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# TOWARDS THE MAELSTROM

## THE DIGITAL HUMANITIES IN ACTION

THEMATIC SECTION

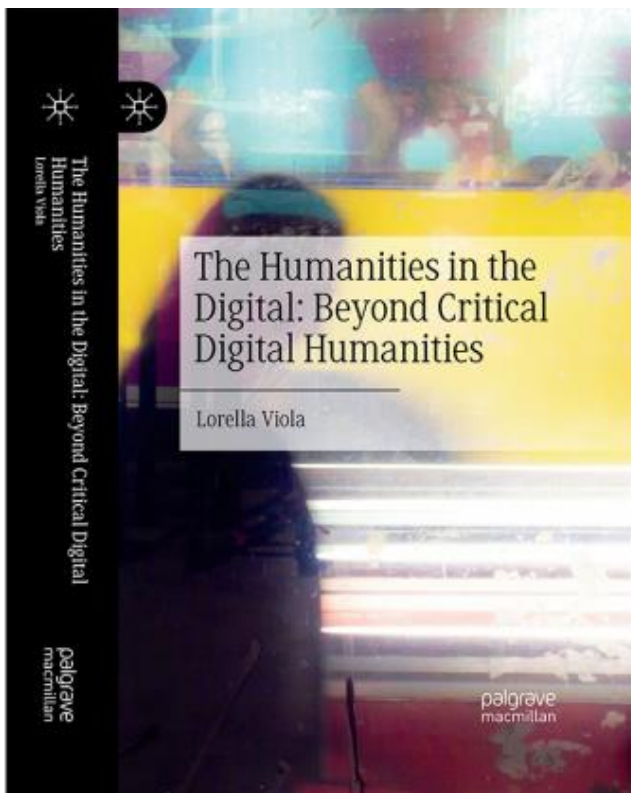


Viola, Lorella. *The Humanities in the Digital: Beyond Critical Digital Humanities*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2023.

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*The digital transformation has profoundly affected research (...). The 'Digital Turn', as it is called, has almost forced scholars to integrate advanced quantitative methods in their research, and in the humanities at large, it has, for example, led to the emergence of completely new fields such as of course digital humanities.* – Lorella Viola

Lorella Viola's *The Humanities in the Digital: Beyond Critical Digital Humanities* advocates for a paradigm shift in how knowledge is created and shared in the digital age. Published as an open-access volume, the book challenges traditional divisions and offers a novel framework for digital scholarship. The book introduces the post-authentic framework, emphasizing the need to move beyond traditional divisions, such as digital versus non-digital, and critiques existing positivistic approaches to digital tools. Viola argues that digital tools are not neutral and require critical human intervention at every stage to ensure ethical and transparent knowledge production. Despite offering valuable theoretical insights, the book focuses more on critique than practical applications, suggesting the need for future research to bridge theory with real-world digital humanities practices.

In *The Humanities in the Digital: Beyond Critical Digital Humanities* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023; ISBN: 978-3-031-16949-6, eBook ISBN: 978-3-031-16950-2; 173 pages), Lorella Viola pushes the boundaries of digital humanities scholarship with her post-authentic framework, which challenges traditional divisions, promotes a holistic understanding of digital transformation in knowledge creation, and advocates for the critical and ethical use of digital tools. Engaging and forward-looking, the book sets ambitious goals for future research endeavours, directed at advanced scholars in Digital Humanities, Critical Humanities, interdisciplinary researchers, and research institutions, encouraging them to engage deeply with conceptual debates, ethical considerations, and the critical examination of their digital practices and frameworks.

First, the author's main argument highlights the need to move beyond binary divisions between critical and traditional digital humanities. In Chapter One, "The Humanities *in* the Digital", Viola proposes a split within the humanities; namely, between Digital Humanities (DH) and Critical Digital Humanities (CDH) (8, 9). While supporters of CDH argue that the digital and analogue divide is meaningless and call for a more critical approach to the digital, CDH inadvertently reinforces this division by establishing itself as a separate field. To clarify what CDH entails, Viola cites Grimshaw, who advocates for a more radical approach that justifies the need for a new field — a space dedicated to critique, opposition, and resistance against digital capitalism, which Grimshaw refers to as Critical Digital Humanities. Similarly, Viola also challenges the term "interdisciplinary", because she finds it limiting. In this sense, her approach leans towards an ontology that bridges postmodernism and digimodernism, which she prefers to call "post-authentic". This shift is meant to point to a paradigm shift; but contrary to popular phrasings, this shift is *in* the digital rather than *towards* it (29).

Moreover, Viola focuses on the current model of knowledge creation, which is based on divisions between disciplines and the compartmentalization of knowledge, claiming that it is outdated in the face of the digital transformation of society. The author contends that society has shifted into a fully digital context, where the digital is not merely a tool for enhancing traditional knowledge practices but a central, integral part of how knowledge is produced and shared.

Viola frames her discussion in Chapter One by introducing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasizing its role as a catalyst for the digital transformation, which later permeated every aspect of society. The pandemic necessitated a shift in our understanding of the "digital", as individuals were compelled to adapt to a new reality

where everyday activities, including both professional and personal tasks, became digitized. This transition is linked to the evolution of digital humanities. Much like the pandemic served as a catalyst for broader societal change, Viola argues that digital methods are similarly transforming the humanities, acting as a driving force for change within the field, noting that knowledge creation happens within society (6). In addition to creating knowledge, she advocates for a revolutionary rather than an evolutionary approach to the digital. An evolutionary approach adds digital to the existing model of knowledge creation as a helpful tool, whereas a revolutionary approach rethinks the digital entirely and its impact on how knowledge is created (7).

Thus, the post-authentic framework she introduces is a critique of the prevailing positivistic and deterministic views of digital methods. Viola argues for a more fluid and symbiotic approach to knowledge creation. This framework highlights the inherent biases, limitations, and subjectivities of digital technologies, underlining the need for critical engagement with digital objects and processes. In the words of the author:

The post-authentic framework I propose in this book is a conceptual model for knowledge creation in the digital age. It rejects the idea of the digital merely crossing paths with disciplines—intersecting, merging, or meeting in a way that implies separate entities are coming together but leaves the overall model of knowledge unchanged. (2023, 29)

In Chapter Two, “The Importance of Being Digital”, Viola continues by contextualizing the shift in humanities into the digital realm. She emphasizes here how digital technology has irreversibly transformed society and knowledge creation. She also mentions the binary opposition of digital versus non-digital, as the digital now penetrates every aspect of the research and creation in humanities. She later moves on to explore the pervasive impact of digital technologies on how individuals understand knowledge, where she also introduces and advocates for an integrated, first-and-foremost digital approach rather than merely compartmentalizing knowledge into discrete disciplines. This exploration of the author extends to further chapters as well. In Chapter Three, “The Opposite of Unsupervised”, she continues to critique the assumptions behind unsupervised machine learning techniques as well as other data-driven methodologies, while highlighting the restrictions of automation in capturing various cultural and historical

aspects, which originally shape the created knowledge. In Chapter Four, “How Discrete”, she also examines the nature of digital objects and critiques their treatment as static or finite entities, highlighting digital objects’ evolving and symbiotic nature and introducing biological metaphors like symbiosis and mutualism to explain how digital objects and knowledge creation processes are interconnected.

The author does indeed touch upon a point that might be considered to fall within the lines of the aesthetic. In Chapter Two, she frames Walter Benjamin’s conceptualization of the “aura” in a way that incidentally, both critiques and expands upon how the digital has been historically perceived in opposition to the analogue, specifically in the realm of digital humanities versus mainstream humanities (38). In this sense, much like Benjamin’s notion of the “aura” is diminished in production, while the unique presence of an original is left behind, digital humanities appear to frame the “digital” as a non-human, agentless, and inauthentic entity that undermines the authority of the original. This raises a critical question: how does digital reproduction differ from mechanical reproduction?

In Chapter Three, “The Opposite of Unsupervised”, Viola emphasizes how the reductionist assumptions underlying unsupervised machine learning techniques are similar to the treatment of digital heritage objects, which are often regarded as simplistic and merely uncritical entities. Still, there have been scholars to challenge such a binary view. For instance, scholars such as Jones *et al.* argue that focusing solely on whether a digital object is authentic or not overlooks the broader work that digital objects do. Digital objects are far from being mere reproductions; they are complex and dynamic entities. This reflects a shift away from the idea of authenticity as something to be aspired to. Instead, such a declaration acknowledges the layered and interconnected nature of digital objects (Viola 2023, 40, 41). In this context, the “aura” in the digital age suggests that digital objects should not be dismissed as just inferior reproductions – they must be understood as parts of a network of power, processes, and entities.

To reshape the understanding of digital objects and digital knowledge creation, Viola borrows a couple of terms from biology in Chapter Four “How Discrete”: symbiosis and mutualism (44, 47). This is because the traditional fragmentation of knowledge into separate disciplines must be converted into a perspective, which deems it as fluid and dynamic. Symbiosis, a biological concept meaning “living together”, becomes a metaphor for how digital objects and knowledge-creation processes are interconnected and

constantly renegotiated. Digital objects, then, should not be viewed as static, agentless entities, for they are evolving forms shaped by various actors, decisions, and interactions. Adding mutualism to this conceptualization would oppose the competitive dynamics often seen in knowledge creation, particularly between disciplines. Since mutualism emphasizes collaboration and mutual benefit, applying it to digital objects and knowledge creation, would underline a conceptual shift in which disciplines and digital processes do not compete but instead engage in a mutually enriching relationship.

Viola also touches upon topic modelling before she introduces her “post-authentic” approach. To be more specific, she critically engages with the limitations of topic modelling as a method for analysing large corpora of texts (92, 94). She argues that while topic modelling formalizes distributional semantics, which aims to capture meaning through the context of word clusters, it oversimplifies the complexity of language. The core issue here is that topic modelling treats language as a series of discrete elements, ignoring the continuous, context-dependent nature of linguistic meaning. While the algorithm efficiently identifies patterns in word distributions, it fails to account for the inherent ambiguity and infinite productivity of language, which is also shaped by historical, social, and cultural contexts. This results in the extraction of patterns that may lack significance because the method does not address the underlying cause-effect relationships that give words and topics their meaning. Furthermore, the arbitrary nature of how topic modelling assigns a fixed number of topics often leads to artificial representations of the documents’ content. The algorithm builds models that fit the predefined number of topics, yet these models can vary significantly with even minor changes in the parameters. This variability can undermine the reliability of topic modelling as it highlights that patterns will always be identified, but their significance is not guaranteed. In this sense, while topic modelling can provide statistical insights, it does not always lead to a deeper or more meaningful interpretation of the content being analysed.

Finally, in Chapter Five, “What the Graph”, the much-awaited post-authentic framework is introduced. Digital objects here are dynamic and evolving artefacts that interact with and shape their environments. In applying the post-authentic framework to topic modelling, the process must be treated as far more than a mechanical, automated task too (94, 95). Thus, Viola identifies key stages such as pre-processing, corpus preparation, and deciding the number of topics as essential points for critical intervention.

Her approach emphasizes that topic modelling, which typically treats texts as discrete data, must be contextualized within a broader understanding of digital objects as dynamic, contextually embedded entities. Chapter Five is also the moment when Viola mentions the cultural biases that are embedded in the visual representation of data through graphing and network analysis tools, which underlines the need for further critical approaches in the field.

The digital tools we use to visually represent data may not always be neutral; instead, they can embed specific worldviews that reflect power imbalances and reinforce narratives in knowledge creation. How technological tools, often developed in Western contexts, can subtly perpetuate cultural hegemony when applied to diverse datasets is not a brand-new topic of discussion. By using different visualization tools at hand as examples, the author raises concerns about how these tools prioritize certain forms of legibility and clarity that may not align with non-Western or minority perspectives (78). This critique reminds us of Mark Warschauer's concept of the digital divide, which refers to unequal access to digital technologies, such as computers and the Internet, among individuals, communities, or countries. Both phenomena highlight how disparities in access and design can reproduce existing power structures. Just as the digital divide limits access to technological tools and the benefits they provide, the cultural biases embedded in digital tools restrict the ways non-Western or minority perspectives are represented and understood. This can even extend to the way in which tools shape the research questions we end up asking. If researchers rely on digital tools that prioritize certain types of information over others, they risk unwittingly aligning their research with dominant narratives, which can marginalize alternative perspectives.

One of the key strengths of the book is its critical perspective on the artificial divisions in knowledge creation. Viola's argument throughout the book can be summarized as the need for digital research to move beyond binaries, which reflects the complexity of modern scholarship. The emphasis on digital mediation positions the book within progressive views that see digital humanities as a fluid and evolving space for multidisciplinary work. The focus on transparency, reproducibility, and critical examination of digital tools contributes to ongoing discussions about how technology both democratizes and complicates knowledge production. Thus, a reflective and active engagement with computational methods is encouraged, while simultaneously reminding

scholars to be mindful of the historical and cultural context. The importance of human agency is underlined by rejecting the idea that digital methods are entirely objective, advocating for human intervention at every stage. Additionally, by urging ethical and transparent research practices, the book stresses the importance of documenting and clearly reporting decisions, fostering a more responsible approach to digital scholarship.

Still, the post-authentic framework has certain limitations due to its reduced focus on the practical aspects of digital humanities since it favours theory over practicality. While addressing algorithmic bias and power imbalances, there is less engagement with how digital humanists are actively tackling these challenges through collaborative and interdisciplinary efforts. The approach demands considerable time and resources, as critical engagement with digital tools at every stage involves extensive human intervention, which may come across as excessive for those working with large datasets or limited resources. Furthermore, the case-by-case nature of the framework limits scalability, making it harder to apply to more extensive or more diverse collections. The rejection of computational objectivity encourages critical reflection, but it also risks introducing subjectivity, as human decisions in data handling can lead to biased interpretations if not carefully managed.

*The Humanities in the Digital: Beyond Critical Digital Humanities* ultimately offers a critical reflection on the binary divisions within digital humanities, urging a more fluid and integrated approach to knowledge creation. By introducing the post-authentic framework, Viola redefines digital knowledge creation, challenging traditional binaries and emphasizing ethical engagement in the digital age. The book highlights biases within digital systems while aligning with ongoing discussions about algorithmic bias and data ethics. However, its limited focus on practical applications may reduce its broader impact. Introduced in Chapter Five, the post-authentic framework establishes a strong theoretical foundation, though its delayed introduction might frustrate readers seeking earlier practical insights. Nevertheless, the framework encourages a shift in how scholars engage with digital tools, advocating for their central role in both literary research and knowledge creation. The emphasis on ethics, transparency, and inclusivity pushes scholars to confront the biases in digital archives and promotes greater collaboration between disciplines. Much like Poe's sailor in "A Descent into the Maelstrom", who survives by observing and understanding the chaotic forces of a massive whirlpool instead of resisting them, Viola challenges digital humanists to plunge into the whirlwind of data with critical insight. In

Poe's tale, the sailor is caught in a deadly maelstrom, then discerns patterns in the turbulence that allow him to align with its forces and eventually escape. Similarly, scholars must confront the challenges, instead of avoiding them, to transform the way knowledge is created, and a more inclusive and creative understanding is developed.

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