into reducing the impression that we are exposed to factors that are completely beyond our control. As an example for this, he refers to the immortality fantasy of silicon valley which involved the embedding of minds into technology, thus preserving them for eternity.

## **Simulating agency**

Thinking about this throws me back to my own research on the use of the GPS-



coordinated dating application (app) Tinder in Cape Town (South Africa). Following 25 people on their dating journeys for two years, one thing became very clear and that is a shared sense of frustration. Even though it was not always easy to pinpoint why, everyone I interviewed insisted that they were often so dissatisfied using the (in)famous and widely used app, so much so that they would frequently delete it. Notably, this had to do with the disassociation of app-facilitated experiences from a sense of realness and authenticity.

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This is interesting, considering that smartphones have been so integrated into daily routines that many of us feel naked not having them within reach, whether it is for a quick picture or a session of swiping left and right for a suitable date while waiting for the bus. Yet, Tinder was not only deleted time and time again, it was also repeatedly re-downloaded because having numerous dating options constantly available at one's fingertip feels freeing. One can decide how much or little to share with others on the app. Choices can be made at any given time with a simple swipe to the right. And whether a physical meeting actually happens and for what purpose can still be decided. Dating, friendship and even business connections are, according to advertisements, an option. But instead of being invigorating, using the app frequently led to a tindinger fatigue. While most of my study participants had been in 'Tinder relationships' at some point, the most prominent association with the app was a lack of enchantment that reached beyond unimaginative profiles. What was romanticised as a more worthwhile experience, on the other hand, was the chance encounter, like meeting someone while both are grabbing for the last cucumber at the supermarket while locking eyes.

One of the main aspects that appealed to Tinder users and had them re-



downloading the app time and time again was the desire to create a sense of agency. However, instead on making good on hedonist promises, the relatively new social space accommodating a wide range of desires but offering very little guidance in how to navigate them often produced more insecurity. The result was avoidance (also see Illouz, 2018) but also attempt to establish a sense of control. Every download was an opportunity to change one's profile and use a different approach to improve dating experiences and reduce chances of disappointment – just like every time we pick our phones unnecessarily it is in the hopes of a positive new experience. It is a way of creating symbolic order in the chaos of the online jungle. Apart from changes in the profile, some people would opt to look for relationships that did not fit narrow romantic ideas of dating and rather cautiously look for what I call 'add-on friendships', that is friendships with the potential for more, which I interpret to be an attempt to curtail disappointment.

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Perhaps, then, the unsolicited, momentary nostalgia triggered by cell-phone functions and the ways in which persistent-yet-disillusioned tinderers manoeuvre the dating game can be read as reimagining connectivity and grappling with an accelerated sense of impermanence. There is a nostalgic note to these practices, finding expression in a desire to meet 'organically' or otherwise embrace the past while hesitantly moving towards what is yet to come.

Digitally facilitated reminders of moments with people we care about reach us at a time when face-to-face encounters become rarer, especially with Covid19 raging on a global scale. At the same time, relationships with smartphones and other digital assortments become tighter, opening up vast new spaces to navigate. This produces not only freedom but also opens up room for unknowns and plenty of insecurities. Still, for the time being, Tinder and other social media platforms – for



better or worse - remain the go-to for many of us when looking for intimacy. In seeking contact beyond revived and idealised distant memories, distinguishing between what is staged, what is self-protection, what is fake and what is genuine becomes something that must be learned anew without resorting to a categorical romanticisation of the past.

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