

This is not the age of AI

Description

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This title (â??This is not the age of AIâ?•) emerges *not* from any skepticism I might hold about AI, but the idea of â??an age.â?• Iâ??m revisiting my post of 2014: Zeitgeist busters #201 in which I vented skepticism about the idea of â??the spirit of an age.â?•

Some social commentators like to sum up swathes of human experience with a prevailing mood, condition or age, to which one can attach a compelling title.

As an example, I wrote later on about the idea of a â??post digital ageâ?•: When did we become post digital. Such identifications, â??becoming post digital,â?• serve various purposes.

It is not just that *I* personally feel bored, disconnected, or sufficiently competent with digital tech that I want to abandon it as a category, but I like to think itâ??s a condition shared by some larger majority.

Thereâ??s solidarity and comfort in elevating oneâ??s own state of mind, even if a minority view, to something global and epochal. Iâ??m bored, so everyone must be bored â?? that kind of thing.

The â??post digital age,â?• also serves to unsettle audiences animated by a fear of missing out (FOMO) of some new trend. Writers, speakers and would-be influencers garner prestige from channelling such anxieties.

Brain rot

I asked ChatGPT to source some more recent claims about the age in which we find ourselves. Apart from a reference to the â??age of AI,â?• these were negative: the age of grievance, the age of â??rage bait,â?• the age of â??brain rot,â?• the age of â??enshittification,â?• and the age of â??polycrisis.â?•

Sources included dictionaries that identify a â??word of the year,â?• consultancies reporting on public mood, risk agencies that diagram overlapping crises, think tanks that identify anxiety, grievance, distrust and disruption. The Zeitgeist label feeds press releases, memes, and slides in keynote presentations. The AI elaborated,

â??Rage baitâ?• captures the monetisation of irritation. â??Brain rotâ?• names a familiar anxiety about attention and triviality. â??Enshittificationâ?• gives comic precision to the deterioration of online services once promoted as liberating infrastructures. â??Polycrisisâ?• gives form to the sense that crises no longer arrive one at a time.

In so far as they catch on, such labels provide partial, vivid and contestable tropes by which to express, address or promote particular anxieties.

The Zeitgeist survives less as a shared mood than as a recurring rhetorical device: a way of exaggerating the present to make it available for thought and persuasion. If we want to stick with the â??ageâ?• trope, then *this is the age of naming the age*!

We are not all of the age

Such formulations presume to speak for the condition of everyone, everywhere. The ubiquity of smartphones, platforms and online media seems at first to support such generalisations. It is tempting to think that a connected planet shares a connected mood. But access to devices and networks does not produce a common social condition.

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Insular communities form around particular points of view, frames of reference, languages, geographies, material conditions, patterns of exclusion, and relations to media technologies. Even where the same platforms are present, they donâ??t engender the same experience.

The phrase â??age of grievance,â?• for example, has one meaning within affluent democracies marked by distrust of institutions, polarised media and populist resentment. It has another, more acute meaning for people whose grievance concerns bereavement, displacement, military occupation, drone strikes, or the destruction of basic infrastructures.

â??Brain rotâ?• presupposes a world of optional consumption, attention management and overabundant media. It has little purchase where communities lack basic educational provision, reliable electricity, or safe access to communications.

â??Polycrisisâ?• names an elite view of overlapping systems â?? climate, war, finance, migration, health, technology. But those living through crisis likely experience their condition not as a plural abstraction but as a singular emergency: hunger, bombardment, debt, drought, illness, exile.

Zeitgeist labels donâ??t only exaggerate. They universalise the anxieties of particular groups, those already well represented in media and commentary. They convert situated discomfort into epochal pathology.

Their usefulness lies not in telling us what age we are in, but in revealing who has the authority, confidence and platform to name the age. The question is not â??what is the Zeitgeist?â?• but â??who gets to declare one?â?•

Postscript

Iâ??m attempting to review earlier posts in the order they appeared. Iâ??ve skipped over two: How bored is your dog? #199 and Mood and movement (and trams) #200. The first of these references the use of a consumer-level head-worn EEG (electroencephalography) device in an art context involving analogue sound sources.

Amongst other innovations that project demonstrated an unselfconscious use of mixed analogue and digital media. In so far as such categorisations pertain, one might describe that as an example of a *post-digital* event.

A brief scan online of AI-based interactive artworks shows that such experiments and provocations continue irrespective of any â??ageâ?• labels.

The second post (Mood and movement (and trams)) identified travel as an influence on mood. Extending the propositions listed in that article, travel serves as a kind of â??zeitgeist buster,â?• not least as it can deny globalising labels by highlighting differences amongst communities and places â?? so long as we look beyond our tourist bubble.

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Note

- Featured image was taken at the Greek pavilion in the Venice Biennale 2026.
- Summary: This post critiques the notion of identifying current societal conditions as an â??age,â?• particularly in the context of technology and AI. It explores how labels like â??age of grievanceâ?• or â??brain rotâ?• universalize specific grievances while disregarding diverse experiences, underscoring the importance of who has the authority to declare cultural epochs.

Category

1. Artificial Intelligence
2. Media
3. Podcast
4. Society

Tags

1. AI
2. media
3. post-digital
4. Zeitgeist

Date Created
June 16, 2026
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