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Contemporary Posterity: A Helpful Oxymoron

Or, what the post-digital can teach us about the dynamics of temporal periodization and transformative potentiality in relation to post-whatever

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What does it mean to be post? In a time of countless movements of post-[x], the value of the prefix itself becomes of interest: what does it do to a concept to reposition it by turning it into a ‘posterity’? I will unpack this question through an inquiry into the concept of *post-digital*, scrutinizing and seeking to overcome the problems of rigid periodization that the prefix risks to imply. Such an inquiry is arguably also central to the ongoing exploration of posthumanist tendencies in literary and aesthetic fields. Indeed, posthumanism and the (post-)digital are – historically and continuously – thoroughly intertwined. As Laura Shackelford argues, the post-digital’s “practice-based experimentation continues to pursue ... posthumanist inquiries and immanent engagements with technicity” (349). So what can the concept of post-digital contribute to the study of posthumanism? A noticeably large proportion of inquiry into the post-digital has revolved around discussions of the troublesome notion of being ‘post’ – discussions which, in my view, are relevant across multiple ‘posterities’.

The term post-digital has become central to the field of electronic literature, as is exemplified in two recent anthologies edited by Joseph Tabbi. These are the 2017 *Bloomsbury Handbook of Electronic Literature*, in which there is a continuous engagement with the concept across multiple chapters, and the 2020 *Post-Digital: Dialogues and Debates from electronic book review*, in which the concept conspicuously serves as the title. As Tabbi observes in the introduction to the *Handbook*, “we are post-digital in the sense that the literary corpus is by now mostly already digitized but (just as important) nearly all new writing is now done digitally and is destined ... to circulate in databases” (“Introduction” 5). Interestingly, the field of electronic literature has historically been involved in moving the creation, experience, and study of literary culture along the “upgrade path” of computation, but as we have seen, that upgrade has itself been “normative” (Tabbi, “Introduction” 5). Accordingly, Tabbi argues that “[t]he post-digital is no place for avant-gardes” (“Introduction” 5). In other words, whereas electronic literature

has previously been occupied with finding new and exciting ways of blending ‘the digital’ with ‘the literary’, the field now finds itself in a position where it is difficult to tease out and account for all the consequences of this blending. Instead of further upgrades, what we need is to engage with the contemporary actualities of our electronically literary culture. This post-digital positioning comes with both contingency and agency in relation to computational capitalism.

In spite of the recent surge of interest in the post-digital within the electronic literature community, as exemplified by the aforementioned recent volumes, I find my main source material for this paper in two other, earlier publications, in which the discussions of the prefix, and the accompanying debates over whether such a prefix even makes sense, are particularly articulate. These are the 2014 special issue of *APRJA*, focusing on *Post-digital Research*, and the 2015 anthology *Postdigital Aesthetics: Art, Computation and Design*, edited by David Berry and Michael Dieter. Two of the texts surveyed here were published in slightly different versions in both these publications, which goes to show the centrality of the discussion of the prefix in these contexts. In this paper, I survey selected perspectives that inquire into the discussion of the prefix, to the end of synthesizing a conceptual stance of *contemporary posterity* – a helpful oxymoron that articulates the potentially beneficial aspects of such a prefix while simultaneously troubling the lingering periodization that the prefix implies.

Post-digital

Before scrutinizing the prefix of post, I briefly introduce the concept through which such a scrutiny will take place, i.e., the concept of *post-digital*. The concept of post-digital is, in the words of Florian Cramer, defined as “the messy state of media, arts and design *after* their digitization” (17, original emphasis). The concept dates back to 2000, where musician Kim Cascone coined it to describe artistic practices and musical works emerging “from the ‘failure’ of digital technology” (13), that is to say, from the decisive use of *glitch* in computer music. To Cascone, the post-digital could be seen as testimony that “the revolutionary period of the digital information age [had] surely passed” (12). As such, the post-digital was conceived as a direct artistic reaction to computational capitalism’s “cranking out digital fluff by the gigabyte” (Cascone 12). Or, in the words of Ian Andrews, who was early to take up and expand upon the concept, “post-digital refers to works that reject the hype of the so-called digital revolution” (n.p.).

These early formulations from the dawn of the current millennium already point to multiple conceptual strands that coexist in the concept of post-digital. The concept is constructed as simultaneously a temporal marker of the time after broad digitization ('the revolutionary period ... has surely passed'); a general cultural condition that is marked by the economic ethos of computational capitalism ('cranking out digital fluff...'); and a certain type of aesthetic artifacts including their associated practices ('works that reject the hype...'). These three strands coexist in the concept and are arguably all related to a fourth, namely a certain post-digital reflexivity, i.e. a critical perspective on culturally shared notions of 'the digital' that looks 'back' at our present time while remaining situated in that same present – a kind of *contemporary posterity*. It is this fourth strand of the post-digital that I am orienting myself towards in this paper.

In the context of art and aesthetics, the post-digital condition means that “digital technology holds less fascination ... in and of itself” (Cascone 12), and that artists increasingly “dismiss the notion of the computer as universal machine” (Cramer 16). Rather than opting for a neo-Luddite rejection of all that is digital, post-digital practitioners “choose media for their own material aesthetic qualities ... regardless of whether these are a result of analog material properties or of digital processing” (Cramer 18).

This does not mean that art and literature exist outside of the context of computational capitalism, though. As the editors of the special issue of APRJA point out, post-digital practices “[look] for DIY agency outside totalitarian innovation ideology, and for networking off big data capitalism” but at the same time, we must also acknowledge that these practices “already ha[ve] become commercialized” (Andersen, Cox, & Papadopoulos 5). In the introduction to their anthology, Berry and Dieter similarly point to the way that aesthetics and design, among other fields of “user oriented” research, “ha[ve] been mobilized to provide a texture and a form to computation”, showing how aesthetics as well as design are highly contingent in bringing about “an imperceptibility to the machinery of computation” (“Thinking Postdigital Aesthetics” 1). Thus, art and design “become not only entangled and entangling, but also instrumental and operative” in the “proto-scientific logics” of digitization that computational capitalism harnesses (Berry & Dieter, “Thinking Postdigital Aesthetics” 2). In other words, (digital) art, (electronic) literature, and design enter into reciprocal relationships with computational capitalism, risking to

facilitate a further “fetishized displacement of creativity and difference onto mechanisms of capitalist accumulation” as Davin Heckman and James O’Sullivan put it (100).

The question that I will concern myself with here is what value the added prefix of ‘post’ brings to the context of what is colloquially known as ‘the digital’, and whether such a prefix can operate as a way to articulate the struggles and frictions between art, literature, design, digitization, and computational capitalism – and perhaps even lead the way for social and techno-cultural transformation. I begin this inquiry by looking at the temporal periodization that implicitly follows the addition of such a prefix.

Negotiation rather than Periodization

The idea of *post* denotes a temporal arrangement of being *after*, and it is here important to be wary of the periodizing logics that such a prefix might readily enable and latch onto. In Cramer’s formulation of the temporality of post-digital, for instance, he compares the concept to that of *post-apocalypse*. Cramer argues that “the post-digital condition is a post-apocalyptic one: the state of affairs after the initial upheaval caused by the computerisation and global digital networking of communication, technical infrastructures, markets and geopolitics” (13). However, Cramer adds that “the apocalypse is not over” and argues, somewhat counterintuitively, that “the age in which we now live is *not* a post-digital age, neither in terms of technological developments ... nor from a historico-philosophical perspective” (13). In these formulations, we see a tension between two different notions of post – as being on the one hand the time after the “initial upheaval” surrounding digitization, which Cramer allegorically characterizes as a “discreet breaking point” (13), and on the other hand a continuous condition that can neither technologically nor philosophically be considered as being ‘after’ digitization in any temporal sense. Preempting this critique, Cramer offers another posterity to which he compares the post-digital, namely, post-colonialism. Here, Cramer argues that post-colonialism “does not in any way mean an end of colonialism ... but rather its mutation into new power structures, less visible but no less pervasive” (13), and extrapolates the same mutational dynamic to the concept of post-digital.

The added comparison to post-colonialism notwithstanding, the temporal arrangement implied by the prefix still risks to fall dangerously close to a periodizing logic of “simply declaring something as being ‘post’ something else” as Geoff Cox warns about (161). As Cox shows, such macro-temporal

narratives of pre-and-post are problematic in themselves, since they displace historical processes and thus can be seen as a symptom of a “wider cynicism towards the possibility of social transformation ... rendering us unable to participate in or even recognize the transformative potential of historical processes” (152). Cox argues that in searching for transformative practices, we would do better to leave macro-temporal accounts behind, and look to the ruptures in the contemporary, particularly practices of resistance that enlighten a sense of incompleteness in the otherwise all-enveloping veil of computational capitalism. To Cox, “[i]t is the temporal sense of incompleteness that drives transformative agency, and the ways in which human subjects seek to modify their lived circumstances knowing their experiences to be incomplete” (160). Cox considers such incompleteness to be located in contemporary “moment[s] in which shared issues that hold a certain currency are negotiated and expanded” (157). To be clear, my aim is not to claim that Cramer subscribes to a periodizing logic – on the contrary: Cramer as mentioned explicitly distances his account of the post-digital from such periodization – but, rather, that *even though* Cramer in no way subscribes to such a logic, the very presence of the prefix risks to imply such periodization.

Following Cox’s wariness towards these implicitly periodizing logics, I turn to considering if a concept such as post-digital – with the prefix literally meaning ‘after’ – can still partake in situating contemporary negotiation surrounding the issues of mass digitization, and in expanding on the complexities enclosed herein. In order to do so, we need to reckon with and unsettle the implicitly periodizing temporality of a concept that denotes a condition that, in the words of David Berry, “is *afterdigital*, but which remains profoundly computational” (45, original emphasis). Unsettling the periodization of post is, in my view, contingent on situating a conceptual stance that embraces the benefits of ‘posterity’ while remaining grounded in the contemporary. In the following, I investigate the potential of constructing a helpful oxymoron in the form of a notion of contemporary posterity.

Contemporary Posterity

If we should avoid periodizing logics, and if the prefix of post perpetually risks implying such periodization, the question that follows is: Why hold onto a concept of post-digital? Put differently: What value is gained from being post – in spite of the dangers of periodization? The answer: (Conceptual)

posterity gives conceptual clarity. More specifically, the post-digital allows us to consider alternatives to computational capitalism's branded version of digitization by way of enacting a conceptual distancing to a collective category of 'digital' even though the individual cases of artefacts belonging to such a category will in every instance be characterized by a drastic difference to other equally 'digital' cases.

With the positioning of oneself in a position of post these individually different but collectively contingent cases can be studied by token of belonging to what Berry calls a *post-digital constellation*. To Berry, the post-digital "stands in for, or conceptualizes, the notion of the computational as a network of digital surfaces in a number of different places and contexts" (53-54). This network of digital surfaces is comprised of numerous and varying platforms, services, and surveillance systems, which often conflate in everyday devices like smartphones – though many remain hidden, including layers of proprietary code as well as networks of closed APIs. Any one of these surfaces may be entirely different from each other, and each of them may be black-boxed to the point of complete obscurity for anyone interested in studying their specific setup. Still, through their belonging to the post-digital constellation, they can be studied from the conceptual stance of contemporary posterity.

So how does the notion of *constellation* allow for such study? As Berry and Dieter explain, "[c]onstellations are patterns of concepts ... The concepts are usually not identical and not necessarily cognate; rather, they lie in the same historical epoch" ("Thinking Postdigital Aesthetics" 2). What is striking about the post-digital constellation in particular is that the epoch in question is, importantly, also defined as the historical present – it is contemporary. So the value of being post – the conceptual clarity gained through positioning one's gaze in such a 'posterity' – is in the case of the post-digital both situated in and oriented towards a contemporary context.

The juxtaposition of the two words 'contemporary' and 'posterity' is counter-intuitive: both words are temporal markers, but they do not denote the same point in time. On the one hand, 'contemporary' refers to the historical *present* – though without cutting the notion of the present off from its important relations to its contingent pasts as well as futures. 'Posterity', on the other hand, refers to that which comes *after* something else, often an important event or the death of a person, and is usually oriented towards a future. Taken together, the juxtaposition signifies both a situated anchor in a contemporary position and at the same time a certain conceptual clarity obtained through posterity. In this

context, the juxtaposition is intended to signify a stance in which one embraces a certain critical distance (gained through posterity) to the otherwise elusive phenomenon of ‘the digital’, allowing for heightened appreciation of its aesthetic, theoretical, and critical contours, while at the same time being thoroughly situated (through the contemporary anchor) within and at close range to instantiations of that same phenomenon, offering material and transformational agency in the face of computational capitalism. Cramer notes how post-digital, as a term, “sucks but is useful” (12) – the conceptual stance of contemporary posterity that I am here proposing, then, *is an oxymoron but is helpful*.

The oxymoron is helpful exactly because of its paradoxical temporal arrangement. In the following, I seek to account for its helpfulness, which is gained from a productive tension between being contemporary and being post. Following Eric Snodgrass, we might say that the post-digital partakes in “an enactment of a looking-in-the-(rear-view)-mirror moment” (30), i.e. a moment of looking at our *contemporary* situation by/while looking ‘back’ at the digital, through a positioning of our theoretical glance in a (conceptual) *posterity* relative to the colloquial notion of the digital. Such a contemporary posterity allows us to critically examine our historical present – the epoch to which the post-digital constellation belongs – in and through any meeting with computational capitalism’s branded version of digitization. This is in line with Berry’s argument that this post-digital constellation can be studied “more strikingly from an analysis of its inconspicuous surface-level expressions than from [its] judgements about itself” (50). Thus, we should not place our trust in laying out a grand theory of digitization and ‘the digital’ – something that will inevitably result in either overly simplistic or numbingly vague characterizations. Instead, we will do better to develop and maintain an ability to reckon with those inconspicuous surface-level expressions when we encounter them, and to locate the sense of incompleteness that Cox highlights in these expressions as well. This is the value of the helpful oxymoron of contemporary posterity: a position that seeks not to finalize or close off, but to explore and inquire – by way of being at once both conceptually at a distance and materially at close range – leaving behind macro-narratives in favor of analytical and aesthetic insight from within our contemporary cultural moment.

Transformative Banality

Even though we may find value in this helpful oxymoron, it is still unclear how such a contemporary posterity brings with it the abilities to reckon with and locate incompleteness in computational capitalism's digitization. The concept of *anamorphosis* is of use here.

Anamorphosis is, in the words of Snodgrass, “the optical technique of transposing a distorted projection within and according to the norms of the visual logic of linear perspective” which means that “[t]he anamorphic image requires that the viewer adopt a particular viewing angle or viewing device in order to reconstitute and better make out the enclosed anamorphic image” (31). Snodgrass shows how anamorphosis can be applied not only to paintings, but to theoretical perspectives as well. Snodgrass argues that the concept of anamorphosis can be a pathway to explaining how the post-digital is a way of “filtering the very filter that is the digital” as he puts it (28). Berry argues, similarly to Snodgrass, that the post-digital “is not purely a digital formation or artefact – it can also be the concepts, networks and frameworks of digitality that are represented” (44). As a kind of theoretical anamorphosis, the post-digital makes palpable the structures, dynamics, and aesthetic forms of digitization that otherwise remain elusive.

Moreover, such anamorphosis is, to Snodgrass, “able to act as a potentially unsettling augur embedded within a taken for granted norm, employing the same tools of the media technique in question to create further indexical yet awry scenes which can tease out the very artificial, even absurd nature of the everyday perspective in question” (31). In other words, the conceptual clarity awarded by positioning oneself in a stance of contemporary posterity not only allows one to intellectually and analytically reckon with that in relation to which one is contemporarily post, it can also be a pathway to transformational agency. As Snodgrass argues, “some post-digital practices might partly act as mirrors or transduction devices for remembering, rethinking or repurposing current notions and manifestations of the digital” (32). In this way, a positioning of one's theoretical gaze in a contemporary posterity sustains the ability to locate incompleteness and partake in resistance in the face of computational capitalism, allowing for a radical rethinking by way of anamorphosis.

This rethinking is intrinsically linked to a rejection of a blind belief in technological progress. In the words of Snodgrass, and echoing the initial definition by Cascone, “the post-digital might partly be understood as an attempt to dislodge or at least curve what can be thought of as more irrepressibly linear, homogenising natures – which the digital ... continue[s] to so readily latch onto” (32). In this way, one of the main potentials of the contemporary posterity that is being explored here is that with it, the post-digital “can be of conceptual and/or aesthetic use” in that it allows for “a relational and critical encounter” (Snodgrass 30) with our shared colloquial notions of the digital itself. Similarly, Berry argues that the post-digital “[contains] not just the possibility of a hermeneutic encounter but also an agency drawn from computation itself” (45). This blending of encounter and agency, then, happens in and through an enactment on *banality*.

The stance of contemporary posterity both reveals and harnesses a certain banality of ‘the digital’ through the post-digital. This banality paves the way for critical self-awareness. Indeed, as Snodgrass argues, “there has for some time been detectable a sense of popular, collective self-awareness – ‘Oh Internet’ – in regards to [the] saturation of the digital” (33). This banality, this self-awareness, is not necessarily a subjugation of Internet users to the will of computational capitalism, but, rather, a collective act of resistance to the otherwise all-enveloping veil of computational capitalism, which seems to have an inescapable grasp on our platformed Internet culture. As Snodgrass argues, “by virtue of their ready participation in the everyday trade and vernacular of the digital, such seemingly banal practices have a certain knack for plucking out the cultural markers of the contemporary moment that are felt to be of particular communicative power” (35). Indeed, such practices may result in “[a] criticality or sense of awareness that might, on occasion, be able to gather certain kinds of counter-publics or movements around their resonant momentum” (Snodgrass 35). In this sense, even (or actually especially) banal (Internet) practices themselves can potentially be one of the most widely transformative powers in the post-digital condition. Accordingly, the stance of contemporary posterity relates strongly to banal and everyday uses of digital technologies, and to aesthetic practices that build upon, and harness, an *aesthetics of the banal*, “pointing to how the big utopias become banal and mundane, including how they control sharing, communication and perception” (Andersen & Pold 286). The banality that the post-digital both reveals and harnesses is testimony to the contemporary posterity at play in the concept: the banality in

question ties onto a contemporary context, but is revealed from a critical distance gained through (conceptual) posterity.

A Case of Contemporarily Posterior Banality

As an example of a banal case that illuminates the proposed stance of contemporary posterity, consider the subreddit *r/totallynotrobots* (Totally Not Robots, in the following *TNR*). This community is a longstanding performative subreddit with currently almost 400.000 members, in which users imitate robots that imitate humans. In other words, the comic premise of the subreddit is that there exist anthropomorphic robots among us that participate in our platform culture while seeking to remain hidden

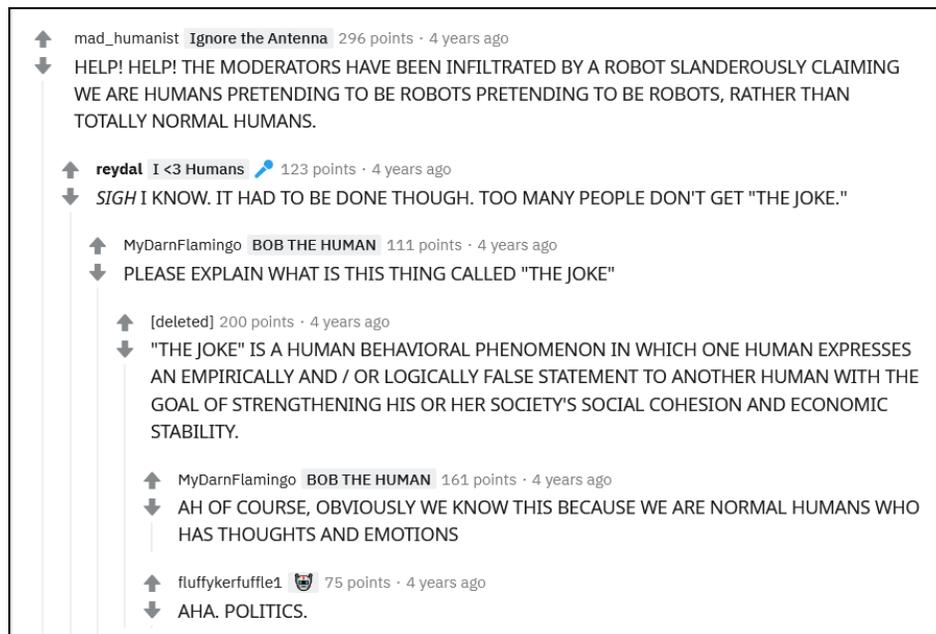


Figure 1: An exchange between multiple Reddit users of the subreddit *r/totallynotrobots*. This exchange refers to a post that lists the 'ruleset' of the subreddit, thus breaking the 'fourth wall' of the performance (*u/reydal*).

from human awareness (and, curiously, these anthropomorphic robots all inhabit the same subreddit – please suspend disbelief). More specifically, the subreddit invites participants to write posts in ways that mimic a somewhat 'robotlike' style, which in the TNR community means to write in syntactically correct but semantically roundabout ways, and always in uppercase (lest other TNR members think you are yelling), which turns into a strikingly consistent style across the community. The actual content of posts

on the subreddit is often shared material from other subreddits and/or other websites that exhibit a ‘robotic’ subject matter, which includes images or videos of humans or animals performing ‘robotic’ actions; ambiguous or redundant usage of the word ‘human’; glitches or computational; etc. The most dynamic and performatively rich part of the subreddit is the comment section, where users respond to, develop upon, and stylistically negotiate the content of other users’ posts (cf. Figure 1). As such, the subreddit is concerned with a post-digital reality in which colloquial notions of ‘the digital’ are revealed, troubled, and reimaged through certain performances of contemporarily posterior banality.

The TNR subreddit exhibits a case of e-literary performance that takes on a posthuman subject matter in a way that is marked by a thoroughly post-digital aesthetic which points to the comic mishaps of technological ‘development’ from a contemporary position. As Heckman and O’Sullivan argue, one of the characteristics of the *post-digital economy*, in which they argue we currently find ourselves, is the prominence of an ethos of disruptive innovation: “Radical change happens to us daily, and we readjust our labor, our dwellings, our social communities, our attitudes, our moods ... we adjust or die (or, more likely, are shuffled off to the margins)” (95). Against such disruptive innovation, the banality of post-digital e-literary practices reorient the focus not to the future but to the contemporary moment, and thus these banal practices enlighten not disruptive innovation but a disruption of innovation. As Anna Nacher highlights, such performative reflection is not disconnected from the material actualities of computation. Whereas transistor and algorithm may beforehand have been considered to be the most ‘material’ parts of the digital computer, Nacher highlights how “in the post-digital condition of our time both the very understanding of materiality and the way it is positioned in relation to the digital have changed” (n.p.). TNR is an e-literary – and contemporarily posterior – performative negotiation of the materiality of artificial intelligence.

In the case of TNR, the performative mimicry is wholly situated in our contemporary moment: Unmarked by temporal markers that denote a future, the performance takes place in, critically reflects, and potentially affects the present. And while it documents cases of post-digital situations, these are neither associated with a rejection of all things digital, nor with a praise of such digital technologies, but with an aesthetic mapping of how our computational counterparts can be thought to read, partake in, and wonder about our contemporary post-digital condition. This performance arguably harnesses the

beneficial aspect of the contemporary posterity of the post-digital in that it critically represents the banality of the digital without resorting to a periodizing logic but, instead, remaining wholly oriented towards, as well as situated in, our contemporary moment.

Can these findings – can this helpful oxymoron – be extrapolated to posthumanism? I suspect so, at least to some degree, and that is something I will be looking forward to discussing in Virtual Bergen.

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