

# Digital Modernism, Part 1: Platform Capitalism and Beyond

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The sociocultural ecologies of 20th century modernism may roughly be divided into two categories: those of high modernism (museums, academic art institutions, upscale concert halls, etc.) – which generally have lacked wider sociocultural implementation – and those of popular modernism (record shops, free art schools, public broadcasting, clubs, cheap paperback books, etc.), which to a much more significant extent were distributed throughout popular culture. A central question that confronts us at the present is thus what the sociocultural, or techno-social, ecologies of a 21st century digital modernism could look like. For even though digitalisation has been around for a while now, we are still grappling with both its sociocultural and aesthetic implications. Indeed, the question of what constitutes a genuinely subversive aesthetic and culture fully adequate to the *digital present* remains an open question. This is so because the digitalisation of culture has so far been orchestrated by capitalism – with sociocultural digital ecologies that do not fit into the narrow profit agenda of capitalist businesses largely absent. In that regard, as we shall see, it is far from an unreasonable suggestion that digitalisation has stymied both aesthetic and sociocultural experimentation – which is a deadlock that a digital modernism needs to overcome. Hence, the question of how to rehabilitate the aesthetic and sociocultural vectors of popular modernism at the present moment indeed remains crucial. Yet the point is not that we should simply aim to recreate the particular aesthetics and sociocultural ecologies of popular modernism, but rather that we must construct similar progressive vectors to propel culture forward at the digital present. This essay will take a look at this problematic from the perspective of sociocultural development specifically.

## Culture in the Era of Platform Capitalism

The great myth of digitalisation – or, Web 2.0 more specifically – is that it has made culture more democratic. Since everyone now can participate in the making of culture, the argument goes, life online has allowed us to overcome the differences between previous social inequalities. Yet this is far from the truth, which the simple fact that not everyone has equal access to digital technology and online connectivity illustrates. But this is at the same time not simply a

problem of access, but also of how life online is structured. The key concept that is necessary in order to come to terms with this problematic is that of the *platform*, which has become the central business model in the digital economy.<sup>1</sup> Simply put, a platform is an intermediary that allows various groups to interact upon it. Typical examples are large online companies, such as Facebook, Google and Amazon – as well as more specific cultural businesses like Netflix and Spotify – which all are digital platforms that provide a basic infrastructure for people to act upon. Platforms did not emerge with the rise of digitalisation, however – indeed, both malls and even older business structures such as marketplaces are examples of platforms<sup>2</sup> – but have come to occupy the centre stage of the digital economy because of the fact that those who own a major platform are able to extract an exorbitant amount of data from everyone who use it. This includes everything from search histories and social relations to cultural and consumer preferences, which are being harvested by the platform corporations and sold to advertisers for the purpose of tailor-making online ads according to individual preferences (this is indeed how these advertising driven platforms make most of their money).

There is thus an inherent inequality built into this business model, insofar as it allows a small group of platform owners to profit from the activities of all those who interact upon it. Indeed, everything that is being shared on these platforms provide raw material for data extraction and analysis for the purpose of individualised advertisement. This is what the argument about democratisation essentially misses, insofar as the celebration of increased participation not only obscures, but even facilitates, the underlying platform business model that indeed requires the constant provision and circulation of ‘content’. For what is important to keep in mind here is that these platforms would be completely useless without the value that people provide to them – so why are we not all being compensated for that value? Instead, our participation only keeps feeding a few monopolistic giants that increasingly tend to monitor and control everything that happens on the web according to their own preferences. This also points to the non-democratic nature of these platforms: the fact that it is only their owners that set the rules for how they work. For even though platforms tend to recede into the background in a somewhat neutral manner, they are far from neutral but have ideologies encoded into their overall design – think for instance of the link between likes and increased visibility on Facebook, and the kind of subjectivity that it engenders – which, because of their sheer largeness and monopolistic tendencies such as network effects,<sup>3</sup> have significant impact on the shaping of life and culture online.

The additional problem is of course that neither of these platforms have any interest in enriching cultures and communities, since they are simply in the business of making money – which makes their techno-social dominance even more unsettling. It is thus a basic sentiment of this essay that online culture in the era of platform capitalism is an overall flawed culture, which I will aim to substantiate by looking at four negative features, or problematic consequences, of the impact of online platform businesses on culture at the present (and these could easily be extended into further points):<sup>4</sup> decontextualization, inequality of exposure, imposed personalisation and the distortion of public space. More specifically, I think that these features all contribute to significant *aesthetic poverty* for both artists and audiences – aside from the already mentioned problems of social and economic inequality. Let us begin with *decontextualization*, which refers to the homogenising impact of the major cultural platforms on the material that is available there. When writing about this particular form of aesthetic poverty, the artist and technologist Mat Dryhurst refers to these platforms as ‘online warehouses’ that problematically remove the sociocultural contexts of particular aesthetic forms.<sup>5</sup> Instead, they are all reduced to generic menu options on the virtual non-places of streaming sites and various social-media feeds – which also feeds into the agenda of platform capitalism, insofar as it treats all kinds of aesthetic forms as nothing but raw material for data extraction (i.e. as ‘content’). Yet this removal of cultural context threatens to have severe negative impact on how work is received online (particularly of the kind that does not conform to mainstream norms), as Dryhurst suggests:

[Y]ou want it to exist within a distinct environment that in turn contributes to the work. When it comes to electronic music producers, generally their work goes further because they start at a club night, or a radio show, or have incredible artwork, or are involved within a hyper-specific community of people. All of these factors distinguish the work, shape it and make it *mean something*.<sup>6</sup>

This also points to another unfortunate consequence of the aesthetic poverty of platform capitalism: the fact that it flattens the antagonism between the underground and the mainstream by lining up what in fact are very different aesthetic forms on the same generic grids. Of course, one could make the argument that this is at least good insofar as it allows all kinds of aesthetic forms – underground and mainstream – to appear on equal terms. Yet this is not really the case, since there is plenty of evidence that indicates that a tiny group of top names generates a

disproportionate amount of attention (plays, rentals, etc.) on the platforms, whereas the rest largely remain in obscurity (in other words, just as in the physical world).<sup>7</sup> This is partly a consequence of the fact that the platforms do not promote equality, because of how their designs tend to visually privilege the most well-known names that generate the most amounts of plays and likes – as opposed to cultural equality through increased diversity (for instance in the form of designs that distribute visibility more equally). In other words, cultural equality does not just entail the right to create, but also the right to be able to share work with a larger community without being outmanoeuvred by a few major players – and it is in this sense that *inequality of exposure* is another negative feature of capitalist digital platforms (including the competitive mindset that it engenders, in terms of a desire to produce content that generates the most amount of likes, etc.).

The third negative feature of platform capitalism that I want to discuss is that of *imposed personalisation* and it is also linked to the problem of exposure. ‘Personalisation’, as we know, refers to making something based on the individual needs of a particular person – and it is certainly not inherently bad. But the kind of imposed personalisation that I have in mind here is something different. More specifically, imposed personalisation refers to the tendency towards sociocultural entrenchment of the digital platforms of late capitalism – that is, the fact that they have been designed in such a way as to mostly expose us to content based on what we previously have been viewing. Think for instance of personalised ads, search suggestions and recommendations – all of which have been compiled on the basis of our personal data that the platforms have collected from us (and which even has begun to impact the realm of content production, in terms of books and TV-shows being created on the basis of user preference extracted from personal data). This is of course extremely problematic, since it threatens to enclose us into particularly bland forms of online bunkers – and what makes the situation even worse, as the artist and theorist Astra Taylor points out in her discussion of this phenomenon,<sup>8</sup> is the fact that this is being imposed on us by the platform owners in ways that are not necessarily obvious.

The final negative feature of platform capitalism that I would like to discuss – and which underlies the others – is *the distortion of public space*. For even though many of the major digital platforms are freely open to everyone and thus have something of a public character in that they are seemingly common spaces for people to meet, they are in fact intensely privatised since they are run by large businesses that do not put the interest and good of the public as their main priority. This is why the characterisation of something like Facebook as some kind

of online town square essentially is flawed, insofar as we are only allowed to participate on the terms set by the private actors who run the platform. Additionally, the distortion of public space must also be understood in terms of how our increased presence on these privatised, online platforms has made physical public (and private) space less social because of our near constant preoccupation with smart phones. And the culture that has grown out of these platforms at the same time encourages us to make more and more of our private life public by putting it on display in the streams of social media – which also is a testament to how problematic the public has become online. And what makes this even more problematic is the fact that it is getting increasingly difficult to opt out of these platforms given the central roles that they have come to play not just on the internet but in our lives in general. Hence, some have suggested that they should be regulated as public utilities.<sup>9</sup> While this certainly is a very important point (that I will return to at the end of this essay), I will first look at another (not contradictory) option in the second part: decentralisation through the constructions of post-capitalist platforms.

But let us first sum up and conclude this first part. As we have seen, online culture in the era of platform capitalism remains an essentially flawed culture insofar as it is characterised by a techno-social imbalance between those who own the platforms and those who use it – which means that it allows the former group to profit from the activities provided by the latter, while also dictating the terms of the platforms. From an aesthetic and sociocultural perspective, this has several additional flaws – including decontextualization, inequality of exposure, imposed personalisation and the distortion of public space – which the rhetoric of democracy through increased participation ultimately misses. As the theorist and critic Simon Reynolds has argued: Web 2.0 essentially overturns the post-war Situationist critique of the society of the spectacle against widespread passivity that only can be overcome through increased participation – which later became a central influence on the DIY movements of the post-war decades. Yet today, as Reynolds also points out, everyone is DIYing. DIY has become more like a hobby or pastime that undoubtedly has been facilitated by platform capitalism (i.e. by how easy it is to produce online content), which on the one hand has drained the concept of its previous critical edge and on the other hand feeds into platform capitalism's hunger for data to extract and analyse for commercial purposes. Hence, what has been lost here according to Reynolds is DIY's antagonism towards the mainstream – that is, its ability to infiltrate and change public space.<sup>10</sup> Today, DIY has been reduced to the production of mostly bland content for circulation on the intensely privatised online spaces of platform capitalism, which gladly uses it as raw material for continued data extraction and processing. Does this mean that DIY simply is a

thing of the past now? Not necessarily; however, my suggestion is that we need to reconsider *what it is* that we are DIYing. More specifically, what if we turn our attention from cultural material to the platforms on which it circulates, as a crucial nexus for future DIY? I will explore this suggestion more closely in the second part of this essay, by looking at DIY in terms of the production of post-capitalist platforms.

### **Decentralisation and Post-Capitalist Platforms**

Through its increasingly invasive methods for accumulating data, platform capitalism has created sophisticated versions of what Fredric Jameson has referred to as ‘cognitive mapping’: the use of technology as an instrument for tracking complexity beyond unmediated phenomenological experience. Indeed, as the theorist Alex Williams has argued, platform capitalism must be understood as part of the shift away from Foucault’s disciplinary societies into what Deleuze has referred to as ‘societies of control’ – since it is not organised around disciplinary methods within the strict timetables and sites of confinement that was crucial to industrial capitalism. On the contrary, platform capitalism must be understood in terms of control as a system of *universal modulation* that operates across the entire social field and that has been made possible by the emergence and social distribution of digital information technologies. Yet as Williams also points out, there is nothing inherently bad about these technologies even though they generally are being utilised for exploitative purposes today – so the question is how to repurpose them towards different, emancipatory horizons.<sup>11</sup>

One strategy, suggested by a number of writers, that I would like to take a closer look at is the constructions of post-capitalist platforms generally operating through distributed ownership (what also has been referred to as ‘platform cooperatives’).<sup>12</sup> Here, I will draw extensively on the work of Mat Dryhurst – who has emerged as a particularly singular voice on these matters within the artistic left. More specifically, Dryhurst has looked at these resources as means for independent artists to get around the problem of having to publish their work through a centralised third party that has no interest in presenting it in a manner that it deserves. Instead, artists effectively have to give up control of how their work is engaged with online by submitting it to the generic grid of something like Netflix or Spotify. For Dryhurst, building alternative platforms is thus a means for artists to take back control of their work by creating communities and digital environments that contribute to, or act as expansions of, their work – much like the independent cultural ecologies of the analogue era (like rave culture, for instance, whose full cultural significance is impossible to understand without proper accounts of

the sociocultural infrastructure around the music – such as clubs and secret party locations, drugs, clothing, specialist record stores, pirate radio, and so on). In that regard, decentralisation through the constructions of alternative digital platforms may indeed turn out to be the online version of the independent cultures of the analogue era. As Dryhurst puts it:

Infrastructure is everything – when we stop building it we begin to lose independence. The surge of interest in experimental music in the past 10 years coincides heavily with the emergence of entities like Boomkat and others who have taken the job of representing underrepresented music very seriously and very professionally. Look to PAN or Primary Information, to see the difference that can be made through careful presentation and self organization. Why not try to do the same with how we publish our work online?<sup>13</sup>

One small but compelling example of a post-capitalist platform within the realm of aesthetics is Dryhurst's own Saga framework – which is a video-based self-hosting platform that allows artists to track and modify their work based on where it is embedded online. Hence, a back-end interface allows artists to create time-based modifications of their work in response to the context in which it is being embedded: a video could for instance automatically self-destruct after a certain amount of plays, or be intentionally obscured if it appears in an environment that goes against what the piece wants to communicate, and so on. This is interesting insofar as it gives agency back to the artists in terms of how their work is being presented online, and in that sense challenges the dominant logic of platform capitalism at several levels. As Dryhurst puts it in his accompanying statement to Saga:

Shifting the balance towards artist-controlled publishing raises some powerful questions about the future of the medium: Can third-party publishers sell ads next to a work that may choose to disavow them? Should a piece respond to a critique of itself? Can you purchase a moment in the lifecycle of a work? Should a work communicate different things in different locations? Is it possible to appropriate a work that is constantly changing? Can we do this by ourselves?<sup>14</sup>

Another example that I want to discuss briefly is the streaming platform Resonate, which was founded by the web developer and musician Peter Harris in 2015.<sup>15</sup> Operating as a blockchain

based cooperative with staff, artists and listeners all owning parts of the platform and having a say in its future development through voting and online discussion, the idea behind Resonate is to provide a venue for independent artists to publish their work in an environment where it is valued and where they are being paid accordingly (for instance in contrast to the ridiculously low amount of royalties payed by Spotify). The site operates a nine-step, stream-to-own model according to which listeners pay more and more for each stream until they reach the ninth step where they end up owning the track. Additionally, the underlying blockchain technology on the one hand allows for payments to be made immediately and go straight to the artists, and on the other hand also allows artists to modify the basic stream-to-own model if they wish to do so (for instance by making the first 100 streams of a track free of charge, or allow public venues to stream their music for less than private listeners). In this regard, we can see why the cooperative model can be useful both for democratising the decision-making processes of digital platforms and for evening out the distribution of money to artists and even to audiences, as well as for overcoming the problems of aesthetic poverty listed above. More specifically:

- It can provide singular digital contexts for the publishing of artistic work online.
- It can implement systems of equality of exposure for the work that is being published on the platforms.
- It can bypass imposed personalisation by instead allowing artists and audiences to have a say in how they want things to appear on the platforms (e.g. some degrees of non-imposed personalisation may be desired).
- It can thus *make the platforms themselves ongoing experiments with how we collectively engage with art online today* – which can be discussed among the staff, artists and audiences, who all are in positions to contribute with ideas about how to develop them because of the distributed nature of the ownerships.

Projects such as this obviously require an immense amount of technical know-how – but they are at the same time not simply about technology. For technology is always socioculturally embedded, which means that its directions need to be negotiated in dialogue with the agents that populate the sociocultural ecologies in question (in this case: labels, artists, audiences, and so on). This is indeed what fuels the vectors of aesthetic and sociocultural development, since art without genuine sociocultural implementation is no more than personal escapism – while technology stripped of aesthetic and sociocultural (or political) registers is simply an empty



infrastructure for no one. Again, this is where the distributed model becomes important – precisely insofar as its communal nature encourages conversations between all these groups in ways that may enrich the technological underpinnings of aesthetic and sociocultural development.

This is not to suggest that experimenting with distributed, post-capitalist platforms is the only way to challenge the hegemony of platform capitalism. Indeed, Nick Srnicek's point about the scaling restrictions of platform cooperatives – the fact that they lack the financial resources to genuinely counter the major platforms and, in that sense (just like pre-digital cooperatives), simply may end up as tiny utopian islands within an unaffected capitalist system – must not be overlooked.<sup>16</sup> Thus, perhaps we should think of resistance against platform capitalism as something like a three-levelled system, which comprises: 1) experiments with post-capitalist platforms and platform cooperatives, 2) incentives to impose regulations on existing capitalist platforms, and 3) efforts to socialise the capitalist platforms by redistributing their ownership to the people. Indeed, perhaps it is only then that the hegemony of platform capitalism will be truly overcome.

At the same time, it is worth remembering that much of this (including technologies like blockchains, crypto tokens and smart contracts) are still in its infancy – so we simply do not yet know what will happen. But it is clear that instruments necessary for decentralising, or shifting the balance of, the web have become increasingly available over the past few years – so in that regard it would be a profound failure if the left did not experiment with these resources also for larger cultural and political purposes. Who knows what could come out of it? From this perspective, the aesthetic and sociocultural experiments outlined in this essay should thus not simply be understood as some kind of retreat to small-scale cultural enclaves in response to the large-scale oppression of platform capitalism – but as indexes of potential post-capitalist cultures to come. Indeed, perhaps experimenting with cultural platforms beyond the centralised Web 2.0 of platform capitalism will allow us to rehabilitate the utopian energy that Mark Fisher has ascribed to the culture – music culture in particular – of the post-war decades, through aesthetic and techno-social experiments that point to a world beyond the dreariness of the present:

Music culture's role as one of the engines of cultural acceleration from the late '50s through to 2000 had to do with its capacity to synthesize diverse cultural energies, tropes, and forms, as much as any specific feature of music itself. From the late '50s

onward, music culture became the zone where drugs, new technologies, (science) fictions, and social movements could combine to produce dreamings—suggestive glimmers of worlds radically different from the actually existing social order.<sup>17</sup>

### Notes

1. See Srnicek, N. (2016) *Platform Capitalism* (London: Polity Books).
2. See Srnicek, N. (2019) 'Bigger Than the USSR: A Conversation with Nick Srnicek', <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/bigger-than-the-ussr-a-conversation-with-nick-srnicek-author-of-platform-capitalism/?fbclid=IwAR254j0gzqXZ2MuC0rXx9cEt6KnkGX97vA2w-OMz6oDcljwabMaDQOVI3rI#!>
3. Network effects refer to the fact that the sociocultural significance of a platform increases in tandem with the more people who use it (i.e. you want to be where everyone else are), which at a critical point makes challenging this monopolistic tendency very difficult.
4. For a more comprehensive account of the negative impact of platform capitalism on contemporary culture, see Taylor, A. (2014) *The People's Platform: Taking Back Power and Culture in the Digital Age* (London: Fourth Estate).
5. See Dryhurst, M. (2015) 'Interview with Mat Dryhurst', <https://daily.redbullmusicacademy.com/2015/11/mat-dryhurst-interview>
6. Ibid.
7. See Taylor, *The People's Platform*, p. 119-130.
8. See *ibid.* p. 130-140.
9. See for example *ibid.* p. 219-230.
10. See Reynolds, S. (2011) 'Excess All Areas', in *The Wire* #328.
11. See Williams, A. (2015), 'Control Societies and Platform Logic', in *New Formations*, 84/85, p. 209-227.
12. See Scholz, T. and Schneider, N., eds., (2017) *Ours to Hack and to Own: The Rise of Platform Cooperativism, a New Vision for the Future of Work and a Fairer Internet* (New York: OR Books).
13. Dryhurst, M. (2015) 'Tools in Our Hands: Discussing Saga with Mat Dryhurst', <https://fallowmedia.com/2015/dec/mat/>
14. Dryhurst, M. (2015) 'Saga v1.0', <https://accessions.org/article/saga-v1-0/>
15. See <https://resonate.is/>
16. See Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism*, p. 127.
17. Fisher, M. (2013) "'A social and psychic revolution of almost inconceivable magnitude": Popular Culture's Interrupted Accelerationist Dreams', <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/46/60084/a-social-and-psychic-revolution-of-almost-inconceivable-magnitude-popular-culture-s-interrupted-accelerationist-dreams/>