Manifesto of Modernist Digital Humanities

WHEREAS mainstream digital techniques reflect a naïve quantitative POSITIVISM;

WHEREAS that POSITIVISM appears as a REALISM—as claim of representational fidelity—in the midst of MODERNIST ANALYSIS;
WHEREAS critical self-reflexivity calls for

a QUALITATIVE characterization
or EVALUATION of methodologies
as well as
technical DISCLOSURES of
sample sizes,
data gaps,
and HUMAN intervention
in
ALGORITHMICALLY GENERATED
DATA;

WHEREAS it seems modernist
digital humanities has

JUST
stepped past that threshold into THINGNESS;
IT SEEMS that the digital humanities use a methodological REALISM to investigate artistic MODERNISM.

IT SEEMS inappropriate that we would pursue methodological REALISM to the exclusion of methodological MODERNISM.

But if realism REQUIRES or SUGGESTS

- beginnings and endings
- probabilistic event trajectories that emphasize causality
- three-dimensional characterization of middle-class characters
- richly detailed political, economic, and social contexts
- a commitment to objectivity, believability, or naturalism
- a rejection of magic, divine intervention, or supernatural elements
- formal coherence and continuity
- things and stuff that are so 19th century and so bankrupt and exposed by Nietzsche and to which, like gluten, we may be allergic

Then is NAÏVE, CHAUVINISTIC positivism even realist at all?
WHAT

would a better methodological realism look like?

WHAT

would a methodological modernism look like?

Taking seriously the discontinuities of consciousness, experience, and social hierarchies does NOT require jettisoning **MATHEMATICS** so much as SKEWING or REIMAGINING numbers, planes, scales, and graphs.
If you value

STATISTICAL RIGOR

above all things,

we can wait as you CLICK OFF and wish you well.

( WE WHISPER IN YOUR EAR A GREAT SECRET:
THEY HAVE BEEN SYMBOLS ALL ALONG. )
NOW THEN.

We can **DECouple** methodological strategies from the content of the objects we study.
NOTHING is stopping us from using MODERNIST METHODS for understanding REALIST TEXTS.

OR

using REALIST METHODS for understanding MODERNIST TEXTS.

There’s not necessarily a DEBT to be modernist with a MODERNIST TEXT. (unless DEBT is how you manage your cognitive economy, in which case enjoy your symptom!)
MODERNIST DIGITAL STRATEGIES should themselves be critical, challenging, open-ended, discontinuous, fragmented, polyphonic, disruptive, perverse, strange, harsh.

Presumably (once upon a time) you thought MODERNIST STYLE was worthy of your ATTENTION and CURIOSITY.
We can reconfigure works from other time periods through modernist methods. Modernism therefore becomes a DIGITAL STRATEGY that can inform project development, tool building, visualization design, & textual interpretation.

Yes, perhaps it’s been awhile since MODERNIST STYLE last took you out for a nice dinner or really looked into your eyes, like really looked into your eyes, but we humbly suggest it may be about that time you basically ignored MODERNIST STYLE when it clearly needed to have a serious talk about what happened back there, or that time you forgot to bring that special goat cheese back from the store, the kind that MODERNIST STYLE wanted to warm up and put on some lightly dressed arugula for a simple but satisfying supper.
WHAT MIGHT IT LOOK LIKE TO READ OTHER MOVEMENTS AND CENTURIES THROUGH METHODS LATENT IN MODERNISM?

Might

we then be able to extract

a true theory of modernism—

A MODERNIST MODE OF ANALYSIS?

The heightened reflexivity purchased by trying to develop MODERNIST TOOLS for MODERNIST TEXTS and MODERNIST CULTURES will ensure that the SPECTER of MODERNISM in all its aesthetic and historical and spatial particularity will be more VIVID & THERE at every stage of a project.
Might
we BOIL down
the realist novel
or
the bildungsroman
or
the scientific romance
or
the epic poem
or
the manifesto
or
the stream-of-consciousness novel
into SETS
of
natural expressions
or
tags
or
metadata
or
protocols
or
applications
that we can use to
TRANSLATE texts into different genres?

GENRES BECOME ALGORITHMS
A MACHINIC NARRATOLOGY
Isn’t this still rather metaphorical, you ask.

OF COURSE.

But the figurations are natively literary
(natively-literary-studies).

Do get back to us when you assemble
persuasive arguments that consist
exclusively of things that PROVABLY
exist in front of you right now.
Perhaps you can drop them on your
foot or run into them to ensure they
are not metaphors.

Send pictures of the bruises!

Let loose generic imperatives and literary
movements and lists of formal characteristics of
modernism. They do not need euthanasia; they need
to get let out in the air, out of their cells, deployed
through digital humanities approaches to deform
texts of interest.
We continue to invest in the heavy industry of making machines out of literary theory.

It’s okay, really.
When was the last time you wrote/said/argued, “Jameson/Latour/Haraway/Agamben/Sedgwick/D&G wrote/said/argued”?

Probably yesterday.
Don’t let’s lie to each other anymore.

So in addition to importing interpretive machines from other disciplines, use those detested periodizations *

* you don’t really detest them, btw, it just sounds legit & heavy when you interrogate, problematize, and complicate them

as imperatives that invade other periods, other genres.
We can DECOUPLE methodological strategies from the content of the objects we study.
Or RECOUPLE them
sure, whatever.
So long as you rekindle that

**FLAME**
with MODERNIST STYLE,

we’re just happy
you’re happy.

Signed,

Alex Christie (@axchristie),
Andrew Pilsch (@oncomouse),
Shawna Ross (@ShawnaRoss),
Katie Tanigawa (@katietani)