

Preface

The “Information Bomb” that Virilio (2000) described has washed like a digital tsunami through the humanities as much as the arts. Online art, digital art, the digital humanities, environmental humanities and digital heritage—all are buzzwords and the jargon at play in early twenty-first century academia. Yet—at least in the humanities—there’s a growing concern what the digital is supposed to deliver in terms of new insights for scholarship and pedagogy. Ontological and epistemological shifts are indeed occurring. Phillip Barron’s observation captures the consternation of a generation of academics native to analogue methods for which the digital is *terrae incognitae*: “for many of us trained in the humanities, to contribute data to such a project feels a bit like chopping up a Picasso into a million pieces and feeding those pieces one by one into a machine that promises to put it all back together, cleaner and prettier than it looked before.” (Barron 2010) For academics adopting the digital, Andrew Prescott’s observation that the digital humanities is becoming “annexed by a very conservative view of the nature of humanities scholarship,” (Prescott 2012) serves as a timely warning. Too many digital humanities practitioners, he observes “have too often seen their role as being responsible for shaping on-line culture and for ensuring the provision of suitably high-brow material.” Prescott (echoing Virilio) states that “this is a futile enterprise as the culture of the web has exploded. The internet has become a supreme expression of how culture is ordinary and everywhere, and there is a great deal for us to explore.” (Prescott 2012) The role of the World Wide Web (WWW) is just a starting point to begin addressing these challenges, and underlines the magnitude of the tasks ahead in facilitating rigorous, imaginative and innovative research and teaching initiatives. The WWW acts as a basin in which the digital humanities, as Svensson (2012) argues, can

[...] serve as a laboratory, innovation agency, portal and collaborative initiator for the humanities, and as a respectful meeting place or trading zone for the humanities, technology and culture, extending across research, education and innovation. This meeting place would normally extend far outside the humanities proper and could include the humanities as well as other academic disciplines, industry and the art world.

A main challenge facing scholars and teachers is to create and engage digital methodologies which reflect the strengths of the arts and humanities, rather than those which simply conform to engineered preconceptions of the digital tools employed. The academy's relationship with technology must be reconceptualized. In contrast to interdisciplinarity, new paradigms are emerging which go beyond merely providing digital or social media links between traditional academic disciplines, groupings and networks. As the Digital Humanities Manifesto 2.0 recognizes: "the modern university segregated scholarship from curation, demoting the latter to a secondary, supportive role, and sending curators into exile within museums, archives, and libraries." However, the revolution sparked by the digital arts and humanities "promotes a fundamental reshaping of the research and teaching landscape."¹ Driven by cultural and technological changes occurring over the last half century, the digital transformations of the early twenty-first century have a precedent from the 1960s. Marshall McLuhan provided forecast of sorts on the shift from the analogue to the digital by drawing upon a literary and dramatic arts metaphor

[...] today, after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned. Rapidly we approach the final phase of the extensions of man—the technological simulation of consciousness, when the creative process of knowing will be collectively and corporately extended to the whole of human society [...] the Theatre of the Absurd dramatizes this recent dilemma of Western man, the man of action who appears not be involved in the action. Such is the origin and appeal of Samuel Beckett's clowns. (McLuhan 1987, 3–4)

Indeed, one generation's concept of absurdity becomes another generation's zone of opportunity, and several observers commented on the analogue to digital shift occurring at the turn of the twenty-first century as Western ontologies and epistemologies were becoming "technologically disrupted" due to the mass proliferation of cybernetic assemblages. Denis Cosgrove contended that thinking in science and technology studies was dissolving the epistemological distinctions between the arts and the sciences (Cosgrove 2005, 51). Donna Haraway observed that the emerging ubiquity of human interactions with technology were creating hybrid machine and organic "cyborgs." (Haraway 1991, 151) Far from being deterministic or dystopian (as McLuhan's metonymic Beckettian clowning), Haraway argued that "cyborg imagery" suggested a "way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves [...] it means both building and destroying machines, identities, categories, relationships." (Haraway 1991, 181) Nigel Thrift proposed that due to the intervention of digital software, the human body was becoming a tool-being in symbiosis with the new electronic time-space shaping social perceptions and experiences of the world (Thrift 2008, 2, 10).

¹"Digital Humanities Manifesto 2.0." 2009. http://www.humanitiesblast.com/manifesto/Manifesto_V2.pdf.

Over the last 20 years three overlapping waves have marked the evolution and innovation of arts and humanities digital scholarship and practice. The first wave's digitization of historical, literary and artistic collections coupled with the emergence of online research methods and pedagogy, dovetailed with a second wave of humanities and arts computing quantification exercises, and digital parsing, analysis, and visualization projects. Currently, a third wave is cresting and the ontological tables are turning as arts and humanities discourses and tropes are now beginning to shape emerging coding and software applications, allowing digital practices to come into league with the visual and performing arts to force trans-disciplinary encounters between fields as diverse as human cognition, bioinformatics, linguistics, painting, gaming, New Media, film, historical, literary, culture, and performance studies, painting and drama (Travis 2015).

It is in such a manner that we need to "surf" the crest of third digital wave so as to harnesses digital toolkits and create models in service of the core methodological strengths of the humanities, such as attention to complexity, medium specificity, historical context, analytical depth, critique and interpretation (Travis 2015). Willard McCarthy states that humanities computational models "are better understood as temporary states in a process of coming to know rather than fixed structures of knowledge," and reminds us that "for the moment and the foreseeable future, computers are essentially modeling machines, not knowledge jukeboxes." (McCarty 2004) Prescott (2012) contends that "If we focus on modeling methods used by other scholars, we will simply never develop new methods of our own," and continues,

[...] if we truly believe that digital technologies can be potentially transformative, the only way of achieving that is by forgetting the aging rhetoric about interdisciplinarity and collaboration, and starting to do our own scholarship, digitally. A lot of this will be ad hoc, will pay little attention to standards, won't be seeking to produce a service, and won't worry about sustainability. It will be experimental.

Invoking a somewhat radical, but nevertheless salient argument, Mark Sample contends that the "digital humanities should not be about the digital at all. It's all about innovation and disruption. The digital humanities is really an insurgent humanities." (Sample 2010) In this regard Svensson (2010) asks "would we expect digital humanists to become involved in pervasive gaming, flash mobs, and online installations or Twitter performances?" He argues that the digital humanities "has a set of embedded core values—including a predominantly textual orientation and a focus on technology as tool—some of which are challenged or diluted through an expanded notion of the field. This should not be unnecessarily construed as a problem, but it adds to the sense of a field in a dynamic state." (Svensson 2012) Does recognizing and rebelling against these core values by "thinking outside of the box" of orthodox humanities approaches allows us to consider a wide variety of engagements?

Can the arts provide assistance in this regard? Computer art, as it was called when it arrived on the scene in the 1960s, faced similar criticism that humanities computing—as precursor to what is now branded “digital humanities”—receives. Computer art was perceived not to be art at all, but mere graphic design (likewise, humanities computing was/is seen as mere number crunching); all it offered were boring geometric patterns (detecting statistical relationships is named as the main benefit by many digital humanities advocates). However, Art, in this regard, is not too different. Leaving aside the deliberate attempts to use art as a tool of propaganda, art schools were heavily influenced by contemporary science and technology, often reflecting wider social, cultural and political debates. French art theorist Fernand Léger published a short essay in 1914, *Contemporary Achievements in Painting*. In his text he laid out the impacts that modern science and technology were having on modern art such as Impressionism, and social and human agency in the early twentieth century:²

A modern man registers a hundred times more sensory impressions than an eighteenth century artist; so much so that our language, for example, is full of diminutives and abbreviations. The compression of the modern picture, its variety, its breaking up of forms, are the result of all of this. It is certain that the evolution of the means of locomotion and their speed have a great deal to do with the new way of seeing. (Léger 1973, 11–12)

One can discern the nature and influence of technology on art here. But where else does the compression of space and time—if not their annihilation, as Karl Marx once quipped—become more visible in the twenty-first century than in the areas of the digital arts and humanities? The “diminutives and abbreviations” Léger referred to are most visible contemporarily in the social media worlds of Twitter, Instagram, SnapChat, Flickr, YouTube, etc. Likewise, the tropes of “speed” and “abundance” are permeating the arts, the humanities and geography alike. Art was challenged by the ever-blurring boundaries between virtual and physical worlds when photography emerged to challenge established visual vocabularies—first iconicity and then authenticity—in the early nineteenth century. The division of labour between art and the actual emerging out of the invention of photography—painting to depict the imaginary, photography the real—soon became brittle, as individuals grew suspicious of the claimed authenticity that photography claimed to possess.

The chapters in this book illuminate how digital methods by employing arts’ and humanities’ tropes and perspectives can navigate around the misplaced expectations and “analogue disciplinary orthodoxies” that hinder the paths to relevant scholarship and pedagogy. This collection contextualizes the digital arts and humanities within disciplinary discourses such as history, performance studies, geography and geohazards, environmental humanities, indigenous and Irish studies, conflict

²See von Lünen’s chapter in this volume for a further discussion of Léger’s quote.

transformation, urban mobility, social media, neo-geography and Big Data. In doing so it offers case studies on how to facilitate digital literacy and research involving visualization, language, human behaviour, culture, society, time and place.

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