

As Study or as Paradigm? Humanities and the Uptake of Emerging Technologies

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1. What's New About New?: Humanities, New Media, Disciplinary Power

This paper takes a broad perspective on the disciplinary formations represented by digital humanities and new media within the academic humanities. In doing this analysis, I show that the gap between digital humanities and new media, the subject of this panel, is the result of incompatible institutional functions. I consider today digital humanities and new media studies as two strategies of containment by which the academic humanities incorporates but also ignores new ideas, which I call the paradigm and the study. These two strategies are the ways in which the disciplines of the humanities absorb challenges to core methodologies from ideas from outside this core. In the first of these strategies, the paradigm, a new methodology or series of questions to be asked of a textual artifact is generated in the humanities, generally by the importation of some foreign methodological framework. This paradigmatic model, I suggest, is at work in the formation of digital humanities as a field of academic inquiry but is also what drove the creation of Theory and other hermeneutic forms of criticism in years past. The second model of new disciplinary forms is what I call study. In this model, new classes of textual artifacts—whether they be from a specific ethnic group, unified by a common subject matter, or emerging from a specific historical period—are found to fall under the purview of the academic humanities and can be studied using a variety of methodologies. In this paper, I suggest that the field of new media is one such example

of this kind of formation, but this formation can also be found to underscore the logic of periodization in literary studies and the creation of various area and ethnic studies programs in the modern university.

While I am aware of the fact that this binarization of academic humanities knowledge production steamrolls over many of the more subtle aspects of work being done in both digital humanities and new media studies, this panel intends to address an observed gap in discourse and I feel that stark structural thinking is one of the best means for accomplishing this task. In analyzing this division in knowledge formations, I show that a paradigm is an institutional knowledge form focused on the production of textual interpretation and the study is a way of filling gaps in curricular and cultural knowledge. Both, I suggest, are strategies that seek to marginalize and ignore much more profound advancements. In digital humanities and new media, specifically, we find a moment where this core advancement, the computer, may be ignored at our peril.

2. Building Better Sausage: Paradigms, Theory, Digital Humanities

In a 2010 blog post, Luke Waltzer, an educational technology specialist at Baruch College, laments the increasing focus, amongst digital humanities scholars, on what he calls “careerism” and the celebration of “scholarship much more deeply and publicly than teaching and learning” (Waltzer, “On EdTech and the Digital Humanities”). For Waltzer, at the moment of the oft-invoked “crisis in the humanities,” when budgetary and even philosophical support are eroding for a humanities education generally, this focus on scholarship and, as he describes it, “the ‘I’m okay, you’re okay’ ‘RT congrats!’ cliquishness” that permeates the Twitter-driven “hive mind” that often serves as the public face of the digital humanities, deflect more productive discussions from the general declining support for all humanities, digital or analog, within the modern university. Waltzer concludes his post by merely noting this discomfort, but I wish to begin here by suggesting that the focus on scholarship is a result of digital humanities role as the new critical paradigm.

I draw my usage of “paradigm” from Thomas Kuhn’s now famous work, *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*. Briefly, Kuhn understands knowledge production in the sciences as a suc-

cession of “great works” that reshape human understanding of reality. For Kuhn, the great works of science are “sufficiently unprecedented to attract an enduring group of adherents away from competing modes of scientific activity” and “sufficiently open-ended to leave all sorts of problems for the redefined group of practitioners to resolve” (Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*10). In Kuhn’s model, then, scientific practice is dominated by a generally held, foundational theory called a paradigm. As a paradigm’s dominance extends temporally, more and more challenges to its validity arise. Eventually, these challenges add up and a new theory causes a theoretical crisis that resolves into a new, better paradigm. When one of these new theories infrequently becomes a new paradigm, the work of other scientists then becomes focused on testing and refining the new scientific paradigm.

For Kuhn, this course of scientific progress is non-cumulative. In fact, essentially, competing paradigms emerge as separate linguistic systems for explaining reality. Kuhn compares these competitions to political ideologies, writing that “like the choice between competing political institutions, that between competing paradigms proves to be a choice between incompatible models of community life” (94). Competing and incompatible models of communities, I think, often mirrors the critical climate of the academic humanities, especially following the introduction of deconstruction and Theory in the 1970s.

Jeffrey Nealon, in his account of the rise and fall of deconstructive criticism, *Double Reading: Postmodernism After Deconstruction*, documents the ways in which, for better or for worse, literary critics in America followed the Yale school, led by Paul de Man and J. Hills Miller, in practicing a mutated form of deconstruction on literary texts. This mutated deconstruction, Nealon suggests, is specifically packaged for literary analysis and does not fully represent Derrida’s project:

Deconstruction was, to put it bluntly, commodified for an American market, simplified and watered down for use in how-to books, which give an entire generation of literature students a suspiciously de Manian overview of what was supposedly Derrida’s work. (Nealon, *Double reading*28)

In Nealon’s account, a misreading of the concept of “undecidability” in the work of Paul de Man leads to a pre-packaged critical machinery. I like to imagine this machinery as a meat grinder that

accepts text as input and produces readings output.

Later in Nealon's book, he finds a new act of misreading producing new and different flavors of sausage being ground in the the New Historicist's appropriation of the work of Michel Foucault. In noting this occurrence, Nealon discusses a model of critical schools very similar to the Kuhnian account of a paradigm that we have been building:

If one were to plot schematically the rise and fall of theories in literature departments, one could rather easily tie the rise of Michel Foucault's genealogical discourse to the fall of Derrida's deconstruction. In fact, Foucault's thought first comes on the American literary critical scene thematized as a socially and institutionally engaged alternative to what many politically oriented critics saw as the paralyzing textualism of Derrida and his disciples at Yale. (50)

Nealon continues this discussion of new historicism by pointing out that, just as with the Yale school of deconstruction, this methodology has very little to do with the actual arguments made by the French thinker associated with its founding. In both cases, we find, instead, a pre-packaged model for producing published work within the contexts of the academic humanities.

This commodification, as Nealon calls it, suggests the reason for the careerism lamented by Waltzer in the digital humanities: the role of these critical paradigms, ultimately, is in satisfying the needs of a publication driven profession. This makes the most sense if we continue into the present the historical progression of paradigms offered in Nealon's *Double Reading*: from New Criticism to Deconstruction and on into New Historicism we then could suggest a broadly Deleuzian critical project concerned with the circulation of affect as the next major critical paradigm. After that, I think we can all agree, we find the digital humanities as the next major paradigm of textual interpretation.

I do not say this to dismiss the digital humanities. There is a quantitative difference between the advantages afforded by the computer as critical adjunct and the advantages afforded by the search for binary oppositions and metaphoric language within a poem, for instance. Instead, I bring up the succession of paradigms within the academic humanities in order to suggest the kind of critical formation represented by the digital humanities. When we say that a gap exists between digital humanities and new media, it is because of institutional concerns that digital humanities addresses,

specifically the need for publication.

Digital humanities is, ultimately, a way of doing textual criticism. In fact, following Kuhn's ideas about paradigms in the sciences, we can suggest that digital humanities is a specialized set of assumptions about how texts work and what makes them interesting. To return to Waltzer's question about why digital humanities discourse often seems uninterested in responding to the budgetary erosion crisis facing the humanities, we can suggest that all critical paradigms in the academic humanities instead respond to the crisis of exhaustion felt around the process of literary criticism generally: the idea that we have run out of things to say about literature. Digital humanities, by being the newest critical paradigm, imports various computational techniques into literary studies to once again revitalize the operation of criticism within humanities departments.

3. Knowledge Ghettos: New Media, Area Studies, Compartmentalization

While digital humanities as an institutional formation attempts to embed computer culture within a temporal succession of competing critical paradigms, new media studies manifests a spatial containment strategy around this same object of study. During the period described by Nealon in my earlier discussion of the paradigm, another major aspect of humanities work in the university was the proliferation of various academic units that all end in "studies." These departments, of course, have a much older and longer history than the various critical struggles in literary criticism, but we can think of the creation of fields such as women's studies or French studies as occupying a similar position with the rise of a professionalized professorate in the American university system. We can broadly consider this rise in such fields as a force in the production of new media as an autonomous field.

Similarities between this formation and the critical paradigm can be seen in Gayatri Spivak's *Death of a Discipline*, an account of the decline of comparative literature and area studies. In this work, Spivak notes a similar issue at hand in global literature and culture fields as Nealon notes in the incorporation of Theory into literary studies: "students in Taiwan or Nigeria will learn about the literatures of the world through English translations organized by the United States" (Spivak,

Death of a Disciplinexii). As with the paradigm above, we find a process where some form of a disciplinary outside is commodified in some way through professional practice. Spivak uses this moment of commodification to reflect on the “colonialism of European national language-based Comparative Literature and the Cold War format of Area Studies” (11). For her, these disciplines, one created by intellectuals fleeing European fascism and the other created to fill the ranks of the Cold War civil service with usefully educated individuals, wall off the subjects of the Global South, for instance, and privilege the translator as a kind of native guide to literature in a number of non-hegemonic languages. Spivak argues, ultimately, that the way out of this exclusion and commodification of global culture is through a focus on planetarity, a cognitive move beyond the limiting boundaries of the nation-state or area and into a criticism that acknowledges the vast network of global diaspora that makes up lived cultural experiences for much of humanity.

The reason this observation is so crucial can be found in other critics of area studies and similarly global disciplines. Put simply, the trouble, as documented in a myriad of scholarly accounts of the crisis in area studies, is the increasing isolation from one another felt by various global studies fields. Just as we saw with paradigms, creating a unique and independent area study field, such as new media studies, manifests a distinct critical language. The creation of field-specific language is not unique to area studies, of course, but the problem is that this linguistic gap is often felt as isolation.

In the mid-90s, with the rising popularity of globalization as an analytic framework, a number of scholarly articles emerged to suggest that the Balkanization of global studies programs was incapable of addressing a global world. In Ravi Palat’s account of this phenomenon, Palat refers to the creation of area studies programs as “the partition of the globe into several antiseptically sealed compartments” that “renders them unable to analyze the consequences of the globalization of networks of material and cultural production” (Palat, “Fragmented Visions: Excavating the Future of Area Studies in a Post-American World”87). This idea of hermetically sealed compartments as incapable of speaking the global experience of culture is common in the body of literature on the failures of the area as an organizing principle for a study. At the same time that this critique of in-

sularity occurs in global studies, however, we see a proliferation of new studies in the humanities, including new media studies (other examples could include animal studies and disability studies).

The problem, then, with new media studies is that, by isolating its object of studies, the discourse isolates itself from the broader currents of humanities work. This isolation, I would argue, is not accidental but the direct result of the way in which studies are constituted in the humanities. As Spivak suggests in *Death of a Discipline*, the study of national literatures often allow the other to appear but not in a specific or dangerous manner. This would appear, then, to be the case with new media, as well: it allows the massive changes to our culture introduced by the computer to appear but not in any fundamental way.

4. Say “Yes” to Computers: From Digital Humanities to Digital Humanity

This inaccurate incorporation is a major feature of both Nealon and Spivak’s analysis of paradigms and studies. Much of Nealon’s analysis of deconstruction is an impassioned plea for the reexamination of “deconstruction as a *philosophy*” and no longer merely as a method of literary analysis, as Derrida’s philosophy, in contrast to the de Manian methodology that came to stand in its place in literary Theory still has much to offer students of culture and literature. Similarly, Spivak’s analysis of the state of comparative literature and the possibility of a truly planetary field for the discipline partly hinges on the fact that the use of translation as a native guide to a language’s literature does not allow the other to actively emerge in the field of study. In concluding this discussion of strategies of containment within the academic humanities, I want to begin to question what aspects of computers, then, are being discarded by the two presently discussed fields.

Moreover, I want to suggest that these strategies of containment are more accurately thought of as a quarantine. In thinking of the power relationships at the core of area studies, both Nealon and Spivak suggest that the violent appropriations of other ideas into institutionally acceptable forms foreclose certain powerful opportunities to truly create something new within our discipline. Is digital humanities merely another flavor-of-the-week and new media merely another small, underfunded area studies department destined for the ashcan of budget reductions? If this is the case,

and it seems that it might be, this is specifically worrying given the fact that these two disciplines are the two attempts by the humanities to account for the massive sea changes brought about by the computer and the massive informational networks upon which our lives increasingly depend.

At the same time, it seems disingenuous (or at least overly repetitive of previous theoretical controversies) to suggest that everyone *must* study digital humanities or *must* study new media. The question to ask, instead, is to think through the possibility of breaking quarantine and moving towards a more general engagement with computation. I would suggest, by way of thinking through this general engagement, that one possibility for beginning may be the acquisition of a more general informational awareness on the part of humanities faculty. We do not all need to change our paradigms or move to a new study, but we have to understand the world that has been created by information technology, because this is increasingly where we all live and work.

Works Cited

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