

# Postdigital/More-Than-Digital: Ephemerality, Seclusion, and Copresence in the University

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## Introduction

Looking at the genealogy of the term *postdigital* as presented in Jandrić et al. (2022), the origin of the construct is traced to Negroponte (1998), whose conception rests on the notion of *inseparability* of the digital and the analog. He also states that the digital ‘will be noticed only by its absence, not its presence’. Here, it seems three ideas are at work; the first is that the digital and analog are intertwined as one inseparable entity, the second is that it is also possible for the digital to be absent, and the third, is that it will only be noticed by its absence, not its presence. There appears to be a tension inherent in these claims, and in more recent ideas about of the nature of the digital, flowing from them. In this imaginary, the digital is presented as an entity fully *permeating* on the analog. It is theorised as *ubiquitous*, and also *occluded* from direct view; resulting in the postdigital, in which the digital as a presence seems to be imagined as a kind of haunting, or an entity outside of direct perception.

This idea echoes popular discourses of the digital as a form of ‘magical’ or ‘transformative’ force. However, the potential absence of the digital is also alluded to as a possibility, in the form of what is noticed, a rupture. This - I will argue - implies an inevitable, totalising, and in some sense, an unknowable force. In this chapter, I will propose that these conceptions of the digital, and consequently the postdigital, lead to a range of effects concerning how the analog, material, and embodied are recast. Focusing on higher education in particular, I will propose that a strong version of this imaginary may lead us back to much-critiqued fantasies of digital incorporeality coupled with an over-emphasis on *connection*, which together continue to influence research, policy, and practice. I will consider the possible effects of this imaginary of the digital as fully permeating, ubiquitous and occluded, focusing particularly on how these ideas reverberate in higher education, and what they do to our conceptions of the nature of absence and presence, in particular with regard to human and nonhuman subjectivities and practices.

The concepts of the network and the meshwork will be contrasted, and I will suggest that neither of these metaphors captures in theoretical terms some of the fundamental aspects of being at university as a student or faculty member. I suggest that these centre on ephemerality, seclusion, and copresence, as opposed to ‘connection’ as it is formulated by the concept of the network, or even the more emergent meshwork. The chapter will conclude with suggested implications for theory and research into digital higher education; and will also discuss how this critique might contribute to the development of a ‘capacious’ concept of the postdigital for future research.

## Origins of the Postdigital

The concept can be traced to Negroponte in an article in *Wired*, in 1998. Negroponte’s regards the presence of digital technology as omnipresent, and therefore invisible. He sets out that:

Its literal form, the technology, is already beginning to be taken for granted, and its connotation will become tomorrow’s commercial and cultural compost for new ideas. Like

air and drinking water, being digital will be noticed only by its absence, not its presence. (Negroponte 1998)

As Jandrić et al. (2022) remind us, the term itself entered the literature in Cascone (2000) and also with Pepperell and Punt (2000). Cascone coined the term in the context of music, Pepperell and Punt in visual arts. For several years, the term was used with reference to arts-related fields, with a special issue being published by Andersen et al. (2014). For Cramer and Jandrić (2021), the utility of the term is that it can ‘help to complicate the terms ‘digital’ and ‘analog’, particularly in the human- ities and social sciences’ (Cramer and Jandrić 2021: 985).

Jandrić et al. (2022) chart the field’s resistance towards definition of the postdigital (with the argument that a definition may be exclusionary made by Bayne in Networked Learning Collective Editorial 2021), or that resistance to a final definition may be more productive (Jandrić and Ford 2022). Jandrić et al. (2022) reject an ‘anything goes’ relativism, and acknowledge a need for conceptual clarity, but stop short at providing this, instead holding open a space for dialogue and capaciousness around the idea. This openness is laudable and inclusive, but also leaves the respondent with some responsibility towards providing at least a provisional stability around the concept, in order to address the theme of this volume. With this in mind, I will focus on Negroponte’s (1998) thesis.

Negroponte’s assertions reply on the notion of *inseparability* of the digital and the analog, and that the digital ‘will be noticed only by its absence, not its presence’. In order to gain some theoretical purchase on the postdigital, the nature of the digital can be explored. I would like to look at these assertions in more detail, to explore what I propose are fundamental tensions inherent in his thesis.

### **Inseparability/Permeation/Ubiquity, and Twine**

The first main idea here is that the digital and analog are *intertwined* as one inseparable entity. This idea is central to Negroponte’s (1998) thesis, and has gained currency in literature which has sought to challenge the notion of a strong binary between the digital and the analog. These accounts have centred on the strongly intertwined nature of digital and analog media and practices, and extent to which these intersect closely, and also the point that all digital technology has a material substrate. The point about intertwined assemblages seems undeniable, particularly with reference to settings where access to devices is widespread. However, it may be instructive to pay closer attention to the nature of these relationships between the digital and the analog, and in particular the *differences between* the digital and the analog. The key point I want to explore here is that a relationship of intertwining relies on the elements being differently composed. The term *intertwined* is used as a meta- phor from working with string. *Twine* is defined as ‘a strong string of two or more strands twisted together’ (Merriam Webster 2022). The etymology of *twine* is regarded as likely to come from Old Norse *twinna*, meaning to double (Online Etymology Dictionary 2022).

The verb *intertwine* has a transitive meaning, ‘to unite by twining one with another’, or an intransitive meaning which Merriam Webster define as ‘to twine about one another’ or ‘to become mutually involved’. Clearly, the term is used in the intransitive when discussing the relationship between the digital and the analog, and it is also used in a metaphorical rather than literal sense. However, it is worth considering that for two elements to intertwine, crucially they do not merge or meld into one material. Twine cannot, by definition, be

composed on one thread; but must be made of two which are materially separate threads brought into close proximity to each other. They then form a new entity.

As can be seen in Fig. 1, twine must be regular and consistent in the twisting of the two or more constituent strands. The tension and closeness must be regular if the twine is to be strong and usable. In this regard, the metaphor of intertwining fits with Negroponte (1998) and other commentators' notion of the digital and analog as inseparable. The twine is, by definition, composed of two constantly present elements. It also fits with the idea of *ubiquity* of the digital, as a thread twisted tightly together with the analog thread. However, it fits less well with the notion of *permeation*, as the threads are still distinct entities which can in principle be un-twined and separated. So, there is a problem with the idea of permeation in the postdigital in terms of the metaphor of *intertwining*.



**Fig. 1** Twine (Wikimedia Commons 2022)

### **Separability and Tangible Absence**

This leads to the second element which I propose forms part of Negroponte's (1998) conceptual framing of the postdigital; that it is also possible for the digital to be absent. In terms of the metaphor of intertwining, this would imply a loss of a constituent and essential part. In the case of a material twine, if one thread is missing, the twine is weakened. Also, the remaining thread will be left in the twisted shape it formed when intertwined. This seems also to fit with the notion of the digital being noticed by its absence. It might be argued that in some sociotechnical systems and routines of practice which involve closely interrelated digital and analog actions and agency, this metaphor is highly suitable, such as a system in which digital technology is essential at all times. An example might be an airport, where without digital technology, the entire assemblage would come to a halt.

However, it may equally be argued that there are other fields of practice in which the digital and analog may have a different relationship, one which is somewhat less tightly bound. Considering the example of a university, it is an interesting thought experiment to consider

the extent of its entwinedness with the digital. It is undoubtedly the case in the contemporary period that many of the functions of the university in terms of administration are reliant on digital entwinement, such as applications, admissions, library services, and room bookings. This list could be extended to include administration of fees, payroll, security technologies, and timetabling. In recent years, the infiltration of datafication into teaching and assessment has led to the uptake of digital textbooks, learning analytics, and exam proctoring, among other interventions. In this regard, it would be easy to draw the conclusion that the contemporary university is as tightly bound into digital technology as the airport. However, there are some notable differences.

Although it appears that the university is entwined with digitality, there are elements of 'analog' practice which are, I propose, in a different kind of relationship with the digital. Unlike the strands which are entwined and rely in the digital for their existence as a functioning twine, some areas of university life still exist as a separate strand or category of non-digital practice, although they have relationships with it. These include reading physical texts, handwriting on paper, handwriting on boards, face-to-face private or occluded conversation, in-person teaching, and non-digital practical work. These practices have deep historical roots in the origins of higher education, and in many contexts worldwide continue outside of settings where digital technology is present or widespread. These practices are characterised by their ephemerality, seclusion, and in some cases, copresence. These are not observable, recordable, or traceable. Arguably, these practices form a core (or a series of interstices) which constitute what higher education was and is; a set of epistemological and sociomaterial embodied practices, around which the digital is closely circled in a series of administrative rings. If viewed in this way, it is worth considering the current growth of datafication and digital platforms into higher education as encroachments from this outer administrative / neoliberal set of rings inwards, towards this core of ephemerality, seclusion, and copresence.

The drive is towards surveillance, recording, monitoring, and measuring. This can be seen in the case of the lecture via learning management systems, which might be seen as surrounding and crowding out the ephemeral event. Also 'lecture capture' technologies, whose name itself is instructive, and approaches such as the 'flipped classroom'. The same impetus can arguably be observed in exam proctoring. Apparently 'student-centred' approaches to 'teaching and learning', I suggest, encroach into these unobserved interstices of individual study practices and personal being with exhortations to record the study process via 'reflection', or to discipline and monitor oneself as a human subject via 'self-regulation'. The physical space of the campus itself is becoming increasingly permeated by digital technologies of surveillance such as cameras, turnstiles with card entry, and digital class attendance technologies. Teaching is increasingly infiltrated by regimes of audit and measurement, such as the UK National Student Survey and the Teaching Excellent Framework, which are controversial government audit exercises aimed at measuring respectively student 'satisfaction' with higher education, and the 'quality' of teaching in higher education. However, I would suggest that despite this, these practices remain, and remain important.

## **Networked Learning**

Returning to consider the concept of the postdigital in the contemporary university, it is worth spending some time considering a metaphor which has become prominent in the field of digital education, the *network*, and also an alternative which has been proposed, the

*meshwork*. The notion of ‘networked learning’ (e.g., Jones 2015) is widespread in its use with reference to digital higher education, an example of which can be seen in the European Networked Learning Conferences and associated book series (e.g., Bonderup-Dohn et al. 2018). The notion of networked learning is relational, defined by Wikipedia as ‘a process of developing and maintaining connections with people and information, and communicating in such a way so as to support one another’s learning’ (Wikipedia 2022). The idea centres on facilitating ‘evolving sets of connections between learners and their interpersonal communities, knowledge contexts, and digital technologies’ (Wikipedia 2022). The Wikipedia page traces various antecedents to networked learning, including Lave and Wenger’s (1991) *Communities of Practice* and Siemens’ (2005) *Connectivism*. The definition was revisited recently (Networked Learning Editorial Collective 2021). In this piece, which reflects on the term in the light of the Covid-19 pandemic and emergency remote teaching, acknowledges some of the shortcomings of the terminology in the area:

‘Online learning’ has always been an awkward term – not least, like ‘digital’, ‘distance’ and ‘virtual’, it can obscure the embodied and physically situated nature of learning (Fawns 2019). Students live in a complex social-material-digital world and the learning spaces they make affect how they learn. (Networked Learning Editorial Collective 2021: 313)

They go on to state that:

It is now rare to find real learning situations that can be described regarded as ‘purely face-to-face’ or ‘wholly online’. Rather, they involve complex entanglements of students, teachers, ideas, asks, activities, tools, artefacts, places and spaces. (Networked Learning Editorial Collective 2021: 313)

They set out that ‘[t]here is a field of research and practice that studies such entanglements. It is known as networked learning.’ (Networked Learning Editorial Collective 2021: 313)

It is perhaps something of a disingenuous retrospective ‘land grab’ to claim that the field of Networked Learning has always had this focus on more-than human assemblages, but the influence of sociomaterial perspectives and scholarship on this more recent iteration of Networked Learning is noteworthy, and the authors explicitly call for a contemporary redefinition. The rest of the paper traces the history of the idea, taking a critical stance towards the early definition, that it is ‘learning in which [information and communications technologies are] used to promote *connections*’ (Goodyear et al. 1998: 2) (emphasis added), raising the very legitimate point that the definition does not explain what these connections may be *for*. They go on to outline a further definition given by Bonderup-Dohn et al. (2018) and de Laat and Dohn (2019):

An emphasis on connections between people and how they develop, maintain and learn from networks of others.

An emphasis on connections between situations or contexts—how people make connections between such situations, transforming or reconstructing knowledge for use in different situations.

An emphasis on the ICT infrastructure and how it enables connections across time and space, including connections between situations (as in No. 2 above), boundary crossing, mobility, etc.

An emphasis on connections between (human and non-human) actants – understanding learning situations as entanglements of people and things.

They also reference a further 8-point definition:

The focus is on learning which has a perceived value to the learners.

Responsibility for the learning process should be shared (between all actors in the network).

Time has to be allowed to build relationships.

Learning is situated and context dependent.

Learning is supported by collaborative or group settings.

Dialogue and social interaction support the co-construction of knowledge, identity and learning.

Critical reflexivity is an important part of the learning process and knowing.

The role of the facilitator/animator is important in networked learning.

(Ponti and Hodgson 2006; Hodgson and McConnell 2019)

Again, there is a strong emphasis in these definitions on connections, relations, collaboration, dialogue, interaction, and co-construction. Despite recent nods towards a sociomaterial sensibility, this is an ethos which is clearly based on a strong version of social constructivism, combined with a thoroughgoing belief in the potential of the online and digital, which raises some contradictions.

In a piece closely related to the subject of this chapter, Carvalho (2018) uses the concept of networked learning in combination with a sensibility towards the entanglement of human and nonhuman agency, looking at an example of learning in a museum setting, and another with university students of architecture learning in the outdoors. She refers to Goodyear and Carvalho's (2014) perspective, in which learning is seen as an emergent phenomenon, also relational (e.g., Gourlay and Oliver 2016). Carvalho draws on the literature around sociomateriality in education; and uses the term *meshwork* to refer to learning networks, drawing on the anthropologist Hodder's work on entanglement between humans and things in archaeology (Hodder 2012, 2013, 2016), as opposed to Ingold's (2011) *meshwork* directly. These studies and her analysis provide an example of how the concept of networked learning is expanding to take into account these complexities. The next section will consider an alternative concept of the *meshwork*, taken from the work of Tim Ingold (2011) in social anthropology.

### **The Meshwork**

The social anthropologist Tim Ingold (2011) challenges the notion of the network, which is conventionally seen as composed of interacting entities or points, and instead proposes the notion of the *meshwork*. As he puts it:

I return to the importance of distinguishing the network as a set of interconnected points from the meshwork as an interweaving of lines. Every such line describes a flow of material substance in a space which is topologically fluid. I conclude that the organism (animal or human) should be understood not as a bounded entity surrounded by an environment but as an unbounded entanglement of lines in fluid space. (Ingold 2011: 64)

Ingold considers the notion of animism, setting out that the conventional understanding of it is misleading. He argues that it is not a question of imputing life to things which are inert. He argues that it is not a form of belief about the world, but more a *way of being* in the world:

Animacy, then, is not a property of persons imaginatively projected into the things with which they perceive themselves to be surrounded. Rather ... it is the dynamic, transformative potential of the entire field of relations within which being of all kinds, more or less person-like or thing-like, continually and reciprocally bring one another into existence. The animacy of the lifeworld, in short, is not the result of an infusion of spirit into substance, or of agency into materiality, but is rather ontologically prior to their differentiation (Ingold 2011: 68). Ingold proposes that instead of conceptualising an organism as a bounded circle, we could think of it as a line. In this conception, the relation is not between the organism and the environment, instead the line is 'a trail along which life is lived' (Ingold 2011: 69). The line is 'but one strand in a tissue of trails that together comprise the texture of the lifeworld' (Ingold 2011: 69–70).

This describes the *meshwork*. However, Ingold suggests that an organism is not one line, but more various lines emanating and criss-crossing out from a centre. 'Organisms and persons, then, are not so much nodes in a network as knots in a tissue of knots, whose constituent strands, as they become tied up with other strands, in other knots, comprise the meshwork.' For Ingold then, the environment can be regarded as a 'domain of entanglement' (Ingold 2011: 70). 'Thus we must cease regarding the world as an inert substratum, over which living things propel themselves about like counters on a board or actors on a stage, where artefacts and the landscape take the place, respectively, of properties and sceneries.' (Ingold 2011: 71) Ingold also extends the metaphor of weaving: 'In this world the earth, far from providing a solid foundation for existence, appears to float like a fragile and ephemeral raft, woven from the strands of terrestrial life, and suspended in the sphere of the sky.' (Ingold 2011: 74)

Hunter (2016) draws on Ingold's concept of the meshwork in a consideration of the 'processual journey' (34) of researchers looking into virtual worlds (focussing on Second Life), looking at *emergent spaces*. As background, she refers to the work of Lefebvre (1991) on the production of space, and Boellstorff (2008, 2012), who makes the point, also with reference to the virtual world Second Life, that '[h]umans make culture in virtual and actual contexts; since humans are part of nature, and the virtual is a product of human intentionality, the virtual is as 'natural' as anything humans do in the actual world' (Boellstorff 2008: 19).

Hunter also reminds us of Leander and McKim's (2003) critique of the idea of an online-offline dichotomy, and their concept of *net-walking*. For them, 'emerging social spaces of Internet practices are complexly interpenetrated with social spaces considered to be "before" or "outside of" the Internet'" (Leander and McKim 2003: 218). Turning to Ingold's *meshwork* and *knots*, she points out his view that 'knowledge is meshworked, generated by wayfarers in the binding of place or topic as relational activity of intertwining occurrences' (Hunter 2016: 37), what Ingold calls *alongly integrated knowledge*, or *storied knowledge* (Ingold 2011: 153–155). Importantly, this type of knowledge is place-binding, not place-bound, and inhabitants' practices and scientific practices are both meshworked; both are wayfarers.

Klenk (2018) considers the limitations of the metaphor of a network in transdisciplinary research practice, turning to Ingold's meshwork as a metaphor which she regards as better suited to account for difference. She argues that the meshwork captures 'how life is lived along lines of becoming: emergent, indeterminate, contingent, historical, narrative' (2018:

315). In the context of her study of a transdisciplinary climate change adaptation project, this allows for an understanding that subject positions are ‘not conceived in advance of a research encounter ... but erupt in the interstices of research methods, objectives and desired outcomes’ (Klenk 2018: 315). As Klenk points out:

Although the ‘network’ metaphor is useful to understand who and what connects to produce knowledge in stakeholder-engaged research practices, it is important to remember that the use of metaphor in science is always accompanied by an important disclaimer: scientific metaphors are not mirror images of reality – they are interpretive and constructive heuristics. (Klenk 2018: 315) Klenk proposes Ingold’s (2011) *meshwork* as a metaphor better suited to capture that ‘individuals and knowledges are “entanglements” that emerge through encounters with others’ (2018: 316). Ingold’s notion of the meshwork is based on Deleuze and Guattari’s (2004) notion of life lived along ‘lines of becoming’. She quotes their explanation:

A line of becoming is not defined by the points it connects, or by the points that compose it; on the contrary, it passes between points, it comes up through the middle, it runs ... transversally to the localizable relation to distance or contiguous points. A point is always a point of origin. But a line of becoming has neither beginning nor end. (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 224–225)

She also gives Ingold’s definition:

In the meshwork, each constituent line, as it bodies forth, lays its own trail from within the interstices of its binding with others. Thus the joining of lives is also their continual differentiation. The knots formed in the process are not inclusive or encompassing, not wrapped up in themselves, but always in the midst of things, while their ends are on the loose, rooting for other lines to join with. (Ingold 2016: 11). In the rest of this chapter, I will consider the notions of network and meshwork with relation to the postdigital university, arguing even the meshwork does not capture certain elements of being the university, which I will argue are fundamental.

### **Ephemerality, Seclusion, and Copresence**

As discussed above, Ingold and various subsequent scholars have favoured the notion of the meshwork over the network, as providing superior theoretical purchase on the emergent, shifting and fluid nature of subjectivities, entities, and how they entangle with one-another. I have proposed that, following these arguments, the meshwork is also a more suitable metaphor for taking account of ‘the postdigital university’. However, in this section I would like to suggest that both these metaphors are incomplete, in that they focus in different ways on lines of connection. In the case of the network, the focus is on nodes and lines connecting them. With the meshwork, the focus is on lines emanating out from individuals or entities, crossing and entangling in a more emergent manner, in which the entity is conceived of as the line itself. However, what both these metaphors fail to account for are the possibility of spaces between the lines, the interstices which are not composed of or concerned with connections or entanglements, or where the nature of *what goes on there* is somewhat different. Arguably, although the meshwork allows for a more nuanced conception of emergent ontologies, the idea is still focused on the notion of a wider fabric or mesh of connections, albeit in a looser manner than the network.



In the context of the university, these might be ways of being, practices, or actions which are not primarily focused on making a connection or an entanglement with other people or entities, or they are, also have another more essential quality. There are several elements which I would argue characterise these examples. One is *ephemerality*. Certain of these practices are *fugitive* by virtue that they are not recorded via notes or digital technologies, but take place in a particular moment, in a fleeting manner. A second characteristic is *seclusion*. Many of these practices take place in a solitary mode, unobserved. The final characteristic I would suggest in the case of conversation, is that of these foregoing elements plus face-to-face *copresence* in the same physical space.

### ***Ephemerality***

In the pre-digital university, and in contemporary settings which do not include or are not dominated by digital technologies, university practices were more likely to be ephemeral and fleeting, with no recording being taken of the speech. The lecture, until relatively recently, consisted primarily of a live speech event, with literacy practices taking place during the lecture, such as the use of text to be read or consulted by the lecturer, the blackboard and chalk, and paper and pen handwriting by students. In more recent years, slides may have been used, or overhead transparencies, also part of an ephemeral event.

With the advent of the learning management system, a temporal shift took place, in that there was then a means by which students could receive copies of materials such as PowerPoint slides in advance of the live lecture. In this regard, the purely ephemeral nature of the event was eroded, as it became possible to obtain these materials and possibly other forms of documentation in advance, therefore arguably making face-to-face attendance less important, although pre-PowerPoint, students engaged in borrowing or photocopying each-others' notes in order to avoid attendance. These slides also caused a shift in the literacy practices required by the lecturer and student during the lecture, as they would take on a structuring role to the spoken event, in addition to providing a visual element, in manner which arguably became more widespread than the prior use of slides or overhead projectors. They typically remain available after the live event is over, also extending the duration of the event in that respect. The pure ephemerality of the lecture is lost, due to this mediatic change.

In this example, an event which has for centuries been entirely ephemeral, no longer has that status, although there remains a spoken ephemeral element. However, other digital technologies may be in play which can erode this further. One example of this is 'lecture capture' recording technology, which may take a video recording of the live lecture. In the case of asynchronous distance or online engagement, this ephemerality is lost altogether, as the spoken event is undertaken as a solitary performance by the lecturer in advance. In this case, the lecturer is required to speak 'as if' there were listeners, knowing there are none at the time of speaking. In this regard, in generic terms, the lecture becomes analogous to a broadcast, a package, or a product. The students have access to a recording which they can play, pause and rewatch as they wish, or even watch at accelerated speed to save time. This can also be seen in the practice of the 'flipped classroom'.

Other examples of ephemeral practices are conversation and experiences which are not recorded. Arguably, these may be also eroded by technologies of audit such as 'reflective practice' forming part of assessment (e.g., Macfarlane and Gourlay 2009). In these cases, the ephemerality of experience such as teaching practice or observation is regarded as insufficient; and must be accompanied by a written account of what took place.

## ***Seclusion***

Seclusion is a further aspect which characterised pre-digital university life and has arguably been eroded to some extent by digital technology. I use the term here to refer to of privacy, being unseen, and free of any technology or observation or recording. Examples of seclusion might include solitary thought and study, practices such as reading physical books and using handwriting, again face-to-face conversation, and walking around campus unobserved. They might also include action which might be characterised as resistance, such as silence in groupwork, non-participation in online discussion boards, and use of muting and avoidance of cameras online.

## ***Copresence***

The third element I would like to focus on is copresence, by which I mean being physically present *with* others in the same material space at the same time, such as a lecture room. This aspect of university practice was until recently still regarded, in the majority of settings, as a default mode for higher education, alongside technologies such as learning management systems. However, in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020 onwards, and resultant lockdowns and campus closures, the status of the face-to-face class has also arguably been eroded. The pivot to fully online remote teaching introduced the notion that this may be an acceptable alternative to face-to-face, rather than a less-than-ideal emergency response.

A ‘discourse of inevitability’ has arisen in the subsequent period, expressing the view that the campus is - if not obsolete, at least optional - drawing on the arguments among others that students with caring responsibilities or those who are differently-abled may find co-presence difficult or problematic to access, or that the ongoing risks of Covid make the campus too risky a proposition. It is worth noting that this is the latest in a series of attempts to call time on the physical campus, following on from similar claims regarding MOOCs. (See Allen and McLaren 2022 for a discussion of the university as a physical place). At the time of writing, resurgent post-pandemic face-to-face academic conferences have also been under sustained criticism in some circles, with the view being expressed that they are inherently exclusionary, classist or ableist.

## ***Fugitive Practices***

Taken together, predigital practices such as those described above tend to be derided as ‘old-fashioned’ or obsolete, such as face-to-face lectures. Others may be regarded as more difficult or impossible, such as being unobserved in physical campus space permeated by surveillance cameras and electronic gate technology; or being required to check in to an online attendance register. Some practices described above such as silence in groupwork, not writing on discussion boards or switching off cameras while online, might be regarded as either problematically ‘passive’ and indicative of a lack of ‘student engagement’, or might even be regarded as transgressive. Others may be portrayed as exclusionary or elitist.

Turning our attention to academic faculty, a similar analysis might be made of practices and activities which are not captured by notions of connection or entanglement, in addition to conferences. Again, these could include academic practices which tend to be associated with the past, such as solitary study and the use of material literacy artefacts such as books and papers. Again, face-to-face discussion outside of formal classes, meetings, or assessments might fall into this category. Use of ‘old school’ teaching technologies such as chalk and a

blackboard might also represent an example. In terms of resistance, this might manifest itself in an avoidance of practices focused on connection such as social media, learning management systems, combined with a resistance towards public performativity in academic work.

Overall, the contemporary situation presents a somewhat contradictory set of tensions. Aspects of human being in the world such as ephemerality, seclusion, and co-presence appear to be on the retreat, relegated to what I term *fugitive practices* which are invisible or even regarded as problematic. However, alongside this tendency, we see a greater emphasis on broadcast and production over ephemerality; surveillance and recording over seclusion, and what I have termed *screen hygiene* (Gourlay 2022) over copresence. The result is - I propose - underpinned by an unexpressed but profoundly transhumanist ethos, which seeks to remove the human from the embodied flow of ephemerality, seclusion, and copresence, and render her into a form of document (Gourlay 2022).

### **Boltholes and Breathing Spaces**

Webb (2018: 98) provides a coruscating indictment of what he terms the 'corporate- imperial university', from which I provide an extended quote, not least to avoid breaking his notably long and resonant single sentence:

The notion of 'the corporate university' points to the academy as a marketized sphere in which the costs of education are shifted from the state onto students; students are positioned as consumers of an individual investment good even as they experience higher education as an extended period of underpaid labor preparing them for an even longer period of crippling debt; teaching is dominated by performance indicators linked to customer satisfaction and human capital formation; the workforce becomes increasingly casualized, insecure and exploited, a precariat operating within a censorious culture of audit, surveillance, and performance management; research is transformed into a high-stakes competition, framed by a regime of indicator fetishism, discouraging long-term research while encouraging research fraud; self-governance disappears as the administrator displaces the academic as the central figure of the university; a culture of organized mistrust permeates the institution, leading administrators to create an ever-more-elaborate bureaucratic cage within which the academic can safely be contained; an increasingly standardized and technically oriented curriculum undermines academic freedom and critical inquiry; universities enter into partnerships with business, subsidizing training costs while operating more like for-profit corporations themselves, developing and marketing their own commercial products; an obsession with corporate branding is accompanied by a dance in which universities track and mimic each other's moves, becoming almost indistinguishable from each other; the sector becomes awash with vision and mission statements, each identical and identically vacuous; capital investment projects escalate at the same time as academic staffing levels fall; cities are colonized, communities are dispossessed and displaced, to create new architectural monuments to grace the covers of overseas marketing brochures that could not be more at odds with the dismal realities of the under-resourced departments students actually encounter. (Webb 2018: 96)

Webb, however, counterbalances this critique by providing a rather more circumspect assessment of prior attempts at 'radical pedagogy', acknowledging that '[t]he field of critical pedagogy/radical education is heavy on bombast and the realities of the utopian classroom often fall short of the theory-heavy promises' (Webb 2018: 100). Insightfully, he critiques the way in which the university 'draws strength from the utopian classroom, happily

accommodating sites of resistance in order to recuperate them as symbols of its tolerance' (Webb 2018: 101), citing Oparah (2014). However, helpfully, he sets out a need to *create spaces*, drawing on Zaslove (2007). Webb highlights Zaslove's description of utopian pedagogy as 'an exiled form of education' in search of 'bolt-holes and breathing spaces in the system' (Zaslove 2007: 98 in Webb 2018: 102).

Webb's proposals are focused on providing various forms of escape from the formal education system and neoliberalism, as opposed to what I have identified as a (related) predicament in terms of digital surveillance and documentation, but his analytic project seems to chime in to an extent. He refers to the concept of 'the undercommons', drawing on the work of Harney and Moten (2013), Shukaitis (2009), and Undercommoning Collective (2016). He describes it as follows:

The undercommons is more than just the creation of spaces with utopian intent. It is a shifting matrix of spaces, processes, relations, and structures of feeling. Harney and Moten do attach importance to teaching and the classroom—in particular as an opportunity to refuse the call to order—but the undercommons exists in institutional cracks outside the classroom: in stairwells, in alleys, in kitchens, in corridors, in smoking areas, in hiding. The undercommons is a community of maroons, outcasts, and fugitives, not of responsible teachers. It is 'always an unsafe neighbourhood' (Harney and Moten 2013, 28). In fact, the undercommons is best described as a way of being: a way of being within and against one's institution and a way of being with and for the community of outcasts (Melamed 2016).

(Webb 2018: 102–103)

Thus far, there are resonances with the analysis I have been developing. However, there is a contrast in terms of Webb's utopianism, his yearning for another better world. The undercommons is presented as an entry point to this other world in the world, while my interest is more in the potential of the existing academic world. However, interestingly, he also quotes Harney's view that the undercommons is a 'a militant arrhythmia' that unsettles the rhythm of the line, 'invites us to feel around us', and brings the utopic common underground into the open (Harney 2015: 177–178). However, having seduced us with the language of the undercommons, he points out how easy it is to be seduced by the language of the undercommons, and acknowledges how difficult or even impossible it is to enact this within the university. Ultimately, he concludes that the fugitives (also his term) can only meet outside the university, to find breathing space.

Webb's broader project is beyond the scope of this chapter, but it may be worth speculating that when seeking forms of resistance, ironically, the spaces which have been derided for decades as obsolete, hierarchical, or irrelevant may in fact proffer *fugitive* spaces for resistance of perhaps a milder kind, with a less radical prospectus –to be only allowed to be fleeting, silent, together with others, and human. This feels radical in itself at this juncture.

### **More-Than-Digital**

A final line (or space) of analysis I'd like to explore in this chapter in thinking in terms of the concept of the postdigital is regarding the meaning of the prefix 'post'. This has already been discussed with respect to poststructuralism and posthumanism, with debate centring on the difference between 'post' meaning 'after' or 'more than' (as already discussed in the context of the postdigital by Cramer 2015 and Feenberg 2019). Regarding posthumanism, the 'more

than' interpretation of the term has allowed for an expansiveness, and also an avoidance of an historical focus, with associated connotations of a loss of the human. With the current topic, the same issue arises, with a tendency towards assuming the postdigital refers to a temporal 'after' period, a notion which is encouraged by contemporary popular discourses of inevitability surrounding the alleged obsolescence of the analog world.

If instead we think of the postdigital, with 'post' denoting 'more than', then I would suggest that this position might allow some theoretical purchase on the two problems I have raised above. The first is my reading of *network* and even the more nuanced *meshwork* as being overly concerned with connection, as opposed to aspects of being. I have suggested the three aspects above, but could equally have suggested stillness, waiting, and quietude. I propose that as a result we are failing to adequately theorise those moments in higher education which are not entirely concerned with connection; but are vital all the same.

If we think of postdigital as *more-than-digital*, then it may provide us with some capaciousness and space for these moments. It may even allow us to theorise them not as fugitive moments in the interstices, but as central, important, albeit somewhat ineffable elements of higher education. This proposal may seem whimsical, but I would argue that it carries the potential to be quietly destabilising, in a system which not only disaggregates and packages education as a neoliberal product, (as argued within the ample critical literature), but also disaggregates and packages the human as a form of document, working within an implicit tendency towards transhumanist ideology.

## Conclusions

In this chapter I have explored the genealogy of the term postdigital with reference to Negroponte (1998). I raised some points surrounding what I regard to be some inconsistencies in the foundational definition, particularly around the notion of permeation, with a detour on the nature of twine. I then went on to review the literature which critiques the notion of network in favour of Ingold's meshwork. While finding the meshwork generative, I suggested that it lacks theoretical purchase on certain aspects of being in the university which have in recent years been eroded and/ or derided. I focused particularly on three aspects: ephemerality, seclusion, and copresence, arguing that these have been severely eroded by digital technologies alongside practices of surveillance, audit, and 'reflection'. I suggested that these have become *fugitive practices*.

Contrasting this analysis with that of Webb and proponents of the undercommons, I concluded that a move to maintain or reclaim these fugitive practices, while less radical than Webb's prospectus, may be a worthy cause. I ended by considering the status of the prefix 'post' in the postdigital and suggested that if it is considered in terms of meaning 'more than' rather than 'after', it could in fact serve to theorise fugitive practices and spaces, as opposed to following the notion of undifferentiated permeability as suggested by Negroponte. It is in this sense that I see the term *postdigital* as having future utility to the field.

**Acknowledgement** This research is funded by the Leverhulme Trust Major Research Fellowship grant number MRF-2020-135.

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Postdigital/More-Than-Digital: Ephemerality, Seclusion, and Copresence in the University 67

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