

Seven theses on the concept of ‘post-convergence’

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‘Thus the Idea, and it alone is Truth. Now it is essentially in the nature of the Idea to develop, and only through development to arrive at comprehension of itself, or to become what it is. That the Idea should have to make itself what it is, seems like a contradiction; it may be said that it is what it is.’

— G.W.F. Hegel

Thesis 1: Today, everyone seems to speak of ‘convergence’ in media technology. What does this mean? You can watch a video on your phone; you can download a book to your laptop; you can have conversation with someone on the internet. In a phrase, you can do something on something that you could already do on some other thing. As a concept, ‘convergence’ is purely descriptive, and adds little to our understanding of the implications of the technology. We have known since Marshall McLuhan that this is the very basis of all media: any new medium contains all previous media as a content. A new medium therefore ‘converges’ all prior media. It’s therefore completely predictable that a mobile phone would be able to access a movie over the internet. The concept of ‘convergence’ therefore doesn’t explain anything about the *specificity* of new media, nor about the *new* uses to which these ‘converged’ media are put. We propose instead to speak of ‘post-convergence.’ ‘Post-convergence’ literally means: *after* convergence. This *after* has a paradoxical *temporal* reference, *logical* implications, and a *polemical* import.

- *Temporal:* it is only when a medium is recognised *as* a medium, and that it is therefore irreducible to its own contents, that it can be said to be becoming itself — and not just a dissimulating repetition of what’s already been available.
- *Logical:* this recognition opens up a set of new problems for the medium. What, if there are no existing models that express its potential, can be done with this medium? This recognition is therefore a moment at which a medium no longer recognises itself — other than as an unprecedented enigma, and as an injunction to experiment.

- *Polemical*: in its experiments, the new medium is going to have to contravene every established routine, law, operation and practice in order to identify some of its own intrinsic qualities.

The concept of ‘post-convergence’ could only emerge now, with the new media of the 21st century. Why?

Thesis 2: The concept of convergence could only have been developed in the 20th century. This is because of the explosion of heterogeneous media of the 19th and early 20th centuries: photography, telegraph, telephone, cinema, radio, gramophone, etc. This heterogeneity forced attention to media as media — precisely both as *heterogeneous* and as *media*, a new kind of difference and a new kind of similarity. When we speak then of ‘post-convergence,’ the concept itself presupposes this earlier moment, of the recognition of ‘convergence’; as it does so, it splits the time of the concept into at least four: 1) the moment of post-convergence; 2) the moment of convergence, which post-convergence references and presupposes; 3) the moment of pre-convergence, which only emerges in its difference with respect to the different differences of modern media that make convergence apparent; 4) the recapitulation and seizure of this triple division of moments in another moment, that of the concept itself.

The concept of post-convergence therefore implies a transformation of the concept of concept at the same time that it implies a transformation of the time of time: the recomposition in thought of the development of time as, first, delivered by media systems, and, second, of the non-linear multiple compaction of times by and within media themselves. It takes primary-school children only a few hours to comprehend what it took the entirety of human history to conceptualise: ‘shoulders of giants.’

Thesis 3: Post-convergence can therefore emerge only as a real concept out of a specific media moment — that of ‘today’ — but can then be reapplied to consider all previous media revolutions in a new light. Ear-horns and reading glasses, bas-reliefs and knots in string. What was once apparently exception — prosthetics — is now retrospectively

evident as the rule, and the patency of this becoming-rule-of-the-exception forces a recognition of the essential powers of modulation that media are. To put this another way, reality itself is quite literally a function of data. This is not an analogy. One problem that people tend to have regarding post-convergent media is a fatal distraction by the means of modulation. It *is* truly incredible to be able to read emailed articles by Einstein on your iPhone while transferring money to your son's bank account. But this isn't the most important lesson of post-convergence. What's more important is the fact that we are using these devices to do what we've always done, which is to modulate between the imperceptible and our sensoria. The problematic of belatedness is inscribed in the concept of post-convergence itself, because the aftermath experience of new media reveals previously indiscriminable primordial elements of our own media history. As Jacques Derrida might say, writing always already inhabited the grain of the voice. New media are massive enhancements of our means of misunderstanding. The misunderstanding is multiplied by the intrinsic quality of being distracted by the means of delivery. In other words, it's no longer true that the medium is the message (or the message or mass-age). Rather, we can now recognise that all humans ever do is to modulate experience into data and back out again in another form. Modulation is always a creative act. The misunderstanding of this crucial point often results in a confusion between quantity and quality. What is the difference between a 3D overlay on a geophysical location in an augmented-reality browser and a Lonely Planet guide? The difference is quantitative, not qualitative. In other words, humans have always placed a conceptual overlay on physical locations. New media devices simply enable an unprecedented increase in the quantity of modulations. But the qualitative differences will only emerge through a manipulation of the implications of this massive increase of quantity. This is the experimental imperative implied by post-convergence.

Thesis 4: 'All that is solid melts into data.' Alternatively: all is data. This is evidently an ontological thesis. What matters is data, but data isn't actually anything. Data is data. Data is absolutely not a phenomenological thing. It cannot be experienced as such, like Aristotelian prime matter. Unlike Aristotelian prime matter, however, we can manipulate data with ease; in fact, it is integrally available as manipulable. Marx claimed that human

beings do indeed make history, but not as they please; today, we make data and just as we please. Data is us. However, this is not the pure freedom that it may seem, nor does it lead to any triumph of the will. This is because data is only available to finite humans as filtered, as interpretation. These interpretations are, precisely, inscribed in display (whether audio, visual, haptic, what have you). Whatever is inscribed in display is always already modulated, and this modulation emerges from ‘a formless soup of meaninglessness,’ that is, a hyperchaos of data. The technical means by which we enjoy the artefacts of new media necessitates the transformation of everything back into data before its remodulation into an available display register. The very act of perception can only now be realised as technologically-delivered contingency; the ‘same’ data can be actualised in an infinite number of ways — of which our body is only capable of perceiving an essentially lamentable range. What this lays bare is that *all* modulation is a creative act. One cannot any longer be unaware that one is always reverse-engineering from an image drawn from the past of the body. The only formal parameters available to the post-convergent artist apparently require working backwards from the doors of perception. We also know that the doors of perception will never be cleansed; perception is always through a glass darkly. One is always thrashing around in the dark, basically.

Thesis 5: The challenge today is therefore: how can one create intrinsically post-convergent artwork? Given that all prior parameters of media are now explicitly available as parameters, what parameters for modulation and remodulation can be generated that have never been effected before? Post-convergence is also a concept that, as it places new media as the basis of all human interaction, establishing the conditions and limits of any possible experience, it also designates two thresholds: 1) the ‘non-media’ or ‘amedia,’ that is, what we cannot think at all, but is the ‘real’ that returns as inarticulable in the gap that the contingent necessity of modulation constantly presents us with; 2) what has not-yet-been-done with media, the necessary possibility of the transformation of the media systems themselves. As such, humans are always obeying a media-driven impulse towards the iconoclastic fantasy of the destruction of media, thereby ensuring further media dissemination. Contemporaneous science places us in a peculiar double-bind, a new version of the very old distinction between determinism and freedom. On the one

hand, a cause must now be considered weaker than its effects, that is, there is an under-determination of cause so that what's called 'emergent behaviour' be possible at all. Something cannot 'emerge' if it's already determined. Hence: creativity in the smallest of acts. On the other hand, causes must now be considered massively in excess of their effects, given that we recognise every act is 'over-determined,' with a pre-history burdening the slightest action.

Thesis 6: Art is not a creative practice. The trend today is to speak of 'creative practice,' as if that were a broader, less judgemental category than 'art.' It seems to us that 'creative practice' is a bureaucratic, governmental modulation of the problem of under-over-determination. It is therefore, despite its pretensions, at once prescriptive and proscriptive. It is the bureaucratic inscription of the fatal distraction discussed above. It dissolves all projects and programs into a soup of indiscriminable 'creativity' and 'practice.' All life and every minute act it involves becomes creative. 'Come in, Jack, I'm just practising sitting,' as Tracy Jordan says in the show *30 Rock*. By contrast, the term 'art' prescribes and proscribes nothing. 'Art' is a generic, experimental name. Art doesn't have to be creative, nor does it necessarily involve a practice — although, of course, it can and often does. It is only with post-convergence that we realise that we are no longer — and therefore never have been — subject to predetermined parameters in art. Post-convergence helps us to realise that, first, what is being promulgated as 'new' (for example, 'creative practice') is, in fact, deeply primordial, fundamental from the first, in fact of no especial interest; and, second, that what is routinely dismissed as 'old' or 'obsolete' is as contemporary as tomorrow's upgrade. The challenge for the artist in the epoch of post-convergence is to discover as-yet unknown intrinsic algorithms of modulation — a quest for unique qualities. There is no why, but we need new hows that are in excess of techniques.

Thesis 7: The poet Paul Celan says:

On inconsistencies

Rest:

two fingers are snapping
in the abyss, a
world is stirring
in the scratch-sheets, it all depends
on you

Let's remodulate, slightly: universes are stirring in the data-banks, and always have been.
If something new is to come-to-be, well, that still depends on you....