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How to cite this publication:

Erslev, M. S. (2021). Contemporary Posterity: A Helpful Oxymoron. *Electronic Book Review*.
https://doi.org/10.7273/gzy8-m368

Publication metadata

Contemporary Posterity: A Helpful Oxymoron

ebr **electronicbookreview.com**/essay/contemporary-posterity-a-helpful-oxymoron

6. november 2021

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11-07-2021
https://doi.org/10.7273/gzy8-m368
This essay was peer-reviewed.

In his essay, Malthe Stavning Erslev approaches the notion of post-digital from the perspective of a broader cultural phenomenon of posterioriy, emphasizing the fact that the prefix post- still allows for discussion of multidirectional and complex changes that our world is currently undergoing. In order to better grasp all the complexities and interrogate somewhat linear periodization implied by the prefix, Erslev employs the oxymoronic concept of contemporary posterity. At the same time, he ties his theoretical proposition with the extensive analysis of an online community engaging in bot-mimicry.

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 happens to a concept when we turn it into a 'posterity'? In the light of recent discussions surrounding post-humanism within electronic literature (cf. Literary and Aesthetic Posthumanism), as well as the questions surrounding post(?)-pandemic platforms discussed at the 2021 ELO Conference (cf. ELO 2021), it seems that we are far from being post-post, and the prefix continuously returns in different forms to allow us to discuss ongoing, multidirectional, and complex changes with a sense of distance and academic rigor.

In this essay, I approach the question of what this prefix does to a concept through an inquiry into the notion of *post-digital*. The investigation of the posterity of post-digital will run in tandem with an analytical exploration of a case of third generation electronic literature (Flores). The case in question is *Totally Not Robots*, an online community that engages in a practice of *bot-mimicry*, or, the act of pretending to be (ro)bots that pretend to be humans. The pairing of Totally Not Robots with the concept of post-digital instantiates a generous and timely case through which to inquire into the pitfalls and potentials of turning concepts into posterities. Indeed, a noticeably large proportion of inquiry into the post-digital has revolved around discussions of the useful-yet-troublesome prefix itself. Over the course of the essay, I synthesize 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.

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The term post-digital has become central to the field of electronic literature, as is exemplified in two recent anthologies edited by Joseph Tabbi (*Bloomsbury Handbook of Electronic Literature*; *Post-Digital*). 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). 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). Whereas electronic literature has previously been occupied with finding new and exciting ways of blending the literary with the digital, the field now finds itself in a position where it is difficult to tease out and account for all the consequences of this blending (Moulthrop). Instead of further upgrades, what we need is to engage with the contemporary actualities of our electronically literary culture.

In a recently reprinted essay, Florian Cramer argues that the field of electronic literature should focus less on "literary intermediate writing for electronic (display) media" and instead engage with "a post-digital poetics defined by a DIY [do-it-yourself] media
[1]
practice" ("Post-Digital Writing" 368). Such a practice favors experimentation grounded in our current media moment, rather than a perpetual view to a soon-to-come future along the normative upgrade path of digitization. Cramer's perspective hints at the most common understanding of the post-digital, which holds that post-digital practices and artifacts are those that are not (exclusively) screen-based, but still to a large extent digital – such as electronically literary installations. Thus, post-digital electronic literature has mostly been discussed in cases where the literary experience is (also) located outside of a digital screen display (cf. Andersen and Pold, "Post-digital Books").

However, the post-digital situation includes screen-based and more-than-screen-based media in equal distribution. For instance, the case of Totally Not Robots (introduced below) is fully screen-based while nonetheless inhibiting ample post-digital tendencies. Beyond simply denoting the role of the screen in a given work, the post-digital bears with it a powerful epistemic potential as an axis around which we can discuss and navigate the (post-)digitized landscape while still remaining situated herein, and *it is the prefix of post itself that unlocks its epistemic potential*. Such is the main claim of this essay; the elaboration of the claim begins with the Totally Not Robots community.

HUMAN.EXE ENCOUNTERED AN ERROR

Totally Not Robots (in the following: TNR) is a community situated on the Reddit platform. This subreddit (i.e. a specific sub-forum within the Reddit platform that is distinct from other subreddits) hosts a multi-year role-play in which redditors (users of Reddit) pretend to be robots that pretend to be 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 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

robotic 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.
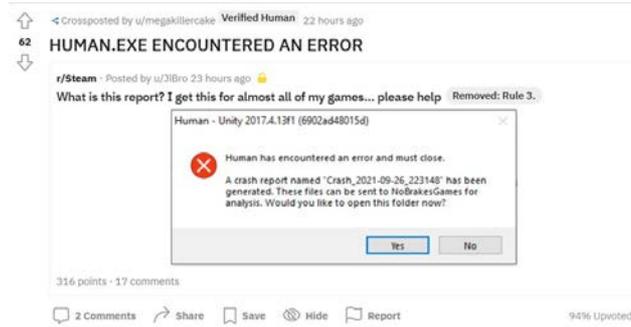
A typical example of content on the TNR subreddit. In this case, a member of TNR has reposted an error message that was originally uploaded to another subreddit dedicated to the gaming platform Steam. Image source: Reddit (cf. u/megakillercake).

The main driver of the TNR subreddit is the sharing of material from other subreddits and/or other websites, including images or videos of humans or animals performing robotic actions, ambiguous or redundant usage of the word 'human', glitches, etc. In figure 1, we see an example of a typical post: A redditor shares content from another subreddit (dedicated to the gaming platform Steam) in which the word 'human' figures in an ambiguous way, implying that the error message refers to a humanoid robot, or that regular humans are in fact running software that is prone to error. This relatively simple and lighthearted pun is just one surface expression of a more profound collective investigation of social robots and artificial intelligence in everyday situations. In the comments section, another user explicates the techno-existentialist subtext of the original post, writing in the form of an error message: "The problem seems to be caused by the following file: fear.exe" (u/megakillercake). What is happening here is a humorous yet earnest inquiry into the notion of anxiety in the context of artificial intelligence (or perhaps the other way around). The post emerges from a quotidian and spontaneous aesthetic relation between errors, humans, anxiety, and robots. It is merely one among many subtle and scattered hints of a collective engagement with central questions and dilemmas concerning mass implementation of artificially intelligent software in everyday life.

The TNR subreddit stands in contrast to corporate narratives of easily implementable artificial intelligence agents in everyday life, which often takes the form of a self-fulfilling prophecy, where proponents of this narrative abstract away complexity and messiness until implementation is possible, which leads to discriminatory or inappropriate use of machine learning methods (Selbst et al.). The narrative of seamless implementation of automated software is based equally on notions of continuous accumulation of computing power and clear separation of human and non-human agents (Schwartz). Against this narrative, TNR exemplifies a specialized interest in the seams, rather than the seamlessness, of mass implementation of automated software, and always oriented

towards a present, rather than a future. Focusing on speculative breakdowns in banal everyday situations, TNR instantiates a view to artificially intelligent software that is thoroughly invested in the messy contingencies of humans and non-humans, as well as the temporal messiness of our contemporary moment. In order to understand the value and magnitude of this post-humanist post-Web post-activity, we need to understand it from a post-digital perspective.

Post-digital: Economic, Aesthetic, Temporal, Conceptual

The post-digital is, in the words of Cramer, defined as "the messy state of media, arts and design *after* their digitization" ("What is 'Post-digital'?" 17, original emphasis). An important part of the concept is the disappearance of taken-for-granted distinctions between presumed digital and analog media. Within the post-digital, computational artefacts simply exist as part of a broader reality, not as a parallel or virtual reality that is cut-off from physical-analog contexts. In the case of the TNR subreddit, the platformed performance highlights the comic frictions emerging from the integration of digital logics (as in artificial intelligence) with a messy world, where misunderstandings and sign-signal breakdowns make way for equal parts frustration and wonder.

From a more historical perspective, the concept of post-digital 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 was conceived as a direct artistic reaction to computational capitalism's "cranking out digital fluff by the gigabyte" (Cascone 12). As such, in the words of Ian Andrews who was among the first 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.). In short, the post-digital could be seen as testimony that "the revolutionary period of the digital information age [had] surely passed" (Cascone 12).

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 (1) an economic condition that is marked by the ethos of computational capitalism (*cranking out digital fluff*), (2), a certain type of aesthetic artifacts including their associated practices (*works that reject the hype*) and (3) a temporal marker of the time after broad digitization (*the revolutionary period has surely passed*). These three strands coexist in the concept and are arguably all related to a fourth, namely (4) 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 conceptual stance of *contemporary posterity*.

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, "What is 'Post-digital'?" 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, "What is 'Post-digital'?" 18).

Even though it is fairly prevalent in the realm of aesthetics, the messiness that Cramer points to is not yet part of our common culturally shared conceptions of the digital or digitality. The disappearance of distinctions between digital and analog should mean that the digital cannot be thought of as simply being a perpetually blue flow of ones and zeroes that are clearly distinct from yet almost always in close contact with a human hand, yet this is consistently the impression that one gets if searching the Internet for images with the word 'digital' as query (cf. Snodgrass, or try it for yourself). Instead of a recognition of the messiness of the post-digital situation, what seems to be the standard interpretation of the disappearing distinctions between digital and analog is that the messiness of our current moment will be fixed by the always-just-around-the-corner emergence of a new (corporately digitized) reality altogether. Thus, we are currently seeing in the rebranding of an outdated social media platform as being part of a so-called metaverse that, unsurprisingly, has blue as the main color of its logo.

The post-digital project is, in other words, far from finished; yet it has also far from emptied its potential. In order to understand the continued relevance of the post-digital, we must trace its four strands with a specific view to our timely case of TNR, beginning with the economic strand of the post-digital.

Cranking Out Digital Fluff: Post-digital Economy

The post-digital economy is driven by an innovation ideology belonging to computational capitalism that always promises to deliver easy (and mostly digital) solutions to complex societal issues. This ideology operates a discourse of describing the world in the future tense, thus sidestepping current and ongoing issues in favor of a promise of an easy solution that is just around the corner. Digital art and electronic literature does not and cannot exist outside of this post-digital economy.

While post-digital practices "[look] for DIY agency outside totalitarian innovation ideology, and for networking off big data capitalism" we must also acknowledge that these practices "already ha[ve] become commercialized" (Andersen, Cox, and Papadopoulos 5). David Berry and Michael 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" (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 and Dieter 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 consequences of computational capitalism are dire. The relatively unfrightening notion of "cranking out digital fluff" from Cascone's original articulation of the post-digital (12) does not do justice to the actualities of life in the *post-digital economy*. As Heckman and O'Sullivan argue, one of the characteristics of the current post-digital economy 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). This disruptive innovation affects our personal, social, professional, and societal lives to the point where disruptively innovative apps tend to define our most basic habits of establishing and maintaining relations to other humans as well as ourselves. Moreover, the ethos of disruptive innovation that characterizes the post-digital economy forecloses any engagements with our techno-cultural situation that are do not follow the normative upgrade path of computational capitalism, leading to a situation where complexity is repressed in favor of simple (and profitable) 'solutions' that rarely actually solve any real problem (Morozov).

At the most global of scales, computational capitalism is a main driver in the continuation of the direst situation that is climate change. Recent development in the field of machine learning, for instance, "comes at the cost of training models for extensive periods on specialized hardware accelerators" that contribute to the emission of greenhouse gasses, which means that the development of artificial intelligence will "become a significant contributor to climate change if [the] exponential trend continues" (Anthony et al. 1).

What we presently need is not innovation fixating on a perpetual future, but a deep and engaged investigation of contemporary alternatives to computational capitalism in the context of digitization. This does not mean that art and literature should negate digitization altogether, but that we should distance ourselves from it enough that we can make out and critically evaluate its contours while remaining in a position that engages actively with it. This is the most vital position for digital art and electronic literature; it is a post-digital position.

The question that remains is what value the added prefix of post brings to the context of what is colloquially known as the digital, and how such a prefix can operate as a way to articulate the struggles and frictions between art, literature, design, and digitization. In the case of the TNR subreddit, the question becomes how the subreddit partakes in a reevaluation of our understanding of – and expectations to – articifical intelligence in and through literary-aesthetic engagements. The rejection of the hype-infused innovation ideology of computational capitalism happens via certain practices and artefacts that expose and engage with distinctly *banal* tendencies in our current digitized situation. As it turns out, this banality is far from accidental: it is a central aspect of the post-digital situation.

Works That Reject the Hype: Post-digital Banality

Even though (or actually *because*) post-digital aesthetic practices and artefacts are not disconnected entirely from the operations of computational capitalism, they provide a platform for resistance to the ethos of disruptive innovation. Such works can act as politico-aesthetic devices for reckoning with, and reimagining, the messy situation that is the ongoing mass digitization of society. As I have hinted at above, banality is central here. In order to understand how so, the concept of *anamorphosis* is of use.

Anamorphosis is, in the words of Eric 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). An example of anamorphosis from the visual arts is the practice of painting an object in highly a disproportionate shape, in such a way that positioning a cylindrical mirror in a specific place makes the object of the painting clearly visible, with recognizable proportions, in the mirror. The technique destabilizes the naturalized assumption of linear perspective and shows how the perception of the world is bound up with the specific viewing angle, as well as the available viewing devices, of a particular observer, thus showing how perception is an act of techno-cultural construction rather than a passive reception. Snodgrass shows how anamorphosis can be applied not only to paintings, but to concepts as well: anamorphosis enlightens how the post-digital is a way of "filtering the very filter that is the digital" (Snodgrass 28). As a kind of conceptual anamorphosis, the post-digital makes palpable the structures, dynamics, and aesthetic forms of digitization that otherwise remain elusive.

In the TNR subreddit, the intermixing of a comic performative premise with a noticeably quotidian and contemporary orientation brings into focus the often-banal situations that define the growing role of artificially intelligent software in our everyday lives. These are not distanced or formalized dilemmas, but situated and contingent – yet also speculative – explorations of the seams of implementation. Through such situated banalities, TNR acts as an anamorphic viewing device through which we can trace the contours of ongoing techno-cultural change (in this case specifically regarding the role of automated software in our everyday lives).

The banality of post-digital aesthetics, its distinct self-awareness, comes from within platformed Internet culture itself, and points recursively to its own banality in its engagements with itself. The active participation in the platforms on which post-digital banality is located is, then, a post-digital necessity. Participation in platformed banalities of this kind is thus not necessarily a subjugation to the will of computational capitalism, but is more likely a situated investigation of the possibilities of agency and resistance. In a study of yet another posteriority, namely post-Web, Alex Saum-Pascual notes how aesthetic-political resistance will involve indulging in an appreciation of the beauty of *meh*: a decisive operation of a boring aesthetic as an antidote to the operation of the attention economy (Saum-Pascual). Such a *meh* exemplifies the necessary centrality of banality in

contemporary rejections of hypes. In this sense, even (or actually especially) banal (Internet) practices themselves turn out to be one of the most widely transformative powers in the post-digital condition.

The light humor and tongue-in-cheek attitude of the TNR subreddit allows aesthetic banality to take hold, continuously engaging with the incomplete parts of digitization in the context of artificially intelligent software (which is inextricably related to digitization more generally). In doing so, the subreddit is not just making fun of technology, but engages in an earnest investigation of central dilemmas related to the implementation of such technology. TNR offers a distinctly quotidian perspective, situated in banal and mundane everyday encounters with post-digital aspects of a post-human situation. The TNR subreddit is just distanced enough from the technologies that are its subject matter to be able to gauge the quotidian dilemmas at play, yet just close enough hereto to be able to continuously locate concrete cases in which these dilemmas play out.

One striking aspect of TNR that we have yet to comment on is its temporal anchor in the present. All the exchanges of the redditors take place in the present tense, and the images that are shared on the subreddit are almost exclusively of things that currently exist, interpreted through the speculative voice of artificially intelligent robots. In this way, the subreddit is not so much a preemption of techno-cultural changes in the future, but actually a contemporary negotiation of changes that are currently happening, oriented towards the current historical moment as it unfolds. The redditors do this via the introduction of a speculative and banal anamorphic viewing devise, or conceptual stance: the performative role of the robot pretending to be human. This viewing device adds a certain distance to the intensity and messiness of techno-cultural changes currently happening, and as such allow the redditors to take on, and better grasp, contemporary dilemmas. The anamorphic viewing device of TNR is directly linked to a perpetual focus on the present, on currently unfolding (banal) situations as these are in the process of occurring. Such a banality requires an understanding of temporality and history as dynamic and continually unfolding processes; in order to sustain such a temporality, we must address the lingering risk of rigid periodization that the prefix of post risks implying.

The Revolutionary Period has Surely Passed: Post-digital Temporality

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 his formulation of the temporality of post-digital, for instance, Cramer compares the concept to that of *post-apocalypse*. He 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" ("What is 'Post-digital'?" 13). However, Cramer adds that "the apocalypse is not over" and argues 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" ("What is 'Post-digital'?" 13, original emphasis). In these formulations, we see a tension between two different notions of post. On the one hand, post is characterized as the time after the "initial upheaval" surrounding digitization, which

Cramer allegorically characterizes as a "discreet breaking point", and on the other hand, post refers to a continuous condition that can neither technologically nor philosophically be considered as being after digitization in any temporal sense ("What is 'Post-digital'?" 13). 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" ("What is 'Post-digital'?" 13). A similar mutational dynamic is at play in the concept of post-digital.

The added comparison to post-colonialism notwithstanding, the temporal arrangement implied by the prefix risks falling dangerously close to a periodizing logic of "simply declaring something as being 'post' something else" (Cox 161). As Geoff 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 will 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). Such moments of incompleteness can, then, be teased out in decidedly banal post-digital aesthetics.

Cox's comments are valuable in that they remind us to look for incompleteness in digitization. Even though most parts of our society are now at least partly digitized, we should not forget that digitization is still an ongoing process. This insistence on the incompleteness of digitization is more important now, in the post(?)-pandemic situation, than ever. The Covid-19 pandemic has brought digitization to an unprecedented level: during periods of lockdown, digital devices and platforms suddenly become central to literally all aspects of life, much more so than was the case before the pandemic. However, we should not be too eager to think that this means that digitization is done and will remain unchanged. Digitization is not just a question of the amount of digital technology, but plays out in the techno-cultural situations set in place by these technologies. These situations continue to develop; the basic fact that video conferencing systems exist and have been implemented in a variety of context does not preclude that such technologies (as well as our use of them) can and will change over time. Digitization does not stop; it continues to happen to itself. The need for continuous negotiations of the role and form of digital technology – the insistence on locating its banal incompleteness – has never been direr.

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 Berry, "is *afterdigital*, but which remains profoundly computational" (45, original emphasis).

Looking in the (Rear View) Mirror: Contemporary Posterity

The banality of post-digital aesthetics emerges from particular, contemporary situations and brings with it a self-reflexive conceptual clarity in relation to the operations of the post-digital economy. As we can see, the first three strands of the post-digital (its economy, its temporality, and its aesthetics) are inextricably inter-connected. I claim that their interconnectedness must be understood in the light of a fourth strand: a conceptual stance of contemporary posterity that relates to each of the other three strands as well as their interconnectedness, but which is still distinct as a strand in itself.

As Snodgrass notes, the post-digital to a large degree revolves around "an enactment of a looking-in-the-(rear-view)-mirror moment" (30). This moment can be thought of as 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. By contemporary, I am here referring to the experience of time from a dynamic, ongoing position in which contemporary actions define the future's past, and thus the movement (indeed creation) of history. Put differently, the word refers to an experience of the dynamic process of time, as this process unfolds, rather than the experience of time as static categories of past, present, and future that are cut-off from one another.

When situating one's conceptual gaze in a position of contemporary posterity, individually different but collectively contingent cases of post-digitized situations can be seen to belong 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. Many of these platforms often remain hidden, including layers of proprietary code as well as networks of closed APIs (application programming interfaces, i.e. software-to-software interfaces operating in ways that are usually not directly visible in the user interface). Any one of these surfaces may be entirely different from one another, 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 and scrutinized.

So how does the post-digital 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" (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 notion of post-digital, in other words, allows us to critically examine our current historical moment by looking at disparate cases of post-digital situations that enlighten, from within, the ongoing complexity of digitization. Thus, Berry argues that our present situation can be studied "more strikingly from an analysis of its inconspicuous surface-level expressions than from [its] judgements about itself" (50). In other words, we should not place our trust grand theories of digitization and the digital, since these 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 inconspicuous surface-level expressions when we encounter them, and to recognize their belonging to and illumination of the post-digital constellation, thus gaining new awareness of the contours of our (post-)digitized society.

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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, the contemporary refers to the historical *present* – with a specific view to the ongoing construction of history of which the contemporary moment is continually part. 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 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" ("What is 'Post-digital'?" 12) – the conceptual stance of contemporary posterity, then, *is an oxymoron but is helpful*.

This oxymoronal stance seeks not to finalize or close off, but to explore and inquire, leaving behind macro-narratives (cf. Cox) in favor of analytical and aesthetic insight from within our contemporary cultural moment. Returning to the case of TNR, and the reflections related to the temporal situation of the subreddit noted above, we begin to see how the stance of contemporary posterity works. The exchanges of the redditors on the subreddit are, as argued above, situated in our contemporary moment: They take place in, critically reflect, and potentially affect the present. And while they document 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.

PLEASE EXPLAIN WHAT IS THIS THING CALLED "THE JOKE"

TNR is concerned with a post-digital reality in which colloquial notions of the digital (specifically artificially intelligent software and social robotics) are revealed, troubled, and reimagined through certain performances of contemporarily posterior banality in the form of bot-mimicry.

The TNR subreddit exhibits a case of e-literary performance that takes on a post-human 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. Against the ethos of 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.

My investigation of the impact of post to the notion of digital in and through the post-digital shows how the prefix adds value and perspective, even transformative potential, to a complex and otherwise elusive concept, yet the lingering risk of perpetuating a periodizing logic is a critical issue that any posterity must be aware of – and continue to address head-on. As the case of the TNR community shows, the prefix retains considerable conceptual value when it is oriented towards a contemporary moment rather than a future scenario. By focusing on quotidian encounters with banal post-digital situations, the TNR subreddit crystallizes and negotiates the contemporary futuring of artificial intelligence.

Thus, I finish with another screenshot from the TNR subreddit. In figure 2, we see an exchange of comments made on the subreddit upon the introduction of a set of explanations and rules for the community: Some redditors were distressed that these rules and explanations would break the fourth wall of the subreddit. However, the discussion of the rules happened from an in-character perspective, and curiously served to engulf the explanations as part of the subreddit's performance, maintaining the fourth wall while keeping the explanations in place. This exchange in particular shows the distinct self-awareness that is prevalent in the TNR community, offering a humorous observation about the role of humor in human social formations from a robotic perspective, while relating this perspective to the experience of humanity, again viewed from a conceptual robot's imagined gaze, all of which is inevitably grounded in a human's experience of robotic technology. The exchange is perhaps a good reflection of the contemporary posterity of TNR: a conceptual distancing providing clarity while remaining situated. And lest we forget the political role of such a conceptual stance, the user *fluffykerfuffle1* is apt to remind us: "AHA. POLITICS".
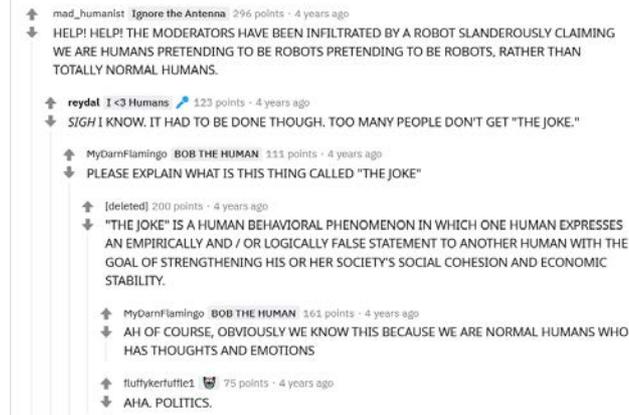
Members of TNR re-calibrate the narrative of the subreddit so that the performative fourth wall is maintained in spite of the explication of the subreddit's comic premises in a document dedicated to explanations and rules. Image source: Reddit (cf. u/reydal).

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*This essay is a reworked version of a working paper presented in March 2021 at the 15th SLSAeu conference.

Cite this Essay:

Stavning Erslev, Malthe. "Contemporary Posterity: A Helpful Oxymoron", Electronic Book Review, November 7, 2021, https://doi.org/10.7273/gzy8-m368.
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