

Humanities of the Digital – exorcizing Ghosts.

Switching terms has been a funny and sometimes even productive game played by postmodern theorists. Just swap one term for another and the unfamiliarity reveals structures, idiosyncrasies and sometimes idiocy.

In classic adjective-noun-constructions, the adjective can switch places with the noun to uncover the marked and unmarked side of terms, hidden structures of dominance and it can pose new questions.

So it should be of no surprise that when "digital humanities" took the world of the humanities by storm, scholars were all too eager to play the old game of switching terms. Especially as whole disciplines saw themselves under siege by new digital methods and tools, the battle cry for "humanities of the digital" was all too expectable especially in what it usually became.

As early as 2010 Grant Simpson suggested that "humanities of the digital" could be a project to shift the focus to technology, the digital itself"

"If the humanities are the collective disciplines that study human expression, I can think of no better place to study the meaning and history of all things digital. While other species have technology, only humans, so far, compute. Thus digital technologies, insofar as they are a human production carrying cultural capital and meaning, can be brought under humanist modes of study. Thus we have a form of technography, analogous to bibliography (which also brings a human technology under the humanist purview)."¹

The important aspect here – in my eyes – is the insistence on the human factor. Because digital technologies are products of human they can be brought under "humanist modes of study". The "humanist" mode should be – more adequately – labelled a humanocentric mode. It performs what social systems theorists Niklas Luhman called a de-paradoxization via re-entry. In the humanocentric view "digital" is – to quote Simpson again:

"An unwelcome change. Perhaps it represents the external world—with the trappings of ubiquitous computing, devices that facilitate communication upon demand, and networks that disorientingly connect people from throughout the span of our lives and

¹ Grant Simpson: "Towards a Humanities of the Digital". Blog post September 13, 2010. <https://www.hastac.org/blogs/grantls/2010/09/13/toward-humanities-digital>

across personal and professional boundaries—seeping into our insular academic routines."²

The act of de-paradoxization simply eliminates the alien threat of the digital by simply re-entering it again into the fields the humanities are most familiar with. By insisting on the human agency in codes, computer layouts, algorithms, they can happily ignore the technical operations of the "digital" and submit human agencies to humanist inquiries again. One example of how this strain of "humanities of the digital" is codified might be the 13th. "International Conference on New Directions in the Humanities" held in June 2015 in Vancouver that also claimed to envision a turn "From Digital Humanities to a Humanities of the Digital". Again, the human agenda was invoked:

"The new technologies and sciences of informatics, for instance, are infused to a remarkable degree with the human of the humanities: the human-centered designs which aim at 'usability'; the visual aesthetics of screen designs; the language games of search and tag; the naming protocols and ontologies of the semantic web; the information architectures of new media representations; the accessibility and manipulability of information mashups that make our human intelligence irreducibly collective; and the literariness of the code that drives all these things. So too, new biomedical technologies and sciences uniquely inveigle the human—when considering, for instance, the ethics of bioscience and biotechnology, or the sustainability of the human presence in natural environments."³

But what happens if we resist to reduce "the digital" to human agencies? When we face the "trappings of ubiquitous computing" head-on? When we face the realization that a bug in an operation system programmed into core foundations of the system in the 1990s only to be still found within the core of an OS in 2017 interacts with software made in 2016 that incidentally exploits that bug? Can we blame the agency of the programmer in the 1990s?

What happens if we face algorithmic trading resulting in flash crashes in sub-second timeframes way below any human capacity to perceive? What happens if we encounter the alien mode of pure non-interpretable operation of a digital machine that knows no human grey zone between a zero and a one? What happens after the number of mobile devices

² *ibid.*

³ Announcement for the 13th International Conference on New Directions in the Humanities. From Digital Humanities to a Humanities of the Digital " held in June 2015 in Vancouver.
<http://thehumanities.com/assets/downloads/humanities/H15FinalProgram.pdf>

have surpassed the number of humans on earth – as they did in 2014.⁴ What happens when the IoT devices that do not even rely on human input anymore outnumber humans – as they did last year?⁵ What happens when the human agency is either already massively shaped by its technological a priori or even surpassed entirely, left behind.

German media-philosopher Friedrich Kittler called for an "Austreibung des Geistes aus den Geisteswissenschaften" in the 1980s. The German "Geisteswissenschaften" are what very roughly translates into "humanities". They are sciences of the spirit, the spirit, we find for example in Hegel. But the German "Geist" has another meaning: It can also denote a ghost. So when Kittler called for an expulsion of the spirit from the spirit disciplines it was also an act of a double inquisition of sorts, both an exorcism and an inquiry. Driving out a spirit while also asking for the ghost, the specter that haunted these disciplines only to find that it had metaphorically left the building already.

Kittler's move was driven by his own media-materialism in which "media determine our situation" and not what we perceive to be human agencies, spirits. What we perceive as spirits could be just the ghosts of the machines, the technical media we use.

What could happen if we perform this very exorcism within the humanities and its digital half-sibling, if we drive out the human as the spirit and the ghost that haunts them?

Maybe we could through the rigor and the tools that we take from what was once the humanities get to the core of the digital itself, its "Being" in the Heideggerian sense, its procedures, its time-critical operations that leave what was once called the human behind. Humanists might metaphorize that the digital laughs into the face of the human. But that again would be a humanistic misconception – it simply calculates in the face of humans and maybe we should start to calculate in the face of the digital as well or at least realize the true being of these calculations

Maybe, in order to reach true "humanities of the digital", we – by a second-order observation – need to figure into our inquiries the human misconception of the digital itself and reduce it out of the equation.

⁴ Zachary Davies Boren: "The world is home to 7.2 billion gadgets, and they're multiplying five times faster than we are" The Independent October 7 2014 16:30:
<https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/gadgets-and-tech/news/there-are-officially-more-mobile-devices-than-people-in-the-world-9780518.html>

⁵ Michael Alba: IoT Devices to Outnumber Humans in 2017. Engineering.com September 09, 2017:
<https://www.engineering.com/IOT/ArticleID/15594/IoT-Devices-to-Outnumber-Humans-in-2017.aspx>