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The Immense Promise of the Digital Humanities

The book as technology

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Photo: Peter Macdiarmid/Getty Images

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Adam Kirsch's recent piece in *The New Republic* on the "false promise" of the digital humanities doesn't probe very deeply into the broad range of experimental approaches to humanistic scholarship that have been bubbling up over the past decades. But it does make some misleading assertions that merit a response.

The first is broadcast in his title: "Technology is Taking Over English Departments." Whether the title is a mere post-factum editorial addition or not, it is indicative of an unduly narrow understanding of what counts as the Humanities (English studies), not to mention a blindered understanding of "technology."

Let's start with the latter. One of the defining concerns of cultural-historical research over the course of the past half century has been what is sometimes referred to as "the history of the book." What this field has demonstrated over and over is that the book is a construct in constant evolution: a construct that routinely and dynamically interacts with a shifting array of other media types. In other words, the book is a technology, not some sort of eternal paper essence born from the brow of Zeus as Kirsch seems to believe. The "mental experiences, provoked by works of art and history" that Kirsch celebrates are anything but "mental"; they are anchored in a concrete physical apparatus whose powers and limits are informed by its design, by the practices of reading that it enables, by the sorts of knowledge forms that shape and constrain it, and by the very real institutions—from public libraries and museums to colleges and universities—that enable, teach, and value cultural literacy. In short, Kirsch's notion that the Humanities are *external* to "technology" or that the books that he prizes aren't themselves technological artifacts is demonstrably false.

A second point: Among the five co-authors of *Digital_Humanities*, not one of us teaches in an English department. All are engaged not just in digitally based work, but also in the writing, making, and design of physical books. Some are physical books that, like *Digital_Humanities*, experiment with innovative approaches to book design or print-plus publishing models; others are learned, critical, archivally researched traditional books; others still are creative projects. The placement of our work—in such diverse fields as philology, medieval studies, art history, German studies, media history, architecture, information studies, and design—within a disciplinary lineage in which "tradition" is equated with crusty Anglo-American practices such as the New Criticism misses the point. Not to mention that contemporary literary scholars will laugh at Kirsch's characterization of new critical practices as "thriving." But the deeper problem is his dichotomy between the digital and the non-digital, the pixel and the page. We are all trained humanists who work with, interpret, write about, and teach diverse aspects of the cultural record of humankind—and we do so with a wide-range of tools and sources, including ones that are textual, visual, sonic, artifactual, experiential, and digital.

Third, the notion that so called "digital humanities" is characterized by an urge "to accelerate the work of thinking by delegating it to a computer" is patently nonsensical. Throughout *Digital_Humanities* we argue not "to throw off the traditional burden" but, on the contrary, for a critical and transformative engagement that is rooted in the very traditions of humanistic inquiry. If Kirsch did some close-reading of the book, he would

find it to be a celebration not of the digital—as some starry-eyed salvific or materialist ideology—but of the vitality and necessity of the humanities.

And such a critical, creative, and imaginative engagement between "the digital" and "the humanities" requires an expansion of the field of humanistic inquiry in ways that leverage the power of data sets, computational analyses, design-centered thinking, and the interpretation of cultural repositories that far exceed the cognitive or analytical abilities of the normative Humanist. The task requires well-informed critical methods and forms of interrogation that belong to the present age, not the sorry "posture of skepticism" that Kirsch imagines in his urge to enforce simpleminded dichotomies. Nobody is arguing that the "digital humanities" are handing over reading, writing, thinking, and creating to "the computer," which spits out data as culturally redundant truisms. Instead, we advocate for emerging genres, methods, knowledge formations, and new publics for the humanities, which not only use but also design digital tools to, among other things, animate archives in new ways, map and visualize data at scale, test assumptions and hypotheses rooted in source material using gaming environments and virtual worlds technologies, and provide new models of access to and engagement with knowledge.

Yes, it is an exciting time to be a humanist—except for Kirsch, who we assume sees himself as one of those lofty, solitary thinkers who need not sully themselves with the "banausic" understandings of the media by and through which they communicate. In

epochs of great change, however, this can be quite limiting, in all its ideological purity. If a pearl-clutching reviewer refers only to "the authors" of a work he misreads, never naming them in the main body of his text, he could have relied upon a sidebar listing to do the work for him—in the age of print. However, those "authors" remain entirely anonymous when read on most mobile devices. We are not, however, anonymous.

Instead, we are rather yours truly,

Anne Burdick, Johanna Drucker, Peter Lunenfeld, Todd Presner, and Jeffrey Schnapp