

Veins filled with the Diluted Sap of Rationality

A Critical Reply to Rens Bod

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This article argues – in contradiction to the thesis developed by Rens Bod – that the hermeneutic tradition of humanities is not obsolete, especially when trying to understand the opportunities and challenges of using digital technologies for future research. The practice of digital history will have to be based on the critical analysis of the creation, enrichment, editing and retrieval of digital data as much as on the application of classical source criticism and historical contextualisation. If ‘content’ or rather ‘data’ is king in digital humanities, as imagined by Bod, context is its crown – at least for digital historians.

Digital humanities are high on the agenda. The online availability and accessibility of digitised or digital-born sources of information rises at an astonishing rate and every day new platforms for the dissemination and promotion of digital scholarship emerge.¹ While enthusiasm and excitement about the digital turn in humanities² by far outweigh more critical or reflexive voices³, a recent report by the Dutch KNAW ‘Commissie Informatica in het voortgezet onderwijs’ detected a growing gap or at least a lack of synchronicity between the rapid development of new digital research infrastructures and technologies and the rather slow development and implementation of digital research skills and practices. Digital literacy in higher education, it seems, cannot keep pace with the rhythm of innovation in digital technologies.⁴ Yet Bod’s inaugural lecture is a telling example of the fashionable plea for pushing digital scholarship simply because new technologies offer new possibilities. This ideology of ‘technological solutionism’, so neatly analysed in Evgeny Morozov’s latest book *To Save Everything: Click Here*, expresses a quasi-religious

sentiment about the unlimited possibilities of the Internet and everything digital.⁵ Driven by a utilitarian logic and motivated by the ambition to create visibility in the ‘economy of attention’, Bod’s provocative statements of ‘the end of humanities 1.0’ can be interpreted as a perfect embodiment of a specific state of mind within contemporary academia. A mindset that the Austrian Professor of Digital Methods in Architecture and Space Planning Georg Franck has aptly dubbed ‘mental capitalism’.⁶ Despite the fact that the effect of this mentality – which has affected Dutch academia more strongly than other scientific cultures in Europe – would merit a sharp contestation at this point, in this reply I have to restrict myself to the discussion of two of Bod’s main theses: first, his assumption that the so-called ‘humanities 2.0’ will be able to ‘reconcile’ the positivist or empiricist tradition of the natural sciences with the hermeneutic tradition of humanities; second, I want to question the narrow perspective of Bod’s intellectual agenda when it comes to his central research question – the search for ‘universal patterns’ in intellectual, artistic or political ‘products’ (in his case, texts).

Humanities 2.0 as new scientific paradigm?

Exceptions prove the rule, but so far historians cannot be accused for being radical innovators when it comes to theoretical or methodological innovations in the field of digital humanities. Kiran Patel recently wondered about the ‘collective silence’ of the historical community when it comes to the dramatic impact of the Internet and digital technologies on the historian’s profession.⁷ While archivists and cultural heritage institutions have been debating the

1 See for example: <http://digitalhumanitiesnow.org>. This article is a critical reply to Rens

Bod’s inaugural address *Het einde van de geesteswetenschappen 1.0* [*The End of the Humanities 1.0*] (December 2012).

2 David Berry, *Understanding Digital Humanities* (Malden 2012); Anne Burdick et al. (eds.), *Digital Humanities* (Cambridge, MA 2012); Matthew K. Gold (ed.), *Debates in the Digital Humanities* (Minneapolis 2012).

3 David Levy, ‘No Time to think: Reflections on Information Technology and Contemplative Scholarship’, *Ethics and Information Technology* 9:4 (2007) 237-249.

4 See for example the recently published advice on ‘Digitale geletterdheid in het voortgezet onderwijs. Vaardigheden en attitudes voor de 21ste eeuw’ by the KNAW *Commissie Informatica in het voortgezet onderwijs*. Published online (December 2012): <http://www.knaw.nl/smartsite.dws?lang=NL&id=26101&pub=20121027>.

5 Evgeny Morozov, *To save Everything, click Here: The Folly of Technological Solutionism* (New York 2013).

6 Georg Franck, *Mentaler Kapitalismus. Eine politische Ökonomie des Geistes* (München 2005).

7 Kiran K. Patel, ‘Zeitgeschichte im digitalen Zeitalter. Neue und alte Herausforderungen’, *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 3 (2011) 331-351.

substantial impact of the digital revolution in their field with some passion⁸, historians as their professional users, have remained surprisingly silent on this question. Yet, according to Roy Rosenzweig, one of the pioneers of digital history, reflecting on the challenges with which the so-called ‘digital revolution’ is confronting the historical discipline is a matter of epistemological urgency: ‘Historians need to be thinking simultaneously about how to research, write, and teach in a world of unheard-of historical abundance and how to avoid a future of record scarcity’.⁹

While the shift of sources from ‘document’ to ‘data’ has mainly been discussed in terms of scale, the epistemological implications of this ontological shift have been investigated less.¹⁰ As the digitisation process destroys the indexical relationship between a past historical reality and its physical imprint on a source (for example between the filmed reality and its physical imprint on the filmstrip), the concept of ‘original’ – so crucial in the emergence of history as a scientific discipline in the nineteenth century – seems to lose its analytical potential.¹¹ In both digitised and digital-born sources, the information – through a process of data processing – is encoded and not inscribed onto the materiality of a medium as it was the case in analogue printing, photography or film.¹² The challenge of doing digital source criticism is therefore to keep track of this process of transcription – a highly complicated task considering

8 Fiona Cameron (ed.), *Theorizing Digital Cultural Heritage* (Cambridge, MA 2010).

9 Roy Rosenzweig, ‘Scarcity or Abundance?: Preserving the Past’, in: Roy Rosenzweig, *Clio Wired: The Future of the Past in the Digital Age* (New York 2011) 6.

10 Jim Mussel, ‘Doing and making: History as Digital Practice’, in: Toni Weller (ed.), *History in the Digital Age* (London 2013) 79–94.

11 While the debate on originality of digital sources has produced some excellent scholarship that would certainly merit closer attention, I think that the concept of authenticity might be more appropriate to reflect the questions at stake. As a relational concept, authenticity problematises the relationship between ‘the original’ and ‘the copy’ in terms of mimetic features, for example in asking whether an interpretation of a text sticks to the author’s intention or whether or

not it is true to the original historical, social or cultural context. For a detailed discussion of the question of authenticity of digital objects see the interesting collection of articles in the volume Charles T. Cullen et al., *Authenticity in a Digital Environment* (Washington DC 2000): <http://www.clir.org/pubs/reports/pub92/pub92.pdf>.

See also Philipp Müller, ‘Understanding History. Hermeneutics and Source Criticism in Historical Scholarship’, in: Miriam Dobson and Benjamin Ziemann (eds.), *Reading Primary Sources: The Interpretation of Texts from Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century History* (London 2009) 21–36.

12 Jean-Philippe Genet, ‘Source, Métasources, Texte, Histoire’, in: Francesca Bocchi and Peter Denley (eds.), *Storia & multimedia. Atti del settimo Congresso Internazionale* (Proceedings of the Seventh International Congress, Association for History & Computing) (Bologna 1992) 3–17.

the fluid nature of ‘texts’ or ‘data’ in the digital workflow.¹³ Because codification means a process of interpretation and manipulation, digital history as a method has to reflect this ontological shift of the status of digital sources on two levels – on the level of classical source critique and on the level of historical epistemology.

While I fully agree with Bod that dealing with digitised and born-digital sources asks for a new practice of doing history in the digital age, I’m fundamentally opposed to his interpretation (or better: prediction) that the hermeneutic tradition of humanities therefore has come to an end. Since its emergence as a professional and academic discipline in the nineteenth century, the practice of historical research has been closely linked to the development of new tools and technologies.¹⁴ Because of the different nature of historical sources a variety of so-called historical ‘Hilfswissenschaften’ have emerged over the past centuries, basically aiming at applying the fundamental principles of historical source criticism to the specific medial nature of sources. New technologies have always impacted on the practice of the historian – be it in teaching, research or international collaboration, and the introduction of and socialisation with these facilities in return has always resulted in a tension between old and new user generations of specific technologies. That the ‘analogue-born’ generation of historians might experience the current transitions in historical practice as more ‘radical’ or ‘revolutionary’ than the ‘digital-born’ is a classic phenomenon of generational shift, but doesn’t justify the prediction of an epistemological ‘paradigm shift’ in the humanities.¹⁵

As in the past, future historians cannot escape the productive confrontation with the new technical, economic and social realities. It is true that the historical discipline might have been more reluctant than other disciplines when it comes to the intellectual and practical appropriation of new digital tools and technologies. In my plea for a new ‘digital historicism’ therefore I emphasised the need for a critical engagement of the discipline with the many methodological and epistemological challenges of the digital era.¹⁶ This digital historicism should be characterised by a fruitful collaboration between archivists, computer scientists, historians and the

13 On the fluidity of digital data see Serge Noiret and Frédéric Clavert, ‘Digital Humanities and History: A New Field for Historians in the Digital Age’, in: idem (eds.), *Contemporary History in the Digital Age* (Bern 2013) 15-26.

14 See Gabriele Lingenbach, ‘Ein Motor der Geschichtswissenschaft? Zusammenhänge zwischen technologischer Entwicklung, Veränderungen des Arbeitsalltags von Historikern und fachlichem Wandel’, *Zeitenblicke* 10:3 (2011).

15 Peter Haber, *Digital Past. Geschichtswissenschaften im digitalen Zeitalter* (München 2011) 106.

16 Andreas Fickers, ‘Towards a New Digital Historicism?: Doing History in the Age of Abundance’, *VIEW Journal of European Television History and Culture* 1:1 (2012): <http://www.viewjournal.eu/index.php/view/article/view/jethcoo4/4>.

public. As the Canadian historians William Turkel and Alan MacEachern have argued, historians will have to develop these tasks in collaboration with technical experts in the field – otherwise they are in danger of having methods forced on them that are not compatible with their practice.¹⁷ But this critical engagement with digital technologies does not imply that historians have to become programmers or IT specialists. As we know by now, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie’s famous prediction that ‘l’historien de demain sera programmeur ou ne sera plus’¹⁸ has proved to be wrong, and the fashion of cliometrics that dominated the field of history of economics in the 1970s is out-dated by now – despite the new possibilities of the digital era.

Instead of predicting a paradigm shift, I argue that new tools and technologies in digital humanities will simply enrich our classical repertoire of source critique. While Bod has updated Dilthey’s epistemic categories of ‘understanding’ and ‘explaining’ as paper tigers in order to destroy or reconcile them in a vague plea for a humanities 3.0, I argue that future generations of historians will have to be trained in the critical analysis of the creation, enrichment, editing and retrieval of digital data *as much as* in the classical internal and external source critique. This evolutionary perspective embedding the field of digital humanities within the heuristic tradition of critical history might be less fashionable than the current trend to use a revolutionary rhetoric when it comes to anything digital, but it is by no means less serious about the theoretical and practical impact of new digital technologies and the Internet on the historical profession and historical storytelling.

In search for ‘universal patterns’?

Recognising that ‘data’ in humanities are complex, fuzzy and incomplete, it comes to a surprise that Bod’s research programme for the humanities 2.0 looks rather simplistic. To a media historian like me, interested in the complex interrelationship between media technologies and infrastructures, mediated contents and their perception and cultural meaning, the search for ‘universal patterns’ in history makes little sense. Bod’s research agenda for the humanities 2.0 reminds me of a positivist manifesto from the nineteenth century, translated into the digital jargon of the twentieth first century and driven by the idea (better: ideology) that digital technologies will finally offer the tools to detect and uncover the (so far hidden) logical foundations

17 William Turkel and Alan Mac Eachern, ‘The Programming Historian’, in: NiCHE: Network in Canadian History & Environment (2007-2008): <http://niche-canada.org/programming-historian>.

18 Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Le territoire de l’historien* (Paris 1973) 14.

of all human activities (be it history, music or language).¹⁹ It was exactly this a-historical approach of positivist and empiricist research that motivated Wilhelm Dilthey to formulate his hermeneutic theory of humanities, arguing that a historical understanding of the past necessarily implies reflection on the basic historicity of both past and present facts and agencies.²⁰ Without denying the possibility of structural causalities, Dilthey emphasised the individuality of perception, imagination and reasoning in order to develop a critical approach to history paying attention to both structural forces and individual agency. In paraphrasing Dilthey one could say that the veins of the ‘reasoning subject’ Rens Bod seem to be filled not with real blood, but with ‘the diluted sap of rationality’!²¹ While standing in the tradition of such great thinkers as John Locke, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, Auguste Comte, Émile Durkheim or Noam Chomsky, Bod’s approach to the history of humanities clearly differs from the tradition of critical historiography introduced by Gustav Droysen, Georg Simmel and Max Weber, which aimed at problematising past realities instead of searching for universal patterns.²²

If, as the French historian Antoine Prost has convincingly argued, it is our questions that construct the historical objects of investigation, then Bod’s ‘historical objects’ are in fact a-historical entities and as such of little interest for historians.²³ The search for universal principles or patterns might be of interest for philosophers, natural scientists or computational linguists, but makes no sense for historians who share a basic belief in the radical historicity (and therefore necessarily changeability) of all human nature and culture.²⁴ If content or rather data is king in digital humanities, context is the crown – at least for digital historians.²⁵ As Achim Landwehr in a prize-winning essay on

19 For a popular yet highly reflexive examination of the (abortive) search for a logical foundation of reasoning see Apostolos Doxiadis, Christos Papadimitriou and Alecos Papadatos, *Logicomix: An Epic Search for Truth* (London 2009).

20 For a critical reflection on this issue see Doris Gerber, *Analytische Metaphysik der Geschichte. Handlungen, Geschichte und ihre Erklärungen* (Berlin 2012).

21 ‘In den Adern des erkennenden Subjekts, das Locke, Hume und Kant konstruierten, rinnt nicht wirkliches Blut, sondern der verdünnte Saft von Vernunft als bloßer Denktätigkeit’. Wilhelm Dilthey, *Texte zur Kritik der historischen Vernunft*, Hans-Ulrich Lessing (ed.) (Göttingen 1983) 32.

22 For an intellectual history of the founding fathers of this tradition see Uwe Barlmeier,

Geschichtliche Wirklichkeit als Problem. Untersuchungen zu geschichtstheoretischen Begründungen historischen Wissens bei Johann Gustav Droysen, Georg Simmel und Max Weber (Münster 1997).

23 Antoine Prost, *Douze leçons sur l’histoire* (Paris 1996).

24 See Olaf Breidbach, *Radikale Historisierung. Kulturelle Selbstversicherung im Postdarwinismus* (Berlin 2011).

25 See Pelle Snickars, ‘If Content is King, Context is its Crown’, *VIEW Journal of European Television History and Culture* 1:1 (2012) 34-39. This article is part of a special issue on ‘Making Sense of Digitized Sources’. See <http://www.viewjournal.eu/index.php/view/issue/view/1>.

the topic of ‘history and criticism’ has recently put it, doing history is the ‘art of not being too sure’ or, in other words, historical criticism means contributing to the ‘Entselbstverständlichung’ (the making less self-evident) of the world!²⁶ Bod’s ‘humanities 2.0’ aim at the opposite.

This ‘Entselbstverständlichung’ becomes even more urgent when taking Roy Rosenzweig’s diagnosis of the radical shift from an ‘age of scarcity’ to an ‘age of abundance’ seriously. This is especially true for my field of expertise, which is the history of media. While most media histories of the past – partly due to problems of accessibility to audio/visual sources – have been based on the study of written and published sources, the massive digitisation of sonic and visual sources (both photographs and moving images) by cultural heritage institutions and audiovisual archives, and the online availability of digital-born sources on multi-media platforms such as Youtube, Twitter, My Space or Facebook will confront future generations of media historians with a fourfold challenge:

- 1 How to develop and apply a critical methodology for an audio-visual digital source criticism?
- 2 How to theorise and analyse the intermedial relationships and processes of remediation in the ‘age of convergence’?
- 3 How to develop new forms of historical narratives in times of transmedia storytelling?
- 4 How to deal with the materiality of media technologies that tend to be overlooked in digital history?

If we accept the assumption that 90% of all data transfer on the Internet as well as 2/3 of all data transfer on mobile communication devices will be video-based in 2014 – this is at least the prediction of the latest ‘Cisco Visual Networking Index’²⁷ – and if we recognise that most public history projects and the popular dissemination of historical information in different media are based more and more on or built around audio-visual sources²⁸, one might conclude that future generations of historians will have to be skilled in the critical reading, interpretation and use of digitised audio-visual sources.

So far, I argue, historical teaching and education is badly prepared for this audio-visual turn in public and professional history – with the danger

26 Achim Landwehr, ‘Die Kunst, sich nicht allzu sicher zu sein. Möglichkeiten kritischer Geschichtsschreibung’, *Werkstatt Geschichte* 61 (2012) 7–14.

27 http://www.cisco.com/en/US/solutions/collateral/ns341/ns525/ns537/ns705/ns827/white_paper_c11-481360.pdf.

28 See Jerome de Groot, *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture* (London 2009).

of historians losing their authority as ‘experts’ of historical storytelling in the public domain. I agree with Peter Haber that one of the major challenges in digital history therefore is to cope with the shift of the Internet from a text-based medium to a predominantly visual medium.²⁹ This shift asks for a critical reflection of both the history of media and the mediated nature of historical sources: but what Haber and other early protagonists of digital history have so far neglected is the impact of this audio-visual turn on future practices of historical storytelling. Until today, the written word has remained the primary medium of historical scholarship – even for media historians. Historical storytelling, at least within academia, is characterised by narrative conventions that tend to give priority to scrutiny over narrative continuity – the footnote being the icon and symbol of scholarly legitimacy.³⁰ But this routine practice of historical writing seems far from being best adapted to the new online environment of digital scholarship.

Until now, digital history has mainly produced what Steve Anderson aptly described as ‘database histories’: ‘histories comprised of not narratives that describe an experience of the past but rather collections of infinitely retrievable fragments, situated within categories and organized according to predetermined associations’.³¹ Although I am sympathetic to the democratic value of such database histories, I believe that the real potential for future storytelling in digital history will eventually lie in a thoughtful combination of different narrative offers spread over different media forms. The upcoming hundredth ‘anniversary’ of the First World War is a perfect occasion to present the rich research on this topical issue in a great variety of narrative formats – podcasts using audio sources, video-essays based on moving images, virtual exhibitions, e-books and even computer games offer the possibility of creating a multitude of media narratives, each based on a specific type of sources and exploring the possibilities of historical narration that is tied to empirical evidence of such sources.³² According to Henri Jenkins, one of the leading figures in new media scholarship, transmedia storytelling is the trendsetting model for the production of fictional media content in the age of convergence. Jenkins defines transmedia storytelling as follows:

29 Haber, *Digital Past*, 134-139.

30 Anthony Grafton, *The Footnote: A Curious History* (Cambridge, MA 1997).

31 Steve F. Anderson, *Technologies of History: Visual Media and the Eccentricity of the Past* (Hanover, New Hampshire 2011) 122.

32 See for example the interactive exhibition on the First World War on Europeana: <http://www.europeana1914-1918.eu> or the ‘World War One goes Twitter’ project of the Master of European History at Luxembourg University: http://h-europe.uni.lu/?page_id=621.

A transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole. In the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best – so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels, and comics; its world might be explored through game play or experienced as an amusement park attraction'.³³

The principle or narrative strategy of transmedia storytelling has so far only been explored for marketing purposes (franchising) and fictional formats, characters and storylines. I think that transmedia storytelling not only shows great promise for fictional storytelling, but for 'factional' storytelling and new ways of experiencing and appropriating historical knowledge as well.³⁴ Why not encourage our students to produce podcast-features using original sound recordings instead of writings essays based on sonic sources? Why not train students in the making of video-essays and learning audiovisual source critique by doing? Why not develop a computer game that simulates the historical past based on the critical use of data-mining software? In order to do so, future generations of students in history will have to be trained both in the scientific tradition of source criticism and in translating these skills into new forms of storytelling using the possibilities of digital technologies. To develop such a critical repertoire of new forms of factual transmedia storytelling is possibly the greatest challenge in digital history. ◀

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33 Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York 2006) 95-96.

34 Max Giovagnoli, *Transmedia Storytelling: Imagery, Shapes and Techniques* (Milton Keynes 2011).