The Postdigital in Film and Popular Music

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Authors who grapple with the term ‘postdigital’ emphasise the fact that it does not refer to the reality which came after digital, but rather to the situation of the omnipresence, domination and hybridisation of the ‘digital’ over ‘non-digital’ (analogue, biological) (Jandrić et al. 2018). This situation can be compared to that described by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2001) in their analyses of contemporary global labour being dominated by ‘immaterial labour’. This does not mean, according to Hardt and Negri, that all or even the majority of workers on our planet work immaterially, but that they have to adjust to the rules of immaterial labour. By analogy, we might live in an analogue world and even resist all things digital, but we still have to play by the ‘digital playbook’. The domination and normalisation of the ‘digital’, without killing the ‘non-digital’, is reflected in shedding the word ‘digital’ in contexts where it previously meant to signify being at the cutting edge of culture and technology. At my own university, for example, the name ‘The School of Digital Media’, to which I objected in anticipation of it promptly going out of fashion, several years ago was quietly dropped in favour of the old-fashioned ‘School of Journalism and Media’.

It verges on the banality to state that the shift from digital to postdigital reflects or at least coincides with the disenchantment with digital technologies as a means to enact positive political and social changes (positive from the perspective of the majority of the society), such as reducing economic inequalities and energy consumption, and participation in the democratic processes. That such expectations were ever expressed can be attributed to the lack of knowledge or acceptance of Marxism. For Marx (1993), technological inventions *per se* are unable to enact political changes; they can do so only in conjunction with specific political decisions and these are made by the ruling classes. Given that the ‘digital shift’ or ‘digital revolution’ happened under the watchful eye of capitalist rulers, it was to be expected that it would serve to abet and augment neoliberal capitalism. Indeed, this was the case as demonstrated by the growth in capital, political power and autonomy of techno-giants, such as Google. Cultural advantages brought by digitalisation are also increasingly called into question, although

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typically by those who are themselves the victims of the rise of social media, most importantly traditional, print media. People immersed in the (post)digital world are often portrayed as philistines and politically naïve people, who do not read anything of value, only watch YouTube, and fall prey of demagogues and totalitarian figures. For example, the political success of leaders such as Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro are often explained by their ability to manipulate social media (e.g. Peters et al. 2018), while the same argument is not used in relation to more established political figures, such as Hillary Clinton or Angela Merkel, despite the fact that they have large resources to put their message across over a multitude of platforms.

And yet, anecdotal evidence, which I gathered in my academic work, which straddles two types of media and cultural production—film and popular music—suggests that the condition of postdigitalisation attracts different reactions among the two types of creators of art. In film, the attitude is typically negative, as much on- as off-screen. Some of the most successful science fiction films and television series of recent years depict the horror of advancing digitalisation and the hybridisation of digital on the one hand, and analogue and biological on the other. Take *Blade Runner 2049* (Villeneuve 2017), where the advancements in the production of humanoid robots (bioengineered humans) and other digital creatures with a degree of consciousness, fail to result in the liberation of ‘real’ humans, while inflicting suffering on the hybrid digital-biological creatures, who are as intelligent as humans. On the whole, this development leads to ‘dehumanisation’ of the human world, where each life, perhaps with the exception of those at the very top, comes across as disposable, permeated by anxiety and casual violence. Another example is the series *Humans* (Vincent and Brackley 2015), set in an even closer future, where the development of robots, here described as ‘synths’, results in an increased unemployment of people, including the professional classes. Such increased unemployment, again, results in anxiety, alienation and suffering of practically all creatures living on both sides of the human-synthetic, analogue-digital divide.

Off-screen, there is widespread revolt of directors of cine-films, such as Steven Spielberg and Christopher Nolan, representing (especially Spielberg) older, apparently nobler times of analogue cinema against the invasion of their territory by Netflix—an institution symbolising the postdigital times of infinite choice for the consumer of moving images and blurring the divisions between cinema and television. Spielberg objects to Netflix films being allowed to compete for Oscars (Nyren 2018). Nolan criticised Netflix because ‘they have this mindless policy of everything having to be simultaneously streamed and released, which is obviously an untenable model for theatrical presentation.’ (Hooton 2017) Both directors also complain that what we can describe as postdigitalisation squeezes out the medium-sized films, which were once the staple diet of cinema theatres; a process which can be compared to the pauperisation of the middle class which is characteristic of the more advanced phases of neoliberalisation. Of course, one can wonder how sincere directors such as Spielberg and Nolan are, best known for big budget, spectacular films, in their defence of smaller movies. Nevertheless, their arguments ring true, given that most mainstream cinemas offer a very limited diet of big budget films, in which narrative is subordinated to a spectacle.

The type of criticism offered by Spielberg and Nolan can also be used in relation to the music business. The move towards downloading and then streaming meant that the older models of music distribution of physical products became untenable or at least

difficult to maintain. The result was a drastic shrinking of the global music market in the first decade of the 2000s and the recording industry losing its dominant position (Mazierska et al. 2019). This translated into slashing of the income of practically all professional musicians except for the stars, a situation which, again, can be compared to the onslaught of both the proletariat and the middle classes under the condition of late neoliberalism. Yet, one gets the impression that musicians and other music professionals are more reconciled with the postdigital status quo than their counterparts working in the film industry. For example, one does not encounter any call coming from the music community for limiting competition for the most prestigious music prizes only to those records which exist in a physical form and which have stayed on the shelves of record shops for a minimum of 6 months or so. Such a demand will attract ridicule. Moreover, although the music community complains about the low royalties paid by digital platforms such as YouTube and Spotify, this is accompanied by acknowledgement of the democratisation of music which such platforms offer. It is also very difficult to spot a song which, in the vein of *Humans* (Vincent and Brackley 2015) and *Blade Runner 2049* (Villeneuve 2017), would depict the dystopian world of human-artificial hybrids. Singers rather celebrate the hybridity, as exemplified by the Venezuelan music producer Arca, or just sing about (universal) love.

By and large, the reality of the ‘postdigital’, with its technological, aesthetic and economic dimensions, seems to be much more accepted by the music community than by the film community. Why is this the case? I will list here several possible reasons, albeit acknowledging that I speculate rather than base my views on any hard data. One concerns the fact that musicians are more used to technological change than their counterparts working in the film industry. Second, due to a much longer history of music than cinema, there is a greater optimism that music will survive and thrive no matter what. Thirdly, musicians believe that the ‘postdigital’ has more utopian than dystopian characteristics; in particular, that it allows the creation of more music by people who previously had no chance to do so and reach with their work a potentially infinite audience. Finally, and most importantly, music can still exist in recorded and live versions and, paradoxically, digitalisation has made live music more important and has expanded its variations; while for cinema, ‘going live’ is less of an option.

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