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**The Experimental Humanities: Raymond Williams, Digital Data, and the Unfinished Project of “Materialist Recovery”**

A few years ago, in an extended review of Franco Moretti’s work in digital literary studies, I came upon a short, strange quote that left a lasting impression on me (Prendergast 2005). The quote was by Raymond Williams, the Welsh literary historian, Marxist theorist, and novelist, who was a major influence on the Birmingham school of cultural studies: “Indeed if I had one single ambition in literary studies it would be to rejoin them with experimental science.” (1979: 341) Williams’ statement is so out of tune with how we tend to think of cultural studies, how we practice not only that particular tradition but the study of literature and culture more generally that the eloquent Prendergast struggles to make sense of it. He introduces the quote only to remark how rare a meeting place the intersection between Marxist criticism and science actually is, despite the claims of various strands of Marxism to their own scientific status, then doesn’t return to it (43-45).<sup>1</sup> If I pursue Prendergast’s thought where he lets off, it’s because it seems to gesture at the central issue raised by the digital humanities—or DH, as its practitioners call it. We can simply understand the latter as part and parcel of a thorough-going digitization of contemporary society. More fundamentally, I would argue, DH asks us to conceive anew what constitutes humanistic knowledge, how we arrive at such knowledge, and how we may rethink socially engaged critique as a consequence.

In its unsettling quality, Williams’ statement promises an opening in what can often feel a stagnant field. To be clear, and at the risk of sounding inflammatory, I do not only mean cultural studies but literary studies as well, including approaches such as narratology. Maybe it’s a case of disappointed love. When I studied German and English in Austria in the early and mid-2000s, most courses on offer seemed to lack both a clear foundation and a wider aim beyond individual case studies. So, when I applied to do a PhD, inspired by books like Williams’ *Marxism and Literature*, I looked to universities in the United Kingdom. More by chance than anything else, I ended up studying with a scholar who had completed his own doctorate at Birmingham’s Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), then taught school and worked at several former polytechnics before securing a professorship at a large research university. As a consequence, my own work during my PhD and for some years afterwards situated itself within that vaguely defined field of cultural studies. Nonetheless, I never felt fully comfortable there. What I saw in my own work, and that of others, were ultimately the same tendencies that had felt so frustrating during my studies: the habit of picking and mixing terms from wildly incompatible frameworks, the indistinction between theory and methodology, the practice of seeking to prove one’s own feats of speculation by recourse to a single text chosen for that express purpose. It all felt a bit futile.

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<sup>1</sup> Prendergast specifically thinks of George Lukács.

Worse still is how everyone tends their own garden. Because there are so many incompatible, and often ideologically opposed, schools of thought, the number of journals has multiplied to a point where you only publish for those who are likely to agree with you. Because it's so hard to distinguish tangible results from opinions, it's also nearly impossible to discern any clear development. The field seesaws between theoretical turns, but what have we learnt? How do we connect one theoretical approach to any other? Do we understand ideological formations, or any of the cultural formats and media we study, better than ten, twenty or fifty years ago? Is that even the goal? Where are we, and where do we want to go?

Too often, I found myself disagreeing with someone else's work on purely abstract grounds—a misreading, as I saw it, of a theorist, or because they worked within a framework I found ideologically suspect. At least, philosophy and political science concern themselves with the foundations of individual and collective action. What is the concern of cultural studies? If it seeks to analyze how ideologies shape culture and its audiences, where are the studies that engage with a representative sample of the cultural record rather than the hand-picked texts that appeal to critics? Where is the research that engages with actual readers and viewers rather than elevating the critic to their mouthpiece in a sleight of hand so outrageous it is never mentioned? I am aware that several scholars before me have lamented the current state of the field. Some years ago, Elahe Haschemi Yekani, Anja Schwarz, and I co-authored an article that began with an overview of this sort of criticism (Dunst, Haschemi Yekani & Schwarz 2014). In contrast to what I wrote back then, I no longer believe that novel theories or increased political participation alone present a viable solution to the weaknesses of cultural studies, as it is practiced today. At the same time, I am unwilling to give up on an approach that at it's best—the collectively written *Policing the Crisis*, for instance—has been able to fuse academic rigor with social engagement.

Williams' statement, I believe, provides a way of reorienting the humanities at a time when they face widespread funding cuts but also show signs of renewal. In the interview from which Prendergast takes the quote, Williams aims his remarks at two targets. The first is what he calls "the atmosphere of specialization" in academia—the splintering into ever smaller scholarly communities (341). The second criticizes the love of abstract theory in the humanities—in this case psychoanalysis—that divorces such work from its empirical basis. As Williams writes: "What is needed is not a blending of concepts of literature with concepts from Lacan, but an introduction of literary practice to the quite different practice of experimental observation. That would be the materialist recovery."<sup>2</sup> These arguments reframe current debates in an unexpected fashion. Critics have accused the renewed empiricism of the digital humanities of acting as a Trojan horse for neoliberal restructuring, or as a craven withdrawal from political engagement (Allison, Brouillete & Golumbia). This criticism overlooks that DH's empirical methods have the potential to revise the basic foundations that underlie political participation, both in what we know, and how we act on that knowledge. Similarly, for Williams, social engagement needs to base itself on a materialist understanding of self and society first.

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<sup>2</sup> I partly disagree with Williams on Lacan, for the simple reason that clinical work has the potential to function as a type of experiment. Yet his general point on the application of theory to literature (including psychoanalytic theory) stands.

It is here, I think, that literary and cultural studies have floundered. We might recall in this context that humanistic research practices frequently hark back to the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth century. Whether it's Wilhelm Dilthey's hermeneutical circle or the new criticism's emphasis on close reading, we have discarded the ideological assumptions behind these approaches but carry on in their spirit. Thus, we place our trust in individual interpretation and depend on subjective insight as if we hadn't deconstructed the individual subject a long time ago. In other words, we might claim a materialist conception of our objects of study. Yet we've failed miserably to develop equally materialist methods of study that do justice to these insights. I labour this point in the hope that it might shine a new light on the heyday of cultural studies, the CCCS and anti-Thatcherite activism of *Policing the Crisis*. Rather than seeing Birmingham as the high watermark of cultural materialism, we might then conceive of it as an unfinished project. Despite its materialist conception of society, literary and cultural studies have long lacked the means to restructure their scholarly apparatus. Important attempts at such a refashioning were made in the 1970s and early 1980s: from the ethnographies of youth culture at the CCCS, the work of Pierre Bourdieu, and the Bielefeld school of empirical literary studies. Some of these ventures, including the Birmingham centre, retreated under institutional pressure or failed to overcome disciplinary boundaries—as in literary studies, where cultural studies has found one of its institutional homes. In his interview, Williams recalled his frustration that reading experiments he had prepared came to nothing due to “the atmosphere of specialization” (341). Nonetheless, he remained optimistic that this endeavour could resume in the future. Other projects encountered a limitation that Dilthey saw as a distinguishing mark of the humanities—the essentially qualitative character of human expression.<sup>3</sup>

This final hurdle, at least, may be disappearing. Dilthey's distinction between understanding the expressions of the human mind, the aim of *Geisteswissenschaften*, and the explanation of measurable regularities in *Naturwissenschaften*, is slowly becoming obsolete (Dilthey 1989).<sup>4</sup> Digitization makes cultural objects countable—from the number of individual words to every pixel of an image. Cognitive methods measure reception processes with increasing accuracy and complexity. Sociologically speaking, cultural production, circulation, and reception can be aggregated at scales that were never before possible. None of these developments are without risk or drawbacks. But they will continue, whether humanists bring their expertise to them or not. Some cultural critics, including Brennan and Golumbia, may choose to stand back, and their view from a distance yields its own valuable insights. Yet I would argue that active participation is more in tune with the project of cultural studies. Not only because we otherwise run the risk of leaving the study of culture to physicists and mathematicians — as in the case of a much-cited article published in *Science*. Titled “Quantitative Analysis of Culture Using Millions of Digitized Books”, none of its 13 authors had a background in the humanities (Michel et al.).

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<sup>3</sup> Thus, Bourdieu's cultural sociology at times remained stuck on an awkward middle ground between empirical ambition and abstract conceptualization, with central elements of the latter resisting the formal description that would allow for quantitative research.

<sup>4</sup> The paragraphs that follow rehearse a few arguments made in Dunst 2016.

More importantly, these developments offer the potential to return to the unfinished project of Williams' "materialist recovery". It might sound misleading to marshal digital data for a materialist method given the former's association with *immateriality*. But digital data makes it possible to share, compare, and revise scholarly labour, integrating the researcher more thoroughly into a network of material actors beyond her or his hallowed subjectivity. Thus, digitization and computation function as catalysts that restructures humanistic scholarship around the experiment.<sup>5</sup> What makes these encounters so valuable for scholarly work is the confrontation with the resistance of results. To rephrase a famous statement by Fredric Jameson, we might say that the experiment, not unlike history, "is what hurts, it is what refuses desire" (1981: 102).<sup>6</sup> Literary and cultural studies constantly remind us of what happens when such resistance is amiss. Whether it's the inability to agree on basic terms after decades of narratological debate, or theoretical speculation unmoored from evidence base in media and cultural studies: where any possibility of falsification is absent, so are the mechanisms that allow a scholarly community to construct agreement and move towards a shared aim. As Andrew Piper argues, using the term "cultural analytics" in lieu of DH:

Cultural criticism in its traditional form resembles an agonistic process—one continually overturns the views of others [...]. The explicitness of cultural analytics means that others can share in the steps of the analyst's knowledge. They can correct those steps and challenge them, or they can build on them and refine them because those steps have been made more legible [...]. Cultural analytics makes the study of culture more architectonic rather than agonistic, more social and collective. There is a basic politics to this practice that has largely been overlooked. (2016)

This reorientation of scholarly practice accords with Bruno Latour's related redefinition of the cultural critic. "The critic", he writes, "is not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles" (2004: 246). In retrospect, we might come to see the retreat into cultural theory and criticism that characterized the 1990s and 2000s as a defensive reaction to the onslaught of neoliberal reform. Opening ourselves to the material resistance of the experiment, constructing agreement, building communities of practice, within and beyond academia, on the basis of a newly conceived materialism: it is this ambition that Williams speaks of in his extraordinary quote, and that cultural studies may do well to remember.

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<sup>5</sup> It is likely that the reading studies that Williams mentions would have included a series of questionnaires given to students or other participants. Yet digitality in the basic sense of a series of discrete values within a numerical system (rather than a continuous or analog signal) would have entered either at the stage of documenting the reading experience or, at the latest, during the statistical analysis of this data—whether it proceeded with the help of digital computation or not.

<sup>6</sup> Which is not to say that an experiment returns objective facts that are independent of interpretation or social construction. Neither, however, should we impute such naivety to the sciences.

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