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DH is Us or on the Unbearable Lightness of a Shared Methodology

Jan Christoph Meister*

Abstract: »Wir sind die Digitalen Geisteswissenschaften oder Die unerträgliche Leichtigkeit einer geteilten Methodologie«. In practice the Digital Humanities are methodologically defined by the principle of digital conceptualization of the objects and procedures of research. Who embarks upon Digital Humanities considers the objects of study implicitly as a complex of discrete measurable states, to apply, based upon this, computer based procedures: analytical, symbolizing or modeling. This mode of digital conceptualization of humanistic topics of research can in principle be used within all disciplines, as a digital *lingua franca*. Before this background we formulate two theses: (1) This methodological theoretical claim of universality has to be relativized by the Digital Humanities community through critical reflection of methodology; digital access does not turn out to be appropriate everywhere, when we make the specifically humanistic drive for knowledge the yardstick of a cost-benefit analysis. (2) The trans-disciplinary nature of the Digital Humanities may be politically “unbearable” by tendency from the perspective of traditional Humanities’ disciplines, as it challenges their disciplinary identity. For the Digital Humanities community both of these theses lead to the obligation to engage in a critical self reflexion of their own methods – and open the dialogue with the established humanistic disciplines against its backdrop.

Keywords: Digital Humanities, Digital Philology, transdisciplinary methodology, modelling.

Identity crises abound: until yesterday we did *Humanities Computing*, today it’s *Digital Humanities*, and the more common our practice becomes the shorter and less descriptive its designation seems to get, as the somewhat opaque neologism *eHumanities* proves. From a linguistic and philosophical point of view the change in terminology, and in particular the emerging next-generation terminology, signals a gradual naturalization of the concept by way of an obscuration of the predicate-argument structure. The evolving *newspeak* adds to the plethora of terminological *nouveau vague* constructs whose *differentia specifica* is marked by a single letter. From *iPhone* to *iHumanities* is but a step.

Before we really take the plunge and begin to refer to ourselves as *iHumanists*, let us use this opportunity to throw a spanner, half philological and half

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philosophical, into the works of discipline formation-by-designation. In order to discuss the “scope of the Digital Humanities” and the question of the “relationship between individual disciplines served by them”, as is my task, I need to sketch out what I mean when I speak of the Digital, of the Humanities, and of disciplines.

In a language-philosophical perspective a change in denominator also indicates a semantic shift, an accentuation that usually reflects a change in a language community’s practice, in what people do and associate when they use a term. Scientific communities are by definition also language communities in that each of them develops a specific terminology. As regards the transformation from *Humanities Computing* and logically (not historically) derived terms, such as *Literary Computing* or *Historical Computing*, to the new generic label *Digital Humanities*, one might say that we have progressed from a predicative to a substantive focus in our language use. *Humanities Computing* was a label that employed the noun *Humanities* – in itself a classifier for a set of academic disciplines perhaps best defined in terms of a family resemblance (*Familienähnlichkeit* as Wittgenstein would say) – in order to predicate a particular variant of *Computing*. Note that the latter term, at least in this combination, was mainly meant in the metaphorical sense of “using machines that can calculate” rather than in the original sense of “the human cognitive ability to abstract quantitative reasoning.”

The second generation term *Digital Humanities* then turned this predicate-argument structure on its head. Now it is a sub-set within the *Humanities* that is predicated in terms of a common methodological characteristic shared by all of its elements, i.e.: the various Humanities disciplines subsumed under the label. The identifying commonality of the elements in this set is their being *Digital*. However, the actual extension of this predication is rather vague: it is not easy to clarify what it means for something to *be* digital, or to *be ascribed the quality* of being digital – in particular when that something is not a material object or an identifiable phenomenon, but rather a set of practices. Would it make sense to talk, *strictu sensu*, of *Blue Humanities*? Certainly not, the categories do not match. But *Critical Humanities* does sound feasible, and so does a hypothetical counter term such as *Affirmative Humanities*. Our intuition tells us that being critical or being non-critical or affirmative are qualities which “the Humanities” – whatever *they* are – may very well possess, because practices *can* be *critical* etc. But they cannot be *blue*; only material or ideal entities, from *blue lagoon* to *blue moon*, can take on that quality, be it literal or metaphorical.

Unfortunately, if we follow this line of reasoning then *Digital Humanities* proves a particularly problematic candidate. To begin with, both practices and entities can be meaningfully labeled *digital*. But then what exactly does it *mean* for something to be digital?

It is perhaps easier to approach this question *ex negativo*. Digital does *not* mean: it can only exist on my iPad. Modern technology and media, as impor-

tant as they have been for the proliferation of digital objects and approaches, are the eggs and not the hen. Digital does mean: conceptualized (if it is an object), or conceptualizing (if it is a practice), in a specific way. This fundamental methodological principle of digitality, so to speak, is *discreteness*. A digital representation of something renders its object in terms of a sum of discrete observations: “on” at t1, “off” at t2; “black” at pixel position 1, “blue” at pixel position 2, and so forth. An analogue representation, by contrast, lacks discreteness – but it compensates for the fine-grained exactness of the digital by offering wholeness and a *Gestalt* oriented conceptualization to which we as humans will respond in a more intuitive, less analytical fashion. Obviously, the intrinsic methodological and conceptual cohesiveness of the analogue and its aesthetic lure is at the same time its phenomenological *forte* and its analytical boundary condition. The more fine-grained digital analyses and representations of objects and phenomena have become, and the more our technologies for re-assembling digital data into synthetic wholes that can trick our senses into taking the representation for the real thing have advanced, the less conscious we are of the underlying distinction. However, the philosophical issue of the distinction digital vs. analogue remains. We cannot have our cake and eat it. Or can we?

As modes of conceptualization, both the analogue and the digital have their pros and cons. They are good for different things. Digital conceptualizations, because they are based upon phenomenological atoms, can be completely de- and re-constructed; they are highly manipulable and can be aggregated to serve purposes – intellectual as well as practical – which we might not even have anticipated at their point of origin. In other words, the digital method has an inherent capacity to *transcend* its original methodological context (though there are, of course, technical limitations), whereas the analogue will in principle result in a historical, contextually grounded conceptualization that does not tolerate being taken apart and re-assembled *ad libitum*. On the other hand, the digital information atom holds no surprises – it is what it is, and being fully defined already at its point of origin it cannot carry any implicit information. In the digital realm, novelty can only be construed by way of recombination; whereas the analogue, which stops functioning as an information bearer if you break it down below modular level, by virtue of its fuzzyness, derives a capacity for innovation from being under-specified. An analogue representation is open to interpretation; it presents itself as a multi-layered model of something in which different dimensions and aspects can become foregrounded depending on varying research interest and context. The intellectual tension between the digital and the analogue thus amounts to a juxtaposition of two highly productive methodological principles: analytic exactness vs. hermeneutic contingency.

As meaning-oriented, hermeneutic disciplines, modern age humanities share a common anthropological interest. Their goal is no longer to explain the cosmos, but to document, to study and to interpret man’s cognitive and emotional

reaction to the physical, the social, the intellectual and the spiritual context in which all humans are embedded. Unlike the social sciences, the humanities tend to base their research not on actual observable human behavior, but mainly on the cultural and aesthetic output which we produce in terms of artifacts, codifications and routines, buildings, texts, music, rituals, political structures, languages etc. And because of the prevailing focus on the meaningful whole which the underlying hermeneutic motive enforces, the humanities have always been the de facto flag-bearers of the analogue. To refer to the traditional (as opposed to: the digital) humanities as *Analogue Humanities* would not only sound funny – it would in fact be a tautology.

And that puts us as Digital Humanists in a really difficult position when confronted by our traditionalist colleagues. The problem is not a question of convincing them that we have useful tools, repositories and analytic practices to offer. We have already reached the stage where practically no aspiring humanist of any discipline can afford to ignore the digital paradigm, if only because DH has suddenly found a very persuasive ally in the funding agencies. But that is a cynical argument, and it will no longer hold when politicians latch onto the next social trend anyhow. The problem that we encounter in *our* encounter with the traditional disciplines and their practitioners is to convince them that we are, still, *real humanists*. The issue is not pragmatics – it is ideology.

Against this background I would now like to address two questions central to our current debate. One, “What is the scope of the Digital Humanities?” Two, “What is the relationship between individual disciplines served by them?”

Thesis One: The Scope of the Digital Humanities is Universal – But Its Practice Shouldn’t Be

I do not think that, considering the object domain of the various humanities disciplines in its entirety, there is anything – any type of phenomenon, any type of object real or abstract – that cannot, in principle, be conceptualized in a digital mode: that is, using the fundamentally digital approach of segmenting a whole into discrete observational and representational information atoms. Some things may not be do-able technologically now, but they will be tomorrow. And once that basis has been established, analytical, heuristic and even hermeneutic (interpretational) operations can follow.

Of course, the further we move away from material objects and into the realm of the cognitive and emotive, from the empirical analysis to the hermeneutic and speculative, the harder and more controversial this transformation may become. It is one thing to claim that you can produce a walk-through 3D-model of the *Aphaia*-Tempel on Aegina and to demonstrate how this approach can be useful to a research team of archaeologists that happen to work at differ-

ent physical locations. It is another to prove to colleagues who do not share our conviction that, say, a Medievalist study in the historical transformation of an abstract concept such as “knightly honour” will benefit from “going digital”. “Honour” is more than just the sequence of ASCII symbols that represent it in the English or any other language – it is a word, a practice, a norm, it can be expressed metaphorically or allegorically, its study requires semantic markup of representational objects, and so on. Yet as we are not dealing with the phenomenon of “Honour” *per se*, but rather with the various expressions that it takes in symbolic artefacts, we still have a foothold in the material world.

However, whether it does indeed make sense to approach *every* humanistic research question from a Digital Humanities angle is quite another question. Conceptually as well as technologically, this decision should always be based on a cost-benefit analysis. As regards technology, this is easily done – computers, software, networks and their operation and maintenance demand the availability of quantifiable resources such as time and money. But the conceptual cost-benefit analysis has so far remained one of the truly blind spots of the Digital Humanities. Taken on a whole, the amount of energy that our community invests into theoretical and methodological critique of its practices and their limitations is still disproportionately low. Things are slowly changing though: ten years ago, when DH was still firmly in the grip of Anglo-American inspired pragmatism and gung-ho technological optimism, we could only listen to the lone voices of the likes of Willard McCarty, Jerome McGann or Dino Buzzetti; today the next generation of Digital Humanists, represented by younger colleagues such as Melissa Terras or Julia Flanders, has already seamlessly integrated their interest in the do-able with pronounced methodological reflection on the why, the how, and the what for. DH practice and reflection have begun to go hand in hand. We are nowhere near there yet, but we are on the right track.

To my mind, this is a crucial aspect which we must bear in mind when we discuss the formation of Digital Humanities curricula. Like any methodology, Digital Humanities can only benefit from a better developed understanding of what it is conceptually good at, and what kind of questions it should not dabble with. Self-reflection and methodological critique are as important as the development and teaching of practices, skills, models and techniques.

Investment into this critical meta-discourse is important not only because it helps us, the practitioners of DH, to advance in our respective fields of research. Equally important is the communicative purpose: for methodological reflection is the quintessential philosophical point of contact among all humanities disciplines. It is one thing to realize that another discipline or method can be instrumentalized for your own purpose – it is quite another to engage with it on the equal footing of philosophical and fundamental methodological debate.

Thesis Two: Digital Humanities Faces the Traditional Disciplines with the ‘Unbearable Lightness of a Shared Methodology’

The humanistic disciplines as we find them at Western universities today are basically a European invention of the 19th century. Even the disciplinary late comers – from Critical Philosophy to Feminist Studies and others – have by and large tried to emulate that model. But what exactly *is* an academic discipline?

The phrasing of the question points to a common essentialist misunderstanding. As Lorraine Daston and others have argued¹, academic disciplines are social institutions that are defined by their goals and practices rather than just by their object domain and their intellectual ‘software’ and ‘hardware’. In the former perspective, a typical humanities discipline is characterized by at least the following:

- a defined (but not necessarily exclusive) object domain
- a defined research orientation and methodological frame work
- a developed terminology and taxonomy
- a set of practices, routines, methods and theories
- institutional manifestation in terms of entities (e.g., university departments), structures (e.g., degree courses) and facilities (e.g., libraries, museums, object repositories)
- an organized discursive community (e.g., academic organizations) and a communicative infrastructure (e.g., journals)

This list is certainly not exhaustive. But it already helps us to get a clearer picture of the potential areas of impact in which the confrontation of the traditional disciplines with the DH can make itself felt.

A fully developed *Digital Humanities* is bound to cut across almost all of the above categories, and as a shared methodology it becomes applicable irrespective of any of the specifics that a traditional definition of discipline might hitherto have relied upon in order to maintain its identity. In my title I have qualified this impact an “unbearable lightness”, not only because one’s bound to get some rhetorical mileage out of an allusion to Nietzsche and Kundera

¹ See Lorraine Daston: *Wunder, Tatsachen, Beweise. Zur Geschichte der Rationalität*. Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer 2001, 22f. – Also: Lorraine Daston: *Die Akademien und die Einheit der Wissenschaften. Die Disziplinierung der Disziplinen*. In: Jürgen Kocka et al. (Hg.): *Die Königlich Preußische Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin im Kaiserreich*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag 1999, 61-84. Daston points out the problematic relationship between the traditional academies and the newly formed disciplines as competing institutions. On the process of discipline formation in a Marxist perspective see Martin Guntau/Hubert Laitko: *Entstehung und Wesen wissenschaftlicher Disziplinen*. In: Martin Guntau/Hubert Laitko (Hg.): *Der Ursprung der modernen Wissenschaften. Studien zur Entstehung wissenschaftlicher Disziplinen*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag 1987, 17-89.

anyhow, but because the confrontation with DH methodology does indeed open a prospect to the traditional disciplines that is liberating and frightening at the same time.

My own focus as an advocate of DH is, of course, decidedly on the liberating aspect. I believe that by conceptualizing our diverse cultural objects digitally and by developing analytical and representational tools and techniques for their investigation and manipulation that share the same fundamental principle, we have – possibly for the first time in human history – found a way to model the entire phenomenal spectrum from the concrete and material to the highly abstract by using one and the same ‘language’. In other words, I believe that the digital is bound to become a sort of new *lingua franca* across the humanities, and perhaps even across all sciences. At present it still operates, metaphorically speaking, at the level of ‘machine language’: While we are good at the quantitative, we still lack the experience to translate many of the traditional, mainly qualitative research questions of our colleagues into the language that is spoken by digital humanists, and *vice versa*. Perhaps – and this would be a question for a historian of science – the impact of the digital onto our scholarly practices might even help to re-create a universal inter-disciplinary discourse practice as it existed across Europe when everyone spoke Latin, thus unconsciously operating in a shared conceptual environment. The paradigmatic 19th century disciplines, because of the political motivation that led to their formation as societal institutions, were nation oriented, and the resistance to the *de facto* hegemony of English as the new academic *lingua franca* which is still being upheld proves that we have not really managed to resolve the question of how to re-establish a universal discourse community.

However, the issue of national languages is only a surface problem. The more fundamental one has to do with the restrictions inherent to any natural language, for natural languages have a natural bias toward – language. They are just not very good at capturing phenomena that are encoded in, say, material objects or performative symbolic practices. This is a problem that even Latin would not have helped us with. The non-natural language of the digital, however, might do the trick.

So what is ‘unbearable’ about this? You might ask. The inherent risk for the traditional humanities disciplines becomes apparent when we consider the bigger picture of universities and academic disciplines at the beginning of the 21st century, and the role which the humanities play within them. In many countries the humanities are under severe pressure to legitimate themselves. Foreign language and literature departments are a case in point. Where I work at present, my discipline – German Studies – is of course not in a precarious position. But I have also worked in a German Studies department in another country, and during a period of fundamental political and economical re-orientation which lead to the complete marginalization of my department.

(Ironically enough, it was in that context that my own interest in Humanities Computing arose.)

Moreover, even where disciplinary existence is not at stake, reputation and social acknowledgment are, and so is last, but not least: funding. There is a fierce competition at play which we cannot ignore. All of these are contextual aspects which, in a strategic perspective, ought to be considered by the Digital Humanities community. How we relate to the established traditional disciplines is a question that *does* have a political dimension, and it would be naïve to ignore it. And while we are on naivety: there have of course also been other so-called paradigm shifts that were pronounced with the highest of expectations – the linguistic turn, the narrative turn, the critical turn – and which started out with the vision of becoming the next super-discipline. Like economies, disciplines and methodologies go through boom cycles, and DH is right in the midst of one. Which means that sustainability should be of prime concern. Again, I do not mean sustainability in terms of infrastructure (we are doing pretty well in that regard), but rather in terms of conceptual and theoretical foundations.

All of these might seem to be questions that should be addressed by organizations such as the Alliance of Digital Humanities Organizations, or by the existing and emerging regional organizations such as ALLC, ACH, DHD. But it does also make sense to raise them on the individual level, because they have already begun to affect us. For me the question is: What do *I* want to communicate and to achieve when I who, by virtue of my training as well as of my institutional affiliation, am based in Modern German Literature and who already combines this institutional identity with a theoretical affiliation to Narratology, term *my* philological practice as falling under the methodological scope of *Digital Humanities*?

Some of my colleagues are not convinced that I am still in German Studies; they are polite enough not to tell me openly, but I can read their minds. And to be honest, more and more often I share their doubt, though I don't tell them either because I truly share their fascination for German literature. I just can't help it – I want to have my cake and eat it, too. And that, in a nutshell, is DH for me: a methodology that cuts across disciplines, systematically as well as conceptually.

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