Postdigital Artistic Positionality and its Potentials for Cultural Education

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Abstract

In 2002, in *Culture in Bits*, Gary Hall described challenges to the 'identity' of cultural studies, pointing to the debate between political economy and cultural studies. Rapid technological change has distracted us since, but these challenges remain. Furthermore, recent developments surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic have also revealed complex interconnections across viral biology and information science, with the global lockdown giving rise to related postdigital artistic activities. In *Algorithmic Culture* Ted Striphas discussed a delegation of the work of culture to computational processes which significantly alters the practice, experience, and understanding of culture. This article examines to what extent postdigital art practices offer a form of resistance to political economic 'illusions' of democratic forms of public culture found across the Internet, and at which price. If humans and technology are acknowledged as part of a collaborative artistic process, can this address issues pertaining to power, exploitation, and emancipation in our postdigital age? We conclude that when artists engage with their personal postdigital positionality, this brings such possibilities a little closer in these uncertain times.

Introduction

In the 21st century political economic 'illusions' are all around us, making it difficult to verify authenticity, including democratic forms of public culture, both online and offline (Mackenzie and Bhatt 2020; Khan 2020). It is all too easy to raise concerns based on what appears to have changed in a so-called digital era, however, it can be enlightening to look further back, as well as ahead, when considering what a postdigital perspective on art practices might offer (Jandrić et. al 2018; Jandrić and Hayes 2018; Sinclair and Hayes 2019; Hayes, forthcoming, 2021). Whilst the disciplines of art and computer science each bring creative potentials, they also bring historical connections and tensions from how they have been understood and enacted in society. As digital media of all varieties have been developed and analysed, the work of both science and interpretation can be noticed. Perhaps art and science are an unlikely couple to bring together, and had they met in a bar, they may even have politely excused themselves before taking their relationship further.

Such an amusing prospect does have serious implications, though, that sit at the roots of many of our contemporary issues surrounding visual media and practices. A proliferation of what has been labelled 'fake news' in a so-called era of 'post-truth' and 'bullshit' has given us recent stress, as well as new categories in which to arrange our concerns. But the more fundamental structures beneath these activities are rather more difficult to expose, as pointed out recently by Mackenzie and Bhatt (2020): 'There have been increasing concerns that fake news in online platforms is undermining the legitimacy of the press, the democratic process, and the authority of sources such as science, the social sciences and qualified experts.' (Mackenzie and Bhatt 2020, p. 3). These observations could not be more relevant, when while this is being written, citizens around the world are anxiously awaiting accurate media updates on the global efforts against Covid-19. Artistic practices and the digital humanities do not sit outside of this situation. Lacković points to an 'unprecedented profusion of visual information across digital media that contributes to the contemporary post-truth era, marked by fake news and uncritical consumption of the media' (Lacković 2020, p. 442). She suggests in response that to engage critically with postdigital semiotics is much needed 'in an age of global ecological and social crises, uncertainty and fast consumption of digital content' (Lacković 2020, p. 442).

These arguments also have implications for postdigital art practices which may be created through the digital (at least in part) and interpreted in the context of cultural education. There is a need, firstly, to consider what this could mean for the identity of cultural studies (taking into account historical tensions with political economy), and secondly, to question whether postdigital art may give us a new