**SEBERGER — How Long?**

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**How Long Is Now? The ‘Digital’ in DH**

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‘What Is Digital Humanities? [. . .] NB: Refresh the page to get a new definition’.

—Jason Heppler, http://www.whatisdigitalhumanities.com

Answers to the question ‘What is DH?’ abound. One needs only skim several recent editions to gain a preliminary, wayfaring-like (Ingold, 2007) sense of the discursive horizon and its temporality (see Berry, 2012; Burdick et al., 2012; Gold, 2012; Hockney, 2004). In such volumes, DH as stabilized institutional entity looms in the distance of a ‘present-future’ (Derrida, 2006, 48). It seems that DH scholars face a set of futures and move (multi-)linearly toward freedom from a ‘turtlenecked hairshirt’ of one form or another (Bogost, 2010).

Recently, however, a non-linear window has opened. Raley (2014) frames DH as a discursive construction, as a site of potential. That is, while ‘semantic battles about the institutional identity of the digital humanities are a symptom of a discipline [. . .] fixated upon making a permanent space for itself” (Raley, 2014, 40), DH may be productively conceived of as a troubling mediator through which scholars can imagine ‘potentials—not what is, but what might have been [. . .], as Geoffrey Rockwell suggests, “what could be”’ (Raley, 2014, 30). Within this formulation, the present-future orientation of the DH discourse tilts.

In this short paper, I will not attempt a concrete answer to the question ‘What is . . . ?’ Rather, grounded in my own disciplinary situation within a department of informatics, I will ask another question. By considering the temporality and materiality of the ‘digital’ as it applies to the humanities’ textual objects I ask, ‘How long is the “now” in which the potentials of DH reside?’

**A Digital Discourse**

As Foucault (1982, 126–27) noted, ‘The positivity of a discourse [. . .] characterizes its unity throughout time’, but the ‘*a priori* of positivities is [. . .] itself a transformable group’. It follows, then, that the durability of ‘digital’ comes into question as the violent (Derrida, 1998) signifier by which DH distinguishes itself from humanities; as discursive entity, it is subject to change even as it effects change. The presence of the digital modifier, a nebulous source of techno-adjectival power, sketches the uncomfortable mutation of a known category (i.e., humanities), established across hundreds of years of practice. (NB: This is closely related to Alan Liu’s notion of ‘alien’ [Liu, 2009, 17]). But how far in time does a mutation reach?

Referential clarity dissolves with the digital modifier as new textual materialities arise and exert influence not only over ‘text that might yet be’, but also texts that already are. At some point, the ‘alien’ of the digital modifier becomes resident across tenses; the digital materiality so emphasized in ‘DH’ yields a potentially pervasive change to the materiality (and therefore interactivity) of the humanities’ textual objects, the products of inscription (see Derrida, 1998; Flusser, 2011). As will be seen through a discussion of inscription, a shift toward digital textual materiality fundamentally transforms the archive of textual study *across* the tenses. In the context of digital inscription, the ‘now’ of DH extends spectrally across the ‘present-future’ and the ‘present-past’ (Derrida, 2006, 48).

**(Digital) Inscription**

The etymological roots of inscription (the Latin *scribere*, to scratch) demonstrate the physicality of the mark, the intentional exertion of force upon a substrate (Flusser, 2011, 11). Inscription results in the removal of the substrate’s embodied noise, its openness and naturally unbounded potential relations to the objects and agents of its ecology. Thus, inscription constitutes a transformation—both the transformation of object into the written-textual and the entrance of a text into the archive it partly constitutes. It represents the point at which a ‘present’ is materially embodied for future remembering, ‘readied for future use’ (Farge et al., 2013, 6). One might further envision inscription as the precursor to textuality, to the ‘woven’ structure of interrelated inscriptions (McKenzie, 1999, 13) in a forward-facing present tense.

In the increasing invisibility (Weiser, 1991) of physical inscription that occurs under the influence of the digital modifier, or indeed the presence of analogous ‘writing on’ or ‘writing upon’, wherein meaning is apparently added without the removal of substrate, such marking still connotes absence. The inscription, as either metaphor or actuality, is the marked’s categorical entrance into the archive*.* The inscription is simultaneously the mark of the archive and the space in which the archive symbolically resides. It is the textuality of the humanities, whether digital or not. As such, the archive of humanities, modified by a digital transformation in the method and mode of inscription, is itself transformed. In this transformation the temporal boundaries of the DH discourse become hazy. The present tense of digital textuality colonizes the pre-digital; the epoch of ‘potential memory’ (Bowker, 2008) re-contextualizes extant texts bounded in pre-digital inscription; the ‘digital’ modifier troubles potential pasts as much as it does potential futures. That which has been woven in one materiality is potentially unraveled. Closed work risks openness (Eco, 1989); woven inscription risks Barthesian fragmentation. The present-future of the digital acts upon the present-past.

**Pervasive Distance**

A basic tenet of philology frames the problem of temporality in digital inscription. According to McGann (2014, 44), the philological method necessitates ‘examin[ing] original materials *in situ* [. . .]. Surrogates, digital or otherwise, may serve the work at some point, but they cannot substitute for those first hand visits’. But such a statement becomes problematic when the alien becomes resident, when digital (re)inscription colonizes pre-digital inscription. When the potential invisibility of the digital renders pre-digital texts fallaciously *always already* digital, the boundaries of text, the difference between original and surrogate, blur. In the event of such a potentiality, one must ask, ‘To what extent can an interpretive knowledge product derived from analysis facilitated by digital transformation refer to anything but itself, to anything but the pervasive present of the digital modifier?’ An analysis of Moretti’s first acknowledgement of ‘distant reading’ will clarify.

The textual-technical *dispositifs* that give rise to such methods as ‘distant reading’ render a representational metaphor that filters the texts that they are (theoretically) intended to render transparent. Moretti (2000) calls for ‘a return to that old ambition of *Weltiliteratur*’ in order to study the ‘planetary system’ of literature (54). In the move from canon to planetary system, a question of scale becomes immediately apparent. How does one move from the closeness of reading to a distant, telescopic view? The answer is scaffolding:

The study of world literature will somewhat have to reproduce this ‘page’—which is to say: this relationship between analysis and synthesis—for the literary field. But in this case, literary history will quickly become very different from what it is now: it will become ‘second hand’: a patchwork of other people’s research, *without a single direct textual reading*.

(Moretti, 2000, 57)

‘Direct textual reading’ is bypassed via scaffolding, the construction of a sociotechnical vantage from which to view the whole ‘planetary system’. The ‘planetary system’ *becomes* text by way of digital re-inscription. The scaffolding provides the context for knowledge production by way of extending the now-resident digital alien of DH to pre-digital texts. But the scaffolding is more than just context; it isthe context *and* the knowledge produced, an artificial hypotext referring to itself through the spectrality of digital inscription. It is the sociotechnical assemblage by which linearity can be assigned to ‘a device, a trope, a limited narrative unit’ (Moretti, 2000, 61), but an assemblage that bears an a priori relationship to the otherly inscribed texts it analyzes. It has only itself as its object of study and must methodologically account for itself.

A digital method like distant reading must interpret itself; it is the contemporary tendency to rely on the prima facie validity of pervasive, computerized, and disembodied representationalism that lurks behind the knowledge productive phenomena of DH (and big data) that deserves interpretation. Moreover, it is in this growing invisibility of the digital that Foucault’s historical a priori of the inscribed humanities archive becomes a *pervasive a priori*: an artificial and invisible scaffolding presenting with the appearance of an ‘always already’ materiality that retroactively transforms the archival materialities of the past.

In order to approach the question of the ‘now’ in which DH potentials reside, one must first reflexively interpret DH itself. The emergence of DH represents an opportunity to read the potentials of the digital, not to merely read digitally—to critique through a process of abduction the potential development of a pervasive a priori. In considering DH as discursive site of potentials as Raley (2014) suggests, one begins to see unexpected implications of the ‘digital’ modifier for the analysis of cultural objects across time. The future of ‘digital’ in the humanities is of great consequence to the past.

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