

The Benefits of Destruction: 'Ruining' the Digital Humanities

'Dropping the Digital' – Jentery Sayers

Jentery Sayers' contribution to *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2016 (DDH)* performs a two-pronged critique of both the DH movement as a whole, as well as notable articles from *DDH 2012*, utilising an innovative and subject-specific method of analysis known as Ruination. Such an approach – reflective of the Digital Humanities' core principles both in method and style – allows Sayers to examine the work of his peers within the broader context of the discipline, as well as recontextualising the terminology used therein as a means of exploring entirely new avenues of reasoning and reflecting on the proximity of the Digital Humanities to their traditional 'analogue' counterpart. Although the apparent simplicity of the technique (isolating the term 'digital' and removing it from a highlighted text) may appear trivial, it reflects on the data-driven nature of the Digital Humanities by adopting an immersive approach to their analysis, a notion highlighted by Sayers' eschewal of subheadings in favour of code strings.

'Ruinations point to possible trajectories without fully illuminating them, and they insinuate that the stuff of digital humanities has been insufficiently identified and described. They also underscore how digital humanities may differ from other strains of humanities and—most important—ask what else digital humanities could be, or should do, or might at least consider.'

Beyond the engaging reflexivity between style and method, Sayers' 'ruining' of such excerpts proves to be fruitful from the get-go. In dropping the term 'digital', the reader is immediately confronted with a palpable anxiety stemming from

having to confront the often undefined (or, at the very least, not coherently explored) tagline of the Digital Humanities as a whole. Despite the general agreement that the field benefits from a high level of interdisciplinarity, this may come at the cost of entirely dislocating its various branches, if they are not persistently re-examined in light of their origins and future trajectories. Does it stand up to scrutiny when fragmented, and is the movement progressing along a productive route? Or is it simply stagnating, exploring the same avenues as the 'analogue' humanities, but simply with a zany rebranding?

In answering this question, Sayers homes in on Alexis Lothian and Jayna Brown's *Social Text*, specifically their discussion of speculation as a means of experimenting with new possibilities, running counter to the juxtaposition of 'speculation' as a phenomenon of failing markets and the waning economic conditions they produce. His reading is in this case quite apt as far as the interdisciplinarity of the Digital Humanities is concerned: an ever-evolving plane for the future of the movement is capable of avoiding certain pitfalls and producing quality debate within it. Maintaining a reference point of antecedent experiments within the humanities more broadly, as well as reflecting on the various institutions which gird progress, is critical for maintaining this speculative quality.

Such speculation as to the potential futures of the Digital Humanities – supported by a fragmentation of their disciplinary code – is oddly reminiscent of *hyperstition*, a neologism of 'hyper' and 'superstition', coined by Warwick University's Cybernetic Culture Research Unit and used to describe the potential of specific information to shape the realities of its own reception when grounded in a reality, be that pop-cultural, religious, or economic.^[1] Hyperstition is, as Nick Land describes, '...a positive feedback circuit including culture as a component. It can be defined as the

experimental (techno-)science of self-fulfilling prophecies. Superstitions are merely false beliefs, but hyperstitions – by their very existence as ideas – function causally to bring about their own reality'. [2] Although criticised for its misappropriation of technical terminology in service of lending an appearance of complexity to the term (a-la Alan Sokal), the term nonetheless gels with Sayers' analysis of instrumentalism as a term which describes the use of 'instruments' to shape prospective outcomes within the field of technology studies[3]:

'...an instrument is treated naively or enthusiastically, as a mere vehicle for unambiguously converting input into output. By extension, the instrument determines cultural change. It is a positivist agent of progress that gains authority over time.'

Fundamentally, Sayers' use of Ruination as a critical tool is symbolically apt as well as being effective where analysis is concerned. As we build on the foundations of the Digital Humanities, we persistently reflect on the trajectories our work takes. Instead of being focussed entirely on merely the potential for new possibilities, it is critical to 'ruin' that which we already know, thereby exposing inherent faults, assumptions, or contrastingly, new paths and avenues for further development and experimentation. Such a focus on ruination will allow us, as digital humanists, to further the potentials of the field, whilst simultaneously keeping in view the ruins of institutions, practices, and ideologies which may impede such progress.

[1] A useful example here may be the introduction of the term 'cyberspace' into popular media through William Gibson's 1982

short story *Burning Chrome*. The term's usage as it enters the mainstream is permanently reflective of the genre's precepts, thereby determining the reality and context of the field to which is applied.

[2] Carsens, Delphi. Interview with Nick Land. Orphandrift, 2009.

<https://www.orphandriftarchive.com/articles/hyperstition-an-introduction/>

[3] See: Shalaginov, Denis, and Armen Aramyan. "From Anti-Oedipus to Anti-Hype: A Critique of Hyperstition." *Logos (Moscow, Russia)* 30, no. 5 (2020): 23–36. Unfortunately the text is in Russian, but if you are interested I would be more than happy to summarise it in more detail and translate some of the key points!

Works Cited

Delphi Carsens. Interview with Nick Land. Orphandrift, 2009.
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