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What's Left?
The Critique of Digital Life in Hyper-digital Music Videos

How to deal with digitality, with the digital circumstances and conditions of our lives?[1] To answer that question, in this text we take a closer look at the visual side of recent developments in music video.[2]

Susan Hayward has lately remarked on a fundamental insufficiency of digitality in the entry on "Digital Cinema/Post-digital Cinema" in her book *Cinema Studies.*[3] This insufficiency arises from ideas connected to digitality, such as "perfectibility," "cleanliness," and "immateriality."[4] It leads, as she states, to a "denial of the human touch"[5] — since we humans are non-perfect, dirty, and material — as well as "a need to re-introduce humanity."[6] This urge to "re-introduce humanity" could be called post-digitality. The re-introduction can be realized in several ways. A huge amount of works in the arts, in design, music, film, etc. tends to "re-introduce humanity" by way of re-analogization, since the analog is — like humans — non-perfect, dirty, and material. An analog look, be it real or just digitally simulated, has been one of the true main trends in current aesthetics for several years.

Post-digitality often takes the route of retroism, following the idea that only the old and analog can be real and true. Just have a look at Instagram photo editing and filtering options which will render new digital photos into old analog ones.

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1   This text is an extended spin-off of Holger Lund: "Make It Real and Get Dirty! On the Development of Post-digital Aesthetics in Music Video." Daniel Kulle/Cornelia Lund/Oliver Schmidt/David Ziegenhagen (eds.): *Post-digital Culture*, Hamburg, 2017, http://www.post-digital-culture.org/hlund-eng — accessed May 23, 2017. It takes a part of the earlier text and relates it to the newest developments in music video.

2   Of course, the visual side is closely related to the audio and to developments within the music. Hyper-digital music video is related to hyper-digital music, which could be seen in connection with e.g. the name of Kode9's label, "Hyper Dub," or genres like Future Bass, Post-Grime, and Post-Dub Step, as well as new digital genres like Vaporwave or Forward.
    The methodological approach of this text focuses on the visual side as an expression not only of the music but of collective changes in society. The music and its visualization react and act on these changes. Here we concentrate mainly on the visual side.
    For recent developments in music and their analysis see e.g. Beyer/Burkhalter/Liechti 2015, and Corbett/Lund/Stangl 2014, as well as Harper, 2016.

3   Hayward 2013, pp. 104–108.

4   Ibid. pp. 106f.

5   Ibid. p. 107.

6   Ibid.

As a first example of this trend in a music video, let us look at Quasimoto's, *Catchin'
the Vibe* (2013), directed by Tuomas Vauhkonen and Jeremias Nieminen.[7] Of course,
the video has been created digitally, but all the indicators for a re-analogization are
on show: digital simulation of a VHS aesthetic, vinyl as an analog medium, the figure
of a magician of the analog and the trash, baking a record right out of that trash. The
trash ensures an authentic look, the exact opposite of digital cleanliness.

Nothing must look like it was produced in a digital studio, digitally processed,
digitally constructed. On the contrary, a maximum of authenticity and realness is
the intended effect of an assortment of aesthetic strategies that make everything
look old, analog, trashy — just like "real" music once was, when it was still made by
rough guys in rough spots in a rough way and it was still called "rock 'n' roll." Simon
Reynolds, the author of Retromania, would probably come to the same diagnosis.[8]
Quite clearly, we see post-digitality taking the route of retroism.

But we shouldn't overlook the fact that this retroism is already reflective and
self-conscious, that the video has a clearly ironic side to it, playing with the myths
of record-making in hip hop — using the trash as a metaphor for sample-based music
made with old and analog samples — as well as playing with the myths of the music
junkie — which sees the record dealing done on the black market, like the dealing of
drugs, the ultimate "street thing."

Retroism and an analog style are not the only strategies within post-digitality,
hyper-digitality is another one. The next video is also bringing an ironic, playful
twist to the game: Modeselektor's Evil Twin (2012), directed by Dent de Cuir.[9] This
video is even more self-conscious on the subject of digitality and for that reason
offers an especially playful example of post-digitality.

In contrast to what we have seen before, the Modeselektor video does not hide
the fact it has been digitally created, as a digital artifact. In fact, we seem to watch
the making of the video as well as the final result: we can see screen windows, a
continuous Quicktime timeline, etc. — everywhere the video exposes its digital
character. This is what can be called its "hyper-digitality," a non-hidden, exposed
digitality.

The term "remediation," coined by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin,[10] might
be useful for our analysis of Modeselektor's video. The term contains the double
logic of an interplay between transparency and hypermediality. Hypermediality
would refer to the window-style of the video, demonstrating the use of digital me-
dia. Transparency would point to the level of reality produced within the windows,
each presenting situations that look as if they were real.

The interesting thing here is the interplay between these levels of reality — the
level of the making-of and the level of what is shown inside the windows as well as
the interplay between the various levels inside the windows. What happens here is a

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7   See http://vimeo.com/72058644 — accessed May 23, 2017.
8   Reynolds 2011.
9   See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Sp8Vhwts6U — accessed May 23, 2017.
10   Cf. Bolter/Grusin 1999.

violation of the laws of representation, as each level can be connected to another level despite of the fact that they are connected to differing levels of reality. Breaking up the logic of these levels points to them as being artificial, confusing, beyond reality, post-real.

The same could be said for the objects and musical instruments in the video. These objects, normally either analog or digital, are re-built out of cardboard and then hand-painted. This "re-analogization" and "handmade-digital" style is already a self-reflective, ironic play with post-digitality and its imperative of "going analog." What we can observe in the video is a paradox attempt to attain, with the means of the computer, a real and true analog. But how could that work? How real and true are laptops made of cardboard? How real and true are windows interacting on contradictory levels of reality? What remains? The all-fake digital?

Perhaps this questioning goes too far. Nevertheless, the video shows both a combination of *and* a reflection on analog and digital aesthetics, intermingling them to offer a critique of digitality. Where is the place of our lives in this, if all is fake? With its critical approach to digitality, Modeselektor's video belongs to the precursors of the "new" hyper-digital style.

Since the early beginnings of digital video-making, some videos have tried to present the potential and power of digitality through an over-artificial digital style. An example for this "old" hyper-digital style is offered by *Birds* (2014), directed by Zeitguised with music by Marian Pramberger and Matt Frodsham.[11]

One of the main objectives of artists using digitality is to compete with the analog, as in a *paragone*, competing for the best results. In music, digital synthesizers have aimed to emulate the sound of the analog piano, trying to sound exactly like a real one. The same can be observed for image-making. Digital style often aims to be as realistic as possible. Zeitguised now adds a typically post-digital twist: the digital style, which normally would be used to emulate real birds as perfectly as possible, is playfully counteracted by a post-digital style, offering us over-artificial birds, far beyond real birds, made out of pixels in the computer. It seems as if these over-artificial birds were laughing at the digital style and its attempts at producing something real, but still within a supremacy of the digital.

In 2014, another type of video came up. Like Modeselektor's video, it can be situated in between the "old" and the "new" hyper-digital, but with a different approach. One example for this type is RL Grime's *Core* (2014), directed by David Rudnick and Daniel Swan.[12]

The video has a specific digital look: glossy textures, monochrome flats, sparkling reflections on the surfaces, computer game aesthetics, digital effects, etc. — creating a post-digital dystopian world, where man can no longer be seen, only his technological remains as halo-ized engineering feats: helicopters, trying to save an imploding world of flooded nature that reminds us of the biblical deluge, only to vanish in a last and final explosion.

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11   See https://vimeo.com/92369879 — accessed May 23, 2017.
12   See https://vimeo.com/112982218 — accessed May 23, 2017.

Like in all hyper-digital videos, the feature of digitality is exposed here and can easily be recognized. Computer game aesthetics and digital effects reveal it and define this video as hyper-digital. The interesting question is: what does this hyper-digitality reveal? It offers no advantage to man, since mankind, who created the digital world, seems to have vanished. Hyper-digitality has turned against its own creators in a dystopian scenery. We are in the realm of non-humanity, not only because man is absent, but also because this absence is connected to the over-presence of digitality, namely, the hyper-digitality.

So, what does the "new" hyper-digital style look like? Just as RL Grime's video, it turns to the relationship between digital possibilities and man. A good case in point is Bradley and Pablo's video *Hey QT* with music by QT (2015).[13] Here we can see all the "perfectibility," "cleanliness," and "immateriality" of digitality, which Susan Hayward has deemed so problematic. Though now these aspects are no longer connected to an insufficiency, but they have changed into agents of reflection on what we have become, living in and through digital media and data.

This music video is extremely well made. After about two-thirds, it changes its character from a music video to a commercial for a sort of energy drink — reminding us of the very nature of the music video: being a commercial, though usually not for a soft drink but for the music. In the *Hey QT* video, this status changes, it starts being a commercial for both the music and something else. The subject of commercialism is further explored through the — very real and really paid for — product placement during the video: the Beats headphones that QT is wearing. Does the drink, however, really exist? It's a semi-official drink, part of the band merchandise, available at concerts and not sold otherwise.

Talking about commercialism, let's have a closer look at QT as a character and at her materiality. She is a girl whose emotions are used to produce a drink named after her, QT. In the first part of the video, we see how the drink is produced with a digital emotional interface — of course only using the "good" emotions. In the second part, after the music video has turned into a product commercial for the drink, QT gets a new identity: not only *is* she present in the drink through her emotions, the text strongly points to the fact that touching the drink *is* touching her. She has become the product, in an almost religious, transsubstantial sense. Like Jesus' blood transsubstantiating into wine, her emotions have transubstantiated into the drink. So, QT becomes QT, as the identical name for the girl and the drink suggests, she changes her status from human to product — and all this by doing and becoming advertising. And that's exactly what digital "social life" is about: self-advertising by becoming a product, or vice versa. The user is the product — that is exactly the message of Facebook, and what makes it so rich and so powerful. Inside or outside the digital world, we are wearing brands and their logos, advertising all the time through fashion, gadgets, objects, then self-advertising ourselves through "profiles" on "social networks" — we already *are* advertising, fulfilling our consumerist roles, and even paying for it!

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13   See https://vimeo.com/123308926 — accessed May 23, 2017.

However, the video is not just about becoming advertising and becoming a product, but also about being consumed. Look at the boys at the end of the video drinking QT. We have the full capitalist and consumerist line: a product, advertised and consumed. Again there is an ironic twist: the over-cool and over-artificial boys just mentioned, the singer's over-artificial, mickey-mousey voice, the idea of drinking the girl's emotions and touching her via the can, as well as the declaration of the drink as "supernatural" — it's all hilariously bad taste! *Hey QT* is funny and a deep critique of digital and consumerist life at the same time.

This double-sided coding, using the digital in a pseudo-affirmative way to criticize digitality, is inherent to most of the hyper-digital music videos. We already saw a bit of this in the ironic halos around the helicopters in RL Grime's *Core.* It is much more openly developed in *Hey QT.* Over-affirmative digitalism is turned against digital and consumerist life.

The remaining videos we will look at all take the same path. The first of these is *That Other Girl* (2015) by Sevdaliza & Pussykrew with music by Sevdaliza and Mucky.[14] It is easy to see what the video is about: constructing and manipulating digital identity by identity building, becoming another person — *That Other Girl,* as the title suggests — which is as pseudo-social as the "social networks" are. In the attempt to nobilitate oneself by becoming a piece of art, getting all the admiration, and being taken care of like a real artwork, the video ends in a strange museum. It is a non-social, empty museum of nothing but self-presentation and self-reflection, it is like the visualization of a digital account. Instagram selfies are exhibited with their numbers of likes — what trophies! They are hanging on the walls of the self, which has become an account of self-presentation and self-reflection, the museum of the self. The hyper-digital style is used here to show us digitality's dead end within all the neo-baroque festivities of pure emptiness. And it's a dead end indeed, since all is so well preserved, nice and clean, but who will ever show up in this museum? No humans are around, at least for the course of the whole video . . . So digitality's dead end is communication's dead end as well.

Philosopher Byung-Chul Han has recently offered a diagnosis of the digital "communication" space. He says: "The internet today is not the space of common communicative action. It is falling into bits and pieces, exhibition spaces of the self, in which people first and foremost do promotion for themselves." But be aware: "No advertisement ever listens."[15]

The next video to look at is by Alan Del Rio Ortiz, *La Vie Est Belle/Life Is Beautiful ft. Baloji* (2015), with music by Petite Noir.[16] Again, there is an interplay between inside and outside view, as at the end of Sevdaliza's video. This interplay, however, this time connected to the subject of Virtual Reality, comes to another conclusion: it shows the body — which is also the basis for the mind — as a place of contradictions.

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14   See https://vimeo.com/134300640 — accessed May 23, 2017.
15   Han 2016, p. 99 (transl. by the author).
16   See https://vimeo.com/143179607 — accessed May 23, 2017.

We see parts of the body digitally enhanced — shiny, glossy, and powerful — but at the margins dissolving into pixels, in granularity, losing existence. And we see, like in QT's and Sevdaliza's videos, a transformable liquid body, a digital body, endlessly changeable, offering infinite states of minds and identities, so you can get lost in your alter egos, like Petite Noir at the end of his video.

So, how to deal with digitality? Several aesthetic developments have emerged over the past few years in music video, which Lev Manovich has called a "laboratory."[17] These developments could be filed under the term "post-digital." On the one hand, the videos show tendencies to avoid the look of the digital by going analog and retro like Quasimoto with "Catchin' the Vibe," or, on the other hand, tendencies to the opposite, by stressing the fact of digital artificiality, exposing and over-affirming it through hyper-digitality — we have seen this in different manners and with different aims from Zeitguised to Petite Noir.

In the past two years, hyper-digital music videos have not only shown and praised the potential and power of the digital — which had been done before in music videos — but they have also shown how the digital infects our lives, our conditions of living, our identities (or whatever is left of them), making the digital and its effects on our lives the main subject itself.

Our analysis has focused on these recent developments, made with digital tools in a masterful and ultra-skilled way to question their own outcome: digitalism. The critique of digitalism is offered in an over-affirmative way, the hyper-digital, and that is what is new, connected to recent philosophical tendencies such as accelerationism, which tries to subvert and end capitalism by over-affirming it.[18] Feeding capitalism, making it an ultra-turbo capitalism — so the idea in short — will make capitalism so fat that it will get sick and die.

And yet the self-reflection of hyper-digital music videos differs from this approach. It focuses on the "making of," the conditions and practices of digital production and representation, and on digitality as a doubtful condition of life. What's left? Non-social spaces, lost, broken, and lonely non-identities, becoming aware of their non-identities and even non-existences. And this is perhaps one of the most intriguing aspects of the new hyper-digital videos: we seem to have minds able to reflect on our own non-identities and even non-existences — a paradox, but surely one worth thinking about. What shall we call it? Perhaps the new self, based on data, a "self" that Vilém Flusser once called "a node of criss-crossing virtualities,."[19]

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17   Manovich,1995. Manovich's statement, "the genre of Music video has been a laboratory," forms
       the methodological basis for this text. It is important to stress that the genre of music video
       continues being a laboratory, especially with regard not only to aesthetic changes but to collec-
       tive changes in society. Music videos reflect — and this is a key point — not only trends within
       different societies; rather they shape and advance these tendencies because, despite outright
       commerciality or commercial function, music videos tend to make use of experimental freedoms.
18   Cf. Williams/Srnicek 2013.
19   Flusser 1996, p. 244.

Now let us have a final look at this Proteus-like homunculus based on data: in Ash Koosha's *GUUD* (2015), directed by Hirad Sab, and in his *Mudafossil* (2016), directed by Hirad Sab and Dalena Tran, as well as in Sevdaliza's *Marilyn Monroe* (2016), directed again by Hirad Sab.[20]

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20   See https://vimeo.com/136268193, https://vimeo.com/162308621 and
        https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UkjU9ladxKs — accessed May 23, 2017.

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Holger Lund works as an art and design researcher and as a curator. After deputizing the position of chair of design theory at the University of Pforzheim from 2008 to 2011, he began his duties as professor of media art, applied art, and design studies at the Ravensburg University of Cooperative Education. Since 2004 he has collaborated with Cornelia Lund to lead the media art platform fluctuating images (Berlin). His research focuses on media art, design research and music visualization. Publications: Audio.Visual – On Visual Music and Related Media (2009), Design der Zukunft (2014), both together with Cornelia Lund, and The New People. Musik als Seismograph (2014). In addition he runs the music label Global Pop First Wave, dedicated to pop history, especially Turkish and other non-western pop music of the 1960s and 1970s.