

## **The Postdigital as Theme in Narrative Fiction across Media**

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## The Postdigital as Theme in Narrative Fiction across Media

### Abstract

This article argues that a sceptical attitude towards the role of digital technology in contemporary life is becoming increasingly prevalent in twenty-first century fiction and offers a new way of theorising this thematic trend via refining the concept of the ‘postdigital’. Providing a critical overview of the way that the ‘postdigital’ has been interpreted in aesthetics, critical theory, and literary criticism, I show how the scepticism towards digital media that is a tenet of postdigital visual arts can now also be seen in some narrative fiction of the twenty-first century written in English. I thus show how what I define as postdigital fiction interrogates the way in which the digital and nondigital have become hybridised in digitised societies and questions the universal benefits digital media bring. Taking examples from print and digital fiction, I show how a postdigital perspective can manifest both thematically and aesthetically in fiction and argue that there is an increasing prevalence of postdigital ethics in narrative fiction across media.

### Keywords

postdigital, contemporary fiction, digital fiction, post postmodernism

### Introduction: Contemporary Society and Digital Media

In the epilogue of the second edition of *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon (2002) declares that postmodernism is “a thing of the past” (165-6). While in 2002 Hutcheon’s position regarding the end of postmodernism was relatively bold, such sentiments are becoming more widespread. Cultural theorists herald various degrees of postmodernism’s demise from a gradual “passing of postmodernism” (Toth 2010), to a more definitive move of “supplanting” the postmodern (Rudrum and Stavris 2015), to its death which is signalled by “the wake of postmodernism” (Brooks and Toth 2007). Common to these arguments is the idea that the playful self-reflexive mid- to late-twentieth century art has been replaced with post-postmodernism (e.g. Nealon 2012, McLaughlin 2012) or, more recently, metamodernism (e.g. van der Akker et al 2017). Central to these conceptualisations is the argument that postmodernist techniques, such as self-reflexivity, irony, and ontological playfulness, are now used not to undermine the idea of ‘truth’ or ‘reality’ but to connect with the real, to say something sincere, and/or display an ethical position about the world (cf. Alber and Bell 2019).

Alongside and/or integrated within debates about the nature of contemporary culture, sits discussions of the role of digital technology in society and our associated concept of 'reality'. Since the advent of the web in the mid-nineteen nineties, a new period of history has seen the world becoming increasingly digitised. While there is still extreme disparity and inequity between those who do and do not have access to digital technology (see United Nations n.d.) within the UK and the US, whose fiction is the focus of this article, 96% of households in the UK had internet access in 2020 (ONS 2020) and 92% percent of individuals in the United States accessed the internet in 2023 (Statista 2023). Some parts of the globe are thus substantially digitalised.

The increased engagement with digital technology has inevitably led to changes to artistic and cultural expression. Examining the ways in which digital technology influences expressions of cultural identity towards the beginning of the twenty-first century, Robert Samuels (2008) claims that “we have moved into a new cultural period of automodernity [...] in which digital youth turn to automation in order to express their autonomy” (219). Automodernity, he claims, results in the combination of human and machine in ways that challenge established forms of interaction and social engagement. In a more extensive study of the cultural implications of digital media, Alan Kirby (2009) outlines the concept of digimodernism which he claims, “has decisively displaced postmodernism to establish itself as the twenty-first century’s new cultural paradigm” (1). Kirby proposes that the emergence and relatively prevalence of digital technology in the mid-1990s drove a cultural change, resulting in “the digimodernist text” which “in its pure form [...] permits the reader or viewer to intervene textually, physically to make text, to add visible content or tangibly shape narrative development” (1). While Kirby claimed in 2009 that “digimodernist literature is yet to come” (218), he shows that digimodernism can be found across digital media including CGI films, reality television, Web 2.0 platforms, and videogames. He thus shows how digital technologies allow works to be edited and/or influenced, sometimes by multiple authors and/or by the reader/viewer of the works. The result is a “group of texts in new and established modes that also manifest the digimodernist traits of infantilism, earnestness, endlessness, and apparent reality” (1). Kirby ultimately sees digimodernism as an increasingly pervasive digital form of cultural production which participates in and departs from postmodernism, “wip[ing] out postmodernism’s irony” and replacing it with a “digimodernist earnestness” (151).

Kirby’s conceptualisation of digimodernism shows that it is enabled because of the participatory affordances of digital technology, with the reader/viewer/player/listener’s ability to shape the text being an integral feature. He thus shows that as digital technology

becomes more ubiquitous and pervasive, and increasingly invisible, its role in society and its effect on our conception of ‘reality’ is becoming increasingly important. Taking the way in which the digital and non-digital facets of life interact or even dissolve into one another as a principal focus, theories of the postdigital also adopt this hybrid position suggesting that the distinction between digital and nondigital is becoming or has become obsolete. In addition, however, postdigital theory and art critiques the role of the digital in society, showing how it is imperative that we move beyond a naïve engagement with the digital – a tool that was originally conceived as a means of democratically sharing, based on trust (Berners-Lee 1999) – to a more media-critical position that more accurately reflects the nature, use, and abuse of digital technology. It is my contention that such a postdigital position is becoming increasingly prevalent in fiction of the twenty-first century. This article thus argues for the centrality of critical perspectives on the role of digital technology in twenty-first century fiction and offers a new way of theorising this thematic trend via refining the concept of the ‘postdigital’.

### **The Postdigital**

The term ‘post-digital’ was coined by the electronic music composer Kim Cascone in relation to glitch music, a genre in which unintended feedback and sonic interferences that would normally be edited out are used as the basis of the composition. Cascone (2000) refers to “this emergent genre as ‘post-digital’ because the revolutionary period of the digital information age has surely passed” (12). For Cascone, the postdigital is a state in which the digital is a given and we are now in a position where we can stand back from the utopian promises of the digital revolution to evaluate and critique its effectiveness and usefulness. This results in compositions that expose the limitations of the digital: “glitches, bugs, application errors, system crashes [...] are incorporate[d] into [...] music” (13) such that “‘failure’ has become a prominent aesthetic in many uses of the arts in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, reminding us that our control of digital technology is an illusion” (13).

Picking up Cascone’s observations from the turn of the twenty-first century, Florian Cramer’s (2014) pioneering essay, “What is ‘Post-Digital?’”, seeks to define the postdigital in relation to the visual arts from the vantage point of 2014. Like Cascone, he sees the postdigital as a techno-critical form of art defining it as “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” (3). Here the ‘postdigital’ is broadened out to describe a sceptical attitude or perspective about digital technology and systems on the one hand, and, on the other, a historical period (but see Cox 2014 for criticisms). Overall, however, postdigital

art “call[s] into question the common assumption that computers, as meta-machines, represent obvious technological progress and therefore constitute a logical upgrade from any older media technology” (2). The postdigital thus rejects the metanarrative that computers and the digital systems they enable inevitably represent universal progress.

In further elucidating the term, Cramer stresses that, in either sense, the prefix ‘post’ should not be understood as a complete departure from the ‘digital’, but rather the “post-digital condition is a post-apocalyptic one: the state of affairs after the initial upheaval caused by the computerisation and global digital networking of communication, technical infrastructures, markets and geopolitics” (5). ‘Post’ here therefore delineates ‘after’ but also connected to, part of, or a continuation of. For Cramer, therefore, ‘post-’ “should not be understood [...] in the same sense as postmodern and post-histoire, but rather in the sense of post-punk (a continuation of punk culture in ways that are somehow still punk, yet also beyond punk)” (4). The postdigital is thus in critical dialogue with the digital as opposed to being a complete departure from it.

### **Postdigital Aesthetics**

According to Cramer, the post-digital “contemporary (and possibly nostalgic) cultural trend” (4) can be achieved via two forms of artistic expression. One is a “deliberate choice of renouncing electronic technology” (2) and a “revival of old-media” (3); he shows examples of this include vinyl, film photography, and the production of paper ‘zines and thus the return to non-digital forms of production. At the same time, and somewhat contradictorily, a postdigital aesthetic is also achieved via the use of digital technology to create something that is not “sterile high tech” (Cramer 2014, 8); the example par excellence is glitch music, from where the term was coined, but also includes glitch art more generally as well as other forms of digital expression that emphasise the failings of the technology. Irrespective of which aesthetic is chosen, “disenchantment and scepticism” (Cramer 2014, 9) about the universal progress brought by digital technology is signified most obviously by the employment of DIY techniques which remove power from corporations and place them more firmly with the artist. Commenting on what he calls “post-digital writing” in particular, Cramer (2012) argues that “the DIY aspect is [...] crucial [...] [because] while the World Wide Web had been a DIY publishing medium in the 1990s, digital DIY has become difficult in a medium defined by only four corporate players (Google, Apple, Amazon, Facebook) [...] The publishing of self-made books and zines thus becomes a form of social networking that is not controlled or data-mined by those companies” (n.p.). DIY forms of publishing, in either analogue or digital, can thus serve as a way of removing access to creative artefacts, personal information, and mediated

online selves and placing ownership and distribution of commodities back within the jurisdiction of the individuals to whom they originally belong.

A concern with the way in which personal information is collected and exploited is a theme that is expressed within many postdigital discussions of digitised societies, cultures, and methods. David Berry and Michael Dieter (2015), for example, claim that “computation demands that people, practices, institutions and the world should radiate data” (3) and associate computer technology and the processes that it enables with large scale data production, collection and analysis. For them the postdigital “offer[s] a means of contesting and critiquing the derangement and reassembly of knowledge through computation” (2015, 4). Providing an example of the way in which digital culture and postdigital resistance to that culture interact in artistic practice, Christian Andersen and Soren Pold (2014) analyse what they define as postdigital books which “focus on the materiality of the book” (175) and include an “experimental artist book” (175) and “social installations of digital literature” (176) and thus “experiment[] with using the concrete, physical book as a material [...] interface to digitally augmented literary experiences” (178). Andersen and Pold argue such artefacts “evade the restrictions of the software system” (169) with what have become digitised mainstream publishing and distribution methods that inherently rely on collection and computation of data. Dominated by the Amazon franchise, they argue that digitisation has transformed reading from what was predominantly a private activity to a form of “controlled consumption” (168) with a licensing culture that “includes a thorough monitoring of readers and reading behaviour” (169) with postdigital books a way of breaking away from that. In both Berry and Dieter's and Andersen and Pold's accounts, therefore, a dichotomy is asserted between digital culture that gathers and exploits personal information for commercial gain and postdigital forms of resistance to that activity which seek to evade data collection and to expose those practices as unethically infringing on civil liberties.

In postdigital perspectives, the commodification of personal data in contemporary society is inextricably linked to the digital means through which we access information, but it is also symptomatic of the way in which we experience life and express our sense of reality both on- and off-line. Berry and Dieter (2015), for example, argue that “we are now seeing a dramatic change in the way in which sociality is performed and mediated through new distributed digital media technologies” (1) and in particular, “we see simultaneously an epistemological and pragmatic shift in everyday life towards the use of computational systems to support and mediate life itself” (1). Key to this dramatic change in society is the use of distributed digital media technologies in the sense of both geographically distinct and

mobilised across different, and often wireless, devices. While Berry and Dieter present the change in terms of the way in which we understand (i.e. the epistemological shift) and access (i.e. the pragmatic shift) information, they also suggest that the ontology of our social interaction has shifted. They argue that “the historical distinction between the digital and non-digital becomes increasingly blurred” (2; cf. Taffel 2015, 7; Anderson and Pold 2013, 1-2; Berry 2015, 50). From a postdigital perspective, while ontologically distinct in theory, in practice our online experiences and related existence(s) are just as real as our off-line experience and existence(s). Collapsing the boundary between the two domains even further, Stéphane Vial and Neal Stimler (2014) propose the concept of ‘digital monism’, which is “the idea that the contemporary human world is inseparably digital and non-digital, online and offline or, in obsolete terms, virtual and real” (np). From a digital monism perspective, it is irrelevant whether our experiences originate online or offline as they are all equally ‘real’.

Spencer Jordan’s (2019) concept of what he defines as postdigital storytelling speaks to the postdigital emphasis on porous ontological boundaries and phenomenological hybridisation. Focusing on storytelling in both fiction and nonfiction, he defines postdigital storytelling as reflecting the “hybridisation of both the digital and non-digital domains” (63) and a “more open and fluid negotiation between the digital and the non-digital” (63). As the subtitle of his book length study shows – “poetics, praxis, research” – Jordan focuses on the process and product of storytelling. He explains that,

postdigital storytelling embraces both formal and informal modes and forms, including social media and web-based platforms and apps; it embraces digital biography and non-fiction as much as fiction, prose and poetry. It is code, data, narrative and performance. It is collaborative and participatory as well as individual and personal. Yet it is also transmedial, foregrounding the postdigital mashup where the divide between the digital and non-digital is porous and creatively fluid (2).

Like Cramer, and Anderson and Pold therefore, Jordan defines the postdigital according to experimental works that hybridise the digital and nondigital (cf. Flores 2016, Nacher 2018) but that, like Kirby’s concept of digimodernism, allow readers to participate in the narrative. In particular, however, Jordan focuses on the ontological hybridity of the postdigital in which “human creativity still retains the capability to move actively and self-consciously across the digital and nondigital domains” (62), examining experimental writing that is either exclusively or partially digital including hypertext fiction, transmedial fiction, mobile storytelling, and artists books.

Significantly, Jordan links the postdigital to wider cultural debates about the nature of the contemporary explored in the introduction to this article. He suggests that “postdigitality is a fundamental feature of [a] metamodernist condition” (2) with a “new ethical imperative from which comes a belief in, and desire for, affective action and change in response to social, cultural, and ecological crises” (1). However, he does not isolate scepticism of digital media – what he calls Cramer’s “postdigital hacker attitude” (61) – as a defining feature. Instead, he argues that his examples are postdigital because of the way that digital media can materially embody the “map/rhizome/string figure” that he sees as encapsulating metamodernist artistic representation (49) and “in which the embodied and situated nature of their readers becomes a central feature of the narrative” (232). He thus sees postdigital storytelling as a participatory form of digital writing that brings together the digital and nondigital materially, ontologically, and/or interactively. Such a definition is borne out in his analyses in which he shows how the postdigital merging of digital and nondigital manifests across his corpus. However, his definition does not depend on postdigital works being explicitly sceptical of societal digitalisation.

A similarly aesthetically determined definition of the postdigital is also made by Germán Sierra (2015, 2012) in relation to experimental print fiction in English and Spanish. He defines “literary postdigitalism” as “the written account of the navigation through [...] [a] continuous, contingent, digitally-processed, and biologically re-processed hyper-reality” (2015, 498) in which authors ‘integrat[e] narration and database’ (2012, 26) in their works. His examples include Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* (2000) which utilises multimodality and nonlinear narrative structures and Jonathan Safran Foer’s (2010) *Tree of Codes* which is produced using analogue, die cutting techniques such that the narrative is punctuated with other parts of the text. For Sierra, postdigital literature is materially self-reflexive, “evolving from a long tradition of experimental or innovative fiction which has included many non-narrative elements as artistic resources” (27). Sierra’s conception of postdigital literature, like Jordan’s above, however, does not depend on works being explicitly sceptical of societal digitalisation.

### **The Postdigital: From Aesthetic to Theme**

The preceding discussion shows how the term postdigital has been used, sometimes inconsistently, to describe both a contemporary critical perspective and an aesthetic that manifests as practice across media and artistic disciplines. As a critical perspective, the postdigital is sceptical of the idea that universal progress is brought with digital technology. As an artistic manifestation, experimental and/or DIY approaches which use digital and nondigital



media are deployed to show the coexistence of the two media and/or to avoid reliance on and/or critique the digital. Categorising particular artworks as ‘postdigital’ therefore inevitably relies on reading them through a postdigital theoretical lens. From this perspective, the postdigital can be understood as a discursive position or critical perspective that can manifest in both theory and/or artistic practice.

From the discourses that surround the postdigital, two distinct, but related themes emerge: (1) a recognition of the increasingly blurred boundary between on- and off-line realms of existence; (2) concerns about the collection and use of our digitised personal information via seemingly invisible information systems that blur the boundary between on- and off-line. These themes are obviously not exclusive to discussions engaging explicitly with the concept of the postdigital; without using the postdigital term, wider discussions exhibit an interest in both the ontology of the digital/non-digital world in which we live (e.g. Hongladarom 2011) and online data collection or surveillance as an established digital practice (e.g. Cohen 2016). Thus, while these themes may be emphasised in postdigital aesthetics and associated theory, they reflect a more prevalent and increasingly mainstream perspective that is not necessarily defined or marketed as postdigital. Cramer (2013) claims in fact that “after Edward Snowden’s disclosures of the NSA’s all-pervasive digital surveillance systems, this disenchantment [with digital information systems and media gadgets has quickly grown from a niche ‘hipster’ phenomenon to a mainstream position” (3). If a critical distance from digital technology and the universal benefits it claims to offer has become an increasingly mainstream position, we might expect to see such a postdigital attitude, which was previously restricted to more esoteric aesthetic movements in, for example, glitch art, DIY zine culture, or artists’ books, in more mainstream critical and artistic responses. According to Sy Taffel (2015) these more extensive and pervasive theoretical positions and associated artistic manifestations have emerged in “music, architecture, design, art, advertising, photography, e-learning, marketing, media studies and film studies” (3). Absent from this list is narrative fiction.

In what follows, I will show how “the historical distinction between the digital and non-digital becom[ing] increasingly blurred” (2), a “contemporary disenchantment with digital information systems and media gadgets” (Cramer 2014), and concern with “issues surrounding the contestation of control over largely automated systems of surveillance and control within globalized network culture” (Taffel 2015, 12) that are recurring tropes in postdigital theory and the visual arts can now be seen in some narrative fiction of the twenty-first century written in English. I thus show how what I define as postdigital fiction interrogates the way in which the digital and nondigital have become hybridised in digitised societies and questions the universal

benefits digital media bring. I show that, in addition to the postdigital manifesting in hybridised, participatory narratives, as per Jordan's (2019) conceptualisation of postdigital storytelling, the postdigital also manifests thematically in fiction either in combination with or independently of these postdigital storytelling techniques. Taking examples from print and digital fiction, I thus demonstrate how postdigital concerns can manifest in less experimental responses to contemporary digitised societies – i.e. in novels published in print – as well as works that are born digital. I engage with readings of contemporary print fiction that display a postdigital thematic position and offer new analyses of digital fictions that display a similar postdigital perspective. Ultimately, I argue that we are witnessing an increased prevalence of a postdigital outlook aesthetically and/or thematically in narrative fiction across media.

### **Postdigital Print Fiction**

In originally defining the postdigital, Cramer refers to narrative fiction, citing the novels of Thomas Pynchon (specifically *Bleeding Edge* [2013]) and Dave Eggers (specifically *The Circle* [2013]) as examples of works in which “the dot-com age ultimately became historical” (2015, 3). Cramer does not analyse the texts to show how a postdigital perspective is invoked but instead connects these texts with the periodising function of the term postdigital, emphasising the definition of ‘post’ as chronologically after as opposed to in dialogue with, critical of, or taking a sceptical position in relation to the digital. Literary critics have, however, investigated the ways in which digital technology and its unhealthy influence on society is represented thematically in contemporary fiction. They have thus invoked a postdigital perspective either explicitly or implicitly in their readings.

Zara Dinnen (2018) explicitly engages with the concept of the postdigital as part of her wider focus on what she calls the ‘digital banal’, a “condition by which we don’t notice the affective novelty of becoming-with digital media” (1) such that “the way we use media makes us unaware of the ways we are co-constituted as subjects with media” (1). In her conceptualisation, the digital banal is a symptom of postdigital life in which “we are always digitally mediated - as data, statistics, profiles, nodes, traces - regardless of our discrete encounters with devices” (163). She shows how this can be observed in novels such as Sheila Heti's (2014) *How Should a Person Be?*, Dave Eggers' (2013) *The Circle*, Jennifer Egan's (2011) *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, and Gary Shteyngart's (2010) *Super Sad True Love Story* because of the way in which digital media is intrinsically embedded in the characters' lives. For Dinnen, the digital banal shows postdigital life as inevitably digitally mediated but her book interrogates how that digital banal is “represented, enacted, and perpetuated as literature

and culture” (14) as a means of offering “ways to read against it” (18). She thus shows how the digital banal is a symptom of postdigital life that has been cultivated rather than being inevitable.

In a development of his original conceptualisation of postdigital storytelling for its application to narrative fiction, Jordan (2021) also introduces the idea that the postdigital can be found in novels and, crucially, that it manifests thematically as opposed to materially via a particular aesthetic style. In his article, like his book, he connects the postdigital to metamodernism. However, while his 2019 book suggests the postdigital manifests through particular structures – namely the map/rhizome/string figure – he argues that his case study, Ben Lerner’s (2014) novel *10:04*, is metamodernist in the way it interrogates “the relationship between cityspace and time” (171). In particular, he shows “the narrator’s anxiety concerning the spatial and temporal effects of hybridic space, what I have described as the meshwork of physical and digital presence, remains a constant theme” (182). He thus suggests that the novel “offers an important and *critical* response to our hybridic postdigital condition” (171, my emphasis). Key to this interpretation is therefore a critical stance that was not part of Jordan’s conceptualisation of the postdigital in his exposition of more experimental forms of postdigital storytelling. He defines “postdigitality” as “new forms of digital and non-digital hybridity” suggesting that “the narrator’s psychosis in *10:04* is fundamentally a response to his perceived need for embodied authenticity and moral affectivity” (174) that is undermined by the postdigitality of his contemporary existence. He thus shows postdigitality as a recurring motif within what he defines as a metamodernist novel as opposed to showing how the postdigital is fundamentally metamodernist.

While they do not engage with postdigital theory explicitly, other literary critics are analysing fiction that they see as thematising the role of digital technology in contemporary life (e.g. Pignagnoli 2023, Shaw 2017). Liliana Naydan (2021), for example, investigates twenty-first century American literary fiction that explores the societal effects of digital technology, intersects with postdigital themes at least implicitly. Focussing on novels by Don DeLillo, Jennifer Egan, Dave Eggers, Joshua Ferris, Jonathan Safran Foer, Mohsin Hamid, Thomas Pynchon, Kristen Roupenian, Gary Shteyngart, and Zadie Smith, she considers

ways in which these diverse authors aestheticise and critique a widespread digital culture that threatens print culture and screens humans from another [...] [and] [...] consider[s] ways in which, in the process, they produce politically charged philosophies of digital technology in literary form that build on ideas about hybrid identity [...] and that present alternatives to the idealistic vision of digitalization (14).

As this account of her project shows, Naydan does not focus exclusively on works that show a contemporary disenchantment with digital information systems and concern with issues of control in network cultures via the fictionalisation of the blurring of digital and nondigital. Her focus on, for example, the threat to print culture sits outside of that remit. However, the analyses of her corpus show postdigital themes in some of the works. She shows, for example, how the protagonists of Gary Shteyngart's (2010) dystopian *Super Sad True Love Story* "hybridize their everyday interactions and foster superficiality, immaturity and illiteracy to detrimental ends" (21). Digital technologies in this dystopian novel include the *äppärät*, a device that broadcasts information about individuals including credit scores and attractiveness ratings, and GlobalTeens, a social medial platform through which most communication is made, resulting in the neologisms "teening" (i.e. social media messages) and the less common practice of "verballing" (i.e. speaking). Despite book-loving protagonist Lenny's best efforts to resist it, digital media is shown as an inevitable, highly dominant part of daily life such that his romantic relationship with younger digitally fluent girlfriend Eunice is largely experienced in this mediated way. As Naydan puts it, "Shteyngart suggests that digital media with which digital citizens have relationships inhibit hybrid individuals from ... connecting with other humans romantically in consistently meaningful ways" (25) and moreover that the novel allows readers to "begin the process of rethinking and remaking the globalized and apparently ever-digitizing twenty-first century" (33). While the digital technologies described in *Super Sad True Love Story* do not exist in the world outside of the novel, social media platforms and the capacity for individuals to be rated publicly (e.g. Ratemyprofessors.com) do. The novel thus constructs a digitally-dependant society that has clear links to existing practices in the real world.

Similarly, Naydan's analysis of Eggers' (2013) *The Circle* as a "parable that draws attention to the ways in which corporations reshape mass conceptions of individual identity, humanity, and reality through digital devices and media that they produce and sell" (114) identifies ways in which digitisation compromises individuals and the society of which they are a part. Analysing the way in which protagonist Mae is increasingly conscious of her responsibility to share all aspects of her life by logging her movements, sticking to the mantra "SECRETS ARE LIES, SHARING IS CARING, PRIVACY IS THEFT" (Eggers 2013: 305), and even wearing a "SeeChange" device that broadcasts everything she does to the internet, Naydan shows how "everyday digital citizens [are converted] into cybercapitalist fundamentalists who sustain a single-minded desire to attain information" (132). Thus, while Naydan does not use the term 'postdigital' explicitly in her analyses, she shows ways in which

novels of the twenty-first century warn of the dangers of societies that are not conscious of the implications of increasingly merging on- and offline domains.

The preceding critical investigations of contemporary print fiction show ways in which postdigital sentiments have been identified in contemporary novels and thus that there is emerging research field that engages with the postdigital as theme either explicitly or implicitly. In addition to the novels identified by critics above, *The List* by Yomi Adegoke (2023) represents a more recent example of postdigital print fiction. The novel follows journalist Ola and podcaster Michael, who, one month ahead of their wedding day, find Michael's name on a high-profile list of sexual abusers created on a Google Doc and posted to Twitter. The narrative follows Michael's attempts to clear his name and Ola's moral dilemma as she tries to reconcile her deeply held conviction that victims of abuse should be believed with her own experience of Michael as a loving partner. The description of Michael on the list does not match Ola's experience of him in the offline world such that she initially "repeatedly insisted that it was 'just the internet'. It wasn't 'real life'" (253) while later reflecting that the consequences of him being implicated "felt pretty real" (253). Ultimately, Michael, unlike the guilty people named on the list, is shown to have been falsely accused but the role of the internet in his and other characters' fate is shown to be intrinsic. The novel explores the dangers of not recognising the nuanced epistemological difference between on and offline domains and exposes the way in which (fake) knowledge that originates online can be erroneously and dangerously privileged. As postdigital fiction, therefore, *The List* shows a degree of disenchantment with digital information systems, a concern with issues of control in network cultures, and explores the consequences of seeing digital and nondigital as ontologically equivalent domains. Notably, while the other novels discussed by the critics above are all typically categorised as 'literary fiction', *The List* is more likely to be defined as 'popular' or 'mainstream'. It has been adopted by the Good Morning America Book Club in the US, appeared on *The Sunday Times* bestseller list in the UK, and is endorsed with positive reviews from popular magazines and newspapers including *Vogue*, *Evening Standard*, and *Red Magazine* in its marketing material. This suggests that postdigital sentiments are no longer the sole concern of experimental or even so-called literary fiction but can also be found in non-literary, popular fiction too.

### **Postdigital Digital Fiction**

If DIY zines, glitch art, artists' books, and experimental electronic literature represent the *avant-garde* origins of postdigital art and postdigital print fiction represents a more

mainstream manifestation, then the two examples of digital fiction I analyse below exist somewhere between these two poles. *Karen* and *I Work for the Web* are born digital participatory fictions. They are ontologically playful in that they require that the audience interacts with their fictional characters. They thus conform to Kirby's definition of digimodernism in that they permit the reader or player to intervene and tangibly shape narrative development, but also to Jordan's (2019) definition of postdigital storytelling in that they materially hybridise digital and non-digital domains and are also collaborative and participatory. However, they are also thematically postdigital in that they interrogate the ways in which the historical distinction between the digital and non-digital can be eroded and exhibit scepticism about the universal benefits of digital technology and media. Their publication on app-stores and social media respectively means that their reach is wider than some of the limited-edition projects found in postdigital book art. They thus demonstrate how postdigital themes can be seen in fiction across the creative spectrum as well as across media.

App-fiction *Karen* was published by Blast Theory in 2015 for smartphones and tablets. The app uses videoclips and interactive elements to build a storyworld around protagonist Karen who is a middle-aged British woman, assigned as the reader's life coach. Over eight days, readers receive seventeen videocalls during which Karen addresses the reader, giving the impression that the reader and Karen are communicating in real time. In each videocall, Karen gives information about herself or else seeks information about the reader by asking them questions and requiring them to input text or select from multiple-choice answers. *Karen* thus relies on the reader being in a serialised dialogue with Karen and, if the reader misses a scheduled interaction, they receive text message notifications from Karen to say so.

As *Karen* progresses, readers are asked to provide more details about themselves such as their personal goals, the names of significant others, and their feelings about their lives. In the tenth episode of *Karen*, Karen's roommate Dave begins calling readers, initially without Karen knowing. Dave's interference in the narrative undermines the apparent confidentiality of the coaching process with Karen, but he also uses the calls to admit his romantic feelings for Karen. Karen's behaviour also becomes increasingly erratic overtime as she crosses more professional and personal boundaries, by asking the reader to support her with her relationship with Dave. In the last videocall, and without warning that the narrative is to end, readers are guided around Karen's now empty flat by an anonymous viewer. All of Karen's belongings are gone, with the implication being that she has left never to return. Crucially, however, Karen has also taken with her the reader's responses to her questions and thus any personal information that they have given her.

*Karen* is categorised as ‘Entertainment’ on the Apple and Google Play app stores, thus providing a paratextual clue as to its status as a fictional narrative. However, various devices are in place that make this experience feel authentic. Primarily, the experience takes place on the reader’s smartphone or tablet and thus on a device on which they will likely use in their daily life. More specifically, the videocalls feels like real Zoom or FaceTime calls and the text message notifications resemble real text messages. The notifications also appear alongside notifications from real people in the actual world such that *Karen* exploits and blends into the user’s everyday interaction with their mobile device, playing with the distinction between reality and fiction via its medium-specific affordances.

Linguistically, *Karen*’s consistent use of what David Herman (2002) defines as a second person “actualized address” (341) is also important in terms of putting her in dialogue with readers. This form of ‘you’ “exceeds the frame (or ontological threshold) of a fiction to reach the audience” (341). *Karen* also asks readers to respond to questions interactively. This places them in what Espen Aarseth calls “a cybernetic feedback loop” with the text/machine in which “information flow[s] from text to user’ via the modes of representation the text deploys ‘and back again” (65) via the interactive functions the reader can perform. The multiple-choice questions are an important example of a feature that creates a cybernetic feedback loop: if readers want to continue through the text, they have to respond to *Karen*’s questions, but if they do so they implicitly become the “you”. In particular, readers are manoeuvred into a relationship with the ‘you’ commonly found in digital media that Jill Walker (2000) defines as “forced participation” in which it is impossible for the reader to continue through a text without physically performing the actions suggested by the text – in this case that would be one of the possible multiple-choice answers. They are embodied as the “you” in the text through their participatory role: the ontological distinction between the actual and fictional world is breached by those linguistic and interactive features working together.

In terms of signalling the fictionality of the interaction, *Karen* does initially ask questions that a life-coach might ask of their clients but this then turns into a more comedic style. For example, in episode two, she asks “Which area is most important for you right now?” with readers asked to choose between: “I want to take more control in my life”, “I want to change my attitudes to relationships”, and “I want to review my life goals”, all of which are topics that could be discussed in a life-coaching session. From episode three onwards, however, *Karen* begins to ask more intimate and inappropriate questions which undermine her credibility. The multiple-choice responses offered to readers also become more ironic, cynical, and/or confrontational in style. For example, in episode 5 *Karen* is in her bathroom as opposed

to her previous position in front of her bookshelf and she is getting ready to go out. She asks the reader, “Did I ever tell you about my ecstasy days?” with readers presented with the following options: “Oh, great. A drugs story”; “No, you never told me”, and “Please [...] go on”. The first response implies that the reader is unimpressed, the second is non-committal, and the third explicitly asks for more detail. However, the style of each response is colloquial with response one particularly sarcastic in tone, presenting an ironic tone of voice that signals the coaching scenario is fictional not real.

While the *Karen* app is intended to give a semblance of authentic life-coaching, Karen’s incompetence and inappropriate behaviour as a life coach as well as the humour elicited by the irony of the multiple-choice questions and answers show that it is not. Karen is not real and, because the actor playing her is performing a script, the reader cannot interrupt or guide the conversation as we would in a real conversation. However, the familiarity of the linguistic interaction, the way in which Karen responds to the reader’s input, and the accustomed conventions of digitally mediated communication on which the app relies all combine to make the experience feel uncannily real for some readers. Empirical research with readers of *Karen* (Bell 2021; Bell and Ensslin 2024) demonstrates in particular that while some reader/players enjoy playing a role in the text by, for example, providing false information to *Karen* for fun, others find the experience unsettling precisely because it feels like an uncannily real interaction even though (most) readers know it is fiction.

In terms of the thematic message of *Karen*, it is because the boundary between the actual world and the storyworld is destabilised that Karen’s unexpected departure at the end of the narrative feels so affecting. Readers have bonded with Karen, sharing experiences with her and giving her guidance. models and potentially problematises the way in which individuals might readily give out personal information about themselves in digitally mediated communication to people they do not know or whose ontological status is unclear. Reality is shown to be an inevitable mixture of the actual and the virtual, with *Karen* foregrounding the way that we might casually communicate across and with digital media in what might one day prove to have unexpected consequences. On the one hand, this shows the way in which we can form strong human connections across what may or may not be ontological boundaries; digitally mediated interactions can be just as poignant and feel just as significant and ‘real’ as those that take place outside of that context. On the other hand, *Karen* shows the way in which digitally mediated relationships can be abused. Indeed, the requests we get for personal information online are sometimes “fictional” in so far as they can come from fake sources (e.g. phishing; unauthorised data mining). In *Karen*, ontological boundaries are breached, but it is



personal boundaries and access to our own world that proves to have the most significant consequence for the reader. The work thus explores postdigital themes in terms of the potential changes in our perception of reality, and the new ontological encounters, ambiguities, uncertainties and dangers that digital worlds can create.

As a piece of *digital* fiction specifically, *Karen* explores postdigital themes via digital technology and thus speaks directly to the notion that “digitization [is] something that already happened and can be played with” (Cramer 2013, n.p.). In fact, the digital technology through which we interact with *Karen* is the very thing we are being asked to be cautious about. It seeks to minimise the visibility of the ontological boundary between the storyworld and actual world via hiding the boundary between the digital and nondigital in order to highlight the dangers that can arise from that actual-to-virtual boundary being eroded. This digital fiction thus probes the distinction between the real (offline) and the virtual (online) to explore postdigital thematic concerns.

My second example of digital fiction is Rob Wittig and Mark C. Marino’s (2015) netprov *I Work for the Web*. Netprov – a linguistic blend of ‘networked’ and ‘improvisation’ – is a form of participatory digital writing that exploits existing social media platforms to make “technologically self-aware art” (Rettberg 2019, 175). Often including a “parodic treatment of contemporary social behaviours on the Web” (177) and “a subversive streak that uses satire as a mode of critique” (177), netprov artists propose a scenario and set up a series of constraints to which contributors must adhere and improvise within, often in real time. As Marino and Wittig (2012) explain “netprov consists of narratives purportedly by and about people who don’t exist (or fictional versions of people who do)” and works are comprised of an ‘inner circle’ of writer/actors who are ‘in on the joke from the beginning’ and an invited ‘outer circle’ of reader/participant/players unknown to the inner circle” (no page) who also participate in creating the narrative.

*I Work for the Web* focused on the way in which people’s online activity is exploited financially or otherwise by large corporations. The narrative unfolded on Twitter and Facebook but was also supported by a website set up by Wittig and Marino to initiate the fictional scenario. The website explained that ‘RockeHearst Omnipresent Bundlers’ – which is a fictional corporation – had invited people to tweet about how much they like working for the web, parodying the way that tech companies canvas, collect, and exploit individuals’ personal data. This resulted in a netprov with two kinds of contributor: individuals who were acting as supporters of the initiative and individuals acting as part of a union of web workers who were

against the initiative. Contributors were asked to tweet responses during the week of 6-13 April 2015 using the hashtag #IWWF.

*I Work for the Web* was a fictional scenario with contributors assuming a role in the unfolding drama. It mixed reality and fiction by asking real individuals to play a fictional role on real social media platforms. It can be defined according to Jordan's (2019) 'postdigital storytelling' in so far as it materially "embraces [...] social media; [...] narrative and performance [...] and [...] [is] collaborative and participatory" (2). However, in addition to that, it is thematically postdigital. While fictional and in many ways playful, it also made a serious political point about the insidious nature of the digital economy. It uses ontological ambiguity as well as irony and parody to make a sincere statement about the digitally mediated, digitally dependent, and ultimately exploitative world in which many of us live. Like *Karen*, it is a born digital artefact that uses the affordances of digital media to make a thematically postdigital point.

## **Conclusion**

This article has shown ways in which postdigital art sits in critical dialogue with the digital. In postdigital aesthetics, that can manifest via using non-digital media either with or without digital media, and/or by self-reflexively foregrounding digital production methods as in glitch. When it comes to postdigital fiction, I have shown how a concern with hybridity can manifest both materially and thematically, arguing for the existence and increased prevalence of fiction that explores postdigital themes. I have thus shown how what I define as postdigital fiction interrogates the way in which the digital and nondigital have become hybridised in digitised societies and questions the universal benefits that digital media bring.

In the print fiction and associated criticism identified above, the bleed between digital and nondigital takes place within the storyworld with the reader situated outside of that domain. In digital works, such as *Karen* and *I Work for the Web* that I have analysed, that bleed takes place between actual and storyworld with the reader implicated in the ontological hybridity. In these latter cases, the reader is not situated outside the storyworld but instead becomes part of it in the participatory and interactive ways identified by Jordan (2019). However, like the print novels discussed above, these digital texts also explore the postdigital thematically albeit using postdigital storytelling as a means of doing so. I thus propose that the postdigital can manifest as both a narrative form, as in Jordan's concept of postdigital storytelling, and as theme in fiction.

In terms of the relationship between the postdigital and wider cultural trends, Jordan (2019) claims that the postdigital is a manifestation of metamodernism and some of the literary criticism I have engaged with above examines texts such as Shteyngart's (2010) *Super Sad True Love Story* and Eggers' (2013) *The Circle* that have been defined as post postmodern (Pignagnoli 2023). *Karen* and *I Work for the Web* can also be categorised as post postmodernist in so far as they repurpose postmodernist techniques to make an ethical point about the world outside of the text (McLaughlin 2012; Alber and Bell 2019). In particular, they utilise ontological self-reflexivity and irony – mainstays of postmodernist fiction (cf. McHale 1987) – to make a serious and sincere point about the postdigital nature of our current reality. However, as my analysis of *The List* has shown, postdigital themes do not always manifest in fiction that is necessarily post postmodernist, metamodernist, or otherwise. Therefore, my conceptualisation of postdigital themes in fiction does not necessarily depend on its relation to other generic or periodising concepts. However, the insidious role of digital technology and its influence on our conception of the 'real' represents an increasingly prevalent postdigital position that is being explored in contemporary narratives across media.

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