

Review of Popular Music in the Post-Digital Age: Politics, Economy, Culture and Technology

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

edited by Ewa Mazierska, Leslie Gillon, & Tony Rigg

Bloomsbury Academic, New York, 2018

306 pp., illus. 15 b/w. Trade, £96.00

ISBN-10: 1501338374; ISBN-13: 9781501338373.

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June 2019

In the introduction to *Popular Music in the Post-Digital Age: Politics, Economy, Culture and Technology*, the editors write that ‘music is at the forefront of technological, political, economic and cultural change, and therefore what happens in music should be of interest to everyone.’ (p. 1) This is an interesting idea—and one that finds theoretical precedence in the work of the French economist Jacques Attali, as Ewa Mazierska, Les Gillon and Tony Rigg rightly acknowledge from the outset of the book. In *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (1985), Attali argued that music is a privileged form of cultural practice, within which changes in the mode of production can be felt long before they emerge in (or infiltrate) other areas of the political economy. With this proposition in mind, Mazierska, Gillon, and Rigg set out to analyse what they term the *post-digital age* from the perspective of popular music. They state that the purpose of the book is to ‘examine the present of popular music and offer some predictions on the future state of music and a wider social reality’ (p. 2), and, if music really is a harbinger for change in the Attalian sense, then this book is a timely addition to the discourse on art and society—the question is, will we like what we hear?

The book is composed of thirteen essays distributed across three sections, each addressing a particular area that, when combined, form the field of popular music: ‘The Music Industry’, ‘The Musicians and their Music’, and ‘Music Consumption’. It is worth noting, as a point of interest, that a great deal of the contributors come from the social sciences, thus, methodologically, the argumentation of the collection is firmly rooted in empirical data. The employment of empirical research methods sets the current collection apart from other writings on the concept of the ‘post-digitization’ and its dual relationship with music, which, beginning with Kim Cascone’s *The Aesthetics of Failure*:

“Post-Digital” Tendencies in Contemporary Computer Music, have largely been metaphysical explications that have attempted to understand what ‘post-digital’ means. The essays collected in *Popular Music in the Postdigital Age* aim to go further by explaining how the effects of the ‘post-digital’ age make themselves known in the popular music of today.

Mazierska, Gillon, and Rigg suggest in the introduction that the effects of the post-digital age in popular music can be felt as the coming together of two equally tricky concepts: what ‘Robert Strachan defines as “convergent digitization”’ (p.3) and neoliberalism. They explain ‘convergent digitization’, following Strachan (2017), as a point in which various modes of digitization come together, culminating with the arrival of personal computation devices. In relation to music, ‘convergent digitization can be seen through the dematerialization of objects containing recorded music, from the object, through the file, to the stream.’ (p.3) Similarly, an important aspect in the logic of neoliberal capital accumulation, facilitated by the internet, can be read as the dematerialization of the commodity form. The editors’ introduction outlines the complicated conjunction of these two concepts in popular music with great detail, but what jumped out is reminder that the marriage of neoliberal accumulation and the dematerialized music object, the mp3, has led to a certain crisis of popular music; that is, corporations such as Apple and Spotify not only benefit from the subscriptions of their customers, they also benefit from the product of their listeners’ (unconscious) labour: data.

Section one: ‘The Music Industry’

The first and largest section of the book contains five essays that each intend to address various aspects of the popular music industry, with topics ranging from the revolutionary potential of blockchain technologies for music distribution (Paolo Magaudda, Chapter 2) and the managerial acumen of UK based independent music clubs (Kamila Rymajdo, Chapter 5). Taken at face value these chapters appear self-explanatory. What we are greeted with, however, tells a different story. Rather than uncritically championing the perceived revolutionary practices that a decentralized blockchain distribution network could enable, Magaudda’s essay is critical of its implications for the music industry’s liberation from big corporations. Rather than balance the scales, so to speak, Magaudda warns that the adoption of ‘blockchain applications are likely to lead to a new step along the path of the subjugation of music to economic and financial logics’ (p. 66). Rymajdo’s chapter also reads against the grain, arguing that the relative success of independent music businesses in the North of England owe to them adopting neoliberal practices in order to survive in the post-digital world. However, in an ever decreasing market, Rymajdo argues that the desired object of accumulation is cultural capital, since the longevity of these nightclubs depends on

their ability to stand out from the crowd (p. 126). The three other essays in the section consist of a reevaluation of what it means to be an independent record label today (Galuszka and Wyrzykowska, Chapter 1); the dual temporality—both future and past—of post-rock music and the alternative music festival ArcTanGent (Forbes, Chapter 3); and the future status of the music festival as sites of ‘axio-normativity’ (Kuligowski, Chapter 4).

Section two: ‘The Musicians and their Music’

The essays that make up the second section of the book are concerned with the work and careers of independent musicians and the products of their labour. Chapter 6, written by Mazierska and Rigg, charts the careers of Joy Division’s Peter Hook and 808 State’s Graham Massey. The authors are concerned with the material conditions that enabled Hook and Massey to sustain fifty-year careers, the midpoint of which coinciding roughly with the era of convergent digitization (Strachan 2017) and the decline of the recorded music industry: in other words, how the time period and global location of these musicians impacted careers that preceded the digital, and now operate in the post-digital, age (p. 135). The other essays in the second section of analyse the effects of the internet on the working lives of musicians across multiple generations (Lars Brøndum, Chapter 7); make the case for musicians from provincial localities to build domestic fan-bases, since, ironically in a globalized, networked, increasingly interconnected world, it is more difficult than ever make an impact on the international stage (Mazierska, Chapter 8); and the final essay of the section, shifting focus slightly from musicians themselves, offers a reading of the genre ‘electro-swing’. The chapter, and the section, concludes with the idea that the ‘appearance of the past in the present’, which is particularly prevalent in contemporary popular music, has something to tell us about the future of popular music more broadly (Chris Inglis, Chapter 9).

Section three: ‘Music Consumption’

The final section of the book is concerned with the consumption and circulation of music—both current and future. In the post-digital age, the reproduction and playback of recorded music is becoming more immediate: with a free Spotify account, one has access to an endless stream of songs and artists from all eras and genres. Moreover, Spotify’s algorithm will even suggest music you might like based on your listening behaviour. In Chapter 10, Matthew Flynn argues that the technological determinism of some commentators does not hold up when weighing up the relative successes of mediums for the playback of music (p. 212), as they often diminish the importance of consumer behaviour. Other than this, the section contains essays on the internet mediated listening behaviours of young people in Austria—while noting the resurgence of vinyl and older playback methods (Michael Huber, Chapter 11); the relationship

between traditional curation and the emerging practices of ‘music curators’ who compile playlists on streaming platforms (Emília Barna, Chapter 12); and the final chapter (Andrew Fry, Chapter 13), which focuses on the algorithmic curation associated with streaming platforms. Fry argues that algorithmic curation can lead to something of an ‘echo chamber’, reinforcing certain styles and genres by reproducing them as suggestions while disregarding others after one appearance in the playlist (p. 269).

Across the three sections of *Popular Music in the Post-Digital Age: Politics, Economy, Culture and Technology*, the word ‘future’ appears in six of the thirteen essay titles, yet we are left without any real sense of what the future of the post-digital popular music industry might entail—apart from Flynn’s prediction that the next phase in the development of immediate music playback will involve an increased use of voice-controlled smart technologies, of course (p. 228). However, the real aim of the book, in my reading, was not to act as popular music’s Delphic oracle. Rather, and what I consider more exciting, is the way in which each chapter takes seriously the Attalian point: that music, as a specific form of cultural production, has important insights not only for the inhibitors of the artworld, but society at large. Despite the obvious and necessary limitations of the book—with empirical studies largely centering around continental Europe—*Popular Music in the Post-Digital Age: Politics, Economy, Culture and Technology* is a timely addition to music and cultural scholarship because it raises a multitude of important questions concerning ways in which a highly marketized and commodified popular music industry might just be able to find its way through the neoliberal fog.

References and Notes

Attali, Jacques (1985), *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.

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Strachan, Robert (2017), *Sonic Technologies: Popular Music, Digital Culture and the Creative Process*. New York: Bloomsbury.