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A DECONSTRUCTION OF THE HUMANITIES: DIGITALIZATION AND POSTHUMANISM AS TOOL OR TOTALIZATION?

Abstract: While the traditional humanities have utilized digitalization as a tool in research and archival work, the so-called “digital humanities” calls the human aspects of the field into question, suggesting the human mind is nothing more than a computing device. The danger of detaching the human quality from human endeavor or study has proven historically disastrous. As in deconstruction, the digital humanities totalizes cultural investigation as predictable calculation, particularly in education, where the humanities would stand against reductivity. It is involved in the discounting of the liberal arts education in the U. S. and Europe for “employable skills,” and provides a school of thought that also impinges on the very concept of the EU.

Key words: *digital humanities, posthuman, humanities, totalization, education, liberal arts, cultural studies, EU, USA*

I

The concept of digital humanities at first glance seems like everything else that has emerged or been transfigured by the virtualized/internet/digitalization era. But while we all will admit to using the web and its digitalized libraries and database sources in a way that none of us imagined just 15 years ago – the concept of accessing international libraries and in one’s proverbial night clothes at 3 am, is a tool and a burden. The latter we know well from the realization that the digitalized world has not saved humanity time for other endeavors, but has actually fostered an environment in which we are expected to do more, given the ease of communication and resourcing, and has tied us on an almost anti-social level to the pseudo social aspects of digitalized phones, sites, and false friends. Digitalization as tool sounds practical particularly given the new wave notion of digital humanities, but

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it can also strike an all too familiar chord of disinformation: is digital humanities a means for expanding the access to the field of the humanities or the actual negation of the human cultural aspect of humanities. Is digital plotting, examination and assessment in the humanities, not the ultimate surrender to those various sources in intellectual life, which claim that humanities is dying or has already died, in higher education in the U. S – less so in Europe – because it is not the road to direct employment. Of course, the very notion of digitalizing the humanities to kill off the liberal arts and humanist studies for something that is marketable is an irony that has yet to hit.

But what exactly is digital humanities and why the fear, not only for liberal arts in academe, but in the very use of this discipline for humanist intentions that need to be explored outside the technological and the fiscal. The idea, for instance, that good, old fashioned humanities, that is the study of the human culture in a given area or time, could do to remind us why the European Union exists, beyond financial failures in part caused by international corporations that have set up scales based in digital evaluations rather than in human and cultural scope. To destroy the financial reputation of a European nation by simply removing a plus after its triple A rating is the ultimate use of the floating signifiers of postmodernity, which reference nothing but themselves. The power of such assignments, spat out by faceless digital analysis that demand a nation act one way or another and which ruptures its relationship with its nations in union, is perhaps the most telling danger in fostering the detachment of humanistic study and comprehension in international relations and in the multi-lateral agreements of industrialized nations. Woe to the less or unindustrialized in which colonialist era damage or Marxist exploitation in which a set of numbers on a grid that spell out both past and future has already been the very bane of its history.

It seems that while researchers in the humanities have developed corpora, such as digitized collections of historical texts, along with the digital tools and methods to analyze them, their aim is to uncover new knowledge and to visualize research data in new and revealing ways. The so-called digital humanities, however, represent the cutting-edge intersection of the humanities and computer science, the merging of skills and points of view from two very different fields that are leading to supposed innovation and opportunities for students who want to enter fields related to everything from writing computer programs to text encoding and text editing, electronic publishing, interface design, and archive construction. Students in the digital humanities are trained to deal with concrete issues related to intellectual property and privacy, and with questions related to public access and methods of text preservation.

Without doubt, current trends in the scientific understanding of humanity are nevertheless calling the basic category of “human” into question. Examples of these trends are assertions by cognitive scientists that the mind is simply a computing device, by geneticists that human beings are no more than ephemeral husks used by self-propagating genes, or by bioengineers who claim that the abomination of human/non-human hybrids are very possible. Rather than engage with old-style

humanist scholarship, posthumanists in particular tend to be more concerned with testing and altering the limits of our mental and physical capacities in fields such as cognitive science and bioengineering in order to transcend the essentially bodily limitations that have bounded humanity. Despite the criticism of humanities scholarship as obsolete, however, many of the most influential posthumanist works are profoundly engaged with the non-scientific in film and literary criticism, history, and cultural studies.

The specter here recalls the theoretical concept of deconstruction which for a few decades before the 1990 s appeared to be gaining idolatry as the universal critical solution. It was to be the sole methodology by which one could dispel the archaic artistic notions of patriarchal style, genre, and social strife with a purity that would free one of such bias in the study and realization of language and communication. Its denial of the very humanist focus of any given literary text for instance, through a hyper-rationalism that I will come back to, managed to actually convince educators and the educated that a creative text is nothing more than linguistic patterns. Any other meaning is negligible. I found myself confronted with this shock of the “new” while considering what to write on for my doctorate at the start of the 1990 s. It came in the form of a critically praised 600 + page analysis of Alfred Döblin’s 1929 novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz* that mentions the novel only a handful of times in the many pages of its own self-reflection as jargon laden metatheory. Worst of all, the politics, the sociopolitical critical reason for the writing of the novel in a Weimar Germany teetering on the edge of the Nazi abyss in the first place, had been all but detached, even discarded as a worthless idealistic projection.

I do not need to recall what the aim of detaching human value and human interaction from an artistic or culturally defining creation leads to, whether it be in politics, sociology, psychology, philosophy, history, gender studies, etc. Europe has suffered to near destruction from such anti-humanist engineering (from the political right and the left) for most of the last century. Deconstruction’s grandfather, Paul de Man’s anti-Semitic Nazi era essays would give him a perfectly logical reason to later demonstrate how a text has no political (read: humanistic) value beyond the study of its linguistic pattern. This old news is worthy only of mention because it is non-digital humanism that reminds us that we write, film, build, study and create for a purpose that cannot be quantified, and should not be quantified simply because the tools are now available, and which questions a new age academe that has decided to follow the enterprise mode of creating a shorter distance, an anti-intellectual reductivity between education and gainful employment. As David Brooks so succinctly put it in a *New York Times* reportage on the crisis in Humanities in 2010: “When the going gets tough, the tough take accounting.”[1]

The dehumanization of humanistic tendencies are the results of a self-idolizing pseudo-rationalism, which is part of the whim of postmodernism, but of course, has previously been known for perverting the notions of the enlightenment into the worship of other reductive public engineering: social Darwinism, divisive constructions of class, race and gender, euthanasia, and the endgame of eugenics. The justification for these and other anti-humanistic patterns in an imagined improve-

ment in the value of the traditional humanities, was always draconian, the results among the darkest moments in human history. It is not surprising that Nazism especially liked to couch its ideology in actual eighteenth century Enlightenment paradigms (Lessing, Kant, Goethe), to move these beyond the concept of humanism, into the conception of the faceless post-bourgeois human, for a genetic and socially constructed existence, based on a false hyper-rationalism that obliterates the very understanding of the reasons for the Enlightenment and humanism in the first place. The false equation that at first seemed to be the perfect link for a humane and scientific society in German neoclassicism: harmony = truth = beauty, was nothing more than an entry for social construction and not social understanding.

I return to the current state of popular digital humanities, that helpful friend of the overtaxed, underpaid scholar and researcher, who can be spared a costly visit to global archives and libraries with a click of an access code and a printer. Who would think that something so useful to the process of scholarship and criticism might carry within it the seeds of its own damage and decline? Or consider the justification by postmodernists and posthumanists that the millennial generation already does not think in cause-and effect rationality, but in a fragmented mosaic of thoughts and concepts freely crossing keyboards in nano-seconds, for the demonization and abandonment of “old-fashioned” and humane cultural study. Yet, Fortune 500 corporations internationally now openly claim that it is the candidate or employee with the background in the liberal arts, or in a traditional humanities grounded, non-specific employment-aimed study that are not only the fastest risers in their fields but also those most favored to get the job. [2] Where is the disconnect? Is it in the new business models of academe?

II

Like the claim that deconstruction was the only worthy methodology for late twentieth century cultural analysis, and its ultimate demise caused by its own self-imposed limitations and resistance to the multiverse of human creativity, there is a disengagement between those factions encouraging digital humanities as the savior of higher education in its promise of progress and employment, and the actual use of traditional humanities in globalized industry. Again, David Brooks observed in the New York Times: “when the job market worsens, many students figure they can’t indulge in an English or a history major,” a fact that explains why the “humanities now play bit roles when prospective students take their college tours. The labs are more glamorous than the libraries.”[3] Traditionalists argue that emphasizing professional skills would betray the humanities’ responsibility to honor culture for its own sake. Revisionists argue that emphasizing the practical skills of analysis and communication in the humanities would make the humanities complicit with dominant social values and ideologies. Even more pessimistically, Frank Donoghue argues that the humanities will simply disappear in the new corporate, vocation-centered university.[4] Google, the seeming mega-enabler of digital humanities, has, however, praised traditional humanities students and intends to re-

cruit many of them. “We are going through a period of unbelievable growth,” reports Google’s Marissa Mayer, “and will be hiring about 6,000 people this year – and probably 4,000–5,000 from the humanities or liberal arts” [5]

This evidence of the professional utility of true humanities skills belies Donoghue’s apparent assumption that the “the corporate world’s hostility” toward humanistic education remains as intense today as it was a century ago, when industrialists like Andrew Carnegie dismissed such an education as “literally, worthless.” [6] So we return to a past future that maintained it would be the industrialization of humanity rather than the study of humanities in the industrialized world that would lead us to a more prosperous and equalizing future. The failure of this line of thought is crowned with the tragedy that a Europe so weaned on classical education and Judeo-Christian humanism could misunderstand or abandon its rearing for a technocratic *Weltanschauung* with the final stop being genocide – or as we have experienced it more recently in politically-correct-speak: “ethnic cleansing.” Once again, hyper-rationalism and the abandonment of the human culture for expedient “scientific” solutions was the culprit. Digital humanities might well become our era’s dystopic enabler. Should this be brushed off as the stuff of science fiction film, we must realize that even the very future of cinema has been affected. As filmmakers move from celluloid to the digital, we are also met with visions that discard the problematic, moving, educating humanism of what was once put on celluloid, and was real, even in its studio-set fantasy, for a set of digital codes with no true visual perspective in its computer generated image. The ease in which film students can translate their visions with digital cameras notwithstanding, it has been reported that the rush to complete filmic digitalization is by no means fully embraced by even popular Hollywood filmmakers, who are being forced to change for the sake of cost and feel the “loss of the human eye and touch.” [7]

As early as 2004, K. Anthony Appiah insisted that the humanities must survive the quantification revolution that digital humanities is really all about:

The notion that mathematical techniques are intrinsically inimical to humanistic inquiry is mistaken. But it is supported by various common confusions. One is the assumption that the use of mathematics involves the reduction of the qualitative to the quantitative, understood as the countable or the measurable. Thus mathematics is supposed to commit one to the thought that what is significant in, say, a poem is some set of features that can be counted or measures and ... that given a mathematical treatment, these measures or numbers somehow cause significance. [8]

There is, in fact, no greater reason for resisting the application of mathematical methods to humanistic questions than there would be for resisting their application to questions in the social sciences, or even biology. Appiah concludes: “So while we should concede that there is resistance among many humanists to the use of mathematical techniques, this resistance is, so to speak, sociological fact, not based on anything intrinsic” He further notes the already given importance of linguistics, carbon dating, genomic analysis, and computerization in the use of humanistic study for some time, but insists that “the tools of these other disciplines are merely tools here.”[9]

Human purposes evolve and cannot be catalogued or even calculated in advance. Appiah points to variants of value that digital humanities could never comprehend in its language: "There is an answer to the question why there are more essays on Rembrandt's paintings than on Ruysdale's ... a reason that Mozart's works have received more attention than Salieri's, a significance to the greater attention paid to Jane Austin than to Walter Scott." [10] Appiah's point is that there is no one point, not in the study, use and application of humanities. The field is composed of complex evaluations that underlie differentiation and differentiated attentions. So while the computations of digitalization are valid on some level, they are only valid on one of many levels and cannot revolutionize the study of humanities, but merely add one more human development to be used and perhaps be studied as well – in the larger scope of humanities. We must not forget that the study of humanities involves theories and conditions of earlier times, times that have little interest or relationship to the digital world but are of great importance to traditional humanities, so that the study of philosophers, writers and artists from earlier centuries leads to an understanding of the fullness of the human experience, not simply reductive calculations about the human mind. That can well be studied from contemporary mentalities. Changes of centuries are only comprehensible in humanistic, cultural terms, not in the biologicistic or evolutionary.

III

How does this mode of post-humanist humanities relates to the current post-modern European experience? Humanities and liberal arts study remain a "European" aspect to higher education in the U. S. Perhaps this very prejudice points out the need for more not less humanities study in America, in which quantification for assessment of learning curves in impossible to quantify areas as basic as world cultural study, as arguable as gender and ethnic roles, and as necessarily emotional as the reception of various sociopolitical stimuli in historical literature and cinema provides the true waste of time on the desired shorter road from academe to employment. As to notion that Europe is more humane, have we forgotten so soon that the dream of the European Union was a cultural/and sociopolitical one, a two World War corrective, and that the digital mapping in the guise of the Euro was but a secondary recognition of the strong and evolving sociocultural elements that bind us together in a long and very un-reducible history. It was to be an abstract medal awarded to the nations that came into the union and now, manipulated, abstracted, and responding to calculation (pun intended), it threatens to overshadow every other tangible aspect of what pan-Europeanism is actually about. In the immediate post-Soviet Europe of the early 1990 s, it was said that the division of Europe would take on an impossible schism now that the ideological/idealisms of the twentieth century will have crumbled along with the Berlin Wall. The new divide would be that Western Europe will have moved into a postmodern phase of regionalism, whereas the newly emerging democracies of the former Eastern Bloc will want to experience a modernistic national phase, which most had little time to un-

derstand after 1919. The problems with an EU expansion across a two post-Soviet neobloc Europe seemed clear. But what of the phantom center and the Central Europeans? Those cultures and countries once and again divided between two halves that in the wake of this dire prediction of EU failure from the 1990s on have indeed found adhesion in a historical, cultural, even emotional center, and with processes that recalled Europe of the past: from the shock of a reordered German experience, to the velvet revolution and quiet cleaving of Czechoslovakia, to the genocidal horrors brought on in an effort to regain sovereignty from the former Yugoslav construct. Today we sit here in Montenegro, one of the constructive results of that bloody process and can discuss the future of humanities in a way that no digitalization could predict. That is the triumph of the field, forever “traditional” and human in its scope. How can such developments be reduced purely to quantifiable outcomes or analysis, when the purposes of these actions deal with the ancient human spirit, historical determination, cultural identification, and simply the fatigue of “scientific-based” political idealism such as Marxism? Here is the true answer to the now cliché anti EU question: what does a businessman in Scotland have in common with a fisherman in Greece? The answer is still found in the traditional humanities education, in all its rich lessons of class, culture, nation, race, religion, gender, and historical geopolitics. While these particular aspects might be categorized and archived digitally, and providing great help for the researcher, they cannot be replaced by mathematical and scientific theory.

The information revolution, virtual realities, and instantaneous communication abilities have made us impatient. Perhaps it is also a lingering modernist obsession, born with the rationalism of the Age of Enlightenment and expanded with scientific method, that every question must have an answer, or better yet, and more so since the early years of this new century, the desire for answers to forestall the questions. The virulent fascist modernist outgrowth from liberal modernism has thus always remained a threat: if Umberto Eco’s postmodern “crisis of reason” threatens an already fluid situation in the self-definition of a culture, let alone, of a community of nations, then mathematical formulae can always reorder and define things without the messiness of the evolving human folly, spirit and desire for transcendence.

CONCLUSION

Just as the modernism born in imperial Vienna at the turn of the previous *fin de siècle* ultimately caused the polyglot Empire’s demise because it could not restructure itself to match its own progressive transcultural intellectualism and popular vision, so might whatever passes for postmodernity, spell trouble for our post-industrial globalist/imperialist realities. If modernism aspired to unity and linear progression – the melting pot, the singular ideal in a benevolent and controlled future – then postmodernism and its digitalization abandons any search for even the illusion of unity or identity in its collage of fragmented culture, which references its various surfaces with irony, often without clear purpose. The Generation X

and Y-ers and the so-called Gen-Millennialists of the Western world are the products and propellants of a culture based values that move dangerously beyond the virtual “game”: the bombardment of inhumane video and computer images; life in sanitized and isolated suburbs; the shopping mall as community of non-identity; the collapse of high and low art into self-reflexive parody; a distrust of the public sphere, political apathy, and an enshrinement of consumerist values, but without the progressive or “ennobling” quality of modern privilege.

Media has leveled the Western multiculturalism during much of the last century, but with virtual realities becoming the catch phrase for individual experiences and personal worlds, the “federation of cultures” which Randolph Bourne called America as early as 1916 is bound to follow suit, even for the EU. Virtual cultural democracies? Virtual regionalism? Erosion and irony are clearly the hallmarks of our era, which can virtually morph any image into anything else. But how does this new impermanence and fluidity of identity work in the reality of humanities education and its international engagement? The digital revolution in humanities seems a reactionary not a progressive attempt to control this by seeking to stabilize, or even freeze socioculture into correctable or even self-correcting patterns. Alternatively, the very nature of postmodern fragmentation is perhaps nothing more than indulgent and self-parodic individualism. If so, then digital humanities as it currently understands its own functions is certainly the “posthuman answer” to this crisis of reason. If significant portions of the human body can now be replaced with non-birth (transferred or artificial) organs and limbs, and the mind can be casually altered with chemical mood and emotion re-balancers, does this truly make us less human or suggest that our changing cultural projections are even more of a subject for humanistic study? How does such a posthuman status continue bind the individual to an identity and a nation to its history and its neighbors. Does Moody’s calculations of graded national economic ratings make any Eurozone country less European – or specifically less EU– in spirit and function, even in times of serious financial strife, or is this yet another aspect of the globalist totalization of value promised by digital humanities: artificially calculated and biased and avoiding the very humanist reason for a European unity based in an understanding of its historical, cultural and social needs?

This is not to say that while humanities students and scholars are trained to consider the ethical, moral, historical, cultural, philosophical dimensions of experience, the linking of humanities with the sciences as in the digital humanities as well as with commerce and industry would necessarily be anti-humanistic. However, blunting the critical power of the traditional humanities in academe in the U. S. and the EU for the sake of vocational training and the discarding of human culture is. How digitalization would *authentically* and constructively increase the abilities of humanities study has to be carefully observed and understood – through the concept of traditional humanities. For this vital area of human/e investigation can enter into interaction with other fields which might strengthen its purposes, but it cannot be displaced.

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