# Debates in the Digital Humanities

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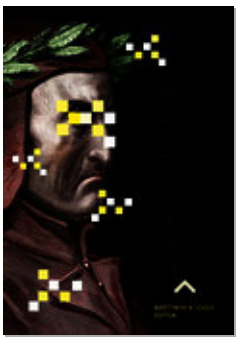

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## There Are No Digital Humanities

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Building on the work of Jean-François Lyotard and Gilles Deleuze in *The Postmodern Condition* and "Postscript on Societies of Control," respectively, let us pursue a little further the hypothesis that the externalization of knowledge onto computers, databases, and more recently mobile media environments, networked servers, and the cloud is involved in the constitution of a different form of society and human subject. To what extent do such developments cast the so-called computational turn in the humanities in a rather different light to the celebratory data fetishism that has come to dominate this rapidly emerging field? Is the direct, practical use of techniques and methodologies drawn from computer science and various fields related to it here, too, helping to produce a major alteration in the status and nature of knowledge and indeed the human subject? I'm thinking not just of the use of tools such as Anthologize, Delicious, Juxta, Mendeley, Pliny, Prezi, and Zotero to structure and disseminate scholarship and learning in the humanities. I also have in mind the generation of dynamic maps of large humanities data sets and employment of algorithmic techniques to search for and identify patterns in literary, cultural, and filmic texts as well as the way in which the interactive nature of much digital technology is enabling user data regarding people's creative activities with this media to be captured, mined, and analyzed by humanities scholars.

To be sure, in what seems to be almost the reverse of the situation Lyotard describes in *The Postmodern Condition*,[1] many of those in the humanities—and this includes some of the field's most radical thinkers—*do* now appear to be looking increasingly to science (*and* technology *and* mathematics), if not necessarily computer science specifically, to provide their research with a degree of legitimacy. Witness Franco "Bifo" Berardi's appeal to "the history of modern chemistry on the one hand, and the most recent cognitive theories on the other" (121) for confirmation of the compositionist philosophical hypothesis in his book *The Soul at Work*: "There is no object, no existent, and no person: only aggregates, temporary atomic compositions, figures that the human eye perceives as stable but that are indeed mutational, transient, frayed and indefinable" (120). It is this hypothesis, derived

from Democritus, that Bifo sees as underpinning the methods of both the schizo-analysis of Deleuze and Guattari and the Italian Autonomist Theory on which his own compositionist philosophy is based. Can this turn toward the sciences (if there has indeed been such a turn, a question that is worthy of further examination) be regarded as a response on the part of the humanities to the perceived lack of credibility, if not obsolescence, of *their* metanarratives of legitimation: the life of the spirit and the Enlightenment but also Marxism, psychoanalysis, and so forth? Indeed, are the sciences today to be regarded as answering many humanities questions more convincingly than the humanities themselves?

While ideas of this kind are perhaps a little bit too neat and symmetrical to be entirely convincing, this "scientific turn" in the humanities *has* been attributed by some to a crisis of confidence. It is a crisis brought about, if not by the lack of credibility of the humanities' metanarratives of legitimation exactly then at least in part by the "imperious attitude" of the sciences. This attitude has led the latter to colonize the humanists' space in the form of biomedicine, neuroscience, theories of cognition, and so on (Kagan, 227).[2] Is the turn toward computing just the latest manifestation of and response to this crisis of confidence in the humanities? Can we go even further and ask, is it evidence that certain parts of the humanities are attempting to increase *their* connection to society[3] and to the instrumentality and functionality of society especially? Can it be merely a coincidence that such a turn toward computing is gaining momentum at a time when the UK government is emphasizing the importance of the STEMs (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) and withdrawing support and funding for the humanities? Or is one of the reasons all this is happening now due to the fact that the humanities, like the sciences themselves, are under pressure from government, business, management, industry, and increasingly the media to prove they provide value for money in instrumental, functional, performative terms? Is the interest in computing a strategic decision on the part of some of those in the humanities? As Dan Cohen and Fred Gibbs's project to text mine "the 1,681,161 books that were published in English in the UK in the long nineteenth century" shows, one can get funding from the likes of Google (Cohen, "Searching"). In fact, in the summer of 2010 "Google awarded $1 million to professors doing digital humanities research" (Cohen, "Digital Keys"; see also Orwant).

To what extent, then, is the take up of practical techniques and approaches from computing science providing some areas of the humanities with a means of defending (and refreshing) themselves in an era of global economic crisis and severe cuts to higher education, through the transformation of their knowledge and learning into quantities of information—deliverables? Can we even position the computational turn as an event created to justify such a move on the part of certain elements within the humanities (Frabetti)? And does this mean that, if we don't simply want to go along with the current movement *away* from what remains resistant to a general culture of measurement and calculation and *toward* a concern to legitimate power and control by optimizing the system's efficiency, we would be better

off using a different term than "digital humanities"? After all, the idea of a computational turn implies that the humanities, thanks to the development of a new generation of powerful computers and digital tools, have somehow *become* digital, or are in the process of *becoming* digital, or are at least coming to terms with the digital and computing (Frabetti). Yet one of the things I am attempting to show by drawing on the thought of Lyotard, Deleuze, and others is that the digital is not something that can now be *added to* the humanities—for the simple reason that the (supposedly predigital) humanities can be seen to have *already had* an understanding of and engagement with computing and the digital.

## NOTES

This chapter originally appeared as "On the Limits of Openness V: There Are No Digital Humanities," *Media Gifts*, January 12, 2011. http://www.garyhall.info/journal/2011/1/12/on-the-limits-of-openness-v-there-are-no-digital-humanities.html.

1. In *The Postmodern Condition*, Jean-François Lyotard showed how science, lacking the resources to legitimate itself as true, had since its beginnings with Plato relied for its legitimacy on precisely the kind of knowledge it did not even consider to be knowledge: nonscientific narrative knowledge. Specifically, science legitimated itself by producing a discourse called philosophy. It was philosophy's role to generate a discourse of legitimation for science. Lyotard proceeded to define as modern any science that legitimated itself in this way by means of a metadiscourse that explicitly appealed to a grand narrative of some sort: the life of the spirit, the Enlightenment, progress, modernity, the emancipation of humanity, the realization of the Idea.

2. Interestingly, for Kagan, "The scientists' intrusions into the philosophers' territory, which robbed the latter of part of their mission, forced them to find another assignment and many selected analyses of the coherence of the scientists' semantic texts" (Kagan, 228).

3. As Kirschenbaum writes, "Whatever else it might be then, the digital humanities today is about a scholarship (and a pedagogy) that is publicly visible in ways to which we are generally unaccustomed, a scholarship and pedagogy that are bound up with infrastructure in ways that are deeper and more explicit than we are generally accustomed to, a scholarship and pedagogy that are collaborative and depend on networks of people and that live an active 24/7 life online. Isn't that something you want in your English department?"

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