Elevate Me Later – an analogue sea in a digital world

Elevate Me Later

  "Elevate Me Later" is the title of a 1994 song by the band Pavement; I was reminded of it, approximately 20 years after the last time I listened to it, by a fellow academic I recently met at a conference who posted it on Facebook. The YouTube link showed a static picture of the band (as there is no official music clip); equally, all other links to the same song present various static images of band members or the album cover whilst the song itself comes in different sound qualities from one link to another. In the 1990s, I had to go to a specialist record store to buy the album, as the band never became popular enough to be stocked by major chains. I also used a slow dial-up connection to search for the lyrics (which I didn't find). It now takes less than a second for a series of results about the very same song to appear on my screen. Whenever I listen to a track I like but don't recognize, I raise my phone close to the speakers and an app instantly gives me its full details. I am part of a generation that was born analogue and raised digital; new technologies constitute an essential part of my daily routine and yet, I feel a bizarre combination of nostalgia and disdain when I realize that, at present times, mixtapes are sold out at Rough Trade or that Lomography is becoming stronger than ever.

  The technological changes of the past thirty years have not only impacted irreversibly our perception (and use) of time but also our interconnectedness and access to information. Images, sounds, texts are continuously reproduced, fragmented, edited, manipulated, appropriated, redistributed. Ten years after Hito Steyerl's "In Defense of the Poor Image" (2009), the finding that the 'new' condition of poor images and their subsequent circulation creates an "alternative economy of images, an imperfect cinema existing inside as well as beyond and under commercial media streams" (Steyerl 2009) seems more topical than ever. At the same time, free access to information and the development of user-friendly software for image manipulation seems to have resulted in the birth of new online 'tribes' based on a series of brand new (and often algorithmically complex) set of criteria. Lev Manovich has coined the term "Instagrammism" to talk about the new 'aesthetics of the image', going as far as suggesting that this is a historical moment of a new movement. Initially talking about the photo and video sharing social media platform Instagram but expanding the argument further to include a range of creative practices, he suggests that there is a standardization of aesthetics on different online platforms that is directly dependent on the style associated with the platform itself. Discussions about social media encouraging gang conformism via "likes" and "retweets" and algorithms devised by online retailers short circuiting choice (Moss 2015) bring forward a constant questioning of the space that is left for originality and/or the ways in which meaning is defined in artistic practices[1].

  So on one hand we have endless reproductions of images, sounds, and texts of various qualities and on the other a set of implied rules associated with different online communities that creates a rhizomatic development of online 'tribes'. The latter often relies on analogue aesthetics or the return of long-

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[1] Ironically enough, "Elevate Me Later" speaks about the shallowness of LA life and culture that fails to 'elevate' the songwriter and frontman Stephen Malkmus.

forgotten media via the fetishisation of anachronistic technologies (Kholeif 2018). In this light, it is interesting to revisit the way in which analogue practices today are renegotiated and examine how technological symbiosis may lead to works that remain true to their own materiality.

Fast Forward to the Analogue

The works that appear in this volume were shown at the exhibition "Fast Forward to the Analogue: vintage immersions" (Project Space, University of Greenwich Galleries, 2 July – 3 September 2019), which sought to explore the use of analogue techniques and to place them within the wider realm visual arts. Over the past years, digital and immersive technologies have been hyped as consumer gadgets, entertainment media and the future of exhibition practices. The free distribution of VR headsets with smartphones and the increasing interest of museums, festivals and other cultural organisers towards 'immersive digital content' have quickly turned VR and AR devices and applications into widely recognized cultural artefacts. The promotion of digital and interactive technologies in the physical spaces of exhibitions and museums has led to some venues relying solely on projections and audience interaction. In this context, the 'analogue' is often presented as what preceded the 'digital'. However, the revival of analogue techniques and aesthetics bears witness to a range of practices that are beyond the mere polarising opposite of digital practices. The exhibition sought to explore nalogue choices in artistic practice today, and to examine how those choices are embedded within an interdisciplinary framework.

The works presented by contributing artists and/or researchers (Mihalis Arfaras, Patrick Beveridge, Eleanor Dare, Carla Garcia, Jim Hobbs, Andrew Knight-Hill, Gabriel Menotti, Dani Ploeger, Audrey Samson, Systaime, Michael Talbot) showcase a wide range of approaches to the notion of the analogue as a concept and practice. After having selected the works in question, and whilst visualising their placement in the exhibition space, it quickly became apparent that groups of works fell into specific narrative threads and entered into a dialogue with one another. Arfaras' *Wochenschau* and *City Life Graffitis* were put side by side Systaime's *Post-Internet Ecology* and offered different takes on pastiche images and collage practices. From a painstakingly frame-by-frame drawing onto film (reminiscent of traditional printmaking techniques) to a quick copy-paste of online imagery, a powerful commentary is made on the abundance of images, the creation of subjective narratives and a diametrically opposed concept of time in the creation of a work. Samson's *Goodnight Sweetheart*, Hobbs' *It's all right. I came back,* and Talbot's *'Acemaşiran Kantosu Aklım Başımdan' by Hanede İbrahim Efendi* automatically evoke memories from a (collective?) past and thoughts on the materiality of both analogue and digital technologies, as well as the handling of the objects themselves at present times. Samson embalms her father's hard drive in resin, whilst Hobbs takes digital scans of his late father's digital slides and presents them both as images and palimpsest-objects. As part of his research on the Ottoman Empire, Talbot presents a shellac record from the early 20th century; in this case, the sound is digitised and accessed via headphones whilst the exhibition of the object itself stands as a reminder of the history contained within the actual physical object. At the same time, Menotti takes us on a virtual tour of Vila Itororó via a VR installation (*Old Constellations [above Vila Itororó]*) that explores material heritage and where, amongst

digitally-created 'constellations', objects left behind at Vila Itororó tell their stories through the voices of their former owners. Right next to it, Carla Garcia's *Sea Cave Cinema* and Patrick Beveridge's *The Mountain Lake* insist on 'film as film' and on the effect of its materiality over their work and the narrative they create within it. Garcia plays with the relation between the moving light in a cave in Portugal and the importance of the medium of film *per se*, whilst Beveridge creates a revisited analogy of the film camera mechanism to the movement of the sun. At the same time, Dare, Hobbs and Knight-Hill 'alter' some well-known references of our cultural and historical heritage. In the VR installation *Empathy for the Devil*, Dare offers an insight into Motel Room number 1 (i.e. Norman Bates' room) from Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960). Apart from questioning VR's function as a potential 'empathy machine', the work makes use of our prior knowledge of the film (and the recognition of the sound sequence from the famous shower scene) to create an unexpected sense of tranquillity: we know that we are 'safe' while looking around Bates' room because at that very moment he is elsewhere and won't be coming back for a while. In *Vesuvius (I wish I had___)*, Hobbs draws in pencil a top back on Mount Vesuvius on an analogue photograph that has been digitally reprinted. His work is meticulous to the point where one can hardly recognise the volcano, although the latter remains seemingly familiar to the well-known image of Vesuvius that has been widely circulated throughout the years. Knight-Hill's *Whispers of a Long-forgotten Dream* offers two soundtracks for the *film Child of the Big City* (dir. Evgeni Bauer, 1914). Apart from altering our perception of the –originally silent- film, the two scores (one a fully analogue instrumental score and the other an electronic instrument rendering) stand as witnesses to the tension between analogue and digital executions of the same soundtrack. Finally, Ploeger's *European Studies #1* uses 6x6 negative film to capture the 'advanced technologies' of contemporary border fences. An ironic take on the 'high-tech' aspect of the material itself versus the physical violence often associated with crossing said fences, he uses an 'old' technology for a result that could be seen as an Instagrammable and over-aestheticised implicit depiction of fear.

Different thematic and conceptual threads could be endlessly devised between the works in question. However, the essential characteristic here is the symbiotic way in which analogue practices are inscribed onto the creative process in order to contribute in the creation of a work of art with a clearly communicated meaning and message. In this respect, the analogue component of the works is not isolated but assessed in relation to the other components and to the intended aims of their creators.

An Analogue Sea in a Digital World
The digital world already counts decades of life and yet one could argue that contemporary art has failed to adequately respond to the impact of the digital revolution (Bishop 2012). Along the same line, it could equally be argued that digital artworks themselves have not yet made a groundbreaking impact on the cultural landscape of the 21st century, which is partly due to the obsolete model of agency deployed by many digital artists (Dare and Papadaki 2015). In reality, this is not a question about the use of medium in the visual arts, but one about being truthful to and challenging the times via creative expression, and thus, going back to the track at the beginning of this text, creating art that

'elevates'. Oil on canvas can do this just as easily as a VR installation; however, merely following the trends in terms of medium and form without fully realizing the impact of these choices resembles following the 'likes' and resulting in the awkward situation where everyone can say anything via an abundance of means but nobody has really anything to say. After all the media, genres, techniques, and -isms, all we are left with is the work itself and its communicated message. In this context, identifying the cultural and historical signifiers of analogue practices within a digital framework becomes a question of understanding and appreciating how the creative interplay between said media can contribute in a complete work of art.

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