



Editorial / Editorial / Editorial

The Challenge of the Digital Humanities

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The expression “digital humanities” resounds more and more frequently in the humanities and social science environments. It designates a set of procedures coming from different disciplines which are in a process toward cohesion¹. For its apologists, it offers new digital devices capable of originating, preserving, storing, interrogating and spreading great masses of data –big data– as it had never been possible before. Its growth is steady and concentrated. According to centerNet (<http://www.dh.centernet.org>), there are currently around 190 study centers devoted to the digital humanities. Even though these centers are distributed in 24 countries, approximately 80% of them are concentrated in Germany, The United Kingdom, France, The United States of America and Canada. Once again we are facing inequality cartography. However, this inequality has its counterpart: the possibility to freely access a mass of digital texts, which is growing fast, and several periodical publications among which the following are found: *Digital Studies/Le champ numérique* –created in 1992–, *Digital Humanities Quarterly* –2007–, *Journal of Digital Humanities* –2011– and *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities* –2014. Indeed, the digital humanities are going through a growing stage in which there are plenty of efforts to establish its precise reach and specificity, and to strengthen its institutional presence². Its multidisciplinary contexture makes this task into something complex, to the point that the term “analogical humanities” has been coined as a contrivance to demarcate its singularity through its opposite. However, beyond the inconclusive character of its definition, the novelties which the digital humanities bring, together with the dialogue between various disciplinary fields, are many. Among them we can find a type of digital text which constructs the history of its reading from the collection of the readers’ interventions³ and the arrival of specialists in study fields so far alien to their disciplines. This last mentioned novelty deserves greater consideration.

In the month of May of the current year an article was published in the *Royal Society Open Science* which bears the name “The evolution of popular music: USA 1960-2010”. What is surprising at first sight is both its place in the category “biology” and in the subcategories

¹ In the Manifesto for the Digital Humanities, produced around a meeting of specialists held in Paris in the year 2010, this area of knowledge is considered a ‘transdiscipline’. (For more information see: http://tcp.hypotheses.org/411?lang=en_GB Accessed: June 30, 2015).

² This is evidenced by the creation of national (Argentina, Spain, Mexico, Japan, etc.) and international associations (For example, the Alliance of Digital Humanities Organizations, <http://adho.org/> Accessed: June 30, 2015).

³ See, for example, Gold (2015).



“evolution, cognition, acoustics”, and the disciplinary backgrounds of its authors: one of them (who signs first) belongs to the electronic engineering and computer science areas, two to biology and one to the staff of Last-fm. This information already anticipates the contents of the article. From the consideration that most of what has been written about the history of pop music is “anecdotal” and has lacked “rigorous tests of clear hypotheses, based on quantitative data and statistics” (2), the authors undertake to study the US Billboard Hot 100 (between 1960 and 2010) strongly inspired by the methods and questions of the studies about organic and cultural evolutions. Within that framework, the information about pop music is considered a set of “fossil records” and is questioned from the interests of paleontology: does its variety grow or diminish along time? Is evolutionary change continuous or discontinuous? The answers to these questions come from statistical analyses applied to a corpus of 17.094 songs (86% of the Hot 100). Far from being an exception, the article seems to embody a truthful product of the digital humanities. Here we are surprised again. The digital humanities now turn their attention to music with a defiant attitude. They do it as they know how to do it: through the supremacy of the quantitative methods and statistics, the sublimation of numbers, the homologation of data with facts, the disappearance of face to face relationships and the ostentatious exhibition of explanatory procedures alien to a hermeneutics of sensibility and intuition. The challenge is directed to every possibility –utopian but inalienable– of an “ecology of knowledge” –kind of balanced coexistence of dissimilar and even antagonistic knowledge– and to the paths based on qualitative and healthy self-critical perspectives which during decades have opened and consolidated the humanistic and social disciplines through the trial and error sequence. In such a diversified academic context, there is no way to forecast what the impact of these approaches will be on, for instance, the studies of popular music⁴. However, it is healthy to meditate about the risks involved in the coming together of the humanistic and social approaches about music and the methods of the digital humanities. Undoubtedly, the prose of the digital humanities encloses a provocation and a paradox: in it, numbers overwhelm us, intimidate us, they generate trust and also distrust⁵. Before this scenario, there are at least three questions that may put that provocation under a critical perspective, namely: can we accept the supremacy of the quantitative approach and let ourselves be seduced by statistics at the expense of relegating qualitative approaches?, what is the benefit of returning to that failed flirting that the humanities and social disciplines had with evolutionism and biology?, and will the digital humanities procedures not be leading us to a state of things in which a strong dependence of the investigations of complex technologies lead to uses concentrated in few hands? These questions and many others arising from them, should lead us to consider the advantages and disadvantages of the application of the digital humanities to the study of music and other sound expressions. Also, the dialogue with the colleagues in the disciplines that now make of music a quantifiable object may be a good way to take a stand before this new challenge.

⁴ It is not feasible to foretell either if within the digital humanities there will be room for a more prudent perspective in the use of numbers and statistics and a more sensitive one to the drifts of the subjects and their practices.

⁵ To observe the preponderant role of numbers and statistics see, for example, Michel et al. (2011) y Tehrani (2013).

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