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Opening the depths, not sliding on surfaces

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Opening the depths, not sliding on surfaces

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N. Katherine Hayles is a pioneer in the field of digital media and digital literature studies and the author various milestone studies. With books such as *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (1999) and *My Mother Was a Computer: Digital Subjects and Literary Texts* (2005) she explores the liberal humanist concept of the "natural self" in the age of intelligent machines; with books such as *Writing Machines* (2002) and *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary* (2008) she draws attention to various forms of digital literature and offerey examples of its close reading; with her book *How We Think. Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis* (2012) and the co-edited collection *Comparative Textual Media. Transforming the Humanities in the Postprint Era* (2013) she discusses the issues of contemporary technogenesis and the future of Digital Humanities. N. Katherine Hayles is the James B. Duke Professor of Literature at Duke University.

N. Katherine Hayles discusses the advantages of social and algorithmic reading and reaffirms the value of deep reading; she doubts media literacy requires media abstinence; she underlines the importance of the Humanities for 'understanding and intervening' in society but questions the idolized 'rhetoric of "resistance"' and she weights the real problems facing the Digital Humanities against unfounded fears.

Roberto Simanowski: You have been writing extensively and from early on about digital or electronic literature combining a theoretical discussion with case studies. In addition you are the co-editor of *Electronic Literature Collection 1* published in 2006. How would you sum up the history of digital or electronic literature?

N. Katherine Hayles: Since I first became engaged with electronic literature in the early 1990's, the predominant tendency I have seen is its continuing diversity. As digital platforms and softwares have diversified and proliferated into cell phones, tablets, iPods, etc., so have the forms and content of digital literatures. The hybrid productions of Jason Nelson combining literary and game forms, the short fictions of M. A. Coverley written for the Excel format, the combination of real-world and fictional content by Shelley Jackson in *Skin* and by Scott Rettberg and Nick Montfort in *Implementation*, and many other experimental ventures indicate how robust and exciting digital literature has become, especially compared to its relative modest beginnings as Storyspace hypertexts. Social networks have provided other opportunities for experimentation, for example Twitter fictions that stretch over many tweets, functioning like electronic versions of the old BurmaShave signs along country roads.

RS: Since multi-linear writing within *Storyspace* in the early 1990s, the Internet and mobile media have further changed the way we read. Apps such as *readmill*, for example, allow immediate dialogue about a text amongst its readers; electronic books facilitate the analysis of how a reader reacts to a text: i.e. where she stops, what passages she skips, what notes she makes. How will social reading change the way we perceive literature in

electronic media? How will the algorithmic reading of such reading affect the writing of literature?

NKH: Social reading expands and facilitates reading practices that have been going on for some time, in classrooms, book clubs, blogs and elsewhere. I think it is an exciting development, as one can now share one's impressions of a text in close to real time with colleagues across the world. Algorithmic reading is also exciting, since it allows us to ask questions impossible before, especially queries concerning large corpora of texts. Nevertheless, we should not interpret algorithmic reading as the death of interpretation. How one designs the software, and even more, how one interprets and understands the patterns that are revealed, remain very much interpretive activities. Moreover, many algorithmic readings are carried out in tandem with hermeneutic interpretation in the traditional sense. An example is the close reading that Allen Riddell and I give of Mark Danielewski's *Only Revolutions* in my book *How We Think*.

RS: In his 2008 article 'Is Google making us stupid?' and later in his 2011 book *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains*, Nicholas Carr discusses the consequences of online media for literacy. From Carr's perspective, multitasking and power browsing online make people unlearn deep reading with the effects being carried offline, with the result that they also unlearn deep thinking. The shift from deep attention to hyper attention has been announced and bemoaned by many intellectuals. The French philosopher Bernard Stiegler even speaks of a threat to social and cultural development caused by the destruction of young people's ability to develop deep and critical attention to the world around them. You take issue with Carr's conclusions in your book *How We Think*. On the other hand Stiegler, in his 2010 book *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations*, refers to your report that students are no longer able to engage in deep reading. What role is the cultural technique of reading going to play if power browsing, multitasking, and permanent online connectivity make the long-established contemplative reading

session increasingly obsolete? How will and how should literature and literary studies react to this process?

NKH: As Carr acknowledges, the web brings powerful advantages, including to scholarship. I am old enough to remember what it was like to do research when one had to rely on typewriters and card catalogues; not for a minute would I want to return to those methods! Even Stiegler, who in *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations* has mostly a denunciatory tone, in his newer *A New Critique of Political Economy* sees hyper attention as a Derridean pharmakon, poison and cure together. Clearly the problem here is how to maximize the web's potential for serious intellectual work and minimize its potential for superficiality and distraction. Stiegler's position, as stated in a lecture he gave at the SLSA conference in 2011, is that we should focus on "adoption, not adaptation"—in other words, we should wherever possible limit access to the "entertainment complex," including the web, to prevent the kind of technogenetic changes I describe in *How We Think*, especially for young people and children where neural plasticity is the greatest.

RS: Media abstinence as part of media literacy in an Adornian like way? Stiegler's proposal seems unlikely given the ubiquity of digital media and entertainment. At least it appeals to parents and teachers to oversee the younger generations's media use.

NKH: While Stiegler's approach of "adoption—no!" may be feasible for very young pre-schoolers, it becomes ineffective, and probably impossible, for children older than five as they become exposed to school, classmates, and other influences outside of the home. Moreover, it assumes that media immersion is entirely negative, and many researchers (Steven Johnson, James Paul Gee) make persuasive cases for some good effects, from acquiring hand-eye coordination to gaining a more sophisticated sense of strategy and planning. If we now turn to deep attention, we can see that from the beginning, the tradition of deep attention required the support and nurturing of institutions—intellectual discourse and an educated elite in classical Greece, monasteries in the Middle Ages, debate and writing in the Renaissance, etc.

So it is in the contemporary period as well. The role of educators at every level, from kindergarten through graduate school, should be to make connections between contemporary practices, for example browsing and surfing the web, and the disciplined acquisition of knowledge. The difference is having an intellectual context for questions and seeking for all the rich resources that can contribute to understanding those questions more deeply, seeing their implications more fully, and moving tentatively toward answers adequate to these complexities. Instead of "adoption, not adaption," my slogan would be "opening the depths, not sliding on surfaces."

RS: In your book *How We Think* you discuss the future of the Humanities with respect to digital media. Your conclusion is that Traditional Humanities 'are at risk of becoming marginal to the main business of the contemporary academy and society.' Digital Humanities, on the other hand, you add 'are at risk of becoming a trade practice held captive by the interest of corporate capitalism.' This prospect about the future of Humanities sounds like a choice between Charybdis and Scylla. How can the Humanities survive the digital turn without dying?

NKH: The Humanities, as I understand them, are above all about understanding and intervening in the cultural, social, technological and intellectual contexts throughout history that have shaped what people want, what they consider important, and what moves them to action. These questions are as vitally necessary now as they have ever been. For the past few decades, as we know, the Humanities have been immersed in the critique of dominant institutions. While this has lead to important intellectual developments such as deconstruction, postmodernism, and posthumanism, it has also had deleterious effects as well, tending to isolate the Humanities from the wider culture and tending toward a rhetoric of "resistance" so widely accepted that the mere idea of "resistance" is idolized without thinking seriously about consequences and the assumptions undergirding it, including the ways in which humanists are complicit in the very practices they criticize.

One of the sites where these forces are currently in play is in the Digital Humanities. There are plenty of problems facing the Digital Humanities: technical (e.g., distinguishing patterns from chimeras in data analysis); cultural (e.g., defining significant problems rather than ones tailored to chasing grants); economic (being coopted by corporate funding to the extent that pedagogical and educational priorities are undercut); and ethical (e.g., power relations between professors and graduate students). However, when people talk about the "Dark Side of the Digital Humanities" (the subject of an MLA panel 2013), these kinds of problems are often not what they mean. Rather, what they more likely have in mind are the disparity in funding between the Traditional and Digital Humanities; the fear that data analysis may displace traditional criticism; and (as I heard Stanley Fish assert on a panel we shared) analysis without interpretation, as if data and text mining were simply machine functions without human understanding. In my view, these fears either reflect a misunderstanding of algorithmic methods (in Stanley Fish's case) or envy about the relatively abundant funding streams that the Digital Humanities enjoy, neither of which is a well-founded critique.

RS: The opposition of algorithmic analysis and interpretation may be shortsighted as is the competition between database and narrative for the 'exclusive right to make meaning out of the world' that Lev Manovich announced more than a decade ago. As you point out in your book, database and narrative are natural symbionts rather than natural enemies considering narratives 'the necessary others to database's ontology.' However, if Stephen Ramsay calls for "algorithmic criticism" as a way to supplement and balance algorithmic processing by hermeneutic activity, he also responds to Franco Moretti's provocative request to replace interpretation by data mining, i.e. close by distant reading. Also, there is a call for „engaged humanities" making a contribution to the quality of human life through productive knowledge (as for example in Cathy N. Davidson's and David Theo Goldberg's 2004 essay *Engaging the Humanities*).

This seems to counter the concept of humanities as a necessary correction of the positivistic paradigm of the natural and engineering sciences in society with the principle of ambiguity (as advocated for example by German philosopher Odo Marquard in his 1986 essay *On the inevitability of the humanities*). In Marquard's perspective the function of Humanities in society is a rhetoric of resistance not (only or first of all) towards institutions but (also and moreover) to signification and Truth. In this light, interpretation after data mining is mandatory not to verify meaning but rather to destabilize it. How valid, do you think, is this concept of the humanities still with respect to the ongoing quantitative turn in the Humanties?

NKH: I think the opposition between interpretation and data mining is somewhat misguided. Data mining is not devoid of interpretive decisions; how one designs the software has everything to do with underlying assumptions and presuppositions, which are forms of interpretive activity. Moreover, one should also not assume that data mining and text mining bear a simple relation to signification and truth. Often results are ambiguous, and judgment is needed to distinguish genuine patterns from chimera and other artifacts of the way the analysis was carried out. As for meaning, isn't it destabilized every time someone offers a new reading of a canonized text, or insists on the importance of a non-canonical one? I don't see meaning as an accomplishment over and done once and for all, but rather a continuing search that contains moments of meta-stability as well as moments of destabilizations. This kind of ferment is what keeps the humanities relevant and constantly renewing themselves. Would it even be possible constantly to destabilize, without ever positing or hoping for or arguing for some kind of stabilization? Even if one thinks destabilizations should be constant, isn't this a kind of stabilization in itself? In my view, we should think carefully about the kinds of problems mentioned above and their implications for pedagogy, for example, the necessity for a deeper understanding of statistical methods and their relation to the results of data and text mining. As the Humanities move into "Big Data," they might

usefully engage with scientific disciplines that have been dealing with these problems for some time.

RS: So you rather see a *bright* side of the Digital Humanities?

NKH: As mentioned above, I find the prospects for asking new kinds of questions using data and text mining techniques exciting, and I am fascinated by what Jeffrey Schnapp and Todd Presner have called *Digital Humanities 2.0*, in which they call for a shift from analytical methods to an experiential focus. I can see their point, but in my view, the two approaches (analytical vs. experiential) are complementary to one another rather than antagonistic. I find the antagonism between the Traditional and Digital Humanities, understandable as it may be, also misplaced. In a collection of essays that I co-edited with Jessica Pressman, entitled *Comparative Textual Media: Transforming the Humanities in the Postprint Era* (2013), we suggest that a better way forward is to embrace a media framework as the basis for teaching and research rather than now-obsolete and cumbersome categories such as centuries, genres, and national languages. Such a transformation, focusing on the specificities of media and practice-based research combining hands-on experience with theoretical work, would re-energize traditional research as well as providing a basis on which scholars specializing in print, manuscript and orality could engage fruitfully with those specializing in digital methods.