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B. Longo – *Review: Johanna Drucker. 2021.* The Digital Humanities Coursebook
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Review: Johanna Drucker. 2021. *The Digital Humanities Coursebook. An Introduction to Digital Methods for Research and Scholarship*. Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge

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An advocate for the engagement of humanities' scholars in the design of technical infrastructure for the internet since the early 2000s, Drucker is one of the pioneering authors of the Digital Humanities Manifesto 2.0, outcome of the Mellon Seminar at the UCLA in 2009, in which the idea of a collaborative scholarship as the modus operandi at the core of the discipline was conceived and defined for the first time.

Johanna Drucker's own specialisation is art and in particular visual design (although she is Professor of Bibliography in Information Studies at UCLA). Therefore it does not surprise that this book has a structure that is, in itself, delightfully creative and easy to follow, making it a terrific example of structured writing. It is written in plain English, with a tendency to privilege synthetic and systematic presentations over discursive and verbal explanations. About forty visual examples and many interesting instructional exercises within each chapter help to memorise, recall and experiment the concepts described. Short takeaways at the end of each chapter also help to this extent.

The first two chapters set the scene. "*The humanities face many urgent challenges*", the author warns, reminding the reader of the short but tormented story of the discipline: object of grants in the early 2000s to support curriculum development, the humanities still must defend themselves from attacks that come from both the outside and within the field. Digital humanities are seen at odds with what Drucker calls "*the entrepreneurial emphasis in the university*" while criticism from colleagues "point out its limited demographics in terms of participants and early emphasis on first-world western cultural traditions".

Advocating the need for everybody to be digitally skilled, and conceding that other approaches for teaching digital humanities may exist (for instance, critical media studies, data science, computer science), Drucker is strongly convinced that *"one role of humanistic scholarship is to keep ambiguity, complexity, and the capacity for contradiction present in the face of techniques that privilege efficiency and problem solving. Humanists do not approach their research as problems to be solved, but as investigations of the cultural record*". And again, "*the digital humanities have the potential to put instrumental technologies into dialogue with interpretative activities*".

In an overview of the discipline, Drucker states that the field is defined through its outcome because it is made of components (materials, born digital or made "*computationally tractable*")

and activities (such as processing data and presenting results by means of using specific file formats, web platforms or digital repositories).

"Datafication" as a practice depends upon modeling, warns Drucker, and the assumptions and biases built in each model are strongly reflected in the choices we made when we create the apparatus that we will use for further processing and data diffusion. The baseline concepts the author insists on are index terms and metadata, data cleaning and consistency, descriptions and links. She also very convincingly explains the fundamental distinctions existing in data and information management: those between structured and unstructured data, between the new and the existing corpora of data, between data and "capta" (these are data automatically summarised or extracted by scripts and not by humans), between parameterisation (what can be measured) and tokenisation (what can be algorithmically included or excluded for the purposes of creating bibliographies and citations, search engines results, visualisation of connections and so on and so forth).

Chapter 3 deals with file formats and Web protocols and it is perhaps the weakest of the entire book, as it limits the presentation to the sole domain of formatting languages (HTML) excluding, for instance, audiovisual formats as well as PDFs that occupy such a huge part of digital content productions. The following Chapter 4 about metadata, classification and markup languages includes a brief presentation of Dublin Core and the DDC and useful exercises that will help recognise the differences in syntax and representational affordances between TEI, JSON and XML.

The same, very practical and instructional approach is adopted in Chapter 5 where the book explains design and construction of relational databases, focussing on the difference between the flat structure of spreadsheets and the content and data models and query languages of databases. Without entering the complex argumentative arena of cultural and media studies about the socio-technical context in which databases are created, this chapter warns the student that "in spite of all of this formal structure, however, a database should be understood as an act of interpretation that makes a rhetorical argument". Conceptual and design issues of legacy data, ethics, metric standards and re-use are also addressed.

The basics of visualisation are presented in Chapter 6, almost a tutorial in statistics, with practical guidelines for thinking about how to choose the right type of chart or diagram. Provocative and instructive exercises challenge the student to try some reverse engineering of a visualisation, to analyse the connections between data and infographics and to reflect on cases of misleading charts. In this chapter there is also a convincingly essential explanation of the very fashionable concept of network graphs (the data structures of networks that have become ubiquitous and used to describe all sorts of social contexts in which analysis of connections is relevant from advertising on social media to cyber forensics).

Data mining, text analysis and also more complex analytics techniques and case studies are introduced in Chapter 7, where the author's tension is towards pointing out that "*every medium poses its own set of challenges for extracting information in a meaningful way*".

Chapter 8 (*Mapping and GIS*) aims at exposing the student to the risks of assumptions encoded in maps of all kinds. Very interestingly, Drucker convinces us that there is a *raison d'être* for spatial humanities, defined as a "discipline concerned with inhabitation and experience and not

simply with location" a conceptualisation that could be perhaps useful also retrospectively in the years to come when more and more maps of all historical periods will be available to scholars.

Chapter 9 focuses on the application of 3D and photogrammetry to historical and cultural sites - a fascinating overview of what ICT can bring into museums and exhibitions, allowing the construction of "virtual models of vanished environments" as well lost monuments, buildings, works of art.

An overview of a wide range of topics covering design and production of websites, from linked open data to intellectual property issues, is offered in the last three chapters that in spite of an undoubtedly thorough background research could leave some readers disappointed because it does not include the latest technologies or debates.

An appendix briefly outlines topics of current policy debates that occupy great space for allocation of resources within University departments all over the world and are reflected in ideas for curriculum development and special initiatives, like legacy data collections, projects and systems and coding skills.

The analytic index can be very useful to students and teachers. The full-text of the book is available online via Taylor & Francis eBooks Complete.

In conclusion, this is a book that achieves its objective in an extraordinarily skilled way and nonetheless may still result unconvincing about the need for the digital humanist to distance him or herself from the traditional humanist. In any case, students and scholars of any generation could find it very useful to verify what they really know and what information and communication technologies they are able to decode, interpret and apply on a daily basis, or how they should be approaching their traditional objects of research with or without digital tools and digital environments in the modern world.

Drucker's *Coursebook* may appear controversial or unconvincing because the field of digital methods and tools for the humanities (as well as for philosophy or any other discipline with a strong core of theoretical, abstract and verbal contents) is far from settled: conversely, it continuously blurs, mangles and redefines its boundaries under economic and policy demands, it tends to forget languages, platforms, tools very rapidly - making practical skills quickly obsolete.

If the author and the publisher planned a new edition or even translations in other languages, they could perhaps consider to review it and offer it as a Digital Scholar Primer, targeting not only scholars and students of digital humanities but teachers of many disciplines, particularly in secondary education, who need to level up their skills with common digital foundations whatever their main subject may be. In fact, it is true that digital technologies and tools have now become pervasively used for education, information and knowledge management ignoring the entire matter of digital literacy skills or relegating it to a wide and confusing range of short courses or accessorial activities extra-curriculum.

In this respect, Drucker's choice of technologies (which she tends to call “methods”) appears very appropriate. Although she refers to them always with the purpose of facilitating the study of artefacts and their digital representations according to principles and scenarios for the digital humanities, the processes and tools discussed are here to stay for long in an interdisciplinary

space that not only allows but often demands several theoretical approaches to unravel around the same devices and across different sectors.