

Whatâ??s wrong with the digital humanities

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Iâ??ve just read the online *Digital Humanities Manifesto* (2011). I wouldnâ??t have, were it not that Stanley Fish, the doyen and defender of the humanities, references it in his guest *Opinionator* blog post (2012). The *Digital Humanities Manifesto* appears with anonymous authorship on a dormant Wordpress blog site attached to the UCLA Digital Humanities research and teaching centre.

According to the manifesto, the *digital humanities* curate(s) online collections, and data mines large cultural data sets â?? emerging practices applicable to all fields. But â??the digital humanitiesâ?• also appears as a banner under which to challenge the practices of the humanities.



The manifesto applauds social media, crowdsourcing and the democratisation of knowledge. It favours integration, new ways of generating knowledge, and teamwork. It identifies those who donâ??t embrace this ethos as those who â??have rarely, if ever, built software, parsed code, created a database, or designed a user interface. They are uni-medium scholars (most likely of print) who have been lulled into centuries of somnolence.â?•

The manifesto laments whatâ??s happened in Universities since WWII, the â??proliferation of ever smaller and more rigorous areas of expertise and subexpertise, and the consequent emergence of private languages and specialized jargons.â?• (The quest to purge the humanities of jargon is presumably a work in progress. The manifesto asserts that â??it eschews disembodied Theory in favour of the nitty gritty of imagescapes and objecthood.â?•)

I like manifestos. They push matters to extremes, while keeping vague. They trade in contradictions and donâ??t burden the reader with complicated arguments. Manifestos also protect themselves under the mask of satire and irony, as if not to be taken entirely seriously â?? or are they? This particular manifesto concludes with hope of its own obsolescence. Perhaps it is outmoded after 3.5 years.

What is a discipline?

The humanities is a conveniently vague category, to criticise â?? and target for digital palliatives. The manifesto conflates a raft of disparate disciplines. It also confuses the content of humanities disciplines with institutional organisations. What is it that the advocates of the digital humanities seek to reform? Is

it history, literature, classics, philosophy, politics, film theory, architecture, etc, as bodies of knowledge, practices, communities, ideologies, factions, discourses, or the institutions, departments, groups, and individuals that nurture them?

In so far as itâ??s sensible for the digital humanities (as a movement) to press for reform, its injunctions could apply equally to universities as institutions (and all or any of their disciplines), not just the humanities. In any case, the challenge to the intellectual professions is a mood that started long before social media, and was in fact cultivated and generated from within humanities disciplines â?? the idea of the radical manifesto, Critical Theory, cultural studies, etc. The manifesto reads as a parodic debate between the putatively radical elements of the humanities against the silent conservatives. But itâ??s hard to criticise a field that already promotes, embraces, institutionalises and thrives on its own critique from within.

From what I read and study in the humanities, particularly its critical philosophies, the idea that â??the humanitiesâ?• now needs to get with the programme to increase its legitimacy looks like pretty thin critique. From my own particular perspective, the humanities serve not least as custodians of the *interpretive* arts, which in turn lead in all cultural understanding, to which even the sciences are subject. Not everyone in the humanities need agree with the *hermeneuts* and those of the *Geisteswissenschaften*, but thatâ??s the nature of scholarship.

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References

- Coyne, Richard. 2013. Even more than architecture. In M. Fraser (ed.), *Design Research in Architecture: An Overview*: 185-203. Farnham, England: Ashgate.
- Digital Humanities Manifesto: http://www.humanitiesblast.com/manifesto/Manifesto_V2.pdf
- Fish, Stanley. 2012. The digital humanities and the transcending of mortality. Opinionator, (January): online.

Notes

- See blog post Manifestos and madness, and posts on hermeneutics.
- The Digital Humanities manifesto also mentions Stanley Fish as emblematic of the breed of tenured, well-paid American academics operating in a restricted job market, which it also gripes against.
- The manifesto also charges the digital humanities with the task of studying and interrogating the cultural and social impact of new technologies. Itâ??s â??engaged in driving the creation of new technologies, methodologies, and information systems, as well as in their dÃ©tournment, reinvention, repurposing, via research questions grounded in the Arts and Humanities.â?• Thatâ??s part of my own project, but I donâ??t think commentary on digital cultures is what legitimates the humanities, as if to give the humanities something worthwhile to do.
- The Vitruvian Man skeleton is in a shop window Pimlico Road, Chelsea, London, taken 29 June 2014 at 22:34. I forget which shop, and the artist.

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