**MELLICK LOPES — Ontological**

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**The Ontological Designing of the Digital**

Mellick Lopes, A. A.

This paper offers a theoretical proposal for understanding the relation between design and the digital humanities with a focus on resource consumption. It proceeds from the position presented by Burdick et al. (2012) that the digital humanities move design to the centre of the research questions it poses. From this central position, design enables an unprecedented reach and capacity for the generation and management of information and the creation of new forms of knowledge. In this short paper I argue that the designed platforms sustaining the digital humanities are not simply enabling; they are agential in the development of new ways of encountering and knowing the world.

The digital humanities depend on design and its objects, and yet in its tool-like practicality and normative intent, design so often evades scrutiny. *Design disappears*. As Clive Dilnot (1998, 22) has remarked, ‘If something cannot be made a matter of speech then it tends to disappear as such, i.e., it does not enter discourse as such and therefore remains invisible. Hence of course, one of design’s ironic conditions: that it is everywhere seen and everywhere remains invisible’.

This paper will critically attend to three territories of design that tend to withdraw as objects of critical attention within the digital humanities:

1. Product-systems shaping digital engagement and participation.

2. Material infrastructures sustaining digital data.

3. Image ecologies encoding and communicating digital information.

Taking each of these design territories in turn:

Digital *product-systems* have very quickly materialised what David Michael Levin presciently called the ‘frontal ontology’ of our age, an interpretation substantiated by the prevalence of mobile screen-based engagement as a new bodily posture, a rise in immediate encounters with worldviews designed by others and attached to these new social practices that extend between online and material environments. I will consider how new ontologies are shaped and activated by digital environments, particularly the proposition of Fry (2005) that ‘our mental ingenuity at finding ever more novel ways to relieve physical effort far outstrips the slower evolutionary time of our physicality’.

Vast, energy-intensive *infrastructures* sustain, store, and distribute data at an exponential rate and unimaginable scale. While innovation drives patterns of obsolescence in product-systems, data seems interminable. We lose touch with the material substrate as digital information has a powerful symbolic vitality that manifests independently of how it is being resourced and reproduced. I will consider how big energy consumers such as Google are reporting their resource consumption and what their analytical stories reveal about how ecologies are being understood, interpreted, and communicated.

As rhetorical devices at the forefront of digital systems, *images* can be conceptualised as energetic and cognitive materials that are reshaping how we see and understand our living environments. As designed systems become more complicated, big and live consumption data are packaged to promote more ecologically literate and aware ways of being in the world. Yet we might ask to what extent can new visualities of ecology generate the sensory intuitions we need to live more sustainably? There is an anxiety around visualising data without there also being a strong sense of how visualisation shapes both cognition and action. With reference to key living experiments and projects, I will consider how participatory forms of data collection and reporting of resource consumption might inform more reflexive forms of ecological data visualization.

All three territories warrant being made discursive in the context of the digital humanities as they have, to paraphrase Burdick et al., profound implications for what it means to be human in the networked information age. The question of what it means to be human is, of course, a fundamental question for the digital humanities. My claim is that any response to this question must now also interrogate the extensively and intensively designed nature of the worlds in which we live, dream, and build knowledge.

In order to perform this interrogation, I mobilise the emerging theory of ontological design. Ontological design is a theory that characterises the nature and agency of design as a fundamental human activity shaping the condition or behaviour of ‘what is’ (Willis, 2006, 81). It is also a method of relational critical analysis. My critique will therefore demonstrate how the unique areas of infrastructure, software, and image design are relationally implicated. The theory of ontological design is based on the hermeneutic phenomenology of Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer, with more explicit design interpretations in the work of Terry Winograd and Fernando Flores, Anne-Marie Willis, as well as Tony Fry and Arturo Escobar. Ontological design understands that ‘our very “being-in-the-world” is shaped by knowledge we pursue, uncover, and embody’ (Fry, 2012, 43).

By bringing a consideration of the ontological implications of digitisation within the remit of the digital humanities, an ongoing critical discourse regarding design’s making and unmaking of material and symbolic worlds is invited.

**References**

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