

Abandon hope of rescue:
an essay on convergence and theatre

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Preface: an introduction to convergence

Convergence is not a term often heard within the arts but it's a concept that has particular importance for the theatre profession at the current moment. Our understanding of the processes, potentials and implications of convergence within the creative economy have a direct bearing upon the issue of theatre's relevance, its cultural importance and its vitality as an art form.

The most familiar version of the concept of convergence is the technological process by which various different media merge within a single device. Convergence devices are in almost every middle-class pocket - the iPhone is perhaps the most familiar contemporary example. I use my iPhone to telephone, email, listen to music and podcasts, watch television online, navigate in foreign cities, store photographs, use online social networks, surf the internet, read newspapers and magazines, and occasionally to Twitter. Six months ago I had a Nokia cell phone. I used it to make phone calls and send texts and that was it.

Henry Jenkins, Massachusetts Institute of Technology's convergence guru, expands the concept of convergence beyond the purely technological, arguing that it is best understood as a process without an end point, 'occurring at various intersections of media technologies, industries, content and audiences'¹:

...we are entering an era where media will be everywhere, and we will use all kinds of media in relation to one another. We will develop new skills for managing information, new structures for transmitting information across channels, and new creative genres that exploit the potentials of those emerging information structures².

According to Jenkins convergence is a culture. He describes a multi-dimensional convergence comprising a bundle of changes; technological, industrial, and social. This is a useful conception of convergence to relate to theatre since we're interested not only in how media themselves converge, but what effect those convergences have upon artists and audiences, how they change consumer habits, cultural practices, and the structure of the market place for example. (Though we don't often label it as such, I'm including theatre as one of the media for the purposes of this essay.)

The subtitle of Jenkins' book is 'where old and new media collide' and it is these collisions and their outcomes that are our main concern. The anxiety that mechanical or technological media forms will eclipse theatre has been with us for decades; the idea of 'keeping theatre alive' has become a familiar trope. But Jenkins makes the argument that the old media do not die but rather assume new shapes and configurations, finding themselves shifted both by the dynamic forces of new technologies and the changing behaviours of audiences. As he points out, television didn't kill theatre and radio is still thriving. What die are delivery technologies; so, for example, the 8-track and the compact cassette - delivery technologies - are obsolete, but the media - which in this case is recorded sound - lives on³. Convergence can be understood as an ecological idea; the introduction of a new technology requires a co-existence to be negotiated, a negotiation that results in a reconfiguration of both status and function of the old media in the context of the new.

Introduction

"Doubt is not a pleasant condition, but certainty is absurd" wrote Voltaire. This essay is one of a series jointly commissioned by NESTA and the Clore Leadership programme under the heading *Cultural leadership in times of uncertainty*. It would be absurd to consider convergence and its possible effects without acknowledging that we're doing so in a context

¹ Jenkins, H., 2001, Convergence? I diverge, *Technology Review*, 104(5), p. 93.

² Jenkins, H., 2006, *Convergence culture : where old and new media collide*, illustrated ed. NYU Press, New York.

³ Jenkins, H., 2006, *Convergence culture : where old and new media collide*, illustrated ed. NYU Press, New York, p13

of great uncertainty. Henry Jenkins may be an acknowledged expert on the subject but even he makes exactly this point, explaining that “everything is changing at once and there is no vantage point that takes me above the fray”.⁴

The negotiation of co-existence between theatre and digital technology is the subject of this essay. I will explore the most significant recent example of convergent practice in British theatre - the National Theatre’s *NT Live* project⁵. *NT Live* has excited great interest in the theatre sector and is seen by many as part of the answer to theatre’s political achilles heel of its limited reach, at least when compared to the digital media.

The forecaster and Stanford academic Paul Saffo argues that a valuable forecast defines what he calls a ‘cone of uncertainty.’ The cone’s point is the present moment and as we imagine forwards the cone spreads out as possible outcomes and situations are acknowledged. The forecaster’s role is to define the edge of the cone. Saffo argues that all leaders should practice forecasting - we should all be considering where the edge of the cone is:

*Forecasting assumes that the cone of uncertainty is also the cone of possibility, that by thinking logically about what likely outcomes might be, one can influence those outcomes for better or worse*⁶.

Saffo argues that the worst thing a forecaster can do is to affect a greater certainty than is justified by an honest mapping of the cone of uncertainty. The art of creating the cone is defining its edges, distinguishing between the highly unlikely and the ridiculous or impossible:

*A good boundary is one made up of elements lying on the ragged edge of plausibility. They are outcomes that might conceivably happen but make one uncomfortable even to contemplate*⁷.

This essay is an attempt to contribute to the mapping of uncertainty regarding the negotiating of function and status between theatre and digital technology, focusing specifically on the case of *NT Live*. This essay aims to complement the enthusiasm with which *NT Live* has been received by the profession, audiences and critics with a skeptical and historic approach to understanding some of the further meanings, implications and possibilities of digitally screened theatre. I very much welcome all responses and contributions to this conversation via my website: www.jonathanbest.co.uk and look forward to the development of this debate in the future.

Uncertainty, anxiety and complexity

The number of leadership events and publications responding to the concept of uncertainty, both within the arts professions and in the wider business world, suggest that there’s a particularly intense anxiety about the subject at the moment. As Graham Leicester observes, the metaphor in business circles has moved on from the excitement and boundless possibility of the 1990’s ‘white water’ to a feeling of ‘being lost at sea’.⁸ He suggests that the reason for this is likely to be that we’re living through ‘a change of age, not just an age of change’. Whether or not we’re experiencing a ‘change of age’ can only be decided in retrospect, long after all of us are dead, but Leicester’s underlying point holds true. An almost

⁴Jenkins, H., 2006, *Convergence culture : where old and new media collide*, illustrated ed. NYU Press, New York, p12

⁵ <http://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/ntlive>

⁶ Saffo, Paul *The secret to effective forecasting*, TED transcript http://fora.tv/2008/01/11/Paul_Saffo_Secret_to_Effective_Forecasting

⁷ Saffo, P., 2007, Six rules for effective forecasting, *Harvard Business Review*, 85(7/8), p. 122.

⁸ Leicester, Graham *Rising to the occasion; cultural leadership in powerful times*, Mission, Models, Money (2007)

perfect storm of disruptive change is reconfiguring our world and with it our lives and our very consciousnesses; the multifaceted processes of globalization and climate change, the internet's transformative impact (including upon the status of hierarchies and institutions), the 2008 economic collapse, and the economic rise of China and India for example. This is what Anthony Giddens memorably called a 'runaway world'⁹, a world which:

has outstripped our capacity to understand it. The scale of interconnectivity and interdependence has resulted in a step-change in the complexity of the operating environment¹⁰

Part of this reconfiguring of the world are the processes of convergence. As the converging media jostle for influence and status in the eventually-to-be-established new order, where is theatre's place and what might its purposes be?

Theatre and relevance

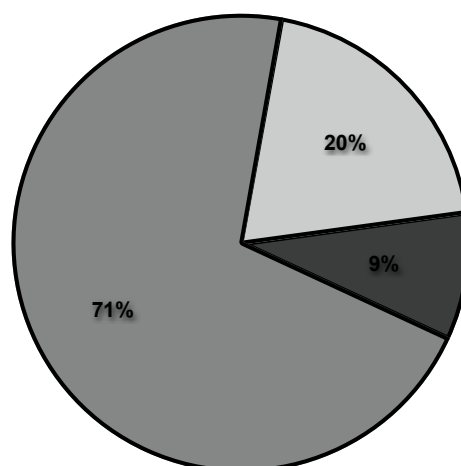
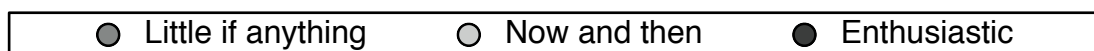
The dominant narrative as of 2010 in British theatre is money, or rather subsidy. I don't want to diminish the importance of subsidy as a principle or its vital role in enabling a diverse and adventurous UK theatre sector, but I would like to suggest though that theatre's biggest challenge is not money but *relevance*¹¹. I bring this up because in my view it relates directly to the confidence of the theatre sector, a confidence which, I hope to show, is essential in engaging effectively with the currents of media convergence.

Let's look at some numbers.

Arts Council England's 2008 research into arts attendance in the UK breaks the population down into four categories of person based on how frequently they attend:

- little if anything (one event or none per year)
- now and then (one or two events only)
- enthusiastic (three or more events per year)
- voracious (more than three events per year)

Unfortunately, this research lumps together attendances at theatre, dance and cinema making it impossible to extrapolate reliable theatre-only data. Nevertheless, it's a useful start. This is the breakdown of ACE's data relating to attendances at theatre, dance and cinema:



⁹ Giddens, Anthony *Runaway World*, Routledge, London 2003

¹⁰ Leicester, Graham *Beyond Survival*, International Futures Forum, Fife 2009

¹¹ Ben Cameron of the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation made this point at a Mission Models Money event in 2009. Thanks to Claire Antrobus for drawing my attention to it.

The 'little if anything' group is predictably dominant. Only 20% of the sample visit a theatre, dance or cinema event 'three or more times per year'. That might not seem too bad but when one considers what these figures would look like if cinema attendances were excluded it starts to become clear how small a proportion of the population choose to experience theatre.

Let's look at the issue of 'new audiences', that prized category of person that every theatre works hard to entice through the doors. What effect did the extra £25 million in subsidy in 2003 have on the sector's success in attracting new audience? The Arts Council's 2009 Theatre Assessment is refreshingly candid:

audience numbers have stayed more or less constant since the Theatre Review¹² following a period of decline. Over the same period there has been an increase in the number of performances¹³

So £25 million more and more new productions but no new audiences. What conclusion can we reach based on the evidence of the last decade other than this: the audience for theatre appears to be finite¹⁴. Perhaps we could be more accurate: the audience *for the types of theatre we're making at the moment* appears to be finite.

Given this evidence it isn't surprising that the digital screening of theatre has excited such interest. Could it be that these digital screenings might finally enable theatre to attract this much talked of but never actually realised 'new audience'? Could this approach to convergent theatre practice be the rescue theatre has been waiting for?

NT Live

On Friday 25th June 2009 an experiment was conducted with 14,000 people who sat in 73 cinema screens across the UK and watched a live digital relay of the National Theatre's production of Racine's Phaedra directed by Nicholas Hytner and starring Helen Mirren. The Guardian's Michael Billington was in the audience and he wrote about it the following day:

For generations we have been told that the theatre is elitist. Last night it was shown that a supposedly difficult classical tragedy can speak simultaneously to people across the globe...my hunch is that this is only the beginning of a revolution in making theatre available in ways of which we had never dreamed.

This was the first of four pilot broadcasts in the National Theatre's NT Live series, a particularly interesting and significant experiment in digitally transmitted theatre. The NT declared access and national reach as the rationale for the experiment - and judged by this measure the first screening was a success, doubling the audience for this particular production literally overnight.

According to NESTA, the intention behind *NT Live* is 'to find ways that digital technologies can support traditional creative industries and extend their audience reach'.¹⁵ This is the paradigm that we are accustomed to in the cultural sector; digital technology as our means to survival in an increasingly uncertain world, and the eventual end to our anxiety (and political vulnerability) over 'access' - just as Michael Billington wrote the day after the NT Live premiere.

But what if we're wrong about this?

¹² The 2002 Boyden Report into the regional producing theatres

¹³ http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/publication_archive/theatre-assessment/

¹⁴ Bonnar, Anne <http://theatreofwith.wordpress.com/>

¹⁵ http://www.nesta.org.uk/areas_of_work/creative_industries/film/nt_live

If, as Henry Jenkins believes, the convergent practice of digitally screened theatre represents a negotiation of function and status between the old media and the new, what might the outcome of that negotiation be? Can we be *certain* that the effect will be to 'support' theatre - or might the outcome in the longer term be different?

Far from the new supporting the old, Philip Auslander, in his provocative study of the cultural importance of 'liveness', sees the old and new media in a competitive relationship:

*at the level of the cultural economy, theatre (and live performance generally) and the mass media are rivals, not partners*¹⁶

This isn't a new idea. Marshall McLuhan, several decades earlier, made a similar point:

*A new medium is never an addition to an old one, nor does it leave the old one in peace. It never ceases to oppress the older media until it finds new shapes and positions for them*¹⁷

Auslander and McLuhan acknowledge something vital - something missing from the almost Panglossian rhetoric of 'digital opportunity' - which is that convergence takes place within a creative economy *in which power and cultural influence are unequally dispersed*. Disparate media always have relative degrees of cultural influence and power - and the contrasting cultural heft of old fashioned theatre on the one hand and digital platforms on the other could not be more dramatic. When a BMW and a 2CV collide the ensuing structural rearrangement is not equally borne by both.

We might believe and/or hope that digital screenings will 'support' theatre, but if Auslander and McLuhan are right the eventual effect of this approach might turn out to be rather different: a competitive relationship which sees theatre's cultural importance and audiences diminish further.

Values

Inherent in the principle of a negotiation of status and function is the idea of change. A convergence of old and new media changes both, though, as we've seen, rarely to equal degrees. The process and nature of that change is particular to each specific case, but common to all examples of convergence is a consideration of values. The newspaper and book publishing industries are illuminating comparators.

Newspapers have seen their already long-declining sales figures accelerate their downward momentum as increasing numbers of readers and advertisers migrate to online platforms. Similarly with the book publishing industry, the audience is shifting to online platforms like the Kindle and the iPad - though less rapidly than in the case of newspapers. Both industries are experiencing huge difficulties re-configuring their business models within an online culture that currently places less monetary value on a digital book or newspaper than the old style paper version.

Technically, newspapers have already adjusted well to online platforms, with the internet's culture of hyperlinks fostering a distinct type of online news consumption. I get most of my news online now, and I'm not missing old style newspapers much. There are those - including Russ Grandinetti, Amazon's Vice President in charge of Kindle Content - who think that the novel should likewise become a multi-media experience. In his view, book publishers are making the same error as the railroad bosses did in the nineteenth century by working on the basis that they were in the business of trains rather than transportation.¹⁸ For Grandinetti,

¹⁶ Auslander, Philip (1999) *Liveness* (Routledge, Oxon)

¹⁷ McLuhan, Marshall (1964) *Understanding Media: the extensions of man*, 2nd edition, New York: New American Library

¹⁸ Auletta, Ken *Publish or Perish; can the iPad topple the Kindle and save the book business?*
http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/04/26/100426fa_fact_auletta#ixzz0o51xffTw

publishers are mistaken to think they are in the book business and should consider themselves creators of 'fiction content'.

Whereas the digital convergence of newspapers has been generally accepted - often enthusiastically - the movement towards this intensified convergence in book publishing is the subject of angry debate, and what is at stake is the book as a cultural object. John Updike argued in the New York Times that a book is more than an object:

It is the site of an encounter, in silence, of two minds, one following in the other's steps but invited to imagine, to argue, to concur on a level of reflection beyond that of personal encounter¹⁹

This collision of old and new media, represented by the ideas of Grandinetti on the one hand and Updike on the other, becomes a collision of values. Grandinetti's view is situated within a creative industries paradigm which sees a distinction between 'content' and delivery technology, or 'platform'. As far as Grandinetti is concerned, Updike's words are the content and there are a range of delivery technologies, from audio CD to paper-and-cardboard book, and digital readers such as the Kindle²⁰, all of them capable of delivering the author's content. For Updike, the book is a constituent part of the experience, embodying the author-reader relationship. For Updike, content and delivery technology cannot be separated.

But don't we already know that? In fact, haven't we long known that there's no such thing as a neutral delivery technology? Marshall McLuhan first alerted us to this idea, almost fifty years ago, coining the phrase 'the medium is the message'. More recently, Jaron Lanier, originator of the term Virtual Reality, software designer and a Silicon Valley philosopher-geek (his own description) reminds us:

We make up extensions to your being like remote eyes and ears (webcams and mobile phones) and expanded memory (the world of details you can search for online). These become the structures by which you connect to the world and other people. These structures in turn can change how you perceive yourself and the world. We tinker with your philosophy by direct manipulation of your cognitive experience, not indirectly, through argument²¹

Again, There is no such thing as a neutral delivery technology; each one inflects cognitive experience and shapes perception. It's this idea that underpins the debates around values and culture that convergence is provoking, as we unpick the significance of cultural objects and experiences. Sometimes, as in the case of the newspaper, we appear largely content as a society to see an object fade into obsolescence. Sometimes, as in the case of the book, the possibility of its vanishing is creating an anxious consideration of values and, at times, angry and tense argument. And, at worst, these arguments polarise into pro-digital 'progressives' and anti-digital 'reactionaries'.

The example of the printed book is analogous to the example of theatre. The values that drew Updike to devote five decades of his life to writing were not transferrable to Grandinetti's vision of the novel as multimedia experience, hence Updike's discomfort. Should theatre makers see themselves as creators of 'dramatic content' and accept that this content can be transmitted equally successfully through a variety of delivery technologies?

Television and the promise of proximity

One of the most striking things about *NT Live* is how exciting it is to feel close to the actors. I experienced this myself at the *Phaedra* screening and it was this quality that, more than

¹⁹ Updike, John *The End of Authorship* in New York Times Magazine, June 2006

²⁰ Grandinetti goes further of course, seeing the Updike content as just one element of the future, complete only when enhanced with other media and absorbed into the online world of universal connectedness through the hyperlink. For Updike, the very idea of the author is at stake.

²¹ Lanier, Jaron (2010) *You are not a gadget* (Allen Lane, London 2010)

anything else, drew me back to see *All's Well That Ends Well*²² and *The Habit of Art*²³. This experience of proximity is central both to the effectiveness of *NT Live* and to the diminished popularity of theatre since the advent of cinema and, later, television.

The initial offer of television in the 1950s was that it would replicate the theatre experience in the comfort of your own home. Television was a live medium in its infancy - and even though much of today's content is recorded it still has the capacity to 'go live' at any moment. This liveness enabled television to compete directly with theatre, liveness being an aspect of theatrical representation that film could not replicate.²⁴ But more than this, television promised intimacy. And it is this intimacy, this proximity – delivered by television for more than six decades - which has queered the pitch for theatre, transforming the expectations and desires of audiences²⁵.

Walter Benjamin, in his 1936 *The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction*, proved to be remarkably prescient in identifying:

*the desire of the contemporary masses to bring things "closer" spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent towards overcoming the uniqueness of everyday reality by accepting its reproduction. Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction*²⁶

This desire to get closer was explicit in the promise of television, as Orrin Dunlap illustrated in his 1947 book *Understanding Television*:

*Television makes all the world a stage and every home a front row seat*²⁷

In the early years of television it was constantly argued that the new medium would render live entertainment more successfully than any previous form of technological reproduction. It's ability to reach directly to the home would make people think they were 'really at the theatre'. Televised drama's explicit aim wasn't simply to extend theatre's reach in a supportive gesture from new media to old, but to recreate the theatrical experience within the home and thus replace theatre as the dominant representational medium.

Television's rise to cultural dominance, complete by the early 1960s, had a direct bearing on the development of theatre. Again, Auslander puts it bluntly:

The general response of live performance to the oppression and economic superiority of mediatized forms has been to become as much like them as possible.

We expect nowadays to watch television when we go to a rock concert - the parallel mediatization of the event is vital to overcome the absence of intimacy of the stadium or concert hall. Whereas these deployments of technology are intended to enhance the

²² *All's Well That Ends Well*, NT Live screening, October 1st 2009

²³ *The Habit of Art*, NT Live screening, April 22nd 2010

²⁴ Auslander, Philip (1999, 2008) *Liveness; performance in a mediatized culture*, Routledge, Oxon.

²⁵ It's interesting to note that the audiences for the NT Live screening of *Phaedra* reported a higher degree of emotional engagement than the audience in the theatre. Twice the proportion of the cinema audience agreed with the statement 'I was totally absorbed'.¹³ I'm unsurprised by these results; these responses are functions of the proximity offered by the screened experience, and the correlation this proximity represents to established tastes and appetites formed by our exposure to television.

²⁶ Benjamin, Walter (1936) *The work of art in an age of mechanical reproduction*

²⁷ Dunlap, Orrin. E, Jnr (1947) *Understanding Television*, New York: Greenberg. IN: Auslander, Philip (1999,2008) *Liveness; performance in a mediatized culture*, Routledge, Oxon.

audience's experience of the live event, what they are also doing is responding to the desire for proximity, a desire created by the dominance of television.

Auslander goes further, building on Walter Benjamin's insight that 'the masses' (as he charmingly calls them/us) have an overwhelming desire to 'bring things closer' by accepting their reproduction. For Auslander, mediatization both responds to the desire for proximity, *and fosters the intensification of that desire.*

Now I don't know whether Auslander is right about this, but it does seem to me that the notion should be somewhere within our cone of uncertainty on this subject because it is *possible* that Auslander (and Benjamin) are correct. If they are then the faith (and I use that word deliberately) that digital screenings of theatre can 'support²⁸ theatre by 'extending audience reach' might be misplaced. If the provision of close-up, digitally screened theatre effectively conditions the audience to continue to seek out the digitally attainable proximity that theatre rarely, if ever, provides, then the relationship between old media and new in the case of this particular convergent practice looks less and less 'supportive' and more and more competitive.

Abandon hope of rescue

Theatre is a remnant of a creative economy from the past. The creative economy based on representation, in which theatre flourished, has given way to one based on replication, in which theatre is profoundly disadvantaged. Its high costs and the difficulties of effecting economies of scale, combined with a one-to-few distribution model which is resolutely non-industrial means that theatre cannot plausibly be considered a creative industry in the same way that film can with its one-to-many industrial distribution and global reach. The digital relay of live theatre is designed partly to insert theatre into this economy of replication, substituting a one-to-many model for the archaic one-to-few.

At the time of writing I'm uncertain as to whether Auslander is right in his argument that mediatized forms foster the desire for proximity that live performance can never satisfy, thus speeding the live along its trajectory to ultimate irrelevance. But I recognise that this sense of a promised proximity was a significant factor in my decision to purchase tickets for two of the three *NT Live* screenings I attended. The argument that the creative economy is competitive by nature, argued by Auslander, McLuhan *and* Benjamin, does seem extremely plausible and the historic trend of theatre's diminishing popularity since the advent of cinema and television is impossible to deny.

With all this in mind, I take the view that the means of expanding theatre's small audience is highly unlikely to be through digital screenings of theatre. After all, digital screenings of theatre don't increase access to theatre - they increase access to digital screenings of theatre. Digital technology isn't a lifeboat into which we can leap and thereby save theatre from its diminished - and perhaps still to diminish further - cultural importance or popularity.

There is no rescue from this situation except - perhaps - through theatre itself. I'll leave the last word to Chris Goode, one of the UK's most adventurous and exciting theatre makers:

When I was starting out, in the mid-90s, everybody wanted theatre to be more like clubbing. It's not necessarily entirely wrong, but it's the wrong premise. I want theatre to be more like theatre; to do what only theatre, distinctively, can. The question of how theatre can be more like itself will always have a different answer, week by week, because theatre will always need to be repositioning itself in relation to the cultural matrix within which it's participating. But we should be wary of supposing that because any one strand of entertainment or cultural activity has a particularly strong currency at a particular moment, theatre should attempt to draw responsively closer to its example. I want theatre to do what nothing else is doing... the challenge is to find new ways of

²⁸ NESTA, *Beyond Live; digital innovation in the performing arts*, 2010 http://www.nesta.org.uk/publications/assets/features/beyond_live

delivering the promise of theatre, not to change the nature of that promise so as to make it easier to deliver to a potential audience that engages more readily with other forms²⁹.

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²⁹ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/theatreblog/2009/mar/10/video-games-theatre>