

PRINCIPLES OF MEAN CONVERGENCE

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San Francisco, 1975: An army lieutenant tries to make sense of his experiences in Vietnam six years earlier, while also trying to keep his job in the military industry. He finds a vocabulary in the retreats and think tanks dotting the countryside around California, immersed in meditation and gestures of holistic thinking. Re-imagining the chaos of warfare as a site of poly-communication, he retrospectively inserts into his platoon's shared moments in the jungle something akin to telepathy, describing it as a two-week nirvana amidst the chaos. He preaches evolutionary tactics and esoteric technology to a military in existential disarray after their exit from southeast Asia. What he proposes is a job for life, as head of the First Earth Battalion, envisioning the military as a global mobilisation force led by monk-warriors who would draw on spiritual and body awareness to become inter-dimensional poly-beings, *homo soma evo sapiens sapiens*. What he becomes is a corporate pep-talk event speaker, serving New Age phrases to blinkered CEOs. He becomes known more for a fictionalisation of his life in the 2009 film *The Men Who Stare At Goats*.

From his seaside house – which he refers to as a bioport – in Hawaii, three months before he would die of cardiac arrest while on a walk with his family in 2017, he uploads a video of twelve predictions for the future. Armies, he blithely states, will help bring back forests, and take school kids into them to re-learn our connection with nature. Space agencies will build portals to and from other worlds in space. 'Isn't it time,' he asks, 'to see our world for the full potential it could offer us? Put it this way – why imagine paradise is coming later?'

Seattle, 1992: the writer Neal Stephenson publishes his book *Snow Crash*, set at an unspecified point in the 2010s in Los Angeles. At one point in the novel, the protagonist has access to a piece of software that projects live intelligence and information as a small, navigable spherical image of the Earth, as a program titled simply 'Earth'. This small detail goes on to be cited as one of the main inspirations for Google Earth, launched in 2005. The novel's protagonist is a hacker, but as a background detail he makes his living as a Deliverator – a pizza delivery man. Stephenson's vision of future cities is of stark divisions between wealthy, gated 'Burbclave' communities, and those who provide their services; but at the bleeding edge of technology and urban cool is the Deliverator, equipped with a souped-up car and bulletproof clothing, each pizza box equipped with microtechnology counting down the seconds of the half-hour delivery slot.

Of all the futuristic projections that have come to pass in Stephenson's book, the predominance of food delivery and the social status of its workers – as a paradoxically high-tech precariat – is probably the most apt, apart from the fact that in his future, all pizza deliveries are run by one central entity: the Mafia. Through the actual 2010s, the delivery industry proliferated, spreading laterally into small app-based companies employing temporary unwaged labourers, aiming to cater to the various strata of food – some attempting to deliver dishes and restaurants not previously perceived as 'takeaway'. What resulted, however, was a rush to the lowest common denominator, where delivery services found their main demand to be for the quick-service chains, what in car-led areas were previously drive-thru. The new system simply enabled people to access fast food faster.

Paris, 1992: An anthropologist attempts to make sense of his relentless travels. He spent so much time in transit – on the subway to the university or to airports to study the next culture – that he became more focused on the places he was spending all of his time in: trains, buses, airport lobbies. Marc Augé's book *Non-Places* attempts to map the proliferation of these generic spaces, as embodiments of supermodernity, without deeming them as either good or bad; they just *are*. In the future, the non-place idea is often mis-cited as the origin of the *espace quelconque*, the anyspacewhatever, a term proposed by philosopher Gilles Deleuze to describe the growing dominance of psychological space – as opposed to architectural or actual space – in mid to late-19th century films. The anyspacewhatever is actor in itself, an active means of shaping the narrative. In *Cinema 1* (1989), he credits one Pascal Augé with inspiring his notion of the anyspacewhatever, an anthropologist who does not, it turns out, exist. The idea is later taken up by a set of artists who enact a self-conscious post-studio form of practice, including Liam Gillick and Philippe Parreno. They reference the notion in several exhibitions, most publicly in a 2008 exhibition at New York's Guggenheim Museum. The implication, ultimately, is that the gallery itself is the anyspacewhatever: a site of psychological potential, remade with each encounter, that in its blankness collapses distance or difference.

Reading, 2031: A casual accident, where a lawyer walks into a Pret in the south-eastern quarter of Reading city centre and walks out of a Pret three streets away, kick-starts a new economic boom. Neoliberalism's last phase was a fulfilment of its originary wish: the erasure of space. The principles of chain branding and standardisation were seen through to a logical conclusion. If you ignore place and make anything for anywhere, context is meaningless. Time becomes irrelevant. This had unwittingly undone several constraints on previous commerce.

Sameness, in itself, was not enough to guarantee transportation. A Sainsbury's designed in the manner of Stansted Airport was not, it was noted, a means to get to Stansted itself. Nor would it get you from the Reading Sainsbury's to the Woking Sainsbury's. Jumping seemed to require a certain muted carelessness or disregard: Pret, but not Eat; Wimpy's, but not the newer design strains of McDonald's; in the US, Dunkin' Donuts became the portal of choice. It became known as the Pret Principle. It was not just about design – it was about investment. The spaces had to have a minimum of effort, the staff a minimum of reimbursement for their time – since, after all, time was now obsolete. What did they need to be paid for?

This was used until they devised more concise means of achieving the same effect, where individuals could don the means of sameness: bulked out uniforms, a portable architecture of blandness, that would allow a jump. But it seemed that another person, or persons, wearing similar clothing had to be in the vicinity of the destination for the jump to work. The delivery companies took to populating cities with people kitted out in their uniforms, sometimes just paying people sub-minimum wage to stand on street corners in the more popular delivery areas: on the edge of suburban gated communities, or in the lobbies of busy lunchtime offices.

Belfast, 2020: An artist, working part-time between three different jobs, sets out the initial principles of neoliberal conflation. Years before the effects took hold, through a series of short journeys to near-

identical spaces, the implications of convergence started to become apparent. Algorithmic space is similar, but not equal to, experiential space. It sits above it, minus the consequences and the ethics. Experiential space, however, is permeable: it can be forgotten, erased, or simply misplaced.

A place where time does not bear on the present means you can side-step history – the question becoming then if this is needed, or even desirable. Those in favour of the algorithmic argued it was simply logical: objective and efficient. In a convergence of perpetually rehearsed traumas, the algorithmic non-place becomes a means of a parallel present, one where trauma can be papered over and interactions are seamless. In a present that only becomes ever more intensely now, the future becomes a choice of which present you'd like to inhabit: the algorithmic, or the experiential. Those on the side of the experiential were too busy living their lives to voice any coherent opposition. While there were layered confusions and overlapping of the two, what convergence made clear was that they were, eventually, mutually exclusive. Such implications were only carried through in the following decade, once any opposition to such ideas was simply forgotten.

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