

Digital Humanities: Experimentation and Comparative Literature¹

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Introduction

During the 2010s, the Digital Humanities has been hailed as “not just ‘the next big thing,’ as the Chronicle claimed in 2009, but simply ‘the Thing’” (Gold). The term is seen as defining a watershed moment in Humanities practices: the “Digital Humanities moment” (Gold). As a millennial signifier as well as an institutional framework, with conferences, un-conferences, journals, institutional support in departments and programs, and a significant presence in the blogosphere and social media (especially Twitter), as well as the MLA, Digital Humanities has come for many (including those of us more or less involved in university management) to signify hope for a potential future for the Humanities in the current context of permanent yet supposedly accelerating defunding, job losses, and casualization of the academic workforce. DH almost seems like a “last, best hope for survival” when higher education seems to be disrupted by the familiar nexus of crisis generating critique, the founding moment of modernity’s understanding of intellectual and knowledge production. With DH’s orientation towards collaborative, interdisciplinary projects, its privileging of methodology over theory, its emphasis on “making” – the production of tangible results, software tools, etc.—, and its interest in archiving and big data explored through algorithms, the work of Digital Humanists has come to strongly resemble the academy’s equivalent of start-up culture. Expectations of what Humanists should be doing, and are actually doing, have shifted from the “Einheit von Lehre durch Forschung” (unity of teaching through) paradigm of universities shaped by Humboldtian ideals towards what are now arguably hegemonic structures of knowledge work in the creative industries, with an “emphasis on design” (Burdick et al.), productivity, and just-in-time delivery all too familiar in the no-longer-all-that-new economy. Some strands of the Digital Humanities have adapted very well to the shifting paradigms and adopted the sponsor-friendly, can-do entrepreneurial optimism of redemption through technology.²

The aim of my contribution here is not, or not primarily, to debunk the boy-scoutish attitudes of the “makers” in Humanities departments with their affective

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²“We refuse to take the default position that the humanities are in “crisis,” in part because this very rhetoric of crisis has persisted for well over a century, however many mutations it has undergone. Jeremiads regarding the decline of educational standards, the failure of students and faculty alike to adequately embrace humanistic ideals, and the demise of tradition may well be inherent to the process of education itself. Digital Humanities adopts a different view: It envisages the present era as one of exceptional promise for the renewal of humanistic scholarship and sets out to demonstrate the contributions of contemporary humanities scholarship to new modes of knowledge formation enabled by networked, digital environments.” (Burdick et al.)

management and “let there be jobs” attitude, which is obviously open to easy co-optation by instrumental reason and the commodification of knowledge production as well as the further casualisation of academic work, with alt-ac’s being assembled in flexible teams that are equally easily disbanded once their “products” are completed in a regime of market logic and competition that has no time for the sometimes glacial timeframes and agonizing spirals of knowledge critique characteristic of more traditional approaches. I will just direct you here to Wendy Hui’s critical intervention in the otherwise buoyant Digital Humanities debate during the 2009 MLA, where she warned that “the vapid embrace of the digital is a form of what Lauren Berlant has called ‘cruel optimism’” (Hui Kyong Chun).

What I want to offer today for discussion is meant as another form of disruption. I come to Digital Humanities as somebody with a degree in Cultural History whose work has mostly been positioned in Cultural Theory, Comparative Literature, and Cultural Studies. I am currently the Director of a large graduate program in Humanities with around 100 graduate students in which we emphasize qualitative, multi-lingual and context-specific research, which is also what my own research foregrounds. But as a graduate student, I also used to be a programmer and computer consultant (I sold my first commercial software in 1989, somehow missing that minor world events like the fall of the Berlin Wall were going on during that year). During the 90s, I was involved in several projects under the banner of Humanities Computing. From this particular perspective, I would like to question the rhetoric of a particular watershed moment in the practice of Humanities—itsself deeply informed by tech and creative industries’ constant and somewhat romantic chasing after the next revolutionary, creative and defining product. Rather, I would like to engage with the title of our panel by offering a few observations on what turn, in addition to the millennial one, we are experiencing in Humanities scholarship at the moment—what is specifically new about the present formations of scholarship, teaching, funding and organizing knowledge production vis-a-vis the Digital Humanities. And, challenging the discourse of disruption, of the many new exciting things the forward march of technology is supposedly bringing, I will also talk about what is returning, or re-surfacing, from a more extended historical trajectory of Humanities’ scholarly engagement with other disciplinary formations since the 1950s. I am particularly interested in the contributions and corrections Comparative Literature traditions, theories and practices can provide in this situation, not in the form of disciplinary or intellectual confrontations but rather in the form of disciplinary affordances that productive tensions in tenets, approaches and research practices can shed light on.

So, at the peril of simplifying diverse and multifaceted disciplinary formations to the point of caricature (and without either big data or algorithms to support my arguments), let me telegraph three areas in which I see potential for a productive intervention, provocation, and intellectual encounter between Digital Humanities and Comparative Literature at an important juncture for theory and knowledge production in the Humanities: 1) histories; 2) spatialities and 3) translations.

1. Histories

Alan Liu argues that drawing on history is a source of strength for the humanities, reclaiming its artisanal, guild model of social organization as a space outside, or pre-, market hegemony, in contrast to the prevailing spirit of competitive “nowness” and creative disruption characterizing current regimes of knowledge production (Liu 375). Liu’s projects are exemplary for a strand in the DH that mobilizes digital storage, retrieval and analysis tools to cope with problems of quantity, complexity, and accessibility of cultural and literary material. The digital archive and its affordances are certainly a crucial area of engagement for the DH and point us to the significance of re-thinking disciplinary relationships to the historical under the rubric of “big data.”

Franco Moretti’s meme of “distant reading,” based on evolutionary and world system theory and encouraging us to explain, rather than interpret, literary practice, is probably the most widely discussed (and followed) outcome of a re-orientation of literary history approaches on the basis of the affordances of digital tools. However, I would posit here that this is not so much a turn but a re-turn, not little reminiscent of the *Annales* historiographic concern with “third level” serial history, an established, albeit contested, methodology for social historians, and riddled with comparable limitations. Modelling lived experience, documented in a historical source or literary work, into a highly abstract system of relationships and data models that do justice to those complexities in order to generate meaningful analyses remains a non-trivial problematic for coding, demonstrated by the slow progress of efforts to build a semantic web (e.g. around semantic wikis implemented through mediawiki extensions), or the open linked data initiative in digital assets management systems such as *islandora*. The desire to have access to a toolkit that models complex social and historical realities in data sets or data bases is motivated by, and contributes to, empirical traditions in Humanities scholarship that pre-date Humanists’ access to computers.³

I would like to highlight here the problematic of structure that emerges from the mapping and transformation of lived and narrated experience, documented in a historical source or literary work, onto a highly “abstract models for literary history” such as a relational or a hierarchical database, or maps, graphs, and trees (Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees*)—obviously a relevant debate when structure has been a key concept for Humanities theory in the last century, and the post prefix has spawned so much insightful theory.

The discipline of History has shown that global and serial approaches, history as a social science, can co-exist with the micro-approaches of a History Workshop-inspired “dig where you stand” tradition,” history as narrative being complemented by a history based on data, and written through graphs and charts as much as narrative. One could posit that the same should obtain in

³It is not a coincidence that the discipline of History, dominated by social history paradigms that aligned the discipline with empiricism, became one of the poster disciplines for Humanities computing during the 1980s and 1990s.

Comparative Literature—"Let a hundred flowers bloom", as Eric Hayot states, somewhat tongue-in-cheek (Hayot 64)—we all know what followed that particular period of Chinese history. However, it seems to me that this is not simply a matter of a multiplicity of methodologies to approach the literary canon, or literary history. Decolonizing Comparative Literature as a discipline implied the re-imagining of the historical as contextually situated, multidimensional, and multi-locational, rather than "what Paul Gilroy calls ... 'the mesmeric idea of history as progress'" (Morris 11). World systems and evolutionary theory flatten time into linearity, with a tendency to re-assert the teleology of modernity, at best a nomothetic complement to the idiosyncrasies of local histories with limited impact, at worst a re-centring of time after the culture wars, re-mediating the colonial canon with novel tools that challenge Comparative Literature's established methodology of symptomatic readings and Cultural Studies' conjunctural critiques, methods of interpretation (rather than explanation) that insist on the uniqueness of the cultural practice in which a multiplicity of historical forces converges, with history "as a source of a liberating certainty that anything could happen," (Morris 26) a world-making project that demonstrates, through cultural practices such as literature, that alternatives are possible. The challenge, and necessary experimentation, of doing Comparative Literature in a digital/algorithmic regime is to mobilize the digital for continuing to insist on seeing history as virtuality in the Bergsonian sense (rather than as an inevitability predicted by formalized "models" that replicate the Black-Scholes model in derivative investment instruments) and to reclaim the variety of stories, and their impacts, from a condescending attitude to the past that EP Thompson already attacked in 1963. It would mean encouraging Comparative Literature experimentations that complement distant reading with a conjunctural critique of digital culture that emphasizes the indeterminacy of the past and salvages the complexities of individual and collective timelines and the impact of digital regimes on remembering and forgetting.

2. Spatialities

The *Annales* school is credited with a disciplinary rapprochement between History and Geography, and Franco Moretti similarly declares his formative influences, in *Distant Reading*, as coming from "Evolution, **geography**, and formalism" (Moretti, *Distant Reading*, my emphasis). The maps that emerge from an algorithmic analysis of cultural practices unify the global into models of spatiality that have a tendency to reactivate the spectral presence of Eurocentrism (or "Western"/ colonial-centrism) in its imagining of global connectivity.

But digital regimes of engagement with contemporary frameworks of experiencing the everyday and making sense of the world should not stop there, and this is where comparative methodologies could make important contributions. Under the conditions of vastly accelerated time-space compression, the problematic of geo-location, of imagining and experiencing the local, especially in the synesthetic of urban environments, has generated a host of virtual forms of representation that

build on and extend maps into novel forms of experiencing space. Rather than relying solely on *dieu voyeur* structures of viewing and representing space, digital technologies have added different scale levels (“zooming in”), individual routes, alternative route selections, traffic flows, modes of transportation, “points of interest”, social networks that connect drivers stuck in traffic to other despairing commuters in the gridlocked city (Waze) and augmented reality to social and individual imaginaries of complex spaces while at the same time structuring and mapping those spaces onto digital data formats (kml, gpx etc.)—a fundamental shift away from the “Blue Planet Earth” representations of analog times. These reconstituted imaginaries of space arguably have the potential to liberate mapping from the reifications of a centred, or re-centring, spatiality and open it up to the potential of conversation and serendipity with the local, albeit in closely circumscribed ways.

3. Translations

My third area of productive encounter is concerned with what has always considered a hallmark of our discipline: its multi-linguality. Few would contest that DH speaks (often somewhat accented) English, hegemonically and self-confidently. Even code speaks English. What would DH look like in Spanish or Arabic? Is there a post-colonial DH that goes beyond routine disclaimers and nods to the digital divide (which still matters, albeit in different forms: not as a binary or hierarchy but multifaceted ways of “experiencing” the web? (cf. Jones)

These are questions that a comparative perspective needs to ask Digital Humanities, unsettling the tacit hegemony of a global English that functions both as a signifier for a regime of knowledge production and an imaginary of globality. Not to challenge this hegemony is a tacit assertion (or rather: re-assertion, return) of meta-narrative, to which there is only one antidote: meta-critique.

Conclusion

Confronting the genre hybridity, multimodality and multi-mediality of contemporary cultural texts and practices does indeed call for new forms of scholarly engagement and communication in the Humanities, but I hope I have demonstrated that for Humanists, this should not lead to the uncritical adoption of the tenets of a design-driven maker culture; nor should it envisage the future of Humanities methodology and pedagogy in training “polymaths who can ‘do it all’: who can research, write, shoot, edit, code, model, design, network, and dialogue with users” (Burdick et al.), or as a turn that relegated theory to the past millennium.

Rather, I would argue for a sustained engagement with, to use a “theory” term, the “problematic” these practices unveil. The powerful imaginary of algorithms making sense of data in the Humanities is itself informed by traditions of knowledge creation and truth claims based on, for example, the unproblematic equation of the social whole as a marketplace or data-driven approaches to

mobilizing and disciplining creativity that finds its equivalent in data-driven derivative trading that relies on scalability. A theory-driven analysis of cultural practices is still necessary and constitutes a core competence of Humanities scholarship that needs to evolve to tackle the problematics of digital practices.

Let me end with addressing the challenge of whether the increasingly neoliberal global academy in which some of us have been fortunate enough to secure tenured employment is still the place to pursue such critique. After all, one of the most astute critics of new forms of work under the regime of the digital, Melissa Gregg, now pursues her research at the Intel Science & Technology Center for Social Computing, to mention just one example of research migrating into the corporate world. I, for one, strongly believe that universities still matter for the future of education and scholarship and are crucial institutions for providing the material environments where research, teaching and community engagement are given the space to bring a diverse group of people together in the pursuit of a socially engaged intellectuality and collective scholarly practice and pedagogy, with the academic freedom to work in flexible groups that might not look too dissimilar from those found in start-up culture, but without the disenfranchising force of funding regimes that require immediate return of investment and culture of a narrowly defined and measurable productivity. The campuses of software development corporations might have nicer, warmer and cleaner buildings than our universities, but they are also sites that have given us unbridled male cronyism, a stunning gender and diversity gap, and the mainstreaming of censorship of knowledge production in the form of non-disclosure clauses, patents and copyrights under the umbrella of what Michael Ignatieff (CanCon!) has called authoritarian capitalism. Defending academic freedom in the digital age implies a pedagogy of teamwork and collective action oriented towards the public good, the reassertion of academic modesty and symptomatic critique, and a continuing vigilance against the temptations of master discourses—"bad attitude" that I am confident a sustained training in Comparative Literature will continue to be a crucial site for.

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