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**PREHISTORIES OF THE
POST-DIGITAL: OR, SOME
OLD PROBLEMS WITH
POST-ANYTHING**

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According to Florian Cramer, the “post-digital” describes an approach to digital media that no longer seeks technical innovation or improvement, but considers digitization something that already happened and thus might be further reconfigured (Cramer). He explains how the term is characteristic of our time in that shifts of information technology can no longer be understood to occur synchronously — and gives examples across electronic music, book and newspaper publishing, electronic poetry, contemporary visual arts and so on. These examples demonstrate that the ruptures produced are neither absolute nor synchronous, but instead operate as asynchronous processes, occurring at different speeds and over different periods and are culturally diverse in each affected context. As such, the distinction between “old” and “new” media is no longer useful.

Yet despite the qualifications and examples, there seems to be something strangely nostalgic about the term — bound to older ‘posts’ that have announced the end of this and that. I am further (somewhat nostalgically too perhaps) reminded of Frederic Jameson’s critique of postmodernity, in which he identified the dangers of conceptualising the present historically in an age that seems to have forgotten about history (in *The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 1991). His

claim was that the present has been colonised by ‘pastness’ displacing ‘real’ history (20), or what we might otherwise describe as neoliberalism’s effective domestication of the transformative potential of historical materialism.

In this short essay I want to try to explore the connection of this line of thinking to the notion of the post-digital to speculate on what is being displaced and why this might be the case. It is not so much a critique of the post-digital but more an attempt to understand some of the conditions in which such a term arises. Is contemporary cultural production resigned to make empty reference to the past in ‘post-history’: thereby perpetuating both a form of cultural amnesia and uncritical nostalgia for existing ideas and mere surface images? As Cramer also acknowledges, one of the initial sources of the concept occurs in Kim Cascone’s essay “The Aesthetics of Failure: Post-Digital Tendencies in Contemporary Computer Music” (2000), and it is significant that in his later “The Failures of Aesthetics” (2010) he further reflects on the processes by which aesthetics are effectively repackaged for commodification and indiscriminate use. The past is thereby reduced to the image of a vast database of images without referents that can endlessly reassigned to open up new markets and establish new value networks.

Posthistory

The Hegelian assertion of the end of history — a notion of history that culminates in the present — is what Francis Fukuyama famously adopted for his thesis *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992) to insist on the triumph of neoliberalism over Marxist materialist economism. In Fukuyama's understanding of history, neoliberalism has become the actual lived reality. This is both a reference to Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* but also Alexandre Kojève's *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel: Leçons sur "La Phénoménologie de l'Esprit"* (1947), and his "postscript on post-history and post-historical animals," in which he argues that certain aesthetic attitudes have replaced the more traditional 'historic' commitment to the truth.

These aesthetic changes correspond somewhat to the way that Jameson contrasts conceptions of cultural change within Modernism expressed as an interest in all things 'new', in contrast to Postmodernism's emphasis on ruptures, and what he calls 'the tell-tale instant' (like the 'digital' perhaps), to the point where culture and aesthetic production have become effectively commodified. He takes video to be emblematic of postmodernism's claim to be a new cultural form but also reflects centrally on architecture because of its close links with the economy. For critical purposes now, digital technology, more so than video even, seems to encapsulate the kinds of aesthetic mutability as well as economic determinacy he described in even more concentrated forms. To Jameson, the process of commodification demonstrated the contradictory nature of the claims of postmodernism: for instance, how Lyotard's notion of the end of grand (totalizing) narratives became understood to be a totalizing form in itself. Furthermore, it seems rather obvious that what might be considered

to be a distinct break from what went before clearly contains residual traces of it ("shreds of older avatars" as he puts it), not least acknowledged in the very use of the prefix that both breaks from and keeps connection to the term in use.

So rather than a distinct paradigm shift from modernism, he concludes that postmodernism is "only a reflex and a concomitant of yet another systemic modification of capitalism itself" (Jameson xii). Referring to Daniel Bell's popular phrase 'postindustrial society', Jameson instead argues for 'late-capitalism' (a term allegedly taken from Adorno). This preferred choice of prefix helps to reject the view that new social formations no longer obey the laws of industrial production and so reiterates the importance of class relations. Here he is also drawing upon the work of the Marxist economist Ernest Mandel in *Late Capitalism* (1978) who argued that in fact this third stage of capital was in fact capitalism in a purer form — with its relentlessly expanding markets and guarantee of the cheapest work-force. If we follow this line of logic, can we argue something similar with the post-digital? What are its residual traces and what is being suppressed? How are new markets and social relations are being reconfigured under these conditions?

Determining logic

To begin to think about these questions it should be understood that Jameson adopts Mandel's 'periodising hypothesis' or 'long wave theory' of expanding and stagnating economic cycles to explain developmental forces of production. In this unashamedly dialectical model, growth is explained in parallel to the previous period's stagnation. Three general revolutions in technology are described, in close relation to the capitalist

mode of production since the 'original' industrial revolution of the later 18th century: Machine production of steam-driven motors since 1848; machine production of electric and combustion motors since the 90s of the 19th century; machine production of electronic and nuclear-powered apparatuses since the 40s of the 20th century (Mandel 119). Correspondingly Jameson characterises these as: market capitalism; monopoly capitalism, or the stage of imperialism; multinational capitalism (35), each expanding capital's reach and effects. He then relates these economic stages directly to cultural production, as follows: realism — worldview of realist art; modernism — abstraction of high modernist art; and postmodernism — pastiche.

Although this model may seem rather teleological and over-determined on first encounter, he explains that these developments are uneven and layered, without clean breaks as such, as "all isolated or discrete cultural analysis always involves a buried or repressed theory of historical periodization" (Jameson 3). The acknowledgement of what lies historically repressed provides a further link to Hal Foster's *The Anti-Aesthetic*, and his defence of Jameson's adoption of the long wave theory as a "palimpsest of emergent and residual forms" (Foster 207). However he does consider it not sensitive enough to different speeds nor to the idea of 'deferred action' (that he takes from Freud's the return of the repressed). This aspect is important to any psychoanalytic conception of time and implies a complex and reciprocal relationship between an event and its later reinvestment with meaning.

This feedback loop (or dialectic) of anticipation and reconstruction is perhaps especially important to understand the complex symptoms of psycho-social crisis. For instance, and to understand the present financial crisis, Brian Holmes traces cycles

of capitalist growth and the depressions that punctuate them by also referring to long wave theory. Rather than Mandel, he refers directly to the Russian economist Nikolai Kondratiev, who identified three long waves of growth underpinned by techno-economic paradigms: "rising from 1789 to a peak around 1814, then declining until 1848; rising again to a peak around 1873, then declining until 1896; and rising once more to a peak around 1920 (followed by a sharp fall, as we know, in 1929)." (Holmes 204) He explains that what Kondratiev discovers is that large numbers of technological inventions are made during the slumps, but only applied during the upsurges (205). This pattern in turn informs Joseph Schumpeter's influential idea of how innovations revolutionize business practices — what he later calls "creative destruction" and later "disruptive innovation" by others (1995) — to demonstrate how profit can be generated from stagnated markets. Holmes traces the contemporary importance of these concepts to establish how capitalism follows a long wave of industrial development that presents opportunities for social transformation from a complex interplay of forces, and innovation is applied: "Investment in technology is suspended during the crisis, while new inventions accumulate. Then, when conditions are right, available capital is sunk into the most promising innovations, and a new long wave can be launched." (206)

Is something similar taking place with digital technology at this point in time following the dotcom hype and its collapse? Is the pastiche-driven retrograde style of much cultural production a symptom of these complex interplay of forces, and an indication of business logic that seeks to capitalize on the present crisis (given the paucity of other options) before launching new innovations on the market? Yet before making such a bold assertion we should also be wary of other determinisms as the relays of technological

innovation alone do not reveal the inner mechanisms of the broken economy, but broader analyses that reach beyond technology: "Technology has as much to do with labour repression as it does with wealth and progress. This is our reality today: there is too much production, but it is unaffordable, inaccessible, and useless for those who need it most." (Holmes 209)

This position seems to concur with the overall problem of endless growth and collapse — the reification of class divisions — where old technologies are repackaged but in ways that serve to repress historical conditions. In a similar vein Jameson would have us conceive of the contemporary phase of capitalism in terms of both catastrophe and progress (Jameson 47). This means to inscribe the possibility of change into the very model of change offered up as unchangeable — or something similarly paradoxical (and dialectical). Other kinds of innovations outside of the capitalist market might be imagined in this way but there also seems to be a problem here in that the very processes have been absorbed back into further stages of social repression.

Postscript

Are these periodisations simply too mechanical, too economically determining? Probably. Indeed, are Marxist theories of capitalist crisis bound to outmoded notions of the development of the forces of production, in order to conceptualise decisive (class) action? That may not be such a bad thing if our memories are fading about what is being displaced and how. Having said this let us perhaps better conclude that economic crises are increasingly subject to the conditions of what Peter Osborne refers to as 'global contemporaneity'. The suggestion is that neither modern

nor postmodern discourses are sufficient to grasp the characteristic features of the historical present. In this view, the contemporary is not simply a historical period per se, but rather a moment in which shared issues that hold a certain currency are negotiated and expanded.

As a historical concept, the contemporary thus involves a projection of unity onto the differential totality of the times of lives that are in principle, or potentially, present to each other in some way, at some particular time — and in particular, 'now', since it is the living present that provides the model of contemporaneity. That is to say, the concept of the contemporary projects a single historical time of the present, as a living present — a common, albeit internally disjunctive, historical time of human lives. 'The contemporary', in other words, is shorthand for 'the historical present'. Such a notion is inherently problematic but increasingly irresistible. (Osborne)

The term contemporaneity has become useful to deal with the complexities of time and history, if not politics, in ways that neither modernism nor postmodernism seemed able to capture. Beyond simply suggesting something is new or sufficiently different, the idea of the contemporary poses the vital question of when the present of a particular work begins and ends. In getting to grips with what constitutes contemporary art, Osborne's point is that the convergence and mutual conditioning of periodisations of art and the social relations of art have their roots in more general economic and socio-technological processes.

Thus contemporaneity begins to describe the more complex and layered problem of different kinds of time existing

simultaneously across different geo-political contexts. Doesn't this point to the poverty of simply declaring something as post something else? When it comes to the condition of the post-digital, the analogy to historical process and temporality seems underdeveloped to say the least. The post-digital can perhaps be considered "badly known," as Osborne would put it.

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