

1. *It has been suggested that the great era of theory is now behind us, and that we have now entered a period of timidity, backfilling, and (at best) empirical accumulation. True?*

Whatever is behind us is less urgent than what is before us. For this the academy—in particular the academy that has grown accustomed to thinking of itself as cutting edge—is not prepared. Everyone knows that information technology is radically transforming our materials, means, and modes of production. But, as Manfred once acutely observed, “The tree of knowledge [at least this knowledge] is not that of life”—and in this case it’s because the only way to deal with these transformations is to know how to use them. Our heritage of “theory” has had a bizarre and comical outcome, one of history’s characteristic little jokes on human folly: it has left this erstwhile avant-garde in a backwater. We’ve professed to believe in the praxis of theory. But that, it clearly turns out, has simply been a theoretical idea. Virtual environments demand clear theoretical thinking, but such thinking is impossible unless the thinkers know how these things actually work. And that knowledge can be gained only under the rubric learning by doing.

2. *It has been suggested that theory now has backed off from its earlier sociopolitical engagements and its sense of revolutionary possibility and has undergone a “therapeutic turn” to concerns with ethics, aesthetics, and care of the self, a turn of which Lacan is the major theoretical symptom. True?*

My response here rhymes with my first response. I don’t see a backing off, I simply see an ignorance. The malaise in the humanities is real and widespread and entirely understandable. The turn of interests toward ethics and aesthetics is not as such important, at least in the way suggested here. What *is* important is the general sense—understandable, it seems to me—that the academy’s inherent (historically evolved) structures drastically impede efforts to integrate the materials, means, and modes of production of virtual culture into the daily practices of scholars.

3. *It has been suggested that the major challenge for the humanities in the coming century will be to determine the fate of literature and to secure some space for the aesthetic in the face of the overwhelming forces of mass culture and commercial entertainment. True?*

Well, yes, but the question is hopelessly framed. “The aesthetic” already occupies a major “space” in the world of virtual culture, it’s just that the academy is out to lunch.

4. *It has been suggested that the rapid transformations in contemporary media (high-speed computing and the internet; the revolution in biotechnology; the latest mutations of speculative and finance capital) are producing new horizons for theoretical investigations in politics, science, the arts, and religion that go well beyond the resources of structuralism, poststructuralism, and the “theory revolution” of the late twentieth century. True?*

See above.

5. *Following on number 4, it has been suggested that the criticism and theory to come may have to explore other media of dissemination besides those of the printed text, the scholarly article or monograph, or even language as such in its prosaic, discursive forms. What is likely to happen or ought to happen to the “arts of transmission” of knowledge in coming century?*

That is far too large a question to answer with a brief annotation. But I will say that the question has been under vigorous and interesting discussion—practical discussion—for many years now, although the traditional academy is scarcely aware of that. And the academy that shaped itself in “theory” (see question 1) has had almost no involvement in these discussions.

For an elaboration of the context of these remarks, see my "[Literary Scholarship in the Digital Future](#)" and "[Textonics: Literary and Cultural Studies in a Quantum World](#)".

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