A Post-Digital Archaeology?

written by Jeremy Huggett | 05/07/2015

Given the current state of digital archaeology, is it more properly referred to as post-digital archaeology? What does this mean? There's a lot of confusion about the term 'post-digital', not least because it's often used by techno-boosters in the sense of "what next?", assuming that since everything is now digital, we're looking to the next 'big thing' – a presumption that is questionable to say the least.

In the context of media art and digital media Florian Cramer (2014) sees 'post-digital' as "a term that sucks but is useful". He talks of how it can seem to be a sign of ignorance of our contemporary reality or some deliberate luddite-style withdrawal from this reality akin to the 19thC Arts and Crafts movement's resistance to industrialisation. He suggests the term 'post-digital'

> "can be used to describe either a contemporary disenchantment with digital information systems and media gadgets, or a period in which our fascination with these systems and gadgets has become historical".

He also emphasises that the prefix 'post-' shouldn't be understood in terms of 'after' but in the sense of 'continuation' or mutation – subtle cultural shifts – and he uses the analogy of 'post-punk' (a continuation of punk culture in ways which are still recognisably punk) for instance.

Others see post-digital as a response to developments such as miniaturisation, ubiquity, the multitude of sensors which change the scale and location of where computing occurs, how it is experienced, and how it is embedded (Caroline Bassett 2015, 140). Still others see the post-digital associated with the humanisation of digital technologies – for instance, David Sable (2012) sees the post-digital as a bridge from the digital world back to the real world, powered by big data and supporting human social activity.

Cramer goes on to suggest that in some respects, post-digital is related to post-digitisation – or at least, the digitisation of the channels through which information are increasingly communicated and consequently the transformations which follow. There is therefore presumably a tipping point – a stage by which we become post-digital – because, as he emphasises, post-digital refers to a state in which the disruption brought about by digitisation has already happened, and indeed, the technology may no longer be perceived as being disruptive. Interestingly, he also describes post-digital as rejecting technological innovation and the associated techno-positivism, and combining old and new in the manner of post-digital hackers, mixing and remixing the analog with the digital, the digital with the real world, and that this is where innovation now lies.

I would suggest that 'digital archaeology' is not yet 'post-digital archaeology', that we have yet to pass the tipping point where the disruption of the digital has already happened. In some areas we may perhaps be approaching that point (our growing reliance on the digital delivery of data, for

instance), but in other respects – the digital excavation, for example – we have some way to go.

However, what is interesting is the way in which the post-digital is associated with disenchantment and scepticism about the digital, takes a historical perspective on the digital, concerns the embeddedness and ubiquity of technology, and entails the humanisation of the digital and its incorporation into the real world. All of which are arguably part of what characterises an introspective methodology – and all things which are not yet the most commonplace in digital archaeology.

(This was part of a presentation made to the Expert Forum of the ARIADNE SIG on Archaeological Research Practices and Methods hosted by the Digital Curation Unit-IMIS, Athena Research Centre – my thanks in particular to Costis Dallas and Agiatis Benardou and their colleagues for the invitation to speak).

References

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