

DIGITAL GLASS

Somewhat late in the day, in reference to an earlier post on limited language, “After Digital” [April 2005]... (www.limitedlanguage.org)

The posting points to the assumption, which in some respects is fairly entrenched already, that we have the hang of digital media, we can sit down, put our feet up in front of the widescreen, its freeview box and broadband access, and work out what our options are. [In the last 12 months, broadband and blog sites have made one’s relationship with “the digital world out there” much more effortless – one quickly forgets how 56K dial-up used to limit one’s range. Graphic Design has once again become a hot discussion point – what’s it all about? – but the discourse is mostly referee’d by those that were there the last time round. Here we go again.]

If we can agree that for most of the design community, digital software became a modus operandi at the end of the 1980s, then 'digital' is not "middle-aged" and still very much in its youth. Digital impacted very quickly on graphic design and print media but for the rest of the world it was the age of the internet and telephony, rather than the graphic design software of the PC and Mac, that had the greater effect, almost a decade later.

I am completely sympathetic with the notion that digital <feels> middle-aged – a sense of fatigue, maybe, and the suspicion that the early and quite critical years of 1990-95 have been superceded by a radical conformity. At the outset, there were voices in opposition to the prevailing currents. That these voices were never given much room to develop is a different subject. The climate changed.

To get personal for a moment, Neville Brody and I took the opportunity to end the 2nd book we did on a note of caution rather than the false optimism characteristic of the early 1990s but it was ‘out of time’, even when the surface of it was readily taken up as a template for a digital aesthetic. The FUSE project was both misunderstood (possibly our mistake) and widely adopted way beyond its print-run. The internet was being spoken of as a superhighway but there were no cars on it. The “End of Print” rhetoric that followed on was one take on the ‘slacker’ aesthetic but there is no movement in the decision to replace text with dingbats, only an encouragement to knowing illiteracy and more hero–designer boredom. This is what we always tried to resist.

Desktop publishing gives way to desktop music, photography and film-making, which race towards new compression codes that wish to deliver everything to a screen the size of a credit card. Celebrity and corporate culture looks the same at any size or resolution. It’s easy to churn out because it is digital, and copying is encouraged just as long as you don’t make copies.

What exactly is 'digital'? It is not as all-pervasive as Negroponte's evangelist line of "Being Digital" proposed, nor, for those of an i-Podded perspective, as desperate on a daily basis as Paul Virilio would have it. The reality is split down the middle.

Last Christmas I had to buy some ink-jet cartridges at Jessops which was bad timing given the seasonal traffic. In front of me in the long queue was a man who'd decided to buy himself a digital camera. It was a Sanyo, for £89.99. I was thinking, they usually make watches, or is it radios?, anyway, this was on special offer and eventually after much demonstration from the cashier/salesperson, this purchaser decided he must ask for a roll of film to go with it.

"Actually, sir, it's a digital camera, it doesn't need film".

Five minutes elapsed as this point was explained; and then re-explained; and seeing the frustration mounting in the queue, at last the salesman sent the man packing with his new purchase and a roll of 35mm film.

The professions that have their daily lives determined by digital media get very arrogant about its ubiquity compared to the experience of many people, who are both seduced and baffled by speedy technological change. I don't think we've even begun to see the wider consequences, let alone understand what 'digital' means for the human race.

Is it the domain of young people? Is it normal to want your child to be computer literate as early as possible? Economically, yes, developmentally, heaven forbid.

If you step back a moment, you see young people are both fascinated and terrorised by the demands of the latest mobile phones, the latest Playstations, and you can observe older people being intimidated by the complexity of choices and swift-fingered techniques demanded of the latest equipment. Older people are physically excluded whilst younger children are made competitive over gadgets that quite literally fry their brains.

The work needing to be done – physiologically – on the effects of digital on the mind, body and spirit will be some time in coming. The mental effects – these, hopefully, being the domain of the artist – seem to have been abandoned in favour of a market game of musical chairs.

The Fine Art scene has yet to come to terms with 'digital'; it mirrors its 'immateriality' in other respects. [Latest example, Rachel Whiteread's boxes in the Turbine Hall of Tate Modern]. I got very annoyed about Nicolas Bourriaud's book 'Post Production' because it promised a critique of this tendency, whilst proceeding to proselytise a list of emerging and already successful artists who can exploit their involvement in who sits in which chair, and for how long, with the curator and critic fighting it out as referee. There was no critical position in relation to their marketing by galleries, the media and critics such as himself. "To make diverse work... that had a lack of desire to control what comes out of it" depends on a degree of invisibility that is anathema to Bourriaud's position, which seems to me already implicit in Baudrillard's critique anyway. Nobody seems to remember how important <his> work is in 2005, it is hardly talked about. The Waterstones 'Philosophy' sections are by and large bare of Baudrillard. Instead, we have the Frieze Art Fair.

To refer to another contention of the initial “After Digital” post - between the 'Velvet Revolution' in Czech Republic in 1989 and the notion that we are approaching some digital media-equivalent, I have to say <wishful thinking>. All would agree that the human touch is the thing what's missing, but after a while you get to feel as if a phantom limb-syndrome is occurring (the sudden unexplained sense of movement).

The i-Pod... It's like Hi-Fi never happened. A shellac from the pre-stereo era has more presence and vitality than mp3 compression offers, the earlobe/headphones make their users (they are NOT listeners) look like walking ECG patients emerging into daylight as they leave the Underground exits. <One flew over the cuckoo's nest> but countless millions are perfectly content with personal isolation and virtual community. I remember being fascinated by a substance that came with every box of technology one used to buy in pre-digital times – “Dessicant Silica Gel” – a crystalline powder the manufacturers put in a white pouch, in with the packaging for the amplifier/cassette deck/tuner you purchased, to remove moisture. This would seem to be the effect the digital has on the brain.

Until there's a revolution the likes of which we have little idea about, nothing is going to change. All the weblogs and interactive devices in the world will add to what's already carved up in the computer fabric of those who have, and those who have not. We haven't got to zombie level yet, but the generalised professions of graphic design and computing, fine art and publicity, do little to shine light on what the real questions should be.

Maybe we start like an artwork, by taking a raincheck on which of the following we currently possess...

1. A mobile phone
2. A computer of some description
3. A telephone
4. Computer peripherals – a scanner, a printer, an extra hard disk
5. A music system - tape/record player/CD/minidisc/i-Pod (maybe the whole lot)
6. A digital and/or analogue camera
7. A TV (black and white, Trinitron, widescreen, plasma)
8. A camcorder, DVD player or video (maybe all three)
9. A microwave oven
10. A fridge
11. A radio

(Generally, these items are surrounded by books.) Not all of them are necessarily ‘digital’ but they all involve electromagnetic radiation.

Some time in the not too distant future, all of these devices, notwithstanding books, will find themselves defunct, starved of electricity, surplus to requirements... whilst at this moment we have a surfeit of recording modes and delivery systems that give us an enormous freedom which is currently (obvious to all, I hope) not being developed in a

humanistic way... a rare set of extremes operate on automatic. Truth and lies intermingle as always. To say what it is that it is is more difficult than ever. Tracey Emin has a go, and we buy that – it's mostly down to reconfigurations of self-publicity.

It wouldn't be beyond the pale to imagine a universal compression code whose speed and "quality" were stratified rather like the divisions between dial-up, broadband and the not-yet-on-the-market. You can see that at the Frieze Art Fair – like everything, it goes punter/curator/owner baron. 'Digital' gives the impression that these three poles are interdependent and dynamic. Most of all they are susceptible to Crash, which makes their day-to-day manifestations ever more reactionary.

Can 'digital' ever enter the socialist stage? This is a big question, and one that will possibly only ever be resolved when the system reaches meltdown. To think that because a few people in Africa have laptops, and that in India the economy has been turned around to a command economy, everything is going to reach middle-aged maturity is, I think, forgetting the internal schisms, and of course forgetting China and its analogue of corporate America, the need for short term supremacy.

The meltdown hasn't happened yet... anyway, its time-based nature is outside our comprehension and against our nature. There is petrol, there is gas and electricity, there is essence. For the time being. Middle age is like a blur from youth, history repeating itself in secret, except you come to appreciate such things and still take them for granted.

Middle age is a state of mind whose digital characteristic can be summarised by one being either 'on' or 'off' the case. It is very much linked to the body and one's ability to survive the immobility.

The glass ceiling that disadvantages women is double-glazed when it come to old people. Digital makes life triple glazing. You, the one [the dot] and the zero. The surface is read by lasers. My eyes are hurting. I have a bit of a headache. The youthful urge is to say "show me something new", anything to distract from the current condition. Today's digital technologies are never around for long enough for us to build a true understanding of their nature.

Jon Wozencroft.
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