

REVIEW | Popular Music in the Post-Digital Age: Politics, Economy, Culture and Technology

Ewa Mazierska, Les Gillon & Tony Rigg, Eds.

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The editors introduce this collection of thirteen chapters with the idea that the “post” doesn’t designate a time after or beyond digitalization but an historical moment in which digital technologies and the internet are ubiquitous (3). In this current post-digital condition, the distinctions between physical and virtual, offline and online life, the analogue and digital are blurred, unstable and in transition. The “post” also registers an alienation from digital technologies in phenomena such as the vinyl revival and hauntological music. Mazierska, Gillon and Rigg historicize this post-digital present as emerging from two aligned forces – neoliberalism since the early 1980s, and “convergent digitization” focused on personal computing. For recorded music, digitization includes the ascendancy of the CD, then MP3 downloading, and, since the mid 2000s, streaming content on platforms such as YouTube and Spotify. The editors focus on this last period of “advanced convergent digitization” (6).

The book is divided into three sections: the music industry; musicians and their music; and music consumption. Chapters draw on approaches in the history of science and technology, critical political economy, cultural studies, media studies and communication. Several contributions integrate original interviews with musicians and music industry personnel, ethnographic and survey-based research with participants in music scenes and events. Some chapters make careful comparisons that reinforce the salience of national, linguistic and regional differences in European contexts, including Austria, Hungary, Poland, Serbia, Sweden and the UK.

In the music industry section, Patryk Galuszka and Katarzyna M. Wyrzykowska's chapter on independent record labels in Poland traces a shift in the concept of "independence" away from political and ideological meanings and the distribution of music, towards the pragmatic and risk-averse development of niche markets based on a "project-to-project mode of operation" (46). Paulo Magaudda interrogates the promises of Blockchain as a digital infrastructure for the music economy with a discourse analysis of hyperbolic claims of revolutionary change, fairness and frictionless distribution of revenue. Two chapters examine music festivals, which had proliferated during this post-digital and pre-Covid period. Kenny Forbes's ethnographic study of ArcTanGent reveals how this UK-based post-rock festival has taken pains to retain its genre ethos and ethics with appropriate business partners, when so many alternative festivals have linked up with corporate brands as sponsors. Waldemar Kuligowski's chapter on festivals in Serbia, Hungary and Poland develops the idea of "axionormativity" to define a music festival's identity around a package of values, symbolism and activities in contrast to other events (96). Kamila Rymajdo's chapter on the underground club scene in Manchester, England, examines the increasingly hybrid nature of clubs as nightclubbing has lost its centrality in subcultures and local scenes to online music activities. Clubs aim to monetize a range of activities, goods and services, depending on their urban locations and architectures, but often do so with work that is low paid or voluntary.

The section on musicians and their music explores the ways that musicians have had to respond to changing technologies and economies of music production, distribution and consumption. The independent composers in Sweden in Lars Bröndum's chapter draw regularly on state grants and have day jobs in other sectors. Neoliberal policies in education and welfare offer fewer opportunities for working-class artists to make a living than their more affluent counterparts. Digital software has enabled an intensification of new hybrid and retrospective genres, such as the electro swing covered in Chris Inglis's chapter. The growth in digital production and distribution of recorded music comes with few or no returns in the post-CD age. Sound recordings are integrated with artist brands and profiles through social media and organizational networks that create a broader range of revenue-generating opportunities, including concert performances, music for video games and merchandising. Successful and influential middle-aged musicians develop adaptive strategies for career longevity, mobilizing and reshaping their legacies by diversifying their cultural production through books, revival tours, and producing other artists, as in the case of Peter Hook and Graham Massey, explored in the chapter by Mazierska and Rigg.

The section on consumption combines perspectives in technology studies and ethnographic research on media users. Matthew Flynn draws on the history of the parlour piano, phonograph and radio to propose a model to predict the future of recorded music. This model balances *playback* (the affordances of music formats, devices and platforms), *playlist* (the sequences and sequencing of music) and *playbour* (repeatable actions and activities that enhance desired listener experiences), emphasizing consumer convenience and agency rather than the instrumental technological determinism of some accounts. Flynn argues that participant consumers have adopted particular technologies because they improve their control over playlists while demanding less knowledge and skill of them as users. His chapter concludes that voice activation of recorded music will become more important in the immediate future. Michael Huber's surveys of the uses that young people in Austria make of music media reveal that popular music is now less

“a core interest” for teenagers, and more “a welcome tool for impression management” via social media (246). Two chapters deal with the curating of music. Emília Barna examines DJs as online curators who monetize their knowledge and skills as “taste entrepreneurs” in the context of omnivorous consumption and a plethora of digital intermediaries, such as online labels, distributors, retailers, internet radio stations, and content providers, including Soundcloud, Mixcloud, Pitchfork and Boiler Room. Andrew Fry’s chapter on algorithmic curation and personalized listening begins to unpack the opaqueness of platforms such as Spotify and Apple Music. Fry outlines the operations of algorithms through the clusters of questions about users and their listening habits they seek to answer: who, what, where, what time of day and year, how often, how fragmentary, loudly or quietly, alongside which other activities? Algorithmic design identifies users and habits, but also shapes and directs listening through recommendations and discovery playlists. Processes of personalization are mediated by platforms, record labels and other corporations. Fry argues that the financial relationships embedded in algorithms need to be more transparent in order for consumers to control their listening experiences more actively.

The editors’ introduction is subtitled “The future of and through music”. The future appears intermittently in various chapters, though the book’s crystal ball-gazing remains tentative. What can we speculate from its pages and what’s missing? Power in the music industries is shifting to IT companies, though the established corporate record labels still exert considerable leverage and rights over the back catalogues of recorded music. Digital technologies have enabled greater access to music production, distribution and consumption. Huge archives of recorded music are available for free or for subscriptions, though the book doesn’t really ask in detail if this abundance results in a waning of musical affect. Beyond the song and the album, music rights and brands are tied to other companies, commodities and services. While addressing the music playlist as media form in most of the chapters of the final Music Consumption section, the book touches only fleetingly on audiovisual media although films, videos and memetic circulation are significant in contemporary musical experiences. Making music is a precarious occupation, but creativity and authorship remain resilient attractions. Music is a tool for the surveillance and commodification of consumers, enabled by their affective investments.

The usefulness of the “post-digital” to characterize this age remains open to question. Many of the logics and tendencies of music technologies, economies and cultures mentioned above are familiar from the past. Flynn’s chapter on old technologies suggests that we might be better thinking about historical continuities rather than ruptures. However, if articulating this “new” or “late” stage of digitalization opens up a space for scepticism and critique of digital capitalism in music cultures, then it may offer more than just another new academic sub-discipline or field. With its wide purview, international collation of case studies and critical bent, this book is a carefully designed, well-written, and valuable contribution that offsets the concentration on platform capitalism in much of the recent literature on contemporary popular music and digital technologies.